

HE TOOK THE CAT TO TEXAS: Part 2

By Michael Ventura

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“It is my very strong feeling that real pacifism, real positive political change, cannot be effectively motivated by guilt, but must come instead from a joyful reverence for life, from a fervent desire to make our own lives more glorious and more ecstatic, and from the very selfish desire to share that joy with all the people and all the living things of the universe.”

Mayer Vishner wrote that when he was young, and, a lifelong activist, he lived those words, or attempted to, for real. Not in an ivory tower or a commune, but on the street.

In August, in my Lubbock, Texas, apartment, I awaited an old Mayer Vishner -- and don't kid yourself: 64 is old. He was due within the hour, accompanied by a cat named Adrienne and a friend named Justin. His mission: to deposit his cat with me, visit, return to Greenwich Village, and end his life.

I didn't see Mayer's choice of suicide as contradictory, paradoxical, or a denial of what he believed. There are countless ways a joyful young person can become a broken old person, yet, within that brokenness, still cleave to ideals that once made for joy.

Thoughts of Mayer invoked what James Baldwin wrote of Beauford Delaney: “I saw him shaken many times and I lived to see him broken but I never saw him bow.”

Mayer never bowed. He wasn't bowing now. Anything but. Mayer intended one final defiance: victory over the sufferings that had imprisoned him for decades and a last chance to break the law in his lifelong challenge to impersonal authority.

As Mayer said: “You can't be a moral person living in this society without getting in trouble with the police every now and then.”

In Part 1, I made clear that Mayer was, as we'd say in the Bronx, “royally fucked up.” Still, in spite of (or within?) Mayer's fucked-upness, he was one stubbornly noble son of a bitch.

As I awaited his knock, it hit me: “This is Mayer's last stop.”

Speaking of fucked up, what had I gotten myself into?

Next thought: Mayer expects me to write about this.

Four years ago he'd asked me to write a book about his “existential project”: to document, step by existential step, his journey to death. He promised it would get me on *Oprah*. I thanked him for his trust and turned him down flat. Let's study Mayer as he revels in being depressed? Yuk.

But this much was clear: Suicide had become the last lens through which Mayer could bear to gaze upon life. His apartment, his cat, his poverty, the few friends he had left, his estranged family, his organic garden, his loneliness, his illnesses, his addictions, his ideals – all were animated anew, freshly colored by the prospect of suicide. The project brought a more-than-half-dead Mayer back to life. Suicide was not a way to die but a way to live.

For a while, anyway. After all, there was so much this-and-that to consider. And then came Justin Schein and Justin's camera. Justin wanted to make a documentary about Mayer. Only well after Justin started production did Mayer reveal the existential project.

So I knew there'd be filming, but I didn't expect it to begin as soon as I opened the door. The camera was rolling to catch Mayer's greeting: “I brought a cat.”

Hugs, introductions, “Jazmin’s at work but she’ll be back soon,” and this potbellied, ill-looking, pixielike person is the same Mayer Vishner I’ve known 29 years but haven’t seen for 22. Didn’t seem that way -- perhaps because Mayer’s soul was so embodied in his voice that to speak with Mayer on the phone was to be in the same room.

Cat, what cat? Soon as Mayer opened the carrying case, that cat took off for the back reaches of my apartment and was not seen again during his visit. There’d be no further footage of Mayer and his cat.

But lots of footage of Mayer discussing his cat. He loved Adrienne. “But I can’t stay alive for a cat.” He went on at length, with unnerving intensity, about how Adrienne would be miserable with Jaz and me. She’d try to get out the front door every chance she got “because she’ll think my apartment is on the other side of that door.” Justin swung the camera my way. I said something like: “Sorry, Mayer, but I don’t buy the notion of a tragic cat.”

(For the record, she’s doing fine. Purrs a lot. Ignores the front door. I tend not to call her Adrienne. I call her Gorgeous.)

A sense of unreality pervaded every moment until midway of the second day when my body got the message that Mayer would be dead sometime the next night. We were filming on the High Plains. Flat land, stiff wind, utter sky. I told him: “I understand it, I bless it, but I fucking hate it.”

I would have liked things to be different, but had no to answer Mayer’s question: “Who do I owe it to to go on suffering?”

Ill, shaky, crazy, poor, addicted, alone, his suffering untouched by years of therapy, medication, and hospitalizations. Who did he owe it to?

Still, something clenched in my stomach that hasn’t yet unclenched.

It became the next day. Their flight was in the late afternoon.

I liked Justin right away, which is rare for me. In his early 40s, he quietly radiates a sense of decency and integrity. A calming presence. (How he feels within that presence, I wouldn’t know.)

So, there’s the three of us, with nothing left to say, killing time. Felt weird. Felt nuts. Suspended hours.

The American Wind Power Center was my idea. “A Museum for the American-Style Water Pumping Windmill and Related Machinery.”

Lubbock is flat. This museum is one of the few places with a view. Indoors and outdoors there are many, many windmills, two stories high, four stories high, six or eight stories high, 400 years of windmill design. Joe Ely’s song played in my mind: “Someday when your bones turn to dust that wind’s gonna blow you away.”

We’re walking up and down an empty hall viewing LaGina Fairbetter’s enormous, minutely detailed mural of Texas Panhandle flora and fauna, featuring every windmill that marked the horizons of the West.

Wait a minute. Windmills?

Here is Mayer Vishner, the most bedraggled Don Quixote imaginable, with two Sancho Panzas, more windmills than you can shake a lance at, and not a Dulcinea in sight. And – and! – we’re making a movie.

Justin, bless him, didn’t push it. He shot a little, then laid down the camera. Saying not much, we strolled upon the grounds, surrounded by windmills. Anther blessing: Long silences did not make us uncomfortable.

Justin picked up a piece of paper from the otherwise virgin grass. It was a folded name-sticker from some museum event. He unfolded it. The name on the sticker: “Justin.”

I believe Justin and I were feeling the same thing. Not about the teasing synchronicity of the sticker (the universe favoring us with what used to be called a “Bronx cheer”). But that it’s the last day of Mayer’s life, and, whatever Mayer’s feeling, we are hurting, Justin and I – and, in a way, that is what Mayer wanted of us and that is our gift to him.

His gift to us was this provocative, not-to-be categorized experience.

His gift to me: something about death that you’ll not catch me trying to put into words.

And a cat.

The breeze was stiff and the windmills creaked as windmills are apt to.

I asked Mayer, “How are you feeling?”

Gleaming with an almost vicious glee, he said “I feel like I’m fixin’ t’ die!”

Twelve hours later he did just that.

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