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Model and Performance Artist

TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS before I was scheduled to have major back surgery, a procedure which would either cure my chronic arthritic back pain or potentially leave me crippled for life, I found myself standing naked and shaved from head to toe at a friend's New Year's Day party, having my body painted along with another friend, to be part of a living art exhibit.

The spellbinding but lengthy ordeal took three and a half hours, during which I had to stand perfectly still with nothing to do except smoke weed and watch, as my body was transformed by a stranger whose spirit seemed guided by a purity that mesmerized me. I never witnessed art being created like that before. This was art that came from the heart, stripped of pretension. The experience changed my life.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't your typical story about a guy who goes from working the corporate nine-to-five to someone who goes to parties naked, painted as a green pickle. I didn't quit my day job. I still work as a business consultant for all kinds of companies, from small startups and organizing music festivals to big power companies. I just do this naked stuff on the side to keep myself sane and keep life in perspective.

But working in corporate America was one of the things that opened my eyes to all the falseness in this world. For example, it's been my observation that the bigger the company, the more likely it is that people in their jobs are just playing a part, and they don't actually know what they're doing. Even so, instead of being held accountable for any incompetence, they get rewarded.

That feeling of disingenuousness was one of the reasons I left home. I was a teenager, living at my family home on Long Island at the time. My mother's brother and his family lived around the corner. One day, their house burned down, and they came to live with us. The thing is—well, certainly as a rebellious teen—I had a hard time getting along with my uncle. Even then, I had a liberal sensibility, and he was a conservative guy, a rule

follower. My mother was the same way, I guess, but it just always seemed hypocritical to me.

I remember the two of them talking about how they could get the most out of the insurance money by having my uncle move in and so on, but at the same time, they were telling me I had to follow the rules. Now, I know I'm the kid who set the lawn on fire instead of raking the leaves; trashed the neighbor's fence during one of the many crazy parties that my parents slept straight through; toured with the Grateful Dead at fourteen and hid in a garbage can for four hours so the cops wouldn't arrest me for illegal fireworks on the Fourth of July. But I never tried to swindle or hoodwink anyone. That was too much. So, I went to live with my grandmother in Midwood, Brooklyn, the borough in which I was born and lived until I was either three or six, depending on which of my parents you ask.

My late grandmother was the only person growing up who just accepted me and respected me for who I was, no matter how stupid I behaved. Looking back, even though on the outside she looked like your typical Jewish grandmother from Brooklyn, internally, she had a very open and accepting way about her. I guess it's from her that I inherited a liberal sensibility, an ability to see through all the crap that society tells you you're supposed to do and be. Living how I want brings me pleasure, but it also means spreading love, truth, acceptance, and honesty. That's what it's about, this thing I do.

I'll give you an example: Fashion Week, here in New York, is probably one of the biggest cons out there. You have all these models with the same kind of body that's supposed to represent what's beautiful, traipsing up and down the runway in clothing meant to disguise other people's "problem spots." Last year, during Fashion Week, my friends and I at Human Connection Arts organized the Polar Bear Paint in Times Square. People stripped down naked—all kinds of bodies, and they were all beautiful—and let themselves get painted. It was freezing cold and raining, but we had a blast posing for photos with each other and with the tourists. That's our message, really, that everyone is beautiful. We're body positive.

The thing is, deep down, everyone realizes the truth of our message. I personally know it's true because once I started doing naked body paint modeling, I found myself surrounded by more positive people. Ninety percent of my arthritis pain went away, and

I came to see life clearly in a way that I never did before. It gives me a lot of joy, it truly does, and I want to spread that joy.

So that's the reason I went to Check Point Charlie in Berlin, naked and painted with a Picasso-*esque* face on my torso, and screamed, "Freedom! Everybody gets naked!" I was just spreading the love. And they did love it! Even the cops called me over to take selfies with me. They probably went home that night and told their families about the crazy naked guy, and everyone had a good laugh.

Maybe, when I'm gone, that's how people will remember me: That crazy guy. Or perhaps they'll remember me as that crazy guy who got them to try all kinds of sexual stuff they never tried before. That's the other side of all the societal bullshit I don't go for: the sexual repression and people staying in miserable relationships because they believe that's what they're supposed to do. But there's a whole world out there; I've seen it. As a naked body paint model, I've appeared at a bunch of wild parties all around the city. People have no idea what goes on just around the corner from their homes.

But these parties, they're not just an expression of "free love." People are expressing themselves, and it's amazing. There's a kind of acceptance there that people in society who follow all the rules and think of themselves as solid citizens don't appreciate. So maybe a wild party isn't your thing, but for the people who go, it's an opportunity for them to be true to themselves, and they accept one another for who they are.

I model for those kinds of parties quite a bit. I went to a Valentine's Day Party painted as a Harlequin and marched and partied at the Mermaid Parade painted as a green merman. I always have fun. There was that one time when I caught on fire and almost had to jump in the river, but otherwise, I'd say I have more fun than most guys my age, and I get paid for it. Sometimes I just model, other times I organize the party. I'm an excellent organizer because I know the law, and I curate parties that are one hundred percent legal.

I think the downside of having so much fun is that people I know—people that I've grown up with—resent me, or they feel jealous. Those friendships aren't what they once were. I feel disappointed in a lot of people. It's hurtful, even if I do understand what's behind it. On the other hand, making a transition like this opens your eyes to the world and to people. You have to take the good with the bad.

So, the parties are cool. They're something. I had to mention that. But I also get to be part of this city in a very special way. I go to marches and demonstrations painted. For two weeks, I was the Breitbart poster boy with the slogan "Embrace Love and Life" painted on my torso. But I also go to more establishment parties, like promotions for Vodka, Cigars, or art galleries. I always do whatever I can to support what I consider real art, even if it means swinging from a subway pole naked after being painted by the artist Quori Moorehaul.

In New York, Andy Golub is the artist who pioneered and championed the body painting movement. He is a pure soul who gets it and encourages people to love their bodies. My favorite quote from him is: "I don't make art to blend into the environment. I make art to contrast with it."

Right now, I feel like I've created the life I should be living. Doing what I do, and interacting with unpretentious people, has helped me understand what good art is: It's art that comes from the heart.

People seeing me painted and out and about in the streets of New York might have a hard time believing that I'm also a family guy with a wonderful wife and two great kids. And, with all the fun I've been having, if I think about my favorite memory, it's the time my wife and I hiked a part of the Appalachian trail together one spring, years ago. Art is everywhere, I guess, but it starts with the human heart, in its purest state.

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