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The Child is the Father of the Man – Mad Men, Episode 8

Abigail Rine

The open images of this episode, “The Crash,” are an apt thematic frame: men careening out of control, chaos on wheels, a sense of imminent and epic destruction. More specifically, a terrified Kenny trying to maintain control of an Impala full of drunk, frenzied, gun-wielding GM clients. This scene cuts suddenly to one of stasis: Don loitering outside the backdoor of Sylvia’s apartment, the collection of cigarette butts around his feet signaling that he’s been there for quite awhile. There is turmoil here, too, but hidden.

Sylvia hasn’t gone back on her decision to end their affair – in fact, she’s furious at Don for hanging on like a heartsick Romeo and calls him at work to tell him so. Don begs for a chance to speak with her, vulnerably admitting that he’s “feeling a lot of emotions, too.” But, unlike during last episode’s “Fifty Shades of Draper” fantasy, Sylvia is calling the shots now, and she urges Don to recommit to his marriage – as she, apparently, is doing.

After Sylvia hangs up on him, Don erupts into a coughing fit so intense that it sends him into a flashback. Don Draper is beginning to fracture and a teenaged Dick Whitman, now living in his uncle’s warehouse, is poking through. Young Dick is suffering from a nasty cough as well, and his stepmother interacts with him like a doctor with an icy bedside demeanor – no affection or comfort, just quarantine in the cellar.

Back in the present, the men of the office are lining up for shots of “energy serum” from Jim Cutler’s doctor. Chevy, the hot new client that brought these agencies together, is proving impossible to please and demanding a packet of new campaign ideas by Tuesday, which means working through the weekend.

As you can imagine, this is when things really start to unravel.

Don, fresh from his amphetamine shot, catches a glimpse of Peggy rubbing Ted’s arm in a comforting gesture, in the wake of news that Frank Gleason has died. This display of platonic affection seems to confuse Don, or at least fixate him enough to send him spiraling to the past again – or maybe his past is spiraling into the present. Either way, Dick is back, and he’s being comforted by a prostitute named Aimee, who lets him rest in her room and assures him that he’s not dying of consumption, but merely has a chest cold. Dick spies a picture of a baby on Aimee’s dresser, and for the moment we are given a comforting scene: a sick, motherless boy being comforted by a sonless mother.

Cut back to copywriters on speed, amidst a fruitless brainstorming session. Don is in his office, turning to the past for inspiration, rummaging frantically through old ads, until

he's interrupted by Kenny, who breaks into a feverish jig while giving a breathless account of his hellish duties as Chevy's "favorite toy."

Don then whisks over to the copywriters to deliver a nonsensical motivational speech, which is clearly more applicable to himself than anyone else: "I know you all feel the darkness here today, but there's no reason to give in." This is our first clue that Don's quest for the "one great idea" isn't really about Chevy at all, but about something far more personal. His next flashback provides the image, the "answer," he's been looking for – Aimee nursing sick young Dick through his fever, giving him spoonfuls of warm broth.

For Don, this memory is an instant, a flash of inspiration, but what seems to him like the next moment is actually the following day – Peggy and others, in black attire, have just returned from Frank's funeral. The past, present, and immediate future jumble together and Don careens between them, with the viewers in tow.

A mysterious girl named Wendy, complete with *I Ching* coins and a gypsy vibe, has suddenly appeared; we learn later that she is Frank Gleason's daughter, but for the moment she has no context, and when Don goes to his office after meeting her in another room, he finds her already there, sitting on his couch. Another time jump. She's wearing a stethoscope, and Don seems bothered by this, maybe because it conjures Sylvia's surgeon husband, or being "doctored" by Aimee, the prostitute. "I'm here to make you feel better," says Wendy, and by this she means sex. She tries to listen to his heart, but can't hear anything. "Oh, I think it's broken," she says, meaning the stethoscope, but Don is unsettled by the thought that she can detect his broken heart. "You can hear that?" He whispers.

Despite the absence of uppers, things are no less surreal on the home front. It's Don's weekend with the kids, but he's busy ghost-hunting at work, so Megan leaves Sally to babysit her younger brothers while she goes out to hobnob with Broadway big shots. When a noise wakes Sally in the middle of the night, she discovers a middle-aged black woman, who claims to be Sally's grandmother, digging through their drawers and cabinets. "I raised your daddy," she says, and the initially skeptical Sally is soon lulled into believing the lie, which highlights how utterly obscure her father's past is to her. For all she knows, Ida could be telling the truth.

In the meantime, Don's quest for his "answer" leads him to the archives, where he finds an ad of a smiling mother leaning over her son while he beams up at her, raising the heaping spoon toward his mouth – not soup, but oatmeal. The copy reads: Because you know what he needs. The mother in the ad looks eerily like Sylvia, with her brunette hair and a matching mole – she's even sporting a head wrap almost identical to the one Sylvia wears in her first appearance in this episode.

Don gazes at the ad, transfixed, and we are transported back to the whorehouse, where Dick awakes, his fever broken, and proceeds to get raped by Aimee.

I use the word rape intentionally. As soon as Aimee's sexual intentions are clear, Dick becomes clearly uncomfortable, avoiding eye contact and clutching the blanket close. "Stop it," he says, but she doesn't. If the sexes were reversed here, if an older man caring for a sick, teenaged girl proceeded to have sex with her against her protestations, that would be immediately recognizable as rape – but what happens to Dick is no less tragic, no less a violation.

Don stares at the ad of the loving mother while a reel of his own warped, abusive encounter with maternal affection plays through his head. Don has dragged us down into his own archives and, in this moment, we do find an "answer," an insight into why Don can't seem to distinguish sex from love, and why his relationships with women are invariably toxic. His first experience of love (Aimee's name is no coincidence) is entangled with sex and exploitation.

This scene recalls an earlier interaction between Peggy and Stan, who is trying to convince Peggy to sleep with him. "I need this," he says, explaining that his cousin was just killed in Vietnam. But instead of sex, Peggy offers him sympathy, as well as the only real glimmer of wisdom to be found in this episode: "I've had loss in my life," she says. "You have to let yourself feel it. You can't dampen it with drugs or sex."

Here, Peggy serves as stark contrast to Don, Aimee, Wendy, and Stan, as she refuses to reduce human contact and affection to a sexual encounter. Of course, as we see later, Stan doesn't listen to her advice and ends up banging Wendy – who buried her father earlier that day – while Jim watches creepily through the doorway, much to Peggy's disgust.

What goes up must come down, and Don is no exception. He wanders home – sweaty, shaky, and mumbling to himself about Sylvia, how he'll convince her to take him back. He opens the door to find several policemen in his living room, along with Megan, his children, Henry, and an irate Betty, who is holding Gene protectively in her lap. Two seasons ago, Betty was an icon of maternal dysfunction, but now, in the context of this episode with its array of twisted mother figures, she's looking pretty good.

All is now fine; Sally called the cops and Ida was nabbed by the police, but this welcome party proves too much for Don, who collapses on the floor. Crash. We are pulled into another memory. Aimee, as she is getting kicked out of the whorehouse, proclaims that she "took that boy's cherry," and, hearing this, Dick's stepmother beats him with a wooden spoon and screams at him while he cowers on the floor.

The scene cuts from a shot of the stepmother's enraged face to the adult Don, sitting on the edge of his bed, looking haunted and dazed. "I'm sorry," says Megan, in the background. "Sally seems so grown up, but she is really still a kid." The same could be said for Don – deep, but not too far down, Don is still a wounded, teenaged, love-starved Dick Whitman. It is impossible to completely separate the two, no matter how hard Don tries. Peggy puts it best earlier in the episode, while tossing out ideas for the Chevy campaign: "The child is the father of the man."

Monday morning. Don is a new man, composed, showered, steel-eyed. He begins his elevator ride alone, and when Sylvia joins him, he doesn't look at her, only offering a single dismissive word in response to her polite, "How are you?" No hint of vulnerability, no trace of the lovesick, chain-smoking loiterer. If Don's Pandora's box cracked open over the weekend, the lid is now locked down. Tight.

At work, Don calls Sally to reassure her that he didn't have a heart attack. Sally is embarrassed at being fooled by Ida and attempts to explain why Ida's vague story was persuasive. "I realized I don't know anything about you," she says. And Don, in an unusual display of self-deprecating honesty, admits what we already suspected – Ida's invasion was his fault; he left the back door open when he went by his apartment building that night – not to see his children, who were alone inside, but to press his ear against Sylvia's door.

In the closing scene of the episode, Ted, who was off mourning Frank and missed the festivities, is bewildered and indignant at the "gibberish" generated by the creative team over the weekend, who failed to even spell "Chevy" correctly. Don doesn't offer any excuse, but simply announces that he will no longer be the idea man for the Chevy account. "Sorry, Ted," Don says, "But every time we get a car, this place turns into a whorehouse." And not just any whorehouse, but the haunted one of Don's past, which he would like to pretend no longer exists.

Yet, as he walks away from Ted's office, the twanging, ragtime piano music reminds us that even though it's a new workweek, and time has temporarily reordered itself, the whorehouse, Aimee, and Dick Whitman are still there. For Don, they always will be.

Mad Men certainly lived up to its name this week. Thanks in part to the magic of "energy serum," we were treated to a slew of men acting like maniacs. Whether or not this was a rock-bottom turning point remains unclear. I suspect things will continue to unravel for Don, as his life mirrors the upheavals and despair of 1968. And if the opening lines of this season from *The Inferno* are any indication, Don may have further yet to fall in his steady, hell-bound descent.