

Astronaut Food

Number Three



“Win for Life” originally appeared in *The Scriber’s Nook*

“Log in/Log Out” originally appeared in *The Fiction Writer’s Den*

“Symbolic Autonomy” originally appeared in *The Scriber’s Nook*

My gratitude to the editors of those publications for their helpful recommendations

Win for Life

“What’s up, Hoffen-franken-mushu-reider?” Bill said, interrupting Hoffenreider. Absorbed in his textbook, *Communication: Making Connections*, Hoffenreider hadn’t noticed Bill come into the convenience store. They never got customers at this time of night, so Hoffenreider was able to study. He was taking extra classes that summer so he could graduate a semester early from Middlesex State University.

“Whatcha you doing, man? Reading some books and making some power moves?” Bill said.

“Sure, big moves,” Hoffenreider said without looking up from his book.

Bill squinted like he was thinking. “So, what’s up with Citgo, man? It’s weird thinking of you working here. You don’t seem like a Citgo guy. Is that what they do to the guys who don’t get the top grade?”

“It’s just for the summer. It’s not like I’m a townie. I don’t even live here.”

“You do right now,” Bill said.

Bill smelled sickeningly of stale smoke, weed, and car freshener. The NPR station Hoffenreider played on the gas station’s little boombox when he was studying started another classical music song. Hoffenreider didn’t recognize it, but for some reason he thought “Mozart” when he heard it.

“Hey, what happened to that kid who used to work here during the day? The

kid who always wore sweatpants? He used to look at me real weird when I came in here,” Bill said.

“Oh, Aaron? He got fired for stealing scratch-offs.”

“No, shit. People here are always stealing scratch-offs, huh?”

“Yeah, he took Win for Lifes. Trying to steal a life, I guess,” Hoffenreider waited, but Bill didn’t laugh. “Actually, he had a pretty good idea: he pulled out the roll when no one was here and took them from the middle before rolling it back up. We have to write down the number on the last card every time we leave, but because he took them from the middle, the numbers at the end of his shift were what they should have been. They only keep the video,” Hoffenreider nodded his head toward the security camera, “for three days, so he was probably thinking the footage would be gone by the time they sold enough to get to the ones he’d taken.”

“So, how’d they get him?” Bill asked.

“Out of nowhere, the 1-1-1 Guy came in and bought like a million Win for Lifes,” Hoffenreider said, laughing.

“Does he buy Win for Lifes?” Bill asked.

The 1-1-1 Guy was super old and only bought two things: lotto tickets with all ones and cartons of eggs. He repeated the number “one” a million times when saying what he wanted on his ticket. Hoffenreider had the sense that the number was particularly unlikely to come up, but he couldn’t quite work out the math on that.

“He’d never done anything like that before. He bought so many that they

caught up to where Aaron had taken the tickets. No one could figure out what happened, so Naum checked the video and saw Aaron taking them. It was gonna be erased the next day,” Hoffenreider said, shaking his head.

“Aaron got fucked,” Bill said when Hoffenreider was done with the story. “That’s crazy. He was so close to getting away with it.”

“He was pissed. Naum took it pretty hard. They’d been boys. I asked Naum about it, and he said that Aaron said something racist when Naum asked him why he did it.”

“What? Why?”

“Got me, man. I don’t know what race has to do with scratch-off tickets.”

“So, what was he getting, the Win for Lifes?” Bill said. “What do they run anyway?”

“Two each,” Hoffenreider answered.

“Oh, yeah?” Bill paused for a beat. “Let me get one,” he said, nodding towards the case of scratch-offs.

Hoffenreider tore off one of the cards. Meanwhile, Chicky appeared behind Bill. “Lucy’s still out there smoking a butt,” Chicky said. “What’s up, Hoffenreider,” he said, nodding toward him.

“What’s up, Chicky?” Hoffenreider said.

Hoffenreider rang up the card and Bill slid two singles over to him.

“For Aaron,” Bill said ceremoniously before scratching it off. He held the

quarter tight in his fist, which made it look like he was scratching off the ticket with his flesh.

“How’d ya do?” Hoffenreider asked.

Bill held the card up close to his face. “You need four to win, but I only got two.”

“Here, let me see that,” Hoffenreider said, taking the card from him. “You need four dollar signs to win the jackpot, but only three to win some money. You got two,” Hoffenreider said.

“You were pretty close,” Chicky said.

“Yeah, I think you can actually win a decent amount of money with three,” Hoffenreider said distractedly. He paused, looked at the card, looked at Bill, and then looked back at the card. “Crazy, right? If you got three, you might have the salary you’d earn for months of work just handed to you because you scratched off this card,” he said.

“That much? Without even hitting the jackpot?” Bill said.

Hoffenreider leaned against the cash register, resting his elbow on it and putting his other hand on his waist. “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen guys come in here with just three and win all types of money. That’s why Aaron stole these: you can make a lot,” Hoffenreider said.

Bill looked at him. “You think so?” he said. “Hey, give me another,” he said after a beat.

“Win for life. Don’t give a fuck ‘cause you won for life,” Chicky screamed, boosting the energy of the fun.

Hoffenreider tore off another and handed it to him. “Could be the one,” he said.

Bill set upon it, scratching it off intensely. “Nothing,” he said without looking up.

“Sucks,” Hoffenreider said and then laughed shrilly. “If you won? I mean, really won? No more time in the warehouse. No more time at your workstation with the boss being a dick to you. Get up when you want, sleep when you want, do what you want. I see guys at college kind of like that. The future’s bright, bro.”

“The future,” Chicky screamed. *“Gonna be dope.”*

“Yeah, Chicky. The future would be dope if Bill won. Man, he could buy this whole place, and then I’d work for him.”

“If I owned a store like this, I would scratch off all the cards. Then you would have all that money,” Chicky reasoned.

“Imagine how much money you would have if you had all those cards,” Hoffenreider said. “Would you sell those cards if you had them, Chicky?”

“No. No, definitely not,” Chicky said, shaking his head.

“Another,” Bill said, slapping a stack of bills down on the counter.

“Smart. That’s smart,” Chicky said, nodding his head solemnly.

Hoffenreider tore off two more. He handed one to Bill and kept the other in

his hand, which he rested on the counter with the card facing up. Without saying anything, Bill grabbed the first card, leaned in close, and started scratching it off.

“If you’re—” Hoffenreider started, but Bill grabbed the second card from him without taking his eyes off the first, which he tossed aside without comment.

“Bill’s gonna win big, man. He’s gonna have some pull in this town. Bill’s gonna be the guy to go to when you want to make stuff happen—just like when we were kids,” Hoffenreider said. Chicky met Hoffenreider’s eyes and nodded his head in short, rapid bursts.

Bill stopped scratching. He held his head too close to the card for them to see what it said.

“So?” Chicky said.

Bill didn’t answer. He kept his head down. He stood frozen, bent at the waist, his face still close to the card.

“You win for life, Bill? You win *at* life now?” Hoffenreider said.

Bill lifted his head with wide eyes. Hoffenreider couldn’t tell if he looked angry or surprised.

Log in/Log out

When I sit down to log in to the library computer, the guy to my right turns to the guy to his right. Every part of him from his swollen white sneakers to his massive face shifts ninety-degrees. He puts the back of his hand to his mouth like he's going to whisper but says in a normal voice, "See, I told you."

The skinny kid he's talking to leans back in his chair and cranes his neck to look at me. He snickers and gives the other a knowing look. They turn back to their computers in unison.

I stare back defensively. The kid who spoke hunches forward, holds his short arms close to his body, and rapidly presses buttons on the keyboard. We're probably the same age, but I don't recognize him, which doesn't make sense. No one moves here. No one has ever moved here.

Libraries are places for people who have nothing to do but notice what other people do. I log out and get up to go.

"Job Search" is in blue and pink block letters against a construction paper background. Two shelves of photocopies and books are underneath it. On their front covers, the books have blurbs about the number of copies the author has sold; on their back covers, the books have blurbs that ask about your dreams of success. I look at the books and think about my application to the gas station in town and wonder

about my application to Half-Price Books in Muncie.

When I'm in the bathroom, I hear someone making noise in the stall. He flushes and comes out when I'm at the urinal. The guy with the loud whisper.

"Oh! Hey," he says, surprised. "Hi," he continues. His pants are up but he doesn't bother to zip them before walking straight from the stall to the urinal. "When you gotta go, you gotta go," he says.

"Touché," I say.

"I been seeing you around here a lot lately, huh?"

"Sure, lately," I say.

"Are you...do you work here or go to school or something?"

"No," I say. I walk to the sink and turn the faucet's cracked plastic handle. The mirror looks like someone dribbled black paint on it, but nothing else in the bathroom is black. It's all the same light green or tan.

"Are you...so, are you a scientist, or something?" he asks. I watch him in the mirror. He finishes and walks to the door. I expected him to have a weird walk, but he doesn't. He's graceful.

"No, I'm from here," I say.

He stops and seems to consider this, hovering at the exit with his hand on the bar of the pull handle. I notice he didn't wash his hands, which makes me think of the black grime that builds up on the library's computer keyboards.

I turn the faucet, logging out of the sink, and leave the bathroom without stopping

to dry my hands.

“We have a problem. Oh, God, we have a problem,” he says.

The loud whisperer is being particularly loud.

“Jeez, aw, jeez,” he says. He knocks the mouse down with surprising force as he stands up. It clatters loudly, and he glances at me. “Didn’t mean to do that,” he says apologetically, as though catching himself after cursing in front of a guest. “She did it, and I knew she would. She did it like I thought she would,” he continues, seeming panicked again.

I can’t tell if he’s talking to himself, to his friend, or to me. He storms off in the direction of the front entrance.

His friend looks at me. I shrug, but he ignores me, rudely turning back to his computer. Annoyed, I go back to looking up Carl Jung. We frown at our screens.

He returns. “I know,” he says, hovering behind his chair, laughing like a cartoon villain. “Paul, do you think I’m a smart ass?”

So the skinny kid is named Paul.

“Sometimes, I guess,” Paul says, sounding bored.

“Because...I am...not going to,” he says, before interrupting himself with a histrionic cackle. “You are not mean to me and then nice to me. You are not mean...” He trails off before seeming to calm down. “You don’t make fun of my girlfriend and then think that I will be friends with you on Facebook.” He pauses for

dramatic emphasis before declaring, “I’m *not* going to accept her friend request.” He hunches over, huffing with theatrical rage.

“She probably just wants to say ‘sorry’ and explain what happened,” Paul says without taking his attention from the maze on his screen.

Actually whispering this time, Paul’s friend, the loud whisperer, storms off again, mumbling to himself.

Neither looks up when I sit down. Paul’s friend, the loud whisperer, is nodding off, opening his eyes wide and making a little noise when he catches himself. Paul distractedly moves the cursor around the screen as he stares at a picture of a model posing on her way into an awards show.

I enter the log-in password the librarian gave me, and the library’s homepage comes up on my screen. I check my email. Nothing. I spent most of the summer between eighth and ninth grade on message boards. I used to fall through the cracks back then. I didn’t have enough going on to draw my friends into, a trajectory of fun to include them in, so they didn’t think to call. I spent a lot of time surfing the Web.

We sit silently. Though I haven’t been to the library or seen them in days, I’ve thought a lot about the drama with Paul’s friend’s girlfriend, so it feels like we’ve been together. Paul switches to reading reviews on a video game website. Paul’s friend keeps nodding off.

I idly tap the table and, after a minute, log out of the computer. Neither looks up

when I walk away.

The gas station has me on third shift, so I sleep late now. We meet to walk over to the library after I've gotten up and Roxanne has had dinner at her parents'.

When we get there, Paul is sitting in front, messing around with a trapper keeper. He distractedly looks up at us before doing a double take and gaping with exaggerated surprise like someone from an old black and white movie. He stares as we walk past. We don't talk.

"Hey," Roxanne says when we get into the library. She mimics Paul's expression.

"What was that about?"

"Paul? We hung out that summer when you were at your Aunt's place," I say.

Log out.

.

Symbolic Autonomy

“Back from the library?” she asks, which sounds like an accusation to him. He staggers into the kitchen, shaking his arms. His old Bronco doesn’t have heat.

“For now,” he says.

She walks to the kitchen table. A smoldering cigarette butt is in the ashtray on the counter where she had been standing. The table has papers scattered all over it. The house’s calculator, which at some distant time has somehow gotten black streaks all over it, is at the place where he normally sits. Zack thinks of the stray crumbs and grains of salt that are always on the table and imagines them sticking to the papers. A bag of corn chips is open and facing her. Licking her pen, she starts to write.

“Taxes?” he asks.

“Tis the season,” she responds. “Tis the season for Uncle Sam to screw me up the ass.”

Though he’s heard her talk that way his entire life, it still makes him uncomfortable. “Gross,” he says.

“So you’re done with your homework,” she says.

“I need a break.”

Picking up the calculator, she continues without looking up. When he tries to use it, its display is always too faint for him to be able to read its numbers.

“What is your paper about?”

He shifts his weight and stands evenly. “Babylonian mythology. I’m studying all the details, like the stuff most people don’t even know about it.”

“Ok,” she says distantly.

“Hey, little bro,” Mark says as he walks into the kitchen with no shirt on, his hair draped over his back.

“Working tonight?” Zack asks.

Mark stares into the refrigerator before taking out the orange juice and setting it on the counter.

“Yup, double tonight.” He gets a bowl from the cabinet above the dishwasher and pours OJ into it. “Super-duper double tonight, *all night*,” he says like a ‘50s rocker. He smiles at Zack.

His mother looks at Mark from under her brow. “Get so high you’re mistaking bowls for glasses now, Mark?” she says.

“You can take hits out of a bowl, and not just *bowl* hits,” Mark answers. Zack laughs even though he doesn’t get it. Mark smiles at him conspiratorially.

“Besides, you can take bigger sips out of a bowl,” Mark says. To demonstrate, he raises the bowl to his mouth and tilts his head back. She doesn’t look up. Silent, she scribbles something on one of her forms.

“What are you up to tonight—hitting that homework so hard it screams for help?” Mark asks him.

“I’m hitting it, but, man, this paper on the symbolic autonomy of Babylonian mythology is *hard*,” he says.

Mark refills his bowl. Zack has always admired how natural Mark looks without a shirt on. His muscles are compact, his chest clear and hairless. Mark must shave his chest, Zack realizes. It’s hard to imagine him doing it. He thinks of the wiry hairs scattered on his own shoulders, back, arms, and chest.

Zack takes in Mark. His body looks young, but his face is marked and lined from hard living. The scar on his face from when he was jumped by a gutter punk in San Francisco seems weirdly incongruous with him standing there in their raised ranch in Dover.

“Sounds like you’re killing it to me,” Mark says.

Zack hadn’t been sure what to say when his mom had said that Mark would be moving back from California. It was impossible to imagine a person growing up in Dover and ending up anything like Mark was when he’d moved back. He’d already been halfway to hippy before moving out West, and that was back when all he had to draw on was the store at the mall’s small selection of hemp jewelry and Grateful Dead trinkets. Zack still can’t think of Jerry Garcia as anything but a stuffed animal.

Mark seemed to be right on the edge of finding something back then. Even in 1990s suburban Pennsylvania, he was cracking the code of the universe’s hidden winks and nods. He tried, but Zack could never make sense of it. Mark had showed

him the lyrics to Pink Floyd's "Brain Damage," but they just didn't seem that profound no matter how many times he read them.

"Yeah, um, 'symbolic autonomy'—what is that again? And what type of job do 'symbolologists' get?" his mom asks.

"It's not a job. Studying symbolic autonomy will make me *smart*, which will *get* me a job," he says.

"Well, I guess you don't need to be so smart to know that," she says. She looks up as she says it, revealing a shard of corn chip on her lip.

"Symbolic autonomy means I smoke *weed* till my eyes *bleed*," Mark says, shaking his head like he's rapping. He stares at her as he says it.

Symbolic autonomy. At least that's what he thinks Professor Spiro said. That and "phenomenology," which he guesses is the study of phenomenoms? Professor Spiro kept saying something like that, so it seemed like a good idea to write the paper about it. The school calls his math class "Pre-College Math," and he can't put the credits from it toward his degree (his "not-college college class" Mark had called it).

"I'm just trying to get a good report card," he says.

"You will, honey," she says.

"Only with a lot of work, and a lot of *symbolic autonomy*," he says, and she laughs.

Mark rinses his bowl in the sink. "Me, the way I see it, there are lots of ways to learn. I just don't see why you gotta strain your eyes staring at a screen all day to feel

like you're learning something." His voice rises, "It's like, why don't you try *talking* to someone? Right? Why don't you try *asking* someone what they mean? Maybe then you'd *learn* something." He puts the bowl in the dishwasher. Zack notices that he took the time to rinse it first.

"Right on," Zack says to his brother's rant, which seems naïve but also kind of right.

"Yeah," Mark says so that it comes out sounding like a laugh. "Sinosat Community College? I call it Quick-in-the-Sack Community College." He walks out of the kitchen, and soon Zack hears him on the stairs.

"You can learn the ways of the world after everyone recognizes how brilliant of a son I've raised when you finish college. Then you can go live some weirdo hippy life in California and forget everything you learned," his mom says as she returns to her taxes.

Then why bother learning it?

He walks to the table but doesn't sit down. He tries to remember the other things Spiro had said and think of what he could put in his paper. Phenomenons. Symbology. Literal autonomy? Symbolic economy? He looks at his mom's tax forms. No, that can't be right. He'll have to think of something else to write his paper about.



Jay Rosenberg is a writer and
editor. Learn more at
www.jayhprosenberg.com

