

THE PART OF ME THAT WAS ACTUALLY ME

By Franco Amati

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We took an instant shine to this unpretentious portrait of the artist as a young wallflower and we like the way Amati presents the social hiccups in group dynamics that we've all suffered at one time or another. The voice is appealing in its earnestness and there are some sit up and take notice passages of dialogue that made us sit up and take notice. A deftly crafted unassuming story with vibes that resonate.*

The work day was waning. I kept looking at the clock. I wondered how I could sneak out before people started gathering for the holiday party. I wondered: *Is it really that bad if you RSVP to something, and then don't stay for it? Would they even notice if I wasn't here? They'd notice. It wouldn't actually change much, but they'd notice. Someone would probably mention it casually: 'Oh did Desi leave? That's odd. Why did he accept the invite? And someone else would reply: 'Well he's like that. He's kind of flakey when it comes to social gatherings.'*

The truth is I knew that staying or going wouldn't make them think any differently. Leaving would allow me some time to rest. It would free me up from more self-conscious rumination. It would spare me the anxiety of awkwardly standing around in groups of three or four trying to talk over music and voices. I wouldn't have to desperately try to seem adept at small talk. It would save me from laughing at jokes that aren't funny. Sharing vacuous comments about the latest shows or movies.

It was all nonsense. Their favorite way to wash down nonsense was with fancy cocktails and costumes. They always needed a stupid theme. The theme this year was New Orleans. We had to wear

something New Orleans related. This perfect theme was chosen by the manager, Martina, who made no secret of spending weeks of vacation time in the Big Easy, brushing up on her French, and mixing it up with other pretentiously posh young professionals who were also there on business.

I didn't wear a costume though. I was depressed as shit about my mom who just had a stroke and about what was going on with my girlfriend and the guy she was having sex with. It was all stupid to me. *Kids wear costumes for parties*, I told myself. *I'm not like that*. These are a bunch of adults who get paid way too much to stare at screens and tap away at keyboards all day, and then they act like high school kids outside of work hours. They all have about as much emotional depth as the software they design. And I couldn't stand wasting any non-work related time getting to know them. It's like devoting hours upon hours of precious time digging and digging for some kind of treasure that might make you think for a second that these people are decent humans, but all you find is that deep down they're just walking bags of shit.

I stayed, made the small talk. Listened to one person after the other comment on why I didn't have a costume. Listened to people try to stupidly guess each other's costumes. Watched as people jacked each other off about how creative they were to come up with one kind of costume or another.

"You have to guess," the new intern said. "Martina gave me the idea, but you guys have to try to guess what I am."

She had on a maid outfit and a big twenty-five cent piece hanging around her neck.

"Um, you're a cheap prostitute?" I wanted to say. No one ventured a guess.

"No one gets it?" She looked around at the three men standing around her holding beers. She gestured to the giant-sized coin. When no one responded after about thirty seconds of stupefied looks at different parts of her costume, Martina walked by us with two big liquor bottles in her hand.

"Don't you get it guys!?! She's a play on words- French Quarter!"

"Ahhh, ahhh, ahhhhhh," the three guys, including me, said in harmony.

“How clever!” guy one said. “Leave it to Martina to come up with that one!”

“Yep, such a wordsmith that Martina,” guy two said.

“Cool,” I said, nodding. Then I walked towards the pizza.

I stuffed my face and drank my drinks. I tried to keep my mouth as active as possible on non-verbal activities so that my lack of conversation might seem less unnatural than I felt it usually was. I wondered: *Is there anyone here as remotely aware as I am of the fact that I haven't said one single meaningful utterance since this party started? Does anyone else realize that all I've done is nod, fake smile, chuckle, and say the barest of backchannels like “oh nice” or “cool” or “awesome” or “that's interesting” without contributing one single anecdote about myself?*

Someone must realize. Someone must see how ill-equipped for this sort of thing I am. Someone must have even the slightest inclination to grab my hand and want to save me, to tell me it's okay, I know this is not you, I know this is not your thing, you can go, we won't take it personally, we won't judge you. You're free to go, my friend. I can see that you don't like this, and I can't bear another minute of seeing you like a fish flapping around out of water for such an extended period of time as if the act itself is the only way to guarantee yourself a decent place to swim and live in the future.

Nope. Instead of someone trying to save me, all I got was the occasional “Hey Desi, stop talking so much.” That would be followed with increasingly intensifying peer pressure to participate in Karaoke. “Hey guys, Desi is going to be doing the Karaoke opener tonight. What will you be singing Desi?” “Oh I think Desi should open up with a ballad” Maybe something from *The Boss* or the *Bon Jovi* archives, what do you say buddy? Represent! Jersey in the house!”

“I'm not singing,” I said.

“I have to leave soon...,” I said.

“I'm still eating...”

“I'm not drunk enough...”

“No, I don’t want to... I can’t...”

“Naaahhhh...”

“I never do Karaoke. I just can’t do it.”

I did what I could to stave off the solicitation. I exhausted my reasons. They all fell on deaf ears. No one gave me a way out. No one let up. The pressure mounted. Everyone had a turn.

It eventually became so blatant that I was the only one who had not yet had a turn at singing. My resistance and worsening reticence had gotten so unbearably awkward and uncomfortable that some unknown part of me broke through.

Maybe it’s that same part of someone that comes out when they’re being raped, the part that decides to stop resisting, that says I’ll just lay here and take it, so it’ll be over sooner. It’s the part of you that doesn’t want to do battle anymore. This part of you emerges and takes over for the part of you that is actually yourself. It’s that unknown force in you that becomes an entirely different person in order to save the part of you that is real and true and sincere from being suffocated into nothingness. It’s the stranger inside you that is capable of absolutely anything. It lashes out and protects that other part of you so that you can both go on with your business and stop being torn up from the inside out.

Anyway, that part of me eventually said “Ok fine. I’ll sing.”

“Yay! He’s really going to do it!” multiple faceless people said.

“What song will you do?” Martina, the song maven asked.”

“*With or Without You*. By U2”

It was the only song I was certain I could belt out all the words to even if there was a gun to my head. It was my favorite song, but not because it’s a fun party song. In fact I’m almost certain it was a terrible choice for Karaoke because it has a falsetto, and there’s no way I could mimic Bono’s vocal range. He goes deep to baritone and then raises up at various parts. I only did it because the song held great significance to me in my life, and it’s the only one I confidently knew all the words to.

I started singing. I went unconscious. I vaguely remember my leg moving Elvis Presley-like to the rhythm of the bass. I'm pretty sure I sang the chorus way too loudly. And I think I did the same gestures that Bono does in the music video.

People cheered. My coworkers were starting to become riotous. Clapping. Woos upon woos from everyone in the room.

When the song was winding down, my consciousness started to return. And as I came back to Earth I caught the last bits of clapping and cheering.

“Wow Desi actually did it!” they said.

“Desi you did it! I'm so proud of you!” Martina yelled.

She smiled, and ran up to me, and gave me a huge hug. “You did it!” she shouted again in my ear. “That was awesome! I'm so happy you did it!”

That was the most sincerely positive reaction Martina ever had to anything that I did the entire time I worked there. I rode the high of her reaction for days. I barely slept that night. And it took some time for the part of me that was actually me to come back out of hiding and breathe the natural air again.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My intent was to describe the anguish an introvert can feel when facing an excess of 'voluntary' social interaction. Co-workers can seem terrible when your inner resources are depleted. Even a trivial event like singing karaoke can be the pinnacle of discomfort. I'm not good when I have to interact with groups in loud settings, so this was my attempt to put that struggle into words. One literary influence was Celine's 'Journey to the End of Night', particularly the frenetic, trapped-in-your-own-head, misanthropic kind of narrative style.*

BIO: Franco Amati has gone from academia, to the tech sector, to the gutters and back. He lives in New York and writes as much as he can. You can read more of his work at <https://francoamati.wordpress.com>