

Maury Suffers from Acid Reflux . . .

Maury was one of the top schmoozers in the Big H. He could enter a crowded party, show up for an awards ceremony or step into a swank dining room frequented by heavy hitters, and he would know the names of nearly everyone present. By the end of the event, whatever it was, he would have had a personal word with most of those people. “What a guy,” they would often say after he’d passed by. Everybody loved Maury.

What everybody didn’t know about Maury, however, was that he suffered from chronic acid reflux. The doctors suspected an ulcer and recommended surgery, but Maury wouldn’t hear of it.

“Are you kidding me?” he would say to Dr. Schwartz of the Brentwood Clinic, for example, “I’d rather wrestle a giant squid than let you open me up! Not on your life!” Dr. Schwartz would raise his hands, palms up, shoulders raised, as if to say, “What can I do?” And that would be that.

The other thing most people didn’t know is that during an attack of acid reflux Maury usually lost all desire to schmooze. “No More Mr. Nice Guy!” he would say to himself. That’s why he kept a snap-lidded, jumbo bottle of Maalox tablets in the driver’s-door map-pocket of his Mercedes sedan. He was very good at using his fingers like chopsticks to fish out a tablet or two, at or between stoplights; and the “no-hands” speaker-phone accessory in the Mercedes kept people from finding out Maury’s little secret.

Except for Fex.

Fex knew about the acid-reflux, but didn’t care. In fact, Fex used this knowledge as a little piece of extortionate information he held in reserve—just in case. It might come in handy some day.

So, today Maury just walked into Fex’s office, skipped the pleasantries and plopped his briefcase down. He nodded to Owl Man and Heron Man, opened the

briefcase and withdrew a handful of papers to be signed. After all, he thought, Fex had told him that the two bird-brains were “in the bag.”

“Now if you’ll both just sign here, and here, and here,” said Maury, reflexively suave, but, on a reflux day, not in a mood to kiss anybody’s ass.

“We’re not signing anything yet, Maury!” exclaimed Heron Man, a bit too loudly, perhaps.

Owl Man continued the thought at a lower volume. In fact, Maury had to lean closer to hear what he was saying:

“Not until we’re sure we understand the whole deal!”

This was Owl Man’s characteristic stance: hold fast, and fortify the position first, before *concretizing*—his word—the “understanding.”

“Of course, sure, no problem,” said Maury, leaning back, and backing off just a bit. “What exactly would you like to know?” He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. **“Before you sign these fucking papers?”** There was that acid reflux rising up in his gullet again, affecting Maury’s speech centers and his mood.

Fex’s eyes darted back and forth and a broad smile began to spread across his face. He could see what was happening—knew Maury was having one of his “tummy days.”

“Whoa, Nellie! Why don’t we just take a break for a minute here? You hungry, Maury?” Fex said, nodding in Maury’s direction. Without waiting for Maury’s answer he pressed the intercom button. “Say, Gladys, would you have some sandwiches brought in, please? Roast beef with horseradish, ham and asiago and duck *pâté* with spring greens would be fine. Several each. And two bottles of that cask-aged claret we just laid up.”

“Seltzer for me,” said Maury, suppressing a grimace.

“And a bottle of seltzer for Maury,” added Fex.

“Very well, Mr. Firestone. Seltzer for Maury.”

“Boy, what a broad,” said Fex, turning back to his guests. “I’d give her a 9, at least, huh? If she wasn’t my secretary, I’d be datin’ her, wouldn’t I? Huh, Maury?”

Maury and Fex, the two bigshots, eyeballed each other, almost winking in a “dog-whistle” code of silent understanding.

“First of all, Maury,” said Heron Man, sounding impatient, “we just barely got off the plane from Seattle, and a few minutes ago we heard only the briefest description possible from Fex here, and ... ”

This time it was Owl Man’s turn to touch Heron Man’s sleeve.

“What Heron Man is trying to say is that Fex’s plan was so brilliant that our heads are spinning with the possibilities. Aren’t they, Heron Man?”

“Oh, yes, definitely spinning, all right. Spinning like wobbly tops!”

It was evident that Heron Man was not completely mollified, nor was he as completely “in the bag” as Fex had said—but in his private mind, Maury, today of all days, just didn’t “give a shit.” He knew the two eggheads would sign and then he could get the hell outta there, pop a handful of Maalox, and hurry along to his next, hopefully very lengthy, appointment with a “hot” young starlet. “I’m thinking she’s, like, a 10!” he had told Fex several times.

This trend in outright sexist thought and expression was becoming quite common and widespread lately, due to an unexpected backlash in politics, after a 40-or-so-year feminist- and black-power-driven hiatus, a hated movement that power players bitterly denigrated as “PC.”

Bottom line? Maury didn’t feel so hot at the moment, and was therefore in a bad mood. At the same time, reflux or not, he was too smart to blow a lucrative contract with “the two eggheads,” just because of tummy trouble and what he would have described, had he and Fex been alone, as an acute case of “anxious balls.”

Just then the sandwich caterer entered the room. He was a tall, obsequious Frenchman named Jules, who sported long black curled hair and a goatee with a “French tickler”—a swordsman’s presentation, though in France he had studied ballet and mime. He reminded Heron Man of D’Artagnan. Jules’ dream had always been to work in Hollywood as an actor, playing dashing roles like an heir to Errol Flynn or Johnny Depp, but for now he was content to wheel the sandwiches and wine into the room on an ornate cart. Fex asked Jules to serve his guests according to their desires.

“*Avec plaisir, monsieur,*” and he went about serving the sandwiches and wine with that obsequious grace. It was all Jules could do not to leap across the room,

execute a scissors kick in mid-air, and finish with the mime's favorite—splayed out hands moving across an invisible plate-glass window.

Jules offered a glass of claret to Maury, who patted his tummy by way of apology, before requesting the seltzer instead.

Critical assessments followed: On the taste of the sandwiches—“delightful,” “superb,” “hits the spot!” On the claret—“smooth, stunning bouquet,” “a *souçon* of blackberries, chocolate and tobacco,” “long finish!”

Finally, Fex re-convened the meeting for its primary purpose—to get the bird-brains to sign the papers.

“OK, that was good! Now, lemme go through this one more time before you guys sign Maury's papers,” announced Fex.

Chairs shifted in anticipation, Jules wheeled the cart away, and Fex, who had eaten three sandwiches, belched, then stood up. He reminded Heron Man of Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*. Or would it be, Orson Welles in *A Touch of Evil*?

“So, here's how it goes,” began Fex: “Ya got these two guys—OK?—these two so-called writers, who think they're gonna write a fancy novel, and they're gonna do that by ropin' a bunch of pretty sharp characters, rope 'em like long-horns or something, and get them to do a bunch of hocus-pocus stuff.”

Fex paused and looked around to make sure everyone was following the subtle innuendoes of his pitch so far. Satisfied, he continued:

“And what are these so-called writers supposed to get the sharp guys to do? They want the sharp guys to pull off a bank heist, so *they*—the writers—can get rich. Except the bird-brains didn't count on the main guy, the real bigshot of the story, bein' so smart. This main guy, he's a big redhead and wears an ascot all the time—looks kinda like me, ya know, heh heh heh.”

Fex looked pleased with himself.

“Anyway, this main guy, he's way ahead of the bird-brains. So, in his head, the main guy, he's got it all figured out, but he plays along with the two writers, plays their little game. But then this Chinese shadow-boxer comes along. And he's got a big beef with the main writer, from before, and wants to fuck up—he wants to mess up—the plans for the heist. But he can't do it 'cause there's these dames—gotta have

dames—and they’re wise to the ninja-guy, so they trick him into playin’ with rattlesnakes. And the guy who owns the bank and hired the ninja-guy, he flips out and throws some dude out the window, and the cops come and haul him away and lock him up. So in the end, it’s the *main guy*, the big redhead, that gets all the dough. ‘Cause here’s the trick, *the old switcheroo*—and you don’t find this out ‘til the end of the movie: *It was real all along!* The writers was playin’ it like it was just for fun, but the main sharp guy knew it was real all along. So, while they run the credits, you see some beach scene in Rio or the Bahamas, some place swanky, and there’s the main guy sittin’ on the beach with his broad, laughin’ his nuts off ... ”

Fex was getting carried away with this ending image. He wasn’t *really* “laughin’ his nuts off,” he was just laughing “hilariously,” or “delightedly,” or something. The studio screenplay writers he proposed to bring on board would decide how the stage directions for that closing scene should be worded. In fact, they would probably re-write the whole thing, so credits were a big deal in the Big H.

“But in the meantime,” said Fex, “you guys are gonna help me fill in the details, tighten up the story a little bit. That’s why you’re listed here on Maury’s contract as “consultants,” right, Maury?”

Fex looked at Maury. At the moment he was holding his tummy, so he just nodded and managed a meager smile.

“What just I told you,” said Fex, “is only a ‘treatment,’ you know, like we say here in the Big H. So we all work together on this treatment, write it up as a real script, bring in production guys and the money guys (I call ‘em ‘bean counters,’ heh, heh), figure out who’s doin’ the set design, costumes, the whole schmeer.”

“What’s the time-period setting, Fex?” asked Owl Man, who liked historical time-lines. “A costume drama, maybe, set in the late sixteen, early seventeen hundreds?”

“Yeah,” piped up Heron Man. “And the main guy, the redhead, can be, like, Louis XIV who lives at the Palace of Versailles, the Sun King, who controls everything!”

“Yeah, yeah, I like that!” said Fex. “I like that a lot! That’s big! But what about the ninja-guy?”

“That’s easy,” replied Heron Man. “We get a sword-fighter—maybe Jules could play that part—and he slaps Owl Man with his gloves, so there’s a duel at dawn with *épées* instead of ninja stuff.”

Owl Man could see that Heron Man was getting on board, that even he—the Heron—for all his initial skepticism, was experiencing a flurry of imaginative sparks.

“But what about the heist?” asked Heron Man.

“No problem,” said Owl Man. “The King—that’s the *main guy*—just robs his own national treasury and gets richer than he was before. He’s in office, but he’s doing business on the side, and he makes the taxpayers pay for everything.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” said Heron Man, with an old-fashioned sense of conscience.

“Of course it is, but the King doesn’t care, because, to him, *if he wishes it, it must be legal. And if he thinks it, it must be true.*”

The discussion continued at this breakneck pace. When it came to an end, and Maury had gathered up the pile of papers in front of Owl Man and Heron Man, they hardly knew what they had signed.

Their heads were spinning like tops. Wobbly tops.

Once back in his Mercedes, Maury popped the lid on his bottle of Maalox, dumped half of the contents into his mouth and, patting his tummy, merged carefully into traffic, on his way to the next appointment.

Chief Paddy Paddington's boyhood training ...

Little Paddy—short for Padraig—Paddington developed an early boyhood habit of haunting the dumpsters behind restaurants and bars carrying out what he called his “snitches.” A snitch consisted in his rifling through the garbage—especially behind bars—in search of liquor bottles that still had a drop or two remaining. His first snitch took place when he was ten. It was a bottle of Old Crow with a quarter-inch of swill remaining in the bottom, the bottle having been covered by some torn trash bags leaking juices from rancid cabbage, lettuce leaves and chicken-fat trimmings. Still, the top was secure and Paddy knew the Old Crow bottle was a find, so, wrestling it out from under the black bags, he slunk around behind the dumpster where he sat in the greasy mud, opened the top, and slugged down the liquid remnants like a thirsty pro—“bottoms up,” the way he’d seen his dad do many times. By the age of ten, Paddy had already developed “the taste”—at least he thought so.

His father, Tommy Paddington, generally known as “the old man,” was a confirmed alcoholic—an “old-school Celt.” His mother, Biddy, on the other hand, was an iron-Catholic to the hilt—practically a virgin and a prohibitionist to boot, having seen far too much ruin emanating from both bed and bottle. So, the old man had to hide his bottles well, but Paddy knew the game the old man was playing and, following the old man one day, found out where he kept his stash behind the washtub shed and, despite his tender age, soon had made it a regular habit to “snitch” from the old man’s apparently self-replenishing stash of bottles. Then Paddy graduated to haunting the dumpsters, trash barrels and gutters, searching for “the

goods,” as he called those golden, crystal drops of distilled liquors. Beer and wine were OK, in Paddy’s opinion, but it was the distilled spirits he found himself craving. “It’s the Celt in him,” the old man would have said, had he lived.

But the old man’s liver got him before he found out what his boy was up to, and it’s just as well, for the old man had a mean streak that the liquor brought on with regularity. The wake they held for the old man was surprisingly lively. Even Bidy danced and sang, grabbing Paddy by the hands and whirling him around until he got dizzy. Then she grabbed her strapping neighbor, Seamus O’Hennessey, the widowed longshoreman, who’d always had a crush on Bidy, and swirled him around a good bit before she got winded. Besides, this being the old man’s wake, Seamus was too righteous to do anything out of order with Bidy—not yet anyway—but he did get good and drunk and passed out in the parlor. By the time the wake was over she’d broken her spirits-vow and had downed a few shots of Irish and sung some more songs ... songs from the olden days.

Without the old man to keep him in line, and with Bidy more and more preoccupied by the increase in Seamus’s attentions, Paddy was left to his own devices, which soon turned to a thorough exploration of the law and its loopholes. This led him into associations with other like-minded boys, and they all pooled their ideas of play and “ruckus” that quickly assumed a consistent, legal-to-illegal ratio of one-to-nine. The boys all found it was more fun, in other words, breaking the law than following it. In fact, breaking things in general became the drift of their games—breaking things, that is, and getting away with it.

A rock would burst through a plate glass store window, shattering it to bits, and

the sound of scampering feet and high-pitched giggling would soon follow, echoing down the adjacent alleyway. As the pitch of the voices dropped, however, so did the gravity of the crimes the boys committed, until one day, Paddy Paddington stood before the magistrate charged with attempted grand theft auto with intent to commit manslaughter—he'd punched a driver stopped at a red light and broken his nose. Since Paddy was two weeks past his majority, he spent the next six weeks in the top bunk of a cramped cell reeking of vomit and urine, listening to the ranting of adjacent felons and whatnot, vowing to himself every night before trying to sleep—though he had no rosary to give him comfort—that if he ever made it out of this miserable version of hell, he would do his mother proud and join the police force as a beat patrolman. There, on the hard-paved streets and cobblestone alleys, Paddy Paddington would show the world what he was *really* made of, despite all the snitching and ruckus.

And true to his word, and to his mother's greater glory—for she had passed through the Gates of Heaven during his third week in the clink—Paddy's first move upon release, after tipping a few at the Fulton Bar and Grill down the street from Tully's Coffee Shop, was to march into the 13th Precinct office and demand an application form.

The sergeant on duty looked him over and, because it had been a slow morning, pulled out a single-sheet form printed in large letters, and slid it across the counter toward Paddy, followed by a ball-point pen.

Thus began the crime-busting career of the legendary Chief Paddy Aloysius Paddington—scourge of criminals from Elliot Bay to Lake Washington and from

Renton to Bothell—whose last operation was directing traffic inside the lobby of Ling Bank during what had become known, in a bit of a misnomer, as “The Great Heist.”