

The Be-Everything! Brothers

“TWO TO CURTAIN, PERFORMERS. PERFORMERS, TWO TO CURTAIN.”

Responding to the stage manager’s nudge, both grown men rose from dressing room chairs, facing one another for the first time that day. Both grown men, adorned in matching neon sneakers, pancake makeup, cravats and cargo pants, hung up their phones—one after receiving updated values on stock investments; the other, while scolding a plumber for shoddy guest bathroom renovation—and turned from lighted makeup mirrors, palms extended to touch the other’s, inhaling deeply until their distinct breaths synchronized. Only then could they expunge dour news about tanking derivatives, or bursting pipes and backyard sinkholes. Expunge what they referred to as “litter thoughts”: any stray observations capable of fraying showtime focus.

Lips smacked repeatedly, a sound like moist kernels of popping corn, as the men rotated their heads clockwise, then counter, never breaking eye contact. Once their neck cricks subsided, a series of sounds emitted from contorting mouths: some like lowing cows or balky motors, others that seemed to have gripped the men with shivers, finally to sing, in harmony, “Mommy made me mash my M&Ms!” Again and again they sang this line, teeth parted, each rendition pitched higher, following the musical scale’s Do-Re-Mi, grinning at one another, palm-to-palm.

“Do a good show?” asked one, a quizzical jab loitering in his words.

“Do a *great* show,” replied the other.

“We don’t *have* to work,” they chanted simultaneously, sprouting grins so artificially wide as to seem dental appliances had been rammed into their jaws.

“We—WANT—to!”

Stage hands often gathered round the dressing room to personally witness this ritual phase, awarding the two their moments of unfettered union with a sentiment approaching awe. This was, after all, a transformative feat; hogtying all adult concerns and distress to live briefly again in childhood's wide-eyed kingdom. How many among the crew could reacquire that innocent enthralling estate themselves, simply from dipping into warmup stretches and vocal articulations? The ritual awed the crew for another reason: it wasn't mere superstition or stunt. The grown men truly couldn't enact their act, absent this slice of pre-show communion. Even after all these shows; *especially* after all of them. Ask around. For a magic show to work, magicians must first trick themselves.

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After which, the arena PA announcer welcomed the day's feature presentation, Len and Leo Kaminski, aka *The Be-Everything! Brothers*, clearing the two stars of that beloved, long-running children's television program to spin and bound across the stage, high-fiving one another and an occasional, fortunate, front-row fan. Each time the crowd whoops crested, the brothers dipped back into their dervish act, eliciting more hollered hooting. This had the effect of pumping early adrenaline into the pint-sized audience, as well as killing time: a not-insignificant consideration when padding an episode that typically ran twenty-five minutes on television into a live-action event exceeding an hour-and-a-half.

Leaps and jogs allowed the brothers to hear through their earpieces repeated reminders of what city they were operating in. Not that this benefit was necessary today; for the first time in their career, the brothers had taken their tour to Minneapolis-St. Paul. The very twin cities where Len had hoped to spend his entire life.

Stirring crowds with claps and yells also dislodged any final, litter thoughts weakening the brothers' onstage connection. For Leo, that last litter was an airplane loudspeaker announcement,

issued as yesterday's flight began its descent: *I'll be coming around the main cabin to collect items you want to be rid of*—unnerving to him not in content, but its delivery from a digital voice.

Len's last remaining litter was a bitter image: skateboarding teens he startled this morning, riding staircases like concrete arteries out of this arena's heart. The teens recoiled, but not from being caught trespassing. He'd tracked dismay in the teens' faces when they recognized his, as if he were the one trespassing, on childhood nostalgia. Could that *really* be the guy whose antics they adored as kids? He looked like *that* now?

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A last reason each live show commenced with mutual wind sprints, windmilling, and relays: so the audience would be captivated by *both* brothers exuding wild energy. Cementing in young minds each brother's equal engagement. After this early frenzy of calisthenics and pumped-in theme music subsided, both brothers screamed into their mics, at the stage lip:

“Good afternoon! So great to be with you in the Twin Cities!”

Looking at his brother, Leo ad-libbed back: “Are *we* twins?”

“If we are,” Len answered, panting, “you sure play a mean game of hide-and-seek. Those first years of my life, I couldn't find you anywhere!”

“Oh, that's right! You're much older.”

Len shot Leo a glare the crowd couldn't discern; not the balcony rows, at least. “I wouldn't say *much*.”

“You wouldn't? Let's put it to a test. Fans, how many of you have brothers or sisters five years younger?” Leo asked. “Or five years older? Do you think *you're* the same ages as them?”

After a resounding wave of negative reactions, Len chimed in: “We better move our show along, brother. Unless you kids came all this way to do math problems?”

An even more resounding *no*.

“I didn’t think so! Let’s get down to business. And as you know, our business is the work of fun, and the fun of work. We’re the Be-Everything! Brothers.”

“I’m Len. This is Leo,” Leo said, purposely mistaking identities. Shouts of protest and uproarious laughter filled the arena. The jovial juvenile fanbase could rattle off dozens of differences in how the siblings looked, spoke, acted—couldn’t Len and Leo, after all these years of brotherhood, even tell *themselves* apart?

“Wait, that’s not right. I got it reversed. I’m Leo, he’s Len. Right?”

High-pitched approval roared back, trailed by wafting vapors of kid-fare aromas: cotton candy, gummi worms, and slush cones; always a ripe and rapid cure for the brothers when they came out of the chute, say, sluggishly tending hangovers.

“Now that I got our names straight,” Leo cried. “Are we ready to... work... this... out?” As Leo attempted to step forward, Len tugged his cravat, holding him back. “What, Len? Len, I’m trying to launch our show. What *is* it?”

“He forgot his briefcase,” one child bellowed from the mezzanine.

“I, uh... well the thing is I...,” Len began.

“Forgot your briefcase!” more kids howled, in anticipation. “Forgot your briefcase!”

After a chant coalesced, Len nodded sheepishly. “I’m afraid this crew of fans has my number.”

“Oh, Len! You forgot your briefcase *again*? You know we can’t launch our new Jobventure without the right tools. Go back and find it. I’ll look here. But hurry! Time’s ticking!”

At which point Len dashed to the wings “in search” of his stray briefcase. In actuality, once he was no longer visible to crowds, Len unbuttoned his too-tight shirt, loosened the cravat, climbed into a custom-made recliner and, breathing in heaves, beckoned one handler to mist his face and retouch his pancake makeup, while a second massaged his shoulders, and a third, his thick ankles.

Through this tending Leo continued running unabated laps on the side of the stage no curtain concealed, turning over props, enlisting audience help to locate Len's elusive briefcase. During live shows, the five-year age gap between siblings stretched into a gulf far wider. While Leo—clearly the more fit brother—kept in constant motion throughout the show's running time, Len, after the opener's initial burst, stayed as stationary as possible, resuming a higher gear only when the narrative arc demanded it. In those instances, Leo had learned to shout louder, to cover the heavy wheezing washing over Len's mic.

For years, the critiques Leo lodged about his faltering performance—and they were legion—fell deaf upon his older brother's ears. Len shrugged them off, noting his trump-card credit as the enterprise's creator and chief executive. Recently though, parents had added consumer complaints to the chorus. Their online reviews no longer ignoring Len's swelling figure and slothfulness, bemoaning cash they squandered to view subpar live shows, time idling afterward in clogged parking lots. Some scolded Len's lethargy; others focused on how his occupations entailed far less derring-do than his sprightlier sibling's ("What kid wants to grow up to be a bookkeeper?" decried one disgruntled parent.). A St. Louis spectator laid into Len's role as a food critic ("Picture this: Leo's onstage measuring spices, chopping wildly, tending four open flames, while Len's awaiting dinner to be plated on a tablecloth. Our 'entertainment' included nineteen minutes of him judging the delicacies Leo prepared. WTF? NEVER going back, even if my kids beg. Though honestly, when I broke the news, they barely shrugged."). Other letters lit the pair up for excessive squabbling ("It may be realistic to depict brotherly discord, but you are *much* sweeter on TV. My twins cloned your behavior, trash-talking the entire, brutal ride back. You've given them less to look up to. Sorry to cry causation, but I want compensation. Here's a receipt for my ibuprofen supply!").

Len read these reviews, studied data of dipping attendance and souvenir purchases, and got the point. Public TV commanded a modest salary. Touring was the true cash cow. But if public-

sphere perceptions degraded, their live and televised incarnations would both suffer. Len pledged to undertake wide-scale improvements, and far more rousing performances.

His grand response, though, involved dropping two pounds, dying his hair, and going on a negligible anticoagulant regimen.

Out onstage, Leo stole a glance at his watch, stalling and vamping. It was time for the TED talk portion of the proceedings. Where the siblings spoke about the employment ethos driving their show's genesis. Testimony they were supposed to impart together. Yet Len remained backstage, too-tight vest unbuttoned, lounging in a recliner four minutes running. Leo had run out of props to peer at. There were only so many leading lines left for him to loudly utter ("Can't wait 'til *Len's* back! He'll arrive *any second* with his briefcase, so we can Be! Everything! Together!"). He had no choice but to end the stall. He'd have to part with tradition, do this part without Len.

"Found my briefcase!" Len yelled jauntily, hoisting the leather, sprinting from the wings.

"Where'd you leave it *this* time?" Leo asked, sighing. Seething.

Each live show, the whereabouts of its vanishing got more arcane, its rediscovery story, more circuitous. How could it not, given Len required longer and longer periods to recuperate after his initial burst? This time, the rigmarole revolved around Len's desire to be fully organized for today's big Jobventure no matter what, preparing his lunch with meticulous caution the night before. However, just prior to putting said meal in the fridge, his devoted mastiff distracted him and, wouldn't you know....

"You played fetch with the dog using your actual lunch, instead of the burger squeak toy, and sealed your *briefcase* inside the fridge?"

Len gave Leo a hangdog grin, a film of pale yellow plaque visibly gleaming on his incisors. "How well you know me, brother!"

How well he did.

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Leo and Len had been brothers in business half their lives. Partners for as long a run as their own *parents*. Under show auspices, the pair held joint employment in hundreds of jobs: governmental positions to NGOs, arts to sciences, athletics to scholarship, sales to clergy. Sojourning to fleeting careers in seven continents, drinking untold gallons of carbonated, caffeinated and fermented beverages, scarfing elaborate, gustatory meals and glorified K rations alike. This sampling had converted Leo into a cultural connoisseur. Len had gone the glutton route: foraging familiar tastes, gulping back every salted and nitrate-flush meat, sweaty olive, arthritic pasta, and other craft-service spread he could prior to shows, like some carb-loading marathoner. The crew was dissuaded from approaching the backstage buffet until Len shoveled in whatever share suited him, washing it down with mandatory Malbec. Cases of the stuff were ubiquitous on tours. It had to come from some precise Patagonian vineyard in Argentina, where flat terrain and chilly conditions produced a crop retaining its mineral tonal virtues. Supposedly Len was that discerning; eff up his order, there'd be hell to pay.

But in Leo's estimation, Len was, on this point, nothing but a penguin.

Leo learned, from an episode sending the pair to the Antarctic (not far from Patagonia come to think of it), that penguins had long lost the ability to truly taste flopping fish slugged down their gullets. The act of eating no longer produced pleasure. Familiarity breeds etc. And so it was with his pudgy, waddling sibling, draining decanters of Malbec without truly valuing the zest.

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Now Len was retelling, to benefit the thirteen people scattered in the arena unversed in this story (a figure likely including only security guards and concession workers), how the siblings launched their enterprise. "Growing up," Len began, "my buddy Leo and I had a big problem. We couldn't figure out what we wanted to be!"

He grinned at the expectant children, pale yellow plaque gleaming again in Leo's sightline. "Actually, it was worse. We couldn't figure out how to declare what we *didn't* want to be. It was like when parents allow you to unwrap one gift from your Christmas tree pile, or a single piece of yummy, sugary candy from your Halloween stash, and insist you wait to have the rest. How do you choose one piece when it all tastes terrific? Select one present to play with from that entire marvelous pile? Impossible, right?"

Leo picked up the scripted story. "Even worse for us: People told us to pick one thing to do with the rest of our lives, shoving every other sweet possibility to the side. Forever!"

It starts, they then said in tandem, when you're busy with your first job. Being a kid.

Family members, teachers, even perfect strangers pose the same, painful question: What do you want to be when you grow up?

"You know how we answered that question, each time we got asked?"

"We want to be everything!" the chorus of delighted kids replied.

"Right! Be everything!" At that moment, images of men and women employed in varied vocations illuminated a colossal screen behind the brothers, starting as starry specks, then growing in size and definition, until their sheer magnitude filled the backdrop. "So many jobs sounded cool beyond belief: musician, librarian, farmer, equestrian champion, shrimp boat captain, railroad conductor, president."

"So many ways we could go! Each one dazzling! How could we choose just one?"

"The idea of needing to chisel *down* that dazzled feeling, day-in, day-out, drove us *crazy*."

"At first, people praised us for our response."

"Or *seemed* to. Only they'd actually say, "That's right, boys. You *can* be anything!"

"Excuse me?" Len's finger wagged, a disapproving metronome correcting the comment.

"You misheard us. Leo and I have no interest in being *anything*."

"We want to...."

“Be everything!” roared the crowd.

School Career Days were the worst. Forced to select a single “occupational exhibit” to demonstrate for the class, Leo chose the job of Writer, only to be informed a Writer’s salary “was too variable to accurately measure and report on.” He settled instead on Lawyer. Did dutiful research. “Not just on the computer. Learned the Dewey Decimal System and everything!” His teacher praised his report, long and loudly enough so that Leo began to imagine the Lawyer option made sense. “Then a classmate’s parent stopped by my booth. She *was* a lawyer, and told me flat-out I should pick another career path. Said my choice wouldn’t earn enough salary. After I’d given up being a writer for the very same reason!”

Len chuckled. “I remember *my* career presentation. I felt sick having to choose, but finally went with Astronaut. The adults got *so* stern. ‘Don’t you know how hard that is? There are only a few astronauts in the entire country!’ Yeah, okay, maybe. But *few* is more than none, right?”

“And just because you weren’t one of the *few* yet, didn’t mean you never would be.”

“Thanks, brother. Now I admit, my face turns an ugly chartreuse shade when I so much as climb into a rollercoaster.”

“That’s true. It does. I’ve seen it.”

“So maybe bursting out of Earth’s gravity wasn’t *quite* the job best-suited for me....”

“But let us discover that on our own. Because we *Be-Everything! Brothers* hold tight to one big belief: Not trying is the worst failure.”

Driven by that determined credo, they launched their TV show, embarking on their tapestry of careers. Learning what skills each vocation required, receiving a training crash-course, then tackling a typical day on-the-job. A crisis inevitably emerged they had to meet by applying their lessons. A series of antagonists always aimed to thwart their vocational Jobventures, including Robotic Robert, believer that all jobs should be automated; Minimal Micky, who encouraged employees to be “work incurious”; and Hazardous Hazel, infamous for engaging in slipshod, unsafe

methods. At show's end, Leo and Len marveled over how much wit and judgment had been required of them in a single shift, while espousing effusive praise for those who handled without complaint the same duties and conditions, on a daily basis.

“Big question now is: What part of everything are we going to be *today*?”

The arena audience shrieked. Popcorn and cotton-candy containers were promptly pressed into seat cup holders. Requests for bathroom breaks, placed on hold. The time had come. For the brothers to unlock their briefcases. To reveal today's assignments. For new Jobventures to begin.

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Just how many Jobventures would this make? Fifteen fresh episodes airing annually, multiplied over how many seasons? Plus scores of ten-city tours, coinciding with show hiatus and school recesses. Cakes presented backstage commemorated milestones, but when candles topping them were lit, Leo and Len shut their eyes: not to seal their wishes' power, but in weariness over the climbing number indicated in the icing. With each new episode shot, promo produced, on-location filming wrapped, and live show staged in city x's arena, fairgrounds, or convention center, their relationship grew more fragile and fractious.

The partnership's early days rolled along easily enough. Len and Leo once inhabited the same hotels, apartments, yurts, and primitive campsites whenever shooting schedules allowed. Preferred joint interviews and press junkets. Shared an on-set trailer. Even famously bought and tended acreage together in their home state of Alabama, following an organic farming episode. But those initial seasons, flush with swelling celebrity and adulation, had coated and pearled any parasitic irritants nested at their core.

More recently, the two stipulated sleeping on separate hotel floors and staggered interviews when touring. As for that Alabama property? Long gone to seed. Emotionally Leo had quit the enterprise a dozen times over, as if carting around in his vest pocket a signed resignation, its lone

blank line ready to mark the effective date. He was sure Len had come a hairsbreadth from pulling the partnership plug too. Each snipe in the media brought on raw distaste, each hedge on contract renewals suggested the approaching end. So why hadn't the ledge been leapt from? Leo and Len would, if pressed in private, lean on that impregnable chestnut for extending unhappy unions: "We stay together for the kids." True, they did feel loyalty to their brand, still savoring exhilaration of their young fanbase. But at this point their escapades were syndicated heavily, alongside numerous full-length theatrical features and holiday specials. All this would continue existing even once the brothers ended their coexistence—a body of work breathing long beyond euthanasia.

Pursuit of coin was no longer the rationale for remaining together, either. Both were millionaires, merchandising residuals lining the pair's pockets even during hiatus, or when public snarling slowed tour extension negotiations. True, they'd wavered near poverty throughout youth; schooled by their father from an early age that a single utility bill could fell them, that a wage had to be waged over, and that whatever one owned was susceptible to circling wolves of competition and government, licking chops until your guard dropped to pounce upon and devour all you toiled for.

Despite these lessons being drummed into them, Len and Leo knew they were set for life. Provided for. They lacked heirs, or domestic partners, so divorce always seemed a question not of if but when. Leo always figured Len would lower the boom in a moment designed to engineer Leo's maximum alarm and upheaval.

Even so, he never dreamt the bastard would ditch him smack dab during a live show.

Leaving Leo exposed onstage, holding the bag alone.

—END OF OPENING EXCERPT—