

Life on the Mississippi

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I was on the second floor of the library, a brutally cold February night outside, pretending to read Mark Twain's *Old Times on the Mississippi* when I realized I was unhappy. As I sat in the velvet shadow of my dimly-lit workstation, nearby students soberly clicking away on their laptops, I regretted exchanging the clement skies of San Diego for the milky-gray ones of Providence to earn a master's degree in my early 30s. I put down the book I wasn't reading anyway, opened up my calendar, and counted the days until summer. I then proceeded to stare out the waffle-glass window at the city, a faded gold church spire, a languid black river making its way through downtown Providence, until my eyes glazed and became sleepy. I turned back to the book: "We stuck hard and fast on the rocks in the middle of the river and lay there four days..."

I knew the feeling.

With a mixture of jealousy and awe, I eyed a burly, square-faced undergrad typing away on his laptop with fierce determination. So certain and confident about whatever it was he was doing. So unlike me. Later, in my apartment the size of a walk-in freezer that smelled of wet cardboard, I called my girlfriend Elise. We had started dating three months before I moved to Providence and decided to try things despite the entirety of the contiguous U.S. sprawled between us.

"I'm wondering if I came here for the right reasons," I said, hoping I wouldn't have to spell out the consolation I was looking for. Though, I wouldn't have anyways.

Before leaving for graduate school, I had worked in the creative department of a small liberal arts university. I became friends with several professors and was drawn to not only the intellectual work they were doing but also how much of an impact they seemed to be having on their students, both intellectually and spiritually. Eventually, I decided to pursue graduate school so that I too could be a professor.

On the phone, Elise rattled off the reasons for being there that I had given her: to spend my life thinking and talking about literature and, you know, contribute to a generic goal of shaping minds and souls that you

find in latinate phrases on university seals.

“You’re right,” I said, though none of it sounded compelling any-more.

On the first day of class, my American literature professor insisted we call him Arch. Not Dr. Tilner or Professor Tilner.

“Dr. Tilner makes me sound like a dickwad,” he told us as we settled into our chairs and dropped our backpacks in synchronized thuds.

Arch used a lot of profanity and stuttered. In his early fifties, he wore thick-rimmed glasses and sported a beige *Mad Men*-esque suit. He had the shiny bald head of an ex-Blue Man Group member and was skinny except for the misshapen bulge above his belt. At our seminar table, he sat in a perpetual stoop that made my own spine ache and began criticizing our obsession with the latest cultural trends with derision. Bloat-ed comic book movies, fantasy-style TV shows with elves and nightwalkers, bizarre sayings of the youth like *hundred percent*. That first day, as he was explaining how brilliantly Pixar’s *The Incredibles* renders Peter Drucker’s concept of the corporation, he suddenly rooted out a glass Coca-Cola bottle from his overstuffed backpack more appropriate for a middle schooler, gave the bottle cap that crisp *psssssssssssssssssch* with his keychain opener.

He drank the whole bottle right then and there.

It was obvious that Arch was brilliant. He could remember the smallest details from an Edith Wharton novel or John Ford film, parse out each thematic thread related to American culture and history on the spot in a manner worthy of a first-rate dissertation. He was hilarious, too. So funny that he was once featured at our university’s faculty comic standup night (I watched it later on YouTube). Here was a man who loved pulling his students into the intricate web of his own humorous intellect. Marcus Aurelius wrote, “The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.” Arch’s soul was a garish tie-dye.

One class period, when it became clear that many of us had not finished reading *Invisible Man*, we witnessed Arch descend into a gaping cavern of self-doubt.

“Come on, Arch. Com—come on. What are you supposed to do when the class hasn’t fin—fin—finished the assigned readings? Okay, Arch, *you’re* the professor. You’re in charge here, take control now, Arch. Wha—

what would your therapist say?" He mumbled to himself in a frenzy.

"What was that?" A student chimed.

"Huh? Oh, that? I was just having a dissociative epi—episode with-
in my psyche."

That was that, and class resumed as normal. Was it performative? Maybe partly. But there was also something raw and true about his experience that day. He really seemed to feel a blast of panic and didn't know what to do—and he allowed us a glimpse of it. Plunges like this into Arch's neuroticism and inner turmoil happened from time to time, usually under the veil of self-deprecating humor, and I began to recognize Arch's self-doubt and ceaseless ruminating in myself. Though, unlike Arch, I was unwilling to let anyone know about it.

As the months passed in Providence, I struggled to make deeper friendships and my long distance relationship began losing steam. I became increasingly unsure about a future in academia. Did I want to devote my life to rooting around the archives of university basements and exhausting terms like "hegemonic" and "episteme" in dry, scantily read scholarly articles for the rest of my life? On top of all that, I was sick of the cold New England weather that, like for Ishmail, made for a "damp, drizzly November in my soul." I found myself swept into a river of self-doubt and anxiety, unsure where I was headed.

I continued to slog along in my "quiet desperation," convincing myself that things would get better that first year. Elise came out to visit and we spent a day in Newport before the summer season kicked off and became flooded with pattering tourists dressed in oversized Tommy Bahama shirts and squealing sunburnt kids. We went into empty shops selling wooden Christmas ornaments on Thames Street and stared at a dark gray ocean nestled by ancient mansions, the former castles of American royals like the Vanderbilts and Astors. We ate a lot. Here I was, surrounded by all this nautical beauty and majestic architecture, spending time with a woman I hadn't seen in two months, and what excited me most was the crispy fried calamari, New England clam chowder, and pan-roasted halibut with fingerling potatoes.

On the last evenings of her trip, while wandering around Boston after dinner, we discussed the obvious.

"I don't feel like I'm a part of your life here," she said somberly. I apologized, admitting I had allowed myself to wander off like

an unmoored boat into self-pity and doubt. I reassured her things would get better, hoping it was the truth.

Later that night, while watching *The Heathers* and right before Christian Slater blows himself up, I felt nauseous. The pan-roasted halibut had turned on me, and I spent the rest of the night vomiting seafood that didn't look much different coming out than it did in. For the last day of Elise's trip, I writhed in bed and coughed up yellowish films of bile that I hadn't done since 8th grade. My head throbbed in agony. So much for the food being the highlight.

Arch once told us that, after the university dean went around offering praise and compliments to everyone in his department, when he arrived at him the dean simply said, "Arch's a great family man." Nothing about his scholarship or teaching. Nothing about his academic or professional contributions.

"Family man," Arch repeated to us in a high-pitched yell, and then emulated the dean's mocking voice. "Arch he—here is a great fam—fam—family man because he, you know, doesn't beat hi—his dog. What the fuck do you do again here, Arch?"

But the dean was right. Arch commuted four-hours every single week to Providence from New York City so his wife could work and his son attend school there. He told us he spent most weekends watching old movies with his ten-year-old son and wife (he once told us that there is literally no better date than watching *His Girl Friday* with a burger and, of course, an ice cold Coca-Cola to wash it down). Once, when he was leading a discussion on Zoom from his home in New York, as he was complaining about the naïve sentimentality of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, his wife called out to him from the other room. Immediately, with a look of tragic concern, he hurried into the next room, leaving the class spinning aimlessly in virtual reality to check on her.

Arch, the devoted husband and father. Arch, the stellar family man. Who would have thought?

It's possible my relationship with Elise would have continued under different circumstances but I was in a stupor, and I lacked the capacity—or willingness—to see things clearly. So, I let my relationship turn predictable: a series of phone calls during which we exchanged forgettable moments of our ordinary days. Instead of giving her a glimpse of what was really going

on—my fears, insecurities, and anxiety about the future—I told her everything was fine. School work became drudgery, each book, paper, and presentation another flaming hurdle to clear. All social interactions turned medicinal, things I did because I convinced myself they were good for me as opposed to enjoying them for their own sake. Everything became banal.

Of course, I was the problem. I was meeting new, interesting people but was too consumed by my own self-doubt and ruminating about whether I had made the right choice coming here to appreciate them. I had the opportunity to spend the majority of my time reading, writing, and thinking about literature—something I would have killed to do a couple of years ago—but I was too worried about navigating some opaque future to be grateful. I had a relationship with a wonderful woman who supported me but I was too self-centered and worried about my own suffering and immediate loneliness to foster deeper intimacy with her. My interior felt like a voiceless, empty veldt. Hadn't my friends, family, and mentors encouraged me on this path? Shouldn't it not feel like I'm swimming upstream if I made a well-discerned choice? Did I make a well-discerned choice?

I thought about Arch a lot during this time. He wasn't a traditional academic mentor for me, some Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society* who equips students' souls with wings or what have you (Arch probably hated that movie). He certainly wasn't like the professors I had met at my former job—the ones who had inspired me to leave San Diego to pursue academia. The times I did meet with Arch during office hours we discussed how genius the Patrick Swayze movie *Road House* is and Bette Davis' *actual* eyes in *The Letter*. We chatted about Ginger Rogers and the role of contracts and ghosts in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short fiction. Everything but the practical, the useful.

Still, Arch had quite an effect on me, and I still think about him today. I'm not exactly sure why, to be honest, but I think it was because he had something I didn't have at the time. Despite struggling with his own self-doubts and interior anxiety, he also emitted a type of happiness that comes from losing yourself to something worthwhile for its own sake. This was not the bubbly happiness of positive emotions or a naturally sanguine temperament. It was the happiness that comes from loving the most important things in life—his family, interesting works of art, compelling ideas

about human nature and human flourishing. The kind that comes from being curious about everything, and being willing to share one's authentic and flawed self with others, like he did with us, his students. For Arch, so many things were worth thinking, talking, and getting excited about—it only required the capacity to look with one's own eyes hard and long enough.

This is what I was missing at the time, and what I also wanted (minus the neuroticism and Coca-Cola habit). I wanted to feel that excited about my work, my writing, my relationships, and my life in general. Life could also be interesting and awe-inspiring, but I had not been willing to look hard enough—to take the time to allow the mystery of reality to spark my mind into fascination and wonder.

I was supposed to read *Old Times on the Mississippi* for Arch's class. He shared his reading of it a couple of days after I admitted to myself I was unhappy in the library. In the novella, Twain offers a fictional account of piloting boats on the Mississippi based on his own experience as a steamboat captain. Steamboat piloting had once been an autonomous, "captain-of-the-soul" type of occupation, in which one's skill as a pilot depended on experience, creativity, and reading the many signs on the river. It was a dangerous business, to be sure, and a pilot needed to know when the water grew too shallow so as to not catch a boulder in the stern or too rough as to not let the ship sink. Arch argued that as individual piloting knowledge was adopted into a network of shared information through a proto-corporation, the individual pilots didn't need to rely on their individual skill or know-how anymore to be pilots. They only needed to tap into a larger body of shared knowledge. As opposed to seeing the river for themselves, they began to see it through others' eyes and, as a result, their roles became less individual, creative, and meaningful. This is why, according to Arch, Twain eventually left piloting to become a writer: to use and express his own creative vision as opposed to relying on others.'

I wouldn't understand it then, but Arch's reading—along with his presence in my life—touched on my own limited vision. I had been looking at myself and life through the eyes of others. I had convinced myself I had made the right choice, and I didn't want to disappoint my friends, family, and mentors back home who had affirmed my decision. I had uprooted my life and pursued graduate school to be seen by an anonymous, exterior collection of other people as worthwhile and important. And the way out of this blindness, at least in part, meant reclaiming my capacity to pilot the

river of my life with curiosity, passion, and my own unique vision. It meant looking at what was present before me, not ahead at some hypothetical future or backward at some overly re-played past, while also being willing to invite others into the difficulty of the present journey.

I eventually started focusing on the present things that season in Providence offered me—time to rediscover my love for reading and writing fiction, new burgeoning friendships, New England’s unrivaled natural and architectural beauty—and less on what the future held for me or whether or not I had made the so-called right choice. Of course, I still worried from time to time, but not the way I did those first few months in Providence. And as it turned out, my destination on the long, winding river of life started to become clearer to me. I realized I still wanted to pursue a career in academia, although it would look different than I had originally intended (I would go on to pursue creative writing as opposed to literary scholarship). While Providence never quite felt like home, I did begin to experience calmer waters. Looking back now, I can see how a path forward emerged in the perceived emptiness, and, strangely, that Arch played an unexpected part in it.

“This scene from *Stormy Weather* is so—so incredible. This is why movies be—before the 60s are a hundred times better than the shitty *Iron Man* movies you guys watch to-to-today,” Arch said as he regarded our class in his customary stoop. He told us we were about to see a Hollywood miracle. “Even Fred Astaire thought this was the greatest tap dancing scene shot for sh—shot.”

He struggled to get the video to play on his computer, becoming infuriated about a rogue pop-up to restart his computer. “Don’t do this to me, dammit!”

Eventually, though, he got it to play.

“Watch this!” He said, and then laughed to himself like a gleeful child. Smiling, he looked on as the Nicholas brothers danced across the projector screen in what was a marvelous display of human skill, gliding and skipping, back-flipping and tapping.

Going their own way.

“So brilliant,” Arch said to himself, meaning every word of it even though he had surely watched the scene hundreds of times before. “Wait for it!” He said, excited, happy. “Yes! Isn’t this something else?”

Arch was right. I had ever seen anything like it before.