



JOHN MANDERINO

**CRYING AT
MOVIES**

A MEMOIR

"Manderino is a funny writer . . ."—Kirkus Reviews

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To Marie

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DEATH OF THE DINOSAURS

I remember, Aunt Sarah took me and my cousin Gene. I was six. Gene was eight and knew all about dinosaurs. He had little rubber ones in his room and knew their long names, their attitudes and eating habits. And while I sat there in my thick red seat, gazing at the blank screen, he whispered in my ear that no one knew why the dinosaurs all died out but this movie would explain what happened.

The lights lowered.

Dinosaurs, huge and steamy and sluggish, roamed among palm trees and giant ferns. Gene leaned his head near mine. "That's a brontosaurus," he whispered. And: "That's a tyrannosaur." And: "That's not a bird, that's a pterodactyl."

Meanwhile, a man's deep smooth voice was telling us how contented the dinosaurs were, what a good life they had. Most of them were plant eaters. Some, it's true, ate other dinosaurs, but that was all right. Peaceful music played on.

Then the music darkened.

Something bad was going to happen.

Then it happened.

Volcanoes blew their lids, the music exploding, and thick boiling lava came oozing down, spreading everywhere, picking up speed, moving swifter than the dinosaurs could flee, some sinking into the ground, others bellowing, others galloping through the smoke and falling flakes, their bodies on fire, howling like hungry dogs. And the volcanoes caused earthquakes, opening long jagged cracks in the ground, one of them running right between a dinosaur's feet, and he spread his legs while the crack grew wider until he couldn't stretch any further and fell in, roaring with horror.

I couldn't take this. I was crying. I wanted out. Aunt Sarah took me into the lobby.

It was quiet out there, clean red carpeting everywhere. I sat on a padded bench while she went to the glass concession stand and returned with a box of popcorn to settle my nerves.

But I was so shaky I dropped the box, popcorn tumbling out on the beautiful clean carpet. I got down on my hands and knees and began quickly picking up kernels and putting them back in the box. An usher coming in a red coat and tie, swinging a big-headed flashlight.

He stood over me. I waited on my hands and knees, head hung, hoping whatever he was going to do he would do it quickly. He spoke to Aunt Sarah, who was sitting there smoking a cigarette. "Nice boy," he said.

"My sister's kid."

He bent down to me, hands on his knees. "Would you like another box of popcorn, fella?"

I looked up at him. He had thick dark hair in his nose. "No, thank you." I didn't want any popcorn. I just wanted to go home.

The usher patted me on the head, good dog, and went away.

I sat next to Aunt Sarah and chewed linty popcorn while she smoked another Lucky Strike and told me not to worry, it was only a movie, and anyway it all happened millions of years ago.

I could still faintly hear the dinosaurs bellowing away in there. They were so huge and pitiful. It seemed hard to believe that God would allow such a horrible thing to actually happen. But there it was on film.

I wondered what else He would allow to happen.

THE SANDS OF IWO JIMA

“That’s real footage,” Uncle Doug points out.

It’s a grainy, faraway shot of a Marine hosing down a hillside with a flame-thrower.

I say to him, “Huh.”

Then it’s back to John Wayne and his men, who seem far more real than the real footage. John Wayne is Sergeant Stryker, his men the men of Company Able, on an island with palm trees, white beaches, and “a whole lot of little lemon-colored fellas,” as Stryker puts it.

Japs, he means.

I’m in my pajamas sitting cross-legged on a throw rug, my younger brother Mike upstairs in bed, Uncle Doug behind me in his sofa chair, in my parents’ basement where he lives.

Uncle Doug resembles Sergeant Stryker. He’s my mom’s brother so he’s not Italian and he looks like a combination of John Wayne, President Kennedy and the Marlboro Man.

“That’s called a B.A.R., what that guy is using right there,” he says.

I know he’s waiting for me to ask him, so I do: “What’s that stand for?”

“Browning automatic rifle.”

“Huh.”

Uncle Doug knows a lot about the war, having been in it. So was my dad, but Uncle Doug was a machine gunner on Okinawa. My dad was a cook on an island off Alaska— we have pictures of him smiling, wearing the same white apron he wears at the butcher shop, not wearing a helmet, not needing one.

“Uncle Doug?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Did you kill any Japs over there?”

He tells me that isn’t something you should talk about. “But I’ll tell you this,” he says. “I know for sure I got at least eighteen of those sons-a-bitches—possibly more, but eighteen for certain. But like I said, it’s not something you should talk about.”

“Eighteen, Uncle Doug?”

“At least.”

My dad killed pigs and chickens.

“Those boats are called A.L.C.’s,” Uncle Doug informs me.

“A.L.C.?”

“Amphibious landing craft.”

“Huh.”

Stryker and his men hit the beach but get pinned down. This wisecracking Brooklyn Dodger fan the clown Rigs gets shot. He tells Stryker, “Looks like ... I’ll get a good ... night’s sleep ... tonight, Sarge,” and dies.

Then a commercial for Bill Moran, your friendly Dodge dealer. “C’mon down!” he shouts, spreading his arms.

Rigs is dead and this clown is selling cars.

I sit there wishing to God I was on Iwo Jima with a B.A.R., racing in a zigzag, blazing away.

screaming, *Die, you lemon-colored sons-a-bitches, die, die!*

“Absolutely worst cars ever built,” Uncle Doug is telling me.

He drives a Plymouth Fury. It’s parked out front, a work helmet in the back window. When he’s not between jobs he’s an ironworker, in a helmet and tool belt, strolling sky-high girders, a Pall Mall in the corner of his mouth.

My dad wears an apron and waits on customers. He doesn’t even smoke.

“That’s a good old standard M-1 rifle he’s got right there,” Uncle Doug points out when the movie is back, Stryker shooting a Jap who shot the happy-go-lucky guy from Tennessee they called Farmer.

“Huh.”

I’m not that sorry about Farmer. He was kind of an idiot.

Stryker and his men fight their way to Mount Suribachi, where they rest for a minute, Stryker pulling out his cigarettes, saying he feels pretty good. And just then, just as he’s saying how good he feels, he gets a bullet in the back from a sniper.

Someone machine-guns a nearby palm tree and a Jap falls out of it. Then they turn to Stryker. “Is he ...?” one of the men says. And the one bending over the body says, “Yeah.”

“Those bastards,” Uncle Doug says quietly.

I can’t speak.

Then that famous shot of those five Marines raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi.

“That’s real footage.”

I manage to say, “Huh,” tears running freely down my face now.

Then one of the men growls out, “All right, let’s get back in the war.” And they trudge off.

The End, music up:

From the halls of Montezu-uma

To the shores of Tripoli ...

Uncle Doug tells me to turn it off and I do, but I don’t want to leave. I want to talk. I want to tell him how I feel about the United States Marine Corps, whose motto is *Semper Fidelis*, meaning *Always Faithful*, and how faithful I will be to the Marines, always, and how I hope to God when I’m old enough to enlist there’s a war going on, hopefully with those little lemon-colored bastards again.

But he tells me, “Lights out, soldier.”

I go upstairs. I walk quietly past my parents’ bedroom, my dad snoring away in there.

He has to get up at 5:30 in the morning, while it’s still dark out. And he doesn’t get home again until dark. And he does that six days a week, for us—my mom and me and my brother and three sisters—always. I know he’s the best father in the world. I know that. I do.

But still: while all those guys were dying on Iwo Jima— guys like Rigs, like Stryker—he was up in Alaska, in an apron, making spaghetti and meatballs.

RIO BRAVO

There was this very clean, very quiet kid my age, Jerome Fitzgerald, who lived at the other end of the block with just his mom. One rainy Saturday afternoon he rang our front doorbell. My mother answered it and came for me. “It’s that kid—what’s his name? Jerome?”

“Who?”

“From down the block.”

“What’s *he* want?” I said, going to see.

He was standing on the porch in a yellow raincoat and hood, under an umbrella. He spoke as if reciting: “My mother was wondering if you would like to come with me to see a movie at the Dolton Theater. Not with her,” he added. “She’ll just drive.”

Out on the street a car was parked along the curb, its motor running, a large woman behind the wheel.

“Right now, you mean?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“What movie?”

“*Thunderball*.”

“James Bond?”

He nodded.

I stood there considering.

“Is she paying?” I asked.

He nodded.

“What about candy?”

He nodded.

I told him that sounded fine. I went and got my raincoat.

On the way there, I sat with Jerome in the back seat, his mother explaining as she drove along, “You looked to me like the sort of fellow who might enjoy seeing a good movie now and then—Jerome’s the same way, the very same—and I thought to myself, ‘Now isn’t it silly—isn’t it *selfish*—to be taking on one of these boys to the movies, just because he happens to be my son?’”

I looked at Jerome.

He shrugged.

As it turned out, the movie was quite excellent, and during it I had two bags of popcorn, a box of Good ‘n’ Plenty, a large Coke, and a Slo-Poke which I was still working on as we afterwards got into the car waiting out front.

“Well? How was it? How was it?”

I told her it was good.

“Jerome? *Your* verdict?”

He told her he thought it was good, too.

“Great minds think alike,” she said, and laughed, pulling away from the curb.

On the way home she talked about how wonderfully this had worked out and said we should do this every time a new movie came to the theater, on its very first Saturday matinee. “What do you think

John? Does that sound to you like a pretty good idea?"

I told her, "Sure."

"Jerome? What about you? John is up for it. Do you think that sounds like a pretty good idea? Pretty good plan?"

"I guess," he said, looking out his window.

She laughed. "Great minds think alike!"

Turning down our street she asked me if I would like to stop over for some fudge brownies she made especially.

I didn't want any. For one thing, I was so full I wasn't sure I could finish my Slo-Poke. And anyway I didn't want to go to Jerome's house. He was so quiet and she never shut up. "No, thank you," I said. "I'm supposed to be doing something."

"Oh?" she said.

"I'm building a doll house for my little sister Nancy."

"How sweet."

She drove on past their house and dropped me off at mine. I thanked her and said goodbye to Jerome and got out of the car and forgot about them.

But two Saturday afternoons later Jerome rang the front doorbell again, his mother in the car, the motor running.

So all that fall and winter I went to every new movie at the Dolton Theater, free of charge, riding on the backseat with Jerome while his mom talked on and on, usually about him, about some "mischief" he'd been up to lately, some prank he had pulled. You could tell she was trying to show me what a fun-loving person he was, what a fun friend he would make, but usually the mischievous prank he pulled seemed a lot more weird than fun-loving, like the time he dumped all the silverware into the fish tank.

"You boys are all alike," she cheerfully complained. "You're all a bunch of little rascals."

Jerome and I meanwhile sat there looking out our separate windows.

And after every movie, turning down our block, she would invite me over for brownies, or tollhouse cookies, or strawberry ice cream. And I would tell her my uncle Billy from Texas was visiting, or I had to help my brother with his homework, or get my mother some All-Bran for her constipation.

Between movies I never hung out with Jerome, or even saw him since we went to different grade schools, but every two or three weeks we went through the same routine, no matter what movie was showing. Sometimes it was something good, cowboys or cops or commandos, but I also remember seeing things like *Pillow Talk*, with Rock Hudson and Doris Day.

The best one I ever saw with Jerome, by far, also turned out to be the last one we saw together: *Bravo*.

John Wayne was Sheriff John T. Chance, with a great-looking hat. Dean Martin was Dude, trying hard to stay off the bottle and be useful against the bad guys. Ricky Nelson was Colorado but really just Ricky Nelson in cowboy clothes. Walter Brennan was good old Stumpy, limping around and complaining in a high cranky voice. And Angie Dickinson, as Feathers, had this way of standing with her hands at her hips looking sideways at John Wayne, who she liked a lot.

After several setbacks they finally beat the bad guys, thanks in large part to Stumpy of all people. And it looked like Dude was going to lick his drinking problem after all. Ricky Nelson would be cheerful and moving on now. And John Wayne and Angie Dickinson were definitely going to be together, maybe get married, who knows? And as *The End* appeared on the screen, Dean Martin sang in his laid back way

“While the rolling Rio Bravo rolls along.”

I felt great.

Leaving the theater with Jerome I just kept shaking my head: “That Stumpy. Who’d a thought Y’know?”

Jerome shook his head. “Not me.”

I liked Jerome. Jerome was all right, I decided. True, he didn’t play any sports, and his clothes were far too neat and clean, and he wore a wristwatch, and probably had hobbies, and his name was *Jerome*.

...

When his mother asked me how was the movie I told her, “It was really good, Mrs. Fitzgerald.” And when she asked Jerome he told her it was excellent.

“Well,” she said, “listen to *you* two.”

I knew what was coming next.

“Sounds to me like you fellas might enjoy a little *chinwag* together, compare notes. Maybe over a nice bowl of tapioca. How does *that* sound?”

I was in such a good mood from the movie I told her that sounded fine.

She went quiet for a moment, driving along. Then she said, “Hear that, Jerome? We’re havin’ company.”

“Ma?” he said.

“Yes, dear?”

“Can I talk to you?”

“Of course you can talk to me. What kind of—”

“In private?”

“Well, hon, that’s a little difficult right now.”

He laid the side of his head against the window.

“Jerome’s a little nervous,” she explained to me. “But he’ll relax. Won’t you, dear. Just give him a chance.” She was looking at me in the rearview mirror. “Everyone deserves a chance. Don’t you think?”

So I went to their house and ate tapioca from a red glass bowl at their kitchen table, sitting across from Jerome, his mom leaving us alone so we could talk to each other and become friends.

I told him the tapioca was good, the best I’d ever had, which was true. I told him my mom’s was always gummy.

He said if I wanted seconds he was sorry but there wasn’t any more.

I told him that was okay. I told him I was pretty full.

He nodded. He said I’d eaten an awful lot in the last couple of hours.

I gave a laugh, agreeing.

He started naming everything I’d eaten, ticking off each item on his fingers.

I corrected him about having two bags of popcorn, and took a final spoonful of tapioca.

“I hate you,” he said quietly.

I looked at him.

He was sitting there with his hands in his lap, staring at me hard. “Get out of my house,” he told me.

I set my spoon in the bowl and got up from the table.

He kept his eyes on me.

Stepping backwards I told him, “No problem. I was leaving anyway. My brother needs help with his

homework—history, Columbus, fourteen ninety-two, all that.”

He continued sitting there staring at me.

I turned around and got out of there.

THE INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

Near the very end of the movie the main character Miles shouts into the camera, wild-eyed, straight at me, *They're already here! You're next!*

Afterwards, across the dark between our beds, I asked Mike for his thoughts.

"I don't know ..." he said. "Those pods ..."

"What about 'em?"

"Seemed pretty goofy."

"What's goofy? The seeds came from outer space and grew into huge seed pods. How is that goofy?"

"With *aliens* inside?"

"*Growing* inside. They didn't just happen."

"And they come out looking exactly like different people in the town? How does *that* work?"

"I don't know, I'm not a scientist. Prob'ly had something to do with them being aliens."

"Yeah, well ..."

"I mean, let's face it," I said.

"Face what?"

"Who knows?"

"Who knows what?"

"That's what I'm saying."

We were quiet for a moment.

"Well," he said, turning over the other way, "g'night."

"Sure that's a good idea?"

Going to sleep, I meant. That was when your alien double absorbed your mind.

He said if it happens it happens.

"It wouldn't bother you? Waking up as an alien?"

"Not if I *was* one."

That was true. When Miles' friend Jack comes back after turning into one, he's very peaceful—it's creepy—telling Miles and Becky in a smooth voice how silly it is to resist, how much better off they'll be if they just give up and go to sleep.

I asked Mike if he wanted to play some cards.

"Right now?"

"Some Old Maid. Nickel a hand. Whaddaya say."

"I'm tired."

"Couple hands, c'mon."

"Lemme sleep."

Mike was two years younger than me, but wasn't afraid of half the stuff I was. Sometimes it pissed me off.

"Tell you something," I said to him. "If you ever did turn into an alien, know what I would do?"

"Gut me like a catfish."

"That's right, pal."

We were quiet.

"I know what you're thinking," I told him.

"No, you don't."

"You're thinking, how would I know it wasn't you? How would I know it was really an alien *pretending* to be you? That's a real good question. And here's the answer. I would start noticing things. Little slip-ups."

"Yeah?" he said, half interested. "Like what?"

"I don't know, you'd offer me a sip of your pop or something."

"Oh I don't share stuff?"

"Before I even asked."

We were quiet. I was losing him again. I went to the heart of the matter. "Or maybe you'd *really* slip up and start showing me a little respect."

He turned over this way again. "A little what?"

"You heard me."

"I don't show you enough respect?"

"Not really."

"Like how? Saluting you?"

"Make a joke."

"I'm asking."

"Skip it."

"I wanna hear."

"Drop it," I told him.

I didn't really want him to, but he did, he dropped it, and was quiet again. So I came out with it. "You think I'm a chicken, right? Don't you."

He didn't answer.

"Tell the truth."

I waited.

"I don't think you're a chicken," he finally said. "Just because you're afraid to go to sleep, that doesn't make you a—"

"Wait a minute, hold it, whoa. Just because I'm *what?*"

He didn't say anything.

"See, this is what I'm talking about. This is exactly what I'm talking about."

"What."

"Respect," I said.

"You're not afraid to go to sleep?"

"Oh, you mean because there's an alien out there in a giant seed pod waiting to take over my mind? Is that what you mean?"

"Well ... yeah."

"Oh, my God. Listen carefully. It's a *movie*, Mike, okay? It's not real. Do you know the difference? I hope so. Otherwise, you know what? I hate to say it but you're insane."

"Hey, *I'm* not the one afraid of going to sleep. I *wanna* go to sleep."

"So go to sleep," I told him. "Who the hell's stoppin' ya?"

We were quiet. He turned over the other way again. He was going to sleep.

“Tell you the part of the movie *I* liked,” I said. “Wanna hear?”

I waited.

“Mike?”

“What.”

“Wanna hear the part *I* liked?”

“Go ’head.”

“Becky,” I said.

“Who?”

“The guy’s girlfriend. She gave me a boner.”

“I don’t wanna hear.”

“Thing was huge.”

“G’night.”

“Like a billy club.”

We were quiet again.

I turned onto my back and lay staring up at the dark. After a minute I could feel him already asleep over there, part of the darkness now. I continued staring up at it, my heart beating hard. You wouldn’t even know you were gone. That was the horrible thing about it. You wouldn’t even know.

I turned onto my side again, towards Mike. I wanted to tell him I agreed with him about the pods. The pods were goofy. Ridiculous. *Funny* in fact, and I laughed out loud.

No response.

I laughed louder.

WEST SIDE STORY

I didn't know very much about my older sisters Cheryl and Linda, what made them tick. They were both good in school, I knew that, and were generally very nice to me. Sometimes they jitterbugged together, not smiling, barefoot on the kitchen floor, Ricky Nelson or Fats Domino on their little suitcase-looking record player.

Cheryl had a boyfriend, Bob, who was tall and a little too handsome, played no baseball, and drove a car. I didn't like him. Linda had a colored picture of the singer Fabian taped to the wall above her bed. He had the kind of face you'd love to slap.

Sometimes one of them would send me to the drugstore with a little folded-up note for the cashier which read, simply: *kotex*.

And I knew they liked the movie *West Side Story* because they took a train downtown to see it three times, and afterwards went around singing:

Tonight, tonight won't be just any night ...

When you're a Jet you're a Jet all the way ...

Maria, I just met a girl named Maria ...

They had a big glossy book from the movie, full of colored stills, and I remember looking through it carefully, trying to get a fix on these two. There were pictures of hoody-looking teenagers in tight clothes dancing hard. The guys all looked like they had jack-knives on them and the girls all looked impure.

There were also pictures of a clean-looking couple, Tony and Maria, singing together, gazing into each other's eyes, apparently in love. The book said the movie was based on *Romeo and Juliet*, which I knew was a love story.

Love, love.

I studied one of the stills of Maria to see if I could imagine falling in love with her. She was in a white dress sitting on a fire escape singing down to me and I was down there singing up to her. We did that for a while. Then she sang for me to take my pants off, which I did, and she started singing like she was mad, and I went up there, singing.

But I knew that couldn't be what Cheryl and Linda had in mind when they sang, *Tonight, tonight won't be just any night ...*

THE BIRDS

The summer it came to the Dolton Theater we had an actual outbreak of starling attacks in the neighborhood, nothing major at first, just now and then a starling or two swooping low over somebody's head on his way to the park. But from there it grew worse.

Skippy Whalen claimed a starling had actually lifted and carried away his ball cap.

Father Rowley was pointing in Brian Baumgartner's face outside the church, telling him what a loud altar boy he was, when a starling dropped a load of milky poop on his finger and flew away laughing at that ugly voice of theirs.

According to the twins Jimmy and Joey, their feisty little dog Tuffy had fought off nine of them, killing one. For a nickel they would bring it out from their garage in a cardboard box and let you look at it. For a quarter you could have it.

There was also a story going around that a pack of them in Harvey, one town over, had actually carried off a little screaming baby right out of its stroller, right in front of the mother, who fainted dead away.

Kids were going around wearing football helmets in the middle of baseball season.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. No one could explain. It was like the starlings were inspired by the movie. But that seemed unlikely. This kid Andy Zahara had a theory. He said the movie had everyone afraid of birds, the starlings had somehow picked up on it, then counted how many of them versus them.

"They can count?"

"Sure they can."

"But what do they want?"

"To take over."

"Take over what?"

"Everything. They wanna run the place."

"Oh ... my ... God."

So far the sparrows were staying out of it, so were the robins, it was just the starlings—black, freckled, oily-looking things, tiny black buttons for eyes. I remember one evening in our alley I counted ten of them along a telephone wire squawking to each other:

—*There he is.*

—*Look at him.*

—*Little creep.*

—*Little coward.*

—*Let's crap in his hair.*

—*Let's pluck out his eyes.*

—*Ready?*

—*No, let's wait.*

—*Surprise him.*

They laughed and flew off together.

I blamed Alfred Hitchcock. Near the beginning of the movie I spotted him stepping out of a pet shop.

with two little dogs on a leash, heading down the sidewalk like he's got nothing to do with any of this. ~~Snobby, coldblooded fatman—he probably enjoyed having golden-haired Tippy Hedron trapped in the attic with seagulls pecking her to shreds. That was how he got his kicks.~~

In the movie the people finally give up. Very carefully they get in the car and very slowly drive away from the farmhouse, letting the birds win. But we fought back. Anyway, some older kids did.

They put together a posse. A couple of them had BB-guns, others had rocks, bottles, baseball bats. I heard it got pretty ugly. Someone hit someone with a rock, the two of them started going at it, others joined in, and pretty soon everyone was shouting and punching and clubbing, the starlings watching from the trees, hugely amused.

This was the way we were spending our summer vacation. This was the way we were spending our three months of freedom.

By the time September came around, I didn't even mind that much.

Then sure enough, just like that, the starlings quit attacking people. In fact, they were hardly around anymore. They had ruined our summer and apparently that was all they'd had in mind.

Sitting at my desk in Sister Veronica Lawrence's class, staring out the window, I wondered what Alfred Hitchcock would come up with next. Maybe squirrels. I always felt like squirrels were just waiting for the chance.

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN

Dear Miss Reynolds,

I am writing to you in my pajamas on the front room couch with a lot of blankets and pillows because I have mono, which is called the kissing disease so I don't know how I got it, I have never kissed anyone but I would like to kiss you. Guess what I just watched on The Early Show? Singing in the Rain. And I have to say, it was pretty sickening, especially your grinning boyfriend Gene Kelly, and that other guy, the little one who sang about making them laugh, he made me want to hit him with something. But I think you are very cute and spunky. May I call you Deb? I think I have a fever, Deb. I think I might be sicker than they think. In case you're wondering, I am thirteen, eighth grade, Sister Marie Alice's class, Queen of Apostles, Riverdale, suburb of Chicago, Illinois, United States, North America, planet Earth, the Universe. Sister Marie Alice is the smallest nun in the school but she can slap you so hard you see stars, like in a cartoon. Are you Catholic, Deb? Every time I think about you naked, do you know what I am doing? Driving the nails in deeper into His tender hands and feet. That's what Sister calls them, His tender hands and feet. I have the chills really bad, but I'm sweating like a pig—how can that be, Deb? Maybe I'm dying. If I died right now I would go straight to Hell and lay there twisting and screaming in pain, without a let-up, forever. Ever think about forever? It's hard to, then all of a sudden you get it and you think No! No! Right now though, all I'm thinking about is you, in a pair of yellow rain boots, and that's all, just the rain boots. Hope you don't mind. I'm trying to say I like you, Deb, a lot. I like the way you sing and the way you dance and I like that chubby face of yours. But I have to say, a couple of times during the movie I was sort of hating you. Know why? Because I could tell you knew what a cutie you were, singing and dancing away, laughing inside, knowing the way you were making me get.

Pray for me, Deb.

Sincerely,

Your number one fan

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

It was on TV a few nights before Christmas, and although she didn't come out and say it, I think Mom wanted this to be a "family event," all of us watching it together, including Uncle Doug from the basement. She'd even made popcorn.

But Uncle Doug said he was going to stay down there and read. He was halfway through this huge book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. He came up and took a bowl of popcorn, though.

So there was Mom and Dad and Nancy on the couch, Cheryl in one chair, Linda in the other, Mike and me on the floor. You could tell from the opening credits—the fancy handwriting trimmed with holly, the sleigh bells and jaunty violins—this was going to be long and corny and boring.

Cheryl lucked out, her boyfriend Bob coming to the back door just after the thing got started. She'd promised Mom and Dad she'd be back early.

"Tell him to come in and watch the movie," Dad suggested.

Cheryl said quietly, "He seems upset."

"Oh, for Christ sake," Mom said.

Bob was a big handsome guy in collegiate-looking clothes but very sensitive and frequently upset.

So Cheryl got out of it. And then, while George in the movie was still a boy working at the town drugstore, the phone in the kitchen rang and Linda jumped up—"I got it!"—and ran out.

I heard her out there: "Hello?"

I waited.

"Oh my God," she said, "you're kidding. Hang on." She closed the kitchen door. It was her friend Mary Jo Foster, undoubtedly. "The Mouth," as Dad called her. Linda wouldn't be back.

Jimmy Stewart pretty soon took over in the movie as George the adult. He was talking to a pretty girl, Mary—Donna Reed from *The Donna Reed Show*—at a crowded dance. Then Dad started snoring, loudly.

Mom woke him up. "We can't hear the *movie*."

"Just resting my eyes," he told her.

But by the time George and Mary were dancing the Charleston together he was snoring again.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Mom said, and got him to his feet.

He walked off, holding up a large gnarly hand: "Goodnight."

"Night, Dad," Mike and Nan and I told him.

After the dance George walked Mary home, telling her if she wanted the moon just say the word and he would throw a lasso around it. "I'd pull 'er down for ya, Mary."

Nancy said she was going to throw up and ran to the bathroom. I felt the same way, but she meant from eating too much buttered popcorn for a seven-year-old. Mom went to help her out—we were all bad at vomiting.

Which left me and Mike, lying on the floor, chins in our fists.

George and Mary went on talking together in the moonlight about their hopes and dreams and such.

Mike turned his head to the side, closed his eyes and went to sleep.

I could hear Mom in the bathroom coaching Nan, telling her to relax, just let it come up. Then Nan began making enormous sounds for a little kid. "That's it," Mom told her, "there you go, that's it ..."

I turned the volume louder.

Mike woke up and went to bed.

~~I continued watching because no matter how bad a movie is, after I've stayed beyond a certain point I'm stuck with it.~~

By the time Mom got Nancy into bed and returned to the living room, George and Mary were ducking rice outside the church. Mom stood there looking around the room, shaking her head and muttering something.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing." She went around collecting popcorn bowls.

"Aren't you gonna watch?"

"I've seen it." She told me to turn the volume down and went to bed.

I felt bad for her. She'd had this nice idea.

About half an hour later George suddenly flipped out, right in front of the wife and kids on Christmas Eve, shouting and breaking things, like he couldn't stand being in this stupid sickening movie a minute longer, and ended up drunk on a bridge in the falling snow, about to jump.

This was more like it.

But then this little old sweet-faced angel named Clarence appears and shows George what a wonderful life he's actually had, and still has, and George goes running back to it, screaming *Merry Christmas* to everyone on the street, and at home he hugs his wife and children— *Oh, kids! Oh, Mary!*—then all the townspeople come over with an actual basket full of cash to save the building-and-loan company, and someone proposes a toast—*To George, the richest man in town*—meaning of course rich with family and friends who love him very much, and they all start singing, *Should auld acquaintance be forgot ...*

Linda, finally off the phone, came in and stood there. "How is it?"

"Stinks to high heaven."

"Is that why you're crying?"

"I'm not crying."

She gave a little snort and walked out.

"I'm *not*."

ZORBA THE GREEK

I watched it with Nan. Afterwards I lay in bed staring up at the dark. Across the room Mike was asleep with the flu, now and then muttering stuff:

“That your bat?”

I wondered what Zorba would think of me.

He told Alan Bates, “A man needs madness,” meaning you’re too careful and scared to really live *live*. Alan Bates knew Zorba was right. “Teach me to dance,” he said, and Zorba got up from the lounge. “Dance? Did you say ... *dance*?” Then that wonderful music, starting slow, as they danced together side by side on the white beach, an arm across each other’s shoulder, Zorba chuckling deeply: “Boss, I have so much to tell you.” And as the music grew faster they separated and danced backwards facing each other, arms wide, smiling in the sun, Alan Bates fully into it now, fully understanding, the camera receding until they were two tiny figures dancing like mad on the vast white beach, the music continuing faster, wilder, happier, the top of my head coming off. Then the credits.

Lying there now, staring up at the dark, I felt certain that if Zorba ever met me he would sadly shake his head. Take tonight, for example. What had I done with this precious gift of Life I’d been given? I watched a movie with my nine-year-old sister, both of us in our seersucker pajamas and house slippers.

“Throw it ’ere,” Mike muttered.

I turned onto my side, facing the wall. “Books,” Zorba said to Alan Bates, with scorn, “you only know books.” I only knew movies.

There was a tap at the door.

“Yeah?”

Nan came in. “You awake?” she whispered.

I sat up and turned on the lamp. She was fully dressed. “What’re you doing?” I said.

“Shhh.” Our parents were asleep in the next room.

“Don’t be shushing me, Nan.”

“Some grounders now,” Mike said.

She looked over at him.

“He’s asleep,” I explained.

“That’s creepy.” She looked at me. “Wanna go out?”

I didn’t understand. “Out where?”

“To the park.”

“What for?”

“Just ... I don’t know, go *out* there.”

“Nan, it’s eleven-thirty.”

“Right,” she said, nodding, meaning that was the idea.

I asked her point-blank, “This got something to do with the movie?”

She shrugged, embarrassed.

But she was right. *A man needs madness.*

I got up and pulled on my pants, right over my pajama bottoms—something Zorba would probably do in his haste to get out there and live, *live*.

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