

Prologue (2000)

Where did I go wrong? Where, what happened, and why me? As I stumble out of the Burlington County courtroom after the arraignment, the questions echo in my head as if I were three people talking to myself. How did I get slammed for grand theft auto, reckless endangerment, and driving under the influence? Third degree lunacy, make that larceny, assaulting an officer, and two or three other charges that might get me sent me away to Rahway. I've seen too many movies that take place behind bars, and if even half of those scenes are true, I'm not gonna last. Tony Mazza, hardened criminal, ha. I try to see the funny side of life, but it's not always so easy.

Why did the picture go to jail? Because it was framed.

Okay, maybe you've heard that one before. My son told it to me when he was seven. Anyway, not much comedy in my situation, unless you like it really dark.

Considering all they threw at me, the arraignment was kinda short. Fifteen minutes in the courtroom, which I somehow thought would be nicer than a low ceiling and fluorescent lights. Smelled like an old basement. The judge, old guy in a black robe and tie, was seated at the bench with fingers laced together like some finger puzzle. Leaning toward me as if he wanted to get a better look at the Face of Crime. Or maybe he was just pretending to be interested. The district attorney looked like a fat puma in a suit.

"Anthony Joseph Mazza, you are hereby accused of" Then came the list, with a pause after each charge and the question "How do you plead?" It was repeated till I felt like saying, "Okay, all right, I get it. Can we just skip this?"

But I pled not guilty on the advice of my old friend Sandy Quade, who showed up after the police took me into custody. Sandy's a short, stocky guy in a black leather jacket, a little intimidating. Or at least he used to be. Hadn't seen him in a while, and he looked a little frayed at the edges. But he knew about what had happened, not sure how,

unless he got word from the lady I live with, Michelle. Or did live with, up until the incident. Says she can't forgive me. Anyway, I've never been really sure how Sandy knows anything, and I've given up asking. Call him a fiend, I mean friend, but for me he's been a savior, mostly, and I ought to be grateful. I think.

Sandy was the one who bailed me out, said he'd find a lawyer to get me out of this mess, made it sound like a game. "We'll switch the rules on this, little bro," he told me, since we go way back, though I'm over forty, and Sandy should stop calling me that.

No, he's not a lawyer. He ran a couple of businesses, including a bike store and a bar, then sorta branched out in a Jersey way. Not exactly the mob. He just knows a lot of people.

He did come through, sort of. Guy named Salvatore Salambini, who sounded really smart over the phone, but who I haven't even met. Talked about a painkiller defense, like I didn't realize what I was doing under the influence of all those drugs. So I didn't even know when I went wrong. Also leniency for a first offense. Sounded good. I was supposed to see him before the arraignment. He didn't show. Some of Sandy's connections are that way, here tomorrow but not today. I should've known better. I should've known a lot of things. Now it's 2:30, and I'm tired of waiting. I'm standing outside the courthouse, a prime piece of real estate with four columns to uphold the laws in the state of New Jersey. Might as well be waiting for the #34 bus, since my car has a dead battery and I couldn't drive here.

Loser. More than one person has called me that. I'm not a criminal. I pled not guilty because maybe I did some of that stuff, but I swear, that's not me. I hope a trial can show that, if Sal Sal ever drops by. I refused a court-appointed lawyer when they asked. The preliminary hearing's set for next Tuesday.

I'm somewhere between hurt and angry, like someone's sticking nails in me but I also want to nail someone. Wouldn't you be that way? When I tried to explain to a few of my nearest and dearest what really happened, I ended up shouting. I need to take the

long view.

But this guy Sal-times-two better show up soon. My neck still hurts from the accident that's part of the court case. Plus, my knee is bothering me again, from a bike crash years ago, and that's really what led to this whole situation. I lean against one of the middle pillars and think about what they call "the events leading up to the incident." It's a long story, actually.

Chapter Two: Call Me a Doctor (2000)

Okay, I'm an idiot. I get up late because the clock-radio alarm doesn't go off. No WKTZ blaring "Born to Run" in my ear. Also, I'm hungover and can't get out of bed till the room settles down. When I manage to take a look at the clock, the stupid digital display reads 6:30. I try to hurry, but where are my pants? I'm so out of it, I say "Excuse me" when I bump into the refrigerator. I get out the door and remember that Michelle needs the car today, so I have to run for the bus.

Five minutes to hustle down Bloomington Avenue for the #77. I start sprinting. When I run, my knees remind me I shouldn't. Old cycling accident. This time, I feel a pop and a pain like five needles that I try to ignore. That's where I go wrong. I still might make it, but halfway down the block, I see our neighbor, Crystal, walking her cocker spaniel, and she waves and cries, "Hello, Tony!" I hello back. She's always cheery, with cheek dimples when she laughs. Almost makes me forget my hangover. We back-and-forth until I say I really have to skedaddle, a word my father used to say. Anyway, the way I pronounce the word makes her chuckle, so I tell the joke about the hotel manager waiting for a train, which makes her giggle all over, only that really does it. I miss my bus

and get to work after 7:00. Another dirty look from Frank the supervisor, and it better not happen again, is that clear?

Where did I go wrong? Hey, If I played football, that's where I'd go long. But seriously, this question has dogged me all my life. Cause and effect, which leads to another cause and another effect. If it's not my timing—you're gonna be late, sonny boy—it's the way I acted—how could you leave with all this work still to do?—or something I said after too many beers—no, why repeat that? I need a new life. I got a list. I'm really not that bad a guy.

I need a break from guilt.

I make it to the hospital by 7:15 with my knee beginning to throb. Ever since my bike crash, and that was way back in 1980, my right knee has a way of letting me down. I baby it by putting a lot more weight on my other knee, which makes both joints hurt. Massage and acupuncture and holistic something-or-other haven't fixed the situation. The orthopedist shrugged and told me I was an early candidate for osteoarthritis. Must've really done a number on it during the run to the bus. And my hangover's the kind that makes you want to just sit on the toilet and stare out the window. But I have to trundle the breakfast trolley through the wards, delivering eggs and mush to the mastectomy in 121A, muffin and OJ to her roommate with a hysterectomy. I force myself to smile. Why? It matters in a place like this. I want to matter, too. Breakfast is the best meal of the day for some of the patients, those who aren't being prepped for procedures. Not even much chance for them to nap, with the PA system blating, "Dr. Donkey Kong, please check in at nurse station three," or "Will Nurse Bed Wet pick up on line one?" But the patients like talking to me. I'm their morning diversion, and I get a kick out of helping them. I feel for them, I really do.

For instance, I chat with the old guy in 110D, in for kidney stones. You can tell he's been through a lot. "You're looking good today" is my opener.

"That's a lie." He's on to me. He twists upwards from the angle his bed is set on.

The same hard stare my old man had. Time to backpedal.

“Hey, I didn’t say you were good.” Broader smile, Tone. “Said you looked good.”

At this, he grins—and looks really bad, his face creased into two uneven halves. Must still be in some pain. But we talk for a bit—he even sounds like my old man—and he tells me a bit about himself. Retired from accountancy. Wife dead, son not around. I tell him I understand.

“Understand what?”

“The situation you’re in.” Wondering if I’ll be like that myself one of these years. I tell him I’ll look in on him again tomorrow.

You can see anyone in here. Last week, I spotted my old tenth-grade English teacher, Ms. Mirsky, and it gave me a start. I mean, teachers are supposed to be in front of the classroom, right? But she looked a lot older, kinda hunched. Anyone who’s in a hospital bed looks different anyway, and she was in for a hysterectomy (I snuck a look at her chart). She’s retired now but remembered me, and we talked for a bit before I had to move on. Her school voice gone cracked and dry. But said she’d really enjoyed having me in class, which made me glow. Still, it’s a hospital, and you know what that means. A while back I came across an old lady named Janice Bates, who I knew from my time selling real estate—long story, might tell it one day. But Janice was in here as a cancer patient and didn’t last long. She recognized me, waved weakly. “One of the funniest white folk I ever liked,” she told me, under heavy morphine. I tried to come up with a joke she’d appreciate but started sniffing instead.

I ran into one patient last month, could’ve sworn she was Dana Quade, same crooked nose and shifty look, only this woman looked old as dirt. In her seventies, I’d guess, but limbs twisted as if she’d been knocked onto the pavement by a car. Not the nicest woman I’ve ever met, really had no patience for kids, but she was Sandy’s mother, so, y’know. I walked over to her, hands behind my back, like a courteous waiter.

“Hello, Mrs. Quade. It’s me, Tony.”

No response. Her mouth was open, her eyes blank. Doped up, but still.

I leaned over her cot. “Tony Mazza. Friend of Sandy’s, remember?”

Her eyes shifted slowly, focused on me. “Sandy left me. I never heard of any Tony.”

I stole out, quiet as a shoplifter at Kmart. Later, I heard a couple of nurses talking about her. One of them jerked her thumb thataway. “Room 409—throat cancer.”

“That’s too bad. It’s always too bad.”

“Yeah, and also not all there. MMSE of 15. You know.”

I checked that out later, and it means real impairment. The kind where time and memory slide around like klutzes on a dance floor. She might remember everything tomorrow morning, then lose it again. When I checked in a few days later, she was gone. Made me feel sad for both of us. I didn’t follow up.

Anyway, no old contacts this morning. No gloomy face, kiddo. Gotta stay upbeat because that helps others. I say hi to the carrot-shaped-and-colored woman suffering from something gastric. Give a big hello to scrawny old Heidi Astrill because she looks and acts rich, even has that kind of name, the kind of lady who might die unexpectedly of an aneurysm and leave everything to her hospital orderly. Two days ago, I took the time to make her a tiny origami boat (an Asian guy named Fred Suzuki taught me how when I was twelve). Said she loved it, but it seems to have gotten thrown out with yesterday’s room cleaning. I lay my arm on the guard rail of Ada Ray’s bed—she’s told me twice that she once sang at the Apollo, and I believe it. I pretend they’re all my patients, and one or two go along with the gag. “Good morning, Doctor Mazza,” Estelle Adderly greets me, groping for the weak tea and Cream of Wheat I bring her. I get her a bran muffin too, if she asks sweetly. All the Jewish ladies make jokes about Mazza and matzoh, but I’m used to it.

I tell them a funny one. “Does an apple a day keep the doctor away? Only if you aim it right.” I don’t tell them the one about the doctor who reaches for his shirt-pocket

pen, finds a rectal thermometer, and says, "Some asshole must still have my pen."

To the guys, I give the Jersey greeting, "Hey, how ya doin'?" I get a range of responses.

"Doin' all right."

"If I were doing well, I wouldn't be here!"

"Not bad. You?"

A nod.

"What do you think?"

"Eh."

Never know who you're going to run into here. The other day, I saw a guy, it'd been years, but damn if it wasn't Ted Donaghy. Last time we talked was maybe ten years ago, though I can't recall the occasion. Friend of my father's, or at least worked alongside him in the insurance office. Coronary bypass. We jawed a bit. Ted's one of those guys as honest as the day is wrong. Told me my father was a good man. Mr. Eddie Vincent Mazza, a sharp guy in a business suit, an office guy, a salesman, a claims adjuster, an on-and-off husband and not-so-hot father.

Ted props himself up on his cot. "Yeah, he often talked about you."

"Really?" I ask like some eager kid. If I'd been told that when I was young, I—I don't know what I'd have done differently. But it would've been nice to know. My dad was dead at forty-seven, not much older than me. Cirrhosis of the liver. Where did he go wrong? Let me count the ways. Wine, women, and song, that was his line. The first two, anyway.

"Tony, get me a beer from the fridge, willya?" Wide smile. "Can't make the school play—working late again." Tight smile. "Look, I'll make it up to you, okay?" Evasive smile. "What'd you do, hide my keys?" Angry smile. "I don't hate ya, kid. Who told you that?" Then he'd tousle my hair so hard, my head hurt.

I understood him a lot better once I had kids of my own. Bunch of things I'd like

to say to him if he were still around. I'd buy him a beer or two, cut off at three. Maybe talk about fathers and sons. Or whatever happened to my kid sister Angela, one subject we always avoided.

Like some horrible joke gone wrong and without a punch line.