

Robbie World

The school of pastel paper mache fish strung from the ceiling opened a path for Robbie like an inverted parting of the Red Sea. I bobbed and weaved ten feet behind, fins and scales scratching my scalp. Robbie plopped into a small booth in the back of the Elegant Bass, a funky café tucked into a row of storefronts down the street from a train station on the North Side. He had already settled in, his hands resting on his lap Buddha-style, by the time I sat on the upholstered bench across from him.

“This is my oasis,” he said with a cartoonish expression.

“*Your* oasis, eh?”

A handwritten menu on the table read like scribbled notes of a crazed Michelin three-star chef with a lifelong dream of opening a corner deli.

“Robbie, you brought a friend.” The raspy voice belonged to a lean waitress with wavy auburn hair cascading over delicate shoulders. The image of a tiger tastefully etched around her left arm didn’t distract from a smile that appealed to the heart.

“This is Sean.”

She glanced at me, her smile confirming the heart thing.

“The usual?” she asked him.

“Grilled cheese with grape jelly. Chocolate milk shake.” I noticed that the waitress wrote *Robbie* on her pad.

The last time I had a grilled cheese with grape jelly was at Robbie's house on Oakmont Street when we were growing up in Philadelphia. His eccentric aunt would ask in a thick brogue, "Gue and jelly, boys?"

The waitress looked at me. "What's so funny?"

There was no use trying to talk without laughing. "The usual," I said, "but make mine a vanilla milkshake." She scribbled *Robbie & V*. Before she walked away she reached out, put her hand on Robbie's shoulder and rubbed it the way someone stranded on a deserted island would rub a lantern and make a wish. Robbie looked up at her, his expression deep and soft. She glowed as if imagining a genie taking shape from a stream of grayish-white smoke spiraling into the atmosphere.

The principles of physiology render it impossible to inhale a solid, but that is the only way Robbie's sandwich could have disappeared. He drained the milkshake, sucking the bottom of the glass so hard the chef stuck his head out of the takeout window. Without warning, Robbie shot from his seat and wandered out of the diner. The waitress was nowhere in sight, so I threw a wad of bills on the table and ran outside just in time to see him pass through the train station turnstile. A cloud of my breath burst ahead of me as I double-stepped the stairway. By the time I got to the top Robbie stood twenty feet away, his heels hanging over the edge of the deserted platform, the train tracks five feet below. A strong gust of wind or sudden sneeze would have thrust him backward into the trough, and with a belly like a sack of potatoes under his brown winter coat I wouldn't have had any chance of rescuing him, as if I ever had. And if a train stormed around the bend, thousands of tons of steel, glass, and passengers reading the *Tribune*, Robbie wouldn't have had time to climb out, if he even cared to.

I walked toward him taking careful, fluid steps not disturb him so he wouldn't lose his balance. I followed his gaze to an abstract painting on the billboard. It looked like a madman had taken a brush and flung every color in the spectrum onto a canvas—an irrational and chaotic work that appealed to an irrational and chaotic mind. I reached out and gently guided him away from the tracks. Never taking his eyes off of the billboard, he said, “Calming.”

I looked at the painting. *Calming?*

The platform vibrated, a sensation I felt in my organs before the sound reached my ears. “This train takes us to Howard Street,” said Robbie, “and then we hop a rail car on the Brown Line to Belmont. When we get to the end of the line we'll see the real painting.” The expression he gave the waitress returned.

“I'm following you, my man.”

He faced me for the first time since we got to the station. “The Impressionists are my favorites. They see more than we are capable of seeing. They understand more than we can comprehend.”

In the time it took to ride the bus from Robbie's apartment into town, stop to eat, and walk to the train station I realized that, to Robbie, today was the day after I visited him at the State Hospital in Philadelphia twenty years ago. That was the last time I saw him. He was heavily sedated in a sterile room dressed in a faded blue print hospital gown tied in the back, no shoe laces or sharp objects. Obstinate as always, he spit the pills they fed him onto the floor, crossed his legs, closed his eyes and drew a long breath. “Ommmm!” carried him away to Robbie World.

It was the first time I'd stepped inside a psych ward, an eerie world of tangible bodies and intangible minds. I walked down a long corridor; hopelessness oozed from porous gray cinderblock walls. I was unprepared for the empty eyes peering from darkened rooms, the whimsical chatter, pleading spirits. When I entered his room all I could think to say was, "How you doing, Robbie?"

"Okay," he said, hanging onto each of the two syllables.

"I'm going to get you out of here."

He stared at the wall in front of him with the concentration of a seer. "Why?" he asked, and then turned to me and added, "I'm home." It struck me that it was the first time I saw that expression, one that emanated from somewhere deep within.

Life happened: I raised five kids, built a business, drank, lost my business, divorced, moved into a small apartment downtown, and worked a series of dead end jobs. Robbie navigated inside a bubble with peculiar roommates, counselors, chess and Zen. Twenty years wiped him from the hard drive of my memory, a casualty of time and circumstance—to Robbie it was yesterday.

A picture of him that stuck in my head was blood dripping down the bridge of his nose under his facemask after he delivered a punishing blow as linebacker on our high school football team. We earned short incarcerations at the Fifteenth District for frivolous infractions like stealing pizzas from delivery trucks up on the avenue, leaving emergency brakes off cars parked on the incline of Brighton Street, and our specialty, disturbing the peace. Robbie got progressively weirder and within a year of graduation he moved into a West Philly row house with the Krishna. He was always different, a good kind of different, but his differentness became

a functional problem and he couldn't hold down a job. He became eccentric, detached, and transported to another dimension where he meditated, medicated, did yoga, hashish, and then finally checked into the institution where he was diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic. Ignorant to mental health anomalies, I figured Robbie's weirdness combined with low tolerance for alcohol and weed caused his illness until the day his aunt said to me, "You know, Seán, it's that thing that gets into the heads of our boys from Donegal."

After his parents died, Robbie's sister and her husband arranged for him to move closer to their home in Chicago. I was buried under an unmanageable work schedule and running the kids to ball games and school activities. I never dreamed I'd see Robbie again until a random conversation with one of his relatives at a funeral back home a few months earlier. The conversation monopolized my conscience until I scraped together enough cash to pay him a visit.

A rumble of metal chassis, gears, windows, and wheels shook the atmosphere long before the train screeched to a halt on the hardened steel tracks. Doors swooshed open to another universe—men, women, every generation, shade, ethnicity and class; some read, others with eyes closed, wires dangling from ear buds; a metal walker and a wood cane, a service dog with a red bandana around its neck, a fruit basket. Robbie stepped inside, made a left, spun around a pole, back toward the window, and collapsed into a seat as if he'd choreographed the routine. I followed him, almost fell, and took a seat facing the front of the car, Robbie to my right. The train jerked forward, the clack of the wheels against metal welds accelerated to a melodic hum; a few minutes passed before the beat eased to a slower and slower tempo, another jerk, doors opened. Passengers sifted out; replacements funneled in.

Robbie looked at a map of the rail system on the wall across from us, and said, “Six stops and we transfer.”

I watched Robbie, thinking I could decipher his life by his countenance, his gestures—whether he was happy, indifferent, and how he managed to navigate my world while living in his. And whose world was the fantasyland anyway? Robbie never complained about taxes, healthcare, political pundits, the price of gas. What made me think that I was better off? Though I sensed machinery whirling between his ears, the human combustion engine buried in the midst of his being, he was unreadable. “You’re in charge, buddy,” I said.

Robbie looked at me. The grin that wasn’t a grin emerged like he read my mind. “It’s too bad you didn’t get to meet Larry,” he said about his roommate in his independent-living apartment run by Miraculous Options. “Maybe he’ll come out of his room when we get home tonight.”

“It’d be nice to meet him,” I said, curious about the other guy I’d be spending the weekend with. *Would it rub off? Do beta waves emit from the crazed and penetrate a stable person’s brain?*

“He’s a little funny around people. Sometimes he snaps, throws a seven. Not violent, usually; just rammy. Years ago he nearly beat a guy to death over a seat on the bus, but he’s over that now.” Robbie looked so deep into my eyes I could feel him. “And he’s a really good speller.” I burst at the absurd remark and he added, “He steals the old lady’s underwear off her clothesline out back and hangs them in his room,” as if defending the reason he considered Larry a master speller.

Now I have to meet him.

The erratic pace and randomness of our conversation reminded me of riding the subway in Philly where the rants of the delusional were nothing more than background noise. I'd get pissed at the annoyance on passengers' faces; some appeared intimidated, others would change their seat as if senseless chatter was a mortal threat. And then there were the rubbernecks who'd stare at the deranged as if they were passing a car wreck on the freeway, gawking at mangled limbs and splattered blood. Children watched in amusement; adults too serious and too cynical, to find amusement.

"Can he spell dick?" I asked, loud enough so people wouldn't mistake we were together, and enjoying being a party to the jabberer, the two of us out on a day pass. *If passengers wondered which of us was mad, who would it be? Clean-shaven Robbie, or me with shoulder-length hair and a beard?*

"Tonight."

By now I was used to the way he'd drop and pick up conversations minutes, sometimes hours later.

"Tonight what?"

"Tonight we'll go back to my place and watch Perry Mason and you can meet Larry."

A little man inside my head threw cold water on my brain. *Perry Mason! Who the fuck watches Perry Mason?*

"I have every episode," he said with great pride. "Something new, DVD. Advance technology like the space shuttle, or microwave popcorn." I caught him watching me out of the corner of his eye, figuring he was playing me.

Robbie's smile hooked me as a kid, and now I could feel that allure seeping back. His smile was as warm as the sun—regardless how threatening the clouds or how ruthless the storm, it eventually shined through. His smile had the capacity to thaw a frozen heart, relieve the sharpest pain, cure terminal disease. I remembered barroom brawls we'd get into, or nights we spent in the tank for public drunkenness—his smile balanced the mayhem. I had always thought Robbie battled torment, but his smile told me otherwise. He rode his disease like a surfer in the tunnel of a fifty-foot wave, not threatened, but exhilarated.

“Howard Street,” he said, shooting up from his seat. I followed him off the train and across the platform. He leaned over the tracks peering in the direction of the oncoming train, always at ease standing on the edge. “The Brown Line will take us to The Loop,” he said, referring to the train tracks that circled downtown. Robbie emphasized *The Loop*, like an Evangelical minister would The Promised Land.

We were sixteen the last time I remembered being on an elevated train with Robbie, the Market-Frankford line on our way to downtown Philly to get a tattoo. The older guys were getting daggers through hearts, *Death Before Dishonor*, and tombstones. Robbie got a fiery orange and yellow sun that covered the back of his left calf. I'll never forget what he said when I asked why a sun. “Energy,” he said. “The sun is the source of energy. Energy is life.” He tried to convince me to get the same thing so we'd be brothers in ink, but I chose an Irish Cross on my back.

Sitting on the Brown Line, Robbie blurted, “Aaron is my counselor. I talk to him because I'm crazy.” I looked at him, not at his abruptness as much as to search his face, and it told me he was comfortable in his self-awareness.

“No shit,” I said.

Robbie gestured a chuckle, like he'd told the world's funniest joke. He looked out the window and tapped his feet on the floor, faster and faster. “Our stop is next,” he said.

“Cool.”

“I love the museum. I go on Tuesdays. It's free from five to eight.”

“Way cool,” I said.

The train slowed. Passengers stood in unison. I watched Robbie snake through the horde, slithering between bodies large and small. Passengers smiled at him making it obvious he was no stranger to the territory. He came to a stop with his face inches from the glass panel in the door. A huge black man wearing an orange woolen cap and headphones winked at him. An elderly Asian woman touched the sleeve of his coat. A young black girl with beads the colors of the rainbow cascading down tightly twisted cornrows held up her doll for Robbie to see. Like an apostle, Robbie rested his hand on the girl's shoulder. She giggled.

Something held me back from following too close behind him; that my place was with the rest of humanity hovering around him. Robbie belonged in the center, like the sun. I was merely one of the planets. We all needed whatever it was he possessed. We all needed him to be there in the center.

We became separated when the door opened. I made a futile attempt to catch him, but had to settle on keeping him in my sight. He passed through the turnstile and walked down the stairway. When I got to the bottom of the steps and rounded the corner, Robbie was leaning against a pole watching a heavyset black guy playing jazz on a clarinet at curbside. He straightened and walked toward the music, fished a crumpled bill from his pocket and dropped it

into the guy's instrument case. Jazzman's thick pink lips spread around the mouthpiece, but his smile didn't interfere with the tune. Robbie got his second wink in five minutes.

We walked together to the end of the block and stopped at the corner. Traffic breezed past—bus exhaust, car horns, delivery trucks slamming into potholes. Across the street, high atop marble steps, pillars supported a magnificent Greek-style pediment. Between the pillars were large glass doors framed in gold leading to a world of Roman, French, and Chinese antiquity—paintings, ceramic, textile, glassware.

When we got to the counter inside Robbie stuffed his hand into his pockets. "I have money," he said, offering no resistance as I paid. He rushed to the stairs leading to the second level and scurried into the Impressionist exhibit. I watched him stop in front of each painting by Degas, Renoir, Cézanne. He stared with the concentration of a surgeon, and the next thing I knew I was absorbed in the art in a way I had never been. We walked in opposite directions, and met in the middle on the far side of the room, both of us admiring Monet's *Stack of Wheat*, a work representing perception of light at various times of the day, seasons, types of weather—light in a storm. Robbie grinned, and calm washed over me.

Time suspended, and I suddenly realized Robbie had disappeared. He'd mentioned Jackson Pollock, so I pulled the museum map from my back pocket. The contemporary art exhibit was at the far end of the massive building, second level. I made my way through the Modern Architecture exhibit, down the main stairway, through the Sculpture Court, Southeast Asian, and Himalayan Art, and back up a stairway in the rear of the museum. Light burst through the glass wall when I got to the top of the stairs. Robbie stood trancelike on the other side of tall clear doors facing a partition with his arms folded, ardent eyes, envious contentedness, and the

grin that defined him. I opened the door and walked in. A strange sense filled me, one that reminded me of the day I'd walked into his sanitary room after he'd been institutionalized.

“How are you, Robbie?”

Robbie's smile was his answer. He welcomed me into his world decades ago, and now I understood that he never left me. Once in, you were in for life. Nothing ever changed in Robbie's world. To him, we were two kids with more bulk around our middles and a little less on our tops.

We stood side-by-side, arms folded, biceps touching. Robbie's body felt warm, intimate. On the wall in front of us hung the painting that was on the billboard at the train station, *Grayed Rainbow*, Pollock's signature work, one that defined the artist—chaotic, frantic, genius.

“Such a calming presence,” said Robbie. We stood there for a few minutes staring at the wall-sized painting before he added, “Pollock tamed madness, kind of like a matador taming a raging bull.”

I considered Robbie's words, and while staring straight ahead, I said, “We're home,” and imagined his grin spreading wide.

Lovers, prostitutes and drunks strolled, pranced and stumbled by as we sat eating hot dogs in Millennium Park staring at office window lights reflecting from *The Bean*.

Robbie let out a loose burp and said, “One hundred tons.”

“Huh?”

“One hundred tons of stainless steel.”

The luminous sculpture by Anish Kapoor, one hundred tons of polished metal looked as though it sucked every light in the city through its mirror-like finish and spit it out in all

directions, kind of like Robbie with information. He had a mainframe's worth of data stored between his ears, a short circuit in his processor.

He rolled up his napkin in a tight cylinder and stuffed it in his empty soda bottle.

“Ready?”

“I was born ready.” Robbie looked out the corner of his eye and grinned.

A young Asian couple was the only other passengers remaining when we arrived at Robbie's station. The doors opened and we stepped onto the platform. Robbie turned his head to the *Grayed Rainbow* billboard as we walked by, inhaled until his shoulders inflated, and then stuffed his hands in his pockets as he released a huge smile.

Parked cars under a lone street lamp were all that occupied his street. I followed Robbie up the front steps and into the house. I took only two steps inside the door before I realized that the demented tenants kept a tidier apartment than I kept my own.

Robbie looked over his shoulder. “Perry Mason?”

I laughed.

As we crossed the dining room a door cracked open to our left, just enough to see beads of perspiration on a bulbous cranium, and bulging eyes blinking faster than a strobe light.

“Larry,” said Robbie, louder than he'd spoken all day.

Larry looked startled. There was no way of telling whether he was about to cry or attack.

“Spell *dick* for Sean.”

The door opened a little wider, and the furrows lining his forehead released. “Dick,” he said, “D-I-C-K, dick.”

I looked at Robbie. “You're right. Larry is a good speller.”

Larry opened the door all of the way. His face softened—the fear that raises a porcupine’s quills in defense transformed to a warm, opened glove.

My brain no longer governed my motor skills; my heart was now at the controls. I extended my hand and rubbed Larry’s shoulder.

“I’ll get us some grapes,” said Robbie.