

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, FATBOY

Chris Riseley

EVERY TIME SOMEONE hears that I quit my job producing television they inevitably exclaim, “What? Are you crazy?” They ask this as if they don’t know that the Industry—yes, capital “I”—is full of cheats, creeps, and liars. The sleazy producer is a Hollywood stereotype that goes back to the nineteen-thirties, and yet none of us believes that it might be true. We are so willing to be impressed by Emmies and Oscars and other awards that Industry insiders give themselves that we fail to understand fully that it is an industry built entirely upon deception.

Case in point: Energy! Entertainment.

The office worked loose and easy. We were hired by Energy! Entertainment (always with an exclamation point) to produce a series of one-hour long celebrity biographies called “Real Hollywood Drama.” We had four teams working on four different shows at the same time. One team was on the breast queen who had married the geriatric millionaire and gotten real fat. (Interesting side note: she later received her own series on Energy! She was so drug addled it was like watching a car wreck. You couldn’t take your eyes off of it.) Another team was on the story of the new young James Dean who died of a heroin overdose on Sunset Boulevard. Another team was on the princess who died being chased by photographers, and I was on the team doing the story of a man who murdered his sister’s boyfriend in cold blood but served only five years, having hired some of the finest lawyers in Hollywood.

See, here’s the truth: it didn’t matter what evidence we found in any of these stories. The only thing that mattered was that the story be sensational. “Oh, ho-hum,” you may think. “Everyone knows that sex sells.” And blood and betrayal and the rest of it. And yet, I never considered what telling all these lies was doing to me. Am I crazy? I don’t know. I only know what happened.

I was looking at my computer screen, where I was perusing leads on old friends of the murderer when I saw a strange blurry light flash above another producer. I had

been seeing things like this for a few days. I tried not to jerk my head this time. I pretended I didn’t see it. And it remained. It did not go away as it had all those other times when I had jerked my head around to look.

I held my head perfectly still and allowed my eyes to drift imperceptibly to my left, toward this other producer. And the light came into view, clearly. It was a little, four inch tall figure holding a noose around this producer’s neck. It floated above his head and pulled the rope taut. There was a translucency to the thing, which looked like a little man, and a translucency to the rope upon which he pulled.

I remained calm and natural and allowed my vision to take in this other producer’s face. He was fine. He showed no signs of suffocation or strangulation or any awareness that he was being strenuously attacked by a little four inch tall man floating above his head.

I needed some water. I calmly got up and turned naturally out of my seat toward the producer who was being attacked. The translucent image vanished.

My heart raced. I walked into the little office kitchen that housed the water-cooler, microwave, coffeemaker and one of the best photocopiers I had ever used. Susan was making copies and she turned toward me. She whispered, “Nate, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I pinched some water out of the cooler. “I’m fine.”

“You’re so pale, and you’re trembling.” She put her hand on my forehead. “You don’t have a fever.” She smiled.

Susan was one of the few nice people that worked in the office. One of the therapy veterans. She and I often griped that the shows were becoming more and more sensational and grotesque.

Within a few sips she reported that my color had returned, and we quickly fell to a few gripes about how our respective shows were going; she was on what we called “the titty show,” and mine was, of course, “the killer show.” I secretly would have traded with her in a hot second, but mentioning that would have been very un-cool,

titties being something you could only joke about as long as you were deriding the network's interest in putting them on air.

I made it back to my desk without any hallucinations. Lars, the producer I had seen only moments before being attacked by a small translucent little creature, was wearing headphones now and had pulled a viewing station up to his desk to watch some of the courtroom tape we had found in which the murderer's father, the great actor, had taken the stand and spoken endlessly about the brutal childhood he had given his own son.

I was trying to get in touch with the man who had given the murderer the gun. I picked up the phone when once again, from the corner of my eye, I saw the same image. Impish little monster just straining to pop Lars' head off. I turned my back to Lars and dialed a number I hoped might lead to the murderer's friend. I decided I was not seeing what I thought I was seeing. I would mention it in therapy.

The phone ringing in my ear, I turned my head back toward Lars, casually, in the hope the image wouldn't be there. But it was. The little imp saw me looking at it and shot right through the air at my face and screamed in a raspy voice: "Mind your own business, fatboy!"

Then it vanished.

The phone fell out of my hand. I wanted to scream, but I contained myself. I reached down to the floor, and hung up the phone. I casually looked around. No one noticed that I was about to shit my pants.

Lars started coughing. He reached for his throat and cleared it. It was just a small cough. He stood up and got some water.

THE NEXT FEW days were field work for me. I was out of the office, tracking down leads that I had created on the phone. One of the leads led to an intensive care unit where the guy who gave the murderer the gun lay in a coma. He had had a motorcycle accident on Mulholland Drive near the big actor's estate. I felt a twinge of sleaze as I pulled a very small camera out of my pocket and took a snapshot of him lying there in the bed. Click. Feeding-tubes shoved up his nostrils, his skin pasty white, red rimming his sunken eyes, he had once weighed an athletic 180 pounds and was now shriveled to 98.

I put the camera back into my pocket and sneaked out so that the charge nurse would not be able to identify me later.

"**AND THEN IT** said, 'Mind your own business, fatboy.'"

I'd been going to therapy for about a year and at this point I couldn't tell if I was going for me or just to see

what kind of extra-short skirt my therapist was going to wear that day. A few of my friends had crushes on their therapists, so I figured it was pretty normal to spend half the time in therapy picturing her alone, masturbating, and dreaming of me.

"Is there some part of you that feels like a fatboy?" she asked. She sat statue still. It was a red oriental-style mini-dress that came to above the middle of her thigh. If she moved her legs even a millimeter the heavens parted. She had long straight dark hair and huge brown eyes that reminded me of the loving innocence you see in the eyes of grazing cattle. She made me want to be a Hindu.

"Yeah, I'm a little fat. Sure, I guess I feel that way," I answered.

"And what about the 'mind your own business' part?" she furrowed her brow pensively. "What do you think that might mean to you?"

"Look, this wasn't a dream. I saw this," I pleaded.

"Yes, but sometimes our subconscious can talk to us while we're awake. That's all. We're just looking for a message."

"And what would the message be?" I taunted.

"Well," she spoke very clearly but never condescendingly. I loved her. "When I ask you what 'mind your own business' might mean to you, just tell me the first thing that comes to your mind."

Click. It was the first thing that popped into my mind. "I had to take a picture of a guy in his hospital bed."

"For work?" She knew all about the sleazy shows I made. She never judged me.

"Yeah," I said.

"Anything else?"

A hundred different phone calls came to mind in which people had begged me to quit calling, or don't bug their neighbors, or to just leave them be. Or had screamed at me because I had told them we were creating a "loving tribute" when we were really dragging memories through the slime.

"Yeah, lots else. 'Mind your own business' makes a hell of a lot sense to me." I said as I lay back on the couch to stare at the patterns in the ceiling plaster. I always looked at the ceiling when actual therapy was happening. When I was processing something that could be useful. It was kind of a nod to Freud that I would lie back in the classical turn-of-the-century patient-posture.

Then I saw the flash out of the corner of my eye. I didn't jerk my head toward her. But in the periphery of my vision I could see them. Two this time. Translucent and sucking at her breasts ravenously. One on each. Her breasts, also translucent, came through her dress and I could see them, clearly, just the way I had imagined them. I had fantasized about her before but this was crazy. It was as

though on one level I could tell that she was sitting there, perfectly clothed and statue still, and on another level, this level of translucence, she was being attacked by these ravenous little creatures. One flew up to her shoulder. He was naked and had a tiny erection which he inserted into her ear. He looked toward me boastfully and smiled.

I jerked myself to a sitting position and stared straight at her. They vanished.

"What? Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm fine."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

What was I going to tell her? I saw an imp fucking you in the ear? "We are, we are talking about it. It's been good." I pulled out my check book and wrote her a check like I always did at the end of my sessions. The only difference this time was that there were fifteen minutes left. "Okay, see you next Saturday," I said, closing her office door behind me.

Walked out into the bright Brentwood Saturday. The building I had therapy in was right across the street from Meza Luna. I had worked on several shows about the ex-wife of the football legend who had been murdered shortly after eating there. Everyone knew it was the football legend that did it, but post-riot hysteria had allowed him to go free.

I sat down at a table at an outside café. I asked a waiter to bring me a cappuccino. Just five feet from me, lying in the gutter, a bum lifted a gallon bottle of Ernest & Julio to his lips and let his head loll back onto the sidewalk. This was an extremely nice neighborhood for a bum to be rolling in the gutter. The cops would be by any second to move him along.

I turned my head back to the menu. It was all these classy little pizzas. A nice pizza always helped me numb out after therapy. Today would require two; flip one over on top of the other and eat them like a sandwich, I was so stressed out.

Then I saw them again. Out of the corner of my eye. There were four. Theimps. But these ones were more than translucent. They were red. They sort of glowed reddish the way a bicycle reflector sometimes catches the bright sun in the afternoon. Two of them were at the bum's ears. It looked like they were yelling something. And two others were down at his hand, trying to hoist the gallon bottle of crap wine up toward his mouth. His arm wavered drunkenly as they heaved. I could tell, to anyone else, he just looked like a slooshy drunk. But to me, out of the corner of my eye, I could see what was going on clear as day.

I slowly turned my head toward the drunk and his assailants. Their image wavered, and they nearly disappeared as I looked on them fully, but I found that if I con-

centrated on keeping them visible, they remained.

I stood up and slowly walked over to the man in the gutter.

He turned his head toward me. Theimps all looked up at me and sneered but continued working on him.

"I don't want your fucking money," he nearly sobbed. "I used to be somebody."

"I just want to see something," I said. I wasn't looking at him. I was looking at the imp holding onto his left ear with both tiny hands and screaming into it ferociously. I couldn't hear what it was yelling. I batted at it with my hand like I would have if it had been a small dog or something. My hand went through the thing but I saw it fly off, as if my arm had created some kind of breeze. It swirled a few feet and then fell face down on the side walk.

The other little things stopped what they were doing and laughed at their comrade, so shaken on the sidewalk. The bum dropped the bottle of Ernest & Bro, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" He tried to sit up. He didn't notice that the three remainingimps were pounding on his chest as if their weight would keep him from getting up. He fell back into the gutter. I couldn't tell if it was the wine or theimps.

The one I had flicked was enraged. He was much brighter red now. He shot up to my face and I felt him clinging to my cheek. He bit. It stung almost imperceptibly, but I had felt something. I grabbed it off of my face and was surprised that I could hold onto it like some kind of G.I. Joe toy.

It struggled in my grasp, sneering, "You've got troubles of your own, fatboy."

"I'm not that goddamn fat." I yelled into my hand, which must have looked empty to anyone passing by.

"Not yet!" He laughed. "You've got troubles of your own."

I watched him furrow his brow, concentrating very hard for one second, and he shrank small enough to slip out of the bottom of my grip.

The bum looked scared of me and sat up, "Get away from me you crazy fuck."

Everyone in the café had watched me scream into my hand. I could just feel them staring. Who was crazier? Me or the bum? I felt flushed, embarrassed, terrified. I was losing it, here in Brentwood with all the beautiful people. I was having a conversation with a hallucination.

I wanted to rush up and talk to my therapist again, but she'd be with another client. I wanted to tell her everything. No one would believe me. Not even her. I could feel them slipping a straight jacket on me.

I walked back into the café and went to the bathroom. I washed my face and stared into the mirror. Was there a little red mark on my face where I'd been bitten? I couldn't

tell. I thought I saw something, but it was very faint.

"There's nothing there." I said out loud to myself in the mirror. "Nothing. I didn't see anything." I felt if I affirmed this out loud it would be true.

The man sitting in the stall behind me coughed and shuffled his feet a little. I was not alone.

I turned and pulled some towels out of the dispenser on the wall, now more embarrassed than ever. I muttered to myself, "Oh, I just want to kill myself."

I thought I heard the word, "Good," slither out next to me.

"What?" I said out loud.

"I didn't say anything, man." The guy on the toilet said nervously.

I saw it out of the corner of my eye. In the mirror. It seemed attached to my stomach. He was huge for one of these things. Four inches tall but obese like that guy in the Guinness book they had to bury in a piano crate. He was pulling slices of pizza out of the air and shoving them into his mouth.

He sprawled across my stomach like it was a big fat comfy bed. He spoke with his mouth full of translucent pizza, goo dripping everywhere off his body. He was almost more slime than imp. He said, "Like the man said, 'You've got troubles of your own.'"

Guy in the bathroom or not, I didn't care; I started trying to rip this fat little thing off my stomach. But my fingers couldn't touch him. I wiped at my belly, nearly ripping my shirt. Nothing. No effect.

"That shit might work with other peoples' troubles," he coughed, a piece of pizza wedged in his throat. He spit it up onto my chest, "but getting rid of your own is a whole different matter."

I washed my face again. I could see it in the mirror, lounging on my stomach, a translucent Jabba the Hut. I knew I was cracking up. And I knew that if I knew I was cracking up that maybe I wasn't cracking up. It would be hard but I could ignore it.

I tucked my shirt back in and walked out of the bathroom.

I didn't feel like pizza anymore, and so I walked over and slapped a few bucks down onto my table. I nodded at the waiter. He nodded and turned away. That's when I saw his imp. It was driving an axe into the back of his skull, over and over. Just chipping away. It was maddened. Tireless. I watched the waiter for a second. He walked over to the service counter and pulled a bottle of aspirin out of his pocket. Popped two into his mouth and washed them down.

There was never any parking in Brentwood, and I refused to pay the incredibly high prices for the garages. The few blocks I had to walk never bothered me. Until

now. I could see everyone's troubles. A woman rode by on a bike; she had one eating her heart. I walked by an old man whose translucent dick was being stretched out and dragged behind him, ridden on by three little femaleimps that drove tiny daggers into it. He didn't seem to notice a thing. A college student walked by me, his physical body walked up right and appeared quite normal, but his translucent body had literally been split down the middle to the waist by a chainsaw, wielding trouble. His guts flowed out behind him.

I couldn't help myself. "Hey. Do you know this area?"

He stopped. His little chainsaw, wielding trouble, didn't seem to care that I knew what was going on. It was just ripping up the exposed guts. Turning them into soup. Translucent spray everywhere.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"I'm looking for CBS Television City." I just lied to get him to stop and talk to me. Picked something that was really far away and would take him a long time to figure the directions.

"Man, are you lost," he started giving me the directions. He pointed up the street and told me where to turn and how to get there. I listened. But without him noticing, I was able to grab the little trouble off of his soupy translucent body. As soon as the trouble was off, the translucent body began to almost soak back into this guy's physical body. His trouble struggled and squirmed to free itself from my grip. When I felt it shrinking, I squeezed tighter; concentrated. It fired up its chainsaw and started working on me. I calmly glanced down and saw that it had no effect on me or my own passenger.

The student finished, and I thanked him. I walked down the street with his harmless little trouble in my hands. My own trouble was laughing his ass off. Pizza spewing from his gruesome hole. He laughed at the trouble in my hands, "Looks like you're screwed now."

"Why's that?" I asked him, trying to keep my voice down in public. "Why's he screwed now?"

He couldn't keep himself from laughing "He got caught!" Fatty laughed and laughed.

The chainsaw one squirmed frantically, but the more he concentrated, the more I concentrated, and the more I concentrated, the weaker he became. I could feel him going limp in my fingers. I was squeezing the life out of him. Strangling him. After about a minute's struggle, he just dissolved. I could feel a sort of slime on my hands. Couldn't see anything, but I could feel it. Wiped them on my pants.

"Hey, Fatty," I said. "Why can I touch somebody else's trouble and not you?"

"It's always easier to deal with other people's troubles." He was shoving another huge slice of pizza down his

throat. Little bits of sausage covered his face like leprosy.

I went home and showered. Naked or clothed, Fatty was on me. Right after I stepped out of the shower he took a big drooling shit that I watched flow down my naked belly and into my pubic hair. It dripped off the end of my flaccid pud. He glanced up at me, laughing, his mouth a garbage disposal, "Looks like I need more roughage, huh?" He laughed and laughed and shit and shit. You couldn't tell where he ended and this translucent shit began. I was covered in it. He shoved more pizza into his mouth.

AT THE PHOTO processing house, I opened my new packet of pictures to see how my shot of the murderer's friend turned out. Those little cameras can take some damn good photos. It was a great shot. Feeding tubes going up the nose, IVs going in the arms, he was a mess. I would be commended by the executives for having gone above and beyond the call of duty.

I studied the photo proudly. Noticed what looked like a smudge right near the guy's neck. I was just about to check the negative when I realized the smudge looked exactly like one of these troubles I'd been seeing everywhere. Looked like one of the little things was stomping down on the guy's throat.

I called to the photo processor behind the counter. I had seen his trouble as soon as I walked in the door. Translucent imp standing on his head jamming a straw through his skull, sucking out his brains. I couldn't do anything about it, and so, like I ignored my own trouble, I ignored his.

I showed him the photo, pointed to the smudge, "Do you see that smudge there?"

He answered slowly, "I don't see any smudge."

"Look closer." He leaned forward. His trouble pointed toward me out of his head like the horn of a unicorn. I smacked it. It flew about three feet over to the counter and yelled at me. "Hey, fuck you, buddy," it squeaked. "Mind your own business."

I flipped it the bird and pulled my photo away from the counter.

"I didn't see any smudge, mister."

"I didn't think you would." I walked out the door.

I GOT TO Cedar Sinai Hospital in about twenty minutes. It took about twenty minutes to get anywhere in L.A.; it didn't matter where you started from.

The hospital was awash with troubles. I had noticed almost everyone I saw had them. One nurse waddled down the hallway with a trouble that looked like a little dog dragging from her uterus, which hung out the back of her white dress. At least I figured it was her uterus. One old

patient in a wheel chair had at least sixteen crawling over him. They were laughing and dancing as they kicked and poked him. He was about to die. It was a party.

It occurred to me that the weaker a person was, the more he could be victimized.

Troubles crawled out of people's ears, nostrils, bellies, assholes. They were inside and out. Swarming over people like ants over a dropped-popsicle melting on the sidewalk in the summer sun. People were a sugarfest of joy.

I walked into the intensive care unit and slipped into the room of the man in the coma. A guy was sitting next to him, holding his limp hand and sobbing. He looked up, "Who are you?" he asked.

I fingered the camera in my pocket.

I'd only ever seen photos and video tape of him. This was the moment that every sleazy producer hopes for, to actually meet the subject of your hour-long, trash documentary-style biography. It was the murderer. Son of the most famous actor in the world. We had all heard that he had moved to Omaha after his release from jail. And maybe he had, but here he was visiting his fallen friend. The man who had given him the gun that had changed his life.

I couldn't tell him who I was. I had pieced a lot together about his life. His sister had committed suicide a few weeks before his release from jail. She had been there on the night of the murder. She had fled to their father's island in the Pacific and had fought extradition with madness. I had interviewed the murderer's girlfriends who had said to me, "Ever think he *didn't* do it? Don't you think it's weird that after he was sentenced, he never talked to his sister again? Don't you think it's weird that she committed suicide right before he got out of jail? Isn't it possible that *she* might have done it, and that his father might have bullied him to take the blame?"

And looking at the purity in his red eyes, crying over his friend, I thought, yeah, yeah; all that's possible. His trouble was a thick stake through his chest. He's lucky he couldn't feel it because something like that would sure as hell hurt. And then I thought maybe he could feel it. Maybe on some level we could all feel our troubles.

I was getting fatter everyday and could sure as hell feel mine.

"I'm a friend from the tree cutting business." I answered finally. It was the last job the man in the coma had. "My name's Nate," I held out my hand. "Who are you?"

"Just an old friend. I was good buddies with this guy a few years ago."

The actor's son was used to not being recognized. His notoriety was a few newspaper stories years ago. Nothing compared to his father's. He was a quiet and polite person. His smile gentle. I wanted to rip the stake out of his

heart, but I couldn't do it without looking insane.

I glanced at the man in the bed. The trouble was crushing his throat. I passed my hand over the man's face and neck in the tender gesture of a worried friend. I came away with the trouble kicking and screaming in my hands. I started squeezing.

The actor's son took a chair on one side of the bed. I took a chair on the other side. I gripped the trouble in my fists low so no one could see what I was doing with my hands. We both sat there looking worriedly at our friend in the bed. I felt the trouble getting weaker between my fingers. Soon I felt it melt into nothing. I wiped the slime off on my pant legs. Fatty on my stomach thought that was funny as hell and laughed and laughed, coughing and farting. Someday I'd get him. Someday.

I said goodbye to the man in the bed and then to the actor's son. "Nice to meet you," he said. "If he wakes up, I'll tell him you were here. I think it's important that people care."

"So do I," I said.

When I made it to the parking lot, I took the photo of the man in the bed out of my pocket. I had no right to have ever taken it. I looked at it. The smudge was gone. It figured. The world was weirder than I ever could have imagined.

I ripped up the photo and scattered the small pieces in the smoggy L.A. breeze.