The Madman’s Tale

John Katzenbach

Chapter 1

I can no longer hear my voices, so I am a little lost. My suspicion is they would know far better how to tell this story. At least they would have opinions and suggestions and definite ideas as to what should go first and what should go last and what should go in the middle. They would inform me when to add detail, when to omit extraneous information, what was important and what was trivial. After so much time slipping past, I am not particularly good at remembering these things myself and could certainly use their help. A great many events took place, and it is hard for me to know precisely where to put what. And sometimes I'm unsure that incidents I clearly remember actually did happen. A memory that seems one instant to be as solid as stone, the next seems as vaporous as a mist above the river. That's one of the major problems with being crazy: you're just naturally uncertain about things.

For a long time, I thought it all began with a death and ended with a death, a little like a nice set of bookends, but now I'm less positive. Perhaps what truly put all those moments in motion all those years back when I was young and truly mad was something far smaller or more elusive, like a hidden jealousy or an unseen anger, or much larger and louder, like the positions of the stars in the heavens or the forces of the ocean tides and the inexorable spin of the earth. I do know that some people died, and I was a lucky child not to join them, which was one of the last observations my voices made, before they abruptly disappeared from my side.

Instead, what I get now instead of their whispered words are medications to quiet their noises. Once a day I dutifully take a psychotropic, which is an oval-shaped, eggshell blue pill and which makes my mouth so dry that when I speak I sound like a wheezing old man after too many cigarettes or maybe some parched deserter from the Foreign Legion who has crossed the Sahara and is begging for a drink of water. This is followed immediately by a foul- tasting and bitter mood-elevator to combat the occasional blackhearted and suicidal depression I am constantly being told by my social worker that I am likely to tumble into at just about any minute regardless of how I actually do feel. In truth, I think I could walk into her office and click up my heels in pure joy and exaltation over the positive course of my life, and she would still ask me whether I had taken my daily dosage. This heartless little pill makes me both constipated and bloated with excess water, sort of like having a blood pressure cuff wrapped around my midsection instead of my left arm, and then pumped up tight. So I need to take a diuretic and then a laxative to alleviate these symptoms. Of course, the diuretic gives me a screaming migraine headache, like someone especially cruel and nasty is taking a hammer to my forehead, so there are codeine-laced painkillers to deal with that little side effect as I race to the toilet to resolve the other. And every two weeks I get a powerful antipsychotic agent in a shot by going to the local health clinic and dropping my pants for the nurse there who always smiles in precisely the same fashion and asks me in exactly the same tone of voice

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how I am that day, to which I reply "Just fine" whether I am or not, because it is pretty obvious to me, even through the various fogs of madness, a little bit of cynicism and drugs, that she doesn't really give a damn one way or the other, but still considers it part of her job to take note of my reassurance. The problem is the antipsychotic, which prevents me from all sorts of evil or despicable behavior, or so they like to tell me, also gives me a bit of palsy in my hands, making them shake as if I was some nervously dishonest taxpayer confronting an accountant from the IRS. It also makes the corners of my mouth twitch slightly, so I need to take a muscle relaxant to prevent my face from freezing into a permanent scare-the-neighborhood-kids mask. All these concoctions zip around willy-nilly through my veins, assaulting various innocent and probably completely befuddled organs on their way to calming the irresponsible electrical impulses that crackle about in my brain like so many unruly teenagers. Sometimes I feel like my imagination is similar to a wayward domino that has suddenly lost its balance, first teetering back and forth and then tumbling against all the other forces in my body, triggering a great linked chain reaction of pieces haphazardly falling click click click around inside of me.

It was easier, by far, when I was still a young man and all I had to do was listen to the voices. They weren't even all that bad, most of the time. Usually, they were faint, like fading echoes across a valley, or maybe like whispers you would hear between children sharing secrets in the back of a playroom, although when things grew tense, their volume increased rapidly. And generally, my voices weren't all that demanding. They were more, well, suggestions. Advice. Probing questions. A little nagging, sometimes, like a spinster great-aunt who no one knows precisely what to do with at a holiday dinner, but is nevertheless included in the festivities and occasionally blurts out something rude or nonsensical or politically incorrect, but is mostly ignored.

In a way, the voices were company, especially at the many times I had no friends.

I did have two friends, once, and they were a part of the story. Once I thought they were the biggest part, but I am no longer so sure.

Now, some of the other people I met during what I like to think of as my truly mad years had it far worse than I. Their voices shouted out orders like so many unseen Marine drill sergeants, the sort that wear those dark brown green wide-brimmed hats perched just above their eyebrows, so that their shaved skulls are visible from the rear. Step lively! Do this! Do that!

Or worse: Kill yourself.

Or even worse: Kill someone else.

The voices that shrieked at those folks came from God or Jesus or Mohammad or the neighbor's dog or their long-dead great-uncle or extraterrestrials or maybe a chorus of archangels or perhaps a choir of demons. These voices would be insistent and demanding and utterly without compromise and I got so that I could recognize in the tautness that these people would wear in their eyes, the tension that tightened their muscles, that they were hearing something quite loud and insistent, and it

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rarely promised any good. At moments like those, I would simply walk away, and wait near the entranceway or on the opposite side of the dayroom, because something altogether unfortunate was likely to happen. It was a little like a detail I remembered from grade school, one of those odd facts that stay with you: In the event of an earthquake, the best place to hide is in a doorway, because the arched structure of the opening is architecturally stronger than a wall, and less likely to collapse on your head. So when I saw the turbulence in one of my fellow patients become volcanic, I would find the arch where I thought the best chance of surviving lay. And once there, I could listen to my own voices, which generally seemed to watch out for me, more often than not warning me when to make tracks and hide. They had a curiously self-preservative streak to them, and if I hadn't been so stupidly obvious in replying out loud to them when I was young and they first joined my side, I probably never would have been diagnosed and shipped off in the first place, as I was. But that is part of the story, although not the greatest part by any means, but still, I miss them in an odd way, for now I am mostly lonely.

It is a very hard thing, in this time of ours, to be mad and middle-aged.

Or ex-mad, as long as I keep taking the pills.

My days are now spent in search of motion. I don't like to be sedentary for too long. So I walk, fast-paced, a quick march around the town, from parks to shopping areas, to industrial sections, watching and observing, but keeping myself on the move. Or else I seek out events where there is a waterfall of movement in my view, like a high school football or basketball game, or even a youth soccer game. If there is something busy going on in front of me, then I can take a rest. Otherwise, I keep my feet going-five, six, seven or more hours per day. A daily marathon that wears through the soles of my shoes, and keeps me lean and sinewy. In the winter, I beg unwieldy, clunky boots from the Salvation Army. The rest of the year, I wear running shoes that I get from the local sports store. Every few months the owner kindly slides me a pair of some discontinued model, size twelve, to replace the ones that have been sidewalked into tatters upon my feet.

In the early spring, after the first melt-out of ice, I march my way up to the Falls, where there is a fish ladder, and I daily volunteer to monitor the return of salmon to the Connecticut River watershed. This requires me to watch endless gallons of water flow through the dam, and occasionally spot a fish climbing against the current, driven by great instincts to return to where it was itself spawned-where, in that greatest of all mysteries, it will in its own turn, spawn and then die. I admire the salmon, because I can appreciate what it is like to be driven by forces others cannot see or feel or hear and to feel the imperative of a duty that is greater than oneself. Psychotic fish. After years of gallivanting about most pleasantly in the great wide ocean, they hear a mighty fish-voice deep inside them resonating and that insists they head on this impossible journey toward their own death. Perfect. I like to think of the salmon as if they are as mad as I once was. When I see one, I make a pencil notation on a form the state Wildlife Service provides me and sometimes whisper a quiet greeting: Hello, my brother. Welcome to the society of the crazed.

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There is a trick to spotting the fish, because they are sleek and silver-sided from their travels in the salt of the ocean so many scores of miles away. It is a shimmering presence in the glistening water, invisible to the uneducated eye, almost as if a ghostly force has entered the small window where I keep watch. I get so I can almost feel the arrival of a salmon before it actually appears at the base of the ladder. It is satisfying to count the fish, even though hours can pass without one arriving and there are never enough of them to please the wildlife folks, who stare at the charts of returnees and shake their heads in frustration. But the benefits of my ability to spot them translates into other advantages. It was my boss at the Wildlife Service who called the local police and informed them I was completely harmless, although I always wondered how he deduced that and have my sincere doubts as to its overall truthfulness. So I am tolerated at the football games and other events, and now, really, if not precisely welcomed in this little, former mill town, at least I am accepted. My routine isn't questioned, and I am seen less as crazy and more as eccentric, which, I have learned over the years is a safe enough status to maintain.

I live in a small one-bedroom apartment paid for by a state subsidy. My place is furnished in what I call sidewalk-abandoned modern. My clothes come from the Salvation Army or from either of my two younger sisters, who live a couple of towns away, and occasionally, bothered by some odd guilt that I don't really understand, feel the need to try to do something for me by raiding their husbands' closets. They purchased me a secondhand television that I seldom watch and a radio I infrequently listen to. Every few weeks they will visit, bringing slightly congealed home-cooked meals in plastic containers and we spend a little time talking together awkwardly, mostly about my elderly parents, who don't care to see me much anymore, for I am a reminder of lost hopes and the bitterness that life can deliver so unexpectedly. I accept this, and try to keep my distance. My sisters make sure the heat and electric bills are paid. They make certain that I remember to cash the meager checks that arrive from various government aid agencies. They double-check to make absolutely sure that I have taken all my medications. Sometimes they cry, I think, to see how close to despair that I live, but this is their perception, not mine, for, in actuality, I'm pretty comfortable. Being insane gives one an interesting take on life. It certainly makes you more accepting of certain lots that befall you, except for those times when the medications wear a bit thin, and then I can get pretty exercised and angry at the way life has treated me.

But for the most part, I am, if not happy, at least understanding.

And there are some intriguing sidelights to my existence, not the least of which is how much of a student I have become of life in this little town. You would be surprised how much I learn in my daily travels. If I keep my eyes open and ears cocked, I pick up all sorts of little slivers of knowledge. Over the years, since I was released from the hospital, after all the things that were going to happen there did happen, I have used what I learned, which is: to be observant. Pounding out my daily travels, I come to know who's having a tawdry little affair with which neighbor, whose husband is leaving home, who drinks too much, who beats their children. I can tell which businesses are struggling, and who has come into some money from a dead parent or lucky lottery ticket. I discover which teenager hopes for a college football or basketball scholarship, and which teenager will be shipped

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off for a few months to visit some distant aunt and perhaps deal with a surprise pregnancy. I have come to know which cops will cut you a break, and which are quick with the nightstick or the ticket book, depending on the transgression. And there are all sorts of littler observations, as well, ones that come with who I am and who I've become-for example the lady hairdresser who signals me at the end of the day to come in and cuts my hair so that I am more presentable during my daily travels, and then slips me an extra five dollars from her day's tips, or the manager of the local McDonald's who spots me pacing past, and runs after me with a bag filled with burgers and fries and has come to know that I am partial to vanilla shakes, not chocolate. Being mad and walking abroad is the clearest window on human nature; it is a little like watching the town flow along like the water cascading past the fish ladder window.

And it isn't as if I am useless. I once spotted a factory door ajar at a time it was always closed and locked, and found a policeman, who took all the credit for the burglary that he interrupted. But the police did give me a certificate when I got the license plate of a hit-and-run driver who knocked a bicyclist senseless one spring afternoon. And in something awkwardly close to the takes-one-to-know-one category, as I cruised past a park where children were playing one fall weekend, I spotted a man-and I knew as soon as I saw him, hanging by the entranceway, that something was completely wrong. Once my voices would have noticed him, and they would have shouted out a warning, but this time I took it upon myself to mention him to the young preschool teacher I knew who was reading a woman's magazine on the bench ten yards from the sandbox and swing set and not quite paying enough attention to her charges. It turned out the man was recently released and had been registered just that morning as a sex offender.

This time, I didn't get a certificate, but the teacher had the children paint me a colorful picture of themselves at play, and they wrote a thank-you across it in that wondrously crazy script that children have before we burden them with reason and opinions. I carried the picture back to my little apartment and placed it on the wall above my bed, where it is now. I have a musty brown life, and it reminds me of the colors I might have experienced if I hadn't stumbled onto the path that had brought me here.

That, then, more or less, is the sum of my existence, as it is now. A man on the fringe of the sane world.

And, I suspect I would have simply passed the remainder of my days this way, and never really bothered to tell what I know about all those events I witnessed had I not received the letter from the state.

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