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Writ 105C

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Unmasking Birdman

Synopsis: A former, washed-up blockbuster star attempts to prove his worth as an artist by writing, starring, and directing in his own Broadway play. 119 minutes long. Starring Micheal Keaton, Edward Norton, Zach Galifinakas, and Emma Stone. 9 Academy Award nominations: 4 wins, including Best Picture. An astounding 91% critic approval on Rotten Tomatoes. An A- from *Entertainment Weekly*. 4 stars from *Variety*. And, of course, the hovering anticipation from my father.

I had done my research. I knew it was going to be one of those really “out there” indie types and I had to be prepared. In our family, your intelligence was defined by how well you could explain the film in the slow walk from the movie theater to the car. Why did the director move the camera the way they did? Did the characters deviate from traditional archetypes? *What did this movie mean?* My father would never explicitly ask me any of these questions but they wrapped around my head like a tight, suffocating mask, not letting me exhale in relief until I had answered them. He believed that creativity was the currency of success. It was the part of the American Dream that he clung to as he left his life behind in Brazil.

I spent at least five minutes picking where to sit at the theater. As we settled into the 3rd set of seats that we tried, my dad leaned over and asked the same question he did before we started every film.

“What’s the name of the film again, *Stellinha?*”

“Birdman,” I said with the same enthusiasm as a child who gets an answer right in front of their class. “Or ‘The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance.’”

The pre-movie ritual had begun. The lights dimmed. *Check.* People’s whispers evaporated into silence. *Check.* The swell of a production company's music filled the theater. *Check.* I sighed in comfort at the predictability of it all. That sigh turned into gasps which turned into frowns which ended with panicky breaths as Birdman seemed determined to defy any constraint of predictability.

The camera follows Riggan floating in his underwear. The low beating of drums. *Are we in the right theater? Indie films aren't supposed to have magic.*

Riggan is trying to get rid of his blockbuster shadow and prove himself through a self-funded Broadway play. The camera never cuts, never tires. *Oh, this one I know. He wants validation that he is a good actor. He wants to be loved for something that isn't superficial.*

Riggan argues with his inner voice, which takes the character of the superhero he once played, Birdman. The drums quicken. *Ok, so there is the name of the film- that means something. Maybe that he is delusional? Also, what is up with these drums? They are making me nervous.*

Riggan seems to embody some of Birdman’s fictional powers. He trashes his dressing room without touching anything. The tapping of symbols takes charge from the drums. *I have no idea what is going on. This magic stuff has to be all in his mind or I don't understand anything. Is he crazy or are we supposed to interpret this symbolically? Or is he actually a superhero? God, why do Indie films try to be so edgy!*

An angry daughter back from rehab and a father, Riggan, who can't focus on anything but a good review for his play. Day melts into night, but the camera never cuts. *Is there never a cut in this movie? How is that even possible? And why did they put his daughter in the movie? What is the meaning of him being a father? Is he failing in what matters because he is too focused on superficial praise? But what matters in this film?*

At Riggan's lowest point, he literally soars through the streets of New York as his past self flies behind him dressed in the Birdman costume, telling him to give up on the play. The sound of drums heightens to their peak. *So, he can fly. Fantastic. I thought we were done with the whole powers stuff. I have never seen any serious, Oscar-contending film have its main character use superpowers. It's like they nominated a Marvel film. I am so confused. What does it mean? Should I know what it means? Shit, my dad looks like he knows what it means.*

Riggan gives the performance of a lifetime on stage with an eerily calm demeanor. He ends up in the hospital. The drums are silenced. *I can't believe he actually did it. I also can't believe that this movie is supposed to have a coherent message because I certainly do not know what it is.*

Riggan flies out of the window of the hospital and is seen by his daughter, who smiles looking up at him. *Wait, WHAT? The powers weren't all in his mind? Oh my god. I don't understand. How can I be stupid enough to not understand an Oscar-nominated film? Pathetic, Stella.*

When the film ended I felt like I hadn't even watched it. Every unanswered question had piled in front of me forming a mountain I couldn't see past. Applause filled the theater. The euphoric air of understanding seemed to allow people around me to ascend. They floated above

me and could see what I so desperately wanted beyond the mountain of questions I had created for myself. I was stuck in my seat, the weight of my self-pity chaining me to the bottom. I felt the mask slowly wrap around my face, just waiting for the walk back to the car.

The post-movie ritual began. We walk out of the theater. *My heart quickens*. The walk is slow, letting the masses wash past us. *My throat tightens*. My father clears his throat. *I clench my jaw*.

“What a movie! What did you think *filha*?”

Much to my father’s surprise, I started to cry. Much to my dismay, it was a deep and heavy cry, not easily brushed away or forgotten.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling alright?” The concern in his voice did nothing but make me feel worse.

I pulled at my face, simultaneously trying to wipe away the tears and the mask, which had tightened like a second skin to my face not letting any rational thought through the barricade of unanswered questions.

“I... didn’t... understand... the movie...” My speech was interrupted by ragged breaths. My dad’s features were arranged in a somber gaze, but I could see in his dissolved concern that he saw the humor in the situation.

“Ah, I see,” He paused. “It is about transcendence.” He looked triumphant as if he had just solved all my problems with one word. We were both unaware that what he had actually done was provide a much-needed label to my sadness.

‘I.....don’t.... know... what that.... means.....’ I sobbed. Transcendence had hammered the last nail into the now complete feeling of despair.

“Transcendence, *Stellinha*, is when you are able to almost float above all the insignificant things in life and feel or do something that goes beyond yourself. It's the power of art. And it's what Birdman can accomplish at the end of his journey. He transcends,” His hand soared upwards trying to show me the path of Birdman's transcendence. The power of his words was swept under the comfort of the tight, much-needed hug he gave me shortly after. Yet, his introduction to transcendence burned in my brain: never forgotten but only to be understood as we sat down to re-watch the film together years later.

The irony easily escaped me as I cried in that moment, but it is impossible to recall this memory without acknowledging its presence. Birdman was able to remove the mask of his ego, his need for validation, his need to be seen as a true artist, and literally fly above the bullshit. The bullshit that I had always been obsessed with entering the theater. The inexplicable sadness I felt wasn't because I couldn't understand. It is because I couldn't understand how to do it. How to let go and taste the freedom Riggan feels as he flies in the last moment of the film.

Watching Birdman was like a much-needed slap in the face, not just for me but for all who watch it. It gives you the same pleasure of escape and the same scattered laughs as any other movie, but the sting comes from the part of ourselves we see in the film. The side of ourselves that reflects on the screen what we can't bring ourselves to see within. It is the necessary power of film. The same power a father holds as their unanswered questions float in the air. In the end, would I say I feel like I figured out what Birdman meant? It doesn't matter. It figured me out first.