

THE WORST SPEECH EVER

BY ZAC CRAIN

ON MAY 3, MY FRIEND AND THEORETICAL BOSS, Tim Rogers, won a National Magazine Award for a story he wrote for *D Magazine* about Barrett Brown, erstwhile spokesman for the hacker collective Anonymous. These awards are a big deal, the Pulitzers of our industry. At a \$700-a-plate dinner at the Marriott Marquis hotel in Times Square, it fell to Tim to make an acceptance speech.

Most winners chose to spend their time graciously giving thanks. Tim—well, let's say he went another way. His speech became the most talked about part of the event. NBC news anchor and emcee Brian Williams called back to it several times, *Capital New York* singled it out in its recap the next morning, and *Los Angeles* editor Mary Melton tweeted that it was the “Angelina’s Right Leg moment” of the evening. I read his speech later and thought it somewhat odd, but not *that* odd. And then I saw the video. The video is four minutes long, the first two consisting of Williams introducing the nominees. Let’s just skip to the good part.

2:18: Williams announces the winner: “The Ellie for Profile Writing goes to *D Magazine*.” Applause follows. Take note. You will almost forget there are other people in the room soon enough.

2:45: Tim finally makes his way to the stage, presumably either from the bathroom or the hotel bar. He poses for a photo with Williams, his back turned to the audience. Not a great angle for him, bald-spot-wise.

2:56: Opening line of Tim’s speech: “So, if you ask any man who writes, and who tries to write funny”—this last word comes out sort of strangled, as though he’s either trying to stifle a belch or just learned it and is unsure of the pronunciation—“if he’s honest, he’ll tell you he’s trying to get laid.” This was clearly meant to be a laugh line. But it is so quiet in the room that you can hear Tim’s hair falling out.

3:07: Panicky, unscripted follow-up, doubling down on the no-laugh laugh line: “That’s this guy, right? So—” Still no laughs. Time to regroup.

3:14: Following a five-second pause, while Tim’s head is slightly tilted back, as though he’s been sucker-punched: “In 1996”—another long pause—“I wrote in print a, uh, uh—I proposed to my bride.” Wheels are now fully off, axles on the pavement, sparks shooting into the crowd, Tim’s foot still jammed on the accelerator.

3:26: “The lovely Christine Rogers.” Before this, Tim points to his wife at a back table and in so doing punches one of the two microphones in the process. I should note there is a *very* slight titter from the crowd now, like when a figure skater fails to stick the landing on a triple salchow. The audience is now a roomful of nervous helicopter parents, just hoping the kid onstage makes it through his scene in the school play without wetting his pants. I don’t mean that metaphorically.

3:30: “It was a pretty funny proposal, I’ll tell ya.” *The New Yorker*’s editor, David Remnick, sends his army of researchers to fact check that claim. “At least it worked, right?” Everyone now feels sorry for the lovely Christine Rogers.

3:36: Following another pause that feels like it takes twice as long as it actually does: “So now, 16 years later, she doesn’t read the stuff I write.” *New York* editor Adam Moss catches Christine’s eye and gives her an approving nod. (I imagine.) “Facebook, kids, you know, she’s got a job. Things happen. She’s got her excuses to not read it.” Excuses that now include this speech.

3:49: “So I knew that I had to do something important. I had to do something big. I had to do something grand”—and I still wonder how we lost in Best Use of a Thesaurus—“to get her attention.” You guys, he just might make it through this thing relatively unscathed after all.

3:58: Never mind. I knew Tim had been working on his stereotypical Italian accent. I had no idea he would decide to debut it on such an important, big, grand stage. “And so tonight, with a little bit of luck, a little bit of red wine, and with this award”—I really hope he doesn’t mean that literally, but I’ve known Tim a long time, so who knows?—“I’m *a-gonna* get lucky. Thank you.”

In Tim’s defense, he explained—after I caught my breath and stopped laughing—that in an effort to calm his nerves, he had come close to overserving himself. And the awkward pauses resulted from his fighting back tears. Of course, that doesn’t explain what he was thinking when he *wrote* the speech.

In any case, Brian Williams put it best when he retook the podium from Tim. “For that moment,” he said, “we were all one, in that I didn’t know where he was going.”

To which I would add only: and we *still* don’t know. **D**



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