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## STORY OF MY LIFE

By Jay McInerney

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We still make Jay McInerney pay for his early success. Four years ago, his first novel *Bright Lights, Big City* rocketed him to stardom and cult-hero status, and when we got around to conceding that *Bright Lights* was not, after all, *The Brothers Karamazov*, we had to do something about the excess of its author's celebrity. So we crucified his next book, *Ransom*; "Sliced white macho bread in the end," said one reviewer, "Thoroughly conventional, thoroughly uninspired," cried another. And when the movie of *Bright Lights* came out this past spring, it gave the critics the chance to do the panning they now felt a useful corrective to the superlatives they'd heaped upon the book.

With the appearance of his third novel, *Story of My Life*, parts of which were pasted into a short story for the August 1987 *Esquire*, our first task is to remember which book we are reviewing. *Story of My Life* is not *Karamazov* either, not even *Bright Lights*, but it is a well crafted and entertaining read.

Alison Poole, a thoroughly jaded 20 year-old, is trying to survive in a Manhattan scene that goes beyond hip straight into frantic. Like all of her girlfriends, Alison is estranged from her parents but not their money. She's just broken up with one stockbroker and starts seeing another, bedding "like twenty suspects" in between, and moves through a dizzying succession of cocaine parties with no job and only a fickle commitment to the acting classes she hopes may someday lead to a career. Long-range career goals don't fit well into Alison's world, for here time has no linear direction and is only a series of thrilling, but unfulfilling moments.

Easy sex and powdered nostrils cannot dull the underlying anguish in Alison's life, where a girl's best friend is revenge; "That's what it's all about if you ask me--we're all sitting around here on earth working through our hurts, trying to pass them along to other people and make things even. Chain of pain." Hers is a world of deceit where you can count on people telling the truth only when they are playing the parlor game "Truth or Dare." And love is the biggest lie of all, especially in marriage: "I don't believe in it. My parents have seven marriages between them and any time I've been with a guy for more than a few weeks I find myself looking out the window during sex."

Alison's mother phones her constantly to grumble about her own boyfriends, but has no time to listen to her daughter. Her father is forever off on trysts with girls younger than Alison. When in a moment of great need she calls home to find her father, her sister answers; "I go, where's Dad? and she says he's in Cancun with a new bimbo. Which is just great. Whenever I need my old man he's on some beach with a nineteen-year-old sex kitten. Story of his life." On a level she doesn't realize until the novel's end, Alison's father is the source of her ennui and self-destructive hedonism, but through most of the book she, like her roommate Jeannie, thinks of him only as a fountain of money whose flow is too sporadic: "Jeannie's dad is really fed up and he's closed the vault. But it's like, these goddamned fathers, they give us everything for a while and then suddenly they change the rules. Like, we grow up thinking we're princesses and suddenly they're amazed that we aren't happy to live like peasants." Among Alison's ambitions is "to be an orphan. With a trust fund, of course."

For a writer who claims to want people to ignore his early blockbuster when approaching his new book, McInerney makes the task difficult. Writing for the first time in a first person voice (*Bright Lights* was in the inventive if sometimes strained second person, *Ransom* in third person), McInerney employs a female central character to make the book seem more distanced and less autobiographical, but, for better and worse, *Story of My Life* bears striking similarities to *Bright Lights*.

The voice may be different but its tone is the same. That's a strength, as it is a tone of immediacy and force, consistently irreverent, witty, and wry. The comic timing never falters. McInerney has always had a superb ear and eye. Not only is the voice as deft as in *Bright Lights*, so too is the description of the New York club scene. Alison races through a cityscape of night spots where girls borrow Alaia evening dresses and stuff rival girls' Ralph Lauren ensembles into trash compactors. Where cocaine suppliers brandish knives and look like either Prince or Jesus, the girls can't quite be sure. Where a cab driver newly arrived from Russia can tell Alison how he wept in a grocery store at the sight of fresh meat that even common people could buy, and shortly Alison's roommate confesses she spent three months' rent money on first-class airfare, an \$1800 Chanel skirt, and, of course, cocaine.

Cocaine is still McInerney's metaphor for a social set guided, as he once put it, by "the idea that tonight, if you go to just one more party, one more place, that's gonna be the one . . . that somehow will fulfill you, and every time you do one more line, you think just one more."

To the book's detriment, though, this may be a world that has lost its glamour. *Bright Lights* caught the tune of life in the Big Apple for the young and rich, but that was in the early eighties. Casual sex and lines of cocaine may not mean the same to the post-AIDS-post-Len-Bias world of the late eighties, where what once brought an indulgent smile now can bring death. We are no longer amused by our Alisons. We are scared for them.

And Alison, who during the Kentucky Derby finds she is rooting for a horse called Demons Begone, is scared for herself. She says, "I'm getting this really weird feeling like, I'm so involved in all this hysterical noise which is supposedly my life but it doesn't add up to anything, if you step back far enough it's just a dumb buzz like a swarm of mosquitoes." She cannot escape this noise, however, until she learns what has led her to seek it, and it is more than having been raised an American princess. As before, McInerney's theme is the discovering, coming to terms with, and maybe forgiving our past, the necessary requisite to moving unfettered into our future. The central character of *Bright Lights* had to acknowledge his mourning for his mother. Alison has to see what estranged her from her parents to begin with.

Which brings us to one of the book's two main flaws, its ending. Ours may be an era in little sympathy with affirmative endings, but we will tolerate those whose motivation we can believe. Endings are not yet McInerney's strong suit. With *Bright Lights*, many readers whose sensitivity I admire found the ending sentimental, insufficiently prepared for. One particularly ill-humored reviewer even called it "a cheap surprise gimmick." I do not agree. I found that ending both believable and poignant. The same cannot be said for *Story of My Life*, whose ending might tax the credulity of even those who'd buy beachfront property in the Everglades.

The other flaw lies in the book's failure, to some degree, of its intent. In August, 1987, when the short story which would become this book first appeared, McInerney said the novel would be "comic-epic." If that remained the intent, nice try, Jay. It is comic, often wonderfully so. But it is not epic, not even large. McInerney has said, "I admire fiction which attempts to extend the resources of language and technique without abandoning character and psychology, fiction which delights in both word and world." Here there is more word than world. The technique is masterful, yet its world is long on substance abuse but short on substance, especially disappointing in view of how well McInerney seems to understand his main character.

Regrettably, Alison remains a small girl in a small world. She has redemptive qualities--loyalty to her best friend, love for her grandparents, a stated if not always achieved devotion to truthfulness--but these rays of hope appear too seldom to light a horizon otherwise bleak with her vindictiveness and self-absorption. Alison is engaging, delightfully witty to listen to, but we don't feel the promise of possibility in her as we did in McInerney's first novel and, worse, we don't care quite as much. Where the earlier voice had a touching confusion, Alison's often begins to whine.

Which book, then, have we reviewed? The one that appears this month or the one that four years ago lifted McInerney directly from being an unknown to being, for the *Risky Business* generation, the writer of the eighties? The question itself suggests that McInerney bears the cross of becoming as much an event as an author, the Truman Capote of a new generation, too much a cross to ask of this remarkably talented 33 year-old, slipping as it did at times even from the shoulders of a Hemingway. With Capote and Hemingway is not the grouping that will serve McInerney or literature best.

He belongs rather with Mona Simpson, Madison Smartt Bell, Lorrie Moore, Amy Hempel, Leigh Allison Wilson, those extraordinarily gifted writers who have all just moved beyond their thirtieth birthdays and all of whose greatest work is still ahead. If McInerney's achievement has not yet matched each of theirs--and many would argue that it has--his is still a major talent from which, at any moment, we might expect a masterpiece.



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