

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

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THE WONDERFUL WONDER MACHINE

A late-in-life catharsis:

Dedicated to an unshaven, pipe smoking angel with bad breath

The older I get, the more clearly I remember things that never happened.

—Mark Twain

RECENTLY I'VE BEEN EXPERIENCING A PSYCHOSOMATIC DISORDER KNOWN as "episodic memory" -occasional difficulty remembering the names of people or details of events from my youth. Of course, cognitive impairment is not unusual for older people (like me) but I think my problem has been exacerbated by emotional stress during childhood. When I was young, living in Chicago, I struggled with an embarrassing problem that I've never discussed with anyone, not even my wife, children, or lifelong friends – nor with a psychologist or therapist. I simply swept unpleasant memories under the rug and followed the advice of my parents: "forget about it - don't dwell on the past." Unfortunately, unresolved childhood trauma can cast a long shadow, subtly shaping our adult lives in ways we might not even realize. So, I've decided to sip a large margarita and have a late-in-life "catharsis" - an exorcism of demons that never went away.

Don't worry - I won't bore you with all that Tom Sawyer crap – I never found buried treasure or kissed a cute girl named Becky Thatcher (I wish I did) but I did have a girl friend when I was eight years old - not a romantic kind of relationship – just a friend who happened to be a girl. Her name was Audrey Rosenberg - she was my next door neighbor and my only friend. That's why I didn't grow up flying a kite or playing boy's games like marbles or yo-yo's -mainly I played a lot of hop scotch and jumping rope with Audrey.

She was two years older than me, taller and faster, and she could beat me in arm wrestling, but she wasn't smarter. Of course she thought she was. And because her name began with an A when we jumped rope she would go first and chant - "A, my name is Audrey, I come from Arizona, and I like to eat apples."

Apples? Impossible! Apples don't grow in Arizona, but I would never correct Audrey – she'd probably punch me in the nose. When it was my turn I jumped and chanted, "M, my name is Myron, I come from Maryland, and I like to eat crabs." (Maryland is famous for crabs).

"No you little twerp," Audrey would snicker, "you've got to eat something that begins with the letter M."

"How about matzohs?"

Once again, Audrey would laugh at me, "boy are you dumb! Matzohs don't grow in Maryland-you make matzohs from stale Jewish flour."

About the only time I ever ventured away from my home was on Saturdays, when I'd join Audrey and a few of her girl friends. We'd sit on a bench near a synagogue on Lawrence Avenue (an Orthodox neighborhood in Chicago) and watch a parade of bearded men in long black robes and

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funny fur hats as they walked along the street - some were holding hands. They weren't homosexual or anything like that - it was kind of a religious thing - they liked to be spiritually connected when they talked to God. Of course these bearded men all spoke Yiddish, so I'm not positive what they were saying. I think God only speaks biblical languages - but not English.

The men smiled at me and I waved back. Audrey was jealous and said God didn't like women - that's why the bearded men ignored her and her friends. I don't think that's really true, but like I already mentioned, Audrey wasn't very smart. I'm sure God liked Ruth and Esther - they were famous Jewish women in the Bible - and Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, who was also Jewish - definitely Eleanor Roosevelt, the nicest woman in the world, even though she talked with a squeaky voice. Oh - I forgot. God also spoke to Joan of Ark - so I guess he speaks French.

"Hey boychick," one of the elderly men started talking to me, "*vas iz deyn nomen?*" (what is your name?)

"*mayn nomen iz Moische,*" I responded. Moische was my Jewish name. The old man smiled and pinched my cheek.

I really knew very little Yiddish, but I picked up a word or two from my parents - they sometimes spoke Yiddish around the house - expressions like *gey shlafn* (go to sleep) or *gey avek* (go away) - and I sometimes used swear words like *shmuck* or *putz* but never when I was near my mother - she always threatened to wash my mouth out with some type of disgusting Jewish soap.

OK - that's enough background! Now let's get to the ugly problem that hovered over my childhood like a dark cloud. Even though I was smart for my age (especially arithmetic and spelling) I was eight and hadn't stopped wetting the bed. My mother went crazy and yelled at me every time she had to change the wet sheets. She growled, grimaced, swore in Yiddish, and shook me by the shoulders. I would cry - but she continued yelling. However, she never hit me.



My bedroom always smelled like a hospital - very antiseptic. That's because every time I wet the bed my mother would mop the floor with Lysol. So, I never let anyone in the room, especially Audrey. If she ever found out about my secret she'd probably tell all her friends - I'm sure they'd laugh at me and find some mean song - just like the one they sang about Maddy Plotnick, a very overweight girl who lived on my block.

*Maddy, fatty, two by four, couldn't get through the bathroom door,
So she did it on the floor, licked it up and did some more*

Talking about mean - no one was worse than my uncle Herman. He'd make stupid Indian war-whoops and call me "Chief pish-in-bed" when we were around my parents. But, when he played poker at my house and other men were in the room he wasn't quite as bad - he'd simply grab his crotch and call me "Chief." Herman is dead now and when he died I wanted to open a window and wake the whole damn neighborhood with Indian war-whoops - but it was snowing and the storm windows were too difficult for me to open. However, I pretended to be sick and didn't go to his funeral.

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Finally, at age nine, my mother took me to see Dr. Isador Horowitz, a dumb pediatrician who played poker with my father and Uncle Herman every Wednesday night – we had a card room in the basement. The doctor read from a book but never administered any kind of medical tests – he never even took my temperature. He said I had “Nocturnal Enuresis.” That’s the medical term for night-time bedwetting – the involuntary discharge of urine done unconsciously during sleep.

“Mrs. Lubell, there is nothing wrong with Myron,” said Dr. Horowitz, and he gave her a pre-printed list of the common factors which could lead to bed wetting, and one by one they discussed each of the items.

- A Delay In The Development Of The Central Nervous System:
- Smaller Than Average Functional Bladder Capacity
- Hormone Deficiency – of an anti-diuretic secreted to decrease urine production at night
- Genetics – related to the chromosomes
- Psychological Factors
- Hereditary
- Abnormal posterior urethra valves
- Neurological disorders
- Urine infection
- Diabetes
- Allergies to certain food

“I’ve checked Myron for all of these factors (*he was lying – he never checked anything*) and I don’t see anything wrong with him, but I want you to go see Adolph Berlinsky at the University of Chicago Medical School; he is one of the top pediatric psychiatrists in the country.” Dr. Horowitz concluded that I had some type of psychological problem and the visit to the renowned specialist was merely to get a second opinion.

(Note: I wish I could file a complaint with the Illinois Board of Professional Regulation – that incompetent doctor should have his license revoked. But, its too late – Dr. Horowitz died many years ago).

During the next four weeks my mother took me to see Dr. Berlinsky, where I was tested for my ability to insert multi-colored wooden circles, triangles, stars, and squares into appropriate holes. I also had to draw lines connecting dots and discuss my interpretation of ink blots that looked like little aliens holding horses. During the four visits at the University of Chicago I never saw the doctor’s face (except when he gave me a Hershey bar and smiled) -he was always looking down at charts. In fact, he rarely even asked me any questions, except whether I had to go to the bathroom. I think he was worried that I might pee on his office floor.

“Myron, this is called a Rorschach test,” said Dr. Berlinsky, “use your imagination – tell me what you see?”

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“I see an alien with two little thingies on top of his head – he’s sitting between two horses - it’s a boy alien; he has a penis - or maybe that’s a tail?”

“Very good Myron – It is a penis. But, does the alien look like he is peeing?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Of course not. So, remember that cute little alien when you go to bed tonight – he is your new best friend – his name is Buddy. You don’t want to pee on Buddy, do you?”

“No sir, but what if I do?”

“Time’s up this week Myron – we’ll talk more about your friend Buddy at our next session. Here’s another Hershey bar.”

After four visits the renowned specialist told my mother, “Myron has no psychological disorder, he is just lazy.” His conclusion was based upon my aptitude with ink blots, three-dimensional objects, and multi-shaped holes.

“However, I have a few suggestions that might help.” He then gave my mother a pre-printed list of bed wetting rules:

No liquids of any kind after 6 PM; that includes Jell-O, which is really liquid that has been converted into a semi-solid state;

Mandatory urination at 6 PM and immediately before going to bed;

Wake the child two hours after going to bed for an additional urination;

Send the child to a sleep-away summer camp

The backside of the list contained the names of several camps.

“Why camp?” asked my mother.

“Peer pressure, its the best therapy for lazy bedwetters like Myron.”

Based upon the advice of Dr. Berlinsky, I attended Camp Briar Lodge in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, two hundred miles north of Chicago. After two humiliating bed wetting episodes I ran away from camp in the middle of the night. I found the main highway and started walking south in search of Chicago. Three hours later I was picked up by a truck and reprimanded by several “Chiefs” and “Warriors.” It was a “Jewish-Indian” camp - all members of the staff had Indian titles. I was then transferred from the main lodge, where all the other “Little Braves” slept, to a small cabin with three other bed wetters. We were supervised by Squish Squash, a mean older woman who cleaned bathrooms. I never knew her real name; the counselors and staff all used Indian names – like the two gorgeous female counselors, Arrow and Star. (*Secretly – I was in love with Arrow – but that’s another story*).

I was warned by Chief Grey Cloud, the owner of the camp, not to tell my parents about the attempted escape. If I did, they would tie me to the main totem pole during our evening pow wow and burn off my little toe. That was the normal Indian method for dealing with cry babies.

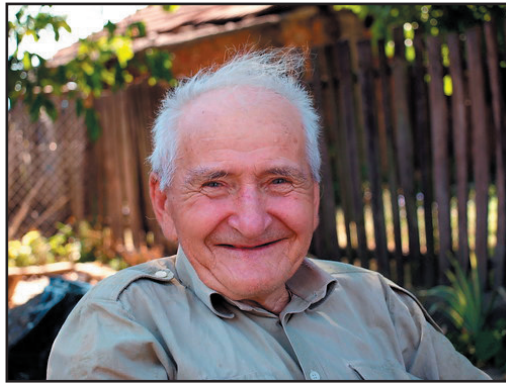


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On "Visitors Day." when my older sister came to Briar Lodge, I told her everything -how I attempted to run away, how I had been forced to sleep in a smelly cabin with Squish Squash, and how they threatened to burn off my toe. I begged her to take me home! "Myron, those are very funny stories," she laughed. "You have wonderful imagination." We spent the next few hours rowing a canoe in an adjacent lake – and she cut me off every time I attempted to complain about the camp.

Not all aspects of camp life were miserable. I liked the evening pow wow -as long as I didn't think about my little toe. Two hundred campers gathered around a huge bonfire and listened to stories by Chief Grey Cloud, the owner of the camp. His real name was Max Moskowitz.

"Tonight, little braves I 'vill tell you how Oconomovak 'Visconsin got its name." The Chief spoke in an unusual accent, part Yiddish, part Indian.



Max Moskowitz aka Chief Grey Cloud (without his ceremonial feathers)

"Many Moons ago da' Indians in 'Visconsin 'vas looking for a new home, so 'dey followed 'dere chief, and 'dey 'valked and 'valked and 'valked until 'da chief dropped 'mit exhaustion. 'Da chief pointed to 'da ground and said, 'dis is 'da place ... O-con-no-mo-woc.'"

We all laughed and showed approval of the story by beating our little tom-toms. But, for the benefit of those campers who weren't laughing, Chief Grey Cloud clarified the punch line. "Oconomowoc - I can no more walk - Get it?"

We also had war-games at camp – the "blues" against the "whites." I was on the white team, but because I slept in the bedwetter's cabin my clothes often had a urine smell so I wasn't allowed to compete in the games, except canoe races in the lake. My rowing partner was also a bedwetter. At night Squish Squash locked the door so that I wouldn't try to run away again.

The only thing else worth mentioning about camp was the Summer Squash covered with honey and nuts. I was required to eat double portions of a secret Indian recipe that was supposed to stop bed wetting. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

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At the end of summer, when I returned to Chicago, Dr. Horowitz recommended seeing Dr. Isaac Gutterman, a prominent pediatric urologist. After extensive tests, measuring the intensity of my urinary stream, my mother was told that my bed wetting was caused by an improperly developed bladder. In order to strengthen the bladder I was required to engage in an unusual exercise known as the "Gutterman Squeeze." Every time I had to pee, I was supposed to urinate in a stop and go sequence.

It would be my mother's job to make sure that I followed a set of written instructions. However, I was too old for her to go into the bathroom and watch me urinate, so she stood outside the door and listened, and directed the process:

"Pee – stop – squeeze - pee – stop – squeeze. Myron, I said stop, you are not stopping; I can hear you peeing."

It probably sounds easy to apply the "Gutterman Squeeze," but once you start peeing it's very difficult to stop. I cheated a lot: I did normal continuous peeing when my mother wasn't around to listen, and I drank after 6 PM by secretly cupping my hands under the bathroom faucet; I also kept my mouth open when I showered. One time, when I was eleven, my mother was so exasperated that she took the wet bed sheet, with the ubiquitous yellow circle, and hung it from my second story bedroom window for all the neighborhood kids to see. When my father returned home from work he was furious. He pulled the sheet back into the apartment and threw it on the floor.

"Dammit Rose! Let the boy alone; 'di tseit iz der bester doktor.'" (time is the best doctor.)

"That's easy for you to say," screamed my mother, "you don't have to clean his 'farshtunken' sheets. How is he ever going to get married? No woman will ever sleep with a bed wetter." I then concluded that I could only marry a woman who also wets the bed – how else would I get married and live happily ever after? But, how will I determine whether a woman is a bedwetter? That's a difficult question to ask when you first meet someone.



I usually slept on a water repellent flannel sheet, which was placed under the regular bed sheet. Urine from a small accident would be absorbed completely by the special sheet. But, if I drank water after 6 PM there was a good chance that the bed would be flooded, and the overflow would penetrate to the mattress.

When I was 12 we moved to Florida and I had no accidents during the first six months; that was the longest I had ever gone without wetting the bed. I was hopeful that I had outgrown my problem. Then, on March 19, 1952, the day before my thirteenth birthday, the dry streak ended; I flooded the bed, even the mattress. My mother went ballistic! At 7 AM she screamed loud enough for all the neighbors at our apartment building to hear.

"Sol, I can't stand this *pishing'* anymore. I don't know what to do. Lets send Myron to military school."

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That evening two salesman came to our door; they were given our name by an unidentified neighbor. The younger man was a Negro; he immediately showed his police I.D. card, which authorized him to stay in Miami Beach after 6 P.M. (*Note: Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 Negroes were not allowed in Miami Beach at night unless they had a police work permit*). He was carrying a large cardboard box that contained a machine designed to stop bedwetting. The older salesman did all the talking. He smoked a pipe, wore a wrinkled tan suit and needed a shave; my parents called him a "huckster."

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Lubell," the unshaven salesman checked his index card to make sure he was pronouncing our name properly. He shook my hand and smiled; he had bad breath - "and hello Ryan. I am about to change your life forever. In thirty days, or less, this fantastic 'wonder machine' will stop your bed wetting problems."

"It's Myron." I didn't smile.

"How much?" asked my father.

"Let me give you a brief demonstration of this unbelievable machine, which was developed by leading scientists in the mountains of Tibet - it has been used by many famous celebrities, including Clark Gable, for his son - I can give you a list."

"How much?"

The salesman spread a special wired sheet on top of my bed. He connected it to the "wonder-machine" and plugged it into the nearest electrical outlet. "Bed wetting is not an emotional problem, it is not a psychological problem, it is not a bad habit, and it is not the result of laziness." Those were the problems that physicians, psychiatrists, urologists, and Indian chiefs had been treating, and this unshaven salesman with bad breath said they were all wrong. He knew something that they didn't, and he promised to stop my bed wetting with his "wonder-machine" in less than one month.

"Bed wetting is caused by deep sleep and arousal disorder, and this wonderful device is designed to cure that problem." He poured some water on the electric sheet and nothing happened. He explained that water alone will not activate the equipment, but urine was different than water; it had a high concentration of salt. He then put a teaspoon of salt into the glass and poured a few drops on the bed sheet. A shrill, piercing noise sounded, like the air-raid siren at my old Chicago school that warned if Russian bombers were attacking.

"Mr. Lubell, this amazing machine normally rents for \$300 per month; but this month we are offering a half price special, only \$150."

I went to bed that night hopeful that the "wonder-machine" would succeed, where years of medical treatment and Indian remedies had failed. I plugged the machine into the wall and followed the salesman's instructions: I drank two full glasses of water, to ensure that I would have an intentional "accident."

Shortly after falling asleep two involuntary drops of urine dribbled upon the electric sheet. Instantly, the "wonder-machine" responded with

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an ear-splitting explosion, loud enough to wake all the elderly tenants at my apartment building. Normally, when my mother woke me for a nocturnal trip to the bathroom I would be in a semi-conscious trance, but after the “wonder-machine” blasted its alarm I was wide awake. I went to the bathroom, peed, flushed the toilet, washed my hands, reset the machine, and returned to bed. We kept the device for the full rental period, but that was the only time I ever heard the bell. It took one night and two drops of urine, and the amazing “wonder-machine” cured a problem that had baffled pediatric psychiatrists and the best medical minds of Chicago- and defied the old Indian remedies of Oconomowoc.

On my thirteenth birthday I stopped wetting the bed- the Red Sea had parted. I proudly proclaimed to the world: “Today, I am a man!”

EPILOGUE:

Uncle Herman, the jerk who made my life miserable, and Dr. Isador Horowitz, the incompetent doctor, are spending eternity together in the same cemetery. I wonder if they play poker in the afterlife?

The “Wonder Machine” salesman: I tried, many times, to find the name of the wonderful huckster- I wanted to thank him. I’m not a big believer in angels, except for this pipe smoking man with bad breath. He definitely was my special angel.