

I Did It Myself

By Mark Wilson

“I’m telling you, Larry, you’ve got a great life.” Roy took another drink. He and Larry were at the high-class bar in the nice part of town, as they were almost every night. “I mean, look at you: thirty years old, not a care in the world, you barely have to work, nice car, nice duds.” He flicked Larry’s lapel, admiring the tailoring. That was an understatement: the blazer was very expensive.

“Yeah, I guess.” Larry looked bored sitting at the bar, sipping a \$20 martini. Larry had a great life because everything in his life was paid for by his parents. Even at thirty, his parents — one a heart surgeon, the other an economist — still provided for him out of a trust fund that had been set up before he was born. Upon entering the world, Larry had no idea that he would never have to work a day in his life. He had a job, but it was only because he didn’t want to spend his days sitting in front of the TV in his underpants, which is what he would have done, seeing as he had no motivation to do most things. It was always his friend Roy, who came over each night, who suggested that they do something. Usually, that consisted of going to various high-class bars, getting smashed, and then stumbling home.

“You *guess*? I would *love* to have a life like yours. I have to go to work everyday to make money. You don’t! You could do anything you wanted to. You could travel the world!” Roy took a swig of his Manhattan. As he put it down, his brow furrowed. “Wait a minute, why aren’t you traveling the world?”

Larry was still staring straight ahead, hand on his chin. He had thought about that before: most independently wealthy people didn’t stay where they were, doing the same inane things day after day. He woke up when he wanted, hung around the house, maybe he went outside. Life bored him, and yet he did nothing to eliminate the boredom. And it wasn’t that life bored him because he was too good for life or too smart for life: far from it. He was bored because he had no motivation. He was introspective enough to understand that, but not introspective enough to understand why.

“Let’s go home. This is depressing me,” said Larry.

“We only got here twenty minutes ago,” said Roy. “We’ve only had one drink.”

“We’ve got drinks at home. And some weed. Let’s go.” They drained their glasses and headed out.

When they arrived back at Larry’s house, they smoked a bowl and watched a home-shopping channel. They made fun of the hosts who were peddling faux-diamond rings and hand blenders. They joked about what kind of people might be up this late watching this stuff, but there they were, watching it nevertheless.

Larry had a job as a middle manager for a company that distributed supply-chain solutions for medium-sized enterprises. In short, he didn’t have to do anything. His father the economist set him up with the job, and because of his father’s relationship with the company president, Larry

couldn't be fired. He read memos every day, and sometimes he sent them, but he didn't actually do anything. This situation was preferable to everyone because Larry didn't want to work and his boss knew that he wasn't qualified to do the work he didn't want to do, so Larry never got any time-consuming — or even challenging — assignments.

On this particular day, Larry called his mother, the heart surgeon. "Mom, I think I want to go back to school."

"Well, that's great, Larry," replied his mother. "Where do you want to go? Harvard? Princeton? Yale?"

"No, it's — it's not like that. I don't want you to put me into a school."

"It's no trouble, dear," said his mother. "Remember my brother-in-law? Uncle Marty? He's a vice provost at Princeton. Or something like that."

Somewhere, deep in the back of Larry's mind, a thought was forming. It was quite possibly the answer to why he didn't feel fulfilled in his life. As he had never had such an important thought before, he didn't quite know what to make of it and certainly didn't understand that it was a life-altering thought. To ask Larry to describe what he felt would be like asking a blind person to describe a rainbow. The words came out slowly and deliberately as the thoughts in his brain congealed into words.

"I ... don't want you ... to help me get in," he said, listening to the words as he said them for the first time.

A pause, and then his mother said, "I mean, it's no trouble. Your father and I only want to help you. What's wrong with that? I mean, some kids get into schools because they're really smart. Other kids get into schools because they're important and they know people. You're the latter, Larry. Just because we happen to be well-connected doesn't mean we shouldn't use those connections. Every person uses the traits at his disposal to his advantage. Smart people use their brains; athletic people use their bodies; influential people use their influence."

Larry's mind reeled. So rarely had he ever had to refute or debate a point that the part of his mind dedicated to complex analysis had atrophied. It needed crutches to get around. But slowly, it stood up from the bed it had occupied for so long and began to creakily shuffle around the room.

"But you and Dad never had help." It was true: his mother and father came from very middle-class roots. They had each worked hard for their respective degrees and paid for them through a combination of scholarships and loans. No one had helped them.

His mother's sense of analysis was like an Olympic sprinter. "Son, we just don't want you to have to go through all the long nights and money worries and all the things we went through," she replied. "We worked very hard so that, one day, you wouldn't have to. Now, you have that to your advantage. It doesn't make sense not to use your connections. Why work extra hard when you don't need to?"

Larry couldn't respond to this. The phone was silent for several seconds. Then, his mother ended the pause. "You just think about it. Anything you want to do, we'll help you with. Don't you worry about a thing."

Larry hung up the phone feeling confused and empty. Why did his mother discourage his aspirations? How was it that she could make it on her own, but he couldn't? The thought entered his mind that he was stupid, and that bothered him, also. If he were stupid, it would be because his parents gave him everything he needed instead of letting him learn for himself. He didn't want to be stupid, but he didn't know how he could think for himself.

"My mom said she'd send me wherever I wanted," Larry told Roy that night as they walked to a club. "She said I could go to Princeton."

"That's great!" said Roy. "I applied to Rutgers, but they didn't give me enough money."

"Money isn't the problem. I mean, I have plenty of money. I just don't want people to give me things anymore." Larry had his hands in his pockets and his body arched forward as he walked. He moved quickly so that they could get to their destination and out of the cold as quickly as possible. He stopped suddenly and turned to face Roy. "Do people ever give you things?"

"Not as often as I'd like," joked Roy.

"I'm serious," said Larry.

"Man, you are serious, aren't you? When did you suddenly become so introspective? Wait, wait: I get it. The doctor said that you have six months to live, and you're trying to give your life a purpose. Have the three ghosts of Christmas visited you yet?" He chuckled at his own joke. Larry frowned.

"I'm trying to have a serious conversation, and all you can do is joke around!"

They continued walking. "Hey, man, lighten up. Okay, fine. No, people don't often give me things. I work my ass off for whatever it is I have. And I don't understand why you don't just take your parents' offer. I mean, if you want to go study something, then go study something on their dime. Why should you pay when they can pay instead?"

"That's not the point!" shouted Larry. Several men milling about on the sidewalk looked up to see what the yelling was about, but then went back to their own business. "Listen: the point isn't to go to school and actually do anything. I don't know what it is I want to do! I just know that it feels like there's something missing. And when people give me things, it doesn't feel like I'm any more fulfilled, you know? It sounds strange, but the more people give me, the emptier I feel, almost like it's not really my stuff. Like I've borrowed it, or even stolen it."

Roy looked at him as though analyzing him, trying to make sense of what he was saying. If gamma rays could have come out of his eyes, they would have, so heavily was he scrutinizing

his friend — or at least, the shell of his friend. The insides of his friend had changed, and only a high-powered beam could have confirmed it. Then, the hint of a smirk flitted across his face and disappeared. “That’s crazy talk,” he said. “C’mon, we’re here.” They entered the nightclub and forgot their worries amidst a sea of hedonism.

The next day, at his office, Larry knocked on the door of his boss’ office. “Come in,” he said. “Ah, Larry, how is everything? How’s your father? I haven’t spoken to him in a while. Is everything okay?”

“Actually, Mr. Stangle, I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Well, if you need to go home, then do it. I don’t want you infecting everyone in the office if you have a—”

“No, I mean, I don’t want to work here anymore. In this office.”

Mr. Stangle raised his eyebrow and leaned forward on his desk, clasping his hands in front of him. His tone turned quickly from jovial to grave. “Is someone bothering you? Is it the work? The hours? Do you think I’m being unfair to you somehow?”

“No, nothing like that. Everyone here is fine. The work is ... it’s fine. You’re fine. Everything is fine. It’s me. I just don’t feel like I want this job anymore.”

“That’s quite a strong feeling to have, especially since it’s the first time you’ve ever expressed it. This is quite a surprise.”

Larry sat forward with his elbows on his knees. Just like the conversation with his mother, he wasn’t prepared to be cross-examined. “Yeah, I know. But I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, and I guess what bothers me most is that I didn’t get this job myself. Mr. Stangle, we both know that I’m here because you were in the same fraternity as my dad, and did him a favor. I graduated from college, I needed a job, and so I came here.” Larry looked up at Mr. Stangle, hoping that the latter could assemble the thoughts that Larry had laid out like a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle in his brain. He was coming to a better understanding of what he thought — he could flesh it out and put it into words — but there was still part of his feelings that he found elusive.

“Larry, you’re doing a fine job and I think this is a fine place to work. I’ll tell you what: give this another week and then we’ll come back to how you feel. I mean, I don’t think it’s exactly fair to spring this on me without any advance warning. Take the weekend, step back, and then see how you feel a week from now. Maybe you’re in some kind of a funk. I know I get into those from time to time, and a little fun always gets me right back into the swing of things.”

“But that’s just it! All I do is have fun! I go out every night, or I stay in with my friends — or rather, with my friend, since I only have one — and I do nothing!” He was getting exasperated at everyone suggesting that there was something wrong with him for wanting to change the direction of his life.

“So go to a museum, or a play or something. Just don’t make rash decisions without thinking about them first. Give it some time and then we’ll see how you feel.”

Larry felt heartbroken. Mr. Stangle, his last best hope for some kind of escape from the feeling of being trapped in an ever-shrinking chicken coop, had blown him off. Unsure of what else he could do, he mumbled something like, “Thanks for your time” and walked out the door.

Roy had called several times, but Larry didn’t answer the phone. He didn’t want to go out, he didn’t want to get high and watch movies, he didn’t want to play PlayStation. He thought quietly for a long time in his dark house. For the last week, he had begun to feel as though his life were out of his control, but he didn’t know what to do about it. Every person he talked to seemed convinced that he was crazy — even Roy, apparently his only friend.

He definitely understood that there was a problem in his life, and he could identify it. Larry even wrote it down several times just to make sure he was right. “I am disillusioned,” he read aloud, “that everything in my life is the result of someone else’s work and that I didn’t do anything to get anything that I have.” He tried to remedy the solution, but no one would listen to him. No one thought that being privileged was a problem. Larry deduced that no one but he could solve his problem — but the solution eluded him.

He decided that a little bit of pot would help him think. As he put his lighter to the bowl of the pipe, his eyes widened. He put the pipe down. He had the solution.

Roy arrived forty-five minutes later. Larry hadn’t returned any of his calls, and given his recent state of mind, he wanted to make sure that Larry was okay. He arrived only a few minutes after the firemen did. Larry’s house — purchased with his parents’ money — was on fire. Roy got out of his car and stared, open-mouthed, at the scene before him. Larry was standing next to some policemen over by the sidewalk. The firemen had the situation well under control.

He approached two firemen who were concentrating on a piece of paper. “What’s going on?” he said.

“Who are you?” one of the firemen asked, snapping his head up. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m Larry’s friend,” he said. “Larry’s okay, right?”

“Larry?” The fireman furrowed his brow. Then, comprehension. “Oh, him,” he said, gesturing to the police car, now looking grave while the other fireman smirked. “Crazy bastard torched the place. Cops are questioning him right now. I hope your buddy has a good lawyer.” He shook his head and went back to the paper in front of him.

Roy stared into space, not comprehending what the fireman was telling him. It felt like his legs had melted into the sidewalk. “Yeah, he probably has the best lawyers money can buy.”

He walked over to the policemen, who immediately became surly. “Don’t worry about him; he’s okay,” said Larry, sounding strangely happy. “This is my friend Roy. Look, Roy! I told you I was feeling something strange, but I couldn’t put my finger on it! I was upset that I didn’t do anything myself, and I didn’t know how to fix it, but I figured it out. And look!” he pointed to the house on fire. “I did it myself!” He grinned widely as the police led him away to a waiting squad car.