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REMEMBERING BOBBY DARIN

Let me tell you how it was before Bobby Darin wrote “Mack the Knife.” Pipeline workers measured everything from fishing lures to ballerinas and recorded their findings in enormous accountant ledgers, bar tenders distilled tears and tin soldiers to make vermouth, beauticians back-combed one hair at a time because we thought life was all details and miles of hard work.

Thus displays of dusty sparrows, filmy shark fins, fading elbow bones, etc. in natural history museums: rows and columns of red wings, blue dorsals, the same 2 white bones 12 times under glass in a wooden box.

All details and incessant hard work.

We’d given up on the guy who invented the ukelele, stopped setting a place for him at the table, and remind me why we were so bewitched by Hawaii.

But we weren’t completely lost.

Did you know if you’re Japanese and someone plays a shamisen just right, you’ll crack open like a geode and a pecan will come rolling out?

Did you know that if you’re Japanese and you crack open like a geode and a pecan comes rolling out, you’re not the first? Millions of your countrymen before you sat crystalline and broken open under a big red sun: The when when when across the horsehair strings settled in your empty stomach and pecans littered the ground like Weebles.

Not completely lost.

Everything was pretty and we liked it that way. Who could blame us? There were automats and slivers of pie to contend with, the death of the navy bean and oh the shark, babe, with his teeth, dear. As if Flash Gordon, tights and all, were the President NBC.

Before Bobby Darin wrote “Mack the Knife,” no one wanted to remember the puddling reflection of each star on the surface of the pool that would some day be Las Vegas. Likewise with the oom-pah-pah-Oktoberfest-pool, the drive-in-sock-hop-pool, the I-think-I’ve-done-a-terrible-thing-pool. The distance between the pools.

After the finale at the fireworks display, we all clambered onto the bus and forgot about tomorrow. The pools slipped our minds and we were left alone, treading starless water in our breakfast nooks, fearing a shark whose face we couldn’t recall.

Armed with a hope chest of disconnected knick knacks—a stiff bristled plastic paint brush from the Renaissance, one Nazi cufflink, fancy gloves—we strung necklaces to give away at Christmas, knowing only we’d have the day off.

Lost in details, we never forgot about a day off coming, only the ones gone by. Heart trouble took a back seat to the Copa; we stopped taking the medication.

But
not completely lost.

For centuries, Japanese have lined up every Sunday morning to get a two second look at a long dead relative’s face: the ones who have forgotten us. A postal worker rifles through thousands of pages and finally arrives at a portrait the size of a postage stamp, #65,952,388—he says it’s your great great cousin—counts one one thousand two and off you go. Next. And the line forms on the right, babe, even though they can’t remember why.

Not completely.

Now we know how to speak all sorts of languages. And anything can happen: that trace of red could be a dahlia in the garden of Caesar's Palace.

And now we're turning left in a Cadillac DeVille, drinking martinis straight from the bottle, nuts crunching under our enormous tires. Our hair is piled high. Right here. Mark it.

You know, Bobby Darin didn't write "Mack the Knife," and it hasn't been all bad, but some of it's been unbelievable.

Like we always knew but could never imagine. Same old song and dance. How could we forget?