

A scene from the play
Asking Strangers About
The Meaning Of Life

(2 person, any variation)

(Writing professor's office.)

(The STUDENT is now a mature college writer. Enter an unkept vehement writing PROFESSOR.)

PROFESSOR

Congratulations! This is the best statement of purpose I've ever read.

STUDENT

Worked long and hard.

PROFESSOR

I think all of our students should read about how you finally realized that the world wasn't going to accommodate you, how you embraced existentialism, took responsibility and found meaning. Inspirational.

STUDENT

(Hopeful)

So... I'm accepted into your writing program?

PROFESSOR

The best creative writing MFA in the world.

STUDENT

Wow.

PROFESSOR

But...

STUDENT

But?

PROFESSOR

There *is* a problem. Your short story.

STUDENT

Didn't like it?

PROFESSOR

It's perfect.

STUDENT

Perfect?

Yes!

PROFESSOR

So... I am accepted?

STUDENT

If.

PROFESSOR

If?

STUDENT

If you admit it's all bullshit.

PROFESSOR

Excuse me?

STUDENT

What you've written is bullshit. All storytelling is bullshit.

PROFESSOR

STUDENT
(*Confused*)

Professor, I want to write great stories that right social wrongs and inspire people to be better people.

PROFESSOR

You do know novels, movies, poems are *just* words, right?

STUDENT

But those words add up to life.

PROFESSOR

No, they're just a bunch of crap writers make up. In real life there are no satisfying narratives, no neatly packed happy endings, no gift-wrapped love. Do you know the number one reason for mental illness?

STUDENT

Our screwed up society?

PROFESSOR

Writers. Screenwriters, novelists, song writers. They spend their lives confabulating beginnings, middles and ends.

STUDENT

But life *does* have a beginning middle and end.

PROFESSOR

But it doesn't add up to a plot. Life is ragged, complicated, sordid, inconsistent and piled with a shocking number of tangents. But above all, do you know what life is?

STUDENT

What?

PROFESSOR

Inconclusive.

STUDENT

You're kinda rocking my world here. I need stories.

PROFESSOR

And they make us paranoid.

STUDENT

That too?

PROFESSOR

What does every story have? A threat, a complication, or a conflict. Read enough and you begin to think that's also true in real life.

STUDENT

But that *is* true in real life.

PROFESSOR

No, real life doesn't have that much in the way of conflict. Most of our troubles are borrowed. And the troubles and conflicts that do exist, we can avoid if we give it a little thought. Unlike the characters in stories.

STUDENT

But we learn from great characters.

PROFESSOR

What great characters? Name one.

STUDENT

Ah. Ah. King Lear.

PROFESSOR

What can you learn from King Lear? He was a rotten father and a shitty administrator.

STUDENT

Hamlet.

PROFESSOR

Would you hire Hamlet as a crime scene investigator?

STUDENT

We're supposed to learn from their errors. Great writers can teach us.

PROFESSOR

Writers are horrible people. If they were good people they wouldn't be writers.

STUDENT

Some are good.

PROFESSOR

Name one.

STUDENT

I like Simone de Beauvoir.

PROFESSOR

She seduced innocent girls and passed them off to Sartre who broke their hearts and dumped them.

STUDENT

Sylvia Plath.

PROFESSOR

Mood swings, impulse control issues, couldn't operate ovens.

STUDENT

Franz Kafka.

PROFESSOR

A paranoid nut with delusions of persecution.

STUDENT

Confucius.

PROFESSOR

Wasn't nice to his wife and children.

STUDENT

Buddha.

PROFESSOR

Abandoned his wife and children.

STUDENT

I still think writers and stories are important.

PROFESSOR

After going to the theatre, you go home and your wife disappoints because she's not as attractive as the actress up on stage. Read a novel and you realize that your husband isn't as exciting as the muscular hero dashing through the pages. And so you become depressed because we don't know that all stories are written for children.

STUDENT

All?

PROFESSOR

All.

STUDENT

'War and Peace.'

PROFESSOR

Children's story.

STUDENT

'Emma.'

PROFESSOR

Children's story.

STUDENT

'The Bible.'

PROFESSOR

Young adult fiction.

STUDENT

Obviously this MFA program is not for me.

(The STUDENT turns.)

PROFESSOR

You know I'm right.

STUDENT

Do not.

PROFESSOR

Do you know when I and you and everyone made this discovery?

STUDENT

Everyone?

PROFESSOR

When we were forced to shelter in place. From our solitary confinement, our time out, we saw that the distractions that make up our lives were just that, distractions. And the illusion of story: getting up, going to work, coming home, socializing, obligations, hierarchies, departmental feuds, bullshit-filled breakout sessions, were all taken away. What was left? Our 'self,' sitting in front of our computers not wearing pants. Suddenly we came face-to-face with the plotless reality that is life.

STUDENT

So, I should stop reading? Stop going to movies?

PROFESSOR

No, enjoy a good book. See movies, laugh, cry, but if you're looking for some overarching structure to untangle the ragged, complicated, paradoxical, joyful inconsistency that is life, you'll be disappointed. You can only find meaning when you admit that you will not defeat your enemies in this lifetime. Virtue will not always be rewarded. The shining prince seldom arrives in the nick of time. And that no curtain will ring down on a wonderful confession from your absent father who suddenly shows up and tells you he loves you. Do you know the only art that even comes close to reality?

STUDENT
Which?

PROFESSOR
Collage making.

STUDENT
What?

PROFESSOR
You know those artists who glue a bunch of crap together?
That's reality. We are only bit players in a massive
Darwinian amphitheater, which does not have heroic
significance, nor a noble end.

STUDENT
So what do we do?

PROFESSOR
The most we can do is have a purpose everyday, if possible a
purpose every hour. But no over all plan. For if you have no
overall plan you'll never be disappointed. The meaning of
life differs from human to human, from day to day and from
hour to hour. But don't expect these purpose filled days and
hours to add up to a story.

(Beat.)

STUDENT
So I'm accepted into your MFA in brilliant bullshit.

PROFESSOR
The best bullshit MFA in the world. Now, let's get drunk,
break innocent hearts, ruin our marriages, abandon our
partners and children and make up a bunch of beautiful
inspiring well plotted bullshit that has nothing to do with
real life.

(Beat.)

STUDENT
I'll go get us a six pack.

THE END