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RULE & INNOVATION



Mick McGrath

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MICK McGRATH

An excerpt from the new collection of short stories by
Mick McGrath *PEOPLE With Whom I Am Quite Pissed*

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HOT BUTTON PRESS: *Contemporary Issues*

RULE & INNOVATION

A few weeks ago, my neighbor Alec and I cleaned his apartment. We folded all the laundry that had been lying in a heap on his bedroom floor. We made his bed. We cleaned Alec's oven. We cleaned his toilet, too. And his fridge. We did the dishes. Then we used Brasso on the kitchen sink, polishing the steel. We tidied Alec's living room.

"Here's a radical idea," I said. "When you're done with something, put it away."

Alec's apartment looks better now. Before I came along, it looked like the Colyer Brothers' Brownstone. I exaggerate, of course, but the apartment does look better.

After cleaning, we went to the store and bought a houseplant. We bought some flowers and put them in a vase on Alec's glass coffee table. Alec resisted the flowers at first, saying, "They're for fags," but I told him flowers can affect one's mood.

We bought some lemons and put them in a salad bowl on the kitchen counter.

"There," I said, proudly, standing akimbo in Alec's apartment, beholding the good work I'd done. "Now you can work."

Alec rolled his eyes at me.

"And God saw that it was good," he said.

Alec and I go to the gym twice a week these days. We sit in the

sauna for fifteen minutes at a time, doing our Box Breathing. Research says long-time sauna users are less likely to get cancer.

We're doing the carnivore diet.

Alec is thirty-eight and a freshman at the University of Tennessee. I can tell he's embarrassed by his age. I tell him it's better late than never.

Alec asks me how many degrees I have. I tell him I have two master's degrees, one of which is a terminal degree, an MFA from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. And I'm flattered when Alec says, "Dang! Two master's degrees?"

"I've also published a novel, albeit with a small press," I tell him.

Alec is a first-generation college student. He needs help. I tell him to do two or three hours of schoolwork every single day, even on Saturdays and Sundays, instead of neglecting his schoolwork for three or four days in a row and letting it pile up. "Tiny & Daily," I tell him. "Tiny & Daily." Alec says two hours a day is a lot.

I tell Alec to get a calendar – a digital calendar, one that enables him to color code everything, not that you can't do that with an old-school calendar.

I tell him to make a to-do list. "A to-do list, as simple as it is, will change your life."

I tell Alec to use the Pomodoro Technique. "Do twenty-five minutes of studying, and then take a five-minute break," I tell him. "Rinse, lather, repeat."

I tell Alec to use the Leitner System. I tell him to add little pictures to his flashcards, too. "Research says students are more likely to recall information during a test if they've looked at pictures while studying," I say. "They call that the Picture Superiority Principle. You should try it, Alec."

I tell Alec to use the Test-Preparation Ritual. "In the minutes preceding the exam, make a list of your fears. What are you afraid of, Alec? Get it all down."

Alec is afraid of disappointing his late mother. He's failed College Algebra twice now, and I'm worried about him. I may not be able to help him with College Algebra, but I can help him to develop an effective study regimen, one that will be conducive to his success.

In fact, that's what I do for a living – while I've spent most of my career teaching English Composition, for nearly three years now, I've been working at South College here in Knoxville, teaching a student success course called College Management that prepares incoming students, many of whom are non-traditional, as they embark on their educational journeys.

Alec isn't one of these manana assholes who have no concept of delayed gratification, people for whom things like sacrifice and self-regulation and planning for unfelt needs have no meaning. Alec wants to be accomplished, not a failure like so many people he knew back in East L.A. Alec is asking more of himself. I admire that.

I tell Alec I'm going to start getting on his case. I tell him he needs a good kick in the ass, not more mollycoddling. I tell him I'm putting him through a kind of bootcamp. "Are you familiar with the Latin phrase *in loco parentis*?" I ask him. "Sorry, Alec, but your parents didn't do right by you. They let you down."

It's difficult for him to admit this, but Alec nods slowly in agreement.

"Look, we're going to get you through College Algebra," I say. "By the way, Alec, did you do your two hours of math today?"

He doesn't respond.

"Alec!" I snap, folding my arms at my chest. "You can't come out and play tonight, Alec." I smile, letting him know I'm only kidding, that I'm not his dad. "I want three hours of math out of you. Three hours of College Algebra. Minimum!"

I tell him there are no days off. There are no days off ever, I tell him. We've got to "improve the time." We've got to work hard every single day, period, no asterisk.

Sometimes Alec gets frustrated and tells me to fuck off. Alec has a low frustration tolerance.

He knows I'm right, though. He knows he needs to do a little bit of schoolwork every single day. And when I say "a little bit," I mean two hours minimum. "Tiny & Daily," I say again, inculcating him. "Tiny & Daily, Alec."

I talk with Alec about goal setting. "Create three or four goals for yourself that you will reach one year from now," I tell him. "Create intermediate goals. You know...like...sub-goals, for a lack of better words, that you'll reach in six months. Keep a journal tracking your progress. Announce your goals on Facebook. Take this seriously! Research says goal setting can be very good for young people. Not that you're all that young – I mean, you're almost forty, Alec."

I tell Alec again to use the Test-Preparation Ritual. "In the minutes preceding the exam, make a list of your fears," I say. "I know it sounds silly, but it just so happens the most prestigious scientific journal in the world, *Science*, published an article about this. Please try it."

I tell Alec to take care of himself. I tell him that taking care of oneself physically and mentally will be conducive to one's success, academic and otherwise. "Health & Wealth," I tell him. "Avoid high fructose corn syrup, anything with ingredients you can't pronounce. When you go grocery shopping, shop along the perimeter of the store, avoiding the aisles in the center. Health & Wealth."

Alec and I are drinking only once a week these days. There will be no more drinking during the week. There will be no more pot, either. There will be no more pornography. And certainly there will be no more mushrooms.

We live on the top floor of a three-story building in downtown Knoxville. Alec lives in Apt. 11. I live in Apt. 9.

We have a balcony entrance overlooking the Tennessee River. A couple nights a week, Alec and I grill. Alec has a charcoal grill, and

we unfold our collapsible chairs and just sit there, on the balcony, babysitting the chicken.

One time, Alec was struggling to open a bottle of Malbec. I went inside and got my wine opener. "Here, use mine," I said, but Alec wouldn't take it. Sitting in his chair, on the balcony, he continued to struggle with his wine opener. "Ugh, get rid of that thing, why don't you?" But Alec told me the wine opener belonged to his mother, who died after a lifetime of alcoholism.

Alec throws his corn husks over the railing onto our neighbors' lawn downstairs. I tell him not to do that, saying, "Let's have a little more respect for our neighbors, shall we?"

I tell Alec to chew with his mouth closed, to stop wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Alec is always leaving things in my apartment – drinking glasses, coffee mugs, pot. I tell him I don't want that stuff in my apartment. I tell him I try to keep my apartment orderly. I tell him I don't approve of the pot.

Alec calls me a robot.

Meanwhile, I'm always leaving books in Alec's apartment – *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, *An Owner's Manual for the Brain*, *Mindset*... One time, I went over to Alec's apartment and saw that he'd thrown my books in the trash. "I was cleaning my apartment," Alec defended himself. "Just like you told me." I read him the riot act for a good ten minutes.

I tell Alec to work on his study space. "Outer order, inner calm," I say. "We need order, Alec. What are some things we can do, whether it's getting a calendar or making a to-do list, to achieve greater order in our lives? Chaos is not your friend, Alec. Chaos is not your friend."

I tell Alec not to underestimate the power one's study space can have on one's ability to think with greater clarity. I tell him about famous studies like Rat Park. "Environments matter, Alec.

Environments do matter.”

Alec grew up in gangland. He grew up in poverty, squalor. As a young man, he was surrounded by crack heads and prostitutes and hypermasculine gang members, animals who’d take your life if you so much as looked at them the wrong way.

Now Alec lives in Knoxville. He’s surrounded by lush green parks, exquisite architecture, healthy radiant people.

Everyone here is smart. The University of Tennessee kids are impressive – they’re very well-mannered and respectful and smart. I should know – I taught First-Year Composition at UT for about four years before moving on to South College.

Some mornings, I stand on the balcony with a cup of coffee and watch the UT rowing team on the Tennessee River. One of our neighbors is an opera singer.

Alec has gotten kicked out of every bar in downtown Knoxville. He says he’s “violent as fuck.” He says he’ll fight “any fool,” no matter their size. “I don’t give a fuck,” he says, his Pacers cap turned backwards. “I don’t give a fuuuuuck.” And he’s not bullshitting. I’ve seen him fight.

I’ve seen Alec get into verbal altercations, too. Once, a bartender cut him off, and Alec got mad and told her her vagina smells like shit. “You need a Tide pod for your vagina!” he yelled. “You need a Tide pod for your fucking cunt!”

To be fair, Alec returned to the bar the next day and apologized, hat in hand. He also needed his credit card back.

The bartender forgave him. Alec is tall and handsome, and he gets away with murder.

Alec once drunkenly asked a female bartender if she had “a hairy pussy.” He asked her if she had pink nipples, a pink asshole. I told him to stop, but he wouldn’t. He asked the black bartender if her nipples looked like refrigerator magnets. He asked her if she and the

other bartender, the blonde, would make out topless.

Alec gets into physical altercations, too. He says he'll fight anyone. He'd rather die than be dishonored.

"But Alec," I say. "You could kill someone."

Alec tells me to clean my pussy.

"I'm not kidding. You could fucking kill someone, Alec. You punch someone, and they could fall and hit their head on a pool table or something. College Algebra will be the least of your problems then, dude."

Alec laughs, mockingly.

Would you listen to yourself?" I say. "You're going to clock someone in the face and maybe knock their teeth out because they said something you don't like?"

"Fuck yeah," Alec says, without missing a beat.

"That is so unbecoming of the academic," I tell him. "That is unbecoming of the academic, Alec, since academics value multiple perspectives."

Alec tells me he's a wolf and I am a little lamb. I tell him that's such a cliché. Alec revises, saying he's a chimp and I am the bonobos.

I shake my head at him. I roll my eyes.

"Welp," I say, throwing my hands up, hopelessly, "enjoy the prison food, Alec."

And I can see his wheels spinning – Alec knows I'm right. I can tell I'm getting through to him.

"By the way, Alec, does it ever dawn on you they could sue you, too? Say goodbye to all that money you got from your mom's life insurance policy. Fun while it lasted, eh? And I'm sure your mother would love to hear this – that you squandered the money she left

you. She wanted you to have that, Alec! That was her peace of mind. At least my son, my little boy, will have some money, she thought, in her final moments – I mean, presumably, anyway.”

Alec gets choked up a little. He knows I’m right.

Alec and I have gotten close. He tells me he loves me. He says he appreciates my help, the way I’ve sort of thrown an arm around him in recent months, putting him through my little bootcamp.

And I’m happy to report he’s doing well in College Algebra. In fact, it looks like he’s going to pass this time.

But when Alec gets drunk, he turns on me. He gets abusive, calling me a “little bitch” and “a pussy” and a “faggot” and an “incel.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m an incel, and you’re an imbecile. The Incel & the Imbecile. How do ya like that?”

Alec threatens to kick my ass. He threatens to defenestrate me, to throw me over the railing of our shared balcony.

Apartment 11 is a revolving door. Alec did have a girlfriend for a while there, but he cheated on her, and now, not surprisingly, she doesn’t come around anymore. She dropped him like a hot potato, and who could blame her? I read Alec the riot act, telling him he’s an asshole for doing that. She was a sweet girl. She didn’t deserve that. Hell, I’d love to have a girl like that.

But Alec didn’t give a shit. And to be fair, he’s not wrong when he says that men are designed by evolution to want to fuck everything on two legs.

Alec is teaching me how to get girls. He tells me to stop jerking off. He tells me to stop watching porn. He says it’s bad for me.

And I’m sure he’s right. In fact, I believe there’s research about the deleterious effects of pornography on men – something about pair bonding or whatever?

The truth is I can't go two days without it. I'm not proud of it, but at the same time, I'm not...like...deeply ashamed of it, either – it's not like it's unnatural to want to watch two people having sex.

Alec tells me again and again to stop watching pornography. He says, "Girls like guys who are fulla cum."

He puts major emphasis on the word cum. Girls like guys, he tells me, who "got a sack full of jizz." Girls like "alpha chimps, like me."

Alec tells me not to kid myself. Girls like hypermasculinity, lions lustily roaming the veldt looking for pussy.

It's not the most flattering thing to admit, but the truth is I've been alone for years now. I'm no virgin, but I've been alone for years and years and years and years and years. Meanwhile, all the girls love Alec.

And I'd be lying if I said I'm not jealous. Alec is happier than I am, especially now that he's doing better in school.

Alec tells me to work on my look. He tells me to use the Jawzrsize or whatever. He says I have no jawline. He tells me to lose weight. He tells me to get a better haircut, better clothes... I tell Alec that banks look at your spending habits when deciding to give you a mortgage. I tell Alec to be conservative with his money. We're both in our thirties, I remind him. Our late thirties. We're getting older, and we need to think about the future, i.e. retirement and so forth.

Meanwhile, Alec doesn't even have his degree yet.

Women do find Alec attractive, though. And it should come as no surprise. Alec is tall, Lincolnesque. I, meanwhile, have this awful little chimp body.

Alec has a nice white smile, even though he doesn't floss. He wears his hat backward, and he looks kind of boyish.

I floss after every meal, but still my teeth are kind of yellow. Genes have more to do with this shit than people realize.

I tell Alec to think about artificial lighting. “When you get up in the morning, it’s important to expose yourself to artificial lighting,” I say. “Artificial lighting releases epinephrine in the body, making you alert, giving you more energy.”

Alec asks me what I mean by epinephrine.

I tell Alec he needs energy, so he can be more productive throughout the day. “Consider elevating your laptop, too,” I say. “Research says we’re more alert when the object of our attention is slightly above eyelevel.”

I tell him to think about binaural beats. “No, binaural beats are not unscientific,” I say. “In fact, Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman recommends listening to 40 HZ binaural beats. He says it’ll help you to achieve greater focus while studying. Give it a try, Alec. For God’s sake, what have you got to lose?”

It’s great that Alec gets girls, but I tell him he needs to settle down and have children. I tell him he needs to find a nice young woman and date her for a couple of years before getting married and having kids. I tell him there’s nothing wrong with the May-December relationship. Just as long as she’s a good girl, someone he can be sure he’ll spend the rest of his life with. I tell him divorce is shameful. Because it kind of is. I tell him divorce is horrible, since it hurts children. I tell Alec that sometimes divorce is necessary but he and his wife should do their best to stay together, so their kids will be well-adjusted, so they too can attract a mate and have kids.

Alec tells me he doesn’t want kids, let alone grandkids, and I am reminded of Elon’s term “Civilizational Suicide.”

I tell Alec he needs to have kids.

Alec tells me again he doesn’t want kids.

I tell him that life longs for itself. And that we need to have children.

Alec and I have agreed to start checking on people – people who have cancer, people with sick kids. We’re going to start saying, “Hey there. Thought about you all weekend. How’d that interview go?” and “Hey. How was your hike along the Appalachian Trail? I’d love to hear about it when you get a chance.”

We’re going to put ourselves aside and start thinking about other people for a change. We’re going to tell people, “Enough about me. What about you?” We’re going to say, “Boy, you were really on my mind this weekend. Everything okay?” We’re going to reach out to people who are grieving and say things like, “You know, it’s a shame things like this must happen to the most wonderful people.” We’re going to send people cards, flowers. We’re going to send our condolences. We’re going to send people gifts on their birthdays. We’re going to like people’s Facebook posts. We are going to be spectators in other people’s lives. We are going to be second fiddle, supporting actors... We’re going to be there for people. We’re going to show up for them.

Alec says I need to work on my social skills. He says the next time he has girls over to the apartment, don’t talk about illegitimacy rates in the United States, for God’s sake. And in the first place, don’t use the term “illegitimacy rates” to describe kids born out of wedlock. For God’s sake, Girls don’t like that! He recommends talking about dogs, the UT Vols, the hit TV show Euphoria.

Alec says the cute girls he invites over to his apartment (all of whom are on Only Fans) don’t like me. He says they talk shit about me when I’m not around. “Who does your neighbor think he is, anyway?” they say. “Like, does he think he’s God or something? Who is he to tell you anything, Alec? You do you.”

I am, according to these dolts, basking in Alec’s reflected glory – if it weren’t for Alec, I wouldn’t talk to women at all.

One night, standing on the balcony right outside my apartment, Alec called me a loser.

“Damn, dude, women hate you,” he said, laughing. “You should hear the shit they say about you when you’re not around, bruh. Women hate you, dude.” He was leaning over the railing, looking at the Tennessee River below. “When you talk with women, their vaginas pucker. Dude, you’re gonna have to find a woman at the burn unit.” Then he got really hostile and said, “You’re such a fuckin’ loser, dude. You’re a fuckin’ loser, bruh.”

I don’t claim to be tough, but I’m not a doormat, either. I refuse to be Alec’s punching bag.

“Excuse me?” I said, looking him up and down. “Who the fuck are you? Hey, asshole, I have two master’s degrees, one of which is a terminal degree from the University of Tennessee. I’ve been teaching at the college and university level for thirteen years now. Last year, I published my novel, albeit with a small press. Do you know how hard it is to write a novel? Writing a novel is like climbing Everest, bro. And guess what: Writing the novel is the easy part! Publishing the fucking thing is infinitely harder. Anyway, what the fuck have you done with your life, you fucking piece of shit?”

“Dude,” Alec said, “the closest you could ever come to getting pussy is smelling my boxers.”

“And what about my teaching?” I continued. “Teaching is hard work. I mean, I know it’s a false equivalency, but teaching is not totally dissimilar to serving in the military, you disrespectful piece of shit. And it’s thankless – I mean, clearly.”

Alec rolled his eyes. He laughed, mockingly.

“I teach students to write with clarity,” I said.

Again, Alec laughed.

“I teach students to participate in public discourse.” And then, quite pretentiously, I quoted the American Association of Colleges and Universities. “I teach students to comprehensively explore ‘issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.’ I teach students critical thinking skills, so they’ll participate responsibly in our democracy, making informed

decisions in the voting booths. That's noble work, Alec. And you... You have the effrontery to call me a loser? Anyway, what the fuck do you do for a living, Alec?"

"Hey, man," Alec said, threateningly, standing up straight and tall now, no longer leaning over the railing.

"What the fuck have you done with your life, except smoke pot and chase pussy, you piece of shit?"

And that's when Alec hit me.

When I came to, I was on the concrete of the balcony, and Alec was standing over me, screaming, "You got knocked the fuck out, bitch!"

"Huh?" I said, softly.

"Don't you ever disrespect me, bitch! Don't you ever disrespect me in your life, bitch! Don't you know who I am? DON'T YOU KNOW WHO I AM???"

I was totally dazed.

"You got knocked the fuck out!" Alec said again, standing over me. "Now what, bitch? Now what the fuck you gotta say, pussy? Now what you gotta say, faggot?"

"Gee, Alec, guess you can take the man out of East LA, but you can't..."

"That's right, bitch! I'm gangsta, nigga! I'll fuckin' kill you, nigga!"

Slowly, I climbed to my feet.

When I got to my feet, Alec got right in my face and said, "What, bitch? What you gonna do, bitch? I'll knock you out again, faggot."

I put my hands up and said, "Okay, Alec. Okay. I don't want any trouble, alright?"

I went into my apartment and locked the door.

“Boy, you better stay in there,” I heard Alec say, his voice muffled, and then he went back into Apartment 11.

I went into my bathroom and assessed the damage – my nose was bleeding, and there was blood all over my shirt.

I considered calling the police, but Alec would just deny it, and without any eyewitnesses, I wouldn’t be able to prove shit, or at least that was my thinking at the time. In retrospect, I realize the police might have noticed scrapes on Alec’s knuckles. They might have noticed blood on his shirt. They might have interviewed the neighbors, asking if they heard anything – or better yet, if they saw anything.

Except even if the neighbors had seen something, they would have lied for Alec. They would have protected him. After all, everyone loves Alec.

Alec is doing something right. Between the two of us, Alec will be the one to survive. And when I say “survive,” I mean hand down his genetic information, leave a genetic legacy.

Alec will find a companion and have children. Then he’ll probably get divorced, ruining his kids’ lives, but the point is Alec will go on.

Meanwhile, loneliness, which they say is bad for one’s physical health, will kill me. Just give it a few years.

In a few years, I’ll die from loneliness, and Alec will go on. Alec wins! Alec the Victorious! King Alec, the Triumphant! King Alec, the Resplendent!

Alec carries the day! Alec prevails! Alec reigns! It seems everyone is into Alec these days. Seems like everyone is into Alec.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICK MCGRATH has an MFA from the University of Tennessee. His writing has appeared in *Terror House Magazine*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and elsewhere. His novel *The Deplorable* was serialized in 2023. McGrath is the cofounder of the journal *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* debuting in 2023 as one of the few online resources that welcomes anti-woke content.

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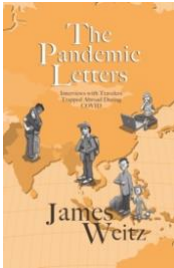
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