Shedding a Tear

William I. Miller

*University of Michigan Law School, wimiller@umich.edu*

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By William Ian Miller

The tale that follows is also one of great gender anxiety, and it is true. I even think it happened exactly as I will relate it, for the events are so vivid in my mind’s eye. I know — vividness has no necessary relation with veracity, at least where memory is concerned. I have told stories about myself that were largely true, but I remember altering the details to make them funnier, more suspenseful, or less boring, or to present myself as either wittier or more endearingly pathetic than really was the case. Now for the life of me I can no longer construct what really happened. I see it as I have told it, though I remember — no, I know — that I fabricated parts, but I no longer know which parts. My intentions are good, and even if they were not, I take the refuge of the postmodern scoundrel: Whether true or not it makes no difference. The tale raises the same points whether it happened exactly as I remember or not.

One day the acknowledged toughest kid announced to a group of us 15-year-old guys that he had had a fight with his girlfriend and that he had cried in front of her. I cannot recall the reaction of the others, but I remember mine to have been something like, no way, impossible. The impossibility was not that boys, especially ones for whom toughness was the chief virtue, could not cry; hell, you were on the verge of tears all the time, every boy-on-boy confrontation being a dare not to shed them. But what could possibly prompt you to shed them over and in front of a girl who could not beat you up?

Yet over the course of the next month, one by one, boy after boy announced a big breakup with their various girlfriends in which they had broken down in tears and had begged to be taken back. I could see I would have to take my turn in this new rite of initiation; I either had to make confession of tears spilled for love or be forever cast among the uncool. Unfair, I thought, to keep changing the rules of cool like this. Was Ron, the guy who started all this, just trying to see how much of a trendsetter he could be; was he even telling the truth? And if he was, could it be possible that all the other guys were telling the truth? Had they really cried?

As I try to access what I truly felt through the distorted lens of memory, it seems that whatever distrustfulness I had of Ron was muted. In short I believe every outrageous tale these guys told, and the consequences of my naiveté were that I often got into more trouble than they did actually trying to do (and failing) what they only said they had done. I was too uniformed and naïve to lie about sex. My lying was restricted mainly to how many beers I had downed, and in another year I would add tales of how fast I had taken the corner in the car, though I still accepted everyone else’s tall tales as gospel, and probably even deluded myself into believing my own fabrications. But maybe they did cry, and my retrospective suspiciousness is as naïve in its own way as my gullibility was back then.

My turn, I saw, had arrived. It is clear to me now, and I think it was clear to me then, why I was the last to join the new emotion display fashion. I was barely holding it together in my act as a wound-be tough guy. Pretending to be tough took all my energy and resolve; I had no margin of error. These guys could afford to announce they had cried, because no matter how hard they got hit in a game or fight they would never shed a tear or show signs of fear. They could actually benefit from the thought that people
would mistrust their tale of having shed a tear over a fight with their girlfriend, but should I tell the same tale, they would believe it with no discount for whether or not I was lying. Of course Miller cried. For I suspected they suspected me of being a fake real guy. I leaked unacceptable truths about myself more often than I would have liked. I couldn’t, for instance, disguise, in junior year, much as I tried, my excitement over Hamlet, a guy whom I understood to have been as nervous about sex and revenge as I was. That I tried to cover for my interest by getting kicked out of the class fooled no one, though I was accorded some grace for it.

Why not put my unmanliness to good use? Because few would doubt I had shed a tear, I could make up a tale that I had had a fight with my girlfriend (who dumped me shortly after these events took place) and forget actually having to worry about generating false tears, or a false occasion for real tears. I was not sure, either, that these guys hadn’t actually shed tears, and if that is what toughness had become in our high school, then I guess I had to go along.

What did I do? I picked a fight with my girlfriend. I cannot recall precisely the grounds. No doubt it was some jealousy that you were never quite sure you weren’t faking anyway. Strangely, it was the guys who insisted you feel jealous. Hey Miller, I saw Ellen dancing with Zawatska at the CYO. No way I was going to bring that up with her; Zawatska could kill me with both hands tied behind his back. Ellen was surnamed Hickok and she claimed Wild Bill as a distant kinman and would have insisted I address myself to Zawatska if I had any complaints. Whatever the grounds, the moment had come to shed my tears, but none appeared. I was thinking of everything I could to coax them out, but nothing worked, not even the thought of my dog getting run over. I was obturate; me, who had faked his way through every minute of my public life since the onset of puberty and a lot before that too, could not generate tears.

Desperately I embraced Ellen — I am ashamed to confess this — so that I could poke my eyes real hard behind her back, all for the sake of telling the truth that I too had shed tears in this new cursed regime Ron had inaugurated. Real tears, genuine fake real tears. But no tears came. I took some solace in the thought that she was not expecting tears from me anyway. I just hoped she hadn’t noticed all the ridiculous commotion behind her back. The truth is I was so worried about what to say to the guys that I can’t remember anything else about the interaction except a small sensation of cowardice over my inability to gouge my eyes hard enough to provoke the tears I desired.

I never wondered — and if I didn’t wonder I doubt the other guys did — though surely it must have been the case, whether the girls were also commenting on the new regime; unless, that is, Ron and every other guy had made the whole thing up and no girl had seen any of the boys in tears. Maybe she was faking going along with it too, knowing only too well that I was playing a role. Besides, I had a distinct feeling I was not playing convincingly any aspect of this post pubescent daily trauma. Who was I playing this for anyway? Not for her, but for the guys, but not the guys either, because I could have lied. It must have been my homage to the dominant adolescent social order, and I was a member of that audience, judging my competence in proper emotion display.

If this was how emotions and courtship were to proceed "naturally," why didn’t nature operate a little more automatically? Had any evolutionary psychologists — who blithely come up with just-so stories to show why it is written in our genes that attractive undergraduate women must inevitably find middle-aged male evolutionary psychologists sexy — ever been teenagers? None of this was coming naturally. I was learning a part that I only wish had been better programmed into my genes (and jeans). We were acting; mimicking actors in the movies of enacting what the other kids lied about doing when they were our age that they had got from the movies: life imitating art.

I was utterly clueless, operating in a fog. As I dimly recall, the whole game was played with alternating senses, alternating fast as a strobe light, of an acute awareness of fumbling cluelessly through a role not fully understood, and of being so totally immersed in it that my parents started sending away for brochures from various military academies as threats to get me to cool it with the fair Ellen.

I was thrown back on my first plan. Tell the guys I had had a big fight with Ellen and that I couldn’t help it, but that I had broken down and cried. That is what I did. I was lying through my teeth, but no one called me on it, for there was in fact a real truth to my lie. I had committed myself by it to the new order; I was giving it the homage of paying it lip service.

William I. Miller, the Thomas G. Long Professor of Law, has been a member of the University of Michigan faculty since 1984. Students have found that his bloodfeuds course equips them to handle axes as well as arguments in courthouses. His research used to center on saga Iceland from whence the materials studied in the bloodfeuds class and his book Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland. He presently writes on emotions, mostly unpleasant ones involving self-assessment, and select vices and virtues. Thus his books The Mystery of Courage, The Anatomy of Disgust, Humiliation, and Faking It (2003), which deals with anxieties of role, identity, and posturings of authenticity. The Anatomy of Disgust was named the best book of 1997 in anthropology/sociology by the Association of American Publishers. Miller earned his B.A from the University of Wisconsin and received both a Ph.D in English and a J.D. from Yale. He has also been a visiting professor at Yale, the University of Chicago, the University of Bergen, Tel Aviv University, and Harvard.