

Old Man in the Tub with MacGyver

by Mathew Paust

He'd been in the tub the better part of an hour, Calvin had. The duty water had long washed most of the shit off and carried it down the drain, leaving only a trickle from the shower head above the spigot knob he was unable to reach with enough leverage to push all of the way in to choke off the damnably taunting trickle. Now, awakening from a short nap and remembering he'd somehow gotten himself turned around and was facing the drain and water source, he hoped his muscles were sufficiently rested for another one-handed assault on the wall-bolted steel handle located waist high were he standing. He assisted the pull with the other hand pushing against the tub bottom. The bicep-to-shoulder muscle burn encouraged him for several heartbeats, until it pooped out. Again.

He lay back. Maybe with a little more rest he'd risk tearing something—tendon? heart muscle? Brain vein? One final herculean strain, if it didn't kill him might get him at least to his knees. Then he could roll against the side. Maybe drape a leg over onto the bathroom floor. The goal at this point was to sit on the tub edge as a first step to eventually standing. Seemed sensible considering his seemingly critically limited options. Time for another nap. . .quick one. . .get the subconscious involved, maybe flash some new thinking into the cerebrum.

Quickly dominating his slide toward another nap was the concept of *critical*, which led a dive of notion fragments to the “quiet room” for triage screening. It reappeared shortly, still pack leader, but toting a flag with the word *thinking*.

Much to ponder with those two words conjoined, he suddenly knew. *Critical thinking* was a phrase he'd only recently memorized as its familiarity grew to dominate the more learned Facebook

discussions. It struck him at first as unnecessarily contrived, redundancy giving serious hue to *common sense*. And the word *critical* alone, in most applications, left a vaguely threatening taste in his throat. He'd long known he was a right-brainer, indifferent to math and less interested in logic than intuition. He knew it was optimum to have them agreeing, and he knew he courted danger relying on only one. But at the moment he felt gratitude recognizing it was not too late for a little left-brain help which indeed surfaced, as if beckoned, as an archival memory of having watched two or three episodes of an old TV series called "MacGyver." The series hero, MacGyver, of course, is a plucky type with a head full of science. Calvin remembered a scene or two where MacGyver helped girls out of impossible situations using everyday simple objects as tools—e.g. hairpins, and/or shoelaces. Calvin had neither within reach right then, but his merely thinking about thinking like this shifted his respect to antidotes from the toxins borne in fear of panic.

On the verge of another flash-nap, he experienced the eureka recognition he'd been using the wrong muscles, and understanding this with logic proudly affirming his embarrassed intuition, Calvin zoned out and allowed the nap to build energy for one last burst. His newly invigorated neurons closed ranks during the downtime, joining both brain hemispheres to ward off a worst-case fixation that refused to cede its voice: how long could he expect to survive in the tub before. . .

He lived alone, voice out of reach of anyone, cellphone in another room, days away possibly before Jack, the only visitor who braved the Great Pandemic occasionally to see him, might appear with a hot meal from Shirley. Jack had a key. Seeing Cal's truck out front and getting no response from the apartment he'd surely open the door enough to give a shout. Embarrassment be damned.

Suddenly the horned skull of Jumpin' Jack Flash appeared, indelible in the forefront of his cognitive deliberations. A true *boo* moment, tainted with the irony he knew he, Calvin, could die regardless—stroke, heart attack, or any of a myriad of mysterious

vital failings of a body grown worn and weak from age and inactivity. It could happen anytime, anywhere without so much as a flick of warning. But to be found naked, alone, in a bathtub? At best Mr. Flash had a sense of humor, albeit mitigating the *boo* effect by rendering the scenario too ludicrous to take root. Calvin almost laughed aloud. He flexed his muscles, concentrating mainly on those in the right arm, the one that might have ruptured itself pulling on the steel wall handle. Now, of course, with MacGyver's critical thinking assistance, he knew to push with the arm was his main physical strength. He'd barely used those muscles in his desperation to wrench himself to his knees. First step was to reverse his geography to enable maximum purchase of the tub's sturdy edge. Once realigned he clamped a death grip on the edge. Then, splaying his left hand on the far side for balance, and filling his lungs with what he accepted could be his last conscious breath, he pushed. . .

