

Jonah Matranga

*Be a Better Baker*

Remember that he's just lost his friend. The memorial got moved outside because too many people showed up out of nowhere, so the mic will do that noisy thing when the wind hits it and that will rattle him, and everyone's been drinking for a while, and it feels like no one else there actually really cares enough to be there, they're just there—kind of like it always was, really. He's just going to do his best to talk about him, talk for him really, try to do his memory justice. He knows that the one time you'd really want the person to be there to make sure it got said right, they're not, because they're gone—so you've got to try and get it right, at the one time you're really never going to. But he's going to try.

Okay. The minister or whatever seems like he's finishing up. It's time.

*“Be a better baker.”* That was something Sully used to say, and I never really got what he meant by it. Maybe something about knowing your place or being who you were supposed to be or whatever, but I swear to fuckin' god I couldn't tell whether he hated someone or loved someone when he said it to them—usually in the middle of some deep cackle, totally unhinged. I'd seen him get in a fight right after saying it as many times as I'd seen him give someone a big, crazy hug. Seen him fall in love with a girl, seen him fall in love with a guy. We'd go to Coney Island Island High for shows and walk around Saint Marks. This is before Giuliani fucked everything up.

When the car went off the road, I swear to god I heard him say it. What, you don't think dead people can talk? Thought you listened. Just go down to the yards one night. Listen to the water against the hulls of the ships. Listen to the wind going through the doorways, whistling through the barnacles. You tell me what you don't hear.

Rick and Ben were these two gay guys that he would always call his fairy godmothers. They were the closest things to parents he ever had—like actual parents. Parents that are actually around physically and maintain some sort of even keel, even when you're being a total fuckin' asshole.

The only thing that really got to Sully was politeness. He'd get really quiet and shut down around it. He didn't know what to do if he came home and needed food. Rick was the only one who ever really questioned him on it, at least in a way that didn't make him want to punch somebody's face in.

I only saw him get in a fight once. It wasn't that he didn't get in people's faces; he did that all the time. But usually—he was pretty small, and he somehow had this thing where I think maybe people thought, 'how could he be so small and still talk so much shit?', and then the one time that he actually went at someone, it wasn't anything like that at all. It was just that someone was getting picked on. And he seriously ripped this guy's fuckin' ear off, like Tyson, except for real. Well, I know Tyson was for real, but yea, it just...

Anyway, after that, he spent some time in juvie. He met some black guy in there who taught him to meditate. I think it helped him, but I also think it created some kind of divider in his head. He'd still flip out sometimes, but other times he'd just get really quiet for a long time. When that happened, I didn't know whether to be worried about him or jealous of him.

We drifted. It was one of those things where I'm not sure who really changed. Even though I think we were both doing better in plenty of ways, it was like a different dance and I missed the old one, even though the old one wasn't a whole lot of fun sometimes. It wasn't about it being familiar, it was just something that... worked for me. I love that phrase, *worked for me*, like when something is working for me, like I'm its boss.

I always talk in the first person, or try to—not the third-person thing where people say their own name, that's really annoying—but I mean when I'm talking about being at a party, or what it's like to be at a party for me, rather than saying 'Yea, so when you're at a party you do this, you do this, you do this.' I try to take the 'you' and switch it out with an 'I'. Works out pretty well, helps me see things different ways. So anyway, yea, we just—we lost touch. And I can't even tell you how much I fuckin' miss him now. I'm not sure why I let it slip like that.

I always wonder what it would have been like to be lusted after that much and then having people be so suspicious of you, all at once. I mean, who

thinks of a black kid named Sully? Once, we were in one of those real conversations that we'd get going sometimes. He started talking more than ever all of a sudden, talked about what it was like before I knew him and before he got to New York. Sounded like his friends really fucked with him. You would've thought that Sully was a nickname that some dude from Brooklyn gave him, but his first name was literally Sullivan, and he never knew why his mom named him that, and he would get fucked with so much it sounded like—for his weird name, for the things he said, for the way he talked, for whatever.

So between all that and watching his dad's legs get eaten away by something that came from diabetes or something like that, he just, by the time his name got shortened to Sully—which really wasn't much better to tell you the truth, in fact it was probably even weirder—he just became this whole other person. That whole cruelty of children thing is really true. What the fuck do we do? What do we do to each other?

Miss you as ever, Sully. Just like Sal and Dean, right? I miss how crowded a room needs to get before it's loud enough where I don't hear you at least a little bit. Thanks for helping me feel a little bit blacker. Thanks for speaking up so I didn't have to, because I wasn't gonna anyway, haha. To Flavor Flav before he was on TV shows.

This one night we drove out all the way in the Hamptons. We went out there to try to crash some parties, and he actually snuck into one and took a few little things of creme brulée. We were feeling good. We were out in the dark, hiding as far away as we could still seeing the house, and all any of us could really see was our spoons it was so dark, so I laughed and said we were eating by spoonlight. It was one of those stupid times that sticks with you. Sticks with *me*.

Sometimes he'd jump to the end of the line right before he was going to order and confuse the hell out of people. He'd laugh and say that he wanted to practice patience. It was never something I was good at. I'm not sure if he was good at it either, but that was the difference; he'd put himself through it, he'd make a game of things. He could just go and go.

Oh, that stuff he swiped didn't turn out to be creme brulée. It was some

chocolate pudding stuff, but it had that same candy top where they must've used a blowtorch thing on it. It's funny that we just call some things magic, because I don't care how well someone can explain it, putting a fire on sugar and having it turn to glass is something that I'll never figure out. Even about the glass itself—it's just super frozen water. I'll never get that.

It's funny, tough as he was, he would talk about all this weird stuff, like how he wished that people could just fool around and help each other out that way. It could be like doing someone a favor, just make them come. I mean, he'd say we all know how good it feels; we jerk ourselves off in secret, and we know how even though that can be really fun, it's so much cooler when we're with someone else, where someone is just paying that much attention to us, or when we get to really pay that much attention to someone and not be embarrassed about it. He'd always talk about how sad he was that we'd made sex into something where it's like somebody's job. It wasn't that he thought it wouldn't be fun sometimes to pay each other for it, like just tip each other out if we thought we did a really good job, but he hated the idea of it being someone's actual job, when they became a sort of—yea, a sex worker. He hated those words together and that whole idea. He didn't think something so fun should be in the same sentence as something so unfun.

Why is it exactly that some people can make each other come and some people can't? Doesn't seem like it's about where or how you do it, right? There's some conversation you can't see—I can't see—that's going on between all the germs we're made of, and we're really just there to get them close enough to each other to do their thing, and we make up all this shit about it and call it love.

It's funny, because probably if I hadn't had a kid so young—had to stop falling apart—I'd have been more like Sully, but I also would've never known him, wouldn't have idolized him the way I do. It's funny how—well, not funny— but it's kind of fucked up how there's sort of probably the same distance, like it's some sort of geometry thing where there's the same distance between someone we idolize and someone we hate. Either way, we're putting them in this whole other world than us.

Sometimes I speak in his voice.

When I was little, our dog Cinderella had this litter of puppies, and before we gave them away and a couple of them died, just in like little puppy ways, getting smothered by—I don't know, I could never figure it out actually—but I'd get home and they'd charge me and jump all over me and it'd feel like they were knocking me down—looking back on it that seems so impossible, I must have sort of fallen down on purpose—but when I was on the ground, they'd tug on my shoelaces and lick all in my ears and everything. When I told that to Sully, he loved it so much. He said that's what it felt like when he had an idea. He'd wake up from it. I never understood how he got from point A to point B. I'm not sure if I actually thought he was like me or if I just wished he was like me.

He'd call me sometimes and tell me that he wanted to call my girlfriend but he felt weird about it. I knew he had a thing for her, and I think she had a thing for him too, and if it wasn't Sully I bet we would've had some really awkward moments once in a while. Luckily, he was someone who'd rather just say it out loud than let it sit and get all weird. Anyway, he'd call me and that was it; he would just say that he was thinking about texting me and he hated that it seemed like no one would ever pick up the phone anymore, that he'd call and leave a message and get a text back an hour later. He thought it was really annoying to answer in a different way than however the message came in. I asked him once if he just thought he was trying to control people. He laughed. I always liked how open he was to not knowing. He'd always say there was only a few things he actually knew. I agree with that.

She was from the West Coast. She'd come to New York off and on. I've never seen a girl that wasn't that hot be so fuckin' hot. I guess you could say that at our age, at that time in growing up, anyone who had any idea about sex could pretty much have whatever they wanted, and that's true...but I have the feeling if I saw Julianne in a nursing home, she'd still have all the dudes on a string.

She had a kid. I think that was as close to being in love as Sully ever got, and I think both of them weren't sure who was raising who or whatever. They'd piss each other off so much. Maybe it was one of those things where neither of them were ever actually ready to open their hearts to

someone, but they saw this opportunity to risk a lot and risk pretty much nothing all at once, because they knew it'd never come to anything. At the same time, I know he really liked her and she really liked him. I'm not sure I ever saw anyone be as playful and sweet as they were with each other. They could really get free. She would just jump on his back for no reason sometimes when they were walking down the street. It was funny; from a certain angle, with her little bleached a-line hanging over his eyes, it looked like there was this little black hunchback with blonde bangs walking down Lex laughing to himself, because she'd be whispering some inside joke in his ear.

The last time I saw him, he was going to see his mom. They were trying to patch it up. The paper said it happened on the way back home, that the car went in the river off the Manhattan bridge, which I didn't even know was possible. They must've been going pretty fast and something had to happen pretty sudden. By the time they found him and got him up out of the bottom, the cops said they couldn't even tell who had been at the wheel when they crashed, because I guess it looked like him and his mom were both trying to get each other out of the car in time, and they were all tangled up.

He wouldn't say much about her, except he was always really careful to say she never hurt him or was even mean to him. She would just get really down on herself, hit herself and smash dishes and stuff, say she just wanted to go away or wanted to sleep or something. I could tell he didn't even know if that was better or worse than having a parent who would beat the shit out of you. I couldn't tell you either way. I mean, I got it a couple times pretty good by my older brother and sister, which was always really confusing for me and basically sucked, but I don't know, it's different when it's a parent.

He was living on some sort of insurance thing. He'd gotten hit by a van. It sounded like it was kind of his fault, but god bless insurance; he'd always say that. He'd buy us black rice with mango and these fake meat medallion things with snow peas. I swear, I never had such good hippie food in my life. There's something about when people are getting fed. Just having that one thing taken care of, it's like the opposite of losing your wallet;

everything feels all right for a little while. We shut that place down so many times. We wouldn't spend nearly enough money for the amount of time we were there but they'd never kick us out, mostly just because of Sully, just how fuckin' cool he was to everyone, they would let us hang out as long as we wanted and they even seemed to really like us. They let us come back and do the dishes one night, and this other time when their delivery guy called in sick, we got to drive around in this crazy rainstorm and take some food to people. It was really fun to be delivery guys.

It's funny, because a lot of jobs, I'm not sure I could do them for a long time, but for a couple hours they're really, really fun. That sounds like I'm talking shit, but I'm not. I hear in Japan that's how they do it; everyone switches jobs every little while so they learn different stuff, I guess, but it just seems like a smarter way to do it because I wouldn't get as bored.

Seems like the Trayvon thing really took it out of him. It's funny because that shit keeps happening—it happens over and over—but that one thing, it really got to him. Just Occupy and Trayvon and all the stuff going on then; there was a lot of almost and a lot of heartbreak, all butted up against each other, coming at us so fast. It's weird because I think that stuff is what got to him, and I think that stuff getting to him is what got to me.

I'm not sure how we ended up knowing each other for twenty or thirty years. What are the odds of that these days? Sometimes we'd go months without talking. Once in a while he'd say something really nice—I mean, he was always nice, really nice, really fuckin' cool. I thought about him so much. It's funny, even though he was so strung out on Julie, I was that strung out on him. Not in a gay way, but I was just so in love with him.

'Old man lying by the side of the road with the lorries rollin by', or something like that. If I was ever really sad, he'd start singing that song to me. It was perfect, because that's what made it such a good song; it started all spooky and then it would seem like it was ending, then it would do that 'don't let it bring you down' part, even though he'd already sung it; the way he did it then it was like this prayer. Hearing Sully sing it was—he couldn't carry a tune worth shit—I dunno, it was just probably the coolest thing anyone ever did for me.

He would always say he was jealous of me that my dad died, and I knew what he meant. When he said it, I knew he couldn't even tell if he was kidding or not.

He loved her so much. He'd say he didn't even know where who ended and who began.

So go down there some night after everything's been shut off and just sit there for a while, when all the big machines are quiet—and I'm not saying that big machines don't have anything to say, but they don't say it like the ocean does, and yea, I know that as much as waves try to be the same thing over and over and that's the whole stupid point of it, they're really just as random. It's just a longer cycle, they break down too. The ocean just does it so much more calmly, over and over again, never worries about keeping it together. It's worked out pretty well for the ocean, right? It's taken some hits, but it sticks around. Can't say that for most machines, with all the ways they basically plan how long it'll be before something is useless and they get to release the new version of it and all that shit. I swear they do that stuff on purpose just to keep us buying. Not like I swear like it's my opinion, like I swear it's actually true; people write about it, people have studied it. It's actually true.

Sully and all his weird 'be a better baker' things. It was like he had a bowl of them somewhere that there was always a fresh, juicy one in."