

SKIPPING TOWN NAKED AND BUSTED

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SKIPPING TOWN NAKED AND BUSTED

PREFACE

Looking back at this book, I find it is not timely or prophetic. Because the party is over. The facts of life are AIDS, cancer, sclerosis of the liver, hepatitis and death. All my life I pursued an illusion – it was sort of a Coca Cola commercial, or a beer commercial. The ego drove me down the road of life, from illusion to illusion, until the party was over. I sought joy in the wrong places. It is time to sober up and prepare for eternity. Most of my friends have died – where are they now?

I am not being morbid here. What I am talking about is mortification of the flesh. Recognizing the authority of the divine in everyday life. Seeking humility, despite ourselves. Helping those in need. Propagating peace. Not sticking your hand in the fire.

Yes, the party is over.

2017-04-08

BACK IN TOWN

I had seen this fellow around the neighbourhood for a few days, and he looked sort of scruffy, with long hair and a growth of beard. He walked about checking out garbage cans and drinking wine. Obviously, he didn't wash every day and his friends were the local Inuit people who had come to Montreal from above the tree line. I found it strange that he always wore gloves and a pair of sandals.

I offered to buy him a coffee at McDonald's one day and he told me his story.

First he told me the end of the story, how he had been discharged from the psych ward with a prescription for neuroleptic medication. They had hospitalised him for forty days because he had caused public mischief. The Montreal police had arrested him. He had made a whip and walked into a government building and then a church and caused a commotion. He claimed he wanted to chase the money lenders out of the temple. Security guards called the police and it took about six cops to wrestle him down and arrest him. He hadn't said a word and didn't resist arrest.

They took him to Douglas Hospital and gave him a PRN. This means they tied him up in a straight jacket and shot him full of tranquilisers. Then they left him in bed for two or three days and finally he was given privileges to mingle with the other patients and eventually go outdoors.

I asked him what was his trade. He told me he used to be a carpenter. And he had come back. I asked him, "From where?" He mumbled something strange which I didn't catch.

He then started talking in parables, saying the wind blows east and west and no one knows where it comes from. I figured he was a wet brain, so I offered him another coffee. He declined and said that if I drank the water that he would give me, I would never drink again.

OK, I figured the guy was looney tunes, all right.

Then he took his black gloves off and I saw the bloody holes in his palms. This was getting weird.

I asked him if he went to church. He said he used to speak publicly in these institutions but no one listened. So he resorted to speaking to homeless people. They listened.

Then he told me he had come back to judge the living and the dead, so I asked him if he was a judge or if he had a court. He simply looked out the window at this point.

I didn't want to be disrespectful but I didn't know what to say. I just sat there silently and we both stared in space. I noticed his eyes looked pure and clear. He seemed to see right through me. I felt cheap.

Finally, I asked him his name and he said, "My name is J.C." I guess he was joking somehow. I gave him my phone number on a slip of paper but he never called me.

I got up and said goodbye to him. But he was gone. He must have left while I was putting my coat on.

2017-03-02

PARKING LOT BLUES

So I am sitting in our car in the parking lot of Walmart, surrounded by about five hundred parked cars, while my partner Bonnie is shopping for hair dye and household cleaning products. There is a special on toilet paper and hand towels. Obviously, we shop where it is cheapest. However, Bonnie is taking a graduate philosophy course and is currently writing an essay about Herbert Marcuse.

Who is Marcuse? Sorry you haven't heard about him. He was a leftist philosopher in the sixties who believed America and the Western democracies are totalitarian, gobbling up any alternative to the system. Just like Walmart has replaced smaller general stores.

And it is raining, because it is April in Montreal, and the sky is lead gray, as the newspaper prints out homogeneous headlines to keep the people under the thumb of the flag. It is raining and gray, just like in China. I remember seeing pictures of a million people waving Mao's little red book, and imagining this is totalitarianism: everyone doing the same thing, believing the same thing, wearing the same clothes. Today we shop at Walmart.

And there are hundreds of cars parked in the rainy parking lot, different brands of cars, diesel engines and four and six piston engines, and there are plenty of shoppers and true believers in Walmart, of all colours and creeds and languages, buying household products made in sweatshops in Indonesia and China. Even the staff are mainly immigrants who barely speak French or English, and they aren't unionized – but who cares? A bargain is a bargain.

I am sitting in the car, thinking about God. Now Marcuse doesn't mention God. So he doesn't hit the nail quite on the head. Because the people believe in God – well, maybe half the people. And for those who are believers, God is dead, because providence is basically Walmart.

Then is it a police State we live in? Only when you are inside a police station or a prison or a psych ward. Then the point is really driven home that you have to follow procedures. And whenever there is a terrorist attack somewhere, elsewhere in the newspaper, or a serial killer, or a

random gunman who blows away innocent bystanders. Then the red flag of mental illness is raised, and the crescent flag, and the police State seems to make sense. And then no one listens to Edward Snowden or whoever is blowing the whistle on the CIA. Do you remember Edward Snowden?

But all these thoughts don't go through my mind as I sit in a parked car on a rainy day in April. I am thinking of meeting our children for breakfast on Sunday, of taking a vacation next August, of what we forgot to buy today. I am getting impatient because Bonnie has been inside the Walmart trap for half an hour now. You know, we don't need soldiers telling us to all shop at Walmart. It all just seems so logical.

2017-04-05

MY MOTHER AND THE DRAGONS

I was very close to my mother. One morning, when I was middle-aged, she was just waking up and I lay in bed beside her. I was all dressed and she was under the blankets. She pulled her bedsheet over her mouth because she thought she had bad breath, and we joked around about that for a bit. Her hair wasn't all gray yet; I could tell she was getting older because she had wrinkles. There were bags under her gray eyes and they looked very meek. Then she told me, in French, "Listen, when I get older, I may say funny things – please promise me you won't laugh at me." Somehow, she knew.

She was a woman who had a lot of intuition. She told me she relied on visions. When I was born, she was in labour a very long time, and she told me years later that she had a vision that reassured her: it was at night and she pictured herself on top of a hill; and halfway down the hill, there was Jesus, wearing a white gown, and he had his back turned to her. Then he turned back and looked at her over his shoulder – and she knew the baby would be all right.

She also had a lot of heart. When I was in last year of college, I had a friend who was a deserter from the American army, and he caught the flu. So for two weeks, my mother had me sleep elsewhere while my friend slept in my bed. And she nursed him back to health.

I certainly caused her a lot of worry. I remember having a fever of 105 degrees Fahrenheit for about a week when I was about ten years old. All I remember is having delirium and seeing a gray ocean with canons going off in the distance, boom boom, boom. I guess what I heard was my heartbeat. They all thought I was going to die, and they erected a small altar beside my bed. There was a crucifix and a small candle on either side of the cross. My uncle – who was a Catholic priest – gave me the last rites. I remember my mom was right there for me. Finally, the fever abated and I recovered. And my mother told me much later in life that she felt my life

was spared so often when I was a child that she knew somehow God had a purpose for me in life. He had not saved my life so often for nothing. It wasn't that I was especially good or anything – I could get into trouble at the drop of a hat. But my mother wanted me to become a priest. She convinced me to go to seminary school when I was going through puberty. And that is when the trouble began.

Somehow the years went by and we all grew older. I never did become a priest, by the way, and raised a family of two daughters. And my mother and father were both very generous with me even before leaving behind a will. My dad suddenly died of a heart attack six months before I met Bonnie, who became my partner. After a few years we were affected by the recession of 1992 and struggled financially. My mother, who lived in Ottawa, while we were in Montreal, would mail me a cheque to tide us over. There was literally no work during this period: I am a freelance translator, and at one point there was one job advertised in the newspaper. It was in Hamilton, Ontario, and there were four hundred applicants for this one job. Then there was one job as a croupier at the Casino in Montreal, and there were fifty thousand applications. So my mother's assistance came in very handy. She would sacrifice herself so we could live normally. And that is just the way she was.

In 1998, she was 88 years old and had a heart attack. My eldest daughter was six years old and Cordelia was four. That was the year of the ice storm. And after the heart attack, my mother believed the ice storm was something in her brain. She started getting confused.

She had a near death experience when she had the heart attack. That day, she was at a center for senior citizens playing bridge when she passed out. They called an ambulance and the paramedics were trying to revive her. All she consciously remembered was being in another dimension and experiencing extreme bliss. Meanwhile, the paramedics were pumping her heart and trying to resuscitate her. When she entered the hospital, she started to cry, because she didn't want to come back to this place, our

dimension. Then a few seconds later, she wanted to go on living because she wanted to see how my daughter Isabelle would turn out.

The next day I was at her bedside and she was very confused. She was telling me one of my dad's friends was a CIA agent and that John Kennedy had been a communist sympathizer. For eight hours I remained there while she was raving. She was just talking nonsense. I wasn't laughing.

A few weeks later, she started showing signs of latent Alzheimer's. She must have had brain damage from the heart attack. But she wasn't treated right away. She would phone me up and ask me to say a mass for her.

"But mom, I am not a priest," I answered.

"Come on, you are pulling my leg. Just say a mass for me, will you?" she replied in French.

"Really. I have a wife and kids!"

And this level of conversation would go on. My sister believed that my mother mistook me for her brother Wilfrid, who was a priest. But I think she always wanted me to be a priest and she imagined her wishes had come true. Anyway, we will never get to the bottom of this.

Other times I would phone her and it was late afternoon. So she would tell me she had been travelling that day and that my father had to meet her and they had to get back to her parents' house for supper. Now her parents had been dead for fifty years by then. I would just listen.

Meanwhile, my sister, who also lived in Ottawa, was closely monitoring the situation. And when my mother started wandering and getting lost in her own neighbourhood, my sister finally arranged with social workers and a doctor to have my mother placed in a residence for seniors. It was under supervision and my mother's sister, my aunt, had passed away and left a sum of money for my mother to receive medical care in her old age. I wasn't able to get involved at this point because I was busy raising my two young daughters. So my sister did a lot of work and showed real dedication to my mother for many years. And I really appreciate her caregiving. At one point I offered to have our mother move in with us in Montreal but my sister wouldn't let that happen.

First, my mother stayed in a residence called Rideau Place, where she had some autonomy. It was arranged a bit like a hotel. Each resident had a room and would come to the dining room for meals. Some of my mother's furniture was in her room. And she was happy there. She thought the place was quite classy and she liked the other residents. And when her illness progressed, my sister placed her in a geriatric hospital. Each step of the way involved a lot of bureaucracy and planning. My sister had to empty my mother's apartment and dispose of her property. Plus she managed her finances.

At one point, my sister wasn't available. She was out of town and I heard my mother wasn't eating anymore. I took a bus up to Ottawa and went to her bedside. She had been moved temporarily into a general hospital and I didn't recognize her. And she wasn't sure who I was. She looked at me in the eye and told me her mother's name: Herméline. And I replied with her father's name: Ulysse. And then she trusted me. She had lost a lot of weight because she refused to eat.

Another time, when my sister was back, Bonnie and I and our children went to visit my mother. My sister whispered in my mother's ear, in French, "Look, mom! It is Robert and your grandchildren..." And my mom began to scream, in French, "BUT THEY ARE NOT MARRIED! THEY ARE NOT MARRIED!" It was suggested we go back home to Montreal and that time, I was devastated. She refused to acknowledge her own grandchildren.

I remember another visit where my whole family was there and my mother started screaming incomprehensibly, "ROBERT IS SCREAMING DOWNSTAIRS! ROBERT IS SCREAMING DOWNSTAIRS!" During that same visit, there was a nun in the hall giving out holy communion to the patients so I asked her to give the host to my mother. Mom seemed to respond immediately and was delighted to taste the host.

I went with my wife to visit my mom another time when she had fallen down. Her face and arms were all bruised. It seems she was developing osteoporosis and didn't have enough strength left in her legs to stand up. So from then on, they tied her to a wheelchair. It hurt to see my mother all banged up and black and blue.

For several years she stayed in the hospital, moving from unit to unit as she deteriorated. Meanwhile my sister would visit her twice a week then every day. She would take my mother for a ride in her wheelchair into the garden and wheel her around everywhere. One day, about nine months before she passed away, I went with Bonnie to visit her and my sister Claire had taken us out to the garden. At this stage, my mother couldn't talk anymore and I was joking with her. I said to her, "You taught me good manners..." And my mother replied, sternly: "Mind them!"

By then, my mother was just skin and bones. And a strange thing happened around two weeks before she died – she couldn't speak or understand French anymore. Her mother had raised her in English and her dad, my grandfather, was a francophone. But she ceased to communicate in French.

I went to visit her one last time a week before she died. She had lost even more weight and her thighs were the size of my wrist. She had no teeth left and the nurse was spoonfeeding her yogurt. She had lost her sense of hearing and my sister told me to touch mom's hand so she could recognize me. And she smiled when I touched her hand.

I knew death was imminent.

I took the bus back to Montreal and as soon as I got back home, I took a nap. I woke up in a start an hour later and was dreaming that I was aboard a bus going to or from Montreal. The bus had been struck by lightning and I was fried to a crisp and was now dead. When I woke up, I was in a cold sweat.

She passed away on January 5, 2007. She was 96.

The very next day, I was interviewed online by an artist in Catanzaro Italy and I talked a lot about my mother. Then I didn't hear anything about this interview for several months. Finally, one day, I found the interview

had been published that day, April 17, in a magazine in Australia called Retort Magazine. April 17 was my mother's birthday.

That month, in April, being a good Catholic boy, I invoked my late mother. I said to her, "Look, mom, I am really broke. What I need right now is a big contract." And what came in the mail that day was a call for tenders from the federal government of Canada for a contract worth one hundred and two thousand dollars. I bid on it and it didn't pan out but a week later I received a certified cheque in the mail from my sister for my inheritance. The very next day, I deposited the cheque in the bank and opened up a trust account for my kids' education. With the rest of the money, I paid some bills and after four days, I had enough money left to buy a pizza all dressed.

2017-02-04

THE FUTURE PSYCHIATRISTS

It was 1969, the year I graduated from Loyola College, and I guess I had a lot of spare time on my hands. I had been doing a lot of LSD25 and had a group of friends in NDG.

One night, I was with some buddies who studied in the Psychology Department and there was a Christmas reception in the Guadagni Lounge at Loyola. So here we were on the fringe, sitting on our fannies in a corner, while in the middle of the large hall, some gentlemen and ladies in bow ties and evening gowns were sipping cocktails lightly and politely.

Meanwhile, I was taking this in, and wondering, "Do I do this or not?" And finally, impulse got the better of me, and while no one was looking, I took all my clothes off and walked out of the room bare naked, carrying my clothes in my hand over my shoulder.

Well, people just freaked. "George, did you see that man!!? He is bare naked!!" Everyone did a double take and stared at me, as I walked out the door without a stitch on.

I walked about twenty feet down the corridor, when a security guard caught me putting my pants on. He barked at me, "Come with me," and walked off without looking behind to see if I was following him. My friend Peter had come out of the Lounge and was trailing behind, and he told me later on that the security guard confiscated his student ID card. While this was going on, I had a laugh and put my clothes back on. I walked out of the university buildings scot free.

However, the word got around that I was a wild man on the loose, and the parents of some of my friends were quite alarmed.

Whatever. I showed them.

2017-03-25

APPREHENDED INSURRECTION

Yesterday morning, they placed my bed in the elevator. The nurses were talking behind a pane of glass in the nursing station. For once, I could understand what people were saying. A male nurse was telling a lady nurse that if people were brought up Catholic, they were brainwashed and didn't have much of a chance in life. A woman called Thérèse, who had caked white skin like a mummy, came into the elevator and stood beside my hospital bed with a rosary and hissed at me, "How many times, my son! How many times, my son!" She was wearing a pink and white bathrobe and had her hair up in curlers. She kept waving the rosary in my face. I yelled, "NO-O-O-O-O-O-O-O !" and that was the first sound I made in the six weeks since I had been catatonic and locked up in Burgess Pavilion of the Douglas.

I remember now what happened before I got hospitalized. The times were evil, I spent a week in jail because I was accused falsely of breaking a window at a riot and I had dreams at night of shooting policemen. While I was in Parthenais Detention Centre, I met a fellow from the FLQ who was being beaten up every day by the police. When I told him I was getting released soon, he gave me a coded message, which I delivered to his comrade on the outside. A civil war was raging worldwide. An Apocalypse.

"A YEAR AFTER THE GULF WAR FACTS ARE EMERGING TO INDICATE THAT THE U.S. WILL ACTUALLY MAKE A 'PROFIT' FROM THE WAR WHILE THE FINAL DEATH TOLL IN IRAQ WILL BE 'HORRENDOUS.' Aileen McCabe, Southam News, January 9, 1992.

I had gotten discharged prematurely from the Douglas in March 1970 and moved in with a mescaline dealer called Larry in Westhaven Village, in NDG, in Montreal. I remember riding the bus in the filthy, slushy month of March and feeling like I was a dirty old fly, with a grimy body and dirty wings. I had a job selling encyclopedias, but I never managed to sell one and I quit after about three weeks. My boss slapped me in the face because I wouldn't smile while practising my sales pitch. I had just gotten the job to

get out of the Douglas anyway. I met Larry at a party with some college students. He was working in a factory, but once I moved in with him, he quit his job and just resorted to dealing for money. I did a couple of deals in Ottawa for a friend of mine and then I just withdrew to the one room I rented from Larry.

I ate nothing but rolled oats and milk for a month. Harry would come over and tell me, "You know, all the hippies at the corner are scared of you. You look like a cross between a desperado and Charlie Chaplin." And then he would discuss his hemorrhoids for an hour. My ex-girlfriend was in the Allan Memorial and she dropped over with some friends once in a while. I remember talking to her on the phone while she was hospitalized and I felt like my brain was splitting in two.

I remember talking to Larry while we were tripping on some of his mescaline, and he had a huge, golden aura about five feet wide glowing around his head. I remember going with him in a chartered bus to a massive demonstration in Washington, D.C. when Nixon invaded Cambodia. There were 250,000 of us sitting in a huge park, and I felt religious as Phil Ochs sang, "I Ain't a' Marchin' Anymore." When we returned to Montreal, my roommate went away for a few days, and I inserted pins everywhere in the apartment with labels saying, "Sofa," "Wall," "Chair," "Table," and so forth for comic effect. Then I painted a surrealistic picture on the kitchen wall: there was Dali's head stuck in a sand dune in a desert scene.

I was driving my roommate crazy. He would drop mescaline and read the same page over and over again in a book. His friends would come over and do sensitivity training on the living-room floor. They would sit in a circle and hold hands and talk about witchcraft. One of my friends would laugh at me and suggest I lighten up and join the Happy Gang. I took all my sixties ideology very seriously. I dropped mescaline and painted a poster of a fist lifted up against heaven, with the caption "SUPPORT HATE TRIPS ALL OVER THE WORLD." That's why the hippies were afraid of me, because I was a heavy trip.

One night, I accidentally conjured up an evil spirit. I was drawing obscene pornographic pictures to exorcize some negative energies from my subconscious mind when an evil presence came into the room. It felt like

pure disembodied hate in the air or electricity projecting thoughts in my brain such as "Good is evil, evil is good, follow me." When I couldn't get rid of this unwanted and disturbing energy, I went into the other room to wake up my roommate Larry. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Larry, wake up ! Can you feel those vibes?" He immediately sprang up and yelled at me, "Ya, that's weird ! What is that?"

"IT WAS A GIGANTIC COMMERCIAL IN THE SKY" FOR THE U.S. ARMS INDUSTRY AND, ACCORDING TO ADMIRAL GENE LE ROQUE OF THE U.S. CENTRE FOR DEFENCE INFORMATION, "THE BEST THING THAT HAS HAPPENED TO U.S. ARMS SALES IN RECENT YEARS... WE WERE ABLE TO DEMONSTRATE THAT MANY OF OUR HIGH-TECH WEAPONS PERFORMED EXCEEDINGLY WELL."

All I owned was a mattress and the clothes on my back and I couldn't talk. People would speak to me, and I would stare at them. One time, I met a friend of mine on the street and I told him I was turning into a machine. Sometimes Harry would come over and take me out for a walk. He wanted to put bombs in churches, because he felt it was the Church that kept the Establishment in operation. Larry and I went to love-ins and outdoor rock n' roll concerts. I was terrified of meeting his friends or going outdoors because of the straight people on the streets. I had been raped in a church by a black guy a couple of years before, and I was afraid of blacks. I felt I couldn't discuss this with anybody in those days. It wasn't politically correct.

I was driving Larry crazy, so he finally kicked me out. We carried my mattress to my parents' place on Patricia, where I stayed for about four days. My parents were gone to Europe and returned the day after I took off hitch-hiking and headed west. My original intention was to go to Southern Ontario in order to get a job picking tobacco. After about a month of hitch-hiking back and forth up and down Highway 401, I was good and psychotic. I slept in Salvation Army hostels, abandoned cars, public toilets and sometimes, just in ditches along the highway. The rednecks at the Salvation Army didn't like hippies and they

poured gasoline in my travelling bag while I was having breakfast. A policeman gave me five dollars and I couldn't even say thank you. A housewife saw me walking through suburbia, invited me in for a meal, but I ran away after using her shower to clean up. Another time, I was discouraged and lying in a ditch, but a local long-haired guy wouldn't help me because I looked psychotic.

I felt like I was running away from something in Montreal, the police, God, myself. I was running away from my identity. I felt I had a mission to save Quebec and I was running away like Jonas from this mission. And the further away I ran, the tighter the fishnet of identity would wrap itself around my mind. I wanted to lose my identity. One night on the streets of Oshawa, Ontario, I tore up my passport, my I.D. and threw my wallet in a garbage can. Everywhere I went, I saw oppression all around me. I saw a newspaper, and it said something about a judge getting shot and something about Angela Davis and this was in August 1970.

I hooked up with a bunch of long-haired freaks near London, Ontario, but they couldn't handle me. They got jobs picking tobacco, and I kept hitch-hiking. One afternoon, it occurred to me that my thoughts were going through my brain at the same frequency as passing cars. I was shedding my past. I would walk along the highway and think of Davie Crockett and old television shows. I was casting off my social and cultural identity. I wanted to drop out for good, to disconnect with society once and for all. Mostly, I didn't want anything to do with dollars and cents.

"FILM-MAKER GEORGE CAREY AND HIS TEAM SPENT MONTHS EXAMINING THE LEDGER SHEETS FROM THE WAR, TALKING TO EXPERTS AND PIECING TOGETHER EVIDENCE TO AT LEAST PARTIALLY REVEAL THE TRUE COST OF LAST JANUARY'S \$70 BILLION DESERT STORM."

After I threw away my I.D. in Oshawa, Ontario, I slept in the basement of an apartment building that night. In the morning, I went out on the front lawn, sat down, stood up and stared, sat down, stood up and stared. I was hungry but I didn't realize it. I had lost a lot of weight in weeks of travelling.

Along came a police car, and they picked me up. They took me down to the station. The first thing they did, in the entrance of the police station, was to tell me to stand facing the wall. Then they told me to bend forward and pull down my pants. They saw my rear end and laughed. I was afraid that they could read my mind and find out the names of my friends in Montreal.

They asked me for my name, and I gave them fictitious names. One detective in a white shirt and short sleeves told me, "Look, kid, tell me your real name or I'll punch your face right through that wall !" I told him my name, and then he told me to stand up. I was alone in a little office in the Oshawa police station with the detective, who was big and husky. He punched me in the stomach so hard that I fell down and gasped. He had knocked the wind out of me, and I hadn't even done anything wrong yet. I was lying on the ground trying to catch my breath and I could see the policeman lurching over me, laughing at me as I groaned and clutched my stomach.

When I appeared in court the next morning, I was about to appear before the judge, when another detective came up to me and said, "Tell us what drug you're on, kid, and we won't say anything about THIS !!!!!" And he reached into my shirt pocket and pulled out some marijuana. I didn't even know how it got there.

When I was ushered into the courtroom, after a long wait with other inmates, I couldn't talk. As I walked behind the prosecutor, he suddenly stood up and told the judge, "Your Honour, I suggest we drop the charges against this boy, because his father came here from Montreal yesterday, and he is a very prominent man in government." Some time elapsed, I still couldn't talk, and the judge sentenced me to thirty days in a hospital for the criminally insane. He struck his gavel on his desk.

I spent four days in this hospital. Everything happened. A nurse would walk into a room and meanwhile, another nurse would walk out: I concluded that people changed bodies when they went through doors. In the common shower room, one man forced me to suck him off. Another time, in the pool room, some guys were shooting pool and I was laughing insanely; one guy smashed me on the head with a pool cue. I was getting

more and more psychotic. I was playing dissonant music on the piano, and a patient slammed the lid on my fingers and nearly broke my fingers. I was getting more and more agitated. There was a war going on somewhere.

"THE FACT IS THAT INSIDE IRAQ THE LOSSES WERE HORRENDOUS," SAID GEORGE JOFFE FROM THE ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT. "IT'S ESTIMATED, EVEN BY THE PENTAGON, THAT LOSSES IN THE IRAQI ARMED FORCES WERE AROUND 150,000 PEOPLE. AND CIVILIAN LOSSES COULD HAVE BEEN AS MUCH AS 200,000."

That is when I was transferred to the Douglas in Montreal. Four policemen and I drove by car down to Montreal. I was watching the highway through the front windshield of the car, and it looked like a movie, the movie of my life. After a while, the movie didn't make sense anymore and I lost track of my thoughts. I was handcuffed to a policeman.

When we arrived at the Douglas, it was a bright hot sunny afternoon. I saw a male nurse called Mike at the admission and I made a gesture drawing my index across my neck as if slashing my own throat. They put me in a room in Burgess Pavilion, and I peed on the floor. They were not amused but they mopped it up. They assigned me to a room across the hall, and as soon as they weren't looking, I jumped out of the window.

I didn't want to be brainwashed to go straight again, I didn't want to be re-integrated into society. I was in a johnnyshirt, and I jumped on to a roof below, and one more storey further down on to a cement driveway. I didn't hurt myself landing. I was gone. I could see the sun shining on the vast fields ahead of me, and I was scot free! Someone grabbed me and hauled me back to my room in Burgess. No sooner was I alone in the room, that I jumped out the second-storey window a second time, just to end up back in my room again. This time they nailed the window shut. They were going to crucify me, all right.

"AND THE DYING HASN'T STOPPED YET."

ACCORDING TO JEAN DREZE, AUTHOR OF THE STUDY HUNGER AND POVERTY IN IRAQ, AN ESTIMATED 100,000 MORE CHILDREN WILL DIE AS A DIRECT RESULT OF THE DISEASE, SHORTAGES AND POVERTY THAT WERE THE SECONDARY EFFECT OF 109,876 BOMBING RAIDS THAT DESTROYED IRAQ'S INFRASTRUCTURE."

I spent six weeks in that bed without talking. They had three shifts of nurses to watch me and make sure I wouldn't escape. The painting on the wall at the foot of the bed kept changing shapes and I thought the black female nurses watching over me were Black Panthers discussing revolution. My mother came in to visit me. She asked me if I recognized her, and I didn't answer her.

Doctor Ast was my doctor, and she was German. I thought she and the rest of the staff were Nazis who wanted to interrogate me to find out secrets about reincarnation. So I wouldn't talk. My family gave me a radio and I listened to CHOM religiously, absorbing all my hippie doctrine. I even felt like my mind was a radio, taking in news and other documentary data through my senses.

"THE DOCUMENTARY ESTIMATED THAT WHEN FACTORS LIKE TRADE AND OIL PRICE HIKES ARE ALSO TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT, "40 THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES SUFFERED A BLOW TO THEIR ECONOMIES EQUIVALENT ON THE UN SCALE OF DISASTERS TO A MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE."

Outside my window they were doing construction and the noise was very loud and disturbing. I thought the staff had pulleys in the spiritual world to tug me towards them and change the channel on my mind-radio to an Establishment channel. There was a tug of war between the staff and the patients. At night, there were fewer staff and the patients used the TV set to pull my mind in their direction. I knew the hospital was trying to reprogram me, to regroove me and socialize me. I didn't want to hear about it.

For days on end, during the October crisis in 1970, I could hear the TV reports about the police and the kidnappers and Trudeau rattling off the names of members of the FLQ. I thought the doctors were extracting this information out of my brain.

They took me for regulation blood tests upon entering the hospital. They put me in a wheelchair and walked me down through the endless tunnels underground beneath the Douglas' various pavilions. I could hear the noise of the wheelchair overhead and I was convinced I was responsible for World War III. Everything I imagined was an image of doom and destruction.

"MANY ENVIRONMENTALISTS ARE NONETHELESS ALARMED. PAUL HORSEMAN OF GREENPEACE INTERNATIONAL MAINTAINED: 'THE SCALE OF THE DISASTER, IF YOU ACTUALLY LIVE IN THE AREA, IS CATASTROPHIC. THERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT. IT WILL MARK AMONGST THE CHERNOBYLS, THE BHOPALS, THE OTHER DISASTERS THAT HAVE HAPPENED WORLDWIDE, AS A MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHIE."

I was struggling to maintain my identity in this militant generation gap, and I felt the massive doses of largactyl they were administering were meant to brainwash me to joining the Establishment again. One morning, I thought I was a wolf and my mother was a wolf. I felt some kind of tenderness about being a wolf.

Whenever the nurses gave me an injection of largactyl, I thought the syringe contained a microfilm of my future life story. I felt they were conspiring to get my inheritance from my parents. Mike would give me medication to drink and tell me, "Better than hash, eh, Robert ?" And I still wouldn't talk to a soul. One night, a nurse sat on my bedside and leaned against me and said to me in French, "I would give a week's salary to hear you say one word to me." And I was staring at him and I still wouldn't talk. I was catatonic.

That was some time ago. I am glad they reintegrated me into society, because they nipped an apprehended insurrection in the bud. As I was sitting on the piano bench in the dayroom of the ward, I noticed there was a dead housefly lying there beside me; I knew it had a microphone in its head. So I put the fly in my mouth and ate it. Its head tasted crunchy. On the other hand, I remember, at the demonstration in Washington, D.C., in the spring of that year, I was mindblown to see a black guy in the vast crowd carrying a full-size cross over his shoulder like Jesus; I didn't know how to react, because I wasn't sure it was politically correct.

"ADD THAT TO THE REGION'S ACCELERATING ARMS RACE AND IT IS ENTIRELY CONCEIVABLE THE REAL PRICE OF DESERT STORM HAS YET TO BE PAID."

WORKING FOR A LIVING: HOW DONALD TRUMP GOT RICH

“Ah, distinctly I remember
It was in the bleak December”
(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*)

I had been hitch hiking a bit through the Rockies, “in a fine frenzy rolling” and I was getting hungry. A pick up truck had dropped me off in the middle of the British Columbia pine tree forest, right at a restaurant surrounded by snow, and suddenly, I had a plan.

Now I was brought up not to mooch and to earn my living by the sweat of my brow. So I walked into the restaurant, all scruffy, with a growth of beard and dirty clothes on, and approached the manager. I told him, “Look, can I make a deal with you? I will work for an hour, doing anything, and you give me a meal. OK?”

He answered, “You got it. Climb up on top of the stove and clean the grease off the grills up there for an hour. I will give you a steak.” He gave me a brush and a steel wool scrubbing pad and a towel. I climbed up on the stove and began to scrub the grease off. It hadn’t been cleaned in several days. I scrubbed and I scrubbed. The grease was caked and dry and kept falling on my face below, but I didn’t care. I was determined.

After an hour, the grills were clean and the manager gave me notice. True to his word, there was a huge hamburger steak on one of the tables. I ate to my heart’s content.

That was in 1977. I was a missing person and hitch hiked some more until two or three months later, my dad wanted to have me locked up, so he sent me an airplane ticket to fly from Calgary to Montreal, where I was committed to the Douglas for four months.

Now they put me on modecate, a neuroleptic drug that worked for me. A couple of weeks later, my psychiatrist went on vacation, and I got a day pass. I was allowed to go downtown every day, as long as I came back to the psych ward at night. Once again, I had a plan. And I recommend it for anyone locked up.

The first day that I got out and went downtown on my pass, I applied for a job as a houseman at the Sheraton Mount Royal Hotel on Peel Street. I looked clean cut and proper. They gave me the job, and that evening I took the bus back to the Drugless and went to bed. So far so good.

I managed to keep the job for several months.

Meanwhile, back at the funny farm, another shrink had replaced my doctor, who had no intention of ever letting me out. So I approached the substitute doctor one day two weeks later, and told him, "Look, why don't you give me my discharge, because I have been working downtown and keeping a job?"

And he did. I was out of there and got a room in a boarding house on Hutchison Street.

And that is the author's message. Hard work.

2017-03-25

THE MAN WHO HATED LEONARD

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

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

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

But I am not dangerous. I just hate Leonard.

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

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

I used to wonder if Leonard has sold his soul in order to make it. I never found out.

I saw Leonard live twice. The first time was in December 1969, the year the police went on strike in Montreal. I ended up in the Douglas that year. And didn't Leonard come and give a concert for the mentally ill that winter, at the Dalse Center. I was there in the audience, and I was thrilled. Hey, it was a good concert. I had had a bad trip on acid, and Leonard said to the patients, "You people are the political prisoners of our society." Just

what I wanted to hear, because I was a politico. A radical. I wanted to plant bombs, but didn't know how.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2002-07-28

THE VALUE OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

I haven't told this story in a long time. Every word of it is true, so help me God.

In April 1968, I was hitchhiking from Montreal to Vancouver with a teenage lady called Ann Wells, whom I had met at a party in NDG that spring. We left with a total of fifteen dollars in our pockets and one night, a car dropped us off in Cereal, which was a village of perhaps two hundred people, just on the border of Alberta and Saskatchewan. It was night time and also very dark.

We got dropped off at a crossroads. There was a gas station and a grocery store, as well as a dirt road going into town. As I said, it was night.

We stuck out our thumb and tried to hitch a ride out of there. After a few minutes, along came a beaten up old car, with six guys inside. They rolled down their windows and got a look at us. "Look, we can cut the hippie's hair," I heard one of the fellows say. They had a wild glare in their eyes, like a pack of hungry wolves who had not seen flesh in a long while. Their faces were deformed by too much alcohol and they looked like red necks. I replied, "That's OK, we'll pass." And they drove off in their old Ford car.

We stuck out our thumbs and tried our luck again. Another car pulled up to us, coming from town, and paused two minutes while they opened the door and threw out a woman into the ditch of the dirt road. The car drove off, and an apparition of a woman crawled out of the ditch and hobbled toward us. She said she was from Newfoundland and was native. She had just been gangraped by some brutes, who threw her afterwards into the ditch. She looked lost, her eyes rolling, and she said she was "just wandering."

At this point, Ann and I walked up to the grocery store, where some of the local people were gathered and talking. "Who are these people?" one of them asked. The man behind the counter replied, "Wanderers, who come around and make life hard for the honest folk." I don't know, we were just getting out of the cold for a minute.

We were looking out the window at the highway. Outside, the native lady was hitchhiking and we were shocked to see she got picked up by the six red necks in the Ford. She got into the car.

I figured she got gangraped a second time that night.

It was around ten o'clock at night.

That was when we met a farmer woman, who offered to let us stay at her place, overnight, if we were willing to wait for her husband. He was drinking at the local hotel. So we got into her car and waited outside the hotel, which was a miserable hovel of a place with a neon sign at the door. We waited for two hours in the dark, until midnight. Then he came out and took the driver's seat. We drove for perhaps half an hour to a farm, where they were tenant farmers. They lived in a trailer and their old Chevy car had seen better days. They told us their story: he had never been to school, but she had a grade two education. Also, he had never traveled to another town, but she had been to the next town over, which was fifteen miles away. They had a portable television in their trailer, which was equipped with electricity. They let us sleep on a mattress in the back of the trailer.

In the morning, a squeaky, cranky yellowish streak of sun appeared on the horizon, and the farmer drove us back out to the highway. I noticed he had a beer as he started his car and said to it, "Chevy car, you no go this morning?" And when he finished his beer, he rolled down his window and threw the empty bottle over the roof of the car into the field on the right.

Finally, we did make it to Vancouver, after traveling through the third world. That summer I went back to university at Loyola College in Montreal. I was nineteen years old.

2013-06-06

LES AFRICAINS

By this time, I was studying translation at the Université de Montréal and was thirty-two years old. In September, when the semester just started, the graduate students and I were standing in a hall, and I noticed a group of African students apart from the white anglo students. I was registered in a French to English program. I found the blacks more interesting than the whites, so I tried to make friends with them.

It was still summer time, but I remember one of them was wearing a winter coat and a tuque, because he found it freezing outdoors. A few days later, I was at the apartment of some of these Africans, and they had cooked some mashed potatoes, a big mountain full, and they told me it was “foo foo cun.” They sat me down in front of the main plate and said you eat it with your hands and dip it in the gravy. They seemed quite jovial about this, as though it was some kind of joke. I answered that I had just eaten and wasn’t hungry. But they insisted that they would be very insulted if I didn’t eat my portion. So I had some but it didn’t go down very well. They laughed and laughed. Obviously, I was the butt of their joke.

After supper, we stood around and each in turn discussed our sexual prowesses with women. One of them was a former policeman in Camerouns, and he said, with gusto, “You take a woman to bed and you punish huh. You treat huh like a beast – and she loves it!” Another man in his thirties called Ben told us about a long night in bed with a woman, stalking her like a cat, keeping one eye open, and then consummating the relationship. And so the evening went.

Some of them were serious about their studies. Others would drink a couple of beer in the morning before an exam. The fellow who told me this found it strange that they made coffee in their homeland – but we drank it. They never drank coffee.

Their humour was different than mine. And humour is always cultural. One African student would approach another and say, for instance, “Mister President! I hear you have a mansion on top of the hill and a limousine!” And they would find this funny. I would tell them a joke I heard in a jazz club – and it would fall flat.

They explained to me about tribalism in Africa. If you applied for a job and the interviewer was from another tribe, you simply didn't get the position. There was no appeal, no questions asked.

Ben and I became friends. He was very prudish. He would see an ad with a photo of a woman in a bathing suit, and he would exclaim, "THAT'S OBSCENE!!" I gathered public sexuality like that wasn't allowed in their country, so I took the African students out for a beer in a giant topless club on Sainte-Catherine Street, where naked white dancers posed and danced for customers all night. Ben said he found that "very interesting."

However, when Africans come to Canada, they are warned not to touch us because we are a very cold people. One lady I knew from Camerouns told me one time she was with a bunch of white student girls and she had an itchy crotch, so she simply pulled down her pants and scratched her privates in public. She thought nothing of it but they all assumed she was a lesbian.

Another time I was at a party at some Africans' apartment and they brought out the gin. There was disco music playing and we formed a line. Everyone grabbed the buns of the person in front of them and we danced round and round like in a bunny hop. At first it felt strange but after a while it seemed perfectly normal. All the people there were marching in a circle and holding the rear end of the person in front of them while someone held on to their bum.

There was one African student, a little short guy, who kept grabbing my ass all year. I would turn to him and tell him, "Do you mind? That's mine!" He never understood and always gave me a big innocent smile. I guess he liked me.

At the end of the school year, some of them returned to Camerouns and I landed a translation job with the federal government in Winnipeg. I worked there for several months and then was stationed in Ottawa. I stayed there for two years and then quit because I was homesick. I eventually returned to Montreal, where I met Ben again. He asked me to edit his Master's thesis. This was quite strange because he discussed the sexual powers of the African male. Between the lines, it read like a pipe

dream of sexual potency. The teacher who had asked me to take a look at it also found it strange. It was as though Ben had lost his mind.

I met with him and he kept telling me that he didn't want to return to Camerouns because "men were plotting evil in government offices." He thought his life would be in danger if he went back home.

Then I received a phone call from Saint Mary's Hospital where Ben had been committed to a psych ward. I was asked to go pick him up and accompany him to his apartment in my custody. There I opened the oven at random and found a Bible on the oven rack. The apartment was in a shambles and I had to take him back to the ward once he had found his passport and papers. He told me his father had fought for the Germans in World War II; this was probably because Camerouns had been a German colony at that time.

Then in ensuing years, I would bump into Ben around the Côte-des-Neiges area. He told me at first he was working under the table as a dishwasher in a restaurant and then years later, the stories got increasingly preposterous. He had won the lottery and had figured out a system to make millions of dollars from playing the lottery.

What I gathered was that he was in illegal overstay and was working under the table, afraid of being deported. One time I took him to visit my parents in Ottawa. Other times I met him with Bonnie my partner. But he never came across or told the truth. The last time I saw him on the street was around two years ago.

2017-04-03

THE SÉANCE: DONALD TRUMP SLITHERS THROUGH THE AUDIENCE

I had been driven to Santa Barbara, California by some members of a cult called The Summit Lighthouse in the winter of 1973 or so, and we were supposed to attend a conference featuring Elizabeth Clare Prophet. She was a medium who claimed to be the reincarnation of Claire of Assisi, the partner of Saint Francis, and she gave talks inspired by spirits from the Great White Brotherhood. These spirits claimed to be Ascended Masters.

Anyway, one night I found myself in a mansion in a rich neighbourhood in Santa Barbara and was sitting among the chelas (disciples) who were seated on lined up chairs in a large hall. The mansion was quite ritzy, with crystal chandeliers in every room; these cults are very materialistic. No one was talking or moving, and everyone was sitting upright and trying not to twitch.

Slowly, gradually, I started feeling the presence of some bad vibe or evil spirit spreading through the crowd. It obviously did not feel wholesome, and I guessed Elizabeth had conjured up this presence. It felt like incarnate hate.

I started acting nervous and stood up, moving around. So some members of the cult in white suits grabbed me and pulled me outdoors, where they forced me to sit on a chair. By then, I lost it and was screaming, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do..." They wrestled with me and a few minutes later, a police car pulled up in front of the mansion.

The officer in the car came out and physically grabbed me and shoved me into the vehicle. I was totally out of control. It was dark and chaotic in the night.

He drove me to a police station where he took me by the shoulders and threw me down on a chair. The cop was worried, because he knew something weird was going on.

I ended up at Saint Francis Hospital in Santa Barbara, in a small room. During the evening, two male nurses showed up at the door of my room with a towel. They said, sternly, "Take a shower."

I answered them, "No problem. I took a shower this morning."

They were not amused. They repeated, “Come on, take a shower.”
I repeated the same thing.

Then all hell broke loose – one of the nurses got me in a headlock and the other one twisted my left arm behind my back – and then I heard a crack – my neck was injured – and I began to scream and holler for blue murder – then they tied me up in a straightjacket, with my face down and I kept screaming for what seemed like four hours, until they gave me an injection of tranquilizing medication – and I was in a rage, until I fell asleep.

The next day, I was still in the small room. I was sitting on the floor, with my legs crossed, meditating. A couple of patients came around my door and took a peek at me. Later that day, I stood facing a wall, with my mouth against the wall. There was a black patient who told me something about God, like, “God likes to be worshipped. That’s his thing. You just worship dat wall.” I was very confused.

And the next day, I was allowed to go out into the garden, where some patients were playing basketball in the California sun. I was very spaced out. Finally, some official called me to his office. The Summit people had offered to take me out of there under their custody. It was determined I was a Canadian citizen, and that day, a van full of chelas came to pick me up, and drove me back to Colorado Springs, where I lived.

But when I returned to Canada, I had to see a chiropractor for my neck for six months. I saw an X-ray of my neck and my spine was all bent out of shape, like a question mark. As I walked down the street, I could hear the vertebrae in my neck clicking, like click-click, click-click. The chiropractor finally straightened out my spine, but I was in pain for months.

The price you pay for experimenting.

2017-03-01

L'HISTOIRE DE LA FOLIE À L'ÂGE CLASSIQUE

In the late seventies, I got interested in the Catholic Church and believed this would be a relief. I began going to charismatic prayer meetings at Saint Augustine church in NDG in Montreal. However, I wasn't ready for what I found in the Church.

I had gone off my medication for a few days and was reading *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. This is the fictitious correspondence between two demons.

Well, it spooked me.

One night, I was at the prayer meeting, and one of the members there decided I needed an exorcism. Before you knew it, there were about ten or twelve of these zealots laying hands on me and invoking various saints and angels and demanding they cast the demons out of me. Here I was, petrified, while they were screaming, "Archangel Michael, cast the devil out of Robert!" and "Mother Mary, lay your power on Robert!" These people were all standing around me, while I sat on a chair, and the jumping up and down and screaming lasted perhaps half an hour. There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm in their shouting and fanaticism anyway.

After some time, a senior member of the congregation walked by, and simply said, "Look, Robert is not demon possessed! What do you guys think you are doing??"

And that was all it took. Before they got time to burn me at the stake, everything petered out and they left me alone.

I came home that night and threw my copy of *The Screwtape Letters* in the garbage. I did not have a book burning.

2017-03-01

ARE YOU WILD?

By now it is 1985, and you are 36 years old - are you wild? Is that what you do, keep a perpetual hard-on all day long? You are living in a two-room basement apartment, after getting out of jail, and you have a social worker called Daniel, who takes you out to the movies, to concerts, for meals. Daniel is French from France, and you don't really respect him, because he said some racist things about blacks. He is a theology student who doesn't know God, who has theories about everything, and he is pretty much of a wimp, as far as you are concerned.

Anyway, one day, he brings his girlfriend, Bianca, along with him on one of his visits to your apartment. It is summertime, and sweltering hot. You are showing her your writings, and she tells you she is a fan of Henry Miller's. She is Italian, but speaks English to you; she has blue eyes, and short-cropped dirty blonde hair. (You wouldn't kick her out of bed for eating crackers.) Anyway, she is one way while Daniel is around. They visit for a few hours, and you serve them something to drink.

The next time you hear from Daniel and Bianca, they are at the airport, and they are off to Cuba or somewhere, and they phone you to say goodbye. You are flirting with Bianca, telling her something about getting a suntan all over. She seems to like you, but it is understood she is Daniel's girl.

A couple of days later, someone knocks at your door. You are in your kitchen, and you go answer the door. It is Bianca. You are all flustered, because she is throwing a curve at you. You serve her a coffee, and at one point, you are both standing close to each other in the small kitchen, and she brushes against you. You take the cue, and you wrap your arms around her and kiss her, a long, passionate, wet, French kiss, her tongue in your mouth, licking your tongue and palate, like a giant snake entering a cave. When the kiss subsides, you smile at her and ask, "What about Daniel?" And she replies with a wink, "Daniel is only Daniel."

And the roller coaster rides begins. You are living on the corner of Fullum and Sherbrooke, near the old Parthenais prison, and she lives fifteen miles away, in Montreal North. It turns out she has two daughters, one fifteen and the youngest one about eight, and they don't notice you at

all. Lovers come and go. Bianca tells you, with an insane laugh, that she has the forty-eight hour syndrome - a new lover every forty-eight hours. You are drinking champagne together. She tells you she is fond of corruption, and she says it with a passion. She is addicted to cocaine, or in the process of getting addicted. She is pretty wild. She works at a dating agency, a legitimate dating agency in the heart of downtown. You go see her at work, and you draw portraits of her and her assistant, who is also Italian.

Bianca is pathetic however. She was living in France at one time, when her first husband decided to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. He bought a sailboat, and took off. Well, he disappeared. Bianca spent five years looking for him. She went up and down the coast of Africa, and heard rumours and tried to keep track of where he had last been seen. But after five years of absence, he was considered missing and dead. Then she remarried three times and got divorced three times. She collected husbands, and now she has the forty-eight hour syndrome.

So you take twenty-dollar taxi rides to her house in Montreal North, and you spend extravagantly together. One time, you are in an outdoor terrace of a restaurant in Montreal North in the hot sun, and she asks you coyly, "What are you staring at?" And you answer, "I was looking at your breast." So she pulls her right breast out of her dress, out of her bra, and lets it hang out where you can see it, right in the middle of the restaurant. You laugh insanely, she laughs insanely, and this is what kind of person Bianca is.

And there are plenty of hot, torrid afternoons, in your warm basement apartment, making love passionately on a sofa bed which falls down one time, and that is funny, and you remember that the sex is so hot and passionate, and the summer is so intense, that her black eye liner and mascara are dripping down her face, in streams of sweat, like a big black spider with its claws rolling down her cheeks. And she asks you, after about three hours of wild balling, "Is that what you do? Do you keep a perpetual hard-on all the time?" And in those days, especially if you smoked a joint, you never go soft, and Bianca and you make love until you get sore. And that is the essence of this relationship, and you tell Daniel you are fucking his girlfriend, and he is not too amused, but Bianca doesn't care about him. Daniel thought he was doing you a favour by taking you out, because you

have a mental illness. But he is definitely out of the picture. You have cut his grass, mister.

And the party with Bianca goes on, for about three weeks, and it is fast-paced, and wild, and steamy. One day, however, you go by yourself to see a movie called Birdie, which sets you off. It is about a Vietnam veteran who is totally gauche with women, and has never had a girlfriend, and when he ends up in a psych ward, he thinks he is a bird, and perches naked on his bed. And this sets off a neurosis in you. You write a letter to Bianca. The letter says very weird things about women. Bianca is turned off. She tells you it is over. You try to phone her once or twice, but she won't take the call. The party is over, and she has found someone else to replace you. The forty-eight hour syndrome. You feel sad, and bitter. You hear from a friend of hers that she got married again for the fifth time about a year later. This friend is a jazz singer called Ming Lee, and he is in touch with her. You move to Fredericton, New Brunswick, that summer.

"Do you remember, baby, last September, how you held me tight each and every night, and you'll find somebody new, and baby, we'll say we're through, and you won't matter anymore." Later, that summer, you are in Ottawa, visiting your parents, and you go for a beer with your dad in a crowded downtown bar, and the Buddy Holly song is playing on the PA system, and your dad tells you, in French, "That is the tragedy of life, that relationships don't last."

Winter 2004

MY DIRTY LITTLE VOCATION

See this child pray in church, see this child serve mass, with his little cassock, and his hair cut once a week. He comes out of the sacristy with the priest, holding his candlestick, and he feels a sense of the sacred all around him. He takes this ceremony very seriously. The girls have nothing to do with him, because he is anointed. He comes in first in class, because of the collusion between his father and the nuns who teach him catechism and the meaning of the sacraments. His whole education revolves around one single purpose – he has a vocation. It is agreed and written in the clouds.

At age thirteen, it is decided by the principal of the high school and by his parents: he will now go to seminary school. He does not think of himself as a castrato, but that is what everything is geared for, so his mother and father can go straight to heaven. This child will become a priest.

He may get into trouble, sometimes he is involved with a bad crowd, but his mother is sure he will amount to something great. She prays for him night and day.

Twenty years pass and now he has finished university. He has been a juvenile delinquent. He has been in jail. But fear not, mom and dad... There is a nephew out there who has a knack with wayward young men. The nephew spends eight days with the child, and everything will be all right. Boy wonder has been deprogrammed of all his wrong beliefs and the nephew phones the mother and she prophesies that great things will happen. The child with the lost vocation will end up back in seminary school again. Priests have predicted this; therefore it must be true.

And the nephew feels sanctified. The mother's prayers have been answered. And the child with the vocation is going to mass once again. Every morning, he wakes up and goes to the building with the crucifix on top.

Suddenly, something goes wrong in heaven. The nephew deprogrammer dies of AIDS and this was not supposed to happen. The kid with the vocation has begun to drink and drink. His father tries to control

him. But the priest-to-be has got a sexual addiction and is seen with prostitutes. This cannot be. The priest is reading Saint John of the Cross, about the Dark Night of the Soul. His mother dies of Alzheimer's and his father, of a heart attack. And the curse is cancelled.

Now he is raising children with his girlfriend, and he stops going to church. Next thing you know, he has stopped drinking and is telling his friends he has a higher power.

Jesus has finally given him a break.

2017-03-24

ON A LIGHTER NOTE

In the spring of 1984, I was off my medication and had been arrested for trying to recover a letter I had mailed from a mailbox. The charge was stealing the mail and I was facing ten years in jail. While waiting for a court date, I was locked up in a ward for the criminally insane of the Royal Ottawa, a locked ward where cameras watched our every move. However, my dear friend Martha Shepherd was given permission to come and visit me. So we sat in the visiting room and she talked; I listened. She was a nun from Madonna House and brought me some chocolates. Being psychotic, I thought these had magical powers and kept hallucinating throughout her visit.

But wait a minute here – who is this Martha Shepherd? What is Madonna House? Let me explain.

In 1981, I was transferred to Ottawa, Ontario to work as a translator at Statistics Canada. I had been in Winnipeg previously and got transferred in July. A medical doctor I contacted referred me to the nuns at Madonna House.

Now there was a bit of bunk involved. Martha was supposedly a former hippie and had supposedly completed a BA in philosophy at the University of California in Berkeley. Then she supposedly had lived in communes in New Mexico. In fact, she had a bachelor's degree in philosophy from some obscure college in New England. She converted to Catholicism and became a nun – this much I believe. But she was never any kind of hippie.

Her partner at the Ottawa branch of Madonna House was supposedly the former chief dietician of the Mayo Clinic. I really really doubt that this is true. All I know is that she was terribly scared of sex and that might be why she joined the orders.

Anyway, Martha did come and visit me at the Royal Ottawa. I was locked up in there with one guy who had raped and killed a sixteen year old girl; another had shot his wife and kids. These were not mama's boys. So I told them I was a hit man for the mob – whereas in reality, I had turned

over a mailbox and strewn the mail all over the sidewalk to find a letter I regretted having written. So they kept their distance from me.

I was not in my parents' good books at that time. My father had given me four hundred dollars and told me to get out of their lives. (I imagine I had pissed them off a bit...) Then he arranged with my lawyer to have me locked up in the Douglas in Montreal for life. He and my lawyer were best of buddies and the lawyer had me plead insane in court.

So while I was in this predicament, here comes Martha, smiling beautifully and innocently with a handful of magic chocolates.

At that time, when I was ON my medication, I used to drop by Madonna House and Martha would serve me a cup of delicious coffee and lend me an ear as I rattled off my sins and exploits. I had an addiction to hookers for several years and the nuns at Madonna House would pray for me. All I needed to do to break this addiction was to attend one meeting of a twelve-step group and read a book called *Out of the Shadows – Understanding Sexual Addiction*. I read the book and within a very little while the addiction disappeared. However I eventually left the Roman Catholic Church – which was probably not according to the agenda of the nuns. Nevertheless, I remained friends with Martha, until she died of brain cancer on October 15, 2011. She remained a nun and had some of the prejudices of nuns. For instance, I had a neighbour and friend who was a Celtic witch, and my friend Martha believed the nastiest things about witches. She did not have the authority or power to burn witches at the stake, but she told me witches were very angry women. Tsk tsk. (Maybe you would be angry too if your predecessors had been burned at the stake by the Inquisition.) Anyway, my neighbour the witch was a wonderful person.

Still, I thought Martha Shepherd had a good sense of humour and did traffic in wonderful chocolates. She practised *ξenia* or hospitality and I think she understood some things. I know she advised me never to deal with old priests.

2017-04-04

TAIL OF THE TIGER RANCH: AN OUTSIDE VIEW

My friend Karlin was working as a delivery man for a vegetarian restaurant off Ontario Street in Montreal, and that is how I ended up on a journey in a van with several young people in their twenties down to Tail of the Tiger Ranch in Vermont. It was in March, I believe, around the early seventies. The other travellers were on their way to meet Trungpa Rimpoche, a Tibetan monk who had fled persecution in China and had set up camp in the Northern United States, whereas I just went along for the ride.

As a matter of fact, some of the other initiates had a resentment and an attitude towards me because they thought I wasn't cool. For instance, at one point, I offered one of them a cigarette from my pack, and a black lady in her thirties snapped at me, "When are you going to stop pushing that poison on people?"

And this was the beginning of political correctness – in the cults in the early seventies in the US of A.

After travelling down the highway for several hours on this pilgrimage (I don't see why they couldn't just go to Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montreal if they were looking for spirituality), we arrived. I mean we arrived at Tail of the Tiger Ranch in the rolling, green hills of Vermont. The people I met there were mainly hippie types. The men had long hair and the women had patches on their jeans. People said things like, "Oh, wow!" I walked past a large room where fifty or so men were sitting cross-legged meditating. They looked very serious about doing this.

All over the farm, men were doing construction, erecting buildings and fences. But the highlight of the pilgrimage was that a group of us had an interview with Trungpa Rimpoche. We sat on the floor while he sat on a chair. He was nursing a beer with his right hand and laying the truth on us. This was the image: clothed, in our right minds and sitting at the feet of the Master. Now, I had my own personal quest regardless of these other disciples, so I asked the speaker, "What is God?"

He answered me, "In Tibet we don't ask such questions so we adapt questions like that to the Western mentality. In terms of Western

civilization, God is your real Self and its relationship with the environment.”

Whatever. It never dawned on me that Trungpa Rimpoche was an alcoholic. Nevertheless, what he said to me was useful information along my spiritual journey. Years later, when I read the Upanishads, it all made sense to me.

However, in the following months, when I returned to Montreal, I pursued my own path, apart from the cults around me. I knew somehow that doing charity or mitzvahs was essential to finding God. For about twenty years I let homeless people sleep on my floor or on my sofa if I had one. I only got robbed four times and never had any trouble with my guests. On cold winter nights, I would bring some blankets and go find derelicts freezing near metro stations.

And I read books by Ouspensky, Baba Ramdass, Annie Besant and Ledbeater, then books by Thomas Merton, Saint John of the Cross and William Blake. Finally, I read the Bible every day for several years, but this was not considered kosher or politically correct by my friends.

What always bothered me was people who thought they had more insight than me and condescended to me. I met some people like that at Trungpa Rimpoche’s farm, but I keep meeting them today. Some people are downright rude, just for the mere fact that my first language is French Canadian.

As my grandmother used to say, “Some people are so good they should be better.”

2017-03-03

BORACHO BANDITO

Are you a troubadour? A singing and dancing highwayman? A disciple of François Villon? Are you going to take off through Africa, smuggling weapons like Rimbaud? Perhaps you have traveled through China, like Blaise Cendrars; perhaps you are a globetrotter.

Do you fit into the System, the Society into which you were born? Do you have enough Imagination to wander aimlessly through a morning in your own mind? Do you have to have a Program for every step you take and every penny you spend?

On the other hand, are you a free spirit? (Are there still any free spirits left, now that the Holy Spirit has begun leaving the Earth?) Do you have the soul of a poet? Are you gifted with genius?

No, sometimes I meet people who are walking/talking prose. They take pleasure in their own prejudice and righteousness. They are always right, because they never stray from the frying pans and lawn mowers of cliché. (If you never take a chance, you can never fail.)

Why don't you kick up your heels, and take off hitchhiking to India? You might be reborn as a rolling stone. Right now, you are just gathering moss, learning the same lessons over and over and over again: a broken record.

I know dozens of places where you can meet adventure on a street corner, under the guise of magic, disguises, delirium, madness, and other opiates. Why not cultivate wanderlust? Why not attempt life? Why not sing a song, right here and now?

Hey, Louis Armstrong told us that it is a wonderful world. Don't prove him wrong. Don't let yourself down. Be faithful to your creative spirit. Wake up; the sun is shining somewhere. Go find it!

January 1, 2002

From seminary school to cults, from terrorist cells to straightjackets and from wild partying to sobriety, Robert Markland Smith was driven by his demons down the yellow brick road until he hit a brick wall. All busted up and drooling, he was found by an angel of a woman who rebuilt him into a family man and a so-called normal human being.

Some of his adventures are told in this anthology of short short stories and they bear witness to troubled times.

All this time, he was writing and translating and following his purpose as he understood it.

Come share this banquet.