## Teach Us To Outgrow Our Madness

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In the winter of 196—, an outlandishly fat man came close to being thrown to a polar bear bathing in a filthy pool below him and had the experience of very nearly going mad. As a result, the fat man was released from the fetters of an old obsession, but the minute he found himself free a miserable loneliness rose in him and withered his already slender spirit. Thereupon he resolved, for no logical reason (he was given to fits of sudden agitation), to cast off still another heavy restraint; he vowed to free himself entirely and let the sky tilt if need be, and when he had taken his oath and a reckless courage was boiling in his body, still scaly and stinking of rotten sardines from the splash of the rock which had been thrown into the pool finally in his place, he telephoned his mother in the middle of the night and said to her,

——You give me back the manuscript you stole from me, I’m fed up, do you hear! I’ve known all along what you were up to!

The fat man knew his mother was standing at the other end of the line eight hundred miles away with the old-fashioned receiver in her hand. He even concluded unscientifically that he could hear the whisper of breathing into the other phone as distinctly as he did because no one was near the circuits due to the lateness of the hour, and since this happened to be his mother’s breathing, the fat man felt his chest constrict. As a matter of fact, what he was hearing through the receiver he had pressed against his ear, delicate out of all proportion to the massiveness of his head, was his own breath.

——If you won’t give me back what’s mine, that’s all right too! the fat man shouted in growing anger, having realized his small mistake. I’ll write another biography of Father that’s even more revealing, I’ll tell the whole world how the man went mad and shut himself up all those years and then let out a roar one day and died where he sat in his chair. And you can interfere all you like, it won’t do you any good! Again the fat man stopped and listened for a reaction at the other end of the line, careful this time to cover the phone with his thick hand. When he heard the receiver being replaced, calmly and for that reason the more adamantly, he went pale as a young girl and returned trembling to his bed, curled up in a ball, pulled the covers over his head despite the stench of the pool, which made him gag, and sobbed in rage. It wasn’t only his mother, the loneliness of the freedom he had acquired that morning at the zoo had quite intimidated him, and so he cried in the stinking darkness beneath the covers where he could be certain he was unobserved. It was rage, and terror, and his overwhelming sense of isolation that made the fat man cry, as if the polar bear immersed to its shoulders in brown, icy water had gripped his bulky head in its freezing jaws. Before long the fat man’s tears had wet the sheets all around him, so he rolled over, curled up again, and continued to sob. He was able to enjoy this particular freedom, minor but not to be despised, because for several years he had been sleeping alone in the double bed he once had shared with his wife.

While the fat man cried himself to sleep that night, his mother, in the village of his birth, was steeling herself for a final battle against her son. Thus the fat man had no reason to weep, at least not out of the frustration of having had his challenge ignored yet another time. As a child, whenever he began to question her about his father’s self-confinement and sudden death, his mother had closed the road to communication by pretending to go mad. It reached a point where the fat man would affect madness himself before his mother had a chance, smashing everything in reach and even tumbling backwards off the stone wall at the edge of the garden and down the briary slope. But even at times like these, his sense of victory was tiny and essentially futile: he never managed to make contact. Ever since, for close to twenty years, the tension of a showdown between two gunmen on a movie set had sustained itself between them—who would be first to affect madness and so to win an occult victory?

But late that night, the situation began to change. The very next morning the fat man’s mother, resolved on new battle regulations, took to the printer in a neighboring town an announcement she had drafted during the night and had it mailed, registered mail, to the fat man’s brothers and sisters, their husbands and wives, and all the family relatives. The announcement which arrived care of the fat man’s wife and marked Personal in red ink, but of a nature which obliged her to show it to her husband, read as follows:

*Our flirty whore has lost his mind, but it should be known his madness is not hereditary. It pains me to inform you that, while abroad, he contracted the Chinese chancres. In order to avoid infection, it is hoped you will abstain from further commerce with him.*

*Signed  
winter, 196—*

*But how much gloomier  
The garden  
Seen from the orphanage toilet—  
Age thirty-four!*

*—Uchida Hyakken*

Unfortunately, the significance of this text was clearest to the only member of the family who depended on language for a living, the fat man himself. With her pun on his age (he was thirty-four) his mother had tried to shame him, and by adding the verse about the orphanage toilet (he wasn’t clear if it was really by the poet Hyakken) she had even insinuated that he was not her real son: the announcement was the product of its author’s overriding hatred, a vexatious hatred which no one in the family was equipped so adequately to feel as the fat man himself. One thing was certain, there was no doubting the blood bond between them: like the fat man himself and like his son, her grandson, his mother was fatter than fat. The fat man was confident his wife would not suspect him of carrying a disease he had brought home from the Occident; even so, when he considered that the local printer must have read the announcement and when he pictured it being delivered into the hands of all his friends and relatives, he submerged in a terrible gloom. The effect of which was to impress on him the importance, not to his son perhaps but certainly to his own well-being, of the heavy bond of restraints which (so he had believed) had united himself and the child formerly. The trouble was, ever since his harrowing experience at the zoo, the fat man had doubted the very existence of these restraints and even suspected that his own desire to create and maintain them had led him to repeated feats of self-deception. Besides, once gained, his freedom was like an adhesive tape which could not be peeled away from his hand or heart.

He could not return to what had been. Until that day when it seemed he would be thrown to the polar bear and he was on the verge of losing his mind, the fat man had wandered around, sprawled on the floor, and eaten all his meals together with his son, allowing nothing to separate them. And this permitted him a perfectly concrete sense of the child as primarily a heavy and troublesome restraint which menaced, even as it regulated, his daily life. In truth, he enjoyed thinking of himself as a passive victim quietly enduring a bondage imposed by his son.

The fat man had always liked children; in college he had qualified for three kinds of teaching licenses. And as the time approached for his own child to be born he was unable to sit still for the spasms of anxiety and expectation which rippled through his body. Later, looking back, he had the feeling he had been counting on the birth of his child as a first step toward a new life for himself which would be out of the shadow of his dead father. But when the moment finally arrived and the fat man, painfully thin in those days, nervously questioned the doctor who emerged from the delivery room, he was told in an even voice that his child had been born with a grave defect.

\_\_\_\_Even if we operate I’m afraid the infant will either die or be an idiot, one or the other.

That instant, something inside the fat man irreparably broke. And the baby who was either to die or to be an idiot quickly elbowed out the breakage, as cancer destroys and then replaces normal cells. In arranging for the operation the fat man dashed around so frantically that his own in those days still meager body might well have broken down. His nervous system was like a chaos of numbness and hypersensitivity, an inflamed wound which had begun to heal but only in spots: fearfully he would touch places in himself and feel no pain at all; a moment later, when relief had lowered his guard, a scorching pain would make him rattle.

The deadline for registering the new infant arrived, and the fat man went to the ward office. But until the girl at the desk asked what it was to be, he hadn’t even considered a name for his son. At the time the operation was in progress, his baby was in the process of being required to decide whether he would die or be an idiot, one or the other. Could such an existence be given a name?

The fat man (let it be repeated that at the time, exhausted, he was thinner than ever in his life) took the registration form nonetheless and, recalling from the Latin vocabulary he had learned at college a word which should have related both to death and idiocy, wrote down the character for “forest” and named his son Mori. Then he took the form into the bathroom, sat down in one of the stalls, and began to giggle uncontrollably. This ignoble seizure was due in part to the state of the fat man’s nerves at the time. And yet even as a child there had been something inside him, something fundamental, which now and then impelled him to frivolous derision of his own and others’ lives. And this was something he was obliged to recognize in himself when his son finally left the hospital and came to live at home. Mori!—every time he called the child by name it seemed to him that he could hear, in the profound darkness in his head, his own lewd and unrepentant laughter mocking the entirety of his life. So he proposed giving his son a nickname and using it at home, though he had difficulty satisfying his wife with a reason. It was in this way that the fat man, borrowing the name of the misanthropic donkey in Winnie the Pooh, came to call his son Eeyore.

He moreover concluded, with renewed conviction, that his relationship with his own father, who had died suddenly when he was a child, must be the source of the somehow mistaken, insincere, unbalanced quality he had to recognize in himself, and he undertook somehow to recreate a whole image of the man, whom he remembered only vaguely. This produced a new repetition of collisions with his mother, who had never spoken about his father’s self-confinement and death and had combatted him for years by pretending to go mad whenever he questioned her. Not only did she refuse to cooperate; during a stay at his home while he was traveling abroad she had stolen his notes and incomplete manuscript for a biography of his father and had retained them to this day. For all he knew, she had already burned the manuscript, but since the thought alone made him want to kill his mother, he had no choice but not to think it.

And yet the fat man was dependent on his mother to a degree extraordinary for an adult of his age, another truth he was obliged to recognize. Drunk one night on the whiskey he relied on instead of sleeping pills, he was toying with a clay dog he had brought all the way from Mexico when he discovered a hole beneath the creature’s tail and blew into it hard, as if he were playing on a flute. Unexpectedly, a cloud of fine black dust billowed out of the hole and plastered his eyes. The fat man supposed he had gone blind, and in his distraction and his fear he called out to his mother: Mother, oh, Mother, help me, please! If I should go blind and lose my mind the way Father did, what will become of my son? Teach me, mother, how we can all outgrow our madness!

For no good reason, the fat man had been seized by the suspicion that his mother soon would age and die without having disclosed the explanation she had kept secret all these years, not only for his father’s self-confinement and death but the freakish something which underlay it and must also account for his own instability and for the existence of his idiot son, an existence which, inasmuch as it presented itself in palpable form, he assumed he could never detach from himself.

The fat man’s loneliness that night as he slept in the bed too large for even his bloated body has already been described, but the truth is that still another circumstance can be included as having contributed to it. That the fat man spent all his time in the company of his fat son Mori, called Eeyore, was known to most of the citizens in the neighborhood. What even the most curious of them did not know was that, until the decisive day when he was nearly thrown to a polar bear, the fat man had never failed to sleep with one arm extended toward his son’s crib, which he had installed at the head of his bed. In fact, his wife had quit his bed and secluded herself in another part of the house not so much because of strife between them as a desire of her own not to interfere with this intimacy between father and son. It had always been the fat man’s intention that he was acting on a wholesome parental impulse—if his son should awaken in the middle of the night he would always be able to touch his father’s fleshy hand in the darkness above his head. But now, when he examined them in light of the breakage which had resulted in himself when hoodlums had lifted him by his head and ankles and swung him back and forth as if to hurl him to the polar bear eyeing him curiously from the pool below, the fat man could not help discovering, in even these details of his life, a certain incongruity, as if a few grains of sand had sifted into his socks. Wasn’t it possible that he had slept with his arm outstretched so that the hand with which he groped in the darkness when uneasy dreams threatened him awake at night might encounter at once the comforting warmth of his son’s hand? Once he had recognized the objection being raised inside himself, the details of their life together, which to him had always seemed to represent his bondage to his son, one by one disclosed new faces which added to his confusion. Yet the very simplest details of their life together troubled him only rarely with this disharmony, and in this the fat man took solace as he grew more and more absorbed, feeling very much alone, in the battle with his mother. The fact was, even after his experience at the zoo, that he continued to enact certain of the daily rituals he shared with his son.