



## Overture: Drowning in Shit

**■ WAS STANDING** on the stairs, my oversized Tweety Bird head sticking out of fuzzy pajamas. I was three. And I was crying.

*Please, Mommy, I don't wanna say it anymore—let me watch TV!*

“SAY it!”

*Shit...shit...shit...shit...wahhh! PLEASE!*

“SAY it!”

*Shit...shit...shit...shit...shit...shit...*

My mother was forcing me to say the word “shit” over and over for a solid half-hour, ensuring that I'd miss my favorite TV program, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. The stairs faced away from the television while the show aired, making my torture that much worse. I was being punished.

My crime?

I had said the word “shit.”

I probably had overheard my parents say it and was only mimicking them, but no matter—I was to bear the full weight of my sin. Because “shit” had slipped from my tongue once, mom demanded that I chant it a thousand times.

These days I'm wondering whether my thirty-minute shit mantra was a magical incantation or some sort of fecal rain dance, because ever since that night, the gods have been emptying their bowels on me.

Take a whiff.

You know that smell. It's unmistakable. Enough to make you gag. And there's no getting away from it. I'm surrounded by it. A vast shitscape. Dung-heaps piled high as landfills. I'm smothered under a crapavalanche. A gooey, oozing, pulsating poop mountain. I inhabit a colossal brown loaf. I am cocooned in shit, a turd-coated larva.

All sewer pipes lead to me. I'm tainted. Defiled. Infected. Soiled. A human septic tank. A black hole. A toilet bowl. When the shit goes down...when it hits the fan...it winds up sticking to me.

My life is a maelstrom of violence and morbidity. A tragedy. An absurdist farce. A slasher film. A triage center where I struggle to

stop the bleeding. My life has gone way past the point where it ceases to be thrilling and sexy and funny...and becomes scary and ugly and sad.

A year ago I was on national television, plugging a hardcover book from a major publisher.

Now I'm in prison, writing on loose-leaf. And my pen's almost out of ink.

I lost my house, my car, my wife, even my dog.

I guess it could be worse. I could be on Death Row. I could have a terminal illness. I could be blind or hopelessly crippled.

Worst of all, I could be ordinary.

I knew almost from infancy that I wouldn't have a normal life.

At three or four years old, I was stricken with a waking nightmare which now seems prophetic. I sat screaming in our bathtub with all the water drained down, my pruny pink body shivering. My mother asked what was wrong. I said that I knew—I just *knew*—that I had already lived this life, and that it had ended in acute violence. And for some reason, God had rewound the movie and was forcing me to relive everything, motion for identical motion. I was headed straight for disaster, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Quite precocious. Little boys are supposed to be made of snips 'n' snails 'n' puppy dog's tails. I was made of shit and teardrops and visions of my own demise.

Physicists struggle with the question of why things break. My great scientific inquiry is the matter of why my life resembles a jet-plane explosion. I'm searching for the black box.

Again, I was three or four—a time in my life filled with black magic—and I drove with my parents from our suburban Philly home to a furniture store in south Jersey. While loading their purchase into the trunk, they gave me the car keys and told me to hold onto them. As dad was slamming the trunk closed, I purposely tossed in the keys, leaving us all helpless and stranded.

From then onward, whenever there's been a trunk slamming, I've thrown in the keys. I really see no other way. I keep painting myself into a corner for the sick pleasure of finding a way out. I'll roll that boulder almost all the way up the hill, just to let it tumble down again. Like Harry Houdini, I'll wrap myself inside ropes, chains, and a locking trunk, then get dropped in the ocean for no other reason than to see if I can avoid drowning.

Place something good in front of me, and I'll smash it to pieces.

I sat there with my coloring book at age four or five, blithely using crayons on an anthropomorphized cartoon carrot. "Here, mommy," I asked with feigned innocence, "do you like the way I colored this picture?" Leaning over my shoulder and swallowing the bait, mom said, "Yes, Jimmy, that's very nice." With that, I savagely defaced the page, violently slashing across Mr. Carrot with bold, fat strokes from a black crayon.

I destroyed what had been nice.

It was pure instinct.

I don't like nice things.

I never wanted an easy life. Never craved for serenity or wealth or popularity. I wanted trouble. I was very careful what I wished for.

Many people talk about going to extremes but really aren't serious about it. They surely don't want to risk anything. But I know the crucial difference between shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater and *setting* a fire in a crowded theater.

And I have a pack full of matches in my hand.

Drama queen. Crisis junkie. Shit Magnet. I am the black sheep of the global village. The Bermuda Triangle on two legs. A living, breathing stigma. I've cornered the market on bad karma. My negative vibes set off every seismograph along the West Coast. They say I'm #1 in the Dead Pool, the next micro-celeb to die. A lot of people want me dead. Or silenced.

Ha, ha—I'm alive. And still chanting the word "shit." I've faked my own death just so I'm twice as scary when I return.

Yet for all the human waste caked onto my torso, I don't feel half as guilty as they say I am. It's just that once you start getting into trouble, they typecast you.

My birth wasn't...intended. I was an accident, and my parents blamed me for forcing them to stay together. They also blamed me for mom's health problems.

The nuns at school told me I was going to hell. I often got blamed for things which weren't my fault, things which other kids had done.

My ex-wife has cancer, and she blames me for it.

My ex-mistress is violent, suicidal, and psychotic, and she blames me for it.

An ex-soldier shoots at the White House, and I get blamed.

Three British tourists blow their brains out, and I get blamed.

JFK's assassination? The Oklahoma City bombing? Hiroshima? The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald?

I did 'em all.

Blame me for everything from world famine to the Ebola virus to the Holocaust to Christ's crucifixion. Blame me for all of your measly dissatisfactions with life. But please, blame me for that annoying voice in your head that tells you I'm right. Blame me when you wonder whether it'll be a car crash or a bad biopsy or a rusty blade which finally brings you down...down...down alongside me.

Your new cellmate.

You want a piece of me?

Come into my lair, said the spider to the fly. If you think you can get some of this, slink on down this web I've woven. I've warned you before to stay away, but since you refused, come a little closer. See the dewy beads as they hang from each steely strand. Watch how they trap and refract the sunlight, how they hold a tiny rainbow before dripping down into bottomless darkness. And watch your step, for you might scuttle over a corpse or two, the brittle husks of insects who thought they could invade my domain without suffering, without writhing in final, fatal seconds of remorse, without losing their souls in the game. This time, well, it won't be like the other times. I thought you were smarter, but I was wrong. So come on down, little fly—I have something for you.

The story of my shit-stained life. My literary autopsy. My premature auto-obituary.

The court papers list my name as James Thaddeus Goad. The "Thaddeus," my mother would always remind me, was an homage to St. Jude Thaddeus, patron saint of hopeless causes.

Mom had big plans for me.

