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## Nosebleed

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# Nosebleed

Paul Heinz

When Abby announced her engagement to Lenny, it led to what we now refer to as The Confrontation, a full-blown war of words that stemmed less from her announcement and more from a lyric I'd written under a deadline about ten years earlier, a lyric that fit a particular mood of a particular character in a particular film. It had nothing to do with anything, but that didn't stop my daughter from using the words against me after I'd voiced some concerns (not "objections," the word she'd use) about her engagement to Lenny, though you couldn't have blamed me if I HAD objected. The guy was clearly a buffoon.

"You wrote it, Dad. Not me," she said that day.

"About a character in a movie, Abby. Not..."

"You can't have it both ways. Remember? You said there's always truth to a lyric, there's always heart behind it, no matter what the subject matter is."

Leave it to Abby. Not only was she insistent on using my lyric against me, but also my long-held belief that even the most cynical songwriter—the guy who'd compose a song about raping his mother if it led to a paycheck—can't write a lyric without some grain of truth, without some internal compass leading the way. I've spent hours deliberating this point with my fellow composer and friend, Randy Newman, an Oscar winner, hit-maker and all-around musical genius (much to my dismay). Randy's big on writing songs "in character," and nothing I say can budge him from his conviction that there's nothing personal when he writes words like "I just want you to hurt like I do" or "Darling take off your dress, yes, yes, you can leave your hat on." To me, there's something there, something inside him that allows him to feel the things he writes about. And when he piles on the schmaltz in movies like *Avalon* and *Toy Story* and *The Natural*, I don't believe he's just giving the director what he wants. Not by a long shot. I believe he really feels the sense of loss of the first, the joy of the second and the majesty of the third.

I've shared this philosophy with Abby over the years, again and again in various little ways, which virtually guaranteed that she would one day fall in love and then blame me for it.

The lyric she kept referring to during our disagreement was taken from a bad PG movie in 1996, a bad year for movies in general, and I contributed to two duds that year. While Randy was composing terrific scores for *Michael* and *James and the Giant Peach*, I was trudging through the forgettable themes to *Nosebleed* and *Cincinnati or Bust*. Never heard of them? I'm not surprised, but all I can offer in my defense is that I truly didn't know how I was going to pay my mortgage that year.

In *Nosebleed*, a forty year-old TV Executive named Marshall still lives with his mother, played by none other than Lauren Bacall, who had apparently contracted an illness that kept her from being able to tell a crap script from a good script. Even *I* knew it was crap. Maybe she just needed the cash as much as I did.

(A side note: at the film premiere in New York, Bacall is reported to have said to a friend, loud enough to be picked up by several of my acquaintances, “Well, at least the score wasn’t awful.” And as backhanded as her comment was, it actually lifted my spirits, because the film was THAT BAD.)

In the movie, Marshall and his mother go through the usual silliness you’ve seen in films like *Mother* which, I’m sad to say, was released that same year to decent reviews and an Oscar nomination for Debbie Reynolds. (Lauren received no such honor, nor did I nor anyone else associated with *Nosebleed*, though the film did manage to squeeze—or should I say flow?—into the tail end of several critics’ “Top Ten Worst Movies Of The Year.”) Marshall’s big hang-up? He suffers from nosebleeds. Bad ones. He’s got a deviated septum, and his nosebleeds occur without warning. At a low point in the film one spouts while he’s making love to a voluptuous blond on her brand-new and (naturally) white sofa. I called the music for this section, “I Bleed For You,” and it included my favorite passage from the score: a violin ascending, signifying the heightened sexual energy and impending orgasm, with a tenor sax descending, signifying the flow of blood onto the woman’s stomach.

Near the film’s end a caterer becomes romantically involved with Marshall despite the obvious downsides. (Roger Ebert wrote in his review, “Mercifully, the film does have an end, and like all nosebleeds, not a moment too soon.”) She stands at the edge of a river and ponders her commitment to our nose-bleeding protagonist. A piano plays lightly in the background in three-four time—the best time signature for sentimental songs—and while the caterer looks inward to examine her heart, an unseen female voice sings softly in the background:

*You must not reflect*

*You must react*

*To keep the feelings you have intact*

*Never let your mind*

*Swallow your heart*

*And keep two lovers apart*

And THAT'S the lyric. THAT little piece of banal crap that I wrote while half in the bag a few hours after Shirley announced that she was leaving me—THAT'S the lyric Abby held me to over a decade later when she argued that she and Lenny were meant for each other and how lots of people have married after only a few months of dating.

“And besides,” she said to me that day. “We love each other.”

“Yes, well...”

“Well what?”

“That’s great. You love each other. That’s a good starting point. But you’ve lost sight of the finish line.”

Yes, I know, but why should my everyday dialogue be any more interesting than my lyrics? Even Randy isn’t all that impressive when you speak to him, and some of his lyrics are lame. But every once in a while the heavens bestow upon the guy a stroke of genius, and schmucks like me are left to play Salieri to his Amadeus, all jealous and woeful and pathetic, while he attends Oscar parties and wines and dines with the Pixar guys (who, incidentally, are a lot less fun than you might think).

But what I meant when I said that Abby had lost sight of the finish line, but what I didn’t dare say because I knew how good I had it with Shirley and I wasn’t about to mess it up like I had before, was that marriage is tough. Tougher than all the dates you’ve ever fumbled, tougher than all the rejections you’ve ever received from job interviews, tougher than all the medical examinations you’ve endured, tougher than the time you came in your pants before she even had her shirt off, tougher than the bullies who called you faggot in school, tougher than the review in the *Los Angeles Times* that read, “Someone needs to remind composer Peter Chamberlin that while the drip technique may have worked in a visual medium for Jackson Pollock, musical notes need to be considered more carefully,” tougher than all the tough moments you’ve ever endured in a lifetime. That’s how tough marriage is. And Randy would back me up on this one, I know, as he’s on his second marriage but still thinks about how things went wrong with his first. (He has a song called “I Miss You,” and when he plays it in concerts, he announces, “This is a song I wrote for my first wife while I was married to my second wife—scared ‘em both!”)

But Abby didn’t see that. She didn’t see what I saw in Lenny: that he wasn’t as polite as he should be, and how that indicated a lack of respect that would eventually manifest itself in other ways. A small thing, perhaps, but I examined Abby’s future through a telescope while she carried on viewing it through Coke bottles.

We argued, and she shoved my song lyric back at me and said, “You

know you believe this. You should let your heart guide you and not your head. You've told me about how you wanted to be a serious composer and how you let the Dollar Almighty guide you instead—that you were scared and overanalyzed everything. You told me all this a thousand times. Well, I'm not going to make the same mistakes you did.”

But she did. She did because she married Lenny for the very same reasons I married her mother: for reasons of the heart. And it didn't make life any easier. My marriage had very nearly ended during my scoring for *Nosebleed* when Abby was only eleven years old, the heart be damned. And I guess that's the upshot, but one I failed to articulate to Abby that day, that whether you live your life according to your heart or according to your head, life's going to humble you and make you second guess whatever decisions you've made. That's what life does. It humbles you. And I believe—and I get no pleasure from saying this—that my daughter would agree with that statement today.

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Shirley left me, but not because of anything specific. There were no—what's the word Hollywood insiders use?—transgressions. No call girls. No blow jobs in limousines. She had simply become unhappy, and as soon as I finished the score to *Nosebleed*, I spent the next two months convincing her to give us another chance. I knew I couldn't possibly function without her, an unromantic notion I know, but believe me when I say that I've never wanted anyone other than Shirley to walk with me through the cesspool of existence. That's gotta be worth something.

As for Abby, well, she and I hadn't always had such a contentious relationship. I was a good dad, and even now when we reminisce a bit, as we are prone to do since Shirley died, Abby follows her mother's example by recalling the good times. Just recently, she and I talked about the night I'd taken her to my one and only visit to the Academy Awards. Yes, the Academy Awards. That tarnished tool of self-promotion. That showcase for the mainstream, all glitter and fashion, stretched skin and bulging implants. A ritual that ignores the genius of so many, that matters not one iota to a man with one iota of dignity.

And yet...

What can I tell you? I have no dignity. I want to be recognized. Even if I score crap movies, I want the score to be appreciated, rising above the sarcastic compliments by the likes of Lauren Bacall.

I got the Oscar nod when Abby was fourteen, after I'd been trudging through the movie industry for over a decade. Though I was excited, my enthusiasm was curtailed because the truth was that the nomination had nothing to do with my score for *Love at the Diner* and had everything to do with a song written by a young composer named Charles Goodwin. He hasn't been heard from since, but

his uncle happened to be directing the film and pulled a few strings. (How else does anything get accomplished in Hollywood?) The movie didn't do much, but the song, a clever little ditty that compared falling in love to eating the perfect cheeseburger—I know what you're thinking, but it worked, I tell you—was all the rage for that fleeting month or so leading up to the Oscar nominations, and that's all it takes to enter the conscience of the Academy. Charlie got the nomination for his song, and I, riding his coattails all the way, received a nomination for best score.

The Academy called at some ungodly hour, and I asked several clarifying questions just in case it was Randy pulling a prank. Afterwards, I nudged Shirley in bed and said, "Darling, wake up and brush your teeth. We've got to make love. Now." It had been three years since I'd won her back, and probably as long since we'd had sex in the morning, but Shirley was willing to accommodate my desire in light of the circumstances.

We agreed that I would take Abby to the ceremony; it would be impossible to leave a fourteen year old girl at home on Oscar night. I still remember how striking Abby looked as we headed off to the Shrine Auditorium, and she couldn't have been giddier that evening, all love-struck over the various heartthrobs at every turn, Jude Law being the highlight for her. Hell, even I was in awe of some of these guys, but Abby stole the show. She looked so amazing sitting beside me in her black dress and her hair that resembled a giant pin cushion, seeming to defy gravity with a complex construction of dozens of intersecting hair thingies. She was truly turning into what every father of a teenage girl feared: a beauty.

I had another fear: that I'd lose to that goofy marimba score for *American Beauty*, written by none other than Randy's cousin, Thomas, but instead I lost to *The Red Violin*. That, to me, was acceptable, even though it broke Abby's heart. If you watch a tape of the ceremonies (I've got a copy backed up by another copy, in case you're interested), Abby's face appears fleetingly on the screen as her head bends over into my lapel when the winner is announced. I spent the rest of the show consoling her.

And Charles's trendy song? That lost too, as did Randy Newman's song for *Toy Story 2*. I gotta believe Randy's loss stung more than mine; he'd just lost his thirteenth Oscar nomination without a win, this time to Phil Collins.

\*                                 \*                                 \*

The day before my deadline for *Nosebleed*, I had an awful run-through of the score with the director. Every nuance—instrumentation, tempo...hell, even volume—was argued measure by measure as if the guy was the second coming of Leonard Bernstein. In the end, we negotiated an agreement to everything except the finale. I'd written an instrumental, but he was insistent that I compose a song with lyrics even if it wasn't what the scene required. What did I care? The movie

was going to be a bust anyhow. Just write a song, I told myself. I spent that afternoon at home, bashing out chords on the Baldwin, trying to come up with something, ANYTHING, that could give the film's end that resounding lift it needed, but I just couldn't get the song finished.

And that was when Shirley came in. I could tell something was on her mind, and I imagined the worst thing she could say to me—that she was pregnant with quintuplets, that she'd just murdered our cleaning lady—but she one-upped my morose imagination by announcing our separation.

“You're telling me this now? I've got a 9AM deadline tomorrow morning, and you're telling me you're leaving?”

“I've been putting this off for weeks, Peter. Months actually. This isn't easy. It took a lot of courage for me to finally...”

“Yeah, loads of courage.”

I wanted to say to her then and there that I couldn't live without her, but I was so overwhelmed with work and self-pity, it took all the energy I had not to call her something awful, to utter a remark so acerbic that I'd never be able to take it back. I clenched my fists and let her leave, but on her way out Shirley said, “Who knows, Peter. Maybe this will give you the inspiration you need to finish your score.”

And I'll be damned if she wasn't right! And here's the fact that still eats away at me today, cell by cell, causing me grief even when I'm feeling good: her announcement to leave me inspired the song that ultimately lifted my spirits and my senses to win her back, but would later be used by my daughter to justify marrying a loser. All these years Abby has used my lyrics against me, but she's never held accountable the person who inspired them.

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By the grace of God, I won Shirley back and experienced eleven amazing years with her. And then she died, unjustly, painfully, too quick to enjoy her last months on Earth, but too slow not to suffer. Cardiac failure due to pulmonary hypertension. The lasting image for me, other than holding her hand and weeping and thanking her for taking me back and making my life so wonderful, is the blood. We'd been enjoying a lazy afternoon curled up on the couch, setting aside the fear and sadness we'd been dealt, when Shirley experienced a coughing fit, so rough and jagged, like gravel grinding, that blood splattered into her hands and onto her shirt. The sight of it so terrified me that I began to wail before I even reached the kitchen to call 911, and this is the vision that keeps me up at night, the horrific episode branded on my brain, permanent and sharp.

And Abby. My darling Abby. She lost her mother, and two months later

filed for divorce. She's so strong. Me, I would have clung onto a shitty marriage just as a buffer from insanity and loneliness and grief. But not Abby. She told Lenny to fuck off, and I said nothing, absolutely nothing. But that was part of the problem.

\* \* \*

I finally found a job after two years of moping around and claiming to be writing a symphony, but really just plucking out a few notes here and there and ordering lots of Chinese takeout. It's not easy to get back in the game when you were never a starting player to begin with. But it turns out that there's a young hot-shot who's fascinated with the work I did in *Nosebleed*, and he's hired me to score a half-hour anime series for the Cartoon Network. We've only talked generalities so far: mood, instrumentation, and the like, but I think we'll work well together. It's a long way from the symphony I dreamed of composing one day for the New York Philharmonic, but it's a living.

After receiving the job offer, I felt so good that I decided to drive to Sunset and grab a bite to eat. I found this perfect little place near Larrabee, a wine bar with tables and candles and a two person band of guitar and bongos, but then it sank in that while the atmosphere was electric, I was alone, and it wasn't the type of place where I could hide in a corner. The hostess asked if I'd like to be seated, and I told her I was waiting for someone. I didn't know who the hell to call, but the first name I scrolled through was Randy's.

"Are you crazy?" he said after I asked him to meet me. "I can't just leave."

"Come on. You know I can't eat out alone."

"Then why eat out?"

"I feel like celebrating. I've got a job."

"Congratulations. Doing what?"

"COMPOSING, Randy. I'm a composer, remember?"

I could tell he was enjoying this. He gave a little chuckle. "Hey, that's great. I just talked to the Pixar guys last week. I think I'm in for next year's release."

"Oh." I didn't feel like celebrating anymore. "I suspect that'll pay a bit better than the Cartoon Network, huh?"

"Sorry, pal. It's a tough business. I've got bills to pay."

"Well, fuck, Randy! You think I don't? Look, can't you at least come out

with me? We can go to that one sushi bar. It's the least you can do after one-upping me."

"There's no way I'm schlepping to Sunset."

"But you love L.A. You immortalized the goddamn place!"

"It's a song, Peter. You know I'd sell my soul and your soul for a song."

It was hopeless. I bid farewell to my friend and then called Abby, and yes, it pains me now to say I thought of her second. She turned me down too, having just arrived home from work. She's employed at an independent studio that specializes in computer animation, and she works incredibly long hours. But still...

"Come on, Abby. I really want to see you."

"You do not. You just don't want to be alone and you called me as a security blanket."

"That's not fair, honey. I'd love to see you."

"Who did you call before you called me?"

"No one, I swear."

"Dad, I'm going to have to take a rain check, okay?"

I swallowed my disappointment. "Okay. Listen, if you change your mind I'll be at that sushi place we went to that one time."

"You're not going to the wine bar?"

"The tables are too big. It's too open. I'll be better off sitting at the sushi bar and kind of hiding."

"Oh Dad!"

"Sorry, Darling. Your father's too insecure to eat alone. That's the way it is."

I left the dimly lit wine bar and went out into the spastic bustle of Sunset Boulevard, past the tourists and rollicking thunder of music rumbling out of clubs, and made my way to the sushi restaurant. I saddled up to the far corner of the bar, which was perfect, because I hate sitting in the middle and having people on both sides of me. Shirley used to humor me and let me sit on the end of a table when we went out even if it meant her having to sit next to someone she didn't really know.

I ordered a Saki and plowed through a pile of edamame, and then spotted Abby entering the restaurant. God, she looked so beautiful, and the sight of her lifted my spirits like a toy to a child on Christmas morning. She appeared almost luminescent with the setting sun spraying through the windows behind her, and with each step she took toward me, the glow faded until she became once again an ordinary person, but one who'll never look ordinary to me.

"You're tough to say no to," she said, kissing me on the cheek.

"You were in the clear. What changed your mind?"

"Mom."

"Oh."

"I just thought of what I'd give to have her call me and ask me out to dinner. And I'm grateful that you're still here."

We chatted for a while about our jobs, and Abby quoted a couple of lines from the new Vince Vaughn movie and I laughed along, not because the lines were funny, but because of the total enjoyment I had watching her enjoy herself. It had been a while. There was a pause at some point, and in my emotional state, I just sort of blurted it out, as sincerely as I've ever said anything in my life.

"Abby, I wish it had worked out between you and Lenny. I really do."

She appeared shocked. "Where did that come from?"

"I don't know. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately."

Her eyes grew soft as she picked at the shells of edamame. "Thanks," she said, clearly wanting to say more, but deciding to choose the less confrontational route.

"And I'm sorry my song inspired you to get married in the first place."

She smirked. "Yeah, well, I could use it against you, and that was half the fun. We really had it out, didn't we?"

"We sure did."

"Poor Lenny. He never stood a chance with you."

"He didn't respect you."

"I think it was more that he didn't respect YOU the way you thought he should. You have these crazy social norms that no one can live up to."

“Oh, come on.”

“How would he know, for example, that it’s the person already IN a room who should be the one to greet the person entering a room?”

I had to smile, because damn it, she was dead right on this one.

“See? You admit it.” Her tone was that of a mild admonishment, like I’d just spilled my drink on the living room carpet. “He didn’t introduce himself properly, and that was it as far as you were concerned.”

“There were other things,” I said.

“Like?”

“He didn’t help clear the table.”

“The guy could have cured cancer and solved the debt crisis and it wouldn’t have made a bit of difference. Now, if he had written a hit SONG on the other hand? That might have softened you up.”

I liked the way she was standing firm, getting a few digs in, but doing it in a playful way that would allow both of us to go home tonight without anger. She’d grown up a great deal these past two years. I hoped I had too.

“So do you believe any of it now?” she asked.

“What?”

“Your lyrics. Following the heart. All that.”

“Do you?”

“A lot less than I used to.”

I finished my drink. “I still believe it. But I’ll tell you, it doesn’t make life any easier.” Abby’s eyes sagged a bit, clearly in need of sleep. “You gonna eat?” I asked.

“No.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

We weaved around the tables and I held the front door open for Abby, but as I did, a big guy with tight pants pushed the other side of the door with force to spare, and the glass struck me square in the nose so hard, I doubled over as if to duck from the stars that now circled my head. The guy said something, but it was all garbled to me, the stinging sensation apparently blocking my wherewithal

to understand the spoken word. Still bent over, I opened my eyes just quick enough to see the blood, and without any conscious thought, my mental jukebox kicked in and started playing the tune I'd written for *Nosebleed*, that god-awful farce of a song. I almost started laughing, but just then a towel arrived and pinched my nose.

“Ow!”

“Dad, straighten up. You’re dripping all over the floor.”

“Listen. I can hold it, for Chrissake.”

“Okay. Hold it like...no, tighter! That’s it.”

She led me outside and I felt an urgent need to sit down. I braced myself against the brick wall of the restaurant and let go of the towel.

“Dad! What are you...?”

“I’m going to faint.”

“Okay. Here. Just...”

It was a mess, but I managed to lower myself to the sidewalk and lean against the wall while Abby reapplied the towel to my nose. And the song in my head got louder and louder...

*You must not reflect*

*You must react*

*To keep the feelings you have intact*

And I’ll be damned, but the song started to REACH me. Is that even possible? Isn’t that like trying to tickle yourself? My own goddamn song MOVED me, for Chrissakes. I started to get all weepy. Oh, Randy would get a laugh out of that one, the guy who doesn’t believe anything he’s writing, who can turn on the melodrama when hired to do so, but not actually FEEL any of it. Well, to hell with it, then! I WANT to feel what I write. And I WANT to follow my heart. Fucking sue me for the cliché.

Abby crouched down beside me and squeezed my nose, and I started blubbering like a drunk.

“Dad? Are you crying?”

There was no need to answer.

“It’s okay. Just sit tight and I’ll help you get home.”

“I’m sorry Abby,” I said, sounding like a drunk Pee-wee Herman.

“For what?”

“For not supporting you. You and Lenny. And then...and then not really helping when you left him. I was all messed up about mom and...and not finding work. And writing shit for a living when I do.”

Yeah, I was making it all about me again. I’m my favorite subject.

“It’s okay, Dad.”

“No. Here. Let me grab that. I’m okay now.” I held the towel to my nose. “I’m just really sorry. I...”

“Holy Christ. What the hell happened?” I lifted my chin to find Randy towering over me, looking as disheveled as ever, hunched over awkwardly, like he was posing for a photo shoot with pins holding his clothes together.

“Randy?”

“Hey, Abby. Wonderful to see you.”

She threw me a look that read, “You called RANDY before you called ME?”

“Christ,” Randy said. “I thought you’d been shot. There’s blood everywhere.”

“A deviated septum, I believe,” I managed to snort.

“That sounds familiar. Saw it in a movie once. A real winner.”

This was all I needed. Abby pulled at me and I sort of shimmied up the side of the wall until I faced Randy.

“It was a hell of a score, though,” he added.

Nice of him to say so, but I knew better. “I thought you couldn’t leave.”

“I thought so too, but...you know. The wife asked who called and yelled at me for not meeting you out.” He gave me the once over. “You gonna make it?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, let’s get a drink,” he said, and I began to walk back toward the sushi restaurant before Randy said, “No, no. Not in there. You look like hell.

We gotta find a dive somewhere.”

While Randy shuffled to my right, Abby slid her hand around my left arm, and I pinned her against me so that I could really feel her. I needed human contact, and it felt good that I was holding something Shirley had helped to create. It was Shirley’s blood pulsing through Abby’s veins. I glanced down at my stained shirt, just like the stained shirt Shirley had worn that day in our living room. And I thought about the blood. Oh Christ Almighty, I thought about the blood.