

MATTHEW MICHALEWICZ

JOBS

are for
Suckers?

A modern novel about
our search for meaning



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*For the everyman and everywoman ... with all their dreams,
struggles, and hopes of heaven*

Author's Note

"Daddy, are you making this book for the fame or the money?" my younger son asked as I typed up the first few pages of this book.

"Neither," I replied. "I'm making it for the art."

"What's *art*?" he asked.

I paused to consider my response—something I was doing more as my children grew more sophisticated and posed ever-heavier questions.

"Art is when you create something meaningful," I tried to explain, "something that comes from deep within—something you've always wanted to create—and you do it only for yourself."

"So you've always wanted to create a book?"

"*This* book," I corrected him.

"For how long?"

"For more than twenty years."

Silence, confusion—"Twenty years?" he repeated in disbelief. "That's a long time, Daddy. Why did you wait that long?"

"I didn't wait ... *I was afraid*."

"Of what?"

"Of not doing a good job ... of not getting the art right."

My son contemplated what I said, chewing quietly on his cookie. "*And you're not afraid anymore?*"

"I'm still afraid, son ... *but I just can't wait any longer*."

“Everything that can be, is”

Multiverse Theory of Physics

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Act One:

Rachel & Felicity

California, 2006–13

Chapter 1

Please God, let this go right ...

The clicker grew slippery as Rachel fast approached the weakest part of her presentation. *Was the segmentation right? Perhaps scale and budget would've worked better than school type and geography?* Her feet began to swim in the tight heels that held them. *Did the market-sizing contain errors?—was there any double counting of students or schools?* A sheen of moisture blanketed her hips and spread upward, chilling her as it went. Her words came faster now, partly from unease and partly to protect against interruption, as if in self-defense. She'd never run a business before—it was all theory to her. But if this presentation went well and these venture capitalists approved, she might just get the chance to turn that theory into reality, that book knowledge into practice.

And so she pressed on, disguising her anxiety as enthusiasm as she thought of the next slide, and the numbers, and making eye contact, and her body language—*arms loose ... arms loose!*—thankful now that she'd given up makeup and mascara years ago, because it'd be running now; running hard. She scanned the handful of casually-dressed men in the room, scattered as they were around the glossy table. But she was no good at reading people; she was the one people found easy to read—“You're such an open book!” her husband loved to tease—her face red, a wildfire.

Thoughts and visions flashed through her mind as she raced on, seeing her work, the thousands of hours she'd

spent on her start-up, seeing those hours piled into hills, mountains—stretching wider and taller until they touched clouds. And her husband, too, how he'd supported her, and their daughter, while she chased rainbows and unicorns in search of dreams. *All that work, sacrifice—did they know?* She stumbled on a slide, losing her train of thought. *Of course they knew—they were venture capitalists ... they saw people like her every day.* She wanted to go on, but the pause she'd carelessly introduced caused one of the chrome chairs to stir.

“Sorry to interrupt, Rachel,” a balding man asked, seemingly the eldest of the group, his face neither frowning nor smiling and his features giving nothing away. “I don't want to break your flow here.”

“No, not at all”—catching her breath. “Please.”

“Could you give us a bit more on your go-to-market strategy? I mean, your software product will require selling into public schools—which means selling into government—and those kinds of sales cycles can be very drawn out.”

She was familiar with that question—she'd gotten it weeks earlier when pitching another venture capitalist; she hadn't answered it well then and had learned from the experience. Taking a different tack, she explained how her proof-of-concept approach would reduce friction in the sales process, along with partnerships to accelerate the number of opportunities. *Her husband had come up with that—sales was his thing ... thank you, Johnny.* The balding man was nodding now: once, twice, his satisfaction evident.

But from that question sprang another, and another, followed by a dozen more—the floodgates now open. Her feet sloshed around in those heels, dress clinging to hips

and thighs as if two sizes too small. But she stood firm. If they were ever to respect her—to say nothing of funding her start-up—she needed to show strength. And she did; question after answer, back and forth, in a dance where every nuance mattered, not just the words or intonation of voice, but facial expressions, body language, charm—a million signals a second, received, processed, analyzed—a Silicon Valley dance of sorts.

“So ... what do you gentlemen think?” she concluded with unease, knowing boardrooms weren’t her world, but showing she could make them such if given half a chance.

It was Brad who spoke first, and she was glad, as he’d been the one who invited her to present. “Look, Rachel, we know you’ve been pitching other VCs in the valley, and they’ve knocked you back. ‘*Sole founder*’ ... ‘*too early*’—that’s what they’ve said, right?”

Her throat tightened—*hadn’t he arranged this presentation? Hadn’t he wanted her to meet the other partners?* The urge flared to defend her idea, her start-up—understanding now why people described the venture capital community as *tight-knit*. But she waited. Her husband had always said she was too impulsive; “Let others finish,” he would say. “Watch their chin—it’ll move before they talk ... let them talk; no one likes being cut off.” *And that’s why he was good at sales ... and she wasn’t.*

She bit her lower lip; each second an ocean of waiting.

“But we already knew that,” Brad went on, “and have a fund for early-stage start-ups like yours. Our thinking is to pair you with a technical co-founder and package that into a larger seed round”—Rachel swallowed; her jaw relaxing. “We’ll have to work through the terms, but look ... we’re keen—we like you ... *we like the vision.*”

“You’re in a great space,” the older man added; “online education, all cloud-based—”

“—that’s right up our alley,” another chimed in.

Her lips widened; cheeks burning.

“The ball’s in our court,” Brad concluded. “Leave it with us and we should have a term sheet to you by week’s end.”

Shaking hands with each partner, she thanked them for the opportunity to present.

“Well done,” Brad complimented her at the door. “Looking forward to the next steps here.”

“Me too,” she managed to say. “Thank you—so kind of you to organize this meeting. I’m really grateful.”

Struggling to appear calm as she entered the elevator, her hand trembled as she pressed “Ground.” *Here we go—ding!* Slender to begin with, she appeared even more so in the reflective polish of the closed doors, her eyes blurry with fatigue and thrill. She tried walking back to her car, but seeing Johnny behind the wheel and Felicity in the back, she broke into a run. And Johnny, noticing the wild flush on his wife’s face—a flush he knew well, and which lingered for minutes and sometimes hours on her soft features—didn’t require any further confirmation that the meeting had gone well. Before he’d even unbuckled his seatbelt, she was already pulling him from the car, lips against his, hugging, squeezing, as if he were a life preserver and she a castaway at sea.

“How did it go, Mommy?” Felicity shrieked, jumping from the backseat and throwing her arms around them both. “Did you ‘nail it’?”

“Yes, darling; I think Mommy ‘nailed it,’” Rachel laughed, kissing her daughter on the forehead. “Quick, Johnny ... a photo together.”

The three of them stood by the car bunched closer than grapes on a vine, with Johnny doing his best to position the phone for a selfie. It took him a few tries—the summer sun beating down, the car roof gleaming, lens flaring—but he got it.

“Perfect,” he said, showing the photo to them. “It’ll be a day to remember.”

Still in the boardroom perched above, Brad looked down upon Rachel and her family with satisfaction. *She’s going to make it*, he thought, knowing that people make all the difference—in life and in business. Pleased with himself and how the day was unfolding, he let the blinds snap back into place before returning to his desk.

“Jenny?”—buzzing his assistant.

“Sir?”

“Can you send over the latest term sheet template?—the one with the updates from last week.”

“Yes, sir; right away.”

“Thanks, Jenny.” And pulling his keyboard close, he began typing.

Down below and back behind the steering wheel, Johnny brushed aside loose strands of Rachel’s hair—black, glossy, luxurious—the kind of hair a man only falls into once in life; as she ran fingers through his sun-soaked curls, pulling his head close, her lips once more on his. They were a yin and yang of sorts: her skin darkish, eyes and eyebrows coal-black, paired with thick, rounded lips of Mexican or Spanish descent; while he was blond, with pale eyes and skin whiter than bleached sand. And behind them sat Felicity, a spillover from yin to yang, a spillover like no other—the most delightful of spillovers.

“Cut it out!” Felicity cried from the backseat. “No sex in

here, thank you very much!”

Embarrassed, they parted. “Let’s go home, Johnny ... I’ll tell you everything on the way.”

“Alright,” he replied, the engine shuddering as he shifted into gear. “I’m *so* proud of you.”

Minutes later they were out of Menlo Park and the tension that’d been building all day finally left her body. So much at stake for the both of them, and Felicity too—they’d just enrolled her in private school, a dream education like the one her parents could never afford. And she and Johnny couldn’t afford it either, being overextended everywhere, on everything, especially their mortgage. House prices had reached nosebleed levels, with everyone bidding over list.

“Crazy times,” some said.

“Better buy something before prices jump again,” others told them.

And so they did. With mortgages so cheap and easy, they took the largest one possible and used credit cards to furnish their new home in Half Moon Bay. Rachel fretted over the debt, the payments, the strain—there seemed no end to it. But Johnny was so upbeat, so optimistic.

“Don’t worry, love,” he’d say, sweeping her into his arms. “I’ll get a raise”—his confidence infectious. “Demand for sales reps has never been higher.”

God, I hope you’re right ... “But what if you don’t?”

“Then I’ll find another job that pays even more,” he’d reply, kissing her eyelids, eyebrows, chasing her worries away. “It’s going to work out, love ... I promise.”

And as they drove, she began to believe—for the first time ever—that he was right, that it was all going to work out. She thought back on her past: she’d always loved teaching; she’d always wanted to be a teacher, to work with kids

and be part of their lives. And she'd achieved that dream, and more; along the way finding herself married and deeply in love with a man who fused her world of teaching with his own of sales and software. *How had it happened?* A million little decisions, a million little steps, all taken in darkness, all leading to this point in life without her even knowing it; everything now making sense, having sense.

Her smile widened—it could go no wider as she told him about the meeting, about how she wanted to pounce on that term sheet, no matter what the terms.

“The terms have to be right,” he replied. “This is your dream ... don't sell it short. Sometimes we only get one shot.”

She beamed; he was so good to her. Straining as he was to keep everything together, day in, day out, without complaint; his only words those of encouragement; and when the end was finally in sight along with an easing of that burden and strain, what did he say? *The terms have to be right! This is your dream ... don't sell it short!*

“I love you.”

“I know,” he replied, finding her hand as they drove.

Felicity pulled herself up from the backseat. “Are we going to be rich, Daddy?” her voice trilling with excitement. “Will Mommy get a million dollars?—*can I get an iPhone?*”

His laugh filled the car, warm and hearty. “When you're sixteen, sweetie—million dollars or not.”

“But that's forever—one, two ... six years!”

“Forever has a way of passing quickly, sweetie—it'll be here before you know it.”

Knowing that arguing further was futile, Felicity dropped back as Rachel and Johnny talked the talk of grownups.

“So, what's next—after you close the funding?” he asked.

“Gosh ... so much to get done; I'm scared to even think

about it.”

“Don’t worry, love,” he told her. “Just take it one step at a time.”

“Well, we’ll have to hire some developers—Brad said they might pair me with a technical co-founder—and then build a full-scale prototype.”

“To take to the schools?—as a pre-sale?”

“Yes, that too ... but more so to refine our research.”

“I think you’ve got the research nailed,” he heartened her. “You’ve been teaching for years, you know the problem firsthand, and remember that student—what’s his name?”

“Tom?”

“Yes, that’s him, Tom Mortley ... those mock-ups he created were a hit. You’re ready, love; trust me.”

“It’s just that ... I’ve never done *anything* like this before—I’m a teacher ... I don’t know anything about *business*.”

But Johnny was adamant; his belief absolute: “You’ll be fine, love—you know you will. You’ll conquer business in the same way you conquered teaching: one day at a time.”

Holding his hand, smiling, her anxiety eased as they merged onto SR-92 and entered the lush hills toward Half Moon Bay.

“You know, Johnny, in all those movies, books—everything—it seems that whenever things start going right, something bad happens.”

He glanced over, his grin permanently etched onto his features. “Don’t be silly”—squeezing her hand. “Bad things don’t happen to good people.”

Chapter 2

The school bus was running late. *When wasn't it?* Rachel thought, but gave no outward sign of her annoyance. *They tell kids to be on time, but can't be on time themselves ...*

"Remember about physio today," she told Felicity. "After school—I'll pick you up and we'll head there together."

"*Again?*—really, Mom?"

Rachel glanced down at her daughter, seeing Johnny's swirls of blond within her flowing chestnut hair—never not seeing them. "Yes, *really* ... we'll keep going until I say."

"It's been years, Mom ... and besides, the doctor said I won't walk again," she replied flatly, as if stating fact—as if stating something she'd accepted as truth.

"That's why we changed doctors."

"But the others—all of them ... they said the same thing."

"Doctors ... *bah!*—what do they know?"—running her fingers through those swirls. "Let's not argue, darling."

Felicity resumed typing on her phone. "But physio costs too much," she said some minutes later. "We can't afford it."

A pile of bills appeared, stacked high: overdue, urgent, final notice. "Of course we can afford it," Rachel lied, putting the vision out of mind. "I don't want you thinking about that, darling"—her voice softening. "That's for grownups."

"But Mom, I'm sixteen next month!—I can handle it ... *okay?*"

Rachel placed her hand gently on Felicity's shoulder. "I know you can, darling."

A deep rumble began its long wind into Glen Ellen,

with the bus stop not far from that great writer's estate who'd passed at age forty, having lived himself to death. *You only live once, right?* The school bus squealed to a stop, the back door opening to let Felicity in through the wheelchair entrance. Rachel cringed at the sight—cringed each time it came for her daughter.

"See you after school," Felicity waved from inside.

Rachel waved back as the bus lumbered back to life, before twisting and turning its way out of sight. Once gone, she began her short walk to the café, the scent of wildfire smoke heavy in the air. Lassen County was burning—*or was it the world?* ... She kept walking, her thoughts shifting from wildfires to prayers; she'd prayed for Felicity last night—*when hadn't she?*—and for Johnny, asking God to watch over him, somewhere, somehow. *But what did people say about faith? about believing?*—that nothing happens without faith; that nothing happens without believing. Well, she'd lost faith; she no longer believed. Life was nothing more than some cruel biological curiosity, no grander than fish she'd once seen in an aquarium, zigzagging mindlessly behind glass two inches thick. People read too much into life; people glorified it—unnecessarily so.

A sudden guilt stole over her. *Be grateful*, she heard her pastor say; *trust in God*. Her therapist had given similar advice, along with exercises to perform whenever her mind went to dark places. She began reciting things for which she was grateful, starting with Felicity, who was so upbeat, positive, pulling Rachel up most days; ... and her mother being alive, still blessed with moments of recognition amidst the fog of age; ... and for her mother's annuity, which covered those ever-escalating aged-care costs—*Death is Expensive*, a newspaper article had read; ... and for being able to provide

for Felicity—not private schooling or the ocean air of Half Moon Bay—but provide nonetheless, a roof over her head, a mother’s love, and whatever encouragement she could muster; ... and for ... *what else? ... for existing.*

Her footsteps slowed on the sidewalk, falling softer and gentler than leaves on snow, as she reflected on that word: *existing*. Yes, that was the right word; it described everything perfectly. She was *existing* ... existing and nothing more. The word hurt, burned, flamed as wildfires flame, somehow representing the culmination of her life’s work and dreams: being grateful for the right to exist; that she could continue existing; that her mother could continue existing; that Felicity—

She broke off abruptly ... the exercises weren’t working. *I’ll try again this evening, after physio*—her mind turning to unpaid bills, the most pressing ones: car payments, café supplies, doctor visits ... the total bringing on palpitations. If enough people came through her café this week, she might be able to settle those overdue bills. And with them paid, she could go on existing until the next wave came—*stop it! Be grateful ... trust in God.*

With jittery hands she fumbled for the café key, noticing a box of pastries by the doormat, melting. If the morning heat was anything to go by, it would be a boiling August day. *And the world could burn that much faster—stop it!* She flipped the “Closed” sign and brought those pastries in, remembering she hadn’t cleaned the floors yesterday, nor the kitchen or toilet. It had been one of those days ...

“Darn it ...” she mumbled, putting the disfigured pastries on display before firing up the espresso machine.

She then began mopping, her thoughts returning to Felicity’s physio and the bills that needed payment this

month ... no matter what. *God, why does everything have to be so hard?* She'd already filed for bankruptcy once—after the accident—and wasn't going through that again, *ever*, having her life's work and possessions stripped bare. Besides, creditors might try to take the café, claiming it was hers in some de facto way even though her mother had titled the property in her own name. Her mother was aged, disoriented—true—but not so aged and disoriented that she'd forgotten how to protect her daughter. *A mother's instinct.* After finishing the floors, Rachel started on the toilet; but was halfway through when a small bell rang above the door.

Pulling off her gloves, she came out front.

"Jimmy—good morning," she greeted the silver-haired man at the door, a throwback to another era; his appearance never wavering from a three-piece woolen suit of the coarsest kind, complete with a white handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket. "The usual?"

"Yes, please, Rachel ... had to take a stroll 'round the block waiting for you to open. Old man like me can't start the day without coffee."

"Sorry, Jimmy. School bus was late—but I'll make it up to you. Get ready for the best coffee of your life." She hesitated, then added: "And on the house, too."

"Mighty kind of you, Rachel, mighty kind," he thanked her while lowering himself into a chair. "Did you see that concert up in Santa Rosa? ... could hear it all the way in Eldridge."

No ... definitely not. "You know I don't get out much."

"Well, you should!" he almost barked, unfolding the newspaper he'd brought along. "Else you'll end up like old Taylor—she was born a nun, you know ... Anyhow, what's the latest on them wildfires?—my television's broke."

“And I don’t watch mine,” she laughed, fleetingly; “but I’m sure everyone’s talking about them—I think they’re out of control.”

The bell rang again and Taylor walked in—speaking of the devil—an elegant, stately lady who owned the flower shop across the street. “What’s out of control?”

“The Rush Fire,” Jimmy replied. “Up in Lassen ... was just asking Rachel if she knew the latest.”

But Rachel was already back in the kitchen, making Jimmy’s coffee, weak latte with oat milk—he was lactose intolerant—before rushing to make Taylor’s as two more customers walked in, then a third, while the toilet remained half-cleaned, the kitchen counter a mess.

“Darn it,” she mumbled again.

“You seen that nice fella working up at the estate?” Jimmy asked when Rachel returned with his latte. “In the gift shop, I think—you two should meet.”

Some “fella” in some “gift shop”—great ... just great. “I’m too busy for that,” she replied, the grind of irritation faint in her voice. *And too old.* “What about that cruise, Jimmy?—have you booked it yet?”

“Awh, come on now ... don’t be changing subjects like that”—grinning; the gap between his front teeth seeming to widen. “You know I’m still saving up.”

“You’ve been saving up ever since I met you—what’s it been now, four years?”

“—five,” Taylor corrected her. “Coming up on six.”

“Well, those cruises are mighty expensive these days ... *mighty expensive,*” Jimmy defended himself.

His original plan had called for a round-the-world cruise with his wife upon retirement, to reward themselves, to start the final chapter of their lives in style. But his wife

had passed before ever reaching those golden years, and the cruise that'd beckoned through misty images from the future, suddenly fell behind, into the past, still misty but now receding. Jimmy still talked of that cruise, as if he'd go one day and was just working out the details, but years of such talk had brought him no closer to a sailing date.

"Now back to that fella"—turning to Taylor for support, who sat at the next table as fragrant and colorful as her flower shop. "Tell her, Taylor—tell her she should meet that fella up at the estate."

But Taylor only rolled her eyes. "That 'fella' in the gift shop is a teen ... not sure he's even of driving age. When's the last time you had your glasses checked?"

It was Jimmy's turn to roll his eyes. "Okay ... I see how it's gonna be." He crinkled his newspaper, pretending to be turning pages. "Then what about Miss Pickerson's son?"

"Married ... three kids."

He crinkled the newspaper again, more vigorously this time, as if straightening a kinked measuring tape. "Well, at least tell Rachel she needs a fella in her life."

"A fella?—*what for?*" Taylor laughed and snorted at the same time, as was her habit. "Fellas are nothing but trouble. All they do is make a mess, living as they do ... worse than pigs. You put up with them for years—*years*, I say—and you know how they repay you? I'll tell you: by breaking your heart. That's how."

Rachel chuckled before moving to other customers, leaving Jimmy and Taylor to sort it out, her mind preoccupied with the half-cleaned toilet and messy kitchen counter. *Disgraceful!* A mid-morning lull usually presented an opportunity for tidying up, but today's morning rush had merged into midday coffees and afternoon teas. Only when

the last customer had been served and the café stood empty did she resume cleaning, but was once again interrupted by the jingling bell. She moved to see who it was, but was checked by a text from Felicity: *Pick me up later?* it read. *Need to finish assignment with group.*

And physio?

Move physio to another day ... not that it matters!

After a slight pause, Rachel replied: *I'll pick you up @ 5 – OK?*

OK – love you!

Placing her phone on a nearby table, Rachel sank into a chair facing the narrow hallway that led to the toilet; the bell forgotten; her feet hurting. Looking straight ahead, she saw her university diploma gleaming on the wall. *A fitting place for it ... by the toilet—stop it!*

After the accident she'd thought about teaching again, but a teacher's salary couldn't cover Felicity's bills ... and in hindsight, neither could the café. She removed both shoes and rubbed the red and swollen feet inside, before reaching upward, toward her cheek, in search of the shallow scar that ran from nose to hairline. It was less noticeable now, but still noticeable; a reminder she was lucky not to have lost an eye. *Another thing to be grateful for ... or was it?* She would have gladly given both eyes—her life even—if it meant sparing Felicity that spinal injury. Youth, dreams, boys ... *poof, gone ... just like that.*

Be grateful, she reminded herself; trust in God.

She'd heard of tragedies where small children had drowned under the watch of parents dozing in the sun. She wondered how those parents could continue living after that; how they willed themselves to rise each morning, get dressed, and push through the day? ... *How, God?—and why?*

Not knowing the answer, her thoughts shifted to Felicity: *Move physio to another day ... not that it matters!*

The diploma gleamed again from the hallway—the afternoon light catching it. Drawing in more air than usual, her fingers closed on a dirty cup that sat half-full on the table. *Please God, give me strength ...* Breathing out slowly, deliberately, she let go of the cup and repositioned herself on the chair, almost wanting to laugh at the mad thought. But then with the swiftness of wild birds startled into flight, she was on her feet, cup in hand, hurling it into the hallway. The cup caught the diploma's edge and cold coffee lit up both walls, crashing, splashing, staining, tiny fragments of glass and ceramic running like sand before the storm. Suddenly ashamed, her immediate instinct was to clean the mess she'd created; but before she could move, a voice came from the front.

"Bad day at the office?" she heard someone say.

She spun around, eyes wet, face on fire. The man sitting at the table wasn't looking up—*thank God*—but she recognized him. He'd become a regular in recent weeks, coming in most afternoons for a black coffee, no sugar.

"Oh, it's you."

She'd seen him a dozen times, served him a dozen times, and yet, never saw him until right then—until she noticed his hands were black. Not greasy. Not dirty. But ink-blotty, as if he'd washed them in dye, staining each dried-out crack of each thumb and finger. He turned a page in the book he was reading—*he was always reading*, she now remembered—before looking up with those uncanny eyes: not brown, not blue, but some odd mixture in between.

"Bad day at the office?" he repeated, the dust falling from his hair.