

The Last Words of John MacMullen

by
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Peter Amitié crossed the boundary between the living and the dead, and he did so with a heavy heart. As he stepped from the parking lot onto the gravel path that lead deeper into the cemetery, he couldn't help but feel sad. It would be his first visit to Angel's Rest since the mausoleum of his dear friend John MacMullen was completed, and it had taken quite a while to gather the courage to make the trip.

He passed through rows of marble blocks and travelled the long path down the hill into the less visited recesses of the cemetery. As Peter steeled himself for his first sight of his dear friend's completed graveside, his mind travelled back over their life together and came to rest on the last promise Peter had made to him: "Yeah, I'll make sure it looks exactly the way you want."

Peter's sadness intensified when he realized that "Mad Mac," as he was routinely called by those who knew him more than passing well, had few other friends when he passed away. Sure, there were the bar tenders, the restaurant managers, the exclusive clothiers that he patronized, the ones upon whom he lavished most of his weekly columnist's paycheck. But they loved him for the weight of his coin, not for the fellowship of his spirit. His mother loved him, too, though she often wondered to herself where she'd gone wrong in birthing such a fellow. And his column's fans undoubtedly loved him, based solely on his paper's unflagging subscription rate.

But Mad Mac had no friends in the industry, the industry he had devoted his working life to. That industry was the film industry. He had always loved movies, even as a small boy; one of his earliest childhood memories was sneaking into the grand Tivoli Theatre at the ripe old age of seven so he could watch

THE WILD BUNCH, a film his parents had refused to take him to. Sequestered in the third row, low in the overstuffed seat amid the adult movie goers who gasped and recoiled in a call-and-response with the violence on the screen, little John was enraptured. Not by the violence, but by the cinematic skill with which the director and cinematographer, the actors and other tradespeople unfurled the banner of their film. And when the heroes died, he cried right along with many of the older, hardened movie patrons.

From that moment on, John MacMullen devoted his life to gaining access to the film industry, which wasn't easy for a boy from Cedar Rapids. He tried his best to act in school plays, but he wasn't handsome enough to play the leads. He tried singing roles, but his weak, high-pitched voice failed him there. His timing was horrible, so comic roles were out, too. He even tried working the technical side, but he could never seem to comprehend the difference between a Phillips and a flathead, and electricity scared the bejeebees out of him.

When he got into college (on what MacMullen considered a well-deserved chess scholarship), he attempted writing, which he felt he had a knack for. But his plays' subjects were always just far enough out of reach of his audience that nobody seemed to understand them. His parody of THE GRADUATE, called THE POST-GRADUATE, failed to impress any of his peers, or a particular sophomore English major he'd had his eye on. His send-up of Faulkner, AS I LAY MOULTING, got some of the worst reviews that Moretail College's paper, "The Tail Feathers," ever published. And his last school presentation, a musical version of Che Gueverra's life, RED SAILS IN THE SUNSET, was so bad that the actors even booed themselves.

But when young MacMullen read the reviews of that production, a review that called the play "so bad, even Che himself would revolt against it," Mac decided revenge was in order. He turned the tables on his critic by reviewing the reviewer. He unearthed bizarre but humorous motivations for the reviewer choosing particular phrases, he attributed the reviewer's desire to impress his readers to a "decided lack of breast feeding at an early age," he even suggested the reviewer consider changing his major from Speech to Speech Therapy. MacMullen's harsh but biting satirical comments struck a chord with the readers of that column, and just like that, John MacMullen had found his niche in life.

More importantly, he'd found his ladder to access the stars.

From that day on, John MacMullen unleashed all the pent-up frustration with the performing arts at the arts themselves, and hurled his words like javelins of jealousy at every realm of the filmmaking art. Which was how Peter Amitié had met him. Peter had had a bit part in a forgettable film called GODZILLA MEETS THE IRS, and caught the critic's eye with an intense death scene that MacMullen described as "one of the most enjoyable mortality culminations I've ever witnessed. Too bad it didn't happen to the director prior to his completion of the project in question." In a huff, Peter had shown up at MacMullen's newspaper desk to complain about the short shrift his movie had gotten in the review, but MacMullen was so impressed that Peter had the balls to show up in person, "especially after appearing in that absolutely dreadful film," that he charmed Peter right off of his rant.

They became fast friends, and Peter quickly noticed something about John MacMullen: as critical as he was, he really just wanted to be noticed and liked by the industry, the industry he'd wanted all his life to be a part of. But his nearly-always condemnational reviews drove a wedge between MacMullen and the rest of the industry that would never heal, not after he'd called director James Cameron, the darling of the decade and a favorite every Oscar season, "a hack of the lowest order, who instead of being enshrined in Grauman's Walk of Fame, should be doing penance in the fourteenth Ring of Hell." Or the time he compared Tom Rows' acting talents to that of "Jenny Scott-Levin, my seven-year-old niece, except Jenny has a wider emotional range. And a deeper voice."

Mad Mac had alienated so many people in the industry that he would never have gotten permission to see another preview again, were it not for his readers' undying devotion. That, and the fact that his

paper had enough pull to get him into every advanced screening, even after the time he'd been seated next to the hugely popular actress Mia Ringold, and then got up and moved one seat farther away.

"What is it, Johnny? Afraid I'll bite?" she'd said in her sweetest voice.

"Not at all, madam," Mad Mac had replied haughtily. "I'm saving room for your ego."

So it was no wonder that, when MacMullen was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx, Hollywood as a whole refused to pay their respects. Day after day, as he wasted away in a private hospital room, Mad Mac waited for them to come, to beg for one glowing review before the famous MacMullen wit was retired forever. But no one came, no one except Peter. He knew how much MacMullen wanted to be liked, wanted to impress people with his choice of words, his extensive vocabulary, his rapier wit.

"At the end, nobody cares for talent," MacMullen sighed one afternoon, close to the end. "They desire only fawning praise, a phony pat on the back and a ten per cent increase over their last film's receipts." He coughed into his bed sheet, and turned back to Peter. "I want to have the last word, Peter. I want to show these...these celluloid buffoons that I don't need them. I want..." Another bout of coughing, heavier this time, interrupted MacMullen's wish.

"What is it, John?" Peter asked.

MacMullen composed himself, then said in that raspy voice of his, "I want to have the last word."

Peter recalled the conversation, that day in the hospital, as he crossed a low hill and closed in on MacMullen's final resting place. He was entering a section of the cemetery reserved for the rich and powerful. Overweight angels hovered over deeply carved cenotaphs. Huge mausoleums raised up in all their bulky splendor, and marble was as common as grass. *How could John be happy in such company?* Peter wondered to himself. Then he realized, *Here, they are all equal. Only the power of your wallet distances you from your neighbor. Not too unlike life.*

That last day with John continued to echo in Peter's head, resounding as loudly as his feet did on the now semi-precious paving stones. "I want to leave them in awe," MacMullen had said.

"What do you mean?" Peter asked.

"I want... I want to show them they are all pikers. I want to flout my superior intelligence, my... my boundless knowledge." Then, MacMullen's raspy voice grew silent. "I want them to have to come and see it."

"See what?" Peter asked.

"My tomb. My gravestone. My final resting place." MacMullen's tired, drawn face grew a thin, wicked smile. "I want to leave an epitaph that none of them can bear not to see."

"Chances are, they'll just come to laugh. Maybe spit, or worse."

"Bah! I could care less!" He fumbled to grasp Peter's hand, and tried to squeeze it managing only a weak movement. "As long as they come."

"Well, what did you have in mind?" Peter asked.

Another grin slowly spread across John MacMullen's face. But this time it was a monumental grin, a Cheshire-cat smile, wide enough to swallow the Grand Canyon, deep enough to hold most of Manhattan with no skyscrapers visible over the top. "My boy, I have an absolutely delicious idea. Promise me!" MacMullen suddenly gasped.

"Promise you what?" Peter asked, surprised by the sudden tightness of MacMullen's grip.

"Promise me!" MacMullen rasped, threatening to crush Peter's hand with his new-found strength.

"I will, I will!" As MacMullen's grip relaxed, Peter added, "So what did I just promise?"

MacMullen's smile faded to a simple satisfied look. "That you'll oversee the construction of my tomb."

Peter argued, he fought, he pleaded. He suggested he might accidentally do a bad job interpreting MacMullen's complex instructions. He suggested he might do a really bad job on purpose. He tried every-

thing he could do to weasel out of his promise, but nothing could dissuade MacMullen. Peter was MacMullen's only friend, and Peter was the only one he could trust with carrying out his grand scheme.

So with heavy heart, Peter walked the last few steps, up and over the final rise. MacMullen had chosen the valley on the far side, from a set of ground plans Peter had rustled up later that same day. MacMullen knew he hadn't much time, and in a few hours (with the help of a hastily corralled herd of lawyers), he'd transferred control of his significant trust funds and bank accounts to Peter, and had dictated detailed, in-depth instructions for his massive mausoleum concept.

"More of a monstrosity, if you ask me," one of his lawyers had commented.

"Thank God I'm not asking you. I'm paying you for your legal expertise, not your architectural acumen."

But all the wrangling with the lawyers must have taken its toll, for John MacMullen, bane of unprofessional actor and unskilled writer, the death-knell for bad cinema worldwide, died later that evening, with only Peter and a nurse in attendance.

He was weak, and his voice was soft and raspy. He and Peter were discussing some of the more difficult arrangements, when MacMullen stopped and gazed up at the ceiling. "You know, Peter, I remember being in a writing class back in college, when it looked like I was going to be a critic. This writing instructor, he..." MacMullen coughed weakly into a napkin that Peter held gently to his lips. "He... he gave me some advice, if criticism turned out to be my chosen profession. At first I thought he'd misunderstood me, that he thought I was going to be a stonemason. But after a few years, I began to understand the value of those words. Four little words, but I've kept them close to my heart ever since. Every time I saw a bad movie, or a horrible performance, I recalled those four little words that he taught me. They always served me well..."

And then he repeated that sage advice from decades long past. Four little words, but they resounded in the dark room like an order from On High. Then he coughed one last time, and passed on.

They buried him the very next day, and ground breaking began a respectable week later. When the project got underway Peter thought to himself, *This is going to be remembered as one of the God-awfullest pieces of construction ever seen in the Western world*, even as he directed teams of architects and supervised hordes of workers. All the while, the last words of John MacMullen rang through his head, urging Peter on, spurring him like a call from the grave.

So on this chilly March morning, Peter walked that long walk, past recent burials and ancient ivy-covered tombs, to view John MacMullen's final wish, a graveside that no one in Hollywood would be able to resist. The workers had put the final touches on it just yesterday, and this would be the first time Peter had seen it in all its finished splendor. He tried to imagine how the public would see it upon arriving for the first time.

Cresting the last low hill, the very tip of a huge, towering spire came into view. Shaped like an ancient Egyptian obelisk fifty feet high, his eyes travelled down its impressive length to a half-circular patio nearly as wide as a football field. Ringing the entire, cyclopean expanse, were hundreds of statues of famous Hollywood personalities, rendered in impenetrable pink granite rather than softer marble, "Because I want them to last for a thousand years," MacMullen had raspingly declared.

Actors and directors, cinematographers and costume designers, famous and infamous alike stood in permanent attendance at MacMullen's graveside, captured in various realistic poses like drunken angels of the fallen Tribe. And across the base of each statue were carved some famous last word or expression, attributed to a personage of history. Peter was drawn in to that great half-circle of fame, just as MacMullen expected, and he began reading the inscriptions and placing them with the incongruous statue that surmounted it.

Some of the phrases matched either through commonality of name, or similarity of life's misachieve-

ments. Under the pompous figure of the widely respected (though privately detested) director Louis B. Oscar were the last words of Oscar Wilde: "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do." Beneath the reeling figure of the perpetually wasted actress Sheila O'Bane, the last words of Tallulah Bankhead: "Codeine...bourbon." Next to her, the equally indulgent actor Roger Charmin Jr., surmounting the last words of Lenny Bruce: "You know where I can get any shit?"

Under the actor Dillan Halfmoon (who'd done an entire movie in drag, and whose statue was dressed in female garb), the last words of unrepentant criminal Arnold Rothstein, who suggested to the police investigating his murder: "Me mudder did it."

Some pairings were intended to match pretenders and the honestly great at their craft. Below the writhing comic form of still-hard-to-believe two-time Academy-winner Todd Kerchiefs, the last words of the wonderful but un-Awarded Edmund Gwenn: "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard." Beneath the thirty-film-a-year actor Mitchell Mutiny, the last words of South African millionaire and rabble-rouser Cecil John Rhodes: "So little done, so much to do."

Peter recalled the story behind the inscriptions. MacMullen, an eminently literate fellow, knew all of the inscriptions by heart, but hadn't the time to fill Peter in on their background or deeper meaning. And Mad Mac expected most of the visitors would be unaware as well, and would do what Peter did: write them down and research them later. But their significance, once known, lent an interesting meaning to an otherwise undecipherable phrase.

There was the line Bing Crosby uttered, just after finishing a round of golf and just before he collapsed: "That was a great game." The last phrase uttered by George V, King of England, on being told by his doctor he'd soon recover and be able to visit his favorite English resort town of Bognard: "Bugger Bognard." The famous French grammarian Dominique Bouhours, who attempted to correct her fellow speakers even as she died: "I am about to - or I am going to - die. Either expression is used." The final words of John Holmes, lawyer and brother of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who disputed a nurse who'd said no one ever died with warm feet: "John Rogers did," referring to a Protestant martyr burned at the stake.

So many statues, so many inscriptions. Some of the words spoke volumes about courage in the face of imminent death, like the final words of the Boer fighter Robert Erskine Childers, executed by firing squad by the British: "Take a step closer, boys. It'll be easier that way." And the famous St. Lawrence, who, being tortured by the Romans in a metal grate over a hot fire, had the courage to calmly call out, "Turn me over, I think I am done on this side." And the French noble Thomas de Mahay, who said, upon being handed his own death sentence as he was led to the guillotine: "I see that you have made three spelling mistakes."

Other words illuminated the great humor inhabiting some people even with Death staring them in the face, like Irish playwright Brendan Beehan's last words, spoken to the nun taking his pulse: "Bless you, sister. May all your sons be bishops." And Lady Astor, noted wit and first female member of Parliament, who awoke from her deathbed to see her family and friends all gathered around her: "Am I dying, or is this my birthday?" And the last words of W. C. Fields to his longtime-mistress Carlotta Marti: "God damn the whole friggin' world and everyone in it but you, Carlotta."

The reason behind the inscription each statue bore was not always apparent; it was as if the Creator of this weird homage had thrown darts at a table of epitaphs and slapped one on each square pillar. But one thing was certain: no Hollywood personality would be able to stay away, once he or she knew they were immortalized in John MacMullen's piazza of fame.

Peter circled in towards the great obelisk, and passed a few people already milling about. No fanfare, no public announcement had been made regarding the completion of the place, but people were already showing up.

A pair of visitors stopped Peter on his circumnavigation. "Excuse us, but can you tell us why this man chose all these movie people to surround him like this?"

“Because,” Peter said as he drifted on, “they’d already died onscreen plenty of times. He felt their achievements needed to be immortalized.”

Peter crossed the final distance of the piazza to the base of the great obelisk. In the center of the towering stone pillar, about three feet above the ground, a simple bronze emblem was affixed to the stone. It was an old style pen-and-ink set, the feather wafting gently in an imaginary breeze.

Below the icon were carved the words “John MacMullen, 1938-2001. Writer. Iconoclast. Critic.”

Below them, set some distance apart, was a final line of words. They hadn’t seemed so important when he’d ordered the engravers to add them, as a final thought, just two days ago. And the engravers, fully aware that they were not part of John MacMullen’s grand scheme, balked at first. But Peter convinced them that, as executor of the MacMullen estate, they were fitting words, and they belonged.

“They explain the whole grand, ridiculous thing. Besides,” he’d added, “they were his last words.”

Peter drank in those four words and let them roll around in his mind. He thought of all the thousands of Hollywood personalities who would feel drawn to this place like some moviedom Mecca, and the millions more tourists who would also feel the magnetic compulsion. He thought how they’d feel, seeing themselves immortalized in stone and verse.

And then they’d come here and read these ultimate last words, and walk away with a new appreciation of its designer, the one whom Hollywood loved to hate, and they’d know.

They’d know down deep in their souls, that John MacMullen had gotten the last word.

Peter smiled and turned to face the paved piazza behind him. He thought about those four little words and how they applied to all the other engravings around him, and he began to laugh. The few couples that were strolling around, interrupted from their inspections and arguments, looked across in startled awareness at the incongruity of such raucous laughter in a place of final repose.

But Peter couldn’t help it. He laughed at the craziness of it all, the weirdness, the strangeness. He laughed at all the bizarre caricatures and their accompanying inscriptions. He laughed for his friend, John MacMullen, who’d never be able to see this wild monstrosity of his creation, a monstrosity that would remain for generations to come, that would outlast the rich and poor in talent, the proud and humble alike. But most of all, Peter laughed at his friend’s last words, engraved on the obelisk behind him.

John MacMullen’s last words were, “Carve them deep, boy.”