

A SHOT AT FAME

By Dave Healey

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We couldn't resist this enthralling story (that reads almost like theatre) as it moves imperceptibly from what appears to be realism into something that is definitely surrealism or, maybe better, sottorealism. Characters, without losing credibility, function as mouthpieces for ideas bigger than themselves and the narrative, in the least likely of circumstances, becomes an inquiry into the nature of being. Absurdities accumulate as the action progresses. Puns, witticisms and a unique turn of phrase abound: —'Carl scratched his head in a way that clearly showed internal debate. At last a decision was reached and Carl shared the winning outcome'. Healey's style in this story verges on outsider lit and the voice has got 'unique' stamped all over it. There's a few typos and grammatical bumps along the way but as is our style we don't edit them out: earthy authenticity is part of the reading experience. The prose snaps like ginger: 'Did God suffer from ADD? And if so did that make Ritalin as sacred as frankincense and myrrh?' And, 'It felt like a sign. A sign that was a sign. There was something prophetic about a sign being a sign. It felt like God was finally being literal.' And and and 'The world was his oyster. Or if not his oyster at least one of the more important bivalve molluscs.' Thumbs up, wonderful stuff with a gravitational pull we guarantee will draw you in.*

A Shot at Fame

Brian moved to the window and pulled back the curtain. The rain slapped against the pavement as if it were moved by some ancient vendetta, by some unknown event from long ago that it was now only exacting its price for. Intermittently the light from the motel sign lit up the room with a tinge of blue as it flashed its message to passing cars.

Mainstay Inn it strobed over and over again. Actually with the electrical problems it was experiencing, it didn't exactly say Mainstay Inn but rather ' stay I n'. Four hours before

as Brian drove along the dark and drenched highway, that was what had attracted him. ‘Stay I n, stay I n’, it flashed to him over and over and over again. It felt like a sign. A sign that was a sign. There was something prophetic about a sign being a sign. It felt like God was finally being literal. After centuries of imparting his wisdom through metaphors he had finally figured out that humans were lousy at metaphors and a change of course was needed. Metaphors were out and God had literally become literal. In fact that was what Brian had mentioned to Carl the over-indulging night manager when he checked in.

“Usually people stop here because of the promotion,” Carl said.

“Promotion?”

“Un-huh, we serve an all you can eat breakfast. It’s right on the sandwich board.”

“Sandwich board?”

“I guess it musta blown over. What with the rain an’ all.”

“I didn’t know. I stopped because of your motel sign. Because your motel sign is a sign.”

“Our sign is always a sign,” Carl agreed. “If it weren’t a sign then it wouldn’t be.”

“What?”

“A sign.”

“No I mean a sign at a deeper level. A sign from God. A literal sign from God” said Brian.

Carl looked perplexed. “I did most of the electrical work.” Carl stopped. There was a silence. “People usually stop because of the promotion. We serve an all you can eat breakfast,” Carl said filling in the silence like it was an unwanted pothole in their parking lot.

“I see.”

“We started it because we were havin’ problems with vacancies. You know, too many. Wouldn’t be a problem the other way. Anyway the day manager, he’s Carl too...”

“Two Carls?”

“Exactly, Carl too. Anyway he thought this would help with the vacancy problem.”

“Right.”

So I have to ask people if they choose to have the breakfast because if they do, I need to make extra. You see?

“I do.”

“How far you drive anyway” Carl asked.

“All night. Does it matter?”

Carl scratched his head in a way that clearly showed an internal debate. At last a decision was reached and Carl shared the winning outcome . “Not really. I’m just curious when it comes to things time related. I keep a log of when I do things vis a vis the time. So I can see if there’s some kinda pattern. I mean if there is a pattern...if there is a predicable occurrence of events....then maybe that calls into question the whole notion of free will. Because if I do things every day at the same time then maybe I’m doing them not because I choose to. Maybe I’m being forced to by some preordained schedule drawn up eons ago by the creator. Get my drift? Because this... and this is important because it’s the crux of my theory. If I am preordained to do them; do I have free will? Am I free to have my will...free?”

Carl looked for some understanding in Brian’s facial features. With nothing forth coming he plowed ahead. “Or are the determinists right? Maybe there is only one possible choice for each of us in which case is that a choice? Can you choose from one? If I am preordained to make breakfast am I really choosing to make breakfast? Or if you are preordained to eat it are you

choosing to have it?"

"I don't know."

"And further did you really choose to stay here or was it in the cards all along?" Carl asked.

"I chose to stop to because of the sign. From God."

"But did God already know you'd stop? Huh?" Carl smiled and nodded. "It's all very complicated, I know but it does fill my days and when you're fighting depression, it keeps your mind off your life. So what about the breakfast?"

"I'll pass."

"Just as well really, our cook's not what he once was."

"Can't cook anymore?"

"No. He lost an eye in the war." There was a silence. "And an arm." Again there was a long pause. "He also walks with a limp."

"What happened?"

"Had his foot amputated. So as I say he's not what he once was."

"Thanks for filling me in " Brian said as he took the key and made his way to his room. He was tired and needed a rest. And this was the place to rest. The sign had told him. The sign that was a sign. Stay I n, it said, stay I n. So he would. He would stay in. At least for a few hours more before he needed to get on the road again.

When he entered the room, the TV was already on. The sound was down but the TV flickered, spreading its message to anyone within a 50 square foot radius. It looked like it might be the news. At least that's what Brian thought. He saw a picture of a hand gun. Then someone else came on screen and started talking. At least it seemed that way because their lips were moving.

Brian turned the set off. To him it looked like another in an endless stream of American school shootings and that was the last thing he wanted to see. More people being killed.

As he turned off the set his eyes fell on the carpet. He immediately noticed the burn marks that stood out in a field of beige. On closer inspection, it was apparent that they weren't just marks, they were letters. Someone had burned a message in the carpet. Was this another sign? Was God filling his evening with obtuse messaging? He could make out the letters but not the sense. D...O...N. What was God trying to say? And why was this deity using an indoor/outdoor carpet to communicate? There were certainly many better types of carpeting that could be used and God being an all powerful, would have had access to many, if not all of them. Still it was a sign and it needed to be deciphered.

What was this monument to beige trying to tell him? Was this a message to someone named Don? There was no Don in the room so that made no sense. If not a message to Don then who or what? Was God telling him to don't something? Was this an incomplete warning? Don't what? Don't stay here? In that case he ought to leave. Or was this an affirmation of his previous sign; stay I n? If that was the case then had God meant to say don't go? It made more sense that this was an affirmation. Why would God tell him to stay and then to leave? That made no sense. The idea of an ambivalent God was not something Brian wished to contemplate. No this was an affirmation: Don't go. Stay I n. So Brian did.

Still he was perplexed. What kind of God gets distracted and fails to complete their message? Did God suffer from ADD? And if so did that make Ritalin as sacred as frankincense and myrrh? Just then his concentration was broken by a clap of thunder. His eyes darted to the

window. So he got up and looked out. As he watched the rain fall he started to wonder how he had gotten into this mess. He remembered when he first joined the Beatlemania: The Sound Alike Show of the Century. He recalled the excitement when he first heard that he had gotten the part of John Lennon. The pride he felt in being chosen. He had always wanted to be a singer and now he was a singer in a mock-up of the world's greatest band. Best of all, he was playing the part of his boyhood idol, John Lennon. What more could he ask for? The world was his oyster. Or if not his oyster at least one of the more important bivalve molluscs.

He was playing the part of John Lennon. The late stage John Lennon. His friend Pete played the Role of the early Lennon. The naive Lennon. The Lennon who dressed in suits and sang 'Ya Ya Ya'. That was important to know because as you have probably guessed Brian was not the only John Lennon in the show. Besides Brain and Pete, Johnny Nicola was cast as the middle period Lennon, the grass smoking, slightly chubby, impish Lennon from Help!

Brian however played the last Lennon. The Lennon who experimented with heroin, the Lennon who got drunk with Harry Nilsson and stuck tampons on his forehead, the skinny Lennon with an edge who climbed into a bag and sang. While he had no affinity for singing inside a sac of any description, he did like the music of the late period Lennon and remarkably if he combed his hair properly and dressed in the right clothes he looked exactly like this Lennon.

The greatest compliment you could give Brain was if you came up to him and told him how similar he was in appearance to Lennon. The comment 'you look just like that dead English guy' always brought a smile to his lips. And because he was the only one of the Lennons in the cast who could do a credible Liverpudlian accent, he got all the lines in the show. His favourite part was when one of the numbers came to an end, he would step up to the mic and in his most

droll voice say 'I'd like to thank you on behalf of the group and myself and I hope we passed the audition'. He was also hoping to get a new line in the show, one that he had been lobbying for for quite some time. It was the line from the Royal Command performance. He saw it playing out like this; just before the last number, he would step up to the mic and say 'we would like to do another song but we need a little help. So those of you in the cheap seats clap your hands and the rest of you just rattle your jewelry.' However it was never okayed due to internal politics of the show and so remained just a dream.

Brian's eyes started close when a crash brought him back from the edge of sleep. His heart stopped. Maybe it was just someone in the next room. The walls were thin. But maybe it wasn't next door, maybe it was outside. Maybe someone had followed him to the motel. He had heard it in his sleep so he wasn't able to locate the direction of the sound. If it was outside it was possible someone was sneaking around. That realization stopped his heart. It took all the energy in his body to propel himself back to the window. Slowly he moved forward and once more pushed open the curtains. Nothing. Just rain. Rain and a flashing light that was a sign. From God; stay I n it pleaded, stay I n. There was nothing else. No person hiding in the shadows. No man lurking in the distance to do him harm. No stranger brandishing a high powered weapon leering in his general direction. Only the rain. The rain and a sign. A sign imploring him to stay I n. So he continued to do so.

He felt utterly alone as he closed the curtains and moved away from the window. He started to cry. He remembered when he first called his mother and broke the news that he had gotten a job with the Beatlemania: The Sound Alike Show of the Century. How proud she was and how convinced that this would make him a star. In fact he was the closest thing to a star that Sandy

Point, Nova Scotia had ever produced. So much so that when he went home to visit, they held a parade in his honour. In actuality it was two cars decked in pink bunting and they don't sell bunting in Sandy Point. For that you had to go to Yarmouth. So when he was picked up at the bus station, bedecked in pink bunting and driven to his mother's place, the idea that this was a full blown parade was already alive in Brian's mind. The fact that several people waved along the way home only sealed the deal. So of course with time and every telling of the story, the number of cars rose and the crowds watching became more expansive and the parade took on a life of its own. Like many in the arts, revisionism played a huge role in Brian's success.

What a wonderful feeling it had been when he first started. Performing was a joy, the travel was mind opening and his new status was rewarding both spiritually and materially. Slowly it changed though. Ticket sales began to flag and the crowds became less so. Officially no one made much of it but behind the scenes rumours were flying. Everyone talked openly about the possibility of replacements. A new McCartney and a new Lennon. Actors who could play all the stages of their lives. That would certainly save some money, having to employ fewer Lennons and McCartneys. In fact when Mick Jagger was asked what he thought about the idea, he said the world would be better off with less Lennons and McCartneys so there was certainly an appetite for a reduced cast.

Then came the bombshell. A change that no one could have predicted. They hired a Mark David Chapman look-a-like. He didn't do anything really, he just stood on the side of the stage, holding his autograph book and staring at the band while being very visible and of course people loved it. To be honest, he didn't look at the entire band he just stared at the Lennons. He never said anything, he'd just stood there motionless. Once in a while he'd make a half hearted wave or

formed the hint of a smile. Everyone on stage found it uncomfortable but the audience revelled in the anticipation of what might happen next.

After the show people would line up to get the Mark David Chapman look-a-like's autograph. Long lines queued up to get his autograph while fewer and fewer choose to stand in line for Brian's. Brian however consoled himself with the belief that this popularity was a novelty and would wane. In time, he thought, people would grow tired and the Mark David Chapman look-a-like would be retired.

In the meantime he did try to get to know this new member of the cast but that proved difficult. The best description that Brian could give to anyone about his personality was that he was 'polite and quiet' and as any cop will tell you, those are two traits to be avoided at all costs. As Brian had guessed, the novelty soon wore off and ticket sales started to drop. Again rumours of change were rife but no one in management communicated their thoughts. Everyone it seemed was on edge. Johnny Nicola started to drink. Heavily. Some nights it's got so bad he can barely walk. Then one night while on stage, Brian noticed the Mark David Chapman look-a-like with what appeared to be a bulge under his coat. Not too large but noticeable. And as sales dropped further and further, the bulge under his coat seemed to grow bigger and bigger.

In the autograph sessions instead of signing, he now stood in line with the audience. He'd get in one of the Lennon's lines, obtain an autograph and then go re-join the line at the rear ad infinitum. Nothing however could stem the falling ticket sales. Then last night, while Johnny Nicola was on stage Brian heard a bang. Like a car back firing or a balloon bursting and Brian looked out on stage only to see Jimmy stagger and fall off the edge into the crowd. In the

confusion people were screaming. He couldn't tell if it was an accident or something else. So he ran back to the dressing room to where Pete was, to tell him but when he got there, the door was locked. He knocked and knocked and knocked but no answer. Then it hit him. The look-a-like, the bulge under the arm, the bang. So he got in his car and drove. He drove and drove until finally he saw a sign from God: stay I n it said. And that's just what he decided to do.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Brian jumped. It came again. Still he didn't go to the source.

"It's me Carl. The guy from the front desk," said the voice behind the door.

Brian crept to the door and opened it a crack.

"You okay?" the voice asked him.

"Fine."

"A while ago the people next to you complained about some crashes. I'da been here sooner but I had to start to get the breakfast room ready. You know for breakfast."

"It wasn't me. I've been asleep," said Brian.

"Oh." There was a silence. "You comin' for breakfast?"

"Why?"

"Thought I'd give you another chance. In case you wanted to break the pattern of predetermination. Also I need to figure out how many tables I should clean."

"You don't clean all the tables?"

"I jus' clean what's needed. So what about breakfast?"

"I'll pass."

"I think this might jus' be the nail in the coffin for free will. Oh well." Carl started to move away but stopped. He turned back and stared at Brian's face. At least the part of it he could see through

the crack between the door and its jamb. “You know you look like someone. I’ve been tryin’ to figure it out all night and it finally came to me...you look like that dead English guy.”

“I think you’ve got me confused with someone else.”

“I figured that. What with him bein’ dead an’ all” and with that Carl walked away. Brian closed the door and sat back down on the bed. He turned on the TV. As the picture started to flicker into focus, he closed his eyes. A close up of a photo of Johnny Nicola now filled the screen. But Brian didn’t see Johnny. Once his eyes closed, he started to drift off and within a few minutes he was fast asleep.

Again there was a crash outside his door but this time he didn’t wake. This time he didn’t go to the window and look out. This time he didn’t see the rain or the sign and most importantly he didn’t not see anyone who might be a threat lurking about. This time he slept. For better or for worse he slept as his door knob began to turn.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Normally I start with an idea and work the narrative until a theme emerges organically. I grew up a big John Lennon fan. I was a little late for the Beatles but when did I start to consume music, Abbey Road was the first record I bought and was then bowled over by Lennon’s first 2 solo releases. However it wasn’t just the music that intrigued me. When I discovered Lennon’s writing, I was captivated. In His Own Write and A Spaniard in the Works were very influential by showing alternative ways that stories could be told and how words could be used in nonconventional manner and still support your narrative. In addition his rather dark sense of humour always appealed to me. From there it was only a stone’s throw to Monty Python, Lewis Carroll, N.F. Simpson, Edward Lear, Beyond the Fringe...*

With A Shot at Fame, one of the themes that materialized while I was working through the story was the idea of the cult of celebrity. It’s particularly pertinent today as so many people seem to be willing to do anything to be grab a few rays of the spotlight. They’ll happily be exploited and humiliated just to be on TV or youtube or whatever medium that’s available. In this story the protagonist sees his mimicking of another artist’s work as a perfectly justifiable reason for him to be famous. Even though he is not responsible for the creation of any of the work he performs and his performance can never be as good as the original, it doesn’t matter to him or the audience that attends the concerts. Like so much of popular culture it is a victory of spectacle over substance.

BIO: *Originally from Halifax, Dave studied drama at Dalhousie University before moving to Toronto and working as an actor and improviser including a stint with Second City and a radio show on CBC. In the last couple of years, he has turned his hand to writing plays. He's had numerous scripts featured in the Toronto Cold Reads and Store Front Theatre's Sing For Your Supper play reading series. His plays have been performed in the Short, Short Play Festival in Toronto, Unit 102's Operation 24, Pittsburgh's New Works Festival, The Newmarket National Ten Minute Play Festival, Buffalo's The Road Less Traveled Festival, Alumnae Theatre's New Ideas Festival and at the Red Sandcastle Theatre in Toronto. Most recently his play 'True Love and the Precise Nature of Miracles' was part of the National One Act Play Festival in November. He sincerely hopes you enjoy his latest work, a short story called A Shot at Fame.*