

THE DIME IN MY POCKET

I woke up that morning on the floor of George's apartment after smoking up with him the night before. It was on Sherbrooke Street near Loyola College in March 1970 and George died of an overdose a few years later; the night before, he was telling me he paid his university tuition by smuggling pounds of hash from Morocco every year. Anyway, he wasn't home when I woke up. I used the washroom, without brushing my hair or brushing my teeth. My hair was long and scraggly. It didn't occur to me to change clothes. I felt a bit grimy as I remembered I had a court date that day.

There was slush on the ground and it was damp and grey outdoors as I waited for the bus. I had been charged with public mischief because I had attended a riot six months prior. The issue was the freedom of political prisoners, and I had gone to the riot in front of the justice building in Old Montreal with some comrades from the FLQ. I had heard of Pierre Vallières and Charles Gagnon, but I didn't know any of the other prisoners.

I was no longer involved in politics. I had been told one night by a comrade called Jean that I didn't belong in that cell in Saint-Henri and that I should go back to my anglo friends in NDG. Nevertheless I had unfinished business to tend, since I had been arrested at the riot and was facing charges.

The metro took me to the *Palais de justice* near the old port. I walked up the steps into the old cement building with pillars in front, and then I

noticed I was carrying a dime of haschich in my shirt pocket. This wouldn't be too cool if I was sentenced to jail, so I found out the washrooms were in the basement and went down to leave my dime behind a toilet in the men's room.

After this,. I went upstairs, where I met my lawyer. The case was beginning soon. We went into the court room. I recognized two guys who had been arrested at the same riot six months before, except they played the respectability card and had cut their hair and were wearing blue blazers with little black ties. I laughed when I saw them, but attending their case before mine came up, I saw the Judge let them off because he was impressed by their penitent appearance. I knew they had thrown Molotov cocktails at the police the night of the riot, and that this had turned a peaceful demonstration into a violent riot, the cops charging into the crowd with their motorcycles and everyone starting to run amock down the streets of Old Montreal.

Whatever. My case came up a few minutes later and it was postponed for a few weeks. I felt sleazy as I went back downstairs and picked up my hash behind the toilet.

I went home and it never occurred to me to clean up my act. I was living on the streets in those days and all of the above seemed normal. I had lost my self-respect and was dealing with a lot of baggage.

January 19, 2015

LIFE WITHOUT GOD

In the spring, I had another court date. This time we had the trial, all in one day, as it turned out. In the morning, a policeman recognized me in the halls of justice and winked at me. I gave him back a look of disgust. But then during the trial I saw why he did that. Another cop, who was overweight and wore a mustache and a pale brown suit, testified that he had seen me smash the window of a bookstore in Old Montreal with a staff. He even described the motion – he had seen me raise the staff and shove it through the window. He was lying of course. I had never broken the window of any bookstore; why would I want to do that? I had in fact tried to break the window of a bank next door, because that was a political act, but never a bookstore.

A policeman in uniform had chased me into a corner on Saint Jacques Street the night of the riot and beat me in the legs with his billy club, along with another demonstrator – I managed to escape and ran for freedom. As I ran to the corner of McGill and Saint Jacques, a citizen tried to trip me –

I wondered why he did that; they hated me without a cause. The cops were hot on my trail – I ran around the Square Victoria metro station right beside the Stock Exchange – I ran away from a motorcycle cop, who was right behind me, when suddenly, out of the blue, another cop tackled me and pinned me down to the ground – the very same cop who had winked at me just now in the halls of the court house. Luck wasn't with me this time.

Of course, I felt indignation that morning when the other policeman lied and tried to put me behind bars. I was an angry dude.

Then the court went into recess for lunch break. I sat outside the court at Place Jacques Cartier with my lawyer. I also felt disgust because he was passing comments about the thirteen or fourteen year old girls walking by on this sunny bright day, noticing their breasts, and I thought he was a dirty old man. I told him the cops had lied that morning in court and told him I was also lying. He seemed to take offence at the fact that I was lying also.

That afternoon, as I took the stand, I also gave a false testimony, saying I had never tried to break any window. I was under oath but I didn't care. I wasn't a believer. I could swear on a bible and I didn't care.

Then the caca hit the fan. The Prosecutor asked me if I had ever been convicted of a crime. I said no, in French. Then he asked me, in French, what about under the name of Allan Brown, in Vancouver in 1968, for shoplifting? We have your fingerprints.

That was like an electric shock.

I didn't know what to say.

That was what the cop had winked about.

They had me.

I was caught.

Caught in my own lies.

In Vancouver in 1968, I went to court for shoplifting and had no ID on me. Another inmate called Allan Brown and I had thought it would be very clever if we switched names before appearing in court. I had stolen a piece of cheese from a supermarket and had been exiled from the province of British Columbia. Very clever.

So when the Judge made his decision, he simply said, in French, I am very confused here. Allan Brown? Robert Smith? I hear all kinds of testimonies here today. I am sentencing you to a week in jail in Parthenais Prison.

And he adjourned the court.

My lawyer never did anything to defend me. I guess he didn't like the fact that I had perjured myself. He was a legal aid lawyer and he phoned my mother months later and demanded to get paid his fifty dollars.

I was hardly a political prisoner. I was being punished for my lifestyle. I was a dirty, lowdown, lying, cheating son of a gun and everything had caught up with me. This was life without God.

January 28, 2015

THE SHELTER IN THE NIGHT

Someone once quipped that if you could remember the sixties, you weren't there: I guess the same applies to the early seventies. The story I am telling here is lost in a maze of dreamworlds and hallucinations, so I am not sure of the dates involved.

Some time after my girlfriend left me, I was living in a boarding house room on the corner of Saint Mathew and Dorchester for a while. I shared a bathroom and kitchen with other tenants, and had a small radio. I still had some of my ex's belongings, including a beat-up tattered King James Bible, which she had been using in a theology course in university. Anyway, one night I heard the news on the radio that a tidal wave had hit Pakistan and three hundred thousand people had died in the floods. This struck a sinister chord in me, and I opened her Bible at random, hoping to find some kind of message. The passage I opened to was the destruction of Babylon in the Book of Revelations, where it describes the kings and merchants wailing and mourning over the great city and its trade in all kinds of merchandise. Wow, I thought, God is a revolutionary!! At the time, I had a copy of a book by Richard Alpert, who had conducted experiments with LSD25 at Harvard University with Timothy Leary. He had gone to India and become Baba Ramdass and had published a cult book called "Remember to Be Here Now." This book was very popular with some hippies, and I tried some of its teachings. I would meditate for half an hour and imagine I was breathing in red smoke and breathing out blue smoke. I would do this religiously for half an hour and then go out and shoplift for groceries! I was also reading an introduction to Buddhism.

I was working in a factory in Saint Leonard, about fifteen miles away, and got to work by metro and bus. I operated a plastic injection mould all night amidst odours of burned plastic and extremely loud noise, with half an hour for lunch in the middle of the night. I am not sure when I quit this job, but it was some time around then. It was – I believe – in the winter of 1970 to 71. Correct me if I am wrong. And I earned enough to pay my rent, buy some groceries and my cigarettes. I was on a treadmill and could not get ahead.

One day, I was very depressed, and contemplating suicide, when down the hall came a little dog, a tiny little dog, with its tail wagging, and it cheered me up. I pet the doggie, which was covered with a green doggie aura. Suddenly, I experienced joy.

Around that time, I cut my hair short. I had shoulder-length black, curly hair, and I took a pair of scissors and cut it all off. I don't remember why, but I put the cut hair in a brown paper bag. One day, Toni came by – Toni, who had brought me into the communist group in Saint Henri two years prior, and for a joke, I told him to put his hand inside the brown paper bag. Well, he freaked. It was full of strands of cut hair. I laughed. My joke had worked.

Another time, shortly later, my ex-girlfriend came by and we decided to make love. I was sitting naked on my bed as she was undressing by the window in the setting sun of late afternoon and the sun was sparkling golden on her behind as she smiled at me and pulled her jeans off. We made love for a long time, and after we both came together, I thought it would be a good idea if I leaned over and whispered in her ear, ‘‘We both

just sinned together...’ Now what the hell – that was the last I saw of her for many years. She didn’t want anything to do with me if I was getting religion!

Then there was the native guy. Somewhere, somehow, I met this fellow and invited him to move in with me. He was definitely a street person, and worked as a male prostitute operating along Saint Catherine Street and seemed to be homeless. So he moved in and we began discussing things. He had spent time in reform school and boasted of his prowesses as a gang leader in this institution. He told me that when his mother was frustrated, she went out into the woods and threw knives into trees. We would go shoplifting for our groceries and I would walk out of the store carrying a week’s groceries under my coat. He would exclaim, “Ça, bonhomme, c’est dans le noir!” And he would advise me not to speak badly about sorcerers. I had been involved in communist politics in Saint Henri and he told me he thought Trotskyites were traitors. He had seen the Black Panther H. Rap Brown giving a talk, and he was impressed by the fact that the speaker never smiled. The native guest would sleep with me in my bed, and one night, he tried to touch me, and I politely told him not to.

A few days later, I showed him my book by Baba Ramdass and we were sitting on the side of my bed and we came across a picture of Jesus on the cross. The native male prostitute, who normally seemed so hardened, told me he felt peaceful looking at this picture.

One afternoon, the two of us were on Saint Catherine Street, when he bumped into an old friend of his, who told him, “I don’t understand what

you are doing with your life!” To this, the native guy replied, “I am just liberating my mind, man!”

And that was how it was in those days, stealing and taking drugs at times and meditating and searching for the meaning of life. We were all experimenting. None of us had the answers.

Like I said, my ex-girlfriend had left behind some of her belongings when she moved out and one night something came over me to strip and try on her underwear. I managed to put on her panties and her pink bra and looked at myself in the mirror – and I knew this was WEIRD so that was the end of that. There was no way I was going to become a cross dresser.

But to experiment and try anything once? Why not??

So I wandered down the alley ways of life, as lost as a stray dog, sniffing for food in garbage cans and searching for God in trash piles. And do you know what? Over forty years later, I am still searching for the meaning of life. Whatever gets you through the night, as John Lennon said.

Feb. 15, 2015

THE CONVERT

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

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

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

Suddenly, however, our relationship was interrupted. I went to his friend's place one afternoon after work, and heard Smitty had ended up in

the Douglas, in Verdun. What had happened? Most people didn't know. I asked around. I stopped asking questions. I went on with my life, working, dropping by his friend's place and seeing my own friends.

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

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

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

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

I went on with my life. I got laid off my job as a secretary, so I went back to university and became a nurse. This took a few years. In 1973 or 74, I don't remember the exact date – I remember bumping into Smitty in the elevator at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, where I worked. I was wearing a

uniform and there were several people in the elevator with us. He looked even goofier than before. I didn't want him in my life again. I kind of smiled at him and told him I was working as a nurse. He was on heavy medication by now. He drooled, trying to smile. This was embarrassing. I didn't want to be seen with this guy. I got off at the third floor, and told him I would talk to him some other time. There was no way I was going to have a relationship with some loser on neuroleptic medication. Those guys are likely to do anything.

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

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

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

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

April 24, 2011

DANCING TO THE MELODY

One day when I was eighteen years old or so, a friend of mine turned me on to a brilliant coffee shop called The Op on Park Avenue. It played music by Frank Zappa, was frequented by street people and belonged to a dealer who later overdosed on ether. The owner's pushers used the place to sell drugs to their customers. The cops often raided the place and the mayor wanted to shut down all these hangouts. I didn't know all this at the time; my friend and I went there simply to have a coffee and chat.

For a whole afternoon, he peppered me with questions, and being the academic that I was, I would answer him with quotes. Quotes from Sartre, quotes from Karl Marx, and he kept asking me, "But what do YOU think?" And I kept avoiding committing myself, because frankly, I had no opinions of my own.

This went on at our table, but meanwhile, I noticed the ambiance of the coffee shop and the appearance of the longhaired guys and girls that were sitting there idly.

Finally, we went back to NDG where we lived, but that evening, being intrigued by this unknown phenomenon, I went back downtown to Park Avenue to figure out who these people were. I brought with me bags and bags of philosophy books.

"No, we're not interested in the books, but it would be cool if you brought some food or money..."

So I went back home and returned with some cash. Then they were interested in talking to me. The guys took me up to the mountain, to Fletcher's Field, which goes along Park Avenue, and they turned me on to marijuana. I had never tried it before. I imagined it made you drunk, so I acted drunk, staggering and falling over. I could have won an Oscar.

My new friends were disgusted. I had no concept of being myself. We ended up back at the coffee shop and everyone ignored me. Accept me, accept me. No one accepted me, I thought. One lady said in French, "Lui, y joue la comédie." This would translate as, "This guy is a phony." I suspected this was not like in a classroom, where you get points for spewing back what the teacher said. "And something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mister Jones?"

Nevertheless, they took me along in their car, to Chinatown, to some party. It was night time and by now, I was bewildered. I was no longer imagining that they said cute things and listened to funny music.

We ended up in a loft on a side street where there must have been a hundred kids doing psychedelic drugs. One guy was lying on the ground hallucinating on a glass prism, not moving, just staring into the glass object. I really couldn't understand what was going on. Everything seemed absurd.

At one point, I was sitting by a window, looking at the street outside. A car drove by and a bomb went off, smashing windows – but no one in the party batted an eyelash. By now, I was thoroughly confused. Stoned. For

one thing, there was no furniture in this apartment, no curtains, no sofas, no statuettes, like at my mother's house.

Somehow that night I went back home, and within a few days, I went back to the coffee shop and bought a sugar cube that was supposed to contain LSD from a pusher called Popeye. And that is what happened: I paid eight dollars for a sugar cube that contained sugar.

Next thing you know, I was selling pot to my college friends and changed my appearance. I was now wearing a military jacket. I thought that was how hippies dressed. And I found out that in my circle of friends, several of them had tried drugs.

We were kind of funny. We would sit around in a circle and pass around a joint, everyone taking a toke and passing it on to the next person. I took it as some kind of religious ritual that we did. People started developing their imagination. And I consciously took the step of graduating from pot to hash. Honestly, I didn't know what this led to.

The college kids I did this with were mainly middle class teenagers. But some people started dropping by the apartment I shared by now with a pusher and another guy, and these people spooked me. One guy told us he was on heroin and had sold his soul and had become a male prostitute for the mafia. Another guy I met did credit card fraud. One of my buddies used to steal cars. I met more and more junkies, until one evening at someone's house, I saw a fellow stick a syringe in his arm. And so on.

At first, it was all laughs. After a few years, it had become a nightmare. I had hepatitis B and little children four years old would run away from me

on the street and yell, “Crazy man! Crazy man!” Another time, I was at Atwater metro station going up to the street on the escalator, and the father in front of me pointed at me and asked his son, in French, “And him? Would you talk to him??”

Turn on, tune in, drop out. How wonderful.

January 19, 2015

CHRONICLES OF BACKSLIDING

Another episode. Another slice of madness divine. By then, I was working part-time and living in a bachelor apartment on Durocher Street, in the McGill ghetto, within the zoo of low-life creatures who drank and partied near the university. I remember walking down Milton Street and seeing a handmade poster some student had hung in a window, that said in Latin, ‘Nunc est bebendum.’ Being raised in Catholic schools, I knew that meant: there is nothing left to drink. It was a call for help, an invitation for search and rescue. Oh there were some students in that neighbourhood who were serious about their studies, but in those years, the main hub of activity was the Yellow Door Coffee Shop, which was a center for pacifists and poets housing the Anglican chaplaincy of McGill. In the summer, young people would play guitar and drink on their front steps, and all the mansions, which are now condos, were used as boarding houses for derelicts and low income tenants. And there were graffiti of dubious wisdom on the walls, such as ‘If voting could change anything, it would be illegal’ or ‘On vous parle anglais, on vous agresse.’ There was revolution in the air, the PQ had just been elected in Quebec and the war in Vietnam had finished a couple of years prior; this was before the hostage taking in Tehran the following year.

I had just returned from California, where I had been indoctrinated by the born-again Christians – read brainwashed. The fanaticism and magic were starting to wear off, and occasionally, I had a beer or a joint. They had opened up topless clubs in Montreal, as all over the place, and one day, since I was taking fine art lessons and was looking for inspiration to draw,

I wandered into one of these establishments and thought of doing drawings of the dancers, but was escorted to the door. Hey, if Toulouse Lautrec was allowed to draw music hall dancers, why wasn't I??

I did odd jobs. I worked at Harvey's flipping burgers for a week, until grease oozed out of my skin, until I got fired for giving out free coffee to any homeless wino who came in the doors from Sainte-Catherine Street. Then I landed a \$ 1,500 translation contract for the Quebec government about violence in sports. I managed to complete it and got paid. The rest of the time, I collected unemployment insurance, and as Harry put it, I prayed all day and lusted all night. I was taking art lessons at Concordia and then at McGill university. This was another wake-up call I should have heeded – we were required to paint nude models, and I started to remember what part of my libido that tickled. So I drew a lot in my spare time and especially drew nudes. I also had a membership at the YMCA and did weightlifting and jogging in their gym every other day. Then on sunny days, I would walk from Drummond to Mountain Street and have a beer with the boys in the bistro.

Now I was fooling myself. I had myself convinced I was going to the bistro to save the sinners who were drinking there. But Graham one day yelled at me, in his raunchy voice, “Smitty, leave us alone with the Jesus stuff and relax and have a beer, will you?”

Nevertheless, I had a market for my proselytizing in another area: a few of my hippie friends from Loyola College days had become junkies and saw me perhaps as a soft touch. There was George, first of all. I had not seen him in about eight years and bumped into him in a grocery store in the ghetto. He couldn't stand up straight, staggering from the effect of

heroin. His face was bent out of shape and at first I didn't recognize him. Anyway, we started hanging out together, until one day he came crawling into my apartment on Durocher and pleaded me, half stoned, "Smitty, what is your power? Share it with me!" And I got him to get on his knees and pray to Jesus for help. "Jesus, whoever you are, come to me somehow, by way of space ship, I don't care, I am lost and need your help!" I thought for sure he was saved by then, but his salvation lasted about a week. A few years later, I heard he had overdosed.

There was also John, slow walkin' John, slow talkin' John. He was tall and lanky, and we met at MacDonald College where we both had a day job moving furniture. He was a mess by then and I let him stay at my apartment because he was homeless. He also made signs of repentance and even came to an evangelical church with me. I truly believed the Spirit was with him, until one afternoon I took a nap and woke up to find him looking for cash in my wallet. I kicked him out of course and he also overdosed – so I hear.

Finally, there was another junkie, who told me, "Yes, I hear you, but would you still be a true believer if you found yourself on the corner of St. Lawrence and St. Catherine with only five dollars in your pocket?" But one day, he wasn't so cool and defiant and came to my place and begged for forty dollars because some mafia guys told him that if he didn't pay them, his "ass was grass." That was the way he put it. He promised to pay me back promptly, but I never saw him again – and he also overdosed.

At that time, to top it all, I was starting to hang out with an astrologer. I knew I wasn't supposed to mess with fortune tellers, being a born-again

born-again, but I asked him to do my chart. It took him a couple of days, and I was angsty about it, eager for promises of good fortune. Well, he did his job and told me my moon was in Scorpio and so was my rising sign, while my sun was in Virgo. Supposedly this meant I had a lot of creative energy which came in spurts, because all my planets except for one were in the same quadrant. But Harry, who was there when the astrologer gave me the results, told us that a moon and rising sign in Scorpio meant I was a sex maniac.

Anyway, that night I asked Harry if he could find me a girlfriend. I was very much lacking in the self-control department, and Harry in turn took me to a biker he knew who said he might know a lady who could do the trick. That evening was a wild goose chase. But my undoing was that Harry had registered for university and moved in with me. However, he would come home drunk as a skunk on his loans and bursaries money and stagger into the house and disrupt everyone there. Finally, rather than deal with kicking him out, I dumped the apartment on him and moved to Lincoln Street, but that is another story. I basically fled for my life.

I sincerely kept hoping to convert these guys, and I am sure there is more joy in heaven, but my own instincts were more powerful than my will power, and I was sinking into a swamp. As the Man said, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak...”

Feb. 16, 2015

LE PAPE QUÉBÉCOIS

Yes. The Québécois pope. Why not? There had already been the pope of Avignon and the Chinese Dalai Lama. The idea was brilliant. That would forever silence those pesky Catholics, those stubborn Muslims and the die-hard Jews.

So the Quebec government decided one fine day to take the Quebec Charter of Values one step further. Not only would it ban hijabs and niqabs, crosses and yamalkas from the public service, but it would install its own pope, a *pur laine* Quebecker, who would disband the Church, tell religious institutions to begin paying taxes and take any kind of meaningful substance -- or what was left of such -- out of all local religion. All religious buildings were now provincial government property. All religious artefacts would be confiscated by government agents. And this pope would make public apologies to the Duplessis orphans and whomever else had been abused by the clergy over the centuries.

First, the newspapers had to make this credible. News would be broadcast that the current pope, the one in Rome, allowed this heretic pope to reign over the conscience and will of all Quebec people. After all, fabricating papal bulls and announcements from the Vatican was old hat. Besides, the current pope spoke in Italian; therefore the translators could easily issue an announcement in *joual* confirming the wishes of the Quebec government. The only people who might catch on were the Italians of Montreal -- and they were not a significant majority. The important thing

was convincing Quebec francophones – they elected the politicians, they mattered.

However, I was astounded when I received an official letter from the premier of Quebec asking me to become this pope. *Moi??* Why me, of all people? Well, I had been to seminary school and had functioned as an altar boy. I was, it seems, the only true believer left in the province, and therefore, the only French Canadian capable of pulling off this scam.

I thought it over for a minute. First of all, was there a salary involved? And what was that second consideration? After all, that was all that really mattered.

It was a cinch to trace my lineage to the first pope, Saint Peter, and then to appoint a college of Quebec cardinals who would elect me. I figured, if John Paul II or Stephen Harper could stack the Senate or the Roman college of cardinals with their buddies, so could I.

Next, I needed an appropriate residence. A little palace somewhere would do, with a country place, not too far away.

It was a done deal.

Now my first papal bull was to disband the existing clergy. It was my job to find a verse in the bible claiming bishops and priests could marry and should be good fathers for their children.

Secondly, the Quebec employment offices would recruit new clergy. These offices already existed, so why not kill two birds with one stone?

Thirdly, we would abolish all crucifixes, skull caps, bishop's mitres, etc to comply with Pauline Marois's Charter of Quebec values.

And finally, we would appoint Church police to enforce these new regulations and perhaps resort to some of the methods of the Inquisition to make sure everyone agreed.

Also new bibles and theology books would be published and mass produced that contained no controversy.

ET LE TOUR EST JOUÉ. It was final. Old fossils like Mgr Ouellet would be put out to pasture. And he would be replaced by a woman. As a matter of fact, instead of teaching children about Mother Mary, schools would instruct them in the arts of wicca.

Within a generation or two, the Roman Church in Quebec would be toast. Ancient history.

And I would be laughing all the way to the bank.

October 16, 2013

STELLAR RIFFS FROM SPACE

He had finally figured it out. The big picture. He remembered watching the detective show *Dragnet*, and at the end of each TV program, it said, MARK VII. Hmm. Mark Seven. That was it. Mark Seven. No, it was pronounced Marx Heaven!! America was secretly communist!!

He never confessed this to the psychiatrists. But he kept noticing signs around him that North American society had been secularized. And this was a plot. Occult churches were springing up invisibly. Even barber shops carried copies of Playboy magazine. We were living in Marx Heaven, the perfect socialist dictatorship. So perfect no one realized the commies had taken over. But he knew.

For example, when he discussed his medication with the social worker, she had macramé hanging from her walls. Her office was decorated in post-modern colours. And didn't post-modernism speak of the end of grand narratives?? The ultimate grand narrative was that this was a natural state of affairs, this total control over his brain by means of medication. They didn't even need to give him a lobotomy.

And as he suffered and twitched from side effects, the social workers smiled at him. What was their ultimate plan? To make him sexually and socially liberated? He knew. He had heard the John Lennon song, *Imagine* on the radio. They were out to get him too.

It was a bit like the Ionesco play, *Rhinoceros*. Everyone around him was slowly and insidiously turning into a rhinoceros. First, there were one or

two. Then herds of them. And finally, he could feel himself turning into one. NO! THEY WEREN'T GOING TO GET HIM!

The entire world was secularizing. And the Spirit of Jesus was being removed from the Earth. Fewer and fewer people in church. Only old ladies still knew the truth. Church buildings were being turned into condos. Ultimately, crucifixes would be a thing of the past. And he was going to be the only Christian left. How many times did he need to genuflect and cross himself to maintain his sanity?? The nuns had warned the students about the end of the world. But there were no nuns left. The convents had been converted into colleges where they taught atheist propaganda.

Now there was one thing over which he was powerless. Secondhand marijuana smoke!! Whenever he walked down the street, there would be pagan high school students blowing joints in the park, and he would get a whiff of the demon smoke! He would even get a buzz despite himself. The devil would get one claw into his brain, then a whole fist, and ultimately - he would be possessed!

Quick, cross himself. Genuflect right there, on the sidewalk! And as they dragged him off to the psych ward once again, he would think of Cardinal Mindszenty in 1956 in communist Hungary, getting brainwashed against his own will. He would think of all the saints who had resisted corruption! The martyrs! The elect!

And as he entered the psych ward and they fitted him into a pair of pyjamas, they would give him a knowing smile and say, ‘‘Don’t worry

about a thing, you're going to like it here...' He knew that smile! The kiss of death! The mark of the Beast!

The orderly who brought him a bathrobe even winked at him. He was doomed!

January 27, 2013

THE MAN WHO FELL ASLEEP

I guess the worst thing you can do is to fall asleep during a movie and remain asleep while they lock the doors of the theater after hours.

A few years ago, I had moved into a flat near the Main, in Montreal, to live close to some friends of mine. There were several college friends of mine living on Saint Lawrence and the neighbouring streets. The neighbourhood was a haven of creativity, as there were poets, and potters, and painters living among the immigrant Portuguese community. We were all bohemians. We drank at La Cabane, and the Bar Saint-Laurent. Some people even did drugs. The local downtown people, who spoke Portuguese among themselves, did not mix with us very much. There were Jewish people of European extraction – for instance, there was a Hebrew tombstone factory, and a couple of smoked meat places like Schwartz's and The Main.

One night, I was in one of these smoked meat delis when a gentleman caught my attention. He didn't look like he fit in, but he nodded at me. We both finished our meal at the same time and stepped out into the cool November night at the same time. I asked him, "Going my way?" and we started talking. I brought him to my apartment, and he went to some lengths to dissuade me from living in the Plateau.

"Listen, you really should move out of this neighbourhood. It is not wholesome. These restaurants and bars are all dens of sin. There is corruption around every corner here, and if you want to save your immortal soul, escape!"

He went on to tell me he KNEW. He was a seminarian, studying for the priesthood. And he was very concerned about my soul. The writing was on the wall – leave this evil neighbourhood immediately.

I didn't take it seriously. Until one night, about a month later. I was walking home from a friend's house, when I had to walk past the Cinéma L'Amour, along Saint Lawrence Boulevard. This was the local porno theater. The wares were advertised at the front door. Naked women, semi-dressed women, topless women. It was certainly decadent.

However, I cracked up laughing, as I walked past the theater, at halfpast midnight. Because there was the seminarian, locked behind the big glass doors of the cinema, trapped and caught. He looked desperate as he saw me, obviously pleading for help. He looked a bit frumpy, as though he had been sleeping a lot after hours...

January 8, 2012

IT DON'T MEAN A THING IF IT AIN'T GOT THAT SWING

To J.B.

Things were slow that cold winter morning, when I got a call from my agent. There was a gig next week at a big downtown club, with me as leader on piano and a bass player and a drummer. It was supposed to pay the standard fee, plus free meals in the bar. OK, arrangements were made. I phoned the bassist and the drummer, who were friends of mine and planned a rehearsal at my place the following Saturday afternoon. Everything seemed copasetic. Once phone calls had been made, I lit up a cigarette and thought about it. The smoke was curling around the white tile ceiling in my kitchen, and I calculated how much I was going to get paid and how much would go towards my rent, which hadn't yet been paid for January. In a way, it was lucky to land a gig in the middle of winter, after the holidays, because normally things are dead until the end of the month.

The first hassle came soon enough. The bass player couldn't make it to the rehearsal because his son was sick. He phoned me up about half an hour after I had called him. He would look for a sub and would keep me posted. All right, I told myself, Murphy's law. Let's see how everything else turns out.

I took a shower and got dressed warmly to go to the bank. I lived in a slum tenement on top of a fancy restaurant and needed to figure out how much I had in the bank. This was the second week of the month, and the

idiot landlord was starting to get hungry for the rent. If all went smoothly, I could pay most of it with the bread from the gig.

Time went on. Marking time. Always this dead time between concerts. It drove a guy crazy. I didn't want to buy any weed with the little I had in the bank. I had to be responsible.

I started thinking about the bass player. I didn't think he was reliable anyway. The next time he pulled a stunt like that I would fire him. His son was sick. His son was sick. What was the real reason he couldn't make it to the rehearsal??

Luckily, for me at least, this bass player called me that afternoon and let me know he would be available to come to the rehearsal. He said his girlfriend would mind the sick son. All right. All right. Now what?

Saturday came around and the guys showed up at my place for the rehearsal. It was all right. We would have to play standards because I knew the management at the night club wouldn't tolerate it if we blew free. Satin Doll. Meditation. Stella by Starlight. And so it went. With a bit of fine tuning, it sounded pretty good. The other musicians knew their stuff. So what could go wrong??

We had to wear suits for this gig. It was almost a club date. The waiters in this place had more class than we did. They wore black vests, with white shirts and little bow ties. It was all so slick. I couldn't stand it. We arrived by taxi. The three of us knew the routine. First, we had a beer and chatted with the barmaid, whom I knew. It was eight o'clock at night, in downtown Montreal. All the slick people in town were there. It was as

though there was a train that shipped in the customers from West Island for our gig. I didn't have a good gut feeling about the whole thing. It was too sophisticated, but I didn't say a thing. Around eight-thirty, the doorman came up to me and gave me the hand signal to start. What the fuck?

Nevertheless, we went up on stage and performed. Come the end of the first set, the doorman, who by now thinks he owns the place, gives me a signal not to play too loud. This sucks big time, because I can hardly hear myself think and the customers are making so much noise while we are playing. The waitresses are serving drinks and the cash register is ringing – it is obnoxious. And this jerk has the nerve to let me know we are playing too loud!!

This place is really cheesy. There is a huge chandelier hanging right in front of the stage, and musical instruments like french horns are hanging on the walls along with photos of famous musicians.

One set. Two sets. In between the second and third set, we go in the back room for the break and the drummer pulls out a bag of weed. I've quit all that stuff so I go back into the club to chat with the barmaid.

OK, Murphy's law. What else could possibly go wrong? We play until two in the morning, and then the manager approaches me. "I'm sorry to do this to you, but I can't pay you the full amount tonight..." Wow. Am I pissed off!! He claims he will pay me the balance on the following Tuesday. And my landlord is screaming for money. Oooh, am I pissed off.

I break the news to the bass player and the drummer. They aren't amused but they know it isn't my fault.

But that's life in the fast lane. That evening, as I come home, I find a leaky pipe in my kitchen. Just to top everything off. I have to phone the landlord the next day. Just the guy I don't want to talk to at this time.

The next day, I wake up at twelve noon and try to figure out what happened the night before. I wake up with a grudge and the uneasy feeling that drives people to drinking. Honest, I feel like having a hair of the dog that bit me. But I have changed my ways.

Unfortunately, the universe hasn't changed its ways. And life goes on.

January 17, 2014

THE BIG TIMES

Imagine being an unknown artist and getting discovered! That is what happened to me in 1986, when I was working in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

I had been translating hansard for the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick for several months and just self-published a poetry anthology called *Intimate Raps with the Morning Star* through a vanity publisher in Missouri. One day after work, I dropped by the Beaverbrook Hotel to have supper and had a copy of my new publication with me.

There was a gentleman I met in the bar and dining room called Jim Regan. We got to talking and he seemed interested in my book. When he noticed it contained a poem called “Homage to the Madonna,” he let me know he was also a Catholic, and wanted a copy of the booklet. He was seventy-six years old and had had a distinguished career in government. He told me he had been the righthand man for Lester Pearson at the federal level and for Louis Robichaud, the former premier of the province. Also, he paid for my supper at the bar and bought a round for the whole place. He simply told the waiter to put it on his tab. He rented a room all year round at the hotel.

Later on, I gave him a copy of another one of my early poetry books, and he liked it as well. He told me he wanted to promote me and mailed both books to what he called “important people in government.” I never found out who were these people.

I met him on a regular basis at the same bar over the next few weeks. He told me he was a lonely guy, because he was divorced. He had a son in his thirties, and he paid for his hydro bill every now and then. He liked women, but at his age, he “only looked.”

I found him very generous and kind. He seemed to genuinely like me and my poetry, so we made friends.

Then suddenly, I stopped seeing him. One day the sergeant at arms of the Legislative Assembly told me Jim Regan had passed away of a stroke. He also told me Mr Regan had made many men millionaires by promoting their names.

At the same time, my cousin Norman died suddenly and another friend of mine died. This was a shock. It seemed for a minute that I had found a friend, one who could help me get ahead as a writer. And now he was gone!

I thought about it, and today I realize that what Jim Regan had to offer would not have made me happy. Fame and fortune? No thanks. I prefer the example someone like Nelson Symonds left behind: he was one of the great jazz musicians and had played with big names in the jazz world. But Nelson lived for a long time in a boarding house on Fort Street in Montreal. He did inspire a whole generation of younger jazz musicians, but never did care to get ahead. And what inspired these players was his passion, his talent and his acceptance of other musicians. He truly encouraged people to play.

Still, I think today of Jim Regan and the road never taken. What would have happened if he had lived? Would my destiny have taken a different turn?

I will never know.

Feb. 20, 2015

RARELY HAVE WE SEEN A PERSON FAIL

He was a true success. Young, slick and hip. There was nothing wrong with him. When he rose in the morning to look at himself in the mirror, he smiled at himself, although the wrinkles were drawing cartoons in the corners of his eyes and in bags under his bloodshot eyes. He had no sense of intimacy with himself: let's tell ourselves a secret, kid. He had defiled whatever mystery had ever been in his heart, casting pearls before swine, selling his soul to get you to believe in him. Job interview after job interview destroyed his ability to tell the truth. All there was left was a lie. And lie he did. To himself, to shut up the ghosts of conscience, to his parents, to God (whenever he was desperately alone) and to his friends.

There is a price for being fake. You wish you could feel perfect, you read books on self-confidence and selling your power. You wonder how other people manage to be themselves.

In the mornings when he was hung over, the comedy crashed and the entertainers couldn't get a chuckle out of the audience. Everything that he had paid for looked cheap, because he had bought it with money, other people's money. He had never invested himself or in himself, for that matter.

What had happened the night before? Where had he left his car or his car keys?

It was always a long painful struggle to regain composure after one of those benders. Sometimes there was a cut lip or a black eye to mend.

And the pounding in his head and dizziness... It was like flies swirling around inside his damaged brain. How do you get the room to stop spinning?

Young, slick and hip. Oi. How he wished that poster image would stay put! No matter if he wore a three-piece suit or an expensive silk tie, everything looked as shabby as a circus act.

Here he comes, Mr Right. Trust me, believe in me, because I can't believe in myself. Do I need to go to confession, he wondered. Do I need to pour out my heart to a shrink?

Better cover it all up. Like a scam that anybody can see through. Like the sun with a black eye in the heavens.

Sept. 18, 2014

ENTROPY

“Mr. Smith! Your presence is required in Board Room 6969! You are to appear before the Entropy Committee!” the butler exclaimed, clicking his heels and doing an about-turn before leaving the waiting room. What the hell do they want now? I scratched my gray beard and got up, shuffling over to the board room. I thought, “I am bored, all right...” At least I was grateful that SOMETHING was happening, rather than waiting forever with the other old folks, who were picking their noses and reading magazines from fifty years ago.

I walked into the room. It was huge. At the back of the room, there was a blinding light, in which seven young people, male and female, sat behind a long desk. I walked towards them for a good two minutes, before I arrived within earshot of the desk. I was told to sit down on a wooden chair, while the young people from the Entropy Committee sat on miniature thrones with plush padding. This was typical these days. The young people enjoyed all the benefits, the pleasure, the sex, the drugs, the alcohol, because they were supposed to be quicker-witted than us, the older generation. They went to university and learned the latest theories. They would be geniuses if they could remember to flush.

A voice boomed out, like the wizard of Oz: “Mr. Smith, the committee has gone over your file, and we have decided you are no longer allowed to walk properly. You have been seen skipping down the street, and this has to stop. From now on, the bad news is that you are going to need a knee replacement; the good news is that you will be provided with a cane. Now

you can shuffle out of here, the way you came in. The butler will escort you to the door!’’

Immediately, I started feeling pain like arthritis in both my knees, as I turned to walk out of the room. It was quite a long way to the front door of the Board Room. In a way I was grateful, because they could have prescribed a pacemaker or a cancer operation or even chemotherapy. I wondered what kind of operation was a knee replacement. Did it hurt? The committee members didn't care.

When I reached the front door, the butler gave me a shove from behind, and I went flying back into the waiting room. Everyone there looked at me with wonder, old cronies with missing teeth, old sailors and inmates with tattoos, people with various infirmities who were waiting to be judged by the Entropy Committee. In a way, I felt lucky, because some of these people had artificial limbs. And you never saw this type of people in ads or on TV, except in documentaries about the third world. Hey, we were the third world!

At the reception desk, I was handed a cane. So this was the next phase, was it? I hobbled over to the elevator, and went down down down thirty floors back down to the street, where some young person was probably going to steal my wallet.

On the street, the weather had been glorious that morning before my appointment, but now it was suddenly November, and drizzling. A cold wind blew a flurry of dead leaves in my face, as I walked with my new cane to the metro. So this was the golden age! Fuck me!

November 2013

THE CARDINAL

I live in a northern country and had been writing for forty-five years. We never see exciting things in our climate, unless you can call a snowy blizzard exciting in winter. The birds we see in our cities are run-of-the-mill sparrows and pigeons; occasionally, there are crows that cover the sky in flocks, with their call that sounds like a curse.

Yes, I had written and written, and got nowhere. The fact is that I don't have stupendous talent or insight; nevertheless, I persisted. I published a hundred poems or so in magazines, little-known literary magazines nearby. I realized very soon this was not going to pay the rent. So I took courses in translation at a local university and became a civil servant. This was drudgery, I thought, and I kept changing jobs, hoping there would be a payoff. Meanwhile, I kept writing and once in a while, publishing a piece here and there. I even landed a grant or two, about ten years ago, and believed there was promise in my writing career. I could see the pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow – but nothing came of it. I had to keep translating to make both ends meet. Sometimes, there would be a big government contract – but then, after a few weeks, the revisors were not satisfied with my mediocre work, and they would assign the work to someone else, who could do the work better and faster.

This went on for many, many years. I began self-publishing. One book of poems, and then another. Then some stories. The first time I produced a vanity publication, I thought I had arrived – until I found out that the authorities who distribute grant money, as well as the critics, pay no attention to self-published work. Still, I hoped to be discovered. Then, out

of the blue, my desktop publisher, the fellow who produced my vanity publications, passed away. He died of cancer. I thought this was the end of the road. By now I had been writing for forty years.

And then, I met Roger. He worked at a government clinic where I was followed for my heart condition and other ailments. He had published real books of poetry, and wanted to promote me. So he told me that my self-publishing years were over. He laid it on me: “Here is what you do.” He told me to put together a manuscript, and mail it out to local publishers. He was sure I would make it, and finally produce a real book with royalties. So I took his advice. I tried. I mailed out a dozen copies of my manuscript. And then I waited. And waited. In came a first rejection slip. And a few weeks later, another. And that was it. I never heard any other response.

And this is where I stood a few months ago. One day, I thought of approaching important publishing houses in the United States and trying my luck. I did a google for a list of publishers, and found one. And I wrote a covering letter. I emailed it out as required to half a dozen presses. I waited, and even forgot about it.

One day, several weeks ago, I checked my email at random. There was a reply. It read, “Dear Mr. Smith, Thank you so much for your query letter. I am sorry for the delayed response. Of course, I am interested in reading your material. Please send me a story cut and pasted in the body of an email. I will respond as soon as I can. Best regards,” etc. For twenty minutes, I was ecstatic. Seventh heaven. I immediately emailed this person my best work. And I didn’t wait – I told 45 of my friends and

acquaintances about my impending success. And then, suddenly, I came down! I realized I might have enemies, people who might be jealous if I made it as a writer. And my wife came home shortly afterwards and she had both feet on the ground. Nevertheless, I kept secretly hoping. Hoping beyond hope.

Several days went by now. Absolutely all my friends wrote back and wished me luck. I knew it – this was meant to be! I was already counting my royalties.

And then, about two weeks ago, I received an email from the publisher who had seemed interested. He wrote me to tell me they were going bankrupt and had to cancel all engagements. As I read the email, I felt a pain in my chest. It gradually got worse. After two hours, it felt as though my lungs were on fire, and there was pressure on my chest. I couldn't breathe anymore, and felt panic approaching. I phoned for an ambulance. They came with paramedics within thirteen minutes. I felt total anxiety. They said it might be a heart attack and asked what I had been doing when this started. I explained. They gave me nitro to breathe, and then oxygen, through a tube that went into my nostrils. Plus they gave me several aspirins to chew. They were working fast and by now, I was in the ambulance and we were on our way to the closest hospital. Once we arrived, the ambulance drivers told the admitting nurse it appeared to be an infarctus. They put me on a gurney and wheeled me into the emergency ward. Suddenly, there were five nurses and a doctor around my bed.

“What were you doing at the time your pain started?” they kept asking, and how I felt, on a scale of one to ten.

I told them I was in shock. And the pain slowly subsided and after more nitro and more aspirin, and more oxygen, it was just a slow ache.

I was facing a window in the ward. There were huge billowy clouds of pure white against a serene blue sky, and there were tree branches. And I saw something I had only ever seen in picture books – there was a cardinal, that flew out of nowhere on to a branch of the tree. It had bright red and orange-coloured wings. It fluttered a bit. And then it bounced on to another branch. What on earth was it doing in this climate? I had never seen a real cardinal. All in all the magnificent bird appeared in the window for thirty seconds, and then – it disappeared.

I have never seen a cardinal since. It was sheer magic, for thirty seconds.

Finally, I had an angioplasty and began the slow process of recovery from the heart attack. I have stopped writing.

July 29, 2013

THEN SUDDENLY WAR ENDED

Nobody really knew why nor how, but this is what happened. There was no election or change of the guard. There was no revolutionary leader influencing others to lay down their weapons. But here and there across the world, like an epidemic, like lightning shining from East to West, one government after another decided to pull their troops out of the war. And within a few weeks, the business pages of local newspapers announced that one arms maker after another, one arms trader after another was converting its armaments factories to peaceful purposes. Was it because the world was tired of fighting? Were the armies out of breath? Not really. But on the front pages of newspapers and in the evening news on TV, people could see one general after another resigning and taking retirement. The good news was that finally, the nuclear powers were showing the will to dismantle their bombs. Had all the world leaders gone mad? What about the enemy? What about the economy, which had relied so much on manufacturing weapons? And yet, the presidents and prime ministers were calmly announcing a new policy worldwide. At some level, it didn't make sense. And those who should be in favour of world peace were the most upset about the new policy of abolishing war. The radicals who used to demonstrate against war now had to find another cause. But the populations of the world just expressed a big sigh of relief. A truce! Finally, a truce! So many thousands of people who used to work in the arms industry had to find new jobs in the new peaceful sector. And yet governments were laying off all the folks who used to manufacture guns and tanks. The new economics books no longer

discussed a guns and butter economy. It was now entirely a butter economy. And yet the stock market didn't crash, there were no food riots. It was as though peace spread from one household to another, from one human heart to another. There was no more need for intelligence agencies or spying. There was a new atmosphere of trust in the air. And gradually people began to dance and sing on the streets, in Jerusalem, in New York, in Madrid and Melbourne; suddenly, the oppression of war was replaced with overall joy. People who had invested in the arms business seemed relieved and went on vacation. Instead of soldiers marching through public places, there were tourists and picnics and festivals. Children began carrying flowers. I don't know, I couldn't explain it or understand why, but benevolence now reigned where malice and cynicism had before. Nevertheless it was business as usual – people stopped taking drugs and pushers flushed their heroin down the toilets. Had the world gone mad? Yet everything was peaceful, crime rates dwindled, there was no more need for police. People began cleaning up land mines from war zones and many who used to be militant began helping handicapped victims of war. Suddenly, there were funds released for veterans and rehabilitation programs were created for former soldiers. In areas where war was not visible, the news came out that local businessmen used to invest in arms and banks shut down any investment which wasn't green. Parks were built slowly but surely in areas where there had been gunfire. There was gradual reconciliation between conflicting nationalities and religions. This process had begun suddenly, but snowballed until peace reigned in every heart. Little boys stopped playing with toy guns and war videos. In schools, teachers ceased to teach about the

enemy out there. People started realizing that Russians and Chinese people were just like us, and the propaganda machine ground to a halt. Happiness started to spread all over the world. Fear and paranoia were now a thing of the past. And love was no longer a dirty word.

August 31, 2014

IN DARKNESS I LIE

“Out, brief candle.”

Macbeth, William Shakespeare

It is the middle of night, and I am awake. I sit, looking out the dark window, pondering the fact that my race is almost run. I can't see the tree or the tree branches just beyond our window, but I can see a streetlight in the distance, and a few lights on in the highrise across the street. This means a few people are awake. One light goes out: someone goes to bed and into darkness.

I am thinking of what is really mine, and remember early childhood memories, like lying in a crib and waking up with a spider on my eye. I cry, and my mother calmly comes and brushes away the insect. One memory. Before that, nothing. No light of consciousness. Just dark night, where it all happens.

Being in my sixties, many of my memories have been eaten away by old age. I forget many beautiful things that have happened as we were raising our kids. My wife will ask me, Do you remember? And I don't. Another brain cell has been blotted out and the light of memory has gone out, in the night.

“Rage, rage, against the dying of the light. Do not go gentle into that good night.” I finally understand those lines.

My conscious brain is a little light in this vast, dark universe of unconsciousness. Is that so? Aren't there other consciousnesses out there? "Is there balm in Gilead? Is there respite in nepenthe?"

What will happen when I die? Will the lights go out? "To sleep, perchance to dream; aye, there's the rub." Is there another incarnation after this one? Will the tree of life produce another leaf like me? Will there be another me? Is this life of mine a one-time deal? As Voltaire said, it would be as extraordinary if we live only once, as if we lived many times.

Then what have you done with your life? Here, the brush of conscience starts scrubbing and scrubbing the surface of my mind and digging deeper with accusations, of which I am often guilty. No, I am no saint. Is there a judgment after death? Will I be cast into a fiery furnace? Reincarnated as a cockroach? In darkness, I lie. Honest, I don't know.

My life seems brief and useless, I am afraid. I haven't been a perfect father, let alone a good father. Haven't always been honest in business. Haven't always been chaste or sober. Haven't always told the truth. Oh my god, I have done all kinds of wrong things!!

What if there is no god and no forgiveness? That is perhaps worse than being convicted by a court. What if the handicapped children and the war victims never do get a break? What if Hitler got away with it?

In darkness is found the answer. Right now, I recoil from looking under the stone and contemplating the worms and beetles. I am going back to bed.

Is there a saint I can invoke right now?

November 25, 2012

THE HOSPITAL

“What kind of hospital is this, anyway?” When I first entered this institution, that’s what I kept asking. It looked like any hospital, except there were no staff. No doctors or nurses, no orderlies or security guards. You could wander off the ward, into the street, and you would constantly bump into fellow patients, wearing Johnny shirts and hospital slippers. They would say hello, and wander off doing their business. Sometimes, you would bump into a patient in a bar or a massage parlour or somewhere, and that could be embarrassing. But most of the time, these people would recognize you, first of all because you were wearing a hospital bracelet, with your name tag and number, and secondly, they would call you by your name, like, “Hey there, Robert, how are you doing?” And they would seem genuinely interested in knowing how you were. Sometimes, you just answered, “Fine, how are you?” But other times, since we were all sick, you would give them a long description of your diagnosis and prognosis; you would display your scars and wounds of yesteryear. And they would share their feelings and ailments as well.

The wards weren’t that clean. And the people you met there were often scruffy, rough and tough gentlemen and ladies, who had seen better days. Many of them still smoked, although the government had warned us all of the dangers inherent to tobacco. Consequently, there was always someone coming down with cancer. These folks had severely abused their bodies over the years and many of them were burned out by the time they were fifty or sixty. There were a few old timers who survived, and were often well respected.

Nevertheless, there were scapegoats in the hospital, some patients whom everyone gossiped about – you know, so-and-so? Well if you work for him, chances are you won't get paid... And you know so-and-so? Well the only reason he is in the hospital is so he can sell his lottery tickets... And then there were some whom no one liked. They had a bad reputation all across the hospital: you know, the guy downtown who is very mentally ill... And some of these scapegoats were totally harmless once you got to know them, but people said and thought the worst about them. “Oh, him, well, he is such a nut case! Did you see how he eats!” And the scapegoats always turned out to have had a bad upbringing and a terrible education. If they spoke, it all came out in the wash. “Oh, he is adopted, is he?” And these scapegoats suffered tremendously.

People had nicknames, like Crazy Pete or Downtown Harry. We always knew whom the names referred to. A nickname was picked for you as soon as you got through Admission and you entered a ward. People got to know you. If you were a soft touch, that got around too. The word would be that this fellow and that fellow have government jobs and were generous. Therefore, I was told at first not to lend money in the hospital unless I could afford to lose it.

Sometimes, there would be a funeral. This poor bastard went through the windshield of a car, or that fellow had a relapse and died on the streets. And all the patients would meet at the funeral parlour and finally, everyone would know the dead person's full name. However, generally there was no wake at these funerals and a lot of coffee would go down.

It was a funny hospital, because as I said, there were no staff, which means we all treated each other. This implied trust and total solidarity. We all knew what was wrong with the next guy, because we had the same disease ourselves. “Yeah, been there, done that” was the general and universal diagnosis. And the solutions didn’t vary much from patient to patient. There were true and trusted solutions to all our problems and few variations in the interpretation of the Pharmacological Compendium. And rarely was medication ever prescribed – only in rare situations. It seemed that a lot of reading of medical literature was necessary to recover, and just associating with other patients. We would convene in groups and the magic of meeting together did wonders. After a few weeks, you started to sleep better, enjoy your food, stop craving and... you made friends with the patients. Then they would loosen the strings on you and let you out on the streets by yourself.

Sometimes, you heard of a patient who got the compulsion to eat out of a garbage can or damage himself somehow. And this patient would show up back at the hospital, all banged up and with a swollen face, and weeping with remorse. As a matter of fact, many patients could say, “Been there, done that!” But moralizing about these relapsers was frowned upon. When the patient ate out of garbage cans over and over again, and would come back to the ward smelling like fish, other patients would shun him. But it took a long time. People would get impatient with such individuals. But the doors swung both ways. You were always allowed to come back.

Unfortunately, some individuals gave up and became disgusted with the common disease of others and preferred to eat out of garbage cans rather than look at others who did the same thing. And you would bump into the apostates on the streets and I have been told it never gets better out there.

But excuse me, buddy, do you see that garbage can over there, surrounded by glittering lights and wild music? Move over, while I rifle through it looking for the leftovers of someone's sandwich! Maybe I will even find a piece of half-eaten pizza!

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