



Angela Patera

People You've Been Before, That You Don't Want Around Anymore

If I were ever to distill my maiden voyage into adulthood into a single phrase, “cognitive dissonance” would capture the essence. However, to confine it solely to the realm of cognition would be a gross understatement. Oh no, it was a sad spectacle akin to a grand opera of the absurd where my lofty aspirations, steadfast principles, and lackluster realities engaged in a fierce battle royal, the only victor being the crushing weight of existential dread sprinkled with a dash of regret.

This general dissonance played across my life's landscape in countless ways. Despite my bold proclamation as a straight-edge punk, disdainful of alcohol and drugs, I found myself nursing weekend-long hangovers, as if partying were an Olympic sport I unwittingly excelled in. Despite my noble pursuit of a vegan, cruelty-free ethos, there I was, in the aftermath of a bender, seeking solace in the greasy embrace of a fast food burger made from a poor animal that had certainly died for my sins.

Despite my meticulous planning and anal-retentive tendencies, I'd always find a way to sabotage myself and veer way off course, letting chaos reign supreme until my carefully laid plans met a glorious demise. Despite my fervent advocacy of radical feminism, I constantly found myself entangled in complicated relationships with inherently problematic individuals. Such was the saga of my journey from mid-adolescence until my early twenties. It wasn't mere

inconsistency; it was a full-blown civil war raging between who I aspired to be and the person my actions revealed.

Growing up white and middle-class in a sheltered and educated urban environment, my life's biggest hurdles weren't accommodation or sustenance, but the paralyzing tyranny of choice overload; whenever presented with a sprawling array of options, my normally articulate inner voice turned into radio static. The sheer weight of possibilities, each fraught with unforeseen consequences, would leave me overwhelmed and paralyzed. Every decision, no matter how trivial, triggered a deluge of "what ifs" in my head. It was a first-world problem of epic proportions.

One intriguing aspect of studying English language and literature at the National University of Athens is that during the sophomore year of our undergraduate studies, beyond our core curriculum, a vast menu of elective courses from all Humanities departments awaited us. The list we could choose from was long enough to trigger a panic attack, and it naturally became the subject of my obsessive scholarly scrutiny weeks before registration. Needless to say, this choice overload led me down a fascinating, if not slightly unhinged mental rabbit hole.

Drowning in a sea of elective options, I sought the guidance of the university's study advisor. Unfortunately, he inadvertently made things worse for me as quite early on in our sessions, he emphasized the earth-shattering importance of my choices using the worn analogy of the butterfly effect where the flight of a butterfly in France could trigger an earthquake in China. Every elective course, he warned, held the key to my future career, income, and mental well-being.

The pressure was on and, despite the siren song of a quick fix—a joint or maybe a single, harmless Xanax—I knew a clear head was vital for making the right choices. Armed with a meticulously plotted constellation map of obligatory and elective courses—obligatory courses forming the core, electives orbiting around them like distant stars—I envisioned myself as the architect of my intellectual cosmos. Oh, the intoxicating blend of youthful hubris and scholarly smugness; I wore it like a shining badge of honour, blissfully unaware that the universe was laughing at my expense.

Little did I know that my meticulously crafted list of elective courses, a testament to weeks of agonizing deliberation, wouldn't survive the onslaught of a hangover. The day registration opened for our third and fourth semesters, I found myself battling a formidable hangover and a monumental headache, courtesy of the previous night's festivities. It all started, as those descents into chaos usually do, with the purest of intentions. After catching Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* at a downtown cinema, I met my best friend, Judith, for what we naively believed would be an innocent glass of sangria.

Fast forward a few hours later, we found ourselves thrashing around at a hardcore punk concert. My usual fastidiousness flickered now and then, reminding me that I had to secure a few hours of quality sleep so that I could wake up early to go to the university registry. However, my inner rebel, fueled by a ferocious punk spirit and a complete disregard for future consequences,

drowned out those pleas with yet another round of drinks until my responsible self whimpered into submission. I got back home at the crack of dawn, dazed and confused, in a cab with the windows rolled down.

A couple of hours later, running on a small pharmacy's worth of Ibuprofen and hiding behind oversized sunglasses, I shuffled into the registration line while searching frantically through my pockets for my list of elective courses. My meticulously crafted list was nowhere to be found. I started sweating profusely. Presented with the official forms and their endless rows of ominous tick-boxes, my brain staged a full-blown mutiny. The words swam before my eyes, morphing into an indecipherable alphabet soup. In a desperate attempt at control, I embarked on a ticking spree, selecting courses with reckless abandon; "Introduction to Islamic Studies"? Sure, why not? "Depictions of Greece in Anglophone Literature and Poetry"? Bring it on! "Politics, Literature, Identity, and the Americas"? Definitely! These courses sounded totally unfamiliar, holding an exotic allure. Unbeknownst to me, some inexplicable cosmic thread was already weaving me into my future.

As it turned out, my registrar-induced amnesia landed me in a semester of delightful misery. "Introduction to Islamic Studies" demanded extensive background knowledge of Islamic history and some Arabic fluency, a skillset I sadly lacked so I managed to get a C+ in the final exams which felt like a herculean task. "Depictions of Greece in Anglophone Literature and Poetry" was, admittedly, interesting. Nevertheless, bi-monthly field trips to the places mentioned in the poems were mandatory so every two weeks, I wrestled with my dwindling bank account and endured five-hour coach journeys to visit Missolonghi, a seaside town, where I was expected to marvel at the meadows where Lord Byron allegedly shed his blood.

However, "Politics, Literature, Identity, and the Americas" emerged as a glorious exception. It unveiled a whole world steeped in a history both glorious and tragic, a world forever wounded by colonialism and US intervention. This course held the potential to be the most impactful of my entire academic career and yet, I managed to squander it.

One Sunday evening, in a moment of misguided camaraderie with Judith, we decided to drop acid together. Fuelled by a rebellious spirit, I yearned to traverse the cosmic hinterlands and report back on the unexplored alleyways of the psyche. However, the ever-present control freak within, ever vigilant against potential chaos, attempted some damage control by safeguarding and insulating this experience.

The trip, I decided, would take place in her dorm room where the windows were barred and there was no kitchenette. This eliminated any access to sharp objects, poison, or flames; the holy trinity of bad trip catalysts according to my hazard- assessment plan. I programmed emergency services on speed dial and gave a friendly heads-up to the neighboring rooms about our impending descent into the psychedelic abyss to ensure a watchful eye in case things went sideways.

Judith, a senior psychology student with a keen interest in the manifestations of my Cluster C personality—anxiety, OCD, phobias— took it all in stride. I often alluded to William

Blake to describe my control-freak attitude as my “*mind-forg'd manacles*” to sugar-coat my situation. Judith knew that my desperate attempt to micromanage even a psychedelic experience was merely the latest testament to my anal-retentive tendencies. In fact, she had already sweet-talked me into being her first official patient once she graduated.

After all, this wasn't our first rodeo with mind-altering substances. After ingesting speed at an Iggy Pop concert the previous year, we had embarked on a horrifying joyride on a lawnmower across a stranger's yard, culminating in an unceremonious dip in his empty pool. The owner, a surprisingly gentle man in his eighties, fished us out, thanked us for the impromptu lawn service and kindly but firmly kicked us off his property.

The next morning, a sense of profound guilt gnawed at me for our irresponsible antics. I even penned an eloquent letter of apology, outlining the mitigating factors that had led us to this nocturnal gardening rampage. I made sure to emphasize that, in our normal state, both Judith and I were responsible and hard-working students with impeccable academic records.

Judith started tripping almost immediately. I, however, remained stubbornly earthbound. As she enthusiastically foraged her tiny room for imaginary mushrooms like a determined truffle dog, I sat cross-legged on her bed, fixated on a poster of Yves Klein's “Blue Venus.” After a while, driven by a burgeoning ennui, I attempted to start an essay on Shakespeare's “Venus and Adonis” for my “Depictions of Greece in Anglophone Literature and Poetry” class: “Venus and Adonis” (1593), probably Shakespeare's first publication, is an exploration of the intricate nature of love and lust. The poem chronicles the plights of Venus, whose unrequited love for Adonis, an extremely handsome man...”

I was clearly out of ideas, devoid of any inspiration. Everything I produced reeked of the uninspired drudgery of a high schooler toiling under the burden of a mandatory assignment. Hours melted into each other, reminding of my mental inertia. Finally, feeling forsaken by the muses, frustrated by my own sealed doors of perception, and weary of Judith's mycological rumblings, I admitted defeat. Trudging home, I collapsed into bed and immediately fell asleep. The next day dawned with a welcome normalcy; no voices in my head, no kaleidoscopic vision, no Technicolor hallucinations. In fact, I was feeling composed enough to resume my day and even attend my “Americas” class.

That day, our professor embarked on an exploration of El Salvador. I was well-versed in the history of El Salvador, having spent the previous weekend devouring Joan Didion's “Salvador.” Coups d'état tumbled forth, followed by a dizzying succession of revolts and authoritarian regimes, each more oppressive than the last. I was already forty-minutes into class when I realized that my mind had taken a detour into bat country. Though undeniably still housed within my own skull, I was inexplicably convinced that I had somehow morphed into Joan Didion and that I had just had a series of scathing essays on El Salvador published in the *New York Review of Books*.

Initially, I struggled to grapple gracefully with this realization but the professor's lecture on El Salvador's recent history triggered a near-Pavlovian urge to snag a front-row seat, lest I

miss a single detail. Notes were furiously scribbled, a waterfall of bright blue ink on a blank sheet that, in my altered state of consciousness, morphed into the Salvadoran flag. Half-closing my eyes, I witnessed the flag of El Salvador with its horizontal triband of cobalt blue-white-cobalt blue and its coat of arms in the center, unfold triumphantly. Glancing outside the window, I noticed that the afternoon sky had taken an impossibly vibrant shade of cyan. Emily Dickinson's "A Slash of Blue" popped into my head, the first domino in a cascade of literary blues.

Blue was everywhere around me. I strived to recall other instances of the symbolic use of blue in literature: the blue eyes in Alice Walker's *The Bluest Eye* as a symbol of privilege and whiteness; T.S. Eliot's use of blue in *The Waste Land* to evoke a sense of melancholy and sadness; Robert Frost's amazement at all the blue things around us giving us a taste of heaven in "Fragmentary Blue"; the replacement of "pleurosis" with "blue roses" in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

The list was infinite. The professor started showing us pictures of El Salvador by Mike Goldwater. A profound sense of sadness engulfed me, and my gaze drifted to the professor's face. His eyes were a hypnotic shade of baby blue. I started humming The Velvet Underground's "Pale Blue Eyes" under my breath: *Thought of you as my mountaintop/ Thought of you as my peak/ Thought of you as everything/ I've had, but couldn't keep/ I've had, but couldn't keep/ Linger on your pale blue eyes/Linger on your pale blue eyes.*

A jolt of self-awareness snapped me back. A few heads had turned in my direction, their disapproving glances cutting through my blue haze.

"Celeste, is there anything you would like to add?" the professor probed kindly.

The sound of my name reverberated through the cavernous halls of my overstimulated mind. Celeste, I mused, my own name, a celestial whisper hinting at a connection to the entire cosmos— a swirling nebula of all things blue. "Celestina," the jewel of Picasso's Blue Period, shimmered before my inner eye. Feeling at a loss for words, I simply shook my head, my gaze falling to my trembling hands and legs, nervously fidgeting under the desk. I was wearing indigo jeans, azure Adidas sneakers, and my mother's silver ring that was adorned with a shard of raw lapis lazuli stone. *Blue Songs are like tattoos/ You know I've been to sea before Crown and anchor me/ Or let me sail away/ Hey Blue/And there is a song for you*

A Joni Mitchell song welled in my head, threatening to burst the banks of my skull. I clamped a hand over my mouth, stifling the urge to let the song erupt. *Blue Here is a shell for you/ Inside you'll hear a sigh/ A foggy lullaby/ There is your song from me.*

Suddenly, the cerulean storm within me abated, only to be replaced by a rising tide of a different sort. Joni Mitchell. The name "Joni" echoed "Joan" and in that instant, the lines blurred. Celeste, the unremarkable nineteen-year-old dissolved. I was Joan Didion. I knew everything about El Salvador. I had lived there.

A primal urge surged through me and I confidently shot my hand upward. Granted the chance to speak, I launched into a detailed account of the 1982 Salvador earthquake. My words

flowed with an unsettling fluency, my descriptions so vivid that anyone could be convinced I had witnessed the earthquake and its aftermath firsthand. Of course, the year was 2005 and I had just turned nineteen and that was a physical impossibility I conveniently ignored.

My elaborate narration left the professor speechless. With a diplomatic cough, he steered the conversation towards the Salvadoran Civil War that took place between 1979 and 1992. But the dam had burst. Once again, my hand shot up, a reflex I could no longer control. For the next twenty excruciating minutes, I held the class hostage with a feverish analysis of US interference in the conflict. When I finally paused, gasping for breath, a heavy silence hung in the air. Before the professor could react, I launched a blistering critique of US support for the El Salvadoran government that was stained with human rights violations, including the murder, torture, and kidnappings of many members of left-wing guerrilla groups. By the time I ended my soliloquy, my T-shirt was damp with sweat, and tears were streaking my face.

My classmates, alongside our flustered professor, gaped at me in a perplexed blend of horror and sheer bewilderment. Taking a cue from their expressions that resembled figures in a Goya painting, I sank back on my chair, wiping my glistening face with my scarf. A horrifying truth dawned on me: I wasn't Joan Didion. I was Celeste, a sophomore English major. The closest I had ever come to 1980s El Salvador was a dog-eared copy of *Salvador* and a spicy burrito. Apart from my fervent contributions to the university feminist zine, I had never made any publications. Here I was, just a silly college student, grappling with the aftermath of a disturbing and untimely LSD trip.

Following that incident, I chose to observe a vow of monastic silence for the rest of the semester, a desperate attempt to salvage what remained of my academic reputation. The subsequent lectures were incredibly fascinating as we explored the cultural richness and the intricate political history of Chile, Venezuela, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Mexico. These lectures were a treasure trove of knowledge I absorbed with the quiet desperation of a starving child.

I never raised a hand again in class, content to be a silent observer, a ghost haunting the back row. Thankfully, hard work ultimately prevailed and I aced the exams, my A+ a testament to my original studiousness. However, a couple of years later, when I approached the professor for a recommendation letter, his polite refusal stung. He acknowledged my strong grades and potential but confessed to a lack of connection with me as a person. In retrospect, and with the benefit of hindsight, I wouldn't hold it against him.

Though this mortifying incident nearly threatened to crater my academic standing, it ultimately proved to be a bitter blessing in disguise and a harsh wake-up call. Unless I wanted to start Syd Baretting my way towards insanity, the path towards silencing the dissonance raging within my head wouldn't be achieved through mind-altering substances. It demanded a commitment to adulting: clean living, self-care, and finding a way to reconcile the warring factions inside of me. A few days after my public breakdown, I woke up with an Elliott Smith song swirling in my troubled mind: *People you've been before/ That you don't want around anymore/ That push and shove and won't bend to your will/ I'll keep them still.*

Staring into the mirror that day, my reflection ashen and wilted, like William Blake's sick rose, it occurred to me that there were so many past versions of myself—people I had been before—I simply could no longer tolerate. My mind felt like a warzone. All I had to do was focus on the Sisyphean task of forging a self that would be worthy of respect. It wasn't an easy process and it took me years to make some noticeable progress, but I had a solid foundation to build on: a clear head that would allow both my mind and heart to inform each and every decision. This new Celeste was taking the wheel, even if the road ahead remained fraught with challenges.

The student advisor's words, once scoffed at, now resonated deeply. Choosing my elective courses truly set off a butterfly effect. Had I not decided to stay out late partying the day before choosing the electives, I would never have chosen "Politics, Identity, Literature, and the Americas," a course that opened my eyes to a new world. Had I not studied Joan Didion's *Salvador* so intently, I wouldn't have gained insights into the intricate history of El Salvador.

Had I not fried my brain on acid right before such an important class, I would never have faced the shame of public humiliation in a place, my cherished university, I held sacred. Had I not encountered this humbling experience, I wouldn't have confronted a truth I'd been avoiding and I would probably have continued down a path paved with late nights and questionable decisions, the warring factions within me escalating. Without this series of seemingly nonsensical events serving as a catalyst for self-reflection, I wouldn't have arrived at this critical juncture.

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