

THE STATUES OF EASTER ISLAND

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BODHISATVA DOG

One spring day, I happened to be in a huge Catholic cathedral in Montreal called Mary Queen of the World, on René-Lévesque Boulevard, attending mass, and had trouble concentrating on the mumbo-jumbo of the priest's invocations and liturgy. I looked up at the Latin inscriptions going around the ceiling in four foot high letters that read, "Damnatus est." This was too much, it was the last straw.

So I got out of my pew and began to walk out of the building. It was a long timeless walk but the doors leading to the street were wide open. As I approached the portico, I saw an old lady trying to chase a dog out of the church. Her hands kept beating the air, but the dog insisted – he wanted to get into the building. Until he saw me.

Once the dog and I crossed paths, it turned around and began to follow me out of the cathedral, down the steps to the sidewalk of the busy downtown street in the business area. Or rather, I began to follow the dog. It definitely knew where it was going, and where it was leading me.

This intelligent animal and I had an understanding. He walked at my pace, on the inside of the sidewalk, and I kept up with its lead.

We walked and walked, out of the business area, leaving behind the skyscrapers, down into a poor neighbourhood called Little Burgundy, where there are a lot of black families. The dog had the lead, and took me down St. Antoine Street and St. Jacques Street. It wouldn't slow down. So I figured it knew where it was going.

We came up to a subway station called Georges Vanier metro. Here the doggie stopped and seemed to pause. A mysterious young girl walked up to me. Obviously, here was my destination. She must have been nine or ten. She was wearing a beige dress down to her knees and seemed to come from that area. We began talking, in French, which was now the official language in this brave new world, and I asked her if there were a lot of suicides in this metro station. I told her I had seen records that there are five hundred suicides a year in the Montreal subways. You know, you are riding on the metro and suddenly, it stops. A loudspeaker tells everyone there is an incident and to be patient. Well, these are suicides, and I

wondered if there were a lot of suicides at the Georges Vanier metro station. The little girl answered me, “No, not many suicides. Just murders.”

This seemed like a revelation, out of the mouth of a seemingly innocent little girl. Meanwhile, the dog had disappeared and I thought of being a saviour in this time and place, but chose instead to go home. There had been many salvations in this province of Canada, but it always seemed necessary to control people and stifle the truth. This child candidly knew the score – so who was I to influence her in any way?

2013

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NO SINGULARITIES

The universe had ceased to expand, having reached its outer limit, and had begun to contract. Just like a person from the Northern hemisphere crossing into the Southern hemisphere past the Equator, we were all headed in reverse time towards a South pole without singularities which would consist in an implosion, perhaps as momentous as the big bang. I for one went from dying in the Emergency of a hospital, with tubes attached to my arms and hooked up to a heart monitor, which beeped alarmingly for all the nurses in the ward, to being an old millionaire gigolo. My girlfriend had inherited her father's fortune in the golf business, and we rapidly spun backwards in time to the days when we were raising babies and changing diapers. Lots and lots of diapers.

In those days, around 1994, I believe, we went on a lot of family outings to the park, because we couldn't afford to travel elsewhere. Moving back, I remember the first night I met Bonnie, and she came into the room with Dwane Read, and the first thought that went through my mind was. Who's the pretty girl with Dwane? I'm going to cut his grass. Prior to that, as I regress towards birth, I am sitting on my balcony, while working for the Ministry of Education, and single, and wondering what will happen next in my life – never expecting to have raised kids and moved out of Montreal. I live in a high-rise in 1989, among the roofs of other high-rises downtown, and I am dreadfully lonely.

I rush back to a million bars and night clubs and strip joints, a lonely bachelor high on alcohol and desperation, hanging around with street people whom I am bankrolling, going to mass, writing religious poetry. And I move back to college days, when I always have my hand up in class, and I'm hanging around with smart alecks from the middle class, and I am spending seven hours a night in reverse at the library, reading Martin Luther and Immanuel Kant, looking up the Chant du Maldoror in the stacks in my reverse spare time.

Then I am in seminary school, thirteen years old, waiting to be born again, which I am in 1948. In those days, there is no television; the bread man comes by in a horse-drawn wagon, from door to door; there are no supermarkets, and in Ottawa, you still see tanks grinding down the streets

in a preview of World War II. My parents are listening to Pius XII on the radio and reciting the rosary after supper along with the radio.
And time is moving backwards, headed towards the big implosion.
It takes my mother fifty-six hours of reverse labour to give birth to me, three weeks late. Then her father dies on the day I am supposed to be born. And later on, he is a young man, working for the government in the Gold Rush in the Yukon, which is far, far away and back in time.
I then remember the Inquisition, the crucifixion of Christ, the early cavemen, in that order, the dinosaurs a hundred million years from now.
Because by now I am in eternity, looking at a brief history of time.
And then nothing but stardust spinning around.
Poof.

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THE ANGEL FACTORY

When I was fourteen years old, I had my first encounter in battle with the dragons. I was expelled from seminary school for drawing nudes during a study session and I wanted my father to die in a plane crash. I didn't even know what a naked woman looked like, but I had been going through puberty and drawing nudes in a huge study hall where 150 high-school students had to study various heresies and Catholic doctrines. I had made a deal with my neighbour, Jean-Charles Wolfe, that I would let him look at the pictures if he warned me when the priest was coming. At the end of the year, my father was ashamed of me. Well, the wolf didn't warn me, and I got caught.

Tall, skeletal, skinny Father Snyder suddenly appeared beside my desk like an apparition from Hell and told me, "Donne-moi ça." A cold chill went through me. Within a second, prison bars came crashing down around me and I was caught, and all the priests in the college passed around my drawings to each other, drawings of rotund, full-figured women posing in erotic positions, and I was even summoned to the Rector's office. The Rector was about eighty years old, frail and thin, with the purple cassock of a Monsignor. He could still fly with his original bat wings and he asked me what kind of books I read, and I told him I was reading "Quatre-vingt-treize" by Victor Hugo, about the French Revolution. The whole thing was very embarrassing. But there was a reason why Wolfe didn't warn me. He used to call me "Hammerhead Smith" and watch me fall flat on my face. Voices started cackling insanely all around my guardian angel, as my father tried to translate memos at the office.

In mathematics class, the priest, Ti-Pit, would pass remarks such as, "So Smith, it seems you're pretty precocious, eh?" And all the students would laugh at me and I felt like melting into the ground. As a matter of fact, I was the laughing-stock of the entire school and I did melt into a little puddle of hair and blood. My skeleton lay naked, surrounded by full-figured, rotund, rubenesque, statuesque women. I began drawing pictures of alcoholics passed out drunk at their table, with a newspaper in their pocket and an empty bottle in front of them. Perhaps there was a topless demon dancing on my head at my desk in the study hall. The Disciplinary

Prefect told me, offhandedly, "Smith, when I saw you could draw pictures, I knew you would do something stupid." When I saw you were an artist, when I saw you were called Belial and scapegoat and the son of a failed priest. I believe the word is condemnation, and I felt the finger pointed at me every single day for about six months. Huge screws started pointing at me from the trees all around me whenever I entered the swamps of my own emotions and my father, well, he was ashamed.

This was 1963. On the last day at the boarding school, my father came to pick me up to take me home, and other boys were milling around the lobby of the Administration Building with their fathers, so my father had this remark for me: "Robert, all the fathers here are proud to be seen in public with their sons. But I'm ASHAMED to be seen with you in public !"

I had been in seminary school for two years. And lo, two thousand years of seminary school is a long, long time. But not as long as one hundred years of Confederation. The reason my parents talked me into transferring from public school to seminary school was not that they thought I might have a vocation for the priesthood. They simply thought the priests could get me back in line. I felt the priests could get my son to respect my authority and love me as he once did. I wept over my son and I wished he loved his father. So my parents saved my academic career and spent the entire summer of 1961 telling me what a great place this seminary school was, until finally, by August, I asked them if I could be transferred there. I was dying of whooping cough and croup, choking in my own sin, and I needed redemption, and flogging too.

Well, I started classes at the boarding school, and within ten days, I was thinking, "WHAT ! GET ME OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW !"

The school was of the concentration camp variety of high schools. The concentration camp variety of schools for young boys, and it was located on the outskirts of Ottawa, at the bottom of a long dirt road called Carson Road. On each side of this road, there was forest, where dragons lay in wait, whispering, "Come, come, Robert, drink, drink of the elixir of death." The campus lay in a valley surrounded by swamps and another dirt road circling the buildings. There were seven 1950s-style, yellow brick buildings: a gymnasium, a cafeteria, classrooms, the administration building, dormitories, the priests' residence and the study hall. They were

located roughly in a circle, surrounded by the dirt road, which was surrounded in turn by a football field and the swamps. That's where my dragons lay in wait, and my son would finally respect his father.

We had chapel four-and-a-half hours a day. Why not ten hours a day, ha-ha, why not sixteen ! More dragons ! More chapel ! The boy hasn't committed apostasy yet ! The day would start off like this: 150 of us would be sleeping in each of the two dormitories, all in the same hall, with about three priests patrolling all night, to make sure nobody played another boy's flute, when, at 6:00 A.M., the bell would go off, around fifteen feet from my bed, with the loud shrillness of an air-raid siren. Everyone leapt out of bed and everything you saw turned into a silent movie, with everyone acting rapid motion, as we had fifteen minutes to get out of bed, wash up, shave, conquer the world and save our souls both, get dressed and be present in chapel. That's where time slowed down for 45 minutes and a century. We were allowed to take a shower once a week, in the evenings. If anybody stayed in bed, the priest would pour cold water on him or pick up his bed and drop it loudly on the floor and yell at him to get up.

So we went to chapel to hear a service, day in, day out, with double services on religious holidays and the guy next to me in the pew never changed his underwear and smelled like a urinal. Then we would go to the study hall and study for an hour, and THEN, we had breakfast. Finally, we were allowed to talk. If you talked in the line-up at the cafeteria, you were notified you couldn't leave the campus for a month. Once a month, the Disciplinary Prefect came to haunt each class like a ghost, an apparition from the dimension we all dread and ordered each student to stand; he would then read the student's disciplinary report in front of the whole class.

After breakfast, there was a fifteen minute break, when we could have a cigarette at last, and only if my father granted us permission to smoke. We were allowed to smoke behind the gymnasium, in the rain or snow. Sometimes we smoked in both, laughing like fiends, like drunken jocks. Then classes, for three hours, where we were deprogrammed from future and past heresies, and lunch. An hour-and-a-half break, when I played basketball and felt violent against my father and more classes for three hours, and mass at 4:30. And another study period, which brought us around to supper at 6:00 P.M. After supper, we had another hour-and-a-

half break, then more chapel, and in bed by 9:00 o'clock every night. Some students weight-lifted during breaks, others weight-lifted in their sleep, some battled dragons and demons and foul birds, others still played cards, (no one did card tricks or Tarot readings for sure), many played sports and one or two students read in the study hall. Much like Yossarian in Catch-22, I spent as much time in the infirmary as possible.

Meanwhile, my parents came to visit me every Sunday afternoon, in the parlour, and it was always a rainy day on Sunday, and Carson Road was long and muddy and the forest had lost all its leaves and the trees whispered haunting melodies to me and I would weep and beg my parents to take me out of this institution, and they would sit back and chirp, "No, Robert, the priests say you're doing just fine, and you'll adjust to the seminary, and they say you're going to really like it here. Just be patient now." And I would weep. I felt I was being punished unfairly. Why did I have to be condemned to a life of drug addiction to atone for my father's death? Another line they would use on me, and they probably meant well, was that I would be unstable if I changed schools every year.

Well, I tried everything to get out of there. At one point, I tried a hunger strike, although I didn't know the expression "hunger strike." I didn't eat for three weeks. Three years, whatever. Whenever all the other students went for meals, I would hide in the basement of one of the buildings or otherwise make myself scarce. So at the age of 14 years old, I weighed 75 lbs. Not that meals were anything to write home about: one time, I found an apple core in the mashed potatoes. Another guy found a rat's tail in his. "Dear, do you think the boy is doing well in boarding school?"

Now I used to receive mail written in English. My childhood buddies, like Marc Boyle, would write me letters saying, "So, how are things in Never-never Land?" And the Disciplinary Prefect, Father Soucy, barked my name over the P.A. system, telling me to come to his office immediately. (And my father was ashamed to be seen with me in public on Judgment Day.) His office was in a tower in the middle of the campus above the study hall, and he watched over all of us from this tower. All our activities were performed at the sound of his bell, and his public-address system was similar to that used in prisons. I went to his office. He told me, in French, of course, "Look, Smith, I know you've been receiving mail

written in English. And you've been hiding behind the baseball diamond to speak English with another student. If this keeps up, you're going to be expelled !"

Father Soucy kept trying to be hip by talking dirty. He smoked cigarettes with his pet students behind the gym and told dirty jokes. He filed his fangs every night. He had his hair greased back with jellyrolls, Elvis Presley style, although in his monthly disciplinary reports, he berated students for wearing their hair greased back. He would have sold his soul to be liked. He was about 35 years old going on 17. I guess he was a greaser priest, of the Order of Dracula. His apparitions when you least expected them would fill you with the fear of God.

And there was sex and violence. Plenty of sex and violence for the little boys. Of course, all the students were male, and there was always some guy asking me to take a shower with him, and I was terrified of these guys. And as for the violence, for instance, I would get smart with Farmer Brown, alias Louis Lalonde, who weighed 160 lbs, while I weighed 75 lbs, and we would make an appointment to meet behind the baseball diamond on Saturday at 4:00 P.M., and I would meet him there, and in front of our respective witnesses, he would proceed to kick me in the balls and punch me in the mouth for about an hour, and I wouldn't give up the fight, until the witnesses stepped in and broke it up. Then my guardian angel came and licked my wounds and kissed me better. My mother was on another planet, and there was no sending her a FAX message in those days.

The way I saw it then, most other kids were farmers, and I was a city slicker, so they hated my guts. Also, I had attended a public high school the year before. Like many Americanized kids, I thought I was pretty cool. It was written on my forehead that my name was Smith in a French school and that I would end up on Death Row, Skid Row or rewriting Cannery Row. I was always trying to fool other people. As a result, I had only two friends, Jean Bélisle, a quiet rich kid, and Gilles Maranda, a rock n' roller who stuttered and always got in trouble.

When I was in grade ten, the other students resented having to take English classes. Our class gave the English teacher a nervous breakdown, and he quit teaching. Students would shoot pins at him, one student had a shit in the classroom during lunch break, another set fire to the curtains in the middle of class and one time, during an English exam, someone

opened a vial of tear gas in the classroom, which meant the exam was cancelled and the room was evacuated. The teacher was a young, meek fellow who let the students walk all over him. He was replaced by a disciplinarian we called Smacksie. One day, a bunch of students got together to protest the poor grades they were getting in English. I pretended to be angry too, although I had excellent marks in this subject. I had written a short story plagiarizing a scene from an Elvis movie and had gotten top marks. The students all went to the teacher's office one by one to ask him to grade us more leniently. When my turn came to go into his office, I went in, by myself of course, and told the teacher the course should be more difficult. Then I came out of his office acting brave, as though I had given the prof a piece of my mind and shown real solidarity with my classmates.

Another time, a student called Ronald Séguin brought in a record player and some records to the campus and got caught teaching the other students how to dance the twist. Therefore, he got expelled, the Disciplinary Prefect swooped down from the chandeliers onto the stage, hissed through his fangs and confiscated the record player and the records, and that was the end of that.

Most of the priests who taught us in seminary school ended up defrocking and getting married years later.

I joined Boy Scouts. That sucked to high heaven, so I quit after a few months. One afternoon, I was walking down Carson Road, and a convertible automobile passed me full of teenage boys and girls drinking beer and listening to rock n' roll on the radio. I guess it was like a Coke commercial, and I felt that was what I wanted in life, and I made up my mind to drop out of Boy Scouts. The priest in charge took me aside and told me, "Robert I'll make you a troop leader if you stay in the Scouts." I thought about it long and hard, and I stuck to my guns. I dropped out of Boy Scouts, and I've never assumed a position of leadership ever since. That was the beginning of the end. Boy Scouts consisted in wandering through the swamps surrounding the campus on Saturday afternoons, with one's torso covered in rattlesnakes and leprous wounds. One day, some Scouts bumped into the Vice-Principal, wandering through the swamps, making sure nobody was skipping out to the nearby quarry, where Ronald Séguin and the other swingers went to skinny-dip with local girls. I didn't

go that far. But I wonder how my son is doing now that I've left the earth? I'm afraid, Mr. Smith, you're dead and he'll manage.

All my childhood friends back home were discovering girls, partying, dancing, listening to rock n' roll and having fun, while I was being trained for the priesthood. If I had had a vocation, it would have been bearable; if I had received grace from God, it would have made sense. It was very serious, and very very square. I became the mascot of the basketball team, because I didn't make the team; every time there was a game, I hanged around the locker rooms and played holy water boy. All I wanted in life was to be accepted. I had no sense of personal identity, and being a person just meant surviving the teasing and violence, trying to be popular and acting cool. I drew cartoons of my teachers, and I was pretty fresh. I thought nothing of insulting people, and I thought I was a tough little kid, although physically puny. I had no respect for people, only for what the group thought of me. Also, I recited the rosary every night underneath my pillow before falling asleep. So my prayers were muffled by pillow feathers and my own failure to articulate my demands clearly.

Nevertheless, there was a priest who was an artist and painted, Father Grenier. He also taught our class Latin. One day, he told me, in front of the class, "Tu sais, Smith, si tu veux faire ton ciel, tu sais, quand tu fais un tableau, il faut que tu mettes une petite crotte de noir avant de poser ton fond blanc". This made an impression on me years later, when I understood what he meant. The way another student put it was, "Here's Robert Smith. He's not the best, but he's better than the rest." I was a pretty arrogant little kid in high school. I had my own dragons to battle, the Gallup polls showed I wasn't very popular, I was a rebel, and I was surviving a system. I got kicked around, but I would never say uncle. Hammerhead. Like a shark, to eat you all up !

If someone had reached out and taken my hand, I wouldn't have known how to respond. I was unconscious and going through puberty. At some deep level, I felt I was being shafted by the priests, by my parents and by the other students. I needed love, somewhere in the swamps of my own heart. So drawing nudes was the only kind of crude beauty I understood. The naked women floated around above the forest at night, in the fog, waving at me and I had no idea that sex could be beautiful. My world was a world of non-persons, wiseacres and athletes, where no one was allowed to

break down and weep, where no one confided in anyone else, because no one had any personal secrets or mystery or treasures to confide. My views were largely based on movies and television; in that respect, I was a typical high school kid.

I was so neurotic after two years of this régime that by Christmas time, 1963, I met my mother's friend Paule Breton, and she was kind of cute, so I blushed and ran out of the living-room. I became an atheist upon leaving seminary school. I didn't believe in dragons anymore. By the time I left, I had adopted a chronic stutter. When I received my report card in the mail, it said, in French, "We find Robert does not have the spiritual qualities to become a priest, so he is not welcome to come back next year."

I guess it's time I let go of those black years, let go of the burden of shame. My father was ashamed of me. But if he and my mother hadn't made me stay in seminary school, I would have probably been a high-school drop-out by grade ten. I might have been a great success as a rock n' roll singer. I wanted my father to die, and he did: in 1989. His guardian angel carried his corpse in its arms to Jesus, and I started drinking again. The dragons had won and there is no condemnation in Christ, is there?

Dec. 18, 1991

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RODOLPHO!!

I was 18 years old. I was in Paris. It was Bastille Day. I may have fancied myself to be a tough guy, but I was very much wet behind the ears, as I sat in a *café terrasse*, reading *Death in the Afternoon*, the great Hemingway classic about bullfighting, and having a beer in the cool of the evening. You see, the plan was to get a grasp of the principles of the *corrida* before journeying on to Spain. This was 1967.

People all over the Left Bank were partying in the streets, there were fireworks, everyone was drunk, and I was indifferent to the national holiday. I was interested in more macho things, like *toros*, *toreadors* and *picadors*. As for the *matadors*, the ones who do the killing, I was ready for them; but I wasn't ready for what happened next.

So I was sitting there reading, minding my own business, when a Mexican-looking fellow sitting over in the corner approached me. At first, I was annoyed, because he was interrupting a good read. But he sounded remotely interesting. He said he was a filmmaker and his girlfriend lived in London. He had an apartment in Paris, and one in London. He spoke with a lisp, and a Latin accent in English, but when I asked him his name, he replied with great pride, as though he were stabbing at a bull, "MY NAME IS RODOLPHO!!"

00OK, I thought, who is this clown? But he got me involved in a conversation about literary things, with a slant on homosexual matters. The *picadors* were driving their *bandilleros*, long flowery spears, into the bull's neck, to get his head lower for the kill. He was telling me that André Gide had proven conclusively that homosexuality is found in the animal and plant kingdoms, that it is completely natural, and that there was nothing to be afraid of. And I knew from the start what this guy Rodolpho was after,

but I went along with it, hustling him for a free beer. He was buying the drinks, and I was drinking them. Meanwhile, the brass bands and fireworks were blowing up in the streets around us.

After the bar closed, we went for a walk. Rodolpho knew a bootlegger who would sell us a bottle of wine. And by now, he was openly discussing sleeping with me. I was acting brave, and putting him on, and I told him I had to make the first move. So we walked through the crowded little streets of the *Quartier latin*, past all the little shops and the drunken people celebrating the anniversary of the seizing of the Bastille.

Finally, we arrived at Rodolpho's apartment, which was on the second floor of an old, dilapidated building. It just reeked of corruption, but I was a macho guy, I wasn't afraid of a thing. So we sat in his living room and talked, and he was still trying to get into my pants. Now he was telling me that he had been to Sweden and used to go into naked saunas, and women would come on to him. Total strangers. I was a virgin at this time, and I didn't want anyone to know this. No woman had ever made a pass at me.

Finally, after the bottle of *vin rouge* was finished, he convinced me to climb into bed with him. He guaranteed me nothing would happen, and see? He would leave his shorts on. So here I am in bed with this total stranger, and my god, he stinks! He hasn't taken a bath in a week!

But my guardian angel was watching over me, because just then, divine intervention happened, and the phone rang. It was his girlfriend calling from London. And I waited and waited in the smelly bed, and at least fifteen minutes went by, and I started thinking. *What the hell am I doing here? I am in bed with a homosexual, and he smells bad. I am in a foreign country, and* – that was all the convincing I needed. I jumped out of bed and put my virgin pants on, and headed for the door.

Just now, Rodolpho was off the phone, and we were at his front door, and he was pleading with me to stay. Why, he had never killed a *toro* in his life, and would I PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE stay and spend the night with him. But my good Catholic upbringing came into play, and I was fleeing from corruption. We ended up on the street corner, and I was getting annoyed. I began pounding the brick wall with my fist, as I listened to Rodolpho try to reason with me.

00At this moment, a band of about eight young Algerians came by and surrounded us. They were about my age, whereas this Rodolpho guy was about 35. One guy punched me in the back of the head, and I turned around and yelled, “Hey!” And the kids immediately picked up on the situation. They could see Rodolpho was as gay as a blade in May, and they were going to beat up a couple of queers. So Rodolpho, like a fool, got down on all fours, and assumed the non-violent position. His face was against the cobblestone sidewalk, so the kids proceeded to kick his face into the sidewalk. And they kicked and kicked and kicked some more. Meanwhile, I yelled at the aggressors that I would take them on one at a time.

And so it was, we began sparring. I was using jujitsu and they were using savate, which is French kickboxing. I was fighting with my feet, and the battle went on for about fifteen minutes. I lost my glasses, because one of the kids tried to punch me and missed. I never got kicked or punched, and I held my own. After one of their guys got tired, another guy stepped in. And there was a lot of kicking going on.

Suddenly, we heard a police siren approaching, that typical French police siren. So the kids who had attacked us ran away. I looked at Rodolpho, and they had kicked in all his front teeth, top and bottom. He was a bloody mess, and he was crying, “Oh, this wouldn’t have happened if

it weren't for you!! It is all your fault! What is my girlfriend going to say??"
And he hobbled back into his apartment, a broken man.

When the police arrived, the Algerian aggressors were nowhere in sight. But I had lost my glasses. I asked the cops if they would help me find my glasses, but they refused to. They assessed the situation, I told them I had just been attacked, and the cops received another call on their radio and took off.

By now, it was dawn, around 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning, and I slowly walked back to my tourist room, and I tried to make sense of what had transpired that evening.

I finally did make it to Spain and one afternoon, I saw a bullfighter get gored. By the time I returned to Canada, I was still a virgin.

April 22, 2004

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A REAL SUCCESS

*“They treat me like a mushroom:
they feed me bullshit and
keep me in the dark.”*

- A comment by a First Nation person

When I was around thirty years old, I thought I had found the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: success was within reach, and I could smell the higher income, the boosted self-esteem, the envy of my fellows and security for my ego. I sought to become established. Hey, I was going to make it, by jeez.

If only I could get my wild dreams and my sex life under control. I went back to university. In order to succeed in school, I had to quit smoking pot, first of all. So I did, and my marks improved. I was registered in a master’s program at a local university and contemplated a career as a translator. I was going to walk in my dad’s footsteps. The only problem was the size of our shoes.

I had got religion, and was going to church every day. I guess I was happy at the time. I fled into visions of birds flying over the rainbow – why, oh then why can’t I? Unfortunately, I began to be in denial. I was no longer in touch with my deepest feelings. I believed I had overcome my inadequacies and mental illness. I answered questions in class, typed out assignments, did research, worked on terminology homework – easy as pie, I thought. But university isn’t the real world.

I found a girlfriend and by now I was on top of my trip. Just follow the yellow brick road.

In December 1980, I heard about an opening in the federal government. So I applied and wrote the entrance exam. Luckily, the topic was something familiar: wine and how it travels. God was on my side. Five months later, it was “hurry up and wait.” I received a letter in the mail telling me to report for duty in two weeks – in Winnipeg, of all places. My heart sank. Winnipeg? I thought there was buffalo roaming the streets in Winnipeg!

Well, my dad lent me three thousand dollars to pack up and leave, break my lease, have some belongings shipped out there, get airplane reservations and it was a *fait accompli*. My dad had a friend in Winnipeg who would help me. Luck was the wind in my sails. I asked my girlfriend if she would move out there with me, and she accepted. It was agreed she would come out two weeks after I was settled there.

Everything was in order. Success was winking at me, beckoning me forward with a motion of the hand. I was driven. The spirit was moving.

However, the night before my flight from Montreal out West, I sat in a restaurant and had supper alone and listened to a song on the juke box, *Un Canadien errant*, about Louis Joseph Papineau's exile, and the tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn't want to leave my friends behind, travel fifteen hundred miles into the unknown, and be uprooted.

Nevertheless, the next day, I arrived at the airport in Winnipeg, and the daughter of my father's friend recognized me from a photograph and picked me up as I cleared security. The friend's family were very nice. They were French Canadian and Catholic. They helped me find a decent apartment, and it was decided I would go to church with their family on Sundays and have lunch with them after mass. They lived in Saint Boniface and were the salt of the earth. But I was lonely.

I started the job in the Secretary of State and everything was working out. But I was building a house made of cards. I never told my boss about my shady past. When the time came to get a security clearance, I told him I had a pardon. The earth moved. Anyhow, I got fingerprinted and my boss arranged for me to have an easy clearance. But by then I had skeletons in the closet. And I was lonely, alone with my secrets, alone without my friends or my fiancée.

Finally, she showed up at Winnipeg airport and I met her there. We settled down together. And they all lived happily ever after.

No.

One day at the office, I had a minute of spare time and looked up the word, "schizophrenia" in the encyclopedia. The article mentioned that rarely did schizophrenics succeed professionally. My heart sank. For a minute. But I quickly suppressed those feelings and carried on regardless. Hey, God was on my side – wasn't he?

Next thing you know, the girlfriend and I had a fight. She wanted to have an open marriage. She returned to Montreal, and I was devastated. One night my boss and I had a beer together. And that was all he had, one beer. I needed company. I could have stayed in that bar all night. I began to go to bars just to talk to the waitress.

Then my boss gave me a break and had me transferred to Ottawa, where my parents lived.

At first this was a bit of a relief. But the writing was on the wall. Schizophrenics rarely succeed professionally. Rarely succeed. Oi veh.

Now, my new boss began to tease me. I would ask him a question and he would answer, "You imbecile, you don't know that?? Haha." And I was a guy whose self-esteem was entirely based on being supposedly intelligent. And I couldn't see the cracks appearing in the foundation.

The translators at that time were using work-to-rule, and I didn't know what that was. There I was, working like gangbusters trying to impress the boss and on one hand, he kept calling me an imbecile, and on the other, the employees around me needed to get rid of me. One day I was walking past a room and all my colleagues were there and I overheard them ask, "What are we going to do to get rid of this guy, Robert Smith?" So I charged into the room and asked, "Why, what did I do?"

They never told me but they set me up. They appointed me shop steward. Oh boy, I thought, a promotion!

Next thing you know, I was in trouble with management, the union, the employees, and the best thing I could do was to haul ass. I warned my boss I would "get" him if he kept teasing me, and he teased me some more. So six months later, I denounced him, at a meeting of all the shop stewards and Section heads in the department. My boss was not amused.

One day I asked my immediate supervisor if I had the potential to become a good translator and she told me, "Robert, you've got all the qualifications to be a good translator: you've got education, culture, intelligence, but you haven't got the character." So I went to see her boss, the Section head, and asked him the same question. And he replied, "I thought you had the potential at one time, but now, a year and a half later, I don't think so."

So I went back to my desk and impulsively wrote a letter of resignation. I gave them a week's notice. The house of cards had crumbled.

At that time, I had ten dollars in the bank. Luckily, my employers officially said I was laid off, so I qualified for Unemployment Insurance. There was a recession going on, as I soon found out. And I went back to Montreal with my tail between my legs.

I didn't find another job for two years, and that was in Fredericton. Another geographical cure.

January 5, 2016

HONEST GOVERNMENT

The word had gotten out that spring that the fall election would revolve around the theme of Honest Government. The People's Party of Slobovia had adopted the theme, as well as the slogans, logos, program and new policies at the Party Convention the preceding fall. The logo was a giant HG, to symbolize Honest Government. The policy was based on the 1990s Russian theme of glasnost, which was meant to bring transparency to the Soviet system. Everyone was to be honest from now on.

I woke up to the sound of the alarm clock radio. To my dismay, the fall election had been canceled, according to the news. The candidates of the opposition had all been arrested and accused of dishonesty. This meant they had no right to habeas corpus, and they were to be detained indefinitely. No one knew their whereabouts. The radio station had sent journalists to investigate the case, and it seems the opposition party members' dishonesty was a cover up for their secret terrorist activities. There was a case of airplane high-jacking involved.

So, I wondered what this would lead to. And I asked myself, "Am I really honest? Do I have the right to walk the streets?" As I got dressed and ready to go to work, I thought about this new turn of events.

As I walked to the subway, I saw electoral posters that were still hanging on trees and telephone posts. They all described the benefits of honest government. They showed the Leader of the Opposition and below his photograph, there was the caption: Would you buy a used car from this man? I wondered if that was slander or just regular electoral backstabbing.

As I took the subway, people looked nervous. No one made eye contact with the other passengers. Everyone looked like they had skeletons in their closet. Maybe this man in the gray flannel suit was a closet queen; maybe the Pakistani lady with the shawl over her head was an illegal immigrant. It seemed as though Honesty was taking its toll. There were advertisements in the subway with the face of the Leader of the country peering into our souls, asking, Have you been honest with yourself today? Immediately, I thought of the money I had earned the previous year by working under the table. And I too began to cringe, and feel dishonest. I couldn't look at my reflection in the window of the subway, and I was ashamed of myself.

As I got out of the subway station, I noticed police officers stopping regular-looking people on the street. I wondered what was going on. Something was up. One older gentleman with a mustache told me the police were doing spot checks, asking citizens for their papers, just in case someone's I.D. was not in order. Why, I wondered. Then a woman police officer stopped me on the next block. She walked right up to me and asked me my name.

I told her.

She said, "Could I see your papers please?"

I said I was sorry, I didn't know it was compulsory to carry I.D. on the street. I had left my papers at home.

She looked angry. "Where do you work?"

I told her I worked at the newspaper.

"That is not an honest newspaper. It has disagreed with our Leader's policies. What do you do there?"

I told her I bought advertising for the paper but I asked her, "What is going on here? Since when do I have to give you all this information?"

"It is for your own protection. There are liars among us, and we are going to weed them out."

I thanked her.

She replied, "Now get out of my face, and the next time I see you, you had better have your papers. Now go."

I thought to myself, "What is going on here? Is this a coup d'état or something?"

As I arrived at work late, I tried to get in the front door. It was locked. A security guard told me, "The newspaper has been closed by the government. It seems we are not honest enough for them. You can pick up your last pay check next Thursday."

Other employees were gathering at the front door. I recognized a couple of them, the cartoonist and the cleaner. Then a police car pulled up and we were told to disband. "Move along, move along. No public demonstrations are allowed anymore. Move or we will arrest the whole lot of you!" It seemed that there were dishonest demonstrations and honest demonstrations. Dishonest demonstrations were attended by liars and terrorists and enemies of the republic. That was the word. Where would all this end? In the name of what?

I walked back to the subway with the cartoonist of the newspaper. He told me his neighbor had turned himself in to the police, for lying to his children and to his wife. He had had an affair with his secretary, and didn't want a soul to know. But now it was public business. He had to make a confession to his wife.

I saw more police arresting people for not carrying their papers. Since the newspaper had been closed down, rumors circulated by word of mouth. There were stories of interrogations, torture, police brutality and total dictatorship. The interrogations were carried out in the name of honesty, in order to get to the bottom of things. There were television shows where everyone hung out their dirty laundry. People were making public confessions about having sex outside of marriage, about having been molested, about being cross-dressers, about seeing prostitutes. And it seemed the more sex-related the crime was, the more interesting it was to hear. Over the next few weeks publishers began to print public confessions. You could read about the secret lives of public figures, telling all, showing all with graphic photographs. Pornography sales soared; attendance at AA meetings had never been better. And meanwhile, every time I rode the subway, I cringed, and noticed that absolutely no one talked to anyone openly anymore. But by now, there were armed police officers in every subway car, just to keep an eye on the liars and dishonest people.

The government had passed the Honesty Act, according to which it was forbidden to lie, to cheat, to work under the table, to avoid paying taxes, to cover anything up, to desire privacy of any kind, or to cheat on one's wife. Cameras were installed in bedrooms and hotel rooms to catch adulterers. So naturally, people went to the bathroom in order to have sex with prostitutes and other people's partners. After all, graffiti were supposed to be honest, and the government condoned graffiti writing in bathrooms. After a while, you couldn't walk into a public washroom without hearing moaning and groaning in the stalls, and then things got crazy.

Some scientist had invented a lie detector. Not just any lie detector, but one that was the size of an electrode, and it could be installed in the brains of people. First, they did experiments with the mentally ill, as these are the guinea pigs of science. Tests indicated that people felt like vomiting every time they lied to themselves or to someone else, especially an

authority figure, and every time they covered something up. And there were plenty of people vomiting. Next, the government began installing these gadgets in people's brains in order to catch terrorists; then to catch bank robbers and violent offenders. And finally, the government just found it convenient to install the lie detectors in every citizen's brain - it just made it so much easier to detect dishonesty. It worked better than a truth drug. So time has passed now and everyone is throwing up every day. It is pretty disgusting to see, but luckily, the government has hired staff to clean up the barf. Except the members of the government are exempted from having lie detectors in their brains. Apparently, the lie detectors would interfere with running the country. Besides, no one suspects a civil servant or a politician of being a liar or a terrorist.

It has now been months since that first day of honest government. The minority lower Slobovians have been herded into specialized neighborhoods, because it is a known fact that they are liars. Their leaders have been accused of being dishonest and plotting terrorist acts. Sometimes, you hear that a minority member has disappeared and been tortured by the police for merely thinking of committing a terrorist act.

So I feel safe now. I am pretty happy with the new situation, because I am a pretty honest person. I have even made a donation to the government to promote honesty, and in return I was given a good job in a crown corporation for three months. And my taxes are in order now. But excuse me, I have to run to the bathroom; I think my stomach is upset -

2002

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THE LANGUAGE POLICE

Being a French Canadian, I had never understood the concerns of English-speaking Quebecers regarding Bill 101 and the language laws. My father had been a member of the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste and l'Ordre de Jacques Cartier. My mother's sister and father, that is my aunt and my grandfather, had been involved in l'Action catholique years ago. I had been taught, like most French Canadians, that "les Anglais" were all rich, unemotional, frigid lovers, hostile to us, prejudiced against French Canadians, arrogant and smug. Their only goal in life was to assimilate French Canadians. What is worse, some of them were *Protestants!*

However, I started getting an insight into the Anglo concerns and acquiring sympathy for Quebec Anglophones four years ago, in 1989, when I was working as a French-English translator for the Ministry of Education under Claude Ryan. Everyone in the office was an Anglophone but me, and the boss couldn't even speak French. So we had nothing to do with applying language laws.

What my job did involve was translating Quebec academic programs into English, and once in a while, into French. One afternoon, I was in the middle of translating a technical manual about the chemicals used in making paints, and I couldn't find some terms. I looked and looked in computers, data banks and dictionaries, but could find nowhere the names of these chemicals in French. So, being a good translator, I used the phone book. I thought I would call a paint company or a paint dealer and ask for my French equivalents over the phone.

I found a small paint dealer on Cavendish Boulevard, in NDG. I dialed their main number.

"Hello, could I speak to your translator, please?"

"Who's calling, may I ask?"

"My name is Robert Smith, and I am calling from the Quebec government. Could I speak to your company translator, please?"

(Aside, to another employee) "It's the government. They want to know if we have a translator!"

(Answering me, a moment later) "I am afraid we don't have a

translator. Can I help you?"

"Well, I wanted to know if your sales catalogue is translated into French..."

(Aside, to the other employee) "George, do something. It's the language police! We're in trouble! Do something, quick!" (Answering me, a moment later) "Does this have anything to do with Bill 101?"

"No, no, no. I am a translator, and I am calling from the Ministry of Education. I just want to find some French terms."

"You mean to say, you're calling from the Quebec government and you don't know French? Or you want to check up on us to know if we speak French?"

"No, I just want to know if you could give me some terms from your sales catalogue."

"You want to check the quality of our French?"

"No, I simply want to find some terms in French."

(Aside, to another employee) "George, what do I tell him?" (Answering me, a moment later) "I am afraid our sales catalogue is in English only, but I promise you we'll have it translated soon."

"No problem."

"Does that mean you're going to send the inspectors here? Our signs in front of the store are bilingual."

"Look, I am just a translator."

"But you're a *fonctionnaire*."

"Yes, but... Thanks anyway. No hard feelings."

"Bye."

I finally did find my French expressions from a federal phone-in data bank. A terminologist was glad to oblige. As for the employees of the small paint dealer on Cavendish, either they have moved to Ontario by now or they are still waiting for the inspectors to show up with a warrant for their arrest, four years later.

May 26, 1994

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LIFE AFTER DEATH

The past few years have been a long, strenuous struggle; you went further and further downhill, getting drunk, living on the streets, eating out of garbage cans and at soup kitchens, hanging around drop-in centers, sleeping in women's shelters, occasionally finding enough money for a room at the YWCA, and eventually returning to the streets, sitting in McDonald's at 3:00 o'clock in the morning, drinking, using needles, until finally you are a walking, talking disease, and you end up in the Emergency of some godforsaken hospital, with hepatitis C and AIDS and God knows what else. You felt like you could just lie down and die.

But one evening, you walk into this place. There is a door, back there, that you just walked through. There is a light there, at the end of the tunnel, and you go through a second door, only to find yourself in a room full of strangers. Someone shakes your hand at the door: what the hell is this? There is a woman dressed in a white gown, shaking your hand, and she asks you, "Are you new?" You don't know what to say. New to what? New in what? What are you doing here? Who are these people?

The woman in the white gown smiles at you and says, "Coffee is ready, right over there. Come right in, you're in the right place." How does she know you are in the right place? Nevertheless, you walk over to the coffee urn, and pour yourself a cup of warm coffee in a styrofoam cup. There is sugar and milk on the table. Someone must have known you were coming and that you needed a coffee.

There are chairs lined up facing a conference table. There are two posters hanging from the rafters of the ceiling, with incomprehensible gibberish printed on them. One says something about "steps" and the other, "traditions." Where the hell are you this time around?

People, men and women, but no children, are milling about, chatting in little clusters of two or three. There is no music playing; the building

looks like a church basement, but strangely enough, you can't hear any organ music. It is incredibly quiet, as though everyone had come back from the dead. Everyone seems to be minding their own business, and it is quiet. No one is raising their voice, and people are coming towards you to fill up on coffee. One other lady walks up to you and shakes your hand again. What is this business of shaking hands all the time? Don't they know that is how you catch colds and flus? She says to you, "Hi, what's your name?" And for a split second, you can't remember. You answer her, "It's funny, but I can't remember." She giggles and replies, "That's okay, if you are new, it is normal that you have trouble talking. Did you have trouble finding us?" And you answer: "I don't know, I just ended up here, as though I was led here." She answers, "And rightly so. Do you drink?" You blush, and you get defensive: "Why? What's it to you?" But she is not taken aback; she just says, "That's okay, it is all right. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. You see, all the people here, all the people you see are just like you. We have already been through hell. This is just a relief, isn't it?" And suddenly, you realize that you have died, and this is life after death. Not quite what you expected, no organ music, no harp playing, no wings, just coffee and a meeting of people chatting. Hmm, very strange. You are starting to get accustomed to where you are. Maybe these people aren't so crazy after all. Maybe, like they say, you are in the right place. The woman is still there, and she says to you, with light and serenity in her eyes, "Nothing will be expected of you. All the jobs have been done. Just grab a seat and enjoy the meeting. No one will lay a trip on you. No one will ask you for money. Besides, we have no use for money in this place."

So you sit down, hesitantly. Other people are sitting down around you, in rows, on wooden chairs that squeak when you move. You are a bit confused, but this seems well organized, anyway, whatever it is. A man at the conference table bangs his gavel on the table and starts the meeting. He

gives his name, and then says loudly: “It is customary to begin this meeting with a moment of silence, followed by the serenity prayer. There is indeed a moment of long silence, then everyone starts chanting this gibberish that you don’t understand. But it only lasts for a second. Then the chairman of the meeting goes on. “Welcome to Life after Death.” And your mind drifts off. And the chairman’s voice becomes meaningless chatter, as you start remembering the endless drinks flowing, the syringes, the robberies, the crime, the bankruptcies, moral and financial, and you are not listening anymore to what the chairman is babbling about, and you wonder why you ended up in this place, when you deserved to be in hell. And suddenly, you realize that you have already paid your dues, you have already been through hell on earth.

Yes, maybe that is it. The car accidents, the blackouts, the wife battering, the children screaming because they had no food, and finally, the streets. Yes, the streets. Long walks through the snow, with holes in your boots, trying to get out of the cold and the wind. Walking, always walking, like a zombie. And all those men always hitting on you, trying to get a piece of tail out of you, for what? What was their problem? But you realize that you weren’t very nice either, yelling at your husband, you remember how totally selfish you were, especially when someone came between you and your booze. And towards the end, before you passed away, you were always in a rage.

Something snaps you out of your reverie. There is a woman sitting at the conference table, and she just said something that caught your attention: “You need to know rage to qualify to be here...” Now that is strange, uncanny, weird. You were just thinking about rage. And now, the rage seems to be gone. For now. One day at a time. Just what were you so angry about? Oh yes, being a woman in a man’s world... No, what was it? Being a native in a white man’s world... No, that was not it either.

Then you spot someone in the row behind you, someone you used to know when you were still alive. Can it be? Yes, it is your cousin, and he has just spotted you. He is waving at you, with one hand, and holding a cup of coffee with the other hand. He is sitting there, dead as a doornail, and yet, moving and smiling at you. You smile back, a funny, shy little smile. And then you look in front at the conference table, and the meeting goes on. People are talking and making presentations. One guy is standing up and offering a silver coin to any newcomers. Is this some kind of scam? You just sit there, waiting for the meeting to end, so you can grab another coffee.

But the meeting goes on, for a century or two, for hundreds and hundreds of years, although it feels like an hour. You are just looking around, trying to get your bearings. And you look at yourself, and you too are wearing a white robe. I guess you have been through the great tribulation they talked about in the Bible, but there are no Bibles in sight.

You try to read the posters with the steps and traditions. You see the word “God” and that seems reassuring. But you don’t understand the rest of the words.

And you start asking yourself, “If I am dead, and this is life after death, when will I meet God?” And your mind wanders off, as the meeting goes on, for another millenium. This seems like the right place, but no one is preaching at you, no one is asking you for money, there are no stained-glass windows or organs playing.

I guess this is as good as it gets, you tell yourself. People are listening to the speaker, dead quiet, sometimes shifting on the squeaky wooden chairs. And suddenly, you are thinking, “Hey, I am okay here, this is home. This is where I belong. This is all right after all...”

And the meeting goes on into the night. This is the big meeting up in the sky. And you are in the right place.

December 27, 2003

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MY BULL HAS A HEADACHE

I had been living in a men's shelter in Kamloops, British Columbia, surrounded mainly by natives from the area, and that is what one of the aboriginal men told me, as he saw me throw my Bible out the window and sit discouraged on the stairway. I had come out West to find God. I had come out here and found myself losing my mind instead.

Meanwhile, my father and mother worried constantly about me back home. Oh, they had had their ambitions about me: she used to want me to become a Catholic priest, and he hoped I would walk in his footsteps as a translator. Now, my dad was naturally a joyful man and always acted happy. But when I became mentally ill, towards the end of adolescence, a deep sadness started to settle in his heart. He felt it was his chromosomes I had inherited and there was no convincing them it was a genetic lottery that was the culprit. No one has any power over this illness, and it may run in a family, but it is no one's fault.

Still, my dad did what was the right thing to do, and when I asked him for help to come back home, he sent me the airfare and organized a way for me to fly back East and get help. And he was forever getting me out of trouble. One time, he took a train to Oshawa and interceded with a court prosecutor so that I wouldn't go to jail for vagrancy. Another time, I had ended up in jail and then in a psych ward in Chicago, charged with being a hit man for the mafia, of all things. And my dad was always there for me, hoping I would one day straighten out and fly right.

This was his dark night of the soul, as I kept raging and pushing and shoving and biting so I wouldn't get branded by the cowboys or get a lobotomy. I was angry with my father because I projected on him. I thought he was a fascist, and kept mailing him poison pen letters. No one could convince me he was a nice guy and would have given me his shirt. One day my mother's best friend Lisette took me aside and told me my parents would live in a cave if it could make me happy. Another day, my father's podiatrist Miss Gardner shared with me what my dad had confided in her – the great pain in my father's heart was that I didn't love him.

Of course, I loved him but felt driven to oppose him all the time. I was afraid he would overwhelm me and control me. Sometimes I thought my parents had hypnotized me when I was young so I would report to them about my friends. I falsely believed they repeated my stories to the police and collected informer money through me. This was pretty far-fetched and had no factual basis, but I was paranoid.

My dad tried to make amends to me the last time I saw him alive, two weeks before he died. He gushed with tears and tried to tell me he felt it was his fault that I suffered so much. I didn't understand. And yet he got it out and it was like a confession of guilt for carrying a schizophrenic gene. Obviously, he hadn't chosen this. And even if it was true, it certainly was not his fault.

In my case, my illness was aggravated by drugs and alcohol. You really shouldn't use substances if there is latent or overt mental illness in your family background.

And the beat goes on. One generation comes and passes and the next generation replaces it – and the sun also rises. These things don't change. One man may be an overeater and his offspring will be schizophrenic and his children may be drug addicts and the next generation may be alcoholic. It is the same chromosome that takes on new mutations every time it is transmitted.

The only hope in my case was taking neuroleptic medication and living a quiet life. As long as I cease creating crises and acting out, with the help of a therapist, and as long as I religiously take the medication, I have a chance. Doctors have certainly abused and exploited the mentally ill, trying experiments on them and committing atrocities like lobotomies and shock treatment. But overall, they do not yet know enough about the marvellous complications of the human brain to be able to avoid or control mental illness.

Right in the middle of my mid-life crisis, I happened miraculously to meet the woman of my dreams who would pick me up out of the downtown sleaze and parachute me into suburbia, where we would play house and raise children. I met her six months after my father had passed away, as though my late dad pulled on God's sleeve and told him I needed a partner in life. Anyway, meeting her was sheer randomness and she swept me off my feet.

She had an agenda. She wanted me to live with her. She wanted to move to NDG in Montreal. She wanted to have children. She wanted me to work – whoops. I freelanced but rarely worked full-time once we lived together.

My dad faded away. Then my mom died, at the age of ninety-six. And their memory receded into the past, into oblivion. I have no grudge about my father. He had been raised in the twenties and the now-conservative ideas he had about politics had not been pulled out of a hat – they were the prevalent ideas in Quebec in those days. I reacted by being a left winger and a pretty extremist one at that. But I am also a product of my environment. I went to university in the sixties and didn't invent too many concepts on my own.

I was a pawn in the game of the social strategists of my times. Judging my father is too easy. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. And with a particular twist of mind of my own, I can yet manage to be reconciled with the human race of my predecessors.

February 4, 2016

THE STATUES OF EASTER ISLAND

The year was 1976. I had just escaped a cult called La Porte ouverte run by a gay ex-monk who beat his native foster children and ran a tight ship. The first night that I slept alone in my new boarding house room, away from the cult members, I woke up screaming in a cold sweat for about five minutes. I had been wandering from cult to cult for several years and had lost my bearings.

I happened to find a job at the Hôtel La Cité, which had just opened on Park Avenue and Pine in Montreal. My job was to vacuum the carpets and clean the toilets. I was a houseman and my boss was a cute Cuban woman who was the head of housekeeping. I had a crush on her. One day, I asked her if people in Cuba liked Fidel, and she replied that they thought he was a big, fat pig who lived in a mansion on top of the hill.

So I vacuumed carpets and one day, there was a convention of all the Kentucky fried chicken franchises at our hotel. And there I was, with my machine, working on the huge carpet in the lobby, when I saw this apparition of a little eighty year old man with long white hair and a white goatee and a white Stetson hat and an all white suit, walking towards me bowlegged, saying to me with a raspy old man's voice, "Howdy! Howdy!" It was Colonel Sanders himself! It was as though he had just stepped out of an advertisement for himself. I just said hello to him and he smiled and walked off.

While I worked in my uniform at the hotel, I saw an ad for the union containing an invitation to gather at such-and-such a restaurant to create a labour union at the hotel. So I went there after work, and sure enough, there was this cigar-smoking, tough-talking labour guy saying things about the government people who walk around with a Bible in their pocket. He looked pretty sleazy, but I let him buy me supper. In exchange, I signed the union registration form, along with the five other employees required for the quorum. The union guy sounded like Lenny Bruce's book, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People." Nevertheless, I was a liberal and believed in unions.

And I vacuumed carpets all day and had a room in a fine boarding house on Durocher Street, which had probably once been a mansion. I was

friends with a Lebanese Christian fellow who lived nearby. He had been in the militia in Lebanon but was a very gentle, dreamy type of guy, a real romantic. We would spend long hours in the night talking about our dreams and aspirations. He reminded me of Kahil Gibran.

I even brought my ultra-conservative dad to visit my room. He had total contempt for the working class; so I showed him how I lived. See? I told him, I don't come into the hotel by the front door like the customers – I come in by the employees' entrance. I also told him I didn't live in my own house, like managers do – I live in a one room apartment. And I have to wear a uniform to work – I don't wear a suit. And that evening, he admitted to me, "Robert, today you taught me something."

Now I had good and bad luck while I worked there. One afternoon, after I got paid, I accidentally dropped my wallet containing my pay cheque into a mailbox. I meant to mail a letter and had a Freudian slip. I tried in vain to recover my wallet. Then another day, about ten days later, I happened to look in the gutter of the street and found eleven soaking wet five dollar bills, lying scattered by the sidewalk. So you win some and you lose some.

Now although I had a crush on the forewoman, she still fired me after six weeks because I was writing graffiti on the walls of the hotel. Meanwhile, I was psychotic and heard voices. Of course this is madness. But when the voices told me to go out West to find God, I packed my belongings and took an airplane out to Calgary, Alberta, where I moved in uninvited with my friend Barry.

You might say this entire episode was a dream, as mysterious as Easter Island, because I was living in my own little world, hearing voices that sounded like someone else's thoughts in my brain, and discovering miracles at every drop of a hat. Perhaps I thought I was a mystic, and read people like Julian of Norwich or Thomas Merton, but to the Cuban boss at the hotel, I was just a pest.

Meanwhile, the Parti Québécois won the election that year and politically oriented people had a totally different agenda. I was just a pawn in their game.

March 18, 2015

L'ILLUMINATION, POINT D'INTERROGATION

*Lancer un câble à l'étoile dans la nuit
Tête hors de l'eau, vers quelque chose hors d'ici.*
(Félix Leclerc, Comme Abraham)

*À vendre les Corps sans prix, hors de toute race, de tout monde,
de tout sexe, de toute descendance ! Les richesses jaillissant à chaque
démarche ! Solde de diamants sans contrôle !*
(Arthur Rimbaud, Solde)

Imaginez un roman sur la quête de l'absolu, de l'infini. Il s'agirait de l'histoire d'un jeune bourgeois insatisfait de l'idéal matérialiste que lui propose son milieu. Chez ses parents il habite une maison modèle de luxe pourri et il veut mieux que ça. Un jour il aperçoit des vagabonds qui semblent heureux, et il part à l'aventure; il fait très peu de valises et sort son pouce. Il se dirige vers l'autoroute et il est parti.

Pour ceux qui l'entouraient, il semble disparu. Il efface toute trace de son départ et brouille les pistes qui permettraient de le retrouver et de le réappivoiser.

Un soir le long de la route, deux heures avant l'aube, il voit les splendeurs inouïes du ciel qui prépare le lever du soleil. Les jaunes suivent les verts, les mauves suivent le rose. Le jeune homme entend les crapauds et les cigales qui se mettent à célébrer le début du jour. Et il a désormais une mission : découvrir la Ville dans le ciel dont l'architecte et le bâtisseur est divin. Comme Abraham, il lance un câble à l'étoile dans la nuit et cherche son chemin à l'aveuglette d'abord; puis il aperçoit des signes révélateurs qui le guident vers son but.

Voici qu'il rencontre d'autres vagabonds. Des chercheurs de l'absolu, à leur façon. Des voyageurs et des coureurs des bois. Il croise des autochtones qui lui inspirent leur vision du monde.

Parfois, il affronte des obstacles insurmontables. La police le recherche, car il est porté disparu. Ses parents ont retenu les services des autorités pour le ramener de force au bercail. Le jeune homme doit se

cacher et changer son apparence; il se déguise et passe inaperçu à travers les villes.

Dans la forêt qui longe la route, il a faim. Les tentations l'approchent. Les voix qu'il entend lui suggèrent de renoncer à son projet et de retourner au confort et au luxe.

Il persévère.

Entre-temps il y a les merveilles de la forêt, de la route, de coucher à la belle étoile, sans souci. La pluie. La neige. Les cerfs. Les renards. Les loups. Les champignons. Les herbages divers. Et toujours le ciel qui fascine notre héros.

Mais voici que la police lui tend une embuscade. Il est arrêté. On le place dans une asile pour les fous dangereux. On le reconduit à l'asile, dans la grande ville. On le force à prendre des médicaments et on lui promet un succès stupide parmi des êtres stupides qui vivent dans la stupeur. On le fait travailler dans un bureau où il doit se dissimuler et camoufler ses sentiments anarchistes parmi les somnambules.

Découragé, il se met à fréquenter des putes et des trafiquants de drogue, des gens de la rue à qui il prêche l'absolu et la liberté. Certains l'écoutent. Personne ne veut renoncer à son vice.

Il est coincé dans les rouages de la civilisation et il s'empoisonne. Toutefois, en train de mourir à l'hôpital, il remarque les infirmiers et infirmières qui s'occupent des patients et il comprend quelque chose. Le sens de la vie, c'est rendre service aux autres. Viser un absolu dans le désert est une préoccupation purement égoïste. Il faut vivre pour servir les autres.

Mais c'est trop tard et les funérailles sont trompeuses et mensongères. On blâme tout sur des mauvais compagnons et des mauvaises lectures.

Une fois qu'il est enterré, on entend les corbeaux croasser par-dessus sa tombe. Quelque part, un enfant chante dans la nuit.

Le 13 janvier 2016

WHAT NIETZCHE'S MOTHER NEVER TAUGHT HIM

You're walking down a side street in NDG, fantasizing that the trees along the sidewalk are giant spiders, about to scoop you up. You're fantasizing that the trees are spirits. You've smoked a few joints, and there is sleep in every object around you, in Sleepy Hollow: the houses look haunted, the sidewalks glow with peace, the lawns are almost growing right before your very eyes. You're eighteen years old, and totally unaware of the complexities of modern life, of political situations, of race relations or of government. You've got long hair, although you don't know why. You draw cartoons of monsters, surrealistic, green-skinned faces. You listen to Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane. You are obsessed with losing your virginity. When you smoke up with the guys, you talk about being surrounded by a bubble. You have a protective cocoon around you, an aura of sleep. You haven't been raped yet.

You're in a classroom in 1969, a couple of years later, yelling at the students. You are sitting on a desk, expounding on revolution. The students are protesting, because this is Loyola College, and they are accusing you of intellectual dishonesty. You are yelling, because you are on fire with Karl Marx. You are yelling, because you have freaked out on LSD so many times. You are a graduate and you are getting into trouble. There is hate in your eyes, hate in your voice, hate for the priests and nuns, for the police, for parents, for all authority. Something is amiss. Something is about to explode, and it is you.

It is 1975, and you are still yelling. This time, you are yelling on street corners in San Francisco about Jesus Christ. You have long arguments with the director of the Christian house where the brothers and sisters live. You argue, because he doesn't like your communist views. You don't buy his right-wing American propaganda. But this is at night, behind closed doors. In the daytime, you walk up Telegraph Avenue to Berkeley campus, and you preach, at the top of your voice, an esoteric, sickly message, full of redemption and truth. It is true, but the motives are wrong, but the fanaticism is wrong. It is true, but this is madness. Everyone stands up in turn and preaches a different Gospel. There are a thousand different cults in ten square miles. It is a spiritual supermarket. Young girls in long white robes, older girls in Indian saris, young brothers with long hair and beards are listening to Holy Hubert, who is yelling, "EVERY COMMUNIST ON THIS CAMPUS IS GOING TO BURN IN HELL!!! EVERY HOMOSEXUAL ON THIS CAMPUS IS GOING TO BURN IN HELL!!! EVERY DRUG ADDICT ON THIS CAMPUS IS GOING TO BURN IN HELL!!!" And Holy Hubert has written a book called Bless Your Dirty Heart. And Holy Hubert is an embarrassment to the born again Christian community. Red-necked and red-haired, with his teeth knocked out, he is preaching condemnation. Tsk tsk, you shake your head. You take Holy Hubert aside, you put your arm around his shoulders, and you try to show him some love. Because you have taken this Gospel message seriously, and you are able to love the most hardened, the most hateful. You are about to collapse, because they have convinced you to go off your medication.

You are sitting in your parents' living room, and you are psychotic. Your mother is giving you the silent treatment. Your father is very worried because you are sick. He thinks you are full of the devil. All your life, he has thought his own son is full of the devil. Sometimes, you ARE full of the Old Nick. Your mother is mad at Harry, because she thinks all of it is his fault, giving you drugs and filling your mind with magic. You are distressed, because you have gunpowder in your brain. You feel the presence of shame. You feel your mother is manipulating you, putting a spell on you. You believe your parents are Nazi witches, planning airplane crashes and plotting the end of the world. You think their Establishment is evil, and the carpet is evil, and you have seen your father's face turn green and melt into his shoulders, looking like a cross between an ogre and Jean Drapeau. But that was on LSD, and you were laughing at him then; today, you are under their power, and you are caught in their web. You are about to be hospitalised, again.

You are working in Fredericton, New Brunswick, as a translator for the Debates Section of the Legislative Assembly. You are weightlifting. You are full of energy. You search through the Statutes of the province to find legal terminology. You photocopy parts of speeches by Richard Hatfield that are already translated. You type, and you type, and you type some more. There are five dictionaries open on your desk, and you also have access to a computer terminal plugged into the Secretary of State's data bank Termium, which your father contributed in founding years before. And your boss thinks highly of you. He phones you every other day and summons you to his office to encourage you and teach you grammar and advanced points of language. And you respect the boss, because he is one

of the single most intelligent people you have ever met, soft-spoken, a near genius: he went to Germany and learned German just to read Hegel in the original, so he could complete his Ph.D. thesis in philosophy. And the boss is your friend. And you have a wild girlfriend on the side called Debbie, and you write essays for her because she is a student, because she is full of mischief, a female Bugs Bunny. And otherwise, it is incredibly lonesome in Fredericton. There is Chooch, who always argues with you about feminism. In Fredericton, there are two hotels, one discotheque, four bars, one largely unused concert hall, one museum, two movie theatres and about 85 churches. Out of 50,000 people, there are about 100 immigrants, and practically no coloured people. There is no crime, no murders, and people don't lock their car doors when they park. There are trees, trees, trees, and Christ Church cathedral, an Anglican church built on Indian holy ground, which gives you a double whammy. You are going to church every day, hoping to make friends. You are also going to confession after every session with Debbie. One day, the priest gets tired, and he suggests for a joke that you buy a rubber doll. Airplanes, taxis, restaurants, loneliness, expensive loneliness. You walk to the library, through the snow, you walk everywhere and there is no one to talk to in Fredericton.

You are back in Montreal a couple of years later, and you have phoned out for a call girl. You are shaving in the bathroom of your bachelor apartment. There is a computer in the other room, and you are earning a thousand dollars a week doing translation contracts. You are living in the fast lane, off on a tangent, wild for kicks. Angry against God, because people are dying around you, because He won't give you a girlfriend, angry against your father, because you think he is a fascist, you are rebellious against

authority, bitter because you drink and smoke and do drugs, depressed with alcohol, high with marijuana, excited because you never ever wait for the bus -- you take taxis everywhere. You hang around jazz clubs every night until closing time. You know most of the musicians in Montreal, and you smoke up with them at the break in the backroom at the club. You're always telling jokes, exploding with godawful laughter, enthusiastic, buying George supper for weeks on end, giving to Cardinal Léger's leper colonies, spending \$ 500 a week on sex, and you are very, very confused at an intimate level. You can't slow down and take time out to talk to yourself. You just talk to your shrink, who calls you "a man in a hurry" and says precious little else. You can't wait. You are in trouble, not with the police, not with the authorities, but with your own conscience. And you go to confession about three times a week.

It is 11:00 o'clock at night, and the contractions begin. At first, Connie says it is false labour. You don't think so, because the baby is due. You phone the Royal Vic, and they suggest she take a bath and if the contractions persist after half an hour, then she should come in to the hospital. You take a bath together, and the little twitches persist. Connie says, "This is a snap." Her waters haven't broken yet. So you pack your bags and phone a taxi. The taxi hasn't come after half an hour. You phone back the taxi company, and they assure you it's on its way. No, the baby is on its way, and Connie drives to the hospital, at 2:00 in the morning, during contractions, and you are trying to be supportive. When the waters break, at 6:00 in the morning, then the fun begins. Childbirth is the most intense, the most painful, the most joyful, the most natural event you can experience. You get a vision of the goddess, and you understand the meaning of life, as Connie gives that

final push, and Dr. Rajabi takes the forceps and yanks out this little creature covered with caca and blood and afterbirth, and he says, "It's a girl!!!" It's like getting hit in the head with a hammer. And Connie smiles, under the oxygen mask, and the little baby with the pointy head squeezes your finger, when she is only two minutes old. Wonderful. Stupendous. Exhilarating. A girl.

Connie and you are lying in bed, and it is two in the morning. The baby is sleeping in her crib. Connie is as big as if she swallowed a basketball. She is expecting a second baby you will call Cordelia. Connie and you are having an intellectual argument about the Holocaust, and you are both distressed. Connie and you are very, very tired, and she is off her medication because she is expecting, and you don't see eye to eye. And she claims she is an atheist, and you claim you are a Catholic, and you have never agreed about certain points. And no one ever wins an argument, and you have been praying for patience for the past six months, and you don't lose your temper anymore. But certain times of the night, and certain subjects trigger mental illness, anxiety and anguish, and you have to call it quits around three in the A.M. And you have a big day ahead of you, raising kids. This is happiness. At last. The happiness you can't find in books, in school, in religion, in drugs, in travel, in wild sex, in A.A. And there is friction at the best of times, but you are not alone.

May 29, 1994

