

WAKE UP!

Robert Markland Smith

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THE GLITTERING PLEASURE DOME

*“Mathilda’s the defendant,
She killed by the hundreds...”*

(Tom Traubert’s Blues, Tom Waits)

“For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.”
(Revelations 18:3)

The barker cries out, for all to hear along the street, “Step right up, folks! Come and see the wonders of the world! We have got women who strip down and turn you into animals, like Circe of old! We have freaks who can recite poetry inspired by the devils and evil spirits of Babylon! Step right up, men, women, children — it’s the greatest show on earth!” And the lights behind him are flashing, strobe lights roam up and down the strip, and there are wild jazz saxophones screeching. The young children walk up to the barker, and stare at him in bewilderment. He continues, “We’ve got Barbie dolls for you, kids, and depraved Disney videos with happy endings for all of you! You, son, come up front here.” And one little boy with stars in his eyes approaches the snake oil salesman. “Yes, sir,” he whispers, his tongue hanging out of his rosy lips.

“Son, tell me,” the barker howls into his microphone. “Do you like war? Do you like blood and guts and gore?”

“Yes-sir,” the little boy’s eyes light up.

“Well, we have got computer games in which real soldiers shoot real bullets at real peasants, and it is all yours for a few pennies a minute. So, step right in, son!” And the little boy walks in, enticed. He enters the giant arcade, with the sirens whistling, and the lewd pictures of women in bikinis, and his mother cries after the little boy, but he is lost in a maze of demonic children.

There is now a crowd of spectators approaching. The barker is on fire from hell, and he is yelling now: “Who wants a sports car that shoots bullets like James Bond’s vehicle? Who wants a Batmobile that can fly through a building as impregnable as the World Trade Center? You sir, you look like you are eager to kick ass!”

And another young man pays his ticket to the doorman, and disappears from the street into the glittering front door of the night club. His girlfriend is in shock, to lose her lover to such cheap attractions and cheap thrills.

Now the barker carries on, and he does a little dance around his white cane. He is wearing a glowing green bow tie, and waving around a top hat with the American flag on it. He spots a young girl out of the crowd. He grabs her attention and she is mesmerized. “You, there! Would you like men to worship the ground you walk on? Would you like to be as famous and sexy as Madonna?” Her eyes light up and a smile stretches across her face, like a snake wrapping itself around her head. The barker continues: “Well, we have just the fashions for you! We have see-through blouses and skin-tight pants! Plus we have spiked heels that will make you look like a tramp! Hey, don’t pass up this opportunity, step right up and pay the doorman. Ladies’ night will be tomorrow night, so pay right up!” And the teenage girl just can’t resist, because they haven’t taught her that in her school. She flows into the arcade, hissing like a boa constrictor. We never see her again.

“Finally, ladies and gentlemen, who wants to get rich quickly? Hey, we have internet sales in the billions of dollars, we have bogus prospectuses, insider trading, and you can

even become politicians! You sir, wouldn't you like to sway the masses with your winning smile? Would you like to be a show-business star and run the government? Step right up!!" And one more young lawyer disappears into the Babylonian arcade, never to reappear until he is recycled into one of the devil's disciples.

However, there is a homeless person in the crowd, a penniless hobo who wanders up and asks the barker, "What about me? Can I get in there? I haven't got the money to pay admission, but you can have my soul, buddy..."

But the crowd has now dissolved, and the doors to the night club are closing. The barker gives the homeless man a look of disdain and scorn, and states, for all to hear: "No, sir, here we only take cash or credit cards. We are not interested in your two-bit soul. Besides, the door is closing. We are not taking any more pleasure seekers tonight. Go to the Salvation Army, buddy, go to the mission and try to get a bed for the night. We are not a charity organization here. Besides, old man, the last shall be first and the first shall be last, ha-ha."

The door closes. The barker has gone indoors. Suddenly, we can't hear the music; the flashing lights have abated. It is dark and silent on the main street. It can be Sainte-Catherine Street in Montreal, it can be somewhere in Soho, in London; it can be in Greenwich Village, in New York. The lights are out, and the homeless person walks away, wondering what he is missing. He stumbles, because he has a bad leg. He searches through a garbage can, looking for a sandwich, and then finds a lit cigarette butt on the sidewalk. He glances back at the magic-theater night club, and then continues on his way, limping into the night.

The shadows swallow him up and cover him like a protective mantle. He disappears into an alley and we can't see him anymore.

Fade.

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THE MARQUIS DE SADE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

Do you remember being seventeen years old, and coming of age? Do you remember what prompted you to change from a jock to a joe college and thence, to becoming a bohemian? Somehow, the Church didn't speak to you any longer, your parents didn't seem very hip and the internal politics and dynamics of your family seemed morbid and repressive, didn't they? You argued about labour unions with your dad, and he kept telling you that you were imagining things, and he wondered what they were teaching you in college... You read *Les Fleurs du mal* by Baudelaire, you read the *Comte de Lautréamont*, and that figures, because you were a literature student. When you first started college, you tried to join a frat, but they rejected you because you wore a goatee and a tiki around your neck. You attended a couple of chug-a-lug parties, watched a couple of frat movies about becoming a successful businessman, and you weren't interested. You cultivated a taste for jazz, and long before you had peers, or friends your own age, you went to clubs like *L'Ermitage*, on *Côte-des-Neiges*, like the *Black Bottom*, on *St. Antoine Street*, and finally, the *Penelope*, on *Stanley Street*, in Montreal, of course.

You were acquiring a sense of identity that lasted through most of your adult life.

When you first moved to Montreal, your father set you up with his cousin Maurice Huot's daughter. Now, Maurice would come to your house and argue that at every session of the United Nations, they should begin with the Lord's Prayer. In other words, he was a bigot. And even when you were sixteen years old, you knew that at the UN there were Muslim countries, and communist countries, and you were kind of embarrassed by your father's cousin. As for the daughter, well, you remember taking her to a Jacques Lussier concert at Place des Arts, and she commented that she only liked the Bach, whereas you liked the jazz, and you remember walking her home to Outremont, across Park Avenue, and she said, with scorn in her voice, that these immigrants were so vile and stupid and dirty and disgusting. She was a tight-assed little bitch, and her pastime was to sit by candlelight in her bedroom and listen to Bach and read Kierkegaard. Mind you, there is nothing wrong with Bach or Kierkegaard, but when you are sixteen years old, you are expected to have a bit more piss-and-vinegar than that. You would take her out on dates, and sit in the park, in Outremont, and she looked so prissy and uptight that you never even made a pass at her. (I guess you secretly hated her.)

So, to sum up, you were dissatisfied with the father's cousins. You wanted to hoist anchor and leave traditional ways behind.

One night, and it was perhaps in February of 1966, you were sitting in the Bistro on Mountain Street by yourself, having a beer, because that's what macho guys did, they drank hard. (Perhaps you were also a budding drunk, but that's another story.) Anyways, you were sitting there, by the door, when in walked a college buddy, Marcel Carpenter. He was in your English Romantic poetry class at Loyola, and he joined you for a beer, and you two got to talking, and he asked you if you wanted to go to a really neat place nearby.

So, you finish your beer, and you both walk down to a place called The Hawaiian Lounge, on Stanley Street, right beside the Esquire Show Bar. You walk in, and you've been there perhaps ten minutes, when you start noticing something funny, something strange going on. For instance, there is a lady with a platinum-blond wig and a beauty spot on her face, and wearing a fancy white blouse with frills and a crotch-high mini skirt, and she comes up to you with a dirty smile and pinches your cheek. And when she speaks to you, she has a man's voice, a deep, sexy, raspy voice, and she tells you her name is Sugar. And there is something going on here, and you don't know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?

And you look around the room, and it's full of boys dressed up as girls and girls dressed up as boys, and you are a middle-class Catholic kid, and you decide to play it by ear. You sit with Marcel and order a beer, and you watch the floorshow, because there is a huge stage right plop in the middle of the bar. You watch nervously at first, while a stripper dressed at first as a woman, strips down to a pair of underwear, and oh my god! it's a man, and he starts cracking a whip, and jeez, this is vulgar. You watch a lesbian singer called Carole Berval belt out Otis Redding songs about girlfriends. And there is Alice.

At the next table over, there is a cute young thing with long, curly black hair, and the blackest, darkest, most evil mascara you have ever seen, and she is wearing a micro mini skirt, and she is sitting with a butch that looks like E.G. Robinson, with short black hair greased back, and wearing a man's suit, and smoking a cigar. Anyhow, the girl is called Alice, and she is dancing on stage, and you ask her to dance, and she dances with you, and you speak French together, and you are a bit disappointed that she is so vulgar. Now, your sun is in Virgo, your moon is in Scorpio and your rising sign is in Scorpio, which means you are in love with Alice, the woman in black. Anyways, after a while, Marcel tells you not to dance with her anymore, because her butch lover wants to kill you.

And Marcel keeps going to the other side of the room, and disappearing for half an hour at a time, he goes to the other side of the stage, and meanwhile, someone from over there keeps buying you beer. You ask the waiter who is ordering you free beer, and he says it's someone over there. So what the hell, you don't care, you drink the beer first and figure you'll ask questions later. After all, a free beer is a beer, right?

So this goes on until about one o'clock in the morning, when Marcel tells you he's leaving. And you tell him you're staying behind, and you're going to watch the show by yourself. And the band keeps playing, and you are trying to look hip, and finally, it's three o'clock in the morning, and it's closing time. Last call.

At this point, a big, muscular guy built like a professional boxer comes to your table, and he's wearing a suit, and he says to you, "Come with me." You ask what is going on, and he says your friend sold you to him for fifteen dollars, and you now have to go with him. That goddamn Marcel. So that's who was buying you free beer from across the stage! So what do you do?

Okay, let's go. You get your winter coat, and you (slowly) walk down the stairs with the boxer, and you (slowly) open the door, and you (slowly) and carefully walk down to the street, and THEN, BY GOD! YOU HEAD FOR THE HILLS, RUNNING AWAY FROM TROUBLE, AND YOU TURN AND YELL AT THE GUY, IN FRENCH, "I'M SORRY, I AM NOT GAY!!" And he doesn't run after you, he just stands there, brokenhearted as his date runs away.

Well, you kept going back to the Hawaiian Lounge, for about six weeks, and buying drinks for Alice, and you phoned the cousin's daughter, and you told her you were leaving her for a lesbian from downtown, and she was shocked. But then Marcel had the kindness to tell you that Alice was NOT in love with you, she was REALLY a prostitute and she was ONLY interested in you because she thought you had money. So what goes around comes around, and you were disappointed, to say the least. You were still a naïve bourgeois kid, and it took some time before you woke up, quite a long time indeed.

I contacted her, and she invited me to go out there and join her. Now St. Thomas is a village near London, Ontario, in the Niagara Peninsula. It is very pretty there, and sufficiently remote to be safe from what was happening in Montreal. Joan told me she had moved out there to stay with her uncle and aunt, because she didn't want anything to do with psychedelics and all the trips going down in the big city. Basically, she fled for her life.

First, I took a train to St. Thomas, fell asleep and missed my stop. I got off at London, and began to hitchhike to St. Thomas. I got a ride with a crazy, angry couple, whose car broke down about a mile out of London, and the husband turned around to me and yelled, 'None of this would have happened if we hadn't picked you up!! GET OUT AND WALK!' So as their engine was smoking, I took my grip and began to walk. Then I got a ride with a pickup truck, and the driver asked me if I wanted a job... He told me where to show up.

I remember arriving in St. Thomas safely, and joining Joan, her uncle and aunt and a bunch of the local people. I didn't know yet why Joan had moved out there – I thought she was pregnant – and I got paranoid – I thought the people there believed I was the father of the child – and finally, I was given a bed to sleep in or rather a sofa, in the living-room of the uncle and aunt.

As it turns out, I did show up for work, and couldn't handle it. It was doing road construction. First, they had me operating a jack hammer, or rather the jack hammer was operating me, bouncing me around all over the highway, and I am a little guy, not built to handle heavy machinery. The next day, I was knee-deep in mud, shoveling mud out of a pit. And finally, the gruff, tough and elderly foreman yelled at me, 'Look, get out of here! This isn't an old folks home!' And I came back home, to Joan and her uncle and aunt, and I hadn't been fired from too many jobs in my life, and that evening, on the front balcony, I broke down and sobbed. Joan wasn't sure about me at this point.

This is where it got psychic. While her relatives were sleeping upstairs, Joan would come down to the living-room, and began initiating me to sex. I was a virgin. At first, it was traumatic. But eventually, we fell further and further in love.

Her uncle started talking about polstergeists, and how spontaneous fires appear around the house when there is a virgin present, but he was probably pulling my leg. Then everyone started noticing the psychic connection between Joan and me: she would pick a card out of the deck, and I could always guess which card it was. Likewise, I would pick a card, and she could guess. I wasn't prepared for any of this. In my bag, I had a copy of Thus Spake Zarathustra, by Nietzsche, and The Trial, by Kafka, which I was reading for the fourth time. I thought I was an atheist in those days. Joan wasn't too impressed by Nietzsche, because she opened his book at random to a passage that read, Women are at best cows. And her uncle would ridicule Bob Dylan, whom we both liked, because he said Dylan couldn't play harmonica.

One day, Joan and I had a disagreement, and she went storming off; however, I knew exactly where to find her, and wandered into a nearby park – where she was hiding, behind bushes.

Joan one day decided to take me to see a fortune teller, an old lady who lived alone on the outskirts of town. This old lady didn't know me from Adam. She sat me down and looked at my palms: she said I wasn't a worker and that I was a student. Then she guessed I was going out with a red-haired girl. Correct. Then she said, N, D, S, L. Pick a letter, so I picked S, and she said to me, in her gentle old voice, they call you 'Smitty' – don't they? (Meanwhile, Joan and her aunt were parked outdoors.) She was right – people used to call me Smitty. Then she went into a trance, and moaned that she saw a key. She added that I would live until the age of 93, and would eat some corned beef and cabbage – and fall asleep, dead. (I never eat corned beef; it is just not part of my diet.)

Anyway, many other things happened, and I had to go back to Montreal, to take care of business. As I was upstairs shaving, it occurred to me that Joan should write me a note to come back, and should stuff it into my bag. I came back downstairs and told her this, and she said the same thing had just occurred to her.

And it was like this throughout this whole relationship. Finally, she broke up with me, because she claimed I was too hung up. She had a choice to make between me and her uncle and aunt, and she chose them. She was more experienced than me in every respect, and I was still wet behind the ears. So I did move back to Montreal, where I majored in philosophy in third year at Loyola, but that's another story...

BATTLESCARS AND STIGMATA

I am Brantwood Beach, and I remember. I sit in Ottawa East, in the capital of Canada, and it was 1959, the year Fidel took over Cuba. There were radio reports, with static over the airwaves, and this was a new hope. I remember it well.

That spring, a bunch of boys were playing with firecrackers to celebrate the Queen's birthday, in the month of May. There was one boy who grew up to be a doctor, and his brother, who was thirty-eight years later one of the generals involved in the Somalia scandal; another boy became a bus driver, and then there was one Robert Smith. Now, Robert was ten years old, and he had 200 firecrackers in his right hand pocket. Nobody is sure how it happened, but maybe a match touched the firecrackers, maybe it was an accident. But suddenly, as the sun watched, the firecrackers started going off, like machine gun fire, crackling and exploding, one by one, then faster and faster, as the boys watched Robert explode.

There was smoke in the air, and the smell of sulphur, and plenty of weeping and yelling, and the machine gun crepitation of firecrackers going off, as the boys pulled Robert aside and tried to pull down his pants, which were on fire, and everyone was in a panic, and then, and then, good old Jean St-Denis came up to Robert in the middle of this hubbub and hue and cry, and asked Robert, "Smitty, can I have the rest of your

firecrackers?” (Now there is a poetic justice, because twenty years later, Jean was trafficking coke in fascist Spain, and got busted and did ten years in jail under Franco’s regime.)

I am Brantwood Beach, and I remember. It was the heyday of motorcycle gangs, and there were hardrocks. The cops didn’t like them, and the cops used to harass them just for wearing their hair in jelly rolls and riding motorcycles. Robert Smith and his friends used to walk through the bushes and woods down by the beach, and find hardrocks sitting around campfires with their girlfriends and a case of beer or two, and Robert liked the hardrocks; he wanted to grow up to become one of them. Because all the other grown-ups were phony, they would talk down to Robert and say, with a nasal voice, “Oh hello, little boy, what grade are you in?” And they would pat Robert on the head, whereas the hardrocks, who were seventeen or eighteen years old, would talk to Robert as an equal. They would discuss what was on their minds. It’s a bit like what Frank Zappa said, to the effect that if children knew what their parents were up to, they would rise up and kill them in their sleep. And the parents all had short, short hair, and short, short tempers, and they worked for the government plotting fascist plots, or so it seemed. The father of Robert, anyway, would argue against communism, whenever given the chance. And Robert longed for a friend to play ball with him or take him fishing, but dear old dad merely helped Robert memorize his catechism lessons every night, for two hours at a time. And if Robert came home with a report card that gave him a 90 per cent average, but saying Robert came in second of the class, Robert was in deep trouble. For the home was élitist, and the expectations were high.

And I am Brantwood Beach. I remember. I remember the time that Joseph de Bané went down to the beach one night, and left a pile of clothes on the sand and walked down into the water, only to swim a hundred feet upstream, and come back out of the water, thence to hitch-hike to Boston, whence he would phone his grieving father a month later, after the police had dragged the waters for nine days, searching for a drowned corpse. And Robert Smith watched the police dragging the waters, and he pondered all these things in his heart.

Likewise, Robert Smith was in the hospital that summer to get his leg operated on for the firecracker burns, for the scar kept pussing and never healed. It was a kiloid wound, and could have turned into cancer. And one morning, in the hospital, Robert wandered around on his wheelchair, and went to visit one of the boys there, who was about the same age, around twelve. And the boy was weeping, and he asked Robert, “Here, touch my leg, tell me it’s still there!!” And the boy was desperate, for a train had run over his leg and his leg had been amputated the night before by the doctors, and Robert didn’t know what to say, so he answered, “Yes, it’s still there.” And there was no leg there, just crumpled bedsheets on a hospital bed.

And I am Brantwood Beach. The girls in bikinis used to come and neck with their boyfriends on the sand, and Robert Smith would lust a tiny little boy lust and then rush off to confession and tell the priest he found girls pretty. And the priests would sit behind the grate and ask, “How many times, my son?” And Robert found out as an adult that you could tell a priest in a confessional that you had slept with three hookers,

robbed a bank, killed an old lady, and as long as you were repentant, the priest would give you the absolution. But if you told the priest something like, “Every time I go to mass, I think of the Spanish Inquisition,” the priest would blow a fuse and kick you out of the confessional box.

And at Brantwood Beach, the waters were polluted soon later. In 1959, there was a bit of seaweed, but now the beach is closed down for pollution reasons. I guess if the Cold War wasn't going to destroy the Earth, the pollution would. And Robert Smith said his prayers every night, praying we wouldn't get nuked by the Russians during the night. And it was dark outside, and the nuns warned the students that on May 1st, 1960 it was going to be the end of the world. And they looked pretty silly on the next day and the next day. And the Year 2000 is upon us, and Fidel is still alive and well in Havana, and Robert Smith has a scar on his right thigh. Here, look, can you feel my leg?

EVERY MAN'S GOT HIS PRICE

“It has always seemed to me that the war has been omitted as a field for the observations of the naturalist.”

(A Natural History of the Dead, Ernest Hemingway)

There is presently an exhibition about the sixties at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and it struck me as interesting that there is practically no reference to the war in Vietnam in the entire show. There is plenty of Beatles music, and you can see and hear Jimi Hendrix playing the Star Spangled Banner on video, but these artifacts are out of context. The entire backdrop of the sixties was the war in Vietnam, and indeed, the violent movement for decolonization in the third world. This was, of course, a result of the 1948 declaration of rights of the United Nations. And it is also interesting to note that the Soviet Union wanted to add to this declaration the rights of nations to self-determination.

In any case, I saw the show at the Museum of Fine Arts, in the winter of 2003-04, and was appalled that there was also no mention of the Front de libération du Québec, which gripped the headlines throughout the sixties in this country, no mention of the women's liberation movement or of the black liberation movement, with all its extreme figures, from Malcolm X to Eldridge Cleaver.

It was, basically, an apolitical show. It did not capture my attention.

This is why I want to tell you about a mercenary I met in Vancouver, in May 1968. I thought he was an anomaly among the peace and love propaganda that was prevalent during those years. He certainly represented a contrast with the generally non-violent hippies I knew.

I had hitchhiked from Montreal to Vancouver that spring, with a lady I met called Mary Wells. I guess we used to call them “chicks.” I was hoping to seduce her, but she was not interested in me. We left Montreal with about \$ 15 in our pockets, to travel over 3,000

miles with no reservations. In Toronto, we slept at a digger's house; anyway, it was overcrowded, and during the night, some bikers came in and stole, among other things, my passport, while I was sleeping. In Saskatoon, we stayed for a night or two with my sister and her erstwhile boyfriend Morris, who were students at the time. Then we hitchhiked and hitchhiked, through the Rocky Mountains, and up to Golden, British Columbia. There we met a speed freak called "Crazy Cal," who was running away from a paternity suit in Hamilton. He had a tattoo on his left arm that read: "Looser." He told me that one night in North Bay, he was really depressed and felt bad about himself, so he took a knife and wanted to tattoo "Loser" on his forearm, but he misspelled it. He wrote "Looser." And that is what kind of guy he was. We spent a night in an all-night diner in Golden, where a redneck kept making threats to us across the restaurant, because we had long hair.

Finally, we arrived in Vancouver, coming down from the mountains around Hope, and it was springtime. All the hippies were hitchhiking the other way, going back East, and we wondered why. Someone told us the cops were cracking down on hippies in Vancouver, so everyone was leaving town.

Once we arrived in town, Cal knew of a digger's house on Second Street, so we went there. There would be a man called a "digger" who would buy or rent a house, and rent out rooms to the local hippie population. We had a couple of dollars between us, so we rented a room, with two beds. Mary Wells had enough of us, because both of us kept teasing her, and she went to stay with relatives in the city.

So that night, I was getting ready to sleep in a warm bed, when I noticed there was a man occupying the bed. He wore his black hair short and had a trimmed beard. He spoke French with an accent from France. I figured I would talk to him and figure out who he was, and what he was about, before I kicked him out of my bed. After all, I had rented that bed.

He told me he had fought in the Algerian war, for the French, and had acquired a passion for killing with knives. And he was on his way to Vietnam, because his intention was to fight as a mercenary, for either side. He was a mercenary soldier, and wanted to practice his trade.

So what can I tell you? I let him sleep on the rented bed, and I was quite happy to sleep on the hardwood floor.

STREET BUSINESS INC.
"AAAAGH!!" I woke up screaming, once again. My arms were flailing, caught in the bed sheets and I was in a cold sweat. I was trying to break out of a web, a spell, something demonic that recurred every night.

“Robert, are you all right?” That is my mother. She was just out in the hall, outside my room, gathering dirty clothes to prepare a load of laundry. She is fifty-something, and a single mom. She is doing her best, but she looks haggard this morning.

“I’m all right, mom, it’s just that dream again...” She looks at me for a second, nods and goes about her business doing housework.

The dream went like this. I am inside the basement of a castle, and I am trying to find my way out. I go up staircases, as though going up into the steeple of a church, and down empty halls. Finally, while my enemies are in pursuit, I find a little door. It is really small. And I slip through this door, and suddenly, I am sliding, sliding down endless tunnels, like on a slide in the park, and it is dark, and no one knows about this exit except for me. The speed of the dream accelerates, as I run down downwards tunnels, and finally exit through a hole in the wall, and come out on the outside of a mountain on which the castle rests. It is nighttime. I am now outdoors, and the mountainside is breathing, and lava like sweat is pouring down the sides of the hill. I am then walking down a country road, where I cross clowns and freaks and snake oil salesmen walking the other way, and towards the end of the country road, there are herds of filthy pigs held in red pigpens. And it seems like that is the future of mankind, to turn into swine held in someone’s animal farm. And then I wake up, sweating and oftentimes screaming for my life, until I realize I am awake.

Oh, let me introduce myself. I am Robert Markland Smith. I am sixteen years old, and the lady I just described earlier was my mother. My father was an alcoholic and just couldn’t stand the pressures of family life. After something happened, he disappeared, and we rarely ever hear from him anymore. I am presently a student at Concordia University in Montreal, and my mother rents a house from her parents. She works part-time at the university or somewhere.

Now it is time for breakfast. Then I will have to pack my school bag and take off for school.

My mother looks tired. It is only 9:00 o’clock in the morning, and she already appears burned out. “You look tired, mom. Can’t you get some rest?”

“It is just that I have been up since 5:30 this morning. I just wanted to finish the laundry before going to work.” She is pausing to have a cup of coffee with me while I wolf down breakfast. “Robert, can’t you eat a bit slower?”

She is a bit concerned because I am overweight. I am downright chubby, and the only reason that bothers me is that every now and then, some kid at university calls me “Fatso” or “Le gros Bob.” I am mainly worried about my pimples. That is probably why I don’t have a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend, because lately I don’t know which way I swing. There is that boy in my French lab who looks so cute...

“Robert, why are you daydreaming? You have a class at 10:00.”

“Sorry, mom.” And off I go, without making my bed or picking up after myself. My room looks like the World Trade Center on September 11 – a total mess.

Now I am in the bus, on the way to school. It is only a few blocks. I am spaced out this morning. That recurring dream about the mountain again. It shakes me up.

I am looking at people’s ears and then their noses on the bus. Mainly business people on the bus this morning. All grown-ups. They look so solid, so monolithic, and I feel transparent and neurotic. They are even smug, I would say. I don’t know, maybe it is the neighbourhood. Maybe these people have never stopped to think things over. That man sitting beside me looks like he is made out of stone. No ruffles, no wrinkles. He is reading the morning newspaper, like most people on the bus. And you know that the paper tells the truth!

Now I am at school. Philosophy class. English class. Go to the library. I saw a gorgeous girl at the library. She had a huge chest. I blushed when she smiled at me. Christ, I wish I wasn’t a virgin...Girls can probably tell. She looked like a Playboy bunny. I wish I had the nerve to ask her for her phone number. All these inaccessible ladies! They must see right through me! Now I am dropping my library books all over the floor. The library security guard is giving me a dirty look. “Sorry, sorry...”

Anyway, I have to go to the downtown campus today. I am on the shuttle bus, with other students. Some guys are fooling around, others are talking to girls, but I am reading a textbook.

I noticed something today. I was just getting off the shuttle bus, which goes from one campus in suburbia to the downtown campus, when I saw a homeless person. And this person was eating out of a garbage can. I have seen homeless people before, I have read advertisements from charity organizations about the homeless, but I paused when I saw this man and I spaced out for several minutes. It was cold, because it is November going on December, and this man with a growth of beard and a scarf around his neck stared back at me. Then he waved his arm at me, as if to say hello, or was he beckoning me to come towards him – or to come into his world? He smiled at me, as though he recognized me... Who was he? Was it my father? I doubt it. But the homeless man, who was carrying bags full of newspapers in one hand, stood there smiling at me for a full minute. He was standing on the other side of the street. He was on Guy and de Maisonneuve Boulevard, and I was on the North side of the street. Then a bus rushed down the street between us, and when the bus passed, the man with the growth of beard had vanished. Was it an apparition? An apparition of my late father?

Come on, Robert. Come to your senses. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. Pedestrians were racing past me, and cars were speeding down the boulevard. Then there was a trickle of snow, one or two snowflakes. Then it started to snow gradually

more and more. I shivered, and remembered I had to go to the Hall Building to see someone.

I never mentioned that incident to my mother. When I came home, my mother had come back from work, and she was just preparing supper. “Did you have a good day?”

“Yes, but I saw a man – “

“And? What about him?”

“Oh, nothing. I have to read a chapter from my history book before supper. I only have three pages left in the chapter.”

“How many pork chops?” My mother looked at me, inquiring.

“Oh, two is good.” And I went off to my room to finish reading the book. I thought for a split second about the homeless man who had waved at me, but I dismissed it immediately. I could remember the look in his eye, a look of wisdom.

That was my first contact with Them.

In the next couple of days, I got a few more signs, omens, whatever you want to call them. This is totally absurd to me, by the way, but I couldn't help but notice.

For instance, yesterday, I was at the Loyola Campus of the university, after a class, and I was using the washroom. Right over the urinal, there was a graffiti that caught my eye: “Break on through to the other side.” I had once heard that lyric in a song by Jim Morrison, of The Doors. That was a psychedelic band in the sixties, and I am a big fan of sixties music. I have a collection of vinyl that includes four or five hundred records. And I have an old stereo record player that still works perfectly. But that lyric rang a bell, it made me space out for a minute, the same way the homeless guy did a few days ago. What is this other side? What does that song mean? Break on through to the other side... Very strange.

Nevertheless, I dismissed that sign also. Now I have been reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, for an English class. Actually, the teacher recommended I read it, because I told him I am interested in the 1960s. And I wondered where and how I could find that level of adventure. And I was on the bus coming home from school, and it blew my mind, but two other people on the bus were reading the same book! There were three of us on the bus reading the classic by Kerouac. Now that was uncanny...

Tonight, I told my mother I felt like I was about to go through adolescence and I warned her I might do some strange or silly things. She seemed to handle it. She already knew this, she told me. She just told me not to drink like my father.

Later on that evening, I didn't share this with my mother, but an image flashed through my mind: I knew I was like a ship that was about to hoist anchor and sail off, away from traditional ways. I was about to wander off. I felt stifled living with my mother, but I couldn't tell her that. I wrote a note to myself to this effect, but I threw it in the garbage, lest mom see it and read it. I wouldn't want to upset her. And then I looked outside the window, and saw the moon looking mysterious out there in the sky, and I took a deep breath. I knew I wanted to experience life, to experience more than college life and living in a room with my mom. It was like a calling, a vocation. I felt led to go out and see life, see the world. And that world out there, that world beyond seemed full of promise. There were lots of beautiful women out there, lands to visit, books to read, smells, mountains, depths of the sea, and adventures.

"Robert, are you doing your homework?" It was my mom calling me back to reality. She was just standing outside the door to my bedroom, and she could sense I was thinking dangerous thoughts...

Reality just seemed to me so mundane, like bank accounts, walking down the same streets all the time, parking meters, the newspapers, the same old wars and strikes, the politicians, the college profs, the cafeteria at school, and church, when I used to be young. It was despicable. The routine, the boredom. Planning for your retirement. when you haven't lived. And keeping the same lousy job for thirty long years. I knew some Commerce students who had their whole career planned, from start to finish.

And I knew that somewhere out there, there was life, real life, strange lands, like Thailand or South Africa. Life in Canada was so... so colonial. People were dying before even being born.

Finally, I saw one more sign, one more invitation, one more calling, before it all happened. My friend Mary Wells invited me to go up to the mountain, on top of Mount Royal. And it was cold and windy. We went up by the Côte-des-Neiges Road side of the hill, and walked up the rickety stairs near the Boulevard. Once we hit the top of the mountain, we walked to the chalet. It was a Saturday, and I postponed doing homework for a day. At the chalet, we saw the strange homeless woman who haunts the building. The chalet is a little restaurant set by a lake on top of Mount Royal, right in the middle of Montreal. And the homeless woman, who talks to herself, who has hair like the Medusa, who dresses in rags, who scurries about mumbling curses, stopped and looked at me. It was as if she knew me from somewhere. My friend Mary Wells asked me afterwards if I knew that woman. But I was in a world of dreams by now. I was awestruck by seeing the homeless woman. I didn't answer Mary. She asked me again, "Robert, who was that? Do you know her? Speak to me." But I kept looking back at the chalet as we walked away. I was mesmerized. The homeless woman was standing by the

door of the restaurant, staring at me as I walked away. And she was saying something to me, but I couldn't make it out from so far away. I was now a hundred feet away.

Who were all these people that wandered the streets? Why did they seem to recognize me? And who am I that they should notice me? What is so special about me?

Mind you, I tried to dismiss those thoughts and concentrate on my everyday life. For a couple of weeks, I remembered the vagrants but then other things happened, and I got distracted. Until I broke on through to the other side.

Normally, I don't ever get drunk or take substances, because I don't want to end up like my dad. He used to scream and get violent when he drank. If the drink was his pacifier, it also agitated him. Especially when he was still thirsty and my mother wouldn't let him drink anymore. Then he got really rowdy. So I avoid alcohol and drugs.

Yet, tonight, I am sitting in a bar on Mackay Street, in Upstairs, and I am getting hammered. I am listening to some John Coltrane music on the PA system. And I feel blue.

But I catch myself. I am not going to end up like my father. I am still lucid enough to pay my tab and walk – well, stagger out of the bar. There are only a couple of other people in there, and no one notices me. No one notices me. I see an old wino across the street, peeing in the alley, and I just ignore him.

I walk to the Guy metro station, which is a block away. I take out my wallet, and find a bus ticket. I put my wallet back into my pants. I take the escalator down to the turnstiles. I pay my way and go into the metro station. I go down the escalator once again down to the platform. There is no one in the metro station but me. It is awfully dreadfully quiet. I start walking down the platform. There is no sound or rumbling of a metro within hearing distance. I am walking down the platform. Suddenly, I notice a small opening in the wall, a tiny aperture, a door with a light shining through it. I bend down, because I am curious. And now I feel led by the spirit to crouch down and crawl through the door. This door is about three feet tall and about two feet wide. Honest to god, I don't know why I am doing this... And I come through the door. I am on the other side of the door, and my feet slip. I am suddenly sliding, sliding, down a tunnel, and it is exhilarating, partly because I am drunk, partly because the slide downwards seems greased. I am zigzagging down the tunnel – where am I going? Now I do a somersault and land on my feet, and I am running down a tunnel that seems to lead to the center of the earth, and I can hear people running after me, or thundering hooves, and I am running, running, and losing my balance. Finally, I bump my head and knock myself out for a second. I end up in a pile of rubbish, and alone. There are rats scurrying about somewhere, I can hear their squeaky voices. They are gnawing at the stone wall surrounding me. I come to my senses, and rather than ask questions, I start climbing the

stone wall, about ten feet up, and now I see a light at the end of the tunnel. I come out of a hole and out into the street.

But where am I? Is this Montreal? I don't feel the effect of the alcohol anymore. I am rather totally awake, painfully awake. There is a blinding light shining through everything even though a minute ago, it was nighttime. I look at my watch, and it is stopped. It seemed to have stopped at the time when I entered the metro station. I am on a street – or what seems to be a street. It feels like high noon, but there are trees on this street, along the sidewalks, and the trees look spidery, alive and creepy. They have no leaves, and there is a wind blowing through the branches, and the branches are dancing a strange ballet. No there is no wind; it is the trees that are dancing. Otherwise everything is still. There are stores along the sidewalks, and the windows are all boarded up. The names of the stores are in a foreign language and a foreign alphabet. It is neither Chinese nor Persian. And there is no one on this street. I am here all alone, and all dirty from falling through that pit. There is soot on my clothes, and I seem to have ripped a hole in both my shoes. My toes are showing through the tip of the shoes.

For a split second, I think of my mother. What will I tell my mother? But suddenly, I see a Coke bottle fall from the sky and land in front of me, as though someone had thrown it at me. I look up and a bunch of wicked children are laughing and they throw another bottle at me. What is going on here? I am going to have to find shelter.

I see some strange gentlemen walking towards me. One of them is wearing a huge suit and has a parrot on his right shoulder. They approach, see my predicament and laugh at me. Right in my face. Why? What have I done to them? They both look intoxicated, and they wander off past me along the street and I can still hear them laughing. Then a blinding light hides them from my sight.

I realize now I have to go back home. My studies. My mother. I go to a street corner. It looks like St-Denis and de Maisonneuve Boulevard. There are plenty of pedestrians walking hurriedly past. I approach one and ask him how to get home. He doesn't even see me, as though I am a ghost – or a homeless person. I approach two young girls about twenty years old. They are well dressed, and look very bourgeois. They walk right past me. Have I become invisible?

Finally, I see my own mother. She is walking with two police officers, a man and a woman. I call out to her, "MOM!! MOM!!" But she stares right at me and doesn't recognize me. Either that, or she doesn't even see me. Oh my God, I want to break down and cry. And time seems to be going by so fast. It seems like I have been in this other dimension for weeks, months. I feel my face with my hand, and my beard has grown. I look down at my clothes, and they are all ripped and shredded. And there are holes in my shoes. Am I here all alone? Where are my friends? Where is Mary Wells? What has happened to me?

I am in a fog, mainly because I am four years old and just woke up. A light is going on in my mind, and I tell myself I am going to remember this dawn.

I live on Hickory Street, with my sister and my folks. Obviously. In 1952, no one gets divorced; it is difficult. My sister? Claire is three years older than me, and I often hang out with her girlfriends. There is Sally Clark, who one day tells my mom, "I don't wike Wobert, he is too wough!" I defend the little girls in the neighbourhood against the mean dog, Spanky, who likes to terrorize little kids. I beat him with a stick once. Spanky runs between the legs of the little girls to scare them, so I show him. Sally has curly hair and wears thick glasses. My sister also wears glasses, that she sometimes leaves in the middle of the street, on the pavement. Then my mom comes to pick up and save the glasses. Sometimes boys from the Italian neighbourhood come up the hill to Hickory Street, carrying knives, to do whatever mischief they can. And there I am, fighting with them on the street, until my mother comes out of the house and breaks it up. These are boys around eight years old. At this point, I think I can keep the evil out of the community.

In 1952, there are not many cars on Hickory Street: the bread man comes by once a day, with his horsedrawn wagon, selling packaged bread from door to door to the housewives. There is horse manure strewn here and there along the sidewalks. Then there is the milkman, who also has a horsedrawn wagon, and the ice man, who sells blocks of cold, transparent ice to the housewives, who use the ice in their iceboxes. There are no refrigerators yet. And finally, there is the rag man, who comes every now and then also with his horsedrawn wagon, yelling, "Rags and bottles! Rags and bottles!" There are no supermarkets in 1952; there is Skipper's, a grocery and magazine store down the street, on Carling Avenue, where there is traffic. Sometimes tanks roll down Carling. I am not allowed to go to Skipper's, because he sells porno magazines, sado-masochistic material with pictures of semi-naked women being tortured by soldiers, on the cover. And Skipper, the owner, is a nice man; he is always friendly with me. He doesn't shave often and wears a cap, perhaps because he is bald. He lives next door to us, but we never play with his daughter, Margaret Di Scipio, because she is not cool somehow. That is the lot of Italian immigrants in 1952. However there is nothing wrong with Margaret. I don't know who told me not to go near her. I do know my dad chuckles about Skipper behind his back, behind closed doors.

He also sneers about the neighbours on the other side of our house, the Comeau family, because they drink. My dad would often tell the story of Bill Comeau, the son, driving home on his motorcycle dead drunk and crashing into their garage. I know the Comeaus drink, because one day, I go into their house. They invite me in to watch television. They have a t.v. in their living room, as well as two sofas. There are no carpets, only hardwood floors, no pictures on the walls, and there are dozens of empty beer bottles behind the sofas along the walls. Anyway, that day, I am enjoying their company, watching t.v. with them, when my mother comes storming into the neighbours' house, grabs me by the arm and rescues me from a future life of crime. This time, my mother is the angel that keeps corruption outside the garden. About a week later, so that I won't go to the Comeau's house anymore, my dad comes home with a television set. Our first t.v., and

Claire and I are weeping, because our father gave in and bought it for us. The first show we ever watch, in 1953, is the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The screen is minuscule, although the t.v. set is a huge piece of furniture, and I remember the black-and-white picture of the pomp and circumstance, as the horsedrawn golden carriage carries the Queen and Prince Philip up to Westminster Abbey. I am told I am the same age as Prince Charles, born in 1948.

And life goes on in our neighbourhood, with twenty-eight children living on one city block in the suburbs. These are mainly girls, so I play with girls. There is one other boy in our neighbourhood, Jimmy, who is my age and lives two doors down. He is a shy kid, who owns a collection of American comic books. I am not allowed to read Superman or Spiderman comics. Then there are the Jardines living diagonally across the street. Barry Jardine is my age, and is always beating me up. Brian, his brother, is my sister's age, and he is a monster and a world of trouble. To attract attention, he lies down in the middle of the street, with his arms out in a cross, lying flat on his back, whenever a car is coming up the hill – then as the car drives over him, he pulls in his arms, so they won't go under the car wheels. He is a daredevil. One night, it is Queen Victoria's birthday, in May, and the entire neighbourhood is out on the street, playing with firecrackers, and I see Brian Jardine place a lit firecracker in the rear hood of his father's jacket. The firecracker goes off, and of course, the father is furious. Another time, Brian is standing with other boys on top of our garage, and there is my mother, pleading with him to come off the roof, while he is throwing stones at her. So I get an image of delinquency at a young age, but I am generally well-behaved. I talk to my grandmother on the phone and I know when to look cute, just like any three year old kid.

I know that one time, I walk up to my sister and innocently zip down my zipper and show her my penis, and tell her, "Now show me yours." And my sister yells with all her might, from the bedroom, "MAMAN! MAMAN!" And that evening, my dad comes home from work and in front of the whole family, he pulls down my pants and gives me a spanking I never forget. Afterwards, I feel humiliated, and ask him why he had to spank my naked butt, and he says, strictly, "So it would hurt more." And I am embarrassed forever.

There is a little girl in the neighbourhood called Vicky Pink. She is my best friend. I know she is Protestant, so I want to convert her to Catholicism, and we walk down the street to our church. At the front door, I pick her up by the waist and hold her up so she can see inside through the window. I know it is dark inside the church building and there are candles burning silently and serenely by the altars, and Vicky exclaims, "It is so pretty!" My mother has already been reading me the Bible since I was two years old. She has read me the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent in the garden of Eden, and the fairy tale about Samson and his long hair. I am soaking all this in...One day, my mother is hanging up laundry in the bathroom and I ask her, in French, "Who made the world?" She answers me, "God made the world." I reply, "Who made God?" And she says, "Nobody made God; he has always been there..." I look down the drain in the bathroom sink. "Always been there... always been there..." My little mind just expanded. My mind is blown.

But Vicky likes the attention of the boys. I see her and stand aloof in the alley, as she laughs wildly, while the little boys put pieces of black coal in her underwear. I don't see the point, I think they are being silly. I would rather play with my dinky toys inside our house. I always keep my toys obsessive-compulsively in order, and if anyone disrupts the order of my toys, there is a world war. One day, I find a pig's foot in the dirt in the alley beside our house, and I go all over the neighbourhood telling everyone I have found a fossil. My mother has taken us to the Museum of Man on McCord Street and I have seen the huge, fierce reconstruction of a tyrannosaurus rex. Another time, I find a British penny, with the image of the goddess sitting down, holding a scepter or something, and I tell everyone I found a Roman coin. What do I know? People don't like me in the neighbourhood however, the mothers say I should grow up to become a policeman, because I am so rough. I like to build imaginary cities in the sand in the alley, with roads and bridges for my dinky toys. I also have a mecano set and a set of wooden building blocks. I get absorbed in my toys and live in my own little world. I remember being an infant: my mother would sit me down in the sunroom while she was busy, doing god knows what, and I would sit there, in my diaper, spaced out, staring at the dust dancing in the sunlight coming in through the window, for what seems like hours. (One time, I get the cool idea of sticking a fork into the electric socket in the wall, and I go flying across the room. I don't remember the shock.)

Another time, a boy and I are climbing a telephone post at the corner, and the other boy yells at me from above, "Jump, Robert!" and I fall about fifteen feet head first on the cement below. Next thing you know, I am in the hospital, and they are stitching up my eyebrow, where I landed on the ground that day. And I love being in the hospital. Nurses love little boys, they find them cute, and I get a lot of special attention, which I don't get at home. My mother is busy with housework and her high-society lady friends. She has them over for tea and a game of bridge every now and then.

And she invites a Haitian priest, Father Papaya, over for tea. Before he arrives, she is dressing me up in my finest little shorts and white shirt and a bow tie, and tells me, "Listen, Robert, there is a man coming here this afternoon, and he is black. I don't want you saying anything about the fact that he is black. OK?" And an hour later, the priest arrives and I come running out of the bedroom and see him. He is black, so I exclaim, "Hey, you're all black!" And he laughs, with his white teeth showing. He is amused, but I look at my mother, and she is turning different colours because she is embarrassed. My sister is more discreet. She asks him if people are all curly where he comes from.

And my dad? I love my dad more than my mom, and I tell her this – she is not too happy about it, as she struggles to do the laundry. When I am an infant, every morning, I weep loudly, as my father leaves for work. But one day at noon, my dad comes home from work for lunch, and the radio is playing a live speech by pope Pius XII. I exclaim, "Papa!" as my father walks in the door, and my father screams at me, in French, "Robert, shut up! The pope is on the radio!!" And I break out in tears. I get it. One day later on, I see a garbage truck, in Montreal, and I know that when I grow up, I want to be either a garbage man or the pope...

Then suddenly, there is trouble. I am often left unattended. My mother brings me to the basement, which is an unfinished room with a dusty cement floor, where I spend many hours rocking on my rocking horse, Doodah. My dad is rarely home. He is either at the office, five days a week plus Saturday mornings. At night, he is in the basement with the neighbour, Edouard Jodouin, printing pamphlets on the Gestetner machine, late into the night. On weekends, they often leave in Mr. Jodouin's car for Sudbury, Sault Sainte-Marie, Témiscamingue and Hawkesbury, where they found and manage French Canadian Catholic Parent-Teacher groups. They are teaching other parents how to raise kids, while my dad doesn't know how to bring me up. He takes me out fishing twice, and plays ball with me once. He is never there for me, but he gets decorated by the pope for his volunteer work.

One Sunday morning, Vicky Pink comes to our back door, where I am expecting her. She walks me over to her parents' place. It is still dark out. As we walk into her father's house, she tells me that her dad cut off his finger, but stuck back on again with water. Somehow, I don't believe her. Her parents are still sleeping, so we have to be quiet. "SHHH." She takes me up into her bedroom, and lets me play with her toys in the closet. She tells me to turn around. And there is, standing bare naked by the window, just staring at me and expecting me to do something. The rising sun is shining on her. She is as naked as Adam and Eve. I look at her for a minute and notice how girls are made, and then I lose interest, tell her to get dressed and go back to playing with her toys in the closet.

On Saturday mornings, my sister and I go to the Civic Arts Center, for art lessons, and I learn how to draw and paint. On the other hand, my mom lies to me sometimes: she wants me to wear underwear, because Christ's disciples wore underwear – I don't believe her. There is already a credibility gap. Sometimes, my mom takes me to the National Gallery, and when I stand up close to the paintings, she tells me you have to stand eight feet away, and squint and look at the picture through your eyelashes, so it looks fuzzy.

Then there is the boy who steals bicycles. To make this story shorter, there is a thirteen-year old boy who keeps coming into our neighbourhood to steal the kids' bikes. One day, I decide to go with him and find out where he is hiding the stolen bikes. I will find the bikes and be a hero and all the little girls in the neighbourhood will like me. We walk down Basewater Road, where he takes me to the Experimental Farm, on the other side of Carling Avenue. I am not allowed to cross Carling. My mother told me so. And then I realize it is Sunday, as we are sitting in the grass in the park, and he is badmouthing the families that are having picnics on the hill nearby. He doesn't like the fact that these people go to church. He says they are all hypocrites. Then he proceeds to molest me and leaves me there. The serpent who enters the garden of Eden. A policeman finds me there, alone, and takes me back to my mother's house. As my mom opens the door and sees me standing with a policeman, she knows there is trouble, and I can tell by the wince of panic on her face. Then I remember driving through the Experimental Farm in the police car, with my mother freaking out in the backseat. I am more afraid of the policeman and the static on his car radio than of the child molester. I don't trust the

policeman. I lie to him to cover up the molester. It is the first time I ever tell a lie. I think about it and make a decision to lie. I discover evil. I am plunged into an abyss of evil out of which it takes me years afterwards to emerge. (And the cop tells my mother that I must never be told about this experience, but I do remember it when I am about sixteen.)

After that, I change. I keep getting into trouble. My mother will be washing her hair, and I run away. She always calls the police, who find me, perhaps a mile away. You can't run away from traumatic experiences. I am forever running away from the evil within, and I will do this as an adult. You have to keep evil Out There.

Meanwhile, my sister teases me a lot, and I tease her, but once she starts school, she is a born teacher and teaches me everything she learns in class, so that by the time I start kindergarten, I already know my alphabet and my numbers.

I want to write a poem when I am three, but can't get past the first line. And the neighbour upstairs, Mr. Slade, teaches me English that year, while we are gardening together. I speak international French, until I start school. I own about six books. But when I am a baby, I am hyperactive, so the doctor prescribes sleeping pills, which makes it worse. I am always jumping up and down and clanging the pots and pans with a spoon at five o'clock in the morning, which wakes up the whole family. But that is my way of expressing joy.

Now when I am five years old, a Vietnamese priest comes to live with us for nine months, while he is studying theology in Ottawa. He doesn't say very much to me. All his family has been murdered by the Viet Cong, whoever that is. He sleeps in my room, and I sleep on the sofa in the hall. His name is Father Nghat. He is a nice man. (Last we heard, in 1979, he had become bishop of Ho Chi Minh City but was under house arrest.)

One night, my sister comes home and tells us she saw some old winos down by the river camping by a fire. And I am fascinated. I want that. I want that adventure. I am looking for the wilderness. There has to be something more in life than the buffoons of bigotry and snobbishness. Something more than the angel who stands holding a fiery sword at the gates of the garden. My imagination is fired up at the thought of living in the bushes, by the railroad tracks, with semi-civilized individuals who can tell stories of distant lands and exotic lifestyles. There are two dimensions, home and the wilderness, and the wild is calling me. Home is repressive, with authority always breathing down your neck. Home is wandering into a church, like I do one day, and not being able to find your way out. And there is fear in your heart, if you dread what is out there, instead of exploring. At night, you look out the window, and it is dark, you can't see what is moving out there. It is calling you, calling you. You can't fence me in; my dad builds a fence around the backyard, and within one day, I have found three ways to escape. And the biggest fence is the lies they have told you: "thou shalt not." The weapon they use against you is to convince you that you are evil if you break their rules. My sister teases me by telling me there is a demon in hell called Robert, who will "get me." Are you a bad boy? Are you

going to listen? They finally provoke you to rebel, to lash out, to steal, to fight and to go against your conscience, because by then you aren't sure what is true or right, after all. And the scapegoat is sent out into the wilderness, carrying all the sins of the community.

That is when heaven is moved to have mercy.

THE FORTRESS AND THE CHAOS

CHAPTER TWO

Everything is in order now. I have built my city and nothing can destroy it. There are bridges and tunnels and roads and plenty of cars that travel there. There are also trucks and steam shovels and army jeeps. Unfortunately, my city is made of sand, and all the vehicles are nothing but Dinky toys. The rain can come anytime and the snow. Any adult can walk on my city and crush it.

My city is located in the alley beside our brick house, on the side of the Comeau family. It is my duty to protect the city, but the watchman waketh but in vain.

First, there is a gentleman in my dad's office whose wife is... Whose wife is... (Don't ever mention that word, Robert.) My mom told me that Monsieur Savoie is coming to our house today. He is from some place called New Brunswick, and he is a translator, who works for my dad. And his wife is... Oh, it is terrible. She is not well in the head. She is like cousin Helen Smith. I hear she is a wicked woman and I should never call my children Helen, when I grow up, lest they should become wicked like Helen. And now there is a black cloud outside our windows, even in the daytime. There is a shadow in the corners that is evil. Don't mention that word, that awful word.

And another day, I decide to go to church and go to confession. I walk to our church and manage somehow to open the heavy door. I walk in and it is silent. There are candles burning by the altars of the saints. There are chandeliers and crosses everywhere. I knock at the door of the sacristy and an old man comes out. Out of nowhere. And I tell him I want to go to confession. I am four or five years old. He tells me to go home, with an old smile. So I walk all the way down the aisle, the main aisle up to the heavy door to get out – and it won't open! I am locked in. Now the building looks evil and scary. I am trapped! So what do I do? I cry. And the old man wearing a cassock and walking with a limp comes limping down the aisle and I see him coming, and he looks evil as he approaches.

Luckily, there is daddy. He takes me out for walks at night. We go down the street where the rich people live, and he picks me up by the waist and holds me over the hedges, so I can see the big houses, and he whispers in my ear, so only I can hear it, "Les Anglais. Les Anglais." And I guess that is where the English-speaking people live, in big houses behind hedges.

And he takes me out at night in August, to see the falling stars. That is magical. The sky is clear, there is no pollution. Falling stars. Sometimes things are just fine, like on

summer nights, when the grownups set up a movie screen in our backyard with a projector and they play cowboy movies for all the kids in the neighbourhood, and everyone eats popcorn and hot dogs under the moon.

My daddy sits me on his knee and plays horsey. Giddyup. Giddyup. And he smokes his cigarettes, lots and lots of cigarettes around me. And as a result, as long as he smokes, I always have lung and respiratory problems. I get bronchitis and pneumonia and whooping cough and coughs and colds. And he smokes.

Sometimes I have fits of croup asthma at night and I can't breathe, so the family doctor drives to our house and makes a house call at three o'clock in the morning, and he makes me breathe in steam from the kettle. Bad medicine, but whatever. It is dark, and my mother is worried. The doctor wears thick glasses.

My mother's aunt, ma tante Marie-Louise, is very, very old. She comes to visit and sits on the sofa and offers to give me a rosary, which she dangles in front of me, if I can tell her what I want to be when I grow up. I say I want to be a policeman, and she says, no, they shoot policemen. I say that I want to be a sailor, and she says, no, they whip sailors. And I go through a whole list of all the jobs I can think of, and there is one job I don't want – and I know that is the one she wants me to say. "OK, I'll be a priest." (And I know I am betraying myself.) And she says, "Yes, you are a good boy. Here is a rosary for you." And my mother applauds my choice. (And this is how the order of the theocracy is passed on in French Canada.)

And the forces of chaos are gaining on me. Les invasions barbares.

My cousin Jean is so small when he is born, that aunt Louise gives him a bath in the kitchen sink. But one night at their house, a couple of years later, at the top of the stairs, in the dark, while our parents are downstairs chatting, Claire gathers Jean and me, and we play confession. She decides we are going to have a contest to see who committed the worst sin. She begins, in French, "I killed a priest..." And Jean whispers, secretly, "I killed a bishop..." And I say, terrified, "I killed a cardinal..." And we are bound together with infantile chains of evil.

Now I am in the hospital with pneumonia and I am a big boy. I am five years old. But they put me in the babies' ward, where the babies weep at night. I scream at them to shut up, but they are babies. My mother comes to visit me every day and tells me to be a big boy. I get needles and needles of penicillin in the bum. After a week, I have had scarlet fever, pneumonia and mumps simultaneously, and I can barely walk. I feel like I weigh a tonne.
I am a big boy. I have been in the hospital for a week.

Sometimes, my mother takes me with her to the Italian neighbourhood, and she visits a lady there who has a son in school. I play with the little boy while mommy talks to the lady. I am in the dark about what we are doing there.

One day, some time later, ma tante Marie-Louise dies. I go to the funeral parlour. She is looking very dead in her coffin. She is not moving. I touch her, and her skin feels cold. A corpse. Death. Mortality.

My father sings Gregorian chant around the house. He paces back and forth down the hall and says the rosary, which he holds behind his back. My mother sings opera. She plays opera on the radio.

One day, later on, my uncle Wilfrid plays some jazz for us on the record player. The records are old, made of lead, and about a centimeter thick. "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho, Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and de walls came a tumblin' down." Negro spirituals, he calls them. I am fascinated. A light just went on.

We all get together for Christmas every year, and the grownups drink and have fun. During the Christmas party, that goes on into the night, uncle Wilfrid, who is a priest, places a tape recorder under the sofa and records everything that is said and sung and all the laughter and silly talk. At the end of the party, he plays back the tape, on the big spools of the machine.

One year, it is my birthday, and Claire and my mother are singing Happy Birthday for me. Suddenly, I realize this day is different than the rest of the year, they are acting nice with me for a change, and I burst into tears and go running into my room. And at Hallowe'en my mother and my sister dress me up as a girl, and I am furious that they are ridiculing me! Besides I keep tripping on the dress... (And if I weep, my father mocks me. This creates in me a sense of rage.)

Another thing the family likes to do is to make me talk crazy. I doze off to sleep while watching t.v. sometimes, and they talk to me while I am half-asleep. They all laugh because I say silly things in my sleep.

I also walk in my sleep, although I don't remember this. One night, I creep into my mother's bedroom and open the drawers of her dresser and pee behind the bedroom door.

My dad will tell me many years later that my family is aware that I am different. He will also let me know I was an accident.

As a matter of fact, I am always having accidents or near accidents. For instance, my father's sister is called aunt Pauline, and she owns a cottage in Rawdon, Quebec, north of Montreal. We are invited there one summer, and Claire plays with her cousin Neil. They are forever running away on me. And one night, we are gathered in the cottage, and aunt Pauline sings me a song: "In a cottage in the woods, little deer by the window stood... Help me, help me, help me, said, or the hunter will shoot me dead... Come little rabbit, come with me, happy we will be..." or something like that. Nevertheless, in the

evening, the party is going on in the cottage and I step out. I walk down to the beach in the dark and wade in the water. I am very young and don't know how to swim. Suddenly, the ground caves in beneath my feet! There is a cliff underwater, where the shore drops! I fall through, and I am in a panic. It doesn't occur to me to call for help. But I kick my feet and move my hands, so I climb on the shore again and can walk out of the water. (While the grownups are busy partying, I am left unattended.)

One Sunday afternoon, the neighbours have us over, because their relative is a missionary in Africa, and he phones their family. Of course this is a big event, and all the kids in the neighbourhood get to talk to this man on the phone. This is in the days when French Canadians are missionaries. (In 2010, other countries send missionaries to Quebec.)

One time, Monsieur Jodouin, the neighbour, gives Claire a purple paper flower. I love flowers. I am sitting on her bed, while she is away, and I am contemplating the flower. But Claire comes running into the room and screams, in French, "Give that back to me!" And she grabs the flower out of my hands and runs off through the house. I run after her, through the kitchen, but she slams the glass door shut, and I ram my left arm through a window on the door and yank it back! The window smashes and a shard of broken glass gashes my left forearm and there is blood and broken glass all over the floor and my mother is screaming and wraps up my arm in a towel and I am taken off to the hospital. When I cut my arm, I can see the bone, under all the blood. They are nice to me in the hospital. The boy in the bed next to me loves to draw military airplanes, for some weird reason. They operate on my arm and I have a scar that will last for life.

The first time I kiss a girl, it feels funny, disgusting, wet, icky. It is Monique Jodouin. Sometimes at family picnics, she is lying on the grass in the park and spreads her legs for me, until her mother chastises her. We go on drives in their car, all through New England. As we leave in the car, we say the rosary for security on the road. Then we sing traditional French songs. "Chansons à répondre."

Of course, there are no seat belts in Monsieur Jodouin's car, and he always has me sit in the front seat. When he jams on the brakes, I inevitably go flying and bang my face on the dashboard and get a bloody nose. I don't think I like cars.

Monsieur Jodouin comes over to our house and makes up stories about hunting. Then he plays magic tricks. I know he is fooling with me and I don't like it. But he also makes faces and everyone finds him funny.

Monsieur Cabana, who lives next door to him, across the street from us, comes from Sainte-Hyacinthe, and my parents still remember his origins. Whenever he comes over to visit and leaves, my parents snicker behind his back, because he comes from a small town. His daughter Louise wants to become a nun. (Somehow, my parents figure these people are "lesser than.")

Whenever we go to church, my father knows the ritual better than anyone else. The whole congregation may be sitting down, but my dad – and therefore, our whole family – is standing up. My father knows the mass better than the priest. This is always embarrassing. Kids are forever embarrassed by their parents. And during the mass, my dad sings louder than anyone else. He is really into it.

However, he has a friend called Mrs. Noblet, who mails me a plaid shirt for Christmas every year. My dad lived in her boarding house in Chateauguay before he met my mother. And she comes to visit every year and argues with my dad about religion. Sometimes when she comes, she is a Buddhist. Other times, she is a Jehovah's Witness. She changes her point of view every time. I am not supposed to listen to these arguments. And she goes for long walks in the pouring rain and does yoga. She is of Swedish descent, born in Turkey and was raised in England. She served in the British Intelligence during the war and her son is the CEO of International Nickel. She is an interesting lady who never gets any younger or any older. She has white hair. She wears a trench coat. She is supposedly eccentric, according to my parents. (Maybe she should be burned as a witch or a heretic.)

And this is our little shelter against the storm, this family establishment, that is as silly as any family. The walls are solid. No communist can break into our fortress. No customs are to be doubted. It is a real fortress. Mind you, there are angels watching over our fortress, but sometimes they are sleeping and neglectful. Sometimes, the problems are within. And the problem with exclusive shields is that they can't shut out the harm. The harm comes from within. We carry our upbringing and our environments inside our heads and we build dams that supposedly protect us against life. While my dad is busily resisting the environment, the disease and madness are within. The decay will wear out our armour soon enough.

Hickory Street.

MISTER PAGE

In the days when I used to go to church, there was a handicapped fellow called Jean-Claude Pagé who used to attend all the charismatic prayer meetings at St. Augustine's Church, in NDG. I felt sorry for the poor man, because he walked on crutches. Actually, he was about six foot five, and rather dragged his legs along behind him. It would take him half an hour to walk a city block. And once I befriended this man, who was in his thirties, I realized he was severely mentally handicapped as well. The reason was that when he was five years old, a young French Canadian boy had hit him in the back of the head with a baseball bat. So his development remained at the emotional and mental level of a five year old.

So far so good. I began taking this gentleman out for dinner in restaurants, trying to be a Good Samaritan or something. And poor Jean-Claude would walk into a restaurant and say to me, in his slow, retarded drawl, "Let's sit beside the pretty girls over there." So we would sit at the booth across from whatever ladies were in the restaurant, and in a flash,

Jean-Claude would reach out his hand for a handshake and ask the women, “Hi, I’m Mister Page, I am from St. Augustine, can I get in touch with you?” And then he would pull out his little black address book, and copy down all their phone numbers. Here is what he did with their phone numbers: one night, having my number, he phones me up at 3 :00 in the morning, and drawls out to me, while I am half asleep, “Hi, it’s Jean-Claude. I guess I shouldn’t be so down. I am feeling lonely.” And you couldn’t just hang up on the guy, because you knew full well he had a mental impediment. So you would listen to his complaining and moaning for an hour or two, while you were losing your beauty sleep.

So, this went on for several months. I would regularly meet Jean-Claude at the prayer meeting on Saturday afternoons, and take him out for supper, and then I began taking him out to movies. To the point that he began counting on it, and expecting it. For instance, we went to see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and in the darkness of the movie theatre, I turned to glance at Jean-Claude, and there he was, sucking his thumb while totally absorbed in the movie. Now, after a few months of this, one Saturday I tried something different. Because I really felt he was taking advantage of me. So we met at the prayer meeting, had supper and then he asked me, with an innocent, little-kid look in his eye, “Now we go see a movie, eh?” I replied, “All right, Jean-Claude, we go see a movie. If you pay.” So Jean-Claude thinks and thinks this over, for about three minutes, and then he blurts out, joyfully, “Maybe we can watch television!!!” (So he may have been retarded, but he was not crazy.)

And I would bump into him on the 105 bus going towards NDG, which back then was a mainly English neighbourhood. I would say, “Hi, Jean-Claude. Where are you going?” And he would raise a fist and yell, “NDG, TA-DAA!!” Remember, he had been hit in the head by a French-speaking person.

Of course, he had strange opinions, like he wanted to nuke the Russians, for instance. And one day he came to my parents’ place and he used the washroom. As he was walking into the bathroom, he mumbled, “And now, French toilet.” And when he walked out, I saw what he meant. He had shit all over the floor, and rubbed his poop on the walls. But you couldn’t get angry, because Jean-Claude was Jean-Claude, and everybody loved Jean-Claude. When he first met my mother, who was around seventy then, he jumped on her and kissed her on the neck for all of five minutes. She was in a panic, and my parents decided I could never, ever bring him into our house again.

Of course, at St. Augustine’s, he had all the girls’ phone numbers, and he phoned them regularly in the middle of the night. So the priest confiscated his little black book. (This is what I was told by several members of the congregation.) So the next time I bumped into Jean-Claude, in the entrance of the McGill metro station, he is in a wheelchair, he lifts up his fist and with a goddawful smile, and blurts out, “NO MORE CATHOLIC!! TODAY ANGLICAN!! TADAA!!” And then he broke out in hysterics, guffawing at his own joke.

After that I never bumped into Jean-Claude again. I guess to some extent, he realized that he could benefit from his handicap. But I am sure he had his ticket to heaven. After all, he went to church, right?

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!!"

OK, 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.

At 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.

RELEASE UNTO US BARABBAS

And lo, it came to pass that I had been off my medication for a season, and half a season, and I remembered something the wise man Nietzsche had once said, to wit that in every generation, and in every country, the Pharisees always crucify Christ. And it behooved me to suffer in similar fashion, for the atonement of the sins of my countrymen and of the whole known world. For I had chosen to partake of the cross.

In that time, I had gone up to the town of Ottawa to visit my parents, while in a fine frenzy, and I found them quite perturbed to see me in such a state. Now, my mother and father decided to watch television that afternoon, and being found psychotic and waxing visionary, it occurred to me that the T.V. set was an oracle, and could mirror the true likeness of things in the room; and lo, it revealed to me that my mother's real name was Henrietta White, and that she and my father were really German refugees, of the Nazi variety, posing as French Canadians. And lo, I came to understand that I was really adopted, and had to denounce these people to the Soviet authorities, for the Soviets had taken over the land shortly before. So I wrote a letter that evening to the Soviet embassy, denouncing my parents as Nazis. By that time, my father was exasperated, and gave me the sum of four hundred dollars, and told me to get out of their lives. And lo, I took the sum of monies and dropped my letter into a mailbox just outside the building where my parents lived. And I took a taxi to the bus station. On the way there, conscience made a coward out of me, and I summoned the driver of the cab to return forthwith to the mailbox, for I was indeed betraying my own flesh and blood.

Arriving at said mailbox, I turned it upside down, and behold, the mail was strewn all over the sidewalk. And just at that moment, as I searched for said letter, the police happened to drive by in their vehicle. And they let me into said vehicle. Now, I was sitting in the back seat and imagining that I could take a miniature spiritual toothbrush and erase the brainwashing from the minds of the officers of the law. But they were not amused, and lo, they took me down to the station, where I spent the night behind bars. And in the morning, I was brought to the courthouse, whereupon I was scheduled to make an appearance and testify in said court of the law.

Now, I knew I was in deep shit. So, upon being interviewed by a psychiatrist before entering said court, and being asked my name, I said, "My name is Archeon, and I am a

getting out of jail, and you have a social worker called Daniel, who takes you out to the movies, to concerts, for meals. Daniel is French from France, and you don't really respect him, because he said some racist things about blacks. He is a theology student who doesn't know God, who has theories about everything, and he is pretty much of a wimp, as far as you are concerned. Anyway, one day, he brings his girlfriend, Bianca, along with him on one of his visits to your apartment. It is summertime, and sweltering hot. You are showing her your writings, and she tells you she is a fan of Henry Miller's. She is Italian, but speaks English to you; she has blue eyes, and short-cropped dirty blonde hair. (You wouldn't kick her out of bed for eating crackers.) Anyway, she is one way while Daniel is around. They visit for a few hours, and you serve them something to drink. The next time you hear from Daniel and Bianca, they are at the airport, and they are off to Cuba or somewhere, and they phone you to say goodbye. You are flirting with Bianca, telling her something about getting a suntan all over. She seems to like you, but it is understood she is Daniel's girl. A couple of days later, someone knocks at your door. You are in your kitchen, and you go answer the door. It is Bianca. You are all flustered, because she is throwing a curve at you. You serve her a coffee, and at one point, you are both standing close to each other in the small kitchen, and she brushes against you. You take the cue, and you wrap your arms around her and kiss her, a long, passionate, wet, French kiss, her tongue in your mouth, licking your tongue and palate, like a giant snake entering a cave. When the kiss subsides, you smile at her and ask, "What about Daniel?" And she replies with a wink, "Daniel is only Daniel." And the roller coaster rides begins. You are living on the corner of Fullum and Sherbrooke, near the old Parthenais prison, and she lives fifteen miles away, in Montreal North. It turns out she has two daughters, one fifteen and the youngest one about eight, and they don't notice you at all. Lovers come and go. Bianca tells you, with an insane laugh, that she has the forty-eight hour syndrome – a new lover every forty-eight hours. You are drinking champagne together. She tells you she is fond of corruption, and she says it with a passion. She is addicted to cocaine, or in the process of getting addicted. She is pretty wild. She works at a dating agency, a legitimate dating agency in the heart of downtown. You go see her at work, and you draw portraits of her and her assistant, who is also Italian. Bianca is pathetic however. She was living in France at one time, when her first husband decided to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. He bought a sailboat, and took off. Well, he disappeared. Bianca spent five years looking for him. She went up and down the coast of Africa, and heard rumours and tried to keep track of where he had last been seen. But after five years of absence, he was considered missing and dead. Then she remarried three times and got divorced three times. She collected husbands, and now she has the forty-eight hour syndrome. So you take twenty-dollar taxi rides to her house in Montreal North, and you spend extravagantly together. One time, you are in an outdoor terrace of a restaurant in Montreal North in the hot sun, and she asks you coyly, "What are you staring at?" And you answer, "I was looking at your breast." So she pulls her right breast out of her dress, out of her bra, and lets it hang out where you can see it, right in the middle of the restaurant. You laugh insanely, she laughs insanely, and this is what kind of person Bianca is.

Meanwhile, I feel like weeping, because I don't want to die, and yet I appreciate every moment, every second. Time is so precious, and if people only knew that life is so short, they wouldn't be killing each other in insane wars; they wouldn't be running after money the way they do. I see a rose in front of me, in the vase on my table. It is so intricate, that I could never fathom who created it, who made it so beautiful.

Here, the waiter smiled at me, as he passed by. For no reason, he gave me a smile, and I smiled back. Hey, why not? Life is so short.

I feel like Jesus, I have to carry the sins of the world. No, I don't identify with that image. But why am I dying? Did I do anything wrong?

My friend Neil died a few months ago, and I feel bad for him, because he died worried. He was in such agony towards the end, suffering from the same awful affliction that I have.

I am glad about one thing, though – at least I am dying sober. Oh, it would be a horrid mess if I was drunk right now. And my AA friends have been so good to me in these last times.

Well, that is it, it is the end. A couple of days more. I have no regrets. I just wish I could feel this beauty forever, this appreciation for every little moment.

There is really nothing to worry about. I have already paid for my funeral. A closed casket, and no ceremony. No goodbyes, it will just hurt too much.

A couple of days, and it will be summer. The summer is coming. The summer is coming.

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.

BEING A FOOL FOR GOD

In memory of my friend Martha Shepherd

This is a true story. Honest. Cross my heart.

My wife goes to Catholic mass once a week, even though she is a Protestant. She is very afraid of being found out. So she always keeps a low profile in church, lest she attract some undue attention or censorship. Especially because she is not a baptized Catholic and is not allowed – technically – to receive Holy Communion. She practically hides behind tall people in her pew so the priest won't see her.

I rarely go to church, any church, but I was getting rather zealous lately and wanted to go to Saint Joseph's Oratory, so I could get cured of my arthritis. I am expecting two knee replacements within a year from now. After all, there are thousands of crutches hanging on the walls of this shrine, where Brother André supposedly healed people.

OK, so this is the premiss. Today Bonnie and I decided to go to the Shrine and hear mass at 4:30. There was a mass scheduled at that time, and we arrived in the chapel right in the nick of time.

However, I noticed the priest entered the chapel alone. He was wearing a green garment, which symbolizes hope. (I know this because I used to be an altar boy fifty years ago and was taught by nuns.) He entered alone, without an altar boy. So immediately, I took initiative and did what I had seen my father do many times. I leapt out of my pew, left my cane with my wife, and marched up the aisle like a man with a mission. I walked up the steps to the altar and quietly asked the priest if he needed an altar boy. He mumbled, "Later." So I stood there beside the altar, waiting for my cue.

It came time for the reading, but I didn't know how to do this. After all, I am not an ordained deacon! So the officiating priest read the Scriptures and I stood there behind him, on one leg, on the other leg, shifting, because I left my cane in my pew.

Suddenly, like in a James Bond movie, a security guard walks up to me and grabs me by the arm and tells me to come with him and escorts me out the back of the chapel. I am trying to amuse him, saying I haven't done this in fifty years, but he is not smiling. Not only he walks me out of the chapel, but down one hall through the sacristy where there are two other men, and down a flight of stairs. I am hobbling to keep up with him, because for one thing I am sixty-four years old and for another thing, I have arthritis in my knees, but I am keeping up with him. He takes me into a back room where there is a bloody crucifix of the last guy they beat up, and by fuck, I know now they mean business.

OK, they are standing around me, and the guy who grabbed my arm is especially in my face. I can see they think I meant to steal the Host to do a black mass, or something criminal, or something equally naughty – but they don't believe my story for a minute. You wanted to sit in for the altar boy? Oh sure! Well, there is the altar boy over there and he was late... Would you like us to call the police?? Then you'll have problems! They'll teach you not to fuck with the Church!

Mind you, I didn't take a shower this morning and am missing a few teeth – so I definitely look like a homeless person in need of trouble.

I ask them if I can go back into the chapel to finish hearing mass and could I fetch my cane? They ask me where is my cane? With my wife. Where is your wife?? At brother André's tomb? No, she is in the pew on the right and she is wearing a black coat.

They go get her and SHE IS EMBARRASSED. This is the worst possible scenario! She mumbles nervously that I meant well and just wanted to sit in for the altar boy.

They escort us to the back door of Saint Joseph's Oratory and slam the door behind us.

I guess the road to hell is indeed paved with good intentions and I can see now why my friend Danuta said to me one day, "I like Jesus but I don't like the social machinery of the Church."

In any case, it will be a frosty Friday in hell before I go to church again. Now it might be my imagination, but I could swear my knees are getting better tonight.

THE MAN WHO HATED LEONARD

Everyone loves Leonard. But me, I used to hate Leonard Cohen. I would go to parties, and this poet would be boasting of having had breakfast with Leonard, and having shown Leonard his manuscript. And yes, Leonard loved his manuscript, and do you know Leonard? Why yes, I know Leonard. I was asked to write an epitaph for him when he dies. And yes, everyone I know in Montreal – and his dog – knew Leonard.

Except for me. I didn't know Leonard. I would see his books sold in the late seventies in used bookstores. And every time I turned the TV on, there was Leonard. OOOOOH, how I used to cringe whenever I saw Leonard on TV. And as for his ex-girlfriend Suzanne, well she cut me off because she thought I was crazy and dangerous.

But I am not dangerous. I just told Suzanne that my parents used to hypnotize me into being a spy for them among the artist crowd. I told that to Suzanne because I was off my medication, and well, I had to tell her something...

But I am not dangerous. I just hate Leonard.

Let me explain why. I used to write poetry. Well, probably pretty bad poetry. I guess it was bad, because every publisher in sight and every magazine editor in Canada rejected my material. I even contemplated making it in the States to be accepted here. So I tried even harder to get published. Something was missing. I was not Leonard Cohen. So I hated him.

Nothing personal, Mr. Cohen. But you could blow your nose on a piece of paper, submit it to McClelland & Stewart, and they would sell it. Worldwide.

I used to wonder if Leonard has sold his soul in order to make it. I never found out. I saw Leonard live twice. The first time was in December 1969, the year the police went on strike in Montreal. I ended up in the Douglas that year. And didn't Leonard come and give a concert for the mentally ill that winter, at the Dalse Center. I was there in the audience, and I was thrilled. Hey, it was a good concert. I had had a bad trip on acid, and Leonard said to the patients, "You people are the political prisoners of our society." Just what I wanted to hear, because I was a politico. A radical. I wanted to plant bombs, but didn't know how.

Anyway, that was in 1969. In 1983, I was out of the Douglas, one day in October. I had just gotten out, by the way, when I was in a smoked meat restaurant on the Main called – what else? The Main, when suddenly, I saw him. Him. You know. The ladies' man.

He was dining with two beautiful ladies at the table next to mine. I whispered to the waitress, "Excuse me, is that Leonard Cohen?"

"Uh-hm," she whispered, meaning yes.

So I surreptitiously finished my smoked meat sandwich, and got my nerve up. I walked right up to the next table over and asked him, boldly I must say, "Are you Leonard Cohen?"

And he looked at me right in the eye, without batting an eyelash, and exclaimed, in a disarming way: "YES I AM!!!"

And lo and behold, I immediately began to stutter, "M-m-m-my na-na-name is Ro-ro-ro-robert S-s-s-smith..."

I started fidgeting as I stood in front of their table, and I said, stuttering some more, "I-I-I ma-ma-mailed you my boo-boo-book I've be-be-been so happy since I go-go-go-got my lobotomy."

I managed to blurt that out, and he almost smiled as he answered me, "Yes, it is sitting on my coffee table at home. Tell me, did you really have a lobotomy!?"

And I burst out with, "No-no-no, but I just got out of the Douglas!!" I said it so fast I wasn't even sure they heard me. Then I added, "I go-go-got your address from my fr-fr-friend Jo-jo-john Max..."

And once again, he gave me a disarming Zen master smile, as I turned around abruptly and walked embarrassed out of the restaurant. As I was walking out, one of the ladies dining with Leonard whispered to him, "That man was just like a little mouse!"

And I went home and proceeded to have a nervous breakdown that lasted ten months.

THE SATELLITE PROGRAM

From: Captain Klutz
To: Colonel Putz
Sent: Thursday, December 04, 2003 8:45 AM
Subject: Tracking homeless people

Dear Colonel,

As per our recent telephone conversation, I will soon forward you the reports concerning tracking homeless people. Our satellite program seems to be functioning adequately. And the homeless people are not aware that we are monitoring them, except for one Robert M. Smith.

You asked me recently for a breakdown and explanation of this tracking program. Here it is, as follows:

- 1) Our computers at headquarters of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are linked to American satellites in the atmosphere. The information obtained by the satellites through remote cameras is transmitted to our computers. The images are then deciphered and interpreted by means of sophisticated programs.
- 2) The satellites follow homeless people around town. Their cameras take films and photographs of these homeless people, as the latter wander around aimlessly from shelters to soup kitchens to parks to alleys, etc.
- 3) The behavior patterns of the homeless people are then submitted to our analysts, who use advanced fractals mathematics to find patterns and therefore predict where the subjects will end up.
- 4) Since there are 30,000 homeless people in Montreal alone, there are a plethora of films and photographs to store and interpret.
- 5) The purpose of the tracking process is to enforce our control on the subjects. The rest of the city is predictable, but homeless people seem to wander aimlessly. And yet, our analysts claim that by following these derelicts around by remote cameras, they will lead us to ben Laden and the whole Al Q'aida network in Montreal.

There is only one snag in our program. One of these homeless persons, one Robert M. Smith, has somehow become aware that we follow him around, and is trying to fool us by deliberately wandering around in irrational patterns. The other derelicts only wander spontaneously from place to place, but Robert Smith seems to be using a ploy to destroy our computer programs. He can wander up and down the same street fifty times in a row, back and forth, and then suddenly veer off once we detect his behavior pattern.

Our satellites are also connected to television sets in bars and restaurants, which look at the customers. The images that customers see on television are only a façade. The real purpose of television is to watch the viewers. But once again, Robert M. Smith has done nasty things like turning the characters on television green on purpose and laughing insanely as news anchormen choke and gag.

Therefore, our hit men from the mafia are following this Robert M. Smith around and waiting for the perfect opportunity to assassinate him in cold blood. He seems to be aware that we are doing this, and has tried to sabotage our plans by walking around in irrational patterns that our computers cannot detect.

As for the general population, they would never believe that we dispose of this level of sophistication. If the media blew the whistle and told them about our plans, the people would think we are joking with them. As usual, the totalitarian states are always elsewhere. The enemy is always Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Saddam Hussein, some totally demonized dictator Out There, but the people place their total trust in their leaders. This type of psychological projection maintains the notion that everyone in Canada is innocent and harmless.

For further information, do not hesitate to contact me as usual.

Yours in Him,

Captain
RCMP
Surveillance
Ottawa, Canada

Klutz
Unit

DISCONNECTING

“Turn on, tune in, drop out”
(Timothy Leary)

“You don’t use a gun on a computer. You pull out the plug.”
(Abbie Hoffman)

Sometimes I think my misfortune was due to interrupting a chain letter I received in the mail in September 1983. It said I would be cursed if I didn’t forward the letter and its promises to so many readers. Other times, I think it was due to my associating with Soledad, a lady who did my tarot reading around the same time. But ultimately, the bottom line was that I went off my medication, and here is how and why it happened.

I was living off Saint Lawrence Street, on unemployment insurance that year, slumming I guess, and drinking more and more. I wasn’t working or looking for work. I guess I

made a halfhearted attempt to find work, but I mainly wanted to concentrate on my poetry. I was hanging out with unsavoury characters, and started to become very, very depressed. I was carrying around a heavy burden.

I phoned my father in September, and he came down from Ottawa to take care of me. Now, he was getting on in years, and his method was always the true and proven way. So he suggested I go into the Douglas, and I agreed. We took a taxi to the psychiatric hospital, or as the patients call it, "the college." It was a snap getting me committed, but then I was on my own.

I felt betrayed, because my regular shrink was on vacation, and I was assigned a new doctor, who prescribed moditin. My normal medication is modicate, another fluphenazine, and I can function on the latter; however, on moditin, I can't even sweep a floor. I was furious. I told them it was the wrong medication, and got no response. I was only in the hospital for a week, when I signed myself out, in a huff.

Once I was out of the hospital, I promptly took their prescription for moditin, and threw it in the nearest trashcan. I was rebelling.

After a week out of the hospital, I went back to my old stomping grounds, the smoked meat restaurant The Main, and the Bar Saint Laurent. And I would sit there, day after day, staring into space, occasionally talking to the barmaid Mena or the manager Ruy. The bar was in a Portuguese neighbourhood, and I am partly Portuguese. But I can't speak it. Nevertheless, I tried to befriend the customers there.

In the front part of the bar, there were Anglo poets and writers who would meet to chat. There were people like Ruth Taylor and Dave Winchester. I hung out with those people for a few weeks, but then I preferred to talk to the Portuguese customers in the back of the bar. My whole social life revolved around that bar scene.

After a while off my medication, it started to occur to me that there was a pattern going on in the bar. The traffic would come and go on the street, and then the street began to look like a transparency in a painting, and I started thinking the pattern had a meaning. Soon, I thought every time a customer walked into the bar, the public address system would play a rock song identifying that person. And then it seemed obvious that the television set was portraying the characters in the bar. If Ruy and Armenia and I were talking around the bar, the television set would show three people in a bar chatting. So I knew.

And this order of things seemed totalitarian. So there had to be a revolution going on at the same time, and I wanted to be part of it. And I had to disconnect from the system, and join the revolutionaries. I tore up my identification papers, and had my phone disconnected. That way, I was out of the System, the infamous System. I was joining the Portuguese mafia.

However, the other people in the bar didn't think this was very funny, when I started crawling around on all fours in the bar; so I got barred from the club. Then I heard a murder happened at the Bar Saint Laurent: a young criminal called Frankie got shot, and I got spooked.

I stopped going out of my house. I stayed home and repainted the apartment. People at the bar had told me to get busy and stop hanging out there; so I got busy. I painted the apartment orange and green, with long stripes going down the halls. Finally, I got evicted. But that was later on.

My neighbour downstairs was a Hungarian chap called Zoltan Paztok, and he was a friendly sort. He was about seventy years old, and at night he would come crawling up the stairs on his hands and knees and knock at my door. Then he would scream out with his heavy accent, "Meester Schmidt! Arrrh zere any Jewwwwws herrrrre?" And I would give him beer money, well, enough to buy a pint for himself.

And at night in the winter, Zoltan would lock me out, so I had to go sleep at my friends' place. It would be thirty degrees below zero Celsius, and I would come home from drinking at midnight and find myself locked out. I became a desperado.

Finally, one night I smashed the window to break into my own apartment. The landlord took me to court over that.

And one day, a friend called Lindsay Norman lent me enough money to pay my rent, so I walked up to a taxi driver and told him, "The pope is in the mafia, and everything I say in your car is going to be broadcast all over the city. Here is \$ 160 – drive me around." So we went for a drive, from Repentigny to Dorval, and back downtown. And every now and then, when I had doubts, I would ask the driver whether everything I was saying to him was still being broadcast, and he would nod reassuringly, yes, yes, of course.

So my rent never did get paid.

And that was how, in the winter of 1983-84, I became a homeless person. And that was the beginning of sorrows. By January, I was walking in thirty-degree below zero weather with no shirt on, and I didn't even know it was cold. I thought a civil war was going on. The cars on the streets were really tanks in disguise; the pedestrians were soldiers in drag. At one point, the mafia was following me around; so I kept walking around in circles to outfox them. At another point, I believed every time I phoned my cousin Jean, a fascist died, so I would phone him every ten minutes.

I ended up in Douglas Psychiatric Center, the Royal Ottawa Hospital and finally, in Parthenais Detention Center. I guess that is where all good revolutionaries end up, in jail. And I spent some time there chilling out. They wanted to make sure the revolution

had come to an end. For this, they put me back on my modocate. And I stayed on it. In all, I was homeless for ten months and off my medication.

People around me kept their distance. We can't handle terrorists too well around here.

MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT

*"Got a little lady, walk that street,
Tellin' all the boys that she can't be beat"*
(Willie the Pimp, Frank Zappa)

I am a little nervous to be found in this part of town, walking rapidly in the cold, looking for something I need desperately. On the corner, there is the theater marquee of a strip club showing grotesque illustrations. There are women in leather mini-skirts and fishnet stockings lined up, asking the men who walk by if they are "going out." I know what I need, and this is not it.

Finally, I see the one I want. She has evil, black mascara under her eyes, and she is holding an alarm clock in her hands. She recognizes me, and the recognition is mutual. She steps forward, holding her clock in her hands. "Ya goin' out?" she asks me. I reply, "How much?" She gives me a price: "Fifty dollars plus the room." A shiver goes down my spine.

We walk off, and she stuffs the used alarm clock into her black, leather purse. She lights up a cigarette and asks me, furtively, "So, you want to buy a used clock?"

She hails a taxi, and we board the taxi. Just in time. The local police car is just coming up the street. All the ladies on the sidewalk immediately disappear into hot dog joints until the heat cools down.

"Where we going?" I ask her, in a low voice, so the driver can't hear. She replies, loud enough so that the driver and I hear: "Saint André Street. You know the place." I nod because I secretly understand, Yes, the alarm clock factory.

We drive off into the night. She is still smoking her cigarette, and flicks the butt out the window. Okay, we have arrived. These are boarding houses that charge by the hour, not by the night. Just long enough to do a transaction.

We rush out of the taxi. It is a clean, well-lighted place.

I hear an alarm clock going off in the distance. I know I am in the right place.

We walk up the stairs to a first landing. She rings the doorbell. A voice inside calls out, "Who is there?" She replies, "It is me." The door opens, and a dreary-looking concierge lets us in. There is a counter. We go to the counter. I pay the concierge twenty dollars

and sign my name in the register: “Mister and Mrs. Smith.” Sounds anonymous enough, eh?

The concierge shows us the room. There is a bed in the middle of the room, and hundreds and hundreds of alarm clocks sitting on the bed, lying on the floor, in boxes, unwrapped, big alarm clocks, tiny little ones, exotic ones, ordinary ones. Lots and lots of alarm clocks.

We enter the room. The door closes behind us. Quickly, my contact turns to me and asks, rapidly, “You have the money?” I give her fifty dollars. Just enough to pay for an alarm clock. She hands me the one in the box on the bed. “Good enough?” I answer, “That will do, sweetheart.”

She turns to the cabinet beside the bed, and touches up her make-up. Then she turns to me and says, “OK, I will leave first. Wait thirty seconds, and then you go too.” She steps out the door. I am brokenhearted. I will never see her again. But after all, I have what I want. An alarm clock.

I wait a minute, and then step out into the hall. The concierge is gone. I go out into the night, and down the stairs into the street. A black cat crawls past me along the sidewalk. I am lucky. No one saw me buy the clock. It is highly illegal in this country to purchase a used alarm clock. And because it is illegal, this business is under the control of the mafia and the police. But I am safe. I walk down the street, with my used alarm clock. I made it.

Meanwhile, I hear a siren in the distance, in the naked city.

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.

THE OCEAN INSIDE

*“And so castles made of sand
melt into the sea eventually”*

(Jimi Hendrix)

A man in an office receives a phone call and stands up and walks to the door of the office and tells his secretary to cancel all appointments that afternoon, and he puts on his jacket over his blue shirt and yellow tie. He walks over to the elevator and waits. The elevator comes and the man gets in; he presses Ground Floor, and stands there, silly, beside other business executives, men and women, all wearing their pin-stripe suits and gray costumes. The elevator arrives at the Ground Floor. The man walks across the lobby of the office tower, to the revolving door leading to the street. He steps out on to the street, and walks over to the taxi stand nearby. He doesn't notice the weather. It is the weather inside that counts for this man.

He tells the driver to take him to the beach, by the waterfront. They drive through traffic, down past the harbour, past the huge ships, down to the beach. It is late afternoon, and the sun is playing games with the clouds. It is alternately gray and sunny, but the man is gloomy.

The cab arrives at the beach, and there is no one there, because the season hasn't started yet. The man gets out of the car and stands alone on the beach, as the cab drives away down the highway.

The man lights up a cigarette.

He takes two puffs from the cigarette, and throws it away into the sand. The man walks over to a chair, and sits there, for an hour, then two hours. He has a broken heart, but that doesn't matter. Time goes by; the sun sets, and there is now a cool breeze coming from the ocean. The sky gets purple, then yellow, then red, and finally, black.

The man is still sitting there, thinking. His heart is broken, but it doesn't matter.

He gets out of the chair, once night has arrived. He walks over to the edge of the ocean, and looks at the waves coming in to lap the shore. Regularly, the waves keep coming in, and finally, this man is paying attention to the ocean shore in his heart. In this spot, he feels there is a spiritual ocean lapping the shore of his heart, and he wants to step into the water.

The man doesn't remove his expensive shoes, but he walks into the water. He feels his socks get wet, and then his feet. He stands there, staring at the ocean, and lights up another cigarette. Once again, he takes two puffs and flicks the cigarette onto the beach. He walks in deeper, into the ocean. Up to his knees. And he doesn't flinch. He walks in up to his waist. Now his suit is ruined. He feels the water lapping at his balls. He walks into the ocean water, and notices the moon rising. It is reflecting off the waves. He walks deeper into the water, up to his shoulders.

Suddenly, an undercurrent pulls him in, and he is sucked out to sea by the powerful waves. The moon winks on the waves. Not a sound is made, except for the hushed roar of the ocean. The man's cigarette goes out, on the sandy beach. One last flicker, and it is out.

A man's end.

THE BOYS I MEAN

*"The boys I mean are not refined
They cannot chat of that and this
They do not give a fart for art
They kill like you would take a piss"*

(e.e. cummings)

I am sitting in an all-night restaurant, on the corner of Mont-Royal and St-Denis, in Montreal; it is around 3:00 in the morning, and I am having a coffee while counting my spare change. My rosary is on the table, at my booth, and I have been off my medication for many moons. A couple comes and sits diagonally across from me, and the man is staring at me. He is Vietnamese, and she could be French Canadian. He is staring and staring – so I turn to him, look him straight in the eye, and say to him, "Bonjour, how are you?"

He replies, "F– off."

The normal thing to do would be to move to another seat in the restaurant, to leave the restaurant or to just ignore this fellow. What I do – I am off my medication – is that I go see the manager of the restaurant, at the cash register, and I complain that a customer told me to fuck off. He doesn't pay attention. He simply dismisses my complaint and tells me to leave him alone. So I pay my bill and walk out of the restaurant. I go outside – it is June 1984, and it is not cold. I go outside, and wait for the Vietnamese guy to come out. He sees me in the window of the restaurant, and understands that I want to fight with him. He gestures, meaning, you and me, eh? And then he comes out of the front door.

The first thing he does is that he punches me in the mouth. He comes out of the restaurant swinging. He connects and cuts my lip. There are a few missed punches, we spar, and then I let out a god-awful "kiai" yell, a type of yell I have learned in martial arts, and I hit him with my right fist, with all my might, on his left cheek. There is blood

all over his face. And then his girlfriend comes out of the restaurant and breaks up the fight. She is frantic and screaming. She pulls her boyfriend away.

I have a cut lip and a major cut on my right fist, where my little finger is. So I phone for an ambulance, and they come, within ten minutes. The paramedics take me to the Hôtel-Dieu hospital. I wait for a few minutes at the Emergency ward, and then they stitch up the cuts, on my face and my hand. It turns out I fractured the little finger on my right hand, when I hit the guy. The doctors put a cast on my right hand and wrist.

Then a policewoman comes in and arrests me. She is wearing her uniform, and she handcuffs me. Apparently, my Vietnamese opponent has charged me with assault.

So by 6:00 o'clock in the morning, I am in a cell at Parthenais Detention Center, in the East end of Montreal. It is a little room, with bars instead of a door, with a metal bunk bed, a writing desk that I guess we eat from, as well as a toilet and a sink. There is also a locker where I can hang my clothes. Some time later, the guards bring us breakfast.

No one is allowed to wear a watch here. So we do time, and soon enough, I understand what the penalty is here: time. There is nothing to do to pass the time. So I say my rosary. Soon, I borrow books from the prison library. I start reading Pascal's report to a provincial superior about the Inquisition, Will Durant's history of philosophy, and some books of Leonard Cohen's poetry. I am cozy in my little cell, and in time, the authorities find out that I am supposed to take medication, so they put me back on my prescription of neuroleptics.

Meanwhile, I am hearing voices: I imagine I can hear God himself speaking to me in my mind. I see things that aren't there, like the sink changing appearance, molding itself into various faces. I get exalted feelings, which I think are mystical experiences, as I pray. Basically, I am delusional. But this makes it easier to endure this situation. There are no women, no children, no plants, and no animals. Everything is made of metal and cement.

I spend a week or two in this institution, waiting for my court appearance. I go to court within a couple of days, and am shipped there in the paddy wagon. I remember telling a prison guard that I am praying to get out of here, and show him my rosary. He laughs at me, and tells me that is not what is going to get me out of there. While waiting in a holding cell, I talk to a longhaired guy who is a pimp, and he is very uptight, pacing back and forth in the cell. He is obviously very anxious to get out of here.

The guards are pretty rough, and I don't know whom I am more afraid of: the guards or the inmates. The inmates tell the guards racist jokes, and the guards laugh. One day, during a meal, I ask a prison guard for some salt, and he yells back at me that the Hilton hotel is downtown, not here. The inmates call the guards "the screws." Most of the inmates are French Canadians; there are a few blacks, but they are English-speaking; then there are a few more Anglos. There are no other minorities.

The guy in the cell next to mine is a fortuneteller, so the inmates ridicule him by calling him, "Boule de crystal (crystal ball.)" One night, while we are in our cells, I think they are picking on me, because the biggest guy in the ward is yelling at Boule de crystal, and taunting him. I think I am Boule de crystal, so I yell back at Mario, who is also the President of the Sector. I tell him I am not afraid of him, because I have friends in the mafia and friends in the FLQ, a terrorist group. The other inmates start asking each other, talking from one cell to the next, "What is wrong with the new guy?" Another inmate answers, "He thinks he is Boule de crystal." So the next day, one of the inmates tells me I have earned the respect of the others, because they could see "what I am made of." I stood up to the President.

Parthenais Detention Center at that time was a maximum-security prison where people were held pending trial. So there were all kinds of people in there: one guy who was a Raelian had stolen a Beethoven cassette (he was sentenced to two years), whereas other people were in there for murder. Most of them were drug addicts. One day, one of the inmates nicknamed "Animal" describes how his wife has been raped by some fellow; so he shot him full of dimes. Apparently, when you shoot someone with a bullet full of ten-cent pieces, it aggravates the pain. Well, he shot this guy in the balls with a shotgun. And now he is sentenced to ten years in the pen. Another inmate agrees, "When you do someone, you should do him good." And the others all agree.

Frankly, I am terrified of these guys. I figure I will try to get accepted by them, so in order to get extra peanut butter or extra rolling tobacco, I do drawings for the inmates. I draw their portraits, I design tattoos, which a tattoo artist will recopy once they go to Bordeaux jail. And they nickname me "L'Arabe," because I have a swarthy complexion.

They can't play cards or checkers or chess without arguing. They watch television, and one night, there is a Michael Jackson show called "Thriller," and all the boys are gathered around the TV set. Another popular show is Robert Charlebois' special for Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day. Either way, there is constant noise in the Sector during recess time. The inmates chatter like naked apes in a zoo. It reminds me of the movie Planet of the Apes. Another source of irritation is the noise of the doors opening and closing, by remote control, because the cell doors are made of metal bars, which clang shut.

And I wonder what I am doing there. One day, on Saturday morning, we are in our cells, and one of the inmates begins to weep, loudly. Nobody comments.

The prisoners tell me that their girlfriends are topless dancers. And they explain to me how to pick up strippers: you ask a lady to dance at your table, and you tell her you have some cocaine at home. So she comes to your house, and you seduce her. Most of these guys have children.

I ask them why they live a life of crime. They all tell me they don't want to work.

The common practice is to bribe the judges, so that is what they do. The inmates hate the system, but they play the capitalist game. I ask them what lawyer to get, and they all recommend Leonard Wiseman. He is expensive, but he is the best. His practice is on McGill Street, down by the harbour, in the financial district.

So time is going by. One day, a French-speaking prisoner covered with tattoos takes me aside, and asks me, “The guys find you are nervous. What is wrong?”

I explain to him that I am not used to this type of people. He reminds me that inmates are very sensitive people, and he believes they are the most sensitive of all people. I ask him why he is in here, and he says one day when he was a teenager, his girlfriend died in a car crash; ever since, he has adopted a life of crime. He tells me that he is blocked spiritually, and he can't pray.

Finally, a new guy is placed in the cell next to mine, and he tells me that he is the son of a famous wrestler. He shows me that his front teeth have been knocked out by his father. He tells me that his dad used to beat him up until he was unconscious. So he is in a rage. A couple of days later, things start to turn around.

The son of the wrestler tells me his aunt died that day, so he wants to kill himself. He is looking for a razor blade to slash his wrists. So I don't hesitate – the next time I see him talking to a guard, I barge in and tell the guard to have this guy put in the psychiatric ward, because he wants to kill himself. And that is the last we see of him.

That night, the inmate in the cell next to mine asks me, in French, “Hey, L'Arabe, you are so cool with the guys... How come you squealed on Vachon?” And I tell him, speaking through the wall, that I did it to save the guy's life. He wanted to kill himself. The other guy answers me, “Sure, sure. We know all about that.”

So my life is now in danger, because the inmates consider me an informer. But the next morning, the authorities let me out on bail. I have a court appearance, and my parents are there, and so is my friend Danny. They are ready to post bail.

That summer, I am out of jail, and I have two more court appearances. During the second court appearance, my accuser is supposed to testify, but he doesn't show up. Therefore, the charges are dropped, and I am a free man.

Meanwhile, I rent an apartment on Fullum Street, and I throw a party one night for all my friends who came to visit me in jail. At least while I was inside for a couple of weeks, they put me back on my medication, and I am back on track. Within a month, I go back to doing translation, for the government. It takes a year for the scars to heal and for me to recover from the ensuing depression.

THE CONVERT

I first met this guy Smitty in the fall of 1969. He was living at his friend Alfred's place on Sherbrooke Street in NDG, Montreal. I was working as a secretary, and after work I would drop in at their apartment, and usually, he would ask me to play a game of chess with him. I found him cute with his long dark hair that flowed on his shoulders, and after a few chess moves, he would look at me, point at the bedroom next door, and we would go into the next room, where we would undress and make love for what seemed like hours. I would smile at him as we made love, with the moon shining on one side of his face, the other side remaining dark and hidden. He would wink at me.

After a whole evening without conversation and lots and lots of seawaves of romance, he would walk me home in Westhaven Village, where I lived alone, kissing several times on the way there, until he would leave me at the doorstep under the moon. It was almost exclusively a physical relationship, except we both had unavowed feelings for each other, and although he had trust issues, we got along well on those terms.

There was a lot of drug use and abuse at Alfred's apartment all through that fall, and his brother was a pusher who kept us all supplied with whatever we pleased. There was a coffee shop called Zarby's downstairs, which was a hangout for a lot of younger people. I knew Smitty had been involved in some kind of political scene that fall in Saint Henri, but since we never talked, it was never mentioned.

Suddenly, however, our relationship was interrupted. I went to Alfred's place one afternoon after work, and heard Smitty had ended up in the Douglas, in Verdun. What had happened? Most people didn't know. I asked around. I stopped asking questions. I went on with my life, working, dropping by Alfred's and seeing my friends.

I wasn't very much involved in their drug scene. I smoked the odd joint and never got into trouble. Smitty was twenty-one, I believe, and had been doing a lot of LSD25 with the wrong people.

I didn't hear from Smitty until three months later, in March 1970. I was still working and he came over to my place one afternoon. It was a Saturday. He showed up at my front door, and I asked him, like May West, 'Is that a pistol in your pocket or do you really like me?' I thought that would make him loosen up, because he looked very uptight. They obviously had cut off his hair in the funny farm. He couldn't smile anymore. His knees were twitching, his feet were dancing, his fingers were playing an invisible piano. His whole demeanour was a circus. He seemed constrained.

I thought I would make him relax. We lay down on my sofa and I tried to kiss him. It was like kissing a corpse. He was totally rigid. They had destroyed his personality.

I told him I didn't love him anymore and to please leave. I didn't want any trouble.

I went on with my life. I got laid off my job as a secretary, so I went back to university and became a nurse. This took a few years. In 1973 or 74, I don't remember the exact date – I remember bumping into Smitty in the elevator at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, where I worked. I was wearing a uniform and there were several people in the elevator with us. He looked even goofier than before. I didn't want him in my life again. I kind of smiled at him and told him I was working as a nurse. He was on heavy medication by now. He drooled, trying to smile. This was embarrassing. I didn't want to be seen with this guy. I got off at the third floor, and told him I would talk to him some other time. There was no way I was going to have a relationship with some loser on neuroleptic medication. Those guys are likely to do anything.

Eventually, I got married and settled down. I had two kids. My new husband was great. We stayed together for several years, and then – I bumped into Smitty again. This time, it was on Sainte Catherine Street, near the corner of Bishop. At first, I didn't recognize him. He now had a beard, a big black beard, and short hair with John Lennon glasses. He accosted me as I was walking down the street.

He was no longer all doped up on medication, but he looked stranger than ever. By now he was all doped up on Jesus. He motor mouthed at me, telling or rather screaming at me that he had just returned from Berkeley, California, where he had supposedly seen the light. Wow, bananas! He was working as a street preacher in Montreal. By now, he was no longer trying to get into my pants; he was trying to convert me! What the hell!!! He told me he had been born again and I had to repent and get on my knees and let Jesus into my heart. OK, buddy, like get lost! I listened to his rap for about twenty minutes, waiting for the perfect time to make my getaway. I dismissed his preaching with something like, 'Well, if it works for you, that's great. To each his own...' And I walked away.

The only difference in this last encounter was that he was no longer meek – he had found power. He was practically overwhelming, albeit psychotic. His eyes said it all. The lights were on but there was nobody home.

I went on with my life. I went through a divorce. Got remarried. It's funny what happened to Smitty. Once they got hold of him, he became a guinea pig. They had him on medication, then into cults. I feel sorry for the guy in a way. He seemed at first like just a regular guy. Never saw him again. I wish him well.

THE WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO

“I lit a cigarette on a parking meter and
walked on down the road.”
(Talking World War Three Blues, Bob Dylan)

“Alas, alas that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come.”
(Revelations 18:10)

The bombs had gone off that morning; by noon, most people were dead. He had woken up that morning and heard the crash of buildings collapsing, and windows shattering. If that wasn't scary enough, he looked outside his window, or what used to be his window, and saw the mushroom clouds in the distance. They kept rising and rising, as an image of total doom and death and destruction.

Immediately, he tried to turn on his radio, and then his television, to see what was going on, but there was no reception. There was not even any electricity. People were screaming, women and children being the loudest. Men were running to and fro, trying to save their lives. Luckily for Winston Smith, he did not live in a high-rise. But he thought it would be wise to go outdoors, before his house collapsed and crushed him under its weight.

Outdoors, there was total pandemonium. Cars had veered off the road and crashed into telephone posts; there were corpses lying around everywhere. Then Winston realized he was wounded: his face was burned, as well as his arms and hands. He thought of going to a hospital or clinic, but the buses were not running, and the metro seemed to have stopped. He was about to walk into the metro station, when a man came running out and yelled at him not to go in there, because people were trapped. The streets had collapsed and crushed the people that had taken refuge in the metro tunnels. Half the buildings in the area had collapsed, and there were mountains of rubble in the streets.

Winston looked up, and the mushroom clouds had gone, but there was a black cloud where the sun used to be, and it was getting colder. Was there going to be a nuclear winter? This was supposed to be a thing of the past. He stopped for a second and wondered. How could this be possible? The Cold War had ended, when the Berlin Wall came down, and now when was that? In 1989, he guessed, although that was some time ago. So who was responsible for this nuclear attack? Was it the Russians? the Chinese? Was it a terrorist attack? There had been nothing in the media about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Everything seemed safe. Mind you, there was 9/11, and the war on terror. But the government had pacified the world, and there was nothing in the news about this happening. However, it is true, none of the nuclear warheads of the United States had been dismantled or destroyed. Russia had sold one third of its nuclear submarine fleet to rogue states like Libya and Syria. And it seemed to Winston that the world wasn't safe for democracy after all. But he definitely felt betrayed by the government.

Then he saw some soldiers, wearing anti-radioactive uniforms, and carrying machine guns, policing the area. So Winston wandered off the main streets, and started looking for food. How would he eat, now that there was radiation in the food chain? He found a grocery store, stuck his arm through the window and grabbed a banana. That would be

breakfast. But wasn't the government supposed to prevent this scenario from happening?

All over the streets, there were corpses, and wounded people. Most buildings had collapsed. There was nothing left to do, but to wander aimlessly and try to survive for a couple of days at a time. And suddenly, Winston realized what he had become, after all these years: a homeless person.

KARL MARX RIDES THIS BUS

A minute ago, I was riding on the bus facing two black women in their forties. One looked bright and chipper, wearing bling bling and talking blissfully on her cell phone. She wore goldrimmed sunglasses, an all black outfit with golden sandals, hoop earrings, a gold bracelet and necklace, and she looked so cool, as though she didn't have a problem in the world.

The other lady was sleeping in the back of the bus. She didn't wear any makeup or jewelry, wore a frayed jean jacket and a ruddy red shirt. She wasn't carrying a fancy purse like the other bourgeois lady. She looked as though she spent the night working in a factory doing hard labour. She didn't shine, she didn't glow with satisfaction. She just looked real tired, real real tired.

WAITING FOR THE SNOW
'Ah, distinctly I remember, it was in the bleak December'
(Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven)

Yes, December was approaching quickly, and so was rent day, the first of the month: I was broke, because work never came in during the fall. On the other hand, I was sober, and my children were doing well in college. If we were still eating every day, it was largely due to my wife. I had met Roger at the government clinic where I was treated for various ailments, and he had struck me as a nice guy. So we became buddies.

I had introduced him to my younger sister, and he was enthralled with her looks. Right away, he made a move on her, just routinely flirting with her, until she fell into his arms. Or rather, she fell into his bed, and had to take the morning-after pill because she hadn't used any protection. Within a moment of hearing about this, he abandoned her and found a new paramour. I wasn't too thrilled about this. He had confided in me, and told me he came from a dysfunctional family in Nova Scotia. When he had moved to Montreal, he went wild, discovering all the nightlife, glitter, and glamour, and finally – the sleaze. Being a poet, he felt it was his birthright to sleep with every skirt he met, to experiment with every substance available, and to stop taking care of himself. You might say he was a lost little boy of twenty-seven going on seventeen. I heard the sound OM that fall, at a time when I was as unstable as in 1968, when I first heard it. According to the Upanishads, it is the sound of the Universe. I was sitting in my living room, dirty, unshaven, dishevelled, and yet saying my rosary, when it happened. The room was filled with a Presence, and I could distinctly hear the sound. My

girlfriend/mother of my children entered the room and asked me why I looked so funny. She was not part of this mystical experience, but I just laughed. I immediately connected with the first time I had heard the OM, tripping on acid, in the days when I worked as a street pharmacist, when I used to permanently borrow toilet paper from restaurants and stuff it under my coat, when the police followed me around, not really to get my autograph. And here I was, forty-three years later, in 2011, sober, the father of two kids, and a professional translator. Roger and I still were friends, because I still felt like a street person, and although he had a part-time job, he had one foot in the gutter and the other on a banana peel. I wanted to save this poor soul. I felt it was my missionary duty to rescue him and take him under my wing. But he was stronger than me, driven by a passion for poetry that was totally magnetic. I didn't know if I wanted to indulge with him or convert him. (God forbid I should convert anyone...) Anyhow, this is where we stood, at the end of November 2011, when I was still able to work, when he was still a star of the poetry establishment. But what ensued could not be predicted.

The leaves had fallen and lay strewn about in the brown/gray gutters of Montreal; the trees were skeletal and bare, like big spider legs clutching at the cloudy November sky. Roger and I were blown about by a devastating wind, that would wreak havoc in our lives and those of others. You have heard of Neil Cassidy and Jack Kerouac – well, I am not exactly Kerouac, but Roger was every bit as much of a psychopath as Cassidy. Push came to shove: he tried to get me published, I tried to get him published, and naught came of it. So we decided to go on a rampage together. I permanently borrowed my wife's credit card, and we made reservations for a one-way flight to Vancouver, he a twenty-seven year old maniac, and I a sixty-three year old fool who should know better. And sure enough, how we ended up at Main & Hastings, panhandling, is a sad story, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, but it was a matter of time before – in mid-December – he hooked up with some junkies and began stealing, while I was phoning my wife and kids collect, trying to backtrack and make overdue amends. I had run up a debt on my wife's credit card, and credit had expired. Finally, I don't know what happened to Roger, because we parted ways when he began to shoot drugs. I contacted a rich friend of mine in Montreal who was vice-President at Bombardier; he sent me money for plane fare back to Montreal, and when I arrived back home, my wife had me committed to this psych ward, where I am writing this sad tale right now. I hope Roger is all right, but first, I have to impress upon the social workers that I will make it up to my wife and kids. And I promise to never, never steal my wife's credit card again. I am laughing as I am writing this, and I don't even know why.

ROBERT'S PRIMAL SCREAM

Picture a wild man on the loose, like Godzilla unleashed on Cleveland, Ohio. Picture King Kong, as he climbs the Empire State Building, with a woman in one hand, and a jet airplane in the other. Well, that's how I feel.

I walk into this town, like the wild man of Borneo, and it is a decent, sleepy little town, with stop signs on every corner, with drug stores, and a bank. But the minute the citizens see me enter town, they hide their daughters in their bedrooms, and whip out the chastity belts. There is a THING out there, George, and it just hitchhiked into our neighbourhood. It is ugly, and wears long, dirty hair and a big old beard. It is stalking every living thing within a block, breathing fire, and spewing out foam.

Martha, do something, call the police. Call the fire department. Oops, there it just went around the corner.

I am walking around, hungry and tired, looking for a place to sleep, looking for food. I guess I smell, I guess I look foul. I am a homeless person, so watch out. Wild man on the loose.

There is a flurry of phone calls, to 911. Everyone is concerned. Something has just emerged from the swamp, and it is a nasty.

Meanwhile, I am harmless. I won't rape anybody. I won't steal anything. I am just a street person, looking for a place to rest my bones.

The cops are on the watch, however. They need to crucify someone, they have an itch for a crucifixion, and they are going to scratch it! They need to beat up on someone. And I would do the trick.

What a weird little town. Everyone looks scared, as they see me approach. People are peeping out their windows, and immediately closing the blinds, as soon as I look back.

You would think I am not human, somehow. The creature from the Black Lagoon. And I know the citizens have been watching those science fiction movies, and reading the articles in the local paper about mother stabbers and father rapers, mother rapers and father stabbers. That is where they get their information.

But justice always triumphs. The local police are there to defend the citizens. They will protect the citizens against Saddam Hussein, and Fidel Castro, and Ho Chi Minh, and Milosevic, and Noriega – against all the bad guys and demons Out There.

But I am not the dictator of a small country, or even of a large country. I have never tortured anyone, extorted money off anyone, taxed anyone, or had anyone arrested. I let the government do all those things.

I am just a homeless person, and I am Jesus, about to get crucified. The cops are getting ready to nail me.

Here they come, the Keystone Cops, and they come whipping around the corner, in their batmobile, and they stop right beside me, along the sidewalk. "Get in, kid!"

And I am escorted out of town. They drive me to the city limits, and tell me to start walking.

Friendly sort of town, they were. I have seen worse. I guess I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in. But the town's integrity got protected. And no one got hurt. The scapegoat is sent off into the wilderness.

I wipe my nose on my right hand, and keep on walking. It is 15 or 20 miles to the next town.

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.

SMILE, SMITTY LOVES YOU

So, no matter who you are, how insignificant you feel, no matter how lonely and godforsaken you have become; you may be behind bars, you may have tubes attached to your arms and nostrils; no matter how unhappy you think you are, rejoice and be exceeding glad, for Smitty loves you. Yes, Smitty has walked down the same paths as you, has carried the same burdens, and Smitty knows about your soul, and Smitty loves you.

(Recite this prayer to yourself three times a month and you will get rich. Smitty doesn't think you should drink or masturbate or smoke dope, but if you do, occasionally, don't feel bad because Smitty forgives you. So go out now and spread the word to your neighbour that yes, Smitty loves the whole world. Smitty has come into the world not that they should suffer, but that mankind could rejoice in Smitty's love.)

Do you feel loved by Smitty? Sit down crosslegged and hold your thumb closed on your palm and feel the cosmic vibrations generated by Smitty's love and whisper to yourself, "Smitty loves me, I am okay, everything is okay, because Smitty loves me." (With fervour.)

You have heard of the starving children? Well, Smitty loves them all, with his relentless, thirsty, all-knowing love. So give all your money to Smitty and Smitty will save the starving children. (Amen. Recite three times.)