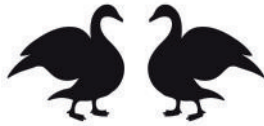


J. DAVID BELL

AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. GANCE



We choose to meet at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Or I choose: it is not his choice to make. I call and tell him I'm his alumni interviewer from the University of Pennsylvania. I am not his alumni interviewer, and neither am I affiliated at present with the University of Pennsylvania, or any other institution of higher learning for that matter, but bear with me. It's a thing I do. I call him up and say, "Say, Mike," I say, "Mike, I've heard a lot about you, fella, and I'd really like to get together and get to know you better." I am loose, jocular, low-key: Mike's dream alum. I use colloquialisms, I josh, I banter. I speak the lingo. I am not the prep school headmaster or retired naval officer Mike has been dreading. I do not make him feel naked. I will not haunt his dreams.

Mike supplies me with my name. Having opted for the alumni versus the on-campus interview, he has received a card from the Penn admissions office and has been waiting for this moment. I call him up and say, "Hey there, Mike, it's me, your alumni interviewer. . . ."

"Mister, uh," Mike says, fumbling, "Mr. Gance?"

"That's right," I say. "Bob Gance." It's unlikely, of course, that the card in Mike's hand lists this Gance fellow's Christian name as "Bob," but Mike is trying to get into college, he is not

going to tell me I don't know my own name. The card could list Gance's first name as "Menachem," and sweet innocent Mike would tell himself it was a typo.

"They've told me a lot about you, Mike, and I've gotta be honest, I'm pretty impressed. Sure you want to waste four years on college?"

Mike is taken aback. I am not an easy man to read, particularly over the telephone. Then he laughs and tries a line of his own. "I guess I could still learn a thing or two."

"Couldn't we all," I say. I already have the measure of Mike: cool, sincere, smart if a bit dull. I've used that line on more kids than I can count, in one venue or another, and it's a winner, tells me a lot. Applicants fall, right on cue, into category. The straight-A squids, with their pinched, antiseptic manners: "Yes, sir," they pipe mechanically, as the strains of "Deutschland Über Alles" swell on the soundtrack. Or the louts on the football team, immune to irreverence: "Duh...what?" Then there are the artsy ones or the potheads, I defy you to tell the difference, with their "Dude! What a radical concept!" The one thing, the only thing I have yet to hear is, "No, I don't plan to waste four years on college, and I'm certainly not going to waste four minutes talking to you, so just go fuck yourself, all right?" Now that would be refreshing.

But Mike, Mike is all right. A little dull, true, but no real harm in that. Not about to set the world on fire, but not likely to take a header out the Quad window either. Mike is a little hackneyed, that's all: Mike is a country western ballad. Grab Mike by the shoulders, give him a good hard shake, who knows what accumulated grit and clichés and model behavior might fall off that delicate hide of his. The world might be a better place, God alone knows.

"The natural history museum," Mike repeats, scribbling.

"The Hall of Dinosaurs," I say. "By the allosaur." If Mike does not know what this is, if I find him cooling his heels by the likelier choice, the tyrannosaur, Mike flunks. I'm partial to kids who know their theropods.

For me it's the same drill every year. From my flat overlooking the college center, where I collect (mostly) dust

and disability, I kill time till January, watch for signs of life in what is otherwise the dead of winter. For more years than I care to say I have shared a rhythm with the Pitt campus, our seasonal cycles inverted and compressed by the academic calendar: flaring briefly in mid-winter before lapsing into renewed somnolence by late spring. But if you know what to look for, the signs of the new term are legion. Bicycles anchored to saplings, handbills sprouting from kiosks, boxes hustled into dorms. Stars twinkling atop the Cathedral of Learning, doubled in the soggy streets. And most of all the students, moving solo or in packs, iPods and cell phones at the ready, always connected. With a spring in their stride they ascend the Cathedral, court Thoreau and Hegel, still cocky enough to dream of a world beyond this visible one. Bright world, glowing world. World of light specks pulsing in ether. Idealist philosophy. I had that subject once, I believe.

So what I do is, once I see the signs, I hit the streets and nose around a bit, then head for home base and start making calls. Every so often I contact a kid who's already been through the wringer. Usually I apologize and call it a clerical error, but this one punk (I didn't like the sound of him), I told him it was a follow-up because we'd had some reservations—that's how I put it, some reservations—the first time around. That shut him up. If you're going to do what I do, Pittsburgh's not a bad place to do it: small and dingy, dying mill town though it is, its demographics suit my needs, trending of late to first-generation college students, easy pickings if you know your business. I've made the rounds in the past, had a couple Fox Chapel and Mount Lebanon grads a few years back, but they bored me, eggheads and Chinese physicists and asthmatic computer hackers every last one. Plus they were a bit savvier to the process, which posed certain risks. But let's be honest. This is not exactly rocket science. It's easy enough to lay bare the sordid details of people's innermost lives, if you go for that sort of thing. Ergo, it's a snap to pry into a region every lusty lad is champing to advertise: i.e., his college aspirations.

There are ways. There are absent-minded guidance counselors, starry-eyed schoolmarms with a yen to see their

favorite pocket-protected nerds excel, athletics coaches who slurp Wild Turkey from the cola bottles in their windbreakers. There is the newspaper, a gold mine for jocks but also a good source for National Merit finalists, math and science contest winners, budding thespians, fund-raisers and other do-gooders, lifesavers ("Billy Jones administers CPR to dying nun, lands pilotless 747"), and so on and so on. There are classified ads, barroom braggarts, class plays and boys' clubs, admissions fairs on campus and off (though I prefer not to be too familiar a face among my target audience). You work the field long enough, you'd be surprised at the dirt you can dig up. There are ways.

But the simplest, most cost- and time-effective method is this: dial the senior class, apologize until you make a hit. Sometimes you get lucky on the first try. Sometimes you get a kid talking, play the confused-old-man act, you can pry another name out of him. These are adolescent males, after all, broadcasting their fantasies in chat rooms, uploading their antics to YouTube. None of them is too careful talking to strangers, especially strangers who come bearing credentials and connections. None of them figures on needing to be. All of them are sure they've got the world licked six ways to Sunday.

And why, you may ask, do I do this? Fair enough, but I'm not about to dredge up ancient history. Suffice it to say that I didn't invent the college interview, that most honorable and lowdown of devices whereby time hands youth its comeuppance. Old artificer that I am, I merely perfected it.

I enter the Hall of Dinosaurs. It is cluttered and spare at once: the hulking ribcages and spinal columns crisscross crazily, but they are, after all, mostly space. My feet ping and pong on the floor, the sound carrying up through the gutted spaces and rebounding off the high arched ceiling, returning as a faint pong-ping. The hall, consequently, is both noisy and hushed. Also polished and dingy, glaring and dim, posh and putrid, sacred and lurid (if not pornographic): these creatures

are extinct, they cannot be expected to inhabit any kind of world we know. Patrons limp along as if sedated. There is none of the childish flurry of Arms and Armor, none of the nervous giggles of Ancient Egypt, none of the peevisishness and bladder-control emergencies of cracked, dusty Mesoamerican pottery, none of the appreciative parental pauses before the truncated torsos of Classical Antiquity. Visitors enter the proscenium at one end and drift out the other, drawn as if by currents worming through the behemoths' bellies. God knows why this is the most popular exhibit, since no one seems to give these relics a second glance. I search the primordial murk for Mike.

I spot him, and am displeased. He stands by the allosaur, all right—but not by the complete, free-standing skeleton. Rather, he has stationed himself against a fragment of tail stapled into a case in the wall. I suspect that Mike is trying to one-up me. My card, no doubt, has me as a respected businessman, pillar of the community, vice-executive-CEO of Widgets Incorporated, and Mike was expecting a cushy office, where he could sink into a smushy chair and make goo-goo eyes at Miss Morgenstern's ass. The Hall of Dinosaurs has thrown him, and he is determined to put on a good show. I respect his spirit, but I don't like the subtle ploy: Mike hopes, by pulling his little switcheroo, to learn something about *me*. He would love to know, for starters, "Why dinosaurs?" (Why not? They're not going anywhere anytime soon.) And then a word or two about my racket, some choice personal details, a trip down memory lane, a confession, a revelation.... If Mike had it his way, I'd end up bawling on his shoulder over my squandered youth. But *I am not the one on display here*. The sooner Mike learns this, the better off he will be.

"Mike," I say, spreading my hands as I approach him, "good to see you, buddy. Sorry I'm late, but I had a hell of a time parking..."

Mike makes as if to shake one of my hands, then drops his own in doubt. "That's okay," he recovers, smiling. "It's always tough around here."

I nod ruefully. Apparently Mike fashions himself something of an expert on the campus parking situation.

"Especially with that Joyce conference," I say.

"Right," Mike says, holding the smile. He wonders, perhaps, whether Joyce is a boy or a girl. "Are we...?"

"Oh, no." I place a hand behind his shoulder. "We'll find someplace else, someplace private."

I lead Mike out of the hall. He fidgets, tries to make conversation. "I used to come here when I was a kid."

I smile. "Lost interest?"

Mike hesitates. Does the University care that he has lost interest in prehistoric reptiles? "Other interests," he says.

I am beginning to warm to Mike. True, he's like all of them: trying to play the game, to win it I mean. But he's plucky, and he thinks quick on his feet. He may survive yet.

We make our way through the Hall of Minerals, past Arms and Armor (which consists at the moment of three workmen in white overalls and a sign saying, "Exhibit temporarily removed for renovation"), then down the hall that leads to the art gallery. Through the glass wall of the walkway we view the gray February day, the gray light brooding over the twisted gray lumps of what some equally twisted critics dare deem sculpture, or Culture. Mike is silent; perhaps he is trying to be profound. I lead him up the stairs, where a couch and two chairs form a half circle around a white block that is presumably a footrest or a table. Or then again, maybe it's Art.

We sit. Mike sinks into the couch, wiggles upward with an apologetic smile, finds his balance. He is a fair-looking kid, built long-limbed and broad-shouldered like a wide receiver, with a prominent Adam's apple, deep-set eyes, and a prickly haircut I assume to be the latest rage. He wears a beige-gray leather jacket, gray pants, an almost black shirt and gray tie. He crosses his legs and locks large hands over his knee. His shoes are new, I can smell them. He smiles slightly and looks me in the eye.

"Well," I say, slapping the arms of my chair. "Where shall we start?"

"Anywhere is fine," Mike says.

"Good." I fish in my coat pocket and extract a bank statement, a couple index cards, two or three letters to the

editor (on departmental letterhead). Kid's stuff: evidently, at one time I imagined changing the world. "I've got the numbers on you, Mike," I say, flourishing the sheaf, "but numbers don't tell me much. Gandhi and Hitler probably looked pretty much the same on paper, if you get my drift."

"Sure," Mike says. His eyes tighten over the Hitler thing, though. I wonder if Mike is Jewish. I wish I could recall his last name.

"So what I like to do is," I say, "I like to ask some questions, pretty standard, boring stuff I'm afraid, and see if we can't get a dialogue going from there. Ice-breaker stuff, you know. No pressure."

"Sure," Mike smiles. "Shoot."

"Right-o," I say. I shuffle papers loudly. A crone in a baggy print dress considers sitting, wavers, decides better of it. Mike smiles at her as she hobbles off. "What's your favorite activity, Mike?" I say.

"Baseball," Mike says brightly. "I really love baseball."

"Oh?" I say. "Watch or play?"

"Both," Mike says. "Right field."

"Hmm," I say. "Buccos fan?"

He laughs. "Not after last year."

"Oh," I say. "Fair-weather fan?"

Mike's smile shifts a bit. He bobs, calculates, tries to recover the male-bonding thing. "The new stadium looks really sharp, though."

"Hmm." I foresee a discussion of revenue sharing and salary caps, steroids and/or Barry Bonds, and I tire of spectator sports under the best of circumstances. "Anything other than baseball?"

Mike moves with me, sensing his seriousness is in question. "I really like math. I was on the math team—"

"Math, huh?" I say jovially. "What's up with that, anyway? When are we gonna catch up with the rest of the world?"

Mike shakes his head. "It's tough, you know. Because no one takes it seriously. I had this excellent teacher, he brought in people—you know, an accountant, an engineer—they talked about how important math is...."

Mike is beginning to sound a bit donnish for my taste. "Do you plan on going into accounting?"

Mike pauses. "I think..."

"Because Penn's program is top-rate," I say, letting just a hint of nostalgia enter my voice. I am, after all, supposed to be an alum. "You should think about it. Or business. That's another good one."

"Well," Mike says, clearing his throat, "I figured I'd look around a bit first..."

"Look around?" I say.

"Yeah." Mike is young enough to believe this is insider information: his voice actually lowers. "I didn't want to, you know, jump the gun. So I thought I'd..."

"You'd...?"

"You know," he says with a conspiratorial smirk. "Keep my options open."

Only the utter banality of this bombshell keeps me from laughing in Mike's face. He cannot know that I've seen this before, that even now I see through him to the label on his back collar. Kids: they always think they've got something on you. "So what's three hundred and sixty-five times seventy-two?" I ask.

Mike tries to cipher. He is on the verge of producing an answer when I say, "That's how long the average male has to live, by the way. It's a good number to know."

"Twenty-seven.... No, twenty-six thousand—"

"So how many days do you have left, Mike?"

Mike looks alarmed. I suspect this has something to do with the mathematical pickle I have posed: his mortality and his ability to compute it have all of a sudden come to seem the same thing. "So Mike," I say, "tell me a little about your family. Any brothers or sisters?"

"One," he says. I can see in his eyes, though, he's still doing the math. "Younger. My parents are from the east coast, Jersey. They moved here when I was little. I've still got family there, though."

"Never feel like ranging farther afield?" I ask. "Seeing the world, as they say?"

"I wanted to stay close to home," he says, yet there is a deprecating curl to his lip. When he hunkers down with my likeness from Berkeley or Texas Christian, he will no longer be quite the homebody.

"So what's it like on the old home front?" I urge. "Your folks...."

"My dad, uh, he runs a business," Mike says. He volunteers no details. "My mom," and the PC flies fast and thick, "works at home. I'm the first—"

"To go to college," I say. "You don't need to tell me, Mike," I say kindly, patting the papers. "I was looking for something more personal, something...."

Mike goggles, evidently at a loss. His brain is a compendium of flash-cards and sound-bites, and he never suspected anyone might call him on it. "Personal?" he says. "My parents.... Well, my dad used to take me to ball games.... And," remembering our fruitless exploration of that particular avenue, "they always, you know, encouraged me...."

"Loving home?" I ask. I am not without sarcasm. "Christmas tree, family vacations, the whole nine yards?"

"We used to go sailing—"

"Mike," I say. "Maybe I'm not making myself clear. I'm looking at, oh, ten candidates. From my perspective, you all look pretty much interchangeable. Carbon copy. Same old same old." Ignoring his pout, I continue, "So what I want to know is, what makes you different? What is it that you, Mike, bring to the dance? That makes me believe you might be the one?"

Mike falters, synaptic signals crossed, craw slightly agape. He has always been told—by parents, teachers, coaches, counselors—that he was the one, and now, seeing himself through my eyes, he begins to doubt.

Then, out of nowhere, Mike does something that nearly throws me. He leans forward, and for a moment I believe he is going to place a hand on my knee. His smile is dazzling. "I'm just me," he says.

I am momentarily flustered, but only momentarily. Mostly I am saddened at the turn things have taken. So quickly, too—Mike is clearly precocious. Truthfully, though, I have

come to expect no better: the canned intimacies, the forced ingenuousness are all too familiar. Only his nearness was disarming. Time after time I get the sense, call it desire, of something fresh, real, glimmering behind the veil of artifice, only to watch it slip away. Perhaps it was never there to begin with. Tantalus: hunger without reprieve, thirst without quenching. His sin I can't recall. Like all the others, Mike is playing the game, guarding the angles, and God bless him, so far as that goes. It will serve him well where he's headed, will stand him in good stead when he's wheedling extensions and otherwise covering his ass. But I have learned all I need to know, and this shift from forbearance to regret invariably marks a revolution in the interview. Mike has lost his appeal. Mike has crossed his Rubicon.

"Mike," I say, "if you could be any kind of animal, what would you be?"

Mike's smile fades. "What?"

I am the soul of patience. "If you could be any kind of animal, what would it be?"

"I—"

"It's an imagination question, Mike. We like to test your imaginativeness."

"Oh." Mike's eyes begin to roll upward in thought, but some impulse—reflex, parental coaching—yanks them down.

"Well, uh, a lion I guess. I mean—"

"A lion. Why a lion, Mike?"

"Well—"

"What is it exactly about lions that makes you think you might like to be one?"

"Oh. Well, they're...brave, and noble, and—"

"Lions eat raw meat, Mike. Do you think you could do that?"

"Well, I guess.... If I was a lion, I mean...."

"What did you say you were planning to major in, Mike? Once you've exhausted all the options, I mean."

"Huh?" Mike is still cruising the veldt with Pumba and Timon.

"Well, business. Uh, business sounds good...."

"Off the record," I remind him. "This is strictly off the record. You want to major in keggers and whatnot, whatever you kids get off on these days, you can let me know."

"Oh." Mike smiles weakly, but decides not to take me up on that one. "Well, then, I mean, Chem. Or Bio, maybe...."

"Maybe you could do both," I suggest. "Say, Biochem?"

"Oh." Mike presses his lips together. "Well, I never thought about that...."

I wince.

"I mean," he says, "yeah. That sounds really interesting."

"Mike, I have five dollars in my pocket. If you can guess what I'm thinking right now, it's yours."

"Huh?" Sweat is visible on Mike's upper lip. He wishes he had the guts to suck it off. "Well, you're.... I mean, you're thinking" He goes for broke, pulls out the old winning smile. "You're thinking what a great applicant I am."

"Sorry," I say mournfully. "Been there, done that." Then I laugh. "Tell you the truth, I don't have five dollars in my pocket anyway."

Mike makes a sound like "kyuh," a sound I imagine to be something like the sound the last Dodo made as it was summarily strangled.

"Truth is, I'm flat broke," I sniff. "How do you like that?"

"Well—"

"Mike, do you really care about people, or do you just pretend to?"

Mike's posture has broken down completely. He's given up on the crossed legs, the locked hands, the forward-leaning, shoulder-hunching attempt to create a personal space between us. He sits rigidly erect, gripping the arm of the couch as if feeling the force of lift-off. "I—"

"You can be honest, Mike. I told you, this is all off the record. I'm just trying to get the measure of you is all."

"Well, I... Okay, I—I care about people, but..." and I watch his hand relax. His eyes lift to mine, peer at me curiously, a look I can only think to describe as *wonder*. For once I lose track of his mind's working; I am not sure what to expect. When he speaks again he does so deliberately, holding my

eye, picking his words. "I think sometimes, you know, I could be nicer to people sometimes."

"What times, Mike?"

Mike clenches and unclenches his hand, working the blood back into it. He continues to talk with the same penetrating look, the same measured cadence. "Like just today," he says. "I was driving down here, and there was this—elderly gentleman—who was having trouble. I think he was lost. And I could have stopped to help him, but I didn't want to be late, you know...." He smiles regretfully. "I didn't want to miss my college interview."

I would love to hear Mike's definition of "elderly"—not to mention "gentleman"—but I press on. "So what you're saying is, you often put your selfish desires before the needs of others."

Mike looks up, smiling. He's a little sweaty around the eyes, but the veil that has settled over his face remains; the smile is impossible to read. "If you say so...."

"If I say so," I repeat. "Mike, what exactly have you been doing the last ten minutes? What line of crap have you been trying to feed me? Exactly how stupid do you think we are?"

Mike shakes his head, smiling that impenetrable smile. I feel myself begin to boil, have to remind myself that Mike, for all his Honor Roll QPA and cheerleader sweetie and fast track out of Palookaville, is just a kid. He looks at me and sees a mentor, a kindly presence, a guiding hand. An alum, with everything that connotes. I could so easily crush him, squeeze the life out of him, but I decide, as so many times before, to enlighten him.

"Mike," I say, "look. We're a college. Nothing more, nothing less. You think people get into college for being saints?"

"I guess not," he says.

"You think undergrads sashay down the halls planning good deeds for their fellow men? You think you get extra credit for slinging hash down at the soup kitchen? What about your professors, deans, the president? You think they're not every bit as selfish and perverse as you are?"

"I guess so," Mike says softly, sadly. I wait for a more meaningful response, but Mike offers nothing.

"Underwear, Mike," I say calmly. Then, "Underwear!" I thunder. People in the gallery stare. "I'm talking about underwear, Mike. I'm talking about the president going home after addressing the board of trustees and breaking ground for the new rec center and giving the keynote address at a fundraiser for kids with goddamn muscular dystrophy, and I'm talking about him stripping down to his skivvies, and I'm telling you he's the ugliest goddamn thing you ever saw. This is a guy who wouldn't think twice about selling out his best friend, planning a putsch or a purge, whatever it takes to keep his paws on his stock options and pension plan. I'm talking about evil, Mike. About lechery, and sodomy, and larceny, and marital infidelity, Mike. About child abuse, and tax evasion, and solicitation, and murder and mayhem for all I know. Mike! Jesus, Mike. How old are you, anyway?"

"I'm seventeen," Mike says quietly, as if he's surprised to learn it himself.

"Well, grow up already," I snarl. "You've got grades, you've got money, you've got looks, you've got muscles. I bet Penn's not your first choice anyway." I see in his eyes that I'm right. "You've got the goddamn world by the ass, Mike, and you can fuck it raw if you want to. Just grow up."

The interview is over. Mike's face is a mask. Only his eyes are soft. He has forgotten that we are in a very public place, has not once minded that people might overhear. He shakes his head, locating himself. I wait for him to stand.

We exit together. The day, gray as ever, offers little of freshness or release. The thin winter air is full of exhaust, horns, slush. There is no halo around Mike. He has gone through the fire, has been scorched, or better scalded, but not cleansed—stripped, but not sanctified. I look at him and see what he cannot: an unbroken succession of more or less Mikes, all mine for an afternoon, their faces now long forgotten, stretching back into the remote past and forward into infinity. As Protean as I, and in the end as much a dead loss. The hope for the future. The world, I find, is always the same.

It is not, believe me, as if I haven't sampled variations on this closing scene. I have had time, nothing but time, to itemize the alternatives. What if, for one, the real Mr. Gance were to have strolled in? (Would he have looked like me?) Or Mike, texting madly on the sly, had called his parents, the cops, the Penn admissions office, raised an armada to storm the citadel and snare me? I have even, in my looser moments, contemplated leveling with one of them, leaping the chasm of dreams and years, revealing the ruse. But to what avail? Kids these days. There is no grace in them.

So I place a hand near Mike's arm, near enough for it to feel as if I am touching it. He does not flinch. "Say, Mike," I say, and even I grate on the staleness of this script, "sorry I was so rough on you in there. You know what I was trying to do, don't you?"

Mike faces me, gray, his hair wet from an invisible drizzle, and for an electric moment I think, this is it. Mike is going to rally, stand up to me, stare me down, stop me cold. I all but swoon. Mike, emissary from that bright world, world of options unsoured, is going to tell me what it is like for *him*. Mike is going to tell me what it's like to lift a curveball into the bleachers, jet-ski off the Keys, help an old lady across the street, lower himself into a warm breathing woman, love God, Country, Mom and Apple Pie. For after all, what right do I have to tell him? Mike is going to do what none of them has dared to do before: buck the rules, revise the script. Mike is going to shout, I am not perverse! I defy you and all you see! I do not wear underwear!

"You understand, don't you?" I say.

Mike smiles and the moment is gone. "Sure, Mr. Gance," he says.