

*every day twice walking*



*the same one-block alley back to work*

## The alleyway near the downtown library

### *Part I*

. . . through a thousand blind alleys.  
 You want to bring me to You through stone walls.  
 – Thomas Merton

I'm not certain about my cap. Why I wear it. When. The air is different in here, where I spend my best hours, often cooler. And the light, in this alley, there's much less of it, always by slices, even when the old sun is right overhead and blazing down.

• • •

Ok, I just have to stop reading too much into tone of voice, when my colleague at the library asks me for something and then pauses and says my name, I don't need to ask myself if he is making some clever joke about my name, maybe he just likes the sound of my name and makes a point of calling me *Max*. He might like me telling him how my folks named me *Maddux*, which is another spelling for the Welsh name *Maddox*, the son of *Madoc*, which means "Fortunate." Oh well. Maybe not. I should be glad to be *Max* and lucky not to be called *Maddux*. I already got teased enough when I was little; sure, *Maddux* is mostly a boy's name, but odd names were as bad as women's names for a boy . . .

• • •

Most people who see me in the alley staring straight ahead— as I often am, in a sort of deep trance— and not as clean as I would rather be— do not think of me as a person . . . exactly, but rather as a type, representative of a cluster— sound crystal— one to be pitied . . . with a sympathy that lets them look at me from as far away as they can manage to imagine themselves . . . even when they are physically quite close to me.

• • •

Yes, *Maddux* wasn't such a popular name then, but now that Brangelina - no, I think it was just Angelina herself - named her adopted kid *Maddox*, then I guess that changed. Sometimes I wish I'd been named *Frank*, but I know my parents would have chosen *Francis* instead. Maybe that wouldn't have been so bad either. I was skimming in a book of poems the other day, and I found this one:

*San Francesco, as you are sky*

cool morning, again –  
 Brother & Sister Horse share hay,  
 trading places, chewing

two brindled ducks  
 approach the horses  
 then squawk off to the pond again

climbing this morning,  
 the path divides in two –  
 who goes up or down this steep hill?

So in Italy *Francesco* isn't confusing because the girl's name is *Francesca*.

• • •

I want to talk about my dog. She is the sweetest one, a pit bull, but a sweeter dog you will never know. Her name is *Cannella* because of her pure cinnamon color. I think of her as a wolf though she would never eat me . . . or would she? I know that, with her strength of jaw, she could terminate me in minutes . . . and then eat me? If she were hungry enough she would, I guess.

• • •

What I can't help thinking is, *Mom, Dad! you named me after that Southern storm trooper, Lester Garfield Maddox! How did that happen? Why would you do that? Was it the middle name Garfield that pushed them over the top?* I often felt myself in the middle. I did end up going to Garfield Junior High School: that is fact.

• • •

I am not homeless, and no hobo, since I have found my house-replacement in this alleyway, where I spend most of my day. I can move around inside the alley, depending on the weather. When it is hot, I do prefer the shady sectors, but not always. If I have had a cold night, I often keep on a lot of clothes – maybe it's aging, but I tend to take longer to warm up, and, no, I am no alcoholic with thinning blood, nothing like that. Also, I have a lot of gear to store, and dressing in more clothes makes that easier, yes it does. Nights are different, more fearful, and I will sometimes sleep in bushes nearby or in a shelter or in a church; rarely do I sleep in my alleyway . . . except when I nap in the daytime. Nod. I come in the day as if I were coming to work, it is a job, on the whole, undefined.

• • •

“I saw the wolf in winter watching on a raw hill . . .”

That, if I remember right, is from a poem by W.S. Merwin, one favorite poet of mine. Maybe I'll go to the library and get a copy to check out. *Cannella* looks at the world the way a wolf might if she were alone on a lone hill . . . in the instant before she begins to howl straight up. I wonder if she once was a cadaver dog. Her sense of smell is excellent, excellent. I know she could have been a great one.

• • •

I am a reference librarian, one of several, in a smallish city library. I say *smallish*, but my city is actually way too big for its britches because it has a major research university within it. Actually, that is not quite accurate: when I say *within*, I refer to *most* of the university. Parts of it are, in fact, in different cities and even in other counties. This university is one big deal. Talking about **britches**, this is one high mark for higher learning . . . no, no, no, that is a joke from a different era. The kids still get high, but they also want to make money, make deals, and sign up for one of the myriad corporations that seem to own and run the universities in this dreadful age we continue to call *entrepreneurial*.

• • •

I have stared at the side of that building till I squint. I sit in front of the wall in the morning when the sun hits direct on the wall, but softer – still I must shade my eyes. In the afternoon I stand with Cannella and peer with eyes shaded toward the wall and into the sun as it creeps down behind the back of the buildings. Guess *ghost sign* is the right term since I can never quite make out anything but the “W” and “L” – other letters have too few shapes for me to read them into words and the spaces between words and lines are even vaguer. It could have been any of these: there was a WOLF ST. nearby back when, and there was a WOLF PAPER COMPANY not so long ago, too. And there is space at top and bottom that could have words. As for the HOUSE OF WOLF, a local I talked to who grew up in town remembers hearing about that restaurant from his good friend’s grandparents. But who says it is even WOLF spelled out. Perhaps the word was WALL or the name WOLL? Ghost signs are everywhere in alleys. Over time, building owners have changed, over and over. And what remains.

• • •

I want to go into the library. I have questions, too. They might have some answers . . . and if they do not, well, I still might use the bathroom like the others do . . . we have a bathroom near City Hall, but that’s the only other one open and only for a few daytime hours . . . the restaurants, the boutiques, they will not stand for us in their bathrooms, not at all.

• • •

Now, when I went to school, protestors ruled the day, almost every day, in fact. The football players didn't protest much, maybe a few of them did, but no more than that. I was interested, but not quite, in the protests most of the time. It just didn't seem right, and I was so engrossed in my classes, my homework, and, then, later at night when I was done studying, thinking about her, what she would feel like.

• • •

The smokers in the alley twenty feet from entrances around the corner – clerks and business district workers, city staff, too – then, a man in short pants, plain t-shirt, black or grey, at least once a day, strides the alley back and forth, left hand often holding a cell and right hand waving, talking not loudly, but with emphases, for his full 15-minute break. The call always ends with a low sound I imagine to be a declaration of affection, but it could just as easily be an acknowledgement of defeat. Who has he been talking to? Why is he scratching like that? Makes me start to itch. My nose. Who dropped that small box of french fries? French fries. Mmmmm.

• • •

I wanted to work in a library once upon a time. I could have figured that all out. Really.

• • •

My own older brother was in the war, Vietnam. Thank God he was wounded and got out before he came home in a bag, a box. But it took it all out of him. He used to come into the library and try to talk to me at the desk, but he wasn't making sense, any sense. Then he'd get loud, and I'd have to tell him to get quieter or he'd have to leave. He couldn't. I didn't even have to call the guard: they'd just come and escort him out. Oh yeah, what the city psychiatrist said: "Schizophrenia is no excuse for bad behavior." My brother though, he had PTSD, and he

seemed like he was seeing things sometimes . . . maybe he was. It must have been just horrible. He liked dogs . . . when we were growing up we had a mutt. He loved her. I scratched that dog's ear in the alley today. Later, when I finished my break, I washed my hands. Twice.

• • •

The other day a young man in dungarees seemed to be studying the letters of the ghost sign and talking— maybe to himself, maybe to a mouthpiece, I could not see clearly— I believe he wants to restore the words— how can he know them?— I think I heard him call it “aging,” but “artificial” I name it.

• • •

Out at my break, walking, getting some air, and the damned phone rang. Mom again with some confusion about tonight. I didn't want to answer, but I did. “Mom, I'll bring dinner to you, and we can watch the show you like, *Dancing with the Stars*. Oh, you want to go out; well, we can do that and then come back to the apartment for the show. OK?” I know I start talking loud as usual with her, but she isn't actually hard of hearing and tells me to talk a bit quieter, and then I try.

• • •

My bag is new shiny. Odd, that shiny when I am dusty. Covered. I carry it with me over one shoulder. Where I found it? Thrown in a free pile blocks away from the alley. Now I have it with me. Filled.

• • •

I do piss in the alley sometimes. I can't hold it. They think I don't smell it. Of course, I can. Nasty business, but it has to get done. Doesn't it now? Where?

• • •

That man called out; maybe he meant Cannella. *Mean damn dog, stayed in the alley. Not lived, simply stayed. A ratter. Not so small, but extremely fast. Catcher, jaws locked down on rodents.*

That's what he said . . . what damned rats . . . I ask?

• • •

On a slow day, I let my mind drift back to my desk at home, and I can almost keep working on what I have been calling *versions*. The Buddhists seem to say, "It is just a story" and, then, follow with "Everything changes." I do not now doubt that, but I have to ask myself, are all these *versions* truly, equally valid. C'mon now! I sit at the Reference Desk all day and hear the most remarkable, even deranged, questions. Boring ones, too; and repeated rantings. All with equal validity? With any?

• • •

And where is she now? I worked hard at that job, and we had times after my workday . . . I know why she left . . . no, it wasn't drugs, I wasn't on drugs . . . then . . . I haven't touched anything in weeks, years, months. Nothing. I think she just got tired of me . . . repeating myself.

I still do I suppose, but in own my head so only I hear, am aware. She was a beautiful woman.

That was a long time ago, but I know I'd still find her, find her . . . I say the thing I loved the most was her calling . . . just before, "Here, here, here," three times just like that and then a grab.

Oh sure, I grabbed back with all I had.

• • •

If I close both my eyes and then put my palms over both lids, I can see the flat grey rocks of the high country where we hiked, it seems just weeks past, John and I together, friends, only foes if we spatted or went fast in a contest. Any race. My hard metacarpals . . . my eyes, lids down. Rest. The rocks were hot on bare feet if we left our shoes behind for a time . . . we sat and talked,

I told him he was no nice guy that time . . . and, all of a sudden, the crickets stop in mid-chirp, all of them at once . . . how could they do that . . . a rattler slithers at the bottom of the rock we are sitting on, and we both shiver and do not move even one muscle.

• • •

I am torn: of course, homelessness is a major problem. How can we assume that homeless people can manage? Without a home, a place to rest and stay? If there is justice, this is not an example. Seriously. On the other hand, how can people without homes refuse help to have one? If I were in that state - and, yes, *There but for the grace of God, go!* - I would welcome all help . . . this I believe from my current position, my stool here at the library Reference Desk. Perhaps.

Who can truly put himself in another's place? Or herself? And homeless kids . . . I almost begin to weep aloud thinking this possible and, indeed, factual. I wonder sometimes if I could do more, I know I could. Those faded signs on the walls stick in my head. I looked it up recently: it's an old term, "wall dogs" for the men who painted them by hand all with just a brush. It's still a way to make a living up on a suspended platform, mostly by themselves, sometimes with another painter. Women do it, too, now. They still call themselves "wall dogs," maybe because of the safety harnesses they wear.

A man called today and asked about Saint Francis, San Francesco - he wanted a poem, not a prayer book - and I was lucky. When I searched the catalogue, a recent poem came up as part of a collection; when I read it to him, he asked me to put the book aside for him:

*several stations in recounting*  
**the Leggenda di San Francesco d'Assisi**  
*by Giotto di Bondone*

*the sky-hand of God*  
*two-fingered sign to the raised*  
*prayer hands of Francis*

*shall never forget  
that moment and the poorman –  
so my cape over the ground for him too*

*I cannot believe  
that I exist without flames  
running down my back*

*unless timepieces crack  
the human father dies first  
leaving the child  
alone on a short porch looking  
out over a rich, deep valley*

*though Francesco points  
over his angry Father's head  
Assisi now recalls  
the Saint's parents in cold bronze,  
broken chain in Mother's hands*

*green bird Francesco  
fly up to your perch in air  
uncaged throne of wood*

*this is what scared me most  
the disappearance of my heart  
and that no one knew the difference*

• • •

I remember the trips, the vacations. I had money then. Always to Italy. My people come from Calabria. We never travelled there, but I believe it is beautiful country, filled with hills and flat

plateaus . . . and such mushrooms . . . so large and deep-colored brown, one *porcino*, huge and, when we'd buy them at the local market, delicious to cook. In hot oil . . . salt . . . peppers, pepper.

• • •

I pace off the length and breadth of my alley, not often, but it is hard for me to remind the numbers enough for them to stay with me or where I wrote them down . . . my alley's width is more than twice my height and the length . . . so much depends on what is left inside here. No straight lines.



### **The alleyway near the downtown library**

#### *Part II*

What I welcome most, wait for, is my lunch break. Many days I snack lightly and then walk, aerate my brain and body for a full hour. I love it most when it is breezy, not cold, but cool . . . in the warm, not hot, sun - what I call *warm but cool*.

...

No no no, I am not nuts. It is the wind that vibrates. My head spins in and out. Dry winds. Soft hands in mine, too. That was ago. Long. A man in the corner . . . not me. No, please not me.

...

Sometimes I play a game, game a play. Words and words and. It's only reasonable. And Cannella knows that, too. Every day I can, when I find the *Daily*, I read all the obits → *obit* turn *bito*, *bima* runs to *iamb*, *bema* becomes *beam* easy, but also reshuffles to *mabe*, a cultured pearl.

Here it all is in my dictionary I carry along with me. Old one, but good one, heavy one and falling off the binding, too bad glue. Cannella is such the good listener. I told her all about Paul Revere, all his songs, and now he's dead. I have my dictionary with me all the time; sorry, this page is torn and all marked up:

### **Full Definition of BITO**

~~† a small scrubby tree (*Balanites aegyptiaca*) that grows in dry regions of tropical Africa and Asia and has bark that yields a fish poison and seeds that yield a medicinal oil — called also *desert date* — see [balanites](#)~~

### **Variants of BITO**

~~**bi-to** or **bito tree**~~

~~**Origin of BITO** origin unknown~~

~~[Mauri Yambo](#) Works at University of Nairobi · 123 followers~~

~~Babiito = "Children of the Bito Tree". History shows that the Babiito were the founders of the Bito royal lineage associated with the founding of Bunyoro-Kitara empire in the western region of present-day Uganda.~~

...

My dog Cannella, she's my fine companion accommodation. I take her with me everywhichever, it helps me get all around. She's no funny rat on my shoulder hiding in my shirt or anything like that, no long snake around my neck, but it's people I don't like very much. But I am lonely too, and sometimes people will talk to Cannella, even to me when she's around. Sometimes some. I am that shy.

• • •

I cannot believe the smell in that alley - so much urine you'd think the walls would have changed color. Lighter. Even bleached. Out.

• • •

The kids play in my alley. Several reasons. None of logic really. If a ball is kicked away, it is retrieved, but they mostly find it in the several steep, small garbage heaps. When a ball is thrown against one side, the bounces can rebound from side-to-side, almost always at pretty crazy angles. And almost every wall is pocked with edges and holes. The ball seems to have a nose and finds them all. These loud guttersnipes, these alley urchins, all want to be stars, so they play day and night, losing track of time until it is almost too late to go home. But they go. Go.

• • •

My supervisor was just impossible today; usually he's pretty reasonable. I think it's too much pressure from the top. I felt it today. He took it all out on his staff, which includes me. I started to snap back at him, but, fortunately, I held back. I have been reading in Dante. I can't read the Italian, it's pretty hard, but sometimes a line makes me stand up from my chair. I could crow like a damned bird. Like this one Dante repeats in two Cantos, X & XI of Paradise, why who knows:

“U’ ben s’impingua, se non si vaneggia.” [Dante, Paradiso X, 96 and Paradiso XI, 139]  
 Longfellow translates: “Where well one fattens if he strayeth not. “That’s St. Thomas telling the Dominicans not to wander and, then, they’ll prosper. I always imagine myself wandering my agnostic self, but, hell, who doesn’t want to prosper?

• • •

Sometimes I disappear . . . for a time . . . even for days . . . does anyone notice . . . I suspect they see me in the alley or standing tall nearby . . . even if I'm not there. Where do I go? I do not want to say . . . cannot always say . . . there is a song in my head I have it right now, it won't go away .

. . . won't leave me. I must have heard it on a car radio driving by, but when exactly I can't remember: "She was just seventeen, if you know what I mean," that is one old song. Maybe the rhyme is stuck in there . . . I don't know. I like that song . . . I liked it fine back when, but "Twist and Shout," that was my favorite song way back. I know those funny Beatles lads sang these both songs, but I liked my Isley Bros singing "Twist and Shout," over and over and over and over . . .

• • •

Where have I gone where? Sometimes for days. Have I disappeared? What disappears? Me? I? I insist and predict. That much I can know and do. I cannot tell how much I need this help. Really.

I need someone to help me, and sometimes I don't tell the whole story, but this time, really to myself, am I?

• • •

It has always been this way for me. In every job I have never quite fit in. My old friend nailed it for me years ago when he told me that was the problem: "Do you ever feel comfortable there?" I could not answer yes then (or now either) though I cannot tell you how much I wanted to. Of course, if I really wanted to . . . Usually I can get close enough to the boss, but then I start to worry, worry about my fellow employees, but then none of them quite gets me either. Betwixt. Between. I wonder about my writings, too, is it also a problem to create versions; are these stories simply separated from me too much?

• • •

This is identity? There were two pairs of the same-size same shoe in the free box. I must have taken— I must have mixed up – the pairs. My feet are not so different. Are different! My feet. Do they know which ways to walk? Separately... together. These shoes are large large, I must

have two of the same foot. I can walk. Okay.

• • •

Now I follow the short, curved trail of lumps of dog turd down the straight street, evenly spaced. Stepping wide. Away. I heard talk once of *strunzi*, little dog shits, but they were in gutter and, hmm, were they long and thin like a dog might crouch and, then, leave, shit hanging. But, hey, these littler oval lumps, dogs leave them, too, wobbling along and shitting them as they walk.

Pieces of shit. Pieces of shit.

• • •

I can be two. That one man sees me entering the 1<sup>st</sup> floor from the stairway. In the library. But then I see him, he's walking down the street minutes later and there I am again.

• • •

Oh for God's sake, even the greatest ones repeat themselves! Respect themselves. That Hegel thought it all circled around the dialectic: even when he made no sense, that's what he meant. Norman Mailer wrote a lot of books, but mostly he just wanted to get laid. Or wanted everyone to think that's what he wanted. Whatever good it did her, Plath told her Daddy off. Sometimes over and over. So why shouldn't I repeat? Sometimes I have a lot to say so repetitions do crop up. R-r-r: I mean, for the sake of my own dog, I always tell her I love her and pat her behind the head – she likes that very fine. I want to write and rewrite my thoughts, but they won't always stay on the walls – those funny kids will wash them away or cover them over if they don't wash off. I was walking downtown yesterday, or some other day, which I cannot recall now, but there it was a sign I must agree with: HAVE A BLESSÈD DAY, but I must argue too, *what does BLESSÈD mean*, I know what it means to me, food for me to bite and chew, for God's sake, we all need it, and why was that guy in his encampment tent at the post office scream screaming –

ing –ing –inging. Like a crazy man. Poor fellow –low . . .

–low, I mean. Meant. Way, way too loud.

...

I had to clean up shit today; one of our regulars could not hold it and sprayed diarrhea all over himself and onto the floor. I guess he wasn't wearing any underwear. My goodness what a mess. Good thing I had that training last week. I sure want to avoid anything pathogenic. What was odd wasn't the diarrhea, that happens. To all of us. What shocked me was looking up from the mess to see—out the window—someone watching me clean up. I could see his eyes, deep dark blue, lock down into mine. Just for a minute. It kinda scared me. And he looked disarrayed that fellow, a jumble.

...

Water. I am thinking again about leaving. No, I won't. Not yet. Yet. After going in the library, it was loud in there. Someone asked if she could help me. First I thought she meant *Leave*, but she really asked me. Rain will be. And earlier today I was walking by the library. Not sure why I stopped. And looked in the window. He was on the floor cleaning up something, maybe somebody's accident— that's what I saw— and he looked up from it and right at me.