

**'Greatly and bilaterally talented, spiky, stinging,
caustic and funny'** NEW YORKER

ERIC BOGOSIAN



Mall

a novel

Eric Bogosian



Scribner

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Thanks to David Rosenthal who said, "Why not?" Thanks to Zoë Wolff for her sharp eye and wit. And thanks to Geoff Kloske for the rigorous final punt. Thanks to my agents, Claudia Cross and George Lane.

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Eric Bogosian is the author of the plays *Talk Radio*, *subUrbia*, and *Griller* and the Obie Award-winning solo performances *Drinking in America*, *Pounding Nails in the Floor with My Forehead* and *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*, as well as, most recently, *Wake Up and Smell the Coffee*. He is the recipient of the Berlin Film Festival Silver Bear Award, a Drama Desk Award and two NEA fellowships. An actor who has appeared in more than a dozen feature films and television shows, Bogosian lives in New York City.

For Harry and Travis

I'm frightened by the devil and I'm drawn
to those ones that ain't afraid.

Joni Mitchell, "A Case of You"

No avoiding it: life does want death. To be alive is to kill.

John Updike, *Rabbit Redux*

1

"MAL!" Mary's voice cut like an airhorn through the aging ranch house. Past the framed needlepoint-by-numbers, past the mute upright piano, past the dusty royal blue-and-gold *Encyclopedia Americana*, past the dripping bathroom faucet, over the wall-to-wall rugs flat with beaten paths, past the circa-1962 pole lamp, down the dark hallway, under the door of the TV den and into Mal's ear.

"Malcolm! You want your dinner now?"

Mal was as still as a lizard on a warm rock, pupils dilated, absorbing the TV images across the close air of the darkened room.

Mal knew how concerned his mother was regarding his relationship with food. She had discussed his problem with the doctors and the therapists and they had informed her that one way to tell if Mal was abusing any mood elevators was if he had no appetite or if he was particularly active. Clutching this inside information close to her chest Mary felt she had the upper hand. But Mal knew something neither his mom nor the doctors knew: A) if necessary, he could force himself to eat; and B) sometimes

when he was speeding on crystal meth he didn't move at all. Instead he directed all his energy into his thoughts and became pure consciousness. Which was what he had been doing for the past three months. Mary thought he had been watching TV or sleeping. But she was wrong. For ninety days, Mal had been thinking and planning, his thoughts as convoluted as a fever patient's nightmare.

Even now, Mal jammed one more conceptual log into the inferno of his brainpan, a memory. The tan brick church embraced by its tiny lawn; the bone white Mary weeping over bloody geraniums; the darkly shellacked doors agape. Inside the cool, frankincense-infused building, Father Donleavy, no, Father Donahue, no, Father Donavon, no, Father Fuckface, that's it, Father Fuckface with the scraped-red cheekskin, is blabbing: Jesus said this and Jesus said that.

And Jesus said, "Why do you kick against the pricks?" And the sullen twelve-year-old Malcolm, his butt perched on the smooth rock-hard oak pew, responds impiously: "But I don't. I don't. I want the pricks *and* the kicks." Another image replaces the questioning Jesus of Nazareth in the fever swirl of Mal's sweaty mind—a tiny bird, swooping quickly. The bird hits the windshield, fragments into fluff and blood, then gets swallowed up by blackness.

"I'm making fish sticks with mashed potatoes and string beans. Okay?"

Surrounded by the dull food smell of meals past, Mary peered into the oven. The mini-lightbulb inside, covered with black oven grease-goo, hid in its corner, cold and dead. Asking Mal to repair something was futile. There were times when he would get very busy and excited, but instead of doing anything constructive, Mal would only create more confusion. Tools and bits of broken lit-

ter would end up strewn all over the living room rug. And guess who had to clean all that up? So Mary lived with the dead light-bulb and the withered mouse carcasses in the basement and the dripping bathroom faucet with its green stain printed onto the black-chipped porcelain.

Mary tugged the tray of fish sticks to see if they had the appropriate brown tinge. The hot metal tilted and dropped. It painted her thumb with a fiery smear of pain. She juggled the whole business, trying to keep the little oily loaves from skidding onto the floor, only to get seared again.

She could put butter on the wounds later. Her immediate mission was to feed and nurture Mal. Sam was dead, Traci was gone, but there was still little Malcolm. Not so little and childlike now with his beard and stringy hair and fog of B.O. She wished she could toss him into the tub like when he was six. Well, "one step at a time" as it said in the magazine.

Mary slid the fish sticks onto a cheery patterned plate. She scooped mashed potatoes, dabbed butter and forked on the boiled, canned string beans. Canned were better. They tasted terrible, but Mal never noticed the difference and they were cheaper. She set the food, fork and knife, salt and pepper, a slice of bread on a smaller matching plate and a flimsy paper napkin on a tray, snapped off the oven and made her way down the hall to the TV room. She noticed the mute piano and made a mental note to wipe it down with Pledge in the morning.

Entering the darkened room, Mary searched for the TV table upon which Mal customarily took his meals. She ignored the slight scent of urine. Mal did not move, the TV set murmured.

"Did you hear me calling you?"

Mal did not speak.

"Well, if you're not going to tell me what you want or don't

want, I'm going to make your decisions for you and you're going to get what you get. The older you are the more you remind me of your father."

Mal scratched under his armpit and looked up at his mother. His eyes shone crystalline blue, numinous in the reflected light of the TV. Underneath it all, he was a handsome man. With the beard and hair he looked almost like Our Savior Himself. Mary loved him. She put the tray down.

"There. You need anything else? You want me to get you a Hi-C?"

Mal eyed the tray. Eyed Mary. He lay the remote control upon the armrest, reached under his greasy, lumpy BarcaLounge seat cushion and extracted a vague shape in the semidarkness.

"What's that, Mal?"

Mal straightened his arm toward his mother's chest as if he were going to accuse her of something, as if she had done something wrong. He didn't speak. He merely moved his finger a quarter of an inch. The little .22 semiautomatic made a *bang* sound like a big cap pistol. Mary looked down but there wasn't anything to see. She felt a burning, then realized Mal had shot her.

"Did you just do what I think you did, Mal?"

Mary finished the sentence as her lungs collapsed and her tightly coiled energy unwound. She decided the fish sticks on the plate needed adjusting. She reached out to touch them, but her body wasn't doing anything it was supposed to. Mary watched the plate come up and hit her in the face. Mary, the plate, the tray and the TV table crashed into the BarcaLounge. Mary found herself folded in half, the green and ochre food staining her and the floor. She looked up at her son, still sitting in the naugahyde recliner.

"Mal? Now who's going to clean this up?" She coughed and a small pink bubble inflated out of her left nostril.

Mal put the gun to her forehead and squeezed off a second round. It smacked Mary backward. The bullet didn't penetrate her skull, rather skidded off toward a shelf where a crystal glass memorializing Traci's wedding stood, shattering it, filling the air with a mini-snowstorm of glass particles. Mary was scurrying toward the door like a broken crab.

Mal watched her with the same dim interest with which he watched his TV. She did not die the way the dogs had died. Dogs bite at the wound like a bad flea because they don't know what's going on. Mary knew. She had no more questions for Mal. She knew the doctor was wrong in his diagnosis. Mal was not better.

2

The summer air hung heavy with molecular bits of exhaust and humidity. Dusk consumed the suburbs: the roadways, the houses, the mall. As each portion was digested, a new glowing entity arose. The streaming red and white of the highway encircled the gold and TV blue of the picture windows. The acidic orange of excited mercury vapor bloomed over the parking lots.

Jeff sat erect in full lotus on a patch of clipped turf demarked on one side by a short, heavy-duty guardrail and on the other by a sloping grade of asphalt that flattened downward and out to form the east side of the shopping mall parking lot. His rigid posture was a foil for his dripping dreadlocks and ragged clothing.

Cars and light trucks, thumping with muffled music, swished past or braked in syncopation to the traffic light a hundred yards up by the entrance to the mall. Jeff closed his eyes and meditated on the chirp of dusty brake pads and the hum of the interstate a quarter mile away. He reached up and touched one of his dirty blond dreads, twisting it 'round his finger.

Jeff raised as much interest as a fire hydrant. Occasionally, a

mask of a face would target him, but through the safety glass there was no contact. An antic child waved to no one in particular. Jeff returned the wave and the kid rolled his eyes and flopped out of sight like a spaz.

Jeff cleared his head, tried not to think about Adelle. He focused his Buddha-mind upon the surface where he sat. This grass was not normal grass. It was some sort of heavy-duty polluted crabgrass. Opaque plastic lids from fast-food drink cups, dull ersatz cork cigarette filters, string and exhaust-darkened sand collected here. Down the way, a discarded oil filter lay on its side bleeding sludge.

Jeff could lie down and make a camp here and no one would see him or bother him. He could live here for years, panhandling the cars stopped at the light, jogging down to the Burger King for a quick snack. He could read every book in existence. People would throw them to him from the windows of cars. He would exist off the grid, a modern Thoreau, never having to kowtow to authority or play in the bullshit of the corporate hurly-burly. He could write a journal and someday, when he died, his journal would be discovered and the world would realize that the stranger by the road was no mere mortal but a sensitive genius who scribbled wisdom as they flew past in their brutish vehicles.

As if he had willed its appearance, a police cruiser quietly rolled to a stop before Jeff's spot. This time, the people inside were looking at him and did see him.

"How we doin' tonight?"

Jeff weighed his options. He could answer the cop as if the cop were actually talking to him (rather than a preconceived notion of who he was) or he could "goof."

"You gonna answer me?"

Jeff remained mute and a second cop reluctantly popped his door and swung out from the shotgun seat. He ambled slowly

around the rear bumper of the cruiser and, hand on gun butt, stood before Jeff. This guy had a blond instead of dark brown mustache. He began with a slow easy tone of voice.

"So how we doin' here?"

"Fine."

"What's your name?"

"Why are you touching your gun? Are you planning to shoot me?"

The cop loosened a shoulder, then a hip. "Not tonight. You on drugs?"

"No, I am not on drugs."

"You hitchhiking?"

"That's how I got here."

"So what's going on?"

"I don't have to tell you that. I'm sitting here."

"Uh-huh. What are you? Eighteen? Nineteen?"

Jeff said nothing. The cop with the blond mustache squatted down so his eyes were level with Jeff's. He brought his face close, his smile as synthetic as his shirt. His irises were clear green.

"You don't have to talk to me. You're right about that. On the other hand, I have a job to do. I don't think you mean to cause trouble, but that's what you're doing. What if someone in a passing vehicle looks over and gets in an accident 'cause of you? Would you like that? What if a bumper got bumped? Or, God forbid, a child got hurt? Maybe taken to the hospital?"

"That would never happen."

"I've seen a lot of things that would never happen, happen."

"I could sit here for a thousand years and I wouldn't be hurting a soul."

The cool green eyes grew cooler. "This is private property, son. Unless you have business here, you have to leave."

"This isn't private property."

"It is. It belongs to the mall. Everything around here belongs to the mall. The roadway too. Hey, I don't like it any more than you do."

"If you don't like it, why are you protecting it?"

"Come on, man. Get your shit together. You don't want to get busted, you *know* you don't. Tell you what, I'll drive you down to the Sears."

The cop spoke to Jeff in the universal hip language. Everyone was cool these days. Jeff felt the power of the machine bearing down on him.

"So you want to do that?"

"What?" Jeff pulled one of his dreads. He scratched his nose.

The cop glanced back at his partner in the cruiser. "You want us to give you a lift down to the mall?"

"I'll move. I'm moving," Jeff said, slowly rising.

"Thanks."

"I think it's sad." Jeff's smooth face darkened.

"What's sad?"

"That people like you are brainwashed by some corporate machine to dehumanize yourselves by dehumanizing others. And it's sad that a person can't just sit down where he wants."

"You can sit down, pal. You just can't sit down here. Sorry."

The cop got back in the cruiser and shared a few inaudible words and a sharp laugh. The car rolled off.

Jeff didn't take a step. He watched the cops watching him from their rearview mirror as they waited in line at the traffic light. In those two seconds, thoughts flashed through Jeff's mind. Thoughts about humans and animals and consciousness and unconsciousness and fascism and revolution and the frustration of having insight when you are surrounded by the narrow-minded. As the light turned green and the line of cars slipped forward, the police cruiser stood waiting. Only then did Jeff take a step.

Jeff made his way down the embankment, wading into a metallic sea of shiny Camrys and Malibus and Broncos. He crossed the black plain of asphalt, the recycled rubber of his faux-Texas crunching bits of broken glass and grit. Confused bugs looped above in the artificial light. Heat clung to the breezeless flatland, unable to rise into the darkening air. The perpetual interstate traffic droned over Jeff's shoulder—larger insects returning to their respective hives. Darkness was falling slowly, yet things were getting brighter in a way.

Jeff avoided the doors where the food court guarded the entrance to the mall. His group of chums would be there, balling soda straw sheaths, tipping waxy cups back, crunching ice between slack jaws. They'd be talking shit, flirting, torturing one another, their bad posture daring the guard to force them to move. The mall had no use for lounging, no use for them.

Adelle would be there. Not saying much, almost pouting. Her blonde-tangerine hair in her eyes, arms limp, legs akimbo. Jeff interpreted her ennui as a kind of efficiency, a kind of wisdom. "She's full of life, but she's saving it for the right moment, for the right one." An older guy, from another town, had been taking Adelle to places none of Jeff and his friends had access to. When this older guy had found her too young and boring, he had abandoned her. Jeff intuited that when Adelle came back to the old gang, she considered it the booby prize for being unlucky in love.

Jeff wanted to sit near Adelle and inhale the perfume of her pale, freckled skin. He wanted to share her dark, depressed state of mind. She was not insubstantial like the rest of them, Adelle had gravity, she understood how thickly and sadly the world coursed. But by going and sitting with her, by being near her, he would automatically become one of the jokers and nothing

more. Jeff thought, Beckett said show up at nine, it's nine now, so he took his time.

He made his way along the stuccoed gray walls, the outer skin of the mall. The ribbon of walkway curved 'round the neat arrangements of scrub pine and mountain laurel, a vain attempt to gentle the harsh bluffs of windowless mallstone.

This path, Jeff thought, this sidewalk where no one walks but me. They built this sidewalk to look like a sidewalk, to make the mall look like a place where humans thrive. In fact, people lock their cars and walk diagonals across the parking lot toward the portals of the mall. No one walks alongside this soulless landscaping, no one is here but me. Someone once made a model of this mall to impress developers and money men. On that model were these bits of vegetation I'm walking past now. On that model was a little model human. *I am that model human.*

In the synthetic twilight, artifacts glowed amongst the shrubs and shredded cedar bark. A flattened bag of potato chips. A limp piece of curving plastic—insulation left behind from construction. An incongruous chocolate brown rat bait container. Nestled in the aromatic green of clipped Japanese yew, a small metal box attached to a stump of pipe. On its side, a red light winked.

"Big Brother is watching." Jeff's grandfather used to say that. When Grampdad was a kid, 1984 was a long way into the future. Now it's ancient history. Here we are, thought Jeff, but we don't know we're here. I know we're here. What good does that do? To know that I'm nothing more than a number? No one has to torture me to get me to behave. No cage of rats around my head. I have no choice but to behave.

Jeff fantasized the Orwellian rats gnawing at his face. If I stand up and die for the cause, what are the chances anyone else will have the courage that I have? So I might as well not fight at all.