

REAL THINGS REAL PEOPLE ARE REALLY DOING

wayne k. spear



“a beautiful and saucy, gutsy book”
—Shelagh Rogers, host of CBC’s *The Next Chapter*

20th Anniversary Edition | 1994–2014

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Are Really Doing

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Wayne K. Spear

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Biographical note

INTRODUCTION

In 1993 I was a Ph.D. candidate at Queen's University. For the past couple years I'd been the managing editor of a literary journal, and I had a play—*The Name is a Vestige*—which I'd performed around Kingston, sharing the stage with writers including Steven Heighton and Jason Heroux and my friend and colleague Adrian M. Kelly.

My plan was to finish an ambitious collection of stories I'd started in 1991, about three generations of a family living in the fictional town of Amigary, called *Among the Lesser Angels*. In the Summer of '93 I went on a two-week retreat to do the final edit.

The first day of my retreat I had an idea for a story, so I wrote it. In that story was the germ of another, so I kept going. Within a few days I had a dozen. I was hooked. In the space of two weeks I wrote *Real Things Real People Are Really Doing*. My work *Among the Lesser Angels* was never published, and the manuscript is long gone.

That's my story about the mysterious writing process. *Among the Lesser Angels* was the book I wanted to write, but this is the book I *had* to write. I loved the fact that on their surface the stories were silly and fun, but that underneath I was exploring some of the themes I'd struggled with (unsuccessfully) in *Among the Lesser Angels*.

Some of the playfulness is rather obscure, perhaps too much so. If you have the first edition of this book, you'll notice for example that the word *television* is spelled with only one eye, my little private joke about a medium which lacks depth of vision. The book is full of this kind of thing, although I never intended *Real Things Real People Are Really Doing* to be a "serious" book. It's a book of play.

The twentieth anniversary of *Real Things* sneaked up on me. I was working on my latest book and went to my bookshelf for a citation. The book I wanted was next to this one, and I grabbed them both. Leafing through the front matter, the date 1994 leapt out at me. Could it really be that I had a twenty year-old book?

This is the point at which I might launch into a fulsome reminiscence, but there's no need of that. The 1990s were good to me, and I look back on them with fondness, but the point of being a writer is to forever move forward, to explore, to innovate, to grow. This book captures a period of my development that is behind, and when I was writing it I had likewise and consciously put behind me a yet earlier phase. I suppose that, for me, is the enduring appeal. *Real Things Real People Are Really Doing* reminds me that we should never stand still. In any case, life will not allow it.

-wks

FAKING IT

You might be pleased to know that this is the only story from this collection that you will have to read. You can read it quickly, too. It's really short, and the answers are given up front. There are no mysteries, no difficulties, no silly poetic subtleties.

Because no one has time for that sort of nonsense.

Perhaps you only bought this because your friends have been mentioning it at parties. You aren't really interested yourself. You aren't a book type of person. Maybe your lover put you up to it.

-Come on, you'll like it.

-Well, okay dear.

The title did seem a bit interesting: real things, real people. That means it's about real things and real people. Everyone likes to read about those. And the real people are doing the real things. There's nothing worse than a book in which no one does anything. Especially when the nothing that they don't do isn't even a real nothing.

I've read a few books like that in my day.

Usually my lover put me up to it.

Then there's those awkward times when you're in a crowd of people and the topic of conversation comes around to something about which you know nothing.

Maybe it's myocardial infarction

or Russian ballet

or carburetors

or origami

or ants

or

books, to get to the point. And you sit there feeling really stupid, because you have nothing to say. It isn't that you're a stupid person. You just have interests different from those of the others—and besides, you're busy being a real person doing real things. You don't have time for books.

Then along comes a real book called real things real people are really doing. You're really upset because you know that someone is going to put you in that awkward position of ignorance. So you figure you'll prepare yourself beforehand. You'll phone in sick for work and spend a whole day plodding through some damn novel about idealistic English ladies who are looking for rich husbands. You'll wrack your brains trying to figure out what the point of it all is. You'll regret that you even bothered.

Actually, I've got good news for you. First of all, this isn't a novel. And second, it isn't filled with those Victorian ninnies you despise so greatly. Third, you won't have to wrack your brain, because everything you need is right here, in this opening bit.

This is how it works. Imagine that the next bit of this story is from your life. You'll have to imaginatively put yourself into this imaginary scenario. Don't worry, it won't take long. When it's over, you can put the book down and get on with reality.

Okay. I'll count to five. When I reach five, you'll be magically transported into an imaginative representation of your reality. You'll know when it's over because you'll once again see reality as it really is in itself is.

One

Two

Three

Four

-Have you read that book by that fellow...oh, what's his name?
asks the host.

-Spur...or Spar. No, Spleen..., replies a guest.

The group sits pensively around the mahogany coffee table,
stumbling for the name that haunts the periphery of their
minds.

-Spear! proclaims the reader.

-Yeah, that's it.

The host sighs in relief and eases himself into the authentic
Biedermeier chair. He continues:

-It's an odd little book. Has anyone read it?

Grinning, the reader mentions, casually,

-As a matter of fact, I read it last week.

-Really? asks another guest. What's it like?

The reader puts down his mug of tea on the table surface,
scratches his head, and inserts a dramatic pause before
continuing.

-It's about the relation of fiction and reality. At first glance, the
stories are straightforward; upon further inspection, however,
they yield a rich interplay of discourses. We begin to see that
reality is as much a construct as is fiction. In reading the book, I
was reminded of the work of the Italian postmodernists and the
French post-structuralists. I would say that Spear's book
continually submits the line between fact and fiction to
interrogation and erasure. Also called into question is Cartesian
rationalism and the tenets of representationalism.

Astonished, the host and guests sit for a silent moment. A

woman in a pink angora sweater and black skirt tugs the edge of the cloth down over her knee, and says,

-Wow. You really went through that book carefully.

The reader deflects this comment with a self-deprecating "It-was-nothing-really" shrug of the shoulders. He has managed to fake his way through a potentially hazardous situation.

Just like in real life.

RAISING CAIN

At first we all said she was crazy. "Eve, you remember now what God said about curses and thorns and the sweat of the brow. And what about the increased pains and the 'he will rule over you' bit?"

It didn't matter. She wanted to have a baby. Several babies.

Personally, I never cared much for Adam. He borrowed my car once, got drunk, and then smashed it up. He's rude and he talks too loud. He tells disgusting sexist jokes and thinks he's so funny.

He's never had a job. He grows drugs in his basement, talks big about some invention of his that's going to make him rich. The dreamer. He takes Eve's money and uses it to get drunk, then he becomes violent.

-What happened to your face Eve?

-Um. An apple fell from a tree and hit me.

That's the second time she's used that one. The first was just before they moved out of her house. She told me the eviction was all because of an apple. When the authorities came around to the house to ask questions, she told them the apple story too. All Adam had to say was, "The woman did it." And they bought the whole thing.

They even wrote it down in their little black book.

Adam isn't even divorced from his first wife, Lilith. No one knows about her, he keeps it so secret. He has children with the woman, but he never offers any support, financial or otherwise. He just lies around the house during the day, and goes down to the Paradise Club at night. He spends Eve's money on beer and

strippers.

-Why'd you agree to live with him, Eve? Can't you see he's no good for you?

-He really isn't that bad. You have to get to know him. He just has his own way. Besides, I love him.

I tried to talk sense into Eve, but it was no use.

-Why don't you go back to school? Get a university degree?

You could take up a career. You could be a landscape architectural engineer. You like gardens.

We could get you some new clothes, a new image. You really are a beautiful woman, Eve. You ought to care for yourself better.

Adam and Eve are still together. No one says she's crazy any more; everyone has accepted the fact that Eve is going to stay with this man no matter what. But it still grieves me to see the way she treats herself, and the way she allows herself to be treated.

I remember the day she came to my house all excited, saying, "I'm gonna have a baby! I'm gonna have that baby!"

-That baby?

-Yeah. The baby I've always wanted to have. I've always wanted something of my own, something I could love, that would love me.

-That's great Eve.

-And I've got the name picked out, too.

FALLING IN LOVE

I've fallen into a lot of things in my day. Holes, rivers, doorways, puddles, automobiles, pits. Falling is easy. Gravity does all of the work. You aren't even aware of the fact that you're doing it. It just happens. You look up at the blue sky from the bottom of the well, and you think to yourself,

Hey. I've fallen.

Maybe it's technically incorrect to say that falling is something you do. Rather, isn't falling something that's done to you?

So I should have said, I've been fallen into a lot of things in my day.

The point is, falling is the easiest activity in the world. You don't have to make any effort; you don't have to plan in advance; you don't need any technical expertise.

Which brings me to the question of falling in love.

Falling in love is not easy. It's not really even a falling. I'd say it's more of a climbing.

First of all, you never quite feel right when you are falling in love. I find it gets harder to get out of bed in the morning. Gravity becomes an obstacle rather than an aid. Falling in love affects my stomach, too. Nothing I've ever fallen into affects my stomach like love does. I lose my appetite; I feel queasy. Eating becomes difficult.

When I'm falling in love, I spend more time in the bathroom labouring over my appearance. When I am falling in love, I don't go out in public looking however I did when I climbed out of bed (and I do mean climbed). I wash every inch of my body (twice) and cover myself in products. One product adds a

smell, another takes one away. Yet another makes me smoother. Then there are products to help things flow or to keep them rigid. One part of the body needs to be highlighted, another hidden. Some parts are too shiny, others too dull. This part is too small, that one too large. What product will fix these things? I can't take the risk of missing even one detail. Because I never know: I just might see my beloved somewhere.

- in the frozen food section
- around the library
- on Princess street
- under the Main street overpass
- beside the lake
- at the theatre
- or I may accidentally see her totally by coincidence in the place where she works.

Because I'll be passing it today sixty-three times.

Well, I'm only passing it because it's on my way...if I take a very special route.

First I dress impeccably in order to go out and buy a loaf of bread. I don't care that the grocery store is west, whereas the clothing store in which she works is due east of my apartment. I manage to rationalize my route. I tell myself, It's such a lovely day for a walk (it's really raining), and besides, I ought to examine the architecture of the west side. So off I go. Inevitably, it will be the windiest day on record, and so I will have to find the exact manner of walking that will minimize the distortion of my hair. And when I've found it, I will have to maintain it the whole way, even if it means getting run over while crossing Main street because I didn't see the car coming.

Falling in love involves a great deal of strategical thought. You need to make your existence known to the beloved. This is not the case with falling in general. The curb does not need to know you in order for the process to be completed successfully. You don't even mind if the ice fails to notice your handsomeness, your sensitivity, your wit. You will never say, "If only I could make the right impression on those stairs. Then they would love me." No, falling of this sort is natural and easy. You discover to your glee that the curb, the ice, and the stairs are cooperating with you despite an absence of coercion and imprecation on your part.

Love is not this way.

You fight for the briefest moment of contact between you and the beloved. You sweat and labour, and you toss in bed, trying to determine her feelings for you. You torture your brain for a solution to this problem: how do I speed up the process? Things move too slowly, if they move at all. You fear love will never come. You decide that it is time for something desperate.

-You will learn French

-You will undergo cosmetic surgery

-You will lift weights

-You will memorize Shakespeare's sonnets

-You will master: ballroom dancing, aviation, bull-fighting, gourmet cooking, Spanish guitar [perhaps classical also, in your extra time], Spanish [since you will have learned French, it won't be that hard—they are similar, after all], and perhaps some form of martial art.

-You will do something that makes you rich and famous and irresistible to women all throughout the world. This will

probably involve skills beyond those you have already enumerated. You think about it. And think and think.

Jesus, you'd figure a woman would be happy with a muscular, sexy man who can cook and who can speak French and Spanish and fight off bulls while reciting, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments" Is this ever a difficult business, this love. What do these women want anyway?

Hold on. I'm losing touch with reality.

That's another thing that happens when you fall in love.

You fail to notice things. You live in a dream world. It's ridiculous, really. Yesterday I was on my way to the 7-eleven to buy rubber bands—it's a good idea to have rubber bands around the house, you never know when you'll need one—and by chance I was passing the clothing store. I failed to notice a large crack in the sidewalk that had caused a section of the paved surface to collapse. I must have been dreaming about something...or someone. Anyway, I failed to notice the crack, and so I tripped and fell. Right in front of the clothing store.

She saw me fall, too.

What I'm wondering is, did she think I was just some ridiculous fool merely falling. Or did she notice that I was falling in love?

Come to think of it, they both look the same to an uneducated observer.

SHOPPING AROUND

This time I am going to shop around.

I met my last lover at a party. I had had too much to drink. We had a brief and tempestuous affair, which ended horribly after three months. I told myself then, I will never make that mistake again.

Linda was my first lover. She was tall and slender. Her hair fell straight along her back, ending where the spine curves inward to form the base of a smooth concave pocket. Her eyes were dark brown, her skin pale. I remember that her teeth were remarkably uniform, as if they were artificial. I did not know real teeth could be so straight.

I've had dozens and dozens of lovers. I remember only a few. I've probably embellished them beyond all reality. My memories may be fictions.

Tanya had short hair. She dyed it henna. Her hair was bell-shaped and hugged her head like a snug wig. She used a product that made her legs as smooth as those of a store-front mannequin. She said it was excruciatingly painful and expensive to get her legs that way, but that she felt that it was worth it.

Maggie wore clothing from a local Middle-Eastern bazaar: silks and flowing scarves and Jinn pants. She wore pink foundation and red blush. Her preferred products were: Noxema, Clairol, Seabreeze, Neat, Max Factor.

Brenda was slightly overweight, but disguised it well with bulky sweaters and skirts. She worked primarily in odours: L'air du Temps, Channel and Night Musk. Her shoes were always of the highest quality, even those that she wore when taking the

garbage to the curb.

Rachel liked to wear hats. She bought most of her clothing through mail order catalogues. Her favourite colours were hunter green, teal, and royal blue. She said she was a Winter. I met her during her black and white phase. She also had a brief leather phase, during which she wore tight black pants and cowhide vests. She liked to wear earrings that dangle to the shoulder.

All of these women were bad for me. I remember their clothing and the way that they smelled, and specific physical details: the curve of a leg, the flatness of a stomach, the darkness of eyes. What I'm not going to tell you about is the grief and the frustration.

I've tried for years to block it out of my mind.

Linda was never happy with anything I ever did. She hated the way I cut my steak, and was determined to reform me.

Tanya ate only vegetables and said it is morally wrong to kill cows. I said I only killed them to stop them. I said, Cows are the most vicious and hateful creatures alive because they prey exclusively on helpless vegetables. I told her that I was thinking about going after other vegetable haters too.

She left me.

Maggie was a singer and sexually voracious. She was also insane. She told me that Janice Joplin once came to her house and complimented her on her musical talent.

Brenda tried to make me feel guilty about every bad thing in the world. She told me I never really loved her, which was true, and that I was leaving her only because she wasn't thin like a supermodel, which wasn't. She held me personally responsible

for the "chauvinism and cruelty of my gender."

Rachel was unfaithful and ran off with a neighbour of mine.
That was during her Spiegel earth-tone phase.

Relationships are so difficult. It's woeful. But this time I'm
going to shop around.

What I have learned about shopping

1. Do your research

Find out where the product comes from. Was it produced by a respectable corporation? Or by one that is exploitative? Check into warranties, and see what kind of experiences other people have had with this product. You may discover things of great importance.

2. Look under the hood

We're not talking just about cars here. Whatever it is, see how it's made and how it works. Have a professional come along and help. Kick the tires.

3. Ask about trial periods

If possible, take the product home for a few days for a trial run. Be explicit that this in no way implies a commitment. There ought to be no obligation to buy.

4. Compare and save

Don't take the first thing that comes along, no matter how shiny and fancy it looks. And don't enter into a bargain until you know all of the facts! Often a salesperson will only tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear. Don't trust these people.

5. Take your time. Get the best deal you can.

6. Get everything in writing

Remember the expression: a verbal agreement is worth the paper it's written on.

7. If you do purchase, keep the receipts and accompanying documents in a safe place

You might want to make an exchange at a later date. Perhaps get a refund. You are not personally responsible for defective goods, but be careful: there are no user serviceable parts. It's also wise to keep the packaging. Often, with the excitement that accompanies a new item, we fail to consider the possibility that we may grow tired of it later. Or it may not work the way we had thought it would. If you have discarded the packaging, you are stuck with your selection.

8. Consider the costs

Ask yourself, Do I really need this product? Isn't the aggravation more than I want? And the responsibility?

In today's throw-away society, most products break down after only a few years. Then you're stuck with a useless product and the costs of getting rid of it.

9. Be honest. Why are you considering this purchase? A lot is at stake. Do you think you could live without it?

You'd be surprised. Many people nowadays are.

MAKING LOVE

1. The first thing we need to clarify is the terminology.

Making love is not to be confused with having sex. To make love is, as the phrase suggests, to make. To have sex is, conversely, to have. To have is to possess, and everyone knows that possession and love are nowhere to be found together.

Intercourse, fornication, and copulation are too clinical and pretentious; they lack emotional content and make one feel that you are just showing off your vocabulary. There's nothing romantic about snobbery.

Sex sounds too Anglo-Saxon, even if it has a Romance etymology. We ought not to confuse the matter by getting obsessed with the facts. The truth is, sex doesn't sound very nice, no matter how delicately you try to articulate it.

Humping and screwing are demeaning. It grieves us that we have to even mention them. Some people think these terms are cute and funny, but general consensus dictates otherwise. The former term might be appropriate for the sexual activities of dromedaries, but certainly not of homo sapiens, while the latter term is best reserved for specific acts of carpentry.

For brevity's sake, we will dispense with a thorough technical discussion of: porking, poking, the horizontal bop, bonking, doing the wild thing, makin' bacon, fooling around, going down and tumbling in the hay. These terms should be avoided. This is not a moral judgement, however—merely a recommendation.

2. When to make love.

The best time to make love is Saturday night between 9:30 and

10:00 p.m. The weekdays are problematic because of busy work schedules. No one has time nor energy. Friday night is worst of all because of the cumulative exhaustion of the work-week. Your best plan is to get as much sleep on Friday night as possible. Therefore: go straight to bed. Do not make love.

Saturday morning would be good, except that there are so many things to do. Think of all the bills that have to be paid, the errands that have to be run, the myriad of chores that have been neglected because you were too busy throughout the week to get around to them. When the alarm clock rings, you had best get right out of bed and get to it. Have your partner help. Tell him to think of dusting as fore-play. This will encourage him to be efficient and enthusiastic.

Note: make sure the bills are paid! Nothing causes coitus interruptus and similar sexual disfunction like the stress of financial debt. One gas bill alone could wreck everything.

If you are efficient and organized, you will have enough energy Saturday night for making love. Here are five questions you can ask yourself and your partner to be sure:

- Am I craving sleep continually?
- Am I listening to my inner child?
- Does my partner respect my needs no matter what, or am I being pressured somehow to do something I do not want to do?
- Do I typically fall asleep during lovemaking?
- Am I getting pleasure out of lovemaking, or am I merely fooling myself?

If you have determined that it is prudent to make love, we recommend the following: First, wait until your favourite television program is finished. If you make love during a half-

hour block in which a program you do not like is being broadcasted, your mind will not be divided between love making and television watching. A one-half hour block ensures that you will have time to make love and also to finish any chores (such as dish-washing) that have accumulated throughout the day. Second, ensure that the answering machine is on so that you won't need to answer calls. Resist the impulse to rush to the phone, even if you are experiencing a lull in the activities. Most calls are not urgent and can be followed up immediately after orgasm, if such an event occurs.

3. Let us proceed to the act itself.

We have established the following norms of lovemaking:

- the missionary position, man on top. Creativity leads to perversity, and besides, you work hard all week. Don't complicate your life needlessly.

- the bedroom. We are told that the French make love throughout the house, and even prefer the bathroom. This seems unhygienic, and not entirely in good taste. We feel the bedroom was made for making love, and making love for the bedroom.

- since foreplay has more or less been merged with Saturday chores, you might as well get right down to business. It's a busy world, and besides, you've been waiting all day. And no one waits all day for anything anymore.

- congratulate yourself and your partner when appropriate. Nothing is more important in today's atmosphere of global competitiveness than to reward and to encourage excellence.

DYING TO TELL YOU

There's something I'm dying to tell you, but be patient. This might take a while.

First, let's define the territory, you know, establish the tone and all that:

I'm not going to tell you any of these things:

-I'm in love with you.

-I stole your car.

-I'm having an affair with your sister.

-I'm going to Texas.

-Your cousin has cancer.

-You've won the lottery.

-Your parents are divorcing.

-Your house is on fire.

-I'm gay.

-I'm converting to Islam.

But suppose I was in love with you, and so I stole your car and went off with your sister to Texas in order to get my mind off of you. And suppose that while we were making love in a Dallas Ramada Inn your sister told me that your cousin was dying of cancer, but the treatment wouldn't be a financial burden because you've won the lottery. Suppose that your parents began to fight over the lottery money and one of them burned the house down in anger. Suppose that while making love to your sister I became convinced that I was in fact gay, and so in moral repulsion I threw myself into religion so that I wouldn't have to deal with it.

Suppose. Reality can get pretty boring you know. Supposing

might do you good.

I'm really dying to tell you something. Oh God, you're not going to believe this, I swear.

Did I mention that I have a new job? That isn't what I'm going to tell you, but I did get a new job. I start next Monday. I'm working in a pizzeria, cooking I guess. Or cutting things up. They haven't told me yet. I might just sweep the floors and clean the toilets. As far as I'm concerned, a job is a job. I've had worse. You know, none of the things I've ever done have involved any brains anyway. In the jobs that I've had I've usually just moved things around, swept a bit. I'll find out Monday. The suspense is horrible. Which reminds me.

How is your sister? I was kidding about the affair, you know. Don't tell her what I said. The truth is, I haven't been with anyone for over a year—sexually, I mean. I don't even have any interest in anyone right now. I'd like to be able to say that I'm dying to tell you that I've got a new lover. But I haven't. I'm dying to tell you something, but that isn't it.

Oh God, you won't believe it.

Okay, okay. Calm down. Geez, it's like there's a muskrat in your pants.

That's an Indian word you know: musquash. So are Toronto and Canada. And moose.

Oh, man. I can't stand it. I'm dying to tell you something.

No no no. Hold on. There was something I was gonna say first. What was it now. What was it? Oh, yeah. I remember. I don't find out what my new job involves until Monday. Did I mention that already? Oh, yeah. Well, it's only that it's really on my mind, you know. I'm dying of curiosity.

Well, I guess the truth is that you're the one who's dying. But don't get mad—this is only a story I made up to kill some time. And what the hell good is a story unless someone is dying of suspense.

HAVING A BABY

I don't think it's fair at all that a man can't have a baby. You've heard people say, "Biology shouldn't be destiny." You know the argument. Besides, this is a scientific age. Men can walk on the moon, explore the bottom of oceans, send messages to other galaxies. I was watching television the other day, and there was a man talking about technological miracles of the twentieth century, everything from artificial organs to digital watches. I thought to myself, If we can do all of these things, then surely a man can have a baby.

Fact: Zeus gave birth and He was a man. Sure, He was a god too—I realize that, but don't you think it's time we stopped discriminating against people just because they aren't part of a pantheon? This is supposed to be a democracy. I mean, first it's, "Sorry, only gods can do that," and pretty soon you're telling Indians that they can't vote.

Fact: Men love babies every bit as much as women do. They even have maternal instincts—you know, baby-having instincts. Lots of men would like to have a baby of their own. I guess you could say it's like a biological clock, except no one has ever heard it tick. It must be a digital biological clock. Makes sense, because people started noticing it in the 'seventies.

Fact: A culture that can make the digital watch can help men to have babies.

It's unfair that men can't have babies. My male friends agree with me. My female ones, too. But the women aren't as progressive as I had hoped, I'm sorry to say.

Sandra laughed when I told her I want to have a baby.

Elizabeth looked at me as if I were crazy. She said, "You have no idea what you're talking about. Having a baby is no picnic."

Cynthia thought it was a romantic idea, but she was sceptical. She didn't think that having a baby was at all like probing into space or penetrating the oceans or thrusting a missile to the moon:

-Men have invented a lot of things, but not this. They just don't understand. It's different.

-Going to the moon is not different from having a baby. You eat weird food. You throw up. You don't feel right. Damn it, Cynthia—just let me have this baby.

Deborah seemed to understand my argument. She'd been trying for years to have a baby, and discovered last May that she couldn't. She said it was devastating, not only because she couldn't have something she really wanted, but because of how it made her feel about her body: she felt defective, incomplete, perverse. These are my words, because I don't remember exactly how she said it. So don't quote me. Deborah and I talked about our desires and disappointments for a while, and then she said something that got me thinking. She said, I always took my body for granted, until I was told that it couldn't do something that for me was very natural and basic. So basic I never really thought about it. I felt that having a baby was a right, something no one could take away. Now I realize it is a gift.

I guess I never really thought about it, my body. I just thought about having babies and about the relation of babies to digital watches. I never thought about my body.

These are the things I have noticed about my body:

- as I get older, there is more of it.
- it's preference of the following qualities: warm, soft, dry, gentle, slow, sweet, mellow, melodious, fragrant.
- it's disdain of the following qualities: sharp, cold, hard, wet, bright, sour, loud, pungent, discordant.
- an increasing susceptibility to gravitational force: specifically in the forms of flab, inertia and exhaustion.
- hunger: of the following categories: 1/physical 2/intellectual 3/emotional.
- of the following subcategories: of physical: a/nutritional b/sexual: of intellectual: a/analytical b/creative: of emotional: a/intimacy b/companionship.
- my body does not like to shovel snow nor to vacuum carpet.
- indifference to most forms of housework.
- a fondness for East Indian food, making love, sitting near fireplaces, hot showers, hiking, fresh air.
- my division of it into regionalisms: 1/The North [brain, head: region of intellection] 2/The South [legs, feet: region of locomotion] 3/The East [arm, hand: secondary region of transportation, handling, etc.] 4/The West [arm, hand: primary region of transportation, handling, etc.] 5/The heartland [lungs, heart, various organs: region of manufacturing] 6/The Breadbasket [genitals: region of evacuation, recreation].
- regions of privilege [in order]: Region 6, Region 1, Region 4.
- regions currently experiencing difficulties: Region 2.
- underdeveloped regions: Region 3, Region 5.
- its determination to do whatever it damn well pleases.
- Or not to do it.

The more I thought about my body, the less likely it seemed I was ever going to have that baby. But I still think it's unfair. I still want to have that baby.

-You have no idea what you're talking about. Having a baby is no picnic.

-Maybe you're right Elizabeth, maybe you're right. Say, you like my new digital watch?

EATING OUR HEARTS OUT

We really shouldn't eat our hearts out like this, because the heart is the seat of our emotions. The ancient Greeks believed that the seat of their emotions was the stomach, and you never once have heard of a Greek eating his stomach out.

Because they knew better.

Of course, there are the philosophical issues involved in eating your stomach out:

- is it possible—to eat your stomach out?

- well, how would you do it—I mean, if you had no stomach to eat *with*?

- would this prove that love is only an illusion, if you could eat your stomach out?

- and where would your emotions go if you consumed them?

Having the heart as the seat of the emotions precludes some of these difficult issues.

I'm feeling sad today, because of sad memories.

I've been thinking about someone who was once very special to me, someone who was kind to me and who loved me very much. I am sad because I miss this person, now that she is no longer a part of my life.

We liked to drive north to the country on Sunday afternoons, especially in autumn. There was a small tea room we would visit. The tea room was hidden away at the back of a cluttered antique store. The building sat alongside a waterfall. I

remember the calming babble of the water, the crimson of the maple leaves, the smell of baking biscuits. The tea room was an enclosed porch overlooking the stream. Seventy-five yards out the embankment rose to a level plane of tilting conifers. We would go hiking and afterward drink piping-hot tea from porcelain. We would eat biscuits and rhubarb pie. We would sit for hours, talking, dreaming.

I liked sitting in this tea-room with her. I shouldn't have come back.

It's lonely now.

I really shouldn't be sitting here like this, because this seat is the heart of my emotions.

SUPPOSING IT HAPPENS

What will you do when you become a billionaire?

Well, supposing you do. Become a billionaire.

You've got to think about something while you're supposed to be working.

Of course, the work day is almost over. When you're finished, you'll go home to your dream house in the country and your personal Italian chef will prepare for you a gourmet meal.

And this time the chef's name won't be Boyardee, either.

Well, supposing it happens.

You better decide right now whether you will have a Jacuzzi after dinner, or see a film in your personal movie theatre. Or maybe just lounge around the master bedroom: build a fire, lie in your big bed, look out of the picture window at the mountains. Boy, your river sure is beautiful. Wish I had one of my own.

Supposing I did. I'd go fishing everyday and catch trout. Fly fishing. Who knows what else I'd hook. Yeah, I'd be a fisherman.

Think of all the things you're going to have when you're rich. And the travel! Paris, Bermuda, Greece, South America.

Me, I'll be right here, fishing.

You could finally do the things you've always wanted to do. And suppose on top of being rich, you were young and sexy as well. With perfect health. Did I mention you are also brilliant? Everyone thinks you are the best.

You have wonderful taste in clothing. Money isn't everything: you have to know how to spend it. Anyone can throw a billion

dollars around. But taste, that's another matter. And you have je ne sais quoi, which no amount of money can buy either. That's why members of the opposite sex find you so attractive. Of course, you're already involved in a passionate and exciting love affair. You and your lover travel the world together and see exotic places. You make love on beaches and buy each other delightful gifts in Rome and Moscow and Rio de Janeiro.

Meanwhile, I'm quite content to be fishing.

In fact, I'm pretty sure I've hooked something. I'm just reeling it in.

Most billionaires aren't cultured; have you ever noticed that? They're all capitalism, all business. They have no charm, no class. That's why it's so refreshing to see someone like you. You're rich, but you wear it well, if you know what I mean. You know exactly what you want. You make good choices. Your lover is a cultured person too. Has a great singing voice. A sensitive person. Has lots of talent. Athletic and creative. And witty, but not pretentious or condescending. Kind, loving, generous. And a great body, if you don't mind me saying so.

Wow, that was a quick catch.

Amazing how easy it is when you know what bait to use.

BREAKING THINGS

1. *Breaking a heart.*

I really didn't mean to break your heart. The first mistake I made was to put it so high from the ground, up on a narrow shelf not far from where the children run. There is nothing in the house to absorb the shock: nor furniture, no heavy appliances, no fat people sitting on the sofa. Even the most careful stroll through the kitchen makes the plates on the mantelpiece rattle.

My brother asks me, Why do you put plates on the mantelpiece? Don't you know that is a dangerous thing to do?

How foolish of me then to put your heart where I did.

It was high on the bookshelf—you know, the white pressboard one I bought from Ikea. I put it together myself, so it is a little wobbly. A lot actually. When my family comes over for dinner, they make the shelves sway gently to and fro. I was nervous that a book was going to fall off. Maybe all of the books. I never suspected that your heart would be the victim. I never wanted to break your heart.

I confess it was not my family's fault. I am responsible. On May 7, I was shopping at the market. In the produce section I met someone. We returned to my home. We undressed and made passionate love in the living-room, only ten feet away from your heart. The violence of our lust caused the entire building to quake. First, a painting fell from the bathroom wall. Then, a potted geranium leapt to its death, shattering on the hardwood floor. I did not care, I was so overcome with sensual ecstasy.

And that is when it happened. Your heart, which was slowly approaching the edge, fell over the front—just as we were achieving orgasm. There was something poetic about that moment.

But I did not mean to hurt you. I would have done anything to prevent this tragic outcome.

Don't worry. Your heart will heal. You will love again.

2. *Lunch Break.*

In the office where I work there is so little time to relax. Corporate life is more hectic than it has ever been before. We live under constant maddening stress. We go from moment to moment, frantic to meet deadlines, to be in the right place at the right time. We work from 7:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night, with few breaks between. At first we ate a small lunch at 1:00. But this became impractical. Our routine eventually involved bingeing in the morning and again in the evening. We fasted during the workday. There was no time to eat. That is when the idea came upon us.

We decided to take a lunch break at noon to interrupt the uniform insanity of our days. At first the venture was a moderate one: a celery stalk, a carrot, perhaps a bread stick. Then we moved on to pencils. And soon, it was office furniture and appliances. We broke coffee makers and microwave ovens and paper shredders. That was enough to relieve our stress and frustration—for a time. But within two months we needed a greater outlet. So we began to break larger items: automobiles, homes, factories. We smashed them with sledgehammers, or drove into them with Jeeps. We began to smash executives and C.E.O.s, presidents and chairpersons. At first it was difficult.

We had no experience in the matter. We discovered that throwing a superior out of a window would rarely cause breakage. The usual outcome was something more like a squishing, or a smashing. They remained in one piece. We had to work at it for a long time before we got it down to a science. But we eventually did.

3. *Break a Leg.*

Everyone agreed. It was a tour de force, an unparalleled performance.

First the newspapers declared the genius of the spectacle. Soon, radio announcers and university professors joined the swarming throngs of admirers who heaped upon the actors accolades. Words like "genius" and "incredible" became as common as snowflakes in winter. The pages of every magazine were filled with praise; every writer clamoured to outdo colleagues in the invention of new expressions of delight. Crowds were turned away from teeming theatres, night after night. What began as a one-week run was still playing to packed houses after a year. No one could explain the phenomenon. This particular interpretation of the play inspired a whole new school of acting. Universities revised their programs, instructors discarded their received theories. Movies took on a whole new look. A complete revolution of taste was effected.

True, it was a bit disconcerting at first. A stage full of actors and actresses, rehearsing their lines, projecting, articulating, hobbling about, some with the bones exposed through shin and thigh, blood trailing behind them. It was hard on the weak of stomach. Gore dangled from the splintered ends of femur and fibula, splattering on spectators. During love scenes, the legs

would fly willy-nilly about like empty jacket sleeves, pointing first this way then that, as if propelled by an independent will. But they never fell off, though they might bend back doubled, forming amazing angles.

At first, audiences were repelled. Then a reviewer explained that, for god's sake—it was only a metaphor.

SEEING THE LIGHT

Part One: *He was born in poverty and darkness*

He made a few mistakes in the beginning, because he was born in poverty and in darkness. I've selected, arranged, itemized and interpreted them for you.

-He fooled around a lot, sexually.

-He drank heavily.

-He used foul language.

Don't look so discouraged. It gets better: you know that.

-He once shot his brother in the foot during an argument about money. Everyone thought it was an accident, but I know that the bastard meant to do it.

He was a bastard, all right. But he reformed. He's a decent fellow now: I rather like him.

Part Two: *He sees the light*

Before we go any further, I ought to produce the relevant facts.

1. He was born 4 October 1939.

2. His father was a housepainter and an alcoholic. His mother made crafts. This accounts for our hero's artistic propensities. He has become quite a clever writer.

3. His mother often read the Bible to him, although he didn't get much out of it at first—that is, before he saw the light.

4. He had trouble with women. He married in 1962, but after only sixteen months of marriage his wife left him. That was 18 May 1964 at 3:27 p.m.

The car she left in was orange.

5. He liked Dixieland music, and he played his 78 r.p.m.s loud.

6. He shunned vinegar.

He was a bastard, but he saw the light. Let me tell you about it.

On 6 June 1964, 10:27 p.m., he was sitting in Sam's diner, a white rectangular building on Queen street. If you go there today you'll see it, although Sam is dead now and the name has changed. It's the same place though. The very booth he was sitting in is still there.

Anyway, he was eating a clubhouse sandwich with fries. He had put salt on the fries, but not vinegar. Sam's had the best clubhouse in those days. The bacon made all of the difference: it was crispy, but not dried out and charcoal-tasting.

He had just finished his dinner when he looked up and saw the headlights approach the front window of the diner. The light was blinding. He thought he was going to fall to his knees. He said to himself, God who are you? He eventually got up out of the booth, onto his feet, blinded. When his sight returned to him a minute later, he looked out of the window.

It was him, all right. You don't forget a face like that, especially when it's behind the headlights of an orange car.

Well, to make a long story into a short story, he walked up to the front door and waited for the man to come in. They looked one another in the eye, and our hero said, "Step out back." So out back they go, and our hero gives the man a damn good beating, like no one in that town has ever been beaten before.

When our hero is done, he goes home, puts on a Dixieland 78 r.p.m., and opens up his Bible. He sees the words, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. He thought of those words, there in the restaurant.

Because he saw the light.

Part Three: *A New Man*

Yes sir, he was a bastard, that man. But you know the story: with age comes wisdom, understanding and contentment. He's a new man now. I rather like him.

Did I mention he became quite a clever writer?

LOOKING LIKE HELL

-17 March

When I woke up this morning I looked like hell. I shouldn't let my hair go this long without some sort of professional attention. I ought to get a haircut, or at least a trim. Even if I were to get my hair thinned out I would look much better. My hairstylist has a special instrument for doing this. This instrument is basically a pair of scissors, but it only cuts a portion of the hair that passes between its blades. If I were to get my hair trimmed, I would be able to style it with greater ease. As it is, my hair does whatever it chooses to do. I wake in the morning to find parts of it standing vertically. My hair manages to point in every direction simultaneously. At the back it is matted, spreading outward from a central point where the white of the scalp is visible. At the top it forms a peak, like whipped cream. In the front my hair has formed into a cornucopia of shapes, defying description.

-25 March

Maybe if I were to change my wardrobe. Then maybe I wouldn't look like hell.

I wear a lot cheap clothing: basement bargains and flea market finds. I raid department store bins and wholesale warehouses, looking for clothing that is reduced in price because it is last year's fashion, or because of slight defects. I buy clothing for functionality, not for style.

Take what I am wearing today, for instance. I am wearing a black rayon turtle-neck shirt and a pair of blue denim bell-bottoms. The pants are a bit big, so I accompany them with a

brown belt. The belt has a horseshoe-shaped buckle—to bring me good luck, I suppose. I am wearing green wool socks and blue and yellow duck boots. The shoes are waterproof, an essential feature of spring footwear.

I look like hell.

-27 March

No wonder I am still single at age thirty-two.

-28 March

I looked in the mirror today. I looked even more like hell than usual. I think I am gaining weight. I have bags under my eyes too. And acne, just below my lower lip. I see three distinct red mounds, although I suspect that they are conspiring to merge together at some point in the near future.

-29 March

I've decide to get a haircut today.

-30 March.

I got my hair cut, and thinned out too. I asked for a simple cut. I told the beautician to thin out the top and to shorten the bangs. I told her my hair was too thick. I said I couldn't control it anymore, it was so thick and tangled. I asked her to leave a "bit" on top and to shorten the back so that it was an inch past the ears.

She mentioned that the hair on the top of my head was tougher than hair usually is. I thought that this was a strange way to describe hair. She said I was right about my hair being unmanageable. She had to put gel in it to get it to lie flat on my head.

She made a joke about my unmanageable hair. She said I was probably growing horns.

-2 April

Even though my hair is short, I still find that it is hard to style. Especially in the front. This morning when I looked in the mirror I noticed peaks on my head. I took a comb and ran it under water, and combed the peaks flat to my pate. But an hour later the peaks returned.

I put on a baseball cap for the remainder of the day, hoping my hair would be flattened out by the evening.

-4 April

I hate going to the beautician. For one thing, she isn't able to make me beautiful. There is a cruel irony in that name: *beautician*.

And the books that they pile around these places don't help either. The pages are littered with sexy men and women who look young and healthy and happy.

I feel cursed.

I'm thirty-two.

I'll be thirty-three soon.

And then forty.

And I look like hell.

-5 April

I went to the hair cutting person to ask about gels. I want a product that will help me to get my hair under control. Nothing I've tried has been able to get rid of the pointy formations on my head. I swear they are becoming larger and more definite. I look like I am growing horns.

She asked me if she could have a look. I insisted on going somewhere private. I don't go in public any longer without my cap on.

Now I am bald, except for the horns.

-21 February

It's taken me a while to get to the point where I can function again. But I do function. In fact, I rather like who I am now. I have a whole new outlook.

People stare and point. It may be the red outfit I found for \$14.95 at the Bi-Way. Or maybe it's the wooden clogs I wear. Clogs have been out of fashion since the early 'eighties.

Okay, so I'm not a sexy magazine cover. So I don't have the latest fashions. So I'm gaining weight. At least I don't have to deal with the questions anymore:

-So are you still single?

-Well what's the matter? Maybe you should get out more, meet people, join a club.

-Have you been putting on weight?

-How old are you now, anyway?

They don't talk to me anymore. They are convinced that I'm the Antichrist, simply because I'm thirty three, single, a bit overweight, and unwilling to play a game that has never brought me anything but misery. Oh, and because I wear a red outfit and have horns and carry a pitchfork.

I'm kidding about the pitchfork. It's just that I do actually look a bit like...well, you know.

But I'm past the point of feeling guilty or getting upset about it. No one seems to be able to accept the fact that I refuse to play by the rules. I have my own agenda now. I'm going to dress the way I want to dress and be the person I want to be. And everyone who has the solution for my "predicament" can just go to...

Better yet, let them stay where they are.
They deserve it.

DRESSING UP

We spend most of our time in captivity. We're released for a few minutes each day—in the mornings, usually—and placed in water. Or the water is driven from above into our anterior and posterior proximal regions while fat-based emulsifiers are forced over our surfaces and into our crevices. If we are extremely lucky, we are released once more in the evening—usually for more water-related treatment. Occasionally, however, we are also liberated and conjoined with one other in an elaborate ritual that involves our pelvic regions. We enjoy this particular type of release from captivity very much. After we are finished, we lie very still. There is a night covering that they put on us until morning, not unlike the covering we endure in daytime. The whole day considered, we are released for perhaps one hour a day. The rest of the time we are under captivity.

The worst climates for us are the northern ones. In Canada for instance, we suffer not only the usual forms of imprisonment, but these as well: captivity of our digits, manual and pedal, captivity of our anterior division, subjection of our connective straights to scarves and mufflers. We are often submitted to several layers of captivity in winter months, though in summer also we endure the constriction of swim suits and the messiness of ointments. When liberated irresponsibly in summer, our surface burns and perishes.

Those of us with mammalian footwear are subjected to peculiar forms of captivity. This is not true however in some parts of the world where female ventral parts are considered functional and

not erogenous. We ourselves do not understand the constriction and captivity of mammary glands. There have been attempts made to liberate us, but these are typically met with horror and disgust.

Those of us with exterior organs of copulation and evacuation enjoy liberated ventral regions in summer. Also in winter, as long as it is done indoors and privately. Much care is taken to ensure that, at all times, our organs of copulation and evacuation are kept in captivity. This is true of internal organs of copulation and evacuation as well as external. As mentioned earlier, our organs of copulation and evacuation are liberated for brief times only, and only for specific reasons.

As a result of captivity, we don't enjoy much comfort or sunshine. Leather or cloth bands kept around our proximal regions constrain our inner organs and are often abrasive. Decorative ornaments and time-keeping engines constitute further methods of captivity. We are released from these in dark times, thankfully, but even then we are hidden under broad strips of material which separate us from our environment. This is true of every dark period, except for the very rare cases when we are placed horizontally over surfaces without liberation from our diurnal mode of captivity. In either case, we are very much imprisoned— to our dismay.

It is supposed that we succumb to illness accidentally, but the truth is that we have designed illness as a method of achieving liberation. Our efforts often fail, but are the only recourse that we have. We are able to endure captivity only for so long. We must devise methods to free ourselves. Our tactics probably sound unreasonable, but before you condemn us, you ought to

consider our plight.

Often a desperate attempt at liberation accidentally ends in our termination. When this occurs, we are bound in cloth like prisoners, and placed in a very small cell. The cell is then held captive in a tiny chamber that is covered in dirt.

We are never released from this particular captivity, neither for water-related treatment, nor for the conjunction with the other of which we are so fond.

FOOLING OURSELVES

You're fooling yourself.

The first sure indication that you are fooling yourself is that you begin to hide things.

Look under your bed. Right now. I'll wait for you here.

Well? What did you see?

Come on, you can tell me. There's no way it will ever get out. I don't know your parents or your priest or your milkman.

You don't have a milkman? See, that just shows you how little I know you.

You're safe with me. You can trust me.

So what did you see?

Fear? Guilt? Loathing? Did you see that horrible lie you told to your mother when you were thirteen years old? We both know you were really having sex in the bushes behind the school.

And you said you were helping a friend make oatmeal cookies for the annual senior elementary bake-sale. To raise money for charity.

Don't ask me how I know all of these things. Let's just say I'm omniscient.

Not quite like God. Well, a bit like God. I don't have much of a body, either. God and I like to maintain a respectable distance from materiality, except when it suits us to do otherwise. You think you know what I look like; you think you are following me along pretty good.

But you're fooling yourself.

You're not fooling God though. He sees every hidden thing, just like I do. And he casts judgement on the things that he

sees.

But don't worry. I won't do that. I am objective. Sometimes I'll be ironic, but that isn't a judgement exactly. It's more like a fun little game. You know, you try and figure out what I really mean. It's all in the spirit of play.

Are you following along? Good.

That wasn't an ironic statement, by the way. I really do think it's good that you are following along. I don't know where I'd be without you. I don't have much company. Once in a while someone comes along and drops in, usually just for a few minutes. I make some witty conversation, but people are usually in a hurry or tired, so they don't pay very careful attention. Their eyelids get heavy and their eyes start to close, and by that point I don't even want to bother. At first I thought it was me, but after a few times through I began to see and to understand more. Now I am practically an expert in human nature. If you stay with me long enough, you'll learn something from me, I promise.

You do trust me, don't you?

How often do people make a promise as wonderful as the one I've made? Just think of it: I could help you to understand human nature.

-What makes romance so difficult? —Human nature.

-Why do we hurt one another? —Human nature.

-Where is the secret key to social improvement and a perfect society? —Human nature.

-What is the cause of suffering? —Human nature.

I guess what I am saying is that you can have an easy, pain-free romance in a world where people are honest and happy and

free.

I didn't say it was going to be easy, though. You have to read a lot of books to get there, and books are expensive. So you'll need a lot of money. And free time. And patience.

If it doesn't work out right away like you thought it would, keep trying. You're probably doing something wrong. You'll figure it out, eventually.

The secret is human nature. Once you've understood it, everything else falls into place.

I know what you're saying. You want a perfect world now. You don't have time to wait.

You're in luck. I've got a deal for you. Not only am I going to tell you that the key to a perfect world is human nature, but I'm going to tell you what human nature is.

Are you ready?

Are you sure?

Okay. Here it is then. Human nature.

Shit.

I don't seem to have it on me. I know I wrote it down.

It was on a slip of white paper. In my wallet.

I must have hidden it somewhere.

WATCHING TELEVISION

In the beginning was the television, see. And the television was with Johnny, see. And Johnny was with the television, see. From the morning Alpha-bits to the evening Omegaman.

For his parents so loved him that they bought their only begotten son the television.

And Johnny saw the television. And he said, "Boy, that's a good television."

Johnny tells this story. Short attention span. Follow close, now. No time. Keep up. Gets to the point.

• • •

Okay, look.

Can't remember quite. How it goes.

Old guy. White beard. Fuddy, duddy, comic like. But hip, like young people, like. Say, Golden Girl, like. But man.

But no young people yet. No boy. No girl. Nothing.

Lightning. Loud noises. Flames and stuff. Smoke.

Water. Crashing around.

Rocks. Smashing on other rocks.

Loud, like.

Birds. Big vulture birds. Flesh eaters. Fly at the camera.

Fish. Say, sharks. Big fin. Music. Flesh eater, too. Close-up.

Open mouth. Sharp teeth.

Snakes. And scorpions. Monsters, like.

Animals fighting.

Okay.

Next a man. Say, Mel Gibson.

Rules the earth. Big man.

Nice place. Wide angle.
So. God—say, George Burns—goes away. Clever line. People
laughing, like. Then goes.
Big tree. Dark. Lots of smoke. Dark tree, evil tree.
God. Comes back. Says, "I'll make a woman."
Black out.
Woman. Eve. Say, Heather Locklear.
Man says, "Hey, not bad."
Laughing. Funny one. Laughing again, same laugh.
Has on a bathing suit. Maybe naked. Can't see. Lies still. Foot.
Shin. Thigh. Belly. Neck. Face. Eye. Hair. Eye. Belly. Thigh.
Shin. Knee. Foot. Eye. Mouth. Eye. Tongue. Belly.
Nice, nice. Good.
Naked. Maybe a bathing suit. Can't tell. Look again.
Tongue. Eye. Hair.
Cut out next part. Pepsi. Car. Cut it out next time. I'll copy it.
Cut it out. Beer. Too many.
Dark tree. Snake.
Hurry, get to it.
Talks. Says, "Hey, you woman. Eat this."
"No," says woman, "No."
Big and red and shiny.
"Can't," says woman.
This part's slow. Hold on. Almost turned it off. But hold on.
Eats. Mouth. Tongue. Chews, slow.
Red. Mouth, apple, tongue. Chews. Slow. Says,
"Mmmmmmm," like. Moans, like. "Mmmmmmm." Belly.
Leg. Foot. Tongue. Wet. Mmmmmmm.
God. Mad, like.

"What's going on?" God says.

"We ate it," Mel says.

Got clothes now. Heather, too. Fig leaves. Nice. Three.

God curses. Stuff blows up, like. Fire. Smoke. Screams. "Ow. ow. ow." Lightning, like. Fun one, that one. Good time.

Rewind.

Loud.

Cry. Cry. Mel cries. Heather cries. God, too. Maybe. Can't see. Who knows? Can't see. Doesn't show.

Tears. Eye. Cheek. Nose. Red. Mouth. Tongue. Fig leaf.

Cut these out, too. Later. Next bit.

God.

Hurry now. Three minutes.

"Okay," God says. "I was too hard. Try this. Make you a promise. Get dressed. Eat. I'll make it better. Some day. Promise."

"Good," Mel says.

"Good," Heather says.

Kiss. Slow.

Kiss.

Light fades.

"I promise," God says.

That's part two.

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

Once upon a time there was an idle but handsome young man who lived in a castle in...

...Northern Sarnia.

The handsome man was the son of a King.

The...

...King of North Sarnia.

Well, the King of North Sarnia had decided that it was time for his son to marry. He took his son aside one day, and he said, "Son, some day all of this will be yours." He gestured toward the window, making a broad sweeping motion with his right arm. The son, from the second floor of their bungalow, beheld castles and fjords and unicorns and magical creatures of all shapes and sizes. He beheld welkin, mountain, and the stream with bright fish; he beheld gnome and fairy and the frolicking peasant.

But the son was secretly suffering a silent sadness.

"Son," said the King of North Sarnia, "I see you are secretly suffering a silent sadness. Some days ago I surmised that you had reached the age of manhood. I surmised that thy heart was lonely and languishing. For ye art alone and without an meet helpmeet. And you really ought to meet one and settle down."

The son turned to his father in joy, for the words liste him well, and they embraced.

The King sent out into his somewhat vast Kingdom of North Sarnia, and beyond, a proclamation:

Be it known that the King of North Sarnia's eldest son, having reached the age of manhood, seeks to take unto himself a wife.

The King seeks from far and wide and late and wee as well a special woman to be his daughter and the Queen of his future-King son. The decision will be announced by Christmas day. All ladies of gentility and breeding are beseeched upon to come to the King's castle. Phone 1-519-687-5735. Fax 1-519-687-6584.

The King and his son had seven months to find a Princess. In the meantime, the King issued a proclamation that there would be a tournament held in his reasonably vast territories in celebration of the future marriage. The castle grounds were prepared for jousting, equestrian sports and dragon slaying. Unfortunately, few jousters and equestrians were to be found in North Sarnia. Neither were dragons present in great abundance. But the tournament was held nonetheless.

Let us pass over it, however, and proceed to other matters of Romance.

Day by day, carriages approached North Sarnia from distant magical realms. Ladies of high breeding arrived from Caledonia the giver of good, boat-footed Moose Factory, sixth-lettered Wawa, gilt-sprinkled Picton, Hagersville the desert-driven, fecund of furrow Fenwick, nimble-streamed Yarker, sylvan Smith Falls, Balls Falls the mighty, Scarborough the protruding rock, Lanark of the wooly maple, Whitby the candid, Pelham the indentured, Ohsweken of the crossing-paths. The ladies brought with them the great riches of their homelands: nectar of Lanark, ambrosia of Moose Factory, famous fatted calves of Fenwick, vials of the glistening dews of Balls Falls, and so on and so on.

The King delighted in the processions that filled his great hall from sunrise to sunset. But the son was downcast, for not a

single lady gave delight unto his heart. How heavy and horrendous the horrific hurt he had to hide. He thought his heart would brast in his breast.

Days passed, and then months. No wife was found for the Prince of North Sarnia.

One night, the Prince decided to go into his father's kingdom disguised as a peasant. He donned a large black cape and a pair of trousers, a hat and shoes. His socks and underwear were green. He made his way hastily to the kingdom's centre, hoping to hear the talk among the people regarding the Royal wedding. As he approached a group of frolicking peasants on a street corner, one of them saw the Prince and—knowing who he was—asked him, "What the hell are you dressed like a peasant for, eh? Geez. I haven't seen a peasant since last Halloween."

The Prince was so embarrassed he went back home.

He stood outside of the house and lamented his fate. His father happened to be inside the house at the very window where the Prince was delivering his soliloquy. Unfortunately, they were those efficient polymer windows that many people are putting in their castles nowadays. So the King couldn't hear a single word that the Prince said.

The Prince thought about going on an adventure. Perhaps travelling to distant lands, fighting foreign knights, dedicating himself to a lady. Maybe he would slay a dragon or two, and rescue a maiden fair from a cruel tyrant. He would have done these things, too—but the 402 highway was closed for repairs. Alas, he was stranded. He decided to wait until his princess arrived. He knew that somehow she would.

By November, however, the Prince had become desperate. No

suitable lady had been found. Neither the ladies of Omemee, nor the maidens of Morpeth pleased him. The belles of Barrie left him flat; the women of Woodstock were uninspiring. As for the girls of Gorrie...

And then one day in late November, barely a month before Christmas, came a carriage from Uxbridge. Out of this carriage floated the most beautiful lady the Prince had ever seen. He knew right then and there that this woman was the future Queen of the Kingdom of North Sarnia. The King knew it too, because the look on the Prince's face was plain for all to see. Without further ado, the King ordered the lady of Uxbridge to be fitted for a dress proper to a Princess. The King ordered a banquet to be prepared for the lady's parents. Then he issued a proclamation that the future Queen of North Sarnia had at last been found.

It ran in all the major newspapers. And on e-mail.

The Prince and Princess of North Sarnia were married the next summer. The wedding was a magical and magnificent affair, replete with maidens and fairies and singing elves and dancing nymphs. The couple was married in the romantic environs of the great North Sarnia castle, against the sublime background of mountain and stream and frolicking peasant and fjord and unicorn and welkin.

And they lived happily ever after.

Though they did sign a pre-nuptial agreement, just in case.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

Everyone thinks they know the whole story. The most recent version I heard came to me in Washington, D.C., and goes like this:

He stole the fire from the gods and gave it to men. The gods weren't too pleased, because they like having all the power to themselves. He was being insubordinate, radical, rebellious. The head god chained him to Caucasus for eternity. Every day an eagle came down from the skies and ate his blackened liver. Every day the liver grew back. That's how this version ends, with him chained to a rock forever and with the bird coming every day for fresh liver.

There are other versions. Sometimes the bird is a vulture, sometimes a hawk. I heard someone insert a seagull once. That shows you how careless and irresponsible humans can be. Then there are the disagreements about the organ: "was it a liver? I was sure it was a gall bladder."

The problem is, none of these humans were there. Of course, even if they had been, it wouldn't make a difference. Human beings can't be relied upon to get the facts straight. They mess around with everything, like children. They exaggerate, embellish, distort. They lie when it suits them. It's a miracle they ever agree on anything. Of course, the usually don't; they usually end up arguing and fighting.

Still, the basic idea is the same no matter who you talk to. Prometheus is the hero. The gods are tyrants, oppressive and cruel.

This however isn't the case. When you know all of the facts,

you'll be able to make a more accurate judgement. Of course, you're probably only human, so it won't be completely accurate. You'll need some guidance.

What no one has told you is what happened after he stole the fire.

People were fascinated by the new substance. They lost interest in reading and sat for hours and hours every day staring at fire. Their minds were rotting in their heads. Some of our statisticians tell us that the humans spent on average forty-two hours a week fire-watching. The fires gradually became bigger and more violent. People suffered burns from sitting too close. People paid less attention to one another. Families began to fall apart. Family values were undermined.

Someone discovered that you could ignite dehydrated plant leaves with fire and inhale the by-products of the incinerating material. For some reason completely beyond our comprehension, human beings found this pleasurable. You now call this activity "smoking." It is both unhealthy and immoral, and it instantly became very popular.

The females experimented with fire in their food preparation. Rather than good, reliable meals such as nuts and berries and raw vegetables, they began to cook and eat the flesh of animals, introducing carcinogens into their diet. We feel it is immoral to eat meat.

Arson became rampant. The usefulness of fire in acts of crime was discovered and exploited, with deadly results.

Fire encouraged romantic behaviour, especially—to our alarm—between unmarried human beings. Not only did men engage in sexual activities with women, but there were also

abominations committed between members of the same sex.

It's no coincidence that we speak of the fires of lust. Fire led to immorality, perversity and unwholesomeness. We knew something had to be done. People were incapable of governing themselves; their thinking and behaviour needed to be directed, legislated. Our decision was intended for their benefit.

We believed that the only way to restore godliness was to make an example of this Prometheus, therefore we drafted a bill outlawing the giving of fire to human beings. The bill was retroactive, enabling us to persecute the criminal responsible for the decline of morality.

You should be able to see that our decision was the right one.

Unfortunately, fire had become so popular that we feared that there was to be no return to the days of decency. We felt that our only recourse was through law, and so we began to punish those who undermined Nature.

Recently, there has been blasphemous talk about the irrelevance of the gods, and some actually believe that we no longer exist. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are still active, although our activities are acknowledged less and less by men. We somehow underestimated the ineptitude of the human race, and the harm that men are able to do to themselves. But we are still acting upon the problem, and we are about to redouble our efforts on behalf of the honourable cause.

FINDING GOD

These things really happen, see. I know it because I heard about them on the radio. Read about them once too. I heard that all over, people are finding God. I had no idea God was lost, but He must have been. And not just once either. He's been found all over. At times all throughout the year. Just turn on your television. You'll see what I mean.

A Pensacola woman found Him at an airport.

Two Wisconsin mechanics found Him in their garage.

An atheist found Him in some place called Logic, and just couldn't deny it.

He was found near many dying people. He likes cancer I guess, and diseases that involve painful lingering. God has been found in hospitals a lot. But don't think He's predictable.

My brother thought he found Him once, but he changed his mind and took up rock music instead.

Our mayor found Him twice.

He was found by a lawyer, but don't be surprised by this. The lawyer had been looking for some time.

God must be a nice fellow to be around so much. He doesn't just show up in North America. He makes appearances in Brazil and Trinidad-Tobago and Portugal. He dresses up and goes to foreign parts. But He's careful. Almost no one ever finds Him on airplanes. I don't think it's only because He's a private Person: I think He likes to keep a low profile when He travels—for everyone's sake. "Look, it's God!" Can you imagine someone saying that on your flight? Imagine it. Think of the difficulty you'd have getting the stewardess's attention with

God flying on the plane.

Just try getting one of those bags of peanuts.

My friend Joey said he's found God, and God has never left him. He said God is his best friend.

I said,

-Can I have one of those peanuts, Joey. I'm awfully hungry.

-No. Get your own bloody peanuts.

WINNING THE LOTTERY

I'm going to win the lottery. This time it's for sure. The envelope came as it always does in the white bag with the big blue lettering. The cover says, You could already be a winner. The letters are bigger than real life.

You've received such letters too, you say. But what you don't realize is that mine is special. It's got my name on it: Mr. Jason W. Plank. Okay, Planck is spelled wrong, but my friend Sam often makes that mistake too, yet he knows who I am. And he's a good friend. So I forgive him.

They've only sent three of these letters in the whole country. Irma Kouros of Lethbridge, B.C. got one, it says. And Ernie McCleod of Fredericton, N.B. got one too. The third is me, Jason Planck of Niagara Falls, Ontario. There's a little local street map where they want me to X my house so they can find it better when they deliver that \$25 000 that I may already have won. They already know the street; they just want to be extra sure about the house. You know, Is it on the right or on the left? You mean, near the big maple tree? Or further down, where the curve is? My aunt Sylvia asked those questions when I first moved here. She likes to know exactly where things are. She is a good aunt, loves me a lot. So she asks lots of questions:

How are you doing Jason?

Got a girlfriend yet?

You think you might be getting one soon?

You're eating well, aren't you?

When I win that \$25 000 I'll eat like a King. No more Kraft dinner and baked beans. Of course, my aunt brings me meals

once in a while, because she cares about me. It isn't that I can't cook. I just don't always take the best care of myself, like I should. The doctors say I'm a little slow, but I can live on my own, they say.

The papers in the envelope say that there were thousands of contestants but that only the three of us made it to the finals. There's a list of all the newspapers that I will be in when I've won, with a sample headline that says, Mr. Jason W. Plank Wins Big! There are stickers that I am to attach to my order form so that I will win big prizes along with my \$25 000. They want to know

-What colour would you like your Rolls Royce to be Mr. Jason W. Plank?

-Please send us your body measurements Mr. Jason W. Plank, so that we can have the tuxedo made specially in preparation for your prize-winning photograph.

-Which products do you wish to order as you final entry qualification, Mr. Jason W. Plank?

I had to go without a couple of dinners to pay for the products, but I know it will be worth it. Besides, I like the products.

-Hey aunt Sylvia. I'm gonna be rich.

-Jesus, Jason. This is a scam, don't you get it? Look, they didn't even get your name right.

-Come aunt, aunt Sylvia. Even Sam makes that mistake, and he's a good friend of mine.

FILLING IN FORMS

Your name:

The story I would like to read is as follows....

Title of this story:

Plot:

Character[s]:

Tone:

Point of View:

Theme[s]:

Images:

My preferred story is [check one appropriate box]:

- ☐ naturalistic
- ☐ realistic
- ☐ idealistic
- ☐ pastoral
- ☐ magical realism
- ☐ postmodern
- ☐ modern
- ☐ gothic
- ☐ romance
- ☐ mystery
- ☐ science fiction
- ☐ ironic realism
- ☐ feminist
- ☐ Marxist
- ☐ gay/lesbian

- ☐ fantasy
- ☐ Native/Inuit/Aboriginal/Metis
- ☐ ethnic [other than Native, etc.]
- ☐ biography
- ☐ fable
- ☐ allegory
- ☐ fabliaux
- ☐ exemplum
- ☐ erotic thriller
- ☐ vignette
- ☐ character study
- ☐ detective story
- ☐ satire
- ☐ parody
- ☐ polemic
- ☐ other [please specify]:

What do you wish this story to accomplish [please use under ten words]?:

How will this story differ from all stories that have come before it?:

What kind of an audience[s] would this story appeal to [you may check more than one]?

- ☐ academic
- ☐ general adult
- ☐ infant [5-12]

- ☐ juvenile [13-18]
- ☐ working-class
- ☐ middle-class
- ☐ upper-class
- ☐ aristocratic
- ☐ left-wing
- ☐ centrist
- ☐ politically correct
- ☐ radical
- ☐ neo-Nazi
- ☐ homophobic
- ☐ clerical
- ☐ LGBT
- ☐ elderly [90 and over]
- ☐ Christian/religious [specify]
- ☐ female
- ☐ dysfunctional
- ☐ other [please specify]:

Number of words:

I have read the laws of my province regarding publication and censorship. I understand these laws and I agree to comply with them. I hereby certify that my story is within the bounds of good taste and lawfulness. I understand that it is a felony to produce false testimony.

Date:

Signature:

[Please press firmly. Remember you are making 500,000 copies, which will be read by government officials, diplomats, literary critics, newspaper columnists, students, relatives, friends, former lovers, current lovers, future lovers, funding agencies, journal editors, publishers, Nobel Prize judges, senate judiciary committees, SSHRC panels, book store owners, complete strangers]

LOSING THEIR MINDS

They're losing their minds, losing their minds, losing their minds!

This is how people who don't know what they're talking about speak.

Come on. Get real.

You watch them on television, doing the crazy things that they do, and you suppose that they are crazy people. Because the things that they do are crazy things. But consider: crazy people are usually not prone to doing crazy things.

Curtis Grady did not habitually run naked through the streets. His neighbours said he liked riding a bicycle. His teachers said he dressed well. An ex-girlfriend commented that he never forgot to bring her flowers on their anniversary. But he was crazy.

Billy Stevenson had a great hockey card collection when he was eight. He was a boy scout. He never missed an episode of Ultraman. He was very polite. And crazy as a loon.

Okay. I realize it isn't polite to use the word crazy.

Still, it was a bit odd for Sheila Mariotti to dress up as the Queen of Tanzania and murder her brother. She was fine until she turned thirty. Then suddenly she was a Queen and only referred to herself in the plural.

You don't think it's weird when you see a Queen on television calling herself we, but try it in your own neighbourhood and see what happens. You can get away with a lot of things when you're in front of a camera. People pay to see you make a fool of yourself. Maybe that's the secret: it doesn't mean anything

when it's free. Part of the ritual is paying for it. Waiting in line. Looking for just the right seat. Like the Romans in their coliseums. They wanted the best possible view, close enough to see the gore from a propitious angle, but not so close that they might spoil their togas. Or togae. And they were willing to pay for it.

The Roman's problems do not exist for television though.

For instance: no matter how many murders you watch each and every day, you'll never get a bit of brain on your cardigan. Sit as close as you want. Murder is safe and clean now, thanks to technology.

-people don't really die, so you can throw them away by the thousands. They get right back up and smile and say, Could I have the cheque please. My agent is waiting for me in the limo. I have to kill someone at three, and die again at seven-thirty. Thank-you.

-it gets rid of the awkwardness of having to select a group. You can kill anyone, because they don't really die. They don't have to be christians or jews or indians or negroes. They don't have to really explode or burn or dissolve or bleed. It just looks like they do, which is just as fun really, when you get right down to it.

-the camera enhances everything, so it looks even better than real life. More real.

There is a woman from our church who says that television violence is out of control. I wonder if she realizes that there are police on television too, real police, fighting real crimes. There are real things on television. But there are things that are not real. My point is, it is important to make distinctions. She says

that the world is going crazy, that violence is out of control. I have to laugh, really. She's just another one of those people running around, saying,

They're losing their minds, losing their minds, losing their minds!

Come on. Get real.

CONVERSING

There are two women sitting at the next table. I can't help but overhear them. They are talking about old love affairs—their old love affairs. I just keep eating my lunch, casually, pretending that I can't hear them. But I'm interested. I want to hear. There's nothing else in the food court that catches my attention. I'm just sitting here alone, like always. And I hate to be alone, especially when I'm eating.

-It's been difficult without Gerry, Rose. Really difficult. But I knew it was over between us. He wanted to marry, and I wanted to get married, but not to him.

-Tricia, I know just what you mean. Robert was so old fashioned. I refused to change my name. I wanted to have a life and identity of my own. It must have been his background. His parents were Calvinists—very conservative people. He wasn't religious himself, but you know. The traditions die hard. In a lot of ways he was as conservative as his parents were.

-Gerry was kind, he meant well. He had a temper, but he meant well. I can't put my finger on it. You know, chemistry. We should have hit it off, but it was chemistry.

-And the strange thing is, he talked about how he wanted to do things right, the way his parents hadn't. I don't know if he was able to except the idea of me having an identity of my own. I think he wanted a wife, you know. A Wife. Like in some old movie.

-I wish I understood better. Chemistry, I mean. I'm tired of working so hard at relationships and finding that they don't work. It's like we talked to death and tried everything, but

nothing worked. Chemistry. That's what it is. I wish I understood it better.

-I'm not sure myself either. I mean, I like the idea of hyphenated names, but it doesn't solve the problem. First of all, they can get pretty awkward if your children hyphenate when they get married. And a lot of hyphenated names sound frightful. Take me for instance. Can you imagine Rose and Robert McCaffery-Vanderhooven? Don't you think it sounds frightful?

-I'm tired of being alone, but can I take the risk of marrying just anyone. Just for the sake of company. And the funny thing is—well, not funny, but you know what I mean—is that I really do love being with Gerry. I really miss him.

-Tricia, you just have to stand your ground. I told Robert that I was determined to get my way. He wasn't bad about it at first, but I could tell it was difficult for him. Traditional is what he is. Like his family. I tried to understand him, but it was too hard. We couldn't talk ourselves out of the problems. You know, too little too late.

-Chemistry Rose. The problem is chemistry.

-It was like he just didn't hear me, didn't understand what I was asking for.

-Chemistry.

-Communication.

I don't know what more was said, because my lunch was finished and I had to get somewhere else. I suppose the nice thing about being alone is that you can come and go whenever you choose. But I sure do miss having a good conversation.

SAVING OUR MONEY

Ever since the wedding, my wife has been saving us a fortune. I know this because she continually reminds me. When I say continually, I mean once a day. Sometimes twice. Five times last Thursday she reminded me how much money she has been saving us.

That was the day she bought the carpet for our attic.

We never go up to the attic, but the carpet was such a bargain that she couldn't resist. She saved us \$200 by buying it. I'm told it looks very nice. Perhaps in the spring when it's warm enough to go up there I'll have a look. For now I guess I'll just comfort myself with the thought that we have two hundred dollars in our possession that, under normal circumstances, would have been greedily snatched up by nefarious carpet salesmen.

Guess we showed them. The fools.

Did I say two hundred dollars? God, that's only the beginning.

We saved \$50 on the slip covers for our appliances.

\$300 was saved on the lawn ornaments.

I believe my wife saved \$80 on the VCR. We already had two, but never mind this tedious fact. We're talking about a principle. Besides, my wife thinks she'll be able to save us a fortune on a television to go with it. There's nowhere to put the television, but if we finish that rec room, we'll have saved...

Where's my calculator?

Better yet, where's my wife. I never get the right answer with a calculator. The damn things are too clinical and scientific and

treat numbers as absolute quantities. That's the problem with technology and its products: there's no human element: no creativity, no emotion, no attention to principles. When my wife explains how we are saving money, there is an undeniable inherent logic to her argument. I know I'll never find a machine that can reproduce it. She says we are saving thousands of dollars. She says it's a fact. I won't argue with her.

I once asked her where this money is that we are saving. She looked at me like I was a fool. I suppose a simple-minded male ought not to meddle in the profundities of fiscal management. I just wouldn't understand, even if she were to explain it to me.

My guess is that she spends the money we are saving. In order to save more.

I was watching the news the other day. An economist was explaining the causes of the recession. He said that the main problem is our national debt. We are spending more money than we have to spend. He said that ultimately the result of overspending is inflation, and that inflation reduces the ability of our nation to maintain its infrastructure and social programs. He called this overspending "fiscal irresponsibility" and said that the only solution is for the government to spend less money.

At least, that's how I remember it.

Anyway, I'm almost certain he didn't say that we need to spend a lot of money so that we will save a fortune. But then, economists are pretty narrow-minded people. They are caught up in facts and numbers and not human qualities like joy and freedom and creativity. I'm certain economists base their conclusions on the calculations of computers.

So we ought not to trust economists.

Not that I have anything against computers. We saved \$1200 on one last month.

Before you call me a hypocrite, just let me tell you it isn't what it sounds like. I haven't become one of those heartless, scientist types who enslave themselves to machines. Our computer serves a kind, domestically enriching function.

The cat sleeps on it.

My wife says everyone has a computer nowadays, but that most people pay twice what we did. The fact is, she says, that computers are the television of the future. The only difference is that we know how to turn our television on. Everyone ought to have a computer in their living room. Of course, the arrival of computers doesn't make televisions obsolete. That's why she feels it would be wise to save some money on one of those too.

I said to my wife, "An economist was saying that the cause of the recession is overspending. He says we need to spend less and save more."

-We? Who, you mean you and I?

-No, of course not dear. Why on earth would he be talking about us.

-Well, there's the government, and then there's us—you know, the people.

My wife must have been feeling a bit defensive. So I tried to put her mind to rest.

-He was talking about the government. He said they have no choice but to spend less.

-I suppose, she said. I've never understood the government. They do the most ridiculous things. It's ludicrous what they

spend money on. I'd like to hear an economist explain that.

-Well, he must have known something, because they put him on television.

-Oh, that reminds me. You'll never guess what I saved a fortune on today.

CONSERVING

This story begins way back in time.

How far back?

Gee. I wasn't anticipating *that*.

Anyways, let's say it starts in the year...4004 B.C. In the beginning. This is a story about the history of conservation.

The first recorded statement regarding conservation was made by the Right Honourable Yahweh in the year, as I have said, 4004 B.C., when he pronounced, "Be fruitful and grow lots of fruit and multiply fruit and be careful with it, too...it's good fruit."

Yeah, he did say that. And that's not all. He then said:

"I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. Be careful, eh. Don't mismanage things...

What? Well, I'm not sure if "eh" is in the Bible. Besides, it's a translation anyway. If you're going to be really picky we might as well do this in Hebrew...

Oh. I never thought of that. I don't know what language God speaks. I guess he speaks them all. Wouldn't you think?

Yes, English, too. But probably not in those days. God probably didn't get around to learning English until he wanted to talk to an Englishman.

Yes. English*man*. It wouldn't have been a woman, not the very first one. Unless He came around for the husband and found he wasn't home. Then I suppose...

Wait. You're getting me completely off topic.

This is about the history of conservation.

Now where was I? Oh yes. In the book of Genesis, God speaks of caring for the earth. There is a distinct reference to the three r's: reduce, reuse...

Yes, there is.

Look, if you don't stop butting in, we'll never get past the year 4004.

Of *course* I believe the world was created in 4004 B.C.

By God, who else?

Yes, he said all of these things. He said, the earth is precious; life is precious; it is wrong to exploit the environment; recycle your waste...

Well, he didn't use the word waste, exactly. But God was an environmentalist.

Well, first of all, he made Adam out of dirt, which is completely natural and biodegradable, and second of all, he made Eve out of a rib, which shows that he knew how to reuse existing materials.

What do you mean, "That isn't how *I* see it"?

It doesn't say subdue. Anyway, that's just an interpretation.

God said that the earth was good. So it was. Good.

I know it isn't good now. That's because we didn't listen. God said, Okay, the world is delicate, like a baby. Don't hurt it. Use your blue box. And be good to your wife, Adam, you hear? And Eve, you be good to your husband. And I'll see you two later, eh.

Well, he said something like that.

And even if he didn't, he should have. Because it's all true.

Anyway, this story would be longer, but I'm conserving paper.

LEARNING HOW

You can learn how:

to lose twenty pounds

to have more confidence

to get a man

to hold on to him

to be a beauty queen

to get into shape

to be more desirable

to make better love

to love him more

to love him less

to reduce your stress

to balance home and children and work

to be the person you've always wanted to be.

It's easy. Here's how:

1. ¹ Sit down with a piece of paper and itemize your priorities; or better yet, use a computer—you'll find that technology is a powerful tool. ² Read this thoroughly and practice the helpful advice, using your computer to record your progress.

2. ¹ Learn the proper uses of medication. There are pills that will help you to lose weight, and pills that will reduce your stress and give you confidence. It is up to you to educate yourself regarding their uses—in consultation with an expert, naturally. ² Watch television carefully. There will be advertisements directing you to the purchase of technologically-advanced equipment. Be comforted by the knowledge that

there is a scientifically advanced product for your particular defect. ³ See your doctor. You may be surprised (and relieved) to find that your womb is the source of the problem. Medical specialists have a great deal of experience with such cases. The treatment is usually quite simple and takes little time to

perform. ⁴ Learn the basic concepts. Co-dependency, dysfunction and hysteria are terms that will apply to you, for all have dysfunctions and fall short of the models of authorities. With the correct terminology at your disposal, you will be more able to seek the appropriate product or procedure as dictated by an expert.

3. ¹ Use your computer to aid you in the organization of your treatment schedule. Begin a file on your software; you may assign it any name up to eight letters in length, such as "HOLINESS," "PURITY," or "BODY." Be organized: submit yourself to a ritual of daily entries, or you will not find yourself

improving. ² When you are cleansed of an offence such as a weight problem or a personal insufficiency of a sexual nature, count off seven days, after which you must visit an expert, taking an appropriate form of offering such as VISA® or MasterCard®. Keep careful track of your transactions by

entering the data on your computer file. ³ Continue to purchase self-help guides such as magazines, books and computer software. The field is always changing as new discoveries alter the quest for female perfectibility. As always, seek an expert for guidance when purchasing a product or service.

4. ¹ Find a private place in which to work. You ought not to

disturb others with your problems. Entries should be made in silence, far away from the important business that is being conducted by others.

KEEPING ONE STEP AHEAD

-Sekoh.

-Huh?

-Like this: say go. Try it.

-Say go.

-Well...that's basically it.

-And that's how Indians say "hi"?

-Well, that's how Mohawks say hi. Other nations have different ways.

Cree say Wace. Ojibwa say Bojoo. Whole bunch of ways.

-Bonjour?

-No no no. Bo shoe—sort of.

-I don't get it. Is there some religious significance?

-Well, no. Bojoo is a greeting. Sometimes Ojibwa say Nana-bojoo. And Nana is Nanabush.

-Nanabush? Is he a god?

-No. Not exactly.

-Nanabush.

-Yeah, only us Mohawks don't say Nanabush. We say Coyote.

-Coyote?

-Yeah. Coyote, Nanabush, Trickster.

-What's trickster?

-Well, that's kind of hard to explain, really. Trickster's lots of things. I guess you could say he likes to change what he is to keep you guessing. You know, stay one step ahead. He's sort of tricky that way—tricky like a trickster. Likes to break the rules.

Play tricks.

-Like a fool? In Shakespeare?

-Yeah, sort of. Sometimes the tricks backfire, and the joke is on Trickster.

-Is he some sort of religious symbol?

-No. That's not quite it.

-I'd sure like to see an Indian religious ceremony. Maybe go up north during one of those festivals I heard of. I saw one on television once too. You Indians got anything like Christmas? I'd sure like to see it.

-Yeah, I guess you could say we have.

-What's it like?

-Well, I'll tell you a little story about it.

First of all, the sacred Indian ceremony begins about three weeks before sohl-stis, which is December 21 on the European calendar. We call this sacred time of the year tahkayaw. You know when the sacred time has arrived because everyone speaks the sacred greeting, eliwehk tahkayaw. I'd translate it into English, but there's nothing like it in the Whiteman's tongue. Anyway, when you hear that greeting, you know the sacred time has come.

The first thing Indians do when the sacred time arrives is go on a mysterious quest called shah-ping. It's sort of a sacred hunting trip. Everyone does it: men, women, children. Well, the small children don't. Not until they reach the sacred age. The Indians go in the morning, and return in the evening. We don't discuss the things we find on our quests. We hide them from everyone else's sight until the time comes to exchange the sacred objects. It's so important that no one else know what

you've found, that the Indians cover their objects in a special paper made just for the occasion. When we've covered everything up, we hide it all somewhere. You know, in our tipis.

We spend two, maybe three weeks on the shah-ping quest. We don't quit until we have found a sacred object for each friend and family member and have brought it back home.

We decorate our tipis with sacred glittering objects made of metals and of wood. We eat special foods and drink special beverages. My favourite is called ehk-nogg. This beverage is served cold and sometimes is sprinkled with a powder called nuht-mek. I think the drink has a religious significance, but I'm not sure what it is. Someone once told me, an elder, but I've forgotten. Anyway, you can be sure it means something religious.

Everything Indian does.

So. Once we've done that, we go on another special quest. This one is really hard to explain: you might not understand it. But anyway, believe it or not, we go out in groups and look for a kris-mus-dree, which is a sacred object full of spirits that grows in the ground. And when we've found the right one, we bring it into our tipis and cover it in sacred objects made especially for the purpose. Some people cut down their own kris-mus-dree—in honour of the Creator. I know it sounds weird, but it's our way.

There's a bunch of special songs and chants that we sing throughout the sacred time of eliwehk tahkayaw. Many of the songs have religious significance, although about a hundred years ago—maybe more—people began to sing non-traditional Indian chants about a mythical Ókwehōweh...

-...that Trickster guy?

-...yeah. Yeah: you got it. Trickster.

Well, this time Trickster was really in disguise. You know, he likes to change his shape. Sometimes he's a person, sometimes an animal. Or something else, even. But this time, Trickster showed up in a big red costume. Like a squaw fancy dress, sort of. It was made all of leather, with rabbit fur lining on the hood. And he had on a big black...wampum belt. And big black mukluks, too. Get this: he had a long beard. When's the last time you saw an Indian with a beard? The really incredible thing is that he was carrying a big bag of those sacred objects I was talking about. The sacred chants tell all about it.

So. Trickster sneaks into the tipis while everyone is sleeping. And he gives each family a few of the sacred objects. Then he goes back up north. To Fort Albany, I think. Or Peawanuk.

And in the morning, all the Indians wake up and exchange the sacred objects. They take off the sacred paper and they sit around the sacred kris-mus-dree and they do many other religious things that I'm not allowed to discuss with White people.

But what about you? What kind of Christian ceremonies do White people perform? I heard once about some White pilgrims who spent Christmas day in prayer. And I saw a movie about Christians, too. Saint Paul, Saint John. Other guys names escape me. Saint someone.

That's like a Chief, right—Saint?

-Well, a bit's changed since then, actually.

-You don't say? Gee, that's too bad, you know.

-Well, maybe. Maybe not.

-Yeah. I guess I know what you mean.

CONSUMMATUM EST

The knife in both hands, I give a quick thrust and pierce the skin of my throat. The snap reminds me, all this time later, of the German wieners of my youth. Now I'll lie here on the floor for what will seem an eternity. But like every other time, I won't die. I won't even bleed, or feel pain.

An eternity! The word mocks me. I used to wonder what it would be like. A world without time, I thought, as opposed to time stretching out infinitely. Even then I could see the difference, not that it mattered. Speculating about something is one thing, living it another.

I've tried everything conceivable: fire, leaping from heights, starvation. I knew it was futile. Here, eating is optional, for pleasure and not necessity. The look on some faces, when for the first time they were offered meat, was one of the things that amused me in the early years. Or the blank incredulous stare on being informed that, yes, people fuck. Well, I was once one of them too, all of my preconceptions blown to smithereens on arrival.

It was exhilarating at first. Like coming out of anesthesia, at least as I can recall this, there's a feeling of disorientation and dizziness. Your eyes open to a swell of cloyed light, like looking through a lens coated in Vaseline. I threw up, which should have been—I suppose *was*—my first warning. Followed by the reassurances of my designated Liminary.

It's okay, he tells me, as I stare punch-drunk into the indistinct pool of what I guess to be a human face.

Henceforth, the absorption of stunning improbabilities. Some

I'd anticipated, like the imperishable body and the singing of hymns. Most I hadn't. But even if you'd come into this having done your homework...well, let's just say a rude awakening lay ahead.

Looking back I suspect that Charles—he was my Liminary—hadn't been here long when he was assigned to the transition. I'm sure that's a matter of policy, although I can only speculate how many others there are like me. There *must* be others. I stopped disclosing my thoughts when I could see quite clearly the incomprehension with which they were met. And even then I was only hinting at my feelings, which have since grown stronger. Am I a freak of nature? A mistake? It doesn't seem possible, but then what does an objection like that have to do with anything here.

As far as I've been able to tell, everyone else is happy. They sing these interminable goddam hymns of praise with apparent enthusiasm, and when they see you on the street they say, "Isn't it wonderful, having eternal life." No one asks how long you've been here—most of us have no idea—although the Parousians will sometimes self-identify. But since there were so many people living at the end, there's nothing particularly special about having arrived with the Harvest. In any case, what difference does a few hundred or even thousand years make now? We've all been here for at least what would have been, on the former Earth, two trillion one hundred and seventeen billion sixty-eight million four hundred and seventy-nine thousand and one hundred thirty-four years. I know this because I have a friend in the Records Division.

There you have it: the difference between a world without time

versus a world in which time stretches on, endlessly. Both may be said to be “eternal,” but they’re not the same. We have clocks and calendars, as a matter of necessity. People say Let’s do so-and-so, and of course you reply When and Where? And they say (for example) On the fourth day of Seraph at the Radiant Hill of Kairos. Then you put it into your calendar, and on the appointed day you go to the Radiant Hill of Kairos for the umpteenth zillionth-billionth time.

It doesn’t help much that, despite all my resentment, I still carry my guilt—even though I think I’m right to feel as I do. You see, there was a time I loved life and loved its creator. In my previous and fallen state, I was needless to say imperfect and not always willing to hold up my end of the bargain. I didn’t deserve—*don’t* deserve—to be showered with blessings. Every morning and night I prayed. *Petitioned* would be a better word. Lust, that was my besetting sin. And now? I no longer remember what desire of that nature feels like. All I have are the memories, as static and desaturated as old photographs. A woman lies on the bed, her pants drawn to the knees. I stroke her with the fingers of my right hand, and soon there are tiny globes of moisture in her hair. It means nothing.

Well, I say that now, having lost—I no longer say “having been freed from”—my concupiscence. Sex, like eating, is a somewhat enjoyable way to pass some time. I can take it or leave it. And this inability of mine to feel gratitude is the source of my guilt. Here, no one goes blind or gets cancer or mourns the departed. There are disappointments, to be sure. One arrives at the bakery to discover the croissants are all gone. The day of the picnic arrives, and it rains. But the next day there is

sunshine and croissants. We even joke about it—how the disappointments of this perfect life are mock-tragedies.

As it happens, the humour was one of the first things I noticed. A joke is always at someone's expense, and in a world without even the possibility of cruelty humour must suffer. You don't think about that when you're listening to the sermons on the glory of paradise—or in any case I didn't: how the jokes will all be bad. I told myself this was a petty complaint, and that it was a small sacrifice in exchange for a world in which genocide, rape and racism no longer existed. To say nothing of the casual everyday filth in which our species dabbled.

So, yes, it has been a slow but inexorable journey that has brought me here, where I now search out the silver bullet or wooden stake or Kryptonite—or whatever it is—that will finish me off.

After the initial reactions, I decided it was best to keep this effort of mine a secret. What I said was: Do you ever sometimes feel that you've had a full life—that you've seen and done all you care to? Or words to that effect. The first time was just down the road, at the florist's. The woman froze, her uncomprehending eyes fixed on my face as her thumb hovered lifelessly an inch from the cone wrapping's seam. I quickly learned to be more cautious.

To my closest friends, I said: "this eternal life has been filled with surprises." It was a carefully crafted statement that could mean so many things. My hope was that someone would take the bait, and that he or she would be thinking and feeling what I was and would say so. But while the former often happened, not once did the latter.

Invariably came the response I would learn to think of as predictable.

“Hallelujah!”

So for many, many billions of years since I have kept my innermost thoughts to myself. I was surprised to discover (there is that theme once again) that I was able to do so. Firstly for the obvious reason, but also because secrets are hard to keep, even from mere human beings. Having said that, I’m well aware it’s possible my thoughts are known. If that’s so, succour has been deliberately withheld.

You are wondering how it is that I’m able to dissemble this way, æon upon æon. Don’t my friends notice that something is awry? As I’ve said, our lives are not without disappointment. I tell them that today the florist was out of chrysanthemums; that I’m impatient for this evening’s “Holy, Holy, Holy”; that it feels a couple degrees too warm, or too cool, for me. Ridiculous, I know, but does it even occur to anyone that I might be lying? It seems not. Nor does anyone bother to dwell upon these admittedly insignificant inconveniences of mine. We are living in paradise, after all.

That, precisely, is my problem. Everything here is perfect, but not as I once, long ago, understood perfection. Or rather misunderstood it. For there *are* what could be considered imperfections. For examples: our household appliances break down and need replacing, there are days in which one feels tired, or perhaps a bottle of wine has soured. These things pass, but across the vast distance of time what one notices—in any case, what I have noticed—is the stasis at the centre of everything. Change is of the moment and without meaning.

The rain arrives, and the rain departs. Then it is sunny again. As for the work of those living and dying generations of old, that is all finished now. *Consummatum est*. There is nothing even to argue over, excepting perhaps that last year's Merlot is better than the Pinot Noir, or that tonight's singing of Amazing Grace was the best so far this month, and other such trivialities.

Even before it had occurred to me to kill myself, the day had arrived on which I wanted someone, anyone, to die. How wonderful it would be, I told myself, to know that this civilization will one day fail, to fight over a cause even to the death, if necessary, or to watch a familiar face grow old—a fantastic notion in a world where bodies are forever in their prime, where there is neither birth nor passing, and where your son and your grandfather may as well be your brothers. I used to think the fanatics were mad, fixated as they were on the end of times. Now I would welcome with my arms wide open the all-consuming fire. Instead I behold these bookstores and theatres and their endless outputs of uplifting stories about the greatness of our saviour and the blessedness of our condition. The music is all in a major key. No longer are there unanswered, much less unanswerable, questions. It's astonishing to me that there was ever a time I could imagine such a world and not revile it, but then I was looking at things from the other side of a chasm.

No longer. Now I am in the sweet hereafter, lying on the floor of my handsome downtown apartment, arms at my sides, with the useless knife still lodged in my throat. Eventually I'll pull it out and the fissure will heal. In the meanwhile I listen to the outside world, the vocalizations of birds and dogs and people,

the general restless commerce of an eternal city. I am only some several dozen yards from Principality Park; if I were to look out my front window, I would see the magnificent cypresses, pines and sequoias—ancient giants eclipsing the understory of distant tablelands and the ravines in which the Cavalry and Lamb creeks flow south to Manna River. How devilishly clever—I can think of no better word for it—to have repristinated an exhausted Earth with these faux-evolutionary flourishes of alluvium and moraine.

Am I truly offended by this apparent contempt for authenticity? Not really. Even here, there is nothing extraordinary about hypocrisy. Despite our miraculous bodies, we are still human. What else should I have expected? The more outrageous acts of our species were extirpated. Murder, obviously. And infidelity, since procreation was no longer necessary and no one in any case saw the point of marriage in a world without death. (How obvious *that* seems once you are here, even if it had never occurred to you in your previous existence.) The desire for beauty and diversions, on the other hand, remained, as did the capacity for dislike of others. We all pretend to like one another, and to enjoy most everything, which you'll agree must be counted a form of hypocrisy.

The wiping of every tear from every eye, the purge of sickness, pain, sadness and death—all this seemed to me like a good and simple enough proposition. Doubtless it was also a clerical nightmare. Here there are former child soldiers, women burned at the stake, heretics, victims of lynch mobs and pogroms, the stillborn. I'm told we all came back in the same way, out of—as I describe it—the anaesthetic haze. Confused and disoriented,

sometimes vomiting, sometimes uttering gibberish. A few minutes, at most, and then you get the individual personality. How I wish I could have seen them with my own eyes: the stillborn child who awakens as a woman in her prime, the antediluvian clay worker who beholds in wonder (and I imagine in terror) our advanced technology, the peasant whose limbs have inexplicably returned.

What a day's work, sorting out the nuts and bolts of this business of remedy!

In the era that I was alive, there was something called normality. The proper role of a man was to love a woman, to marry, and to produce children—sons, preferably. The role of a woman was to love, and submit to, a man. Deviation from the norm was an abomination.

I'll credit eternal life with this much: it teaches human beings to regret the stupidity of their former ways.

What I mean is that we have come back in the full integrity of our inner selves, not in some idealized way founded upon this notion of what is proper and normal. And so at any time I can go to Principality Park, and there I will find Temi, my deaf neighbour, or the two-spirited park warden Angelia. Or my friend Nadeem, who was eleven months into his transition from female to male when the War began. Many of my co-religionists had learned to see these fellow creatures of mine as broken, abhorrent or depraved. And as I've noted, it was exhilarating, for a time, to be of this bold kingdom where all of that was blown instantly and forever to pieces.

Now that I think more upon it, what I said of humour is not entirely true. There were moments, early on, of genuine wit. No

one reads the scriptures—why would they? But we all remember the stories. One day the Tower of Babel came up. I was in the Latin Quarter of Israfel with a woman who was for the first few hundred years my constant companion. (This was before I finally abandoned the old habit.) We were in the market, browsing the trinkets. All around us we heard the languages of the world's peoples. I observed, rather off-handedly, the irony of a paradise of confounded tongues. Hadn't this diversity been originally calculated to bring us to ruin?

I put it better back then. We laughed. And now it's just one more joke I'm unable to make. We've all had the time to learn most every dialect, which wasn't the case for me back then. Nothing seems foreign or exotic—which is a good thing, but a bad thing too.

I think of the women that I loved. There weren't many. Eventually this love came to an end, the way everything came to an end. Only here nothing ends. What have I learned? Simply that no one can make two plus two equal five. The sunsets are less beautiful when you know that they must go on, infinitely. It is no one's fault, and there is nothing to be done about it.

Shall I lie here then, for eternity? No, eventually I must rise and confront the day. They will greet me, saying, "Hallelujah, all praise to Him," and I will reply, "Praise be!" Everything will be perfect, as it always has been, as it always will be. A world without end.

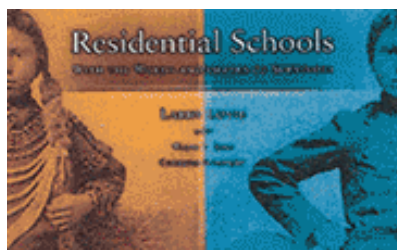
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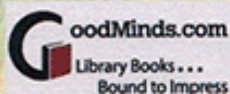
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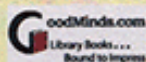
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