

DAVID MOLteni

The Bee Eater, 2016
Oil on canvas, 30 x 34 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

ED PARK

Tell Me Your Dreams

1 My wife is a corporation. I hear her say this to friends over dinner. We eat with our hands at the solid Ethiopian. The ownership has changed but the food is exactly the same. I don't like the wine but I like everything else.

This is a strange part of town where the avenues become streets, the streets become plazas, the birds look confused. Our friends, another couple, are also apparently a corporation. They run a day spa an hour outside the city. It's supposed to be very good. They're thinking of moving because the commute is murder. "But it's a reverse commute," I say, and they look at me like, "Doesn't he know anything?"

We talk about the five-month drought, a movie three of us have seen, a movie none of us has seen but have heard good things about, a spate of recent weird crimes, the president and his mixed record on an assortment of topics. We return to the drought again but this time say it's nature's way. Sometimes I think we all talk too much.

A complex discussion of taxes comes next, allowing me to zen out. I stare at my bottle of Ethiopian beer, the squiggly writing on the label. Before we leave the restaurant, I see them place a batch of business cards on the table by the door. I want to say, in jest, "Can I be a corporation, too?" But the right opportunity never presents itself. Then the rain comes down, for the first time in months.

2 My wife is a corporation and you'll never guess her line of work.

Unless you're in the same racket.
(Wait for it.)
She's a psychic!

3 Let me ask you, what kind of man would marry a woman who claims the gift of second sight, ESP, clairvoyance, term it what you will? Never mind her eyebrows, Frida and Kahlo.

I've never been called stupid, which doesn't mean I'm not. I have an advanced degree in ethics from Rue University, where I wrote my thesis on the concept of reverse psychology. This is the science of getting someone to do what you want by suggesting they do the exact opposite. It's more of an art than a science. I don't want to brag but I did groundbreaking work. That paper still gets cited, though less frequently as the years go by, I find.

In my early days I'd leave little flyers all over the quad, "Tell me your dreams—\$5 for a half hour," with my phone number and the address of the subbasement of the psychology building. Grubby undergrads came by at odd hours, looking for beer money. "You can leave if you like—go ahead," I'd say, after giving a fiver. That was the first experiment. They were supposed to accept the bill, then stick around, uncomfortable with the idea of getting something for nothing. Sixteen of the first twenty participants simply said thanks and split. Come the end of week one, I was out a hundred dollars that I didn't have. The department chair gave me a stern wordless look. There was no week two!

Eventually I graduated. I followed my girlfriend, Jess, to Boston on a whim. Jess wasn't actually my girlfriend, just someone who stalked me and whom I eventually stalked back. Had the stalkings been aligned, we might have been okay. As things stood, the situation fizzled in our new city, and I found myself at loose ends. My ethics degree wasn't opening any doors. I wanted to be—what? A life coach told me to say the first three things that came to mind. I said television critic, carpenter, first violinist of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, despite not owning a TV, tool kit, or violin. I have still never been to Cleveland.

I read a lot, or rather I bought a lot of books that I put in impressive piles on the floor of my basement apartment on Newbury Street. I took the LSAT, but when the results came in the mail, refused to open them. Jess, who was no longer stalking me, took the liberty of looking. She slipped the paper in the trash and didn't say word one. In my mind I could be Oliver Wendell Holmes or else a bum on the street right now.

C'est la vie!

4

I will say: That was a time in my life when I went to see a lot of bands play. The Volumetrics, Wonton Wonton, The Splitting Headaches, Instant Cred. After a week of club hopping, the back of my hand was a rainbow palimpsest of ink-stamped logos, of stars and surds.

I went to see rock-rap, freak-folk, and trip-hop. Nü-metal, rap-country, and klezmer-reggae were not unknown to me. I had a fondness for something called goth-jazz. But I wasn't particular. I was just bored out of my mind. I tried to volunteer for a political campaign, but I didn't like any of the candidates. Maybe it was that the positions up for grabs for the coming election cycle were somewhat opaque. Alderman, comptroller—that sort of thing.

It was at a show for The New Grubs that I met my now-wife. She was working the merch table. I bought a T-shirt just for the excuse to talk to her. Nervous, perspiring, I pointed to a shirt, paid twice the asking price, and left without saying a word.

A month later, a bus drove through a puddle, transferring every drop to me. I thought: My time in Boston must end. I had no plan beyond closing my bank account. A handmade sign outside a dodgy storefront caught my attention. It was the emblem that transfixed me, a crudely drawn enigma. What was it—a lobster with a wart, a sundial of some sort?

No: A hand with an eye in the middle. For the price of five cups of coffee, my future would be revealed to me in tremendous detail. The offer wouldn't last. I had already been spending above my means. Every dollar I owned was stuffed in my jeans pockets.

She was smiling in the shadows, the girl from the

merch table, plucking a card from the middle of the deck. The Fool, it said.

The Fool!

5

Now we live across the country in Irvine, which sounds like someone's grandfather. Don't ask me how it happened. One minute your wife is attending a conference on alternative tarot, the next you're doing the walk-through with an agent named Tracy.

I've had a lot of jobs here. I've been a chiropractor (unlicensed), a podiatrist's assistant (PU!), a copywriter for Kaiser Permanente (fired), a library book-sale attendant (twice), a lifeguard—a terrible lifeguard. Don't ask. Right now I work in an office with two other people. We produce what is sort of a news site. I say sort of because, well. It depends on your definition of news. It depends on your definition of new. I say produce in the sense that something appears on the screen when you type in the address.

My beat is advertising. I'm in charge of getting ads. Cold-calling the local burghers, walking in with my bleary printouts showing banner, side stripe, and corner placement. (My tablet broke!) Our neighbors hate us—the three other suites on our floor. It's a miserable situation all around. If I ran a business, I wouldn't want to put an ad on our crummy little site. I wouldn't want to have any association with it.

The one good thing about my setup is the noodle shop downstairs. They do all sorts of Asian noodles and you can also get Japanese sweets, Taiwanese bubble tea, Thai iced coffee, Korean baked thingamajigs. But not always. Sometimes you can only really get the noodles. And that's enough. I've gained about a million pounds. The corporation says she's buying me a treadmill.

"How about a personal trainer?"

She doesn't see that happening.

6

Rain again tonight, pad see ew again tonight, the talk again tonight: kids or no kids? Or really it's: kid or no kid?

Sometimes she's mildly pro. A week ago she was in the latter camp.

"What if he becomes a sociopath?" she says. "How would we live with ourselves?"

"What if he becomes president of the United States?" I counter, using my gift for reverse psychology.

"Same difference," she says.

"Why not just—" I stop myself. It's always a bad idea to tell her to use her psychic powers.

I go into my little room, which I refer to as the man cave, though the dimensions are much smaller than anything you could call a cave. There's not much inside. Some books, a dog-eared old *Maxim*, a transparent Super Ball with tiny colored flecks inside it. I bounce that thing for two hours, because why not.

7

My phone rings there in the man cave. I cool it with the Super Ball. When I first got my phone, I coveted all these different ringtones, a different meaningful snippet for each person in my life. But I couldn't figure out how to get them to work, so now when it rings it just sounds like water going over a bunch of wind chimes. It sounds like the factory default.

Caller ID says "stoner friend," though Max isn't really into anything. A little weed. Some ecstasy. He used to do mushrooms on a semifrequent basis but stopped when he tied the knot.

I smile at the memory of Max typing "stoner friend" into my brand new phone.

My wife, the corporation, is not fond of Max!

"You know what song I hate?" he says, without even a greeting. "The French baby one. The one where the baby says, 'Oh la la, bébé.'"

"I think I know that song!"

"It's been in my head this week. Is that normal?"

Now it was in *my* head. "Yes."

"That song must be twenty-five years old at least."

"At least."

"So that baby is twenty now, easy."

"Don't you mean thirty?"

"What year is it? Never mind." I could hear him take a drag of something. "I wonder if that song tainted his life."

"Don't worry about it."

"If I had a kid, I'd never put him in show business," Max

continued. "What's the point? I guess money. I guess the money would be nice. If I had two kids, maybe I would push one toward show business, and the other to be a doctor."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Remember the baby on the cover of the Nirvana album?"

"The one reaching for the dollar bill in the swimming pool."

"That's the one. Chase that money. Now he's all grown up. They had him on the radio the other day."

"He's a musician?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. I think he's just a regular person, like a barista or something."

"He's a barista?"

"I didn't listen to the segment. I was parking at the grocery store. How would you rate your parallel parking ability? I've got mad skills."

The conversation drifts from there. It becomes midnight, it becomes half past one. I don't even sign off, just let him drone. Max was always a talker. I tuck the phone under my pillow so that when I wake up there's no more noise and the battery is dead.

8

At eight the next morning, I accompany my wife to the police station. I'm being dramatic. She's not a suspect in the recent rash of crimes against high-end florists. Rather, she's helping the police put a stop to the mysterious destruction of tulips, zinnias, and orchids.

Not long after we moved to the area, she was instrumental in solving the case of the fluorescent graffiti. Her contributions have been minimal since then, but she says it's always good to have the law on your side. The police chief, a robust young man named Tyler, looks at her in awe. Apparently he's come in for private readings. She envisioned a career in politics, inspiring him to contemplate a run for sheriff.

In the bright conference room, my wife sits with her eyes closed, pen and paper before her. "Zot," she says. "Zot."

"What?" Tyler says, eyes widening.

"She said 'Zot.'" This comes from a grizzled force vet, who never quite bought her solution to the graffiti caper. I call him the Phantom. He looks like a comic-book hero

of yore, some holdover from an age of primitive printing processes who should be wearing a cape.

“Zot . . . zot . . . zot . . .”

Tyler looks at me. “She okay?”

I nod gravely, purse my lips to shush him. I’m wearing my old New Grubs shirt, which shows a big red balloon about to land on a needle. There’s a small hole in the back and another in the armpit. If I don’t move too much, no one will see.

“Zot . . .”

A few minutes of this, an hour. Cops enter, cops leave. I’m totally focused. It’s a rare thrill to watch my wife in action, throwing around her corporate muscle, but even I feel fatigued. At last the Phantom slaps the table in exasperation, blurting, “So what’s this ‘zot, zot’ about?”

“That’s *enough* out of you,” Tyler says. I picture a generational struggle, their years-long feud bubbling to the surface at last, a duel at twenty paces.

My wife opens her eyes. “I know who did it,” she says. The hairs on my arms go up. The Phantom gasps. She writes something down on a slip of paper and seals it in an envelope and places it inside a box, like a tackle box. She hooks a small padlock through a hoop and snaps it shut.

“Why’d you do that?” The Phantom whines.

“She has her ways,” Tyler says. He winks. “Always trust the process, right, boss?”

“Always,” she says.

9

We drive home in silence. I have about fifteen minutes before I need to go to work. I head to the man cave, the corporation on my tail.

She’s holding what looks like a giant cockroach carapace or some sort of meat that’s been forgotten. “Where were you last night?”

“Home.”

It’s one of my old dress shoes. “Look at the soles. They’re ruined from the rain.”

I shrug with flair, like, *Woman, I’m not the weatherman*. “C’est la vie.”

She presses the still damp tongue to my cheek then lets the shoe drop to the floor. “Listen,” she says. “I can’t keep covering for you.”

I don’t say anything.

“I’m a corporation now.”

“I know that.”

“And you’re on my payroll.”

“It’s just for taxes.”

“This can’t keep happening. What’s ‘zot’?”

I look up. “How should I know? You were the one who kept saying it.”

She shook her head, sadly. “Zinnias . . . orchids . . . tulips. Right?”

“I don’t know. *You’re* the psychic.”

“Put your hand down.”

“Make me.”

“I’ve got Tyler on speed dial.”

“That’s a load of bull.”

“Try me.”

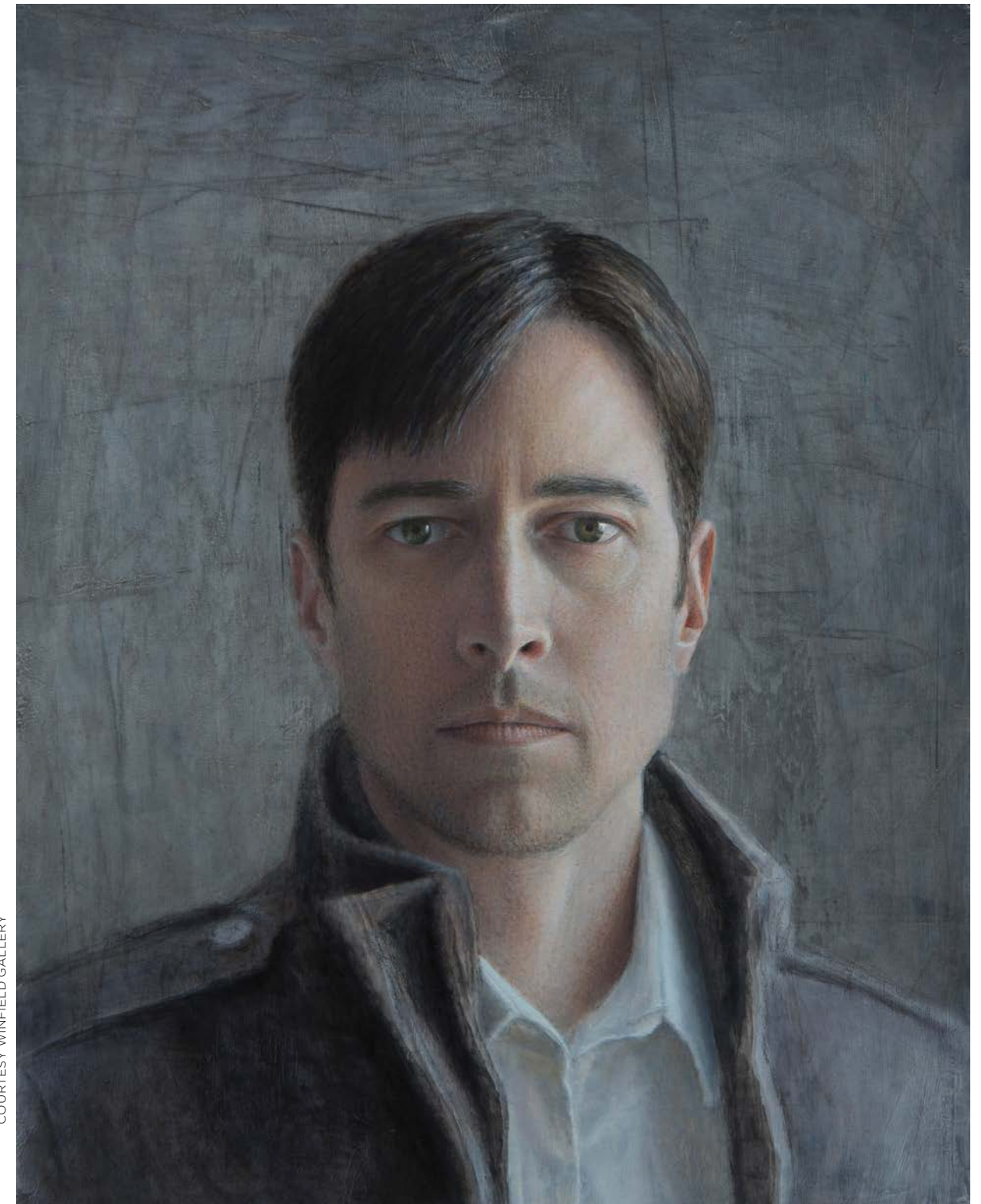
10

I don’t go to work. I stew in my man cave and send the Super Ball whizzing off every surface. At the police station the next day, I tell Tyler and the Phantom about my stoner friend, but there’s no record of any call. My alibi is destroyed. Where was I? The GPS in my phone made it easy to trace my path. Apparently I visited every flower shop in a ten-mile radius, trying to sell them ads for the big spring promotion. Apparently it didn’t go well. Apparently that night I paid another visit, and apparently my name is Max and I’ve got a song in my head, a real bitch of an earworm, this little blond Frenchman that won’t do the decent thing and button it, just button it, just stop for once in your life.

Ed Park is a book editor and fiction writer living in New York City. His novel, *Personal Days*, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. His stories have appeared in the *New Yorker* and other places.

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Self Portrait, 2016
Oil on canvas, 14 x 11 in



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