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It's a Mad, Mad, Sad World

I share the ICU room with two other patients. The one next to me is old and shriveled. He's skeletal, including his head, which looks like a skull on a cadaver. He reminds me of the Crypt Keeper. I'm thinking he's suffered a massive coronary, after a protracted illness. He looks hideous. He's never conscious the two days he's here, although my peripheral vision is limited, so for all I know he may have opened his eyes a couple of times. I still can't see much more than the ceiling and directly in front of me, my bed tilted upward at about a 45-degree angle. I'm immobilized. It's like I never left the old woman's lawn. Across from me, the bed aligned perpendicular to mine, is a mummy. He's so wrapped in bandages I can't tell how old he is. He was in a horrible car crash—multiple vehicles, gnarled metal, twisted bodies, flames, the works: a real Hollywood production. He's more carefully monitored than I or the Keeper.

After being here for two days I can finally turn my head enough to see a glass-enclosed nurses' station back toward my left. Sometimes two nurses sit there. One is present at all times. Before I could see it, I knew something elaborately medical existed behind me. I can hear the repetitious beeps and irregular gulps of machines tracking our bodies, and once when a steady mechanical screeching woke me in the middle of the night a nurse rushed past me to take care of the old guy. The next day he dies. Periodically, the nurses come in to adjust the tubes jutting out of the Mummy. Far more tubes stick out of him than me. The Keeper has a lot too, but I can't see him well enough to know who's got more between the two of them. I count three attached to me: the IV fastened to my left wrist,

the thin tube poking into my upper sternum, and the plumbing-sized tube inserted into the middle of my right ribcage. On the morning of the third day, the day before I'm moved from the ICU to a standard room, the doctor has to distract me when he pulls out the large side tube.

"So," he begins, inching closer to the bed once he's looked at my chart, "how are you this morning?" He has a foreign accent. I'm guessing eastern European. I tell him I'm fine. There's a long pause.

Out of nowhere, he asks, "Tell me, what kind of girls do you like?"

"Girls?" I ask, unsure of where this is heading. There are two younger doctors with him and one of the nurses from the station. They look at me and smile.

"Yeah, girls," he continues, now taking hold of the tube. "You know, what's your variety, your type: blondes with big breasts—excuse me, nurse [she waves him off]—brunettes with long legs. Maybe you're a man of the buttocks. You tell me."

What the hell is a "man of the buttocks"? Is this guy for real? One of the other doctors laughs. "You mean an 'ass man,'" he corrects him. "Oh, yes, of course," the older doctor says, "an ass man. Are you one of them?"

I decide to play along. It's actually becoming quite amusing. "Well, let me think," I begin, "I don't think I'm a 'buttocks man,'" I say, smirking at him. "Maybe I'm more of a . . ." But there's no chance to complete the sentence. Subtly, without my noticing, he has placed his left hand on my chest. In an instant he presses down with it as if I need to be restrained. Then, with as much force as someone yanking the cord on a lawn mower that won't start, he pulls out the tube with his right hand. I feel as if I've been kicked by a horse, but not just anywhere. It feels as if it's kicked me everywhere, from head to toe. Pulling it out creates such a body blow it renders me incapable of even crying out. I utter something approximating a thunderous moan.

The distress is so pervasive and rapid it takes a while for my brain to comprehend it and catch up to it. When it does, the pain is so severe I wish I could pass out, which I almost do. But I don't. It goes away after a couple of minutes. Suddenly, I need to sit up, as if my diaphragm is compelling me, as I take big gulps of air. As I do, I see the doctor smiling at me, holding on to the tube like a prized sausage. He's tricked me, and he's proud of it. I can't really smile back at him. I'm still undergoing a hefty coughing fit, but he can see from the expression on my face that I'm grateful he made me contemplate whether I was a man of the buttocks. As the panting subsides, I notice the Mummy, motionless as a corpse. He hasn't moved one iota through all of this. Sure, I'm suffering, but at least I can feel pain.

That poor soul hasn't stirred once the whole time I've been here. He seems as good as dead. It's different for me, I tell myself. I'm certain I'm going to make it out of here alive.

Every time I look at the Mummy I think of the concluding hospital scene in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. It's a marathon comedy with a marvelous cast of vaudeville and Borscht Belt comedians, such as Milton Berle, Buddy Hackett, and Sid Caesar, as well as a hilarious performance by the Broadway star Ethel Merman. It also includes a host of better-known jesters in cameo appearances, like Jerry Lewis and The Three Stooges. It's a laugh-fest for sure. It's such a long movie—a three-plus-hour running time—that when I saw it as a child with my parents and sister there was an intermission. It was a big hit, the kind of movie that created cultural buzz. When it appeared on TV a few years later, broadcast over two or three successive nights, millions of Americans stayed home to watch it again. But what I most remember about seeing it was the impact the final scene had on me. While I laughed at the slapstick silliness geared for kids, as my parents laughed at the kind of puns that went over my head, seeing the characters in the hospital ward was frightening. Even when I watched it again on TV and was older and more prepared for the scene, it still freaked me out. One minute the characters were clowning around, dangling from the top of a fire truck ladder and hanging off of a collapsing fire escape, and the next minute they were in body casts held together with pins the size of knitting needles. Learning about the precariousness of life may have terrified me more as a boy than seeing Spencer Tracy wrapped in bandages with his legs and arms suspended in slings above the bed.

But I'm not horrified now staring at the car-crash victim. Maybe it's because I know I'm in pretty bad shape too. It also could be that I'm gaining insight into how sorrowful life is for everyone, even for those living inside a smash-hit comedy. None of us can escape it. Only one letter separates *cosmic* from *comic*, after all. Strangely, I find this comforting. At the most basic level of human existence, we're all in it together. I'm no longer terrified by life's fickleness, as I was when I was a child. If anything, I feel relieved. For the rest of my life I am not in the least bit afraid to die, or afraid of death. I even begin to embrace the gruesomeness of living as part of the whole, the darkness on the other side of the light. One minute you're driving around cracking wise in a packed taxicab and the next minute you're laid up in a hospital bed with a tube sticking out of your mouth. Go figure. But not everyone can stomach all of the little ugly pieces, especially in our sanitized, packaged society. When Billy "Pops" visits me later that day, he nearly faints when he sees me. He has to be

helped out of the room. By then, the nurses were all complimenting me on my progress and on how good I looked. What in the name of hell did I look like when they wheeled me into the place? I wonder.

In the early evening hours, the Mummy dies. The Keeper died the day before. Of the three of us, I'm the only one who makes it. Their deaths make me more determined to make a better life of myself, now that I have one, and to be a better human being compared with the shitbag they wheeled in here a few days ago.

After visiting hours are over, it's eerily quiet. Even the machines behind me are silent. I'm in the room alone. No one else is brought in to replace my dead roommates. As I try to fall asleep, I am strangely blissful. I'm getting another chance at life. The next day, I'm told, I'm being moved to a regular hospital room. Now it's official: I'll live. But there was never any doubt in my mind. The entire time I am in the ICU I know I will. Perhaps the doctors and the medical staff viewed my condition as touch-and-go. Not me. I was thinking green light all the way.

The belief exists beyond anything mental or visceral. There's no single word for it, maybe because it's all-encompassing in its own right. "Mystical" or "supernatural" might apply. But I was never a big believer in otherworldly phenomena. I didn't "convert" when I was being administered the last rites. If it didn't happen then, it never will. I know I'll live because I've convinced myself I have a lot of unfinished business. I simply have to go on, to live longer and accomplish things defined by honorable behavior and right action. It's a cliché-ridden thought process, but clichés exist for a reason. They often aptly crystallize what takes a generation to explain. As soon as I found myself in the ICU following the surgery, I knew it was the beginning of my new life. I am on a new path.

The world is all before me.

While past wrongs and injustices can never be rectified, I believe in redemption, in forgiving myself for what was done and preparing myself to do better. I'll be in training for the rest of my life, to live a better life. I promised that to myself in the ER: *If I awaken after this, there will be a reawakening.* Waking up in the ICU proves to me there will be more to come. *There is no way I am going to die*, I thought throughout my stay there. I have too much to do, and too much to discover, maybe even too much to answer for—at least in my own head. The next time I'm about to kick the bucket, which Jimmy Durante literally does right before he dies in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, I want people to think well of me, from those who know me to the checkout girl at the supermarket. I plan on killing people with kindness and generosity instead of killing myself slowly

with ill feeling and ill will, which nearly led to my killing myself quickly. There's a rush of energy coursing through me. I think I get it: Really, what more is there to life than to be good and to do good for others? What else should we live for other than to make life less difficult for others, thereby making life more meaningful for ourselves? As I lay there, I knew I'd been far from being that kind of person before I was shot. I will remedy that in the future. I've been given a second chance. Being shot was the worst and the best thing that ever happened to me.

The morning I'm released from the ICU, I'm left alone for most of the time. The emergency-care nurses and doctors don't need to fuss over me anymore. That will be left up to the regular crew when I'm moved into a regular room. No one comes to visit me, either, knowing I'm being relocated soon. They'll visit me later in the day when I get there. Like the night before, I'm overwhelmed by the moment. It's spontaneous. An indescribable rush of infinity and temporality washes over me. I feel as if I'm going to live forever. I also feel as if I could die at any moment, and that every moment will be my last. Impermanence and eternity combined in a single vision. I can't help but think there is something special about this, brought on by my proximity to death and the startling revelations that followed. Will I feel this way forever? I wonder. Who else knows these things or has known them? Can it be articulated when I'm having trouble making sense of it in my own mind? Am I foolish for thinking this way? Is it brilliance or blindness, genius or madness? Should I tell someone about it? The answer to the last question will arrive in a few days when my parents advise me to remain as silent as humanly possible about being shot, as if it never happened.

But it did happen. And it will live *only* inside my head. Nobody else will know what I "saw" (at least not until now, until whoever is reading this "sees" it too). I don't know this as I wait to be removed from the ICU, how being shot will have to be kept a secret, including the illuminations. Many things pass through my mind as I lie there, especially what transpired a few days before in the ER. As I muse away the morning, I recall one of the other three consequential impressions I had: a vision of a fortress of books. It is, admittedly, an odd thing to think of before you believe you're going to die. Remembering it feels strange and awkward. I grin with private embarrassment—and conviction. Despite its oddity, I know I'll build it. If I build it, I will come. I will come to the house of books, a fortress of books, of my own creation and design. Later, after reading Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, I will learn what it was I must have been seeking: liberation. Douglass was on the verge of death, too, literally

and figuratively, and books saved him. Of course, it was merely the color of his skin that brought him so close to death. That isn't a crime, unless you're living in the American slave South. He also obviously had more obstacles to overcome for books to "save" him, although his innocence may have had its strange advantages. I guess what I'm trying to get at is that it has occurred to me recently that literacy can "save" even a scoundrel. It can be a potent force in anyone's life.

On the sixth day, my sister brings me a book, the first book I will read on my own, without its being a required schoolbook, which I rarely read anyway. She didn't know about my vision of books stacked skyscraper-high, so it is a timely and fortunate gesture. Perhaps it's more opportune than accidental. She must have noticed that I wasn't reading the *Sports Illustrated* and *Playboy* magazines my friends had given me, and I simply couldn't bring myself to watch TV. As in the past, I stared out the window trying to figure things out.

For storytelling purposes, I wish I could claim that the book she brought held great emblematic value, some apt male *Bildungsroman* like *David Copperfield*, *The Red and the Black*, or *The Adventures of Augie March*. Even something like *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Catcher in the Rye* would have been more metaphorically suitable than the actual book she delivered. Her book wasn't remotely like any of them. Instead, she pulled out of a small brown paper bag, which included some chocolates, a bestseller. It was a blockbuster, really, one of the biggest-selling books in U.S. publishing history. When the Steven Spielberg film version of *Jaws* was released a couple of years later, a few more million copies were sold. Despite its lack of symbolic import, my sister had chosen wisely. A more complex book might have been too much for me to handle. I was a slow, feeble reader. In class, whenever I was called on to read aloud I could hear myself stuttering. (Yet I was known for *telling* funny stories.) I probably would have struggled and suffered through almost anything else. In the end, Peter Benchley's novel served as a valuable hook (I apologize for the obvious pun) because it was an effective introduction to the most important component of any good book: It was an interesting read.

When I recently assigned it in my undergraduate Senior Seminar course, "Popular Fiction in the Post-War Years," I re-read it for the first time since then. At first, its simple prose made me cringe. But that second reading followed a couple of decades of inhaling books. That has included several rather beefy, sophisticated volumes, books I suspect only a tiny percentage of the population has read, let alone has even heard of. So it's no wonder I found *Jaws* simplistically written, after pounding away at Proust,

Foucault, Tolstoy, Wittgenstein, Eliot (George), Thucydides, Ricoeur, Marx, and Hegel. During my quest, I had stumbled across Mortimer Adler's "Great Books" list. It wasn't enough for me to read the half-dozen works of Plato included on it, for instance. I read the entire extant oeuvre, including the nearly unreadable *Laus*. When I recently returned to *Jaws*, I was therefore light years removed from those days when I'd stumbled along in the classroom as a buffoonish reader.

Nevertheless, at some point while re-reading it I got sucked right back into the story, and the book turned into a page-turner, in spite of its familiarity. That's what I remember most about my reading the book for the first time in the hospital. Once I picked it up, I couldn't put it down. And once I did, I wanted to pick up another one, and another, and continue reading until the stories ran out or until I ran out of time to read them all. As strange as it seems, that was one of three pivotal thoughts I had that night in the ER. If I had time, I saw a future constructed out of books.

When my sister handed me the book, I grasped it as if I were holding the Holy Grail, or that I'd trumped Jason and captured the Golden Fleece. It meant that much. Days before in the ER, I'd concluded that I had missed out on something big and important, something wonderful and edifying. By not having been a reader, I was an incomplete person, or so I believed. I wouldn't overlook it the next time—if there was a next time. And there was. And there still is. In fact, there is a whole series of next times. *Jaws* represented the future. Holding it, I was certain that its pages contained the promise of discovery, perhaps even self-discovery. Sure, it was only *Jaws*, the kind of novel critics would call pulp fiction and my academic colleagues much worse. But to me it was a first step, a baby step.

Admittedly, I was susceptible to an exuberantly romanticized vision of what books offered, and I likely still maintain that idealistic view, but who can blame me? I was alive! I had every right to believe that the book's pages contained valuable material, aiding me in acquiring the kind of useful literacy I didn't possess before I was shot. I wasn't a reader then, and look where that had gotten me. If I became a reader now, it might take me to entirely different places. I would make as much use of every book as I possibly could, toward my restoration and toward knowing the world with greater insight—at least with multiple visions. I knew I wouldn't consume them as they had been handed down in school, as a yardstick with which to evaluate my academic progress and shortcomings, or with which to measure me against my classmates. I wouldn't become bookish, either, as the means to propel me out of the working class. (And possibly resenting them later for what they'd done to me, as so many working-class

academic narratives reveal.) Nor would I turn around as a teacher and use them as weapons against my students. I would read books for their use-value, not for their exchange value. It's probably why I read *Jaws* as if my life depended on it.

But after *Jaws*, then what? While my sister had introduced me to the world of books, I couldn't expect her to be my mentor. She was engaged to her childhood sweetheart and would be married the following year. She had her own life to manage. Besides, as good a student as she was in school, she wasn't a reader. At home, she read *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*. She didn't read much else, other than her schoolbooks. She dropped out of college after one semester. It wasn't for her. But, unlike me, she was expected to go and she was expected to excel. She was encouraged by my parents to apply to some of the finest smaller liberal arts colleges in the area. Left on her own, though, she couldn't maintain the motivation that drove her during twelve years of Catholic school. I'm sure my parents were disappointed when she returned home during the winter recess, done with her studies.

Perhaps her decision to leave had something to do with their decision to dissuade me from going to college. Maybe they figured if she couldn't cut it then how could I, a historically impoverished student who'd started amassing behavioral problems to boot. And then there was "the accident." That confirmed their worst fears and solidified their worst impressions of me. Even though I had diligently begun to rewrite my academic story after I'd been shot, that wasn't enough to convince them I was worthy of higher education. Nor was sitting in the local library during my spare time and bringing home cartloads of books. I don't think they understood what I was trying to do and how it all stacked up against that night in the ER. I certainly never told them. I wasn't supposed to talk about it. Besides, they likely were unimpressed with my new-found interest in books anyway. Not being readers themselves, they weren't interested in them, other than to acquire a skill or learn how to make money. Books had no use-value; they functioned purely as exchange-value. This outlook likely had a lot to do with their working-class background. To them, my books were, as Richard Hoggart points out in *The Uses of Literacy*, "strange tools."

Overall, books weren't part of my upbringing, not in the larger or smaller scheme of things. In the homes of my many "day care" providers, there were no books. None of the Oakwood Heights homes I was ever in had books either. I don't recall seeing even a single library book in any of the households of my friends or in the homes I was infrequently invited into when collecting for the paper route. Members of my extended family weren't readers either. Even an older cousin who became

a grade-school teacher lived in a home devoid of books. There certainly were no books in our house—at least not ones my parents read. The ones that did exist were for “show.” The year my father rejoined the family, he built a wooden dividing wall, half the length of the hallway, to separate the hallway entrance from the living room. The living room side included three bookshelves. In addition to placing a clock, photographs, and various knick-knacks on it, he supplied the empty shelf space with a few books he’d found left on someone’s curb. They were maroon-colored, hardcover editions of historical biographies from the same press, none of which my parents read. Almost forty years later they sit on their fireplace mantle in the New Jersey condo they own. My mother of late regularly visits her local public library and reads lots of popular contemporary fiction, with an occasional “classic” thrown in. When I was growing up, though, her reading habits were like my sister’s. She read only magazines and usually did so to extrapolate from them decorating or food tips.

As expected, we weren’t terribly close with my father’s side of the family during their separation, so even if any of them were readers I never noticed. I would sometimes be watched by one of my dad’s sisters during the week or have a sleep-over in the summer at one of my cousins’, but that was a rarity. In all that time I never saw any books in their homes either. One of my cousins received a half-academic, half-athletic (football) scholarship from Princeton. Like my sister, though, he dropped out, after one semester. He had attended a really rigorous all-boys Catholic high school run rather heavy-handedly by the Brothers. While there he was a top-notch student, an academic star lauded with all sorts of honors. His academic success may have been driven more from the constant coercion of the “whip” than from his own interest in learning. When he too was left on his own he couldn’t quite bring himself to succeed without pressure from the outside.

In my youth, I thought he was the coolest guy on Earth. He started dating a gorgeous redhead who lived around the block from us, so I would sometimes see him in the neighborhood. He was one of the most well-known athletes on Staten Island, a speedy, powerful outside linebacker, who *also* garnered a host of academic awards. I used to drop his name around like he was a celebrity, which, in the small world of Staten Island back then, he was. But he didn’t strike me as an “independent reader.” I don’t recall seeing any books in his home or in his room, other than schoolbooks. His academic successes in high school stemmed largely from hitting the *school* books as hard as he hit a tailback. As I learned during my quest, as well as inside the academy’s corridors, as both a student and as a

professor, being successful in school may have little to do with acquiring knowledge or possessing a profound desire to learn. Lots of students can be “good” students simply by playing the game and going through the motions of pulling the right levers, blowing the right whistles, and ringing the right bells. (The same can be said about teachers.) Neither students nor teachers need to be particularly interested in real learning in order to go far in the educational establishment. Pressing the right buttons can sometimes be enough. Whether or not my cousin couldn’t continue doing that when he was at Princeton, I don’t know. I do know that despite his “scholarship boy” credentials, he was like other members of my father’s side of the family, not much of a reader for readership’s sake. As such, when I was released from the hospital with my finished copy of *Jaws*, his name didn’t appear in my brain’s Rolodex as a person to ask for academic or intellectual advice.

On my mother’s side, my cousin Andrew was the only member of my family who might have been “bookish,” but there was still some uncertainty about that in my mind growing up; more important, circumstances dictated that the condition of our relationship didn’t extend to books or matters of the mind. He had turned himself into a Big Brother of sorts during my parents’ separation by doing such things as taking me to the airport to watch the planes take off and land or drive me to Fort Wardsworth to watch the ships and tugboats slip in and out of the harbor. He and his wife, Pat, who had turned herself into a Big Sister of sorts, sometimes came by our house at night to spend time with all of us as well. Their benevolence didn’t include “schooling” or instruction. They correctly recognized that simply spending time with me, without passing judgment on how well or how poorly I was doing in school, was more than anyone else was doing and more than I could ask for. I vividly remember those trips to JFK Airport with great fondness. At that time in my life, being happy for a few hours was a treat. Andrew did a lot for me, although I still saw him too infrequently to consider him my book guide. More important, right before I’d been shot he had recently returned from the University of Illinois in Champaign, where he was studying for his doctorate in Comparative Literature. He stayed only one semester and never bothered enrolling in another program. At that time in his life he seemed dispirited and cynical about the usefulness of books and the value of intellectual development. He had crash-landed. It just so happened to coincide with my takeoff. I needed a true believer. Besides, I had learned plenty from him and his wife through their magnanimity. That was more than enough, and more meaningful than any school lesson or anything

I've ever read in a book, quite honestly. Maybe I didn't want to ask any more of Andrew than he'd already given.

The dissociation between books and males in my family was typical of the general male population in Oakwood Heights in particular and on Staten Island in general, and probably in the nation as well. Book reading was strictly taboo. Guys who read books were either certifiable nerds or raging homos. Real men didn't read books. There was something suspect about anything too closely aligned to the mind or to the emotions. Books might distance a true man from reacting to life's challenges physically and viscerally. Certainly no real man would read a book in his spare time. Any man with spare time on his hands needed to be using his hands, not his brain, to weatherize a porch or turn an attic into a playroom.

Once *Jaws* had set me on my way, there were no men to model myself after as I prepared to begin my quest. If anything, I hid my passion for books from them. I wasn't close to any female, except my sister, so no female could act as my principal agent. Besides, book reading was already aligned with the feminine. I would have been doubly mocked taking on a female mentor. I might as well have said I was moving to San Francisco. I could have sought direction from teachers, but at that point I hadn't met any who didn't push books solely as a way to gauge a student's academic worth, to use books as a disagreeable means for testing illiteracy, by spotlighting it and identifying "poor" students, rather than as an agreeable means for promoting and advancing literacy. Reading, generally, was treated as a blood sport by almost all the teachers I knew. In addition, few of them seemed to enjoy what they were doing. It was as if books were ponderously weighing them down, almost as much as they were trying to weigh us down with them. There was nothing joyful about it. After I'd nearly been killed, I expected—and needed!—books to enliven me, not to deaden me. It seemed teachers were part of the problem, not part of the solution, as one popular slogan still in circulation then might have characterized it. I was on my own when it came to my education, to that part of me that believed a formal education would make me a "better" person. It was also my way of "getting out." And I don't necessarily mean getting out of the working class, more like getting out of what I was and used to be and getting into something "more."