

Leopold Berry had been trying to ignore the raccoon in the tree out the window, but like so many things in his life, it seemed impossible. The raccoon was perched on a branch that aligned perfectly with the head of the man Leopold was supposed to be listening to—a man who'd just asked Leopold a question he hadn't really heard. It almost seemed like the raccoon was trying to distract him on purpose. Twice the creature had nearly fallen out of the tree, only to drag itself back onto the branch after a lot of clawing and flailing. Just now, its tail had burst into flames.

The natural thing to do, Leopold realized, would've been to direct the attention of his father and the interviewer to the animal-on-fire as explanation for why he'd been so distracted these past minutes. He couldn't, of course, because the raccoon's tail was not really on fire. The raccoon was not really there at all.

These things happened to Leopold sometimes.

When he was twelve, a therapist told him he had a hyperactive imagination—that he saw strange and impossible things at the moments he most wanted to escape from his life. He'd once been plagued by these dissociative episodes, but it had been years since the last one. Then, a week ago, Leopold had seen a single, small rain cloud trail a harried fruit vendor down a sidewalk in Hollywood.

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The week before that, through the windshield of his traffic-stalled car, he'd watched a man pry a tooth from his mouth and insert it into a parking meter, prompting a fissure to open in the pavement. With a furtive glance behind him, the man had climbed into the cavity, disappearing just before it closed over his head. But these episodes had been brief, and each time Leopold had assured himself it was nothing to worry about. Who didn't occasionally fantasize while stuck in traffic?

But now the raccoon.

This episode had lasted longer than either the tooth man or the fruit vendor, which was disconcerting and, at the moment, extraordinarily inconvenient. He desperately wished the raccoon that was not really there anyway would just disappear.

Then, with a peevish flick of its flaming tail, it did.

The meeting had not been going well even prior to the raccoon. Leopold wasn't purposely trying to frustrate his interviewer, an avuncular older man in golf clothes who had started off smiling but now looked like he, too, wished he were somewhere else. Nor was he hoping to piss off Richter, his tall, barrel-chested father, who was growing quietly apoplectic in the chair beside Leopold. He really was doing his best, if only to appease Richter, but he couldn't focus. The gray suit Leopold had been forced to wear was loose in some places and tight in others. He was certain his pale skin had flushed bright red. He'd forgotten most of the canned responses his father had encouraged him to memorize, and the ones he did remember came out sounding forced. And now he'd allowed six seconds of excruciating silence to elapse as he stared out the window at a nonexistent raccoon.

Leopold directed his eyes back to the man behind the desk.

"Sorry, what was the question again?"

There was a creak of stiff leather as Leopold's father dug his

fingers into the arms of his chair. "Larry's just tired," he said through peroxide-white teeth. "Poor kid was so excited about this meeting, he hardly slept last night."

Larry was a nickname Leopold had acquired in childhood and had never been able to shake. *Larry Berry*: It sounded like a punchline. The only person ever to call him by his given name, Leopold, had been his mother, and because it rang foreign on anyone else's tongue, he'd long ago resigned himself to Larry, a name that made him cringe whenever it was spoken aloud.

The man glanced at his watch. An electric guitar, signed by the members of some famous band, was displayed proudly on the wall. "No need to be nervous, Larry. We're just having a friendly conversation." He grinned in a way that was designed to put Leopold at ease. "I asked, what's your greatest strength? What do you feel you're best at?"

Leopold cleared his throat. He could feel his father's eyes drilling into him.

"Well, um, I guess . . ."

He tried to conjure one of the answers he'd rehearsed, something about leadership and problem-solving.

". . . I don't really know?"

"If you ask me, Mick," his father cut in, "Larry's problem is he has too many strengths. Makes it tough to decide where to focus his energy. Berry family curse!" He laughed like a sputtering engine.

The man chuckled politely. "Then I'll make this easier. How about you give me your top three?"

Leopold's mind went blank. He saw something flick among the branches of the tree out the window but forced himself to ignore it. His palms began to itch.

"*Larry*," his father hissed. "No need to be modest."

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"I'm not." Leopold shifted in his seat. "I'm just . . . not the best at anything."

His father made a strangled noise.

"Now, I'm sure that's not true," said the interviewer.

But it felt true. It was the truest-feeling thing Leopold had said aloud in a long time. What he excelled at were minor things his father thought categorically worthless: working on his old car, tinkering with small electrical objects, and making homemade movies set in the world of a certain fantasy TV show that had gone off the air before he was born. He was ashamed of these forgettable skills, so he never mentioned them.

The man winked. "Don't worry. I'm good at finding hidden talents."

"I certainly hope so," Larry's father muttered.

In Richter Berry's opinion, there were two types of people in the world: winners and losers. He'd argued as much in his first book, *Think Like a Winner*, the publication of which he'd parlayed into a career as a success coach, a profession that suited him perfectly because it involved, mainly, yelling at people. So long as he did it with a smile, a shocking number of seemingly well-adjusted people would submit to being berated, harangued, and belittled by Richter Berry in the name of self-improvement. Whole auditoriums of them, all paying for the privilege.

Richter was very proud of himself, and of his two stepsons, Hal and Drake. Hal, captain of his high school wrestling team, and Drake, going into his second year at USC's business school, were turning out to be killers in the barrel-chested mold of their stepfather. But Richter was worried—had been worried for years—that his biological son, a lean, dreamy, distractible boy with no discernible talent for, or interest in, anything practical at all, was growing up to become . . . *not* a winner.

But Richter was no quitter.

He couldn't abide a failure in the family; it simply didn't fit the brand. He'd given his son several perfectly good options for a future career: Larry could go to law school and become a lawyer (preferably corporate); go to business school and get on the executive track (Fortune 500, or what was the point); do a finance program that would lead to private equity or investment banking (Goldman, ideally, though the boy was hopeless with numbers, so that seemed the least likely of the three). All Larry had to do was choose one, and like magic he'd have the inestimable blessing of his father's support. Richter, self-made son of a pig farmer from a hardscrabble town in the Midwest, would've killed for such an opportunity at seventeen. But the boy was like a cat: strange, lazy, and nearly impossible to train. His mother had been far too easy on him, so now, to compensate, Richter had to be hard; Larry had made it abundantly clear that he would never be hard on himself, that if given half the chance he'd spend the rest of his life with his head in the clouds and accomplish absolutely nothing. So when, after innumerable lectures and tirades, Larry had still not chosen one path over another, Richter had engaged the (very expensive) services of the best private college admissions counselor in Los Angeles, a man who had miracled C students with no legacy credentials into Harvard, and felonious delinquents from nothing families into Stanford. It was amazing he'd even found the time to slot them in for a meeting. And now, probably just to spite him, his son was flushing a golden opportunity down the toilet.

"What about the aptitude test?" Richter asked.

The interviewer's bulletproof smile faltered. "Wasn't too helpful, I'm afraid."

The raccoon was back on its branch, one leg extended skyward, earnestly licking its privates.

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“Larry’s results were a bit . . . inconclusive. His grades don’t reveal any special aptitude for one path over another, though that’s not especially uncommon. As for the test, Larry scored the perfect average on every metric.” He almost looked impressed. “Never seen that before.”

“You mean to say,” Leopold’s father huffed, “he’s perfectly average.”

The counselor hesitated. “I think results like this reveal the limitations of testing, not of your son. Which is exactly why we bring potential clients in for these little heart-to-hearts.” The word *potential* seemed to hang in the air. “I can help you, Larry. But first you have to be honest with me.”

Stop calling me Larry, Leopold thought.

The counselor steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “Let’s forget colleges and careers altogether for a minute. Here’s the most important question: What do you love? What’s your passion?”

Leopold’s instinct was to give a canned answer, but there was an attentiveness in the man’s eyes that caught him off guard. He actually seemed to be listening. Leopold couldn’t remember the last time an adult had done that. And so he was compelled to do something he almost never did in front of his father: tell something like the truth.

“Well, I think I might be good at editing movies,” Leopold ventured. He hadn’t quite found the courage to say *directing* movies, and editing sounded like a more achievable but still respectable career prospect.

The man leaned forward, head bobbing.

“I was wondering, maybe, about . . . film school.”

His father wafted a hand through the air. “Four year jerk-off.”

“Actually, this could be perfect,” said the counselor. “This, I can work with.”

Leopold felt a small hope spark in his chest. Like maybe his whole life was about to change, and a door was opening he’d never known

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was there. And then the man said, "You should consider entertainment law. Some of the best-paid lawyers I know work for movie studios," and as he began to describe the impressive house in Malibu owned by one such lawyer, a ringing filled Leopold's head, and he saw something out the window he could no longer ignore: The raccoon, now fully engulfed in flames and leaping from branch to branch, had caught the tree on fire. As the blaze spread quickly through the canopy, a flock of small birds, also on fire, shuddered out of the leaves and scattered into the air.

Leopold went rigid, suppressing a sudden urge to panic. Not because the tree was on fire—he knew it wasn't—but because there was no denying it now.

It's happening again, he thought.

He was Seeing into Sunder.