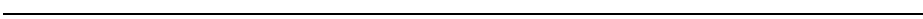


**Robert Markland Smith**

**Street Business Inc.**

**2016**



# STREET BUSINESS INC.

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To Bonnie, Isabelle and Cordelia



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## THE GLITTERING PLEASURE DOME

*"Mathilda's the defendant,  
She killed by the hundreds - "*  
(Tom Traubert's Blues, by 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 got 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?"

"Yessir," the little boy's eyes light up with an evil glare.

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“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, haha."

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.

— DECEMBER 25, 2003

## ROBERT'S PRIMAL SCREAM

Picture a wild man on the loose, like Godzilla unleashed on Cleveland, Ohio. Picture King Kong climbing 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.

– JANUARY 22, 2004

# 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:

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. 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.

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. Since there are 30,000 homeless people in Montreal alone, there are a plethora of films and photographs to store and interpret. The purpose of the tracking process is to enforce our control on the subjects. The rest of the city is

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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 round 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 facade. 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 Klutz  
RCMP  
Surveillance Unit  
Ottawa, Canada

## 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, by 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.

— FEBRUARY 7, 2004

## MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT

*"Got a little lady, walk that street,  
Tellin' all the boys that she can't be beat"*  
(Willie the Pimp, by 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 needed, 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.

– JANUARY 16, 2004

## 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

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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 Cote-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 ñ 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?

Now I am starting to get hungry, and there are no restaurants around. All the stores are boarded up. I see a garbage can, and there is a delicious-looking slice of pizza sitting right on top of the pile of rubbish. Hey, I am not proud, and I am so hungry that I grab the slice of pizza and eat it. Now I feel sick. I ate too fast. And I realize that I have lost weight in the past while. It seems that night and day are all the same.

Now I want to phone my mother, but I have lost my wallet. So I stick my fingers in a pay phone, in the coin return. No, there are no quarters in there.

And I am getting tired. I don't know if it is morning, noon or night. I find an alleyway where I won't get bothered. So I lie

down on a piece of cardboard, out of the way of pedestrians. I fall asleep within minutes.

Time goes by. I am sleeping on my piece of cardboard. The snow is falling. Snowflakes from heaven are falling. Falling. I am covered in cardboard. It seems like weeks and weeks have gone by. Finally, a stray dog licks my face, and I wake up. My bones are sore. My back and legs are sore. I am frostbitten and there is nowhere to go. I yell at people on the street, "Help me, help me!" But no one can hear me. I am in a parallel universe, or so it seems. They can't hear me, and I can see them but they don't even see me.

Finally, I see another dude from the streets. He can see me, or so it seems. He is Chinese, I notice. Or maybe Korean, I can't tell. He speaks to me. He wanders up to me, and smiles at me. I say to him, "Cold." He answers, "Cold." And he smiles.

We wander off together. He is about forty or eighty or a hundred years old. I can't tell. He takes me down an alley, and we find other street people sitting around a campfire. They are burning cardboard boxes, shards of wood, planks and toasting their hands by the fire. It is a little fire. It feels good. No one speaks my language. But I sit down at my place by the fire. And it feels good. One man next to me smiles at me. And it feels good.

The night comes down and it is snowing a gentle snow. A few flakes land in the fire and crackle. It feels good. It is warm and there is light.

— DECEMBER 3, 2003

## THE ALLEY CAT

*"Concentration moon, wish I was back in the alley!"*  
(Frank Zappa)

I was walking around the streets in Montreal, and I came up to Drummond and Sainte-Catherine. I felt all of a sudden as though everyone in the intersection was staring at me. At the same time, I felt dangerous, as though I were carrying a machine gun on my back. The fact is that I was dirty, and I felt dirty: I hadn't taken a shower in several days, I only owned one set of street clothes, which I wore over and over again; I didn't shave, and I felt the hostility of everyone around me. Harry had told me that the hippies at the corner restaurant were afraid of me, because I was "a cross between a desperado and Charlie Chaplin." I don't know about any crosses, except for the cross I was carrying. I also told people I had a fish on my back, like on April Fool's Day. I told them I felt tormented because of the fish. Sometimes, when I did a lot of acid, I felt as though I had three bodies, one I was walking in, and two others trailing behind. And I couldn't gather my three bodies together into one center. I was off center, like a John Max photograph. My soul felt dirty and grimy, from too many bad acid trips, from too much harassment by the police, from being molested as a child (although I wasn't aware of this). It was a dirty world I lived in, it was polluted with hatred and discrimination and violence and cheap sex. As I walked down Sainte-Catherine Street, I could see discotheques and bars and cars and a wide disparate assortment of drunks and low-life people of all walks of life. In this world, green lights kept turning red; any social structure was oppression, and the police could spot anyone with altered consciousness committing thought crime. I was tormented by the capitalist system, because salesmen would tell me things like: "Everybody's got a price" and "Do you want to be a hammer or a nail?" And it was a society in which "nice guys finish last" and "it is lonely at the top." I felt at a deep level "the

race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill!" I was definitely at the bottom of the totem pole, and envied those who drove Mercedes Benz's and Jaguar's. Is it true that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last? I was lumpen-proletariat, and no one would talk to me except other street people or the police, and that to give me a hard time. I aspired in life to be a waiter, because I was stuck at being a busboy. The junkies and prostitutes were my peers, and I was impressed by panhandlers who actually made money. And yet, I knew at some level that these were not gentlemen and ladies \_ I had been brought up with a silver spoon in my mouth, and I could never live that down. I kept trying to escape from the aristocrats and snobs. My worst fear was to be denounced as a racist or a conservative. Some girlfriend of mine once called me a fascist. Another called me a police informer. But back in the sixties and seventies, everyone suspected everyone else of working for the police. I saw people standing on street corners, waiting and staring. "They also serve who only stand and wait!" And I thought they were spying for the police somehow. I saw the same people in Douglas Psychiatric Hospital, sitting in a hall or in one of the tunnels, crouching and waiting and staring, and I knew they had a cosmic purpose to watch for Jehovah or something. They were the original witnesses of the Higher Power. And I would see the hookers standing around and joking with their colleagues on the corner of Saint-Laurent and Sainte-Catherine, and did they have a police mission as well? Hey, every street person was appointed from above, and I was supposed to save Quebec, like Jonah. And I kept waiting to be swallowed by the whale. I had been spit up by the whale, and I felt covered in vomit. I guess it is just the feeling of having been arrested and psychiatrized, if there is such a word. And I felt degraded, by the world, by the fallen angels around me, and I remember feeling that I was a fly, with dirty wings, and a dirty body, as I rode on the bus. Sometimes, it was grimy old March in Montreal, when there was slush and mud and dirty snow everywhere, and I was a dirty old man, a

derelict, a loser, at the age of 21 or 22, and there was no hope for me, because I was condemned. I was under God's wrath. And I raised my communist left fist against heaven in rebellion, and my destiny was to be crushed.

Why was I doing all this?

Meanwhile, in a far-off jungle surrounded by rice paddies, in a small country in Southeast Asia, across the Pacific Ocean, the culmination of Western civilization, its logical extension to the ends of the third world, despite the opposition of all the left worldwide, was that American soldiers and their mercenaries were pouring Canadian-made napalm on little Viet Cong insurgents, for the mere crime of wanting independence from the colonial arm of technocracy.

Meanwhile, in a world of rational madness revolving around materialism and domination, in a world where scientific research and market-economics gambling have spun out of control, perhaps only the homeless people are in their right minds.

— DECEMBER 16, 2003

## THE WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO

*"I lit a cigarette on a parking meter and  
walked on down the road."*

(Talking World War Three Blues, by 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.

— DECEMBER 29, 2003

## LITTLE BOXES

*“And there’s doctors and there’s lawyers and business executives,  
And they’re all made out of ticky-tacky,  
And they all look just the same.”*

(Little Boxes, by Pete Seeger)

“The only thing that the System can’t assimilate is the young fella walking down a country road, without a dime in his pocket, and whistling a happy tune.” These were the words of the oracle, the Capitaine. He had a big, black beard, and long, stringy, dirty hair, and he had been a member of the Communist Party, but had gotten expelled for being too much of a non-conformist. At this time, he was collecting welfare and growing a vegetable farm, and painting pictures about the end of civilization.

The Capitaine was the father of a friend of mine, and he smoked pot with us, but he didn’t realize we did things like yoga bare naked and magic mushrooms. We all lived in cabins along the highway, and the Capitaine lived about five miles away from us, on a farm with his family. I lived in a hunting cabin about fifty feet into the woods, and we had no running water or electricity. I was escaping from civilization as I knew it. My friends all had different ideas of what we were doing there, but one thing was certain: we weren’t going to pollute, by using electricity or oil or by piling up garbage heaps. Sometimes we wore clothes, and sometimes we didn’t. Sometimes, I would walk into the kitchen of the farm house, and a couple would be in their birthday suits, having wild sex on the kitchen chair. And there were animals in the house, ducks, chickens, cats, dogs, and other animals. We cooked our meals on a wood stove, and heated with a Quebec heater, which is essentially a log-burning furnace. My toilet was two trees, with a board nailed across between them, and a hole in the ground below – winter or summer.

So we smoked the pot that we grew in the garden, and dropped peyote buttons, and drank as we pleased. None of us worked at jobs. I was on unemployment insurance, which provided me with \$ 28.00 a week, and my friends were on welfare.

As a matter of fact, when Harry came to visit from the city, he found fault with this arrangement. He thought it was hypocritical to collect welfare and then claim we were rebelling against the System. I guess it was typical to rebel against something on which you depend. On the other hand, he was an international smuggler, and he earned his living. He smuggled millions of dollars of LSD and lived in four or five apartments at the same time in Montreal, just to throw off the police.

Well, one day, I went into Montreal with Harry, just to freshen up and take a shower. And it felt good to sleep on a real mattress for a change, rather than straw. That evening, I told Harry, "I have a hunch I am going to end up in Quebec City tomorrow." He didn't think anything of it.

Well, the next day, I was on the highway, hitchhiking back to Wickham, when a car pulled up. There were two hippies inside. I asked them, "Where are you headed?"

They answered, "Quebec City."

So I got into their car, and I asked them their names. One said, "I am Simon Peter" and the other exclaimed, "I am John the Baptist." OK, so I knew I was in for a ride and a half. It never occurred to me these guys might be looney tunes.

It turns out their rap was that Jesus Christ was alive and well in Canada. They had a mixture of occult and Christian teachings. For instance, one of them told me that racists smoked cigarettes, because they thought minorities smelled, and the odour of their cigarettes blocked the smell of the people. OK.

Then we drove into Quebec City, and one of them, Simon Peter, saw a vision of a hand in mid-air, and this meant there was a lot of illiteracy around there. Then we went into a restaurant, and they ordered in English, which is not too cool in Quebec City. So the waitress gave them a dirty look, and the one called John the Baptist crossed his hands and prayed. I asked him what he was praying about, and he said afterwards that he invoked the fire of heaven so that it would consume this restaurant. Finally, they drove me back over a hundred miles to Wickham, which is fifteen miles past Drummondville. It was winter, but it wasn't too cold.

Patricia Mathews met these two characters and merely dismissed them as "bullshit American hippies" whereas my mind was blown.

– JANUARY 15, 2004

## THE GREAT BETRAYAL

*"Money doesn't talk, it swears"*  
(Bob Dylan)

This afternoon, I went to a charity organization that helps out homeless people, to see what kind of people they were. They were located right in the middle of the Gay Village, which is less than gay during this time of year. It was snowing heavily. The Gay Village is a little shantytown in Montreal, where there are syringes in the alleys and prostitutes shuffling about on the corners. I thought at least the charity organization was in the right district.

I found their address, and knocked on the door. A lady came to the door. The door was locked. She opened it, and I said to her, "It's for a donation."

"Oh, no, we don't give out money" she replied, and she tried to slam the door in my face. Luckily, I had my foot in the door, and my wallet in my hand. I showed her several hundred-dollar bills.

"No, no, I want to GIVE a donation."

All of a sudden, she greeted me like a prince. She exclaimed, "Why, come right in, sir!" (I had become a sir.) "Here, let me phone the boss."

She got on the phone, and called next door. The boss was in the middle of lunch. Now that I was giving money, it was all right to bother the boss in the middle of her lunch.

"Hello, Audrey? Yes, it is Danielle, next door. There is a gentleman here who wants to see you, and he has A LOT OF MONEY to give us!!"

Blah-blah on the phone, then Danielle tells me to go next door to the lunchroom, where I can see the boss. I walk over and enter a small room, where three people are having lunch. "Oh, Mister Smith! Why don't you sit down with us?" (I had become Mr. Smith now.)

And I proceed to tell them that I used to be a homeless person, but now I am raising two children, and I work as a translator. And lo and behold, they are fawning over my great degree of social conscience, and of course, I give them my charity donation, and we chat a bit, and I just want to get out of there.

— FEBRUARY 6, 2004

## LIFE AFTER DEATH

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

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

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

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

People, men and women, but no children, are milling about, chatting in little clusters of two or three. There is no music playing; the building looks like a church basement, but strangely enough, you can't hear any organ music. It is incredibly quiet, as though everyone had come back from the dead. Everyone seems to be minding their own business, and it is quiet. No one is raising their voice, and people are coming towards you to fill up on coffee. One other lady walks up to you and shakes your hand again. What is this business of shaking hands all the time? Don't they know that is how you catch colds and flus?

She says to you, "Hi, what's your name?" And for a split second, you can't remember. You answer her, "It's funny, but I can't remember."

She giggles and replies, "That's okay, if you are new, it is normal that you have trouble talking. Did you have trouble finding us?"

And you answer: "I don't know, I just ended up here, as though I was led here."

She answers, "And rightly so. Do you drink?"

You blush, and you get defensive: "Why? What's it to you?"

But she is not taken aback; she just says, "That's okay, it is all right. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. You see, all the people here, all the people you see are just like you. We have already been through hell. This is just a relief, isn't it?"

And suddenly, you realize that you have died, and this is life after death. Not quite what you expected, no organ music, no harp playing, no wings, just coffee and a meeting of people

chatting. Hmm, very strange. You are starting to get accustomed to where you are.

Maybe these people aren't so crazy after all. Maybe, like they say, you are in the right place.

The woman is still there, and she says to you, with light and serenity in her eyes, "Nothing will be expected of you. All the jobs have been done. Just grab a seat and enjoy the meeting. No one will lay a trip on you. No one will ask you for money. Besides, we have no use for money in this place."

So you sit down, hesitantly. Other people are sitting down around you, in rows, on wooden chairs that squeak when you move. You are a bit confused, but this seems well organized, anyway, whatever it is. A man at the conference table bangs his gavel on the table and starts the meeting. He gives his name, and then says loudly: "It is customary to begin this meeting with a moment of silence, followed by the serenity prayer.

There is indeed a moment of long silence, then everyone starts chanting this gibberish that you don't understand. But it only lasts for a second. Then the chairman of the meeting goes on.

"Welcome to Life after Death." And your mind drifts off. And the chairman's voice becomes meaningless chatter, as you start remembering the endless drinks flowing, the syringes, the robberies, the crime, the bankruptcies, moral and financial, and you are not listening anymore to what the chairman is babbling about, and you wonder why you ended up in this place, when you deserved to be in hell. And suddenly, you realize that you have already paid your dues, you have already been through hell on earth.

Yes, maybe that is it. The car accidents, the blackouts, the wife battering, the children screaming because they had no food, and finally, the streets. Yes, the streets. Long walks through the

snow, with holes in your boots, trying to get out of the cold and the wind. Walking, always walking, like a zombie. And all those men always hitting on you, trying to get a piece of tail out of you, for what? What was their problem? But you realize that you weren't very nice either, yelling at your husband, you remember how totally selfish you were, especially when someone came between you and your booze. And towards the end, before you passed away, you were always in a rage.

Something snaps you out of your reverie. There is a woman sitting at the conference table, and she just said something that caught your attention: "You need to know rage to qualify to be here!"

Now that is strange, uncanny, weird. You were just thinking about rage. And now, the rage seems to be gone. For now. One day at a time. Just what were you so angry about? Oh yes, being a woman in a man's world! No, what was it? Being a native in a white man's world! No, that was not it either.

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

But the meeting goes on, for a century or two, for hundreds and hundreds of years, although it feels like an hour. You are just looking around, trying to get your bearings. And you look at yourself, and you too are wearing a white robe. I guess you have been through the great tribulation they talked about in the

Bible, but there are no Bibles in sight.

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

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

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

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

— DECEMBER 27, 2003

## THE BIG FREEZE

*“They refused Jesus too.’  
He said, ‘You’re not him.’”*  
(Bob Dylan)

It is minus 41 degrees Celsius, and I am sleeping under a blanket, in the entrance of a metro station in Montreal. And I am shivering, but I have managed to fall asleep. And I am dreaming.

I am in an office, working as a translator; and I am the only employee that can fly in that office. The other translators are chasing me around, with butterfly nets. But I am staying close to the ceiling, fluttering about, I can't let them catch me. I am flying from room to room, in a dark mansion, and the other office employees don't want me around, because I am a schizophrenic, and they don't like me.

They think I am weird – maybe because I can fly and they can't.

Here is a window. I know what I will do. I will fly out the window, and grab a clothesline, and slide to another building. But as I am sliding along the clothesline, a pretty young secretary is sliding beside me, and she wants to make babies with me.

And I am sitting in a hot tub with the pretty secretary, and she has turned into someone very sexy. But her husband comes storming into the room, and chases me away. And I am flying again, running away from the husband, who has a big black beard like Rasputin the monk, and he is chasing me away with a fly swatter, trying to catch me as I fly out the window again.

And now I am in church, and I seem to be an altar boy, holding

up the skirts of a bishop, as he parades around spraying incense on the congregation. And the two of us lean forwards, and backwards, and now we are skipping down a beach, in Cuba.

“YOU THERE, MOVE ALONG!!” I get a kick in the ribs from someone, and I look up. It is a metro security guard, and he has a billy stick. “COME ON, MOVE.”

So I snap out of my dream, and pick up my shoes, and start walking. It is minus 41 degrees Celsius outdoors, and I was just trying to stay warm for an hour.

There are several other fellows sleeping in the metro station. It smells acrid, like urine and alcohol, as someone peed on the floor. There are empty beer bottles on the ground.

I guess they don't want you around when you are a genius, eh?

— JANUARY 14, 2004

## HOMAGE TO CATALONIA

I had spent a week in Madrid, going to the Prado by day, sitting in bars at night drinking cerveza and watching Flamenco dancers, attending bullfights and drinking more cerveza. I had enough of the capital, and wanted to see Barcelona. So one afternoon, I stood along the highway on the outskirts of town, and stuck out my thumb. Maybe hitchhiking under Franco was not recommended, but I was taking chances. Around 7:00 o'clock at night, the sun was going down gradually, and I thought I was out of luck — when along came a blood-red Mercedes Benz that screeched to a halt.

The first thing the driver told me was that *la bateria esta rota*: the car battery was dead. He was a Spaniard returning from working in Germany, and he was headed back home in Barcelona. He was about 35 years old, and I was 18. His complexion was swarthy, and he had a full head of black hair. Like many Spaniards, he was pretty macho.

We drove through the desert, 400 miles to Barcelona, at breakneck speeds. The sun set on the desert, which has ochre red sand, and is peopled with peasants living in earthen huts. I was shocked at the apparent poverty of the desert people, compared to the wealth of the capital, Madrid. In the capital, young ladies didn't go out alone; they were always escorted by a chaperone. And the dresses were ankle-length. It wasn't just conservative; the times were fascist. Nevertheless, I was carrying about ten books by Karl Marx in my suitcase. How I got across the border was beyond me.

In any case, now it was night time, and the driver and I were chatting on and off, because I only speak broken Spanish. I sat on the edge of my seat, because he was driving at 80 miles per hour, with no headlights. He would follow the red rear lights of the car ahead of us, through winding mountain roads;

sometimes, the car ahead of us would take a sharp turn, and we would be going nowhere at 80 miles per hour in total darkness. It was exhilarating, but he was a good driver.

Finally, we stopped at the equivalent of a diner along the highway to have a beer, and relax. We were sitting in the middle of a large adobe-style restaurant, and there were truck drivers sitting all around us. So we were discussing whether or not "beer" in English is spelled "bier" as in German. After a while, we were chatting, and - me and my big mouth - I started saying, out loud, "el comunismo esta muy necesario in Espana" roughly translated as "they need a communist revolution in Spain." Suddenly, Marcello, the driver, whispered to me, "la cuidado" or "be careful!" and I noticed that you could hear a pin drop in the bar. All the Spanish truck drivers were listening intently to what I was saying, and staring with big brown eyes that spelled, "lynch mob." So Marcello quickly paid the tab and we exited coolly - calmly - and - collectedly, to his Mercedes Benz, that luckily, still had its engine running - and we skidaddled, we headed for the fucking hills!! The driver explained to me that you don't talk like that, openly, in central Spain.

We finally arrived in Barcelona, and the driver set me up in a hotel that was run by a family he knew. He took me out to the bullfights, and one of his relatives showed me around town.

Meanwhile, despite myself, I was learning a bit of discretion. At every government building, there were soldiers with machine guns stationed on the four corners of the establishment. And when the dictator came into town, his soldiers would go from door to door and hand out little flags - and tell people to go out and cheer for Franco. On every coin, it said, "Francisco Franco, saviour of Spain for the glory of God."

— APRIL 15, 2004

## 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.

— APRIL 22, 2004

## 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, "Fuck 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 “kiaï” 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 Hotel-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.

— FEBRUARY 3, 2004

## THE MERRY-GO-ROUND CRUCIFIXION

*"He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation?"*

(Isaiah 53:8)

He had been a missing person for two months, when he wandered into Oshawa, Ontario. His only belongings were a shoulder bag, which he left in the bushes by a river, and the clothes on his back. He was visibly mad: his eyes displayed a psychotic stare; he hadn't shaved or combed his hair or washed in several weeks. His clothes were nothing but tatters and rags. People noticed him on the streets, and then immediately phoned the police about the weirdo that just infiltrated the neighbourhood. But the town has no need to be nervous.

His journey through Oshawa led him to explore a church basement. You might call it a pilgrimage, because he was searching for the meaning of things. He simply wandered into the building; he was wondering what you are supposed to do once you become an adult, and a church was a good place to look. Was there a destiny, a spiritual program he hoped to find there?

From there, he walked the streets, never thinking of stealing a morsel to eat. He sought a friend, but his empty pockets kept people away. Here he was, in a foreign land, and whom should he turn to for help? He walked on, and on, and evening was approaching, so he strayed into an apartment building, and settled under the staircase in the basement, and lay on the cement for the night - too crazy and bewildered to care for his own comfort. He was rather driven by instinct, like the wild beasts, like Nebuchadnezzar or King Lear.

Upon awakening in the morning, he went out on to the front lawn of the apartment building, and sat down on the grass; then

he stood up, and then he sat down again - this he did for half an hour, trying to decide where to go next.

Someone must have phoned the police, because they came screeching down the street, pulled up to the curb beside the young man, and ushered him into the automobile. And there he was sitting in the back seat of the police car, when a lady came running out of the building, and offered Robert a sandwich - but they were off to the races. Robert looked in the rear view mirror of the vehicle, and saw his own eyes in the glass. They were definitely wide and psychotic-looking, and he was disheveled and lost and demented. The condemnation was complete. His father had told him, many years before, "I am ashamed to be seen with you in public" and now the self-fulfilling verdict had been passed.

As they arrived at the police station, the cops told him to stand there and face the wall. Then they ordered him to bend over and pull down his pants, which he did. They saw his behind, and they laughed, a good, hearty pig laugh; and then Robert was interrogated in a little office by two detectives in white shirts with their ties undone. They, at least, were clean-shaven. All they wanted to know was his name, and where he came from. Robert was terrified and gave them several different names, and they were visibly annoyed. It was the dog days, and why should officers of the law have to bother with the wretched of the earth? They had families to feed, and better things to do.

Finally, one officer was left alone in the office with Robert, and he told the young man, sternly, "Look, kid, tell me your name, or I'll punch your fucking face right through that wall!!"

The young man mumbled, "Robert Smith, and I'm from Montreal." The detective then told him to stand up and keep his arms down and out of the blue, the cop punched Robert in the pit of the stomach with all his might; Robert fell to the floor, trying to catch his breath, and as he clutched his stomach,

writhing on the floor, he could see the cop towering over him, laughing with all his teeth.

The following morning, the young man was taken out of his cell, and placed in a holding cell before entering the courtroom. He had been given a baloney sandwich, with no butter or mustard, and a single, black cup of coffee. In this holding cell, there were several inmates waiting to appear before the judge.

Robert found some paper on the floor, and tried to block the holes in the walls thinking there were microphones hidden in there. A detective came up to Robert, and put his hand in his shirt pocket, and seemed to pull out some marijuana. And he whispered to him in a raspy voice, "OK, kid, tell us what drug you're on, and we won't tell them about THIS!!" But Robert didn't see the sleight-of-hand trick, and knew even less how the grass ended up in his shirt pocket.

They called his name: "ROBERT SMITH." And they ushered him to step into the courtroom. He was startled a second later, because as he walked past the first lawyer, the prosecutor leapt up and proclaimed to the judge, "Your Honour, I suggest we drop the charges against this young man, because his father came all the way here from Montreal yesterday, and he has a very prominent position in government." And he reached over and handed some documents to the judge. Robert was standing in front of the magistrate, he was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. As a matter of fact, he couldn't talk anymore. Finally, the judge banged his gavel on the desk, and passed sentence: "In light of this evidence, I am sentencing this young man to thirty days in a hospital for the criminally insane."

From then onwards, things blur, there is laughter, there is violence, there is moaning, and abomination. The young man, 22 years of age, had only committed treason in his heart, thought crime, once or twice. Like Jonah, he was fleeing from a

mission, and the Beast had caught up with him and swallowed him. He was definitely a man on the run. He was now in the hands of the System; all ye who enter here lose all hope.

— DECEMBER 7, 2003

## THE MESSENGER ANGELS

First, my girlfriend Lorraine left me, and then I couldn't find a job. I was out of luck. So I applied for welfare, and went to their office. This was in the early seventies, and there was a lot less bureaucracy at the welfare office than now. The welfare officer was pretty hard-nosed, and he simply told me he wasn't giving me a cheque, and to go deliver circulars door-to-door for Montreal Messenger Service. He said they were located at 444 Notre-Dame Street East, and to show up there at 5:00 o'clock in the morning. This was in November, and the winter was coming.

I got to the address he had given me the next morning. There were some trucks parked in the parking lot, and a bunch of winos and derelicts and drug addicts waiting around. I was told what to do. This was the procedure: you gave your name, and they called you if there was room for you on a truck. Then they gave each worker \$ 5.00 up front for his breakfast. Some guys would just show up, take the \$ 5.00 and run. They would buy two beers with the money and forget all about working for that day. If your name came up, you got selected to work.

So my name came up, and I boarded a truck, with some other street people. It was still dark out, because it was around 5:30 in the morning. We were all shivering. Some men had cigarettes, most of them were smoking rollies, and it was cold. The men that were aboard the truck with me were heavy-duty drunks. Their faces were weather beaten, their clothes were tattered, and no one had shaved that morning. So we went out, the truck pulled out, and we drove to a neighbourhood where we were supposed to deliver flyers from door-to-door. As we were driving out there, some of the old drunks started noticing me. I was young, fresh out of college, and very naive. They started razzing me. One guy murmured, in French, "Look at this young pup. He is about to cry." I guess I looked sad. I was afraid of

these men, because they were tough. Then they ignored me and started joking among themselves. One man grabbed another man by the testicles and squeezed hard, yelling, "This guy's got hard nuts. He's going to have poor children!!" I was shocked. These things never happened in my mother's living room.

And we drove on in the dark. They were chatting and passing around the tobacco. There were piles and piles of circulars in the back of the truck.

I remember a couple of shocking comments I heard. One younger fellow, about thirty-five years old, said, "They think they are making poor people happy when they give us their leftover used clothes." Another man exclaimed, as we passed a Steinberg's supermarket, "Your children are worth more at Steinberg's." It was like taking an education in class-consciousness. I think I learned more in a few weeks delivering circulars than I ever learned in courses on Marxism in college.

Finally, we arrived on Saint-Hubert Street, and they let us off the truck. Each man was given a shoulder bag full of circulars. We were to pick up another load every couple of hours. We were told there were inspectors who followed us around, in case we felt like throwing the flyers in a garbage can. So off we went, up and down the staircases, placing a flyer with an advertisement in each mailbox. And on Saint-Hubert Street, all the old houses have three stories, and you have to walk up the stairs three stories, and down the stairs three stories. And this went on all day long.

Unfortunately, I was wearing old shoes, and there was a nail coming through the heel of my shoe, into my foot, from right under the sole of my shoe. And still, I trudged up and down the stairs.

Soon enough, it was time for lunch. So I followed two other

workers, and they took me to a tavern, where they had a liquid lunch. It was the old style of tavern, where they had sawdust on the floor, so you could spit on the floor. It was pretty raunchy. And the men I worked with had pretty little respect for the middle-class. They thought I was pretty stuck up. One guy would say to the other guy, "This man is my brother, but he doesn't realize it." And the afternoon started in this way, with a buzz of alcohol. The sun was shining through the stained glass windows of the tavern, and rays of sun danced on the sawdust. The waiter was a big hulk, and he wore black pants and a clean white shirt. The men would give him a "V" sign, and he would bring them two beers.

At night, it was the same routine, except we were tired and we had earned \$ 17.50. That was our day's wage, plus the \$ 5.00 they fronted us for breakfast. By the time they drove us back to the depot, it was dark again.

This went on for several weeks, and my feet were sore from walking on the nail in my shoe. I tried to fix it, but I never had time to go to the cobbler's and never enough money to buy a new pair of shoes.

One night, I had just finished work, and I was taking the subway back home. Another hippie approached me in the metro station. First, he asked me if I wanted to buy some mescaline, and I said no. We got to talking and we took the same bus home. And suddenly, he asked me on the bus, "Do you believe in God?"

I replied, "No."

So he added, "Well, he exists. I am still his enemy because I do wrong things, but go to your room tonight and humble yourself before him and he will reveal himself to you."

Then he got off the bus at his stop. I went home to my room,

and tried to pray. It was the first time I prayed as an adult. I got on my knees, and mumbled a few sincere words. The light from the moon was shining in through the curtains, and when I got up off the floor, I didn't feel anything, but I knew something was about to happen.

— DECEMBER 13, 2003

## THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH

*"but if the salt have lost his savour, it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."*

(Matthew 5:13)

I am sitting here, in a café, having the most wonderful croissant, and the most delicious coffee, writing these notes to myself, on a sunny spring day. No one here knows me or the fact that I am dying of AIDS; in the Caribbean they call it "the skinny disease" and I guess I am wearing thin. My blood count is atrocious, and I may only have a couple of days left to live.

Everything looks bright and lively, as though there were light within each flower I see blossoming, within the furniture in the restaurant, and I feel everyone is in love. I especially feel touched by the tremendous expressions of mercy of those around me, the nurses, the doctors, my gay friends, my family. At the same time, I feel as though I was under the wrath of God, for the mere reason that I am a human being, condemned to die soon of this painful disease. I feel there is a cloud above me, like a stormcloud. And somehow, the fascists are right, damn it, they are right, and it is their god that has prevailed.

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.

— JANUARY 12, 2004

## IN THE INNER SANCTUM

I am sleeping. I am dreaming that I am sleeping, on the floor. I think I know where I am: on the floor of a bank. There are people using the instant teller machines, lining up, and I can overhear them shuffling about, handling change, and I can hear the beeps of the computers, and the people are talking, keeping a safe distance from me; and I am concentrating on a good dream.

It is not too comfortable, whereas I am sure all these customers sleep in clean sheets. The floor is hard, and I keep tossing and turning. I have been sleeping here all weekend, on an empty stomach. No one has given me a cent; mind you, I haven't panhandled. There is a camera aimed at the ATM machines, and I don't think it can see me.

I haven't shaved in a few months, and my beard is getting good. Nor have I changed my clothes in many weeks. I am wearing my winter clothes, although it is summer. Maybe I should take a shower, the next time I am in jail or in a hospital.

I am glad for the customers of the bank. There seems to be an endless supply of twenty dollar bills for them.

I remember, one time, I tried to get a bank loan. They asked me for collateral; I answered them that if I had collateral, I wouldn't need a bank loan. The banks only help those who already have money.

Did you ever try to open a bank account lately? You almost need a credit card to open an account. It takes them a week to check your credit rating.

On the other hand, if you try to walk into a bank like something the cat just dragged in, they show you to the door.

I guess they have their own sense of respectability, but they don't show the public much respect - not if you are poor, anyway. They are definitely not a charity organization. Oh, they make donations to concert halls and to other tax-deductible charities, but these are just tax write-offs. I think actually that they are feeding their faces in a time of slaughter. I remember during the last recession, in 1992, the banks all made profits of almost a billion dollars per quarter, while the general public was suffering. In that whole year, I think I earned a total of \$ 3,000. But panhandling is not as lucrative as imposing user fees on your customers and playing the stock market with other people's money.

But it is getting dark outside. I think I will go out and sleep in the park. Who knows? The police may not find me. I will lie down under the bushes, so no one can see me.

But what did Billy Holliday say? "Them that's got shall have, them that's not shall lose. So the Bible says, and it still is news."

Still, it sure would be nice to have a crust of bread to eat, while these customers withdraw and deposit thousands of dollars in the ATM machines.

— DECEMBER 29, 2003

## NEBUCHADNEZZAR

*"The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws."*  
(Daniel 4:33)

*"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness!"*  
(Howl, by Allen Ginsberg)

I first met Greg Pellegrino in the fall of 1978, through our mutual friend Harry. Greg had a B.A. in Psychology from McGill University, and was bright and alert, until Harry got hold of him. He was a bit shy, and looked clean-cut. He wore thick, black glasses, and had short, black hair and a trim black beard. He had a twinkle in his eye, and functioned very well.

Within two years, he was living on the streets of Montreal, and was a different person. He now wore a winter coat and knee-high rubber boots in the summer time. His hair was shoulder-length and he stopped trimming his beard. He now had a gray and black dirty beard that came down to his navel. He carried around plastic bags full of newspapers. And he wandered all over the city, looking for a place to rest.

By now, his conversation was just rambling. He sounded like the gravedigger in Hamlet, and he was always trying to hit me up for a twenty dollar bill, on the grounds that I was a "Christian." His face was ruddy and reddened from walking in the sun. He told me he never washed, because his body dirt was his protection against bad vibrations. He complained that his father used to use the washroom whenever Greg was taking a shower as a child and for this reason, Greg stopped washing.

Obviously, he was psychotic, from going hungry, from

hardship, from sleeping outdoors, and from being an outcast, left to associate with sick people.

I kept bumping into him on the streets for about twenty years, and I would often give him a handout, or take him to a restaurant. A couple of times, I let him stay in my apartment, but he would bother me. He wanted to take drugs in my house, and he would talk incessantly until 4:00 o'clock in the morning. He was basically out of control, and I couldn't convince the poor man to take a shower or change his clothes. And he would ramble and rant and rave, about the Hell's Angels, and the devil, and the rich people, and unidentified flying objects. He lost all sense of grammar.

One time, I bumped into him in a welfare office. He was sleeping in the back of the room, and he told me he wanted to collect \$ 30,000 in retroactive payments from the government. He hadn't received a single welfare cheque in the many years he had lived on the streets, and he was claiming compensation.

By this time, his face was beet red, from walking around outdoors in the sun, and his big, black eyes were bulging, like the eyes of Trotsky or Charles Manson. He had fire from above, and his words cast spells and made the city shake. He commanded heaven and earth, and could summon ten thousand angels in one fell swoop to come down and destroy his enemies. Like Count Count on Sesame Street, there was thunder in his voice, and lightning crackled when he counted.

I haven't seen Greg in a couple of years now. And I don't know if he is alive or dead.

— DECEMBER 14, 2003

## PAULINE FROM THE BLIZZARD

Today, there is a blizzard in Montreal. Twenty centimeters of snow fell overnight: this means there are snowbanks along the streets that are three feet high, the streets are slippery, and cars are buried under the snow along the sidewalks. I went to the Amitié-Friendship drop-in center, to see some of my friends. It is a center downtown on Lincoln Street, where people with various mental health problems can go socialize, have a coffee for fifty cents, get handouts of free canned food, and receive counselling from social workers. There are sofas in one room, with a TV set and a computer or two; the other room is the dining area. The center is subsidized by the government.

I got there shortly after noon, right after the center opened, when I walked Pauline, a young lady I have seen hanging around with Harry. She panhandles by the Alexis-Nihon shopping center, and I have heard she is a wreck.

She came in from the storm, and right away, the two social workers on duty, Sylvia and a French-speaking black guy told her she had to leave. She was wearing an extra shirt, her red hair was uncombed and dishevelled, she was very thin and might have looked pretty, given proper make-up. Pauline blurted out, "Why?"

Sylvia answered, calmly, "You know, Pauline."

"What have I done?"

Sylvia replied again, slowly, "We don't need to tell you."

Pauline begged them, saying, "Please. Can I have some food? Look, I got rid of the lice."

"No, Pauline, you have to leave."

“But you guys are supposed to help me!”

Sylvia ordered her to get out. But Pauline tried another angle:

“You guys are supposed to be social services, right?”

The man finally told her, “Look, you have to go now.”

There were only a couple of other members of the drop-in center present, and they were in the other room, eating their lunches. I was standing nearby the incident, so the man approached me and asked me to my face, “What do you want?”

“Me? Nothing.”

Then all of a sudden, Pauline’s eyes lit up, and she dashed towards the phone. Then she paused and asked me, “What day is it today?”

“December 15th” I answered.

“No, the day!”

“It’s Monday” I told her.

So she went to the phone, and tried to phone the Montreal General Hospital. I gathered she needed to get her injection of neuroleptics. She hadn’t been to the drop-in center in a month, but something nasty must have happened the last time she was there.

The male social worker told her that she had to leave. Pauline was desperate. She replied, “But I am a homeless person!!”

They were adamant. She had to leave. She tried to phone someone at the hospital, and couldn’t get through. I even gave

her a quarter so she could make her phone call. I could tell the social workers resented having me present or trying to help. Then Pauline stormed out of the building, back out into the cold.

By then, David Smail had come in. He and I were standing out of hearing range, and mumbling. I asked him, "What is her problem? She must have done something!"

He replied, "She is a street bum. She just got out of prison."

Other people started flocking into the drop-in center; they were schizophrenics, but one notch above Pauline, for some unfathomable reason. They were allowed to eat free food, but Pauline, who couldn't help herself, was turned down. I would have taken her out for lunch, except I was broke also. I am expecting some money towards the end of January, but right now, I can't help anyone else out.

Finally, I left the drop-in center and took the metro back home. It was difficult walking the streets, because it was slippery, and you had to climb over the snowbanks to cross the streets.

I don't know what became of Pauline. But "a robin redbreast in a cage / Puts all heaven in a rage" (William Blake).

— DECEMBER 15, 2003

## 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.

— APRIL 24, 2004

## 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 modecate, 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 her friend 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 moderate. 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.

— APRIL 14, 2004

## REVOLUTION FOR THE HELL OF IT

*"A spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of Communism"*  
(The Communist Manifesto, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels)

I am sitting in a café on the corner of Bleeker and Fourth, in the West Village, in New York, and this is April 1968, when someone sticks his head in the door and yells, "GRAND CENTRAL STATION! MIDNIGHT! BE THERE!" and marches on.

I am curious.

So I arrive at Grand Central Station with my friend Steve Pasano, just before midnight, not knowing at all what to expect. Suddenly, there are about three or four hundred teenagers present, and some are playing guitar, some are throwing balloons in the air, and everyone is chanting slogans about the war in Vietnam, like:

"HELL, NO! WE WON'T GO!" or "HO HO HO, HO CHI MINH, NLF IS GOING TO WIN!" or simply, "SNOOPY FOR PRESIDENT!"

Meanwhile, more and more people are joining us in the demonstration. I have never been to a demonstration before. I had just been hanging out in Greenwich Village to play bohemian. The Montreal crowd I came from wasn't very political.

All of a sudden, someone climbs up on the traffic island in the middle of the train station, and rips the hands off the clock. Later on, Herbert Marcuse said this was very significant, but I am not sure. One scruffy-looking guy stands up in the crowd, holding a body-size poster that reads, "UP AGAINST THE WALL, MOTHERFUCKER."

Just then, the cops attack. I get hit in the hand with a billy club. The cops enter the crowd and arrest the guy with the poster. Then all hell breaks loose. The cops rush into the crowd, over and over again, in a V formation, beating the air with their billy clubs. They simply run at us, and sweep through the crowd, until there is practically no one left in the station.

My friend Steve looks discouraged. He is a college professor, and used to drive up to Montreal and sell us a pound of grass for a good price. That was where I met him and his wife Carol. I used to live with a dealer called Bert, and he was friends with Steve.

The next thing that I remember is that all the kids are streaming out of Central Station, and walking up to Central Park in the warm April night. In the park, we are standing around smoking joints, when about a hundred young people run head-on towards each other from opposing sides, and form a pile of human bodies twenty feet high. They yell as they run into this pile of bodies. I pity the kids at the bottom of the pile. They look kind of funny, squirming in a huge pile of bodies.

Then we spontaneously form little circles, and light bonfires to stay warm. It is a warm night, but it is still April. There we are, warming our hands on the fires, when suddenly a cop comes into the circle and stomps out the fire with his boots. So we wait a minute, and start another fire. Same scenario: the cop comes into the circle, and stomps out the fire. And a third time, except this time, we close in on him. The cop stops stomping on our fire, and looks up, and there are over a hundred teenagers, all stoned on marijuana, standing - in dead silence - staring at him with no expression on their faces. The cop can't move, because we are standing a foot away from him. We are all around him.

Well, the cop gets spooked. He starts blabbering insanely, "Well, I am a liberal, you know. I have nothing against you kids.

My son is one of you guys!" And we aren't even listening. We are just standing around him, a foot away from his chest, and staring at him, in total silence. The cop is very nervous. He is trapped.

At this point, I must have blacked out on grass, because I can't remember what happened next. But I remember a couple of years later, reading about this event in a book by Abbie Hoffman, who organized it. Because there were master minds engineering events like this, in order to politicize hippies like me.

Right now, all our heroes from the sixties have died, and, as Joyce said, "we have the night to mourn."

— JANUARY 23, 2004

## VAGABONDAGE

*"The Son of Man has not a stone where to lay his head."*

(Jesus)

Who am I and where do I come from? Have you seen me, wandering past the window of the restaurant, as you dine on scallops and white wine? I was the character carrying bags of newspapers, dressed in a secondhand army coat, with long dirty hair. I stared at you, and I hated the world you live in. The waiter wore a little black bow tie, and a black vest. I was just passing through.

Maybe you saw me, walking past the gas station, the other night, along the road. The plastic Esso sign looked so clean, so respectable; you would never think that oil companies are behind most of America's wars. You would never assume there was blood on the hands of oil magnates like George W. Bush. What you seemed more concerned about is that I looked at you. I was the hitchhiker walking past the cars. I didn't dare use the washroom of the gas station, because they don't like bums using their facilities. There was a light shining over the Esso station, and everything was going so smoothly for you. You paid the bill, as your girlfriend sat in your BMW preening herself in the rearview mirror.

I don't know if you saw me, but I certainly know you. I walk past the Ritz Carlton Hotel, and I see the doorman greeting you. You certainly feel proud of yourselves, as you give him a tip. I guess it helps to wear a tuxedo, doesn't it? But I remember a quote from Hamlet. Oh, I can't quote very much Shakespeare, but there is an expression I understand: "the proud man's contumely." It means the scorn you feel for me. I am just a street person in your eyes, but I feel I have every bit as much class as you. I also know another expression you may not appreciate: "The clothes do not make the man." Maybe my rags are not

worth very much, but they are my own.

I see you people drinking and carousing. I walked past the back door of a topless club the other night. You were in there, gawking at naked ladies, and you spent more money in one night on a topless dancer than I earn in a month. You sure must have been thirsty, drinking all that beer. I hadn't eaten all day and all night, and I looked in the garbage can of the bar to see if I could find a sandwich. The waiters chased me away.

I guess you people really feel you have class, and you deserve all the privileges you have. After all, you went to university, didn't you? Did you get through school on a student loan, or did your rich daddy pay for your studies? You went to all the finer schools, and you made connections in the business world. My only connection is the other homeless people downtown. We meet sometimes at a McDonald's all-night restaurant. Each man has a coffee, and comes in from the cold. There is bitterness sometimes, and sometimes good cheer. Sometimes there is a cigarette to be smoked.

I haven't seen you around lately. I used to panhandle from you. I would stand on the corner and stick out my hand, and one time you gave me a quarter. I guess when you die, God will give you back your quarter. But I think you gave a lot to tax-deductible charity organizations, didn't you? Surely, that is your ticket to heaven. Can you buy God's grace? But I don't think he is for sale.

In the olden days, when I was younger, I used to shovel the snow from your driveway in the winter, but now you have hired a contractor to plow it clear. That sure was a beautiful house you owned. I see it is for sale. Did you pass away? Did your company go bankrupt? I know it is hard to manage other people's work. You have responsibilities, and you had to put your children through university. I don't have children. No woman ever fell in love with me. I guess I wasn't attractive

enough. I just loved Marilyn Monroe and dreamed about Britney Spears. But women that look like that are out of my league anyway.

It sure is nice to receive a welfare cheque on the first of the month. The problem is that when you are homeless, and you don't have an address, they won't give you a cheque. So you are in a catch-22. First you need money to pay the rent, but you can't have money unless you have a cheque. But you can't collect welfare unless first you have an address. So it is a vicious circle, and the homeless are condemned to stay homeless. Oh, you can always try to get a room at the Salvation Army, but they won't let you in if you smell of alcohol. I know: I got turned down last week. And nobody wants to stay at the mission, because there are bedbugs. So you find a park bench in the summer, if the police don't chase you away. In Montreal, anyway, you are not allowed in the parks after midnight. But we are not dangerous.

I hear you went to see a show at the concert hall, at Place des Arts. You saw an opera, with the fine upper-class gentlemen and ladies. But I have seen a show that you will never see - I was hitchhiking from town to town in the summer time, and I was between towns, in total darkness. I looked up, and I saw ten thousand stars shining on me and the highway. Then around five o'clock in the morning, the dawn was approaching, and the sky turned yellow, then green, and finally, there was a pink glow on the horizon. And gradually, the sunlight spread across the sky, and suddenly, the sun rose, majestic and perfect. No, you won't see that light show in your concert halls. And the sun rose in perfect silence, except for the birds singing. And during the night, when I was looking at the stars, there were crickets and bullfrogs in the distance, singing for me. Just for me. But if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it fall, does it make a noise?

I guess you have had your private entertainers, like your escorts

coming to your house, but that is another story, isn't it? I guess you like young girls in their twenties, but they have told me they keep their hearts to themselves. I always wondered about that - how come you have so much pleasure, and I have none. It has been years since anyone ever kissed me, but you have to pay for your affection. How does it feel?

But something is happening here, and you don't know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?

However, you broke my heart the other day, when you called me a bum. You had been drinking, and you had had too much to drink. You were staggering down the street, and you told me what you really thought of me. I felt cut to the quick. But I guess I can forgive you. If there is reincarnation, maybe you will have my lot in life the next time around. If there is heaven and hell, if the messiah is the guy born in a manger, I feel sorry for you. But you will have a great funeral, and a fine tombstone. Nobody will know the difference. And then we will be equal.

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