

Imaginary Advice, Episode 47

ME VERSUS THE SPAR (PARTS 1 TO 7)

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Hi, friends. [quiet electronic music in background] Uh, first of all, sorry this episode is going up so late. I'm just about to get married! And as it turns out, weddings require a bit of admin—who knew? So, I've been deep in that business.

Also, I am broke AF, so I've been taking every job I can get my hands on to pay for it all. So, I've been teaching workshops and doing commissions and making pasta collages for commuters stopped at red lights, selling turmeric to schoolkids, that kind of thing. Which all means my little one-man podcast operation had to take a backseat for a couple of weeks.

But I'm back now. The wedding is about a fortnight away but...I've got the time still to sit down with you guys and try and make something.

Oh! And um, it should go without saying that um, if you support the show on Patreon you get to come to the wedding. Of course! I mean, yeah, of course. That goes without saying, right? You don't need to dress up, just come in your civvies. Uhh...if you give...25 dollar a month you-you're allowed-you're allowed to pick up the wedding cake with your hands and then blast it out of a vuvuzela during the first dance.

Alternatively, you can stay at home and enjoy the other perks that being a supporter provides, including bonus episodes of the podcast and a fake Adam Curtis documentary that I made about Howard from the Halifax adverts. If you want to sign up, you can go to www.Patreon.com/RossGSutherland.

Thank you to everyone who has signed up in the last month or so. I really appreciate it. You are the-the uh, the sacred fishermen of my heart. Your support is holding together this rickety ship, one month at a time. So, thank you.

Um...on with the episode. [music stops]

Recently I've been thinking about love and uh, specifically I've been-I've been trying to work out the first time that my heart truly broke.

[curious arpeggiated music]

I'm not saying that my heart is permanently broken. I'm not saying that there are just two historical periods: before heart-break and after. What I'm looking for, I suppose, is just that moment in my life where my heart hurt The Most. What moment did love really beat the shit out of me?

Because I feel...whatever moment I choose to represent that, like, it *has* to be transcendent, right? It can't *just* be a break-up. It has to be something rooted in romance but then kind of like *expanded* out of it—it just kept growing and growing until it encompassed everything.

Of course, that's a hard thing to quantitate because, you know, we persistently get better at dealing with negative emotions. Repetition tends to dull trauma. Hence, it's *new* experiences that are often the scariest. The first cut remains the deepest.
[music continues]

I have one particular story that's um, that's stuck in there in the back of my head like a, like a crack in my tooth. I even dream of it sometimes. My subconscious is clearly *still* running simulations on this memory [smiles] trying to find a way to neutralise it.

I think my brain retells this story over and over because it's trying to discover a version of the story that feels positive—a version that feels heroic in some way. But it can't! [laughing] It just can't seem to find that version.

It's like a uh, like a crossword puzzle that you keep in your bag for years. My mind just pulls it out about once a month and then tries one more time to fill in the gaps.

[music stops]

I don't really want to tell you anything about the girl, or about the relationship itself because, you know, that's her business as much as it is mine. But in broad strokes I can say: we lived together um, for nearly five years in Liverpool, broke up, and then I came back to my parents' house, which is in a small village in Essex.

[quiet cinematic music]

I'd been back at my parents' for about two weeks uh, when um, I hear through the grapevine that uh, my ex was seen at a party kissing a mutual friend of ours.

Now I have to mention this kiss because this is the variable that the entire story arranges itself around, right? I'm testing an equation, you could say, right? And this kiss...this kiss is the X.

When I—when I hear about this kiss it—it's like I've been hit by lightning. Uh, you know when you open the fridge and then immediately forget why? You know, you have a tiny little fridge-based ontological crisis...Well, this feels like uh, like gawping into the biggest fridge in the world. I've opened a planet-sized fridge. And then I just...go blank. Everything is cold and meaningless. I no longer know why I'm here.

I leave my parents' house and I go for a walk around my village. I actually—I go for a walk all night long. I just walk and walk...It's like I've been switched back onto factory settings.

It gets to about 4 in the morning and I'm sitting in the children's playground on the other side of town, and I'm so tired, but, you know, I know I can't sleep.

So, my plan is this: the village shop, aka the Spar, opens at 8 a.m. So, all I'm gonna do is, I'm—I'm gonna hold tight and wait for the Spar to open, then I'm going to go in, and I'm gonna buy a four pack of beer with the spare change in my wallet. I've got just enough for four beers. And then I'll find somewhere quiet to drink these beers, away from kids going to school or people driving to work.

I dunno, may-maybe I'll uh, I'll disappear into the forest [chuckles] next to the village and drink my beers in peace in the woods, and then I can kind of dull all these anxious thoughts that are running through my head then I can finally go home and sleep.

So, I pass the next four hours taking another trip around the village, walking up and down every street. It's all filled with memories from my childhood. And all this nostalgia, it's just making me feel worse! All it does is drive a deeper division between Then and Now, cos like, all these scenes, they're all dead. All these houses are filled with different people now. These memories are just...they're ghosts, and nothing more.

[cinematic music rises]

[bell dings as he walks into the store]

Come 8 on the dot, I push my way into the Spar.

The bright light stings my eyes, but I can see behind the counter is this nice older lady called Molly. [minimal piano music, just a couple of notes] Now, everyone in my village knows Molly.

She's been behind that counter for, um...well, I mean, they pretty much built the Spar around her. And after a night wandering the frozen streets of my village... seeing that familiar face...I could feel my heart lifting an inch. Maybe that was just kind of evidence of continuity, proof that some things go on, no matter what.

I go to the freezer. I pick up a four pack of Foster's and I take it to the counter...and I look at Molly she looks at me and she says, "Have you got any identification?"

[pause; piano again, insisting on one note] Uh, which I don't. [piano, insistent note getting more tense] Because I'm a grown man. [ominous buzzing chord starts in the background]

I can't remember the full argument but what I said back to Molly was not pleasant. I mostly said, "What is your problem" over and over and over.

More than the words it was *the way* that I-I spoke. I remember that um, that I re-I refused to leave when they asked me. And a young lad from the back of the shop had to come and stand next to me, arms folded, until I gave up.

[ominous chord builds]

Uh, I remember walking back into the street uh, which was, which was now filling up with people, all on their way to work, kids on their way to school. I remember standing there, outside Spar breathing in the uh, cold fresh air a-and then my-my heart just...exploded.

[sound cuts out suddenly]

It's more complicated when you're not just receiving pain but *also* inflicting it. [arpeggiated music again]

I-I immediately felt ashamed, you know, just at how uh, how readily I'd passed on my sadness to someone else. You learn something about yourself in a moment like that [arpeggiated music]...and you can't take that back. Like, there is no, there is no redo button. [arpeggiated music continues, curious]

And yet my dreams...are *always* trying to take me back to that morning. They're always trying to fix that past. My head just-it can't-it can't give it up! It just keeps telling that story back to me...

Over... And over... And over...

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[elegant, peaceful piano music]

[Ross, a 19th c. country gentleman:] If my tale were to have a beginning, let us say... it is with a kiss. A kind of crossing, if you will. The evening had arrived with news from Liverpool: a past betrothed of mine had been seen in the romantic company of another, leaving me in a somewhat Turkish frame of mind.

Heady with emotion, I decided to take the opportunity to clear my senses with a long walk upon the Essex countryside, to enjoy the hill-roads and thrifty dwellings of my market-town while the moon was at its fullest. [ducks, countryside sounds] And yet, I abandoned myself with no particular destination, allowing instead my trail to wind of its own will. I felt the itch of progress...and yet I could not grasp it, as I walked past scenes of teenage rumness—the graveyard where I had supped my first cider, the antique shop once featured in an episode of *Lovejoy*, the bench from whence the Jolin brothers would daily call me 'wanker'—all now long faded to memory, like a small dog in mist.

Feeling...thirsty 'round the witching hour, I decided to make my way to Spar.

[fondly:] "Ah, Spar," I thought. Happy the man who can stand in that modest pristine arcade and feel,

if even for a fleeting moment, the truancy of time. To be sheltered from the destroying winds of one's own history, the soft song of Bonnie Tyler drifting through the aisles as one stands, weighing a four-case of Australian lager in one's hand.

For there is no shame in Spar. No judgement, not here. 'Tis a...worldly enterprise. And all are welcome beneath her mop-scented dress.

And so, I bring my petty items to the register. O reader, happily turning this page by the fireside at home, if you have ever considered the post of alcoholic a viable career move, then you should know my disposition.

Molly watches as I present my unfortunate mid-naughties chain wallet. [music fades] “Sir,” she says, her eyes looking through me and into some recent querulous past. “Forgive me but...[single piano note] do you have any identification?” [insistent piano note]

[sigh] Alas, predictably, [smiling] I do not. [laughing] Just the correct legal tender and my motherfucking beard, but sadly, no more. [calm piano music resumes; Ross is a proper gentleman again] And so, after a...lively exchange, I return to the door, assisted by the shop-boy.

And there, on the step, taking in the morning air, [buzzing sound begins in the background, growing] I finally recognised my character. [buzzing louder than music now; Ross is less and less jocular] My heart sucked from my chest like a cow falling through a decommissioned mineshaft—

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[cool, exciting jazz music]

[Ross, a laid-back, confident criminal:] Alright, listen up. We just got the OK from Liverpool. So, we do the job, as planned.

[paper rustling]

See this X here? That’s the target. It’s time to show ‘em what this crew is really made of.

Come 4 a.m. I am in position...[paper rustling] here—children’s playground. After that I’m going to head east, north, east, north, north-west, round the vicarage, west, north-west, south, east, north, north-east, east, north, north-west, past the shop they filmed Lovejoy in, north, north-east, east, south, back down the Roman road, then west, ready at 8 a.m. to infiltrate...[brings finger down on map]

SPAR. That’s right. We’re hitting the big one.

[music continues]

You don’t need to tell me mate! What thief wouldn’t want to take a shot at Spar, it’s the fucking Xanadu of every career-criminal! A state-of-art security compound, we’ve got dry-goods...we’ve got frozen...we’ve got four rows of magazines all with Paul

O'Grady on the cover...But all we care about is the Foster's. We're on the clock, after all.

But listen, even if we get through the reinforced steel and the laser-web...we're still gonna have to get past the chief. Ex-Stasi. Sharp as a spring-loaded shoe-knife. "The prescience of a chess master," according to the bio on her Myspace page.

But don't worry lads! This is where my genius customer disguise comes in. Military grade image mapping will cover my entire body in a photorealistic shopper camouflage. From the outside it will be impossible to distinguish me from a sad 28-year-old man trying to buy himself a breakfast beer.

All I've got to do is walk the loot right up to the front door and the idiots will just let me pay for it! [music fades]

After that, it's easy. We just pass on the goods to our global underage drinking racket...[kisses his teeth, mega satisfied with himself] *Foolproof*.

Unless...[single piano note] [laughing at the absurdity] I mean—nah, nah, nah, I mean, it couldn't—but...[insistent piano note]

Unless...it turns out that Molly actually has the power to *reach* inside the human mind and see someone's true self. [ominous buzzing sound begins in background] There is a 0.01% possibility that she is a telepath who can turn my psyche inside-out like a dirty sock, revealing our entire criminal enterprise in a single look. [ominous buzzing growing]

But you know what? [buzzing cuts out; Ross' cool is back] If *that* happens, we just switch to Plan Theta. [cool music resumes]

Yeah? [turning pages] If security goes into lockdown, I immediately start shouting shrill self-pitying accusations that make no sense. Of course, if you move like we move, then you know: part of the job is knowing when to walk away. That's the sign of a real professional.

Either way, lads, I'll be at the extraction point, yeah? You'll spot me easy. [buzzing resumes; music fades] I'll be the one just standing in the middle of the road, paralysed by sadness, my face like the wall of a Category-B prison—

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[dark, crunching guitars that sound like doom and despair]

[Ross, a terrifying demon:] First there is a cross. A crossing. Two celestial paths converge and so begins...the final cataclysm.

When Liverpool shall rise up and block out the sun. And the sky shall turn to copper, electrifying the sea. And chubby lovesick twenty-somethings shall wander the streets of Essex like startled owl-people.

And then the Spar shall return to the Earth.

The SPAR. [massive echoing] The subterranean inverted temple of Spar shall rise. No mortal can look upon their toiletries! Only the disciples of Molly shall pass.

I walk into the fires of Spar to claim my prize, to claim what's mine. Molly watches, [single piano note over doom music] her eyes like the decapitated heads of Neil and Christine Hamilton. [insistent piano note] [horrible screeching voice:] "Do you have any identification?"

[music cuts out; demon has a coughing fit]

[music resumes] "Do-you-have-any-identification!?" She screams. But ooh, predictably...I do not. Just my helmet of sorrow and the coins of...awfulness but, sadly, no more.

Oh, the folly, to believe that I could tame one of the Ancients! That I could bend the apocalypse to my will!

Unworthy, I feel my tongue turn black with hatred. My twitching hands, possessed by the darkness, bewitched by the consolations of Molly!

It takes all my strength to claw my way from the temple. [wind howling] The Essex winds blow through me, [growing quieter:] I can feel Molly's curse sticking in my heart like an icicle of piss.

[ominous buzzing resumes; demon Ross, quietly:] The world will still end...and I shall end with it.

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[long exhale, Ross preparing for a rap battle] OK.

[music starts, Ross raps over hip hop beat:]

It begins with a kiss, this
And look I know it's none of my business
Miss, I know that I'm too late
Walking round town in a fugue state
Ooh, great. I'll be stepping into Spar (echo: Spar, Spar)

Open the fridge like I'm back at the bar
Bringin' the party back to life like I'm CPR
Hah? You wanna see my ID?
Do you think it's likely a man with this body is like, even nineteen?
[insistent piano note] Ooh, should I speak politely?

Running now with perspiration
Bursting to curse but my nerves say "stay calm"
Wallet from the pocket but I know the game
I'm gonna need more than a young person's railcard

Cos predictably I got nix, you see
I got pics, but the face don't fit to me
And if I wanna walk out with more than tonic...

[music stops; Ross talking:] Gonna need my passport, prove-it card, driving licence,
[sigh] or some other form of ID with my date of birth on it

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[a crowd laughing]

[Ross onstage, voice amplified on PA, sighs:] Do you have any identification? [sighs]
Do. You. Have. Any. Identification. [moving around the room] Do you have, any,
identification?

[long breath] ...And I said, "But I'm 28." [some laughter] She said, "Sorry. It's the
law."

I said, "Well, look: I've got my uh, my university card here, uh, that says I'm a PhD student. So, you know, surely that proves I'm over 17, right? You know, I'm not... Doogie Howser, [quiet laughter] or something..."

She said, "Look, you've had your fun, now just move aside so I can serve the gentleman behind you."

I said, "Look! I've been coming here and getting served since I was FIFTEEN YEARS OLD! [laughter] Which was some 13 years ago. So, if you think here and now I'm still only 17 years old, that means when you first served me...I was FOUR." [laughter]

"Do you remember serving a 4-year-old back in 1995? I feel I would!" [laughter]

"Sorry," she said, [single piano note] "I have never seen you before in my life." [insistent piano note]

[pause] And uh, then she looked at me [long breath]...with her eyes... [laughter]

But um, all I could hear was Bonnie Tyler uh, coming down from the ceiling, singing [singing:] "Turn around [laughter]...Turn around!"

So, I did.

Thank you very much! That's great, thank you so much. Thank you for coming down, everyone!

I really appreciate you all being here to uh, to normalise uh, unacceptable social behaviour. It's so great we can all come together like this just so we can laugh about me [chuckles] uh, intimidating an old lady just for doing her job. So, thank you and good-night!

[audience clapping, laughing, whistles of appreciation]

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[calm minimal music in background]

[Ross, a literature professor delivering a lecture] The uh...the Kiss symbolises an ending of sorts. Um, the image of a kiss is often used as a sign of death. Othello says:

“No way but this,
Killing myself,
To die upon a kiss.”

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, death occurs no matter if you refuse love or accept it because *both* refusal and acceptance transform you in some way. You undergo a metamorphosis which erases the human subject at the heart of it all.

In the case of this story, uh, the kiss represents the beginning of a-a-a new love, which consequently erases the love of the protagonist, who suddenly feels pushed into the margins of his own life.

The use of Liverpool is also symbolic, I think, serving as an extension of this idea of expulsion. Uh, Liverpool is associated with vibrancy and intense emotion, uh, in contrast to the market towns of Essex, old medieval wool-trading posts, almost entirely located within the realm of the past. Obviously, an Edenic metaphor is going on here: our hero has been cast out of Scouse paradise uh, to toil in a kind of purgatorial Essex anti-space.

We see uh, this character, this-this “Ross”, wandering their town aimlessly—uh, the public space reimagined as labyrinth—uh, with the village shop representing the Minotaur in many ways. Uh, the name Molly, close to Moloch—the root of the minotaur, adapted by Minoan storytellers. Also, Moloch is the [Canaanite god](#) associated with [child sacrifice](#), uh, appropriate for a story in which the protagonist has to prove that they are not a child, uh, and what’s more, fails to do so.

You could say uh, that this is a quest narrative—a search for beer, yes, uh, for self-annihilation, but the martyring sort. When um, victimhood is intended to bring something *into being*—it’s an attempt to *appear*, not disappear.

The search for beer has a further religious aspect: uh, the Foster’s lager that Ross is searching for has another name, as this advert from 1987 can confirm:

Ad playing: “[laughter]...Foster’s, the amber nectar.”

Amber nectar: a positively Homeric phrase, if ever I heard one.

Like the nectar drunk in Homer’s poetry, is the amber nectar also analogous to the ambrosia of the Gods?

Ad playing: [Australian accent:] “We can always cool down with a couple of ice-cold Foster’s.”

Well, from the same advert, listen to how actor and Australian Paul Hogan describes the substance.

Ad playing: [Australian accent:] “Mmm. Tastes like an angel cryin' on yer tongue.”

“Tastes...like an angel...crying on your tongue.”

Now, look at the whole story through the lens of this phrase: Expelled from a kind of “Eden”, Ross, our marginalised character hallucinates himself into a labyrinth—a disruptive space where inside and outside become entangled. You can see he is lost, trying to locate a new story, some kind of new heroic purpose which he believes he will find at the centre of the labyrinth.

Soon after, he decides that this purpose will be martyrdom through drink, believing self-annihilation will allow him, in a way, to remonstrate with a higher power, challenging the forces that excluded him. This is supposed to be his *furious* revenge. His tears mixing with the tears of angels, the amber nectar. He believes that this will be a *showdown* with his God.

But instead, [single piano note] at the centre he meets Moloch [insistent piano note] who punishes his arrogance by taking away everything he had left. [ominous dark chord] All identification—his purpose, his history—all of that is sacrificed.

Riches that he didn’t even know that he had, until they were removed.

And that’s really the essence of this morality play: how hate and bitterness only erase us further. Right? It’s a bit obvious when you put it like that, I suppose.

Another allegorical reading would be an examination of the cost of trying to position oneself at the centre of a story, and why any attempt to occupy such a space is in fact self-destructive. The Ross that we meet here might actually be a reference to a minor part in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Ross is Macduff’s cousin—always hanging around the edges, mostly delivering exposition. At the same time uh, it is *through* Ross that Macbeth realises that the witches’ prophecies are coming true.

Shakespeare’s Ross exists within the stability of the peripheries. There’s a simple realness to just walking on for a minute and telling people what you’ve been up to

and then walking off again. [laughing] It's-it's uncomplicated! That's appealing.
[ominous chord continues]

Compare *that* to the insanity of the centre-stage, where Macbeth has to interpret everything, fight everyone, lose everything. In this particular Shakespeare play, the margins would be the best place to hang out. Why would *anyone* want to get any closer to Macbeth's black hole psyche?

But this is precisely what we see the Ross of our story attempting to do: he is pulling a Macbeth, bitter of being cast out, he's trying to bully his way back into the centre, trying to make the story all about him, dumbly unaware that at the centre of the labyrinth is not God, but Moloch, always waiting, always hungry for a sacrifice.

The witches erase Macbeth by convincing him that he's the hero. The Ross of this story suffers the same fate: he doesn't realise that the centre can erase you, even more efficiently than the margin.

Of course, in the Shakespeare play, Ross eventually sacks off Macbeth altogether. He abandons his batshit monarch and fucks off to join Macduff's army instead. And I feel like...maybe *that* is the lesson we need to learn. That's the lesson that our Ross character missed.

We can't occupy the centre without it destroying us, but that doesn't mean that we are trapped or helpless at the edges, because we can still *change* the thing at the centre. We *all* have the option at any time to exit back into the wings and find a new story to appear at the edge of.

The stories are *never* about us. But there are an infinite number of stories that we can be an extra in.

[dramatic choir music]

And that is what a heart break is. It's just a momentary splice in the tape. [voices talking in background] But the tape always goes on. We just exit the back of one scene and re-enter the back of another—

[sound distorts and rewinds quickly]

[Total Eclipse of the Heart: "Turn around..."]

And *that* is what I learnt from getting ID'd in Spar.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Imaginary Advice. [music continues: "Turn around..."]

I'll be back really soon. Yeah, that's all from me.

[IMAGINARY ADVICE]