



*From the moment of that decision I was Max Feldstein
and Max Feldstein was not I.*

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FELDSTEIN AND HUNCH

I am Max Feldstein, but my name is Todd Hunch. I am Max Feldstein because one day while strolling the city I tripped over a small child and fell into the arms of Max Feldstein. Now he is everything to me. Max with his unusually horizontal face, curly short cropped hair, and checkerboard cufflinks that reflected the sunlight into my eyes, partially blinding me for an instant and making my smile into what Max probably saw as an ugly grimace. This is how he knows me, how he sees me, how he remembers me: a falling idiot not gracious enough to respond to his generosity.

His name is Max Feldstein (I think) and he is everything to me. What I am not, he is. Max Feldstein and me, Todd Hunch. There is no magic in the world anymore. The alchemists have grown modern and old and turned to pawnbroking. But their legacy is everlasting: I will turn this Hunch into a Feldstein, this paltry Todd into Max. The shit of me will go gold. I need this new existence to exonerate the one I am about to shake off my back.

My destitute mistress told me in bed: "You are not Max Feldstein. Any more than I am Max Feldstein." But a scheme was already unraveling in my head. In order for me to become Max Feldstein I simply had to become Max Feldstein: this was the easy part. The difficulty lay in convincing others I was Max Feldstein.

Five Reasons Why

1. Max Feldstein has inconceivable wealth, and though I'm not a stickler for privilege I do care very much about how I am perceived.

2. Max and I look startlingly alike; but for the comb of his wavy hair and sporty clothes he is my double. My doppelganger and my fetch. The other I.

3. I am not contented with Todd Hunch, nor with his mistress Claudine. They live in a one bedroom apartment with potted plants and a single bathroom. The TV is always on, though muted, because Todd and his mistress are conspired against by silence. At any moment a conversation may occur.

4. Todd Hunch works as an electrician. He is unionized, routinized, mechanized, walks to work and sulks back, plagued by middle-class demons of his own conjuring, static and hectic, quiet and loud. Attends union meetings that quickly turn orgiastic with booze and thinly disguised homosexual overtones. At home he nukes his dinner and drinks his breakfast with a straw. On the other hand, Max Feldstein is what? A broker? A publisher, man of the world, cocaine distributor? Film director, producer, fruit tycoon? Prince in exile of a small island in the Pacific (the natives, jealous of his riches and beautiful wife, formed a primitive coup. Max's majordomo, faithful to the last, though sharing the island people's blood, got wind of the plot and informed his master. Max escaped by helicopter to the mainland. Suddenly, about to duck under the rotars, he realized that he's forgotten his wife in the tumult. He returned in the dress of the islanders as a seller of knives, managed to cross the entire island during heavy rainfall, and, with wife in hand, made his second escape, pursued by arrows and ungodly taunts and curses). Whoever Max Feldstein is.

5. I am not happy.

Physical Description

Max Feldstein has a long face and a wide jaw; both replicate my own only too well.

His eyes are blue. My eyes are blue.

Max's voice is a hollow bass. So is mine.

Max stands six feet four inches in low shoes; I miss this height by a quarter of an inch, far too close, fortunately to be mistaken for Todd Hunch.

Max Feldstein has a square mole on the right side of his forehead, just beneath his hairline, which he always forgets to shave. It is not a coincidence that I suffer the same mark, but on the opposite side, so that if I were standing in front a mirror, we would be identical in our shared attribute.

Max dresses appropriately for every occasion: suit, red tie, loafers. His leisure days are spent trying to attire himself in such a way as to appear at leisure. (Note: when I am Max Feldstein I must enforce my business dress with a silver-plated walking stick. That should be enough. Whether he carries one or not, no one would suspect my fraud, and actually, I would be more Max Feldstein if I enhanced his style.

On Personality

Max is outgoing, sociable, amiable to strangers. Due to his status he is unconcerned and unafraid of rejection. I am none of these things but they can be learned quickly if one grasps at the power he has learned to exude so effortlessly. He would do anything for someone in need and that makes him feel even more secure. Yet, to anyone who chastises or in any way abuses his righteousness he is brutally judgmental. Like god, or a troubled angel.

My destitute mistress remains at my side because she is destitute and ethically terrified of social experimentation with others. She is becoming by the minute more indifferent towards me, though she probably doesn't realize this; if she did, she would never say as much. We barely speak now, have taken different shifts at our respective jobs — she is a hairdresser or a hairdresser's assistant.

Of course I cannot know how Max and his wife respond to one another, what they talk about in the morning over eggs and French-pressed, fair trade coffee, their favorite sexual positions, how many

times they eat out in a week. Mrs. Feldstein is much younger than her husband, but he has the stamina of a man of my age, thirty something. His wife is a former soap opera star. She couldn't take the politics of the business, nor the producer's frequent bouts of groping female leads. After that it was nothing but hardships and disappointments: secretary for a used-car lot, barmaid, hotel maid, salesperson in a furniture emporium. A hard life. One child when she was eighteen (I guess she must have been pretty young on the set), the father a waste, trailer park, empty bottles clanging down wood stairs. The producer isn't such a bad guy in retrospect. But then she meets Max Feldstein at a party she's catering. It's a long and romantic courtship. He saves her. Sometimes she wonders about the child in the orphanage. Max Feldstein saves her life every day. I'm confident that I will make her even happier.

I had first to reconcile my wish with a steady hopefulness that it would be carried through. This I achieved by acting less and less like Todd Hunch, who I do not like one bit. Sometimes I, Todd Hunch, will alter my voice in imitation of his in a demand to be respected. In haste I am approaching the quintessence of Max Feldstein. (And he of me?)

What Occurred That Day

When he caught me in his masculine Max Feldstein-arms that summer day near the park, he said: "Are you okay? Good thing I happened to be walking by when I did." But this was Max Feldstein, Max the Unquestionable, so I could not question more and he strode off. When he was gone I said, "Huh." People were standing around, curiously staring at the odd epiphany. But had he truly been watching me before the fortunate incident, and why would he do that? Was it because we shared a likeness and he yearned to fill the abnormally large boots of Todd Hunch?

On My Poverty and Aspirations

I am very poor, sickly so. Loathed by my mistress Claudine, whom I adore and who says she adores me in turn. I would become anyone. I have a list of dozens of people I could become, from game show hosts to used carpet salesmen, influential, successful people. Anyone, really; anyone but Todd Hunch and his debilitating sadness and anxiety. To be Max Feldstein I had to *be* Max Feldstein. That has been my calling since I awoke one day, suddenly perplexed with the stark realization of Todd Hunch in my mirror and in my brain.

Obvious Problems of the Todd Hunch Method

I did not have an inkling where Max Feldstein resided, whether or not he wore a toupee, how many times he had traveled to Europe, what he desired, what was missing in his life, or if indeed his name was Max Feldstein (I had no reason to assume it was. Or wasn't.) These dilemmas made me shudder, kept my eyes floating around the ceiling far into dawn. I grew restless for some solution, and snarled meanly at all those (Claudine) who did not present one at arm's length.

Deductions from His Words

What had he said? "Are you okay. Good thing I happened to be walking by when I did." Looking around for I don't know what (the object of my stumble), and directly into the blessed clasp of Max Feldstein, a nice man. His words signified a nice man, outgoing, sociable, amiable to strangers. Did he know me personally? Max was watching all along, yes, perhaps, but had he plotted it in his spare time? What had he plotted? Had he informed his wife what he was up to while letting his eyes stray across the surface of his ceiling as he lay awake far into dawn? Was she in a position to guess? What was her role? Did she have a role? Maybe she'd been the one who egged him on. I had too many questions. Everything was a question, and questionable.

Things I Repeat to Myself About Max Feldstein

Max my all
Max my sunshine-cloud of pre-joyful memory
Max the max
Max Max Max
Max my doubt relinquished
Max the taster of moons
Max the elliptical habit of identity
Max who smells of Italian leather and peach cigars

I will put myself in the position to occupy the man's life. The reassuring thought accompanies me that I am not Max Feldstein, no, not yet, but soon. So soon I am already nearly smoking down a large cigar on the veranda where Max Feldstein currently enjoys the same. The stench of a city there below, the whirring of a scratched jazz record playing in the den, his wife preparing some tuna seasoned with red wine and sweet mustard then sprinkled with unsalted peanuts and left in the oven not too long. I can taste it already. Until then I am a mess. Nothing makes me happy except dread and I know that nothing makes me happy except dread, making me feel all the more dreadful.

E.g. My destitute mistress Claudine: "Why do you always look so unhappy?"

"Because I am," I say to her. Because I am, I say to myself. I want so badly to tell her why; tell her the whywherewhowhat, for they are all answered with the same remark: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: You don't do anything anymore. Just sit around by yourself all anxious. What are you waiting for?

Todd: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: You quit your job I can't believe it —

Todd: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: What are we going to do, Todd?

Todd: Claudine . . .

Claudine: No, Todd, what are we going to do? It's always the same thing with you. Always. It never ends.

Todd: I don't feel like myself.

Claudine: No shit.

Todd: I'm not myself lately.

Claudine: You better start —

Todd: Max Feldstein.

Claudine: What?

Todd: Max Feld —

Claudine: Who?

I've grown fond of the intimate little silences we used to inflict on each other. Now she won't stop barking at me. Claudine doesn't understand. So help me, Max, I've tried.

The Night I Broke into His House

The night I broke into his house the moon, I remember, didn't show, but the grass, I remember, bristled in the wind, pointing towards the dim curves of the secluded Feldstein mansion. For hours, until at least three in the morning, I sat on the front stoop and talked to myself by whispering into the ear of the green plastic elf next to me. His arms were reaching out in friendship. I couldn't believe Max Feldstein would have a decoration so awful, so clumsily undecorous. Must have been his wife's idea. Ridding the place of that green stump would be one of my first decisions, having moved in.

Thesis: I would climb up the drainage pipe and smash a window with my bare fist.

Antithesis: No doubt I would fall or gash my hands or face on glass.

Synthesis: Something else.

Thesis: I would muster extraordinary strength and hoist the garage door.

Antithesis: Not likely: I would invariably throw out my back due to an inconstant level of concentration and get pummeled by the heavy door, halfway in.

Synthesis: Something else.

Thesis: I could take that green fool who was listening to me and toss him clean through the window.

Antithesis: He was made of flimsy material, and even if he was successful I would never be able to explain why I had done such a thing if I was indeed Max Feldstein (which I was).

Synthesis: Something else.

All of these means and more until I heard myself say: "Why not just ring the doorbell?" It was such a mediocre entrance, one designed to be as inconspicuous as possible; nothing melodramatic about ringing a doorbell and announcing myself. From the moment of that decision I was Max Feldstein and Max Feldstein was not I.

Synthesis.

The Tricky Business of Having Discovered the Whereabouts of the Max Feldstein Residence

I typed a letter and had it placed in the local newspaper:

Dear Kind Man Who Saved Me After I'd Tripped Over
A Child,

Thank you for saving me from a certain deathly fall last week at the entrance to the park. I cannot thank you enough for what you did. After this unfortunate accident and the kindness that ensued, I feel obligated to notify you that once you had walked away and disap-

peared into the afternoon crowd, I realized that you had dropped your wallet during my rescue. It is in safekeeping, I assure you, and I have not opened it to discover where you live, as this, to my mind, would be a breach of common decency. Please respond to the post office address supplied below and I will mail your wallet ASAP.

Thank you again,

(Signed) A Grateful Person

Here is how I knew the correct letter when it appeared, since a lost anything will cause a veritable riot of responses: Max Feldstein had not lost his wallet (to my knowledge) and due to his unabridged kindness, would definitely reply that I had made a mistake and the wallet was not his.

The letter arrived in three days.

Dear Grateful Person,

I humbly appreciate your thoughtfulness in this matter. I remember the day well. However, the item must belong to another, insofar as I am holding mine in my right hand as I write. Thank you for your consideration; it is a rare thing to encounter such true selflessness.

(Signed Max Feldstein? No, but I did have a return address).

The End

I pressed the doorbell incessantly until a woman's head peeked out and the door was thrown back. The interior of the house was dark.

"I thought you were in Nashville," the woman said.

"I am," I said, "but Max Feldstein always returns to the place of his origin."

I convinced her to move away with me the next day. She found the prospect exciting. I guessed my successor had been somewhat of a snobby bore. Her wonderful name is Claudine.

That night over pickled herring I told her all about my self, what she assumed as my clandestine self (Max Feldstein apparently didn't spend much time at home) and learned from her remarks everything I needed to become Max Feldstein. Now I am a particularly resurrected Max Feldstein: a caring, adorable Max Feldstein. I also told her about Todd Hunch. A man I've always liked, a working man, a peasant if I may be blunt, but big-hearted. Enough of a man to be two men, perhaps even three. He missed out on this veranda scene. The sky a lush gray cloud. The smell of leather and cigar with a hint of peach. You're down there somewhere, Todd Hunch.

My wife comes up behind me, her green eyes glittering over a glass of sherry.

"He's down there somewhere."

"You are always trying to be someone else," she says. It's true, and I hate Max for that. ■