THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLER

THE HOUSE OF GOD

THE CLASSIC NOVEL OF LIFE AND DEATH IN AN AMERICAN HOSPITAL...

SAMUEL SHEM, M.D.

AUTHOR OF *MOUNT MISERY*

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY JOHN UPDIKE

THE HOUSE OF GOD

Samuel Shem, M.D.

A DELL BOOK

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To J and Ben

We shall forget by day, except
The moments when we choose to play
The imagined pine, the imagined jay.

—Wallace Stevens
The Man with the Blue Guitar

INTRODUCTION

We expect the world of doctors. Out of our own need, we revere them; we imagine that their training and expertise and saintly dedication have purged them of all the uncertainty, trepidation, and disgust that we would feel in their position, seeing what they see and being asked to cure it. Blood and vomit and pus do not revolt them; senility and dementia have no terrors; it does not alarm them to plunge into the slippery tangle of internal organs, or to handle the infected and contagious. For them, the flesh and its diseases have been abstracted, rendered coolly diagrammatic and quickly subject to infallible diagnosis and effective treatment. *The House of God* is a book to relieve you of these illusions; it does for medical training what *Catch-22* did for the military life—displays it as farce, a melee of blunderers laboring to murky purpose under corrupt and platitudinous superiors. In a sense *The House of God* is more outrageous than *Catch-22*, since the military has long attracted (indeed, has forcibly drafted) detractors and satirists, whereas medical practitioners as represented in fiction are generally benign, often heroic, and at worst of drolly dubious efficacy, like the enthusiastic magus, Hofrat Behrens of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain.*

Not that the young interns and residents and nurses conjured up by Samuel Shem are not sympathetic; they all bring to the grisly fun house of hospital care a residue of their initial dedication, and the most cynical of them, the Fat Man, is the most effective and expert. Our hero, Roy

Basch, suggests Voltaire's Candide in his buoyant innocence and his persistent—for all the running hypochondria of his hectic confessional narrative—health. Three things serve him as windows looking out of the claustral hospital fun house onto the sunlit lost landscape of health: sex, boyhood nostalgia, and basketball. The sex is most conspicuous, and in the orgies with Angel and Molly acquires an epic size and pornographic ideality. A glimpse of Molly's underpants becomes, in one of the book's many impetuous parlays of imagery, a sail bulging with the breath of life:

> . . . in the instant between the sit down and the leg cross, there's a flash of the fantasy triangle, the French panty bulging out over the downy mons like a spinnaker before the soft blond and hairy trade winds. Even though, medically, I knew all about these organs, and had my hands in diseased ones all the time, still, knowing, I wanted it and since it was imagined and healthy and young and fresh and blond and downy soft and pungent, I wanted it all the more.

In the prevailing morbid milieu, spurts of lust arrive from a world as remote as the world of Basch's father's letters, with their serenely illogical conjunctions. Sexual activity between female nurse and male doctor figures here as mutual relief, as a refuge for both classes of caregiver from the circumambient illness and death, from everything distasteful and pathetic and futile and repulsive about the flesh. It is the coed version of the groggy camaraderie of the novice interns: "We were sharing something big and murderous and grand."

The heroic note, not struck as often and blatantly as the note of mockery, is nevertheless sounded, and is perhaps as valuable to the thousands of interns who have put them-

selves to school with the overtly pedagogic elements of Shem's distinctly didactic novel: the thirteen laws laid down by the Fat Man; the doctrines of gomer immortality and curative minimalism; the hospital politics of TURFING and BUFFING and WALLS and SIEVES; the psychoanalysis of unsound doctors like Jo and Potts; the barrage of medical incidents that amounts to a pageant of dos and don'ts. It would be a rare case, I imagine, that a medical intern would encounter and not find foreshadowed somewhere in this Bible of dire possibilities.

Useful even to its mostly straight-faced glossary, *The House of God* yet glows with the celebratory essence of a real novel, defined by Henry James as "an impression of life." Sentences leap out with a supercharged vitality, as first novelist Shem grabs the wheel of that old hot rod, the English language.

> The jackhammers of the Wing of Zock had been wiggling my ossicles for twelve hours.
>
> From her ruffled front unbuttoned down past her clavicular notch showing her cleavage, to her full tightly held breasts, from the red of her nail polish and lipstick to the blue of her lids and the black of her lashes and even the twinkly gold of the little cross from her Catholic nursing school, she was a rainbow in a waterfall.
>
> We felt sad that someone our age who'd been playing ball with his six-year-old son on one of the super twilights of summer was now a vegetable with a head full of blood, about to have his skull cracked by the surgeons.

We have here thirty-year-old Roy Basch's belated bildungsroman, the tale of his venture into the valley of death and the truth of the flesh, ending with his safe return to his

eminently sane and sanely sensual Berry. Richard Nixon—the most fascinating of twentieth-century presidents, at least to fiction writers—and the mounting Watergate scandal form the historical background of the novel, pinning it to 1973–74. *The House of God* could probably not be written now, at least so unabashedly; its lavish use of freewheeling, multiethnic caricature would be inhibited by the current terms "racist," "sexist," and "ageist." Its `70s sex is not safe; AIDS does not figure among the plethora of vividly described diseases; and a whole array of organ transplants has come along to enrich the surgeon's armory. Yet the book's concerns are more timely than ever, as the American health-care system approaches crisis condition—ever more overused, overworked, expensive, and beset by bad publicity, as grotesqueries of mismanagement and fatal mistreatment outdo fiction in the daily newspapers. As it enters its second million of paperback sales, *The House of God* continues to afford medical students the shock of recognition, and to offer them comfort and amusement in the midst of their Hippocratic travails.

JOHN UPDIKE
April 1995

I. FRANCE

Life's like a penis:
When it's soft you can't beat it;
When it's hard you get screwed.

—The Fat Man,
Medical Resident in the House of God

1

Except for her sunglasses, Berry is naked. Even now, on vacation in France with my internship year barely warm in its grave, I can't see her bodily imperfections. I love her breasts, the way they change when she lies flat, on her stomach, on her back, and then when she stands and walks. And dances. Oh, how I love her breasts when she dances. Cooper's ligaments suspend the breasts. Cooper's Droopers if they stretch. And her pubis. *symphasis pubis* the bone under the skin being the real force shaping her Mound of Venus. She has sparse black hair. In the sun, she sweats, the glisten making her tan more erotic. In spite of my medical eyes, in spite of having just spent a year among diseased bodies, it is all I can do to sit calmly and record. The day feels smooth warm, pebbled with the nostalgia of a sigh. It is so still that a match flame stands upright, invisible in the clear hot air. The green of the grass, the lime-white walls of our rented farmhouse, the orange stucco roof edging the August blue sky—it is all too perfect for this world. There is no need to think. There is time for all things. There is no result, there is only process. Berry is trying to teach me to love as once I did love, before the deadening by the year.

I struggle to rest and cannot. Like a missile my mind homes to my hospital, the House of God, and I think of how I and the other interns handled sex. Without love, amidst the gomers and the old ones dying and the dying young, we had savaged the women

of the House. From the most tender nursing-school novitiate through the hard-eyed head nurses of the Emergency Room, and even, in pidgin Spanish, to the bangled and whistling Hispanic ones in Housekeeping and Maintenance—we had savaged them for our needs. I think back to the Runt, who had moved from two-dimensional magazine sex into a spine-tingling sexual adventure with a voracious nurse named Angel—Angel, who never ever did, the whole long year, to anyone's knowledge, string together a complete sentence made of real words. And I know now that the sex in the House of God had been sad and sick and cynical and sick, for like all our doings in the House, it had been done without love, for all of us had become deaf to the murmurs of love.

"Come back, Roy. Don't drift off there, now."

Berry. Finishing our lunch, we are almost to the hearts of our artichokes. They grow to enormous size in this part of France. I had trimmed and boiled the artichokes, and Berry had made the vinaigrette. The food here is exquisite. Often we eat in the sun-dappled garden of our restaurant, under the lattice of branches. The starched white linen, delicate crystal, and fresh red rose in the silver vase are almost too perfect for this life. In the corner, our waiter attends, napkin over his arm. His hand trembles. He suffers from a senile tremor, the tremor of a gomer, of all the gomers of the year. As I come to the last leaves of the artichoke, their purple surpassing their edible green, and throw them toward the garbage heap for the farmer's chickens and glass-eyed gomer of a dog, I think about a gomer eating an artichoke. Impossible, unless it were pureed and squirted down the feeding tube. I remove the thistly hairs, green abundant, covering the mound of choke, and come to the heart, and I think back to eating in the House of God, and to the one best at eating, best at medicine, my resident, the Fat Man. The Fat Man shoveling onions and Hebrew National hot dogs and raspberry ice cream into his mouth all

at once at the ten-o'clock supper. The Fat Man, with his LAWS OF THE HOUSE, and his approach to medicine that at first I thought was sick but that gradually I learned to be the way it was. I see us—hot, sweaty. Iwo Jima-heroic—hovered over a gomer:

"They're hurting us," the Fat Man would say.

"They've got me on my knees," I'd reply.

"I'd commit suicide, but I don't want to make the bastards happy."

And we'd put our arms around each other and cry. My fat genius, always with me when I needed him, but where is he as I need him now? In Hollywood, in Gastroenterology, in bowel runs—as he always put it —"through the colons of the stars." I know now that it was his zany laughter and his caring, and that of the two policemen of the Emergency Room—the two policemen, my Saviors, who seemed to know everything and who almost seemed to know it in advance—that had gotten me through the year. And despite the Fat Man and the policemen what had happened in the House of God had been fierce. and I had been hurt, bad. For before the House of God, I had loved old people. Now they were no longer old people. they were gomers, and I did not, I could not love them. anymore. I struggle to rest, and cannot, and I struggle to love. and I cannot for I'm all bleached out, like a man's shirt washed too many times.

"Since you drift off there so much, maybe you'd rather be back there after all." says Berry sarcastically.

"Love, it's been a bad year."

I sip my wine. I've been drunk much of the time we've been here. I've been drunk in the cafés on market day as the clamor ebbs in the market and flows in the bars. I've been drunk while swimming in our river, at noon the temperature of water, air, and body all the same, so that I can't tell where body ends and water begins and it's a melding of the universe, with the river curling round our bodies, cool and warm rushes intermingling in lost patterns, filling all times

and all depths. I swim against the current, looking upstream where the winding riverpath rests in a cradle of willow, rushes, poplar, shadow, and that great master of shadow, the sun. Drunk, I lie in the sun on the towel, watching with blossoming arousal the erotic ballet of the Englishwomen changing into and out of swimsuits, glimpsing an edge of breast, a wisp of pubic hair, as so often I had glimpsed edges and wisps of nurses, as they changed into and out of their costumes before my eyes, in the House. Sometimes, drunk, I ruminate on the state of my liver, and think of all the cirrhotics I have watched turn yellow and die. They either bleed out, raving, coughing up and drowning in blood from ruptured esophageal veins, or, in coma, they slip away, slip blissfully away down the yellow-brick ammonia-scented road to oblivion. Sweating, I tingle, and Berry becomes more beautiful than ever. This wine makes me feel like I'm bathed in amnion, breathless, fed by the motherbloodflow in the umbilical vein, fetal, slippery and tumbling over and over in the warmth of the beating womb, warm amnion, warmnion. Alcohol helped in the House of God, and I think of my best friend, Chuck, the black intern from Memphis, who never was without a pint of Jack Daniels in his black bag for those extra-bitter times when he was hurt extra bad by the gomers or the slurping House academics, like the Chief Resident or the Chief of Medicine himself, who were always looking at Chuck as illiterate and underprivileged when in fact he was literate and privileged and a better doc than anyone else in the whole place. And in my drunkenness I think that what happened to Chuck in the House was too sad, for he had been happy and funny and now he was sad and glum, broken by them and going around with the same half-angry, half-crushed look in his eyes that I'd noticed Nixon had had yesterday on our French TV, as he stood on the steps of the helicopter on the White House lawn after his resignation, giving a pathetically inappropriate V-for-defeat sign before

the doors closed over him, the Filipinos rolled in the red carpet, and Jerry Ford, looking more flabbergasted then awed, put his arm around his wife and walked slowly back to the presidency. The gomers, these gomers . . .

"Damnit, everything makes you think of those gomers," says Berry.

"I hadn't realized that I'd been thinking out loud."

"You never realize it, but these days, you always do. Nixon, gomers, forget about the gomers. There aren't any gomers here."

I know she's wrong. One lazy and succulent day, I am walking by myself from the graveyard at the top of the village, down the catnapping winding road overlooking the château, the church, the prehistoric caves, the square, and far below, the river valley, the child's-toy poplars and Roman bridge indicating the road, and the creator of all this, the spawn of the glacier, our river. I have never taken this path before, this path along this ridge. I am beginning to relax, to know what I knew before: the peace, the rainbow of perfections of doing nothing. The country is so lush that the birds can't eat all the ripe blackberries. I stop and pick some. Juicy grit in my mouth. My sandals slap the asphalt. I watch the flowers compete in color and shape, enticing the rape by the bees. For the first time in more than a year I am at peace, and nothing in the whole world is effort, and all, for me, is natural, whole, and sound.

I turn a corner and see a large building, like an asylum or a hospital, with the word "Hospice" over the door. My skin prickles, the little hairs on the back of my neck rise, my teeth set on edge. And there, sure enough, I see them. They have been set out in the sun, in a little orchard. The white of their hair, scattered among the green of the orchard, makes them look like dandelions in a field, gossamers awaiting their final breeze. Gomers. I stare at them. I recognize the signs. I make diagnoses. As I walk past them, their

eyes seem to follow me, as if somewhere in their dementia they are trying to wave, or say *bonjour*, or show some other vestige of humanness. But they neither wave nor say *bonjour*, nor show any other vestige. Healthy, tan, sweaty, drunk, full of blackberries, laughing inside and fearing the cruelty of that laughter, I feel grand. I always feel grand when I see a gomer. I love these gomers now.

"Well, there may be gomers in France, but you don't have to take care of them."

She goes back to her artichoke, and the vinaigrette accumulates on her chin. She doesn't wipe it off. She's not the type. She enjoys the oily feel of the oil, the vinegar sting. She enjoys her nakedness, her carelessness, her oiliness, her ease. I feel that she's getting excited. Now she looks at me again. Am I saying this out loud? No. As we watch each other, the vinaigrette drips from her chin to her breast. We watch. The vinaigrette explores, oozing slowly down the skinline, heading south toward the nipple. We speculate together, without words, whether it will make it, or if it will veer off, toward cleft or pit. I flip back into medicine, thinking of carcinoma of the axillary nodes. Mastectomy. Statistics crowd in. Berry smiles at me, unaware of my regression toward death. The vinaigrette stays on line, oozes onto the nipple, and hangs. We smile.

"Stop obsessing about the gomers and come lick it off."

"They can still hurt me."

"No, they can't. Come on."

As I put my lips to her nipple, feeling it rise, tasting the sting of the sauce, my fantasy is of a cardiac arrest. The room is crowded, and I am one of the last to arrive. On the bed is a young patient, intubated, being breathed by the respiratory tech. The resident is trying to put in a big intravenous line, and the medical student is running round and round the bed. Everyone in the room knows that the patient is going to die.