

Sex, drugs, and rock and roll - minus the sex.

Mean Thoughts

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## INTRODUCTION

by

Chris McCreary

At times it's seemed to me that everyone in the world thinks they could write a novel. I don't doubt the truth of it - surely every human being has a tale that's worth telling. But does everyone have the tenacity to get that novel out of their minds and onto the page? More importantly, assuming that the events chronicled in the narrative are somewhat autobiographical in nature, can the experiences that meant - and continue to mean - so much to the author be converted into fiction in a way that's actually fresh and engaging to readers? I'm here to tell you, friend, that with *Mean Thoughts* Steve Oskie has succeeded in bringing a sharp, insightful novel from the depths of his soul straight onto the page with every nuance intact.

In the grand tradition of texts such as James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Oskie's novel follows its protagonist to the crucial turning point in terms of self awareness and artistic development. And like Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, Oskie's book tackles the unique dynamic of the friendships that young men have as they set out to push the boundaries of the world around them. Evoking Kerouac is a bit misleading, however, because whereas he prided himself on the spontaneous, freewheeling nature of his prose, Oskie has honed his writing here so that every sentence is in its place and every word is exact and yet still somehow passionately felt. The precision of the prose is remarkable, thanks in large part to Oskie's skillful use of Mark, the acutely self-aware narrator of *Mean Thoughts* who we follow from smoky bars to quirky part-time jobs as he makes his way through romantic entanglements and evolving friendships. The access that

the reader has to Mark's inner workings provides us with a crystal clear, and sometimes painful, view of the narrator's inner turmoil.

Examining the past can be tricky, though, and many a fine author has fallen into the trap of idealizing his or her wayward youth. Oskie sidesteps this temptation; his narrator recounts youthful experiences in a way that avoids an overly sentimental tone while at the same time refraining from interjecting so much adult wisdom into the narrative as to destroy the reader's experience of being in the moment with these 20-somethings as they stumble and sometimes fall along their paths to self discovery.

In a sense, this book recreates a Philadelphia that is already long gone - many of the bars and restaurants mentioned here closed well over a decade ago, and some of the neighborhoods that Mark frequents have since morphed into yuppie outposts or have fallen into utter disrepair. Rather than making the book seem dated, however, its specificity of place and time creates a narrative that is, in many ways, universal. While a portion of the haunts described in *Mean Thoughts* may've been history by the time I began to prowl around the city myself, I can easily place myself in the moment of this book and envision Mark (who coincidentally looks, in my mind, remarkably like a young Steve Oskie) weaving his way down Locust Street after having a few too many drinks, say, or hailing a cab in front of an all-night diner on South Street. And I think the same will be true for any reader of this book, no matter where you live or in what decade you came of age - surely you, too, will find yourself in these characters' humorous foibles and bittersweet moments of self discovery.

If there is any justice in the world, *Mean Thoughts* will build a fiercely loyal cult following that will spread its gospel far and wide. (I envision the book with a cult following as opposed to mass-market success, by the way, because it is perhaps too well written and introspective to compete with the fluff that tends to dominate best seller lists.) This is the kind of book you pass on in

the heat of a new friendship. "Here," you might say to your new roommate, slapping your own battered copy down on the bar between you, "you've got to read this." I could go on at length about the virtues of Oskie's book, but instead I'd like to get out of the way and let you get on with things. Here. You've got to read this.

*Chris McCreary is the author of a book of poems, *The Effacements* (Singing Horse Press), as well as several chapbooks. His reviews and interviews have been published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Rain Taxi Review of Books*, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *XConnect*, and elsewhere. Along with his wife, Jenn McCreary, he co-edits *ixnay press*, a small press dedicated to the publication of experimental writing. Chris holds a masters degree in creative writing from Temple University, where he currently teaches.*

## MEAN THOUGHTS

(An excerpt from the novel)

### XV

In still another manifestation of the glory days of my youth (so gruesome to me in retrospect), I developed the laughable habit of inviting women over for dinner and preparing the same meal every time. On each of these occasions, I offered a highly derivative menu that I had gleaned from the Veal Marsala at Ralph's, the Fettucini Alfredo at Villa di Roma, and a frozen package of green beans with almonds, a side dish that I had picked up from my mother. But if I had any chance at all of impressing these women and getting them into bed, I carelessly gave it away by consuming screwdrivers throughout the cooking process, one or two of them while doing my best to soften the cheapest veal I could find, another while immersing a box of Ronzoni pasta in boiling water, and still another while poking at the block of frozen vegetables in order to pry them apart, my drunkenness linked not only to the screwdrivers but to the sickeningly sweet Marsala wine that I swigged directly from the bottle. By then, I was cooking each of the three major components of the meal at far too high a light, and the burners of our gas range were being pressed to their very limits as I hurried to complete the preparations. It is likely that each of my dates was charmed by the fact that I had taken it upon myself to cook for her until the moment that I opened the front door, at which point it became all too obvious that I was plastered, so that in stepping aside to let her in I not only irrevocably altered her evening but made it impossible to complete the seduction that I had planned. I realize now that I would have been a lot better off taking the young women to Ralph's or Villa di Roma in the first place, which would have given me a halfway decent chance to limit my alcoholic intake and suavely drive them home. On nearly

every occasion, my dinner guests recognized all of this at once, took whatever pleasure they could in the ill-prepared meal, and refused to see me again. The lone exception was a nurse named Margaret McAlister, who took pity on me when I pleaded in the pathetic manner of Billy McDevitt. When my pleading finally got to her, she followed me up the stairs, past Sarah's door, and onto the shag carpet in my room, where I undressed her and failed to become erect. This failure provided me with very little choice but to perform oral sex instead, a joyless exercise that left me with a hangover, a painful recollection, and a line for a short story, Teresa sharing it with a co-worker at the Western Union switchboard in Moorestown. To hear her tell it, the two women passed the story back and forth and twittered like school girls when they read the witticism in question: "As it happened, I found another way to please her, though it gave me something of a stiff neck." But the real payoff occurred in a dusty little comedy club years later, when a hopelessly obese comedian nailed it with a painful precision, referring to that particular form of oral sex as "too many u-turns in bed." And as I drowned out all of the others with my laughter, Michelle caught another glimpse of who I really was.

#### XVI

Even now, I have a tendency to look for Teresa when I find myself in a crowd. Although it is largely an involuntary response - and the emotional equivalent of pain in a phantom limb - I realize that I'm partly responsible. After all, I've been known to pick at a scab until it bleeds.

Despite the fact that she has failed to materialize, I can usually find someone who bears a certain resemblance to her. It could be the woman's physical appearance, her mannerisms, or the way that she sneers at her boyfriend; but somehow, it's Teresa all over again. At this point, I almost believe that Teresa had a wrecking ball mentality, and that she was determined to knock us down - until I remember that I experienced her subtlety as well.

Within a week of her move to Pemberton Street, Teresa reported that Pete had taken an indefinite leave of absence from PRISM and that Frank had gone on an unprecedented binge with crank. As it turned out, she conveyed this to me over the telephone while I worked the grill at Mr. Martin's.

"Thanks, Bun. Can you watch those for me?"

Bunny glanced in the general direction of the kitchen, where I was frying onions, flipping burgers, and concocting a mushroom cheesesteak. The onions were a legitimate part of the job, and so were the burgers; but as Bunny suspected, I had every intention of eating the cheesesteak myself.

"Hurry up," she said.

"Sure thing."

I handed her the spatula, and made my way to the phone.

"Mark, it's me," Teresa began. "You're not gonna believe this."

"What happened?"

"He robbed a bank."

"Who did?"

"Frank! He tried anyway."

"When did he do that?"

"The other day. He was drivin' the trash truck."

"No. He wasn't!"

"I'm serious! His car wouldn't start."

"What a putz."

"He had a note and everything. He read it to me this afternoon."

"He read it to you? How romantic."

"It was - in a way."

"I was kidding."

"You were?"

"Wait a minute. How could he read it to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't he give it to the teller?"

"No. He got paranoid and drove away."

"Paranoid? Was he doin' lines?"

"Yeah. One thing led to another."

"Of course. It makes perfect sense."

"Then he got in an accident and totaled his father's truck."

"I feel sorry for him. I really do."

"Do you know what he said to the cop? 'I'm bein' followed.'"

"And what did the cop say?"

"'Yeah. By us!'"

"Where is he now - in jail?"

"No, Ancora."

"Jesus. Poor Frank."

"I'm gonna visit him. Will you come with me?"

After he was arraigned before a magistrate, Frank was transported to the state-run psychiatric institution at Ancora, where he cooled his heels for a period of two weeks, came down from the crank, and received a thorough evaluation. Instead of calling a lawyer, however, he spent his one and only phone call on Teresa, allowing the phone to ring more than fifty times before admitting the fact that she was partying in another location. Although it really didn't matter which of us she was with, I was able to eliminate the possibility that she was with me by recalling her annoyance at something that had occurred when I helped her move. After I wrenched my back on a chest of drawers, Teresa punished me for several days for declining her offer of a backrub; and despite the fact that I immediately regretted my decision to decline - and spent the rest of the day arching my back and grimacing in the hope that she would make the offer a second time - she ignored my transparent attempt to turn back the clock, refused to make allowances for my fear, and remained out of contact until her anger died down, a period of time that took me

well past Frank's phone call from the psychiatric institution. And then, as a pathetic footnote to the incident, I used the backrub as a masturbatory fantasy for the next several years, savoring the mental image of Teresa unbuttoning her blouse without my knowledge, running her breasts over the bare skin of my back, and bidding me to face her, at which point we copulated for a respectable amount of time before enjoying a simultaneous orgasm.

## XVII

Because my response to her declaration of love was unsatisfactory - and I insisted on the sort of casual relationship that she had proposed to Dave - Teresa took up with still another young man after Dave returned to New Orleans, a piece of intelligence that I gathered after bribing Harold McTeer with a shot of Corvoissier at Dobbs. Not only did Harold provide me with the pertinent facts about Joe Rinaldi, but he issued the sternest possible warning, informing me that Rinaldi was a thief, a gambler, and possibly a bigamist, as he was currently involved in a dispute over the legality of his latest divorce. This information represented a significant breakthrough for me, since Teresa had been uncharacteristically silent about Joe - possibly as another form of punishment, or because she anticipated an even stronger aversion than the one I had exhibited with Frank - and had left me with only my own recollection to go on. Because I had been particularly outspoken about Frank since his hospitalization had begun - and had claimed that Frank represented a clear sign of Teresa's "self-destructiveness" (not quite realizing that the word was one of Teresa's pet peeves after Lorraine had used it a thousand times since Teresa had reached puberty) - I had nothing to add to the impression I had formed on the basis of a single event. On that humiliating occasion, I had seen Joe from behind at the downstairs bar at Dobbs, gotten the wrong impression of the blond pony-tail that extended to his waist, and tapped him lightly on the shoulder

as a preliminary to buying him a drink, only to learn that I had been sadly mistaken about his gender. The minute he turned around with an impudent expression and glared in a hostile way, however, I felt the entire weight of my error and realized that he was much tougher than his long hair, red glasses, and slightness of build had originally indicated.

"Yeah, man, he's bad news," Harold declared, shaking his head from side to side. "You best watch out for him."

"It's not me I'm worried about," I frowned.

"Whoever. I wouldn't go near the motherfucker."

Coming from someone who had survived several knife fights, I felt certain that the advice was sound.

#### XVIII

In addition to wrenching my back, I happened upon a contraceptive gel at Teresa's apartment, and for all intents and purposes, that particular discovery decided the issue of whether or not I would attempt to sleep with her. The fact that Teresa used the same form of contraception that Karen Marcus had employed on Pine Street, and that Teresa had purchased the same product (three ounces of an anti-spermicidal substance manufactured by Johnson and Johnson) should have had a calming effect on my nerves; but the truth is that it unsettled me instead. By reminding myself of my subconscious tendency to divide women into two basic categories, however - those that I had the courage to sleep with and those that I did not - I can immediately dispense with any form of surprise and take an honest look at the factors that were actually present. When I force myself to do that, my reaction seems particularly instructive and a clear sign that my suspicions were correct about at least one of my defense mechanisms. Unlike Karen, Teresa was simply too sharp-tongued for me to risk a disastrous sexual experience, and I didn't even have to consider the other main factor that affected my sex life in those days - the question of whether or

not I would miss the woman if my humiliation prevented me from seeing her again.

Now that my cowardice had proved decisive, Teresa went about the task of insinuating herself into Joe's life, successfully completing the preliminary steps of inflating his ego, introducing him to the touch of her hand, and making herself necessary for his very existence, while I held up my end of the bargain by retreating into the safety of my relationship with Sarah, until I arrived at the neat psychological ploy of playing the two women off of one another, persuading myself that I was in love with Sarah whenever my gross failure with Teresa began to oppress me for any appreciable amount of time, and professing my love for Teresa whenever I was reminded of the coldness of Sarah's heart. Needless to say, this strategy was even more transparent than the notion of my being a womanizer (although the two were certainly linked), and it proved to be far more insupportable by collapsing under its own weight within a week or two of my attempting it. I realize now that any number of incidents might have caused it to collapse, but it made a perfect kind of sense that my overconcern for Sarah's well-being was at the center of it, as was Teresa's fierce determination to push her way to Joe's limits, not resting until she identified anger management as the overriding issue of his life. And just as I had felt a sharp pang of protectiveness when Sarah injured her hand on my door, I suffered noticeably when each of my love interests sustained an injury to the same part of her body, Sarah wearing a patch after being diagnosed with conjunctivitis and Teresa provoking Joe into giving her a black eye.

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