

# REFINEMENT

How a Good Marriage Can Nudge an Unwary Man  
in the Direction of Civility

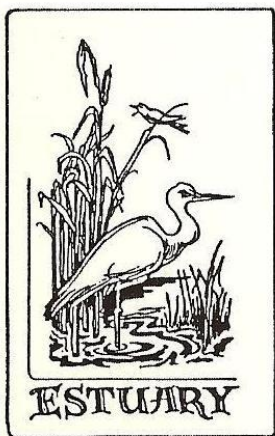
Henry Edward Fool

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One evening, wishing for some wine, which I drink for effect, not affectation, I said to my very dear wife, "Pass me that small glass, por favor." She handed me the glass and remarked, "You don't know how appropriate what you just said is. This glass was made in Spain." I laughed and said, "I never know how appropriate anything I say is."

But, she's been helping me with that.

It's part of the reason I married the woman.



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## INTRODUCTION

Never having given any thought to marriage, and having no real hope of finding a good wife anyway, it probably seems a bit unfair that I should end up with, quite possibly, the greatest wife any man has ever had in the entire history of marriage. I can not deny the injustice in that, but, it really is not my doing. Despite myself, and against all odds, I now find myself married and as happy as a man of my particular temperament can possibly be.

I can not tell you how that came about, but I can tell you this much, being married to the right woman is the best thing that can happen to any man. Believe me. It just makes so many things so much easier, it makes the unbearable nearly bearable, and, with any luck at all it elevates the man. It may even have elevated me a bit. I've written this book in an attempt to prove that. Unfortunately, it probably only proves that I am not the excellent husband my truly excellent wife deserves. Admittedly, I am merely a very very *good* husband. Nonetheless, I am now a respectable guy, and that's sayin' somethin'. The odds against that ever happening were pretty good.

Because I'm an average guy, I've stood my ground many a terrible time in the past, chin up, unbending, and watched as one wonderful woman or another slipped quietly out of my life. (Don't worry, that won't be your last opportunity to sneer knowingly or snort derisively.) Alternatively, I've taken those extra little steps necessary to drive them out and, one time or two may have done what was required to destroy things utterly (which, strangely, was a great deal less dramatic than some of the amiable partings).

An old wino once explained my actions to me.

I was sitting on a park bench shortly after purposefully, methodically, dismantling an affair that had been nothing less than a gift from Heaven, and I happened to wonder out loud why I was such an idiot. He mumbled, “Dog’s in, he wants out; dog’s out, he wants in.” I looked at him startled. “It’s that simple,” he assured me. And I had to admit, for me, it has pretty much always been that simple.

When *this* dog was in, he always wanted out, sometimes secretly, sometimes desperately...but, in my mind, it was always *for her sake* (of course). When this dog was out, he inevitably found himself gazing at couples as they strolled along together hand-in-hand under the sheltering trees, and thought longingly about how good that would feel...for a while, before the inevitable grumbling about naïveté and self-deception kicked in. After all the muttering had subsided, this dog always wanted in again, sometimes secretly, sometimes desperately, but always achinglly. So, marriage, and the happy stability it provides, came as a completely unexpected twist in my otherwise tumultuous, directionless life of love. Now that I’m a married man—by what magic I cannot say—I have no greater desire than to simply stay put.

I’d like to hear that old wino’s explanation for that.

Set me up so that I can spend every moment of every day for the rest of my life in the company of my very dear wife, and I will do that with eagerness and ever-ascending joy. I’m pleased to report that she feels the same.  
(Yes, I checked.)

So, I've changed, and continue to change, and I have little doubt that in time I will—simply by her presence in my life—eventually becoming the embodiment of tranquility that my dear wife once mistakenly thought I was. Of course, that would have come about inevitably, and quite naturally I suppose, once I'd become just too old and weak to maintain my normal thorny belligerence. My theory here is that a good marriage expedites the process. Such is the power invested in that arrangement. It's insidious.

I feel as though I'm being drawn to a higher level.  
(Please go back and read that again,  
but this time without the mocking dreamy falsetto.)

A very good friend of mind once wrote to me saying, "I must note that you tend to idealize many women – I think you quite fancy them, you bounder." In this book I will demonstrate that there is not a single aspect which I have admired in any woman that is not embodied in my own very dear wife. She has all that and more. My wife is a remarkable creature who requires no idealization.

And then of course, there's me.

## GOOD LUCK FOREVER

I'll tell you what I think happened.

My life was cold and bitter and dreary and I was, even in my later years, taking a New York City kind of pride in how ugly it all was. I had, by the incessant inward chatter which some call self-hypnosis, others call prayer and still others dementia, convinced myself that I was both strong (surviving) and happy (loitering regularly in my favorite café as if I didn't have a care in the world.) So, I was alone but not lonesome. I was solitary but not really (yet) missing companionship. But on select nights, somehow on select nights, the sight of lovers strolling around arm-in-arm as if what they had together might last forever, irked me. After the snarling and sputtering subsided, I wandered home to face... have I used the phrase *my dismal existence* yet? Undeserving of Life's attention, I entered my small room head bowed like a school boy, aware that I had done something wrong, not knowing precisely what, but fully prepared to accept my continuing punishment. Then came the crushing loneliness.

Upon morning recovery, I would, at times wander about the various parts of the city—be it the empty business district on the weekends, or my own bustling bleary-eyed neighborhood during the week. And I would alternately feel free and thankful or empty and needy, depending, I guess upon which way the wind might be blowing, or maybe the cooperation of the traffic lights as I approached. Once you've surrendered to misery there is much to be said for a green light at the right moment. I mean only that while either suicidal or pleasantly content such things

hardly matter. In the doldrums however, small kindnesses, whatever their source, mean a great deal.

It was in this strange mix of genuine sadness and feigned contentment that I found myself one evening walking through Chinatown and passed an old woman with a blanket laid out on the sidewalk. She had things for sale; some dried roots, some bowls with carp painted badly in a washed out blue, and a dozen dull grey Chinese coins on long brightly colored strings. There was no sign telling me what the roots were, and I already had as many badly painted fish bowls as any man could ever need, but the coins kinda interested me. In front of them was a small sign saying, "Good Luck Forever \$1."

As I walked away the idea of good luck forever started to appeal to me. The price was certainly reasonable. In fact, it seemed like a tremendous bargain. I'd only gone about half a block before I'd talked myself into it. Shrugging, I turned and began quickly wending my way back through the crowd. Suddenly having one of those coins had become urgent. So, I was glad to see that she was still sitting there.

Squatting down in front of the old woman, I picked up one of the coins saying, "This will bring me good luck forever?" She smiled and nodded her head.

"Yes," she said. "Good luck. One dollar."

"This will bring me good luck *forever*?" I insisted.

She smiled and nodded her head enthusiastically.

"Yes. Good luck forever."

"FOREVER?" I asked raising one eyebrow.

“Yes,” she said unflinchingly, “good luck forever. One dollar.”

Man, I could not get that dollar out of my wallet fast enough.

A mathematician could probably figure out the cost breakdown over a lifespan, but I was still pretty happy without doing any calculations. I figured good luck for an hour would be worth a buck. Good luck for an entire day, a week, or two...what would that be worth? I only wished that I'd come across that old woman a day earlier, or better yet, a week earlier.

The day before, I had been walking home from the public library—the finest surviving free public institution there is—and I found a 5 dollar bill in the street. This happens to me all the time; ask anyone who knows me. Of course I picked it up...un-crumpled it... winced at its moistness... and shoved it deep into my pocket. And, of course, I looked around to see if there were more. I was standing there scanning the length of the gutter in both directions, when down the street, in the direction I'd just come, a Chinese kid let out a hoot and started waving a bill in the air. One of his friends ran over and snatched it out of his hand. He showed it to others as they gathered.

“Twenty Dollars!” one of them squealed, “The ice cream’s on Calvin!”

The week before that event, while walking down Bush Street, some guy, a mere half-step ahead of me, stopped suddenly, bent down and scooped up something from the sidewalk. I glanced at it in his hands as I walked by, and it



was a pretty healthy wad of cash wrapped tightly with a rubber band. “Hey, I just dropped that,” I said flatly, unconvincingly.

“Yeah, sure,” he said coldly and skittered off down the street without looking back.

That’s the kind of luck I was used to.

I told this story to a friend of mine later that same afternoon saying, “Man, I was almost kinda lucky.”

He looked at me and said, “Well, as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been almost kinda lucky.” And it’s true. I have always been almost kinda lucky. I’m an almost kinda lucky guy. Of course, with that Chinese coin hanging around my neck things were bound to get that extra little nudge required to turn me into a good luck forever kinda guy.

For the first time, I *knew* what all those musicians mean when they say they *know* they’re gonna make it. They’re convinced that if they just keep putting in their time, paying their dues, developing their chops, eventually they’ll get their break. Me, I was no longer waiting. With that coin around my neck, I’d make my own breaks. It was a little weird to think that it only cost me a buck to get things rolling; weirder still to realize, in looking back, that I was wearing that coin when I met Sylvie.

In his book *HIT MEN*, Fredric Dannen tells the story of how John Lennon wrote a tune that sounded *maybe just a little bit too much* like one that Morris Levy owned the rights to. But, instead of taking him to court over such a small matter, Mr. Levy invited Lennon to dinner. By sheer coincidence, as it turned out, Lennon’s next album had no

less than *three* tunes on it that Morris Levy owned the rights to. I think that's the kind of luck you might need in any business.

But with that kind of luck or without it, being married to the right woman is the best luck any man can have.

That's the kind of luck I have.

And, if I have anything to do with it, it'll last forever.

Kind of a footnote:

Its work having been accomplished, after I met Sylvie, I gave that lucky coin to my roommate. I thought it might do him some good. He was an unemployed cab driver—having been fired unreasonably for driving drunk and running over a pedestrian—and an aspiring writer of vulgar, vicious, and absolutely torturous fiction of the highest literary sort.

Five minutes after receiving the coin he was at my door urging me to take it back. It seemed to have had the opposite effect on him. Immediately after accepting it he received a deep paper-cut, knocked over several thousand pages of steaming vitriol, and in the antics that followed, slipped, fell, and ended up in a heap among the scattered piles of precious fiction.

Why on earth anyone would be silly enough to attribute such an event to an old Chinese coin is beyond me.

## FINGER PICKING

I don't think anyone was ever able to come up with more than three or four thousand reasons why my wife and I should not have married. I could only come up with about 2600 myself. Still, somehow I could not entirely agree with the woman who, leaning casually in at the door of the hotel office one evening, smiled and said, "I have to tell you this. From the very beginning, my husband and I were *totally* against you marrying Miss Bertrand. But, now—now that it's been, what...ten years...we're starting to believe that it might actually work out." She smiled prettily as she continued to lean upon the office doorpost.

I must have looked startled...but that didn't stop her. She went on in a most amiable manner. "I mean, really, think about it. Sylvie is intelligent, well educated, well traveled, young and beautiful and French..." She stopped short of saying, "and then, of course, there's you." But, she stood there long enough to be sure that I filled in that information myself. She smiled when she saw that I had gotten the point. I smiled a crumpled little smile in return, and, because I've been told it's unacceptable for anyone in any business setting to lash out with the sort of cold, merciless response that was careening around in my mind, said nothing. I think I deserve some credit for that.

I had no idea who that woman was. As far as I could tell, I had never seen her before in my life, though she claimed to be a regular guest at the hotel. Still, suddenly I found myself resolutely against *her marriage*. I just felt that her husband probably deserved a wife with finer social discernment.

When I reported this weird/laughable (you choose) affront (no choice to be made there), my dear, charming and adoring wife asked who the woman was. I told her the woman's name and that she claimed to have been a guest at our wedding. Sylvie told me that she did not recognize the name, neither did she fully comprehend why the woman—wedding guest or not—thought she should have any say whatsoever in whether or not we should be married. (And that is just one of the reasons I love my wife.) Neither one of us could understand why the woman might think her approval now would mean anything to us. It doesn't.

As to our marriage I can only say this: we've been happy from the very beginning and remain happy today. When we peer in that direction, we see only happiness ahead. Yes, we know that bugs some people...most notably, I think, my wife's father. But, that's just the way it is.

In terms of strangeness I place this woman—the Arbitress of Marriage—up there with the guest who stopped in front of the office one evening and asked, "Do you two want some leftover pizza?" We paused out of courtesy to our guest—just as if we might have been considering the offer. "It's untainted," he added. He waited for us to think about that, and then added, "We didn't tamper with it in any way." What a salesman. There is still some debate about who should take top honors as our strangest guest, the Arbitress of Marriage or the guy offering us untainted pizza. Sylvie likes the Arbitress; I think the pizza guy had a pretty convincing schpiel. Leftover, untainted, never tampered with, not quite yet cold, still in the hands of the original owner.

Strangely, I can see the Arbitress' point. Many people can. We all know that my wife deserves better than me. I'm thinking: someone intelligent, well educated, well traveled, young and handsome and French...maybe toss in successful, as a kind of salt for my wounds. Nonetheless, she loves me beyond all reason, and I don't think I'll ever change drastically enough in the eyes of others to make her love for me understandable to them; it's hardly understandable to me. Make what you will of that; I am not a deep thinker and hardly know what to make of it myself. BUT, I accept it, and that is a very big part of Love.

My very dear wife is everything that a woman should be. She is intelligent, she is kind, she is sweet, she is lovely to look at, and always a pleasure to be with. She is modest and decent and soft-spoken. She is delicate and unassuming. She really is very much like a flower. She is femininity itself. She is also noble. She has dignity. What is really very nice is that she has no idea whatsoever of just how wonderful she is; how beautiful, how desirable. That is a good trait in a woman. That is an EXCELLENT trait in a wife. She is my happiness. Though, she admits she *can't even sew*, there is no doubt about it, she is the most wonderful being that I have ever had the very good fortune and the great good pleasure to have in my life.

And I'm pretty handy with a needle anyway.

As said, I provide the dark tumultuous background against which my dear wife shines all the more brightly, all the more steadily. Enough about me though.

Every time I look at her I am filled with delight; to hear her voice excites me and gives me hope for the day ahead. There is nothing in this world I would rather do than hold her in my arms. (Believe me, gentlemen, whatever else they may tell you, whatever else you may have convinced yourself of, there is much to be said for hug-ability.)

Without her there is so much I would never have experienced which I now realize is the very essence of living. For example, before her, I rarely found myself walking around my place singing, though I know a thousand tunes; I never found myself chanting, “thank you, thank you, thank you”...while splashing around in the ol’ tub; I never danced. Times past, it would have been easier to drag a mule into the back seat of a burning, fully-engulfed, Volkswagen bug than to get me on the dance floor. These days my personal, somewhat goofy interpretation of The Rites of Spring may be but the opening act in a typical evening’s entertainment...living room theatre staged solely for my wonderful wife. I’m a fool for her and, when the work’s all done, I’m usually eager to prove it.

In many ways I’m still trying to win her.  
(And I think that’s a good thing.)

You know, one Spring day my very dear wife and I were walking along in Golden Gate Park—knowing us, we probably had a brace of dogs straining on ahead—and I was trying to explain to her the phenomenon that is Duck Baker (whose artistry can not be explained, only experienced). I’d started out by telling her that Duck was a finger-picker.

My wife, who is French and therefore properly educated at a level far above such stuff, asked sweetly, “What is finger-picking?”

At that very moment (at that precise moment) we came around the corner and there before us, in the meadow below, was a large herd of three or four hundred finger-pickers. They were all gathered ‘round in clusters of six or seven and all flailing away in giddy syncopation. The timing could not have been better. “THAT,” I said with considerable aplomb, “is finger-picking.”

When Sylvie and I are together there is often cleverness to Life.

I don’t know what was at play there, but of course I wish more of Life were like that for everybody. As for me, almost every moment I spend with my wife holds that same kind of magic. Our marriage is like...it’s like I’ve taken up residence in my favorite museum. Though I’m eager to do so, I know I can never explore it all, and, at the very same time I’m fully satisfied by what I’ve seen already. Because I’m male, I don’t always allow myself to see the wonder of our marriage, or to dwell on it for too long, or to appreciate it fully, or to respond to it—it’s easy to be overwhelmed by things that are this pure—but, at least I always know it’s there; I recognize it, and I’m thankful for it. Time being what it is, I try to enjoy it as much as I can of course, and that is pretty easy too.

Our marriage is a very cool thing.

## **MAN VERSUS DOORKNOB**

One time, before Sylvie and I were married, I was called in to fix the doorknob in room #404. Of course when a doorknob falls off in the hands of a guest at this hotel it is important that the guest is lead to believe that this is the rarest of all possible occurrences, or, better yet, that it has never happened before. The truth is something different. At the hotel every doorknob in every room—entry door, closet, bathroom—comes off a dozen times each year. Replacing them is an endless task. Let me assure you of this as well—no amount of rage can supply the torque necessary to make those knobs stay put. Believe me the full range of rage-to-torque limits have been thoroughly tested.

Just as an aside, my grandmother lived in the same house for eighty-seven years and not once in all that time did any doorknob ever come off unintended in anyone's hands. But, that was a different world, a saner world perhaps.

Of course it would be wrong for any hotel employee replacing a doorknob for the twenty-seven thousandth time to mumble or, through gnashing teeth (for example) mutter what might be interpreted as an unbroken chain of blistering vulgarity. And, it would be wrong for that employee to, while screwing in that much defiled little brass—the softest metal on earth—screw, to address it, or any other component of the door knob assembly in venomous terms while sputtering through seething breath. So I usually try very hard not to.

On the other hand, for the sake of my own sanity, and in order not to allow such trivial things to build up into a



massive gnawing psychosis deep deep within the darkest part of me, I sometimes throw things. Sometimes—and for this I believe I deserve some credit—I don't.

Unfortunately, while I was fixing that particular doorknob, on that particular day—just at that point where any man on earth might have reached his limit, and may have even stumbled one step beyond it—my beloved future bride arrived, quietly, unannounced, as though upon a gentle cloud. Up until that very precise moment she had known me only as a calm, steady, quiet, soft-spoken, thoughtful kind of guy. So, to walk in while I was in the act of making slanderous accusations concerning the legitimacy of that doorknob's familial lineage must have come as a shock to her. You know, it's never nice to see anyone gesticulating wildly like a madman, and stomping around in a childish fit, but even less nice to come upon your betrothed in such a state. That moment was not a dream come true for either of us. I had known all along that she was far too good for me, but this pretty much proved it.

Believe me, quite honestly, for weeks after that event I did everything I could to convince Sylvie that she did *not* want to get mixed up with a guy like me. (I'm sure that, had I called upon them for their assistance in those efforts, both her father and her mother would have offered their full cooperation and any support I might have requested.) But, by that time it was too late; I loved her enough to want to marry her, but did not possess the character, kindness, or common decency to run her off for her own good.

Neither did I have the will. I was entrapped, with no desire to escape. The woman has a natural modesty which I find irresistible.

At that point I probably just figured that if I could get past the fact that she was good and honest and decent; that she was kind, and giving and thoughtful; that she was educated and reasonable and always even-keeled, that she could probably get past the fact that I was none of those things.

Clearly, after the doorknob incident, the blindfold was off.

Thinking back on that occasion, I have to wonder what on earth the poor, young woman saw in me that allowed her to accept my proposal of marriage.

Still, a few months later, she married me.

Come to think of it, she married me even after the shoe store incident, which was— let's face it—really an act of God. I mean, whose fault is it that I have been given an abnormally high instep? And, there was nothing I could do about the fact that all of the shoes she might like to see on a gentleman's foot simply will not go on this man's foot.

## SCHEMATIC FOR A WIFE

When asked what I was looking for in a wife—something which I was asked frequently by my friends through the years—I always said, “First, she must be intelligent. Then, she must be a pleasure to look at...” That was followed by a long list of additional requirements, always ending with, “and it wouldn’t hurt at all if she were French.” Where I got that French idea, I do not know. To my knowledge—other than my grandmother—I’d only met one French woman in my entire life, the mother of a strange little jug-eared French kid in my fifth grade class. And though I liked his mother a great deal—she was a proper, trim, lovely cultured creature—*she* didn’t like me at all. I gathered that from the fact that, after my first visit to their nicely kept house, to play with her jug-eared son, he was told never to invite me there again. Maybe I used the wrong fork.

Nonetheless, my very dear wife, Sylvie, could not be more perfect had she been taken directly from my own blue prints. In fact, she goes far beyond my schematic dreams.

Here is but one reason:

We were coming out of a grocery store with one bag of groceries—forty dollars—and, because we used a discount card I asked her casually, “Did we save anything?”

“Yes, we saved \$1.29 on the juice and 29¢ on the beans.” (I eat beans.)

“Wow,” I said, “we saved a dollar sixty on forty dollars. You know,” I added, “if you were Debbie, we’d be hauling out TWELVE bags of groceries and we’d have something like \$5.72 cash clutched in our fists.”

Debbie, as my very dear wife knows, is the exact opposite of her in almost every aspect; she is loud and vulgar and slovenly, a poorly educated heavy smoker who drinks too much occasionally and is, in those moments, a public embarrassment, if you're the type who believes in dignity of any sort. BUT, she can, by methods I've never understood—though I've witnessed it first-hand several times—use coupons to fill shopping carts with hundreds of dollar worth of stuff I'd never even consider eating, and either pays almost nothing for it or, as I've seen, is actually given cash back, after the tonnage is all tabulated.

Let me say here quickly—though not quickly enough—that Debbie is at once a remarkable parent; understanding and caring and patient, and good natured; she expects her kids to possess honesty and character, and they do. It's for them that she spends hours on Wednesdays and Sundays clipping coupons and filing them away in a big folder. So this dedication to clipping coupons—if completely shameless—is at once an honorable process.

So, let's review: "If you were Debbie," I said, "we'd be hauling out TWELVE bags of groceries and we'd have something like \$5.72 cash clutched in our fists." "Perhaps you should have given that matter more thought *before* we were wed," my dear wife replied.

In fact I hadn't given much thought at all to the matter of marriage before I met Sylvie, since I had little hope of attaining the wife of my own design. Add into that mix the fact that I never harbored any real desire to become *a married man*, and the chances were even slimmer.

Certainly if I got the wife I deserved, Debbie would be an angel by comparison. The wife I deserve would be massive and immobile and probably missing her front teeth; she'd be somewhat snappish (those nasty looking, oozing sores might affect anyone's demeanor) and, I'm sure she would be what anyone who didn't know the details might call just a little bit demanding. She'd have two or three dirty little future hoodlum brats from two or three previously dissolved marriages, or near marriages, or pretend marriages, and she would probably despise me every bit as much as my wife's father now does. I'd find myself working part-time in a gas station in an *I'd-rather-drink-myself-to-death-than-go-home* sort of way, and peering fixedly into the never-ending darkness of my interminable future.

Of course, my miserable life would be proof, and fair warning to all, that there IS justice in this world—that we DO get what we deserve...and that no matter how much you care, or demonstrate that caring through calm reasoning, whining, complaining, threatening divorce, or cussing and slamming things around, a woman who smokes cigarettes will never even cut back, let alone quit.

So, instead we saved a laughable \$1.58 on groceries and drove away happily ever after.

This rant reminds me of a time when, for reasons unexplainable, I asked my wife if she would like to know the sort of thing that was going on in my ever-spinning mind in those times when I sit around looking idiot-thoughtful, unconsciously tugging on my lower lip.

Because she is kind and caring, she made the mistake of saying *yes*. So, then I started out telling her precisely what I'd been mulling over and chewing on for the last few days, weeks, months, and, I had just gotten under way when she stopped me mid-sentence (after a very short time indeed) and said nicely, "Wait. Is it too late to... uh... withdraw my request?"

"Your request?"

"...to hear all that you've been thinking?"

"You don't want to hear what I've been thinking?"

"If that's all right with you."

"I was just getting started..."

"I sensed that."

And, though it pained me deeply—because I really felt that I had a lot to say—since I love her so much, I agreed to go no further. She went back to her reading and I went back to tugging on my lower lip and thinking about things which no person I truly care about should ever be exposed to.

And so that is why I've decided, pretty much on the wing, right here and now, to go no further with this.

## **THE WOUNDING OF THE JEWELER'S WIFE**

Marriage to the right woman is the key to happiness.  
Heroics is the door it opens.

There may be as many as three heroic acts concerning my wife which I might lay claim to, and they all came about spontaneously. I feel like that's a good thing... the spontaneity factor.

For example, one rainy afternoon at COSTCO when approaching a wide, fairly deep puddle near the entrance, I picked Sylvie up in my arms and carried her across. I recall this event with great pleasure because of the response it received. It was the usual scene—crowds of people scurrying by, anxious to get in out of the rain, busy with their own thoughts, eager to get their hands on large quantities of the finest and most necessary stuff that can be placed on a flatbed pallet. But by the time I lowered my wife gently to the dry ground on the other side of that puddle quite a few of these good people had stopped and focused their attention on us. It was a little unnerving—even though many of them were smiling—and, just like in a bad movie, some of them began to cheer. Some applauded. The heavy set, firmly-seated black guy checking membership cards at the door leaned forward with a grunt and shook my hand as we entered. He declared loudly for all to hear, “See, now THAT’S the way it’s s’posed to be done!”

At that proud moment my opinion of the good people who shop at COSTCO turned a full 180 degrees. Salt of the earth. Some of the finest people around buy in bulk.

A second heroic act concerned me getting up very early in the morning and walking across town to comb the sidewalk in front of the Opera House looking for a wayward button. Without the details it doesn't sound like much, and with the details it would probably sound ridiculous, but she was impressed, even though I came up empty handed.

The third heroic act was the wounding of the jeweler's wife.

Being people of reasonably good taste we soon discovered that it was almost impossible to find, in this world, a decent looking engagement ring. Apparently engagement rings are restricted to two types of design and two types only, the classic solitaire perched up high on four spiky prongs—vulgar and awkward and stupid—or something designed by the same crew that gleefully slapped together the Edsel. Of the Edsel type there were two distinct categories, rings that idealized the Edsel's garish grill, and those that thought the backward fins were something a woman might like to wrap around her delicate finger. We were looking for something with a little more dignity, maybe designed by someone sober, and maybe with a hint in it somewhere as to the planet of origin. As said, it proved to be an almost impossible task.

Eventually we did however find a nice little ring that nobody else wanted. In the very back of the most ignored section of the eighty-second store we'd looked in, the ring sat quietly abandoned collecting dust. It was on sale because the craftsman who made it had apparently taken some care with its design and creation, and who needs that.



It may have come from a previous century. It may have sat ignored in that case since then. When we asked about it, the sales-person could hardly believe her ears.

“That one?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes.”

“The one in the back?”

“Yes.” Great efforts were made to conceal her delight at finally finding a couple dumb enough to want the damned thing. “That one...the one in the back?”

Finding a decent looking engagement ring had been such a struggle that when it came to the wedding bands we decided we’d skip the frustration and design them ourselves. What fools! Finding an engagement ring was the lollipop that led to the root canal of having wedding rings custom made.

Somehow, eventually (and by that I mean, after a very long and arduous search) we found ourselves poking around in custom jeweler’s shop number 10. When we showed him the engagement ring, the jeweler smiled. He went over to a counter and pulled out a copy of the very same ring (he couldn’t get rid of it either). He told us that he had made it himself, from a Late Victorian design. We looked at each other startled and delighted. Our search was over; this was the guy; this was the guy who understood, the guy who could give us the rings we wanted. I was so glad I hadn’t pulled that trigger.

We sat down with him and enthusiastically discussed what we had in mind. We looked through ring design books for a while and found a lovely eighteenth century entwined ivy

design. I asked him if he could do that. He looked at it, smiled and assured us that he could.

"It's not a problem," he said. A little voice inside my head spoke up saying, Beware of anyone who says, 'It's not a problem.'" But, I ignored it. Gosh...you know...is it right for a man of my age to giggle so openly?

"You'll do this for us?" I asked this sainted jeweler.

"It will be a pleasure to do something different for a change," he said, and, after shaking hands, the noble man patted me reassuringly upon the shoulder. We parted with mutual respect, the most amiable of friends.

A month or so later, when we came back to look at the rings he was working on, they were NOTHING like the design. NOTHING. They had none of the style, the care, the taste of the ring that he said he had made himself. There was not a hint anywhere in those rings that indicated he was even capable of producing such a ring. It was heartbreaking. I showed him the design again.

"This is the design you're working on?" I asked with some force. He said yes. I looked him in the eye and asked him point blank, "Can you make this ring?"

He said, "Yes, of course."

"Do you want to make this ring?"

He said, "Yes."

"Will you make this ring?"

"Yes, of course."

What we didn't know then, which was later confirmed by many sources since, was that it is common practice for custom jewelers to assure their customers that they can do what they ask, then they do whatever the hell they please.

If he's the giving sort, he does the absolute minimum necessary to produce something vaguely similar to what he's assured you he would do, in the hope that you'll accept it. But, we didn't accept it. We didn't accept his half-assed efforts. We had no intention of doing so. No, we were being difficult; we insisted that he make the rings as we designed them.

The scene where I look him straight in the eye and ask him, "Can you make this ring? Will you make this ring?" got fairly old fairly quickly. It had become a hellish situation. I'm sure that the jeweler and his wife were filled with something less than the purest of pure joy when they saw us coming in through the door. It went on like that, with a kind of upwardly spirally tension, until he finally understood that we were not going to accept anything less than the quality of work he'd shown us originally and we were not—having given him a down payment—going away. It was months before he got a grasp on those simple facts. MONTHS.

Eventually, after I drew a greatly simplified version of the ring, he sat down and (begrudgingly I would guess) did the work necessary to produce it. By that time all the fun had long ago been drained from the venture. We just paid in silence, took the rings, and went away exhausted, shaking our heads. I'm sure the jeweler and his wife were inside their little jewelry shop shaking their heads as well...unless they were both idiots, which actually, now that I think about it, is the one possibility which would explain everything.

After the ring was on my beautiful new wife's finger, we abandoned our responsibilities at the hotel for a few days, and went up north a bit where the trails are, as far as we could determine, endless.

During that time I could tell that Sylvie was keeping something from me and eventually it came out—her ring had some sharp edges on it and it was painful to wear. It got to the point where she just couldn't wear it at all. She called it 'the ring of thorns.' I spent an evening or two trying to burnish down the sharp parts with a wooden spoon, but to no real effect. So, when we got back into town we took her ring to the jeweler again and we explained the situation. His wife took the ring, looked at it with disdain and said, somewhat sullenly, "I will take this ring in back and buff it out for you." From the way she said it, I sensed that we were no longer friends.

So she disappeared into the room in back and emerged a very brief time later saying, "It should be OK now," and held it at arms-length for us to take.

My wife tried it on and it still hurt her. So, I said, "You'll need to buff it out a little more, please, it's still too rough." At this point the jeweler's wife protested, "I buffed it out, it's fine. Believe me, it is fine."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes," she said, "its fine." she said.

I ran the ring through my fingers and, even in my mitts, the thing felt coarse.

"You buffed this ring?" I asked.

“Yes, I took it into the back and I buffed it out; it is now fine,” said the jeweler’s wife.

“It still feels a little rough,” I said.

“No...It should be fine,” said the jeweler’s wife with real commitment.

“It’s rough.”

“No, I just buffed it; it’s very smooth.”

“It’s smooth?”

“It is quite smooth.”

And here’s where the heroism comes in. I reached out and I took that woman’s hand and I slashed that ring across her palm. She winced, let out a little yelp and withdrew her hand quickly. She looked at me bewildered.

“You still think it’s smooth?” I asked.

She did not say a thing. The jeweler did not say a thing. Nor (somewhat wisely, I think) did he rise from his chair. For a moment the world consisted only of me and the jeweler’s wife, face to face, toe to toe, locked in the eternal struggle between Good and custom jewelers.

When it came back the next time a newborn baby could have worn that ring without irritation.

## **CHEFS and WEDDINGS**

On the evening of our wedding neither my new bride nor I was allowed to sit down and eat, though everyone all around us was shoveling it in shamelessly (supposedly in our honor). Decorum demanded that Sylvie and I go around shaking hands and smiling and exchanging quips, or at very least listening to them, instead of partaking in the extraordinary repast the highly creative, undeniably great chef had produced (supposedly in our honor). I had passed by the huge display of cold dishes many times, admiring each tantalizing offering with the eye of the famished, but had only managed to pop in two shrimp quickly during those brief few seconds when nobody was hauling me off here or yanking me around there, to nod and smile and just generally pretend to be everything I normally, naturally, am not.

There was a refined rice sort of thing—really just the bed upon which the crab claws and craw-dads lay resplendently sprawled—which I knew to be absolutely delicious, and which I knew my wife enjoyed for its elegant simplicity. So, when the warm dishes had come out and everyone was fighting their way in toward the lovely little filet mignon with truffle sauce, I slipped quietly into the kitchen where the insane chef was bending over something that looked like a very large, goofy-eyed salmon in aspic. I waited for him to complete what he was doing and to stand back and admire it for a bit before I cleared my throat. He spun around and glared at the unexpected, uninvited, unwelcome intruder, the groom, me. I smiled.

Up until that point, I had known this man to be one of the most incredible chefs whose work I had ever had the great good pleasure to continually be astounded by. I also knew him as the man who called from France on July 13<sup>th</sup> to tell the owner that he would not be available to complete the preparations for our little (sold out well in advance) Bastille Day celebration.

“Do you have any more of that rice?” I asked.

“You want rice?” he boomed.

“Well, if you have it, yes,” I said meekly. “I’ve always enjoyed that rice...and Sylvie loves it.”

Without further exchange of any sort the insane chef took a plate down from a shelf, strode quickly over to a corner of the kitchen that was full of large covered pots and selected one. Tossing the cover aside, he returned and in one wide overhand motion turned the entire pot upside down onto the plate.

When he lifted it, rice spilled all over the counter top, leaving a pile about 9 inches deep covering that plate entirely. That beautiful rice was scattered for two feet in every direction. He then took the empty pan and, using the same overhand technique, flung it across the kitchen in the general direction of the stainless steel sinks—where the dishwasher (after years of working with this idiot) was quick enough to dodge it—before it clattered into the growing stacks of Madame’s precious, irreplaceable, delicate, discontinued, Gien china.

He turned to me with fury in his eyes.

“You want anything else?”

“No,” I said.

“You sure? Chicken? Lamb? Beef?” He glared at me.

“No. Thank you,” I said somewhat stunned.

I found a small bowl and I spooned some of the rice into it, and was about to pick it up and leave the kitchen when he stepped over and blocked my path. He stood six inches from my face and said quietly, “Rice is all you are wanting?”

“Yes. Thanks,” I said.

He moved in closer still, looked me in the eye and snarled,

“I’m not afraid of you.”

I took a breath for the first time since entering that kitchen.

Finally something I could understand!

I looked him unflinchingly right in the ice cold eye and I snorted. “I’m not afraid of you either,” I said good-naturedly. Then I picked up my bowl of rice and left the kitchen.

I was delighted to find my wonderful new wife sequestered in the back, in a booth, far away from the madding crowd, talking with some high school friends of hers who had come from France for the occasion.

“Where have you been?” asked my lovely bride quietly.

“Riding the roller coaster to Hell,” I said.

My wife, who even then understood my every thought, explained to her friends, in French, that I had just been in the kitchen with the insane chef.

“Oh,” they nodded knowingly. “He is quite good; no?”



## UNDERDONE DUCK

It always seems peculiar to me that when you walk into a restaurant packed with pretentious customers (and by that I mean vibrantly self-aware folk posturing and talking very loudly about themselves, their investments and their possessions, rather than, say, quietly discussing St. Augustine's discourse on humility), the staff is predictably even more arrogant than the clientele. Most of us with any experience recognize what a great honor it is to be there among such people of course, and meekly admit to ourselves that we clearly do not belong. To be welcomed frostily, escorted to a place to sit, and waited upon by our superiors is always a humbling experience. Still, there is something a little irksome about the arrangement. By that I mean, we're the ones who are paying.

So, my best friend, Dean had helped us move an unwieldy piece of furniture from the hotel to my wife's parents' house in that fairyland county just above the Golden Gate Bridge, and to thank him we said, "Is there any place you'd like to go for dinner?" He named this place in Larkspur. So, we went. We waited a bit, as is proper, but were soon seated. The place had a reputation for food, so I cast aside any unreasonable objections. I like food. My wife likes food. Dean likes food. All the Justins and Jasons, shouting about how many mansions they had recently acquired with no-down, interest-only loans, did not distract us from our goal. We weren't there to impress anybody. We were there for the food.

I could not tell you whether it was the Queen of Sweden or the Queen of France who waited on us, such is my

ignorance, but I hope we were appropriately obsequious; keeping our eyes to ourselves and speaking in lowered apologetic tones. It would be a mistake to go up against such magnificence only to embarrass ourselves by having to be put down in the midst of lofty and critical company. So we all ordered meekly, quietly, humbly.

My wife ordered ravioli. And it doesn't matter what Dean ordered (though my wife would remember, I don't). For our purposes we'll say he ordered sweetbreads—that sounds like something Dean would order. When it was my turn, I ordered the duck and the Queen nodded, turned smartly, and started to skittle away. I put an arm up in her path and she turned with a kind of overly-theatrical petulance. "Please," I said, "tell me, is the chef French?" She told me he was. And so I continued. "Please...I know that what I am about to request will offend him...but can you ask him to please make the duck overdone?"

See, I know something about French chefs, and I know that traditionally, as a matter of nationalistic and gastronomic pride, they deliver all fowl well underdone.

"If you would be so kind, please," I said quietly, "ask him to over-do the duck. I would like it to be over-done. Please ask him to do that. That's the way I, idiot that I am, *would like it.*" I knew of course that she would enter the kitchen 17 seconds later, shout, "one rav., one sweetbread, one duck!" and that would be the end of it...unless I was a trouble-maker.

I am not a trouble-maker,  
but I like my duck done.

So, while we waited and while I pretended to carry on jovial conversation with my dear wife and my good friend, I was deeply entangled in inner turmoil. When the grub arrived, as is usual for me, my wife's ravioli looked ravishing, and Dean's sweetbreads looked nothing if not desirable, but the duck was under-done. It had wilted skin, it was a grayish brown for about one eighth inch, and, from there on inward it was a kind of a vibrant 1950's lipstick pink throughout, even in that elegantly lowered lighting.

The queen was gone in a flash and it took me several minutes to flag her down and coax her back to our table. (Which one is our waitress? The one with her back perpetually toward us.) When she arrived, with the burden of martyrdom heavy upon her shoulders, I said, "Hi." She said...nothing.

I said, "Do you remember me asking for my duck to be over-done?"

She said that she did.

I said, "You know, really, honestly, I know that what I am asking is just terrible and crude and stupid and brutish and maybe a little vulgar as well..." I was careful to be sure my tone told her that I was sorry for conducting my life on such a low level, and especially in a forum where my betters might possibly be unnecessarily exposed to it. "...but, could you please take this back and ask the chef to give it a good scorching? Please. Tell him I apologize for offending him, but tell him that's the way *the idiot* wants it. Please."

If coal miners only knew the tremendous labor this good woman then had to go through in order to bend and pick up

my plate, they would never complain about their joy-filled lives again.

And, even as she carried my plate away, I knew this: (I *knew* this). I knew it would either come back burnt, or it would not come back at all until my wife and my best friend had finished dessert, or it would come back—and this was my best hope—EXACTLY as it had been when taken away, only a little older, a little drier, a little colder, a little more congealed. To test this theory I had, with the greatest sleight of hand placed a little indentation in the edge of a particular piece of the underdone duck with my knife and arranged a brussel sprout in a particular way upon my plate. I encouraged...I *started to* encourage... my wife and my good friend to dig in and ignore my plight, but encouragement along these lines, though they both love me dearly, did not seem entirely necessary. And when the duck returned—arriving only shortly after Dean had thrown down his napkin and pushed back from the table and let his eyes roll back into his head—my wish had come true; it was not burned to a crisp. The brussel sprout was in the very same location upon the plate, but colder now, and the duck still held the tell-tale knife mark.

The duck had sat in the kitchen waiting for a time when I might come to my senses and accept it for what it was.

I did not eat it. Instead, I ate a couple of the overdone vegetables and stuffed myself with a variety of good-lookin' but near-tasteless, whole-grain bread. My dear wife meanwhile had taken one bite out of one of the TWO very precious ravioli and found it wanting. She investigated the

other with hope and a fork, and though the fork remained, the hope did not last. “Taste this...” she said to me quietly, and I did. It was a non-descript mosh of vegetable matter with a hint of something sea-foodish. She couldn’t eat it. Hungry as I was, I couldn’t eat it either. Here’s \$42 worth of ravioli—though in what world two ravioli are worth \$42 I don’t know—that could not be eaten by either of two, slightly discerning, nearly-starving people.

So, the dessert was acceptable, though nothing special. The best thing in the place was the wine, which had not come from their famous kitchen, but from Italy. So when the waitress came to deliver our check, she said NOTHING about the fact that neither my wife nor I had touched anything on our plates. Instead, she asked us if we would like to take it home. I didn’t understand the logic in that. And, troublemaker that I am, I asked to speak with the manager. So, the Queen of France or Sweden went away in a huff and after a few minutes I was escorted alone into a small room, where there was a big desk and paper-work and bills and cash laying around, and a nicely dressed kid of the Justin and Jason generation stood up and asked me if I enjoyed my meal. The Queen was there behind me with her arms crossed, tapping her foot and sucking on her teeth. I said I didn’t.

As you know, there are two distinct types of managers in this world. There are those who believe that the employees who work under them are always, always wrong, and there are those that believe it is their job to viciously defend any employee who works under them against the unreasonable demands of all of us useless damned customers.

It became blisteringly clear, and very shortly, that this guy was of the latter sort. He wasn't apologetic about the fact that I was expected to pay more than \$200 for a meal I did not eat. And, he did not have the time to listen to my story. BUT...he did offer to have the stuff wrapped up so that we could take it home. I realized that seating himself again and returning to his accounting was a sign that my audience with him had come to an end.

To make a long story short, I believe it is much to my credit that I did not return to that place later that night and wait for the dishwasher to finish his mopping-up and turn off all the lights and step outside, closing and locking the door behind himself, and stroll away under the moonlight whistling a little tune, before burning that goddamned place right to the ground. I thought about it though, and concluded that it might be a bit of over-reaction on my part.

But, I maintain the dream.

And in that dream, I always toss a duck in amid the flames.

## BIRDS

My wife is French and that means that if Jack and Jill go up the hill to fetch a pail of water and Jack falls down and breaks his crown—unless Jack is a dog, a cat, a bird, a porpoise, a lion or an elk—it pretty much serves him right for being such an idiot. If, however, Jack is an animal of any sort other than human, he must be nursed, poor thing, back to health in my wife's lap with her parents in quick attendance, while we receive anxious phone calls from relatives in France each day to see how the poor creature is doing. This is my way of assuring you that the tales you may've heard about the French and Les Animaux are all true. If a French gentleman's wife and his dog both fall into a pit, the gentleman will first recover the dog and immediately begin to comfort the animal, covering his muzzle in kisses, and proceed to take whatever small cooing steps may be required to restore the animal's trust in humanity and encourage his joy once again in Life, BEFORE (breathe here) turning his attention to his wife—who has by now extracted herself from the pit, clawing her way to the surface through her own efforts—and chastise her for putting the poor beast at such risk.

Many a French divorce is based on the scurrilous accusation that the wife has “stolen the dog's affection” and the French replace their dog's toothbrush more frequently than they do their own. (A statement which my wife, both French and a genuine toothbrush-replacement zealot, finds slanderous.)

My wife has been brought up to believe that it is a crime of the most vile and unforgivable sort to rearrange your

position on the couch in order to re-establish circulation to one or both legs if, in that brutish and selfish act, you might disturb an otherwise perfectly comfortable cat. My wife also believes that dogs do not smell bad. (Nor do they drool.) I have been unable, in the many years that we've been married to convince her that when someone uses the phrase, "...smells like a dog," that it is not a compliment, and that the stuff that flies about the room in great stringy globs whenever a dog shakes his perfectly unscented head renders edibles within range, if not inedible, at least no longer as desirable as they might earlier have seemed.

On the other hand, having been born and raised in the United States, I was brought up to believe that dogs belong outside (maybe because of their smell, I don't know); they belong outside, in the yard, in all weather, and cats are allowed indoors only as long as the television and lights remained on in the living room. So, when it comes to animals, there is a bit of conflict here in the dreamland known as our marriage. And at no time during our otherwise perfectly blissful existence was the conflict more evident and our devotion to each other more severely tested than that time known as: the Year of the Birds.

Maybe I should make it clear, going in, that I like birds. Hell, I love birds. One of the most delightful periods of my otherwise frustrating and joyless life was spent awash in the joy of raising cockatiels. If nothing else I say here can be trusted, this—my delight in birds—can. So, it's peculiar that so many birds should be involved in this matter and that I should find myself remaining so callous. But, too much of almost anything is more than enough.



That year, for some reason which can only be discerned at a greater distance than we are allowed birds were falling from the sky all around us and falling, typically, at my wife's feet or at the feet of Noodle, the fine and noble pure-bred retriever who, being a French dog, scooped them up gently in his mouth and brought them dutifully to one of us.

There is a passageway between the hotel—where we work and live and laugh and love, and one of us whines without end about servitude—and the building next to it which seemed, for that happy season, to capture young birds in first-flight and hold them in suspension until my wife or the dog-in-law stepped outside. In this manner we became guardians to more than one pigeon, a young dove, a wren-like creature or two (and nothing more exotic)... each injured, helpless, frightened, desperate to take flight and get back to the nest.

Of course, we took them in to M. Bertrand—a man of infinite patience when it comes to birds. He boxed them up carefully and comforted them, while keeping them warm and feeding them with a syringe, until we could escort them safely to the nearest animal care facility which accepted foundling fledglings. I don't know how many times we showed up there, just before closing time, with one of these nestlings, but enough times that the workers looked at each other knowingly as soon as we appeared in their doorway, trembling, with down-cast eyes, shoe box in hand.

I realize that this doesn't sound like much—retrieving a few birds or so and taking them to an animal shelter—but I'm wending my way around to something.

This shelter was situated somewhat north of here, about 17 miles as the crow flies or 48 grueling minutes toiling away in unavoidable bumper-to-bumper idiocy, depending upon your position in the evolutionary scheme of things. It was near the Bertrand's place where they keep chickens, uncountable finches, countable, but who would want to bother, pigeons, two cats, a dog...a chipmunk, one giraffe, a warthog, a mule and an albino wombat named Claire. (Actually the giraffe, warthog, mule, and Claire are all a figment of my imagination—but they would all be given a fine French welcome and thereafter fit right in.)

There's a rabbit that has gotten involved in all this as well—a birthday gift to my wife's father from his loving daughter, my loving wife, who could not look at the thing in a cage and not imagine it freer and happier at her father's place. (A premonition which proved more than true.)

Just as an aside, rabbits are interesting creatures. They are small and cute and cuddly and warm, but they take absolutely no guff from anybody. If you think you're going to push a rabbit around just because he's little and furry and cute, I'd advise against trying it. I've seen that rabbit threaten to kick Noodle's ass and run him right out of the room. And, granted Noodle is the meekest animal on earth, but he's 10 or 12 times the size of that rabbit. This confrontation happened only once though, because after that Noodle was clever enough to simply get up and amble quietly out of the room, whenever the rabbit showed up. Good old Noodle sees that rabbit, and he's gone. Believe me, when a rabbit rears up on his hind legs, all chisel sharp teeth and menacing claws, he means business.

The chickens and the pigeons live together, for the most part, in their own little out-building where they carry on in the most savage manner you can imagine. They lay eggs, they make noises, they evacuate their bowels in an explosive display of indifference, and they peck hell out of each other whenever nobody is looking. It's all very rustic and very charming, and more than a little bit bloody. Some people like that sort of thing. It's far too Life-and-Death for my taste. Sylvie has limited her admiration to the visual aspects of each bird, which she finds engaging. "Yes, dear, that certainly is a good lookin' vicious, foul, and completely mindless creature."

At the hotel my wonderful wife and I have a French alley cat and a very expensive little dog with a neatly curled tail. The front office has a window covered entirely in stickers which prove that this good establishment has contributed to every known, unknown, legitimate and questionable animal welfare association known to man and several which no one has ever heard of either before and certainly not after M. Bertrand's more than generous contribution. The animal welfare scams love this hotel. "Send us your check NOW, the wolves are starving even as we speak! Oh, my god, I think we've just lost Little Lame One."

Of course, the dog-in-law comes in with the owners when they arrive, and departs with them when they leave. It's not unusual to look into M. Bertrand's office and see a recuperating pigeon walking around on his desk or sitting upon his shoulder or testing his new-found strength fluttering around the room. Animal-wise, the hotel is a place of peace and contentment.

Back up north, the Bertrand's hen house is full of life and death and crowing, and shrieking, scratching, and eating and foul water and ankle-deep bird excrement, and enough eggs to feed an entire flan-deprived nation. There is no end to the pecking problem, of course. It's just one of the things that birds do. And by this method—the pecking—several of them have died and took their sweet time doing so and looked pretty sad during the somewhat lengthy, drawn out, nerve-wracking process, while others (those peckers) prospered, looking quite plump and nicely plumed, without a care in the world or a feather out of place, as they strutted around, queens of the roost.

When a bird is being pecked on by the others, M. Bertrand takes the poor thing to heart, takes it into his house, hand feeds the poor thing and cares for it until it becomes attached to him and he attached to it, in the classic inseparable sense. At this point the bird is no longer suited for bird society and—it has been learned by heartless experience—IF reintroduced into the hen house, the poor creature will shortly thereafter be rendered into a heap of feathers and entrails with the only remaining evidence of its previous existence the blood spattered ground.

“Oh look, here's little Miss too-good-to-stay-in-the-coop-like-the-rest-of-us now!”

Meanwhile, during all of this—hens being pecked to death and homing pigeons repeatedly returning to the guy who had sold them, and beloved fowl being taken by rats at night and by hawks in broad daylight, right before M. Bertrand's startled eyes—an entire brood of chicks was cooked to death (baked I guess...or broiled maybe) in a

well-meaning, somewhat misinformed, experimental effort to keep them warm at night.

I am compelled here to state that this man, my wife's father, has saved the lives of *many* rejected birds by tenderly force-feeding them with a syringe until they could eat on their own, and that's no easy task. He has also corrected that strange curled-toe effect some birds seem to develop, with hand crafted cardboard shoes—which despite their clownish appearance—worked perfectly. He also developed a suspension system—rubber bands and a harness—so that those occasional birds who could not otherwise stand, might survive and lead a somewhat bouncy but no less fulfilling, caged life. He has taught more than one bent winged creature, with great patience, to fly.

Basically, for Sylvie and me however, the year of the birds was defined by perpetually plummeting fledglings, and it culminated in this startling event which I've hinted at but will not yet reveal. I'm holding it in reserve. Take heart. It will be well worth the wait. It is, unqualified, the truest and purest example of the French attitude toward les animaux that you will ever hear. I promise. But, first I must say this.

You know, my grandmother raised chickens all her life and she never got involved in henhouse politics. She had the ability to take up an axe and lop off the head of a hen when her life as a hen was over and her life as dinner was about to begin. She could, if company was expected, take up a chicken in each hand, and with a single motion, wring both their necks simultaneously. As a kid I witnessed both acts, and I remember the squawk they let out. I also remember

clearly how, once they were rendered headless, they ran around the yard—scattering the others and spurting their own life's blood in all directions—until Death decided that was enough of that. But I forget the somewhat less bloody process that followed, though I probably witnessed it dozens of times. Whatever the steps, she handled them all without either squeamishness or tears.

None of my grandmother's chickens had names.

Of course all of M. Bertrand's chickens have names; romantic names from the, sometimes literary (typically poetic), sometimes musical (classical) always glorious French past. And none of them will ever experience the axe. Those not taken by predators die of old age and are given a proper burial. Ah, well... weighed out and bagged, I think my Grandmother had the right idea when it came to chickens. For her, chickens were not pets. She never spent much time with them on her lap, except to pluck them. She never sang them lullabies or celebrated their birthdays. She may have talked to them gently, I don't know. Maybe though. Probably not. She was a good woman; a sensible woman. She fed them until it was time for them to return the favor. That was the arrangement. None of my Grandmother's chickens ever saw a veterinarian.

At any rate...chief among the peckers at Chez Bertrand was a hen named Gertrude. She was many times bigger and several times more demanding than all the others, and totally self-serving. Observations proved to my untrained, somewhat tainted, eye that she was a lumbering lummox of the vicious type. She repeatedly escaped during the day and

appeared at night cackling at the front door of the Bertrand's house, demanding immediate entry. Soon, by this strange behavior, she became my father-in-law's favorite. Admittedly, Gertrude was nice to look at, but, undeniably, she was an oppressive tyrant in the hen house, and, while strutting around proudly in the Bertrand residence, like all fowl, she had absolutely no control, or showed no desire anyway, to control her bowels.

My very dear and ever-delightful mother-in-law—a house-cleaning fanatic if ever there was one (apparently and regrettably, it's in the genes)—may have had (I am guessing here) just a bit of a problem with this bird being in the house so frequently and roaming wherever she might, and doing what the mindless do so freely. I don't think she has anything against birds in general—she just prefers finches. I believe Mme. Bertrand thinks, as I do, that chickens are best kept outside, in the chicken coop. My mother-in-law and I share this particular cold and, no doubt cruel stance when it comes to shared inter-species housing.

One day Gertrude managed to get her leg caught in some part of some apparatus in or around the chicken coop and, in the frantic process of trying to free herself, broke her hip.

To come home and discover any of his birds with a single feather missing was terrible enough, but this was the beloved Gertrude, and this was a serious fracture. So, it was all the more excruciating for M. Bertrand. She was discovered in the evening, still trapped, still struggling, clearly in pain, exhausted, frightened, and, my guess, just a bit irritable; facts which all made it even more punishing

for the good man. How long had this poor, beloved by man, feared by feathered associates, creature suffered?

There were no indications that any of the other birds had rushed to her assistance, and by the time M. Bertrand arrived home, they were all on perches and in nesting boxes, fast asleep...not a care in the world...dreaming, perhaps, of a brighter future.

Gertrude was rushed to an emergency veterinarian clinic. The vet—an American no doubt—looked at the limp creature struggling weakly in my wife's father's hands, shrugged and said coldly, directly, simply, informatively, "It's a chicken."

He was not sure the French gentleman knew that I guess because, according to my father-in-law's own account, he said it twice. "It's a chicken!"

Having had many years experience handling misguided Americans in his hotel, the clever M. Bertrand showed no sign whatsoever of how these words enraged him. The appropriate American gesture, I think, would have been to either punch the doctor right in the mouth and with considerable force or, at very least to make it clear that that particular option was being seriously weighed. But, M. Bertrand remained calm, calculating thus: veterinarians are doctors, if only of a minor sort, and he knew something about doctors. So he began to speak to this doctor-of-sorts in terms that any doctor of any sort would understand. He spoke directly to the man's heart; he started *talkin' money*.



At rest up until that point, the true doctor inside the veterinarian roused itself, and rose to the surface like a trout on a hatch of mayfly. The man's eyes lit up. His brow moistened. The conversation turned very serious very quickly. Yes, the man understood my father-in-laws concerns completely. "Oh the poor creature," said the, now near-tearful veterinarian and, "Yes, I understand how much she must mean to you." But, he was anxious, of course, to establish the actual figure. "It will be tricky of course, but yes, this noble fowl can be saved. It might cost a lot of money... (M. Bertrand shrugged)...but, yes this precious, precious, darling bird can be saved. How much do you think you might be willing to pay?" (M. Bertrand made a gesture which dismissed the question as too trivial to address.) "By Gad, this magnificent creature MUST be saved, Sir!"

(It was a scene right out of Gilbert and Sullivan.)

A plan was devised; drawn out on a scrap of yellow notebook paper (I've seen that paper, and it was a clever plan, although, in my opinion it required too many screws.). A plate would be carefully fabricated of some special alloy and a pin could be inserted just so, and the hip restored. It would cost some real money, of course. This needed to be made clear. It would cost.

M. Bertrand shrugged, blew a dismissive puff of air out between his lips to indicate that money was not a problem.

An aside: In the long run, I think this *money's no problem* stance may have been a mistake. From this point on, whenever M. Bertrand showed up at this veterinarian clinic, the wheels in the good doctor's slot machine eyes began to

spin around wildly and, somehow, it always came up cherries.

So, the *go-ahead* was given and the bird was taken gently aside and in time Gertrude was returned to her owner as the recipient of, quite possibly, the first hip replacement in all of chickendom. And here's a surprise, it proved to be every bit as expensive as the doctor had predicted—maybe a little more than M. Bertrand had anticipated, but ah, well.

Secretly (and this is just between you and me), M. Bertrand, who is no slouch, gasped when he saw the bill. He gasped quietly, inwardly, while retaining his outward composure, but he gasped. He confessed as much to his daughter, my dear wife. Here is a man who not only has coffee in *canal-side* Venetian cafés, but takes pastry as well and does not blink when the tab is slapped down with utter disdain upon the cold, but warm by comparison, marble tabletop. Still, this chicken hip-replacement far exceeded his expectations. It was worth it...of course...of course.

When she returned to the coop, walking now with an undeniable limp, looking something like an old Russian peasant woman, Gertrude was more vicious than ever. Very soon after her return every bird in the joint had feathers missing around their necks, and Gertrude had put on a little weight.

I can't tell you how I feel about all of this. To say that stories from the henhouse at Chez Bertrand no longer hold any charm for me would be one way of saying it.

And I won't even hint at how I felt when I heard that—a few brief weeks later—Gertrude had been dragged off in the middle of the night and torn limb from limb by a raccoon. I can safely say this however: I'm glad the Year of the Birds is behind us.

## MINOR JUSTICE

My wife regularly buys books for me. Although she reads three to five books per week; I read only one book in three to five weeks. So, typically it is a while between the time she gives me a book and the time I finally get around to it. Such is the case with The Pastons, a pretty cool (involving) nicely bound book, mostly private letters between various members of a noble English family in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Apparently, someone in the Paston family had put up a toll gate on the road that went through her property linking the town to whatever it was that lay beyond, and that caused some real trouble with those who wished to pass through there. So, I'm reading it, and I'm interested, and I'm getting more deeply involved. I'm looking forward to seeing how things work. I'm doing a pretty good job, setting a good pace, because I'm wondering particularly about this toll gate thing—I am completely on her side by the way—and when I turn page 96 I find myself suddenly on page 145. Upon further investigation, I see that page 160 is followed directly by page 113. That ain't right, even for a casual reader like me. So, I'm concerned, and I start pawing through the thing with increasing concern only to discover that pages 97 through 112 are missing entirely.

So, I wrote a nice letter to the nicely-bound book sellers who sold the book to my wife (and who have sold many nicely-bound books to her in the past), asking them if they would please replace the faulty book with one of the same title which had a more traditional approach to page-related continuity. I told them I would gladly return the other. I explained that I was concerned because *Lord Hungerford*

*just rode past Sheringham...*but I didn't know what happened to him next.

Well, the good people at the nicely-bound book sales company wrote me back almost immediately, sending me a terse little note saying they would need proof that I had purchased the book from them. Let me say here what I thought when I read that note. "Christ, what idiots!" That's what I thought. And I thought that more than once. Every time I read that letter, I thought it again but with increasing irritation. But, I calmed myself before responding. This is a little trick I've taught myself after 30 or 40 years of doing it the other way around, with limited success.

So, this idea of calming myself before responding is kind of an accomplishment of mine, and it has only really taken root since my marriage. For many years I mouthed (and touted) the concept of calming myself before responding—I saw the wisdom in it—but never quite learned how to employ the method. For many years I saw the lack of wisdom in responding to things without first calming myself, and pledged that 'next time' I'd give calming myself first a try, just to see how that might work out, but didn't. In the heat of the moment, calming myself never really occurred to me, or if it did I didn't feel I really had the time for it, I couldn't squeeze it in just then, before firing off a response. So, in this instance I made some real headway in my maturation as a man striving to become a gentleman. Bloated with pride I told my dear wife, "You might want to write this down: At age 50-something he decided to calm himself *before* responding to idiocy."

But, it goes far beyond just that. I also promised myself that I would maintain a good-natured attitude throughout the ordeal that I was no doubt about to find myself embroiled in, no matter how long it took to get it resolved. (I was growing by leaps and bounds.)

So, I wrote them back explaining that I had not, myself, purchased that book from them; that the book had been a gift given to me by my dear wife a long time previous to me ever picking it up, and that I wanted, out of kindness, if it was at all possible, to keep her out of the matter. Perhaps, I suggested, we could forgo making my poor wife paw through stacks of paperwork and bank statements; perhaps they could determine from their own records whether or not my wife had purchased such a book from them OR, by that same process determine, as they seemed to suppose, that I was perpetrating some kind of an overly complex scam to screw them out of a free, nicely bound, properly paginated copy of *The Pastons*. It was a carefully crafted letter, an appeal for decency and common sense and minor justice of a sort and all those other things that we can no longer expect as givens in this rapidly disintegrating world.

It was not a strongly worded letter, it was neither overly clever nor too chummy, it was carefully constructed (I thought) so as to keep fairly well hid what I honestly thought of their idiotic response to a perfectly reasonable request.

Can I say something about banks here? Just a single tale which comes unexpectedly to mind.

One time, thirty years or so ago, I deposited \$300 into a Wells Fargo savings account. I was flush at the time. But, down the road a very short piece I had need of that money and I went into that bank to withdraw it. I had a little book with a stamp and a bank employee's signature saying I had given them \$300. So when I presented my little book and asked for the \$300, the clerk counted out \$298.56.

I threw up both palms in an overly dramatic gesture which meant, "Whoa! I ain't touchin' that." I explained to the clerk, who seemed less than concerned, that I had deposited \$300 and I expected \$300 back. She, without further pleasantries (neither eye contact nor the faux-smile which is always expected of me in the hotel business) printed out something that showed my account number and the figure \$298.56. I then very quickly reached across the counter and recovered the little book with a stamp and a bank employee's signature saying I had given them \$300, and I showed it to her. I said, "I put \$300 in this account and I want \$300 out. That, to me, seemed perfectly reasonable.

I'll be brief because I know you have bank stories of your own, and better things to do, as Robert Frost might say, and better things to do.

So after some quibbling with her dug-in behind the safety of her counter, followed by a little remote quibbling with someone of a sterner sort, seated 18 feet away, who would not come out from behind her desk, I eventually ended up sitting in a comfortable chair across a much larger desk from the Branch Manager. He listened to something whispered in his ear by one of the others, eyeballed me,

looked at the paperwork, including the little book with a stamp and a bank employee's signature, before saying, "We can give you \$298.56 right now and settle this or you can come back in three days."

I said, "See you in three days," got up and walked out.

But, here's a question for you—wouldn't you, if you had been that bank manager—wouldn't you have simply reached in your pocket and pulled out a couple of dollar bills and tossed them casually upon your great big nicely polished desk? Wouldn't you then have said, "Here you go; you've been a good customer. If you ever find yourself on surer financial footing come back and see us again." Wouldn't you have done that? I would have. I probably would have changed it up a bit, shouting, "Here's your goddamned money, now get out!" He didn't though. More frightening still, the thought never crossed his mind.

Just to wrap things up, I returned three days later and the matter still hadn't been settled. I was told the accounting was handled in Los Angeles and it would be a few more days. (I actually wondered at the time if Wells Fargo was giving me the run-around in order to screw me out of a dollar forty.) When I returned again—couple of days later—they gave me my \$300 without comment. Who knows what GRAND banking machinations went into that excruciating decision concerning \$1.44? I'm sure it involved lawyers and accountants and board meetings, finger-pointing, firings, resignations in disgrace, perhaps a suicide or two. Bankers are such goddamned idiots. Most of 'em would screw their own grandmother out of a penny for a day's interest.



As for the nicely, but somewhat unpredictably bound copy of The Pastons, I think we went one more round in written form before I picked up the telephone. The implication that I was perpetrating an elaborate scam required the kind of huffiness only a stern voice over the phone can provide. “I want to speak to someone there who is reasonable,” I said nicely to the woman who answered on the other end. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” she asked with courtesy, but maybe just a bit surprised. “I said, I would like to speak to someone there who is reasonable, you know, someone who is capable of thinking straight, and who is in the position to accomplish something.” To my surprise the woman then said this: “That would be me. How may I help you?”

As it turned out, she was correct. She was reasonable and she did think straight and she did have the authority to make things happen. With very little effort on my part the thing was soon settled. I received a good copy of The Pastons a few days later in the mail.

I haven’t been able to work it back into the rotation yet, but I checked, and when I turned page 96—breath held, eyes a-squint—I found myself on page 97. Better still, from that point forward through the remainder of the book, the pages run in standard order. So now I have two nicely bound copies of The Pastons, I’m thinking about giving the first one to someone as a gift just to see what happens. It’s basically a new book; hardly been touched.

Henry Edward Fool

...My hope would be that after discovering its flaw, they'd write a letter to the nicely-bound book sellers and tell them it had been a gift from me.

Sylvie suggests I simply turn it into a book-safe.

## **ONE HALF INSULT ONE HALF INJURY**

One morning my very dear wife and I stepped out of the hotel on our way to take the dogs to the beach, and there was a car lying upside down on the sidewalk, up against the façade of the Sushi Man restaurant. The Sushi Man himself was standing there in a kind of jovial shock amongst a crowd of curious onlookers, cops and tow truck drivers. The trajectory of the incident could be traced backward through the side-swiped cars it had left in its wake as it came careening down Bush Street. They'd all been rearranged and had come to rest at strange new angles to the curb, with dents and scrapes and broken windows along the street side.

The last one hit, apparently, had been struck so hard that it had been driven up over the curb, and only the street-side wheels remained on pavement.

As my wife and I were taking all of this in, and remarking at how astounding it all was—it looked like a scene out of a movie about the end of civilization—I noticed something even more astounding. There was a meter maid. She was bent over the windshield of the car which had been driven up onto the sidewalk. She was checking the VIN. She was in the process of writing that car a ticket. I guess she thought that guy didn't have enough troubles.

My wife, who may have picked up a bad habit or two by hanging around with me, said, perhaps somewhat snidely, "She's probably just giving him a warning."

## PERHAPS

My truly wonderful wife and I were poking around in a nice little independently owned bookstore in a somewhat upscale, tree-lined, neighborhood one sunny San Francisco afternoon. I was standing almost in the doorway pawing through stacks of big, beautifully illustrated, recently published, nicely reduced nautical books and wishing I had more time to read. Outside, a trim young mother was passing by with her two young sons in tow. I'd say the younger one was maybe four and the brother not much older, but wiser to the ways of the world.

I didn't hear what lead up to it but as they were passing the young one declared, "When I grow up I'm gonna marry Mom."

Just as a point of information, his mother, without breaking stride, replied, "You can't marry a relative."

The older brother was somehow inspired by this to wrap his arm around his brother's neck and began to wrestle him around until they both came crashing in through the bookstore doorway. "You can't marry a relative, dummy," he said. "And," he added after driving his brother up against the table where I stood, "Mom is, *perhaps*, your closest relative." They stumbled around together in the doorway a bit more, then, I suppose Mom had stopped, turned, placed her hands on her hips and, with a motherly look, called them on. They just disappeared leaving me a little confused but thoroughly entertained.

It was the statement "Mom is...PERHAPS...your closest relative" that got me. Why was this little kid speaking like

that? Why was he hedging his bets on Mom's position in the familial scheme of things?

"And...Mom is, PERHAPS, your closest relative."

I must have been laughing too loudly for the sanctity of a small independently owned bookstore in a somewhat upscale, tree-lined, San Francisco neighborhood because the owner, behind the counter, scrunched up her doughy face in a display of prim but nonetheless scathing disapproval. The message seemed to be that she didn't mind selling books for a living, but it was just such a shame that she had to sell them to buffoons like me.

When my truly wonderful wife—who in such circumstance glows all the more brightly in my eyes—came to my side and asked what I was laughing about, I repeated the conversation much too loudly and far too joyously for anyone's taste...and, though the bookshop owner didn't, Sylvie liked it. She saw, in that tale, the kind of value that is either immediately understood or can never be explained.

Naturally, I'm tempted here to divide the world into two camps; those who understand and laugh and those who are irritated by those who understand and laugh. But then I'm reminded of our own customers, and understand the bookshop owner completely. I think somewhere deep inside her, buried in amidst all the intelligence and innate nobility, genuine kindness and natural courtesy, my wife even understands that view. Customers are a pain.

Sylvie, who is genuinely one of the nicest persons to ever set foot on this miserable planet, told me one day that she'd

had a dream. In the dream some bitter old woman—a guest at the hotel—had her cornered in the office and was pelting her with a steady barrage of tiresome details concerning her political views. As it was, this guest's POV was diametrically opposed to every view my very dear wife maintains. (Sylvie is a royalist—which leaves very few people in this century in agreement with her on most matters political.) At any rate, my wife, who, in the wakeful state, is kind far beyond any social requirement, was listening to this woman go on and on about this, and further on still about that, and, during the seemingly endless tirade, Sylvie found herself actively formulating a response that would, in a nice manner (of course), put a courteous but undeniable end to the discussion.

Apparently she came up with it and, when the harrier broke stride to take in a long breath in preparation for a fresh assault, Sylvie said calmly, *Oui, Madame, mais nous n'avons pas le regard de dieu qui voit l'éternité.*" (roughly: Yes, Madame, but we don't have the glance of God, who sees Eternity.) That put an end to it.

My wife told me this tale laughingly. She said it was a satisfying end to an otherwise miserable dream. And, despite the pomposity of the statement, she assured me, and I believe her, that there was no posturing, no posing, no arrogance whatsoever involved; it was merely a statement of fact. She issued this grand statement only as a means of putting a little perspective into play. One interpretation might be: Think what you will politically, there's probably something much bigger going on which we may never be

able to see. The real meaning of course was this: she just wanted to be rid of the woman.

As said, too much of anything is too much, but that's especially true when it comes to customers. Almost anyone in any line of business would probably agree with me that things would just be so much easier and a whole lot more pleasant if business could be conducted without the steady annoyance of having to deal with customers. But even in her dreams my wife treats the most annoying of them with courtesy and respect, and the assumption of their reasonable intelligence.

If anyone should like to know why I love my wife; this is just one of the nearly countless reasons why.

## OATMEAL

The secret of fine French cuisine, if you don't know already, is butter. Butter is the first thing in the pan and the last thing in the pan. Whatever is being prepared is braised first in butter, then placed into an oven in a pool of butter until it reaches the required state of doneness, then it's in the pan again with a bit more butter to put the final touch on it. After it's plated, some form of butter—a butter based sauce or some other buttery accent—may be dolloped or poured on top and then dribbled all around. It's served with good French bread which anyone who knows what he's doing slathers with good, unsalted, French or Danish butter. This approach to cooking naturally leads to universal praise, great admiration, wide recognition, and skyrocket-high cholesterol. After eating in one of the best French restaurants in San Francisco every evening for 4 or 5 years straight, mine was over 290.

The doctor offered me two alternatives; take some drug which, as likely as not, will later prove to cause heart attack, bleeding ulcers and dementia; or, eat a cup and a half of oat meal each and every day for six months. Then, he assured me, IF the test results were good, I'd only have to keep it up for the rest of my life.

I honestly thought eating oatmeal every day would be a breeze. I have always enjoyed the taste of oat meal. My idea of a real cookie—other than fresh-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip with walnuts, of course—is a nice big oatmeal cookie with a sprinkling of raisins. And, if I were the type to either be up or awake at some socially acceptable hour, I think a big bowl of oatmeal, a little pure



maple syrup, and a little butter, would be a great way to start any day. Even without the butter it would be more than OK. But, if you can eat a cup and a half of oatmeal every day for six months you're a better man than I am. (And apparently better than my brother as well, since now, after a similar experiment, he takes some kind of cholesterol lowering pharmaceutical rather than face another bowl of oats.)

I started out simply, making my oatmeal with water. Then, after a month or so, I started adding low fat milk. One night, just by chance, my wife took a shot at it, and the results were just incredible. It was the most delicious oatmeal I'd ever eaten; at once both creamy and slightly crunchy. The taste was remarkable. What a difference. Now THAT's oatmeal! I asked her what she had done to create such a fantastic dish and she said, "I followed the instructions on the box." It had never really occurred to me.

Some days later I was discussing this with my brother—who at that time was also on the oat meal diet—and he told me he'd gone through the same progression, including, ultimately, his own dear wife obtaining the very same remarkable results by the very same process: following the directions. More than high cholesterol runs in our family; we also have good instincts when it comes to picking excellent wives.

Somewhere in late March I hit the wall. Suddenly, without warning, the very thought of oat meal made me want to retch. I didn't want to see the stuff; I didn't want to smell it; the last thing on earth I wanted to do was to eat it. Worse

yet, even the word *oatmeal* caused a crank in my stomach to begin a slow churn. Unfortunately in discussing this development with my wife that awful word came up again and again. I pleaded with her, “Please, can we talk about this subject without saying that word?”

What was I going to do? I had 3 more months ahead of me, and, then—if my cholesterol had dropped to acceptable levels—I’d be expected to keep it up throughout eternity. I gave the matter some heavy thought while taking a few days off. Then, I girded my loins and, holding my nose charged head-long into the kitchen. I added fruit to the oatmeal and that seemed to help. I mixed in nuts. I tried it uncooked with yogurt and that went fine. I added oat meal in other forms to my diet—granola, woven oatmeal cereals, oat meal mixes with raisins and cranberries and nuts. Before long I was back on the good ol’ oat meal wagon again.

Although I have no doubts that my 290+ cholesterol level can be reasonably traced back to the restaurant, I’ve never said so. It would be a waste of breath. My in-laws would simply refuse to believe it, and no people on earth have greater denial skills than the French.

“Why do they not eat in our own restaurant?” M. wails. “They are afraid of cholesterol,” Madame chides. They shake their heads in derision as they cut into their steaks. “Pah! I have eaten this way my entire life and I have no cholesterol!” M. declares proudly. “What are they eating now, hay?”

“They say that his cholesterol has dropped 112 points since not eating in our restaurant,” my dear, occasionally fair minded, always delightful mother-in-law adds meekly.

“Well, that is something,” M. admits, “but to eat with great joy, to appreciate the rich and... (it goes on).

## BACON and Other Things

So, I got this wife/marriage thing going on and it's pretty good, but in conflict with that I am a male. So, I know I'm not supposed to go down to the kitchen and ask the cook to fry me up three fresh hot crispy slices of bacon and two scrambled eggs; and I'm not supposed to pile all that between two slices of wheat toast and gobble it down like a starving wolf but, on occasion, I do. I think I've done it twice in 12 years. And the second time, by chance, as I'm chomping down on this monstrous delight, just as my eyes roll Heavenward in gastronomic ecstasy, in walks my wife.

First, she stage-acts surprise, then stern criticism, then disgust. I was expecting her to follow up with "I don't even know who you are..." with a quiver in her voice, like a line out of a badly written movie. I explain that it's the second time in 12 years—and because she knows me, she knows it's the truth.

And that's that.

It doesn't come up again.

Things are perfectly normal again: no nagging, no second thoughts, no interrogation, no unfair and unfounded accusations. That's just how cool she is. That's just how glorious our marriage. (For a man, caught in the act of scarfing down a huge bacon sandwich, such an arrangement is nothing less than glorious.)

She sees this little indiscretion in the same light I see it: Men sometimes want bacon.

She doesn't always see things the same way I see them however. Sometimes she doesn't even *see* the things I see.

One day, we were standing on the corner of Powell Street and Sutter waiting for the light to change so we could step out into the street and be threatened by the people driving cars and wishing more than anything else in the world to turn onto Sutter Street, no matter the cost in human life. Standing at the curb, directly in front of us was a guy dressed like a clown. He had on clown make-up and clown clothing and a clown kind of hat. He was waiting for his chance to step out into the street and be threatened as well. Someone he knew saw him from across the street and shouted, "Hey, Lester! Hey! Lester, over here..." So, Lester the clown waved, and honked his tiny little, but oh-so-very irritating, horn, almost directly in front of my wife's face.

On our way up the hill, I said, "I could have bopped that clown moron..."

She said, "What clown moron?"

I'm astounded. "What clown moron?! That clown moron who was standing right in front of us. You didn't notice a guy dressed like a clown standing right in front of us?"

She said, "No, I was thinking about other things."

I do not ask her what other things she was thinking about, because they were probably things worth thinking about and way beyond my reach.

While I was thinking about how irritating I found that clown moron, she was probably translating some 16<sup>th</sup> Century French poem into Russian.

Another time, my wife and I were going into a bookstore and two women dressed like poodles came bouncing up to me and offered me something in a can, which I turned down. We went into the bookstore and I said something of a derogatory nature about women dressed like poodles, and she turned to me and looked at me very strangely.

“What did you say?”

“I said, it’s a weird world in which people dressed like poodles are out hawking soft drinks.”

“That’s what I thought you said. But, WHY did you say that?”

“Because of those poodles who approached us outside.”

“Poodles?”

“Yes. You didn’t notice that two young women dressed as poodles approached me and offered me a can of juice?”

I then lead her back to the front of the bookstore and we looked out, and the poodles were still there (thank god).

After she purchased her week’s supply of seven books, and I a copy of *Wooden Boat*, we stepped back out into the street. The poodles, I noticed, were further down a ways, near a corner. I looked at Sylvie.

“Yes, I see them,” she said.

The epitome of this—or maybe not—was one day when we were on our way to the French bakery and we found ourselves at a stoplight. I watched as a poor, lanky, black man in a suit came walking quickly up the hill with a woman walking six paces behind him and haranguing him every step of the way. He stopped and turned to confront her, but her relentless verbal onslaught gave him second thoughts. He gestured wildly—Just leave me alone—but, that was the last thing on that woman’s mind. He turned the

corner, and she was right behind him, yammering all the way, as they made their way down the hill and out of sight.

When the light changed, I said to Sylvie, "Well I'm glad we don't have that kind of thing going on."

She said, "What kind of thing?"

I said, "You didn't see that woman haranguing that poor guy in a suit?"

"No."

"You're telling me you didn't notice those two people walking up the street arguing with each other?"

"No," she said in sweet innocence, "I was distracted."

"Distracted? What were you distracted with?"

"I was distracted by our conversation."

By this time I'd forgotten what we'd been talking about.

"What were we talking about?" I asked.

"We were talking about how, when we are out on the street together, we never see the same things."

One time, on our way back from walking the dogs, she spied a lone meditative figure, posed poetically up on a rooftop. She thought him forlorn, melancholy, deep in thought. I looked up and laughed; it was some young tough on a cell phone. He was smoking a cigarette and looking over the edge of the roof. "He's calculating the distance to determine if he can spit on passing cars below," I said.

She said, "No... he seems pensive."

I said, "Yeah, he's probably trying to factor in wind speed."

## **A VERY DANGEROUS WOMAN**

My dear wife is calm and quiet and unassuming, she enjoys opera; she reads five books a week; she's a historian; she plays the harp: you'd think I'd be safe in her company. But, being with her has been a danger to my life from the very beginning, because my wife climbs trees, she rollerblades and skis; she swims in shark infested waters, and she likes nothing more than to set out upon a long walk with no consideration whatsoever for either the impending heat of the day or this peculiar nagging concept, harbored only by whiners like me, that we must inevitably also walk an equal distance in return.

I had never rollerbladed, nor skied, nor did I swim, ever—but especially not in shark-infested waters (well, once, in Hawaii, and we thought the guy was joking) —and I truly prefer a bicycle to bi-pedal ambulation if it involves more than three blocks. So, you can detect the depth of my love for this wonderful woman in the fact that I tried all of these things in order to impress her. For the record, we had no idea that bay was recognized as the west coast's most heavily populated breeding ground for sharks until long after we swam in it. (I suppose the National Geographic camera crew should have given us a hint.)

About rollerblading let me only say two things. One—as a child I never really got the hang of roller skating, and, I learned very quickly that having your feet suddenly slip out from under you is no fun. Because—two—when I fall down it is a horrendous thing. When I fall down, it's not a simple matter of dropping to the ground, it's more like I've been picked up and raised several feet in the air and, in that



brief moment while suspended, additional weights have been attached to my various flailing appendages and strapped to my chest, and *then*, I am SLAMMED down into the ground with a much-too-long-delayed, eagerly-awaited vengeance. When I fall, it's as if the gods themselves have a hand in it, and they're taking the opportunity to send the message that they don't like me very much. So, my attempt to impress the young lady, by heroically strapping on rented rollerblades, ended quickly and painfully, but not catastrophically if a bruised ego doesn't count. (I say this because, these days, many in our overly-sensitive society *would* consider a bruised ego both catastrophic and cruel, as well as a viable excuse for any socially repugnant or criminal behavior one might engage in at any point further on down the road of life.)

So, then it was on to skiing, where the falls are not upon the warm, dark, pebbly, rock hard surfaces which you might encounter on rollerblades, but cushioned by a cold, white, powdery, rock hard substance. Skiing is actually pretty damned wonderful, and if you can ignore the fact that the 'sport' seems to attract the finest and most arrogant human beings to ever honor the planet with their enviable glowing presence—each one so far superior to the next that it's hardly worth mentioning—then you can, riff-raff though you most assuredly must be, have an exhilarating time on skis. It is like nothing else. It is truly very cool, and truly very expensive. And, let's face it, we really don't belong there. I have no idea how smugness has become such a deeply ingrained part of skiing, but, despite appearances, arrogance is not requisite. My very dear wife is quiet and unassuming, and she skis like a dream.

Despite the lack of any desire to impress anyone, she skis like an angel. After seeing her distinctly gentle style the first time, I could spot her on the slopes the second she entered my view. Here she comes now, way up there at the top, dressed in powder blue, drifting down toward us like a lovely little snowflake. It's a beautiful thing to see. She's so light upon the snow you'd expect to see no tracks whatsoever behind her. You'd think watching her would be pleasure enough for me—wouldn't you?—especially considering my tendency to fall like a ton of bricks. But, I wanted to ski like that. I wanted to join her. I wanted the two of us to drift down that mountain together, in tandem, side by side, nicely, lightly, gracefully. Forget the simple fact that she is a natural and has been skiing for many years and I am an un-natural and had never skied before.

So, I gave it a shot, and over four or five ski trips I believe I have performed some of the most impressive falls ever witnessed in the history of the sport.

"Oh my GOD! Are you alright?" asks the stranger with trepidation in her voice.

"Yeah, I think so. Did it look pretty dramatic?"

"My god, I thought you'd at least be knocked unconscious."

"Did you see where my skis went?"

"Yeah, they're...Are you SURE you're alright? I've never seen anyone take such a horrendous fall before."

"You should have seen the one I took on my last run."

I didn't realize how much I loved flying down the hill without any control and no hope of gaining any until, one day, I found myself telling someone about my adventures

on the slopes, a few months after I broke my hand. During my 20 minute sales pitch it became undeniable: Man, I loved skiing.

The opposite of skiing, in almost every way, is hiking the trails of California. You go very very slowly, and there are no falls, but in many ways it is so much more painful.

Whatever our intention when we start out, our little hikes always turn into a death march. How we continually find ourselves out there somewhere, without a leaf of shade to be found, under the blistering sun, an hour's walk from where we might find any relief, is beyond me. But, in each of these grueling events there is a point where the husband—supposedly a tough guy—begins to break down, first suggests, then nags, then begins to whimper and plead with his wife—a genuine lady in every aspect of her being—to turn back. But she presses on, trudging relentlessly onward as if by going further away from the point of departure we might find—perhaps in death—whatever the heck it is we're after. Her take on it seems to be that only a weakling would quit before collapsing.

Though there must be things in this world that are worth dragging yourself up one hill and down the next, across the endless god forsaken wilderness under a vindictive sun in order to attain, we start out with no such goal. We start out only seeking enjoyment. And, though some things can be attained by trudging around out there on dusty, poison oak infested trails, enjoyment isn't one of them. It can't be found out there. Sunstroke can. Dehydration, dissembling, delirium, dementia. Those can all be found out there. But,

it's difficult to find a compassionate wife out there, I can tell you that.

Hiking for some people—and I think my dear wife can be counted among them—is like a remote control in the hands of an American male—they are driven ever forward by the hope that they'll stumble upon something worthy of their endless search. And, like the male with his beloved remote control, for the devoted hiker, there is really no hope, and they know that going in, but can not, somehow, be forced to ever openly admit it.

If you're looking for enjoyment out there, you're heading in the wrong direction. Turn around, my friend, I urge you. True enjoyment is found at home, in the shade, where the only walking required is those few steps necessary to replenish whatever you are drinking during that particularly idyllic time.

Not to mention the torn rotator cuff.

## DEATH MARCH FOR MARINE MAMMALS

“Come, Meet our Patients!” That was the hook. Apparently we’d given money to these people and now were we invited to tour their installation and look poor injured marine mammals directly in the moist ever-pleading eye. Like the animals they attended, the organization was struggling to survive; they were helpless without the aid of others. They wanted to thank us for our contribution and maybe, in the process extract a few more ducats. Who could be so heartless as to NOT accept such an opportunity? Not us, boy. We wanted to look at poor sick baby seals. Somehow that idea spoke to us.

Like so many of these sponsor appreciation/fund raising events there was supposed to be food. We knew what that meant. So, we took a bag lunch of our own. We made our little donation at the door, ate what we had brought, and dutifully sat on the bleachers in the sun, waiting for something to happen. After everyone else had had their fill of Chips Ahoy! and watery coffee, we were divide into groups of eight and were lead on a trek through the property. It seems to me that they wanted my wife and me to be in different groups—for what reason no one would say—but I jumped files and convinced somebody else to take my place in the other group of well-meaning strangers.

Then we walked to a building where they showed us their equipment. They showed us what they wore when recovering injured marine mammals. They held up a big net and asked, “What do you think this is?” They showed us a scrap book. They walked us from one place to another talking all the while about what they did and how

noble/unassuming/heroic/thankless their task. And, whenever we got within twenty feet of a living, breathing, recovering marine mammal of any sort, they rushed us along quickly, asking us to please keep moving.

Apparently looking at these poor recovering creatures could only cause them further harm. At no point, as we were ushered around the 30 acres, were we ever allowed to stop and gaze at one of their patients. In fact, in each case we were specifically asked not to.

So much for, "Come. Meet our patients!"

The grand finale was held in a cinder-block building where a marine mammal doctor of some sort gave a little talk about what they were trying to accomplish with all their grand but humble efforts, rescuing poor helpless injured marine mammals. Surprisingly, we discovered that what they were trying to accomplish, in large part, had to do with lab tests. Someone in our group asked what was *the most memorable poor little helpless animal* she could recall, and the good, sensitive, caring doctor replied: (something like this) "Well, I will never forget the time I was performing an autopsy on a sea lion pup and when I opened 'er up I discovered a bi-phlobial-dispeptic cranial lesion. God, that was a wonderful thing to stumble upon. So rare...so rare." She thought back upon that moment for a bit and a wan smile played across her lips. While she drifted off in reverie, my wife and I took the opportunity to drift off ourselves; we'd had enough. The good doctor had already shown us slides of blood smears and an enlarged liver (or something), we were pretty sure photos of the autopsy would be next.

So, now begins our journey home.

Having arrived in the backseat of her mother's car, we had decided beforehand that we'd simply take the bus back. Laugh with me now as we walk about a mile to the place where we are supposed to catch the bus and discover that it does not run on Sundays.

Here's a question for you. If you were running buses from the city out to the nearest beach in Marin, would you think that people might want to use that line on weekends? Me neither. WHO in their right minds ever goes anywhere on a Sunday, especially to the beach.

So, with no other alternative—I tried sticking out my thumb but the superior races seldom stoop so low, even after sharing an exhilarating afternoon not looking directly at poor injured marine mammals together—we started walking. (Caring about poor struggling marine mammals DOES NOT necessarily obligate one to extend courtesy to human beings.) I do not know how this works, but it was, as it always is when my very dear wife and I find ourselves in these situations, the very goddamned hottest day of the year. (There's that cleverness in Life, I mentioned earlier.)

So, as said, we started walking. And, after walking (my best guess) three hundred and forty-seven miles down the dusty road, we came to a place where we had to choose between either dragging ourselves up a very steep, long and winding narrow shoulderless road, over several consecutive ridges of the highest hill in the Marin Headlands, and, after a long and winding descent full of blind curves and steep cliffs, arrive maybe half a mile from the bridge, OR walk through a perfectly flat, probably cool, somewhat lengthy

but straight, tunnel, and emerge maybe half a mile from the bridge. (Hottest day of the year. It's your choice: up over the mountain on a narrow road with many blind curves, no shoulder, steep cliffs and oncoming traffic, in the blistering sun, or through the cool and shady tunnel.)

So, we headed toward that tunnel. And when we got there, there was a BIG sign stating very clearly in direct and perfectly understandable terms that NO Pedestrians (that was us) were allowed in that tunnel. None.

So, we went in there.

And it was narrow.

And it was dark. And it was cool, and it was damp.

And it was somewhat lengthy, and it took a while.

But, I've gotten ahead of myself.

The tunnel was a one lane affair where the light stops cars on one side while cars from the other side pass through. So, since we weren't cars, and since we were strictly and expressly forbidden anyway—but since I WAS NOT going to trudge up one side of that mountain on foot in the blistering sun only to descend the other side, still on foot (but a great deal more irritated), still under the blistering sun, we entered that tunnel when the light turned green on our side, along with three cars, none of which thought it prudent to roll down their little windows and offer us a lift despite the obvious innocence and clearly elevated social status of my wife and my feigned humanity. (Thank you, Norman Mailer.)

Let me say something about humanity here—I mean something about those cars waiting there who must have



been aware of our plight, since we were standing there beside the road, next to the sign, waiting for the light to ....well, on second thought never mind. What would be the point?

So, we entered that tunnel.

Dark, narrow...so long that we could not, from our side, see the light at the other end. And when we were a ways in, cars stopped coming up quickly behind us and blaring their horns, and cars started coming toward us rapidly blaring their horns and flashing their lights (They seemed to enjoy their high beams in particular.) Out of some great innate human kindness, instead of giving us as much room as they possibly could, each of them gave us as little. A kid going through the other way on a bicycle, slowed down enough to shout that we would be arrested if we were caught in there. "This is Federal Property!" he shouted. I thought that probably gave more comfort to my wife than me.

And at that point, Sylvie started lobbying to turn back. She may have been right. My thinking was, turn back or not, we're still in a tunnel which we are not supposed to be in, so, let's get somewhere. I had already decided that I would die of starvation in the Marin headlands rather than haul myself up over that ridge in the sun; it was the tunnel or starvation.

It was an endless tunnel.

It was dark and muggy and narrow and filled with exhaust and all the cars whether coming at us threateningly, or moving along swiftly in the direction we were headed, were

loaded to the gills with aggressive thoughtless lead-footed, horn-loving pricks. E...ventually we made it out the other side alive, somewhat shaken. But, as fate would have it, there was a cab just sitting there when we emerged.

He took off in a hurry when he saw me walking in his direction. There was also a bus stop there though, and I went over to look at a nicely posted schedule, only to discover that, apparently the Marin County bus people were in complete agreement with the San Francisco bus people concerning the necessity of busses going to the beach on Sunday. So we continued walking.

This is only half the tale, but you must be as tired as I am. I'll tell you the rest some other time. Suffice it for now to say that, from that point on, it only got worse. The 10.35 miles that MapQuest says we walked that day was really much further, because the bus we finally did manage to flag down in the Presidio, looped around and took us back in the direction we'd just come shortly after we boarded. The closer to home we were, the more difficult it became to get there. I sure hope none of this sounds peevish.

A note:

I asked my wife one day if she had read this accounting and she told me she had. Then she said this: "Unfortunately, you failed to capture the full horror of the event."

## ENTERTAINING THE FRENCH KID

Because it's convenient, we like to perform our forced marches, whenever we can, in the hills of Marin. There, there is no relief from the pounding sun however green and lush those hills may appear as you fly by in your air conditioned car on the freeway far below, on your way to some cool glade in the midst of sheltering trees. There, in the hills of Marin, you can trudge endlessly in ever widening circles with no hope of ever finding your way back, and (if you're anything like me) while glaring out from the smoldering center of your ever-building discontent, you can observe others trekking buoyantly along those same oppressive trails chatting away cheerfully, quipping cleverly, and smiling mindlessly like contented idiots. Or, at least that's been my experience.

I believe my very dear wife gets more joy out of it than I. Sisyphus would get more joy out of it than I.

Let me say here that I don't know what it is with the French (but, perhaps that's already clear). Sylvie's father is a handy example. Since I have known the man he has; fallen from a ladder (and not in the usual way, but face first), fallen off the same roof several times, fallen down a flight of steps (or two or three or four or more), fallen from a precipice while protectively clinging to a life-size stone sculpture of Phoebe, fallen THROUGH a skylight onto a marble floor, impaled his hand on a rake, impaled his head on an exposed roofing spike, impaled his foot—for once in the traditional manner—on a large rusty nail, scraped and burned and cut and sliced and jammed and bruised and strained almost every part of his body; proudly displayed

the injury on the next day—always with an interesting tale attached—and then proudly displayed the thoroughly healed location three or four days later so that those who don't believe in miracles must go away and re-think their position. This man has had his eye pecked at by a chick, while it sat, and shat, lovingly upon his shoulder, and it only improved his vision in that eye.

The reason I tell you this is because there was a young French woman staying at the hotel, supposedly for a month or so, and after day two she was homesick and wanted to return to France. So, Sylvie had this idea that we would drag her out to Marin and march her up and down those heartless hills until she either changed her mind or Death finally emerged the obvious preferred choice when judged against taking one more miserable step.

So, that's what we did. (And when it was all over *I* was homesick and wanted to return to France...) But seriously, I think the idea was—as it always is—that if you go out there and you walk around, by observing and absorbing nature in all of its truly convincingly-natural aspect, you will find that a kind of satisfaction begins to fill your usually empty being. As you make your way about, without the assurance of mirrors or the necessity of credit cards, or the manipulative praise of others, you will re-discover what is real. And, of course, that would all be swell, if it weren't for the endless clomp- clomp- clomping required under a relentless and oppressive sun. Not really a beach-kind-of-guy, I take my full share of humility at home, on the couch and consider the magnificence of this world from that position. When my very dear wife throws her arms around

me for no apparent reason, I am most convinced of the true loveliness of the world in which we find ourselves. No flora required.

So, anyway, we took this French kid out into those hills and tried to walk her to death and she only grew stronger with every lapsing hour. And when my wife and I had had our fill of it and were almost desperate in our desire to strike out homeward in the most direct path possible, the French kid was just beginning to blossom. We—wife and me—in hats and covered in sun block, were being broiled alive under a particularly cruel glaring bulb, could hardly take another minute of it, but the kid—ash-blond, pale of skin, hatless and unlathered—could not get enough. I was whimpering as we trudged onward and gave out loud sobbing prayers of thanks when our car at last hove into sight, a tiny little silver speck amid other little blessed multi-colored specks so far below that it seemed cruel...but not so far that I didn't begin to run, in a wobbly-kneed kind of pitiful way with tears of joy running down my blistered face.

The French kid wept that such fun should end so soon. She looked at me and, in her innocence, thought she understood my tears.

"Oh...we can come back again," she assured me. It was about the same as, upon my arrival in Hell, finding myself greeted by someone consoling me with the assurance that my stay there would be both prolonged and guaranteed.

When we went out for pizza that night, the French girl was every bit as pale of skin as she had been upon her arrival in

this country. My wife and I had fiery red noses, chins, cheeks, necks, foreheads, hands and arms. And though we ate quite well, we were really too exhausted to eat with much enthusiasm. Our little guest from France however ate like a wolf, and chatted continually about what a wonderful time she'd had and how now she wanted to stay in California forever.

## DEATH MARCH HALF MOON BAY

On another trip, returning from Pacific Grove or that same neck of the woods, we stopped in Half Moon Bay on the way home. I knew of a small park there where we could stretch our legs, refresh and renew ourselves. The idea was to take a walk on a short trail, before returning to work.

The trail, which leads to an old abandoned trout farm, was much shorter than I remembered it and we emerged from the shade of the forest with our eyes on another trail which wound seductively around a large hill festooned in shade trees. The trail, on the map, appeared to be a reasonable length, and the trees were inviting. It was a hot afternoon. At that time I think we were willing to do anything that would keep us from returning to the hotel and face work. So, we started out.

It was a very pleasant climb indeed for the first little shady half hour, but then we thought we had had enough and were standing around debating whether we should turn back or continue on. It was merely a matter of distance—which way was shorter.

As Fate would have it, we met a slightly overweight young man in a Giants baseball cap coming from the other direction, and we asked him, “Say young slightly overweight Giants fan coming from the other direction, how much further to the end of this truly delightful trail?” He replied, “Well, dear gullible old folk, you are more than half the way there.”

I did not know then, but I now know what he was thinking while he smiled and spoke these words. He was thinking this, “I cleverly have kept unrevealed the fact that every goddamned miserable inch of the remainder of the way, as soon as you round this bend ahead, will be in the blistering sun, with no escape until you reach the end, which is actually much much further than I’ve suggested, you stupid, stupid, trusting, old gullible bastards, each of a generation which I, for no good reason, most certainly despise.” Perhaps these were not his exact thoughts, but they’re close enough. Otherwise he would have said, “It’s much further ahead than where you’ve come from, and it’s all in the sun.”

Because he wore a Giants cap I thought he was an honest, kindly sort of amiable slightly overweight moronic young prick and not the vicious, lying, thoughtless, false-hearted, moronic young prick he actually turned out to be. It was the Giants cap that had confused me. (But, actually, now that I think about it, I seem to recall that the trailside rapist in Big Basin 30 years ago, also wore a Giant’s cap.)

So, being as gullible and trusting as he had supposed us to be, we pressed on. And, even after we found ourselves under the microscope of the blistering sun—such is the trust that dwells within our willing hearts—we continued to press on—at a certain point it seemed only logical to continue—and so also continued to believe that it was the shortest distance to the finish line.

We wandered around in there, under the relentless, nagging sun, back and forth upon that dusty trail, switchback after



endless switchback, without the slightest movement of air or anything like the fading memory of shade, until my very dear wife, whom I adore with all my heart, began to get quite red in the face and she declared that she honestly felt she could go no further. She had a headache, felt nauseated, and her heart was racing. At that point, I began, in the fine American male tradition (as I know it), to curse that goddamned slightly overweight deceiving bastard in the Giants cap. And I continued to do so with every weary step. But, no matter how loud, scathing and childish my rant, my wife's condition only continued to worsen. Still, I cursed that kid roundly, and without let up, until we reached the bottom of that hill.

I'm not sure that helped her much.

It wasn't really the lovely end to our little get-away that we had anticipated.

## **BREAKING NEWS**

The days of me tromping around on the stage of Life bellowing toward the heavens, “Give me a break!” are over. On Sunday last I not only got the break I’ve been demanding for so many years, I got two breaks. And as Life would have it, they came about totally unexpectedly.

My truly wonderful wife and I were walking the pretty-damned-wonderful dog in the late evening, and we decided, since it was a cold, clear night, to go a few extra blocks. Near the center of the block, on our side, the sidewalk disappeared and I suggested, “Let’s go across the street, it’s probably safer over there.” As we approached the sidewalk my foot landed on the mist-slickened surface of a manhole cover and the long bone of my left leg turned inward to the right and my left foot collapsed off to the left and I came crashing to the pavement. Somehow I knew immediately that I had broken my ankle. What I didn’t know was that I had broken it in two places.

When my startled wife saw me sitting in the street holding my dangling, unresponsive foot in one hand, I told her, “I think I’ve broken my ankle.” As she reports it, and as I remember it, I was perfectly calm at the time. “I’ve just broken my ankle; see if you can get some help, please.” It was one time in my life when my normal high-strung, near-hysterical approach to every tiny inconvenience might have made some sense, and I’m sitting there on the cold pavement, an idle duck casually adrift upon a placid pond.

By chance a Chinese woman was coming out of her house and she lent Sylvie her cell phone to call an ambulance.

A young man stopped his car to see what the small crowd was about at that hour and why some old man was sitting in the street. He got out and looked, asked a couple questions, then went back to his car to get me a blanket, tossed it at me and said, "Keep it." He paused. "I really gotta go," he said. Then, like the Lone Ranger, he was gone.

When the ambulance arrived it was being handled by two kids of the Justin and Jason generation, though one of them was named Josh. They seemed relatively indifferent to my pain, my comfort, and my concerns about how my wife and the dog were to get home safely. They gave me commands and demanded answers to a variety of questions. I pleaded one more time that my wife and the dog be given a lift in a homeward direction, but no dice. My dear wife and the dog would have to fend for themselves.

I was locked in back there with Justin or Jason, a young man half my age but better than me in every way; youth, looks, musculature...a job that he could actually stand, decent pay. He'd broken, not one, but both ankles, one more than once, several ribs, an arm or two...the list was endless. He came from that generation—all eager practitioners of stupidicide—which is proud of their reckless approach to dangerous and completely unnecessary idiotic stunts on boards of every conceivable sort. He talked loudly with a kind of energetic smugness during the whole trip, about (naturally) himself and (casually) his various injuries and (of course) how lucky his mother was to have him still living at home, at age 37. Between the lines I imagined how proud and lenient she must be to have her grown son fornicating brutishly in his

little room across the hall while she tosses fitfully, alone, still bewildered by her ex-husband's abandonment, only to go off and marry a young blonde named Tiffany and live a distant happy life with their two new genius angel children in Malibu. Her EMT first-born son, sensing that I must be hungry for every detail or every aspect of his life since daddy's departure, gladly filled me in while we bounced along together, siren a-wail, to the emergency room.

At some point during the trip he called me a *tough guy*.

Before I left the hospital, five hours later, with my leg in a cast, two doctors, some unspecified clipboard-bearing male and a nurse had all looked at me at one time or another and declared me a tough guy. It was a *nom de guerre* which carried over to the doctor who re-set my ankle and put a permanent cast on it two days later. He called me a tough guy too...at which point I tried to get a look at my chart to see if someone had written those words on it in bold print somewhere. Just for the record, I'm not a tough guy; I just don't take all the pills doctors broadcast so eagerly, and I don't surrender to the knife if still conscious or living.

Week Two: I had already called everyone I could think of to say that Christmas gifts would be delayed due to this broken ankle when Sylvie turned to me and said, "If blind women can weave baskets you can certainly wrap a few gifts." We are a gift giving people and nothing short of death will prevent us from doing our duty in this utterly meaningless matter.

An aside: One time many years ago I made a futile attempt to convince people whose lives were already full of useless goddamned junk that the exchange of more useless goddamned junk with other people whose lives were also already completely full of useless goddamned junk was idiotic. I stood in the business district handing out flyers which stated my case. (I was young at the time.) And what I was doing caught the attention of a Chronicle reporter (Dwight Chapin) who then interviewed me and wrote a kind, fairly representative article about my idiocy. (This was long before I met Sylvie.)

So, one time, in reference to that—I forget how the matter surfaced, but—my dear wife said to me, “I can’t believe you launched a campaign in an attempt to destroy Christmas.”

I said, “I didn’t launch a campaign in an attempt to destroy Christmas. I simply tried to convince a few people who already have too much goddamned useless crap in their lives that giving more goddamned useless crap to others, who then feel compelled to give them some goddamned useless crap in return, is silly.”

“Well, you know what my view is on that,” she said.

“Yes, I know what your view is on that. Your view is that people should be able to accumulate as much goddamned useless crap as they might ever want and exchange it with others should they so desire, without criticism or interference of any sort from people like me.”

To which my very dear wife replied, “Precisely.”

And this is why I love not only my wife, but our marriage. Other wives in other marriages would have taken that

opportunity to mess with their husbands in one completely unnecessary, pain in the ass way or another. But, not my wife. In our marriage we are entertained by the other's weird, somewhat misguided, point of view on those matters in which we each maintain a distinctively unique clarity.

I don't think the honeymoon is entirely over, because she continues to wait on me with a concerned look in her lovely eyes, but I think we're both pretty tired of this broken ankle thing already.

I can't do a thing but sit around with my foot up, writhe in continual (and by that I mean relentless) pain and look on helplessly as I slowly begin to understand why the houses of invalids are always such an embarrassing mess. My nightstand, which usually holds a photograph which captures my dear wife and her adoring husband, a little needlepoint she did for me in a similar frame and a peculiar little bronze lamp with a lily-shaped embroidered Victorian shade, now holds all of that as well as a letter from I can not recall whom, a telephone, two remote controls, several small scraps of paper with undeniable but indecipherable pith scrawled awkwardly upon them, some pills my delightful mother-in-law gave me which I refuse to take (cause I'm a tough guy), an unopened bill of some sort, and the spoon that I used last night to eat yogurt. Next to me on the bed, is, curled up nicely, a cat, and the case with my ukulele upon which now rest an address book, a case for my reading glasses, two good books (one by E.B. White, the other by Admiral Lord Cochrane), an empty plastic water bottle, a used paper napkin, a cup with a used fork in it, and something which, because of the light, I can not

determine the nature of though I'm sure it has a reason for being there.

We have 6 weeks to go, and already I have the pallor of a poet.

A few days have passed and now it's Christmas.

I wandered out on my crutches to the office to sit for a while with my good wife and to employ the skills I've developed over the last few days at wrapping gifts with only one useful ankle. I've gotten pretty good at it and managed to wrap one nicely framed opera poster, one small cast iron pig and a glazed white ceramic bowl with a pewter pill box resting inside upon a bed of freshly shucked walnuts, without causing myself any further injury. Although I have rejected my friend Bruce's advice—he saw this as an opportunity for me to sit around in cafes with my crutches, a cup of coffee, three days' growth and a knapsack, scowling at people and grumbling—my fractured ankle has not turned me into a sweetheart.

The very few and lucky guests I've come into contact with all seem surprised to discover that a broken ankle hasn't rendered me more amiable and a great deal more chatty. People who have never spoken to me before want to hang around and talk about it; they smile sweetly as they prod me for details. I know the response they're expecting. I'm supposed to shrug it all off with wit and charm—but I can't. Or won't.

Henry Edward Fool

Nonetheless, this event has given me some time, at last, to think epic thoughts...

... not that I will.

An afterthought:

My very dear wife, who sprains her ankle at least twice a year—and a dozen times a year before I made her throw out those damned clogs—was attentive and tremendously sympathetic throughout my broken ankle ordeal. This is a woman who can, and has, sprained her ankle while simply standing still on a flat surface. On the other hand entirely, my reaction to her spraining her ankle is to first, curse the heavens, then, stomp around in circles like a madman while mumbling to myself, before picking her up or helping her to her feet. For as long as I have known the woman she has suggested that I might consider picking her up from the middle of the street *first* and, after assisting her safely to the curb, *then* release my apparently uncontrollable rage upon the heavens. Her hope, I think, is that, in time, I may, some wonderful distant day, simply pick her up, see that she's OK, and rage not at all. Naturally, I share that hope.



## **A FEW WORDS ABOUT COURTLY LOVE and then the Shingles**

I've always been a fan of courtly love. The idea that you can love a woman truly, purely, from afar, and dedicate yourself to her, to her protection, to her happiness, without ever having any physical contact with her is a remarkably lofty concept. It is only a concept of course, and all the wrong people subscribed to it, and usually for the wrong reasons. It would probably be for the best, for example, if more people in drinking establishments would attempt to practice it. That the earliest advocates of courtly love—not to be confused with actual practitioners—could not have had the woman they desired anyway doesn't really detract that much from the loftiness of the ideal. That the object of their desire was, typically, married to a nobleman with a very sharp sword and either an indeterminate or too-well-known temper takes away just a bit. (A blade even in the hands of a relatively unskilled swordsman does tend to send an unmistakable message.)

As a college kid I subscribed to courtly love...the option, even way back then, was called stalking. The fact that I had no difficulty getting women into bed with me kind of ruined the noble concept though. These days I recognize the beauty of courtly love and though we are together in every wonderful way, I still take the time to admire and adore my wife at a distance. This distant appreciation of her adds something like a hunger to our wonderful marriage and maybe even elevates it to a level where marriage should probably reside anyway. But, enough about voluntary courtly love, now let's talk about the shingles and strictly enforced courtly love.

In the on-going battle to prove who cares least about their customers, the airlines or the banks, the health care professionals win hands down. It's not surprising that anyone might find it difficult to drag to the surface whatever it takes to care about the health of a never-ending deluge of miserable, whining, sickly, possibly contagious, strangers, but these people, in general, don't seem to even care about their own health. The conflict between the title, *health care provider*, and their dumpy appearance as they shuffle around in grubby, soiled, once-white uniforms is telling. It doesn't really help much—no matter how sick we may be—to look beyond the fact that so many of them are slovenly and over-weight, only to observe them taking every opportunity to slip out into the alley to stuff their faces with puffy cheese snacks, shamelessly glug down soda and desperately inhale cigarettes. Judging by such carelessness in the matter of hygiene, you might think they were in the food preparation business, not health care. Going to such people for your health, is like asking a butcher to baby-sit your pet pot-bellied piglet.

The healthcare people, like the banks and the airlines, continually tell us how much they care though, and ...I probably don't even need to finish that thought.

So, let me now tell you this:

When I broke my ankle, there was not a single soul who checked into this hotel, or crossed my path by any other means, who had NOT also broken an ankle themselves, at one time or another. Until I'd broken my ankle they'd all kept the fact a secret from me. Of course, I had no reason to doubt any of them.

But, when it comes to shingles, it's another matter.

I say that because a man within earshot once shrugged and declared that he'd had *a mild case of the shingles one time*. So, I knew that man immediately to be a liar. If by 'mild' he meant that he had uncountable red, encrusted, puss-producing welts which ran rampant from his sternum, around one side of his body and ended only at the center of his back; and that every single pore in each of those uncountable welts responded to the slightest touch like an exposed nerve during a root canal—*without anesthesia*—then I wonder what a bad case would be like. For me the pain ran deep deep within me, as if that entire segment of my body was continually roasting in a fiery hell.

When my very dear wife asked me to describe the pain to her, this is the best I could come up with. It was like someone had taken a dozen knitting needles fresh from an open fire and, using those welts as targets, plunged those red-hot needles directly into the meat of my body and drove them in, about four inches deep. It was by far the most painful thing I had ever experienced in life... and as a child I'd been forced to watch I Love Lucy.

Initially that pain lasted six seemingly endless hours each night. During that time I found myself screaming and in tears. Seventeen days later, although the welts were slowly drying up and going back to Hell, from whence they'd come, the pain had become continual (and by continual, I mean relentless). I was no longer crippled by the pain, but every movement forced me to reflect on what a regrettable mistake my own birth had been.

(Admittedly, I deserve no better.)

I expect far too much from life. And let me add quickly, though probably not quickly enough for some people, that YES, I do realize there are people in this world suffering greater tragedies than a bout of shingles. Nonetheless, as they say...

Nonetheless, I feel compelled to say something about Kaiser Permanente and their system-wide total inability to EVER answer any direct question, no matter how simply put, with a direct answer. Though their tendency toward inaction is worse, of course.

My father-in-law—with whom my wife and I work—had shingles, and because I was as close to 60 years old as a man can get without leaving it behind, my wife called Kaiser and asked if I could get a shot which would prevent that occurrence in me. “No, not until after his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday,” she was told. My wife, who loves me far beyond what anyone who knows me might consider reasonable, said, “Yes, but my husband is being exposed to this contagious malady even as we speak.” “Not ONE DAY before his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday!” she was told with the usual unnecessary brusqueness. Of course any time an idiot is randomly assigned authority, and that idiot comes into contact with a gentle, courteous, clear-thinking, and logically minded, soft-spoken lady of natural pleasant demeanor, there is bound to be conflict. Beyond that however, I would think that anyone in the health care business, upon hearing about someone being exposed to a contagious disease, would not even think of denying that

person a shot that could protect him and prevent him from having to go through that dread disease.

But, I'd be wrong.

My wife was born in France and has had no immunization shot against chicken pox, nor has she had chicken pox. So, since the two diseases—shingles and chicken pox—are entwined, she was highly, highly susceptible, both from lack of immunity as well as from being around her father. The good folks at Kaiser could not believe, WOULD not believe, that she had never had chicken pox. And, it was impossible for them to accept the fact that she had never had a immunization shot for that virus. She TOLD THEM SO. She told them so. They refused to believe it.

They suggested that she have a blood test to see if she was, for what reason I cannot imagine, lying to them.

"Maybe you had chicken pox and have forgotten," they said. "Maybe you had a shot but don't remember."

"My mother says that I never had this shot," said my wife in sweet dulcet tones.

"Well maybe your mother doesn't remember," came the snappish reply. What pleasure. What caring.

So, my wife took a test to prove to the delightful, ever-caring folk at Kaiser that she had never had either chicken pox or the immunization shot. And that test proved that my wife was not a liar. The results came back about the time my father-in-law had stopped being contagious.

So, then—a few very short days before my 60th birthday—I came down with shingles, putting my wife in even greater

danger. Concerned about her welfare, I asked the doctor who ‘treated’ me what we needed to do to protect my vulnerable wife, and explained things to her.

She, my doctor, said, “Have her contact her doctor.”

I said, “Well, in the meanwhile what would you suggest?”

“Have her call her doctor.”

“No—please listen to me—what should we be doing to keep my wife from getting chicken pox?”

“Have her call her doctor,” she said. “I can’t speak specifically because I don’t know about her case.”

“Yes, you do,” I said with remarkable restraint, “I just told you. She has *never had* the chicken pox and she has *not had* an immunization shot and we are in close, continual contact with each other. So, in the most general sense, knowing what I’ve just told you, what should we be doing to protect her?”

“Have her call her doctor.”

So, you know, that brings up the question: IF I had, at that moment, in an uncontrollable rage, strangled that person—I’m sorry...that Doctor—as she sat there looking hollow-eyed and somehow smugly indifferent, would I be allowed, in a court of law, to tell my whole story, and would I be capable of telling that story in such a way that the judge and jury might both understand that I’d been driven to it? Would they understand why I had done what I had done? At the time, I guessed not, and therefore did not.

My wife spent two hours on the phone explaining her situation, in a remarkably controlled and courteous manner—as is her way—to not just one but several

consecutive healthcare idiots, ALL of whom expressed their inability to believe that she was telling them the truth, and ALL of whom suggested that she take a blood test—to determine if what she was telling them was the truth. When she explained to them that she had done that once already, they had a suggestion for her. They suggest that she talk to her doctor.

I stood by during all of this, listening to my wife as she was being tortured by these idiots for as long as any man could, before I went into another room and picked up the phone. It took two calls to get anyone to hear or understand what I was saying which was, in essence...well you know...I was contagious, my wife was susceptible—she has already had the blood test to prove that she is not a liar—and could she get a shot to prevent her from contracting chicken pox? Guess what they said.

“She would have to talk to her doctor.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because she’s the patient.”

“She is not the patient YET,” I explained with a constraint that amazed even me, “and what we are trying to do here is to prevent her from becoming the patient.”

I took a breath.

“You know,” I said, “I know that you people are really busy creating TV commercials telling everybody how much you care, and printing up posters touting patients’ rights and brochures encouraging us to ask questions and become involved in our own health, but neither my wife nor I have EVER, in all of our dealings with you, EVER

managed to get ANYONE from your organization to answer a simple question with a simple direct answer.”

And the person on the other line said this, “I see they have you on such-n-such for pain, have you noticed any change in you demeanor since taking it?”

I said, “You know, I *have* noticed a change in my demeanor, but it has nothing to do with that drug. It has everything to do with your organization’s policy to NEVER EVER, under any goddamned circumstance, give anybody a direct answer to a direct question.” To which she replied, “You should have your wife call her doctor.”

You’d think I might have developed an admiration for the skill required to avoid answering any question while at the same time maintaining a very high level of cold, indifferent, and completely uncalled for rudeness, but I never did. Some people seem to appreciate it though. The Economist, speaking of health plans, held up Kaiser Permanente as an example of just how wonderful, how quick, clean, neat and efficient, health care could be, saying, *Kaiser, which is arguably the best*. I nearly choked when I saw those words.

During these tribulations—and I don’t know which was more painful shingles or dealing with idiots—I kept myself in a separate room, and lived alone with only occasional glimpses of my caring wife. And during that time I renewed my appreciation for courtly love, loving her all the more dearly with each passing moment. Still, it was a hell of a price to pay for something I already understood.



## **MALE TROUBLE without apology**

I had a pain in a part of the body part that many males feel somewhat possessive about and, after putting it off as long as any American male could without being driven stark raving mad, I made an appointment.

The doctor came in and asked me what the problem was and I described the pain and he smiled and said, "Well, sounds like you picked *something* up." He winked.

"I'm a married man," I said.

"Ha-ha," he laughed, "most of the men I treat for STD are married men."

"Yes, perhaps, but I'm married willingly," I said, "I don't have a sexually transmitted disease."

He smiled knowingly. "Just relax, this is pretty common. After we find out what it is exactly, we'll take care of it and your wife won't ever have to know about it."

"This is not a venereal disease," I said, "I've injured myself."

He looked me in the eye to determine if I was pulling his leg, then snorted conspiratorially. "Yeah, I know," he said, "most of the men who come in because they've *injured themselves* are married men. Your wife will never have to know about it."

"Listen to me," I said, "I have had nothing to do with any woman other than my wife."

"Just take this to the lab," he said with a knowing smile, "when you're done we'll see what further tests we'll have to do." The stupid bastard winked at me.

I said, “Listen, I have not been with any other person. I have been with my wife and only with my wife for as long as we’ve been married.”

He snorted again and said, “OK. But, we’ll just give you a little test to determine what you have. When it comes back we’ll talk about what to do about it.”

The guy was some kind of a fuckin’ idiot. <sup>1</sup>

So, they gave me *a little test*, and it was determined that I had NOT contracted a venereal disease; that I had, in fact, injured myself, which is pretty much what I had told the man going in. How, was still a mystery.

When next time I sat before this guy, this doctor—one half hour later—he said, “Well, there are no signs of STD, but you *have* hurt yourself; I’ll prescribe something to help you heal.” He offered no apology for having offended me, my wife and our marriage. I waited, it never came. After making a few notes on the computer he simply got up and left the room.

I don’t know why I was surprised; I had fallen into that very same trap before. Late one night, years before, I woke up suddenly with a tremendous pain in my chest. Harkening back to the continual, relentless onslaught of fear inducing commercials, I had my girlfriend at the time

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<sup>1</sup> In editing this piece my wife placed a margin note saying, ‘*Do not be vulgar*’, but, though I have taken the time, and I have struggled with it, I’ve been unable to come up with a more perfect description of that man.

drive me to the emergency room. That is what the commercials encouraged us to do. Don't be silly, they said. First sign of such pain, get yourself to a hospital! So, I did that. And the doctor came in—casually—and checked a few things under the hood, and told me, “There's nothing wrong with you; it's stress. You should learn to relax, instead of coming in here in the middle of the night and wasting our resources.” (That's a direct quote.) I said, “Is there anything I should do?”

He said, “Try not to get hit by a truck when crossing the street,” and left the room shaking his head.

Apparently, unless you are absolutely sure it's a heart attack you're just wasting everybody's time and these guys have better things to do than to mess around with someone who doesn't have the common sense to know the difference.

So, with those experiences behind me you might see why it becomes a toss-up between going to a quack who simply and without pretense reaches into his pocket and dishes up the sample drugs, or going to another health care professional who, without knowing anything about me, accuses me of cheating on my wife, OR rushing in, at the medical community's constant urging, in fear for my life only to be horse-laughed out of the place, or, wishing not to waste their resources, simply dying in bed.

One time when my wife was checking into the hospital; they were preparing her for a minor operation and the brute nurse had inserted a needle so badly into her arm that her wrist had swollen to five times what it normally would be. My wife was frightened and asked, in the most humble and

courteous manner, if this seemed quite correct. The nurse, in return said, basically, "Don't be such a baby!"

I went off immediately to get a doctor. The doctor followed me back, and asked, "What's the problem here?"

The nurse responded, "The problem, Doctor, is that *this patient doesn't seem to understand her position here.*"

Apparently our position as patients is to shut up and do what we're told to do. But my wife is not a sheep. And she's quite observant too. For example, she once observed that some medical people act more like prison guards than health care professionals. From what I've seen, that's a pretty good description.

Although the doctor did what she could to keep the fact hidden, that the nurse had inserted the needle incorrectly, and perhaps dangerously, she also had to correct the brute. The whispered conversation between them, as the needle was withdrawn and re-inserted, wasn't all that comforting to either my dear wife or me. So, you know, without being anywhere near as crude about it as might be fair and reasonable, the medical community ...well, forget that.

Let's just say that my personal experiences have not left me with the very best impression of these people or their organizations, no matter how delighted the patients appear in their posters, or how often their commercials tell us they care. But then, I am not a good patient. I don't enjoy being talked down to, and to complicate matters, I don't take orders well, I don't bow and scrape, I don't tremble in the presence of my superiors when they enter the room exuding boredom and exhaling tobacco breath. To make things even

worse, I ask questions, which goes against the grain of the health care system. Whatever they say, there's nothing more inappropriate or unacceptable than a patient asking questions about his own health. Whenever I do, the umbrage fills the room so immediately that the air is driven out and only a chilly vacuum remains.

"Is it somehow unclear to you that I AM your DOCTOR? You just sit there and keep your mouth shut."

One time my doctor was giving me some advice and she looked at me to see if I was listening. I said, "I get most of the best advice I receive from a woman, so I hear you."

The doctor stood up and looked at me sternly, and declared, "I am NOT a woman, I AM A DOCTOR!"

So there you have it.

I'm unconvinced that these people care about anyone's health. They do seem to care a great deal about their image however. Despite all the near-giddy self-promotion however, the inbred arrogance that fills their workplace is offensive to anyone with any degree of self-worth or sensitivity, and their individual and combined indifference to anyone with real concerns or fears, is frightening.

But, what's the alternative?

## THE GOOD DOCTOR

When I'd suffered long enough with the ear infection and thought it was long past time to take action I picked up the phone, and after taking a deep breath, held it long enough for fate to intervene, should she so choose, before beginning to dial. In the midst of this my very dear caring and perpetually wonderful wife came in and on fate's behalf asked me what I was doing. I told her that I had suffered long enough—a conclusion she'd arrived at weeks earlier—and that I was on my way to the hospital. She suggested that I simply call her father's personal physician, Dr. Codger—it would save time and money and I'd get the very same results...pills.

"But, he is your father's physician."

"Yes, but he'll see you without an appointment; he will charge you little if not less; and," she added, "he's just around the corner; you won't have to take the long ride out to the hospital." I was convinced and shortly found myself in the old physician's office, where I sat filling out a form. Smoke?—No. Drink?—No. Diphtheria? —No. Walk with a limp?—No. Speak with a lisp?—No. In a very few brief moments I was whisked on into the doctor's office.

Dr. Codger was a rapidly aging, frail, older man, with wisps of white hair floating away from his head on either side in small tufts, and a crazed look in his eye. He looked like a demented duckling in a lab coat. He began grilling me about the financial state of things at the hotel as soon as I entered the room. His questions were all non-specific and my answers all evasive. I didn't know what he knew or what he should know or why he should be asking me. So he took my blood pressure (normal) and my temperature

(normal) and weighed me (just fine) and asked me to sit on a padded table of some sort while he held each wrist in one hand and looked intently into my face (which gave me the creeps). Then he looked into each eye with some device which projected light. Then he looked down my throat and shoved a dry wooden paddle into my mouth and asked me to gag—which I did. Then he took a device and stuck it first into my right ear, then into my right nostril, then into my left nostril and then into my left ear, in that order, without hesitation (and by that I mean without taking the time for any sort of cleansing between ear and nose, nose and ear.) Of course I’ve seen chefs do that sort of thing before, but I expected more from a doctor. “Gosh,” I thought. (Yes, that’s precisely what I thought, *Gosh*.) Admittedly I know nothing at all about medicine, but I do know something about hygiene. (Hygiene is that thing which anyone in the restaurant business usually lacks.)

During all the time he was observing me I was keeping a very cautious eye on Dr. Codger. He reached into his lab coat pocket, extended his open palm before my eyes, offered me a choice of a wide variety of sample pills.

“Which one would you like?”

“There are so many...I don’t know what any of them do.”

“Let me narrow it down for you then.” He re-pocketed all but two bottles and held them up for me to look at.

“Well,” I said hesitantly, “what’s the difference between them?”

“These are made by one pharmaceutical company and these by their competition; they both do the same thing. I think either would work well in your case.”

I selected a bottle. He commended me on my wise choice then gave me instructions. Though I'd be well long before the pills were all taken, I should take them all. If I needed more I could just give him a call.

This all seemed very strange to me, but he was strolling through it pretty casually, which gave me a queasy kind of hope. We shook hands, and when we shook it became evident to him that there was something wrong.

Specifically, I have a torn tendon in one finger; the sheath of that tendon has detached itself and gathered in a kind of unseemly clump near the base of that finger. The bump is seldom ignored by anyone I shake hands with. It prevents me from extending my little finger in a way that might be desirable, while, say, holding my wife near and smothering her in the kisses her warm hugability seem to demand from time to eager time. So, Dr. Codger said, "What's this?" He turned my palm upward and looked at the lump and then said, "Viking heritage."

I said, "What?"

He said, "You have Viking heritage. Those damned redheads all have this tendon problem."

"Really?" (I am not a redhead, never have been.)

"Oh yes; it's typical."

"Ah," I said, and prevented myself from saying anything more. "What do I owe you?"

"Nah," he said waving it away. "Tell M. Bertrand he should come in and I have some more depression pills for him."

"I won't do that," I said.

He looked at me startled, and then dismissed it. "Oh, OK, I'll have the receptionist call him."



“That might be a better idea.”

Of course I could have gone to a “real” doctor at the organization with which we insure our health. I hesitate to go there however because they have no catch and release policy. Going there is like taking your car in for one of those free inspections: of course they are going to find something wrong, and of course it is going to be expensive. Put aside, for the moment the fact that they have called both my wife and me liars on one occasion or another.

When I returned to the hotel my wife asked me what had happened at Dr. Codger’s office.

I told her, “It’s amazing to me that your father is still alive after seeing that quack.”

“He’s been seeing him for years,” my dear wife said.

“All the more amazing,” I said and told her of my wonderland experience.

A couple of days later I was in our little rooms, sacred cello bow in hand, immersed deeply in the music—my fingering was thoughtless, my bowing far beyond any skill that I could honestly claim—and the warm fragrance of the sound was drifting slowly up, engulfing me, gently caressing and comforting my feverish mind. I was at peace...

when the phone rang.

“Yes!” I barked. “What?” I whined.

“Mr. Fool?”

“What?” I sighed.

“Mr. Fool?”

“Yes.” I softened further.

"This is, Shamequa, Doctor Codger's receptionist. I have to tell you something."

"Yes?" I said quizzically. Could the quack have discovered anything at all in his weird cursory inspection of my corpus gros? "Yes?" I said using my most charming irritated mode.

"I just wanted to tell you that, when you walked in the other day I thought you looked like someone."

"I looked like someone?"

"When you walked in I thought you looked like someone, but I could not figure out who it was."

"I...I'm sorry, what?" I was completely confused. The good doctor's secretary (sorry, receptionist) was calling me to say what exactly...?

"When you came in for the first time the other day I kept looking at you because I thought you reminded me of someone and I couldn't really put my finger on who it was."

"Uh...OK...what can I do for you?"

"It's Peter Lawford," she squealed breathily. "You look like Peter Lawford!" This discovery brought her school-girl delight.

"Oh," I said. "Anything else?"

"No, but, you really do look like Peter Lawford," she whispered.

"Thank you," I said, "Dr. Codger thinks I have a Viking heritage."

"What...?"

"Codger told me I have a Viking heritage."

"The doctor told you that?"

“Yes, he said I have a Viking heritage. Perhaps Peter Lawford had a Viking heritage.” I said, “What do you think?”

“I guess that’s possible,” she said. I could hear her enthusiasm deflating. At that moment I think she realized that talking to me wasn’t anything at all like talking to Peter Lawford. Even over the phone I think she could sense that I wasn’t standing around posed nicely, smoking a cigarette, holding a fine crystal highball glass with scotch and soda in one tastefully bejeweled, nicely manicured hand and smiling in that suave, *married-into-the-Kennedy-clan* way that Lawford had.

“If you need to make another appointment anytime, feel free to call,” she said with a hint of disappointment. This conversation hadn’t worked out the way she’d supposed; I guess she had other dreams.

“Thank you. I will,” I said, putting down the phone and picking up the cello bow. I had no idea what kind of response she had expected. After toying with the bow for a minute—admiring its line, tempting its balance, rubbing the fine wood under my thumb—I put it down, stood up, and went over to look in the mirror.

I didn’t look anything at all like Peter Lawford.

## **MY FLAT REFUSAL TO LEARN**

The concept that familiarity breeds contempt makes quite a bit of sense to me. I'm sure my in-laws feel that it breeds disappointment as well. They've been disappointed in me for what must feel like a very long time, because I flatly refuse to learn enough French to stand up straight 'n' tall and proudly proclaim that the duck is yellow or that the elephant is plus grand que le mouse. Although the idea of a grown man walking around prattling like a five year old is repulsive to me (and even more so if that grown man is me), my refusal to toy with a foreign language is not merely a matter of misplaced pride. My wife and I share a common language and that language is English.

This is only important because much of my idiocy, most of my jokes, and all of my loudly espoused, bullishly-defended misunderstandings about every aspect of life are expressed best in a language with which I have some experience. My ability to entertain and defend my dear wife is the most important part of my existence here, and, because I am not a mime, English plays an important part in that as well. That accounts for the main portion of my stubbornness. But also, I refuse to dabble in French for the very same reason I don't attend the opera wearing only a burlap codpiece. It's not so much a matter of my own discomfort as it is respect for everyone else who might be unnecessarily exposed to my disgrace.

French is a fairly subtle language and I no longer possess a subtle mind; that is part of it as well. That the French maintain a perfectly understandable and justifiable protective stance when it comes to their language, is

another. But also there's this: I have tried bouncing a little French off of our guests, welcoming them in their own language (apparently I do a fairly convincing *bonjour*). Unfortunately, for arriving French guests *Bonjour* is a shot fired from the starting gun; after that they want chatter, and they want to chatter amiably and they want to chatter amiably in French...all perfectly reasonable. When I can't get beyond *bonjour* they feel as though they've been deceived. I see their point. On the other hand, might I, in all humility, suggest that possibly too many French people arrive here predisposed to find themselves deeply deeply offended by Americans who do not speak French? Forget, for the moment, that I never expect anyone in France to speak English on my behalf...and they don't.

The final aspect to my argument is that I honestly feel that there are some (albeit, admittedly, very few) *good people* in this world who do not (yet) speak French. I am *not* claiming that I am one of them. But English is a legitimate language and many people, especially here in the United States of America, feel comfortable using it. Regrettably, I must cast myself in with that miserable lot. And, when we are in France, I feel most comfortable not pretending to speak a language which I do not.

When we were last in France my wife was on the phone when the elevator repairmen showed up at the door. So, I had to go down to let them in. I opened the front door and a man in overalls came in and blocked the door open with a huge block and tackle. "Bonjour," he said and started chattering away in the joy-filled effervescent manner of good French people everywhere. He said something—as far

as I could determine—about his partner arriving shortly, after finding a parking space. I nodded, grinned my best well-meaning, apologetic, dumb-American grin and said, “I’m sorry, I don’t speak French.”

“Oh,” he said, employing one of the thirty seven French permutations of what for us English speaking folk has but one monosyllabic form. The way he used it, the utterance contained both a mild scolding as well as a good-natured acceptance. Then he went on to rattle off, in the most cheerful manner, a long tale that—(again) as far as I could determine—had to do with a donkey, a priest, a goose and a sack of wheat. I nodded while maintaining my cooperative nature, but I guess it was clear to him that I wasn’t getting it because he stopped about the time the priest had shouldered the sack of wheat and entered an igloo.

I smiled. He smiled.

I shrugged. He shrugged.

There was a pause.

Then he began chattering again, this time more loudly, but much more slowly—always cheerful, always courteous, an absolutely delightful fellow.

His idea (an idea which seems to have almost universal appeal) was that if he spoke loudly and slowly enough I would quickly begin to pick up French and in no time we’d be sharing a table in an outdoor café, with butter, jam and a baguette. and alternately discussing the merits of the various soft cheeses and the evolution of cinema. I could tell—not from the words because this time I had no idea whatsoever what he was talking about—that he assumed I was a delightful fellow myself, you know, despite my

inability (a consideration I never receive at home). He went on and on in this manner for some length of time then looked to me for affirmation. “Eh?” he asked. I smiled. “I still don’t speak French,” I said.

If, like myself, you watch the French from a good distance, with a limited grasp of their language, no understanding whatsoever of their history and even less of their politics, you can see clearly that they have no real idea of what a mess they are in. [And, though I honestly believe the French might benefit from my POV, I’ve been cautioned to say no more about it here.]

But...here’s the French mind at work:

We left the office in order to take the dogs down in the alley to relieve themselves just now, and in the rush I wasn’t sure if I’d locked the office door. So, I said to my very dear wife, who was behind the pack, “Can you go back and lock the office door, my computer’s in there and I’d lose 43,000 hours work if someone walks off with it...?” And she said, “Yes, and the poor thief would be disappointed because the thing is not in the best of shape.” “Yes,” I said, perhaps somewhat dryly, “we must consider the poor thief.”

Later, my wife told me that she was being sarcastic. But, I assured her that considering the thief’s point of view would never have crossed my mind even briefly, sarcastically or otherwise. The only thought I might give to the thief in that scenario would be concerning what I’d do to the bastard if I ever caught him.

But the French mind sees things differently.

“Oh! So YOU are the one who stole my computer? First, let me admire the clever way in which you pulled that off, while we were watering the dogs, and then let me apologize that I did not have a better computer for you to steal. At the very least I could have left a little more space on the hard drive for your purposes. This was both thoughtless and wrong of me. Perhaps together we can think of some way that I can make it up to you.”

Though I don't suppose I'll ever learn the French way of thinking, I'm even less likely to take up the language that underlies that kind of thought. Many people seem to think that I've wasted a perfectly good opportunity to learn French—a surprising number of whom have no second language under their own belt but feel very strongly, nonetheless, that I should.

One fine day my wife's father (a man who speaks two languages fluently and has a solid grasp on a few select random and meaningless phrases in several others) apparently told my very dear wife that working here at the hotel was “an extraordinary opportunity” for me to pick up French and that he didn't understand how I could find myself surrounded with people who speak another language and choose to ignore such an advantage. “Wow,” I said, “I'm surprised to hear that coming from your father.”

“Why do you say that; my father speaks excellent English.” she said, just the slightest bit defensively.

“Yes,” I said, “But he doesn't speak a word of Chinese and he has had almost forty years of this very same *extraordinary opportunity* with his Chinese employees.”



“It’s not the same thing,” she said.

“Puh!” I said, employing a very French mode of dismissal.

“Really?” I continued, “The man has been surrounded with Chinese maids and Chinese desk clerks who all have spoken some form of that language and...”

“It is not the same thing at all,” said my very dear, long-suffering but forbearing wife, while waving a pure white banner with the family shield emblazoned upon it. “You can’t compare an English speaker learning French to a French speaker learning Chinese,” she said (and perhaps somewhat justifiably).

“Oh, for crying out loud,” I said, “I’m not suggesting that he learned anything that would be difficult for him, like, ‘thank you’ or ‘good work, dear devoted servant’. But maybe he could have learned to say ‘No, no, no, no no, it must be done THIS way’.” I could see that this was hurting my dear wife so I tempered it. “Well, maybe he could have learned to say, “Good morning.”

This was actually kind of funny coming from me, because, for a very long time I’ve professed that the most despicable phrase in the English language is, “good morning.” It’s especially irritating when broadcast randomly with a kind of absolutely unnecessary early hour cheerfulness, and accompanied by one of those toothy idiotic grins that morning people always seem to have plastered on their bright clean fresh faces while they bounce around mindlessly in front of us sane folk. Sylvie was looking at my argument, but not buying it. My good, dear and loving wife often finds herself in these situations because she

loves two men who each feel their life would be better without the other.

On a brighter note, concerning this same topic, one of the Chinese dishwashers seems to think that “good night” is a greeting. When she sees me coming she smiles nicely and says “Good night!” in a cheery little voice. I smile back and say, “How are you?”

Every time I enter the kitchen, she smiles and says, “Good night!” and I ask her how things are with her. If I enter that kitchen four times that evening, she smiles and says, “Good night!” four times. Sometimes, out of the deep well of my irrepressible kindness, I respond charmingly, “Good night.” That is the extent of our communication, but there’s something really very nice about it. It reminds me of the old Russian lady who somehow repeatedly got herself locked outside on our, shared, fourth-floor fire escape, years back. Each time I let her in through our bedroom window she bowed and said, “Thank you too much, Mister. Thank you too much.”

Whenever we met in the hallway she always took my hand in hers and patted me on the hand saying, “Good Mister. Good Mister.” She said it with tears gathering in her ancient eyes. “Good Mister.”

“Jesus,” I thought, “What the hell kind of mister would I be to ignore you tapping at our bedroom window? What kind of a mister would abandon a nice old Russian woman to her fate on a fire escape?”

I don't know if I'm a good mister or not, but I'm pretty sure slaughtering a second language in the presence of others wouldn't make me a better mister.

## **HOW A GOOD WIFE IS LIKE A WALKING STICK**

My very dear wife bought for me a walking stick. Because she is tuned-in to my aesthetics (doesn't share them always but knows what I see in things), it was the perfect walking stick: solid, hand-shaped ebony, with a simple and comfortable silver knob. I've made use of that stick when I've had need of it and found it pleasing. And after using it regularly for a while I realized that a good wife and a good walking stick have a lot in common. I actually wrote a little pamphlet called:

### **THE GENTLEMANLY ART AND USES OF THE WALKING STICK**

(...from which I will now here draw.)

The Gentlemanly Art:

Life is not a battle and the streets not a battleground.

My wife and I have taken the habit of walking around downtown in the very late evening for our health. Some would say this is not the healthiest of habits, but we seldom meet with any kind of trouble and, in part, I believe this is due to the presence of my walking stick. The single time we might have had a little difficulty, I was without my walking stick, but that event was quickly defused, not by flight but by another option. I stepped up close to the young man, looked him directly and unwaveringly in the eye, and told him confidentially, "You're making my wife nervous." What he read into that simple statement I do not know, but there was no doubt whatsoever about my intent.

Admittedly, I did not know whether this young man was as crazy or as dangerous as he would have liked us to believe—but he didn't know the very same things about me. Having looked me in the eye for what I thought was time enough, I believe he thought I just might be. So, he abandoned the field quickly, leaving me feeling heroic and strangely theatrical. "I'm sorry about that, Sylvie," I remember saying, "But had I been in possession of my walking stick, that might have been prevented."

Indeed, the presence of my walking stick could not have hurt the situation; with my walking stick, it might have never occurred. There are few unsavory personal encounters upon which the introduction of a good walking stick cannot improve.

#### A Gentleman Lightly Armed:

When necessary a man with a walking stick is an armed defender. The walking stick is at once both respectful and defensive; never a threat, merely a suggestion, if necessary it becomes a demand for the introduction of courtesy into an otherwise discourteous situation. The presence of a walking stick declares, "This is the level upon which we will play this game."

#### The Suggestion of Courtesy

Unfortunately, courtesy is an agreement which must on occasion, be defensively enforced, so, a walking stick then becomes a warning, not a request. A gentleman with a walking stick asks for courtesy, but demands respect.

### Simple Common Decency

Naturally, a gentleman with a walking stick wants no part in ignorance, vulgarity, and offensive behavior of any disrespectful nature. Common decency is invested in the walking stick.

### Practical Not Pretentious:

In centuries past, walking sticks allowed dandies to carefully tend to their arrogance in public without challenge. However, these days, a walking stick is more than a mere pretense. A man without a walking stick, whatever else he may be, is just a man. A man with a walking stick is a man of the social order. With that stick he is imbued with dignity, poise, reasonable self-assurance. Above all else, a man with a walking stick is a gentleman, as he must be, and as he can afford to be.

### Selection of a Walking Stick:

Like a good wife, a good walking stick is a thing of beauty; pleasing to look upon, a pleasure to hold, strong, resilient, at your side, quick to your defense and should you need to, you may lean upon it. Like the good wife a good walking stick is nicely balanced and completely dependable; you always know what to expect of it. And, like a good wife, it draws a line.

Primarily—like a good wife—possessing more than one walking stick only leads to awkward situations. It makes every simple enjoyable outing difficult, and, ultimately, in almost every instance, leads to humiliation and downfall.

## **NIGHTSTICKS and STONES**

My wife and I were walking somewhere; I'd tell you where but I'd be making it up. (We were going to visit an elderly lady upon her death bed, and feed her homemade soup no doubt.) We were passing a hospital when something went whistling by my ear and slammed into the metal garage door behind us. What the heck was that? While I was looking around my dear wife spied some kids—young men really—on a roof across the street from us, crouched behind a parapet. One of them had something in his hand pointed in our direction, but, when we made eye contact, they all ducked behind the little wall. A few seconds later they all emerged, each rising up to his full height, in defiance.

At that moment, for an instant, I truly, yearningly wished for the ability to reach that roof in a single bound and just beat the hell out of those stupid little bastards, but alas...

I wasn't going to mess with these young idiots; I was going to take my wife safely out of harm's way. I marked the house in my mind and escorted my wife across the street to their side, where they'd have less of an angle on us, and we hugged the buildings until we made it to the nearest corner. "Where the hell are the cops when you want one?" I was saying bitterly. "Those stupid little bastards could have really injured one of us."

"I think that was their intent," my dear wife said.

"There are never any cops around when you need them," I concluded and, just to make me look bad, Fate had two cops dragging themselves slowly out of a squad car down at the end of that block.

I ran up to them. “There are some kids on a roof around the corner,” I huffed, “and they are shooting something at people...”

“Wait. Wait. Wait a minute, sir. Wait, sir,” commanded one of the cops.

“No, this demands attention right now; those kids could really hurt someone.”

“Sir, you are going to have to wait. We need for you to answer some questions, first.”

“Look,” I said, “There’s no time for questions. There are kids, they’re up on a roof, they are firing something at people, and somebody is going to be seriously injured.”

“Sir, you are going to have to stop talking and let us ask you some questions.”

“We’re walking down the street, across from the hospital and kids on the roof fired something at us and it nearly hit my wife. You need to do something before someone gets hurt,” I said.

That did not go well with the cops. They didn’t like me telling them what their job was—even though they didn’t seem to know it without such instruction.

“Do you live around here?”

“What does that have to do with...Look, pal...” I said, and at that very point the cop put his hand on the butt of his gun and he said to me,

“You look, PAL, we’re not going to be able to do ANYthing until you slow down and allow us to ask you some questions.”

“Nope,” I said, “No questions. I’m *telling* you for the last time. Then, you do what you feel you have to do. There are kids on the roof and they are firing projectiles of some sort



at people walking in the street near the hospital. One of those things almost hit my wife. They are on the roof of the fourth or fifth house in from the corner; it has a tiled roof. That's it. That's all I have to tell you. I know no more than that. There you go; do whatever you feel you gotta do."

The cop looked at me as if he were tempted to arrest me. I looked at him as though I thought he was useless. Then his fellow cop—a pear-shaped woman—spoke to me, saying snidely, "Thank you SO much for your cooperation." Then they both waddled off slowly (very slowly) around the corner from which we'd just come.

I started to walk away, but Sylvie suggested I put all that aside and go around the corner to point out the place for the cops. She was right of course. So, I went back around the corner and discovered these officers of the law standing at the doorway of the first house on the corner ringing the doorbell.

"Yes, who is it? Oh, yes, actually we *were* up on the roof just now shooting at people...Is there something wrong? Here, let me buzz you in, so we can talk about it."

"What are you doing?" I wailed, "I told you it was like the fourth or fifth house down the block, I told you that there was a tile roof."

The female cop then took her nightstick in hand and—to this I will attest in a court of law—tapped me lightly on the chest and said, "Thank you for your assistance, *Citizen*."

So, you know, I guess now I have to balance that story with one that shows that cops are not all utterly useless idiots like these two seemed to be, and it's gonna be a bit of a strug... Oh wait, I do have one.

There is this stop sign in Encinitas where nobody stops because, if you go straight ahead the road becomes a dead end in about 100 yards, and if you take a right turn there, it heads down hill to two very large, very popular shopping malls—which is where everyone who finds themselves at that corner is headed. So nobody really stops at that stop sign; they all just kinda slow down a bit before making the turn. Once in a while the Encinitas police put a cop up there at that corner—just beyond the bend, just out of sight—because it's easy income for the city. He could probably reasonably and legitimately ticket every single car that takes that route, from dawn 'til dusk, for not stopping, and ticket most of 'em for not signaling as well.

So, there I am one day, coming up to this stop sign, and the guy in front of me does something peculiar—he stops. “What the heck is wrong with that idiot?” I ask myself. “Come on, come on...” I touch the brakes to slow down enough to make the turn, and as I do, I look, and there is a cop on a motorcycle. He's looking right at me. At this point I'm already halfway through the stupid turn. But I slam on my brakes anyway—as kind of a token to the man—come to a complete, somewhat sudden, jerky stop.

I look at him.  
He looks at me.

I shrug theatrically and raise my eyebrows in an overly-exaggerated plea of innocence...and he does this:

He drags the back of his gloved hand across the brow of his helmet as if he were wiping off sweat—the classic gesture for *gees, that was a close one*—and he smiles.

So, I think that tale more than balances the tale of the two stupid, virtually useless San Francisco cops.

(And if I can think of any other positive cop stories before this goes to print, I'll stick them all right here.)

## **MAGIC SECRETS REVEALED**

There was a street magician on TV the other night. He was remarkable. After roping in an appropriate sized crowd, he selected an honest, normal-looking, somewhat toothy, blonde woman from among them to help him perform his tricks. To add to the verity, she was startled to be selected as were her friends, and therefore, not a shill.

The magician asked this somewhat toothy blonde to select a card from a brand-new, unbroken deck. After she placed her card back in the deck, he mixed them up thoroughly, then suddenly turned and threw the entire deck of cards up against the window of a café. Naturally, the people sitting inside that café, at the spot where the cards splatted, were all startled by this. The crowd outside were all startled as well. The somewhat toothy blonde was startled. Me too. I'll admit it, I sure didn't see that coming. What the heck...?

The cards all fell to the ground, leaving only one card stuck to the window. But, we're all grown-ups here; we've been around, we've seen some stuff, and we all know that card stuck to that window could be none other than the one the toothy blonde had selected. Old trick, ho hum.

Then—here's where it gets truly amazing—he told the woman to go over and take the card off the window. He told her it was hers to keep as a souvenir. She was delighted of course. So, she stepped over to the window and she reached for the card, but somehow she could not remove it. What's going on? She was confused. The crowd outside was confused. The customers inside were all

confused. I was confused. Why doesn't she simply take the card?

The people INSIDE the café were suddenly animated; their eyes were bugging out, their jaws had dropped. One of them reached up with some hesitation, and plucked the card from the *in-side* of that window.

(SON-of a BITCH!...as they say.)

Everybody all around was amazed; the people inside were amazed, the people outside were amazed, the guy at home on the couch who until that very moment was supine just kind of monitoring things with his eyes half open found himself sitting perfectly upright. He was amazed. We were all, each and every one of us, completely blown away by what we had just witnessed. We all shared a common thought, 'HOLY-moly, d'you see that!'

I was so amazed that I got up and ran down the hall to the office where my wife was working and told her, in sketchy, erratic detail, what I'd just witnessed.

Naturally, she was unimpressed.

Later on, that same evening, they repeated the show. My wife was watching with me. This time around I was as stunned, as flabbergasted, as I was the first time I saw that act performed.

"Look, look-look, look," I stammer. "Watch...See? It's... INSIDE the window. What do you say to that?"

"Nice camera work," she said.

"It's not camera work," I said.

"They're shills," she said.

"You think all of those people are in on it?"

“They’re all shills,” she said dismissively, painting the entire crowd with the same brush, as if they were politicians instead of good, clean, decent, honest folk.

My wife—who never even heard the word “shill” until I taught it to her—doesn’t believe in magic. This is a woman whose bookshelves are swaybacked from bearing the load of every fantasy book ever written. This is a woman who cannot get enough of wizards and dragons and elves and entire noble empires suffering under ancient spells. I, who refuse to read anything with the words dragon, knight or sword in the title; who believe in almost nothing and see shills and charlatans everywhere I look, confessed my amazement once again.

To throw a deck of cards at a window and have one card stick on *either* side of that window—even if it’s the wrong card—is a pretty neat trick. To have a card stick on the *other* side, is magic. Shills or no shill, it’s magic to me. (I’m sorry, I have to say that again.) When someone can throw a deck of cards against a window and have one of them end up stuck to the other side of that window—no matter how he accomplishes that task—*that* is magic.

Our marriage is like that.

When you can take a guy like me and point him in the general direction of respectability, and keep him on that path for any length of time, without him bolting, that’s magic. My wife can do that.

And she makes it look easy.

### A QUICK CONFESSION:

I think I should probably admit that I learned everything I know about creating a successful marriage from an email I received one day with the subject: *Why Not Mens Can Be Making of the Womens Happy?* At first glance, I thought it must be a scam of some sort, but then I read the opening line: “Making of the womens happy can be GOT!” Though still somewhat cautious, I was intrigued. I read on. And I’m glad I did. Now, I’m thoroughly convinced that making of the womens happy CAN be got! Additionally, I think I’ve stumbled upon a truth of my own—done right, making of the womens happy is making of the mens happy as well.

Say, I just realized that there has been no mention of jealousy anywhere in this book!

I guess that’s because jealousy has no part in our lives.

It’s not that we don’t think of each other as desirable, it’s that we are certain of each other. For me, there is not a woman on earth who could even tempt me. And, though she doesn’t like other women being overly friendly with me (especially Japanese women, for some reason), Sylvie feels secure. She has no problem whatsoever with me talking admiringly about any woman who is either extremely old or dead, but if I go on too much about a woman who is neither, I get the squint. But, that is not because she doesn’t trust me, it’s because she doesn’t trust the other woman.

When it all comes down, she knows my heart belongs to her and only her, and her unreasonable devotion to me is without question.

## WEDDING RING LOST

My dear wife and I are in Golden Gate Park one Spring-like, somewhat rushed, afternoon. The tether that ties us to the hotel stretches only so far; additionally, our excursions are usually on the meter. So we're trying to beat the clock on the way home when suddenly I feel that something is not quite right. I don't know at first what it is; I just feel something is wrong. Then I look at my hand as it rests on the steering wheel. "My wedding ring is gone!"

My heart is in my mouth, my mind is racing. Where could it have fallen off? We'd been to several places in the park. I'm so deeply entangled in my own confusion that I can't tell how she is taking it; she looks pale; she is strangely silent. This is horrible—that band is the symbol of the most important, the most sincere commitment in my life.

I run back across the street to the water fountain where I had just been watering the dog-in-law. As I search, the anxiety builds within me. It's not here. I'm on my knees, crawling around in the tall muddy grass. It's just not here. I begin to re-cross the street, searching every inch of the roadway between that fountain and where we are parked. Crossing slowly, methodically, with on-coming traffic bleating at me, drivers glaring at me, offering gestures of something other than their kind support. I'm oblivious to them. The world is void of the understanding I most need at that moment. We search the car of course. Nothing.

We drive back to every place where we had been that day in reverse order, retracing every step, every inch, carefully, methodically. I go so far as to extract the plastic bag full of



the dog-in-law's by-product from the garbage can where I tossed it, nose held, with great disgust earlier that day. And—God save us all—I look inside. I poke a stick around in it (if you can believe that) with my heart beating innocently with the dear HOPE that my ring will appear. I honestly, with all my heart PRAY to find my ring in that foul stuff. I don't know whether to laugh or cry or throw up when my wedding band was not found there. Just as an historical note: I came closest to throwing up.

During the lengthy search my right hand keeps going to my ring finger, questioning the absence there.

We return to the picture framing shop where our outing had begun and talk to the manager, describing the ring and making a little sign offering a reward for its return. Now of course we're very late to work. This has really hit me. I'm lost in hopelessness. On the way home we calmly discuss the options. My wife wants to return to the jeweler who had made the ring from our design and have him reproduce it. I want a simple band in order to avoid any possibility of ever again going through what I was going through at that moment.

Back at the hotel, saying not a word to anyone I head straight to our rooms and collapse on the couch in utter despair. I'm exhausted and I feel guilty. I should have...I should have...I don't know what I should have done. I don't even know why I feel that it's my fault, but I do. I feel terrible; what kind of thoughtless fool loses his wedding band? I'm sick to my stomach. I'm ashamed.

Henry Edward Fool

My sweet wife is in the bathroom, quickly getting ready to go into the office, when I hear her call my name. She's standing in the hallway, outside the bathroom.

"Go in, go in", she encourages me.

And I go in.

"Look," she says, "look about."

I look around. Instantly my heart is flooded with joy, my eyes are wet with tears. I cannot believe what I see. There in the cat's litter box is something shiny.

## **A COMPLEX SCAM WELL EXECUTED**

My wife is not upset; she accepts idiocy with a noble indifference. I am furious however, because I have never really learned to embrace idiocy. So, I become childish and I stomp around a bit and I reiterate the details a thousand times loudly while she looks at me with loving kindness, from the couch, book in hand, waiting for me to recover my sanity. The dog doesn't take it so well either. He jumps down from the chair where he's curled up, and, eye on me every trembling step of the way, scurries to a safe position behind the couch. This is an indicator to me that maybe I should adjust my volume downward so that only those on our side of Kansas can hear my protest clearly. But let me ask you this: How many of you know your mother's social security number?

And let me ask you this too: Can you contrive a scam which involves asking the phone company to repair your mother's telephone line?

I'm a basically honest guy and I am always amazed at the creativity involved in some scams when I hear them described. Some of them are so clever that I don't understand how they work even after it's been explained to me. So, perhaps there is such a scam, I call the phone company claiming to be some poor innocent victim's son-in-law and ask them to fix her broken phone, and then what? How do I turn that into money?

You may have guessed by now that my wife's mother's phone was not working. We couldn't reach her, and since we didn't hear from her, as was usual, we assumed she

couldn't call out. To add to the surety of that surmise my wife's father was calling us from France to say that he couldn't get through to her either. So, my wife, good and caring daughter that she is, called the phone company and told them, "You know, there seems to be a problem with my mother's phone line, we can't reach her and indications are that she can't call out."

So *they* (the phone company folks) say, "Who are you?" She (my wife) says, "I'm her daughter."

They say, "How do you know her phone doesn't work?" She explains the two most basic functions that one might reasonably expect from a telephone and how her mother's phone doesn't seem to be performing either of them at the moment.

They say, "What's the address?"

She tells them.

They say, "What name is the phone bill under?"

She tells them.

They say, "What is the account number?"

She says, "I don't know that."

"We're sorry." They say in a tone which reveals not simply that they are not, but precisely how much they are not, "but, someone whose name is on the account must call us to request the repair."

My wife explains that since the phone doesn't work, her mother is incapable of using it to call and ask for it to be repaired."

This seems to make a vague, distant, ephemeral kind of plausible sense to them. They pause, they think, they say, "Please hold..." and they go off to talk with a supervisor.

The supervisor, a man of some experience in these matters, knows how to handle the situation. He gets on the line and asks my wife all of the same questions the other *person* (I'm just guessing here) asked her. Then he says this, "What is your mother's social security number?"

Well, if prior to hearing that I had no real understanding of why some guys climb up to the top of a steeple somewhere and simply throws themselves off, I did right then. But, as it happens, my wife knew a place in her father's office where her parents' social security numbers were listed and she went and got that information. She read the social security number to the supervisor at the phone company and, I have to be honest here (unfortunately) and say that in a very short while, several brief hours, her mother's phone service was fully restored. She called us herself to say so.

But, for reasons which I suppose I'll have to attempt to explain to God at some point, but can not even attempt to explain to you now, THEN I hit the ceiling. After it was all settled, I hit the ceiling. What the hell kind of a idiotic world are we living in? What kind of a scam would involve asking the phone company to fix a broken phone line? Maybe you can envision such a scam, maybe several come to mind, immediately; I can't imagine even one, not matter how much thought I give it.

So, here we are in the courtroom now:

"...and you are the most vile example of humanity we have ever had the pleasure to send to Hell..." says the Eternal Judge, and glaring steadily down at me, he slams his mallet down with a resounding CLACK.

A woman arriving late, finds a seat and leaning over, whispers to another, "I just got here, what did he do?" The other, while keeping a leery eye on me—lest I jump the rail and select her from among the crowd to attack—says, "He tried to get the phone company to fix his mother-in-law's phone line."

The late arrival gasps and covers her mouth with both hands, lest the evil residing within me escapes, flies through the courtroom, directly into her maw, and takes up residence in her innocent soul.

"Good god, they didn't fall for it did they?"

"No, luckily they were wise to it."

"Oh thank god."

"The court has been unable to determine if he actually IS the woman's son-in-law."

"Really?"

"He didn't even know her social security number."

"You're kidding. He tried to get a woman's phone fixed and he doesn't even know her social security number?"

"Unbelievable, isn't it?"

"It's just amazing what some people will try to get away with!"

"This world just gets stranger every day."

## **BOLSTERS AND BASEBALL BATS**

When I make my wife laugh I feel like a success as a husband. That's pretty much my job, as I see it. Everything I know about marriage, distilled, comes down to this: it's my job to make my wife happy and to protect her...and I seem to be biologically suited to both tasks. With only about 10% of her intelligence it's simplicity itself for me to play the fool for her; it's as if I was born to it.

As far as protection is concerned, I am, like many males, just a big stupid battery storing frustration, disappointment, regret, crushed hopes, false starts, delayed dreams, failure and embarrassment until that time when it may be called upon for either defense or to accomplish what would otherwise be physically impossible. One time, for example, my little wife and I paddled a four-ton canoe against a strong, belligerent and relentless head-wind for 600 miles before finding a place to haul out. By the time it was all over I had tapped into, and almost depleted, my deepest reserves of stored irrational male bitterness.

While flipping around the channels one day, I stumbled upon a peculiar scene and decided to stay tuned for awhile, at least until I could figure out what was going on. On the screen was a woman pounding a round pillow (a bolster, I'm told) with a baseball bat. What struck me was the pure ineptitude with which this woman wielded the bat. She lifted it awkwardly—a completely foreign object in her hands--and then just pretty much let gravity take over. After the bat bounced off the bolster she lifted it again, and lethargically let it drop; there was no wrist, no shoulder, no back, no legs, no passion in it.

There was a group of women sitting around her, shouting encouragement, cheering her on. Clearly they saw things differently than I did. One of these women—her *Life Coach*, I later learned—was saying things in words that I recognized but did not entirely understand. “It takes real courage to face your past, Trina,” she was saying. “It requires true inner strength to express your anger. Envision your anger dispelled with each blow. With each stroke you take another step toward regaining your life!”

Being a sane kind of person, I laughed at that. It was, perhaps, the most ridiculous thing any Life Coach (whatever the heck that may be) could have said to any woman making frail efforts to regain her life with a baseball bat. Believe me, Trina was getting *nowhere*. She was regaining *nothing*. A baseball bat isn’t the correct instrument for most women to express anger anyway, and everyone with any sense knows that. Put Trina in a kitchen however and she’ll be on the road to regaining her life in no time. Give her a cabinet full of pots and pans and she won’t need instructions from any Life Coach (whatever that may be) and she certainly won’t need any encouragement. Many of the women I’ve known have had a natural talent for developing truly impressive expressive skills utilizing only the clattering of dishes and the slamming of cabinet doors.

My truly wonderful wife walked in while I was laughing at this...event, so, I explained the situation to her pretty much as I’ve just explained it to you.

"Really," I said, "hand a man that bat with instructions to express his anger, and that pillow will be in shreds in a



matter of seconds, and the table underneath it reduced to kindling."

"Well, perhaps she's never handled a baseball bat before," my very dear wife said sympathetically.

"Nothing could be clearer," I admitted. "But, hand a man a baby-doll in knit sweater and matching booties, with instructions to unleash his anger, and unless someone steps in to stop him (three strong men is recommended), the entire room will be reduced to rubble. No Life Coach—whatever the hell that is—required."

This last statement made me stop and think about what I'd just said. Not the verity of it; it's loaded with verity. If a bear should ever suddenly appear, and all I have is a baby-doll in knit ensemble, that bear had better take notice.

It's really rather sad though. My wife, whom I adore, pretty much knows me as a kind, caring, generally good-natured, entertaining and sometimes goofy sort of guy. I'm very very sorry to say that she also knows that I have my limits...she's seen me at my worst...more than once. But, (this is neither an excuse nor an apology) as far as I can tell, it's simply the biological construct of masculinity.

As said, my job is to entertain her and to protect her.

There's the can of worms. I've already opened it for you.

## **MARRIAGE and FORGETFULNESS**

Men, are, above all else, forgetful creatures. Whatever woman may be—and that remains a warm mystery—man is forgetful. Most of all he forgets his obligation to love. And although I often forget what I went into a room for, I never forget how much I love my wife upon return.

Additionally, I try not to let her forget how funny I am, because it's pretty much the only thing I have to offer.

Whenever they interview a couple who have been together since the beginning of time and are still clearly in love, they always ask the same question: "What makes your marriage work?" In response, the ancient lovely wife always says. "He makes me laugh."

The old man always says, "She's my best friend." That's what Sylvie and I have going; I make her laugh, and I'd rather spend time with her than anything or anyone else on earth. And, I can tell you this: I never forget that, and it can't be separated out of me. It's the world in which I live.

## ON DINOSAUR SAFETY

Yet another idiot raised on a steady diet of video games made the leap from shooting people on his computer to shooting people in reality the other day. It's almost a reasonable conclusion after all. If we raise our kids believing that shooting people (decapitating people, blowing up buildings and crashing cars) is acceptable entertainment and just good clean fun, some of them are going to pursue that entertainment in the real world. At least that's my point of view. So, as the news of this slaughter unraveled, I started huffing and puffing and sputtering and pacing the floor while gesticulating loudly, espousing this point of view, in the privacy of my own home, in front of my always delightful, insightful, remarkably forbearing wife. Her view is that my view on this particular matter is questionable at best.

"You CANNOT let kids think that killing people is a game without some of them getting the idea that really killing people might be fun," I say.

To refute my argument, she says this:

"That's ridiculous. Once I had a game where I was shooting dinosaurs... I got pretty good at it too. But, I never felt the impulse to go out and kill any real dinosaurs."

Case closed.

My fear is that this is yet another indication that this very fine woman may be hanging around with the wrong crowd.

### **THIRD AND FINAL NOTICE**

One day, while her folks were in France, my dear wife opened up an envelope marked **THIRD AND FINAL NOTICE, RESPOND WITHIN 30 DAYS**. It was from the tax people. They were threatening to close down the hotel unless we “filed and paid all past due returns, including penalties and interest in no less than 30 days”. The letter went on to further state that, according to their records, the balance due was \$0.00.

Sylvie showed it to me and asked me what I thought she should do. I advised her to write them a letter refusing to pay. It was the voice of experience. I’d been through this before, with the phone company.

One time many years ago, the phone company demanded \$0 and 00 cents from me, but had given me 10 days to respond. I’d ignored the **FIRST NOTICE** and **SECOND NOTICE** because it just seemed so ridiculous. But the threatening tone of the **THIRD AND FINAL NOTICE** inspired me a bit and compelled me to write. I wrote back saying that I absolutely refused to pay \$0 and 00 cents. I told them that it was a matter of principle; that I would never pay \$0 and 00 cents, and they could take me to court and let a judge decide the matter.

They responded almost immediately saying that if I did not pay \$0 and 00 cents they would not only shut off my phone service but I’d be responsible for accrued interest on the balance due, at some absurd rate like 29%. I did not waver, I did not surrender, I did not buckle or bend. I did not even consider bending. As said, it was a matter of principle.

Instead, I wrote them back saying that nothing on earth could make me write out a check for \$0 and 00 cents and if they shut down my phone service *I* would see *them* in court.

I was feeling pretty smug because, with my superior brain, I'd long since figured out that if I didn't pay \$0 and 00 cents, even considering the accrued interest, it was pretty much the same as if I did pay \$0 and 00 cents. In fact, if I *didn't pay it*, \$0 and 00 cents was precisely, to-the-penny, what I would be paying. I was counting on the court system to see the logic in that.

Rather than attempt to explain this to the phone company however—because they'd already demonstrated their inability to think along such lofty lines—I sent them an empty envelope with my return address on the outside. Strangely enough that seemed to satisfy them. As I recall my next bill was for something like \$39 and I paid it with a check, as I usually did. We were old friends again.

At any rate, that's why a **THIRD AND FINAL NOTICE** with 30 days to respond didn't send chills down my old spine. Thirty days was certainly enough time to screw around with those idiots.

## A DOG OF HER OWN

The dog-in-law is wonderful. The dog-in-law is good. The dog-in-law is great. And Noodle is everything a dog-in-law should be. He is helpful, friendly, willing, eager, kind of obedient and, although there is no requirement for it, he also clogs up the center of a hallway in a respectable, noble (staunchly immoveable), princely sort of way. So, he has dignity. He stinks, he drools, but he has dignity. He evacuates a couple of pounds at a time, but there is only hollow innocence in his eyes as he does it. It is the dog-in-law's essential undeniable goodness that lead my wonderful wife to wish and hope and pray for...and, given the opportunity, to talk quietly, sweetly, charmingly and incessantly about, having a dog of her own.

I feel compelled to say here, very quickly, that I am not a dog kinda guy. Nonetheless, I could not help but be impressed almost immediately with the dog-in-law's intelligence. One day, when he was the very tiniest pup, I took him aside, picked him up in my hands, looked him in the eye and gave him a few words of advice. "Always eat quickly," I told him. "Eat as though you haven't eaten in a week...eat," I said, "as though you may never have another opportunity to eat again." I told him that. "AND," I said, holding a finger up in front of his nose to keep his attention, "get as much sleep as you possibly can." That was my advice to the pup. To my astonishment the little guy recognized the verity running like gold throughout that good advice and took to it right away. Even now, more than twelve years later, though that wisdom was presented in English, a second language for him (or maybe third, if dogs

have a language of their own) he remains firmly committed to the good advice I gave him, that day, as a pup.

Naturally, I feel honored.

Previous to having the dog-in-law around I might have been found posing aristocratically from time to time and pontificating: "Beyond the fact that they smell bad, drool a lot and have the peculiar ability to turn one pound of dry food into 8 pounds of something so foul it makes even dog breeders gag, I have nothing against them." Now, after getting to know one, I have to admit, dogs are very nice.

That said, there's this:

My almost endless whining (for one must sleep sometimes) about being trapped here in the building in which my very dear wife was raised, and has lived almost every moment of her life, falls second only to my constant whining about having neither enough time nor space in our lives. Those secondary complaints stem from the first directly. Being indentured to this hotel, my time is never my own, and our two "little rooms", as some people call them, are small.

The lack of time complaint comes up whenever I sit down and pick up a book and I am rendered, by circumstance or duty, incapable of reading seven words in succession without interruption. On the other hand my wife somehow manages to read something along the order of 5 books each and every week and, since she generally enjoys them enough to keep them around, our little rooms shrink incrementally almost on a daily basis. So, my complaint about lack of space, say last month, was myopic.

The vast emptiness we lived in way back then, exists no longer. The great emptiness which surrounds us today will be but a memory tomorrow, as the books slowly close in upon us.

The shrinking space lament also comes up (somewhat more explosively) whenever I trip over something that resides, unreasonably to my mind, on the floor. Distilled, my complaint is this: "If it ain't a rug, it doesn't belong on the goddamned floor!" Otherwise, my life here, as the only born-an'-raised American at a truly French hotel, is perfect. By that I mean I love my wife and when I think upon that love, time and space mean nothing to me...there is no north or south to it...at least until I pick up a ukulele and am immediately interrupted, or until, once again, I stub my toe.

Stomping around whining about our lack of time and limited space almost defines me as a man, if a man taking that tack—instead of the traditional escape into heavy drinking and reckless driving—can claim to be a man.

My very dear wife creatively eliminated both the time and space problems in a single blow when she got her puppy. I may have thought I had no time before, but I was mistaken. Of the twenty-seven minutes of leisure I jealously fought for and claimed for myself each day previously, eighty-one are now taken up each day by the puppy. I thought we had no space before, but apparently there was room enough for a small dog, his bed, his bowls, his toys and an almost perpetually visiting dog-in-law.



I would now like very much to go directly to the things of value upon which this adorable creature has chewed, because that was his approach. He seemed to know if there was any real value in a thing and then go right to it...(My very dear wife has this same ability in any store.) We'll get back to how cute the doggie is later.  
(By all accounts he is very cute.)

That aside, the very moment he arrived he ambled over, and, when our back was turned, chewed some tassels off the bottom of a new, relatively expensive, somewhat weird-looking, barrel-shaped, over-stuffed, green velvet chair which my wife's father had given to his only daughter for some unnamed gift giving event. He (the puppy, not my wife's father) then went into the other room and began to chew upon the much loved, fine, antique, ornate, hand-carved bed, which sits heavily, darkly, threateningly (depending upon the light), at any rate somewhat fairytale-like, in our bedroom. You might imagine what joy that has brought to our little rooms, since my wife enjoyed the first for its newness and the latter for its stately oldness. Additionally, he has chewed the corners of walls. (I don't know how.) He chewed the A string off my cello (and he's lucky it didn't injure him in the process and that I didn't injure him after the process). He chewed the very nice Johannes Kraus cello bow—which my wife gave me as a gift on my birthday—I like a bow with a little tooth, but not tooth of that sort...and it has never been the same. That event inspired this heartfelt plea:

*All I want is God to protect me, my wife to find me thoroughly entertaining, and for her dog to stop chewing on my cello bows.*

Because I love my wife and fear that love might be hindered should I scold her new dog in any way which he might seem to deserve, I yanked a knot in the A string and went on playing. Then, I took the bow in to Ifshin to have it re-haired, albeit just a bit imperfectly. The antique bed, I have assured my wonderful wife, will be restored in time. But the tassels on the gift chair have been a hassle.

I first emailed the people who sold the thing to my wife's father saying, charmingly I thought, that our new puppy consumed two or three tassels off the bottom of the chair, and that, we love the chair and we love the puppy, we would like to see them both make it through the first year in good repair. I assured them that they could sell us some tassels or give us some tassels and that it really didn't matter much to me which; I wanted only to restore the chair to its original, albeit short-lived, glory. I received an email in return saying this was a special matter which would take special attention and we would hear from the person assigned to this very special task *shortly* (that was their word choice.) So, I waited.

More than a month went by. I heard nothing.

I copied the email and sent it again under the subject Second Request. I received, in response, a statement that this was a special matter which would require special attention and we would hear from the person whose task it would be to service this very special and highly important matter *very shortly*. The insertion of the word *very*, assured me that they had heard my cry.

The better part of three weeks went by. I heard nothing. So, I emailed the same note, this time stating that it was my Third Request and, shortly after sending it off into the vacuum, I sat down and—it being a particularly slow day at the front desk—picked up the phone and dialed this company’s customer service number. The overly-charming lady on the other end of the line identified me/us somehow almost instantly and said, “Yes, I see that you have emailed us about that three times and I must apologize; your emails were all sent to the wrong department.”

This person was being helpful and I recognized the rarity of that, so, I did not ask why the wrong department did not send my emails on to the correct department. I chose instead to remain silent. I was also careful to assure this sincere lady that I knew there were more important matters in the world than the restoration of these few tassels. I told her that I recognized that there are some very real things going on in the world right now. Still, I thought if I didn’t pursue the matter now I would find myself entering old age bearing the burden of regret for my negligence whenever I looked at that chair. “My guess is,” I told her, “that I probably won’t need any additional regrets hanging over my head at that juncture in my life.”

This statement seemed to put a chill in the air for reasons which I could not then, and cannot now, see—though I’ve thought about it. She became snappish, and told me coldly that someone might come by and sew tassels onto our chair. Then she told me, they might decide instead to sell us some. Then she said they might just send us some. Then she said this: “...IF we can get some.”

Henry Edward Fool

So, I don't know where that left us but I certainly gave  
that puppy a stern look when next our eyes met.

## **IF IT LOOKS LIKE A FOX AND ACTS LIKE A CAT**

I'm not a dog kind a guy—I'm sorry I'm just not—never have been. And I don't really take-to the dog kinda people I've met—either. The aristocrats with their purebreds, and the bums with their vicious snapping, free-roaming, blockheaded beasts, both annoy me. In fairness I think I should say that dog people don't really take-to me either (few people do.) To me dogs have always seemed to be little more than smelly fur-covered machines expressly designed to turn a pound of kibble into eight or ten pounds of ... but we've been through that already.

My wife wanted a Shiba Inu for our anniversary, and so I did what any man who loves his wife would do; I laid down some rules. No dog shall EVER upon this bed lie. (Those were the rules.) And they were strictly enforced for several days. The evening I picked up the sleeping pup and gently placed him upon our bed marked what my very insightful wife called "the weakening of my anti-canine resolve."

This transition was much shorter than the time it took my wife's cat, Papillon, to accept my intrusion into his idyllic existence. For several years he was convinced that I didn't truly understand all that was required of him as a highly cherished pet. But, during those years, through careful observation, I began to recognize the tremendous burden that poor creature must bear each day.

I've made a list:

He must he eat

He must sleep.

I'm sure there's more to it than that which, due to my insensitivity to nuance, I will never know.

At any rate, it took the puppy maybe 12 hours to wheedle his way into my hardened heart. He was so frightened and so very lonely those first few nights away from his mother, and he cried so pitifully, that I slept on the bedroom floor with him curled in my arms. I spoke to him quietly, soothingly, whenever he whimpered or awoke in fright, and just stayed near him throughout the night. Meanwhile, my wife was sleeping on the couch in the other room, *with the cat in her arms*, to assure him of her continuing affection. Nonetheless, like Papillon, for a very long time that puppy wouldn't let me get anywhere near him when he was fully awake. And, for a very long time, I was heartsick over that.

His distaste for me was such that, whenever we were out walking and my wife (quietly, secretly...) handed me the leash, that little dog would flip out. If he looked back and saw me on the other end of that tether, he'd run it out to the very end and, looking back in fear, flop around on the end of it like a fish on a line. It wasn't personal though, that pup didn't like anybody that wasn't my wife. He liked other dogs, but, like any reasonable being, he could do without people.

People sure liked that puppy though, and right from the very beginning. Number one gushing statement: "He's so cute." This doesn't separate him out from a lot of other puppies, admittedly. Number one observation: "He looks like a fox." Which separates him out decidedly. Number one question: "What is that?" Number one answer from misinformed know-it-all passersby: "It's an Akita." (Actually, I believe these two breeds may be related in some way, but this is not a scientific treatise.)

Number two answer from misinformed know-it-all passersby: “It’s a Basenji.” (He’s not a Basenji—doesn’t look like a Basenji—and they are not related.)

Apparently our Shiba Inu learned everything he cared to learn in the first couple of weeks...as he demonstrated to our surprise and continual amazement. For example: we showed him where we wanted him to empty himself on the very first day and from that moment on he tried his hardest to get to that spot in time. Like all pups, on occasion he failed to make it, but he made a valiant effort. I was convinced that if he had opposable thumbs, could stand on a ladder and turn a door knob, he’d have taken himself out. At any rate, if you’re looking for a dog that can be trained to pee directly into a drain, this is the dog for you.

Unlike most mutton-headed canines he does not feel that every living creature on earth is his friend. He is absolutely dedicated, completely devoted, and somewhat obedient to only ONE person, my wife. He wails as if injured at her departure; moans soulfully while she’s away, and throws himself shamelessly upon her when she returns. He regards all other human beings from a maintained distance, with either fear or curiosity. If a human approaches him, he backs up. If they persist in their unwanted advances, he leaves. For the most part, he wants only to be left alone—another perfectly reasonable position for any intelligent being to take. Like other dogs he has fur and teeth and a tail of course, but, pretty much that is where the comparison ends. There’s no drooling, no barking, no desire when walking down the street to stick his nose into every foul smelling remnant of former passing pissers.

He rarely has any desire to leave his mark glossing the surface of theirs. He likes flowers. Take him to a park and he'll stop and take in the fragrances of a freshly planted plot. He likes grass too; to eat (he munches it like a cow) to run in, to root, to bite and just generally take delight in.

Like a magpie, he collects things. He does not necessarily chew on them—though some he does—a lot of these things he just likes to have around. Like a fox he has found a place, a lair, that is all his own, out of sight, behind the couch, and he hangs out there, with his collection of things. He WILL NOT chew on any object manufactured especially for dogs to chew on. Will not. By natural inclination he will chew on anything you *do not* want him to chew on; photographs, driver's licenses, birth certificates, anything irreplaceable or of great nostalgic value. Though I do not really value them, he likes my socks for some reason or other. If you have an antique bed which has nicely weathered hundreds of years and you place a Shiba Inu in the same room, prepare yourself to comfort your poor distraught grieving wife. As my wife says, "He's worse than a termite." He prefers hand-carved pieces that have been properly cared for and properly aged.

Unlike other dogs he refuses to chase a ball. And, if you toss him a piece of bread, he doesn't jump up and snap it viciously out of the air like every other dog on earth; more likely he'll observe its trajectory until it hits him in the nose, and falls to the floor. Then he picks it up and chews on it with great satisfaction. The idea of plucking it out of the air would never occur to him. He doesn't fetch; has no real interest in that. He will not tug on a rope. He will play



with a ball of yarn or chase a laser light precisely like a cat. This is a dog who might not care, at the moment, to eat the food you've just placed in the bowl before him. He may eat half of it and walk away, returning later to casually consume the rest—there's no hurry. After vigorous exercise he does not necessarily particularly care to take on water—you can lead him to it, but I challenge anyone to make a Shiba Inu drink. After a while of calm repose, he may come out and lap up a little (or a lot), but again, there's no hurry... and it's always his decision.

He loves other dogs; all other dogs; short, fat, big, small, any shape, size, color, breed, demeanor, or temperament. He is especially drawn to those who take an instant disliking to him. He'll walk right up to the most vicious looking one in any herd and—to the confusion of many of them—place his nose directly on the other's nose. It usually leaves the brute dumbfounded long enough that he gets a head start. He's quick, and very very dodgy, so their own anger usually wears them out long before they can clamp down upon the neck of the joyful little bounding scamp. If there is a cat in residence he will approach the cat in the same way he would any dog. The same confusing nose to nose contact is made before he starts dodging the storm of viciously thrown claws.

Apparently he has a noble heritage which extends back maybe as much as several thousand years. Skeletons of his bloodline were found in an ancient Japanese archeological dig, and those bones pretty much prove that the Shiba Inu is a rarity among pure bred dogs, because no one has tampered with them during all that time. No one has said,

Let's make his nose shorter...or his ears longer. No one decided to breed them to get some kind of idiotic jowly thing, or attempted to move the hind legs forward by three or four inches, thinking that would be more pleasing. No one has yet come up with a striped variety (horizontal of course); or declared that if he's more than 14 inches at the hind-quarter he's inferior. No; the one they found in the 6000 year old burial site was pretty much the one my wife now holds (struggling to get at the cat, I see) in her arms.

And,(this is kinda cool), after DNA testing, National Geographic Society has determined that the Shiba Inu is, among all the breeds out there, closest to the wolf; which may explain why many larger dogs start to take flight when they see him coming and herding dogs of any sort either gang up on him or run him off.

All in all, my wife's dog is pleasing; he's clean, intelligent (perhaps a bit too intelligent) good natured, slightly aloof, clever, undemanding; a perfect match for my wonderful wife in every way. Beyond all that, I like him a lot, despite the fact that, in general, I'm not really a dog kinda guy.

## RECOMMENDING A GOOD RESTAURANT

My very dear wife and I were walking the dogs in Golden Gate Park, trying to keep them on the path, out of the grass and mud, when I asked her, “Have you ever recommended a good shoe repair guy to the shoe repair guy who just fixed your shoes?”

I was walking a bit behind her at the time because I was in charge of the dogs and Noodle’d picked up the scent of something truly foul, and was straining at the leash with all of his biologically-driven insistence, in an effort to get to it and lay his nose directly upon it. [Here’s a question: If these animals—dogs—do in fact have a sense of smell 34,000 times more sensitive than us humans—as dog experts claim—why do they have to place their nose directly upon something which we would flee from as quickly as possible?] That aside, I didn’t know if Sylvie had heard me, because she merely kept walking and had not responded in any way.

Not always the most wonderful person on earth—though not always the worst either—I asked, perhaps a little loudly, perhaps a little sharply, if she had heard what I had said.

“You mean about cobblers?”

“Yeah, I asked if you have ever recommended a good shoe repair guy *to* your own shoe repair guy. Have you ever said to him, ‘Hey, I really like what you did with that heel; there’s a guy over in the Marina District who *really* knows how to knock out a great half-sole.’”

“I heard you,” she said nicely, “but, I’m not sure I understand what you are talking about.”

Though not always sure what I'm talking about myself, in this case I was. "I'm talking about the restaurant." (I felt it was unnecessary to add, *of course*.)

"Hmmm," she said, knowing that, given time, a strangely constructed somewhat oblique explanation would follow. "When people leave the restaurant they sometimes stop at the office and say, 'Wow, what a wonderful place. That meal was excellent!' and then they go on to say, 'There's this place over near Fort Mason where they handle fish perfectly, and the view from there is simply spectacular. It's just absolutely marvelous. It's one of our favorite restaurants in town.'"

"I see what you're saying, but I don't think recommending a cobbler to another cobbler is quite the same thing," she said. Then she—because she is both quick and clear thinking—gave me three of four neatly defined reasons why someone might leave a restaurant with the praises of another restaurant upon their lips.

I could kinda see it, but balked saying, "Come on, would you EVER say to someone at a restaurant, 'That was a wonderful meal. Have you eaten at the Gilded Swain? Man, they are SO good. The Gilded Swain, man, you can not go wrong. We must eat there 30 times a year. The Gilded Swain over there on Ninth near the park. It's superb!'" She replied, "For me the best situation in a restaurant is when you are hardly aware of the presence of the staff." "Well, yeah, but you see my point. It really irritates me when someone leaving the restaurant stops to laud some other restaurant as if they are doing me a favor." "I'm sure they mean well. But, the shoe repair comparison doesn't work, it's not the same thing at all."

“Ok,” I said, “How about this then. What if I said to you, ‘You’re a fine wife, a really good wife, and I really love the time we spend together, but BILL’S WIFE...man, now that’s a wife! I mean, you’re good an’ all, and I’ve been very happy with you; I’m completely satisfied. Still, you have to admit... Bill’s wife, MAN, that woman’s certainly got something very special going on.”

I could see that Sylvie understood my point. And, from the look she gave me, I was certainly glad that we didn’t know anyone named Bill. There was a little warning in that look nonetheless, I guess just in case we ever do meet anyone named Bill.

“If I were you,” she said, “I’d just forget about customers making comments about the restaurant, you already have enough other things to worry about.”

She was right of course; I always have plenty of things to worry about, and I’m usually kept pretty busy in my spare time inventing new ones. Still, allow me to offer you some advice. If you’re leaving a restaurant and feel suddenly inspired to tell someone, who works at that restaurant, how wonderful some other restaurant across town is, don’t.

## THE DOG WALKER'S WISDOM

One day when we were out walking the dogs along the beach I saw the most amazing thing I have ever seen in my life. A woman with a flock of dogs scattered all over the beach—running and fighting and swimming and emptying themselves, and just generally being dogs—shouted a command and each and every one of those dogs stopped what they were doing, came to her, and, when she told them to, sat. They remained fixed on her, looking up obediently, waiting for her next command. What magic is this? I asked myself. It was beyond magic, it was a miracle.

If you know anything about the dog brain, you know that, in telling a dog what you want of him, you must say everything at least twice, and then you must wait as the message travels from the ears to the brain and while the brain struggles to determine what it is that you want. With certain types of dogs it is then, while in the brain struggles with a translation, that a decision must also be reached as to whether or not your request will be honored.

To complicate things further, many times when your request is denied, it's not a matter of belligerence or disobedience; it's merely that the animal's mind has drifted off, onto other matters—or, if it can determined from the look in the animal's eyes—into the great emptiness of no thoughts whatsoever. Dog lovers find great charm in this doggie thoughtlessness. It is just one of the uniquely canine characteristics that melts the hearts of dog people, and it explains why, if the animal can do anything at all on command, the beast is thought of as clever.

(But, I can see my thinking has taken an evil—and by that I mean realistic—turn.)

At any rate, however else it may appear, I love the dogs I have in my life. When Noodle was sick I was so concerned that when I returned home after his departure in the evening, my wife thought someone dear to me had died. She rushed to me and put her arms around me, and in the most caring way possible asked me what was wrong. I was in tears, worried about the poor dog-in-law. She had only seen me in that state one time before, while filling out our income tax forms. (It's too easy isn't it?)

After seeing what that dog walker could do with a pack of unruly dogs I thought there was a book in it. So, from that point on, I kept an eye on the dog walkers whenever they were within eye-shot, and shortly became convinced that dog walkers have more real *working experience* with dogs of every sort than the most famous *celebrity* dog trainer in the world (you may know one or two of them from TV). I also convinced myself that the wisdom hidden in that experience could be of great service to every dog owner. I, for one, would love to have either of the dogs I deal with obey an order once in a while. I can't imagine what that must be like. Meanwhile, I comfort myself and entertain my wife by giving them commands to do things that they are about to do anyway and pretend they've complied.

After surreptitious observation I began to realize that the dog walkers not only had control over the pack, they also seemed to be reading each individual animal. So, no matter

how many dogs they wrangled, they monitored each dog's stance, movement, demeanor.  
"Daisy, GET back over here!"

I wanted to interview dog walkers for the book, and constructed a little plea, and a questionnaire and a business card and I had plans of putting this packet on the windshield of dog walkers' vehicles whenever we came across them—which was every single day. I opened up a page on my website: DOG WALKER'S WISDOM, asking dog walkers if they would like to be interviewed for the book, or submit their thoughts on the topic. I designed the book cover, which included the photo known now as Young Nazi Dogs Look Toward a Bright Future. On the BACK COVER I wrote this blurb:

"There is absolutely nothing in this book that you couldn't pick up yourself by merely spending 10,000 hours or so with every breed of dog known to man."

As usual, the footer on my plea said:

*No Calls Please, I've Already Got Enough of That in My Life.*

When I presented all of this to my very dear, somewhat cruel wife, she said, "How many books do you have started already?" Clear thinking and honesty are as refreshing as they are rare in this muddled world. Luckily for me, I can always turn to my wonderful wife to find both, whether I want them or not.

THEN... she suggested I actually finish one of *those* books before adding yet another to that long, ever-growing list. Ah well, I still think it's a good idea.



## MIRACLES

I have to believe that there is something a bit miraculous about the combination of my wife and her dog. There are too many miracles associated with that combo to think otherwise. The first was Bayard's escape.

The Mighty Bayard, now at age six, still does not like the city streets; he prefers the woods, the beach, the park, anywhere where there are no people but there might be some dogs. When he was a pup he had a near-hysterical fear of the streets. We had to harness him and drag him outside and, once out, we had to physically drag him down the sidewalk, going to or coming from the park. Along the way we received many a stern look from passersby who thought we were torturing the poor creature.

One evening I was working in the hotel office and my good wife was out dragging the Mighty Bayard up the hill to a local park four blocks away. I don't recall exactly what I was doing at the time Bayard appeared by himself scratching frantically at the front door. "My God," I thought, "where is Sylvie?" If Bayard was here alone, was my wife lying in the middle of the pavement somewhere?

I asked my friend, Bruce somewhat frantically to watch the dog and I ran out into the street in a panic, looking anxiously for any sign of the woman that I love. Fear coursed through every fiber of my being, until I saw her running toward me with the dog-in-law on his leash. Apparently, something had happened to spook the Mighty Bayard and he pulled free of Sylvie and took off for home.

She took off after him, but couldn't keep up; he soon disappeared from her sight, and the only indicator she had that he was still alive was the startled look on people's faces as they interpreted the scene and, mouths agape, silently pointed in the direction the dog had run. She arrived, out of breath and unable to speak, as I stepped outside the front door.

We will never know what miracles must have transpired to get little Bayard down that hill and to the hotel by himself safely. To do that, he had to cross three streets full of rush-hour traffic. The first street he crossed, California Street, is busy day and night and impossible to cross on foot unless and until the lights are in your favor. That street carries a lot of cabs and has a cable car line. Cab drivers are not necessarily looking out for little run-away dogs as they ply the streets wildly in desperate search of fares, and cable cars are not known to stop on a dime. So, for Bayard to make it across California Street unharmed was a miracle.

Then he ran downhill for a block and across Pine Street.

Pine Street, day or night is pretty much a racetrack. It is a one-way street designed to empty the business district as quickly as possible, so the lights are timed to do that. Unfortunately, those lights are timed so that, if you drive a steady 27 mph, you'll flow right through each intersection. But nobody has ever figured that out. Consequently, Pine is four lanes of frustrated drivers, waiting anxiously at every intersection, eager to shoot through there as soon as the light changes, and hoping to accelerate fast enough to catch the next light while it's still green... which is, as each of

them should know by now, impossible. From my many years of experience driving on Pine, the light at every intersection turns yellow as you approach and red about the time you arrive. So, Pine Street is a madhouse. Drivers on Pine Street are vicious and incredibly aggressive at any hour, but especially during rush hour. It's as if they are trying to escape a fireball. And, Bayard made his escape that day, and dashed across the four lanes of Pine Street, in the very height of rush hour traffic.

Countless miracles must have unfolded to allow the frightened little guy to make it across either of those streets at that hour. But he did. Then, he continued—according to the startled looks on people's faces—down Mason Street to Bush Street, where additional heavenly protection must have intervened guiding him across three more lanes of traffic without harm.

On the beach where we usually walk that dog I've managed to lose my car key twice. But, since we keep a spare key safely in my wife's purse and the purse is always safely locked in the trunk of the car, in each case we had little choice but to re-walk that half-mile stretch of sand looking for the key. In both cases, I actually found that key, after methodically covering the entire beach, not on the sand but in the 23 acre grassy expanse between the beach and the parking lot. How's that for a miracle?

My wife also lost the dog's brand new collar on that same beach—she'd taken it off the pup in order to keep it as new as possible for as long as possible. So, we retraced our journey from the very beginning, step-by-step, walking

along the beach, heads down, until we came back to the place where we'd exited thirty minutes earlier. There it was, in plain sight. Had we simply turned around and looked we would have seen it where it had fallen.

Finding anything on a half-mile of beach, even if it isn't yours and you're not looking for it, is a miracle of sorts. And finding what you are looking for on that particular swath of grass—where I lost my car key—is nothing less. That field is so dense and deep and irregular that Noodle—who has a pretty good nose for a tennis ball—often loses that most precious object in that wild greenery. I've gone after balls I'd thrown in there myself, knowing precisely where they'd landed, and after a long, patient and thorough search, have given up. So, to find a car key in there...

As said, I have come to believe that there is something a bit miraculous about the combination of that doggie and that woman. Of course, I'm delighted to be along for the ride.

## A MIRACLE of NATURAL INTERFERENCE

Speaking of miracles, someone of great authority and the very best, though somewhat weird, intentions has become determined to reclaim a forty foot long 16 foot wide swath of ground near the beach. For reasons no reasonable person could possibly ever understand they want that particular plot to be inhabited strictly by *native plants*. My wife and I have walked by there almost every day—to walk the dogs—for more than 12 years, and for most of that time we have quietly watched their patient efforts. Out of kindness, we have kept our critical observations, snide remarks, and laughter to ourselves. What lunacy!

They first drew the line against invasive plants by marking off the area with a string and posting little signs saying to stay out. Later, they fenced it in with short plastic fencing. More recently they've built a more substantial fence with faux four-by-fours and plastic coated cables.

With the battle lines drawn, someone who knows such stuff goes in there in secret and places little colored flags throughout the area—(I'm guessing) yank this one, leave this one, offer this one some water. The noble battle is fought almost entirely by middle-aged, middle class women wearing floppy pork-pie hats and dressed like lumberjacks. They can be found there almost every day devotedly down on their knees, in obedience to those little flags, yanking out any plant which looks like it may have any life to it. Whenever and wherever anything healthy looking takes root, a flag appears, and they yank that thing out of there.

All around that carefully tended plot—in the completely ignored areas—vegetation of every sort thrives, growing thick and lush, providing homes for cheerfully chirping birds. Meanwhile, inside the fenced-off, protected area everything struggles. Those especially selected, carefully coddled, precious native plants lay around in the dirt, grey or brown, withering and dying like weeds. That's pretty much what they look like too. BUT, because of the undying patience, on-going diligence and devoted care of that selfless army of women, that plot always look like Hell.

What complete nonsense!

We both have our opinions—great horticultural experts that we are—about what it would require to make that deplorable little plot of ugly dying native scrub prosper. I think it would require a miracle. My dear wife thinks that it would do a lot better if they would simply leave it alone. So, either way, dear devoted diggers, we wish you luck... but feel we must also say, fat chance.

## **The MUD at MILLERTON POINT**

It's almost impossible to find any place in Marin where a dog might be a dog, and our attempts to find such a place have all proven futile. At Limantour Beach we let The Mighty Bayard run free within the designated area, and he was having a great time, just running around wildly at full speed, and challenging the incoming waves—not disturbing any nesting Plovers or upsetting the ecosystem in any way that would leave a permanent mark, or destroying our poor helpless, defenseless, trusting planet so severely that we all go skittering off into space—when a died-in-the-wool Marinite ran up to us snapping, “WELL, it's obvious YOU TWO didn't BOTHER to READ the dog-leash regulations...” and started looking around anxiously for someone in uniform to further destroy our innocent, well-earned, God-given, flickering glimpse of happiness. Why is it that people who are quick to quote the local law to you are always bristling with such umbrage?

It's as if they themselves have given birth to that law and feel they must personally enforce it. That was certainly her stance. But, perhaps she *was* the sole reason the Marin beach, dog-lease laws came into existence. I can see the local council as they finally reach their breaking point. They all lean in toward one another and one of them whispers, “Look, the thing doesn't make sense to me either, but, in the name of Christ, can we please just pass this law and get this goddamned woman off our backs...Please!

I realize that we (wife, dog and I) should have all been more appreciative of her correction. When she spoke down

to us like children we should have bowed down meekly in response, and maybe trembled a bit, and showed, in some way, how thankful we were that she had taken the time to speak down to us at all. That's Marin for you.

Once, just beyond Lagunitas—a town with more dogs than people—the State Park ranger charged us \$10 to walk the dog-in-law in their park, on a leash, AND we were strictly instructed that he had to stay *on the pavement*. Three hundred yards in I said 'Screw that' and let the dog-in-law off leash, only to have the park ranger appear almost instantly beside us in his car. He looked at us sternly and shouted, "Keep that dog *on his leash*, and keep him *on the pavement*. This is your last warning." In Marin, dogs can't run on the beach, dogs can't run in the forest.

It was with these wounds still bouncing around within my frail and overly-sensitive nature that I very meekly asked the woman in the Point Reyes Station parking lot where we might, in that area, let our dog be a dog. She had a large, eager, bug-eyed Weimaraner bouncing off the walls of her Volvo station wagon, so I thought she might know.

"Is there *any place* around here where we can let our dog run free?" I whined like a child.

"Yes," she said good-naturedly, with only the slightest hint of residential superiority, "Millerton Point." Then she offered me directions, "Head out of town toward Tomales. It's maybe three miles, on your left."

"The dog can run free there?"

"Yes. Millerton Point. I take my dogs there often."

"Thank you," I said. I think I may have bowed slightly.



We were familiar with Millerton Point. We had let the dog-in-law off-leash there to run at one time or another, but had always thought we were getting away with something.

This trip, we were trying to squeeze as much delight as we could into our three days/two nights off work, but with my very dear wife's sprained ankle (and need of a cane), the near-statewide edict against dogs having liberty of any sort in any setting, and my tendency to carry every fleeting inconvenience, no matter how slight, around with me—a martyr-like burden, but with neither martyr-like surrender nor noble martyr-like silence—it was not panning out to be the perfect dream get-away we had planned. So, we went to Millerton Point, and we went out onto the trail, and we made our way to the beach, with the Mighty Bayard straining at the leash every step of the way, and my poor, very dear wife following behind, slowly making her way along the sandy trail.

We came up over a ridge to discover the tide was out. But not just out, the tide was further out than I had ever seen it before, and I've been in this area for more than forty years now. There was a thirty of forty yard wide expanse of mud between the beach and the water. That mud was as black and as slick as engine sludge drained from an old Hudson. It looked soft and frothy, a jet black crème brulee.

The Mighty Bayard, always fastidious—who walks around puddles and jumps over even the smallest patch of mud, on the paths where we usually walk—was eager to be free. Knowing the animal as I do, I had no doubt whatsoever that, when I let him loose, he would stay on the dry shell

and pebble beach. I was bending over about to do that when my very dear wife appeared at the top of the sand hill behind us. While struggling toward us on the soft sand with her cane, she shouted, “NO! Don’t let him loose.”

I took the dog, and went back to my wife to talk sense to her. “DO NOT let him loose,” she reiterated.

“Why?”

“He’ll go running off into that mud and we’ll never get him clean again,” she said firmly, but [insert knowing laughter here] naively.

So, I laughed knowingly and corrected her thinking.

“Are you kidding?” I said, “THIS DOG jumps over the slightest bit of mud. He goes *around* puddles. He won’t go anywhere near that stuff,” I assured her. “Believe me,” I said with some authority, “I know this dog, and he won’t go anywhere near that mud.”

Just then a woman came around the corner with a dog off leash and her dog—a large loveable idiot—was running along the dry beach with his tongue hanging out. I raised one eyebrow and nodded at their fine example.

“DO NOT,” my wife insisted, “let Bayard off-leash.”

“Nonsense,” I said, “He just wants to run with that other dog.” As I said that, I bent over and unhooked the dog.

“Don’t...” my very dear wife said, but too late. “He’ll go in there and we’ll never get him clean.”

Of course, I felt no need to respond to such foolishness and, snorting a bit, turned to watch with complete astonishment as both of those idiot-dogs ran through the tall grass, down the slope, over the beach and directly into that mud.

Once in there, they started chasing after each other in large swooping circles, running occasionally back onto the beach to gallop along together for a while, snapping and jumping and bumping into each other, before running out into the mud again. The mud was so loose and so deep that both dogs were into it up to their chests. As they struggled to stay on the surface they lunged forward awkwardly, until their footing was attained, then they dragged themselves out of there and ran along the beach for a while before returning to the mud.

Back out in the mud again, they ran joyously in wide circles, scattering mud in all directions. It was a wonderful thing to watch. Bayard was—as predicted—soon covered in the fous stuff from head to toe, with only his back and head unsullied by the rich, deep, black, yuck. He couldn't get enough of that muck. Both dogs were having a great time. Cold as I am to my fellow man, I truly enjoy watching Bayard have fun. So, I was as happy as the dogs. I was laughing hysterically; the woman who owned the other dog was laughing and having a great time too. Let's see now...

When I turned to see if my very dear, and remarkably perceptive, wife was enjoying this as much as the rest of us, I discovered that she was not.

Thus begins the comedy routine where I attempt to capture the galloping, ever-evasive Bayard and re-lease him, so that we might drag him off of that beach and find some way to get him clean again. There's a little bit of pressure here because the woman we're renting a room from for two

nights, has made it perfectly clear, by phone, face to face as well as in print, that any pets staying in her place “must have clean paws” before entering the stupid little room she’d rented us for twice the rate we charge our own guests for a nice room, in a nice hotel, including a full breakfast.

The carpets in her place are a light tan color which is, by pure chance, perhaps the ultimate contrast with this very very VERY black mud the dogs are playing in. So, there’s that. Add in my wife’s displeasure with me—for releasing the dog against her better judgment—and, you can see how things are going. Now it’s me chasing Bayard as he runs out of the mud, across the path, through the waist deep brush, over the pebbled beach and back into the mud again. Comical as this scene may appear from a distance, my very dear wife, from her distance, finds no humor in it. She’s absolutely correct of course, but how was I supposed to foresee that the dog who side-steps puddles, would suddenly turn into a happy mudder?

For a short time he was in brush so deep that he could hardly move and I thought I had him trapped, but he escaped to the mud again, and I waded out there in an attempt to hook him up, but he escaped back to dry land. My wife, in her attempt to help collar the little beast, now stood herself upon less-than-perfectly dry land. Her cane and boots were eight inches deep in that mud, and somehow I found myself with both legs in that mud, half way up to the knees.

Then I could not extract myself.

My feet were sinking into the stuff and I could not extract myself. I was being drawn slowly but steadily downward.

If there was a solid bottom, I hadn't reached it yet, and my concern was escalating as I continued sinking. One of my legs was in up to the knee and the other nearly up to the knee, and I was beginning to panic. I couldn't get out. It was like being in one of those terrifying dreams where you want to scream but cannot make a sound. The thought that I may have waded in over the berm, and I might be in yuck thirty feet deep flashed through my mind. Was I going to perish in this mud?

"I'm sinking..." I hollered at my wife. "I'm sinking!" But, she forsook the opportunity to respond in a thick Germanic accent—"Vat are you sinking of?"

I was truly frightened, and she could see that. She was as concerned as I was, but not as helpless. So, she hobbled over toward me as quickly as she could and shouted. "Lie flat upon the surface." Extending her cane toward me, she shouted, "Lie flat upon the surface, and crawl out."

Desperate, and with no other options that I could see, I did that. I bent forward, placing my chest upon the mucky surface, and from that position, managed, with great effort, to slowly extract one knee. Then I knelt in the muck upon that knee and, crawling like a baby, pulled myself out.

(Later, Sylvie told me that I had Bear Grylls to thank for that very good advice. So, thank you, Bear Grylls.)

As we were pulling into the driveway of the cabin where we were staying, the landlady just happened to be pulling out. She stopped to roll down her window, and judge us—and find us wanting in so many ways—and to shake her head unwittingly while wondering why life is so cruel as to continually send her such riff-raff as guests.

I understood completely. I didn't like her any more than she liked us. I asked her casually if there was a hose, and she squinted at me and, with great caution, asked why. I was clever enough not to tell her that our dog was covered from paw to his jowl in a thick rich black yuck. Instead I said, "Oh, we'd just like to rinse the dog's paws before he goes inside." And she snapped, "Well, please make sure his paws are thoroughly dry before he goes in. And please keep him off the bed." Then she drove off.

We waited in the car for a bit to be sure she didn't return immediately, before taking the dog from the car.

My boots were still encased in that mud, when I threw them away six month later. From the looks of them you'd think I'd spent that afternoon spreading hot tar on a flat roof. ...

Oh, and my very dear wife reminds me that that mud smelled like rotten fish.

TO WHOM THIS MAY CONCERN:

One afternoon, the phone in our rooms rang and it was my wife's father saying, "Quick, get your camera and come out front right away!" So, we rushed out and there, along with my wife's parents, stood two young women both talking on cell phones. Madame (my wife's mother) was standing there at the curb, looking a bit lost and saying, "Oh, such a big deal over such a small matter!" My wife's father pushed past us and ran into the hotel followed by his good wife. That left Sylvie and me standing there wondering what the problem was.

Usually the problem was that a delivery truck had come too close to the curb and had shattered the neon signs which hang on the front of the marquee. So, Sylvie and I were looking around for evidence of the shattered neon when her father emerged, pushed his way past us again, and kneeling beside a car which was not his, began rubbing the fender with his handkerchief. My wife and I looked at each other in complete bewilderment, as he instructed her to take a picture of the fender. One of the young girls interposed herself between Sylvie and the car. The other approached rapidly shouting, "No pictures! NO pictures!"

"Take the photo. Take the photo!" her father commanded.

"Why?" she asked.

"Take the photo, take it!" He ordered rapidly.

"Why?" I asked.

"They are telling us that it has been damaged by Madame's car," he moaned.

“Damaged?” I could not detect ANY damage whatsoever; not a dent, not a ding, not a scratch, not a scuff, no mark of any sort; nothing whatsoever, and I have pretty good eyes.

“Where’s the damage?” I asked.

“This is not your business!” said one of the girls and she placed herself directly in front of me.

“This is not YOUR business!” said the other from her position between Sylvie and the car.

By this point the guy who works next door had emerged and I welcomed him eagerly and escorted him over to look at the fender. “Do you see ANY damage to that fender?”

“THIS IS NOT YOUR BUSINESS!” said the girl loudly and stuck her nose practically upon my chin. “You stay out of this!” she said to the guy who works next door and pointed at him in what anyone would say was a threatening manner.

“Where’s the damage?” I asked. “I don’t see anything.”

“It’s NONE of your business,” one girl said emphatically.

Meanwhile Sylvie had side-stepped the other girl and managed to take a picture.

“NO pictures are to be taken of my car!” said the other stamping her foot and wheeling to face Sylvie. “No pictures. You can not take pictures of my car!” she said and stood blocking any clear view of the damage that did not exist.

So, it was M. Bertrand and Mme Bertrand and my wife and I and the guy who works next door and these two skinny little entrepreneurs. And of that entire gathering only the two young females could detect any damage. M. was upset and Madame was bewildered. The lead female was saying,



“Just pay us and we’ll forget about it.” M. Bertrand said to his daughter, “They are saying it will cost \$700 dollars to repair this car.” The other one said, “Why don’t you just pay up, old man, and we can forget about it!”

M. Bertrand then said, “But, there is no reason for this animosity. The damage has been taken care of. Why don’t you and your family come to our restaurant? You can have a nice dinner in our restaurant; I am the owner, I invite you; you will be my special guests.”

At this point I told one of these girls, “This is all bullshit.” I told Sylvie to take a picture of their license plate as I stepped out in front of oncoming traffic. I was looking for the cop that is NEVER EVER EVER around when you need one.

As I stood in the middle of Bush Street, hoping, praying, weeping for a cop, one of these chicks came over to tell me, “This is none of your business.”

“Oh yes it is,” I assured her.

“IT is NONE of YOUR BUSINESS,” she hissed.

“It IS my business,” I said calmly, while looking at traffic.

“I’m a witness.”

“You’re not a witness. You were not here. You did not see what this crazy woman has done. What are you a witness of? What are you a witness of? Tell me. Tell me please.

What are you a witness of? You are a witness of nothing!”

“Exactly!” I said, “I’m witness to the fact that there is absolutely nothing wrong with that car. There is NO damage to that car, and my wife got a pretty good shot of that fact, despite your friend’s interference.”

“That’s because he wiped the damage off,” she said and left me.

“Well then it’s gone isn’t it?” I shouted at her.

She turned to face me again.

“This is none of your business!” she squealed in frustration.

Right then a cop appeared in the distance. At my furious flagging he pulled over.

As soon as the cop car stopped the leader of the scam switched gears, saying quickly to M. Bertrand, “That’s OK, if you apologize we’ll just forget about it.”

“Now, you’re gonna get the justice you’re looking for!” I said as the cop extracted himself painfully from his car and dragged himself martyr-like toward the crowd. Sylvie and I didn’t stay around to explain the obvious--no photos, no witnesses... no damage.

This is an accurate portrayal of what transpired on that day, from my POV. Things that were said directly to me are, for all intents and purposes, word for word.

Signed, dated

Note: So, my wife’s father went to court over this matter, with the letter you’ve just read and the photographs—which clearly showed NOTHING, not a mark, not a scratch, not a smudge on that car. And—here’s justice for you—he was instructed to pay something close to two thousand dollars for ‘the damage’ done to that car. What damage I don’t know, but *a judge* decided the case based upon what I’ve just told you.  
What a wonderful world.

## A ROMANTIC LITTLE TRIP DOWNSTREAM

My love and I clamber into a canoe and, once afloat, drift lazily downstream through the dappled shade provided by the lovely overhanging trees. We have nothing to do but gaze languidly about at the beauty all around us. After three miles of heavenly, leisurely bliss—dreams are always over far too soon—we regrettably pull our now much-beloved canoe out of the water and, looking back longingly, climb aboard a bus full of other dreamy-eyed, river-smitten amateur canoeists. Arriving back at our starting point, we stand arm-in-arm and gaze for a bit more upon the river before sighing one last sigh, getting into our car and drive off, our hearts full, our spirits still adrift upon that heavenly river. The silence between us is the sound of fulfillment. The crooked smiles which play slightly a-quiver upon our lips reflects the warm dying embers of our longing to return soon... to our dear river... in our lovely little canoe...lazily adrift...adrift still...adrift forever...under a kindly sky.

That was the dream.

That was the way it was supposed to be.

The nightmare was something quite different. And, it began the moment I attempted to lift the canoe and discovered that it weighed as much as our car. What particular type of aluminum is this that has such incredible weight? Even knowing what I know about steel-hulled ships, I was surprised that the thing would float. I was even more surprised to discover that the slightest head wind turned us toward shore before driving us back up stream. According

to the brochure we were supposed to be drifting lazily down river, not fighting a relentless headwind.

I don't know how many canoes were launched on the river that dreadful day, but, once headed in the right direction I noticed that those who weren't passing us swiftly, were already far ahead of us and disappearing around the first bend.

When I was a kid we used to go to the Wisconsin Dells once in a while and there I learned to row a boat. Since those times past I've rowed a boat from time to various time, and I feel like I'm an adequate rower of boats. I just want to make it clear that this was not new to me; it was not a learning experience; I knew what I was doing: feather the oar, drag the left to turn that way, side oar tiller steering, alternate rowing...

But, as said we had a little bit of a headwind and whenever either my wife or I stopped paddling for as much as two heartbeats we found ourselves broadside on the water and driven toward shore. It was as if the canoe was made of iron and the shore was lined with powerful magnets. With every paddle stroke it was feeling less and less like a heavenly little canoe ride down stream and more and more like eternal damnation.

Other people were seemingly unaffected by this wind in any way. Why, I do not know. We watched, jaws-a-drop, eyes-a-bug, ruffled, confused, somewhat infuriated, as people drifted by with their oars stowed, stretched out, hands laced behind their heads, eyes closed, unconcerned, occasionally dipping an idle hand in to correct their course.

We watched as a grandmother and three small children, passed us as if we were standing still—which we were, and that required all of our combined continual efforts to accomplish. They were singing camp songs. Most irritating of all was my once dear, now distant friend, Ron, who arrived in California with his own kayak. He playfully paddled up and down the river with the ease of a bird in flight...look there he is again...are you sure we don't have a gun on board? If either one of us stopped paddling for a single second we were driven back upstream toward shore.

On that day, I was forced to tap into many years of stored frustration, disappointment and accumulated bitterness in order to keep that heavy slogging craft headed down stream, and almost drained that source entirely before making it to the point where we could, at very long last, haul out and put a final end to our misery.

You know, I don't mind the gods screwing around with me, endlessly—apparently that's just the way Life is for some of us—but it seems unfair that whoever orchestrates such stuff should drag my truly wonderful, frail and lovely wife into their perpetual, petty, vindictive attacks on me.

They say that which doesn't kill us, leaves an ugly, ever-festering mark upon whatever is left of our tattered soul, and I believe that may be true. Though once I loved them from a distance, I now hate canoes. Even the thought of one causes a guttural growl to begin building in the back of my throat, a warning to anyone who might walk in carrying a canoe on his head and warbling cheerfully about the joys of life adrift. I see those happy deluded folk with canoes

strapped on top of their SUVs, whizzing by on their way to what they think will be a long awaited, eagerly anticipated joy-filled afternoon, carelessly adrift through the shady of the willow laden banks of a slow-moving river.

“You IDIOTS!” I grumble and shake my head derisively.  
“You poor foolish gullible idiots...”

## **RESTAURANTS SERIOUSLY UNRECOMMENDED**

Because my wife is French she describes all of her trips by the meals that were eaten. She remembers every detail, telling me what each person had, how it was prepared, and critiques each dish, seemingly as it arrives at the table once again before her eyes. Years after her visit there she can tell me that, at a certain roadside restaurant in Germany, the green beans were underdone or there was too much salt in the tarragon sauce. From what I can gather her most memorable (disappointing) trips were to Moscow, Venice, London, Prague, Berne, Florence, and Vienna. Really bad meals can also be had in Brussels, Munich, Newcastle (of course), Palermo, Lisbon, and Nuremberg. Name any city in the European theatre and sit back. But when she paints a picture of a great meal, in a great setting, under an awning somewhere, overlooking a river, with massive mountains in the background, you'll find yourself longing to go there.

Believe me, in every instance where my wife declares a thing to be of quality and worth eating, IT IS. If my wife tells me that something is really good and I should try it, she's always right. The thing about that—and here is where food snobs develop their attitude—once you've tasted the superior thing, you can't go back. When you do, you can only taste the shortfall. Sylvie is not a food snob, not by any means; she does however have distinctly refined taste. I'm learning.

It goes far beyond food, of course. Blindfold my wife and place her in a store full of items she's never seen before and about which she knows NOTHING, and she will go directly to the finest example of that thing which that store

possesses (meaning the most expensive), and pick it up and look at it admiringly and declare, "This one is quite nice."

I don't know how many times we've been surrounded with African masks or American Indian baskets or boolaps from the Xandephian Galaxy, and she finds the finest and most expensive item in the joint. "How long have you been collecting?" the salesman asks, admiring her choice. When we tell him we know nothing about boolaps he says, "Well, you certainly have an eye for quality." And though I know that this is a salesman's ploy, a glance around at the less-stunning prices on the other items confirms that, in the case of my wife, it's actually the truth; she's been drawn by the best boolap in the joint. So, I guess that sums it up, my wife has an eye for quality. And when it comes to food, she has a taste for things done well: made with select ingredients, prepared properly and with consideration. Ask her to make a list of herbs and spices she might like to have around to kitchen and the first thing out of her mouth will be saffron; next will be some other spice also ounce for ounce worth more than gold. It comes naturally to her.

Quickly let me say here that she is not as unreasonable as I had once thought she was concerning food; I have successfully introduced her to Thai food, and she'll now eat pizza though not just any pizza and not with the savage delight the stuff brings out in the rest of us. On the other hand, she has drawn a pretty firm line against ribs and fish tacos, which I think is a dreadful mistake. I can understand it of course, it took me a while to get over the idea of a fish taco and actually try one.



So, dealing with me you get this: "I know it really sounds disgusting but you really should try the fish taco."

With her you get: "Yes, we went there one time and the food was just awful. The restaurant was quite nice, but that's as far as it went. My father, he had a salmon mousse which was quite good but I must say they were not generous with this mousse. My mother had a little steak which was, for her taste, overdone. I had the cold asparagus salad which would have been acceptable had the cheese been freshly grated. As far as I can tell, the best part of that meal was the coffee, which I do not drink, but which my parents both said was quite good. And the pastry...Ah...I would gladly go there again for that pastry!"

If anyone should like to know why I love my wife; it's statements like that...that and her complete hugability.

Here's wisdom, gentlemen; whatever else you may think you're looking for in a woman for the short term, for the long run there is much to be said for having a woman who fits perfectly in your arms. To feel the warmth and weight of her; to smell her hair and the fragrance of her neck as she clings to you...well, that's almost everything. And in that wonderful moment, it is everything.

My wife describes her journeys by the meals she's eaten, and then, as they say, there's me. I'll eat anything...OR, I used to eat anything. How or why she married a man with a complete lack of gastronomic appreciation can not be explained. But, I've since evolved. Now, after my marriage to someone with high innate culinary discernment, I've willingly put aside the normal American diet. These days,

when I find myself forced by circumstance (other people) eating in any of the commonest chains, I feel like I'm poisoning myself—which I am of course—it's the recognition that's new to me. However, in terms of poisoning ourselves it would be difficult to beat the Indian reservation we stopped at in Arizona.

My sister knew of some ruins out in the middle of the desert which she thought Sylvie and I would enjoy looking at. And though we much preferred just sitting around inside and talking about how unbearably hot it was outside, rather than going out to test that conviction, we did. Getting out to the car I must have commented on how hot it was 17 times. I thought I'd gotten it out of my system, but getting out of the car I couldn't prevent myself from observing, "Man, it's hot out here!" After we made it safely from the parking lot into the blessed (air conditioned) gift shop, we took refuge for a few moments in order to steel ourselves for the hellish trek to the ruins. Once outside again, it was the obvious, undeniable topic of choice, on our way to the ruins. The ruins were kinda neat, but not enough to make us want to hang around in that cruel and unforgiving heat. We raced back into the cool welcoming arms of the gift shop and stood around mentally preparing ourselves for the 46 foot trek back to the car.

I forget whether it was on our way to the ruins or on our way back that we all discovered that we were hungry. Shortly, on the side of the road there was a Native American 'museum'. Basically, it was a compound composed of a gift shop and a restaurant. We went in to the museum and looked over the shelves and shelves of badly

made, embarrassingly cheap, useless junk, before deciding that we could wait no longer and must get something in our stomachs. We looked at the Native American restaurant and decided that we could not in good conscience deny these people our money simply because it looked like a junior high school classroom set up for a cookie sale. We went in.

Inside there were eight square tables looking very much like card tables with red and white plastic table cloths. On top of the plastic table cloths—such is their value—there were once-clear yellowed plastic protective table cloths. Of the eight tables two were occupied—one, a party of four and the other, a couple, all Indians. They looked at us—great oppressors that we are, and always will be—as though our presence was not exactly welcome and they'd sooner struggle along without our monetary contribution to their cause. We ignored the warm welcome.

This was not the first time that upon entering a restaurant my instincts started screaming, "Turn around and leave this awful place!" And it wasn't the last time I ignored that warning. It's ridiculous. I'm 62 years old and somehow can not manage to learn this simple lesson.

So there was a young woman, slightly on the heavy side, as they say, sitting by the cash register and she ignored us completely. She did not move, did not look up, did not speak. By now the other customers had decided to take that same tack, so we went over and sat in stick chairs at one of these tables and waited. During our wait, I suggested several times that we should maybe just get up and get out

of there, but my sister—a frail but bull-headed sort of businesswoman—insisted that she was too hungry to go on. So, we waited and eventually the young woman sighed the sigh of a thousand eternally wounded native American martyrs, arose from her stupor and waddled over to our table with menus. She dealt them to us like a hand of poker. I think then she left, while we looked things over.

It turns out that each of us was on the same path when it came to ordering. Each of us, in our own way, wished only to avoid being poisoned. My very dear wife ordered a ‘house salad’ thinking there were only so many ways they could screw that up which might, in the same stroke, endanger her life. My sister ordered a hamburger with French fries, thinking that she was hungry enough to choke it down no matter what they did to it, and the cooking should probably kill any bacteria. I ordered something from the authentic side of the menu, thinking, ‘This is probably what the locals are eating’ and hoping that they handled it with more care than the other dishes, or at very least, that they didn’t want to poison themselves.

I’m sorry to reveal, at this late point in the tale, that because I am not French I can not give you all the details of every plate delivered, but I’ll tell you this: each was every bit as awful as we had supposed it would be. Sylvie’s salad was a bunch of chopped and wilted iceberg lettuce served in a white plastic cereal bowl, awash, a-swim, drenched and drowned in a gluey pinkish bottled salad dressing. My sister’s burger was super-saturated in grease; the fries glistened, and slid off the fork. My what-ever-the-hell-it-

was (it turned out to be a kind of watery beef stew), was served with a slice of Wonder bread.

So, having paid our long over due debt to the Indian nations, at the risk of our health, we got up and got out of that awful place. (My sister, businesswoman that she is, even left a tip for the privilege.) And, for the next 72 hours, each of us, in our own quiet, unassuming way, monitored our insides.

You would think it could not get much worse than that. But you would not be thinking deeply enough.

## CHINESE VEGETARIAN

I had a friend from college, Steve Podlewski, a good and honest man, who harbored an unusual spiritual leaning. As a result of that proclivity, he was a devout vegetarian. He lived in San Diego, but appeared from time to time in San Francisco for religious events of one monumental sort or another, involving juggernauts and throwing sweetened rolls around. And, whenever he was in town we'd occasionally get together and have lunch. On one such occasion, he told Sylvie and me that he was going to take us to his favorite place in San Francisco, a vegetarian restaurant in Chinatown.

So, we—Steve and his daughter and I and my dear wife—walked over to this most-beloved vegetarian restaurant and we went in and we slithered through the main room where all the tables were occupied by Chinese, and went directly upstairs where all the tables were occupied by non-Chinese. We sat at the dirtiest table I have ever sat at under any circumstances and waited quietly, if somewhat unnerved, until a kid in a stained apron came by and with a couple quick swipes of a dirty, once-white, moist rag, swept most of the debris in the direction of the deeply-soiled carpet and into my lap. Then he handed menus all around, bowed in a movie-like way and disappeared.

Steve and his daughter started pouring through the menu with great anticipation. Sylvie and I looked for possibilities. ‘What do you recommend?’  
‘It’s all great! This is our favorite restaurant in San Francisco.’

“So...what do you recommend?”

”I like ants in a tree.”

“I always order the Buddha’s delight.”

Before I go further I have to say that I love Steve Podlewski, he’s been a very good friend for almost forty years, and his daughter is a remarkable human being. They’re both wonderful people.

So, with that out of the way, let’s go back to that restaurant. By what means I can not possibly say, we ordered a bunch of stuff, and while we waited we talked. Eventually, the food came and was dropped in the center of the table.

And you know, it’s a peculiar thing that four people can be sitting at the same table sharing four or five items, and two of those people can be shoveling it in with great joy, producing guttural sounds of pleasure and rolling their big beautiful eyes heavenward before digging in jealously for more...while two others, with the same selection before them, are fairly firmly impaled on the horns of a dilemma. These others—wishing dearly not to offend the very good and kind people who brought them to that godforsaken dive—are cringing at the thought of eating a single forkful of any of that stuff.

But we did, of course. And still, to this day, hope to never have to again. Let me add quickly that my wife and I both enjoy vegetables, but—as Sylvie put it—we *prefer to eat something that might be identified by either taste or texture.*

So, we smiled a lot. We nodded a lot. We looked around and feigned interest in our greasy surroundings; spent as much time as we reasonably could trying to see through the dirty windows, feigning interest at what was happening on the street below. We did all that we could to disguise our revulsion and our fears. When the ordeal was finally over, we were effusive in our thanks, and I picked up the tab, and left a generous tip.

I don't think either Steve or his daughter fell for it though.



## OF RAW EGGS and AMAZING ARROGANCE

If you prefer your omelette seriously under-cooked—for all intents completely un-cooked—and wish it to be delivered to you by a waiter barely willing to make the required, somewhat strained effort to lower himself to the level necessary to that task, you would have loved La Mere Poulard's on Mont- St. Michel. Sadly, Mere Poulard's, I have learned by way of the New York Times, has gone out of business. Or, let me be more precise and say Thank GOD Mere Poulard's has finally gone out of business!

The NYT attributed the closure of this *great establishment* to some “cold and heartless hotel-keeping corporation”. The Times suggested that the heartless (criminally minded) corporation wanted more money from the place. After having supped there, I'd like to suggest that perhaps the place was shut down because the clear thinking chief executives of that heartless hotel-keeping corporation had eaten there. That would be the first example I can ever recall of a corporation placing taste before profit, but, from my personal experience I can assure you Mere Poulard's never did that. What I'm struggling to convey here is my utter distaste for that place...and their utterly disgusting, world famous, raw-egg omelette.

(I hope I haven't stepped on my own tail by saying that outright instead of hiding my feeling somehow cleverly between the lines.)

While in France, whenever we mentioned to any one that we were on our way to Mont St. Michel, they chirped up immediately, “You must go to Mere Poulard's.”  
“You must go to Mere Poulard's.”

“You must go to Mere Poulard’s.” Whoever had trained the entire Nation of France to say that, had certainly done a thorough job. “You must go to Mere Poulard’s,” they said with such great, heart-felt, insistence. You must go to Mere Poulard’s, they said with joy. You must go to Mere Poulard’s they urged with both high and humble passion. You must go to Mere Poulard’s, they twittered, and then drifted off in fond memory of the place. After hearing that a dozen times or more from as many people, with at least as many nodding in vigorous agreement behind them, we thought we might give the place a try.

According to Victor Hugo Mont St. Michel is to France what the pyramids are to Egypt, and that comes very close to the truth. And for over 130 years Mere Poulard’s has been a famous and important part of that attraction, though why, I can not be expected to explain. After having eaten there I can’t think of one good thing to say about the place. It really is one of those situations where you look around at all the others and wonder if you are the only sane person in the damned place. Because of its ravenous dedicated following, you have to wonder also if perhaps you are the only sane person who has ever set foot in Mere Poulard’s.

Mere Poulard’s was launched in 1873 and offered the ultimate in fine dining: virtually uncooked whipped eggs. They called them omelette. From the beginning, these omelette were delivered by stiff and nicely starched servers, each infused with that extra-extraordinary arrogance—I’m sorry, dignity—one might expect in such a fine establishment. Apparently, crowned heads of state (everyone from some guy who married Zsa Zsa Gabor

twice, to Eunice Shriver), to film stars (Ronald Reagan, Chill Wills), to celebrities (Archie Bell, Lou Christie), and politician's relatives (Billy Carter) had all eaten there and just simply loved it. People came from far and wide to eat there (some guy from Egypt and his several dark-eyed brides, a guy wearing a Gaucho's hat, a Japanese baseball player)...as evidenced in enlarged photographs clinging to every wall. So, that explains the waiters. How could you serve slimy eggs to somebody who once spoke three lines in a sit-com in 1963 without some of that greatness rubbing off on you?

Sylvie tells me, "I remember what I had. I had some unidentifiable piece of underdone chicken and a stale roll, and we were both starving when we left that awful place." This is a remarkably sparse statement coming from a woman who can tell you everything she ever had to eat on any trip to any restaurant, the quality of preparation, the quantity of each portion, the setting and, not a-typically, the range of the discussion that was taking place during the meal. I asked her if she remembered anything more and she shuddered. "Yes, I remember the waiter," she said, but begged me not to ask her to think about it further.

What I remember first, was the unquestionable fact that everybody eating there was far better than my wife and I—not just better, but FAR better—and the waiters were far better than everybody that happened to be eating there. You can see where that placed us in the scheme of things. BUT, make no mistakes, the three guys and two women, dressed in livery and long white aprons, continually whipping raw eggs in big bowls in the front window were better than

everybody in that restaurant, including the waiters, and perhaps better than everyone else on earth; they had that look about them. There is no greater noble task, no higher position attainable on earth, than whipping eggs in the front widow at Mere Poulard's. To my small mind, this demonstrates, once again, the very sorry fact that the restaurant business has NOTHING whatsoever to do with good food.

Mont St. Michel in a nutshell: At the summit of the mount, there is a Benedictine monastery (and it is absolutely magnificent), all around, at the base, there are now, as there have been for hundreds of years, tiny shops and tinier stalls all hawking cheap and useless junk to tourists. Throughout the history of that wonderful place these shops have been there; throughout the history of that magical place these shops and stalls have come and gone. And now, even the great Mere Poulard's is gone. Ah well, you know. Ah well. And though now you can never experience it for yourself, I hope I given you a little taste of Mere Poulard's.

Believe me, a little taste is more than enough for anybody.

Some of us idiots like our eggs actually cooked.

## **The ELUSIVE PANCAKE**

My wife spent the first 45 years of her life having almost nothing to do with pancakes, and mainly because a pancake and a crepe are two very different things. A crepe is not a very thin pancake; and a pancake is not a heavy-handed, puffy little crepe. You can not judge one by the qualities of the other, and find it wanting; that would be unfair, unreasonable and just plain wrong, though many people, both French and Americans, make that mistake with national pride and stubbornly uninformed prejudice.

I forget which came first, the beloved aunt coming here from France and ordering pancakes in Point Reyes, or my wife shocking the hell out of me by ordering pancakes in Healdsburg one morning-afternoonish. At any rate, for a while there, every French woman in my life was experimenting with ‘the pancakes’. It’s like one of those phases where suddenly every woman in sight is wearing black woolen tights under a short glossy plastic skirt. Who knows where these ideas come from? So, the beloved aunt bravely had her pancakes and declared them good—but I could tell by the way she said it that she’d never eat another pancake again as long as she lived. When she nodded, smiled and said, “Yes, it is quite good,” what she was really saying was, “Well, I’m glad I can finally scratch that one off my list.” You could see it in her eye.

On the other hand, when Sylvie ate her first pancake, she was too busy eating to say anything. And when I asked if I could take maybe just a little bite of it myself, the message was clear: “Get your own.” You could see it in her eye.

It was quite a surprise. I never would have guessed my wife—who can toss a crepe with either hand—would take so readily to pancakes. Sadly this tale reminds me of our quest for Japanese noodles—a long-standing hope which ended unsatisfactorily. I mean, it reminds me of several such quests and the diminishing hope which accommodates them as we search desperately for the thing she wishes for, and never really ever find it. Sometimes the desire is resurrected for reasons unknown, only to die a second and final death.

The search for Japanese noodles began after watching a Japanese film where this cowboy-truck driver...but you've probably seen it. So, we started looking for such noodles. Going in we thought that our odds were pretty good, because this is, after all, San Francisco, and San Francisco is, if anything, awash in Asian culture. San Francisco is also awash in other cultures of every nationality, sort, tribe, and conceivable configuration, as well as some completely inconceivable—but none which produce really good noodles, except for the Italians of course, and the Thai folk, and a few others. And, then of course there's Spatzle which Sylvie once had in an Alsatian restaurant in Paris and declared quite good.

It came with veal in a cream sauce. Meanwhile, her father had a huge charcuterie plate, complete with pate, duck, sausage, sliced cold pork, sauerkraut, pickles and potatoes; a huge heap of various edibles, nicely arranged. While there, in that setting, she tells me she saw *one of the most disgusting things* she ever saw in her life. As she tells it, a woman came in alone and she ordered the same thing her

father had had. And, this woman ate everything on her plate—everything—very quickly, and then she took two fingers and inserted them...

I will extend to you the kindness that my dear wife didn't extend to me when she told me this tale, and leave the rest to your imagination.

(Don't worry, you can't overshoot this one.)

Even after that, my wife tells me she would gladly go on a quest for good Spatzle. I was kind of astounded to hear that—and I believe quite naturally—so, I questioned her.

"You would? Even after what you witnessed?"

"Well, I didn't hold it against the spatzle," she said.

So, we never found noodles like those noodles we saw in that Japanese movie. We never even came close. 'Closest we came was a place in Japantown where the noodles were the best we'd had, but they were very stingy with them, and when we asked what kind of noodles they were, the waitress shrugged and said, "I don't know, some kind of Chinese noodles." The idea that a Japanese noodle joint in Japantown should get their noodles from Chinatown was so disheartening that it put an end to the noodle quest.

The pancake quest—now that I think about it—worked the other way around. First, we discovered the best pancakes that could ever be created, *then* the quest began. But, allow me to explain.

My very dear wife and I have only one day-off each week, and that day varies according to the capricious whims of

our fellow employees, who, by some indefinable ancient mystical spell, hold sway over us. So, I think we discovered these wonderful pancakes on a Tuesday. And so then, on a Tuesday, we got up early, and climbed into the car and flew up there to Healdsburg (it's like an hour's drive) and, delighted, arrived at the door to the place and found it closed. "CLOSED on Tuesdays" the sign said. You can imagine how the great joy we nursed during our trip was dispelled as we read that annunciation. I think we dawdled a bit in Healdsburg anyway, pretending it was a fine day-off despite our crushed desire for those pancakes, but we weren't fooling ourselves, so went home defeated.

When next our schedule changed to accommodate our fellow workers and we had a Wednesday off, we got up early, climbed in the car and drove as fast as we could, while still remaining in control of both the vehicle and our expectations, up to Healdsburg and got out and practically ran to that place and IT WAS OPEN. Oh JOY! So, we went on in and waited in a very long and understandable line for a very long, and soon-to-be-worth-it while only to be told that it was now Summer and they only served pancakes in the Winter, or it was Fall and they only served pancakes in the Spring, or something weird like that. Ah, life.

When a likely season rolled round and our day-off happened not to be a Tuesday, we got up early and you know the rest. On that outing we discovered that they had recently decided to serve breakfast only on weekends. So, I don't know, we didn't hang ourselves, but it was a thought. Another thought was, 'Maybe we should try to find some excellent pancakes closer to home.'



Somehow—on the way back—we ended up at the Two Bird Café out there in the great emptiness between Fairfax and whatever else comes next. And we walked in just in time to be told that they had stopped serving breakfast—the grill had been shut down and cleaned, breakfast things put away for the day. And, I’m not chatty by nature but, since the waitress was standing there pencil poised, waiting for us to choose something we didn’t want from the lunch menu, this entire tale of our quest for ‘wonderful’ pancakes came spilling out of me. I did my best to capture the sadness of our tale, loading it up with anguish, slathering it with yearning, and sprinkling it with feeble, dying hope. In response, the waitress said, “Wait here.” So, we did.

When she came back, she looked at Sylvie and she asked, “What kind of pancakes would you like?” I said, “I thought you were finished serving breakfast.” She said, “We are, but I got pull in the kitchen. What kind of pancakes would you like?” Kindness is a wonderful thing.

When the pancakes came they looked good, and they took to the fork well, and they went in without a struggle; they were evaluated and found to be, “really pretty good”. I sat back in my chair, looked across the table at my wonderful wife, and basked in the joy of seeing her happy again. But, let’s face it, “really pretty good” is not the same as “wonderful”, so, I was sure our quest had not yet ended.

These days, she makes her own pancakes from scratch. And they are by far the best pancakes I have ever had.

## GOURMET

One evening a young man came into the office, sat down and asked my dear wife, with a straight face, if she could recommend a good restaurant that served Mediterranean-Fusion cuisine. Neither she nor I knew exactly what Mediterranean-Fusion was, so, after the kid left frustrated—driven out by our total lack of hip-ness—I told Sylvie my suspicions.

“It comes to the table on a large, square, heavy, snow-white plate. There is raspberry coulis drizzled in random patterns around the periphery; in the center, in a pool of some gooey off-white sticky stuff with balsamic sore-spots, there is a rounded glob of who-knows-what, with three fried sea bass fins sticking out of its sides at a jaunty angle. This mound is topped with a dollop of caviar, covered by a small weird haystack of unnamable finely shredded greenery, and sticking out from that there is a single, deep-fried, crinkle-cut potato chip something like the main-sail on a small Mediterranean fishing boat. Near one edge, there is a whole, tiny, strangely colored, freshly imported turnip and in one corner about half a teaspoon, no more, of currant-apple sauce made on the premises by the executive chef himself.”

My dear, insightful wife laughed a lovely bell-like laugh and added, “Price: Sixty-seven dollars.” This was not the first time that we’ve read each other’s minds precisely. What a pleasure. Still, the kid went away frustrated, thinking we were dull and stupid and out of touch, which we very gladly are.

Naturally, all the Mediterranean-Fusion places in this town are packed to the gills every night with haughty drunken youngsters sitting in there proudly and loudly, shoulder to shoulder, shouting at each other. They couldn't be more pleased with the atmosphere, with the food, with the service, with themselves.

So, obviously everything I've said here just now is merely sour grapes. Still, I think that kid was missing something. When I was his age I lived almost entirely on burritos, and enjoyed every damned one of them.

## **FINAL WISHES**

My dear wife is more liberally-minded than I in matters concerning human nature—or maybe she just demands more solid proof of some poor person's idiocy before condemning them. This comes up because, in the hotel business, I constantly overhear conversations between guests and they all sound completely senseless to me.

My wife tells me that if we could overhear our own conversations we'd probably be appalled at how inane it all sounds. She may be right. I admit that what most often comes out of my mouth is a peculiar mix of arbitrary, utterly-useless pseudo-knowledge, unfounded pontification, and pure uncut senselessness. But it seems to keep her entertained. And, from the very beginning, I have seen that as an important part of my job as her husband. It comes naturally.

She was probably referring specifically to the discussion we had one afternoon while we walked along a country road with the dog-in-law. We were debating whether it is better to walk facing on-coming traffic in order to look the guy who is about to run you over in the eye, or to walk with your back to traffic and have death come as a complete surprise. Ultimately we decided facing traffic was best and that we could take advantage of those last remaining milliseconds here on earth to send one last-breath message to our poor unfortunate/reckless/stupid/vicious/drunk/drugged, or simply preoccupied killer. Then we thought that we should probably plan in advance what facial expression we would wear in those final seconds; sadness,

horror, anger, eternal damnation, forgiveness, et tu stranger?, scolding, indifference, scalding indifference?

I thought that, in that instant just before impact, I might be able to get in a few quick, wry, light-hearted, life-is-but-a-dream sort of forgiving laughs. She liked that idea but thought such laughter might be subject to misinterpretation and thereby condemn my (poor unfortunate/reckless/stupid) preoccupied killer to unnecessary post-collision confusion. She was right, of course; I wouldn't want to condemn my (poor unfortunate/reckless / stupid) preoccupied killer to a life of pondering an ambiguous message.

She also doubted my somewhat overoptimistic estimate on the number of laughs I might be able to cram in there before car and corpus collide. She thought there might be time for only one good laugh, and therefore it would have to be a very good laugh indeed; it would have to be highly animated so as not to convey the wrong message. Again, our concern was only for my (poor unfortunate/ reckless /stupid) preoccupied killer. I wouldn't want my (poor unfortunate/reckless / stupid) preoccupied killer to spend a single moment during the remainder of his long, happy and successful life trying to interpret the message sent to him by someone he was about to run over and kill. I was sure he'd have enough problems without that.

Suddenly our acting abilities were being called into play, and I admitted something. "I don't know about you," I said, "but I need to wade into that sort of thing kinda slowly. I can't just jump in. I mean, it's only because I've been working on it for a while that I can come out of the tub and

do a pretty good Jack Nicholson.” This was something of an embarrassment for me to admit. “Once I’m warm of course, I’m a pretty good actor, but in this situation there would be no time.” Partly out of kindness I suppose, she confessed her lack of any skills of a theatrical nature.

For a while there we thought we should simply allow whatever our natural response might be to send whatever message it naturally would. But I couldn’t let go of the idea that this would be my last opportunity to express myself.

Without the time to prepare, maybe laughter wasn’t the best response for me. On the other hand, what if I nailed it perfectly and the guy didn’t kill me but only left me a bag of shattered bones on the side of the road? Once revived and on my way to recovery, would I have to explain my antics? Would I have to say I didn’t expect to survive, or would it be understood? Sylvie thought it would be understood. She envisioned the guy standing somewhat sheepishly (I’m guessing here) beside my hospital bed, shrugging and saying, “Hey, look, if *I* thought *you* were about to be run *me* over I would have worn that same enigmatic message on my mug.”

Though neither one of us are actors—and only one of us can tell a convincing lie—we both thought exaggerated gestures of a staged sort would be the way to go. Maybe in that final instant we would be able to draw upon the deep pool which had until that moment remained untapped. For my wife, I suggested something between Lillian Gish, in a pensive pose, and the classic Greek Mask of Tragedy. She agreed that might work nicely, but wondered if she would

have time to throw the back of her wrist up against her brow and tilt her head back in time for the perfect pre-impact pose. Still, it was a lovely vision.

We spent our time during one idyllic evening's stroll trying to establish, the definitive gradient between effete snobs and complete slob. We tinkered with that for quite a while and finally got it down to something like twelve distinct types. For some reason many of the levels were determined by the shoes the people on that level wore. Once we thought we had it nailed down—reduced to nine clearly defined types between effete snobs and complete slob—we moved on to other things of lesser import.

One day we walked the same route as the previous day reconstructing the conversation we had on that previous day's walk point-by-point, location by location, impressing no one, but amazing ourselves with our abilities to recall practically every word of that previous day's utterly worthless, thoroughly involving conversation. ("And right here you said, 'Is that a duck I see?'" "Was it duck or swan?" "Oh, you're right...'Is that a SWAN I see?")

One time I was bemoaning the fact that—if we were ghosts—we could no longer have any effect on the physical world (not that we have much now).

"What about poltergeists?" she asked innocently in that sweet angelic voice of hers.

"HA," I laughed, perhaps just a bit too sharply, too critically, too knowingly, too jaded (ly). "I'm talking about *real* ghosts, not utter nonsense," I said with the voice of

authority. “Real ghosts,” I explained, in somewhat kinder tones, “can only observe.”

She thought about that for much less time than I would have had to (which is the norm).

“If we were real ghosts,” she said, “we could fill up our time going to the opera, the symphony, the movies...for you, once in a while, we’d go to the ballpark. And, we’d have very good seats and never have to pay for a ticket.” I thought about that much longer than she would have had to (as is the norm). I told her I kinda liked the idea; it gave me something to look forward to.”

She said the seats at the Opera House weren’t really that uncomfortable.

That’s her; that’s me; that’s the sort of semi-senseless yattering with which we entertain ourselves on our walks together. I think it beats the typical old-married-couple quibbling (again) over whether she instructed him to buy regular or de-caf. But, who knows?

Months later, upon this very same walk, we recalled the conversation about how to face oncoming traffic related death and what final message we might send the manslaughter-er behind the wheel. My dear wife said that it would probably be best if we were run down before coming to any final decision on the matter—that way, she thought, then, our response would be natural, spontaneous and genuine, rather than a theatrical contrivance; and thereby express our true feelings. I couldn’t really disagree with that. But, I must say that, for the remainder of that walk, I kept my ears pinned backward, focused upon the slightest sound of traffic behind us.



## **A MUTUAL EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE**

When opportunity presents itself my wife and I add to each other's universality. For example, she tells me everything of value that has transpired in this world on all fronts—cultural, historical and scientific—since 1583, and in remarkable detail. In fair exchange, I offer what I know about the price of common lumber in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1983 until sometime in or around the fall of 1987; and, in all humility I cannot deny that my expertise concerning the flattest bicycle route between the 5700 block of Geary Boulevard and Golden Gate Park cannot, I believe, be challenged.

The implied imbalance of that exchange may explain why, since meeting Sylvie, I have launched a dozen websites, invented and patented; sleep inducement techniques, a chess set with added ranks, (requiring additional pawns and knights), a half-width pool table, (which no one seems eager to build), as well as a mosquito-based inoculation delivery system (which I later discovered is already in process by others who, by chance happen to be in the correct field, with the correct credentials and the proper funding to undertake the task (none of which do I have).

From that you can guess that I'm some kind of an embarrassing idiot/moron half-assed inventor kind of guy. BUT, that's only a single facet of my multi-faceted lunacy. I am also a published author, along with every other human being on earth, having written at least five book-length works which no one wishes to publish (or read, for that matter), and a couple of screenplays, which no one who might do anything with them will ever look at. So, I'm also

some kind of a self-deceived, idiot/moron/so-called writer kind of a guy as well. I yearn to become something more.

Self analysis causes me to think that what I'm really trying to do with all of that is to create something so that my wife might be proud of me. I'm trying to impress her. I want her to think she married a *somebody*. On that same matter, I hope I never begin to think that I am *somebody*.

Very quickly: One time a young couple from L A was checking in. I've been instructed (repeatedly) to be friendly, and so I try. I make my little awkward attempts. So, when we got into the elevator I asked casually "What do you folks do in L A?" And the extraordinarily self-assured male said, quite coldly, "I'm a writer." He said it with such incisive frigidness that I uttered not a single word for the remainder of our little ride together. What I wanted very badly to say was, "Yeah, and if you threw an orange down any street in any town in America today, you'd hit more writers than high school graduates."

As far as my writing is concerned, my wife tells me it doesn't matter. She'd feel the same about me whether I write or not. But, naturally, I'd like her to maybe love me just a little bit more because of my work. The only real problem with the writing, as she sees it, is that it makes me "unfrequentable." And I guess it does. When I am working and suddenly find myself being yanked back to the surface, the glare I give the yank-er is probably pretty frightening, and when I speak my words are not soaked entirely in warmth and gentle kindness. But, she must know by now that if there is anyone on earth that I would want to

frequent me while I'm working, it's her. Still, the balance required in order to get any work done while offering my truly dear wife the love and attention she deserves is, at times, almost impossible for me. I regret it deeply.

Most importantly, I want her to enjoy my writing. I'd just feel better if she did. When she reads something I've written and laughs out loud, I know I've produced something of real value; I feel that my efforts were worthwhile. She insists that it doesn't matter. For me it does. I've actually been somebody a couple of times before, and it can be kinda cool.

One time, when I was considered a serious painter by people who knew what they were talking about, someone offered to make me the next Larry Poons. I rejected that offer of course...and with community-theatre level umbrage. (I wanted to be the next Jules Olitsky.) Another time, down in San Diego, a friend of mine wanted to get into a sold-out Etta James concert and I said, smugly (for that's the only way you can say such a thing and pull it off), "Pah, I'll get us in." I showed my blues publishing credentials at the door and, well, why go on...

It hurts a little to think that all my good work as a so-called writer means nothing to my very dear wife, but she's that way with her own work as well—she writes and illustrates epic poems which are every bit as charming and lovely as she is, but has no desire to see them in print.

Of my work, her favorite is a screenplay called *EARWIG*.

Here's the opening shot:

*Henry thinks he's the luckiest man in the world. He may be. He's one of those rare men who not only loves his wife but remains IN LOVE with her. And there's good reason; as some have noted, Sylvie is well-read, well-traveled, extremely well-educated, young and beautiful and French.*

She likes Earwig best of any of the so-called books I've written. One evening I came in and found her stretched out on the couch reading Earwig and laughing out loud. That perfect moment will warm my heart for as long as I live.

She was moved by my piece in Evergreen... so moved that she had to tell me how appalled she was by it. There's a story there that is worth telling.

In 1963, when I was 14 years old I sent my first submission to Evergreen Review, only to have it rejected. The good people at Evergreen responded with a note paper-clipped to their standard reject slip. The note read, "We liked your stuff; we have no use for it; we encourage you to keep at it. Let this be the first of many!" That was in fact the first of many rejections. At the time, it was a mystery to me how they could have guessed that the 32 page, single-spaced tale I sent them, typed side to side, top to bottom without margins, was my first submission. Forty-five years later, I sent them my second submission—what I thought was my best stuff... only to be rejected again. They said it wasn't really *their style*. I found that irritating.

I found it irritating that I sent the good people at Evergreen something I knew they would have no interest in and they had the temerity to tell me that they had no interest in it. More irritating was the fact that I *knew* what they wanted.

“I KNOW what they want,” I cried-out to a cold and indifferent universe. Closer to home, I complained to Sylvie, somewhat bitterly, somewhat childishly (about 60/40 I’d say) saying, “That’s my best stuff!” After mulling over it for a while I added, “The sad part is that I *know* what they’re after; I know *exactly* what they’re looking for, for god’s sake.”

My wife looked up from what she was doing and casually suggested, “Well, write that then.”

So, I did.

This was not the first time I’d gotten very good advice concerning my work from an intelligent woman with a cold and indifferent eye. And, I’m sorta pleased to say, it’s not the first time I took that good advice, with excellent results. (Writers, if you want the best advice you can get concerning your work, ask someone who doesn’t really give a damn about your so-called work. If you’re a married man, you probably won’t have to look too far to find such a person.)

So I took my wife’s advice. I sat down and created something I knew the good folks at Evergreen would like. It took me three days—maybe nine hours all in—and they accepted it, almost immediately. I enjoyed that. (Immediacy is something that never happens in this

business.) I was ecstatic. I was delirious. It was the coolest thing that had happened to me in a very long time. “WHY,” I asked my very dear, clear thinking wife, somewhat naively, somewhat pleadingly (about 80/20 I’d say)... “why can’t it work out like that more often?” It really is a tight little piece. But, it really isn’t my style. It shows what I can do however. It’s not really my kind of writing. Sylvie didn’t like it at all. Evergreen liked it a lot. I was delighted. Life.

[I’ll show you both pieces in a moment; you decide.]

I was excited that Barney Rosset had selected one of my pieces for his publications of course, but I was a little disappointed that my very dear and wonderful wife hated every word of the damned thing. You know, I once had a friend—he lives in Paris now, partly thanks to me—and, one evening, he turned out to be a complete bastard. But, before that, before he turned out to be a complete bastard, he once told me—to my complete amazement and great delight—“I would gladly read anything you write on any subject, any time.” That’s kind of the opposite tack my wife has taken on the same issue. But, I can’t blame her. It’s understandable. He—the complete bastard—would only have to read anything I wrote on any subject any time, once, my poor wife reads everything I write on every subject every time, a thousand times. (And, apparently I expect her to do it with joy.)

She's driven by unspoken agreement to help me edit most of the book-length stuff I spew out before I rush it, much-too-soon, into print. Quite naturally anyone who has read anything a thousand times would balk at the idea of reading it one more time, for pleasure. And, having trained herself to look for every possible flaw in my work, it's now impossible for her to look at it any other way. I once compared handing a finished piece to my wife for editing to trying to change the blade on a lawn mower while it's still running. On the other hand I know that if Sylvie ever begins to enjoy my work, I've lost a good editor.

Still, she's on my side. Sylvie once told me, "It's sad to think that there are people who would enjoy your work, but will never even hear about it."

That is sad.

Sadder still is the thought that my own dear wife might enjoy my work, if it was written by somebody else.

It hardly matters. We'd both rather spend what time we can together, on the couch—her, with a cat in her lap, a dog snuggled up against her legs—talking, or watching some weird old film together. (A Russian peasant boy wakes up on a train to Moscow. He doesn't know how he got on that train. Wait!—he's also dressed in a nice new suit. How did this happ... my god, there's MONEY in the pockets of his vest. Two rubles. He's astounded. As he stares out the window at the passing unforgiving frozen landscape, he tries to piece things together...CUT TO: geese walking around squawking in the tiny fenced in yard of a small wooden cottage. A kindly looking old peasant woman—slightly on the heavy side—comes to the door wiping her

Henry Edward Fool

hands on her long, heavy apron...she looks out...she scans the horizon...she shakes her head and shouts, “Yuri.”... She wrings her bony old hands. Is that a tear in her eye?)

I don't know where she finds those films.

Some of them are endless.



LAMBFIELD [rejected by Evergreen]

We must be nuts, my wife and I. Maybe we are. I'll give you the facts; you decide. Those that have already decided fall in fairly impressive numbers solidly on the "Yes, they must be" side of things. Among them, initially at least, were my wife's parents, my own dear parents, my best friend and almost everybody else who has heard about our sudden madness. The one exception was my wife's best friend, a well-traveled, somehow still innocent, Russian intellect who is amiable and maybe more than just a little nuts herself. She was the only one we told who understood. She smiled genuinely, and congratulated us. She was delighted for us "I think it's great!" she warbled. Everyone else pretty much just looked at us blankly as if what we had told them was incomprehensible, or worse... they looked at us knowingly. Behind our backs I'm sure they shook their heads in disbelief, or rolled their eyes about wildly, but while facing us they were kind enough to maintain firmly fixed faux-smiles and refrained from using phrases like hoodwinked, bamboozled or flim-flammed within earshot. My wife and I are delighted despite this reception. That's us; we laugh in the teeth of good sense. You wouldn't know it to look at us though.

To look at us you would never guess that we are the type to buy a house which we have never seen, 2600 miles away, in a town we've never set foot in, from a couple who we have never spoken with, using an agent and a lawyer, neither of whom we have ever met, to represent our best interests. I'm fairly certain that we are not the first people to buy a house sight-unseen, in a town far far away, but it

feels like it. From the looks on people's faces when we tell them, such behavior still remains pretty much uncharted territory; territory best left unexplored, or perhaps explored exclusively by gullible idiots. From their point of view, it is a peculiar thing to do—buying a house without having clomped around in it with one's head cocked, tapping on walls, crawling around on your knees looking suspiciously underneath sinks, pausing on the lawn while staring at the roof-line, rubbing your chin meditatively with one eyebrow slightly raised. These are the things that anyone really serious about buying a home would do. Still, we're pleased. Though I haven't seen North Carolina in more than thirty years, and my wife—born in France and raised in San Francisco--has never been there, we love the place already.

If you think you might find some clue to our lunacy by looking into our past you'd be mistaken. Everyone who knows us—or thought they knew us—was taken completely by surprise. We surprised ourselves, if you want to know the truth. “You did what? You bought a house that you haven't seen?” If that revelation wasn't staggering enough, then we gave ‘em the ol' knock-out punch, telling them we have no plans to see the place anytime soon. Did I mention that? Well, yes, more likely than not it'll be several years before we ever see our lovely little house. Those who care about us were (quite naturally perhaps) concerned about our discernment. They were dumbfounded by our joy. Many of them seemed to have difficulty digesting what had just been said. We were asked to repeat ourselves. After hearing it again, there was a lot of open-mouthed blinking going on, as if they were unable to

decide, which was more astounding (and by astounding I guess I mean stupid) buying a house unseen or not going to see the place as soon as the ink was dry.

There's an explanation however. But briefly: we're in the hotel business, and the hotel business is like raising goats. You can't just abandon the goats and go wandering off across the United States of America to the mountains of North Carolina just to look at the single most expensive purchase you've ever made in your entire life. This is especially true if you don't own the goats; if they're merely goats-in-law.

For my own comfort I have to assume that you're with us on this. I mean, in order for me to continue this tale I have to imagine you're laughing with us and not at us. After all, what's the big deal? It was all done quickly, neatly, painlessly, over the Internet. Or maybe that doesn't help our argument.

And of course then there's this: we weren't even looking for a house. We never talked about having a house; never even thought about having a house as far as I can remember. And, if we had, the idea of buying a house, seen or unseen, 2600 miles away in the mountains of North Carolina, never would have crossed our minds. If we had been looking for a house, had talked about a house, had longed to own a house--that house would have been in California where we live. That's where we would have been looking.

But, we wouldn't have found one of course, because we couldn't have afforded it. We couldn't afford any house in California...which is why, I think, we'd never given the matter much thought. On this side of the map the full price we paid for our little cabin in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains might have been a down payment. In this city, the shabbiest little tear-down in the most frightening part of town (and I mean *frightening*), starts at, literally (and by that I mean literally), five times what we paid for our lovely little North Carolina mountain home. Five times. So, for us, out here, owning a house would forever remain outside the realm of possibility, since neither of us plays the lotto.

That's the kicker. When I think about our far-too-distant-future-home in North Carolina, I don't feel so bad. And I certainly don't feel stupid. They can laugh if they want. Because, when I see pictures of our little house—the house some people apparently think may not even exist—my heart fills with a kind of proprietary fondness. The first time I saw that little cabin, snuggling up against the hill, sheltered by the trees, it was like a ball dropped into a slot and, “HEY! That's my number!”

## II

The main problem with buying a house unseen far far away is the many nagging questions we have which must remain unanswered. Why was this house built around a rock? I realize that it's biblically sound advice, but, still, it seems a bit strange having a huge rock taking up more than half of your basement. Is that entire hill behind the house one big solid rock? Is every house around there built on a rock?

What do our neighbors, whose house we can see from our driveway, look like? What do they do for a living? Is their house built upon a rock? If we move the washer/dryer combo from the bathroom into the room downstairs, will that leave enough room to install a nice old claw-foot tub? What will it cost to have French doors put in downstairs? How far is it to the nearest hardware store, café, grocery store, bookstore, library, theatre, French restaurant (not necessarily in that order)?

We're also concerned about other, somewhat more nebulous things. We're concerned, for example, that the dog we don't have yet will run out of the house we've never seen and be eaten by a bear we've only read about in your local newspapers. It doesn't keep us awake at night, but it's a legitimate concern. Somehow the breeds of dog my wife and I are most attracted to all harbor this dash-out-of-the-house-at-every-available-opportunity aspect to their character. There are, of course, more immediate concerns. While watching the strangely fluctuating temperatures in the mountains on the Internet, my wife has expressed her concern that the poor plants won't know what to do. Is it Spring? Is it Winter? Poor plants, always trusting, much deceived. I'm worried that the pipes will freeze and that, if we plant all the fruit trees my wife wants, the roots will grow into the septic tank and we'll have, not just trouble but, the kind of trouble nobody really needs.

But there are joys associated with buying a house unseen far far away and things are learned, some useful. For example: it used to be that if I wanted to clear out a room full of bachelors all I had to do was start talking about what

a wonderful wife I have. And that still works of course; mention the joys of marriage and unwed males scatter like chickens. But now I've added a new weapon to my arsenal and, in the same stroke, I've expanded my field. These days, if I want to empty a room of people--male, female, married or not--all I have to do is start talking about our little cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. And I'm glad to see them flee of course, because of the constant dread that one of them might innocently ask, "When was the last time you've been to North Carolina?" Somehow deep within me I know that the truth—that I haven't been there in 35 years, and my wife has never been there—might sound maybe just a bit peculiar, even to a sympathetic ear.

One of the joys of buying a house unseen far far away is that it doesn't seem real. If you're not actually able to touch the antique table lamp, have seen it only in pictures, you're not able to absorb its quality, the detail of the ornamentation, the fineness of its lines, or feel its weight, its presence...you don't worry so much about whether it might fall off the lovely little antique table, which you've also only seen in pictures, and shatter into ten thousand pieces on the floor which is somehow always out of focus. (This is due, in part admittedly, to what my wife calls my monk-like detachment to material things.) And, if the ceiling in the bathroom falls in, you don't find yourself entangled in the frenzy that might otherwise surround such an occurrence. From 2600 miles away such events just don't have the immediacy.

Owning a house yet-unseen far far away also affords you the chance to dream. And dream we do. My wife and I both

dream about the place. We dream quietly, alone. We dream together openly, eagerly, excitedly at times, anticipatorily. We dream together on the couch while glued to every home improvement show that airs. We dream of the day we move in; we dream of knocking down walls and moving staircases; we dream of just sitting on the deck exhausted, covered in plaster dust and deliriously happy. We dream of eating at the little round oak table in our very own first kitchen. Yes, it's small, but it's ours. And we scheme too. We'll enclose the north side of the deck and turn it into a nice little sun room. We'll build a guest room downstairs. We'll turn the second bedroom into a library. We'll raise the roof, plant fruit trees all along the driveway... For us, for now, there's a pretty fine line between dreaming and scheming...and either one may involve power tools.

Before we owned a cabin in the mountains we never spent a lot of time planning what we would do if we had all the money in the world, and we still don't. These days we do spend a little time thinking about what we would do if we had a lot of it. If that ever happens, we've got plans. Believe me, every penny has been allocated.

Money's not so much the problem; time is what we seem to always lack. All in all, I'd say we have about ten to twenty years' worth of work to be done around our little house to turn it into the place we dream and scheme about. Then, of course, once that's all out of the way, it'll all be reading Shakespeare, building historically accurate ship models from scratch, playing the cello (with noticeable improvement) in front of the fireplace and going on little

strolls with the dog we don't have yet, while my lovely wife, the mere mention of whom can clear a room full of bachelors, is picking fruit from the trees whose roots have not yet punctured the septic tank thus avoiding the kind of trouble nobody really needs. This is our vision of living life in a little mountain cabin far far away.

And as the sun drops over the Blue Ridge Mountains, my wife and I rock steadily away on the sun porch, at peace, dogs and cats secure, and I sing a quiet little ditty off key.

Get yourself a little French wife,  
Buy a small cabin in the mountains,  
These are the keys to happiness,  
I'd recommend them to anyone.



[This is the piece I banged out for Evergreen, which my poor wife hates.]

## MARGARET

At a very early age it became apparent that Vincent had a problem with authority. By that I mean his mother was very often seen surrendering to despair, throwing both hands in the air, then bending over and, fixing his unresponsive eyes with her own unwavering glare, screaming red-faced, "What am I going to do with you?" It was a rhetorical question. Everyone pretty much knew, even at that age, that she could do nothing with him, and most guessed that, in life, he would do nothing with himself. Although, come to think of it, most of what he would do throughout his life would be done with himself (we're not suggesting self-mutilation however.) I think that's pretty much the beginning, and, laughable or sad, it's pretty much the truth. For those who place much of the blame on the fact that the poor kid was named Vincent I have to say I had an Uncle Vincent and he was quite normal in every aspect (almost invisibly normal); he had no problems at all with authority.

Years passed...as is their tendency. The passage was both agonizingly, excruciatingly slow and, Hey, where the hell did those years go? So, after the arguments for and against were carefully weighed Vincent was sent off to boarding school, where he was as much like my Uncle Vincent as I am like the twin brother that I never had, but might have. (There are rumors.) My meaning is this—to his own astonishment—Vincent fit in. In his own withdrawn, self-alienating, quietly critical, inward way Vincent fit in. And why? Because, nary a young lad there in that place, had

NOT experienced his own (dear) mother throwing both hands up in the air in total despair. They'd all faced the fixed unwavering accusatory glare of the somewhat critical motherly eye. The shrill scream—What the heck is wrong with you?—was not foreign to their ears So, though they arrived from different directions, they all arrived on the trailing impetus of a swift boot in the young fundament. [Please note: There is no mention of fathers here because at a certain level of society there is almost no need to mention mothers either.] With this encouragement each of these fine young white American male-kids decided for himself, in his own way, at his own pace, that he was unique and perfect, and unwanted, and, is there a socially acceptable way to say, So, fuck it? Still something about the new kid didn't seem quite right.

The first night there, in the dorm, surrounded with renegades from every recognizable tribe, Vincent lay awake contemplating his situation. This was no dream, he assured himself. It was no dream, but, Vincent felt not the urge to bolt. He, like a hero, remained calm, remained still and pondered. He took the classic pose, hands behind the head while staring at the ceiling. Looking around in the dark, he could see by the light of a distant begrudging star, the huddled sleeping forms of his fellow cast-offs, as he considered things. "Sure, they got it made; the food, the arts, but I understand the taxes are killing them..." said a distinctly British voice, and Vincent was jolted awake. Talk about dreams. "Weeks passed and Vincent had become the most popular..." said a narrative voice, and Vincent was jolted awake yet again. Talk about nightmares.

Let me say something here. I know that this all may feel a little too real-time at this point, but the wolf is on its way and will appear at the door very soon. And, it's hungry. Believe me, I've scrapped a thousand words for every one that remains. The craft is in allowing you to think it's all just mindless goddamned drivél.

Weeks passed and Vincent was as abstract from the crowd as he had been at his arrival. He watched as alliances formed and camaraderie lead to whispered vulgarities and back-slapping friendships. There was some snorting, such was the cleverness. He stood off alone though. He stood off alone, at a distance (over there near the rusty forgotten basketball hoop mostly), forming no alliance, and whispering no vulgarities, and, slapping no one's back and snorting not at all, and, as the bible says, he understood them not. He had no craving for friendship. But, (here's hope) deep within the gurgling mess of his loins...need I say more?

We find our ways. We all find our ways. So here he is now, sneaking out the window at night. And we see him as he makes his way under the moonlight across an open expanse, as if escaping from a movie-set-prison. And here he is at the gate and, now, already he has slipped through. And now he takes to foot down a winding dusty path. And here he is now already lying beside her in a small cot with only an old army blanket over their skinny jutting frames...and, as they say, the bony bodies bumped through the night. (This is how quickly thing happen in Life. It's a wonder that upon returning from some disappointment or another we don't bump into ourselves departing with the

idiot grin of expectation still upon our ever-hopeful faces.)

Though initially intrigued, he had to admit, in the light and insight of morn, that her idea of love frightened him a bit. The next step finds him back in the old corral and he has his hands laced behind his head once again and he's thinking about her as the ceiling fan wops by carelessly overhead. He's thinking that her idea of love frightens him a bit. I'm not saying that he knew anything at all about such stuff at this point, he didn't. But, later, when he did know something, he realized he was absolutely right to be frightened by her ideas about love. This is an open-ended thing where you fill in the blanks. I'll wait.

Do we have to go through the part where she yanks him around for months on end until, one night stumbling back to school very very very goddamned 'runk, he thinks, "How much can a man take?" These were his exact words. Do we have to say, 'Vincent was about to find out'? Now you may begin to see what I was talking about when I said the lion would soon be at the door. You just didn't know the beast would be a lovely young red-haired girl.

By his third year Vincent was going nowhere, but he was going there steadily, rapidly, and she was going there with him. These two were addicted to each other. The bruises on his forehead were proof enough for anyone that they could not or would not find healthier ways to express their urges. That doesn't mean he was not content...although he wasn't. She wasn't either—though both were madly in love--and so, inevitably, one day, she stomped out of the room, leaving the door open behind her. When she returned, he

stomped out. Then she stamped out and slammed the door. Soon though, she was back again, and it was his turn. When he returned several months later, looking somewhat shame-faced, it was only after being with, you know, others, none of which were as weird or as clever as she...or as frustrating...or as intriguing. One of them declared herself to be 'Eternally listening for the kind of noise that rides on the wings of nothingness', a statement which was, if anything, kinda creepy. But, that's wasn't enough for Vincent. Another ate with her mouth open, which was too much. A third wore spandex before it was popular to do so, and though not a conformist by any means, Vincent found the way the stuff emphasized her knobby knees while at the same time forming countless creases behind those knees, distasteful.

So, he returned yet again to his original torment. That is not to say he sipped once again from the ever-flowing cup of reason. It's saying something else entirely. Addiction is the word I've been looking for. They were together again. That's all that matters. That's the point I'm struggling to make. The shoes and clothing scattered about her room speaks volumes. Quickly though, very shortly after a fragmentary languid peace in his arms, she wants out or he wants out or she wants brunch and he wants travel by starlight, and what young relationship can withstand the impact of an onslaught like that?

Do we have to go through the part where they begin the endless squabble? TOO MUCH of that takes place in cafes and other public places, with people gawking or purposefully ignoring them, which ever you think worse.

Let me just say this about her (not that Vincent is an angel): when push came to shove—she proved to be a highly-skilled shover. So, considerable confusion reigned when she suddenly discovered, to her great surprise, that she loved Vincent, and could not live a day without him, even if it meant being nice. That made things (I like to think) unbearable for both of them. In the movies this sort of thing happens all the time; and there is a reason for that. (I find myself snorting each time I stumble through that line...so feel free; it seems a natural response.)

But it had been a rocky beginning. Even as he hit on her that first night, he had doubts about the percentage Destiny played in the affair. That she used the phrase "my boyfriend" six times in the first two sentences she tossed his way, was not the kind of encouragement Vincent had hoped for. But, the work boot of alcohol was on his neck...who needs to say more about that?

Just an aside: Somewhere in here he became fascinated with ships—not boats, ships. Square rigged, not fore and aft. Wooden hulled, not iron. And while he devoured what he could in print on the matter his mind began to pull loose of the moorings and find itself (thankfully) adrift. But, returning to port, he always found her there; sometimes waving, sometimes fuming, sometimes impossible to fathom.

Meanwhile he was flunking out of boarding school (as one might guess)—as were, proudly, defiantly, for all intents and purposes, all the others there at that halcyon place. The Rolls Royces came empty and departed with someone

smoldering, cross-armed, sneering alternatively smirking, at any rate ever defiant in the back seat, almost on a weekly basis. Vincent's mother drove a Ford, and Vincent remained. But, it's really a shame about the others because some of us could see our best and our brightest in those glistening arrogant eyes. By that I mean that, despite their resistance, many of these 'juniors' and 'the thirds' could not only quote Neitche, when pressed, they could actually spell Neitche. Where they got this knowledge I don't know. But, GOD knows they had the wherewithal (money) to launch whatever enterprise they felt might gain them the additional steadily growing wealth that no young man deserves despite surety of entitlement. Oh, and I meant to say something about the chicken incident but forgot. Only let me say this much about that: I suppose in any real kind of writing Vincent would be held responsible for the chicken incident, after all he seemed a likely suspect, always keeping to himself and a long list of similar, misdemeanors. In the best American writing he'd be wrongly accused and OH, the injustice of it all!

But, Vincent had his own problems—chickens aside—and it's about time we gave her a name. Margaret. Her name was Margaret. I guess that comes as no surprise to anyone who has ever known a Margaret. She was standing outside a bar, smoking a cigarette, looking many more than her 18 years when he wobbled drunkenly by and asked,

"Are you alone?"

"No, my boyfriend is inside."

"Wow," said Vincent, "He must be some kind of an idiot."

"My boyfriend is no idiot," she said blowing a smoke ring.

"My boyfriend is 26 years old, and he could crush you with

one hand, and he's definitely not an idiot."

There seemed to be nothing Vincent could say to that and so he took the opportunity to say nothing. It was only about 2 AM and the night still lay ahead.

"But," said Margaret after a casual puff or two on her cigarette, "why did you say that?"

"Why did I say your boyfriend must be an idiot?"

"Yeah, you know..." she whispered encouragingly.

"Because, if you were /my/ girlfriend, I wouldn't leave you standing around out here by yourself where someone like me might come along, scoop you up, and carry you off."

(There was no doubt about it, at 2 AM under the neon bar-light glow, Margaret was a beauty.)

So, you already know the rest. Twenty minutes later they were at Margaret's dorm room and she was nicely, barely-clothed, and had just finished reciting poetry to him. I wish I could think of a more creative way to say that. So, it looked like a good beginning. I mean, the clean film-noir pick-up, the sneaking up the squeaky dormitory steps without being caught, the rolling seduction of recitation, the candles, the suppressed giggles of delight under the blanket, and, ultimately, the discovery by Vincent that he was skilled at something he had never done before, which coincided perfectly with Margaret's discovery that Vincent had more natural skill than her 26 year old abandoned and now almost forgotten boyfriend... who was not an idiot.

So, where is this going, you must certainly ask, and that seems like a reasonable question.



It's going here:

One rainy afternoon, a few days before Christmas, Vincent found himself crouching behind a stone retaining wall at the corner of Harrison Street and Monument Avenue.

Through the drizzle he watched as a huge man, short and broad, in a very black, nicely made suit carried cardboard boxes down a slippery brick pathway to the open trunk of a large, old, Rolls Royce. Behind him, following slowly, head down as if in mourning, was a girl Vincent recognized. The man placed the boxes in the trunk, opened the back door for her (Vincent expected to see a little bow of some sort, but there was none). The man closed the trunk as he went around, brushed his gloved hands together, slid in behind the wheel and drove off smartly. There was something very sad about this ceremony; maybe it was the rain, the girl's demeanor, the way the huge shiny car disappeared in silence down the street without her ever turning to look back.

Vincent stood up. He didn't know quite what it all meant. Once he was sure they were truly gone, he emboldened himself to walk around the corner and up that same slippery brick pathway to the apartment door where it lead. He knocked. A girl he'd never seen before came to the door.

"Is Margaret here?"

"Nope. Are you Vincent?"

"Yeah..."

"This is for you." She handed him a tasteful envelope. He tore it open, took out the tasteful note within, and read these words: "I will never forget you. I will always love you. Margaret"

"She's gone?" he asked while folding the thing and shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Yeah," sighed the girl, perfectly bored. "She's rich, and now she's gone." She started to shut the door, but Vincent put up a hand to prevent it.

"Is she coming back?" he asked. He had to ask. He had to know.

"I hope not."

"What happened?"

"Her house burned down." The girl sounded burdened by having to relay such news, but, at the same time, just a shade elated. She put the back of one hand to her brow and tilted her head back and fluttered her eyelids like a heroine in a silent film. "Margaret's tragedy," she said, "Tra-la-la-la-la."

"Her house burned down?"

"Right to the ground. Her brother's in the hospital," she said, leaning one hip against the edge of the door and rolling her eyes.

"Is he OK; I mean, I don't know the guy but..."

She sighed. "He's OK. It's the house they're upset over."

"But, Margaret—she's...not coming back?"

"Well, she took all her stuff, what does that tell you?"

"Wow," Vincent said.

"Yeah, bummer. Now they have to all fly off and live in their place in Europe somewhere until their mansion here can be restored to its former glory."

"Wow," he said again.

"Yeah, wow." She said and closed the door.

Vincent stood there in the rain for a very long time.

## **INSURED INJUSTICE**

Let me say going in that Gloria Hawkins is a nice person who wanted to make things right in some way, but in the meantime we had already obtained our insurance with a more reasonable company. (Thank you again for that kindness, Ms. Hawkins.) But, I think it is important for you to know that at times you may be lead to believe you're in good hands when you may not be in good hands at all.

Ten days before closing on our first and only house, the Allstate Insurance Company declared that they were withdrawing their offer to insure our property. This was frightening news with ten days to go, because without insurance there would be no loan and without a loan there would be no house. The unexpected little bump on the road to happiness was also neatly timed, arriving on a Friday afternoon before a three day holiday, so that I could do nothing while those three days crawled slowly by. Since there was nothing much I could do for that period other than fret, that's what I did. I fretted. I fretted mightily. Paced and fretted. Wrung my hands and fretted. Pulled out my hair and fretted. I fretted both quietly and openly, so there was probably some cussing involved as well, but there's no reason to drag you into that.

Eventually the injustice of it was too much for me to bear and I sent off an email to the NC Department of Insurance-- "We license and regulate the insurance industry"—asking them if an insurance company could do such a thing—agree to insure you one minute and then tell you, forget it the next. To me, it seemed unreasonable and clearly wrong.

But, only rarely are things which seem unreasonable and clearly wrong to me, also illegal. Still, I thought I'd check.

Step with me now through the looking glass and, with seven days to go before closing, there I am talking on the phone with a guy from the North Carolina Department of Insurance. He's telling me, "You can't force an insurance company to sell you insurance, you know." I repeated what he had just said and I guess it sounded strange even to him because he edited it, saying, "They're under no obligation to *offer you* insurance." Putting aside the fact that they had *already* offered me insurance, and I had *already* accepted it, it still seemed a little peculiar. Not being an insurance expert—just a guy who wanted to purchase insurance, observing the industry from the other side of the counter as it were—I thought selling insurance was what insurance companies did. And I thought, since they had given us an estimate and we had accepted it, and sent us something to sign, and we had signed it, that things were pretty well sewn up. I was wrong of course.

But, I'm dancing around the real issue here without touching directly upon it, and that's not fair to you or to the insurance company. To judge this matter fairly you need all the facts. So, with respect for fair play I have to tell you that, before they withdrew their offer to insure our house, I had offended the insurance company...and probably twice.

The first offense was innocent enough. Since everyone (and by that I mean everyone) told us to insure our house for "full replacement value", that is what I wanted to do. And, the insurance people were nice enough to do that. The

problem popped up when I started talking to local (western North Carolina) contractors about possible changes we might wish to make to the house. The contractors all agreed that basic construction, in that area, cost so much per square foot. When I compared it to the value that the insurance company said was full replacement value of our little cabin, those figures did not match. For the insured amount, according to the contractors, I could build about 4/5 of our small cabin.

So, I called the insurance company and asked for more insurance. They assured me that I had enough and any more I would be in danger of “over insuring” our property. They assured me that they had tables and that the tables didn’t lie. Was I questioning the accuracy of their tables? Not at all, but, I told them what the contractors had told me. There was a great silence in response to that. After some resistance, they finally caved in and gave me what I asked for, but with the stipulation that they had advised me that I was over insuring. This cost me, I think, an additional \$16 per year. To over-insure the house cost me \$1.33 a month. Why the insurance company did not want an additional \$1.33 from me each month, was something I did not then, and do not now, understand.

I offended them a second time when I refused to insure a house which I did not own and a car which I did not possess. It seems that in that refusal I was being uncooperative. This happened about twelve days before closing, I think. I received an email from the insurance company saying they just discovered that they could only insure our house in North Carolina IF we also insured our

property in California with them, and, of course, our car as well. Now I've been around and I know a few things and one of the things I know is that this kind of extortion is nothing more than good clean fun between a company and its hapless customers, so, I was perfectly willing to play along. I thought I had a little bit of an advantage however because we own no property in California (or anywhere else for that matter) and we did not, at that time, own a car. I sent them back an email stating that we'd be glad to insure anything we had with them but, could not, for reasons left unsaid, insure anything that we did not own. I thought I was playing the game pretty well.

One fine and sunny morning—I was feeling fairly perky, facing the future blithely, undaunted, even delighted by the way I had handled that—I opened up my email and discovered what a neophyte I was. I discovered that the good hands people had no sense of humor whatsoever when it comes to insuring stuff which doesn't exist. I was messing with the wrong guys. Refusing to insure property and automobiles which we did not own was just the sort of slap in the face that the insurance company was not used to and would not put up with it. The next email I received from them said "Thank you for your interest in our company and agency. Perhaps we can assist you with your insurance needs in the future. Thank you!"

This finely crafted, though somewhat cryptic, message reset the stage for my day. It was like one of those magic tricks where they yank the table cloth out from under the place settings without disturbing anything. As a writer I had to admire the cold brutality of it. Suddenly, the sky was no

longer sunny, the dark clouds had rolled in and there was thunder on the horizon. I picked up the phone to see if it really meant what I thought it meant. Yes, congratulations, your house now is without insurance. Ten days to closing and no insurance. Which pretty much brings us back around to where we started.

You and I both now know that it is perfectly acceptable for an insurance company to say, “Yes, we’ll be delighted to insure you!” one moment, and then, “Sorry, we’ve changed our mind.” the next; the reason—logical or not—doesn’t matter. Why this new found knowledge affords me no comfort I cannot explain. That it is unfair, unreasonable and perfectly idiotic for an insurance company to insist that we insure property and cars which we do not own does not enter into the equation. As the guy from the North Carolina Department of Insurance explained it, the insurance companies can’t be forced to sell anyone insurance. Apparently, they can force us to buy it though, whether we have anything to insure or not.

I once asked Sylvie, “Which do you think bothers me more, injustice, no matter how slight, or my inability to do something about a situation?”

She wisely replied, “For you they are often the same thing.” I’ve spent much of my life trying to convince myself that it’s like that for most of us.

Now I feel the need to tell you this, just to wrap things up.

Every time I see one of their ads on TV and hear the slogan, ‘You’re in good hands with Allstate’, I find myself

Henry Edward Fool

involuntarily uttering a word which my very dear wife does not enjoy hearing... but with which she openly admits complete agreement.



## TEARS OF JOY

There have been, I think, six times in my life when I've experienced tears of joy. The first that I can recall was when a judge in Richmond Virginia, with cruel eyes under a stern unforgiving brow, stared down at me for a very long time while I cowered before him innocent as any reckless young motorcyclist might be.

"What kind of a motorcycle is this we're talking about?" he finally asked.

"A 650 Triumph, Sir," I mumbled.

"Yeah. And how long have you had this motorcycle?"

"About three months I guess...Sir. Not quite."

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, "The law is the law, and I'm going to have to..." He raised his gavel and held it aloft for a bit. "Oh hell," he said, "Case dismissed!" and he brought that gavel down with a clack. And, with that sound my eyes were instantly filled with tears, tears of joy.

The second time was when I stood beside my truly lovely wife, as we pronounced our vows to each other. I spent that entire ceremony overwhelmed, my eyes filled with tears of joy. Well, and not that this counts, but my eyes are filled with tears of joy as I write about that. So, now there have been seven times in my life when I've experienced tears of joy. I'm becoming an old softy.

The third time that I can recall tears of joy was when my very dear wife's father returned from a trip to France and immediately after he entered the hotel, and set his bag down, I came forward and placed a golden retriever puppy in his arms. It was a surprise. He had had to *put down* his

previous dog—also a golden retriever—about a month earlier, before his departure. (We thought it was time.)

The fourth time was many years later when my father received the French Legion of Honour “for having played a significant role in the taking of the heavily defended fortifications in the area of Metz” during World War II. M. Francois-Xavier Tilliette, Deputy Consul General of France, Los Angeles, before pinning the medal on my father’s chest, concluded his statements by saying, “Our message, Monsieur, is a simple one, but it could not be more heart-felt: Merci...thank you.” At that moment, my eyes, already filled with tears of tremendous pride, overflowed with tears of joy. I have always considered it an honor to be my father’s son.

Then, of course, there was the time when I was being sued by Jack Nicholson. The first person I told about that lit up with a huge smile, extended his hand and, after shaking mine vigorously, said “Congratulations, that’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever heard.”

He had a lot of questions which I didn’t really care to answer; being sued by Jack Nicholson was not the joy for me that it was for him. Apparently, there are few things more entertaining in this world than someone you know being sued by Jack Nicholson. The next three people I told were all jolted into near-ecstasy as the joyous news surged through their minds. My wife and I were devastated however, and maybe just a bit frightened. It’s one thing to be sued by someone, but quite another to be sued by Jack Nicholson.

She was haunted by the idea that Jack Nicholson might take away our one and only possession, a very tiny unassuming little log cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. When I told people of her concerns, I discovered that I have some true friends in this world. They each expressed sympathy and offered what encouragement they could. Tom, a very good and long-standing friend—a lawyer—asked me to send him everything on the matter, and ended his email with the firm assurance, “Don’t worry about this.” Those four words brought tears to my eyes.

That was the second time in two days my eyes had filled with tears of joy.

One day earlier, when someone told me that Osama Bin Laden had been shot down dead, I found my eyes full of tears—tears of joy. I remember saying to my dear wife, “I had no idea this event would mean so much to me.” With no real investment in the eradication of Evil, there I was, eyes awash in tears at the news.

Sometime in early 2008 when I began converting two screenplays I’d written into a more readable format. My thinking was that I’d slap them back to back and try to pawn it off as a book to my small but dedicated readership. The first one, *EARWIG*, is basically a somewhat oblique meandering love letter to my truly wonderful wife which, as all such screenplays must, involves the recitation of a Gerard de Nerval poem in perfectly nuanced French, the performance of one of the Bach suites for cello in front of a gathering of astounded friends, beating my father-in-law resoundingly at ping pong, and a horrendous car crash.

Oh, and there's an earwig in there too.

The second screenplay--the one that caused all the trouble—has to do with Santa Claus. And, because I think Jack Nicholson is one of the most entertaining artists I've ever had the great good pleasure to watch perform in any media—and one of the select few people I can imitate with recognizable skill—Santa looks and sounds and acts like Jack Nicholson in that play. So, I shot off a letter to Jack Nicholson's agent asking for whatever permission I might need to call the thing Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus. In all, while working on this piece I shot three or four such letters off into the black hole that is Hollywood.

So, then there was nothing. There is only a great silence from the south while I go through something like 14 proofs and edits. Then, on March 23, 2011 (precisely three years after beginning the simple project of converting screenplays to prose) I published EARWIG. When the first copy arrived, I printed out a small paper band which said, "Includes: Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus", wrapped it around a copy of EARWIG, boxed it, addressed it to Mr. Nicholson's agent, and dropped it in the mailbox.

The letter that accommodated that book was printed that out on EstuaryPublications letterhead, with the logo up top and the slogan: *No calls please, I've already got enough of that in my life.* at the bottom.

On May 2, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when I was lying quietly in a fetal position on my bed in a darkened room I got a phone call from Mr. Nicholson's agent. Clearly this

was a man who was hopping mad but holding himself under restraint. My side of the conversation was somewhat awkward, because I was really surprised that I should be speaking to this man at all, and I was still half-asleep. On top of that, even though I knew that was his sole purpose, I was frightened by what he was saying. At the same time I got the real sense that this was just a man doing his job. He said, "Well, you'll be hearing from Mr. Jack Nicholson's attorney about this. "Meanwhile, I insist that you remove that book from your website immediately and stop all sales of the book until you've heard from Mr. Nicholson's attorney."

I had no idea what to say to that, and so said nothing.

"Mr. Nicholson is highly protective of his name and his image," he told me.

"I understand that. But I really have no intention of offending Mr. Nicholson," I said.

"I'm going to put everything I just said here in an email and email it to you. I expect you to respond by saying you will comply with everything we've just agreed to. Look for my email."

"Thank you," I said, and he hung up.

I honestly believe that the man came very close to calling me a jackass. Perhaps he saved it until after he hung up. After he hung up I sat up, turned on the light, and held my head in both hands, stunned by this completely predictable /unpredictable (depending upon your experiences I suppose) turn of events. Then I went in and told my wife, who first turned pale and then expressed the fear that Jack

Nicholson would soon be holding the title to our little cabin.

Later that day, I received another email from this man saying, "... per our conversation, I suggest that you take down the sale of the above book immediately from your web site immediately (sic) until you hear from Mr. Jack Nicholson's attorney. As I indicated, you had no permission to put a band around your book indicating a section that includes "Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus."

Thank God I have a clear thinking wife. She looked at that and saw the problem immediately. I responded: "re: no permission to put a band around the book indicating a section entitled, 'Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus'."

"My very dear wife finds this turn of events truly frightening, as do I. But, unlike myself she remains clear thinking and has posed this question: Is your objection to Earwig the band around the book with Jack Nicholson's name on it? If so, you should know that the ONLY copy of that book with that band on it was the one I sent to you. The cover of Earwig has no reference whatsoever to Jack Nicholson. There is no mention of Jack Nicholson on the back cover or on the spine of the book either."

That evening my wife had to replace me at the front desk because I was slammed with the first migraine I've had in many years. I was nailed to a sweat-soaked bed for several hours and, after the worse had passed, I remained partially blind for a while. That night, I may have been in bed, but I was not sleeping. I was thinking about Jack Nicholson's

attorney. And when I could pretend no more, some time around 5 AM, I got up and I went into the living room and I wrote a letter. At some point I fell asleep from exhaustion. When I awoke again I fired off an email to Jack Nicholson's agent, saying: "I've given some thought to what you've said. In fact, I thought about little else. Thanks for that: I need more trouble in my life right now."

But, I want to reiterate what I've done at your request, because it seemed like the correct thing to do. I have removed the name of Jack Nicholson from anywhere on my website. And I've removed any links to 'Jack Nicholson IS Santa Claus'.

I'd like to say again that there is no reference to Jack Nicholson on the cover of Earwig anywhere. There never has been. The band that seems to have caused your upset was placed on one book and one book only, the one that went to you. It was placed there so that you would know that Earwig contained that story. It was a courtesy.

That said, there's this. As far as the content of that story goes. I don't know how you can determine that it is slanderous or whatever it is you apparently think, when you haven't read it. And, I don't know what could be offensive about blurring the line between Jack Nicholson and Santa Claus anyway...one of 'em is quite possibly the most beloved mythical character in the history of mankind. You want to go around saying I'm Santa Claus, nobody who knows me would believe you, but I'd have no objection to you doing that. I DO object however to you saying that I'm trying to sell my work to people who are so goddamned

dumb they'll buy something just because it has some celebrity's name on it. I think more of my work, and much more of my readership, than that."

That email said everything I had to say on the matter, and as far as I could see, I was done with it. I didn't want anything more to do with the damned mess until I had to.

Sometime in the late afternoon, after walking the dogs and forgetting that I had a care in the world, I forced myself to open up my email and my heart sank when I saw that it was from Jack Nicholson's agent.

He wrote saying, "the coast is clear as long as you never put the banner around the book, keep his name off the cover and don't do any advertising about the chapter that uses Jack Nicholson's name. Please reconfirm that you will follow these guide lines and you are good to go."

I thanked the man; told him that I appreciated him getting back to me so soon, and agreed not to do three things that I never intended to do anyway.

Very shortly after, another email came in.  
It read: "Good luck with the sale of the book."

...for the third time in as many days tears filled my eyes.



## **GOOD BREAD and Good Riddance**

The one time we managed to spend two weeks in Asheville, North Carolina (though we could not stay at our own place, which was rented at the time), my dear wife and I went out looking for a loaf of good bread... preferably French. And shortly after giving up entirely—resignation had been savagely beaten into us—we found ourselves driving by a bakery with a huge sign out front in blue, white and red, declaring: Boulangerie de Paris. I looked at my wife and raised both eyebrows. “EH?” I said. She winced as if I’d pinched her. She didn’t want her heart broken again. It’d been a tough day, and I understood.

We were both convinced that, whatever the name, if we stopped and parked and got out of the car and went in there, the only thing we were sure to find was a very pleasant, pleasingly plump, North Carolina blonde behind the counter, and further disappointment.

We drove on for about a mile before I managed to convince her to give it one final shot. “Come on. You never know...” I said. She may have sighed and rolled her lovely eyes heavenward, but submitted without enthusiasm. So I swung the car around and we pulled into the driveway out front and we extracted ourselves from the car and we both took a deep breath—and I crossed my fingers—and we went in.

My wife, who can detect a loaf of good French bread by the look of it alone, and at a considerable distance, lagged a bit behind; she had zero expectations. But, I was hopeful and, rushing in, immediately excited by what I saw. The place

looked and smelled just like the French bakeries I'd been to in France. It was the typical French bakery arrangement: a counter with baskets of bread in various recognizably French sizes and shapes. I was absolutely delighted. I was more delighted still when a French male of about 42 years of age came out of the back room wiping his flour-covered hands on his apron and sighing theatrically. Oh God, the burden that poor man must bear. That he should ever have to pull himself away from his bread in order to deal with customers seemed such an unnecessary part of the man's job. He eyed us coldly, spoke not a word. This was the place!

My wife perused the bread with cold discernment. Then she said this: "Non." She gave the bread a final glance, said, "Non" again and turned to walk out. The baker looked at me, "NON?!" he said. "NON?!" And as we made our way toward the door he followed us, "NON?!"

My wife and I went out and got quickly into our car. I started the engine and began to back out. When I looked back, before pulling out into traffic, the baker was standing in front of his place staring at us. "NON?!"

I don't know whether I heard it or I read it on his lips, but I knew at that moment that, next time we were in Asheville, we would not be welcome back at Boulangerie de Paris. Even if I happened to have a cattle prod on me at the moment and could, through its influence, convince my dear wife to give that bakery another try, French bakers have memories like steel traps.

## ALL ROADS LEAD TO PAIN

Before our marriage Sylvie tried to introduce me to inline skating—which I never grew to enjoy because I don’t have a fully developed appreciation for jaw shattering falls on rock-hard rough surfaces—and skiing—which I loved but quit after I broke my hand in what witnesses declared to be one of the most spectacular falls they had ever witnessed on the slopes. The message seemed to be that anything of real entertainment value involves a hard surface upon which you must fall. The exception is scrabble, a game where my fall is merely metaphorical but every bit as hard, every bit as painful, every bit as spectacular, because her final score is always three or four times what mine is. The game must be as embarrassing for her as it is for her apparently illiterate husband. But I don’t want to talk about that. So, let’s move on just as if scrabble had never been mentioned. Because, of the many fine and painful things to which Sylvie has introduced me, opera is the most torturous.

Since our marriage I’ve gone semi-willingly to several opera and I learned, from my very first exposure, that no matter how expensive the tickets (and her father has spent years jumping through every hoop necessary to obtain the best) opera is unbearable. It’s unbearable because it involves sitting for hours in excruciating discomfort upon the most unforgiving, apparently vindictive, velvet covered seats, with no room for your legs, while battling some ancient aristocrat for elbow-room on the shared armrest. Add to that all the senseless screaming on stage and, for some of us, it creates an unnecessarily-prolonged, though somehow highly-personalized, Hell. I mean, when I look around, everyone else seems to be taking it all in stride.

After my first experience Sylvie asked me how I enjoyed it, and I replied, "It's almost as if they're intentionally trying to make it difficult to sleep through." Honestly, I've come away from some of these things more tired than when I went in.

The unqualified worst was *Wozzeck*.

I looked up *Wozzeck*, just to discover what kind of a madman would create such a vile thing, and discovered it was "the *first* opera by Austrian composer, Alban Berg". My dear wife leans in to say, "It's such a shame to see that in print that way; it implies that he did others." I could not agree more.

Apparently this opera first offended anybody-with-any-sensitivity-at-all in 1925 and was (justifiably, sensibly) immediately banned. The fact that it was banned in Germany in 1925, says almost as much as needs to be said. According to the all-knowing Internet, it has since reemerged and has established for itself, "a solid place in the mainstream of operatic tradition." The properly-dressed, clean-shaven, nicely-coifed aristocrats in the audience all sit there riveted, while scatological phrases are shouted from the stage in German (for god's sake!) and raise their lorgnettes to take in the vulgarity in print on the super-script screen overhead. Modern productions, we've been told, are consistently sold out...demonstrating once again what goddamned hypocrites we all are.

During the opening scene I felt shame at being there.

Among my wife's many natural qualities, she is a lady, and I feel an obligation to shield her when I can from things both sordid and vulgar. It's not that I think she can't take it, it's that I honestly believe she shouldn't have to. There's no reason any decent person should be exposed unnecessarily to such stuff. But, that fine and refined audience, sitting there on that evening, in the opulence and elegance of an opera house, saw no problem whatsoever with *Wozzeck*. These very same people would probably cringe and bristle hearing Bart Simpson cackles, 'Eat my shorts.'

We'd read that *Wozzeck* had been called "challenging" and "an intense experience". We discovered that it was in fact stupid and vile and mean-spirited and miserable and also, fairly consistently, just plain disgusting. Oh, and utterly without meaning. And we discovered all of that in the first seventeen minutes. Still, because we are experienced and reasonably open minded—any opera might have a rocky beginning—my wife and I waited nearly twenty minutes before getting up and walking out of that god-forsaken opera house.

So, that's the picture. We rise quietly from our seats and make our way to the aisle, with every head in the place turned in our direction, wobbling, en-masse, in jowly umbrage. Since my wife and I are both timid by nature, she did not look at them. But, as we made our way toward the back, I—who have learned to bury my nature deep deep below a hardened, challenging, protective surface—glanced long enough at those aristocrats to receive the bolts of their shuddering disapproval. Apparently our behavior, in walking out, was more offensive than the stench spewing

from that stage. But, let me take a moment here to state our case to the gentle folk who remained, "It would have been far more insulting to sit there and listen to that." Oh, and I'd like to say this as well, "You people are all idiots."

When we finally arrived, drenched in humiliation, at the back of the opera house, there was a nice woman standing near the exit. As soon as I saw her I felt the relief of instant kinship. So I said jovially, "I congratulate you, Madam, on your good sense." She looked at me slightly askance, so I continued, "It's nice to see that someone else has the decency to walk out on this offense."

"Oh," she said cheerfully, "I'm not leaving. I just had to use the ladies room."

So—sole champions of decency—my dear wife and I left that awful place. Lesson learned.

Because of that experience I am no longer surprised that we continually vote numbskulls, morons, thieves and criminals or every conceivable sort into political office, or that the most senseless, foul and indisputably hideous creations on earth are sold to people as 'Art'. Anyone who is willing to sit through *Wozzeck* has lost their ability to think clearly.

## OPERA TWO

Having spent some time in Los Angeles—both the heart and the soul of depersonalization—I have a pretty good grasp of the overwhelming emptiness of that frantic place. Nonetheless, we planned a little romantic get-away to L A, to take in an opera. What could be cooler than that? Fly on down to L A, have a little dinner, take in the opera, after a good night's sleep, fly back to the crushing tedium of work.

It had been planned well in advance and, though I was as sick as a dog with a nagging relentless cough, nothing was going to stand in the way of that trip. I'd discovered in the past that sometimes rum is the only thing on earth that will stop such a cough. So, I got on the plane with a little spray device full of rum and, while in flight, I continually sprayed my throat with rum. You would think that this would lead to a humorous outcome of some sort, but it lead to nothing. The rum proved to be utterly useless, neither inebriating me, nor putting an end to the nagging cough. By the time we landed, I was feeling somewhat better however, and my very dear wife was feeling somewhat worse.

As said, she introduced me to opera.

In return I'd introduced her to chess.

She introduced me to skiing.

I introduced her to shooting eight-ball in a semi-respectable bar. And, during our little outing to L A I introduced her to Nero Wolfe— but, apparently she doesn't like arrogance even in a fictitious character—and I tried once again to introduce her to Bob Dylan by way of my best off-key, nasally imitations—which she liked even less. However, she feels comfortable knowing that I enjoy some things

which she can never be driven to enjoy herself. To her credit, for example, she participates semi-willingly with small-time, occasional, intra-marital wagering.

When the new cabinets were installed in the front office—the work of a French carpenter—they had no drawer pulls. Drawer pulls had not yet been discussed as thoroughly as such a detail might demand. Once that decision was made of course, installing the drawer pulls would be a three day job for anyone paid by the hour, and a twenty minutes task for anyone who'd already been paid for the job. I saw this as an opportunity to make a few bucks off my dear, innocent and always trusting wife. The fact that the decision would involve two French males made it a sure bet. So, I bet her that *no drawer pulls of any sort* would be placed on those cabinets for 8 months. Naturally she feigned offense, but, somewhat tellingly, she also hesitated to take that bet. Still, in the name of the French people, she took that bet—it was a matter of honor.

Eight months later I was a richer and somewhat smugger (if that's possible) man. On that day I quickly asked her if she would care to bet on when these new cabinets would have a final finish-coat applied to their raw, untreated, by then already marred, scratched, gouged and stained, formerly new and unblemished mahogany surfaces. She told me that she did not wish to accept such a wager.

To date, that remains, quite possibly, my greatest accomplishment, on this planet, during this lifetime. When I reach those pearly gates, and they glare down upon me and ask what I have done with my life, I'll hold up my



head and proudly declare, “I swindled my dear and trusting wife out of a hundred bucks one time.” But, to nail it down I’ll add, “AND...and, in the very same stroke, I taught her never to bet on a French carpenter.”

By all accounts, when we walked out of that opera in LA that night—because my wife’s forehead was red-hot to the touch, she was shivering uncontrollably, her teeth were chattering, and she felt like she was going to pass out—we missed one of the greatest performances in the entire history of opera. [Anna Netrebko in Lucia di Lammermoor] The LA newspapers said so the next day. And, when we returned home to San Francisco, our local new conspired to rub it in: “A GREAT performance, by a GREAT performer!” But we had had other concerns at the time.

The doctor we spoke to over the phone seemed deeply concerned himself, when I told him what my wife’s temperature was. He told me to go out and get my hands on some Tylenol as quickly as possible and get it into my wife even quicker. That worked like a miracle on her dangerously high temperature. So, let me advise you, if you need to save the life of someone you love, who has a run-away fever, the answer is Tylenol. One Tylenol and her fever began to dissipate. That very good doctor even called back to see how she was doing...and I thanked him profusely. What a romantic/catastrophic get-away that was.

I introduced her to Nero Wolfe, and my darling wife introduced me to the numbing fear that the most wonderful person I’ve ever met might not make it through the night.

## **A WORD ABOUT GOD**

My very dear wife explained one evening that she needs no further proof of the cruelty and meaninglessness of life and the non-existence of God than the relentless abuse, both physical and verbal, a schoolmate of hers suffered under for her entire short life. Eventually, the young lady freed herself of her tyrannical oppressor mother and found some small portion of happiness and reasonable success in an insignificant career, before coming down with leukemia and dying at the age of 31. My wife tells this story with such resolve and such passion that it's hard to understand that the woman was not a close childhood friend, but merely a classmate. The injustice that poor woman suffered in life has tormented my wife for years, and that is proof enough for her that there is no God.

From my side, the presence of my wonderful wife in my life leaves me with no alternative than to believe that a somewhat misguided God exists. To have the honor and the great pleasure of such a remarkable, intelligent, thoughtful, loving woman in my life is a miracle of the most generous, albeit undeserved, sort. I've never known what to make of that kindness, of course, but I'd be a fool to deny it.

Voltaire sees God at the helm, steering an enormous ship through time and space, with us, the rats in the hull. And intellectually, I'd have to agree with that except for my natural tendency to interpret things as acts of kindness, protection and caring. On the other hand, there are a lot of things that any kind, caring or naturally protective person would not ignore, but God does undeniably.

My intelligent and gentle wife calls our meeting luck. If that's what it is, then Luck is an incredibly benevolent sort of thing, and, apparently, a thing with absolutely no discernment whatsoever. That's a definition which almost everybody might agree on.

## A Saab Story

Since we had no car, the only time we could get the doggie out of the hotel and to a place where a dog could be a dog without embarrassment, were those certain select days that my wife's mother drove in to do the flowers or write checks—averaging about three times per week. On those days, while she was drudging away, we borrowed her car and took Bayard and Noodle (the dog-in-law) to a place where they could run around awash in the boundless joy of liberty. Noodle would chase the ball...and steal balls from anyone else that was not quick enough...and Bayard would run around like a madman with any other dog that would run with him. And, though never really a dog kinda guy—this is just between you and me—I really loved watching Bayard running around; it touched me to see him happy. Contra-wise, on those days when we didn't have access to a car, I broke my heart to watch poor little Bayard behind the couch with his head on his paws, until sometime late in the evening when he could stand it no more. At that point, driven by hard-wired biological madness, he started running in large circles around the couch and would not quit until he was totally and thoroughly exhausted. That was at once a sad and delightful thing to witness. Why, I asked myself, should it come to this? Why, I asked my wife, should it come to this? Neither of us could come up with an answer.

Bayard thinks of me as a peculiar, possibly dangerous, god-like creature—the source of food but completely unpredictable—and Sylvie as the ever freshening fount of kindness and comfort.

And though he depends on us, he doesn't always trust us. Naturally, gods that we are, we want to see him happy. So, we decided—since we would need a car to conduct our lives in North Carolina anyway (if it ever came to that), we should buy a car. That way, we could take Bayard to a place where he could run with other dogs almost every day. It was a brilliant idea. We applauded ourselves, patted each other on the back (took turns), and, were my wife of the drinking kind and not an ethereal being, we would have toasted our own cleverness. Unfortunately, I was forced, by circumstance, to drink her share of the toast.

Meanwhile, Sylvie, who has a mind like a steel trap and is the most tenacious seeker to ever seek anything on the internet, did what she does best and came up with only ONE car that we could actually afford to buy, which wasn't an embarrassment to be seen in—a bottom-of-the-line Honda. There were two or three other cars which we could afford but of such disgraceful breeding that we could not bear to look at them, let alone imagine ourselves driving down the street in one. The HONDA started at about \$14,000 SUP-POSED-LY.

So then it was my turn. I spoke to every Honda dealer within reach until I found one that had that unique combination—the color she wanted and the price I wanted. Then, on the very first day after our brilliant idea, we got up early and dragged ourselves out to the Honda place. And, maybe I'm stepping on my own tail just a bit to say so, but, IT WAS HELL! Buying a car is Hell, and from what we could determine on that first outing, car salesmen are all liars.

Not only did these people not have the color she wanted, as they had claimed over the phone two hours earlier, they didn't have the price they quoted me over the phone two hours earlier either. These facts were kept from us until after we test drove a car of an appalling color, at another price. Then, they tried to convince us to buy that one.

Their technique was a combination of rapid-fire nagging, pushing, needling, browbeating, deriding and psychological manipulation randomly applied in the most brutish manner. Their thinking, as far as I could see, was that anyone would sign any document rather than prolong the onslaught of endless harassment. If it came to that, any reasonable person would buy a car just to get it over with it. Strange creatures that we are, we did not agree to buy a car which we didn't want at a higher price than we were quoted and pay for things on that car which we neither wanted nor needed, nor had any use for. So, we walked—which wasn't easy because, in order to test-drive the car, I had to surrender my driver's license to these people, and they do not give it back willingly.

Fortunately, because there was no doubt in anybody's mind—be they salesman, or sales manager, or whoever that third guy was—that I am what many people seem to recognize almost immediately as a mean son-of-a-bitch, I got my license back fairly quickly. (I'm not really a mean son-of-a-bitch, but in many instances I've allowed others to believe I am.)

On the way home, out of devotion to the cause, we stopped at the VW store where I had obtained (via the internet) an

ALL-IN quote on a Rabbit that they said they had but didn't actually have on the lot at the moment. So, we test-drove the one that they did have, and liked it. Then we all—the wife and I, and the salesman, and his back-up—discovered that the All-In price I was quoted was some kind of unfortunate mistake and it was really the price at which they start gnawing on your mind and manipulating your consciousness, and attempting to belittle you into buying something which they have, which you don't want, at a price you're not willing to pay. The humorous thing is that throughout all of this, every word spoken by these fools was issued as if they honestly believed they had some authority over us. It wasn't as if we were customers, it was more like we were subjects and they were hypnotists. I found myself alternately thinking "Who are these idiots?" and "What makes them think this is any way to sell cars?"

So that evening, completely disheartened, I began trying to find an honest car dealer or, at very least, a human being who might deal in cars which we could afford. I was a miserable man and it was a lonely and miserable task.

After hours of looking at cars that I *did not want* and *would not want to be seen in*, but could afford, I started looking at USED cars of a sort that we thought we might be able to afford and also be willing to be seen in. That process was only slightly more hopeful. I had been at it for several hours and exhausted and disgusted, and disillusioned and sad when I said, t' Hell with it and started looking at cars that I *did want* and *wouldn't mind being seen in*, but couldn't afford, meaning SAAB.

When I owned a SAAB, about ten years earlier, it had almost 300,000 miles on it and it ran like a top. It was levelheaded and quick, it sipped gasoline, it was comfortable and good lookin'. When I parked in the wealthiest neighborhoods of Del Mar, nobody called the cops. When I took it in for muffler work, I found myself bragging to the muffler guy about the near 300,000 miles my car had on it, and he snorted and said- 'Hell, we have Saabs in here with 3 or 400,000 miles on 'em every day.' As he was speaking these very words, a guy pulled into that parking lot in an old brown Saab with 750,000 miles on it. This is the absolute truth. Three quarters of a million miles on that car. (Wagner Mufflers, Oceanside, CA—call 'em yourself.)

. . .

So then, I was poking around, dreaming, wondering what it would cost to get into a car that I might enjoy, and I do not know how, I do not know why, I do not know what I did or how I did it, but there suddenly before me was the picture of a three year old Saab. It was in near-mint condition, one owner, with low mileage, and, at a price we could afford. In fact it was the same price we would have paid for that bottom-of-the-line new Honda (slightly less than we would have paid for the Rabbit that my wife liked more than I did...) What's weird is that this vehicle was at a dealership 8 blocks from the hotel.

I *RAN* to the room and told my wife about this miracle and, miracle upon miracles, she said: Well, let's get up early tomorrow and go look at it. I was sure, like me, she'd had enough of looking at cars for a while.



I'll tell you this--that car was EVERYTHING it claimed to be.

It was immaculate.

It had only 24000 miles on it.

It was still under factory warranty.

It looked and felt and drove great.

It was a color she liked and a price I could manage.

The people at the dealership (Ellis Brooks) were not pushy in any way whatsoever; they did not treat us like idiots; they did not try to force us to buy anything, they did not make us jump through hoops or batter us with any weird sales-psychology, they were nice and courteous. They spoke to us directly, in easily understood terms, just as if we might be fellow human beings and not their prey. So, we bought that car on the spot.

Sylvie was happy (though I think she was mainly glad to get it over with), I was delighted. By gad, if you gotta have a car to take the dogs to the beach, you might as well have one that's levelheaded, quick, comfortable, good lookin' and a pleasure to own.

So that's our Saab story.

## DOGS ON THE BEACH

When I have an opinion on a matter it will be (far more likely than not), intractable. At the very same time—depending upon my position in the matter—my opinion varies considerably. For example, when I am crossing a city street on foot, I really wish all those cars would give me a little more room and their drivers would exercise a little patience. When I am behind the wheel, I wish those pedestrians would hurry up and just get the hell out of my way. From any perspective anyone would have to admit that I'm right in both cases; drivers really should offer pedestrians a little more respect/distance/courtesy; pedestrians really should consider how badly their presence screws up the urgency of the poor driver's immediate pressing progress. That said, let's now talk for a minute about dogs.

We (my truly wonderful wife and I) find ourselves walking *our dog* on the beach several times a week. And, I've discovered something about myself in the beach/dog walking process. When some large dog starts getting maybe just a little too rough with our dog, the owner of that big stupid vicious goddamned ugly slobbering mutt always dismisses it saying, "Oh, he's just playing." That's nonsense of course. If I walked over and punched that same owner in the mouth I don't think "I was just playing" would stand up firmly enough in court of law to dismiss the case brought against me. Just playing?! What the beast is actually doing is getting himself wound up. He's pushing himself closer and closer to that place where his wild instincts kick in and overthrow his civil nature entirely. At that point he'll take our poor little doggie by the throat and

drag him off down the beach never to be seen alive again. That's what he's doing. And, that's not play.

We were on the beach this very afternoon and two dogs with herding instincts started running Bayard down. When they had him at bay, they started biting him, and not in a friendly way, but with intent. So, as is my way I interposed myself between my wife's dog and these ruffians. They started to run him down again and, again I interpose myself. For some reason this offended the owner of these mutts a great deal. "Hey!" she bellowed in a commandeering voice, "Let *them* work it out!"

"What did you say?" I asked. I probably said it with some force because, I decide when my wife's dog needs protection, and I decide what's necessary to protect him. She dismissed me with a gesture and instructed me, "Let *them* work it out."

"Nobody's gonna tell me I can't defend my wife's dog."

"Well, fuck you then," she snapped.

(Ah, civilization!)

"Fuck you too, you moron," I responded. "If *my* dog was attacking one of *your* mutts you wouldn't be standing there saying 'Let *them* work it out' would you?" I added.

At that point she took the ball throwing device she had in hand and, aiming carefully, chucked a tennis ball at me as hard as she possibly could...and missed. Bayard, as is his way, ran down that ball and carried it into the ocean where he dropped it and we all stood there for a bit and watched it as it drifted slowly out into the bay.

Why placing myself between my wife's dog and some vicious mutt who wishes only to tear him apart should offend the owner of the vicious mutt is beyond me, but it always does. Owners of such beasts are continually offended by my intervention. I don't know why. Usually I never say a word, I do not touch their dog, I do not shout at their dog, I do not, as my instincts tell me, grab the beast by the scruff of his neck and drag him out to sea, I simply place myself between the stupid, vicious, mutt and our little dog. They always find that offensive somehow.

I have more to say about that, but I'm sure you've heard enough...to agree entirely with me...or at least to understand what my poor wife must have to put up with.

Later—same pleasant little walk—when our dog chases down a puffy-little white curly, cuddly toy-like creature, my view has taken a reversal. Perhaps in the interim I've evolved; perhaps I've come to see the wisdom in what the owner of the big stupid vicious slobbering mutt told me a few minutes earlier. As our dog drives the tiny wide-eyed innocent into the sand and throws himself on top of the squirmy, kicking, bundle of squealing fear, I do not and can not, quite honestly, perceive any problem whatsoever.

"He's just playing," I assure the paling owner as she stands by gasping for breath, frightened, and finally (really quite unnecessarily) picks the thing up and holds it protectively against her frail frame.

"Why don't you get control of your dog?" I'm asked with completely uncalled for snappishness.

"Pah..." I say with a knowing smile. How does one address such idiotic concerns? "He's just playing," I snort. My

reply is a courtly mix, equal parts good-natured understanding and utter derision. "That's the way dogs play," I explain. But it never seems to comfort them.

Though it hasn't really helped me much I've reached certain conclusions after three years of walking dogs on the beach. Simple observation had lead me to believe that we live in a world full of idiots, and most of them either own large vicious stupid dull-eyed slobbering beasts who are far too rough or tiny little useless trembling fluffy fear-filled creatures which really need to toughen up a bit if they are to survive in the very real world of the California dog-beach.

Whatever I may think of their owners, almost universally, I've come to appreciate the dogs. Maybe there are things we could learn about life from them. They are basically a peaceful lot and, even though deprived of the Divine Spark, they've still somehow managed to obtain a pretty good life, with very little effort. But unlike us humans, they do it without ever speaking a word. Even with all that, dogs rarely believe that they are the center of the universe. You have to admire that. Their trusting nature is interesting as well, often misdirected, but interesting. I think I've learned a few things by watching dogs too. Let me enumerate them: I've learned that tennis balls are the most important things on earth, sticks come second, followed closely by anything that someone else may be eating. I've also learned a kind of peculiar patience; when there is nothing to do or nothing can be done, dogs lie down, place their heads on their paws and wait. When it's time for action, they're ready.

One time on the beach, when Noodle was a puppy and I was a middle-aged man, we went running off together down along the edge of the water.

Noodle was bounding along joyfully, full of the mindless energy of youth. He was literally, as my very dear wife was kind enough to point out, running circles around me and, adding insult to injury, sometimes backwards.

Here's where the patience comes in. Some day in the future, when Noodle is a very old dog and I still cling with sharpened claws to the tattered remains of middle age, I will take him back to that beach. In the meanwhile, I'm patient. I haven't yet decided between clockwise and counter-clockwise.

## CONVERSATION

H. Allen Smith tells this story about a society event which he yearned to go to because a great man, who Smith admired, was slated to attend. Of course such an event was closed to mere commoners like Smith, but, somehow, by luck, he was offered an invitation. And, much to his astonishment, he ended up sitting at the main table, right next to the great man. Smith knew this would be his only opportunity to chat with the great man, but didn't have the nerve. He settled for keeping an ear open so that he might catch every golden word that spilled from the great man's lips. And, as Smith reports it, the only thing the great man said during the entire event was, "Peas! I hate peas. I've always hated peas. I'll go to my grave hating peas."

I was telling this story to my very patient and always forbearing wife as we walked a couple of dogs around in her parents' neighborhood, just as if we might reside there. That lead quite naturally to the story of H. Allen Smith covering a heavyweight championship bout between somebody else and Primo Canera. In that fight Canera was beaten so soundly, so severely in the early rounds that the referee called it off in order to save the poor man's life. In those days (I don't know how it's done these days), reporters went into the locker rooms after the fight and interviewed the victor first, and then went over to speak to the vanquished. As Smith tells it, he picked up the Sports page the next day and there was an interview with the thoroughly beaten Primo Canera.

In that interview Canera is quoted as saying, "Yes, he assaulted me with such ferocity and pursued me with such

tenacity that I was forced to finally submit.”... or something along those lines. Smith said, Pah! Canera couldn’t have strung those twenty words together if he’d been coached by a Rhodes Scholar for a month. Smith had actually been in that locker room after that fight and heard that interview. According to H. Allen Smith, the interview went more like this.

“He hit you pretty hard, Primo...”

“Holy Jesus.”

“Did you think you’d have a chance to recover between rounds?”

“Holy Jesus.”

“Will you fight him again, Primo?”

“Holy Jesus!”

So, I told these stories in that same order to my good wife, and pretty much in the same way I just told them here, while we walk around under the Eucalyptus trees.

And she responded by saying, “I’d like to know who the great man was.”

“The great man?”

“The great man who didn’t like peas.”

“I don’t recall who it was,” I admitted.

“Still, I’d like to know who he was.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s quite right about peas,” she said, “... they’re disgusting and they contaminate everything else on the plate just by their presence. So, I’d like to find out who this great man was and look at his work to determine if he was also right about other things.”

What a wonderful mind this woman has!

That man who hated peas was H. L. Menken.



And, although I like peas, I am in complete agreement with him about many things, especially government. My wife is a Royalist who regrets the French Revolution—and looking at the general downward trend of French influence and power in the world since those bloody, senseless events, it's certainly not difficult to see her point. As for peas, my dear wife shares the opinion of Madame de Maintenon—Louis XIV's morganatic wife—who (according to Francoise Chandernagor, in her absolutely wonderfully written book, *The King's Way*) thought they weren't a topic worthy of discussion.

*Today the theme was novel—they were discussing green peas. It was the fashionable topic: how eager one was to have some, or how delicious they tasted or how one looked forward to having some more.*

So, then we walked the dogs for a bit in silence (my mind delighted but a bit befuddled, hers ordered and productive no doubt) until my wife mentioned the Insane Chef. Apparently the IC made the best Paella in the world, and the first time he made it there were, as the recipe calls for, peas. So, my dear wife separated out all of the peas on her plate and moved them into a corner where they were safely confined. The IC noted that and in an unpredictably reasonable gesture, set aside a portion of his Paella without peas, for my dear future wife, from then on.

So, then she asked me how my family's search for the perfect Paella was going. The last time I ventured down to Arizona—to attend the award of the Legion of Honor to my father—I discovered that I didn't know a damned thing about the familial conspiracies that were unfolding down

there in the desert. The first shocker was my parents' dedication to professional basketball, which is weird enough, the other was the family commitment to Paella.

When I was a kid, my father once made this statement about basketball: "It should be a 3-minute long game, each team starting with 100 points. That's what it usually comes down to anyway. Why not," he suggested reasonably, "just cut out all the time wasted leading up to those last three minutes?" I took that, pretty much, as a dismissal of the game of basketball. So, I was somewhat astounded—after not having seen them for several years—when I walked into my parents' living room and they were watching a basketball game on television. I was even more astounded to hear my mother say something like, "I don't know if they should keep Billings; his contract is up this season, he's just not hitting his shots from outside. If they could get a good buy-out for the remainder of his contract, they could move Hilbert into that slot; I think he's really starting to develop."

My father, with his fingers laced behind his head, nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right..." he said, "and Hilbert's better under the rim."

Naturally, I went right outside to check the house number.

More surprising than my mother's impressive inside-knowledge of the business-end of professional basketball, was my family's search for the perfect Paella recipe. Apparently, they'd been working steadily, conspiratorially—behind our backs—for years, trying to create the perfect recipe. From what I could gather from their conversation,

they were getting pretty close. There was still some debate about the particular type of prawns that should be used and whether the onions should be scalded first within their skins, but they were all pretty excited about narrowing in on a recipe of undisputed perfection.

When I told my wife about it, upon my return, she said, “They don’t use peas do they?”

## A GIFT-GIVING PEOPLE

The French are a gift giving people. At least the ones I'm now associated with give gifts at every opportunity, and the fact is out there. People we don't even know and whom we have never met invite us to the wedding of their second cousin's, half sister's step son's former high school friend, because we're not just gift-givers, we're good gift-givers. I put up my share of whining resistance, but, there is no discussion of the matter, gifts must be given.

When Christmastime rolls around my wife and I give gifts to; her parents, my parents, my siblings, her relatives in France (every last one of them), the maids (though we are not, never have been and never will be their employers), all the other desk clerks, the former chef and his children, the insane chef and his wine thief son, each of the waiters, the dishwashers, the guys at the garage (though it is her parents' car which resides there) the maintenance guy, the computer guy, the internet guy, some guy in Utah who stayed here once, some people in Upstate New York who might stay here sometime in the future, and to anyone who during the year may have crossed our path, tipped their hat while looking in our direction, or grimaced in our presence in such a way that it might have been construed as a smile. For some reason which can not be explained to me, because I'm so thick-headed, we regularly give gifts to the woman who house-sits her parents' house whenever they are away.

Beside her relatives and my relatives, *none* of these people have *ever* given us a single gift, except, for some reason which cannot be explained to me, the woman who house-sits her parents' house whenever they are away.

Quickly let me add, and I do not want them to.

The last thing my wife and I need is more junk. When guests to our little rooms arise to depart, I've been known to jump to my feet and say, "If you see anything you like...please, take it with you." They never do. The exception was my friend, Ron, who gladly accepted a truly fine, walnut-encased, metronome on behalf of his struggling musician son, which I soon regretted. Had I only known that they were going to stop producing that model, I'd have said, "Anything...Except the metronome."

Sylvie thinks I'm an 'Indian giver' because when I returned to San Francisco, after finally extricating myself from the spiritually consuming flytrap that is southern California, I reclaimed a bicycle helmet that I'd bought for a girlfriend, 20 years earlier. From the moment I gave that woman that helmet she'd refused to use it, and it was found in the original box, with the sales receipt still attached, in her mother's garage, where she'd abandoned it on the day I bought the thing for her. Clearly she had no use for it. I did. What do you think?

When Sylvie gives a gift it isn't just any old thing...it's something especially chosen for that particular person. Personality, taste, background, aspirations, passions, lineage, and glove size are all carefully considered. Because I am a cold-hearted American, I have tried to wean my benevolent wife of this idiocy, but to no avail. This habit raises a lot of questions. Predominant among them is: At what age do we stop giving someone else's child—which you have never set eyes upon—a birthday gift?

Henry Edward Fool

It seems rather cold to stop at two.

But, by the time the kid's four he's developed a certain expectation. He'll feel slighted if, while pawing through his haul he doesn't find anything from those people out in San Francisco who he has never seen.

That's the problem with being great gift-givers.

## AND... POMEGRANATE JUICE

My wife likes to watch competitions involving chefs on TV. The one she liked the most for a while involved handing each competitor a picnic basket with five (I think) incongruous items in it and then allowing them 30 minutes to make something edible out of it. For example, in round one, when they open up the basket it may contain, Tootsie Rolls, an avocado, marshmallows, beets, and green tea. From that our chefs are supposed to create an appetizer. And, it's always pretty amazing what they come up with.

When they've completed their salad dish they each present what they've created to a panel of judges who select one dish as a failure and that chef is eliminated.

The remaining chefs are given a new basket with an equally strange combination of ingredients and told to make an entrée. Naturally, if you place three people in a kitchen and tell them each to make something tasty using lemon grass, pig snout, duck fat, maple syrup and clams, one of them is going to fail. So, after someone is scrapped for having made the least acceptable entrée, the final two remaining chefs are given a basket from which to make a dessert.

My wife was in the office at the time, so I was watching one of these competitions on her behalf. It had come down to the final round, and the two remaining chefs were given their baskets. Inside, the ingredients were, as I recall, smoked oysters, Swiss chard, cookie dough, capers, and pomegranate juice. These chefs were supposed to invent a wonderful new dessert using all of those ingredients.

So, during the commercial, I ran to the office and repeated the ingredients for my very dear wife, and I asked her “What would you do with those ingredients?”

Without hesitation, she very cleverly said, “I’d pour about a pint of pomegranate juice into a large glass, I’d drink it, and I’d walk out the door.”

That was a unique solution—which I’m sure it has never seen in any of those competitions—and overflowing with a delightful honesty. I was entertained for about 40 minutes with that answer. During that time, I thought only of the amazing variety of reasons I love this very good woman.

Personally, I’d been thinking more along the lines of a generous dollop of freshly-churned smoked-oyster ice cream, drizzled with a pomegranate-caper sauce, and resting resplendently upon a Swiss chard sugar cookie.



## HOW WE MESH

Those dating experts who match people up because they have the same; background, likes, dislikes, activities, interests etcetera, have it all wrong. As my wife has pointed out more than once, with such criteria in place, we would never have even met and certainly never would have married. I've noticed that nose shape seems to be a strong initial attractant. If you look at couples, you soon recognize how many people seem to be attracted to someone with their own nose. I have no idea how those relationships ultimately pan out of course, but my wife and I have distinctly different noses, and we're doing just fine.

We both agree that our differences add to the stability of our marriage. She's intelligent and reasonable, with a classical education. She has a grasp of at least three languages and recognizes enough of others that she can make an educated guess as to what is being conveyed. And then, there's me. The only thing that we have in common—besides our love for each other—is the fact that we are both extremely shy people, but even that is expressed differently in each of us. Anyone observing my wife would know that she is shy, though one idiot wrote a slang-riddled French criticism of my wife on the internet, saying “she thinks she's better than us.” Only the densest person on earth would take her behavior as anything other than timidity.

On the other hand—or perhaps on the same hand—many people seem to take my behavior as a sign of arrogance or misanthropy or bitterness, all weapons which I wield awkwardly to shield a near-painful shyness. I've noticed that truly arrogant people tend to think of anyone that

doesn't treat them like royalty as being arrogant.

But, back to us...

Our combined knowledge is fairly expansive; she knows almost everything worth knowing (or is in the process of knowing it) and I know an awful lot of things that no one would ever need or care to know. My wife says that if we could go as a team, with our shared knowledge, we could win on Jeopardy. But it is not our range of knowledge which entertains us, it's our peculiar way of thinking. Look at this morning.

Some guy has disappeared after completing the Bay to Breakers footrace. Searchers discovered his wallet, his passport and some of his clothes on the beach. Everyone is confused—what could have happened to him? On the local news there's speculation: drowned, kidnapped...amnesia? "Pah," I say, dismissing the thing entirely. "It's a set-up," I say. My instincts tell me so. "Nah," I mutter, "something ain't right here."

My wife, who consistently asks the one question everyone else has overlooked, says, "Who carries their passport with them on a footrace?"

No one on the news has either noted this fact particularly or has asked this very telling question.

"Wow," I tell her, "I really admire the way your brain works."

Earlier this morning, my wife was getting ready to go down to the restaurant, in order to slave-away, serving breakfast to the most inappreciative people on earth, hotel guests. I'm lolling in bed when she says, "I'll call you if we need you."

I spurt out, “No. Please, call me if you DON’T need me.” This sounds idiotic to both of us—but, for us, what sounds idiotic sometimes works. My explanation goes like this. “If you call me because you *don’t need me*, I’ll be happy to hear that phone ring. AND, *if you don’t need me*, you’ll have the time to make that call. On the other hand, if you call me because *you DO need me*, I will dread hearing that phone ring and, in that case, you won’t really have the time to make that call.” We both looked at that for a moment. Surprisingly, it made tremendous sense. I hadn’t thought about—very little that comes out of my mouth undergoes any sort of thought process—it just came out. She looked at me and I had to admit, “Yeah, I’m as surprised as you are.”

Later that day, the news people declared that ADHD in children leads to obesity as adults. I said, “I’d think it would lead to creativity as adults.”

My very dear, forbearing wife asked, “What are you talking about?”

I said, “Well you know, putting disparate things together in unique and completely unexpected ways...that IS the creative process. I think kids with ADHD might either become inventors or produce great art.”

She said (without blinking), “Well haiku maybe.”

That’s what works for us. I admire her clear and beautifully reasoned way of thinking, and we’re both a bit surprised by what comes out of my mind. But, at times, I’m concerned about my evil influence on the woman.

I think prolonged association with the likes of me may have influenced my poor wife to her own detriment, and I’ll tell

you why I think that. After reading this, you'll need no further proof.

We were watching an old TV series from the late 60's—The Avengers—and in one scene a man was being yanked right through the roof of his car by a large mechanical monster of some sort. An exterior shot showed the poor man struggling in the claws of the beast from the waist up. They cut to an interior shot, showing the guy from the waist down, legs flailing wildly, as he was being drawn viciously through that car's roof. The last thing we saw, before he was gone entirely, were his light gray, ankle-length, suede boots. At that point my highly-intelligent, extremely well-educated, well-traveled, French wife turned to me and said, "Do you like those shoes?"

I realized at that moment that she'd probably been hanging out with me maybe just a little too much.

I considered trying to re-align things again by saying, "Hey, you're the stable one, remember? I'M THE ONE who makes weird, seemingly irrational comments." But, I didn't, because it was an interesting observation. I really did kinda like those shoes. They weren't anything I'd wear today, but they were something I might have worn when I was younger.

So, I simply said, "Yes."

## **ROADS and CAPPUCCINO**

Bill Clinton aside—for who could ever top that buffoon in matters of shamelessness—there is no more shameless example of humanity than the men who repair the streets of San Francisco. Because of their ubiquitous incompetence San Francisco is the one city in the United States where it is not laughable to drive a 4-wheel-drive SUV around town. It not only makes good sense, it's advisable. It's also advisable to keep your hubs locked. Driving around San Francisco is not only a pain in the neck—city planners here have dedicated their lives to making it impossible to go anywhere in a straight line—but a pain in the back, hips, neck, jaw and head. Of course these guys dare anyone to attempt to fire them—they are government employees after all—but, I'm not sure they even care. There has to be something else at play. I ponder this every time I shatter a tooth while driving this city's miserable streets. Their incompetence has to be intentional.

My very dear wife says that it would make sense if we were to suddenly discover that the City is heavily invested in front-end alignment shops. But, she adds, she doesn't think they're that clever. Of course, the most self-serving people are often the cleverest, but seldom the brightest.

In North Carolina—a much poorer state, where they have something called winter—the roads are all better maintained. In the most remote mountain passes of the poorest counties of North Carolina, the roads are smooth and nicely paved.

With that in mind, here's a little story for you.

We had been driving in an easterly direction for maybe an hour, wandering through the mountains of North Carolina with dwindling hope of ever coming to another town, when we came around a bend and there, in the center of the pavement, laid a dog. I stopped. He raised his big head slowly and looked at us. Then, with great care, he pulled himself to his feet and, shaking his head, seemingly at the unnecessary disruption, ambled casually to the side of the road. At that point we were truly in the middle of nowhere. And at that point I realized that the very worst road in the most remote part of North Carolina was better in every way than the very best, most recently paved section of pavement in San Francisco. In the most heavily-wooded, long-forgotten nowhere of North Carolina, you'll find yourself driving on the smoothest road you'll ever dream of—and if you live in San Francisco, such beautifully maintained pavement is only a dream.

After he was out of the way, having thrown himself on his side in a patch of grass, I turned to my wife and said, "We're coming to a town soon, I can feel it." I think may have been confusing the forests of North Carolina with the open sea and dogs with doves, but I took that dog as the indicator that we'd find a town in our path shortly. And, sure enough in a matter of minutes we found ourselves in Bakersville.

Bakersville, when we arrived, appeared to be virtually abandoned. There were two 'antique stores' one building with a struggling 'art gallery' a bank, a pharmacy (or something like that) and a small café in the back of a real estate office. We poked around in town and found

ourselves in the café. It was run by two nice middle aged women. They asked us where we came from and we said, "San Francisco." One of them said, "Oh my, that's a piece." The other, coming to our table to take our order said, "I had an aunt who went out there to San Francisco once." We all smiled.

Sylvie had tea. I ordered a cappuccino.

Behind the counter I could hear them discussing how to go about making this exotic challenge to the coffee pourer's art. And when she delivered my coffee she said, "I hope it's alright, it's the first one I've ever made."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," I said falling into the local way of things. It was kind of a latte looking thing in a tall glass. "I hope it's not too strong," she added, and stood there wringing her hands in her apron as she waited for me to taste it and declare my judgment. I sipped. She raised her eyebrows in hope. I said, "It's good! Thank you."

She went back behind the counter and we drank our drinks and got up to leave.

"We hope you have a pleasant stay in North Carolina," one of them said.

"And we hope your coffee, and your tea, Ma'am, were alright."

"It was good," I said. "How long have you been in business?"

"Oh, about two years now...Is it two or is it three?"

"I'd say it's closer to three."

"I guess almost three years."

"Well, I wish you continued success," I said and we left that place with a pleasant little wave.

Henry Edward Fool

“Been in business for three years, never made a cappuccino before,” I mulled out loud. “How was the tea?” Sylvie made a face. “How was the cappuccino?” “It was OK,” I lied.

On our way back we got kinda lost. We had taken a wrong turn somewhere on the back roads and stopped near a stop sign to look at a map.

A brand new, top of the line Volvo pulled up beside us and the passenger side window slid down. I rolled my window down and smiled at what could be either a retired judge or a successful tobacco farmer behind the wheel. He was wearing a dark suit but, pretty clearly, cut his own hair. “Are you lost?” he asked.

That’s the whole story.

The thing that makes it memorable was the way he said it. He said, “Orrrr YEWwwwwww Lawwwwwst?” Beyond the inflection, the incredible kindness of that solid good-natured man rang through those words.

Orrrr Yewwwwwww Lawwwwwst?

I think, at that point, both my wife and I felt that, maybe at last, we no longer were.



## The CAMEL OF INTENT

After the pig races, and the duck races (which were even more entertaining) we wandered around the North Carolina State Fair grounds. Cows, horse, pigs, goats. pigeons, geese, hens of every sort. Oh, look, there's a camel. So, we dove into the tent-covered corral, just to get out of the sun.

The fenced-in pathway wove around in a big circle leading us past various penned-in creatures. There were llamas (I guess they were llamas) and a few other exotic beasts, and one camel. We were walking through their slowly—just minding our own business, as they say—looking with little real interest at the animals, luxuriating in the shade, when Sylvie clutched my arm and pulled in close to me.

“What...?” I said.

“That camel,” she whispered, “doesn’t like us.”

I looked up and sure enough, there was absolutely no doubt whatsoever that that camel had taken a disliking to us. I know NOTHING about camels, but that much I knew. That beast had it in for Sylvie and me.

There wasn't much we could do. The pathway between the pens was narrow and laid out for one-way passage, and there were people shuffling along behind us, shoulder-to-shoulder, stern to stern. But of all the people in that tent at that moment, that camel only had eyes for us.

“Why us?” I whispered.

“I don’t know. But he certainly doesn’t like us.”

“What did we do to offend him?” I wondered aloud.

“I don’t know. Let’s just get by him as quickly as we can.” I thought that as excellent advice.

Unfortunately, that camel had free range in the center of things, just behind the penned-in animals. So, wherever we went, that camel moved along, trying to get as close as he could to us. Every time I looked up, he was staring directly at me. Neither one of us knew what to do, so, we stood as far back from the fence as we could and waited for an opening in the crowd. Our plan was to scoot past that camel as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, we pretended to be interested in suckling pigs or whatever lay in the pen before us. The camel wasn't falling for it though; he stayed fixed on us.

"They spit," said Sylvie quietly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"And they can bite."

"Yes, I'm sure they can bite. But I think they kick pretty good too."

"Well."

"Well what?"

"They kick WELL too."

"They kick pretty damned well. Let's just try to get by him as quickly as we can."

When an opening appeared before us, Sylvie and I slid quickly through the crowd with a barrier of overalls and summer dresses shielding us from the camel's view. And, when we emerged again, that camel moved as far as he could within his confines in an effort to keep us in range. He was with us every step of the way. Whenever I peeked through the crowd in his direction, he was right there, looking back at me, with an evil look in his eye.

Unfortunately, there was never more than one pen between us and our friend, and because the place was laid out in a loop, we had to pass him at both ends. We kept as much distance between us and that camel as we could while discussing the matter.

“What did we do to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“He has taken a particular disliking to us.”

“About that there is no doubt.”

“He looks like he wants to get close enough to spit on us.”

“He looks like he’s hoping that’ll be the beginning of it.”

“What did we do to him?”

“Honestly, Sylvie, I have no idea.”

With the final bend between us and the exit, we waited for the crowd to provide us with an opportunity to escape. We kept a pen of guinea pigs or rabbits or something between us and that camel for quite a while. We wanted a clear shot past him, and we didn’t want anyone getting in our way. Meanwhile, no matter who or what passed by that camel’s pen, he remained fixed on us. When we moved he moved; whatever else we did to pretend our indifference, when we looked up he was looking at us and working up a good spit.

When a gap in the wave of oncoming gawkers opened up we moved quickly, diving into the crowd. If the camel moved to one side of the crowd, we turned and fought our way back through them the other way. And that camel followed. But we were too quick for him; fighting our way up-stream against the influx of people we eventually made our way out through the entrance, where we’d come in.

Henry Edward Fool

Even after we'd exited that tent—whenever we looked back in—that camel was still focused on us.

“He’s hoping we’ll come back in,” I said.

“He’s *daring* us to,” she said.

I wouldn't have done that for a thousand dollars.

## WISHING MAKES IT SO

Maybe there is something to be said for the idea that if you wish for something long enough and earnestly enough it will come to pass. I mean, for some of us it seems to be true. I am somewhat embarrassed to admit that, for brief and sporadic moments, I am one of these people.

Admittedly, for most of us this thing you long for never comes; for some it comes in a timely manner, but, for me, if it comes, it comes whenever it feels like it, and not before. By this I mean that when I was a low-life various people on various occasions (parties) asked me what it was I was looking for. They meant why wasn't I gainfully employed like them, and tied down to a wife and children like them, and shouldering the burden of a mortgage, like them. I couldn't answer that, so, I side-stepped it. "I'd like to have a good woman in my life. She must be, foremost, intelligent. That's number one. And she must also be good looking." They would cut in saying, "Blonde." I would raise both eyebrows, in the Heaven forefend mode, and say, "Brunette." (A man of some experience, I had my reasons) "And," I would add with a glimmer in my bloodshot eye, "it wouldn't hurt at all if she was French."

I don't know where that last thought came from; I had never in my life come upon a single French girl either interested in me or otherwise. The only French female I could recall ever having met, in my entire life, was the very good looking, very trim and nicely attired mother of my friend, Sebastian, in fifth grade. During my first visit to their pristine little house, she took her son aside and

forbade him from ever inviting me over again. I don't know what I had done to offend her. In those days I rarely spoke in the presence of an adult, and I couldn't imagine looking one in the eye. I was as meek as a mouse in those days. But I managed to offend her nonetheless.

That aside, that aside, that aside...

By unpredictable twists and seemingly random rambling turns I drifted aimlessly down the river of Life until I arrived at a small, privately owned French hotel, saw Sylvie, knew she was far too good for the likes of me, and (certainly) far too young, and made every effort any honest man could make not to pursue her.

"What do you think of this man who calls himself a writer?" the owner asked his daughter after my interview. "He is very presentable, Papa." Sylvie tells me that this is what she said.

"Yes, he is presentable, but what about those SNEAKERS?"

"I'm sure that if you would only ask him, Papa, he would be willing to find more acceptable shoes for himself."

"I do not like this dedication which Americans have for their sneakers!"

"He is very presentable otherwise, Papa," she encouraged the man gently.

"Yes, yes. I suppose he is preferable to the trigger-happy buffoons which seem to be our only other option. Still, I do not like that he showed up wearing these sneakers. I would have hired him on the spot if he had not been wearing those SNEAKERS."

"He had a good sense of humor as well, Papa."

“You mean his statement about being our token American? Yes, I found that clever as well. But, I would have found it more clever still had it come from the mouth of a man who was wearing proper foot attire. Would you say foot attire? In English, would they say foot attire?”

“I believe foot attire would be a reasonable way of stating it. But shoes also works.”

“I just don’t like this addiction these Americans have for their sneakers.”

(Anyway, this is all hearsay.)

So, now that we have been married, well, for all of these many years, I have not found myself either possessing or wearing a pair of sneakers, well, for all these many years. My shoes, when they are not purchased in France, are purchased in stores that I never would have even considered setting foot in when I was a low-life. And, I’ll be honest with you, I don’t miss the sneakers so much any more; for a while I did, but now I’ve adjusted to finer footwear, and I don’t think I’ll ever go back. I still miss the old flip-flops though. I’ll never get over that I suppose.

When I finally do get around to leaving this place, I’ll be wearing flip flops. The thought of wearing sneakers at that somewhat crucial juncture has occurred to me as well, and I am sure my wife’s father would purchase the damned things himself if he thought that by doing so it would hasten my departure. As luck would have it, we’re probably stuck with each other for a while longer.

A closing shot:

It's kind of funny the way life works itself out. When I was a low-life, I was an innocent, and an idiot; I was timid and full of fear: I was slightly out of control, maybe just a little bit crazy...and aimlessly adrift. Now that I'm a married man, I am no longer aimlessly adrift.

The other day I received an email from the disc rental folks asking how I liked *The Last Station*. I asked my wife, 'Did we watch something called "The Last Station?"' She looked up from her book to say, "Yes, it was about Tolstoy." (By her account, we'd watched it two nights earlier.)

"Oh," I said. "Why was it called "The Last Station"?"

"Didn't you happen to notice that the last hour and forty minutes took place in a train station?"

"Why did it take place in a train station?"

"Because he *died* in a railway station."

"Oh..."

"Don't you remember?"

Surprisingly, I did remember. Suddenly it all made sense.

For me, once the words 'The End' come on the screen I've forgotten everything that came before that; the name of the film, the actors that were in it, the events that took place on screen, the music, all of the memorable dialogue which people seem to be able to engorge and regurgitate; it's all gone as soon as the lights come up. I like to pretend that I have more important things going on in my mind, but the fact is, I have less important things going on in my mind, and these less important things leave little room for greater things. I think Sylvie finds that irritating at times—as I do myself—but I've always found those who presume that they are cleverer than they actually are something of a pain.



My greatest fear is that someday I may wake up and realize that I am one of them.

After my wife jogged my memory as to why “The Last Station” was named that way, we got into a philosophical/historical discussion about how badly Madame Tolstoy was portrayed in that almost-endless film. And I found myself having to admit two things: I didn’t know a damned thing about Madame Tolstoy, and I didn’t like that movie very much. But, I kept that last thought to myself, because I try very hard to avoid reacting to simple matters in a way that might make me appear to be, too precisely, exactly what I am: uneducated, unsympathetic, and unapologetic. I’m trying to hold on to this wonderful creature, not run her off.

One day, I told my wife this: “I’d really like to treat you every minute of every day with the most extreme courtesy. I think that’s only as it should be.” And I meant that.

She said, “Thank you.”

I said, “But it’s just not in my nature.”

She laughed in the most genuine manner. Apology accepted; no further explanation needed. As always, she understood.

They say that women marry men hoping to change them, and men marry women hoping that they will never change. We married each other knowing damned well neither of us would ever change. She will carry her intelligence, her grace, her dignity, her clear sightedness, her unassuming beauty with her through time....and then, there’s me. I certainly don’t deserve such a wife, anyone can see that. Still, it’s a bit disheartening that so many people do.

One time a guest at the hotel came into the office for one thing or another and in the process he said, "The woman who checked us in was really very VERY nice."

I said, "Well that's as it should be; who checked you in?"

He said, "I think she's the owner's daughter, speaks with a French accent. She is really nice."

"Nice?" I said, "She's great!"

He looked at me a bit startled. I could see that he had no idea that nice woman was my wife. The possibility of such an unlikely pairing would never have occurred to him. Such was his disbelief that he thought perhaps he'd heard me wrong.

"What did you say?" he asked tentatively.

"I said she's great; she's absolutely great. She's intelligent, she's beautiful, she's a pleasure to work with. She's wonderful in every way."

Apparently my response was mind-boggling to the man, because he sat there and looked at me for a while saying nothing. Then he simply got up and left the office.

I knew what he was thinking of course. He was thinking that I'm madly in love with the owner's daughter...that she deserves much better than me... and that I don't stand a chance. And he was right of course.

Well, two out of three.

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If by chance one day you should wake up thinking, “Hey, I think I’d like to screw a lot of innocent trusting housewives out of a thousand dollars each!” you could use no better template than the one established by The Havervale Academy of Furniture Re-arrangement and Space De-personalization.

I’ll tell you how it’s done.

First, you establish an organization: The International Association of Furniture Re-Arrangement Professionals. Then you give one of your lower-level co-conspirators an award: Canada’s Top Furniture Re-Arrangement Professional. Now that she has credentials, you hire her to run your non-existent school. Suddenly, your school has a highly honored, award winning professional in furniture re-arrangement at its head.

Now, let’s look in on Henry Edward Fool and his very dear wife, Sylvie as they slog together slowly—like sheep they head onward—okey-dokey, occasionally more slowly, more wearily (the brightness gone for the moment from their eyes), while facing only endless years of senseless drudgery. Once filled with an anticipatory (either innocent or naive) joyfulness, they had, in preparation for that distant happy day, saved and saved and saved, and spent not, and refused to spend, and did not spend, and saved some more, and eventually, accumulated enough to make the down payment on a very small, tiny little (826 sq. ft.) cabin very far away, in the Blue Ridge Mountains. And there was joy in everything that sprang from that

purchase—the questions, the dreams and schemes, the plans, the renovations...

At this juncture, all Henry Edward Fool wants is to escape with his dear wife to their little cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and it looked, for a while there, as though there was some hope of that coming to pass, until the cancerous combination of malfeasance, misfeasance, outright lies and the double fisted grasping greediness of Wall Street insiders brought the Colossus crashing to the ground, and it took 46% of many good and honest people's hopes along with it.

Sylvie hadn't given up. Ever-hopeful, Henry and his wonderful wife--still dreaming--continue knocking down walls and moving staircases around in their minds. Maybe something good will happen. You never know. It could. Who knows, you know? You never know. "One can but try," says Sylvie. That's her motto. A lovely woman, a lovely motto.

Poor old Henry is disheartened by events...he's a weakling and something of a whiner. They were SO very close to escaping to the mountains and disheartened whining weaklings don't usually take such stuff well. But, because he loves her so dearly, Henry says not a word, attempts a broken little smile. One can but try.

One day, there's an ad on TV, and it heralds hope. Let those who don't believe in miracles explain that one! The Havervale Academy of Furniture Re-Arrangement and Space De-Personalization is offering a course in "Home

Staging.” They proclaim their intention to dominate the staging industry by filling the northern hemisphere with Havervale certified stagers. Delighted, Sylvie tells Henry about the ad.

“When you *complete* the course, they offer you a job,” she explains.

“Really...” says Henry, “How long does the course take?”

“They say six months.”

“Really? Six months and they offer you a job...”

“That’s interesting...what does the course cost?”

“A thousand dollars,” she says with hope not yet entirely depleted.

“That’s a thousand bucks that we ain’t got,” Henry says coldly, ending the discussion. One pin, one balloon, predictable results.

“But, you’d be good at that Henry,” his dear wife pleads in persuasive melodic, caring tones. She delineates her argument. “You have taste, you have a degree in Art, you have years of experience as a carpenter. It would be perfect for you. AND, I think you’d probably enjoy doing that.”

To *enjoy* doing what you do to earn a living! That dream had been scuttled so many years ago that he could not remember it. But, it was true, he might be good at it. He did have an aesthetic sense. He did have an advanced degree in ‘art’. He knew how to deal with people in the trades. He might actually enjoy doing it. It was also true that he had been re-arranging things all his life—as his dear wife had pointed out—AND, having spent some time in both Los Angeles and Arizona—one the heart, the other the soul of depersonalization—he had a pretty good grasp of the overwhelmingly persuasive power of beige.

According to HGTV, that was key. Paint everything beige, and remove every hint of human presence. When buyers look at a house they don't want to see any indications that human beings might have, at any time, occupied that space.

With his very dear wife's encouragement Henry Fool picks up the phone to call Havervale Academy of Furniture Re-Arrangement and Space De-Personalization in Canada. Moments later, he looks his wonderful wife in the eye. "My god," says Henry Fool, "it's a miracle! They have an opening in a town near our little cabin!"

"The future belongs to those who prepare for it."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

It would cost a thousand dollars. The course in home staging would cost them a thousand dollars. So, it took them a few weeks to decide. But, they figured it would be worth it. That was the clincher. It would be worth it. For a thousand dollars Henry and his adoring wife could if not secure their future, at least take a few small steps closer to it. Once certified they could begin to disentangle themselves and then carefully extract themselves from the jealous, heavily made-up, somewhat demanding, ever-grasping sun-kissed mistress that is California (breathe here), comfortable in the knowledge that Henry had a job waiting for him on the other side of the map. Once the course was behind him Fool and his very dear wife could, at long last, make the long trek, across the length of this great country and take up quiet residence in their little cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The course arrives in the mail.  
Fool can't get at it quickly enough.  
He tears into it.

On the cover of the large glossy binder is the image of a stereotypical contemporary woman, clean, neat, good-lookin', smiling in that fixed, broad-mouthed, gaping, rictus grin of idiotic delight that advertisers expect contemporary women to wear every waking moment of every day no matter their circumstances. Missed the bus? We have a product for that. Let's see those teeth! Old fat bald sweaty guy leers at you while making guttural swine-like sounds, as you hurry by? We have a product for that. Let's see those tonsils! Someone dear to you has just been told they have cancer? Oh, what are *you* pouting for? Let's see those sparkling eyes; show us some of that perkiness. Where's that clever, we-rule-the-world, hair-tossed look? You're about to set out on an adventure; you're about to become a furniture re-arranger. A nice big, wide-open, completely senseless, idiot-grin is what's called for here.

Inside the binder are three full-size booklets, and seven small, half-size, booklets. The full-size booklets are:  
An Introduction to the ART of Furniture Re-Arrangement and Space De-Personalization  
A Glossary of Home Staging Terminology  
Tips & Tricks of the Trade from the Staging Experts at Havervale

On the cover of each of them is this very same female grinning away because, as we all know, Life is just one big wonderful delight after another. What she's so thoroughly delighted about in this instance, we will never know.

Perhaps it's the fact that she holds in her hand the very binder upon which her image appears. In stark contrast, the seven small booklets are merely labeled: Lesson One, Lesson Two, Lesson Th... you get it. No gushing beauty on these, this is the serious stuff.

Henry takes up the Glossary of Home Staging Terminology and finds that a CHAIR is "a piece of furniture, sometimes upholstered, upon which one sits, or, *let's be honest*, occasionally slouches." A suspicious chorus begins to take up song almost immediately in his mind: "Somethin' ain't right. Somethin; ain't right. Somethin' ain't right." Later on, Henry will tell people that he knew *at that very moment* that he'd been taken. It was more than an inkling. Henry calms himself. This must be a joke perpetrated by the typesetter. He turns a page and discovers that a COUCH is "upholstered furniture seating two or more, typically used for sitting upon or, occasionally reclining." For more in-depth information concerning couches he is advised to "See SOFA, SECTIONAL." But, Henry can not look up either Sofa or Sectional, his hands are shaking too much.

The chorus grows louder in his mind. Oh, this is not good, they chant. In quick time he discovers that the entire Glossary of Furniture Re-Arrangement is nothing more than a list of things he's been able to identify, without assistance, since he was three years old. Now the chorus takes up a new tune: A THOUSAND DOLLARS for this! A THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR THIS, they sing.

There's more: ANIMAL PRINTS are "Animal skins or reproductions of, or an artistic impressions of, exotic hides,



such as Zebra or more commonly, Leopard.” CRAFT, he discovers is “to make an object by hand”...A LAMP is “A light source i.e. a bulb, but also used to describe a light fixture which may hold a bulb.” SPACE is, “A confined or defined area.” VIGNETTE is “Furniture arranged into an appealing, or pleasing, alluring, even seductive grouping.”

The Glossary of Home Staging Terminology runs the gamut from ABODE: “Living quarters, or more typically used to indicate a Residence.” to ZIG ZAG: “A clever pattern formed by a continuous line, which turns sharply back and forth upon itself creating a series of W’s. The points are alternately known as zigs and zags.” The book advises Henry to pursue this matter further and to increase his knowledge by looking up HERRINGBONE. But he can’t do it. He just can’t. Honestly, put a gun to his head and demand that he look up HERRINGBONE and he would balk. Because, at this point, Henry Fool is heartsick.

His fear is that he’ll be told that HERRINGBONE is ‘a pattern formed by alternating black and white, or sometimes dark and light...as in grey or less typically other colors, zig zag patterns’. He doesn’t want to see that in print. Fool is almost certain that IF he were to see that in print he would be left no alternative but to decide right then and there whether it might be easier to purchase a gun in California and attempt to smuggle it across the Canadian border or to wait until his arrival in Toronto and try, there, to get his trembling hands on one.

Fool is a grown man and he’s never been taken before. His mind simply can not grasp what is going on.

There are 60 pages of terms in The Glossary of Home Staging Terminology. The man has just purchased 60 pages explaining things which no English speaking person on earth does not already understand, better, and in simpler terms...for a thousand dollars. The phrase, ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS! shoots like a bolt of lightning through his scattered mind. His jaw is clenched so tightly that his teeth begin to shatter, because he thinks that if he allows his mouth to open he'll scream those words. He doesn't want to go insane, but, at this point it seems like a reasonable option

Henry honestly can not understand what is going on. It's beyond him. He's basically an honest guy, basically a trusting guy, so, being swindled is new to him. They say that the driving force for people who get scammed is their own greed. But, Henry Fool is not a greedy man. It would be difficult to find an American male less driven by monetary gain than Henry Edward Fool. And, to want a job is not a greedy desire. To pay for the necessary training to obtain that job, is not a matter of greed.

"This is NOT good," the chorus chants. "This is not good." Alternately he's thinking: "A thousand dollar for this/ a thousand dollars for this/ a thousand dollars for THIS/ a THOUSAND dollars for this/ A thousand DOLLARS for THIS." He closes The Glossary of Home Staging Terminology and throws it across the room.

(It's his loss of course; now, he'll never know the definition of DOOR in the language of idiots.)

While all of this is going on—while Henry is discovering further undeniable proof that he has been taken—weaving in and out of all the emotions that have been jarred awake within the man (his distaste, his anger, his shame), there is the heartbreaking question: “My god how am I going to break this to Sylvie?”

But, wait, wait, wait.

Wait just a minute...

Fool had forgotten that the goal of this was *to obtain the credentials* and then *get the job*. All he had to do was to learn the language of idiots, regurgitate it, get his credentials, and get the job. Oh, this was such good news. This was a tremendous relief to poor old Henry. Get the credential, get the job. That was the point.

An aside:

The first time Henry Edward Fool had been asked by the Executive Director of Quail Botanical Gardens to edit a business letter, he sat down with the man and after looking at the guy’s meandering first draft, asked, “What are you *trying* to say?” The Executive Director leaned back in his chair, interlaced his fingers behind his head, sighed, pondered and said something like, “Well, we’re trying to say that there are 17 distinct micro-climates here at Quail. That coming here is a unique experience. And what we’re doing here is well worth your support.”

So Fool went home and he slashed all the wordage and cordage and verbiage and garbage out of the draft letter, and he wrote this: “There are 17 distinct micro-climates at Quail Botanical Gardens. You’ll soon discover for yourself

that coming here is a unique experience, and worthy of your support.” When he sat down next with the Executive Director he handed the man the letter, and the Executive Director looked it over, looked astonished, looked at Fool with admiration and said, “My god, Henry, THIS is EXACTLY what I was trying to say! You must be a mind reader. This is EXACTLY what I was trying to say.” Based on that experience Henry Fool developed a philosophy for business writing: Ask ‘em what they are trying to say—say that.

Henry was certain he could pass any test Havervale might throw at him, and soon he’d have a job. So, now, with renewed hope, and a screaming headache, he turns to the primary text: An Introduction to the ART of Furniture Re-Arrangement & Space De-Personalization. In it he learns that one should: “Always be sure to smile! *Because* ...believe it or not a smile can actually be ‘heard’ on the phone, even on your cell! So, smile! Remember, you never get a second chance to make that first good impression!”

Smiles are heard. Even on your cell!

The text book is replete with similar powerful advice. “Practice your smile while looking at yourself in the mirror. Ask yourself, ‘Is this someone I would really want to meet? Is this someone I would want as a friend? Be honest now. If the answer to either of those questions is ‘NO, most certainly not!’ then, continue practicing until the answer is a positive, cheerful, Yes yes yes!” “Why does it all read like it was written by little Shirley Temple?” Fool asks himself.

He soon discovers that there is nothing in the book which could not be picked up by watching an hour and a half of HGTV or, for that matter, Sesame Street.

*Many people believe that de-cluttering, depersonalizing, updating old or unattractive furnishing and fixtures, painting items for a fresher, cleaner look, rearranging or re-purposing furniture, and clever accessorizing are the only tools employed by the professional stager to make a home more appealing to potential buyers, but there is so much more to it.*

Fool picks up: Tips & Tricks of the Trade from the Staging Experts at Havervale.

*It begins: Warning! An empty house is a heartless hulk, a mere gathering together of walls and floors and windows. BUT a house staged in a professional manner is a house with a heart. It is warm and welcoming, and usually commands a higher price when put up for sale upon the real estate market.*

*Here's some practical advice for brightening a dull room: You've heard of bringing the outdoors in? Well, you can bring the outdoors in even further by making sure windows are sparkling clean, and curtains are drawn completely back. Tie them with a bright neat contrasty ribbon!*

*AND DON'T FORGET: Even the closets need your personal professional attention too!*

*WARNING: Some people seem to think that they can stage an entire house all by themselves, but most people in the business of Professionally Staging homes agree that a professionally staged home is a more effectively staged home, and the results prove it!*

Henry Fool is now re-thinking that matter of the gun. “Some people seem to think that in order to remedy a horrible situation they must travel to Canada and eliminate the bastards who put them in that situation, but many people in the business of handgun-initiated, personally administered, justice simply put the gun to their own heads, if only to avoid reading one word more than absolutely necessary! A rope will also serve, or try a cheerfully colored but ever-so-stout twine!”

*Someone once said that home staging is like magic, and there’s just no denying it. Home staging is about creating an illusion. Nothing less than magic can take an empty shell of a hard-to-sell house and transform it, creating such interest and demand. If the trick is performed to perfection, buyers will find themselves reaching for their check books and wondering why!*

*It’s all details, details, details! De-cluttering has cleansed the space, now to apply the foundation and then the makeup, the lashes, the lipstick, the liner, the blush. Yes, a staged home can be seductive, and should be. And after all, why not, you want to sell your home don’t you?*

*Only after 'the space' has been de-cluttered, does the real staging begin. Step one- De-personalizing the space is, for the Professional Stager the same as preparing the canvas is for the true artist. Professional stagers **are** considered by many to actually be highly skilled artists. The 'space' is their canvas upon which a vast array of elements, articles, and other items are arranged using creativity and their own personal, unique vision to add dazzle, sparkle and excitement. Using luscious colors to offset a formerly 'dull space'. they create a fun, bright, polished, clean, crisp masterpiece for the eyes of eager house hunters. But, it doesn't stop there!*

But it does stop there for Henry.

He could take no more.

What kind of writing is this? Are there no editors, no prisons, no work houses? Has something occurred to stop them in their useful—in this case necessary—course?

More disturbing than the writing was the fact that, of the 120 pages of that booklet, the last 30 described the manifold ways in which one might fail the course. Each restriction was followed by the same cold admonition, "...the student would then become ineligible for a refund." Basically there were 30 pages detailing the many ways Havervale could keep Henry Fool's money and NOT give him a job.

"In skating over thin ice our safety is our speed." Emerson

Henry Edward Fool, now exhausted, picked up Tips and Tricks of the Trade from the Staging Experts at Havervale. He said a very quick prayer.

But, Tips and Tricks of the Trade proved to be what lawyers call *an Unforeseeable Material Adverse Change*, a deal breaker. Not just because an amazing number of things could be ‘made to look just like new again’ by applying mayonnaise, but also because far too many problems could be solved with shoe polish, crayons and vinegar, according to the Staging Experts at Havervale.

Henry picks up the phone.

“Hi. I just got this home staging course in the mail and I need to talk to someone about it.”

The woman on the other end is listening, but Henry doesn’t know where to begin. She’s busy; she nudges him on by asking the nature of the problem. Henry has always been direct. He prefers directness. Many people on the receiving end of directness prefer anything but directness. Henry knows this. He can’t help himself however.

“The problem is that this course seems to be written by idiots,” he says...but in the kindest possible manner.

There is a somewhat defensive response.

“Well, our course is designed *to reach and teach the average person*.”

“It appears to be written for...I don’t know...maybe for ten year olds.”

“Well, actually it was, as I have just told you, written *to reach and teach the average person*. So, yes, it was written at a fourth grade reading level.”

“It was written for idiots...”



“Well, that’s not very nice. It was written for the average person.”

“You’re telling me that the average person reads at a fourth grade level?”

“Yes. It’s common knowledge that the average person can not read above the fourth grade level. Our course was designed Not to EXclude but to INclude. It was carefully designed *to reach and to teach the average person.*”

“Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first to quote it.” *Emerson*

“That’s the kind of person you’re looking for to represent your company? You’re looking for people who can’t read above a fourth grade level?”

“Well, you don’t need to be able to read at all to be a stager.” (She had a point.)

“But you DO have to read to take this course.”

“Yes, and it’s written so anyone can do that.”

“It appears to be written by idiots...Forgive me, I mean that it appears to have been written by someone with fourth grade writing skills, and a fourth grade imagination.”

“Well, actually, our course was written by a team of Staging Experts here at Havervale Academy of Furniture Re-Arranging and Space De-Personalization.”

“A team of experts...”

“Our own staging experts.”

“You know, I’ve spent some time as an editor and from that experience I’ve learned to read quite a bit between the lines, and this...stuff...reads like it was written by a bunch of women, sitting around a kitchen table, drinking coffee and throwing out whatever ideas pop into their heads.”

“It was written by our own team of staging experts.”

“What do I have to do to get my money back?”

“You’ll need to obtain a Return-Refund-Request form.”

“How do I get one?”

“Go to our website, it’s all done through the website.”

“Can you FAX me one?”

“It’s all done through the website.”

“Your staging experts didn’t have the foresight to include one with the course...”

“It’s all done through the website.”

“I gave these people a thousand dollars. What the hell is wrong with me?” Henry says after hanging up.

Stuck, with no way to get the thing immediately out of his life, or out of his mind, Henry tries to find some humor in it. In three or four thousand years he’d probably forget this ever happened. And, maybe there are people on this planet who don’t know what a RUG is.

Did you know that, in a 90 page document, the phrase ‘in a professional manner’ can be used 27 times? Dress (3 times), speak (5), act/acting (4), present yourself (4), always (6), appear, conduct yourself (2), fail to present themselves, arrive on time, not carelessly but...*in a professional manner* (once each).

Though Fool felt, at this point, that he’d already learned a big lesson—he was not entirely sure what that lesson was. So, curious about what the actual lessons looked like, he picked up ‘Lesson One’ in a professional manner, only to discover that inside it was called, “Exercise #1”.

The disregard for any distinction between the meaning of these two words would normally have driven Fool mad, but he was already far beyond that. The booklet was basically 24 blank pages. On the top of each left hand page there is a header: BEFORE. On the opposite page there is a header: AFTER. Below each header was a title, for example: Living Room. Below, there was an outline of a rectangle, with a watermark. The watermark said, "Place your BEFORE photograph here."

Below that, five blank lines labeled 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 under a heading: "List five things about this room which would cause you to pause before buying this property?"

On the opposite page, another rectangle marked, "Place your AFTER photograph here." Below that, five blank lines labeled 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 under a heading: "List five things about this professionally staged room which would persuade any serious buyer to purchase this property?"

That was Lesson One, otherwise know as Exercise #1. Twenty four pages; LIVING ROOM, DINING ROOM, MASTER BEDROOM, FOYER, OFFICE, SECOND BEDROOM, PLAYROOM, FIRST CHILDREN'S ROOM, SECOND CHILDREN'S ROOM...Aviary...

"What in the name of Christ is this?" Fool asks out loud. The explanation on the inside title page said, "After having carefully studied the Introduction to the ART of Furniture Re-Arrangement and Space De-Personalization you are properly prepared to put your new found knowledge to use." It was followed by a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson: *Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us do what we can.*

There was no further explanation.

“Thank you for subscribing to the Pre-Historic Archeology Correspondence Course. Your first lesson (*exercise* if you insist) is to go out there and dig up a mastodon.”

Exercise #1. go out there and stage a house.

Fool bristled at the misuse of Emerson, and he did not like the casual relationship these people had with words, but he was furious about the idea that now he was to go out and stage a house. IF, he asked himself, he were capable of staging a house, what was the point of the course? Now that you know what a chair is, and the several ways in which you might occupy one, go stage a house. Now that you know everything our staging experts might feel comfortable revealing about mayonnaise and shoe polish, get yourself out there! Henry did not need to look into the mirror to see if he was smiling his ‘best and most winning smile’; he did not need to see his own image to determine if anyone would want to meet him. He was pretty sure that anyone who saw him coming down the sidewalk in their direction as he looked at that moment, would, if they had any sense at all, step out into on-coming traffic rather than take any chance at having to deal with Henry Fool. He probably did NOT look like anyone they would “be delighted to invite to (their) next party.” Certainly NOT! And, he had the feeling that no amount of practice was going to change that now. He was pretty sure his demeanor could be heard loud and clear, even over your cell!

Exercise #2, he saw, was called De-Cluttering a Cluttery World. But Henry Fool didn't have the heart to go on. He had been wrong. There was no humor to be found in this stuff. With the phrases, *They CAN'T be serious* and *A THOUSAND dollars for this!* continually replacing each other in his mind, Henry Fool slumped forward in his chair and held his wrinkly old head in his gnarled old, arthritic hands. Fool was ashamed of himself. He was actually ashamed of himself, for having fallen for such a scam.

One might ask of course, if these people were not really offering instruction, if these people were not really offering work, what were they up to?

The \$250 *Re-Shelving Fee* for returning the course gave poor Mr. Fool a clue.

"It is impossible for a man to be cheated by any one but himself." *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Bullshit, Ralph.

## PARALLEL LIVES

So, I was telling my wife about a time when Robin and I were sitting out on her mother's sun porch in Richmond shortly after scoring heroin out at some farm on the James River, and my very dear wife said to me that she could not understand my life back then. She said she would never be able to understand that.

So, I thought about it a bit, and I realized that I could explain it...or, at least give it a try. I told her, "I think I can help you understand it."

She agreed and turned her attention to me.

I told her this:

One summer afternoon I was in the outer Richmond and the band, Titfield Thunderbolt was playing softball against some mid-level drug dealers. I was the only one on that field who didn't either deal in drugs or use them on a regular basis. So, one of them said to me, "You know, like, hey, uh, I'm up at bat this inning and, so, like, you know, I forgot to deliver this note to someone over on Hanover Avenue...could you deliver it for me?" And I said, "Sure." At that point in the game the score was something like Titfield Thunderbolt 12, Dealers 14. So, I took this note over to this big mansion, and went around back to the carriage house, as I was instructed. There were these big French doors and they were wide open, and I went right in.

There was nobody around that I could see, but the place was set up nicely with French Provincial

furniture and Venetian Mirrors and gold-trimmed marble and fine objects of every imaginable sort. “You, I told my wife, “would have appreciated everything in that room; every object, every picture, every rug, every piece of furniture in that room.” She would not have liked the fact that there were drugs and cash and a gun or two laying around.

I continued:

Since there was no one there, I just stayed put, looked around at the opulence, and waited. Eventually a tough looking guy stepped into the room, saw me, said, “Wait a minute” and stepped back out. After a while a guy came in who I’d seen before and I gave him the note and he said, “Thanks. Get lost.” And I did. So, that was just a meaningless flicker in my life.

Then, I reminded her of the day we went to visit her best friend in her family home. We were greeted at the back door by her friend’s mother who—in an old bathrobe—looked like someone abandoned by the side of the road. Nice smile though. She invited us in with noble courtesy. Her husband, standing in a doorway with a book open in his hand and mumbling to himself, looked up, saw my wife and lit up with delight. He came over to greet her warmly, and they spoke for a while, alternating freely—and seemingly at random—between Russian and French. We were then escorted down a cluttered hallway to a small, musty, cluttered room, where her best friend was laid up with a broken leg. While they chatted, I sat quietly in a corner and looked around at that room.

It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. And by amazing I mean appalling.

There was an old dirty shag rug on the floor and it was littered in stuff. There were empty boxes of crackers and pink plastic spoons and fine leather-bound books resting awkwardly against table legs, and stacks of newspapers and magazines in several languages, and broken children's toys. Under my chair I noticed a prescription bottle of some sort, without a cap, its pills spilling out into the tendrils of that shag rug. About the room there was cheap plastic junk of various sorts mixed in amid original oil paintings and plaster busts and Russian icons. What appeared to be an original, hand-lettered manuscript in some ancient tongue was push-pinned to the wall directly next to a large gold frame containing a child's crayon drawing. In that room what might have been the True Cross of Christ was treated with the same disregard as the 3D glasses which sat upon the marble mantel. The universal carelessness was disturbing and incomprehensible. These people were steeped in education and culture; literature and language was their milieu, science and art their métier, but that room could not be described without using the word mess.

I do not understand, and probably will never be able to understand, how my dear wife could ever find herself in such a place, or why she would have taken me there. That is what I told my wife, who could not understand, and would never be able to understand, how I found myself standing in a drug dealer's carriage house. For bonus points, I reminded her that she would have LOVED every item in that pristine, nicely-ordered carriage house.



As far as I can tell, the greatest difference between my wife and whoever I am is that, given the choice between eating and sleeping, she would eat, I would sleep.

We face that choice all the time. We arrive back here after getting up early, serving breakfast and walking the dogs, and the unspoken question hangs in the air. "If you were both hungry and sleepy, which would you do first, eat or sleep?" I thought I had made a little break-through one day when she volunteered, "When we get home, I think I'll just crawl into bed; I'll eat when I get up." But, by the time we had gotten home she'd reverted to her old misguided ways and asked me what's for lunch.

"You can eat any time," I said, "You can't always sleep; you have to take the opportunity when it's available."

She replied, "I think Wednesday, we can prepare enough food to get us through the rest of the week; what do you think?"

I said, "I don't really think about food that much."

She said, "That's because you have me to think about it for you."

I said, "I've made it through 64 years somehow without spending a lot of time planning on my next meal."

She repeated, "That's because you have *me* to think about it for you."

Then she tried to distract me by nuzzling my neck.

That's what you might call an unfair advantage.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THINGS

My dear wife accuses me of not being able to see the other side of one issue or another. Alternatively, she accuses me of talking out of both sides of my mouth. And she's right. I've noticed it myself. I do have a tendency to see only one side of things in those times when I'm not busy changing horses in midstream. She's helping me with that. And I think there's been some progress. To date, she has successfully taught me to see the other side of things. Unfortunately, she has not yet been able to teach me to understand, accept or respect the other side of things; she hasn't managed to teach me not to deride or laugh at or snort in a superior knowing manner, at the other side of things. There's still work to be done.

She encourages my development along these lines by telling me that seeing the other side of things is the first step. I hear hope in her lovely voice when she tells me that. But, for me, seeing the other side of things is also the final step. Seeing the other side of things is, for me, both the alpha and the omega of understanding any POV other than my own. I am, of course, ashamed that I can not, for one moment, no matter how brief, do more than glimpse the other (no doubt wiser) side of things. My hope is only that this inability of mine might prove to be a source of entertainment for some (you, dear reader) rather than the irritant it seems to be for those poor souls who must either work with me on a daily basis or share my bed at night.

When it comes to seeing the other side of things, I am like the child who has learned to count to three and now, when asked to count to five, finds himself completely lost. So, I

waste a lot of time trying to deflect the fact by sneering at the other side of things or laughing at the other side of things or stomping around in our little rooms bellowing about the other side of things, when I should be lowering my head and making courageous attempts to plow my way through the barrier that holds me back from personal arbitrational evolution.

She has also volunteered to help me, if it is at all possible with my foul mouth. One day, when she had had enough, she informed me that I am ‘neither a longshoreman nor a tobacco farmer’. I was rubbing my shin at the time and somewhat distracted but, for the life of me, I could not understand what she meant. Since I didn’t recall ever having expressed any desire to pursue either of those fine and noble occupations, I was completely confused by that statement. So I asked.

As it turns out, she was suggesting that, since I harbored no such aspirations, I should, when next I bang the very same spot on my knee against the very same corner of that very same table, refrain from speaking in the manner of an eternally oppressed and thoroughly disgruntled laborer.

I agreed to try.

It’s not the first time I’ve agreed to try however.

It’s a struggle.

I do admit to using some pretty foul language, with appropriate/understandable theatrics, from time to time, but almost exclusively in her presence, and only under the most trying of appropriate/understandable circumstance. That’s my view. Her view is that there is no appropriate/

understandable circumstance under which a person with any character, breeding, dignity, self-respect, respect for others within ear-shot, or sensitive to simplest requests of his wife, would employ such language. And, she's right. So, I try.

For the greater part of my life, I was pristine of utterance. For the greater part of my life, angels freshly fallen from Heaven were more vile of tongue.

However, after a short Summer span working in a cement plant—where I took on the bad habits of every single workingman there—I returned to college an untamed creature. It was several months before I recovered the real me and reverted back to a relatively pure form of thought and speech. Now, unfortunately for the woman I love, due to damnable circumstance—being inextricably trapped in an unbearable work situation—I relapse from time to time, and find myself expressing my ire like a millwright.

Every man has his limits.

I'm trying, I'm trying. I truly am.

Quite reasonably, she expects more of me.

At times she exercises unreasonable restraint on my spirit. For example, now she tells me that, while driving, I must have *a reason* for wishing one of my fellow drivers to Hell. And, apparently the fact that he's driving a Range Rover isn't reason enough.

She also tells me that unless a person has offended me personally, I have no reason to resent them. I'm working on that too.

“No matter what their political views?”

“No matter what their political views.”

It’s a struggle.

With her help, I’m making some real progress however, and beginning to see that I am as much of a problem to others as they are to me.

For example:

While chauffeuring the dogs back from their daily trot along the beach, we found ourselves stuck behind a driver going about as slowly as any car might go and yet remain upright. Two blocks further along, a large pickup truck came charging up behind me and began making efforts to place his radiator inside my trunk. I didn’t really like the threat of being rammed from the rear, and I liked it less because there was nothing I could do about it.

At that point, I told my wife, “There are two types of drivers in this world, the slow-poke, like the guy in front of me, who doesn’t seem to care if they ever get anywhere, and the truck driver, like the guy directly behind me, who is driving like his vehicle is engulfed in flame and I’m the sole thing standing between him and water.”

She casually responded, “Don’t you see that *YOU* are the *truck driver* for that poor person in front of us, as well as the *slow-poke* for the truck-driver behind us?”

(For god’s sake, *this* is the kind of thing I have to put up with!)

“Well why do they always pull out in front of me only to slow down to a crawl?” I asked. “Why don’t they wait, pull

out *behind* me, where there is not another car in sight, and then poke along as slowly as they wish?"

But I was talking to myself. She'd already moved on. She realized a long time ago how cruel it is to introduce reality in any form into one of my meaningless rants.

In exchange for her help in these matters I have tried to influence my wife from time to time. She will not be manipulated of course, but I have tried to instill in her a kind of playfulness-which-makes-no-sense-whatsoever into certain matters regarding our friends. For example, when visiting my best friend for the first time in his new home in a genuinely scary part of town, I coached her to refer to me throughout the evening as "My man", but she wouldn't.

And, one time, while on the way to visit her best friend—a woman who has never enjoyed me all that much—I tried to convince her to wait until I left the room on some pretense and then, taking her friend aside confidentially, lean in toward her and whisper, "Oh, dear friend, I think I've made a terrible mistake. I'm starting to wonder if I could have found a better husband." I told her to wring her hands a bit while saying it. But she refused.

She's not immune to my idiocy however. Of all the brilliance that has exited my mind and taken wing in her presence, my wife prefers these few words: "I can't STAND sitting down." (The old jokes work best with those who have never heard them before; there's a lot less rolling of the eyes and exaggerated sighing, and more somewhat-misplaced admiration for your cleverness.)

To her great credit however, she refused to laugh when I said, “I know the rug needs vacuuming badly...and I promise you, tomorrow, I will vacuum it badly.”

An important final note:

I don’t really know how this works, but it certainly does. We were all just sitting around one afternoon. My dear wife on the couch—book in hand, cat in her lap, dog within idle-unconscious-petting reach—me, across the room in a chair, where I could admire their remarkable individual and combined beauty from a poetic distance. And she yawned. So, then I yawned. And then, the dog yawned. “Did you see that?” I asked amazed. The true significance of that event had not slipped by her. She was as amazed as I was. We didn’t know that yawning jumped the species gap.

As we were discussing that, the cat looked up at us, somewhat critically—we’d selfishly disrupted his complete rest—and *he* yawned, before curling up tighter and going back to sleep. I was sure that was purely coincidental. So, I let a little time slip by, and then, I faked a yawn. She yawned immediately and, after her, the dog yawned.

That got me wondering of course and, little later on, when it was just me and the dog, I faked another yawn and...yep.

Now I ask you, where, outside of an excellent marriage, are you gonna find good fun like that?

CLOSE OBSERVATIONS,  
While Maintaining a Suitable Distance

We were walking down the street toward the garage with a dog in tow. My dear wife said, “What temperature do you think it is out here?”

I turned on my senses, sniffed the air and observed the distant western sky in a discerning manner, and declared, “Sixty three degrees. What do you think it is?”

She said, “Sixty-something.”

So, we got to the garage and we waited while they retrieved the dog-walking car and we got in and we started to drive off. “Oh,” she said, “let’s see what the temperature is.”

She pushed a button and the LED revealed the outside temperature to be sixty-four.

“Ha-hah!” I cheered triumphantly. “I was only off by *one degree*! Pretty good huh?”

She smiled and said, “Pretty good, but I win.”

I said, “What are you talking about? You said, ‘What temperature do you think it is?’ I offered a specific temperature; you toss out some general estimate, like sixty-something. I’m closer than you were. I’m only off by one degree.”

“Yes,” she said with remarkable aplomb, “but YOU were wrong.”

So, this is the kind of thing I have to put up with.

I make no claim on her remarkable intelligence or her cleverness, but I’ve had a a very real (albeit bad) influence on this fine woman’s thinking.



One day standing in line at the grocery store where I get the ‘old man’ discount I noticed a blind woman, with her assistant behind us, and I said to Sylvie, “I wonder if she gets a discount for being blind.” She turned to me and said, “She probably pays more, for being blind.” I apologized immediately for having corrupted her, and my wonderful wife bristled in a theatrical manner and responded, “I was sarcastic long before I met you.” To which I must say this: Nonsense.

Here’s a neat kind of discovery. I’ve found out that, when addressing complete strangers in my best imitation of a sociable manner, if I start by saying, “My wife says...” OR “My wife has observed...” OR “My wife noticed...” these strangers take it well and respond with appropriate smiles, nods, witticism or laughter. Whereas if I make that very same observation, casting it in precisely the same terms WITHOUT the *my-wife-says* preface, they are repulsed. They cringe and, while cutting a wide berth and keeping a wary eye upon me, they move quickly out of pouncing range, as though my next move might be to grab them, drag them off into the bushes, and take whatever gruesome steps might be required to remove and devour their vital organs. This realization came full to me when we were out walking the Mighty Bayard and a couple approached from the other direction also walking a dog. The dog had a very large stick in his mouth—much longer than the creature itself—and he seemed very pleased with it. My wife noted that the dog to stick ratio was way out of whack. As we approached these people I said, “My wife says that you’ve come very close to exceeding an acceptable dog-to-stick ratio.” And they laughed.

They laughed. And even while the bell-like tones of their laughter embraced us still I realized that, in the past, when I had made similar oblique, but well-meant observations to strangers, they had ignored me, or looked at me as if I might be dangerous (which I am not) and scampered off. With the *my-wife-says* preface, they always take it well.

This is a *great* discovery for me.

Some kid was dragging huge dead-weights through the parking lot—the weights were attached to a chain and the chain attached by a headband to his head. And he was dragging these things through the parking lot as a kind of weird, extreme exercise. My wife remarked, “That looks inconvenient.” When the kid stopped to regain his breath a few feet from us, I told him, “My wife says, That looks inconvenient.” The kid was out of breath, but he laughed and wheezed out, “Believe me, it is.” Had I said to that same thing to that same kid without the wife, he would have ignored me.

At any rate, I think by this method I am not so much becoming civilized, but am taking on the illusion of civility... and really, that’s enough for me. I don’t have the same desire to fit in that most people seem to possess, and maybe that’s what they detect. In TRIAL BY GUEST I noted that the briefest contact with me brings out this realization in real human beings.

*“Do you have a brochure for the hotel”*

*“Certainly.” I hand them the brochure and offer a forced smile. A funny look comes over their faces; they have detected that smiling at complete strangers for no particular reason*

*does not come naturally to me, as it does to say, imbeciles, charlatans, salesmen, scoundrels, liars, manipulators of every sort, and politicians running for office. This, they resent.*

Many people seem to think that I am in a foul mood even in those moments when I am not, and **that** is almost guaranteed to put me in a foul mood. Whatever others may think, I'm rarely in a foul mood; I usually dwell in a world of my own, in relative contentment, with no desire to reach out to my fellow man. Without the wife in tow, that becomes quickly evident to all parties, and whatever I may say to strangers only confirms, yet again, that I am 'not really one of us.'

Being treated like an outcast—though admittedly I am—wounds me deeply and leaves me heartsick, nonetheless. Let me say this though, my wife—who among all people knows me best—thinks of me as a thoughtful, kind and somewhat goofy guy who is generally good-natured and not too rarely in a good mood...(yes, I checked). Others still wonder—frequently aloud—how this poor deceived child continually misses the vile nature that people who have known me for seven full seconds see so clearly. What they fail to see is that I am that vast darkness upon which her beauty shines all the more brightly.

All that aside, because of our wonderful marriage, I feel that my act as a normal, socially acceptable human being has become just a little more convincing.

## BROTHERHOOD

My wife asked me to go down to Walgreens and pick something up for her; I forget what exactly...iron or vitamin D or something like that. So, I slipped down the street and made my way into Walgreens and over to the vitamin section only to discover that I could have anything in that store, anything at all—just pluck it off the shelf and take it to the check-out counter—except the single item for which I had come. They had every vitamin and mineral on earth, and several different brands of each; they were all lined up, nicely, neatly on display, surrounding the gaping emptiness where the one I was after should have been.

So, I just stood there for a while and looked things over carefully, deliberately, systematically, just to be sure.

As I was standing there a man—maybe a little younger than me, maybe a little heavier, but every bit as tired, with a Walgreens badge—passed by. I collared him.

“I’m looking for (iron or vitamin D or whatever it was),” I told him, “there’s none on the shelf...”

“If it’s not on the shelf we don’t have it,” he said with a careless indifference, and started moving things around on the shelf in front of him.

“Do you think you might have some in the back, in stock?” I asked.

He sighed, straightened up and looked at me. “If it’s not on the shelf we don’t have it,” he said with maybe a bit more dramatic emphasis than was really necessary.

We looked at each other for a while.

“Are you a married man?” I asked.

His face softened. He nodded his head and smiled a crumpled little smile despite himself. Without another word he went past me and through the doors, into the back. He emerged a couple moments later carrying a bottle of the stuff I was after, and placed it in my hand.

“There y’ go,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome, brother,” he said.

This time the smile was genuine.

## TRANSITIONING

It really is very difficult for me to explain how the fondness for my wife fills my heart. But, I'd like to hint at the depth of that feeling by telling you this:

On those few, select days when we are allowed the great luxury of sleeping-in undisturbed, I usually get up first and carry myself away into another room to do whatever it is that my nagging mind has convinced me needs doing. Meanwhile, she sleeps like an angel until sometime later when I notice the light in the bedroom has come on. Then I poke my head in there and she's there, all tousled hair, eyes still closed, surrounded with adoring pets, adrift in a tumultuous sea of white cotton. If you ask her what she is doing, she says very quietly, very softly, "transitioning." It sounds so wonderful.

At that moment, I have to think that it would be a far better world if more of us would take the time each morning for transitioning. And I dream of that day when I will.

Of course transitioning does take some time and, due to the nature of the beast that resides within me, I have no time for such stuff. When I look in upon that scene—wife with dog and cat, on a sea of sheets--I find myself beaming with adoration. When she says, "transitioning" in a sleepy voice, I must confess, my heart is flooded with the most wonderful affection for my dear wife. I adore her every moment of the day of course—whether upon the beach, selecting an artichoke, or taking a reservation over the phone—but the fondness that fills me while she's transitioning is, perhaps, the purest I've ever felt.

Of course it would be wrong for any man, driven by lowly animal passion, to throw himself upon such a lovely creature, capture her in his arms, and nuzzle her neck until she squeals. So, I try very hard not to do that, too often.

If I could have it my way, I'd arrange it so she could transition for as long as she wished, every day of our lives together. And I would make efforts to control myself.

That's the way I feel about her.

But, you know, just to balance things out, I think she feels pretty strongly about me as well.

One day, while having tea, she noted something.

"Look at this, Mon Ange," she said chirpily, "I have a Swedish dish, a Russian tea glass, a Japanese tea pot..." I saw an opening and quickly added, "And an American husband."

"And they're all of good quality!" she beamed.

### WE SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Neither of us is entirely comfortable with the fact that I would leave her if she lost her nose and would turn her in if I thought she had murdered someone, and that she would do neither. I admire her dedication to me, of course. But, I told her, “If I did somehow lose my nose, I wouldn’t expect you to stick around. And, if I did murder someone, I wouldn’t be the man you had married, so you might as well turn me in. I don’t see how you could possibly sleep next to someone you thought might have murdered someone.” “If you murdered someone it would be someone deserving of murder,” she replied.

Okay...so, maybe if she lost her nose, I’d wait and see what the replacement looked like. And if she felt the need to murder someone, I wish she’d come to me first; if I agreed that the bastard needed murdering, I’d murder him myself. But, beyond the nose ‘n’ murder conflict, most of the things we see differently are tiny.

She sees a poor little abandoned doggie looking out the window, waiting anxiously for his mistress to return. I see a mangy cur looking for any opportunity to escape his confinement, with eager, escalating hopes of attacking the next dog that passes by and tearing it to shreds.

One evening we watched a movie—Nadine—with Jeff Bridges and Kim Basinger. So, poor old Jeff finds himself breaking into some photographers studio, steals a file, is being looked for by the cops and hunted down by thugs. At some point he’s been shot at and beaten up and threatened with a crate full of discontent rattlesnakes, all before noon.



He manages to escape from all that for a brief moment and takes refuge in his nearly-abandoned roadside tavern. While he's thinking about how he's going to extract himself from the mess he's in, he walks over to a refrigerator and leans in and plucks himself a beer. He pries off the cap and, as he's lifting it to his lips, my wife says, "HEY, that's his third beer today!"

I think she and I may have seen that scene somewhat differently.

Our differences are often merely a matter of heritage. It's like a French goodbye versus an American goodbye.

For the French, there is first the preparation to say goodbye. Then there is the preliminary goodbye followed by what appears to be a goodbye but isn't. That is followed by a lot of chatter and kissing and shaking of hands and telling of brief but entertaining tales and a tentative goodbye is issued. Then they break off into groups, males with males, females with females. Then there is the hugging and a step is made toward the door; goodbyes are then said all around. The door is opened and held in that position as goodbyes are once again exchanged. The guests then step through the doorway and the door closes behind both those who must depart and those who must regrettably remain. There is some discussion upon the sidewalk for a period of time, usually involving politics or education. There is laughter. There is joviality and many thanks and some *not at all* and some *yes, it was quite nice wasn't it?* and goodbyes are then offered in a tentative manner. Then there is the kissing and shaking of hands again and those who must leave do so

but turn to wave sadly (but with hope!) every 14 paces or so. Those who must regretfully remain behind weep openly (with tears of joy) while waving and making efforts to still their frantically beating hearts. After all, they have not seen these wonderful people since last week and it will be three of four more days before they see them again.

My wife was left completely in shock the first time *my* parents said goodbye, and then simply walked out the door. “Were they angry with me?” she asked with great concern. “No. Why?” “Because they said good night and...well...then...” she could not go on. I’m not sure she entirely understood it.

## RETURNING WALLETS TO UNGRATEFUL LOSERS

These days, when I see a wallet on the ground, I give it a wide berth. I don't even look at it twice. I've already done my time finding and returning wallets and want nothing more to do with it. For a while there I told my wife, "Next wallet I find, I'm taking the cash and throwing the damned thing down the gutter." She knew I didn't mean it though—underneath it all, I'm still a strangely caring individual. Since we've been together, I've returned four wallets—and have come to the point where any reasonable man would decide that, the next lost wallet he sees will remain right where it lays.

Maybe it's the same for everybody; maybe everybody finds wallets on a regular basis. If so, then everybody knows that people who have lost their wallets are some of the most ungrateful people on earth.

Think for one second about what a pain it would be to reach for your wallet and not find it where you expect to. Think about the worry. Think about the hassle of cancelling all of your credit cards and the ordeal it must be to get a replacement driver's license from those vicious snapping morons down at the DMV. What would it be worth to you to have someone call you and say, "I found your wallet; would you like to come by and pick it up or would you like me to bring it somewhere?"

If someone did that for me, I would take all the cash out of that wallet and I would hand it to that wonderful person, and I would shake their hand, and with tears of gratitude flowing from my eyes, I would thank them a thousand

times. Oh, but how ungrateful those who have lost their wallets are! They don't see it that way at all.

Some of them don't even say thanks. Others count their cash in front of you, to be sure it's all there. Apparently their thinking is that you might be honest enough to track them down and return their property, but probably aren't honest enough to forego the opportunity to rob them first. Some of them are accusatory. After many years of finding and returning wallets, I can tell you that it is not unusual at all for the guy you've just handed his wallet to say, "How did you get my wallet!?" He eyes you coldly, hoping to dis- settle you enough that you confess. I've never seen the logic in that question, but have always felt the sting of it.

At that moment I always have the urge to take the damned thing and just throw it as far away as I possibly can, hopefully into heavy traffic. I've never done that of course but, if I did, I think I'd enjoy topping it off by telling the guy what an ungrateful and stupid son-of-a-bitch he is. Alas, such dreams ne'er come about.

Just recently, I did see a wallet on the street, while I was out on my way to FedEx, and I stepped right over it. I think that's a step in the right direction.

Along those same lines, one time a guest at the hotel left a book behind and called up to see if we would have it shipped to her, in Santa Cruz. Because the next day was our day off, and we had nowhere in particular to go, my wife suggested we drive on down to Santa Cruz and hand-deliver the book. She's a romantic and an avid reader and

books are that important to her. Since I don't care where we're going or what we're doing as long as she's by my side, we picked up the book at the desk on our way out the door, and drove 40 miles south to deliver it. In our minds it would be a wonderful surprise and an unexpected delight for the woman to answer the door and have us hand her the book—next day, hand-delivered, no charge, our pleasure.

But, no; dreams never come true When we showed her the book, she turned angry instantly and demanded to know how we had gotten her book. That we had taken the time and effort—not to mention the consideration—to bring her book back to her, was completely lost to her.

From my experience, that is such a common response that it should be predictable, yet I fall for it every time. I must be an idiot. I expect thanks and receive accusations. When those who bother slip a finger into their pocket to pull out a reward—they come out with a dollar or maybe two. I just returned a wallet with \$400 dollars in it and the noble Doctor from Hillsborough hands me a foul and nasty old five dollar bill. FIVE dollars! Doctor. Hillsborough. I saved him god knows how much worry and trouble. Five dollars!

Along with the idea that I want nothing to do with returning lost wallets any more, comes this tale. One day I found an old, crumpled envelope sitting on the planter outside the hotel. When I picked it up to dispose of it, I discovered that it contained three hundred dollar bills. It had no markings, either inside or out. Since I was on my way somewhere in the vicinity of the corner where a homeless Moroccan kid plays French tunes badly on his accordion, I took the

envelope with me. That grimy, soot-covered accordionist played badly, but he was dedicated—always found on that corner, dismantling French tunes in an erratic up-tempo—so I thought he'd earned a little respite. Since it was found money—I hadn't earned it and it was not enough to help us in any real way with our problems— it would be a pleasure for me to provide it. So, when I walked by that accordionist I casually tossed the crumpled envelope into his hat.

About two days later, as I was walking to the garage to pick up the dog-walking car, this accordion player passed me going the other way and button-hooked me. "Any spare change, sir?"

"What did you do with the 300 buck I gave you the other day?"

"You didn't give me anything the other day."

"Yes I did. I tossed an old envelope into your hat. It had \$300 in it."

"You didn't give me any envel...what envelope? When?... An envelope? There was no envel..." He stopped without finishing the sentence.

Then, it was as if life itself was being sucked right out of that man. The poor guy hung his head and walked away without saying another word.

## CONCLUSION

That any man has received from God a greater gift I would doubt. I could not be more sincere.

Admittedly, I have done nothing to deserve this gift. I have not earned the love my very dear wife lavishes upon me, but I'm learning to surrender to it. That's the struggle for most men, I believe. For me, it has become natural to give thanks a thousand times each day for our good marriage.

There is not a single doubt in my mind that my very dear wife is the perfect person for me. She is the yang which balances my somewhat wild, somewhat bitter, unfettered yin. Nor is there any doubt that, for some unexplainable reason, I am the one for her. She has told me as much. I'm the only one for her. That thought fills me with an almost unexplainable joy.

What we have together was meant to be.

I call it *Orchestrated from Above*, she calls it *Luck*.

Because she is better educated, and a far better thinker than I am, I'll go with that. So, I am a very lucky man. I am constantly and continually, head-over-heels in love with her, in this life. I feel certain that I have loved her in previous lives. My deepest prayer is that I will love her in every life to come.

Henry Edward Fool

Other books by Henry Edward Fool

**WHEN I WAS A LOW-LIFE: An American Education**

(published: June 2, 2010) The culmination of nearly 50 years of writing, as well as occasional thought, concerning 4 college years in Richmond, Virginia, beginning 1967.

**TRIAL BY GUEST: An Accurate Accounting of the Various Reasons I Should Be Hung** (published, November 10, 2011), concerning 12 years working in a small privately owned French Hotel, in San Francisco, beginning 1999.

**AMERICAN RACONTEUR: Real American Writin' for Real American Readin'** (published 2012), excerpts from the blog of that same title, concerning the 18 years prior to, and the nearly 40 years after the events recorded in *Low-Life*

**LOST IN THE DIN: Why Your Opinion on Politics and Religion Means NOTHING, and Mine Means Even Less** (published, November of 2012), concerning politics as seen from an a-political POV

**REFINEMENT: How a Good Marriage Can Nudge an Unwary Man in the Direction of Civility**

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(both adapted from screenplays) by Darryl Mockridge



## NEX' TIME 'ROUND

Having lived life in the way that I have lived life, I think my best hope in the next one is probably a step down. So, I hope to fall no further than dog.

I pondered that a bit on my own before asking my dear wife how she thinks that might work out.

"If I was an abandoned dog stuck in a kennel somewhere," I asked, "do you think you would recognize me and take me home with you?"

She looked at me as though she didn't understand the question entirely. So, I explained.

"If, in my next life, I come back as a dog and you come back as yourself, would you, upon finding me miserable and alone, shivering and frightened, stuck in a cage somewhere... probably slated for death... would you look into my eyes, recognize me, and declare, 'I just got to have me that dog!'"

Coming to me, throwing her arms around me and kissing my neck until chills ran down my spine, she assured me that she would.