

Book of Puzzles

by Jim Miller

She refuses to be called Ms. anything. She rejects that she is a teacher. “I’m your guide,” she says. Dipped in black, she walks into the classroom, sits on top of the desk, criss-crosses her legs, and says, “My name is Michelle and I will lead you to your path.” She pauses, looks around the class and says, “But you must explore it on your own.”

You paid for this program of self-actualization—a five-week seminar in a rented classroom of the adult learning center of North Central High School. The website asked, “Do you want the ability to DO and BE what you know you WANT?” It asked, “Are you selling yourself short, living the ‘same old, same old,’ ‘getting by,’ ‘settling’? Are you living an average life of convention, a life of conformity, mediocrity, unhappiness, and despair?”

The website promised to let you discover your unique purpose in life. The website guaranteed that you will never worry again about what others think or say; become unleashed from anything that holds you back from your full potential. It guaranteed you results or your money back.

Because you’re a sucker, and because things are going bad for you at work and because things are going worse for you at home, you “clicked here” and you paid the \$485 to improve your life, to become self-actualized.

Michelle turns off the lights. She lights a candle. She puts on tribal music—soft drums, wood flutes—Native American, if you had to guess. She says, “I want you all to close your eyes.” She says, “Search for what scares you. Envision your fears. Embrace them. Absorb their power.”

You think quirky.

With the lights off and your eyes closed, Michelle talks about her recent fast, the one, she says, “that lasted at least a week, but probably longer because you lose the reality of time and place when you deprive the body of sustenance.” She tells you her spirit led her to the woods for an evening frolic in the wild. She tells you she met her talking crow. “Not any talking crow,” she whispers. “My talking crow.”

You think odd-duck. You think carnie-freak show.

She says, “If you sit in the woods long enough, still and quiet, your crow will find you. Bring you your message from the nether space.”

You think head-case, nut-job.

She reads poems, her poems. Poems about Texas, trailer homes, and rape. Poems of booze and pills. Poems of binge eating and purging.

You think damaged. You think fucked-up.

And because damaged and fucked-up is something you think you could get behind, you decide you like her.

It’s late when you get home and Sarah is already in bed. At first, you aren’t all that interested in telling her about the seminar. Maybe it’s because she’s a shrink and you think—no, you know she’d scoff at the idea of improving one’s lot in life by way of, what is it, positive thinking? Or maybe it’s the idea that starting this conversation would inevitably end in an argument you aren’t capable of winning. Or maybe it’s the excited feeling you get when you think of Michelle and that feeling just might disappear if you talk about the class. But then you see that Sarah’s enthralled in her book of crossword puzzles and didn’t see you walk into the bedroom. You want to distract her so you ask her about her day.

“Huh? Oh fine, yours?” She doesn’t lift her eyes off the puzzle.

“Strange,” you say.

In the bathroom, you change from office attire to gym shorts and a t-shirt. You brush your teeth.

“Strange how?” she calls out.

You tell her how you found this class. Once a week for five weeks and you will, in the end, be self-actualized. “Or,” you tell her, “I get my money back.”

She says nothing.

When you go back into the bedroom, she looks up, asks, “How is that strange?”

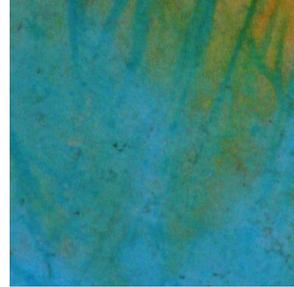
“Well, that’s not all that strange,” you say as you climb into your side of the bed. “But the teacher, I mean the *journey guide*, is, um...”

“Strange?” she asks.

“Curious.”

And with that one word, curious, you become aware that you have nothing else to add to this conversation. You took a class and the teacher was curious. Next topic, please.

You miss the old days, back when you were first married. Back when Sarah noticed that you entered a room, that you were breathing the same oxygen. You miss how she listened to your daily war stories of spoiled actors and lazy directors. You miss how she told you stories of crazy patients,



“not my real patient,” she used to say. “My pretend patient, David.” Or “my ‘friend’s’ patient, Leslie.” It was always David and Leslie. You even miss how she used to ask for help when she was stumped with her puzzle. You miss, “Do you know a seven-letter word for strange? Last two letters RE.” Back in those days, you seemed to pull the words from out of nowhere. “Bizarre,” you’d say and she would start to fill in the word and say, “That’s it. Thanks, you’re a life-saver.”

She was happy.

But then she quit asking about your day, she quit telling you about David and Leslie. She quit asking if you knew “a five-letter word for cool and distant, starts with a,” and now you can’t tell her “aloof.”

I’m anthropophobic, isolophobic, and I fear contradiction. If I think too long about Alzheimer’s, I have panic attacks. I’m scared of getting old, of choking on peanut butter, of the fallacy of ghosts and leprechauns, of dogma, and of the number eight.

But quitting is not an option. Your show has remained in the top ten for years and the money is good. You know you need to ride it out. Stick with the show until it ends. Until the studio quits making money from it and cancels it. You can’t quit, because studio heads aren’t interested in new sitcom projects from quitters.

“Anyway,” you say, “I think I could make a sitcom of her life.” And you really do think it is possible; with a character like Michelle, the show would be a little dark, a little tragic. A little funny.

“Whose life?” Sarah asks and scratches a word in her puzzle.

Michelle doesn’t light a candle—not this time. Her face is paler than last week and you wonder if it’s the fluorescent light bleaching the life out of her. She is again dressed in black, but this time she shows more skin. Her flour-white legs look like prosthetics attached to the blackness of her torso. She explains that you must envision your success before you can achieve it—that you must see yourself being successful. “If you can’t see it,” she says, “then how can you do it?”

“How was work?” she asks.

“Did the shoot wrap up?”

You don’t want to talk about the show. You don’t want to tell her how the producers want you to bring in a new character, a possible love interest for one of the leads. Someone to freshen up a stale story line. A stale time slot. That conversation is also stale and always ends with Sarah saying, “You could always quit. Start a new project.”

She tells you to think back to one of your failed attempts in life. She says, “Think back to a time where you wanted something and you messed it up or stopped trying. Maybe it got a little too hard.” She turns to the person to her right and says, “Please tell everyone your name and tell us your failure.”

“Yeah, um, my name is Jared. And I, um, so I tried once, but then I, um...”

“Don’t be afraid,” Michelle says. “In the right capacity, fear is an emotion we need, but too much of it can prevent us from doing things necessary in our life.”

“Um, okay.”

“Jared, fear is a necessity, unreasonable fear is an obstruction. You need to learn the root of the fear, visualize how your life will change if you challenge your fear—if you face your fear. Don’t let fear prevent you from achieving your prime directive.”

You think, Prime directive? Where have I heard prime directive? It’s there in the outskirts of your memory, but you can’t touch it. You write in your notebook: Google prime directive. You write in your notebook: Fear is a necessity. Use fear to achieve goals. You’re not exactly sure this is what Michelle meant, but it’s close enough.

Then it’s your turn and with all eyes on you, you share the first time you met with Sarah—your first date. You explain that it wasn’t a date, not really. It was research for your show. You were interviewing several female psychiatrists because you needed to get into their heads collectively. You wanted to build an archetype. “I paid each one for a session,” you say, “and they pretended to be my doctor.” Typically, you met in their office, for effect, but this time, with Sarah, it was dinner, and wine, and valet parking, and you picked her up and you were dropping her off after. “So yeah,” you say, “it felt more like a date.”

While sipping wine, she asked you questions. Typical getting-to-know-you type questions, but with a shrink tone. She asked about your childhood, your parents, your romantic relationships; she asked about what made you angry and what made you happy. She asked what you were afraid of.

You told her in one breath what scared you: “Poisonous snakes and rats.” You said, “I’m not afraid of insects really—when they’re onsey-twosy. Yes, they creep me out, maybe cause the shivers—but not real fear. Swarming insects, well, that’s a different story.” You told her, “Thousands of bees or millions of ants invading my personal space—shit.” You said, “I’m anthro-

pophobic, isolophobic, and I fear contradiction. If I think too long about Alzheimer's, I have panic attacks. I'm scared of getting old, of choking on peanut butter, of the fallacy of ghosts and leprechauns, of dogma, and of the number eight."

"Did you practice that?" she asked, looking over the rims of her glasses. "It sounded well-rehearsed."

You told her she wasn't the first shrink to ask what scared you. You said, "You aren't the tenth."

"Is any of it true?" she asked.

"Why would I lie?"

"Why would you tell the truth?"

You both sat quiet for a moment, then you picked up the bottle of Merlot, half tipping it toward her glass. "A little more?" She nodded.

She asked about what you do and you told her that you work in TV. You write and produce TV shows.

"Anything I've seen?"

You told her about the two shows that nobody has seen yet. Two pilots. "One is a campy little sitcom about a gay plumber, a fag hag who loves the plumber and tries to convert him, and her brother, a failed poet whom the plumber loves and tries to convert." She scrunched her face with worry and you saw what would be deep wrinkles in the next few years. She said, "That sounds really stupid."

"It is stupid. But in order to develop my idea, I have to develop this pilot."

After ordering your meals, handing over the menus, and resituating yourselves, she asked, "So then, what's your idea?"

"My idea?" You sipped your wine. "My idea is a drama about a shrink who blows a case. She misses a problem with a kid and he kills himself. The kid comes back as a ghost—he haunts her in a way. She has all these sessions with him trying to cure him, and whatever issue she tries to address, one of her real-life clients suffers through something similar."

"Sort of like that Bruce Willis movie, you know that one with the goofy-looking kid?"

You know that movie. And you've heard this comparison before. Stephens at MGM said pretty much the same thing. He even had the stonies to ask, in the middle of the pitch, if he could change the doctor to a male lead...maybe even try and get Willis. Before you walked out of his office, before you called him a useless hack, you asked him if he even "bothered to read the fucking manuscript."

"No, no, no," you said, "not at all like that movie."

You explained how in your story, the kid dies because the doctor messed up. The kid is a ghost who comes back to haunt the doctor, but he is a good kid. He is a confused kid. And the doctor has all this guilt.

"They have imaginary sessions, right?" she asked. "And they both receive mutual therapy?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And through this therapy, strangers are helped by the kid or the doctor?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that movie?"

You picked up your glass and finished off the wine. Filled it, and took another long swallow. Behind her, in the distance, the kitchen doors flapped open and a tuxedoed waiter hauled out a tray of dinners for some table somewhere. Outside your window, in the corner, a spider was preparing its dinner. You said, "Yeah, just like that movie."

When you finish your story, you admit to Michelle, to the class, that Sarah was right. Your show was a thinly disguised imitation—or more accurately, a rip-off. What were you thinking? Maybe, in part, that is what you loved about Sarah. She calls things as she sees them. She pulls no punches. You say, "She saved me from spending one more minute on this project. She freed me to look for something more original."

"So what can you do to avoid this type of failure in the future?" Michelle asks.

For the others, this was a trick question. For you, the answer was painfully obvious. "I need to listen to Sarah more."

"Why would you do that? Her advice is what caused you to quit your idea. Her opinion is what caused you to give up on yourself and fail to follow through on your goals."

"But it was a really bad idea that no studio was going to buy. I was able to spend more time on the show that the studio wanted, which has proved to be a moneymaker. It made me a success."

"But you hate it. You have settled. You have fallen into the trap of mediocrity and conformity. How many other ideas will you let another crush before you trust yourself?"

She looks to the person to your left. "Your turn. Tell us your failure."

You think Michelle is wrong. You don't let others step all over your ideas. You never have. Which is why Stephens doesn't answer his phone

when you call. But that's not important, not the idea, not whether or not you failed or fell into any trap, not anymore. What is important is your new concept for a sitcom. This one based loosely on Michelle, or not so loose. This Michelle. This damaged young woman, and what? She can't be a self-help guru, can she? There's irony, but it's too close to reality. Maybe a dietician, you think, an anorexic dietician. Or maybe she is a hotline consultant, phone-sex worker, or maybe a web-cam porn star? The more you think about it, the more you like the idea of Michelle as a character. She's a gold mine.

You decide to talk to her after class. You tell her she was right. That you should never have given up on that shrink story idea. You tell her that you want to restart your work, but you need to freshen up some research. Would she allow you to interview her? "Can we meet for a drink? Talk a while. Informal really—maybe coffee?"

"Coffee sounds good," she says.

"So how was class?" Sarah asks. "Are you self-actualized?"

She's working a puzzle and you can't tell if she is mocking you or if this is playful banter—the type of banter that used to lead to sex. "It was okay," you say and plop on the bed and lie back. "Shoes, please," she says. You sigh and hang your legs off the side of the bed. You sit, not talking. She scratches the pencil on her puzzle. You stare at the black-and-white photo on the wall—Sarah on the beach, Sarah in a bikini, Sarah splashing and playing with a beach ball. You think, What was that, two, no, three summers ago—St. Thomas, Rum Runners, reggae and the sex, all the sex. Damn, what happened to her?

You wish you could pinpoint that exact moment when the two of you quit talking to each other, or worse, when you quit listening to each other. You wonder if it was an exact moment, or if it was a gradual drift. Like erosion, a fraction of an inch here, a fraction there. And then one day you look at a picture on the wall and think, what happened to that happy couple?

You tell her that you have set up an interview with Michelle for the next Tuesday.

"Michelle?"

"The teacher from class."

"Oh."

"I told you about her last week. I told you that she was a little bizarre and would make a great character in a sitcom."

"You said she was curious."

"Yeah, well, I've set up an interview so I can develop a character

sketch, develop a story line."

"Like you did with me?" she asks.

"Exactly," you say and remember how that first interview ended with Sarah. You think about the two extra bottles of wine, you think about the invite to her place, waking in her bed, both of you naked with sex still fresh on your skin. You wonder if Sarah is thinking the same thing. Moments pass—the clock ticks and she taps her pencil on the puzzle book. She's stuck on a word and you wait for her to ask.

You check your watch every minute or two. When Michelle is 20 minutes late, you think she is fashionable. At 40 minutes you think flat tire, maybe rear-ended. At an hour, you decide she is a no-show. You finish the last cold swallow of your coffee and pack up your stuff. You convince yourself to wait five more minutes and stare out the door, willing her to open it. You watch out the window as cars pull in and out of the parking lot. You see this little kid outside, sitting with his mom. He has long, wavy blonde hair and huge blue eyes and you think he's six, maybe seven. You think he could be in commercials and if he was good, on TV. He waves at you while his mother talks to her friend and smokes a cigarette.

You wave back.

You're watching the window, like TV, the boy eating a cookie, making faces at strangers, when Michelle walks in.

"I need something stronger than coffee," she says. "You in?"

She is a wreck. Her black mascara, you think yesterday's mascara, is smeared around her puffy eyes. Her stance is nervous and jittery.

"Yes," you say, "let's go."

You sit on Michelle's futon holding a paper cup half filled with tequila and struggle for something to say—something, anything to break the awkwardness of virtual strangers. Michelle is sloppy drunk. She holds her cup up. "Cheers." You soundlessly clink cups and drink. You know it would be easy getting her into bed, and this would be the farthest thing from the "same old" that you can think of. But really, would it, you think—a bored husband cheating on his wife—isn't that the very definition of bourgeois?

"Did I tell you about my husband?"

"Husband?" you ask. "No, I don't think you ever mentioned your husband."

She looks across the room, at herself in the mirrored wall. She unslumps her shoulders, pushes out her breasts. She lifts them up, support-

ing them. “They’re starting to sag a little,” she says, but not to you. “I’m not even thirty yet and they’re starting to sag.” She lets her breasts go and pushes her fingers through her hair. “Maybe that’s why?”

“Why what?”

“Did you know that my husband is in prison? Felony assault or maybe it was attempted murder, I don’t remember.” She walks across the room and grabs her cigarettes. “Get this. He beat the man who fucked his woman. Not me; he quit fucking me a long time ago. He kicked the shit out of some young kid who fucked his nineteen-year-old girlfriend. Put him in a coma.”

You look to the front door and wonder how exactly to leave. You think about all those old spy shows you used to watch. When danger was in the air, they always had a secret passage or an emergency exit that led them to safety. Now, just this one time, you wish for the secret passage, you wish you could go to the mirror, touch the corner, and swoosh, a door.

“Can you fucking believe it? She was only nineteen.”

You don’t know what to say so you ask, “Are you going to divorce him?” She starts to pace around the room.

“All he said was, ‘I’ll make it up to you, baby. When I get out, it will all be better, I promise.’” She drops her cigarette on the carpet and grinds it out with her foot. “His lawyer, the fucking swine, says six months minimum, two years max.”

Your entire body tenses when she sits next to you, close to you. She puts her hand on your leg. Her fingers glide up your thigh, stopping fractions of an inch from your starting-to-get-hard dick. “Or,” she says, “I could be lying and he could walk in any minute. He could catch us in the throes of hot steamy passion.” She says this while drawing small circles on your thigh, her long nails sending lightning across your body. She grabs your leg, using her nails like claws, and squeezes. She asks, “Can you feel the danger?”

You grab her hand and move it off your leg.

“Dangerous sex is my favorite kind of sex,” she says. She leans over your lap, her breasts resting on your legs, and grabs for the bottle of tequila. You grab hold of the bottle. You say, “Michelle, it’s time to stop,” but you’re not sure what exactly you want to stop. She lets go with a pout and rests her head on your shoulder, staring again at the mirror.

After a few minutes, she asks, “Am I the kind of girl you’d leave your wife for?”

You pretend not to be listening. You zone off, stare deep in the mirror, at the reflection of the cheap art hung on the wall behind you—a deserted beach at sunset or sunrise; only a set of footprints walking across

the sand hints at a person. You put on your faraway eyes and don’t answer. There is no easy answer to her question. If you say yes, then you’re leading her down a long, deceptive road. You say no, and—well, it seems too cruel to say that out loud.

You wonder why you’ve never asked yourself that question. Not Michelle’s question, but your version of that question—should you leave Sarah? Not for Michelle. But to leave. To escape. You wonder if she would notice that you left. If she noticed, then what? Would she get a cat or a dog to share her stories with? Would she find a new person to help her with her crosswords, a new person to help fill in the blanks?

“I know this is a shitty question,” Michelle says, sounding a bit more sober. “I’m not asking you to. I don’t even want you to.” She sighs deeply and stares off with her own faraway eyes. “I just wonder if I would be the type that would make you want to.”

You want to tell Michelle that she’s all character, no plot. You want to tell her she needs to find a story; she needs to find a beginning, a middle, and an end. But then what would be the point? She wouldn’t understand. “No,” you say. “I don’t think you are.”

“I didn’t think so,” she says and falls asleep.

It’s after midnight when you get home and Sarah is asleep, her crossword book folded on her stomach. You undress and slide into your side of the bed. You pick up her puzzle book, with its cover worn and slightly tattered. She’s been working on this book for as long as you can remember. You flip through the pages, see the empty boxes of the unfinished puzzles. You see all the unasked questions. 40 across: a five-letter word for “single entity.” Starts with “t,” ends with “g.” 44 across: “far from fresh,” six letters, ends with “cid.” You pick up Sarah’s pencil and start filling in the empty boxes. You write: thing. You write: rancid. You write: clone, realm, stoolpigeon. Page after page, the empty boxes are filled.