

The Ink of the Perverse

by

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The Ink of the Perverse

I am not more sure that I breathe, than that the conviction of the wrong or impolicy of an action is often the one unconquerable force which impels us, and alone impels us, to its prosecution.

from *The Imp of the Perverse*, by Edgar Allan Poe

I had often joked to my friends that my unwritten memoir would be an eight-hundred-page tome entitled *My Mistakes*.

When I sat down to begin that book, which I intended to be my last, I realized I was shorting myself. This project would be a monster, a perverse monster that could easily go twelve hundred pages or even more.

I had decided to give up the tablet, the text messages to myself, the endless tweaks in Microsoft Word. I would write out my misbegotten life in longhand. I set myself up with a nib pen, a jar of black ink, and a folio-sized ledger with room on either side of every page for notes and revisions. I am left-handed and have the unfortunate left-hander's foible of dragging my forearm across pages, rendering them unreadable. To address this problem, I paid closer attention and bought sand and a blotter to use when I needed them.

How to begin? Where to begin? When does an innocent youth become responsible for their actions? When was my first big mistake? I soon realized that I was avoiding the initiative. I was false starting, delaying the inevitable. I was like the golfer in a bad dream who can't hit the ball, because there's always an obstruction, a branch or the corner of a building, an obstacle in front of the ball, or the ball keeps falling off the tee, or the golfer is supposed to hit his tee shot through the window of the room he's standing in.

I am known among my friends as a skeptic, the boring voice of reason, which makes my relating this story even more outlandish. I'm the guy who would never have this kind of experience. Does this make me more believable? You'll have to decide for yourselves.

My Mistakes, by Stephen Maine. Do I include everything? If I did, I'm guessing the length of my sad tale might rival the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Okay, that's an exaggeration. Maybe Volume A.

I set up an office setup in my bedroom, but after a couple days the sight of the folio, the unused pen and ink, the sand, the blotters, all of it became oppressive, a constant reminder of my procrastination. I moved everything into the closet. I don't mean that I stored everything away. I set it all on a small low dresser. I put a folding chair in front of the dresser as if this was to be the place where I would write the book. The one that I did not want to write. The book that I was not writing currently. Then I forgot about it all except for a minute or so every day when I would go into the closet to get a shirt or pants or socks.

I'm comfortably retired, twice divorced, living in a too big house with too many rooms. I only use a few of them. The rest I leave shut up with the heat just high enough to avoid freezing the pipes in winter. The place looks a little creepy from the outside. Nobody comes to my door for treats on Halloween night. They don't even try to trick me. I'm left alone and I like it that way.

But one night, while getting ready for bed, I noticed a light emanating from inside the closet. A faint hardly noticeable light. There were no knocking sounds or inhuman whispering. No odor of verbena or any other tell. There was simply a tug on my brain, a pull, that led me to rise from my bed, and walk over to the closet, open the door, and stare at the mute objects on the

dresser. After a couple of nights filled with these numerous interregnums of standing in front of the folio, I caved and sat down in the folding chair.

“What do you want?” I asked. Somehow I knew I was addressing an entity, though of what kind, shape, or manner I could not tell. I saw nothing but wavering shadows.

“Only your soul, Stephen, Old Soul,” a basso Voice answered. A Voice where there should be no voice.

My hands shook. I grabbed the edges of the dresser, holding on until my fingertips turned white. The muscles in my belly were clenching from the tension.

“Leave me alone.” My voice was a high-pitched, miserable squeak.

“I want to help you, Old Soul. You need a thorough cleansing with mortification. That’s my specialty.”

“Mortification of the flesh? No.”

“There is no ‘No.’ There is only ‘Yes, Master.’”

“You are my master now? I will resist you!”

“‘Resistance is futile,’” the Voice mocked me with a bit from popular culture.

“Who am I talking to? Myself?”

“I’m not going to get into the whole ego, superego, id thing. Let’s just say you’re having one of Maslow’s peak experiences, extended over a longer time than the great psychologist thought possible.”

“That’s not what Maslow meant,” I corrected the Voice. “Peak experiences are supposed to be positive. I’m having a nadir experience.” In the closet, lit only by a sliver streaming under the closet door from my bedroom, I shivered though it was a late summer night in New England and still almost ninety degrees outside. I switched tactics. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s go. Let’s do it.”

“You have choices,” the Voice said. “We could go chronologically, or we could rank them from petty to catastrophically serious and start from one end or the other of that spectrum. Or we could categorize them – all the mistakes, all the perverse things you have done over your life Mistakes with women. Mistakes with family. Mistakes at work. Mistakes with friends. Or some other arrangement. Your choice.”

“Okay,” I said again. “Let’s start from the beginning, but let’s skip childhood and start with early adulthood.”

“Take up your pen.” I did as ordered, but I didn’t write anything. “You’re running out of time.”

“I haven’t even started!”

“Nonetheless. Here’s a writing prompt for you. How about the time you locked the family’s car keys in the trunk?”

“But that wasn’t a mistake!” I cried. My father deserved it for—”

“—We’re speaking of your mistakes, not his. Your mother and your brother and sister had to wait around for two hours while your father called a locksmith.”

“That’s the best you can do?” I chided the Voice. “Seems innocuous to me, in the grand scheme of things.”

“All right. Let’s go with the category Mistakes with Women, for all the money. That’s where you’ve made the most egregious errors, isn’t it?”

I had to concede the point.

“How about the time you were on the JV baseball team and whacked your first girlfriend unintentionally with a bat while warming up. She got a mild concussion.”

“That hurt, but from this distance in time it’s funny. She didn’t die, and she didn’t break up with me over it.”

“No, that came later, after you made more mistakes with her.”

“I’m not enjoying talking to a blank book,” I said.

“That’s why we must fill it. I doubt this one folio will be enough to hold all your mistakes. It’s only a start. Let’s move on.”

“Wait, what’s in it for you?” I asked my tormentor. “Do you get points for how miserable you can make me? Who’s judging you?”

“Only you, Old Soul.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“But that’s what you are.”

“Wise beyond my years? Hardly. If I was I wouldn’t be talking to you now.”

“Remember the time you witnessed a car crash? A thief fleeing police T-boned an elderly couple. He jumped out of the car and ran right past you, and you did nothing. The cops threw you a disgusted look as they chased him.”

“Oh, come on now, that’s not a mistake,” I protested.

“A mistake of omission. The most perverse kind of mistake. How many times in your life have you had the opportunity to act, and failed to do so? Shirking, doing nothing. Letting the bad times roll.”

“You said you were going to stick with women.”

“Yes. Quite right. Women. You do have an appalling record with them, highlighted by insecurity, intemperance, inebriation, inconstancy, let’s see what other ‘in-s’ could I apply to your history? The groveling on one side, the sarcasm on the other. Disrespect in all its forms.”

“If you’re going to bring up things like that, this is going to get ugly. It’s too embarrassing. I won’t write those down.”

“You must.”

“You can’t make me.”

“No. You will make yourself.”

“No!” I slammed shut the folio, stood up, and walked out of the closet.

I was back again the next night. There was nothing for it except to begin a hideous series of evenings, each leaving me more depressed and exhausted the next morning. I took up my nib pen and descended into the worst hell, recalling all my past perversities, all my mistakes, chronicling the abominable things I did to my first wife Marina. Inexcusable cruelties. Freshly remembered they tortured my mind as I wrote them down, *My Mistakes, Meine Fehler* in German, uncomfortably close to *Mein Kampf*. The painful memories began to pile up. The time I came back on a weekend to see my wife Marina and neglected to visit my mother, who was

dying of cancer at the time. On a subsequent trip I brought Marina a pair of expensive ivory earrings, but having no other money, I gifted my mother with an insultingly small and cheap silver sewing thimble. She hated it.

The time I had hitchhiked home and ended up a few miles away and called my mother to come get me. While I was waiting, a little puppy wandered out of a nearby yard. I called it over to me, but as it crossed the street a car sped by, hit it, and kept on going. Instead of ringing the doorbell of the house where the puppy had come from, I pushed its dead body into a storm drain and fled when my mother arrived. Why? I hadn't really done anything wrong had I?

These are the low-hanging fruit, the easy remembrances. The ones that stick are harder to recollect and more excruciating to write down. How Marina and I left the East Coast while my mother was still in the last stages of her horrific death and only came back after she'd passed. The rest of the family had been there. I pressed down so hard on that memory that I broke a nib and had to replace it.

“Let’s talk more of Marina. More mistakes to be mined there, for sure. You were twenty-four when you married her, and she was seventeen. That’s one colossal blunder right there.”

I had to agree. The marriage was doomed from the start. I didn’t make it any easier by clinging desperately to her. I wanted to keep her, but it was impossible. She craved something I could not offer her. Excitement. Novelty. Exoticness. Escape from poverty. Hope. I wrote it down.

“We haven’t even gotten to your second wife yet.”

“Oh my god.”

“How many pages do you have so far?”

“Only a few.”

“You must up your output. Spend more of each day at it. Crack down, or you’re going to crack up.”

“I’ll try.”

“Do I have to go all Yoda on ya?”

“Please, no.”

“Let’s move on to wife number two.”

I groaned, but inside I knew the Voice was right. Wife number two would be a rich vein of failures, a veritable motherlode. I subsisted on canned soups and that college dorm staple, ramen noodles. What little groceries I needed I ordered and had delivered. I moved the folio, pen and ink out of the closet and back into my bedroom and created a writing space that had all the creature comforts—electric teapot for tea, a mini fridge at hand, anything I could do to maximize the amount of time I spent writing and minimize time away from the project. *My Mistakes* was an epic. One foolish, no, that is too soft a word, one lunatic, stupid idiotic decision after another. The nib pen was messy. I spilled ink regularly. Still, I refused to go to the computer. These memories had to come out at nib pen pace.

Although the writing was slow, the memories poured in at warp speed, one after the other. It hardly seemed possible that one man could have bungled so many relationships. The women I dated after Marina left me provided a tangled skein, a montage of stupidities, all my doing, not theirs. Though I was supposed to be sticking to blunders with women, mistakes in my work life

bubbled to surface. Jobs I quit because I didn't like my boss and was willing to work as a temp several pay grades lower than my qualifications. Jobs I left because I'd foolishly dated a co-worker and couldn't stay after the romance was over. Outbursts of my often-unregulated temper cost me a few positions where if I had had any self-restraint I might have made enough money to have lived comfortably.

The Voice coached me through it all, present whenever I sat down and faced the growing pile of pages. Once when I was stuck it asked me why I wasn't writing.

“I’m thinking how this is going to end.”

“Badly, of course.” The Voice was nothing if not a realist.

“I’m just aiming for the least embarrassing death possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know, on the toilet like Elvis, or with my pants down in front of a computer monitor watching porn.”

“What will you care? You’ll be dead.”

“For a disembodied spirit, you’re pretty savvy. Yes, I’ll be dead, but I preemptively feel embarrassment at the thought of it.”

“May you die in your sleep.”

“Amen.”

“But there’s a catch. You know how people say when you die your life flashes before your eyes?”

I knew where this was going.

“In your case, what do you suppose will flash before your eyes?”

“All my perverse mistakes, right?”

“Right. Only instead of a flash, you’ll be in a coma, and it’ll be more like long-running episodic television.”

“Ugh.”

“And on a loop.”

“How long will it run?”

“I wouldn’t like to say. It would depress you. In a coma, there’s no escaping it either.”

“So there’s no possibility for repentance, forgiveness?”

“I didn’t say that. But it’ll cost you.”

“What currency do I have that I can spend to buy your, your—what is it I would be buying again?”

“Your soul, Old Soul.”

“Wait. I’d be buying my soul back from you?”

“Let’s just say I have temporary ownership of it. Of you. That’s why we’re here.”

Surges of nausea broke over me like rogue waves on a troubled shore. I knew that the Voice was a part of me, goading me, humiliating me. Why was I doing this to myself?

“I can’t take it anymore. How do I get rid of you, Voice? Do I have to kill myself?”

“That would work. Or you could perform a ceremony of repentance and forgiveness.”

“What would that entail?”

“It’s a ‘design your own’ thing, independent study. What would make you feel absolution?”

“I’ve never thought about it. Don’t I have to finish *My Mistakes* before I get that chance?”

“Not necessarily. One pure, honest, unself-aggrandizing word would do it.”

That pissed me off. “Look,” I said. “Look at all these pages of self-incrimination. Isn’t this enough? I want to get out of here, take a walk in the park, feel sunshine on my face again.”

“You’re just nibbling around the edges. When are you going to get to the meaty stuff? What did you do to her?”

I jumped up, swinging wildly at empty space. “That’s none of your damn business!”

“Ah, but it is my damn business, and yours. Until you face it, you’ll get nowhere, you’ll remain holed up here, unable to proceed in any direction.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re lying. Why would you lie to me? To yourself?”

“I didn’t hit her.”

“Let’s go back to that night.” Suddenly I was reliving one of the worst mistakes of my life. It was the night before Joanna left me. I knew she’d been cheating on me, but I continued to cling to the hope that maybe it was just a fling, that we could somehow salvage our broken

marriage. That night she came home smelling of another man. I couldn't take it any longer. I pushed her down on the bed and, I can't use the words "made love." I forced myself on her, had my way with her. We didn't argue, didn't speak. She crawled off to sleep in the guest bedroom, The next morning she left and never came back.

"Write it down," the Voice commanded me.

"I won't. It's too horrible."

"You will. Look, you have done so already." It was true. The words had formed unbiddably in my folio, a miserable story taking up several pages of hastily scrawled text. I must have been putting it down as I remembered it. Automatic writing. Only it didn't say what I said it said. Instead, it revealed the horrible truth, that Joanna didn't leave and not come back. She was still here, in the freezer in the basement, where sometimes I used to keep a haunch of deer or an order of steaks and hamburgers from one of those television ad meat merchandisers.

That's when the real horror kicked in. That's when I realized that I wasn't talking to myself. This wasn't simply the ravings of a man feeling guilty about his past. The formless Voice that I had thought to be a spiritual doppelganger inside me, was not that. I was being manipulated by an outside force. How did I suddenly understand this terror? Because if it was myself then I would never have written what I wrote, which was a lie. Inexorably, I would have hidden the truth even from myself. But the Voice obeyed no such niceties. I couldn't let on that I had seen through it. My only hope was to catch it in a lie, and by doing so destroy it. No longer a matter of me needing to absolve myself. Someone or something else was playing me. Why? For fun, it appeared. Why should I stay trapped in my own home? I needed to get out, crash through the invisible barriers that were keeping me chained to this painful task. I grabbed the folio, spilling

the rest of my ink carelessly on its pages and all over the bedroom floor, and ripped it up, tore it up, and would have burned it if I thought I could do so without burning down my house. I hurled the ink bottle into a corner where it smashed and sprayed indelible blue stains on the walls. I broke the blotter and threw the sand against the walls where it mingled with the ink in weird patterns. The only artifact I didn't destroy was the nib pen. I had grown fond of it.

But where was I to go that the Voice couldn't follow? "Leave me alone," I cried. "I'm done with you." There was no answer from the Voice. It didn't need to prompt me. Even without its hectoring, I would have ended up where I am. The package service delivered replacement paper, blotter, and sand. It took only a few minutes to set up my writing stand in the closet again. Here I sit, telling this tawdry tale only to myself. No one else must ever read it, or I'll end up in prison, but how would that be different from my life now? And I knew that the Voice would follow me, wherever I went.