

Your Place in This World

by

Jake La Botz

“Tommy, you got a Bardo?”

“Washington, Ramirez, Pucinski. Yep, we got him.”

A laugh from behind startles Steve. The joy in it reminds him of his Mom. He was only four when she died, but he remembers her voice — how playful and musical it was. “Pure country,” people used to say. Nothing like the hard Chicago talk — with rocks in the consonants and the threat of throwing them at you in the vowels — that came out of his father, Ernie, and everyone else in the neighborhood.

Steve turns and sees a man in tatters mumbling between giggles — searching the walls as if he’s lost something there.

“Hey you, warming center’s down the block. Get moving,” the desk sergeant orders.

The laughing man’s eyes land on Steve as he moves toward the door. The two rest their gaze on each other a moment before the man begins giggling again and walks out. Eager to hear more of the joyful laughter, Steve almost follows him.

“Bail is two bills. Got that on you?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, pulling a wad out of his pocket.

The desk sergeant accepts the rubber-banded roll and eyeballs the boy.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Steve Bardo.”

“Let’s see some I.D. Why aren’t you in school, anyways?”

There had been a birth certificate a long time ago. Steve saw it once when he was little. Baby Boy Bardo, it said on it. He thought it was a special document — one just for babies, to show what sex they were. He figured the real one would come when he was older. Truth was his parents never legally named him, though his Mom had started calling him Steve after seeing the Steve McQueen movie Bullit. Before that it was either “the kid” or Ernie’s favorite — an initialism from the birth certificate — “Triple B,” or just “TB.”

“I got a pass from the principal,” Steve says, handing the sergeant a note written by Ernie’s girlfriend, Loraine.

The sergeant reads the bogus letter, shakes his head, and asks, “Which school you go to?”

“Schneider,” Steve answers, hesitatingly.

“Who’s your homeroom teacher?”

“Mr. Napoli.”

Within his first month at Schneider it became clear to his teachers that Steve couldn’t keep up with classwork. As such he’d earned the label “learning disability” and was moved from Mr. Napoli’s room to a special class in the basement which didn’t have a regular homeroom teacher. Kids of different ages, from fifth to eighth grade, were in the basement class for special reasons too. Besides the learning disabilities there were “bilinguals,” who came from foreign countries and couldn’t speak much English, and “social adjustments,” who yelled a lot and sometimes threw chairs. Steve understood the bilinguals needed English, but it wasn’t clear to him what the rest of them were supposed to be learning.

“Pull the guy, Tommy,” the sergeant says resignedly, handing the roll of cash to a younger cop and returning to his desk.

“Your count is off by three bucks,” the young cop says.

Steve pretend searches his pants for the three dollars he’d hoped would go unnoticed. The young cop smiles at the would-be con.

“You gotta find your place in this world, kid. Otherwise the wrong kinda place’ll find you. Catch my drift?” The cop says.

Steve moves to the window and watches the heavy snowfall turn parked cars on Western Ave. into white lumps. The clang of a metal door a few minutes later lets him know his dad is on the way.

“If I see your kid here again I’m calling DCFS,” the young cop says to Ernie as he marches him into the lobby.

“I hear you, officer. I’m going back to A.A. anyways,” Ernie says, with a wink aimed at Steve.

Ernie had brought the kid along to his court-ordered A.A. meetings a year earlier. Steve thought the church basement groups were like social adjustments or learning disabilities for grownups.

Whatever it was they were supposed to be learning down there, Ernie wasn’t getting it. But Steve had come to realize something important sitting in the bowels of God’s house: there were different floors for different folks, and he and Ernie belonged on the bottom. They were basement people — not meant to be upstairs praying in the real church, studying in the real school, or working in the real office. Though he understood well enough which floor he belonged to, Steve still didn’t know how to fit in down there. Ernie, on the other hand — whether he was in the hole at the state pen, living in a dingy cellar “between places,” or sitting in a church basement sipping coffee — was a bonafide basement dweller who knew how to engage in every aspect of lower level life.

“I knew you’d come through for the ol’ man, Triple B,” Ernie says with a canned laugh, as he steers his son toward the door.

Over time, though, Steve came to believe that nobody truly fit in with anybody anywhere in this world. It didn’t matter if they were basement people, upstairs people, or even penthouse people. What gave it away was the huge amount of effort they put into acting and sounding the same as the others. He’d seen it on the streets, at school, and A.A., with grownups and kids alike. The tight boundaries of a given group — its permissible and prohibited words and actions — always made Steve nervous. But the most painful thing, the one that clued him in every time, was the fake laughter.

“Got any cash left?” Ernie asks as they leave the precinct.

Steve shakes his head.

“Fuck. I’m dog sick. Loraine’s ass better be out on the street.”

As they pass the warming center Steve runs to the door and looks inside.

“They got coffee and rolls,” he says.

“Grab ‘em quick, TB. We gotta get moving.”



Jake La Botz is a touring musician and meditation teacher. His songs, and sometimes acting, have been featured in film and television, including *True Detective*, *Shameless*, *Rambo* (yes, *Rambo*) and more. La Botz’s fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The Inquisitive Eater*, *Metonym Literary Journal*, and *The Museum of Americana*.