

The Reflection Once Removed

Scott Bradfield

This is a story we felt we had to take if only because the ending made both of us laugh out loud (no, don't peek; it's worth the wait). Scott Bradfield is the author of a novel. The History of Luminous Motion and two short story collections. Greetings from Earth and The Secret Life of Houses. All three are outstanding and unmissable. He currently divides his time between writing fiction in North London and teaching it in Connecticut, where he shares an office with the man who inspired the Robin Williams character in Dead Poets Society; the London press show of this movie was disrupted when he and editor Kim Newman couldn't stop laughing during the big suicide-in-the-snow scene.

A native Californian - as the authentically earnest lifestyle philosophy of 'The Reflection Once Removed' makes clear - Bradfield has spent most of his adult life in colder places, but still returns to Los Angeles in his fictions, which often use the clutter of pop culture to inform a sense of lives gone astray. Of all our contributors, he has probably taken the most roundabout route to our remit, turning fast-food psychiatry and consumer fetishism into a surprisingly upbeat story.

* * * *

I

've got this idea,' Raymond Donahue I said, covertly reaching under the dining-room table to dislodge Charlotte's Pomeranian from his ankle. 'And I've had this idea for quite a while now. Why don't we make it illegal for people to practise psychoanalysis without a licence? And I don't mean just in the state of California, either. I mean, why don't we think about this as a nationwide ballot initiative?'

'I'm serious, honey. I really am.' Charlotte reappeared from the kitchen, producing more food items which Raymond hated. Beets and tough, sinewy string beans. Gristly chicken-loaf and green olives stuffed with a vaguely gelatinous, pimento-like substance. 'I'm afraid you've got a womb-complex, Raymond. You can't help yourself. It says so right here in

this great book by Dr Elliot P. Bernstein I've been reading lately.'

Charlotte ladled more unrequested string beans on to his plate. 'The womb-complex is a complex which afflicts many young men of your age and background. Young men who were overprotected by their mothers happen to develop low self-esteem motivation factors which cause them to distrust their female cohabitants or lifetime-mating partners. They grow insular and self-obsessed. They retreat into private fantasy worlds. They hardly ever take their mating partners out for dinners or shows or even dancing, and they watch an excessive amount of sporting events on TV. They begin to develop a thinly concealed hostility for all women, even their mating partners who love them, since no woman, however loving she may be, can provide that perfect original safety they once enjoyed behind the walls of their mother's womb.'

'My mother was a belladonna addict who slept around with bikers,' Raymond said distractedly. The Pomeranian, like a homing missile, had already latched on to his ankle again, and was beginning to hump against it more earnestly. 'I was raised by my father in Burlingame.'

'It's the same thing,' Charlotte said, passing him a suspicious brown plastic bottle emblazoned with thunderbolts and the resounding Liqui-Marg motif. 'Honestly, honey. I don't know why you're being so evasive.'

When the Pomeranian engaged his ankle again, Raymond gave it a swift, perfunctory little kick. The Pomeranian ricocheted off the leg of the sofa with a tiny yelp.

Charlotte instantly shot Raymond a dire look. Her look said, Isn't that just what I should have expected from a man with such a well-defined womb-complex?

Raymond was watching something green wobble on a plate across the table. He wasn't wearing his glasses but, for one moment, he could have sworn he saw the green object start to wobble in his direction.

'That's not jello-salad, is it?' Raymond asked warily. The only edible substance in the entire world that Raymond hated more than gristly chicken-loaf was jello-salad.

'Yes, it is,' Charlotte said coolly. 'But I'm afraid you're just going to have to wait for your dessert, Raymond.'

* * * *

'*Getting to Know Your Own Enzymes*, Raymond, is not, as you call it, just another *crackpot* book.'

Sylvia was wearing her Day-Glo nylon jump-suit, brown cotton leg-warmers and a yellow terrycloth headband. She had just disboarded her exercycle in the living room to return to the kitchen and give Raymond another piece of her mind.

'The body, *Raymond*, just *happens* to generate its own language. How do you think the brain communicates with its many important organs and muscles and so on? Why, by means of its own highly complex signalling system - that's how. All Dr Elliot P. Bernstein is saying, Raymond, is that if the body can talk to itself, there's no reason we can't talk to the body. You know, open up some sort of dialogue between the intellect and the metabolism, the soma and the pneuma, the yin and the yang. I don't think you should just go around calling a creative, highly educated man like Dr Bernstein a cracker-brain, Raymond. The man does have a Ph.D., you know. The man *did* go to Harvard.'

Raymond was standing on a kitchen chair and rummaging in one of the highest, deepest storage shelves. He gripped a can of Lucky brand Hominy Grits under his right armpit, and a box of Instant Mushroom Soup packets in his left hand.

'He's got a Ph.D. in Education, Sylvia,' Raymond said. 'I don't know if that exactly qualifies the guy to start dis-pensing a lot of mumbo-jumbo about hormonal linguistics. Whatever the hell that is.'

Sylvia emitted an audible little huff. 'How many Ph.D.s have *you* got, Raymond? Why don't you tell me, then. How many Ph.D.s have *you* got, anyway?'

Raymond replaced the soup and hominy on the storage shelf and looked down at Sylvia. Sylvia's white, slender hands were clenched on her hips. She looked quite pretty, Raymond had to admit.

'Have you got anything to eat around this place?' Raymond climbed down from the chair.

'There's lettuce in the fridge, Raymond.' Sylvia's hands were beginning to unclench. All of the tension in the room began to subside, as if air were being let out of a balloon. 'Why don't you fix yourself a nice lettuce

and tomato sandwich?’

Raymond blinked myopically around the kitchen at the various glimmering appliances. Then he sat down in the chair and absently examined a loaf of Mama Fibre’s Whole Earth Bran-Bread.

‘I don’t really feel like a tomato and lettuce sandwich,’ Raymond said aimlessly. Suddenly he felt very sad, but he didn’t know why. ‘Actually, I sort of felt like a cheeseburger or something.’

Within moments, Raymond heard Sylvia’s nice legs pumping fresh mileage on to her exercycle in the living room.

* * * *

‘And then of course there’s this whole ozone layer thing, and all the carcinogens in our environment, and all that. Like, I was reading this article in *People Magazine* last week? John Travolta’s like trying to save all the caribou in Alaska, and the American government, just as you’d expect, isn’t lifting one tiny finger to help.’ Penny showed Raymond the little finger of her left hand. Penny wore many jewelled and elaborate rings on her fingers. They were standing in the frozen food aisle at Von’s, and Raymond was examining two different brands of frozen zucchini lasagna. After a moment of dull reflection, Raymond replaced both brands in the misty frozen food cabinet.

‘It’s like, it’s about time somebody began doing something about all of these important problems, don’t you think?’ Penny was peering into the frozen food cabinet, as if for signs of life. ‘I mean, too many people have been too me-oriented for too long now. Like I’ve been reading this great book lately called *The Culture Revolution*, by this very famous guy, Dr Bernstein and all? Dr Bernstein says that me-oriented types of people are the saddest types of people in the entire world, because they are unable to bathe in the cultural vibrations which less self-centred people share with each other all the time. Did you know they sell Dr Bernstein’s excellent book right here in this very supermarket? Well, they do. In fact, it just happens to be number three on the *New York Times* paperback bestseller list this week. By the way - ‘ Penny’s jewelled fingers tapped at the Bird’s Eye Frozen Vegetable Platter Raymond was examining in his hand. ‘What’s your name, anyway?’

Raymond replaced the Bird’s Eye in the frozen food cabinet. Raymond had been shopping for an hour now, but he couldn’t really find anything he liked. No matter how many high crowded shelves of food he

investigated, all he could think about was the day-old Carl's Western Bacon Cheeseburger he had eaten just that morning for breakfast. Raymond's shopping cart contained a loaf of Bran-Bread, and a plastic gallon carton of generic hundred per cent orange juice.

'My name's Raymond,' Raymond said after a while. 'And according to your friend, Dr Bernstein, I'm suffering from a pretty severe case of womb-complex right now. I should probably warn you about that right off.'

* * * *

Some nights Raymond dreamed about food. Char-broiled steaks, potatoes with sour cream, pot roasts and gravy, breasts of chicken simmering with sweet, translucent juices, spare ribs and pork chops and veal parmigiana and turkey pot pies. Usually he started awake in bed just as he was reaching out for it. It was as if he had transgressed some sort of moral boundary. If he wanted to grasp the dream-food and make it real, then he would have to suffer reality instead.

'What's the matter, honey?' a woman's voice asked.

Raymond could still smell the steaming vegetables, the tender slabs of sirloin and lemony trout. The woman's smooth hand touched his face.

'Where am I?' Raymond asked.

'You're with me. You're at my house.'

'What year is it?'

'1989.'

'How old am I? Where do I work?'

'You're thirty-eight, honey, and no spring chicken. You sell advertising space for California's largest home advertising magazine, *The Bargain Buyer*. Your offices are in Sherman Oaks.'

Raymond reached out for the end table and found his cigarettes. His sense of vertigo withdrew with a smooth, sliding sensation.

'What am I doing here?' he asked the woman.

'Not too much, baby. I'm afraid you haven't been doing too much

good around here at all.'

* * * *

It was becoming increasingly difficult for Raymond to remember who he was with, how long he had known her, and what exactly she meant to him. Every morning he awoke in strange bedrooms where the quality of light lay strangely distributed across things he did not recognise. Often the bed beside him was empty, and he ventured alone into weirdly gleaming bathrooms where he puzzled at unusual brands of shampoo and deodorant, or scalded himself trying to adjust the complicated, often futuristic-looking shower devices. The women left him microwave-ready meals wrapped in plastic on their immaculate kitchen tables, and hasty notes scrawled on the backs of torn envelopes and advertising leaflets.

Make yourself at home, the notes told him. *Be back soon*.

Raymond uncovered the waiting meals and sniffed at them. Sometimes the food resembled muesli, or a nutty, fibrous substance. Sometimes it resembled hummus, taramasalata, or something with cheese. Vainly Raymond searched through unfamiliar cabinets for Corn Flakes, Fruit Loops, or anything else he recognised. Instead he discovered snail pellets and gardening supplies, rusty woks and elaborately packaged fondue kits, unpaid utility bills and neglected pastry. Usually he just burned a piece of Bran-Bread in the toaster, and soothed it with whatever brand of butter substitute he could find in the refrigerator. Breakfasts in strange houses, Raymond thought, were pretty depressing experiences - especially for men who were rapidly approaching middle age.

He couldn't remember them by their faces or their names any more, but only by the books they left behind. *Learning to Be and Love Yourself*, *Developing Your Own Me-ness Strategy*, *Eating for A Better I.Q.*, *Men Who Love Too Much* and *the Women Who Leave Them*, and, of course, the perennial bestseller, *Doing it Your Way*, with a special introduction by Frank Sinatra, Jr. All of these books were either written by Dr Elliot P. Bernstein, or in collaboration with him, and they featured numerous graphs and charts concerning the relationships between self-esteem and diet, oogenesis and body language, erogenous zones and state-wide radon activity. Raymond often caught himself gazing absently at the various diagrams and illustrations for hours while the ice dissolved in his drinks, or his mugs of coffee grew cool on the kitchen table.

Raymond figured that if all the women he had ever known in his entire

life were even half-right, then he suffered from a pretty extraordinary range of personal problems that included narcissism, self-doubt, abstract behaviour patterns, colitis, diminishing Alpha Wave activity, various sorts of neural and lymphatic disorders, severe overdependencies on alcohol, antibiotics and TV, and an almost psychotic disregard for the achievements of supply-side economics. 'I don't think I have to tell you, Raymond,' a blonde woman with a Karmen Ghia once said, but you're one really loused-up individual. Don't take it personally or anything, Ray-mond. I just thought it was something you ought to know.'

* * * *

In September Raymond enrolled at the Dr Bernstein Center for Adjustable Behavioral Abnormalities in Reseda, where for ten days he was subjected to the relentless schedules, strategies and ministrations of an impressive battery of random counsellors, psychotherapists, herbalists, dietary technicians, muscular coordinators, adaptive macro-societal engineers, and one rather impolite old lady who ran the Snack Bar. The impolite old lady who ran the Snack Bar was named Eunace, and she wore fluorescent make-up, butterfly glasses on a chain around her neck, and mottled, inad-equately dyed hair in a bun. Usually Raymond sat at the Snack Bar on a stool and drank Mocha-Max, a single-blend coffee and creamer substitute, while he vaguely examined the shelves of heavy-looking carob cookies and vegan souf-fles displayed behind glass cases like exhibits in some inedible museum. In ten days, Eunace never smiled at Raymond once, and whenever he arrived at the Snack Bar she always emitted long, exasperated sighs, as if Raymond were the most boring man who had ever lived. During his brief internment at the Dr Bernstein Center for Adjustable Behavioral Abnormalities, Raymond quickly learned that Eunace's Snack Bar was the only place around where he could nurse his severe psychic obsessions and libidinal fixations in relative privacy.

'You know, Eunace, I've been thinking,' Raymond liked to muse, examining the thin pink residue at the bottom of his depleted mug of Mocha-Max. 'You remember all those women in my life who've been telling me what a self-centred, hopeless neurotic and screwed-up wreck I am? Well, come to think of it, none of those women are what you could actually call perfect or anything. I mean, they're all perfectly *nice* and all, but almost without exception most of them believe implicitly in things like reincarnation, alien visitors from outer space controlling the Pentagon, and astrology. In fact, come to think of it, most of them are Capricorns. Do you think that means anything, Eunace? That most of them happen to be Capricorns?'

Whenever Raymond looked up, Eunace began banging dishes in the

sink and scrubbing them with a frayed, soapy rag. Raymond had to admit that Eunace was probably not the most patient and attentive listener he had ever encountered, but at least she found him so boring that she didn't bother to offer him any constructive criticism of her own. Perhaps, Raymond thought, it was because Eunace realised, somewhere deep inside her dim, soapy brain, that if there was one thing Raymond was never short of at the Dr Bernstein Center for Adjustable Behavioral Abnormalities, it was constructive criticism.

* * * *

For ten days Raymond was analysed, steamed, acupuncture, rolled, screened, vilified, hugged, X-rayed, audited, sensorily deprived, and enrolled in afternoon swimming lessons at the enormous, Olympic-sized Dr Bernstein swimming pool, which was located in the sweeping, brilliantly scented Dr Bernstein Botanical Gardens. Raymond was required to chart daily graphs of his hourly heart and metabolic rates, and to keep a secret diary in which he purged himself of his most shameful resentments against the Dr Bernstein Center and all the highly qualified, deeply concerned people there who were trying to help him.

'People who never learn to swim suffer from womb-insecurity neurosis, which is a very difficult form of neurosis to deal with, especially when you're a lady,' Bunny told Raymond every afternoon during their daily aqua-therapy session. Meekly, Raymond held his breath while Bunny plunged his head underneath the sparkling, chlorinated water, or trawled him into the deepest part of the pool and held him in a back-float against the thin surface. 'For many people, the womb is the only happiness they ever really know. Once they're born, everything starts to go straight downhill. They feel lonely and rejected. They feel unloved and without a home. They become deeply afraid of ever being happy again, because they believe that happiness is something that leads to suffering and deprivation. This is what we call here at the Institute a Bad Behavioural Syndrome. Bad Behavioural Syndromes are habits you develop that make you unhappier than whatever experiences made you develop those habits in the first place. Does that make any sense to you, Raymond? Do you realise that people are often their own worst enemy, sometimes without even realising it?'

Bunny was the most extraordinarily fat woman Raymond had ever seen with most of her clothes off. Her two-piece swimsuit resembled wire bindings on a bale of hay. 'When you're a lady and you feel unloved, then you find it impossible to love yourself,' Bunny told Raymond later at Eunace's Snack Bar. 'So then what you do is sit around your apartment all

day long, just watching television and eating yourself into oblivion. You become massively fat, and the fatter you get the more unhappy you become. And so you eat more, and then you get more unhappy. And so on and so forth. Since I met Dr Bernstein, I have lost nearly eighty pounds. As a result, I have developed a more assertive attitude towards my own femininity. Now, how does one of those carob cookies look to you, Raymond? I think I wouldn't mind a carob cookie to go along with my Mocha-Max.'

'I don't think so,' Raymond said politely. He was listening to a bubble of pool-water oscillating thinly in his left ear. It sounded like hovering alien spacecraft in a science fiction movie. 'I think I'll just finish my Mocha-Max and go back to my room.'

* * * *

On the day of his release from the Dr Bernstein Center for Adjustable Behavioral Abnormalities, Raymond couldn't stop whistling Stevie Winwood's 'Back in the High Life Again' all the way home. He went directly to Hamburger Hamlet and ordered his favourite meal, the cheesesteak and fries with a large Coke, and a strawberry shortcake for dessert. He flirted with all the waitresses, drank three jumbo vodka-tonics, and even purchased a pack of Marlboros, which he smoked sparingly and with much self-indulgent dispatch. So far as Raymond was concerned, the best thing about the Dr Bernstein Center for Adjustable Behavioral Abnormalities was not having to be there any more. It was sort of like having a malignant tumour in your brain go into spontaneous remission, or a merciful governor call in time to prevent the electric switch from being thrown. On his way home that afternoon, Raymond stopped at Ralph's and bought a gallon jug of low-fat milk, assorted Swanson's Hungry Man frozen dinners, and a large 24-ounce economy size carton of Kellogg's Sugar Frosted Flakes.

'At first I guess I probably tried to fight it,' Raymond told Wendy, Crystal, Sylvia and Marie over succeeding evening meals at their houses. 'I didn't have enough confidence in myself to trust in the sincere, highly qualified concern of others. I was anti-social, and spent most of my time in my room. Whenever one of my counsellors or Behaviour Monitors tried to start up a friendly conversation during meals or exercise sessions, I wouldn't even give them the time of day. Then, one afternoon while I was sitting smugly alone in my room, I remembered what Dr Bernstein said once about the Negotiable-Me Strategy. The Negotiable-Me Strategy is the strategy one conducts in order to convince the world about the sort of person one wants to become. The Negotiable-Me Strategy often arouses conflictual-action situations between itself and the world's very resolute

You-Negation Paradigm. This is the same thing as saying that one's self-vocabulary has become deverbaised in a highly chaotic manner.'

With evident concern, Raymond reached across the table and touched Wendy, Sylvia, Crystal or Marie's hand.

'Are you following what I'm trying to tell you?' Raymond asked. 'Or am I using too much technical jargon for you to relate with where I'm coming from?'

* * * *

When the various women in his life stopped returning his calls, Raymond settled easily into a new, grateful routine of smooth and uneventful complacency. He subscribed to Cable and began taking extended holiday and sick leaves from his office. He bought a window planter for the front porch, and a cherry-red hummingbird feeder for the kitchen window. He ate late breakfasts and liked to watch the hummingbirds dart, hover and weave outside in the glisten-ing blue air. The hummingbirds were emblazoned with bright, pheromonic splashes of colour, and dipped their long beaks into the sugary red water, burning energy like tiny blazing oil refineries. The phone hardly rang at all any more. Whenever it did ring, it was usually some telephone market-ing outfit promoting newspapers or magazines, or Bunny from the Dr Bernstein Center trying to sign Raymond up for a special extended 'follow-up' session at the new Dr Bern-stein Holiday Self-Actualization Camp located somewhere in the Napa Valley. Raymond wished Bunny all the luck in the world, and told her that if he could find time to attend what sounded like a highly enlightening exploration of human-growth potential, he would definitely call her back right away. Then he had his telephone disconnected and bought a small, mottled grey puppy from the pound which he named Cylus. For the first few weeks, Cylus went to the bathroom all over Raymond's apartment. Whatever Cylus didn't pee or crap on, he chewed to ribbons with a happy animal patience. Cylus was an extremely amiable, energetic young dog who knew how to take pleasure in the simple things of life. When you got right down to it, Raymond thought, the simple things in life were all that really mattered.

Then, one afternoon in late May, someone knocked at the front door. When Raymond went to the door and opened it, he found the book-jacket-familiar face of Dr Bernstein, whose smile glinted as cheerily as the thick, bifocal lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses.

Looking up from one of Raymond's hand-sewn suede cowboy boots which had come to resemble bad meat, Cylus growled distantly.

‘You may be able to run and hide from Dr Bernstein, Raymond,’ Dr Bernstein said wisely, making smooth little gestures in the blue, sparkling air with his wooden clip-board. ‘But it’s never so easy to run and hide from yourself. As I’m sure we all well know.’

An automobile horn sounded abruptly in the street. When Raymond looked down at the kerb he saw Bunny seated at the driver’s wheel of an open-top pink Cadillac convertible. Bunny waved merrily. The pale flesh flapped in her armpit.

It took Raymond a few seconds to regain his teetering balance.

‘You’re absolutely right, Dr Bernstein,’ Raymond said. ‘You’re absolutely, *absolutely* right.’

‘Self-motivating behavioral strategies don’t just start working overnight, Raymond.’ Dr Bernstein entered Raymond’s apartment with appreciative nods at the television, video, sofa bed and CD player. ‘Behavioural abnormalities often require *years* of cautious, professional evaluation. You’re a young man with a lot of promise, Raymond. But you’re also a young man who is very definitely, and very profoundly screwed up - and don’t think I’d ever say such a thing if I didn’t truly care about your well-being as an individual.’

‘I’m sure you wouldn’t, Dr Bernstein.’ Raymond was dancing frantically around the living room for heavy, blunt objects. ‘I’m sure you’d never do anything to endanger my happiness and well-being at all.’ Raymond systematically noted and disregarded the locations of a Rand Atlas, rabbit-ear television antenna, hearth-top piggy-bank, and some thick-framed museum prints of Picasso, Matisse and Cézanne.

On the floor, Cylus’s growl roughened. He was sitting up and watching Dr Bernstein. He had forgotten his partially macerated cowboy boot altogether.

‘Why don’t you throw a few clothes together,’ Dr Bernstein said. ‘Just enough for a day or two at the Holiday Camp. You’ll probably want to bring along a little cash. And your chequebook - don’t forget your chequebook. Your cheque guarantee card. Your Visa and Mastercard cards.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Raymond agreed happily, and departed for the back bedroom where he opened his battered brown overnight bag and filled it with socks, underwear, tooth-brush and toothpaste, denim trousers and

denim shirts. Then he went into the closet and, from underneath mould-ering laundry, retrieved his notched and yellowing Louisville Slugger baseball bat. He hurried back to the living room.

In the living room Dr Bernstein was saying, 'Nice doggy. This is my non-threatening, beta-status posture, doggy. Can I pet you? Can we be friends? Ouch!' Dr Bernstein took a sudden backward step.

'You brainless little turd!'

Dr Bernstein was raising his open hand just as Raymond hammered the back of Dr Bernstein's skull with the Louis-ville Slugger. Raymond had never been a particularly good baseball player, but it had always been his favourite sport anyway. He removed Dr Bernstein's cash- and credit-fat wallet and stuffed it into the vest pocket of his Wrangler jean-jacket. Then he went to the front door and waved at Bunny in her pink Cadillac. He gave her the V for Victory sign.

Bunny waved back happily and honked the horn.

Raymond returned to the living room and gave Dr Bernstein another firm cerebral whack with the Louisville Slugger, just for good measure. Then he bundled up Cylus, climbed over the ratty backyard fence, and hailed a cab at Van Nuys Boulevard.

'Not supposed to allow dogs in this cab,' the driver told him.

Raymond showed the driver a fat wad of bills from Dr Bernstein's wallet.

'LAX,' Raymond said. 'You better step on it.'

The driver contemplated the wad of bills reflected in his rearview mirror. He removed a grey lump of gum from his mouth and placed it in the ashtray.

'Where you headed?' he asked after a while.

'To get my mind straight,' Raymond said. 'To raise my consciousness. To increase my self-esteem coordinating capabilities in a highly resolute, predetermined manner.' Raymond gazed out the window at the smoggy, opaque Los Angeles skyline, the angry cars and drivers, the roaring buses and airplanes. Los Angeles, he thought, had never looked better.

Raymond looked at the driver's reflected eyes in the rearview mirror.
'But this time I'm going to do it in Rio.'

* * * *