

From "Driven To Distraction"
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VIGNETTE II

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When Maxwell was born, his mother held him in her arms and cried tears of joy. He was the son Sylvia and Patrick McCarthy had wished for after their two daughters. Maxwell stared up at his mom as his dad leaned across the pillows and drew little circles with his forefinger on Maxwell's wrinkled forehead.

"He looks like my father," Patrick said.

"You can't tell this soon, silly."

"I just have a feeling," Patrick replied. His father, Maxwell McCarthy, after whom this new Maxwell was named, had been a prominent Boston lawyer, the rod and staff of Patrick's life, his hero and his guide. The values of intellectual achievement and rock-solid integrity combined with a hard-drinking, convivial bonhomie made the senior Maxwell an almost legendary figure. As Patrick looked down at his son now, he saw some of his old man in him. The large head size he concluded meant brains. The twinkle in the baby's eyes meant *joie de vivre*. And the integrity would come from a disciplined upbringing. A gurgling, swaddled package now, Maxwell McCarthy was destined for great things.

Sylvia's fantasies drifted more toward the simple but boundless joy of holding this little baby. Oh, she had thought about his future before he was born. She hoped for him what she hoped for her other children, that he could have the advantages she hadn't had when she was growing up. Her family had been torn apart by mental illness, depression, and alcoholism. She had worked her way through law school, where she met Patrick, and

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she was now juggling part-time legal work with being a mother of—now three. In the process, she'd lost all contact with her family, and she was never far from the sadness of that. As she looked down at Maxwell, she thought, *We will be good to you, beautiful one.*

As an infant and toddler, Max never liked to be left alone. He was gregarious and active. When he learned how to walk, it was almost impossible to childproof the house, Max was so fast. Cute as he was, it was exhausting to take care of him. As one of his baby-sitters said, somewhat vengefully, after a long night with Max, "You have a very high-maintenance baby."

By the time he was four, young Max had a nickname, "Mad Max." "How shall I put it to you?" said Max's day-care provider to Sylvia and Patrick. "He is very enthusiastic."

"You can be straight with us," Patrick said sternly, for the moment forgetting he was surrounded by teddy bears, little bunnies, and storybooks, not leather-bound tomes.

"Well, it's just that he likes to do so many things, he's all over the place. The minute he starts one thing he's into another. He's a bundle of joy, but he also can be very disruptive in the group."

In the car on the way home Patrick said, "What Miss Rebecca of Sunnyside Farm was trying to tell us is that Max is a brat."

"She was not," said Sylvia. "He's just rambunctious, like you used to be."

"I was not. I had discipline. Standards. Max has no standards."

"He's only four, for crying out loud," Sylvia said. "Can't you let him be a little boy?"

"Sure. Just not a spoiled little boy."

"Oh. And I suppose his behavior is all my fault," said Sylvia.

"I didn't say that," Patrick replied.

"No, you didn't say that, but since I'm home twice as much as you, you've made it pretty clear to me who has primary responsibility for the kids. But Pat, boys need dads."

"Oh, so it's my fault now. Clever way of turning it around." They drove on in silence.

At age six Max entered the first grade at Meadow Glen, a coed private school. Things went all right at first, but then one day, as the kids were on the floor doing projects in pairs, Max suddenly took his jar of paint, smashed

it on the floor, kicked the project he and his partner were making across the room, and started punching himself in the face. His teacher took him outside to calm down while the co-teacher stayed with the other children. "What happened in there?" his teacher asked Max.

"Everything I make breaks," he said, tears beading down his cheeks.

"That's not true," his teacher said. "Your project was looking very good."

"It was not," Max said. "It sucked."

"Max, you know we can't talk like that here."

"I know," Max said sadly. "I need more discipline and better standards."

Later, at the request of the teacher, some testing was done on Max, but as it turned out it was only intelligence-testing. Max had a full-scale IQ of 145, with a ten-point split between performance and verbal. "You see? He's plenty smart," Max's dad would say. "What he needs is to buckle down."

Through the early years Max's grades were fine. The comments on his report cards, however, were upsetting, comments such as "Despite my best efforts, I cannot persuade Max to pay attention consistently," or "Although he doesn't mean to be, Max is a constant disruption in class," or "His social adjustment lags behind," or "He is so obviously bright—but he is a born daydreamer."

As for Max himself, he felt confused. He tried to do what he was told, like sit still or pay attention or keep his hands to himself, but he found that in spite of his best efforts he couldn't do these things. So he kept getting into trouble. He hated his nickname at home, Mad Max, but whenever he complained about it, his sisters teased him, and when they teased him, he hit them, and when he hit them, he got in trouble. He didn't know what to do.

"I don't know what to do with you," his father said one day.

"Why don't you send me back to the dealership like you did with the Fiat? Maybe they have a lemon law for kids." He had learned about the lemon law through listening to many conversations between his parents.

"Oh, Max," his father said, trying to give him a hug, "we wouldn't trade you for anything. We love you."

"Then how come," Max asked, pulling away, "how come you said to Mom that all the problems in this family are because of me?"

"I never said that, Max."

"Yes, Dad, you did," Max said softly.

"Well, I didn't mean it if I did. It's just that we need a game plan for you, like when we watch the Patriots I tell you about the game plan. What kind of game plan can we come up with to keep you out of trouble?"

"Well, Dad, you say it's up to the coach to come up with a game plan that works, and if he can't do that they should fire the coach. You're the coach around here, aren't you Dad, you and Mom?"

"Yes, son, we are. But we can't be fired. And we need your help."

"I'll try harder," Max said. He was nine years old at the time. That night he wrote on a piece of paper, "I wish I was dead," then crumpled it up and threw it in the wastebasket.

His life, however, was not all gloom. For one thing, he was, as his second-grade teacher put it, "chock full of spunk." And, as that same teacher said, he was cute as a button. He was smart, no doubt about that, and he did love to get into things. He could turn a telephone booth into a playground and a telephone book into a novel. His father thought Max was more creative than just about anyone he'd ever met; he just wished he could help Max contain it.

What Max couldn't do was behave. Conform. Sit still. Raise his hand. And he didn't know why he couldn't. Because there was no explanation, he began to believe the worst: that he was bad, a spaceshot, a dingbar, a functional retard, all names he'd been called. When he asked his mother what a functional retard meant, she asked him where he'd heard the term.

"I read it in a book," Max said, lying.

"What book?" his mother asked.

"Just a book. What does it matter what book? Do you think I keep records?"

"No, Max, I just wondered if maybe someone called you that and you don't want to tell me who." As soon as she said it, his mother realized her mistake, but the words were out and irretrievable. "Max, it doesn't mean anything," his mother hurried to add as she tried to hug him.

"Let me go," he said.

"Max, it means nothing. Whoever said it is stupid."

"Like Dad?" Max said, staring into his mother's eyes through tears.

By the sixth grade, Max's grades became erratic, ranging from the best in the class to barely passing. "How is it," one of his teachers asked him,

"that one week you can be one of the best students I've ever had and the next week act as if you weren't even in the room?"

"I don't know," said Max glumly, by now getting used to this line of questioning. "I guess I've got a funny brain."

"You've got a very good brain," the teacher responded.

"A brain is only a brain," said Max philosophically, "but a good person is hard to find."

The teacher looked astonished at this precocious remark, astonished and perplexed, which Max picked up on. "Don't try and figure me out," Max said with resignation in his voice. "I just need more discipline. I'll try harder."

Later, at a parent-teacher conference one of the teachers offered this description: "Watching Max sit at his desk in class is like watching a kind of ballet. A leg will come up, then an arm will arch around it, and then a foot will appear as the head disappears from sight. This is often followed by a crash. Then, often, a swear. You know, he's so hard on himself it's hard for me to come down on him."

Max's parents listened, felt guilty, and sighed.

Although Max thought quite poorly of himself by now, his spunk and pride kept him from talking with anyone about it. However, he did have conversations with himself. Sometimes he would beat up on himself. "You're bad, bad, bad," he would say. "Why don't you change?" Then he would make a list of resolutions. "Study harder. Sit still. Get homework done on time. Don't do things that make Mom and Dad worry. Keep your hands to yourself."

Brought up Catholic, sometimes he talked to God. "Why did you make me so different?" he would ask.

And other times, the best times, he would wander unperturbed with his thoughts, from one image or idea to the next, so that big chunks of time could pass without his even noticing it. Often this happened when he was reading a book. He would start on page 1, and by the time he was in the middle of page 3, he would be off in fantasy on a moonwalk or winning a football game with a rushing touchdown in the last minute. The daydream could go on for a half hour or so as Max sat staring at page 3. This was one of his greatest pleasures, but also a real obstacle to getting his homework in on time.

Although Max had friends, he at times annoyed them by what they

took to be his selfishness. As he got older, he found it hard to follow the conversation in a group of friends and so he stared off, blankly. "Hey, what's with you, McCarthy?" his friends said. "You on drugs or something?"

But because of his basically cheerful personality—he had learned how to put up a good front—and because his raw intelligence could carry him academically, Max avoided social or academic catastrophe.

By ninth grade his family had grown accustomed to him as Mad Max; instead of fighting back, he took the teasing and added to it by making fun of himself, tripping over his feet intentionally or pointing to his head and saying, "Crazy." His mother moved his room to the basement. "At least the mess can be contained in one place out of sight," she said. "Since you're constitutionally incapable of straightening your room, at least we can move you to the least offensive spot." That suited Max just fine.

In contrast to the time he drew circles on his son's forehead when he looked at him as a baby in the hospital, Max's father now just hoped and prayed that Max could survive in this cruel world, that he would find some niche for himself where his creativity and good nature were rewarded and his gargantuan carelessness and irresponsibility not get him fired. When his mother looked at him now, she thought of him as her lovable genius-goof. At times she felt very guilty at not having been able to straighten Max out, but after three children and more professional compromises than she cared to think of, she was trying to learn to go easy on herself. Indeed, she felt relief that the family had not been destroyed by the problems Max had caused earlier on.

This period of relative calm and accommodation ended as Max encountered the greater stimulations the world of high school offered. He felt an internal restlessness that could only be soothed by engaging in some external situation of equally high energy.

He began to find release in athletics, becoming a fanatical long-distance runner and wrestler. He talked about "the pleasure in the pain of the long-distance run" and the mental relief, the feeling of "absolute psychic clarity" in the last half mile. He was also an excellent wrestler. He was especially good at the move at the start of a period when you explode out of your opponent's grasp. Here at last was a place where he could legitimately go crazy, where at last he could release all the energy he had stored in his cells and slash through the bonds of good behavior as if escaping from a briar patch. In wrestling Max could break free. He also loved the agony of getting

down to the proper weight for a meet. "I hate it, of course," he would say, "but I also love it. It focuses my mind on one thing, one goal."

But, as relatively adaptive as his sports were, he also began to flirt with danger. He began experimenting with drugs, particularly cocaine, which he noticed calmed him and helped him focus. He was always on the go. He had more girlfriends than he could keep straight. All this left him little time for studying. He continued to play a game he called "chicken," walking into exams totally unprepared and seeing if he could fake his way through. He began to discover that he couldn't do this as well as he had in grade school.

In a part of his being, he knew he was courting disaster. On his way out the door one day, he casually said to his mother, "You know, Mom, I'm a walking time bomb."

Thinking he was joking, she answered with a laugh. "At least you're not a dud." The family had learned long ago to turn Max's self-deprecatory remarks into jokes. They weren't unfeeling; they just didn't know what else to do.

What happened next could have happened in many different ways. Or, it might not have happened at all. There are many adult Maxes out there who have managed not to trip and fall. They simply live frenetic lives, a whirligig of high stimulation and often high achievement, with an abiding sense that their world is on the brink of collapse.

But Max, fortunately, did trip and fall. It could have been academic failure or drugs or alcohol or some high-risk prank. In Max's case, though, it was the unusual route of wrestling. In an effort to make weight, he violated all the rules; he was found comatose and thoroughly dehydrated in his basement room. When he was hospitalized, his family doctor was sensitive enough to see this episode as a signal of some pretty serious psychological problems.

In the course of Max's evaluation, neuropsychological testing revealed, in addition to Max's already documented high IQ, a number of other issues. There was good evidence that he had attention deficit disorder. Second, projective testing revealed extremely low self-esteem as well as recurring depressive themes and images. In marked contrast to his cheerful exterior, Max's inner life was, in the words of the psychologist, "full of chaos and impulse surrounded by a fog of depression, heated by desperation."

At a parent-child meeting with the psychologist, Max's mother broke

down in tears. "It's not your fault," Max said softly. His father cleared his throat defensively. "It's not your fault either, Dad."

"It's nobody's fault," the psychologist interrupted, and began to explain to Max and his parents what they had been living with for these many years.

"But if it's this attention deficit thing," his mother said, "why didn't we pick it up earlier? I feel so guilty."

"It often goes undiagnosed," the psychologist said, "particularly in bright children."

The more Max listened, the more things began to fit together and make sense to him. What he had known about himself, dimly, intuitively, for a long while finally had a name. "Just giving it a name really helps," Max said.

"Better than calling you Mad Max," his father said. "I guess we all have some guilt to deal with."

"But the good news is that there are some corrective steps we can take now," the psychologist said. "It won't be an easy process, but life will be a lot better than it has been."