

Free Agents / Max Apple

My heart went last. Trailing stray veins, pumping, still hot, and friendly and full of abject apologies it joined the others.

This almost did me in.

"Fuck him," said my brain, and the battle lines formed.

"I," if you'll forgive me for the looseness of the term, was left with the brain, intact spinal column, and total skeleton minus only the riotous thumbs. Gone were the internal organs, three senses and that whole complicated genetic code which the brain, surprisingly, could not lay claim to.

It was a classic strike, and I was stunned to the depths of my being by the issue itself and the speed with which it surfaced. Now, I am no Andrew Carnegie and my liver is no Eugene V. Debs. From each other we might have expected otherwise. Still, who knows? I can only tell you, in all honesty, that when it started I was as innocent as Florence Nightingale. The stomach grumbled, the kidneys ached a little. Yet, I thought I was "together." You know how it is. You live twenty, thirty years and in some very meaningful ways you get to feel used to yourself. For the stomach there's Di-Gel, for the kidneys Doan's pills. Most of the time you don't need anything. You can look in the mirror and think, "he's not so bad." You learn to cope. Sometimes people tell you, you're cute, you're funny, you have a good personality. What happens is, you begin to take yourself for granted.

You say, "that's life." You take a drink, a wife, a job, a tranquilizer. Then suddenly, one sweet morning, you learn that behind your back your liver and kidneys have been plotting a revolution that makes Lenin seem as insignificant as the Spanish-American War. The liver and kidneys issue a proclamation endorsed within the day by all of the internal organs.

"The so called one life one body ruling," their press release reads, "has for an entire decade been based upon false medical, legal, and moral evidence. The star surgeons traipse through the land making big reputations by moving organs from one body to another. An average John Doe might have a new heart, a fresh pair of kidneys, pints of alien blood, even an engrafted tooth if the dentists have their way, and you know they will. Meanwhile, the organs are treated as so much meat.

"Before the age of transplants we took for granted the indignities placed upon our brothers, the gall bladder, the appendix, the tonsils, and the intestine by the yard. No more.

"After the May 11 deadline which we are imposing, all organs, muscle, and tissue, whether initially within the Apple body or added subsequent to birth, become as it were, free agents, capable of negotiating with any available bodies. We, the undersigned, hope for a just and speedy solution in the

spirit of democratic fairness that has characterized the history of collective bargaining.”

The liver and kidneys make this statement public on the morning of May 4. By midday all of the major organs sign and I face the distinct possibility that on May 11 the long standing implicit contract between my parts and myself will become nonbinding.

I call my doctor. He contacts the legal division of the AMA. Their chief counsel suggests compulsory, round the clock negotiation with all parties continuing past the deadline without curtailment of services. The parts turn a deaf ear. The spleen, who quickly becomes their counsel and spokesman, says, “the AMA sucks. We’re dealing with you, boss, it’s you and us, sink or swim, no bureaucracy. Cards on the table.”

Imagine how I feel. In a week I might literally go to pieces.

“Be heroic,” says the brain hanging tough. “Stand now or forever face the possibility of internal dissent.”

“But I’m no hero.”

“Neither was Achilles. The times make us all.”

“He was 9/10 of a god.”

“And you mister frightened of everything, you are not made in the image of Pete Rozelle. Let them know who’s boss. Do it once now or every day for the rest of your life.”

“Why me,” I ask the spleen. “Why me when the world is full of strong men, examples for the young and credits to their races and nations. What’s there to prove on Max Apple who, at his best, barely makes it through a day? Why not Muhammed Ali, or Larry Csonka, or Pelé, all heroes with heroic lungs and hearts and bladders? When you want new rules why not try them out on somebody who matters?”

“Ever heard of Brown vs. Board of Education,” the spleen replies. “Brown was a nobody. It’s the principle. Celebrity just confuses the issue. All important decisions are tested on nobodies.”

“But spleen and all the rest of you,” I plead, “honest to God, I thought until the minute I read your statement that we had been in a happy union since my conception. I never heard any complaints. How did it get this far without my knowledge?”

“You could have opened your eyes sooner,” says the spleen, “but still none of us blames you. It’s true, a week is not long. If you want long go to art. Time flies. We have short productive seasons. If we said Max, old buddy, sure we trust you, take a year or two no hurry, we would become a disease not an issue. And there’s always the danger that in a moment of pique you might jet down to Houston and replace the half of us with more docile members.

“Face up to it,” the spleen says, “biology is destiny.”

I begin to tremble.

"Get hold of yourself," he says, "this is not personal. We know that you're an easy target, so were all the generous slave owners in the plantation days. Sure you're a decent fellow. In other times you might have anticipated a long uneventful life, a slow decay, even a pleasant enough senility. And we would have gone along as all our brethren of days past did, arm in arm with you toward the inorganic future.

"But you're no dummy, boss. Look where you're at. Where's the Family, the Church, the State? Now it's the body's turn to step into the twentieth century."

"And I am your stepping stone?"

"Don't get sentimental," the brain says. He has heard enough. "Don't get sentimental with this crowd it's just a waste of good feelings." He advises me to lie low, keep out of the negotiations altogether, leave everything to him.

"Your weakness is your strength," he says, "who wants your organs. These boys are not Reggie Jackson and Catfish Hunter. Face it, I'm the only one who might ever get another offer and you know I'm not about to leave."

"We may be individually weak," says the spleen, "but we have numbers. And think of this while you're at it. Here you are an obscure fellow with a chance to make major history. Deal with us and together we'll become the Magna Charta of science."

I admit that I respond to such rhetoric with a kind of benign ecstasy. I am ready to give in, but the brain, my counsel, steps hard upon my instincts.

"In the crunch, they'll fold," he says, "they have to. Where else can they go? It's not as if there was another league. Collective bargaining itself," he says, "is a ridiculous misnomer in this circumstance," since he can discern no demarcation between labor and management.

"Then ask him," counters the spleen, "why he stays and the rest of us don't."

"Simple loyalty," says the brain, "coupled with good judgment and right reason."

They go on like this for hours. By May 9 I am a shambles. My friends, unaware of the struggle within myself, see only neurotic symptoms. Little do they know that the brain, whom they suspect, is my only mainstay. When I try to tell my boss that on May 11, I may find myself a new person he thinks I have been doing meditation or EST training. He commends me. "We all should do it," he says, "regularly. It keeps us from growing stale."

On the evening of May 10 I beg my brain. "Let them have the new ground rules. Reinstate the contract. Give them everything they want and more."

"Sorry," he says, "but the stakes are much higher than yourself. Give them you and they'll want everyone. Here we'll make our stand."

"I'm not the stuff of martyrdom."

"The readiness is all," he says, and my eyes, who stayed, though the tear ducts left, give one final gush at 9 p.m. on May 10.

At midnight when my organs leave, I become, in an instant, like Italy during a national strike. I am there but not there. The heart, as I've said, lingers, almost changes its mind I think at the last instant, but is driven along by the social pressure of both lungs.

I think that neither the parts nor I ever really thought it would come to this. Until the last instant we cling like lovers. Then, immediately we are divorced. And if you think that divorce between man and wife is a dismemberment, imagine my alienation.

"Marxist propaganda," says the brain, "no conditions can alienate a man from himself."

"But here I am, a hulk, an empty cavity. Prick me and I won't bleed."

"Stop being sentimental and get some rest," he says. "You'll need it. We're on the docket tomorrow at nine."

II

Without too much haggling, the brain and the members settle on the pituitary gland as judge. Although he resides in the brain's neighborhood, there clearly is no conflict of interest. During the week of turmoil, in fact, during my entire life as far as I know, the pituitary has maintained a remarkably disinterested attitude toward all the commotions of human necessity. He also looks very judicial, small but long, gray at the sides, thoughtful, intensely calm.

The jury, though, is a horse of another color. The members insist that they be tried by peers, i.e. parts, and the judge quickly agrees over strenuous objection from the brain-prosecutor who refuses to accept the analogy with blacks being tried by all black juries. He attempts to call a well-known Gestalt psychologist as expert witness to protest the judge's ruling but the bench turns a cold ear. After this ruling, jury selection proceeds quickly. Shelley's heart, Einstein's brain, and John Dillinger's penis along with nine less celebrated organs comprise the final jury. Einstein's brain, naturally, is chosen foreman.

Since the entire transcript will soon be available (Arno Press, a New York Times Company), I'll only give the highlights from my admittedly limited perspective. First, let me say absolutely that the brain as prosecutor and the spleen as chief defense attorney conducted themselves in a splendid legal manner. There were moments that might have been ugly, even grotesque without good judgment on all sides. Yet, so orderly and decorous was the entire proceeding that in spite of the circumstances I could not help feeling proud of myself.

Among the many witnesses for the defense the spleen called:

Dr. Christiaan Barnard
Jim (Catfish) Hunter
Dr. Benjamin Spock
The heart of Luis Rodriguez
The right kidney of Alma Sands
Dr. Kenneth Eidel

The prosecution's list included:

William Shakespeare*
Socrates*
B. F. Skinner
Dr. Michael DeBaakey
Jackie Robinson*
Bowie Kuhn
Saint Thomas More*
Masters and Johnson

* All deceased were represented by counsel.

When presented with the prosecution's witness list, the defense objects to the fact that fully one half of the state's witnesses are deceased. The court overrules the objection, since in all cases deceased parties are represented by adequate counsel. "In this instance," the judge blandly states, "life and death are not the important issues. Let us proceed."

"To me they are," I want to yell at the top of my lungs who ignore me from across the room. Since neither side calls upon me to testify, I am a mute witness to the playing out of my own destiny.

"You always are," says the brain, "stop whining about it. If none of this had happened you would be as ignorant of your internal self as you are now. Shut up and trust me."

I do so.

The central defense argument is clear enough. Organs have, at least in a legal sense, an existence of their own. They can survive individually when kept under proper circumstances and, furthermore, can and often are exchanged among various bodies without the consent of themselves. "In this day and age," states the spleen, "the body can no longer be considered as a whole." Dr. Barnard, taciturn, chain smoking, clearly uncomfortable, admits that though he does not like this kind of approach, it clearly seems to be scientifically accurate.

"When I began transplanting hearts," he says almost apologetically, "I was young. Money, girls, and the Nobel Prize were on my mind. Then there were those sufferers by the dozens turning blue daily before my eyes."

"If you had to do it all again," asks the prosecutor under cross-examination, "would you?"

Defense objects. Objection sustained, irrelevant question.

The prosecutor then asks if Dr. Barnard in his vast surgical experience, has ever in his wildest fancy considered a heart as anything but an appendage to this or that body.

"Well sir," says the good doctor, "yes I have."

The brain asks no further questions but the judge orders the jury removed and requests the doctor to continue.

"I don't like the direction in which this leads me, you know," Barnard states, "but I have indeed often wondered in the midst of many a chest if there was not something in this pulpy mass beyond my skillful fingers. I have thought of this at the moment of transplant and then sometimes weeks or even years later when the heart is rejected. Some scientists think that organ rejection can be overcome by drugs. I admit that I don't think so."

"You mean," interrupts the defense counsel, "that you believe that organs have a kind of free choice about their circumstances and are exercising it in spite of medical science."

The doctor nods a quiet yes.

The prosecutor is so angry that I am afraid all might turn to chaos now. But he quickly calms himself. "Who cares what that candy ass thinks," the brain whispers, hiding his anger as he looks over his notes on Catfish Hunter.

None of the other defense witnesses seem to me very substantial. They range from Hunter's defense of capitalism (if only the case were that simple), to the straightforward but not very moving testimony of the Rodriguez heart and the Sands kidney that they were removed and relocated without their prior consent and were not especially content with their present location.

But, oh when my large and dramatic brain begins to call the witnesses for the prosecution, then and only then does rhetoric flourish in the courtroom. Shakespeare, represented by Dillon & Reed, lays out our case in an oblique but universal fashion.

"Take but degree away and the bounded waters should lift their bosom higher than the shores, and make a sop of all this solid globe."

"Objection," says the spleen. "This language, fit perhaps for the stage is but a subterfuge in these chambers. Cut out that honeyed tongue and let the mouth speak for itself."

"A strange metaphor for this defense," the judge observes, then he asks the Bard's counsel to be more direct.

In everyday language Shakespeare says, "Every ship must have a captain. Likewise, the vessel needs oarsmen, sails, cooks, porters, et al. If every oarsman thinks himself a captain, every cook a commander then the ship whether it be a body, a state, or the universe herself flounders like a headless chicken."

In cross-examination the spleen asks very politely, "Mr. Bard, what do you mean by universe, or more specifically, have you ever heard of the notion that there are endless suns?"

"The elephant hath joints but none for courtesy," says the Bard, "his legs are legs for necessity not for flight."

"Do you believe," asks the impatient spleen, "that the earth is flat?"

"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

"Your Honor, no further questions. I think it is obvious that for all the eloquence expressed by this witness he is hardly able to make any serious judgments about twentieth-century phenomena."

The prosecutor, displeased by this subtle disparagement of a key witness asks for a recess until tomorrow. The bench grants us only half an hour.

The brain, in a desperate resort to the living, calls B.F. Skinner. In a long and complicated testimony, Skinner asserts that wholes have little enough of what the defense calls "freedom" and that this scarce commodity dispersed among a horde of organs would lead to the end of all useful social behavior.

The sly spleen rises slowly to cross-examine. "Professor Skinner, would you please name that part of the human organism which you most admire."

"The brain."

"And if, professor, you were looking for pleasure centers, in say a lung or an intestine, how would you go about doing so?"

"I don't believe that these organs, by themselves, experience either pleasure or pain."

"You mean, sir, that they require the brain to translate sensory data and make judgments for them."

"Exactly."

"If it please the court," says the strutting spleen, "may I point out the great similarity between this world view and the pre-Lutheran Christian view which held the Church, specifically the Pope, as the arbiter and judge of all moral phenomena. I hope the jury will see that Professor Skinner, a so-called modern scientist, makes precisely the same argument as the Elizabethan playwright. To accept such reasoning requires a return in science and theology to the Catholicism of the seventeenth century."

"Objection," from the prosecution.

"Sustained. The jury will ignore the defense attorney's statement."

The brain and I huddle. "This is getting very serious," he says, "I'm afraid it's all going against us."

"What will happen to me?" I ask.

"Ironic," he says, "that the prosecution is worried about the fate of its client. Must I remind you that you sir, are the state. What happens when the Supreme Court rules against the government, does all legislation cease?"

Anyway, relax. I'm calling the big one now. Forget Masters and Johnson, they'll never make a dent on this jury."

The prosecution calls Socrates. A hush falls over the room. You can barely hear the lungs expand. After a long moment, Einstein's brain, risking its position in the jury calls out, "let's hear it for one who started us all on the road to wisdom." The courtroom bursts into spontaneous applause.

The bench gavels for order but himself joins in the standing ovation to the ancient Greek represented by Baker, Sullivan & Vance.

When order is restored and the judge politely warns the entire room, especially the jury against any further outbreaks. The spleen approaches the bench. "Your Honor, I request that the witness be removed before making any statement. Until the vogue of the modern existentialists, he has represented the greatest historical threat to my clients."

"Objection, Your Honor," from the brain, "must we listen to such disparagement of a man whom all the world esteems?"

The court allows the spleen to continue but warns him to be specific. "Alright Your Honor and ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Here you have Socrates, wisest of men, the prince of irony, the founder of the examined life which we are at this very moment most diligently proving." The spleen turns to face the witness. "How, Socrates, did you end your earthly stay?"

"Hemlock by the glass," says the calm philosopher.

"There you have it, Your Honor. This so-called 'wise man' destroyed his organs for the sake of an idea."

"Could you have escaped, Socrates?"

"Yes."

"Could you have bribed the jailers?"

"Yes."

"The jury?"

"Yes."

"And yet you chose to stay, to execute your own organs and were content to leave us all with the mild witticism about going off to life and death and who knows which is better. Well, you proved your idea, sir, at the expense of innocent organs. For all you know your heart was a sophist, your liver altogether aphiosophical. Letting this man testify, Your Honor, would be as absurd as appointing Charles Manson the guardian of Sharon Tate's offspring."

The judge is stunned. I don't blame him. The truth of the argument is altogether apparent. The court is silent. My heart beating across the room whimpers to me, a gesture of reconciliation. My pale organs wither in the fluorescent glare of this public place. My brain, that fertile, inexhaustible prosecutor treads water in the silence.

"Your Honor," I state, hardly knowing what I do, "I wish to testify."

“Sit down, fool,” whispers the brain. “If we lose, let’s at least go out in style.”

But, finally, I am able to ignore him. He seems no more persuasive at this moment than any of the other organs.

“What a piece of work a man is,” Shakespeare calls out as I approach the witness stand to replace a bewildered Socrates as he steps down without having any chance to demonstrate his powers.

Neither the defense nor the prosecution rises to question me.

“Speak,” says the judge.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” I state, “and I shall not want.”

“Objection,” from both defense and prosecution.

The judge leans over and looks gravely at me. “You know the ground rules. If we wanted to do it this way, we wouldn’t be in a court now, would we? The question, sir, is justice. Speak or forever lose your tongue.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I state, “those living and those represented by counsel, strangers, and my own vital parts. I admit it. The ball game is over. I am in violation of the antitrust laws, I am in restraint of trade, and I have monopolized myself. My brain has most valiantly been attempting to wrest victory or at least dignity throughout these proceedings. I thank him for his efforts, but no brain could successfully prosecute this case. I call the entire court to witness the fact that I now declare myself dispersed. Whatever previous legal rights I claimed to my parts or to any part of a part including X-ray film and Xerography, I now relinquish. Go, in good health and good fortune to whomever you wish. And may each of you affix himself to a more solid and substantial spirit than I have proved to be.”

“Your Honor,” says the brain, “I ask the indulgence of the court. My client is no longer himself. Let the court spare us any further damage to what was once a model of sweet reason.”

The gavel rings out. “Forgive me,” I whisper to myself. The judge instructs the jury. They file out.

As we wait in silence, my brain ignores me, places an empty chair between us. I am, at this moment, beyond desolation. I am ready to throw in the towel but I don’t know how. I am paralyzed, bereft of mind and body, yet in the midst of this crisis a strange indifferent calm overcomes me. It is the calm of the drowning man who gives up the struggle for one last pleasing glimpse of blue waters and teeming aquatic life.

The court fades. Left with nothing else, memory overwhelms me. The memory of fleeting sensuality. The taste of vanilla ice cream. The sound of the national anthem and Rice Krispies. “I am what I am,” I whisper. Then, my heart, the one whom I know has been sympathetic throughout, he steps across the bar that separates us and begins to beat within me not a millimeter from his accustomed spot. His movement of return is stately, digni-

fied, self-conscious, not like the hasty retreat of yesterday. He is telling me something, this heart of mine. Barely has he settled into the cavity of my chest when the others equally austere and serene join en masse. Kidneys, liver, thumbs, nerve endings, tear ducts, and finally the spleen himself. All these come to me as if I am gravity. The brain maintains a puzzled silence. The judge too has resumed his previous anonymity.

"I am what I am," I state again, this time more confidently and the organs hum like an Indianapolis 500 engine. I can sense that each one of them is as happy to be back in his smooth soft spot as I am to have him there. I shift gears. I rise. I walk. I spit. I think.

"Nothing is settled," the brain reminds me, "the jury is still out."

"But," I say, "I am together again." I roar, I bellow, I beat my chest. When the jury returns glum and single file, I take a deep breath and blow them out of the box.

They scatter in my wind. "We were hung anyway," Einstein's brain calls out from the blue sky. "And you, so recently yourself again, don't be so violent. We're all up in the air anyway."

"To tell me this," I yell to the heavens, "I don't need Einstein's brain." Clouds suck up the jury. Full of myself, on tiptoes I bounce on the grass ready for everything.

Lost Weeks / Jonathan Baumbach

Two years and five months after his presumed death, a bearded somewhat ratty figure appears unannounced at his former apartment. He is about to push the buzzer when he hears a man's voice come from inside. And then in apparent answer comes the voice of his daughter saying, do I have to, Daddy?

It is in this fashion that Francis learns that Nora has remarried, that his daughter, believing him dead, has given away the title to his paternity. He turns around as if he were sleepwalking and leaves without making his presence known. He will not interfere, much as he might like to, with the normal flow of their lives.

Unwilling to admit his disappointment, Francis has a brief fling at alcoholism, moving in dazed profusion from bar to bar on a short trip to oblivion.

A young prostitute, new to the oldest calling, takes him to her hideaway, nurses him through a particularly bad session of delirium tremens, becomes his keeper.