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**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**

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D. Phil CRITICAL AND CREATIVE WRITING  
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**LISTENING TO WRITING: a sociolinguistic enquiry into the creation  
of meaning and effect in modern American literature, focusing on the work of  
Kurt Vonnegut and George Saunders.**

## **SUMMARY**

This thesis proceeds in two modes, utilizing both a critical and a creative lens to think about the use of simple language in formal writing. It examines the production of a register that categorizes insider/outsider status (the mechanics) as well as interrogating the (un)conscious attempts of authors seeking to prise into or remain removed from established cultural identity (the intention). It investigates the use of the vernacular and the informal in American writing in general and how it is ultimately reflected and reworked through an autobiographical channel: an examination of voice, register, and code-switching in my own writing.

The first section, ‘Listening to Writing,’ is a forensic analysis of Vonnegut and Saunders, two exemplars of literary informality in American writing. It seeks—employing the work of Sarangi, Milroy, Hunston & Thompson and others to pinpoint, at a microanalytical level, what makes the conversational conversational, and the sociolinguistic work of Austin (performativity), Giles, Coupland, and Gumperz (accommodation and identity), and Auer (code switching)—to investigate the authors’ specific manipulation of pitch and register to create effect. It also appraises the historical and cultural imperative of the American abhorrence of intellectualism and hence the disdain for high-flown language and how that is reflected in not only the literature but also the very social self-positioning of the authors.

The second section, ‘My Ice Age,’ is an autobiographical foray into outsider/insider, normal/abnormal categories and boundaries, extending the investigation of voice and

register as examined above to explore the complex nature of belonging and alienation, of community and identity, from being a white boy in an Inuit settlement to being from an Inuit settlement in Los Angeles to the complexities of belonging and alienation that arise from being gay. The juxtaposition of two different tones in 'My Ice Age' is used to reflect the juxtapositions of geographic and temporal otherness, the distance (formality) and increased vernacular in the Los Angeles sections reflecting a need to fit in, to forge a place for myself both geographically and socially through the use of voice and register.

Both the critical and the creative lenses elucidate use of simple language and variations of registers to create sociological bonds/alienation. Simple language—and humour—forges communion with reader. The adoption of the vernacular, therefore, has a purpose beyond mere stylistics, in that it also is used in a social and community building (or razing) way. In other words, the use of informality becomes a performative speech act.

## CONTENTS

1. Listening to Writing, and introduction	5
2. Eggheads, Good Ol' Boys, and the Plain Talk Express	12
3. Still Listening	32
3.1 Say It Like You Mean It	33
3.2 Literature for Deviants	35
3.3 Of Charm, Drupelets, and Penises	51
3.4 Tears of a Clown	57
3.5 Hearing Voices	59
4. Meet the Baselects	73
4.1 Greetings from the Dangerous Craphole	77
4.2 Talking Funny	79
4.3 Literature as Co-dependence	107
5. Scripto Ergo Sum	113
5.1 Talking the Talk	114
5.2 Alien Life	117
5.3 Lies, Lies, Lies	124
5.4 Rules of Engagement	130
6. 'They Eat That Shit Up'	132
My Ice Age	137
<b>Chapter 1</b> The Edge of the Known World	138
<b>Chapter 2</b> Cracks In The Ice	153
<b>Chapter 3</b> Fata Bromosa	170
<b>Chapter 4</b> 2%	188
<b>Chapter 5</b> The Expanding Horizon	194
<b>Chapter 6</b> 10%	215
<b>Chapter 7</b> Annexation	232
<b>Chapter 8</b> Animae	254
<b>Chapter 9</b> Anchors Away	272
<b>Chapter 10</b> Humiliation and the Sour-Toe Cocktail	286
<b>Chapter 11</b> Denial and Acceptance	297
<b>Chapter 12</b> Winter Wonderland	312
<b>Chapter 13</b> Days Draw In	322
Bibliography	
Creative	331
Critical	332

## 1. LISTENING TO WRITING

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Begins *Slaughterhouse-Five*<sup>1</sup> (Vonnegut 1969); one simple, profound, thrilling sentence.

*Listen?* One word, one paragraph. Listen to what? An odd request, considering I'm reading it. I'm holding a book. *Listen*: an attention signal (Sarangi 2000), an imperative, emphatic, a demand to behave ourselves and pay attention; something that one would normally expect in spoken conversation. There is a sense of immediacy, a sense of the colloquial, a verbalness. It is a directive, directed at us, and 'there is strong support for the view that the addressee or audience is a very important influence on speaker's style' (Holmes 2001). This, then, is not the kind of book we're accustomed to reading. The distance between us and the author is narrowing. But then it gets even more alarming: a colon. 'Listen:'. A colon—more profound than a comma, which would have been adequate. Stronger even than an exclamation point—which can be, well, fun—for when do we see a colon used? What usually follows it? Lists. Directions. Vital information, basically. Time to sit up straight. Take notes if necessary. We know this is serious; it's like the Emergency Broadcast System of punctuation. Our attention has been got.

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<sup>1</sup> It begins the *story*, that is, and opens the second chapter. The *book*, however, starts in the first chapter, where Vonnegut injects himself into his fiction, detailing both the origins and the difficulty in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Chapter 1 is Vonnegut showing his hand, vanquishing all artifice, all authorial authority, putting himself in there, revealing himself, conceptualizing 'his own life the way he later does Billy's, in terms of Tralfamadorian time theory' (Lundquist 1976 in Allen 1991: 82) and 'reminding the reader that fictions are provisional realities and not bedrock truth is the essence of Vonnegut's work: his one enduring theme' (Klinkowitz 1982: 17).

This is an author with no pretence to the normal niceties of literary expectations, the kind of books we have to read in school, clean, unmessy, traditional: the kind of book our grandmothers' like. The pantheon of 'good books,' the kind Miss Wedderburn used to teach us in seventh grade, the kind sanctioned by the Kansas State Board of Education. This is someone with something urgent to say, someone informal, someone like us; an author who 'respects the reader's creative intelligence and incorporates it in the making of literary art' (Klinkowitz 1982: 89).

But then something odd. A code switch, or con/textual shift, where 'speakers use their language differently from how they were using it before' (Sarangi 2000: 30). After the, well, abrupt, even rude directive—and its informality—we get a clause whose predicate—the present perfect 'has come'—is somewhat archaic, has something vaguely biblical in the syntax, like the cadence of St. Luke, like perhaps Luke 2:10,11. Vonnegut seems like he's trying to say something that is not normally said, something that is unfamiliar. Like Luke was ('Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy...'). There is something spontaneous-seeming about this. It feels urgent, and sloppy in the way that urgent things are. It doesn't smack of the care and assiduity that proper literature demonstrates: this is immediate, where rules of grammar and syntax and consistency matter less than the imparting of meaning in as quick a way as possible in order to stop conversation from flagging or losing one's conversational turn. It's like speech, with the register shifts from imperative to crypto-biblical, a variety pack of syntax and vocabulary, like he's scrambling in real time to find a way of saying. It feels made up on the spot. This is strengthened by the next word. 'Unstuck.' This is neologism (or might as well

be), a survival word (Carter 2004).<sup>2</sup> There are certainly easier, more succinct ways of saying the same thing. Why not ‘loose’? That would be more precise, more literary. Again, this seems conversational, with the extemporaneity and improvisation that conversation entails, making things up as he goes along in order to keep the flow going, sacrificing the optimal word for one that’s merely serviceable—if lexically suspect—to at least get meaning across.<sup>3</sup>

This mixing of formal, slightly clunky present perfect with a word that seems drawn out of a meagre lexical pool has created a voice, a relationship between author and reader, a relationship of greater intimacy that one would have had with one’s dustier experiences with literature. In a word, Vonnegut has positioned himself, right from the very first line, utilizing conversational tropes to achieve a confederacy (Benwell & Stokoe 2006: 140).

He employs a ‘we-code,’ which Gumperz associates with ‘in-group and informal

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<sup>2</sup> Ersatz words we grab and stuff into a conversation to keep it from lagging, whether they’re the right word or not; indeed, whether they’re a word at all. This is explored in greater detail below (see 4.2 ‘Talking Funny’)

<sup>3</sup> Although the realm of nomenclature is not with the remit of this paper, Vonnegut’s protagonist does bear some comment as it fits into the nature of linguistic register, Sarangi’s con/textualization. Billy Pilgrim (like ‘Davy Crockett’) is a nickname, and not only a nickname, not only the truncated form of the formal William—Bill—but to add to it (or, rather, to subtract from it) it’s actually been infantilized, as a diminutive ‘Billy’. But this character is not a child. He is a war hero, who survived the Nazis, the allied bombing of Dresden, and even his own murder. He’s old, balding even, and paunchy and myopic. But this use of the diminutive, as well as rendering him ineffectual and harmless, is informal. Vonnegut’s use of the name therefore creates our relationship to him, and therefore the novel. Colloquial, unthreatening. Nomenclature as a performative speech act. And ‘Pilgrim’, an entirely functional name: Billy is most definitely a wanderer, through time and space. So why not Billy Wanderer, Billy Voyager? Besides the diminished euphony, Pilgrim, as opposed to Peregrinator, evokes a quest, a noble search, a righteous search, deserving of St. Luke’s attention. Our new friend Billy Pilgrim has a clean soul, not just a reckless sense of adventure. But he’s not on a quest, he’s loose, unstuck, a carrier bag in jetty. There is a sense of sanctity about him, or the sanctity of innocence.



activities, and for the majority language to serve as the ‘they-code’ associated with the more formal, stiffer and less personal out-group relations’ (Gumperz 1982: 1966 in Auer 1998:262), to do this.

Why is he writing like that?

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate, using sociolinguistic analysis, what modern American authors—Kurt Vonnegut, the godfather of American meta-fiction, and George Saunders, the pre-eminent contemporary practitioner—are doing, exactly, and how the use of voice and register are manipulated to create meaning. And humour. ‘Modern linguistics has continually played an inspiring role: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics have provided many suggestions for the formal analysis of narrative or other discourse forms, as well as for an account of content and interpretation’ (Van Dijk 1985: 5) and has been invaluable as a tool, ‘to examine texts in order to lay bare the ideologies that have inspired them’ (Hunston and Thompson 1999: 8) and a particularly apposite one when exploring modern American fiction. I seek to investigate what, how, and why, and conclude with an examination of voice, register, code-switching in my own writing, very specifically *My Ice Age*, where I use (at first subconsciously) two very distinctive registers—a conversational voice and a more distant, frigid voice, which links to the content: needing to be liked in LA—more jovial, looser, conversational—and the emotional distance and aridity of childhood in a unwelcoming and emotionally hostile place such as the arctic. I have found that my unexamined motives are, indeed, reflected in a study of the work of the two writers herein examined. Then breakfast.

The *what* is the use of a vernacular voice, a purposeful ‘disavowal of mastery’ (Saunders 2008: 79), the use of informality in formal setting (fiction writing of the canonical, classic sort), the authors’ specific manipulation of pitch and register to create effect and humour. Montgomery describes register as having three components—field, tenor, mode; the component of interest here is tenor, which he describes as not just the topic or subject, but ‘social relationship with which communication is taking place—aspects of social relationship—i.e. politeness, formality, status’ (1995: 107-109)—it is a use of language that ‘carries with it an entire world of middle-class American values’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 87).<sup>4</sup> It is simple language used complexly: ‘the key to Vonnegut’s genius...is his unique ability to fashion a work of art out of ordinary middle class life’ (ibid. 1977: 2).<sup>5</sup> But what, precisely, makes the conversational conversational?

The *how* will be investigated in both a stylistic examination of Vonnegut and a detailed grammatical triage of Saunders (below): ‘in the hands of a sensitive and intelligent literary critic, linguistic tools are a magnificent aid to clarifying and articulating our best

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<sup>4</sup> A note needs to be made, perhaps, of the discrepancy between the term ‘middle class’ as it is used in America and as it is used in the U.K. The middle class in America is considerably lower. Often, if you have a job but aren’t rich, you’re considered middle class. Perhaps you don’t even have a job and rent a crummy apartment but hold fundamental Christian values, are proud of owning a gun, and demonstrate against abortion doctors and Gay Pride parades; you would also probably consider yourself middle class.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Klinkowitz is a smidge hyperbolic here, understandably, and even laudably, because he’s enthusiastic, but that may cloud, I think, his intended meaning. Vonnegut is unique in his talent as any great writer is unique in his voice, but as a fashioner of art out of middle class life, he’s not unique in that he’s the only one doing it. Flaubert, I am reminded, is certainly one. Raymond Carver is a notable other. Even John Updike, often, and Flannery O’Connor and certainly George Saunders. The list goes on, and far exceeds the scope of this paper. But he is discretely, singularly, Vonnegut—same clay, different sculptures—and for that we should be joyful. Like Klinkowitz.

responses to literature.’ (Fowler 1981: 46). Stylistics, as propounded by Toolan, contends that through close scrutiny and parsing of the linguistic particularities of a given text we can gain a deeper understanding of both the ‘anatomy and functions of the language. The celebrated Socratic phrase “the examined life” is often invoked to remind us of our need to subject all our behaviour to rational and moral self-scrutiny; stylistics nails its colours to an analogous slogan, the need for and value of “the examined text.”’ (Toolan, 1998, 2002: ix ) and ‘is always on the lookout for one or more of the following: pattern, repetition, recurrent structures, ungrammatical or “language-stretching” structures, large internal contrasts of content or presentation’ (ibid.: 2).

The *why* is tripartite, the three strands dovetailing and overlapping. First, it’s American, vehemently American (as will be interrogated in the next section, 2. ‘Eggheads, Good Ol’ Boys, and the Plain Talk Express’), and not necessarily in plotting—no Horatio Alger stories of pluck, no Daniel Boone stories of adventure—but the very use of the language itself. Second, using a voice, a register, affects how people respond to us and treat us, ‘language is not simply used to convey referential info, but also expresses information about social relationships’ (Holmes, 2001: 259): the authors just want to be liked.

Personally. In other words, the use of informality as a performative speech act, or, as Fowler suggests, ‘that the most natural definition of a fiction is a theory of reality constructed through a particular use of language’ (1981: 34). This is the evaluative function of language, ‘the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about’ (Hunston and Thompson, 1999: 4), that ‘communicates the

meaning of the narrative by establishing some point of personal involvement' (Cortazzi & Lixian, 1999: 105). It builds camaraderie, builds 'a particular kind of relationship with the reader' (Hunston and Thompson 1999: 8) 'by assuming shared attitudes, values, and reactions which it can be difficult for the reader, as the subordinate in this relationship, to dispute' (ibid.: 10).

And third, it's a ripe vein for humour. There may be gags, there may be set pieces, but most of the humour emerges from the exquisite handling of narrative voice<sup>6</sup> and the deployment of vernacular tropes.

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<sup>6</sup> Though, of course, neither author invented this. I think back wistfully, the dim echo of younger laughter on my chafed lips, to my first discovery of Austen—*Pride and Prejudice*—and reading Mr. Bennet saying 'She times her coughing ill.' Since then there have been countless examples: Donald Barthelme, William Kotzwinkle, Lorrie Moore, Richard Brautigan, Amy Hempel, Don DeLillo...to name only a—biased, because they're my personal favourites—few. No, they didn't invent it, but that does not diminish either Vonnegut's or Saunders's achievements.

## **2. EGGHEADS, GOOD OL' BOYS, AND THE PLAIN TALK EXPRESS: A cursory look at the tradition of anti-intellectualism in America**

America has a rich history of intellectual poverty.

Texas Gov. George W. Bush, a Methodist who leads the Republican race in opinion polls and fund-raising, gave the most personal testimony in Monday's debate. Each candidate was asked what "political philosopher or thinker" he identified with most. ... Bush, the third candidate to answer in the debate, said, "Christ, because he changed my heart. (Buttry 1999)

This American abhorrence of intellectualism—'being dumb is very American, very egalitarian' (Cohen in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 19)—and hence the disdain of high-flown language has been rooted deep in the American identity from the get-go. The glorification, the hagiologising of the common man springs from independence. Or, rather, *Independence*. It was a reaction against the country from where the founding fathers—more or less—originated, Britain, and British class rigidity, strict social stratifications and the sacrosanctity of the monarchy; "'uncivilized" vernaculars began to function politically in the same way as the Atlantic Ocean had earlier done: i.e. to "separate" subjected national communities off from ancient dynastic realms' (Anderson 1983, 1991: 196). America was the land of the free, by God, where every white, protestant, land-owning heterosexual male was created equal. 'What America is, to me,' Saunders writes in his story 'My Flamboyant Grandson,' '...a guy has a crazy notion different from your crazy notion, you pat him on the back and say, Hey pal, nice crazy notion, let's go have a beer' (2006: 21). America, down to its nub, is anti-elitist, or, in Vonnegut's term, 'aggressively unaristocratic' (2006: 2). It is part of the American creation myth, one of our 'bastard legends' (Wylie 1955, 1996: 46). And, naturally, this is reflected in our self-expression: 'the freedom with which certain English grammatical

and lexical patterns were treated in America reflects this independence of spirit and lack of regard for accepted tradition' (Marckwardt 1958: 108).

'Ideologies do not exist in silence, but neither are they usually expressed overtly. They are built up and transmitted through texts, and it is in texts that their nature is revealed' (Hunston & Thompson 1999: 8). The use of the conversational style in modern American fiction reflects the American fetish for the common man. Indeed, the most celebrated work of one of the country's most revered composers, Aaron Copland, is *Fanfare for the Common Man*. Fanfare it certainly is, but the common man it celebrates is not an earthy rabbit-skinning sod-buster. Its melody is not that of a hoedown, or really any form of roots music. It's breathtakingly majestic—regal, even—and elevates common man to the echelons of the Roman gods. We love the common man! Or, rather, the *idea* of the common man. '[I]t is an American convention to adore common people without restriction...it is our American common people...[who have] cut loose the ship of state from its sounding machinery, its rudder, its glass, and its keel, leaving the whole business to drift where the blather of common men blows it.' (Wylie 1955, 1996: 102)

'Anti-intellectualism in America is a very old hat—a stovepipe, at least, maybe even a coonskin. We wear it well; we're unlikely to give it up just like that' (Slouka 2009: 10). We have made ourselves a nation of good ol' boys and gals. 'It's a ride in a Chevrolet,' go the lyrics of recent country-and-western hit by Rodney Atkins, '...fireflies in June...kids sellin' [sic] lemonade...it's a kid with a chance...it's a farmer cuttin' [sic] hay...it's a big flag flyin' [sic] in the summer wind...one nation under God, it's America!

[sic]' (James & Petraglia 2009). It is America; a fairly recent country, comparatively, that had to find an identity quickly. We've been inculcated in movies, television commercials, and country songs: the John Wayne-ification of the American psyche. 'Typical and repeated patterns of interaction...and the development of roles and institutions cause the members of a society to represent the world as a system of recognisable objects: habituated categories of perception and action which simplify the society's management of itself and its habitat.' (Fowler 1981: 24-25). It's good to be common man; it's good to be equal: ergo, we must all be common man. It's good to talk simple American: 'Because language *must* continuously articulate ideology, and because ideology is simultaneously social product and social practice, all our language and that of others expresses theories of the way the world is organised, and the expression of these theories contributes to the legitimation of this theorized organization' (ibid.: 29). In other words, in Marckwardt's words, 'we may reasonably expect a language to reflect the culture, the folkways, the characteristic psychology of the people who use it' (1958: 6).

Because of this equation linking egalitarianism with virtue—which is true—and common man with virtue—which is a construct—the seeds were sown for anti-intellectualism, which has only grown more rabid in recent years. 'Americans have long felt a mistrustful ambivalence toward the brainy' (Lopate in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 165). It is 'the fear Alexis de Tocqueville voiced in *Democracy in America* that the future would inevitably result in an egalitarian dismissal of excellence—seen by democratic man as an easily removable cause of envy and exclusiveness.' (Washburn & Thornton 1996: 19). Somewhere, somehow, the notion of intellectualism became inextricably linked with

criticism, with anti-Americanism, ‘ the result is to keep the American majority not just intellectually *uncritical* but *anti-critical*’ (Wylie 1955 1996: xiv). But is not an unexamined life not worth living, as Socrates would have it? ‘I don’t care,’ a friend of mine once said to me, ‘as long as I got my Tivo and my Jamba Juice.’ He was kidding. Sort of. ‘In a savagely egalitarian society, where is the place for a man or woman of some culture?’ (Slavit in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 131-132)

As Mark Slouka, in recent essay on the ever-plummeting median of American intelligence, and the fervent embrace of intellectual decline, calls for attention to be paid to

...our ever-deepening ignorance (of politics, of foreign languages, of history, of science, of current affairs, of pretty much everything) and not just our ignorance but our complacency in the face of it, our growing fondness for it. ... Today, across vast swaths of the republic, it amuses and comforts us. We’re deeply loyal to it. Ignorance gives us a sense of community; it confers citizenship; our representatives either share it or bow down to it or risk our wrath. (Slouka 2009: 9)

Lowest common intellectual denomination is our calling card. Intellectuals decry it: there is a constant threnody in Book Review sections inveighing against the abysmal literacy rate. But decrying to whom, exactly? Readers of Book Reviews? In other words, readers? ‘There are hardly a million [in America] who voluntarily read non-fiction books. .... Either our schools are incompetent to deal with our moppets or else society has produced a gaggle of Dodger fans, impervious to any literary schooling.’ (Wylie 1955, 1996: 91). Saunders satirically encapsulates the modern American mindset in ‘A Brief Study of the British’:

...we Americans...tend to be perhaps not as knowledgeable about other cultures as we might be. This is regrettable. Since we are the



sole remaining superpower it is desirable that we know something about the rest of the world, because otherwise, when we take over different parts of the world, how will we know how good we did? (2008a: 85, 87)

Heather McDonald spiritedly describes the Dartmouth Conference in 1966 that was dedicated to reinvestigating the teaching of English in America. ‘It was anti-authoritarian and liberationist; it celebrated inarticulateness and error as proof of authenticity’ (McDonald in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 89). Wylie, even more spiritedly, excoriated the lamentable schooling, as ‘only the less attractive and the less aggressive remain to teach—the social leftovers... bebies of suggestible, spineless dimwits’ (1955, 1996: 93).

But still it persists. A key to appreciating the everyman-ness as a root fiber of the American psyche is to see how high the lowness goes. And there is no higher exemplar than the very top, the White House. A few illuminating episodes, thus:

Jill Lepore, in her analyses of campaign biographies during the 2008 presidential elections, finds that since Andrew Jackson (the first candidate to shop himself as a ‘self-made man’) all the have the same tenor: ‘even the best of them, with rare exception, share the same Jacksonian story: scrappy maverick who splits rails and farms peanuts and shoots moose, battles from the log cabin to the White House by dint of grit, smarts, stubbornness, and love of country’ (Lepore 2008: 80). From Jackson to John McCain’s Straight Talk Express of 2008, to become the most powerful man in the country you have to talk like you don’t deserve it. Hence the continuing ascendancy of Sarah Palin who, even with her notes written on her hand, can’t get the right words out. ‘[T]here can be

something almost endearing about it. It can appear quaint, part of our foolish-but-authentic, naïve-yet-sincere, rough-hewn spirit' (Slouka 2009: 9).

Andrew Jackson's rugged individualism won elections. William Henry Harrison, in 1840, following suit, was sold as 'as a simple frontier Indian fighter, living in a log cabin and drinking cider, in sharp contrast to an aristocratic champagne-sipping Van Buren.' (Whitehouse.gov 2009). So not only the fetishisation of simplicity, but also the animosity towards the intellectual. But you can see it right there on the twenty-dollar bill: Andrew Jackson is raffish, tousled, wearing a cravat but obviously uncomfortable in it, yearning to toss it off and put his buckskin shirt back on, 'the first President with a personality' (Mallon 2008: 143). He doesn't look like the dour and bouffanted George Washington or smug and prissy Benjamin Franklin; he looks like a tumescent romantic poet. 'Nineteenth-century America was not without those individuals who not only accepted their lack of culture and refinement as an established fact but who gloried in it, and indeed flaunted it...resistance to culture with a capital C' (Marckwardt 1958: 129).

Another example is that of Henry Clay, who had to play down his statesmanship and experience—as Speaker of the House of Representatives, as Secretary of State—even apologize for it (with tongue, perhaps, in cheek) and highlight a past that was perfectly suited to D.W. Griffith melodrama: “‘orphan boy’...trudging his way, with grist of corn, to a distant mill, to provide bread for a widowed mother and younger brother and sisters’ (Lepore 2008: 83).

Rugged individualism—a term dating back further than Teddy Roosevelt and a concept synonymous with America—was manufactured. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy: ‘linguistic acts don’t simply reflect a world but that speech actually has the power to *make* a world’ (Jackson 2004 in Loxley 2007: 2). America, as we know it, was truly created with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, a term originally used by Jacksonian democrats in the 1840s to justify Western Expansion (pbs.org 2009). America west of the Mississippi was a wild place at the time in desperate need of some quick civilizing to keep the riches out of the hands of the Mexicans and Indians. It gave the new Americans the entitlement of their rightful legacy to fruited plains and amber waves of grain. From sea, by God, to shining sea! It birthed the paragon of Americanhood: a man of the earth, rugged, individual, likes his coffee strong, his horses and women broken and watered, and wasn’t afraid of gettin’ his hands dirty, breakin’ sod, toughin’ it out. Americans were no sissies, by God, no panty-waists wearing spectacles, reading literature, letting themselves get all soft and pasty; Americans worked with their hands, not their heads. It was how you got things done. Doing ‘em, not talking about ‘em. By God. Readin’, writin’ were for them milquetoast boys back East. Sissy stuff. Plain speakin’ was what was needed to manifest your destiny, not that double-dealin’ trickery of city folks.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Is it, perhaps, the way with all post-colonial frontiers? We see a similar thing in South Africa, another new-ish democracy finding form after loosing itself from the British and doing God’s work by keeping the wealth out of the hands of the natives. J.M. Coetzee writes in *Summertime* (2010) of the perception of manual as opposed to cranial labour. His subject—a dead, Nobel Prize winning author named J.M. Coetzee—is a man of learning, a man of teaching, and specifically of writing, an intellectual in a hard, sere land. This man is seen (therefore portrayed) by the women in his life—in a series of posthumous interviews—as ineffectual, weak...limp: ‘there is something cool or cold about him, something that if not neuter is at least neutral’ (101); ‘he had no sexual presence whatsoever’ (24). He can’t fix a car, can’t even work out the mixing of concrete from a simple recipe. ‘He is paler and scrawnier than a good South African ought to

The idea was to take your future into your hands and don't let ignorance be a handicap.

Or, as Saunders has a character, Freddie, put in the story 'Sea Oak':

'Let me tell you something, ...something about this country. Anybody can do anything. But first they gotta try. And you guys ain't. ... And therefore you live in a dangerous craphole. And what happens in a dangerous craphole? Bad tragic shit. It's the freaking American way—you start out in a dangerous craphole and work hard so you can someday move up to a somewhat less dangerous craphole. And finally maybe you get a mansion. But at this rate you ain't even gonna make it to the somewhat less dangerous craphole.' (Saunders 2000:106)

But surely the nonpareil of an American undone by simply being too smart is the saga of the ill-starred campaigns of Adlai Stevenson. Adlai Stevenson, the senator from Illinois, known for his liberal policies, his oratory eloquence, and the hole in his shoe (his statue in the Central Illinois Regional Airport prominently features this hole).

Adlai Stevenson lost his bid for the presidency in no small part due to his blatant, unapologetic intellectualism. It was for Adlai Stevenson that the term 'egghead' was coined. According to Simon, a supporter called out to Stevenson at a rally: "'Governor Stevenson, all thinking people are for you!'" To which Stevenson replied, "That's too

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be...a grown man, yet he blushes like a girl!' (94). He was an intellectual, a 'poet who could not even make a fire' (168), which is a poor substitute for being an actual man: 'his mental capacities...were overdeveloped, at the cost of his animal self' (193). In his lovemaking 'there was an autistic quality' (52); 'he is nothing, was nothing, just an irritation, an embarrassment' (193). Ouch. This frontier fetishisation of anti-intellectualism—in Australia—has also been satirized in Monty Python's skit of the Philosophy Department at the University of Woolloomooloo, where the professor who teaches Logical Positivism is also in charge of the sheep dip, and they welcome a new faculty member from Britain with 'I'd like to welcome the pommey bastard to God's own Earth, and remind him that we don't like stuck-up sticky-beaks here' (Monty Python 1970).

bad. I need a majority to win” (2000, 2009). Simon sees Stevenson’s legacy as instructive, if not inspirational, for today’s politicians who ‘see his two election losses as object lessons: don’t sound too witty, high-minded or elegant’ (ibid.).

When the brothers Alsop (Stewart, a leading Republican, and Joe, a newspaperman) labelled him an egghead, suddenly Stevenson was something that the American public wasn’t. This is performative: ‘words do something in the world, something that is not just a matter of generating consequences, like persuading or amusing or alarming an audience. The promises, assertions, bets, threats and thanks that we offer one another are not this kind of action; but nor are they the linguistic description of non-linguistic actions going on elsewhere: they are actions *in themselves*, actions of a distinctly linguistic kind’ (Loxley 2007: 2). It is the old saw about how you can’t unring a bell. ‘The trouble with being educated is that it cuts you off from the great mass of people who, let us be frank and admit what is obvious, aren’t.’ (Slavit in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 131-132). Suddenly Stevenson was that most loathed of thing in America—an elitist. These political death-knell charges of elitism when someone is intellectually ambitious are an insidious taint that sticks like stink. ‘[W]e could spend some time analyzing the fungus of associations that has grown around the word “elitist,” which can now be applied to a teacher driving a thirteen-year-old Toyota but not to a multimillionaire CEO like Dick Cheney’ (Slouka 2009: 10).

Meanwhile, Adlai’s opponent, Dwight ‘I Like Ike’ Eisenhower, pummelled the electorate with his earthy roots as ‘The Man From Abilene.’ According to Lepore, Eisenhower’s

biographer ‘played Ike’s home town for all it was worth: “The lusty pioneer energies that built it had moved farther West, but they left behind a robust, independent settlement whose rugged population knew the value of hard work and took for granted the virtues of sturdy individualism.” (That’s lusty, robust, rugged, hard, and sturdy, all in one sentence’ (2008: 84).

How many generations of Americans (male, white, heterosexual, protestant) have modelled themselves on Davy Crockett, frontiersman—indeed, the very King of the Wild Frontier, according to the 1955 Walt Disney television programmes—exemplar of American manhood in all it’s coon-skinning, musket-loading, Injun-killing simplicity. Crockett’s own campaign biography extolled the cardinal virtues of his parents: ‘humble, plain, and not much troubled with book knowledge’ (ibid.: 83). This is the American ideal. Generations, stretching into the future, of kids playing Davy (no fancy-pants ‘David’ here) Crockett in the backyards of every town in every state in the Union. What scraped-kneed kid would trade his Davy Crockett coonskin cap for an Adlai homburg?

Unlike the British, who ‘dislike anything that sounds...boastful’ (Orwell 1944), for Americans the boastful is okay, even expected, like rainbow rings on a baboon, and even necessary—it identifies you and expedites ‘networking,’ which is the defining trait of interaction in American culture. ‘At the end of a hard day’s work the American cowboys or miners or lumberjacks or apple-pickers have had their fun out of making up stories... The dreams of American workers, naturally enough, have never been delicate, exquisite, or polite... They have been big and powerful, and a strong wind is always blowing

through them' (Carmer in Marckwardt 1958: 99). We have a penchant for low-flown braggadocio, for American chest-puffery and hee-haw, so much so that we had to be warned to tone it down during the war. 'Don't show off or brag or bluster—"swank" as the British say,' were the instructions in an Army manual for soldiers stationed overseas, 'if somebody looks in your direction and says, "He's chucking his weight about," you can be pretty sure you're off base. That's the time to pull in your ears' (War Department 1942, 2004: 29) (and also show your blatant lack of concern for the mixing of metaphors).

Indeed, this he-man, good ol' boy swaggering may not be the British thing, but back at home there is less compulsion for the American to pull in his ears. At home on the range, the American, even the modern city-dwelling sort, seems ready to stare down a snorting bull and outdraw any double-dealing varmint. 'Many men subconsciously favour non-standard speech forms. This is partly explained by the fact that some men associate non-standard speech, especially WC [working class], with masculinity and ruggedness' (Chambers 2003: 244). 'The pressure to adapt is considerable, and it's all in one direction—down' (Slouka 2009: 11). Plain talk is the lingua franca of America.<sup>8</sup> In sociolinguistic terms, this is convergence. By adapting one's language to those around them, the speaker 'can then attenuate sociolinguistic distance, bring the other person psychologically closer, and enhance conversational effectiveness and smoothness; in

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<sup>8</sup> Even smart people talk low. They pretty much have to in order to be heard at all. As Saunders—satirically—writes, 'I know my American readers will find this hard to believe, if they have even made it this far, due to all my big words I have been using' (Saunders 2008a: 87).

other words, it can fulfil both cognitive organization and identity maintenance functions’ (Giles 1991: 42). By talking like the everyman, one can win elections.

Adlai Stevenson didn’t heed this. His ‘obvious erudition did not persuade the great American public’ (Mishra 2008: 15). Eisenhower, however, did, and won both elections. ‘[A]s Herzog put it, “ because he expressed low-grade universal potato love”’ (ibid.).

But no one could have greater low-grade universal potato love than George W. Bush, who also won—incredibly—two terms of presidency. Although Bush is indubitably the apex of low, one doesn’t need to go to the paragon of inarticulacy in order to find this basal convergence.

Chambers notes that ‘the perception that a particular dialect carries prestige is simply an adjunct of the fact that its speakers are the ones in power’ (Chambers 2003: 233), but some veins are so deep, if you didn’t talk folksy, you wouldn’t get in, no matter how powerful you are. ‘Every White House has had its intellectuals, but very few presidents have been intellectuals themselves’ (Raban 2008, 29). And if you got too intellectual once the hand-shaking, back-slapping, and baby-kissing are done and you’re elected, you probably wouldn’t see a second term. Indeed, as Cynthia Ozick notes ‘emulation, is governed from below’ (Ozick in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 84) and it is insidious. With our new aural culture, and pervasive media, ‘[w]ith the exception of the South and parts of the East Coast, there is very nearly a uniform *vox Americana*. And we have everywhere a uniform “tone.” It is in the streets and in the supermarkets, on the radio



and on television; and it is low, low, low' (ibid.: 85). As early as the beginning of these united states, Tocqueville 'saw clearly that it is easier to raze than to raise' (Washburn & Thornton 1996: 237).

Consider...what happens to men or women (today as ever) the minute they declare themselves candidates for office, how their language—their syntax, their level of diction, the field from which their analogies are drawn—takes a nosedive into the common pool. Notice how quickly the contractions creep in and the sleeves roll up. The comparison to high school seem appropriate...In American politics, as in the cafeteria, the crowd sets the tone. It doesn't know much, and if you want in, you'd better not either. (Slouka 2009: 10-11)

'During his talk, Obama had slipped into a colloquial style (not his strength), and at one point he decided to drive home a point with a down-home aphorism. The McCain-Palin claim as change agents, he said, was false. "You can put lipstick on a pig," Obama said, to the delight of the crowd. "It's still a pig.'" (Boyer 2008: 37). Was Obama adopting a mucker pose, which Marckwardt defines as 'taking the low road linguistically, adopting substandard speech, in order to curry favour or good-will' (1958)? Obama had to accommodate the speech of the common man or risk alienating the electorate because some 'Democrats feared that Obama himself—cool, cerebral, aloof—was a problem...' (Boyer 2008: 36) and even appointed a special aide to advise him on how best to be just a regular guy. 'Among the lessons: order regular mustard, not Dijon, and no more button-down shirts' (Freedland 2008: 7).

Communicate intelligently in America and you're immediately suspect. As one voter from Alaska expressed it last fall, speaking of Obama, 'He just seems snotty, and he looks weaselly.' This isn't race talking; it's education. There's something sneaky about a man like Obama...because he seems intelligent. It makes people uneasy. Who knows what he might be thinking? (Slouka 2009: 11)

‘[L]ocalness can become a commodity’ (Eckert in Faught 2004: 76), and this is the basis for the mucker pose: just like souvenir hawkers in Pittsburgh need to cultivate a working class accent, no matter where they’re from, in order to sell more, politicians utilize a lower register to sell themselves as one of the guys, someone you’d lend your power tools to, someone you can trust. It can be an awkward stretch sometimes. Bob Dole, in his bids for the presidency, also tried to fish the shallows: ‘Dole tried to look the part of just an ordinary guy, a real American to whom everybody could relate—except himself’ (Newman 1999: 103). It was vital that Obama become accessible.

In his tendentious screed against Clinton, Newman does make some prescient observations:

As soon as he would go below the Mason-Dixon line, a transformation would take place. His walk would become less stiff and not nearly as formal, almost as if he was not the president anymore. He seemed to grin more when he was in the South, almost casting himself into the role of a ‘good ol’ boy’ who fit right in with his environment by dropping his G’s and flattening his I’s. He also grew more nostalgic and began to speak with more colourful words. In a word, he became southern. (Newman 1999: 103)

Yes, he was adopting a persona. But, oddly, Newman fails to point out that Clinton *is* southern. ‘Here, the idea was to create the image of Clinton as one of the regular guys’ (ibid.:105). Certainly Clinton, President Clinton, was more Ozarks than Harvard.

As Saunders writes about the Republican convention:

There were a lot of wry shakes of the head at the elitist foibles of the Democrats, who’d all been hopelessly corrupted and led away from common sense forever by ‘their prestigious Ivy League educations’ (this to be said with a sneer). Suddenly, it was a bad thing to have gone to Harvard and Yale. The Republican Party, they seemed to be saying, is not just the party of the rich. It is, actually, the party of the poor. The poor who, through hard work, pull themselves up out of

poverty. Yes: the Republicans believe in working hard. But not too hard. If one works too hard, one might find himself at a 'prestigious Ivy League university'. This would be terrible. (Saunders 2008b)

But it would be a daunting task to actually find a leading politician who didn't go to an Ivy League school. 'At the heart of each of these campaigns is the use of image manufacturing' (Newman 1999: xvii) and Newman makes a salient point when he says, 'Washington has become the Hollywood of the east, where image is more important than substance and the intensity of a politician's charisma determines his power with the people' (ibid.: 13). When your party is not in power, it is disingenuous and manipulative. When your party happens to be in the White House, it is skilful communication. 'The Great Communicator' they called Ronald Reagan; perhaps a more honest epithet might be 'The Scary Fibber.' 'These types of image manipulation techniques are not new. Calvin Coolidge wore an Indian war bonnet to lighten up his image. Teddy Roosevelt made sure that one of his campaign posters had a picture of him charging up San Juan Hill. ...Carter always was seen in his cardigan sweater, looking plain and simple for the people' (Newman 1999: 104).

And so back to Bush, whose inarticulacy was not disingenuous, who could hardly be accused of rhetorical manipulation. George W. Bush, the textbook example of not much troubled with book knowledge. Book knowledge; it muddifies the brain. And he becomes, in common parlance, 'the leader of the free world.' 'This entrenched anti-intellectualism is everywhere around us. George W. Bush gets elected as president due to his faux-folksy way and his wilful anti-intellectualism' (Buttry 1999). But this is no less image manufacturing than Clinton's. The spoon-fed Hasty Pudding Eli, from a line of bluenose Yankee aristocrats—his grandfather Prescott Bush was a Connecticut senator,

his father was president—was now a bronco-busting rancher from Crawford—‘This type of discursive model implies an anti-essentialist view of identity, since it presumes all meaning to be situated not within the self but in a series of representation mediated by semiotic systems such as language’ (Benwell & Stokoe 2006: 31). The words made the man: Bush could use phraseology right out of the Dodge City Saloon—‘dead or alive’—in the context of potentially global catastrophe, and some may frown slightly and cluck their tongues, but no one was unduly surprised. People, apparently, could relate to him; he didn’t make demands on their intellect, didn’t highlight their inequality by representing someone who actually did their homework at Yale instead of beerbusting at frat houses. His favourite political thinker was Jesus Christ, who was quite possibly mythical—and there’s no shame in that—and undoubtedly a composite. And, either way, someone who left no writing.

But perhaps he misheard the question, as he claims (though he was the third candidate to answer it (Buttry 1999), which would mean he wasn’t listening to anyone else, or was quick to action on things he didn’t understand; either way, not attractive attributes in a president of the United States). But all became unambiguously clear when, asked what his favorite book was, he said *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Lane 2000). By Eric Carle. Written when Bush was in his twenties. He was admired for his hominess. ‘Americans want to like their president as well as agree with him. They often will overlook differences on issues if they like or trust the person’ (Benedetto 2004).

It continued. George Bush announced a war on ‘Terra,’ which I always assumed was Latin for ‘earth.’ Within days, news anchors, presumably very well educated journalists, were discussing ‘terra’ as they might, say, ‘terror.’ As Chambers notes ‘the social stratum with political, economic, social, or military clout usually sets the standard for dress, manners, education, material possessions, and, of course, speech’ (2003: 233). Most recently Sarah Palin, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, frequently called into question her opponent’s ‘verbage.’ And, oddly, no one called into question her own verbiage. You see, it would be petty to publicly question someone’s poor grasp of the language they’re using to attack others’ use of language. It means you’ve spent too much time out of the sun reading books that are going to poison your mind and not out doing healthy things like moose hunting. ‘We may not know much, but at least we know what we believe. Tricky elitists, on the other hand, are always going on. Confusing things. We don’t trust them. So what if Sarah Palin couldn’t answer Charlie Gibson’s sneaky question about the Bush Doctrine? We didn’t know what it was either’ (Slouka 2009: 10).

I was, for a time, a writer in Hollywood for a television show about a lawyer. I went to a party in the Hollywood Hills, friends of mine, who were themselves writers for television. A roomful of writers. Over a glass of white zinfandel and baked pita chips from Trader Joe’s, one of them—I believe he wrote for a TV show about cops in New York, or was it teenagers in Orange County?—said, in that American way, that folksy, no bullshit, plain speakin’, I’m-gonna-level-with-ya-cause-I-like-ya way; the physical stance widening, with a sway, and thumbs hung from belt loops; the half-smile confident and

gaze direct, the deepening and bassing of the voice so it's a commanding, avuncular rumble from the thorax, 'I don't read books.' The others at the party murmured in awe and envy, and congratulated him on his enviable honesty.

On the other hand Bush's opponent, Al Gore, claimed that his favorite book was Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. Pernicious whiffs of eggheadism began to emanate around Gore's campaign. Plus, Gore had actually written books; books about ecology, books no one read or was likely to. People don't like to be made to feel stupid. He may have been from Tennessee, but Americans still don't trust smart people. Gore even lost his home state.

But, oddly, speaking 'low' is not more egalitarian. A large and varied vocabulary and a precise grasp of the recondite rules of syntax don't cost anything. There is nothing more democratic, more classless, than vocabulary. Anyone—white, black, rich, poor, male, female, from Okie dirt farmer to Connecticut senator—is allowed to use 'chthonic' in a sentence if they wanted to. Words, and their use, are free. They're also free speech.

There are dictionaries in every community library, every public school room. Alas: Americans like their Americans with calloused hands, flannel sleeves rolled up, ready to say what's on their mind. Americans like their writers drinking Scotch, slappin' broads on the ass, or fighting bulls. They like their leaders to bust turf, wear denim, and drink beer. There is actually a key Zogby/Williams Identity Poll leading up to elections that asks, 'Who would you most want to have a beer with?' (Benedetto 2004). 'During the 2004 election, much was made of the fact that "the average guy" would rather have a beer with Bush than with John Kerry, since Bush was a C student who mangled his

words, didn't know much about foreign countries and sometimes wore a cowboy hat. This idea still pervades US politics, although last time I checked, "the average Joe" hadn't had a beer with either Bush or Kerry' (Saunders 2008b). Much was made of it because that person wins the election (Benedetto 2004). In an era of economic crises, war, racial dissent, partisanship, jihads and crusades, doctors murdered in the name of Christian fundamentalism, shifting balance of world power, climate change, obesity, poverty, and empire implosion, it seems precarious to use who you would like to sit and have a beer with as a basis for electoral logic, for electing arguably—historically—the most powerful man in the world. Trusting one's gut is the most valued methodology for decision-making: 'The gut tells us things. It tells us what's right and what's wrong, who to hate and what to believe and who to vote for. Increasingly, it's where American politics is done. ... We know because we feel, as if truth were a matter of personal taste, or something to be divined in the human heart, like love' (Slouka 2009: 10).

So what do you do if—a conundrum here—you are a writer? Adopt a register of gee-whiz, corn-pone, aw-shucksterism to not alienate the torporous masses? You need the vernacular, 'language which has not been standardized and which does not have official status' (Holmes 2001: 74). If, like Vonnegut and Saunders, you are a clever writer, you can use language, simple language, base language—or basilect—and use it as fruitfully to create art as any high-minded, high-flown, high-falutin' language—or acrolect.

'[I]deological motivations underlie the long-term maintenance of stigmatized norms in the face of pressures from focused and codified standard languages so familiar to

sociolinguists; speakers want to sound like Southerners, African Americans, Tynesiders, Belfasters, New Zealanders...' or cowboys or farmers or truck drivers

... and other groups with whom they align. They also want to sound unlike whatever group they currently perceive themselves contrasting with. The loyalty of such speakers to their own dialects and their resistance to language forms associated with others constructed as oppositional is usually described by sociolinguists as exemplifying the capacity of spoken language to index identity. The identity factor is, in fact, precisely what an ideological framework addresses, assuming also (and crucially) that salient social groups with which speakers identify are subject to change. (Preston, 2004)

In essence, people want to be liked. They want to be liked to win elections; they want to be liked to gain a reading audience; they want to be liked for deeper reasons explored in greater depth below.



### 3. STILL LISTENING

Leech (in Van Dijk 1985: 41-42) writes, ‘a close examination of the language of the poem [or, in my case, fiction] leads to a greater understanding of its meaning and value; i.e. to a greater APPRECIATION of it as a work of art... The method of stylistics, in these terms, is to relate features of linguistic description step by step to aspects of critical interpretation.’ In Vonnegut it is the use of language that creates his art: ‘Why these word-choices, clause-patterns, rhythms and intonations, contextual implications, cohesive links, choices of voice and perspective and transitivity, etc. etc., and not any of the others imaginable?’ (Toolan 1998, 2002: ix). It is a calculated use of register, informality: literary speechisms. It comes down to stylistics.

My interrogation of Vonnegut will involve the use of intrinsic explanatory stylistics.

Leech explains it thus:

We may distinguish DESCRIPTIVE stylistics (where the purpose is just to describe style) from EXPLANATORY stylistics (where the purpose is to use stylistics to explain something). Again, with explanatory stylistics, we may distinguish cases where the explanatory goal is EXTRINSIC (e.g. to find out the author(s) or the chronology of a set of writings), or INTRINSIC (where the purpose is to explain the meaning or value of the text itself). (in Van Dijk 1985: 39)

Vonnegut—and Saunders—and myself—all use an ‘ordinary’ language, a conversational, informal language.<sup>9</sup> And *use* in a sense that there is active manipulation for a very specific purpose.

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<sup>9</sup> Through unavoidable constraints, the limits of this paper permit me only to focus on the work of Vonnegut and Saunders, though many other writers use ‘non-literary’ language to craft voices and create works of the highest echelon of letters. A meagre and paltry sampling would include the work of Lorrie Moore, Amy Hemple, Charles Bukowski,

Stylistics...generally assumes a predictable relation between situation parameters and the kind of language use associated with them. It is therefore often taken for granted that just as there is a special kind of language called 'scientific language'... so there must be a special kind of phenomenon called 'literary language'. This, in turn, leads to the assumption of a dichotomy between 'literary' and 'non-literary' language, which has been reinforced by formalist or structuralist theories that literature communicates in a totally different way from 'ordinary' language. (ibid.: 41)

Instead of writing in a 'literary language'—the kind Saunders discusses thus: 'Great writing was hard reading. What made something great was you could barely understand it...' (2008a: 74)—for Vonnegut, in his own estimation, 'sound[s] most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am' (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 70).

Cavell (1969) explicates Ordinary Language Theory as finding the sublime in the everyday.

### **3.1 SAY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT**

What makes something great is that you can barely understand it; Cavell, in his discussion of Ordinary Language Theory, says this need not be so. Ordinary language philosophy sets out 'to map out the logical geography or our conceptual schemes' (Kemerling 2001) solving traditional philosophical conundrums by dissolving the misunderstandings arising from convoluted, adulterated language, the sort traditionally used, and stoutly guarded, in the bastions of haute-academe. Language used in traditional philosophical argument can become so distorted, they propound, that the meaning of

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David Sedaris, and Mike Birbiglia, not to mention the surreal—yet still ordinary—language of Donald Barthelme, the serpentine but no less basilectic language of William Faulkner, and the crowned head of minimalism, Raymond Carver (though recent erudition suggests that more than a little of the credit for Carver's 'K-Mart realism' be directed to his editor, Gordon Lish (New Yorker 2007).

words can be so construed and reconstrued and then misconstrued that they lose their meaning. Philosophy gets into trouble when it doesn't take into account the context of the word's use in ordinary language.

This is absolutely relevant to literature, specifically that of Vonnegut and Saunders.<sup>10</sup>

There is great value, great meaning in ordinary language. Basically, it's about context.

'The profoundest as well as the most superficial questions can be understood only when they have been placed in their natural environment' (Cavell 1969: 41). Ordinary

language theory explores and appreciates the complex submerged iceberg of

communication, the meaning connoted by our speech, the complex underlying

relationships, clan allegiances, aggression and submission, of the language we use, not

unlike the shorthand of a biometric chip to convey vital unspoken information, or the

complex unvoiced histories and status available, in a good whiff—for a dog—of another

dog's ass. Simply put, the 'the language we traverse every day can contain undiscovered

treasure' (ibid.: 43). 'Must we mean what we say?' Cavell asks in his seminal,

eponymous essay. The imperative suggests agency. The answer is No, we don't. *We can*

mean a lot more than we say. Without intention, without agency, but subconsciously,

imbued reflexively with the culture in which we're embedded.

It's not what you say, it's how you say it. Using language tells us less about the meaning

(semantics) than about the way it was used (pragmatics). It's not about the words, it's

about the speaker: 'it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make certain

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<sup>10</sup>...and Carver and Moore and Sedaris and Barthelme and...

inferences, draw certain conclusions. *Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language*' (ibid.: 11). No less a part

than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk. Intimate understanding is understanding which is implicit. Nor *could* everything we say (mean to communicate), in normal communication, be said explicitly—otherwise the only threat to communication would be acoustical. We are, therefore, exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims. (ibid.: 12)

Ordinary language, as deployed by Vonnegut and Saunders, can be very powerful and intoxicating material, like quicksilver or Spanish Fly.

### 3.2 LITERATURE FOR DEVIANTS

The use of the colloquial in the modern American fiction under consideration is, as Leech explains, deviation. It is a marker of style, a marker of stance: 'deviation is observed as a discrepancy between what is allowed by the language system, and what occurs in the text. Determinate deviation, that is, is a violation to some degree of the rules or constraints of the language code itself. This type of deviation is significant in the study of literary style...' (in Van Dijk 1985: 40). This is, he continues, secondary deviation, 'deviation not from norms of linguistic expression in general, but from norms of literary composition, of the 'poetic canon'...including norms of author or genre. This can also be called CONVENTIONAL DEVIATION or DEFEATED EXPECTANCY' (ibid.: 48).

This deviation from the stanchions of proper literary language and the adoption of informality, of conversationalism, creates an intimacy between the author and his

audience, a constructed conviviality: ‘such ties between language and situation lead us to a comprehensive theory of style.... When a person reads or hears a piece of discourse, he forms an impression of its style by comparing it to the kinds of discourse he has experienced before in comparable situations’ (Enkvist in Van Dijk 1985: 20). The familiar sounds familiar. In his discussion of Fairclough’s (1992) work on discourse types, Sarangi describes ‘conversationalisation’ as ‘the simulation of conversational forms in institutional settings to manifest equality.... There are strategic motivations behind appropriations and transfers of different discourse types, and we need to appeal to socio-political changes to account for them’ (2000: 12). When an author sounds like a friend or neighbour, the reader responds in kind. These authors are using a *faux*-restricted code, a modality that is familiar, ‘implicit,’ that assumes a context in common with the addressee, as opposed to an elaborated code which is used in more formal circumstances, or by higher status speakers, which is ‘explicit,’ unbound by immediate context or commonality with the audience (Milroy 1999). This is ordinary language in action. ‘[W]e forget that we learn language and learn the world *together*’ (Cavell 1969: 18). Language is context, and all the evocations and unspoken meaning that comes with it. ‘What seemed like finding the world in a dictionary was really a case of bringing the world to the dictionary. We had the world with us all the time, in that armchair; but we felt the weight of it only when we felt a lack of it. Sometimes we will need to bring the dictionary to the world...’ (ibid.: 20).

‘*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel about the author challenging his own processes and bringing himself into the centre of his fictional activity’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 69). Oh, but

wait for the next one: *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) is about ‘two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast’ (Vonnegut 1973: 7). One is Kilgore Trout, a misanthropic science fiction writer—who played a secondary role in earlier Vonnegut novels—whose stories are used as filler between the open beaver shots in porno magazines. The other is Dwayne Hoover, who runs the Exit Eleven Pontiac Village in Midland City, and is on the brink of going insane—his chemicals gone bad—and wreaking chaos on his quiet corner of a quiet mid-western city. Kilgore Trout’s fiction will drive Dwayne insane, will be the catalyst, as it will fill Dwayne’s head with ideas that, in the wrong head (which it turns out to be) will lead to carnage: Dwayne Hoover will think that he is the only sentient creature, everyone else are mere robots and therefore disposable. The book is also Vonnegut’s fiftieth birthday present to himself, whereby he cleans out all the detritus of his psyche and grants his characters freedom. ‘...what we see is an author at work making up his own version of it. ... These two poles of autobiography and creative self-reflection are extremes that conventionally realistic fiction avoids; ... Vonnegut questions his own authority as novel-master’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 73-74).<sup>11</sup>

As well as making us feel at ease with the writer, the simplicity—the dispassionate and simple sentences, explaining mundane things as though to a slow child, or a foreigner, also conversely distances, making the common uncommon, the familiar strange. An example:

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<sup>11</sup> This was also done by Fowles, Vonnegut’s contemporary, in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and later by Lorrie Moore in *Anagrams* (1986) and Thomas Bernhard in *Correction* (1975, 2010)

*Fucking* was how babies were made. (Vonnegut 1973: 12)

‘According to deviation theory, literariness of features of creativity inheres in the degrees to which language use departs or deviates from expected patterns of language and thus defamiliarises the reader. Literary language use is therefore different because it makes strange, disturbs, upsets our routinised “normal” view of things, and thus generates new or renewed perceptions’ (Carter 2004: 59). We feel like aliens, like Tralfamadorians, looking in on human behaviour. Literary—or adult—fiction written as though it were a grade school primer brings things to a basic level, lets us see with fresh eyes, lets us slough off the complacency of everyday numbness, lets us see things as new. This is schema refreshment, a

disruption at the textual or linguistic level of deviance but then offers cognitive renewal in terms of how the world is perceived. Schema refreshment in literary texts results in new ways of seeing and thinking about the world. (ibid.: 60)

This is nowhere so evident as in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). Vonnegut combines these simplistic explanations with a profusion of colons (‘It looked like this:...’), setting things out in a logical, unadorned matter. For example, in the first chapter he explains America to an idiot:

This was their national anthem, which was pure balderdash, like so much they were expected to take seriously:

*O, say can you see....* (Vonnegut 1973: 8)

It was the law of their nation, a law no other nation on the planet had about its flag, which said this: ‘*The flag shall not be dipped to any person or thing.*’ (ibid.: 9)

➡ The motto of Dwayne Hoover’s and Kilgore Trout’s nation was this, which meant in a language nobody spoke anymore, *Out of Many, One: ‘E pluribus unum.’*

The undippable flag was a beauty, and the anthem and the vacant motto might not have mattered much, if it weren't for this: a lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made. (ibid.)

Here was another piece of evil nonsense which children were taught: that the sea pirates eventually created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else. There were pictures and statues of this supposed imaginary beacon for children to see. It was sort of an ice-cream cone on fire. It looked like this: ... (ibid.:11)

at which point he draws a picture of the torch on the Statue of Liberty.

Which looks like an ice-cream cone on fire.

Or, indeed, this, from chapter two:

Sometimes somebody would say in [Trout's] presence, "Excuse me, I have to take a leak." This was a way of saying that the speaker intended to drain liquid wastes from his body through a valve in his lower abdomen. (ibid.: 19)

A wide-open beaver was a photograph of a woman not wearing underpants, and with her legs far apart, so that the mouth of her vagina could be seen...a beaver was actually a large rodent. It loved water, so it built dams. It looked like this: ... (ibid.: 22-23)

But it isn't just being cheeky. Being naughty. Even being funny. Secondary deviation and stylistic tours de force can also be deadly serious, as in the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when the world is waking up from massacre and madness and there is only silence. Secondary deviation is perhaps necessary when what needs to be said can't be said, when words, just plain words, would diminish it. 'The art to break such a silence must therefore be both indirect and extraordinary, cast into new tones; the recording of a personal and historical horror in the world of fact calls for an act of style and fantasy' (Klinkowitz



1982: 63). How does Vonnegut end it? ‘One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, “*Poo-tee-weet?*”’  
(Vonnegut 1969: 186)

The theory of accommodation ‘is concerned with motivations underlying and consequences arising from ways in which we adapt our language and communication patterns towards others’ (Giles 1991: 1) and can function ‘to index and achieve solidarity with or dissociation from a conversational partner reciprocally and dynamically’ (ibid.: 2). Accommodation usually occurs in face-to-face interaction, a product of speech.

Conversationalism, writing that mimics speech in all its groping, clunkiness, uncertainty, and backtracking allows for accommodation to be synthesized. The register is used very specifically, from a sociolinguistic standpoint, to disarm. Its goal is solidarity.

‘[A]pproval seeking has been recognized as a prime motive in accommodation’ (Bell 1991: 74), ‘as one person becomes more similar to another, this increases the likelihood that the second will like the first...the greater the speakers’ need to gain another’s social approval, the greater the degree of convergence there will be’ (Giles 1991: 18-19).

Vonnegut’s (and Saunders’s, and my own) use of a familiar, restricted register creates—even forces—accommodation.

This simple, ordinary language, as well as eradicating the formal distance between writer and audience, is also a modality—‘the cover term for the ways that are available to a speaker within a language for expressing ‘opinion or attitude’ (Lyons 1978:452 in Toolan 1998, 2002: 46)—for humour. As used by Saunders—flip, rife with argot—it is scathingly satiric of American intellectual sloth. In Vonnegut, notably in *Breakfast of*

*Champions* (1973), it is no less incisively biting, critiquing ‘the common elements of middle-class life as Americans have evolved it in recent years’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 17), a country foundering, sick to its core.

Vonnegut’s discussion of comedians he likes is highly revelatory of his perhaps covert motivations for his very overt use of the vernacular and lower registers: ‘I’m crazy about Chaplin, but there’s too much distance between him and his audience. He is too obviously a genius. In his own way, he’s as brilliant as Picasso, and this is intimidating to me’ (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 104).<sup>12</sup> This aversion to flagrant genius, besides being American to its pith, reflects Vonnegut’s need to fit in, to not be intimidating; to make every effort to reduce the distance between artist and the outside world. This means simplicity. This means speaking like your neighbour, and writing how you speak. ‘I learned to write for peers rather than for teachers. Most beginning writers don’t get to write for peers’ (ibid.: 88).

This convergence, this writing like the everyman, this avoidance of alienating through genius, can ‘attenuate sociolinguistic distance, bring the other person psychologically closer, and enhance conversational effectiveness and smoothness; in other words, it can fulfil both cognitive organization and identity maintenance functions’ (Giles 1991: 42). He’s writing like a man from Indianapolis. He’s writing to be like you; to be liked. He’s writing, as Auer puts it, in a ‘we-code’ as opposed to a—more traditionally ‘literary’

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<sup>12</sup> An odd and interesting reaction to this little Englishman’s all-American Dickensian underdog who delights in getting the better of the upper class snoots and gluttons. Vonnegut is looking at the artist’s process and not the art, understanding, as I’m trying to formulate, that great, hard-wrought art—genius—can look simple, humble, and ordinary.

(Van Dijk 1985)<sup>13</sup>—‘they code’: ‘some notion of individual, group or social identity is usually explicitly or implicitly used as well. For example, Gumperz...talks of an “association between communicative style and group identity,” of “linguistic behaviour as a set of *acts of identity* in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles”’ (Auer 1998: 276).

Well, actually, he’s writing like a man from Indianapolis *speaking*. ‘The primary fact of natural language is that it is something spoken, spoken together. Talking together is acting together...’ (Cavell 1969: 33-34). ‘Speaking...is a *social* activity, writing is *solitary*. It follows, therefore, that whereas vagueness, ellipsis and ambiguity can be tolerated in speech to a high degree (because mistakes and miscomprehensions can often be repaired if they should occur at all), they can sometimes be quite properly criticised when they appear in writing’ (Milroy 1999: 54).

And sloppy he is. Informal. ‘[E]xchanges are also impregnated with vague and hedged language forms—for example, ‘a bit’, ‘like’, ‘well’—‘and a range of evaluative and attitudinal expressions...which further support and creatively adapt to the informality, intimacy and solidarity established between...speakers’ (Carter 2004: 9). He uses the

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<sup>13</sup> The literary language described by Leech, so daunting to Saunders as the kind that you could barely understand, language used, presumably, by the likes of Edith Wharton, Henry James, Herman Melville, Longfellow, the Brontës, Shakespeare, et al: the canonical fellows, the kind of authors who if you didn’t read you were not properly educated. Whatever the conversational frissons contemporary readers got, those have been somewhat lessened by the unforgiving forward march of time, and with their lofty rise to the pantheon of classic literature. They have become, to generations of modern schoolboys, difficult and stilted. Dusty.

same language, whether he's talking about Tralfamadorian time theory, intergalactic zoos, nuclear Armageddon, or his own penis. Because it's not really about those things. Like Saunders, whose stories are less about aunts returning from the graves than they are about trailer trash trying to cope with modern American trailer trash life. Vonnegut's 'novels may deal with the strange (invasions by Martians, unimaginable wartime atrocities), but they are crafted from materials in the storehouse of American culture' (Klinkowitz 1982: 20). Vonnegut carefully crafts his writing to seem like speech. He starts sentences with 'And...', as though he's suddenly remembering, rambling, like it's stream-of-consciousness. This is repair, like he's spontaneously ended a sentence but the thoughts just keep flooding in as they occur to him, and he needs to elaborate. Like speech, he uses short paragraphs, fragments, like errant thoughts in a discombobulated mind; left displacement, hyperbaton (all investigated at length in the examination of Saunders, below). He uses deictics, repetition, code-switching, polymodality, self corrections, paralinguistic elements. Whew. Let's take these one at time.

A deictic is a word that is dependent on the context in which it is used (*here, you, that one there, next Tuesday*) (Toolan 1998, 2002). They are rarely used in writing as the context depends on temporal and logistical cohesion between addresser and addressee assuming a shared non-verbal knowledge. A deictic looks like this:

➡ My psychiatrist is also named Martha. She gathers jumpy people together into little families which meet once a week. It's a lot of fun. She teaches us how to comfort one another intelligently. She is on vacation **now**. I like her a lot. (Vonnegut 1973: 268)

*Now?* When is that? Now in, say, 2010? Or now sometime in 1972 when Vonnegut is writing or now in 1974 when it is being published? (The passage, since we're on the

passage, is a momentary detour, a tangential aside as when someone is reminded of something during conversation that allows them to share a similar incident in order to create a bond of mutual experience. MARTHA, in the book, is also the name of an ambulance dispatched to the scene of Dwayne Hoover's crime. This polymodal switch, where Vonnegut takes us out of the diegesis to share a homey little coincidence, is hardly coincidental. *He* named the ambulance. It's fictional. His surprise is disingenuous.

Another marker of speech is repetition and pattern—and very specifically to Vonnegut—incantatory phrases. These phrases mimic memes, the 'unit of cultural transmission' that leap 'from brain to brain' (Dawkins 1990: 192): the virulent little speech mannerisms such as *like, you know, eh?, innit?*, etc. that 'parasitize my brain' (ibid.). But whereas Dawkins's brain parasites function as markers of sympathetic circularity, Vonnegut's phrases do more than that: they are another way to bring himself—not as a first-person character, but as an extradiegetic author—to the forefront, as 'incantatory phrases and devices ('So it goes...') control the tone and the reader's response' (Klinkowitz 1982: 67). These are extradiegetic inserts. Winks. Metafictive attention getters. Throat-clearings.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Although the focus of this paper is voice and register, perhaps, briefly, a word about metafiction, of which Vonnegut is the patron saint—or Dr. Frankenstein, depending on one's bent. Metafiction is the post-modern enterprise of author presence *as* author,

that new way of reading...to undermine Coleridge's notion of 'the willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of the audience when experiencing a literary work. In other words, rather than intentionally forgetting that what he is reading is unreal—the pure invention of the writer—the reader of post-modern writing should always be aware of that fact. To make sure that he never

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* we get ‘So it goes,’ sometimes earning its own paragraph. We also get ‘and so on.’ To ensure that we understand that this is, in fact, an incantatory phrase, and not just resignation on the author’s part, in Chapter One we get it twice in a row:

...and another will be ‘If the Accident Will,’ and so on.  
[¶]And so on. (Vonnegut 1969: 15)

Also in *Slaughterhouse-Five* we get ‘He says.’ A seeming dialogue tag when embedded in related dialogue, but when Vonnegut gives it its own paragraph, it becomes something else.

He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.  
[¶]He says. (ibid.: 17)

It becomes an epistemological stance marker. This is the author exposing his attitude toward what is being said, casting doubt, in a gesture of camaraderie with the reader. *He says?* Billy Pilgrim is fictional. Vonnegut has gone to great lengths to tell us this. And who’s talking? The voice is not third-person omniscient; it doesn’t seem very voice-of-

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forgets the writer constantly calls attention to the artificiality of his art. (Allen 1991: 55)

And Vonnegut is very near the surface of all of his fiction, often and methodically breaching it, never letting us forget he’s there, writing. Vonnegut ‘manages a new relation between the world of the actual and that of the mind creating a world through its power to imagine and utter.’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 64). As has been discussed and will be discussed further below, many of Vonnegut’s techniques—polymodality, paralinguistic elements, incantatory phrases, etc.—are exemplars of metafiction. However, less an exhibition of cleverness (a charge often levelled at metafiction) or surrender in the face of cultural exhaustion (ditto), Vonnegut’s metafictional gestures seem at one with his use of ordinary language. They are another way to make us like him.

God, or godly in any aspect. God, or so I've been led to believe, isn't so catty. It's kind of petty, really; small. This is the voice of someone ungenerous, like an ill-informed village gossip who might have briefly met Billy once and didn't like him.

Vonnegut has a penchant for incantatory phrases. The *So it goes* in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; the *And so on* returns in *Breakfast of Champions*; *Hi ho* is the melancholic mantra in *Slapstick*; *Listen:* appears in *Cat's Cradle*, *Breakfast of Champions* and others. Often these mini-sentences, these sighs, get their own paragraph. They have nothing to do with Billy Pilgrim, Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater, the Tralfamadorians or Montana Wildhack, Ice-Nine, or the Sirens of Titan, or anything else. They're all about Vonnegut, and Vonnegut making himself known to us. They are the author's direct thought, used 'for effect, to convey emotions' (Toolan 1998, 2002:107).

And another marker of speech—to address the potential problems of ambiguity—is paralinguistic elements. 'When we speak, we constantly use *paralinguistic* features to help us: these can be vocal (tone of voice, intonation, pause, emphasis) or non-vocal (gesture, facial expression)' (Milroy 1999: 54). Of course, for an author, these would be difficult, not to mention uneconomical (and not to mention impossible, now that Vonnegut is dead) to transmit on the written page.

➡ So how, exactly, does he do this?

➡ In his use of arrows as punctuation, for one. Playful dingbats, which simplify text, breaking it down into valuable and digestible packets of meaning and information. And

fun. But also, self-deprecating, joking with us, as often the arrow will point to some superfluous titbit.

An example of a set of paragraphs from *Breakfast of Champions*:

- ➡ Dwayne Hoover had oodles of charm.
- ➡ I can have oodles of charm when I want to.
- ➡ A lot of people have oodles of charm. (Vonnegut 1973: 20)

When speaking we groan, sign, punch the air, bulge our eyes, point. Vonnegut draws. Certainly Vonnegut's most revolutionary paralinguistic elements, and most pronounced example of secondary deviation, are his drawings in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). These are not pictures in a children's book for those too young to read, nor are they woodcuts to create luxe versions of, say, *Inferno* or *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. These drawing (perhaps a relative—distant—of the etchings Blake—who was quite mad—incorporated into *his* writing, pictorial elements that were of one piece with the words) are paralinguistic designs incorporated into the text, the text incorporated into the design.

And again the effect is of informality. No Englishman from a hundred years ago, straining his eyes over acid and copper plates, would etch a rendering of a girl's underpants. And as speech is unplanned, versus the planned speech of formal writing, Vonnegut not only mimics the syntax, lexicon, and errors of speech to create a faux-unplanned style, he gets to the very essence of speech—the informality and the spontaneity—with his drawings. Certainly the time it takes to draw, say, a beaver (both in the actual and figurative meaning of the word) would have allowed for a polished



sentence or two. But to the reader these renderings feel spontaneous—‘Yes—there is a picture in this book of underpants’ (Vonnegut 1973: 5). Indeed, ‘in relatively unplanned discourse more than in planned discourse, speakers rely on morpho-syntactic structures acquired in the early stages of language development. Relatively planned discourse makes greater use of morpho-syntactic structures that are relatively late to emerge in language’ (Ochs 1979:68 in Milroy 1999: 121). Vonnegut’s (and Saunders’s) use of simple language—morpho-syntactic structures that emerge early in language—just feels like speech. And one can’t really go much earlier than using language so simple it abandons language altogether. And Vonnegut’s drawings feel very simple, even regressive. Infantile. Bratty. Or, as an article in *Indianapolis Magazine* said of his babooneries, ‘...a riot of indecorous line drawings and misbegotten words that were suggestive of a small boy sticking his tongue out at the teacher’ (Vonnegut 1981, 2006; 202). ‘But Vonnegut’s purpose is not to titillate but to allow the reader to see through convention. Klinkowitz says of the drawings, “We are at once reminded of the simple essence of a thing”’(Allen 1991: 107). Seeing through convention, challenging the familiar notion of what a novel is, seeing it anew. Yes, the simple essence, the truth, even the author’s foundering and self-doubt in the realization that his country is broken and polluted and sputtering. More so than short words and the sentences a tot could understand the drawings are simplistic, immature. His first drawing is of an asshole, and looks like a mutant asterisk. The book, Vonnegut says, is a fiftieth birthday present to himself, and ‘I am programmed at fifty to perform childishly—to insult ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’ to scrawl pictures of a Nazi flag and an asshole and a lot of other things with a felt-tipped pen’ (Vonnegut 1973: 5).

And they keep coming, ill-mannered, ribald: on page twenty-two is scrawled

‘WIDE-OPEN BEAVERS INSIDE!’

He follows this with the aforementioned drawing of a real beaver, and then by the puerile drawing of female genitalia. On page twenty-four, ‘Female underpants looked like this:’ and he shows us.

This is certainly the most extreme example of localization in Vonnegut, more so than any code-switching, polymodality, or deictic intrusion. ‘Textual surface structure may be said to be localizing when it operates to hold up the reader’s attention at a specific place in the total syntagm. Language, at one place, becomes different from the ongoing textual norm. Inevitably, the immediate impact of localizing structure is to interrupt progression and to disturb cohesion’ (Fowler 1981: 75). As ‘Listen:’ jolted us as the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or the extradiegetic asides like ‘My penis is three inches long and five inches in diameter. Its diameter was a world’s record as far as I knew. It slumbered now in my *Jockey Shorts*. ...’ (Vonnegut 1973: 284) jerk us away from the unravelling journey of Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover, these localizing textual events, paradigms of metafiction, pall in comparison to the drawings. We are not *watching* the story, we are watching Vonnegut telling it. He is drawing the reader’s attention. We are not sympathizing with Kilgore Trout, Salo the space traveller, Billy Pilgrim, or Felix Hoenikker. We are with Vonnegut.

‘Vonnegut’s fiction is in both shape and subject a challenge to familiar notions of what the American novel should be, but it is articulated in America’s most commonly accepted terms’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 19). ‘What alternatives do I have?’ Vonnegut writes, ‘The one most vehemently recommended by teachers has no doubt been pressed on you, as well: That I write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago’ (1981, 2006: 70).

*Pressed on you?* Pressed on whom? Me? The informal register, the ease, the assumption of confederacy, is made even more explicit by the presumption that we’ve—‘no doubt,’ an epistemic stance adverbial—shared the same experiences and opinions of those experiences. He’s writing to a like-minded soul with the utmost congenial intentions.

He is a fundamentally decent fellow. In a letter to the school superintendent who’d burned one of his books, Vonnegut wrote that if he—the superintendent—had only bothered to read his books, he’d have realized they weren’t pornographic, or lewd, or anarchic, but that they simply ‘beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are’ (Vonnegut 2006: 5). There: just a fundamentally decent fellow, hoping for decency in return. ‘Perhaps the best way to begin understanding Kurt Vonnegut is to keep in mind his epigraph to *Bluebeard*, which is a line out of a letter to him from his son Mark: “We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is”’ (Allen 1991: 15). A line from his son, who had more than enough problems of his own, but succinctly capturing Vonnegut *père*’s own stripe. Or, as Vonnegut puts it, on the epitaph for Kilgore Trout (from Trout’s last novel), ‘We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane’ (Vonnegut 1973: 16).

### 3.3 OF CHARM, DRUPELETS, AND PENISES

So, besides being a decent man with a Midwesterner's innate humility, and harbouring a Midwesterner's near-mythic American abhorrence for intellectualism — 'His posture as the sceptical, even anti-intellectual Midwesterner is essential to his voice and his vision' (Klinkowitz 1982: 86-87)—he also just wants to be liked. He writes in a register 'so familiar as to be banal and coy' (ibid.: 20-21) courting the approbation of the world of letters because 'informal contexts—[vernacular languages] ...lack public or overt prestige...though they are generally valued by their users, especially as means of expressing solidarity and affective meaning' (Holmes 2001: 133): the social limitation of sub-standard speech was the risky, let alone *writing* like sub-standard speech.

So why do it? Vonnegut is surely no stranger to a critical reception that seesaws from adulation to excoriation, from being the vanguard of American post-modern fiction to 'the frequently levelled charge that his work is simplistic rather than simple' (Allen 1991: 9). 'It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them' (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 291). This sentence itself, purposefully, is informal, looking as it does like conversational repair, 'the various ways in which utterances are reworked in the act of speaking them' (Montgomery 1995: 115), using 'and' instead of commas, as though the ideas are occurring to him as he speaks (there are no polished drafts in speech). And so unlike, of course, formal, proper writing which, as George Orwell

would have it, in 1946, ‘consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug’ (Orwell 1946, 2004: 111-112). Vonnegut abjures sheer humbug wherever possible. It’s deceptively simple, this style, as ‘there is an understandable tendency for people to believe that writing is somehow more complicated and difficult (and more important) than speech’ (Milroy 1999: 55). Deceptive because, of course, he is not speaking. He is writing. He is writing very carefully. This mimicking of speech is a construct, a style no more or no less than the style of modernist stream of consciousness, symbolism, the villanelle, Victorian realism, or the sheer humbug of the most obtuse parliamentary paper on educational reform. He says so himself: ‘Sentences spoken by writers, unless they have been written out first, rarely say what writers wish to say’ (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 73), which is why he refused interviews. ‘The only way to get anything out of a writer’s head is to leave him alone until he or she is damn well ready to write it down’ (ibid.). Conversational style is purely writerly style, meticulously mimicking the ‘processing taking place in real time—disfluency features; repeats, retrace-and-repair sequences; grammatically incomplete utterances; simple phrases especially in pre-verbal and medial positions; auxiliary omission...’ (Sarangi 2000: 61) that we see in speech. It is crafted, the voice from over the small-town drugstore counter, on the other side of the picket fence, of the mailman who never fails to stop and pat the head of your dog. ‘This guy... wrote as if he were still, like me, a regular person from the Midwest’ (Saunders 2008: 77) and ‘such language carries with it an entire world of middle-class American values’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 87). Vonnegut’s Midwest is not necessarily a physical place—linguistic locale is not necessarily geographic but is often

cultural, or subcultural (Faught 2004). In America Midwestern is shorthand for plain talking—if slow talking—no nonsense, salt of the earth, culturally Calvinistic; that place that's located in all of us when we watch a Jimmy Stewart movie. It's what Vonnegut admires in Mark Twain, or George Saunders admires in Vonnegut, and idealization usually leads to emulation: his praise is self-revelatory or, as overheard in a hot-tub in Marin County, 'the beauty you see in others is the really the beauty you see in yourself, my friend.' Vonnegut on Twain:

'He himself was the most enchanting American at the heart of each experience. We can forgive this easily, for he manages to imply that the reader was enough like him to be his brother. He did this most strikingly in the personae of the young riverboat pilot and Huckleberry Finn. He did this so well that the newest arrival to these shores, very likely a Vietnamese refugee, can, by reading him, begin to imagine that he has some of the idiosyncratically American charm of Mark Twain.' (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 171)

Klinkowitz writes that Vonnegut's

'own experiences within this class provide the structure for his fiction—a perspective that takes the most sophisticated notions of twentieth-century science and philosophy but reshapes them in the familiar terms of bourgeois life...he is doggedly middle-class, and much of what he knows derives from what he learned as a child in Indianapolis, giving him a simple disposition toward plain truth which he maintains despite the more complex, even hysterical, responses that disturbed times have called up.' (Klinkowitz, 1982: 20)

I believe that is a misreading. Vonnegut is not bourgeois, an avatar of the middle class.

He is from that, yes; he uses that language, but he uses it as an insidious attacker, he gets inside and vehemently challenges the status quo; he doesn't uphold it or enshrine it, as someone doggedly middle class ought. It is a persona, regardless of how indistinguishable from the real Vonnegut. It is a performance, something consciously

manipulated for effect.<sup>15</sup> He is subversive, a Trojan horse. Bourgeois? This is not nice, polite art; this is not Norman Rockwell's Indianapolis—or Roger Miller's, for that matter. The bourgeoisie do not get their books banned from libraries and entire school districts. Doggedly middle class Americans don't draw assholes or open beavers or little girls' panties in felt-tipped pen and publish them.

Vonnegut is writing in a way that he knows is not proper; it is deviation, deviation from 'proper' writing, writing like that of a 'cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago.' We know he knows 'better' because he wrote a style guide for the International Paper Company on what proper writing is, called 'How to Write With Style.' In it Vonnegut is absolute in his proscription to 'never include a sentence which does not either remark on character or advance the action' (1981, 2006: 70). It leads one to ponder—well, me; it leads me to ponder—the incantatory phrases peppered throughout his books—his 'so it goes,' 'and so on,' and 'hi ho.' He *regularly* includes sentences that neither remark on character or advance the action. *Breakfast of Champions* is gravid with asides. For example, how has the spiralling fates of Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover been affected by explication of Martha, and how nice she is as a psychiatrist? Not at all, not at all. Or:

She had thirty-six-inch hips, a twenty-nine-inch waist, and a thirty-eight-inch bosom at the time of her death. Her husband had a penis seven and a half inches long and two inches in diameter. (Vonnegut 1973: 266)

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<sup>15</sup> In my own writing (see following section), the voice is often alienatedly bemused. Not that I am not often alienated, or equally often bemused, and have been known to stumble (as these words are on the verge of showing), it is still a persona—albeit an authentic persona—being used. Used, I suspect, for the same reasons that Vonnegut uses his, or Saunders his. It is playing myself. But still playing.

An aside interrupting an aside about the woman for whom an ambulance was named and what she was reading before her untimely death from rabies. This has nothing to do with the story. Nor does knowing that he can have oodles of charm when he wants to, or that the corner in Indianapolis boasting a clock designed by his father is known locally as 'The Crossroads of America,' or that the girth of his own penis is five inches, or even, the fourth paragraph in his story 'Welcome to the Monkey House' (ibid.: 1968): 'Drupelets are the pulpy little knobs that compose the outside of a raspberry.' What action, precisely, is being advanced by these winks and digressions and diegetic ruptures? The characters in the story, the events, are completely unaffected. Who, then, is the character being remarked on? It is Vonnegut himself. And he is very much remarking upon himself and we become aware, should we have somehow become unaware, of his presence, first and foremost, in his fiction. And what action advanced? Very clearly the narrative is of his writing the book we are reading.

This pretence of breeziness, this mimicry of collegial colloquy, of simplicity (though not writing as he speaks, but carefully mimicking speech in a highly literary way) is dazzle camouflage. Simple prose (doing complex things) makes the reader trust him, like him, laugh with him. And we do! It makes the reader let him in. It's disarmament.

Voice as tool. His advocacy of simplicity in writing:

Remember that two great masters of our language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. 'To be or not to be?' asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. (Vonnegut 2006: 69)



Size doesn't matter when it comes to epistemological profundity. How good or not good existential query is has nothing to do with lexical length, verb tense, or any grammatical concern. And, wryly, he knows this, too.

In *Breakfast of Champions* he asks himself, rhetorically, what he thinks about the book that he's writing. 'I feel lousy about it, but I always feel lousy about my books' (Vonnegut 1973: 4). Critics, notably Allen (1991), have taken this as an admission that that book is, if not a failure, at least one of Vonnegut's least successful. Besides ignoring what follows the coordinating conjunction, which reveals the near-universal angst all artists have about their work—including, one can conclude, Vonnegut vis-à-vis *Slaughterhouse-Five*—it is a mistake to read this at face value, as it would be to dismiss Vonnegut's prose as simple. It was not said in an interview. It was embedded in the fabric of a meta-fictional book. It was not an admission; it was a ploy. It is self-deprecation, always an attractive quality, always a quality that makes someone like you. 'My friend Knox Burger,' Vonnegut continues, and Allen cites as evidence of failure, 'said one time that a certain cumbersome novel "...read as though it had been written by Philboyd Studge.'" That's who I think I am when I write what I am seemingly programmed to write' (ibid.). At the end of the chapter Vonnegut, instead of signing his own names, signs '—Philboyd Studge.' It's funny, it's humble, it's endearing. It's also a literary allusion to a short story by Saki called 'Filboid Studge.' And did his friend Knox Burger actually say this? It would be a remarkable coincidence, as Saki's 'Filboid Studge' is the name of a breakfast cereal, just as Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* is

the name of breakfast cereal (General Mills epithet for Wheaties). Not so awkward, not so simple, after all.

Accident? Coincidence? Only if one is subscribing to Jungian theories of Universal Subconscious and assuming that Vonnegut is unaware of Saki's work,<sup>16</sup> and considering that Vonnegut was the pre-eminent American man of letters in the 1960s—and he parses Joyce and Shakespeare—that hardly seems likely.

No, The-Man-From-Indianapolis—even if it is a pose—is not a mucker pose. The key is to not just look at what he's doing, but teasing out why he's doing it.

### 3.4 TEARS OF A CLOWN

The camouflage as an ordinary guy, the kind with that idiosyncratic American charm, the kind you want to have a beer with, is, as has been discussed, part of the American mythos, part of American letters, but also belies a deeper need in some authors, including Vonnegut, and Saunders (and myself): the need to be liked, and the need to reduce the chance of alienating those who could *potentially* like you. So you use a voice, a register, that is non-threatening and confederate. And humour. Vonnegut basically says it ➡

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<sup>16</sup> Like, for example, my submitting a story to one of my university workshops called 'Stanley and the Girls' completely oblivious to Kingsley Amis's *Stanley and the Women*. I hadn't heard of Amis at that innocent-as-an-undergraduate time. I just worked with someone called Stanley, and thought it was humourously pathetic name. Sorry, Stanleys. Or the time when I was, like, fourteen, and came up with an idea to write all day long, from the moment I woke up one Saturday to the moment I feel asleep. One day in the life of, writing down everything, every thought, no matter how mundane or random. I had inadvertently discovered modernism and stream of consciousness. I was dismayed to learn later that it had already been discovered, and I wouldn't get credit. It was hard to let that one go. I'm still a little bitter.

When I was the littlest kid at our supper table, there was only one way I could get anybody's attention, and that was to be funny. I had to specialize. ...And that's what my books are, now that I'm a grownup—mosaics of jokes. (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 103)

Getting attention. Getting accepted. Writing to win friends; writing to overcome an inferiority complex. As he states in *Palm Sunday*, 'Peer pressure...is the most powerful force in the universe...' (203). Do those of a stable disposition, a balanced personality, a secure ego structure, care what others think *to that extent*? And to call peer pressure the most powerful force in the universe, and this from the man who imagined Ice-9, a compound that could destroy the entire world by merely coming in contact with it (Vonnegut 1963), the power source UWTB (Universal Will To Become, which was responsible for the universe in the first place) (Vonnegut 1961), and a man who'd lived through the bombs and incendiaries that razed Dresden? Wow. Talk about co-dependent.

In *Palm Sunday* he comes back to his discussion on why he's funny. It's somewhat deeper than merely being small as a child (usually those with an overarching need for acceptance have a list): it's because he has a German name, and that could be touchy in the decades in which he grew up, decades marked by German wars. 'So it was a good idea for me to tell a joke as soon as possible' (1981, 2006:165).

He writes that he knows, and actually likes, several German war veterans who emigrated to America, and that they, too, had to become 'screamingly funny as soon as possible' (ibid.). It is performance, like an actor performs, to satisfy a deep-seated need that impels

them to seek out, despite enormous and innumerable obstacles, to get stuff in front of strangers and win their acceptance if not their admiration.

### 3.5 HEARING VOICES

So we know it's not simplicity, it's a simple style masking something a lot deeper. It's personal. Vonnegut's use of the first-person not only 'help[s] provide structure and direction in a narrative' (Allen 1991:45), but does far more than that. There is, of course, nothing odd about the first person—but he is not a character, first-person or otherwise, in the fiction. He is outside the narrative, he is extradiegetic, the author, though the line gets fuzzy. On page 274 of *Breakfast of Champions* there is confusion as to agency—'As for myself: I kept a respectful distance between myself and all the violence—even though I had created Dwayne and his violence and the city, and the sky above and the Earth below. Even so, I came out of the riot with a broken watch crystal and what turned out later to be a broken toe. Somebody jumped backwards to get out of Dwayne's way. He broke my watch crystal, even though I had created him, and he broke my toe' (Vonnegut 1973: 274). *Somebody?* He's making this up. *What later turned out to be?* It's a fictional broken toe, broken by a fictional creation. Though he remains a non-fiction author, struggling to write the fiction that we're reading. And just so we know Vonnegut hasn't just changed his mind, suddenly decided to become a diegetic narrator, and the story just a delayed first-person narrative, we're given his calm assurance that he is indeed the creator, and just as confused as the reader. This is, to use Genette's term, heterodiegetic.

*Voice* refers to the act of uttering the narration, which is always situated at a diegetic level inferior to the narrated event. Thus, one can recognize an *extradiegetic* level, situated outside the events..., an *intradiegetic* level, dealing with main story, and a series of metadiegetic levels, occurring when narratives are embedded within one another. The kinds of narrators are classified according to their participation in the action: heterodiegetic stories have outside narrators. (Pavel 1985: 99)

Pavel, in his analysis of Genette's work in narratology, discusses 'focalization' (ibid.) as perspective, point of view, or, basically, 'who speaks?' *Non-focalized* stories would have an omniscient narrator; *internally focalized* stories would have a point of view restricted to a character; and stories where the narrator knows less than the character(s) would be *externally focalized*. Vonnegut, with the insertion of the author—as author, not as character—creates a narration where the focalization changes frequently, where it becomes difficult to separate the writer from the writing, the author from the characters, 'a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text' (Klinkowitz 1982: 69). This is what Genette referred to as polymodality.<sup>17</sup> Vonnegut's voice switches from diegetic

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<sup>17</sup> The use of a polymodal voice is subtly and brilliantly employed by Flannery O'Connor, arguably one of the greatest American short story writers, in 'A Good Man Is Hard To Find.'

'The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida.' (O'Connor 1955, 1980: 9)

The first line succinctly and immediately defines the character, and puts in place the tension and drama on which the story is built. 'The grandmother': the banal, simple use of the definite article completely informs the reader of the character's disposition, of her relation to the other characters—it is distant, belying her staid, staunch position in the family (and the mutual animosity). The character is set apart, through the non-focalized voice (the narrator is not a character) yet a voice that almost imperceptibly but categorically affects how we feel, the definite article becoming an attitudinal stance marker. 'The' not 'their' not 'our' not 'her': a possessive is not used—she is attached to no one. It creates a sense of misplaced formality, stilted. The non-focalized language is subtly polymodal, as it feels odd, clashes with the milieu of a Georgia family on a car trip, stopping for barbecue sandwiches at establishments like the roadside filling station

to extradiegetic (for example, discussing the origins of some of the characters in other books in the book he is presently writing), or, indeed, metadiegetic, as multiple texts are embedded: in *Breakfast of Champions* we again meet Eliot Rosewater from *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965); Kilgore Trout from the same book, as well as *Slaughterhouse-Five* and others; Francine Pefko from *Cat's Cradle* (1963); and Khashdrahr Miasma from *Player Piano* (1952). All this, mixed into the story of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men, along with asides from the author from his present (in 1973) state of angst and existential fragility and humility. Creator and creation become blurred, scrambled like synapses in Dwayne Hoover's brain; non-fiction creeps into the novel, fiction infiltrates memory. But it isn't just a post-modern melange of reference and allusion, Vonnegut—the author—actually interacts with his creation.

‘Mr. Trout,’ I said, ‘I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books.’  
 ‘Pardon me?’ he said.  
 ‘I’m your creator,’ I said, ‘You’re in the middle of a book right now—close to the end, actually.’  
 ‘Um,’ he said. (Vonnegut 1973: 291)

In order to prove to Kilgore Trout that he is indeed his author, Vonnegut transports him, just by writing it, to the Taj Mahal, to the surface of the sun, and ‘...to the Indianapolis of my childhood. I put him in a circus crowd there. I had him see a man with *locomotor ataxia* [the last stages of syphilis] and a woman with a goiter as big as a zucchini’ (ibid. 292). He is also attacked by a Doberman pinscher ‘who was a leading character in an earlier version of this book...’ and also in *Sirens of Titan* (1959) ‘...I feared nothing.

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and dance hall run by Red Sammy Butts. It captures the grandmother's own misplaced, ridiculous gentility, as well as the frigidity between her and the rest of the family, the lack of warmth. It sets her up as pretentious, above her station, snooty, pompous, inflated. She is, after all, campaigning to visit her connections in East Tennessee, a land known for its illegal distilleries and attenuated gene pool and was the actual setting for—to get all extradiegetic—the film *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972).

That was foolish of me. A writer off-guard, since the materials with which he works are so dangerous, can expect agony as quick as a thunderclap...I should have known that a character as ferocious as Kazak [the Doberman] was not easily cut out of a novel' (ibid. 285-286). But this is fiction; he doesn't have to be attacked. But he, as a non-fictional writer entering his own fiction, is so surprised by the Doberman's attack—a dog he dreamed up—that he reflexively pulls his testicles up into his abdominal cavity 'like the landing gear of an airplane. And now they tell me that only surgery will bring them down again' (ibid.: 289).

This isn't just a clever game for Vonnegut. He is revealing humility, self-awareness trumping his own diegesis, upending Genette's assertion that voice is situated at a diegetic level inferior to the narrated event. The book is about Vonnegut, the writer, and his relationship to us, the reader. 'The real interest in the novel is not so much the literal action as it is the way Vonnegut comments on that action so as to reveal his concerns about the nature of writing, the strained social fabric of American society, and the tenuous state of his own psyche' (Allen 1991: 104). The style is a means of creating that relationship, determining its tenor. 'Wordplay [in spoken language] is doing more than merely displaying or achieving a focus on content. It is introducing a more affective element into the discourse by creating attitudes and by creating and reinforcing relationships' (Carter 2004: 4).

ANOTHER EXAMPLE (LITERARY)  
FOR THE PURPOSES OF COMPLEMENT AND CONTRAST,  
AND FAR TOO HEFTY FOR A FOOTNOTE

With Fowles, too, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969, 2004), we see the author becoming present, tearing back the curtain of disbelief suspension, and showing us himself as author,<sup>18</sup> his word-smithing — ‘I am overdoing the exclamation marks’ (209) — and laying bare of the mechanics — and frustrations — of the novelist’s lot. Early on we get the sense that something isn’t altogether right with this Victorian corset of a book, like tiny cracks in a lens, letting something through, or like the electric amoeba in the corner of your eye when you have a migraine. Something seems off with narrator. Something...polymodal. The voice, the narrator, seems to be — as he later baldly claims — mostly following ‘the conventions of Victorian fiction’ (409), and we are reminded of these conventions by the interspersions of Hardy, Arnold, Marx and other eminent Victorians and the compendium of Victorian minutiae that is excerpted at the beginning of each chapter. It is not only the grammar and syntax, but also the mindset, the focalization. To wit:

Gipsies were not English; and therefore almost certain to be cannibals (90)

Then suddenly, from an externally focalized voice that is seemingly contemporary with Charles, this author, though still with the overt tropes of the voice, is writing from a

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<sup>18</sup> Or, perhaps, as ‘author’, as ‘John Fowles’, who happens to be writing, coincidentally, a book called *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Other authors have created constructs that are doppelgangers — the list is vast, but a recent example is J.M. Coetzee in *Summertime* (2010) where Coetzee creates a South African author named J.M. Coetzee, who also wrote a book called *Dusklands* (1974), and a book called *Disgrace* (2000), and also won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The main difference is that the Coetzee in *Summertime* is dead.



vantage far outside that of Victorian Dorset: voice and vantage don't match up. There are intrusions, anachronistic allusions—to events, viewpoints, technologies—decidedly outside the world of Charles and Sarah and Ernestina in 1867:

The computer in [Sarah's] heart had long before assessed Mrs Tranter and stored the resultant tape. (103)

Or this:

She possessed [no books], I may add, because they were all sold; not because she was an early forerunner of the egregious McLuhan. (38)

What was that? A sudden flash-forward, a highly subjective, highly opinionated, authorial aside...who is this narrator? Where is this voice coming from? And why is McLuhan egregious? Because he espouses the primacy of technological media? And it's not just McLuhan's theories, or his work, but McLuhan himself who is egregious. What does this say about the author: that he is (1) in 1969 and (2) a bibliophilic Luddite? The voice is one of prickly spite and far from the externally focalized, dispassionate, god-like voice we would normally find in a novel of this sort, a self-consciously Victorian sort. In fact, the voice frequently seems at odds with prose itself.

On page 19 the narrator tells us that 'unknown to the occupants' the 'bilious leaden green' of the walls was rich in arsenic. A voice with its 'bilious' and its 'leaden green' but also with knowledge outside the story, outside the time, outside the narrative, outside the theme; so outside, in fact, it begs the question 'who cares?' The narrator at this point displays an academic thoroughness to his own story, like he was writing inside and outside at once. How can he know both the facts of the characters innermost, unvoiced

thoughts—some thoughts not even conscious thoughts yet—and arcana of such things like the paint in the kitchen walls, knowledge with no contemporary relevance to the characters and diegesis, and, really, of little concern to us? A pseudo-scientific and yet contradictorily opinionated, emotional narration. It does no service to the art of the fiction. In fact, it's a hurdle, a stumbling block, to the narrative flow, this hyper-academic thoroughness, like he's objectively commenting on the very text he's—subjectively—writing. Like he's writing outside and inside at the same time.

Another kick in the diegetic pants:

He had a very sharp sense of clothes style—quite as sharp as a  
'mod' of the 1960s. (43)

*Where* is this voice? At times right there, in the story, in the diegesis—like Vonnegut, he pays visits to his characters, to their homes, spies on them through an eyeglass, rides on trains with them, and like Vonnegut he becomes God consciously to the characters (as Vonnegut transported Kilgore Trout around the universe to show who was control, Fowles flips a florin, in front of Charles, to determine his fate). At other times the narrator is very much removed, an arch academic, a bit show-offy, impartially cataloguing the most tangential trivia; at others he's a fiercely pontifical crab writing in the 1960s, calling things 'ludicrous' (48) and 'stupid' (159). The voice is at times non-focalized, as he tells us of the innermost murmurings in the hearts of separated lovers, sometimes it's internally focalized as neither he nor the character know the doings of the other characters:

There are tears in her eyes? She is too far away for me to tell. (469)

And sometimes, as discussed above, it's externally focalized, as the narrator neither knows—nor cares—what the characters are up to:

Meanwhile, Charles can get up to London on his own. (267)

Sometimes we, the readers, are being addressed directly:

He would have made you smile. (47)

or:

Perhaps you have begun to agree with Charles about Sam. (333)

or even:

I would not have you—nor would Dr. Grogan, as you will see—  
confuse progress with happiness. (152)

where not only is the narrator addressing us, but presumably the characters are considering us as well.

Sometimes the voice is dispassionately detailing the mores and particulars of the middle classes in Victorian Dorset; sometimes it's withering and hyperbolic:

Nothing is more incomprehensible to us than the methodicality of the Victorians... (48)

Nothing is more incomprehensible to us? Really? Not quantum mechanics? Not chaos theory? Not the ratio of rate increase to customer service on Southeastern Rail?

Sometimes, as with the McLuhan inclusion above, it is metadiegetic, bringing in other works, not only contemporary ones, but also, breaching diegesis, from the century hence, Like:

It was, in short, a very near equivalent of our own age's sedative pills. Why Mrs Poulteney should have been an inhabitant of the Victorian valley of the dolls we need not inquire... (92)

Why need we not? But in any case, not only a wrenching of diegesis but metadiegetic in its allusions to literary works from the future, and Jacqueline Susann at that. (Or 'Besides, in such wells of loneliness is not any coming together closer to humanity than perversity?' (160) where he alludes to Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel about sexual inversion, namely lesbian undividedness.)

By the time we've reached chapter 12, the sensitive reader—well, me—is slightly confounded. The sensitive reader can't figure out what this Fowles fellow is up to.

The second simple fact is that she was an opium-addict—but before your think I am wildly sacrificing plausibility to sensation, let me quickly add that she did not know it. (92)

Whaaa...? First, he's yanking us out of the narrative by our dewlaps, revealing his authorial strategies and complications, and foreshowing the infamous Chapter Thirteen lurking just beyond the next page-turn. This struggling—plausibility or sensation?—is also a hint at relinquishing agency, as though the characters are self-determining, act

without his knowledge, like he can't be blamed for the preposterousness of the prose, almost a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction stance, which is disingenuous because, of course, it is fiction. He could make Mrs Poulteney the Nabob of Uttar Pradesh if he wanted to.

Later that night Sarah might have been seen—though I cannot think  
by whom, unless a passing owl—standing at the open window...  
(93)

It's his world, his diegesis. If he doesn't know, who does? But then he turns around and claims authorial godship:

I will not make her teeter on the window-sill; or sway forward, and  
then collapse sobbing back on to the worn carpet. (ibid.)

This is also a knowing, metadiegetic swipe at the conventions of the genre in which he is working.

Though there have been niggles, though we have our suspicions, things have been, well, sort of normal, even with the voice faltering a bit. Maybe this just isn't one of Fowles's best efforts. Maybe he just can't keep it together. It happens.

Then, in the virtuosic Chapter Thirteen, the narrative ruptures become a haemorrhage.

Chapter Twelve ends, 'Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?' (94).

Chapter Thirteen begins (95) 'I do not know. [first person]. This story I am telling is all imagination' (95).

The reader's relationship to the heterodiegetic narrator, to the characters, changes.

Drastically.

These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and 'voice' of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend he does. (95)

As in Vonnegut, this unmasking, this breach of the fourth wall, brings to the fore the question of agency: yes, Fowles and Vonnegut are the authors, and hence nominally in charge, as Gods in the universes they've created—Vonnegut takes Trout to the surface of the sun to show his omnipotence, Fowles grants that he is the puppeteer—'But I am a novelist, not a man in a garden—I can follow her where I like?' (96); '...then in the first truly feminine gesture I have permitted her...' (281)—but, curiously (or at least curiously to anyone who hasn't written fiction)<sup>19</sup> the characters begin to display wills of their own, take on their own agency: Trout needs convincing, and then refuses to be set free; Ernestina convinces Fowles that she must win Charles back—'...she leaves me no alternative but to conclude that she must, in the end, win Charles back from his infidelity' (256). Both authors wrestle, visibly, there on the page, with the nature of artistic creation, the books become not about the characters, whom we've been told are figments of the authors' imagination, but about the authors themselves, and their writing of the very books we're reading.

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<sup>19</sup> I once had a character visit a doctor to get sawn out of her body cast. It was a simple scene, necessary to get her motile again and back into the plot. I was furious when she started flirting, and the doctor flirted back. I needed to get on with the story. Finally I just gave up and let them rut like livestock. The doctor originally didn't even have a name, and he ended up becoming a major subplot. I got my revenge, though, when I—accidentally—killed her twice in the last chapter.

Fowles discusses this tug of agency thus:

You may think novelists always have fixed plans to which they work, so that the future predicted by Chapter One is always inexorably the actuality of Chapter Thirteen. But novelists write for countless different reasons...Only one same reason is shared by all of us: *we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is.* Or was. This is why we cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator; a planned world (a world that fully reveals its planning) is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live. (96)

But whereas in Vonnegut the heterodiegesis—the author revealing himself and his art, the characters remaining characters but interacting with their creator—creates a new diegesis, one that incorporates non-focalized, internally focalized, and externally focalized narration. With Fowles, the breach is permanent: there is no new diegesis; author and work are cleaved. Instead of trying to make peace, as Vonnegut does, Fowles interrogates the very nature of narrative and its appeal.

I have disgracefully broken the illusion? No. My characters still exist, and in a reality no less, or no more, real than the one I have just broken. (97)

This is Fowles's brilliance. He has broken the suspension of disbelief, torn apart and scattered the diegesis, but, in the end, nothing much has changed. We still go back to the story, we still go back to the characters, even though our relationship to them has been irrevocably changed.

It's as startling as what David Lynch did in his film *Mulholland Dr.* (2001). If I may: about two thirds into the film Diane and Betty wake up in the middle of the night and go

to the Club Silencio in downtown L.A. It is that moment—there's one in every Lynch movie—when the film slides into the viewer's unconscious, when the logic shifts to the logic of delta wavelength sleep. As the women sit in the audience, the emcee announces, 'No hay banda! There is no band.' The women look concerned. 'Il n'est pas d'orchestra,' the emcee continues, 'this is all a tape recording.' He is telling us, like he is telling the women, that this is not real, it is make believe. 'No hay banda...and yet we hear a band. If we want to hear a clarinet, listen...' And we hear a clarinet, the recording of a clarinet. The emcee tells us that we hear a trombone, then a trumpet, and the curtains part and a trumpet player, with trumpet pressed to his lips and fingers working the keys, comes out. He yanks the trumpet away, but the song continues. Are we surprised? A little, even though we've been told, repeatedly, no hay banda. 'It's all recorded,' the emcee says, and the trumpet player quickly brings the trumpet to his lips and a sting is heard. 'It's all tape. Il n'est pas d'orchestra. Listen,' he says, and raises his hands as though in agency, and thunder rumbles through the theatre, and the lights flash in simulated lightning. 'It's all an illusion,' he reminds us for the tenth time. He dissolves—it's film: the illusion, the mechanics, have been exposed—and is replaced on stage by Rebekah del Rio. She sings, heartbreakingly, a cappella, 'Llorando' (Roy Orbison's 'Crying'). When she collapses, and the song continues, our breath is taken away. Diane and Betty are in tears and shaking. It is an extraordinarily affecting moment. We are shocked that it's an illusion, but we had been told, repeatedly, that that's exactly what it is. But still we dove in, heart-first, into the diegesis. In a single scene Lynch has shown us how cinema works, how movies are magic.<sup>20</sup> Fowles does the

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<sup>20</sup> It's why there is no such thing as successful dada cinema—we refuse to be



same thing. No hay banda—there is no story, he’s making it up as he goes along, there is no Charles, no Ernestina, no Sarah, no Mrs Poulteney. But, as he says, they still exist, and, like contented somnambulists, we fall back into the story.

There’s a sucker born every minute. (Hannum in Brown 2010)

Peter Reed (in Klinkowitz & Lawler 1977) finds Vonnegut’s incorporating himself into the book estranging, finds that the book becomes ‘personal in a rather exclusive way....The effect results in the reader’s feeling partially estranged in the fictional world into which he has apparently been invited’ (105). I find just the opposite. I find it thrilling. In the terms Saunders uses to describe Barthelme: ‘Part of the art...involves the simple pleasure of watching someone be audacious’ (Saunders 2008: 17).

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unbewitched. Dada is dependent on active revolt. Surrealism, however, dependent as it is on dreams, is ideally suited to film.

#### 4. MEET THE BASILECTS

In his essay ‘Mr. Vonnegut In Sumatra’ (Saunders 2008a: pp. 73-83), though he is talking specifically about *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Saunders is perspicaciously describing his own writing method:

Your real story may have nothing to do with your actual experience...feel free to shorthand those experiences, allude to them sideways, or omit them entirely. Joke about them, avoid directly exploiting them, shroud them in an over-story about aliens: you know what you know, and that knowledge will not be shaken out of your stories no matter how breezy or comic or minimalist your mode of expression, or how much you shun mimesis. (Saunders 2008a: 78)

And that is exactly what Saunders does: but instead of writing about Tralfamadorians, he writes about Vonnegut: it is through describing Vonnegut that he gets to the root of his own writing. Indeed: ‘All art is autobiographical,’ according to Federico Fellini (in Walter 1965). Or, to quote from myriad of New Age self-development gurus—whom I encountered in Los Angeles in the 80s—‘The universe is a mirror, my friend.’

Saunders writes of his surprise and delight in discovering Vonnegut’s use of ordinary language, a register that seems so commonplace, a voice that was the voice of the everyman:

Plain American was fine for getting around your dopey miniature world, cashing checks and finding restaurants and talking about television and so on, but when the real work of Art was required, you hauled out the fancy language, the one nobody used. (Saunders 2008a: 74)

Art was supposed to use the language that nobody uses, or in Vonnegut’s near-identical observation, real writers were supposed to write ‘like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago’ (Vonnegut 1981, 2006: 70). It is a startling discovery that words so

unexceptional, a voice that familiar, can be deployed so ingeniously. ‘...the book felt like an ode to the abandonment of control, a disavowal of mastery’ (Saunders 2008a: 79). I had an almost identical experience of awe and exhilaration, as an adolescent in the Arctic, picking up *Slaughterhouse-Five* in our one bookstore. It was, as it was for Saunders, an epiphany. I didn’t think words could do that. I didn’t think fiction was *allowed* to do that.

‘A disavowal of mastery.’ That seems an apt description of Saunders’s own work. His use of language is not only mundane, but of low prestige, base. To utilize a term from studies in post-Creole continua (though it has been commonly adopted to describe the stratification of non-Creole, non-standard dialects like Black American English or Cockney), it is a mesolect, or even a basilect (Milroy 1999). Saunders masterfully controls this tongue of the trailer park, uses the stunted expressions—the cliché, the brand-naming, the feeble grasp of standard English—to create humour and hone trenchant satire. He manipulates the tropes of conversational language, of speech, to create a voice that succinctly captures a milieu and immerses the reader in a slice of America so familiar that we laugh, so incisive that we cringe in recognition of our own slide into cultural torpor and complacency. You could say the humour in Saunders is reliant on, as Sarangi (2000) describes it, cohesion, which is ‘a quality assigned to text by readers as an index of the accuracy of the representation of component features in terms of the phenomenology in which the reader lives... it is ‘culturally constrained... it can only be described in terms of the reader’s perceptions of the world’ (91). The reader is conversant with the milieu depicted. Further: ‘... textual cohesion and ungrammaticalness are not incompatible. Utterance which might be judged deviant from

the point of view of a sentence grammar can, if their deviance is consistent, become text-grammatical; and the consistency of type of deviation gives rise to textual cohesion...'

(Fowler 1981: 71). And it's 'audacious,' as Saunders himself writes in his encomium of Donald Barthelme:

Some part of art, certainly of Barthelme's art, involves the simple pleasure of watching someone be audacious. ... the pleasure we get from the narrator's stuttering, fragmented syntax, a pleasure which comes in part from our awareness that this syntax is not exactly *necessary*; it is, yes, character-indicating, but mostly it's funny, and also impressive: we take pleasure in how well it's done. (2008a: 178)

Milroy writes: 'let us accept that although the formal structures of languages and dialects are not appropriate phenomena for value-judgements, speakers of languages *do* attach values to particular words, grammatical structures and speechsounds' (1999: 11). And we do. Vonnegut knew this. Saunders knows this. And they use this knowledge of our unconscious judgementalism: sometimes diegetically—for purposes of characterization or humour—and sometimes more complexly, to affect the relationship between the writer and his audience. It is the treasure trove of hidden implicit meaning that Cavell speaks of.

Saunders's use of the lower American dialect—'white trash,' not to put too fine a point on it—is a marker of the indolent classes, the undereducated, the lower earners. Social-class discrimination based on linguistics (usage, pronunciation, 'unacceptable' grammar, etc.) is, according to Milroy, publicly acceptable (1999). Indeed, upward social mobility may be impeded, as an onslaught of Cinderella-tinged films, novels, and plays—*Working Girl*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Pygmalion*—have shown; the glass slipper being a linguistic one. As John Simon writes, with an understanding that his argument has no

basis in linguistic validity, reframing his curmudgeonly plaint on the grounds of squeamishness:

To the question ‘Who cares how you say it as long as you are understood; isn’t “like I said” just as clear as “as I said”? the answer is, ‘Yes, but rather more distasteful.’ You can blow your nose as efficiently with your fingers as with a tissue or handkerchief, but isn’t the former disgusting? (Simon in Washburn & Thornton 1996: 46)

Or, even more vociferously, Philip Wylie, who proposes some draconian measures in service to ‘correct’ grammar:

Children who are unable to learn or who will not learn the exact use of the tongue in which, probably, they will ever try to articulate their ideas should not be permitted to listen to radios, go to movies, or otherwise amuse themselves with the ideo-onanisms of our society. (Wylie 1955: 92)

As has since been reasoned, non-standard English may be (subjectively) inelegant, or even—apparently to Wylie—offensive, ungrammatical it is not (Pinker 1995). It’s different, but—technically—no less correct. This slavish adherence to ‘proper’ grammar and pronunciation may be anachronistic, but Wylie’s deft handling of the language is captivating. ‘Ideo-onanisms’? Brilliant technique in the service of specious ends (to paraphrase Woodrow Wilson’s apparent reaction to Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*).

It is just this sort of stratification and fierce linguistic boundary-marking that Saunders revels in. ‘If society is stratified, then as language enters into the life of that society to shape, cement and reproduce it, it too will display stratification. Particular groups will tend to have characteristic ways of using the language...and these will help to mark off the boundaries of one group from another’ (Montgomery 1995: 64). And the stratum of Saunders’s characters is very clear indeed.

#### 4.1 GREETINGS FROM THE DANGEROUS CRAPHOLE

The milieu of Saunders's stories is of neglected third-rate American cities, left behind economically, culturally: left to float on the ennui and learned helplessness and self-sedation of consumerist numbing. It is the subdivisions. It is the cast-off America of crime-ridden low-cost housing with Elysian names thought up by robotic marketing firms, of aerosol cheese, of pop culture stupefaction and corporate euphemism, of branding, where mediocrity is aspirational.

Saunders—trusting the reader's familiarity, 'since saying something is never *merely* saying something ... a statement of "what we say" will give us only a feature of what we need to remember. But a native speaker will normally know the rest: learning it was part of learning the language' (Cavell 1969: 32-33)—paints a picture of a world of white urban detritus—'in all cities, there are linguistic hierarchies which correspond to social hierarchies, and the persons of highest status with greatest potential for exercising power are always speakers of the linguistic variety which is judged to be the most logical, beautiful and comprehensible' (Milroy 1999: 92). So Saunders uses the lowest.

His authorial voice matches his milieu. A milieu where husbandless mothers discuss child rearing. To wit:

'Man, fuck this shit!' Min shouts.  
'Freak this crap you mean,' says Jade. 'You want them growing  
up with shit-mouths like us? Crap-mouths I mean?'  
(Saunders 2000a: 97)

It is a milieu where life, where America, is drained of its bite, pasteurized, where you can visit California and instead of actually looking around you, you trek to Disneyland and

pay to enter California Adventure, where rock was blasted away to make room for the Imagineers of Disney to construct fake rocks; a place where real cheese has to be announced and becomes a selling point: ‘What were the alternatives? Pretend cheese?... It was what was wrong with the world. ... It should just be taken for granted that something like cheese should be real’ (Twa 2000: 224). In Saunders:

I sit down by our subdivision’s fake creek and think. (Saunders 1997: 20)

His is a milieu where maternal pride flourishes:

The babies start howling for more ice cream.  
 ‘That is so cute,’ says Jade. ‘They’re like, *Give it the fuck up!*’  
 ‘We’ll give it the fuck up, sweeties don’t worry,’ says Min. ‘We didn’t forget about you.’ (Saunders 2000a: 106)

where a discussion of verbal etiquette goes like this:

‘Well, shit’s just a word, too,’ says Freddie. ‘But we don’t say it at lunch.’  
 ‘Same with puke,’ says Ma.  
 ‘Shit puke, shit puke,’ says Min.  
 The waiter clears his throat. Ma glares at Min.  
 ‘I love you girls’ manners,’ Ma says.  
 ‘Especially at a funeral,’ says Freddie.  
 ‘This ain’t a funeral,’ says Min.  
 ‘The question in my mind is what you kids are gonna do now,’ says Freddie. ‘Because I consider this whole thing a wake-up call, meaning it’s time for you to pull yourselves up by the bootstraps like I done and get out of that dangerous craphole you’re living at.’ (ibid.: 104-105)

But, as Milroy points out, using a spoken register (instead of a more formal written—and writerly—register), allows for more leeway, less rigidity. Indeed, spoken language is highly dependent on the placement of the speakers, either geographically or socially or even situationally (1999).

By expertly deploying these tropes of speech and of social placement, Saunders's complex use of simple language captures the cadence, colloquialism, awkward syntax, restricted vocabulary, reliance on cultural clichés as mental reflex as well as verbal clichés—meme-speak—that foments the humour and meaning of his work.

#### 4.2 TALKING FUNNY

A closer look, a triage, of several of Saunders's stories will elucidate some of the markers of speech he utilizes to create a sense of informality, in contrast to the more formal writerly style of *literature*, the kind that brings out the fancy language no one really uses. Using sociolinguistic analysis we can discover exactly how he goes about writing as though speaking, and the effects that that achieves.

In 'Sea Oak' from *Pastoralia* (Saunders 2000a: 90-125) the narrator works by 'taking his clothes off' at an aeronautically themed lap-dancing restaurant called Joysticks. His sister, Min, and their cousin, Jade, stay at home with their bastard babies watching daytime television and grudgingly studying—during commercials—for their GEDs in order to get High School Diplomas. They study not to find employment, or for the sheer joy of learning, but because "“If we had our diplomas we could just watch TV and not be all distracted”" (93). Also living with them is their aunt, Aunt Bernie, a put-upon spinster with an unrealistic and ill-advised optimistic streak. When Aunt Bernie is fatally stricken with a heart attack during a burglary, the survivors are thrown into an existential crisis, their self-reflection as shallow as the platitudes they mouth. But their lives become even more tumultuous when Aunt Bernie returns from the grave, not as a spectre, but physically: 'Same perm, same glasses, same blue dress we buried her in' (112). Aunt



Bernie begins to issue directives—abruptly, vulgarly—to her nephew and nieces, detailing a strategy for improving their lot and thus earn enough to provide her with the carnal life she never had while still alive. But she is decomposing rapidly, and the smell is getting to Min and Jade.

Following are examples of the conversational tropes, the purposeful informality employed in the story (I have emboldened the exemplary word or phrase. In the case where more than one occur in the passage, I have placed a number after it which I shall refer to following the quotation):

**Outside it's sunny** (1). **A regular day** (2). **A** (3) **guy's** (4) changing his oil. The clouds are **regular** (5) clouds and the **sun's** (4) the **regular** (6) sun and the only **nonregular** (7) thing is that my clothes smell like Bernie, a **combo** (8) of wet cellar and rotten bacon. (9) (Saunders 2000a: 116)

In the first two sentences (1, 2) we see the short declarative sentences that often characterize the informal nature of conversational speech. Just information delivery, unadorned. Also—as will be discussed in greater detail below—indicative of the limitations of speech, as compared to writing, due to the paucity of spontaneous access to vocabulary presumably because of the shortness of human memory (see discussion of Milroy below).

Sentence (2) is a fragment. Fragments—in this case, a syntactic non-clausal unit—are more commonly seen in speech, like the short declarative sentences above, due to the extemporaneous nature of speech, the need to convey information without the luxury of revision. As Milroy writes about the ungrammaticality of conversation, of the grammatical leeway afforded to performance errors not necessarily afforded to more

‘standard’ written delivery, ‘an ungrammatical sentence is then said to be produced as result of the limitation of human psychology and memory...when such sentences are judged to be ungrammatical, the norms of careful written prose (which is *planned* discourse) are being misapplied to conversational speech (*unplanned* discourse...) we are again observing a malfunction of the standard ideology’ (1999: 64).

In (3) the use of indefinite article (coupled with the catch-all colloquial epithet ‘guy’) creates a sense of vagueness, of imprecision and ambiguity. Milroy writes,

...potential ambiguity is of little or no importance in speech, as the social context and mutual knowledge of speakers, together with stress and intonation, will make the intended meaning clear. ...Writing, however, is deprived of stress, intonation and the possibility of immediate feedback from speakers: to write a language well<sup>21</sup> is a continuous struggle against ambiguity. (ibid.: 53)

Another example of this from the story is:

Inside the briefcase are my T-backs and **a thing of** mousse. (Saunders 2000a:110)

This assumption of mutual knowledge, or familiarity with context, is also a marker of sympathetic circularity (see below). It makes the ambiguity of ‘...a thing of’ acceptable, even beneficial.

(4) is a contraction. Contractions—to uphold the knuckle-rapping proscriptions of primary school pedagogic totalitarianism—should only be found in speech or informal writing. Things may have relaxed somewhat, sacrificing rigidity and absolutism, and

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Well’ meaning—how I would mean it, that is, not presuming an intimacy with Milroy’s feelings and dispositions—as mentioned before, the standard, the way utilized by the canonical writers studied in sophomore English Literature classes; that ‘literary’ voice described—previously—by Leech (in Van Dijk 1985).

formal writing may include contractions for ease of reading and to avoid sounding stilted (for example, 'it's'), however, the use of a contraction in this passage is highly informal, mimicking conversational speech. 'Guy's' does not necessarily allow for clarity; indeed, perhaps the opposite—it could be plural as it is not a proper noun. 'Guy's,' like many contractions in speech, is for ease of pronunciation. Therefore, it is highly irregular in 'proper literature,' to utilize Saunders's own term. It is mimicking speech. Other examples from the story: 'Min's my sister, Jade's our cousin' (ibid.: 93); 'It's supposed to look like a duck but now the beak's missing' (ibid.: 96).

(5) shows the repetition common to speech, 'the main creative functions seem to be in the dialogic building of a relationship of accord between the speakers' (Carter 2004: 8). The repetition of the rather unevocative adjective 'regular' reading like speech, as though the speaker were droning in order to convey the ordinariness of the situation. It is also a marker of sympathetic circularity (see below). This also exhibits lack of variation and perhaps anaemic word choice. As was discussed above, conversational speech is extemporaneous, without the luxury afforded in writing of lexical mulling. Thus, words lodged in the short-term memory are the most easily accessed (*regular, clouds, sun*).

Another example is, 'I sit. Min squeezes and releases and my hand, squeezes and releases, squeezes and releases' (Saunders 2000a: 112), the repetition almost taking on a performance aspect, the words mimicking the repetition of the act, the cadence being almost onomatopoeic.

The choice of the unspecific ‘regular’ (6) (like the noun ‘a guy’) is one that assumes in the reader/listener an acquaintance with what the usual condition of the day is (or what ‘a guy’ looks like), or what the states of the clouds and sun usually are. This assumption needs some sort of shared knowledge—or at least a benchmark—to make sense. What is regular, so that we may judge this day, these clouds, and this sun, as ‘regular’?

Saunders’s word choice here is a marker of sympathetic circularity, a conversational trope that allows the audience to take the author’s/speaker’s point of view, and permits non-exactitude because they have parallel experience. ‘Talk in interaction is built for understanding, and on the whole effortless understanding’ (Schegloff 1987: 202 in House 2003: 2), and is ‘an appeal to a framework of shared understanding which makes absolute explicitness unnecessary’ (Montgomery 1995: 114). This mutual reservoir of knowledge and shared experience, that allows a linguistic community a linguistic economy, is called ‘sedimentation’ (Kramsch 2003), and allows speech in truncations, in telescoped thoughts, in colloquialisms, in fragments, grunts, and inventions. It ‘enables members of a social group to incorporate their experiences into a common stock of knowledge, a large aggregate of collective memory, and a common definition of what is good and just’ (Taylor 1989: 132). Or regular.

Sympathetic circularity is usually evident in discourse markers such as ‘...someone who, if he wanted to, could drive west for three days **or whatever** and sit in the sun by the ocean’ (Saunders 2000a: 104) or ‘On her head is a thumbprint. Like Ash Wednesday, only **sort of** glowing’ (ibid.: 116). These dismissals (in the first case) or equivocations (in the second) are appeals and assumptions of community and shared attitude. Again,

the purpose of markers of sympathetic circularity is confederacy between speaker/author and listener/reader.

‘Nonregular’ (7) is an example of a speaker’s (particularly a speaker from the academically stunted milieu of Saunders) conversational invention and predilection for neologism. Speakers often engage in morphological creativity, fashioning new words by amending old ones, adding morphemes, or, in the case of ‘nonregular,’ creating lexically non-standard variants that are nonetheless perfectly comprehensible to the listener. These neologisms are often ‘survival’ words: the apt, or correct, word is unavailable to the speaker in the throes of conversation, and the speaker must deploy one as an ersatz filler, a ‘survival mechanism’ to allow the conversation to continue (Carter 2004). Also key with this sort of morphological invention is that it is generally found in circumstances where there is a degree of understanding, of comfort between the parties, so that neologism is allowed, even motivated (ibid.).

Elsewhere in the story we get:

...Aunt Bernie started in at Drug Town. But she’s not bitter.  
Sometimes she’s so **nonbitter** it gets on my nerves. (Saunders 2000a: 95)

and:

After dinner the babies get fussy and Min puts a **mush** of ice cream and Hershey’s syrup in their bottles... (ibid.: 107)

and:

Probably one of the babies is **puky**. (ibid.: 99)

The morphological creativity—‘puky’—in the final example is particularly instructive:

The derivational potential of words and morphemes [being] creatively exploited, is surprising common in everyday talk...[it] can be used not simply playfully but also to intensify meanings or to add an evaluative

tone to what is said ... the -y suffix is highly productive and is becoming an established process by which 'new' words can be produced. (Carter 2004: 98)

As Americans began to rule the world, synonymising themselves with speed and modernity, morphological invention (including creating neologisms by turning nouns — like 'synonym' — into verbs, as well as dropping superfluous, vestigial consonant clusters and rococo silent vowels) has become commonplace. 'American English has found a fertile field for its inventiveness' with a surfeit of suffixes and prefixes clinging to a single word (Marckwardt 1958: 90). It's the American way not to stand on ceremony: if you want a word, make one yourself. Manifest Vocabulary, if you will.

Neologisms are innate to Americans, a melting pot society with a melting pot language. People needed to be understood, so adoption of disparate lexicons was essential. Because of the varied nature of these parent languages, simplified spelling was required, as was the conversion of all these new words into all the necessary parts of speech (Marckwardt 1958).

But, of course, this is not *really* the verbalization of a slightly more than adequate stripper living in Sea Oak. This is Saunders, expertly capturing such limitations. This type of invention is pseudo-survalling. Something I do myself. Again, the purpose being to simulate solidarity.

Another form of neologism is the colloquial truncation (8). As with markers of sympathetic circularity, truncations and omissions assume a common knowledge with the listener/reader, and an informal ease.

After the initial short declarative sentences the final sentence (9) in the paragraph is a breathless onrush, feeling as though the narrator is desperately making it up as he goes along. This is a tumble of thoughts and imagery, one idea dragging the other along with it, words added as they occur, stream-of-consciously, flailingly piling in phrases and trying to fit them to ideas, though not necessarily purposefully, so as not to lose one's place. This reads as though unplanned, speech-like, a run-on sentence: an effect Saunders uses frequently. Another example:

I think: I am so sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't here when it happened and sorry you never had any fun in your life and sorry I wasn't rich enough to move you somewhere safe. (Saunders 2000a: 100)

This creates an unpolished feel, another disavowal of mastery. 'Processing taking place in real time,' Sarangi writes, abounds with 'disfluency features (pauses, um); repeats, retrace-and-repair sequences; grammatically incomplete utterances; simple phrases especially in pre-verbal and medial positions' (2000: 61).

Other discourse markers of speech to be found in the story are—moving from neologism to neosyntax—ellipses, not just truncation and omission within a word, but entire words elided:

You work at DrugTown for **minimum.** (Saunders 2000a: 98)

Minimum what? Wage, perhaps? The elimination of the noun, or the nominalization of the adjective, reveal the informality: it is addressed to an audience that is in the same experiential sphere (the sentence is not dialogue), that understands what is missing, that is, indeed, a confederate. The passage:

**So not lucrative**, and Canada's a moot point. (Saunders 2000a: 97)

is a single paragraph. The initial clause has no subject, no verb, and begins with a conjunction.

The following examples of truncation just, well, stop, seem like the author/speaker can't be bothered to continue. Although, of course, this is not mere laziness: the ellipses very much act as style stances (see below).

No way am I table dancing for Angela. No way am I asking Angela Silveri's friend if she wants to see my cock. No way am I hanging around here so Angela can see me in my flight jacket and T-backs and wonder to herself how I went so wrong **etc. etc.** (Saunders 2000a: 117)

'Etc. etc.'?

Here the narrator is quoting Freddie, his mother's new lover, giving the eulogy:

...and left behind a lot of love, **etc. etc. blah blah blah**...but she was always content with whatever happened to her, **etc. etc. blah blah blah**. (Saunders 2000a:103)

Blah blah blah. Perhaps the most inarticulate, if at the same time damning, condemnation of verbosity and grandiloquence in a speaker's canon.

Unanswered questions are another form of sympathetic circularity, as the syntactic form of questions, even rhetorical questions, assume communion with an audience, an 'affective connection' (Carter 2004: 101).

It's just grass. How do you deface grass? What did they do, pee on the grass on the grave? (Saunders 2000a: 108)



What markers of sympathetic circularity, as well as most other tropes of informal, conversational speech such as auxiliary omission, colloquialisms, invention, and others discussed below are all pointing to is what linguists call a restricted code. A restricted code is a register that assumes mutual knowledge, and is sociocentric (unlike the converse, an elaborated code, which assumes no commonality with the audience, and tends to be egocentric in that the self is differentiated). Restricted codes use language as though the speaker/writer and the listener/reader are part of the same community; a restricted code is positional (Montgomery 1995). Utilizing a restricted code means it is unnecessary to explain that a Kleenex is a paper tissue—you shop at the same store—or that making minimum refers to wages.

Literature—at least the kind Saunders describes as ‘the real work of art’ (Saunders 2008a: 74)—has traditionally (again, the ‘literary language’ outlined earlier) used an elaborated code. There is a certain formality, and there is no assumed intimacy. For writers like Saunders (and myself) to utilize a restricted code makes the leap, bringing the reader in as confederate, as equal, as friend.

Immersion into a restricted code linguistically places the audience directly into Saunders’s fictional world. As Vonnegut says that a writer only achieves unity in his work if he is ‘writing as if speaking to one person’ (Klinkowitz 1982: 5), Saunders liberally deploys colloquial use of brand shorthand, of word choice, of omission and truncation as though he is talking to someone who knows what he’s talking about.

For instance, in ‘Sea Oak’:

Mr. Frendt comes on the P.A. and shouts, ‘Welcome to Joysticks!’  
Then he announces **Shirts Off**. (Saunders 2000a: 91).

‘Shirts Off’ is not dialogue, it is not even delineated with quotation marks or italics. The majuscule tells us that Shirts Off is a formal thing, a proper noun, a rite we should be cognizant of. And though it hardly needs to be, it is not explained. It is assumed we are well aware of the procedure. Similarly:

For dinner Jade microwaves some **Stars-n-Flags**. (Saunders 2000a: 107).

Saunders doesn’t explain Stars-n-Flags, because the assumption is that the reader/listener will be *au fait* with Stars-n-Flags, will no doubt take comfort in such comestibles himself. Though Stars-n-Flags are entirely fictional, we, the reader/listener—and this is Saunders’s genius—know exactly what they are.

‘Stars-n-Flags’ does not even make sense; the common expression, itself an epithet, a colloquialism, is ‘Stars and Stripes.’ ‘Stars and Stripes’ is the American flag; ‘Stars n Flags’ is stars and stars and stripes. Or whatever. The conjunction ‘n’ is a further degradation. Saunders—in a single phrase—is satirizing the American penchant for jingoism, not to mention the dietary vulgarity of spongy pasta in a tin of sugary ‘tomato-flavoured’ sauce formed into arbitrary shapes—SpaghettiOs, dinosaurs, the alphabet, Noodle Roni (which is a tautology, however mangled the morphology, and is, presumably, pasta shaped like pasta). Besides being a sly satire on said jingoism and junk food, Saunders targets the American appetite for neologistic branding (this is a land,

after all, where along any interstate you can find establishments like Git-n-Go, Chick Fil-A, or E-Z Lube).

Throughout his work, Saunders takes aim at the commodification of the American psyche, a target as wide as the blue Montana skies. He satirizes the American fetish for incorporating brands into cultural exchange, the pervasiveness of corporate-speak and its penchant for nominalization, and the blatancy and paucity of imagination in marketing nomenclature. This corporate usurpation of language is American to its roots, and Saunders takes it to the extremes of banality.

We've seen—and Saunders has satirized this—brands become memes (Xerox has become a verb, 'Scotch tape' has replaced 'adhesive tape,' Coke is no longer a brand, but a symbol of America itself.<sup>22</sup> Saunders's characters speak in brands:

I close my eyes and wrap Bernie up in the **Hefty** bag and **twisty-tie** the bag shut and lug it out to the trunk of the **K-car**.  
(Saunders 2000a: 123)

Cliché instead of thought; casual conversation becomes product placement. This commandeering of the American intellect is evil genius. Marketing directors even manage to plant and infiltrate colloquialism, mimicking the organic, indigenous nature of slang, and insidiously accrue the covert prestige of colloquial codes (Holmes 2001; Chambers 2003). Saunders very clearly understands that language equals community—'it has now become apparent that the function of non-standard language as marker of

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<sup>22</sup> And, perversely, was originally marketed as a 'brain tonic and intellectual soda-fountain beverage' (Marckwardt 1958: 89).

group identity ...is in no sense a socially marginal phenomenon, but is deeply rooted in the language behaviour of communities everywhere' (Milroy 1999: 94). Some brands have become a symbol of linguistic territorialism and stratum solidarity. Witness, for example, MacDonald's marketing directors coming up with the hip, hip-hop campaign of 'Mickey D's,' voiced by union actors done up like urban teens, planting the epithet 'Mickey D's' as though it emerged from the streets. Susceptible consuming teens (the target) use the name, in an effort to be cool, to be in, when in fact they were just pawns, zombie parrots, automatons, of corporate marketers. Saunders's narrator no longer uses a plastic garbage bag; he uses a Hefty bag.

Saunders also targets the pernicious trend, originating in boardrooms and metastasizing into stockrooms, into schools, into government agencies and grocery stores, of assumed familiarity. 'We shout, we speak in slogans, and we have apparently lost our tenuous grip on the compound/complex sentence and the kind of thinking which requires its syntactical structures' (Washburn & Thornton 1996: 15). Habermas, in his discussion of neo-conservative Daniel Bell's use of informal language in boardrooms, writes that it is the 'infantilisation of American men, free rein of adolescent mind sets, middle age is the new adolescence. But it creates camaraderie, accessibility, egalitarianism' (1985: 39). It's cool to be seen as one of the boys, cool to be informal (Chambers 2003); witness Bill Clinton with his sleeves rolled up, Bush in his cowboy boots. It started with sports metaphors and in recent times has bastardized terms from the self-actualization movement—

...I had to step into a closet and perform my **Hatred Abatement Breathing**. (Saunders 1997: 5)

He says that just for the record and **my own personal development**, he's always found me dull and has kept me around primarily for my yes-man capabilities... (ibid.:24)

Saunders also takes aim at the fetish not just for brands, but for branding, and the increasing blatancy of it. Everything can be branded; using a majuscule can turn an ordinary word or phrase into a commodity, can create a rite, can confer importance.

After fifteen years as **Cashier** she got demoted to **Greeter**. (Saunders 2000a: 103)

At Joysticks the dancer/waiters are under constant pressure to perform well. They are commodities, and as such they get rated, the ratings themselves becoming commodities:

What a stressful workplace. The minute your **Cute Rating** drops you're a goner. Guests rank us as **Knockout, HoneyPie, Adequate**, or **Stinker**. ... I'm a solid HoneyPie/Adequate, heading home with forty bucks cash. (Saunders 2000a: 92)

Brilliant satirisation of the hierarchical quantification in our commodified society, the meaningless tags that are placed on us to define our meaning, our worth, and their arbitrary nature—*HoneyPie? Stinker?*—and the exsanguination of all meaning from the terms. Words, corporate slogans, become 'strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object' (Orwell 1946 in Orwell, 2004: 109). The very name Sea Oak. Call it what you want in order to sell it. Sea Oak sounds idyllic, even though 'At Sea Oak there's no sea and no oak, just a hundred subsidized apartments and a rear view of FedEx' (Saunders 2000a: 93).

In a way, this is laziness. But in a more important way, it is the corporate marketers who are creating the cultural landscape. Though the blatancy would seem to be offensive, one grows numb. In ‘Sea Oak’ a character lives in ‘a sad little duplex on **Self-Storage Parkway**’ (Saunders 2000a: 92). In ‘CivilWarLand in Bad Decline’ Sylvia Loomis, the ‘queen of info,’ parties ‘at the **Make Me Club on Airport Road...**’ (Saunders 1997: 6).

Saunders’s satire is increasingly relevant as we see the corporate soporification—the ‘creeping paralysis’ in Milroy’s words (1999: 39)—of the American mind and landscape. There is no irony, no wit or imagination, no shame in the current spate of rechristening public space: the evocative Candlestick Park in San Francisco becomes 3Com Park. Candlestick Park had effortless poetry; 3Com is not even a word. Minute Maid Park took over where Houston once had the Astrodome. Mile High Stadium in Denver was replaced by INVESCO Field. There’s PETCO Park in San Diego, which, at least, is alliterative. It’s a time of Corporate Labelling of the American imagination.

At HardwareNiche you can get a video of *Bloodiest Crimes of the Century Reenacted*. You can get a video of Great Bloopers made during the filming of *Bloodiest Crimes of the Century Reenacted*. You can get a Chill’n’Pray, an overpriced cooler with a holographic image of a famous religious **personality** on the lid. (Saunders 1997: 56)

Even religious icons become celebrities, celebrities being just self-propelling commodities.

This corporate blatancy and linguistic desaturation of meaning is also evident in the titular location of ‘**CivilWarLand** in Bad Decline’ (Saunders 1997: 3-44), a story about a historical re-enactment amusement park under siege by teenage gangs tunnelling under

the walls, spray-painting simulated frontier buildings, wounding tourists, and killing a dray horse. The park is facing bankruptcy and a put-upon yes-man is entrusted with finding a solution under threat of losing his job. He agrees to give Quinn, the leader of the Desperate Patrol (a group of Thespians [sic] done up to look like returning war veterans) live ammunition for his gun, just to scare the gangs, but Quinn is instead grappled by the teens who steal his pants and ‘put tiny notches in his penis with their knives’ (ibid.: 9). Stronger measures are needed so they hire a Vietnam vet with a history of war crimes to assist with security. The vet soon goes feral and disappears into the woods, stalking teenagers and dismembering them for offences as minor as stealing candy. There’s also a family of ghosts from the actual Civil War who are contending with their own psychological problems.

Exploring a passage from that story we can find other tropes of conversational linguistics:

When visitors first come in **there’s** (1) **this** (2) **cornball** (3) part where they sit in **this kind of** (4) spaceship and **supposedly** (5) get blasted into space and travel faster than the speed of light and end up in 1865. (6) The **unit’s** (1) dated. (Saunders 1997: 10)

As well as seeing contractions (1), markers of sympathetic circularity (2, 4), colloquialism (3), and run-on sentences (6), we also see adverbials that mark the particular stance of the speaker/author (5).

The frequent occurrence of these particular adverbials is consistent with several contextual characteristics of conversation, particularly the focus on interpersonal interactions, the conveying of personal assessments and opinions, and the lack of time for planning or revision which makes precise word choice difficult. (Conrad & Biber in Hunston & Thompson 1999: 65)

Conrad & Biber identify three discrete types of stance adverbials. The epistemic stance adverbial comments on the speaker/author's opinion as to the veracity of the proposition.

For instance, 'supposedly' (5) above, or

Were our faces **ever** red when we found out it was **actually** the Irish who built the Canal. (Saunders 1997: 3).

Attitudinal stance adverbials convey the speaker/author's feelings, attitudes, expectations:

We drink and drink and **finally** he falls asleep on his office couch. (ibid.: 11)

Or:

The **last thing** I need is **some** fat guy's spit on my tie. (ibid.: 4)

And, lastly, style stance adverbials comment on the manner of delivery. 'Style stance adverbials are similar to epistemic stance adverbials in being most common in conversation, to emphasize that the speaker is being, among other things, "serious," "honest," "truthful," "frank," or "hopeful"' (Conrad & Biber in Hunston & Thompson 1999: 67). An example in Saunders is:

When I've finished invoicing I enjoy a pecan cluster. Two, **actually**. (Saunders 1997: 46)

It is the relaxed expectations and immediacy of speech that allows for a more fluid approach to grammaticality. One of the markers of speech is deviation (Leech in Van Dijk 1985). This is not to say that speech is ungrammatical, but there is more variability permissible in speech 'according to social grouping of speakers' (Milroy 1999: 47).



One form of this variability particularly common in speech is hyperbaton, or deviation of syntactic order, which is abnormal in written English (Leech in Van Dijk 1985), and in particular left dislocation, an inversion of the normal word order, primarily for emphasis.

I can't believe it. **Never again** to see my kids? (Saunders 1997: 26)

Or:

**Big deal**, is my feeling. (ibid.:10)

Left dislocation, I myself use it a lot. It's putting all the important stuff at the beginning, getting it out there, and if there's still time and I still have your attention, using the end of the sentence to explain, to clarify, to embellish. The left side: that's what's important.

Left dislocation can be thought of in terms of syntactic Darwinism: get the good stuff out first, make sure it survives. Get the meat on the table, as it were, and—if there's still time—bring out the butter carved like rose petals. From 'Sea Oak':

**Four times in a row** she shrieks get home. (Saunders 2000a: 99)

Left dislocation is essential in speech along the same lines as survival words are: the speaker has limited time and the jockeying for turn makes having one's meaning understood quickly imperative.

'My Flamboyant Grandson' (Saunders 2006:13-22) is a story about a grandfather named Leonard who, after having been mercilessly teased by his own grandfather for having enlarged calves, endeavours to love his grandson unconditionally.

Dear Lord, he is what he is, let me love him no matter what. If he is a gay child, God bless him, if he is a non-gay child who simply very much enjoys wearing his grandmother's wig while singing

‘Edelweiss’ to the dog, so be it, and in either case let me communicate my love and acceptance in everything I do. (ibid.: 14)

When Leonard takes his grandson to New York to see a show—‘Babar Sings!’—

Saunders suddenly takes us into the realm of not-to-distant-futurism, where strips in your shoes activate personalized advertisements. It is an offence to remove your shoes, rendering the strips inoperable, but when Leonard’s feet begin to bleed—as they are prone to do—he is left with no choice, and must face the consequences.

Furthering the above discussion concerning the unplanned nature of spoken narrative, one of the key elements—and one that is mimicked extensively by Saunders, Vonnegut, and myself—is retrace and repair (House 2003; Milroy 1999). It is the stumbling to get everything out and have it make sense, within time constraints and without fine-tuning (and subject to a panoply of psychological reasons for why we utter what we utter, even if it’s wrong, even if it’s humiliating, even if it’s the opposite of what we want to actually say). Retrace meaning going back, to repair the mistakes we’ve just made. It’s thinking out loud. It’s what normally happens in the privacy of one’s own room during writing, and what doesn’t normally make it to the page. It’s verbal editing.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Other writers who’ve used this to wondrous effect are Lorrie Moore who, in *Anagrams* (1986) seems to start the story four times before settling on the final form (reflecting the protagonist’s compulsive need for reinvention) and Thomas Bernhard in *Correction* (1975, 2010) whose entire novel is ongoing correction, for example: ‘I am all alone in what I may call Roithamer’s garret, I had the immediate impression of being inside a thought-chamber, everything in this chamber had to do with thought, once a man was inside it he had to think, being in this chamber presupposed incessant thinking, whoever enters Hoeller’s garret, enters into thinking, specifically into thinking about Hoeller’s garret...’ (Bernhard 1975, 2010:15). To name but two.

Repair is a ‘universal and fundamental interactional resource specialised for handling problems in speech production, perception and comprehension’ (House 2003: 2). Speech has no final drafts, only first (and second, which is repair, or even third, if you’re really confused or inarticulate). Retracing and repairing are not common to writing as the opportunity for polish is evident. Unless, of course, you work hard to polish your work to appear ideally unpolished, as in the case with Saunders, Vonnegut and, with luck, myself. Working hard to sound like a person from Indianapolis.

From ‘My Flamboyant Grandson’:

...when I towed a fleet of thirty [mobile billboards] around town with a Dodge Dart, wearing a suit that today would be found comic. By which I mean (1) I have no problem with the concept of the Everly Strip. That is not why I had my shoes off (2). I am as patriotic as the next guy (3). Rather, as I have said (4), it was due to my bleeding feet. (Saunders 2006: 17)

We see the narrator restating his premise when he gets off track (1), struggling to ensure the audience is clear as to what he is talking about (2), fending off suspicion or accusation before it even arises and justifying himself (3), repeating himself, and acknowledging that he is doing so (4). ‘[S]peech...may actually *require* some redundancy so that there will be less danger of a spoken message being misheard’ (Milroy, 1999: 68). As House (in Coupland 1991), while discussing the argument that repair is either a sign of the fallibility of language or a sign of its robustness, says—in support of the latter— ‘repair [is] an inbuilt design feature that enables understanding when it is temporarily threatened’ (House 2003: 2).

I had brought my grandson to New York to see a show. Because what is he always doing, up here in Oneonta? Singing and dancing,

sometimes to my old show-tune records, but more often than not to his favourite CD, *Babar Sings!*, sometimes even making up his own steps, which I do not mind, or rather try not to mind it. (Saunders 2006: 13)

This *feels* like speech, like he's figuring out what he's trying to say as he's saying it, as when the grandfather, starting with a simple declarative statement, in an effort to ensure that his message is clear, rushes, getting distracted, trying to cope with the grammatical complexity of an increasingly labyrinthine sentence, having to retool the syntax as he goes along.

From 'Sea Oak':

As I come out of the woods I hear a shot. At least I think it's a shot. It could be a backfire. But no, it's a shot, because then there's another one, and some kids sprint across the courtyard yelling that Big Scary Dawgz rule. (ibid. 2000a: 96)

As the above passage illustrates, we are with the narrator—a none too self-assured narrator—in his confusion, stumbling, thinking. Retrace and repair is especially effective in the above passage as we get a sense of tension, of the immediacy, within the story.

But, if this repair isn't in character dialogue but in the narration, and if this prose isn't, generically, stream of consciousness, why would an author present himself so, well, vulnerably, with such lack of mastery? Why write in that voice?

The stories examined so far are indeed first person, thus in the character's voice.

However, more telling are Saunders's essays, which are in his non-fiction voice. That voice, that register—as we also saw with Vonnegut—is, for the most part, pretty much the same as the voice he uses for his fiction.

From ‘A Brief Study of the British’ (Saunders 2008a: 85-96):

One finds oneself longing for the simplicity of America, where, for example, everyone understands that New York City is a city, that Cleveland is a state in either Ohio or Indiana, and that the Mississippi River, I’m pretty sure, does not run in any other state than Mississippi. Or city. I can’t remember if Mississippi is a city or a—anyway, the point is, the American visitor to Britain can avoid all confusion by simply referring to his hosts and hostesses as ‘you guys.’ (Saunders 2008: 86)

Although this is satire, we can see the hedging, the retracing, the revision, the self-questioning. It is an interesting tack as it shows the author to be fallible, in a way submissive, relinquishing his dominance, rolling over, eschewing his alpha-dog status, his position of authority: the statements are coming out haphazard, non-authoritative.

Elsewhere from the essay:

...keeping the world safe **from** (1) democracy. Or, **should I say** (2), safe **for** (1) democracy. **Whatever** (3). **What am I** (4), **some kind of** (5) language scientist or **wordologist** (6) or **what-not** (7)? (ibid.: 88)

As well as seeing retrace and repair (1), in this case what looks like a performance error, which, since it is being written, should have been corrected in the first sentence, we also see an adverbial stance (2), unanswered questions (4), and the onrush of unplanned speech. The marker of sympathetic circularity (5), neologism (6), and colloquialism (7), as well as seeming unplanned, also exhibit an increasing annoyance, as though the speaker were becoming exasperated in real time.

Another form of ungrammatical material, from a formal standpoint, is non-clausal material (Sarangi 2000; Biber et al 1999). The ‘whatever’ (3) above is an example of this as it cannot convincingly be linked to any clause. Non-clausal material—or inserts—is a

marker of speech as they often occur as clarification in repair, as well as—in this case—a stance adverbial. Other examples are:

What we want our ending to do is to do more than we could have dreamed it would do.

Sheesh.

No wonder there's such a thing as writer's block. (Saunders 2008: 181)

'Sheesh'? It isn't even a word. It's a sibilant fricative exhalation. And it gets its own paragraph.

Other forms of non-clausal material would be syntactical non-clausal material. These can convincingly be linked to a clause, but aren't, usually because material has been elided to prevent undue redundancy, and carry with them the assumption that the addressee shares the same knowledge. But they are still fragments, thus ungrammatical, and, historically, have been rare in formal writing. For example:

I clock out and cut through the strip of forest behind FedEx. **Very pretty.** (Saunders 2000a: 96)

...out he goes. **Poor Lloyd.** (ibid.:92)

**No biggie.** (ibid.: 99)

Another marker of sympathetic circularity common to speech that we see often in Saunders is the familiarizing vocative. From 'Bohemians' (Saunders 2006:183-195), a nostalgic tale of eastern European immigrants in the narrator's childhood mid-western suburb, and the importance of not prejudging people:

When **Mrs. H.** claimed her family had once owned serfs, **Mom's** attention wandered. (Saunders 2006: 184)

‘Mrs. H.’ here is for Mrs. Hopanlitski. And the ‘Mom,’ as the majuscule indicates, is used as a proper name: it isn’t ‘my mom’ where it becomes a common noun. From ‘CivilWarLand in Bad Decline’:

**Mr. A’s** another self-made man.’ (Saunders 1997: 4).

From ‘Sea Oak’:

‘Oh my dear sister,’ says **Ma**. (Saunders 2000a: 103)

The use of these markers is indicative of friends speaking to friends.

Though not necessarily tropes of speech or informality, there are other striking features in Saunders worth noting. As discussed previously with Vonnegut, Saunders also employs polymodality in his stories. A metafictional wink, perhaps? The resultant localization from the striking change in lexis, as Saunders gives his characters unusually higher registers than his undereducated and underambitious characters have previously shown aptitude for, throws the reader, troubles the diegesis. In Saunders’s own words (discussing Barthelme), ‘we notice this weird, illogical elevation of diction’ (Saunders 2008a: 181). To wit:

There’s an **ad hoc** crackhouse in the laundry room... (Saunders 2000a: 97)

‘Ad hoc’? His character is talking about an impromptu crackhouse, and is of a stratum of characters who would live in a subdivision where crackhouses are a commonly occurring phenomenon. Or:

So not lucrative, and Canada's a **moot** point. (ibid.)

'Moot' hardly seems the kind of word that the character might have encountered while offering drunken secretaries a glimpse of his cock for tips, or relaxing at home with a steaming bowl of Stars n Flags, nestled on the couch watching *How My Child Died Violently*.

Temporal connectives also reveal the unplanned nature of speech, and are conspicuously present in 'The 400-Pound CEO' (Saunders 1997:45-64), a story about a corpulent clerk named Jeffrey whose job is to write obfuscating letters hiding the true nefarious nature of Humane Raccoon Alternatives, a company founded by an ex-con, Tim, that instead of humanely relocating raccoons 'execut[es] them with a tire iron' (45) and dumps the bodies into a lime pit out back. 'Huge, and terrified of becoming bitter' (49), Jeffrey is lonely, bullied at work, and laughed at by women. When he inadvertently comes upon Tim attacking an animal rights emissary, he runs to the woman's rescue and unwittingly kills his boss by crushing him under his 400 pounds. Instead of going to the police, Jeffrey dumps the body in the lime pit, and assumes the mantle of CEO, ready to claim the love of Freeda, the document placement and retrieval specialist. But soon the police arrive.

At noon another load of raccoons comes in and Claude takes them out back of the office and executes them with a tire iron. **Then** he checks for vitals, wearing protective gloves. **Then** he drags the cage across 209 and initiates burial by dumping the raccoons into the pit that's our little corporate secret. (Saunders 1997: 45)

The 'and then this happened' nature of the narrative seems rather juvenile, amateurish, and lacks the facility of polished storytelling that can instil forward thrust, forward



narrative inertia without something so bald as ‘and then this happened.’ It seems feebly constructed. Speech, unplanned discourse, is, by the standards of formal writing, feebly constructed. It is awkwardly simple, disarmingly simple. Not unlike children’s fiction, as is evident with Saunders’s own fiction for children. As with his essays, the voice is not so very different.

*The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (Saunders 2000b) is a story about a three-house town called Frip, besieged by orange, multi-eyed baseball-sized creatures called gappers that, daily, climb out of the sea and swarm the village goats to, well, to give them their love. However, this daily onslaught causes the goats to cease milk production—the basis of Frip’s economy—and in severe cases to cause the goats to fall into stupefaction. The children of Frip must, constantly, brush the gappers off the goats, put them in a gapper sack, and haul them back to the sea.

**Now** (1) gappers are not smart, but **then again** (2) they are not equally stupid (3). One day, at the bottom of the sea, one of the **less-stupid** (4) gappers, who had a lump on one side of its skull that was **actually** (5) its somewhat larger-than-average brain **sort of** (6) sticking out... (Saunders 2000b: 11)

With (1), an avuncular ‘now,’ we see, as with Saunders’s other prose, a marker of informal conversation, the style stance adverbial, followed quickly by an epistemic stance adverbial (2). The entire first sentence (3) is a case of equivocation, of retrace and repair: the narrator states something, but questions whether his intended meaning has been conveyed. With (4) we get invention, a survival word in the onrush of extemporaneous speech. Common in this sort of invention is the use of the word just used (stupid) only with an affix so that the speaker doesn’t have to trudge his deeper lexical store, which

requires some rumination for sifting. (5) is another epistemic adverbial stance and (6) is a marker of sympathetic circularity, the ‘sort of’ being purposefully vague (one can almost imagine the narrator gesticulating at this point, a sort of hand flapping or rotary propeller).

This is a spoken register, nearly identical to the register Saunders uses in his literary fiction. However, reading it in the context of children’s literature, it seems appropriate. This conversational style seems apt, natural. Children’s literature, due to its audience, is more informal, more accessible. It is far more jarring in adult fiction. And more funny.

Vonnegut and Saunders have both had the charge levelled at them that their writing is ‘childish.’ It’s instructive to see the similarity of Saunders’s own writing for children, which is granted childishness, to his other work, including his non-fiction; it limns his use of tone and register. The writing is, as is Vonnegut’s, simple, but it is far from simplistic. It’s very purposefully simple, and that purpose will be discussed below.

Another trope of informal, juvenile (in the non-derogatory sense of the word) narrative is the pattern story. Saunders’s stories are littered with them. He loves them. This is truly where the audaciousness that he admires in Barthelme (Saunders 2008) comes to the fore. Saunders even puts them in his narrative asides. From ‘Sea Oak,’ as the narrator describes possible locales to escape from Aunt Bernie, he considers Canada:

We went for a weekend last fall and got a flat tire and these two farmers with bright-red faces insisted on fixing it, then springing for dinner, then starting a college fund for the babies. (Saunders 2000a: 97).

In the space of single sentence he takes the story from a perfectly believable situation to ludicrous extremes. Here, also in ‘Sea Oak,’ is a description of the television show that the characters watch after dinner to take their mind off of Aunt Bernie’s demise. The programme is called *The Worst That Could Happen*:

...a half-hour of computer simulations of tragedies that have never actually occurred but theoretically could. A kid gets hit by a train and flies into a zoo, where he’s eaten by wolves. A man cuts his hand off chopping wood and while wandering around screaming for help is picked up by a tornado and dropped on a preschool during recess and lands on a pregnant teacher. (Saunders 2000a: 107)

Not only do the tragedies not occur, Saunders interrupts plot and dialogue to escalate, to take things about as far as they can go. It is childish nonsense, as he explains in his essay on Barthelme’s ‘The School’ (Saunders 2008: 175-185). The example of a pattern story that Saunders uses is simplistic, a schoolyard game: eating a piece of candy of ever-increasing size. After several examples of voluminous pieces of candy, his point being well made, he continues. Not for academic edification, not for clarification, but simply because—as one might do in an informal chat with a friend—he can’t help himself, or doesn’t try. By continuing he doesn’t become increasingly witty; quite the opposite: continuing makes him fallible, admittedly and shame-facedly juvenile. ‘...you’re in on the joke,’ he writes,

...your mind knows the general shape of the fun to be expected. But if I kept going (‘I ate a candy the size of the United States! The size of North America! The size of...’ even typing this is getting tiresome, although I would have liked to get at least as far as ‘I ate a piece of candy the size of Uranus!’), you are going to start to dislike me. (Saunders 2008a: 177)

Like a schoolboy, he just wanted to giggle at writing ‘Uranus.’ This informality, this dropping of face, this indulgence risks—as he admits—our interest and our patience. One would presume this to be the prime consideration for a writer, maintaining an audience. But, revealingly, no.

His is ‘you are going to start to dislike me.’

### 4.3 LITERATURE AS CO-DEPENDENCE

So why does he do it? Saunders’s voice is a far cry from what he once believed was necessary in great writing, which was done

...in a language that had as little as possible to do with the one I spoke. The words were similar but arranged more cleverly, less directly. A good literary sentence was like a floor with a hole hidden in it. You dropped into the basement and, scratching your head, thought: ‘Why’d he say it that way? He must really be a great writer.’ (Saunders 2008a: 74)

With Saunders you don’t scratch your head and wonder. You recognize. You don’t rush to the dictionary to look up ‘sheesh.’ There is no hole in the floor. So, is he aiming at not being great?

As has been discussed, there is an American penchant for anti-intellectualism, for the common man, for the American voice that is doggedly un-intellectual. But, like Vonnegut, it goes beyond that, though it is linked to it. As well as an indigenous need not to alienate by writing like an Englishman from a hundred years ago—and being a

turgid vein for humour, as has been previously discussed—these authors just want to be liked.

Certainly he claims (above) that he worries that we'll dislike him. But we don't. This seems a prime motivator in his writing—overtly. In Vonnegut, it can be teased out, but Saunders comes right out with it. He wants to be liked. Loved, even.

In 'American Psyche,' Saunders's column for The Guardian, he writes:

I have always been honest with you, Guardian readers, which is not the case with my American readers, to whom I lie incessantly. I trust we can put this behind us and love each other the way we used to.  
(Saunders 2007)

Love each other the way we used to. It's funny. It's gently satiric of that palpating American emotional effusiveness with strangers and fellow-members of one's self-help group. But the sentiment is not isolated, and perhaps no more illustratively than in panegyric of other writers. Again, to analyze his analysis of Barthelme:

In other words, what does Barthelme have to do here, as he goes forth from the end of paragraph nine (which I consider the end of the Rising Action), so that we will continue to love him? (Saunders 2008a: 180)

This is a writer writing about writing, unguarded, abandoning all pretence, Saunders's arguments not framed in those terms more readily recognized as academic, terms like epistemological cohesion, diegetic fidelity, mobilization of discourse, or other 'ideonisms,' to hijack Wylie's unkind terminology. He speaks, purely, of love. Is that not, when it comes down to it, the reason why we read: because we love it? And isn't that why we write: to create things that people will love? Saunders gets to the marrow of it:

essentially, to be liked. And isn't that the root of all the arts? Certainly performing arts, of which literature, in its modern, American sense, arguably is.

What he likes about Barthelme—and Vonnegut—we find in Saunders's own writing. To reiterate a phrase from earlier, 'the universe is a mirror, my friend.'

On Barthelme one more time:

...in the process of advancing the pattern, he has given us a little something extra: a laugh, yes, but more important, an acknowledgement that the writer is right there with us—he knows where we are, and who we are, and is involved in an intimate and respectful game with us. (ibid.: 178)

This is not literature of adulation or sycophancy. This is literature as camaraderie, confederacy...

I think of this as the motorcycle-sidecar model of reading: writer and reader right next to one another, leaning as they corner, the pleasure coming from the mutuality and simultaneity of the experience. (ibid.: 178)

...literature of fraternity, of friendship. Saunders writes like the writers he likes, the writers who want to be liked. One can't imagine riding in a motorcycle-sidecar with Henry James. Henry James is no one's friend.

Saunders uses a voice that is accessible and non-threatening, in the plain American for 'getting around your dopey little world' (Saunders 2008a: 74). As Janet Holmes writes, 'language is not simply used to convey referential information, but also expresses information about social relationships' (2001: 259), 'the better you know someone, the more casual and relaxed the speech style you will use to them' (ibid.: 224). This is key to

Vonnegut, certainly to Saunders, and directly applicable to my own writing as well: the use of voice to get audience on your side, to listen to you, to go along with you, *to accept you, to like you*. ‘Voice, then, is the act of meaning making itself...the choice of which role we will play, which identity we will put forth in our interaction with others.’ (Kramsch 2003: 132 ).

It’s how we get people to like us; how everyone does it, not just writers. We seek camaraderie through speech. We talk like everyman, and everyman don’t talk high-fallutin’, in a ‘language that nobody uses.’ Not in everyday life. Not if you want to fit in. It’s talking down, lowering oneself to be more accessible, less daunting (which dovetails exactly with the American penchant for anti-elitism and the fetish for the common man discussed previously). To illustrate using an extreme, when we talk to a baby, when we want that baby to smile, we speak in monosyllables, in labial plosives, in nonsensical phonemes. We don’t try to impress the infant with our understanding of, say, the use of the epistemic adverbial stance in modern American fiction.

Sociolinguists call this convergence. ‘[E]ach person’s speech converges towards the speech of the person they are talking to. This process is called *speech accommodation*. It tends to happen when the speakers like one another, or where one speaker has a vested interest in pleasing the other or putting them at ease’ (Holmes 2001: 230). It reflects ‘a speaker’s or group’s need (often unconscious) for social integration or identification with another. ...as one person becomes more similar to another, this increases the likelihood that the second will like the first’ (Giles 1991: 18). We seek to achieve solidarity when

we write like a man from Indianapolis, not an egghead,<sup>24</sup> when we don't get all superior and what-not, when we defer to others. In his essay 'The Braindead Megaphone' Saunders describes people that enter our heads through various media, '...in fact, as you read this (sorry, sorry) I am become one of them' (Saunders 2008a: 2). He actually apologizes to his readers for reading him. This mid-western deference is accommodation.

Accommodation generally requires face-to-face interaction. But using the informality of speech, using a conversationalistic register, writers can mimic this proximity. It is accommodating as assumption. Is this a mucker pose (Marckwardt 1958)? Not really—that term connotes a certain scheming, a certain inauthenticity. In Saunders and Vonnegut (and myself) the purpose is to please, not to trick. Certainly the convergence, the assumption of proximity, is a construct, but not of guile; it is a construct as all co-dependent relationships are. The genius of Saunders and Vonnegut is that they forge an allegiance with their audience, exploiting the tendency of people, of readers, to have a 'strong identification and affiliation with the distinctive patterns of their locality' (Montgomery 1995: 67). Or of their culture: an anti-elitist American culture. They make themselves easy to like.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Unless of course, it was pointed out to me, one is at a Mensa convention. Please see Chapter Four—'2%'—in *My Ice Age*, below.

<sup>25</sup> In a personal way. These are not the Towering Giants of literature lore, the Great American Macho Icons, the chest beaters and priapic satyrs of legend. They lower themselves, as it were; they accommodate. These are writers of a modern America, the Post-Idealists, where heroes are suspect, where writers don't have to drink scotch by the quart and bang movie stars or catch marlin or box. Certainly there are people, as has been sagaciously pointed out, who do prefer 'the company of James in a morning room preferable to squeezing into a sidecar' (Boxall 2009), but, I venture, these would be far



For example, here's a subheading in Saunders's chapter on effective short story writing:

‘ENDING IS STOPPING  
WITHOUT SUCKING’

(Saunders 2008a: 179)

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from common *in America* outside academe. And, alternately, there are certainly factions who level the charge of puerility at Vonnegut, who abhor line drawings of assholes in their fiction or recoil at tales of spinster aunts returning from the grave looking for one night stands. All authors, most definitely—James, Vonnegut, Saunders, Hemingway, Mencken, Mailer, et al—are appealing to a certain readership, and cultivating it. But the older authors were alpha dogs; Saunders and Vonnegut utilize other strategies to forge bonds.

## 5. Scripto Ergo Sum

[T]here are two social functions of narratives: a referential function, which gives the audience information through the recapitulation of the teller's experience, and an evaluative function, which communicates the meaning of the narrative by establishing some point of personal involvement (Lavov and Waletsky 1967:33). The evaluation makes the narrated events reportable, repeatable, and relevant. It wards off the withering rejoinder, 'So what?' (Cortazzi & Lixian in Hunston & Thompson 1999: 105)

One of the ways that evaluation does this is 'to construct and maintain relations between the speaker or writer and hearer or reader' (Hunston and Thompson 1999: 5). 'This has been studied in relation to three main areas: manipulation, hedging, and politeness. In each of these areas, the writer can be said to be exploiting the resources of evaluation to build a particular kind of relationship with the reader' (ibid.: 8) (though, to be honest, the latter two are really just phyla of the first). My use of voice—the hesitancy, the hedging, the reluctance to offend<sup>26</sup> is used to build a liaison, a sense of community. Just as Saunders assumes a lower register to make people like him, just as Vonnegut uses voice to disarm, in a manifestation both of humility and a compulsion to avoid offence (which leads, yet again, to desire to fit in). As George Grosz, another German expatriate, put it on arriving in America, 'My motto was now to give offence to none and be pleasing to all. Assimilation is straightforward once one overcomes the greatly overvalued superstition concerning character. To have character generally means that one is distinctly inflexible' (in Kranzfelder 2005), similar sentiments and strategies claimed by Vonnegut. Accommodation, of course, functions as the linguistic expression of assimilation: making yourself (speak) like others in order to fit in, building 'a relationship

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<sup>26</sup> Though there is no proscription against mocking. Nothing brings people together like mocking someone else.

between writer and reader, in particular by assuming shared attitudes, values, and reactions which it can be difficult for the reader, as the subordinate in this relationship, to dispute.’ (Hunston and Thompson 1999: 10). Accommodation is forced entry into an extant community.

‘Community,’ as in its close relative ‘communion’: bringing together, sharing, even a sense of participation in a sacrament, a ritual of belonging; commonality, mutuality. This assumption of and therefore fashioning of community is used to overcome a sense of outsidership, of inadequacy, of other. Like Vonnegut’s formative memories of being the smallest child at the table, or of having a German name in America during times of virulent Teutophobia, or Saunders’s performance anxiety in the face of *real* writing (‘Great writing was hard reading. What made something great was you could barely understand it...’ [Saunders 2008a: 74]). The sacrament, the communion, occurs when the writer divulges this, lays himself bare, rolls over, brings the reader in, converges, even if not necessarily to a lower register: a *social* convergence, reneging his position as the holder of authority, of confidence; the voice of God always being the given author’s—explicitly, in Vonnegut’s case—the author chooses to become mortal, just like you and me. This candidness forges the bond that overcomes the isolation being discussed in the writing.

## 5.1 TALKING THE TALK

In my own work, I use a lot of the tropes of informal conversation as well to assume a voice in a conscious attempt at confederacy with the reader. These fragments, the left

dislocation, the disfluency features as though the processing is taking place in real time, hedging, morphological invention, neologising, phatic utterances expressing solidarity and empathy with others in that they mimic speech, mimic informality—when we hear them we *know*, like we know that Saunders means us no harm, like we know that Vonnegut is a decent fellow.<sup>27</sup> ‘[L]earning what these implications are is part of learning the language; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk. ... We are, therefore, exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims’ (Cavell 1969: 11-12). The voice, the writing, is familiar. It sounds like something we’ve heard before, a friend in a bar, a friend shyly telling stories to fill the hours on a long car trip. Our synapses snap into place—the brain makes sense—ergo, the writer must also be our friend; ‘something does follow from the fact that a term is used in its usual way: it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make certain inferences, draw certain conclusions’ (ibid.: 11). This, as has been explored previously, is well known to politicians. They know that by using a lower register, contractions, and cornpone rhetoric that voters will see them as *one of them*, not as an east coast, pinko, fag intellectual. They will want to have a beer with you, even if you are a confirmed alcoholic like George Bush. Wood, discussing Sarah Palin’s nomination for Vice President: ‘The leathery extremist Phyllis Schlafly had this to say,

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<sup>27</sup> The ‘we’ here, of course, being the community of recognizers which includes Saunders, certainly, myself, a number of professors tenured in the late seventies, and most sophomores. The ‘we,’ of course, does not include the Kansas State Board of Education, Richard Nixon (presumably), and my Aunt Laure. And a ‘decent fellow,’ that is, for a member-of-his-World-War-II-generation type fellow—a fellow of *that* sort—writing in the 1960s, but, really, of the 1950s, where a certain amount of atavistic misogyny is, though unforgivable, even in hindsight, at least contextualized.

at the Republican Convention, about Palin: “I like her because she’s a woman who’s worked with her hands, which Barack Obama never did, he was just an elitist who worked with words” (2008: 74).<sup>28</sup>

What I see in Saunders’s writing (like what Saunders sees in Vonnegut’s writing), what I admire, is what I see, or would like to see, in my own: the ability to assume a persona of unthreatening informality, to draw the reader in, to relax, to have fun; the concise and deceptive simplicity and the confidence in that simplicity.

Vonnegut makes a statement of his own fallibility, an admission of his own weakness, and explanation—excuse?—for his writing’s haphazard structure. Saunders confesses his neediness. I do the same thing in mine: admission. Artful awkwardness.

In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which Vonnegut writes to start the book—not relegating it to the introduction, banished to the biblio suburbs—he explains the genesis of the novel and details his own experiences and the difficulty of writing them. As Vonnegut had difficulty articulating his own profound formative experience—finding shape for them, finding voice—I, too, was at a loss to formulate my own coming of age in the Arctic. I could give my book form, not with science fiction, but by bracketing and intertwining the arctic episodes with my own more recent experiences. Vonnegut used Tralfamadore, a planet he’d invented in an earlier book. Los Angeles is my Tralfamadore.

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<sup>28</sup> Although killing a moose with an automatic weapon from a helicopter is hardly wrasslin’ a bear to the ground.

## 5.2 ALIEN LIFE

But he, Siddhartha, where did he belong? Whose life would he share?  
Whose language would he speak? (Hesse 1922, 2008: 33)

*My Ice Age* is about alienation, about being a lone stranger, on the Arctic Circle or in Los Angeles; from one vestige of community to another, at home in neither, each providing its own facet, but no whole: ‘what is thought of as “alienation” is something which occurs within moral systems; since these are profoundly haphazard accumulations, it is no surprise that we feel part of some regions of the system and feel apart from other regions’ (ibid.: 26). Just like Vonnegut the German Boy, my alienation was profound and haphazard: a white boy in Eskimo village, an Eskimo village boy in Hollywood, a gay boy in, well, the world. Though this will not be a gay coming-of-age tale, sexuality does inform it. There is the inevitable alienation and estrangement from place (family, community, society) that gayness foments, ‘for lesbians and gay men the diasporic sense of separation and loss, so far from affording a principle of coherence for our subcultures, may actually attach to aspects of the (heterosexual) culture of our childhood, where we are no longer “at home”’ (Sinfield 1998: 30). You become different from your culture. A sealing off into separateness, a feeling like an alien barely passing as normal, the result, according to Bersani, of ‘the profoundly biased cultural education we receive in sameness and difference—that is, in our self-forming perceptions of where we end and others begin, and where and how the frictions of otherness block the expansion of our selves’ (1995: 4). What happens, during puberty, when these entirely foreign feelings swamp the addled adolescent mind? The Arctic Circle was a tough place for any boy, but a

burgeoning gay boy? The rough games of the Eskimos, past-times like running after lemmings to smash them with rocks, were designed to hone nascent hunters. The blood and muck and discomposure that would fill their adult lives. Not games that exactly came naturally for anyone but a solid Kinsey 1.

### A SLIGHT FORAY INTO GAY

But was it to a gay community that I was drawn? ‘Indeed, while ethnicity is transmitted usually through family and lineage, most of us are born and/or socialised into (presumptively) heterosexual families. We have to move away from them, at least to some degree; and *into* if we are lucky, the culture of a minority community’ (Sinfield 1998: 30). In *Summertime* (2010) Coetzee writes of the sense of disenfranchisement of the whites in South Africa: ‘Whatever the opposite is of *native* or *rooted*, that was what we felt ourselves to be. We thought of ourselves as sojourners, temporary residents, and to that extent without a home, without a homeland’ (210). And though, of course, the political and moral qualms *vis a vis* legitimacy are vastly different, the sentiments nonetheless are the same.

Certainly the gay community was an option, a cohesive, organized society of like-minded communityless community-seekers. It was veritable homeland. As Mrs Friedke says of the gays in *The Driver’s Seat*, ‘...the ones who were born like that...the ones that can’t help it should be put on an island’ (Spark 1970, 1994). And we, basically, do just that ourselves. And, like other nations, it is an ideological construct, ‘cultural artefacts of a particular kind’ (Anderson 1983, 1991: 4): ‘it is an imagined political community ... *imagined* because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their

fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (ibid.: 6).

We congregate; flock, even: 'instead of dispersing, we assemble. Assemble into communities in big towns, around the world' (Sinfield 1998: 30). It's just normal. Not surprising since, well, we're social beings basically, as a species, and what sets us apart is our attraction to something that is non-standard. Indeed, for gays it's even more important because either for ourselves or for others, it becomes our defining characteristic, like many minorities. I.e., a hypothetical: 'Which one is he?' 'You know, the black guy.' We need our communities for self-reference, to be ourselves, when our selves are illegal or unacceptable or unwelcome within other communities. We need a place to feel safe, to openly practice primate grooming behaviour, to pair-bond. To feel normal. Because it is normal, even if Camille Paglia thinks it's abnormal (ibid.: 76-78). I'm surprised at Camille Paglia! She should know better. Sex is just for procreation? Not for chimps, not for dolphins, not for penguins, not for humans.<sup>29</sup> Then food must be just for sustenance? Put down that chocolate éclair, Camille Paglia! She claims to be speaking 'humanly' not 'statistically.' But how else do you gauge the norm if not statistically? Not normal would imply it isn't a commonly occurring phenomenon throughout almost all species most through many millennia. It's normal, a regularly

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<sup>29</sup> 'Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it,' as Cole Porter would have it (1928). Although he was talking about falling in love, researchers have documented homosexual behaviour in everything from bees (the Southeastern Blueberry) to birds (emus and chickens, to name two) to fleas, educated or not. It was also documented in worms, wasps, toads, rattlesnakes, spiders, turtles, salmon, cheetahs, and buffalo (Bagemihl 1999). Also, coincidentally, most arctic wildlife, including caribou and char, the two staples of my diet growing up.



occurring 1-in-approximately-10 kind of thing. April only occurs once in every twelve times; you wouldn't call April an abnormal month.

It is a community (or subculture, as Sinfield prefers) as it does have its own rituals and iconography. The hagiology has Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand as its co-deities (perhaps like Zeus and Jupiter), with minor deities filling out the pantheon, including Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Marlene Dietrich. There are also splinter sects—like Mystery Cults or Jews For Jesus—subcultures within the subculture, dedicated to the worship of Doris Day, Sandra Bernhard, Lucille Ball, and Divine.

It has its own creation myth, the Stonewall riots of 1969 being the gay Bastille Day, when some drag queens, already inconsolable after Judy Garland's death, had their last nerve stepped on by New York police on a routine harassment raid of the Stonewall Inn and threw their high heels through the window and ignited four nights of anarchy in Greenwich Village. The anniversary is celebrated, worldwide, with parades and carnivals, as Gay Pride Day. We even have our own flag. If that's not a transnational community, slightly more than a subculture, I don't know what is.

It must be a community because a group must be codified and official if revolution—like Queer Nation, or ACT UP, or the Radical Faeries—can occur, to shake things up. In order to revolt, the communal shackles must first exist. It's the difference between oppression and mere bullying, between revolution and mere vandalism. '[T]rue

communities exist which can be advantageously juxtaposed to nations' (Anderson 1983, 1991: 6).

We have our own press, film festivals, dentists, drug stores, and high holy days (the aforementioned Gay Pride and Halloween, where people in our capitols—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City—prepare their costumes all year and the city shuts down main metropolitan thoroughfares to accommodate the bacchanalia). We have our own founding fathers and mothers in Harvey Milk, Radclyffe Hall, Alan Ginsberg, and Rock Hudson (our Abraham Lincoln of AIDS awareness).

'Gay subculture, certainly, is hybrid, to the point where it is difficult to locate anything that is crucially gay' (Sinfield 1998: 29). Sinfield discounts tropes of gay culture, from disco to drag to opera, because it is also appreciated by straight audiences (cross-over and cooption), but because rap and hip-hop now play in white clubs don't make them any less black. And Judy and Bette and Barbra were virulently straight in a virulently straight industry, but still they are gay icons. The 'gay community' does exist, and is dominant, and we are exposed to it, but whether we choose to subscribe to all or any of it doesn't nullify its dominance. Because not all members of the subculture have all the crucial elements doesn't mean the template or ideal doesn't exist. Not everyone in America is lantern-jawed, blue-eyed, and riding a horse, but that doesn't make them not American. Gay culture is monolithic; and though, of course, not all members of the community comfortably fit into it, it is aspirational. It is the face of gay—50-year-old men who buy Calvin Klein underwear a size too small. Even old trolls going into a bar to find only other old trolls would be displeased. This hegemony of the hunk, propagated by theorists

like Mark Simpson and Toby Manning (*Anti-Gay*) and criticized by Sinfield, is, I think, clearly elucidated in the rumours about Tom Cruise or Keanu Reeves being gay. They're hot, they must be! Contrast that to the rumour-vacuum surrounding, say, Philip Seymour Hoffman, who has often been quite gay on-screen. And no-one ever excitedly traded in rumours about J. Edgar Hoover being gay, and he actually was. There is ostracism of the old, the chubby, the bald, the poorly endowed (though those groups can find their place as fetishist interests in organisations like Chubby Chasers, who hold annual conventions, or NAMBLA, the North American Man and Boy Love Association. Sheesh. Sure makes you gay proud).

The monolith of gay culture is like a fascistic utopia, very definitely having the rigid mindset of a newly empowered minority. Like in the 70s when the Black Panthers chastised assimilated blacks for not being black enough, just try walking into Studio One in West Hollywood on a Saturday Night in a polyester leisure suit and Spray On Hair. Same-sex sex won't be an option.

But I was no more part of gay subculture than I was an Eskimo. 'In many small-town and rural circumstances, being gay is quite a struggle; the last thing you want is someone from a city telling you that you don't measure up because you can't handle "queer"' (ibid.: 21). I believe that my experiences, and my variegated sense of alienation, is certainly coloured by being gay, though it is not coloured by my being a member of the gay subculture; for one of those 'who have felt themselves to be interested in same-sex

passion but somewhat to one side of the metropolitan identities, *gay has been a constraint*' (ibid.: 7).

### BACK TO WHAT WE WERE TALKING ABOUT

*My Ice Age* is an outsider's tale. It is simultaneously about needing to be somewhere else and needing to find a place to be. Identity unease. Vagabondage. The voice in the writing is a method, as analysed in Vonnegut and Saunders, to overcome that alienation, that outsidership through informality. In his study of spoken language, Carter found that 'wordplay is doing more than merely displaying or achieving a focus on content. It is introducing a more affective element into the discourse by creating attitudes and by creating and reinforcing relationships' (2004: 4). In *My Ice Age* I want to explore outsidership, not as an ethnographer but as a bewildered, reluctant, sometimes unwilling participant in these two (forgive me) polar opposites, environments with nothing in common except that I belong, really, in neither. Or as Rushdie expressed it when writing about the Indian migration, 'Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy' (1991, 1992: 15), 'we are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society' (ibid.: 19).

But the very fact of writing about alienation in an informal, candid register—admitting difficulty, stumbling—is careful and deliberate manipulation, the same strategy as used by Vonnegut and Saunders, to garner approval and create—elicit—camaraderie.

Sometimes being an outsider is good. Take Vonnegut. His early sense of alienation gives him a more sharply focused view on the world around him. 'It's a tremendous advantage to be at the edge...because you can make a better commentary than someone at the centre would' (Allen in Jackson 1988: 12-13). V.S. Naipaul, in one of the great novels of diasporic dyspepsia, *Bend In The River* (1989), nails it to its pith: 'I belonged to myself alone,' Naipaul writes, pinpointing the worldwide homesickness, to paraphrase filmmaker Wim Wenders. Worldwide homesickness. That encapsulates my own sense of never feeling at home, a homosexual colonial in heterosexual society, never really fitting in. Naipaul continues, 'I'm a lucky man. I carry the world within me. ... in this world beggars are the only people who can be choosers. Everyone else has his side chosen for him. I can choose...' (155). It is freeing, this alienation, this unconnectedness, but it is also untethered. '...because we felt our lives to be fluid we all felt isolated, and we no longer felt accountable to anyone or anything (191) ...I was waiting for some illumination to come to me, to guide me, to guide me to the good place and the "life" I was still waiting for' (95). Needing to be somewhere else and needing to find a place to be.

### **5.3 LIES, LIES, LIES**

An offshoot to linguistic manipulation and stance adverbials is the question of truth. Surely a form of accommodation and convergence is lying (not lying for personal gain like, say, junk bond traders or cocaine mules, only those lies, the little white ones, that grease the wheels of social interaction: the lies for a different sort of personal gain like merely avoiding offence or risking alienation). If, indeed, as Giles would have it, the

greater the need ‘to gain another’s social approval, the greater the degree of convergence there will be’ (1991: 19), then the greater degree of lying. Perhaps not even *lying*, but perhaps not exactly the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Embellishment. Embellishment and bowdlerization. Pruning, really; pruning and shaping. Reworking. Because how I’m relating my past, of course, is subjective and, equally, selective: ‘All writing involves a degree of concealment’ (Thirwell 2008: 15).

Reality is certainly the seed of my writing, but trying to write accurately of memories is pointless. Truth: give me a break. As if. I address that specifically in the segment on returning to Winnipeg and the confrontation—and sense of betrayal, shame, terror, and outrage—of my relatives’ contrasting memories of my own upbringing. My mythology is not the same as their mythology.<sup>30</sup> Memory tends to be very episodic. Sometimes it’s just flashes, an impression, sometimes merely a set and not even a scene.

Episodic memory depends on the perception of particular and often unique events, and one’s memories of such events, like one’s original perception of them, are not only highly individual (coloured by one’s interests, concerns, and values) but prone to be revised or recategorised every time they are recalled. (Sacks, 2007: 110)

So strict fidelity to truth is not necessarily the point, ‘for our ability to give a causal account ... of how we came to use the words we do and to assert the propositions we assert shows nothing whatever about whether we are representing reality accurately’ (Rorty, 1982:133). As Werner Herzog points out, ‘Facts and reality sometimes are not enough—you need an enhancement and intensification of it’ (2008). Or as Saunders

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<sup>30</sup> Mine, of course, is the only correct version. This certainty is a volatile stand, I fully realize, and not one I take capriciously. Such a stand, after all, has a long history of wars, crusades, and jihads. But it’s true because my memory is so good. No, really. I can remember getting my diapers changed.

notes about *Slaughterhouse-Five*, ‘This book was not a recounting of Vonnegut’s actual war experience, but a *usage* of it. ...you know what you know, and that knowledge will not be shaken out of your stories no matter how breezy or comic or minimalist your mode of expression, or how much you shun mimesis’ (Saunders 2008: 77-78). So I use my memories of my experiences. Play with them. Adjust them to my own purposes.

But these flashes must be structured, shaped. ‘Real-life stories can, of course, be narrated in more than one way. Depending on the stance the narrator wishes to take, the verbalization of a single event can present a very different aspect, depending upon whether it is told seriously or humourously’ (Alexander 1982: 118). This cobbling together of experiences is what Allen, describing what Vonnegut does in *Slaughterhouse-5*, compares to ‘what the Gospel writers attempted to do in their time: construct a new form out of the fragments of old forms’ (Allen 1991). It is also what I’m trying to do: create a mosaic out of the tangle of the past, piecing together vignettes and memories and scraps of memories, emotions and judgements, reportage and memoir. Assembling fragments and impressions from various points in my life, one perhaps spurring the next eliding a distance of years, like Arctic madeleines, or simply complementing it, or creating meaning through contrast. Bringing experiences together but keeping them separate. A Tralfamadorian journey of my own.

Rushdie writes, in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991, 1992) that people, let alone writers, ‘do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions’ (12). We, all of us, create our own memories, and by extension *lives*, and by extension *realities*: ‘[a] version and no more than one version

of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions' (ibid.:10). 'Meaning is a shaky edifice' (ibid.:12). This is compounded for the writer who has left, emigrated, fled. Rushdie writes that 'the past is a country from which we have all emigrated' (ibid.: 12) but for the out-of-country writer 'this is loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from this past, of his being "elsewhere"' (ibid.: 12). I look back on my youth as *fait accompli*—the disjuncture between growing up in the arctic and my bicycle ride down to Los Angeles is severe. It is, in a very real sense, two completely different lives. Two very different narratives with, necessarily, two very different protagonists. I try to capture this disjuncture in the writing voices.

Invention, extrapolation, hyperbole, bowdlerization is a necessity. Even instinctive. In all family mythologies<sup>31</sup> (except really boring families) anecdotes are refined, given a structure—set-up, rising action, pay-off. 'What if we are all fictioneers... What if we all continually make up the stories of our lives? ... our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints imposed by the real world'<sup>32</sup> (Coetzee 2010: 226-227).

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<sup>31</sup> That is to say, in the *family* lore of egocentric cultures like North America, or, in the case of more populist societies, the community lore.

<sup>32</sup> In *Summertime* (2010) Coetzee plays with the notion of remembering, of creating narratives for people we remember and for ourselves. 'Why should what I tell you about Coetzee be any worthier of credence than what he tells you himself?' (226) says one of the women telling the narrator about Coetzee. Now, it is neither the time nor the place—nor the proper Coetzee scholar—to parse the minutiae of Coetzee's biography or hagiography—or self-delusion—but we can pare it down to the nub: the essence is encapsulated by just one good example, that the Coetzee in the book and the Coetzee writing the book are both South African, both wrote *Dusklands* (1974) as their first book,



We see stories. We relate events in our life like stories. The bible does it, myths do it, cinema does it. Even jokes do it. We like a narrative thrust, a beginning middle and end, a three-act structure, a through-line.

I have been able to identify discrete episodes in my life. Chapters, as it were. According to Vedic astrology, these chapters are called Dashas. And believe me, being born into a 17 year long Saturn Dasha was no picnic.

How to tie together the snatches, the old 8mm home movies in my head? With an underlying thread providing hidden sutures, the thread being alienation, the need to please, looking to find a place to be.

‘You can go back many times to the same place. And something strange happens if you go back often enough. You stop grieving for the past. You see that the past is something in your mind alone, that it doesn’t exist in real life. You trample the past, you crush it. In the beginning it is like trampling on a garden. In the end you are just walking on ground. That is the way we have to learn to live now. The past is here.’ (Naipaul 1989: 112-113)

Not only do we have different memories, as Sacks says, hence different realities as past experience cannot but affect and influence the present: it’s how the brain works—we make connections, and dendrites, and sense—we react to things necessarily in ways that

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but the Coetzee in the book died, while the Coetzee writing the book has not. That’s the crux of it, really. Some details are blatantly true, and some are blatantly not true, and many are misty. But, the untrue—and it doesn’t get more untruer than writing about yourself as dead—casts a pall over it all. This is fiction, clever fiction at that, and not to be trusted.

are absolutely coloured by our previous experiences. Otherwise we'd all be sitting in our own pee trying to eat rocks.

And this rude handling of the truth will make it—with luck—more interesting. As Vonnegut wrote in the introduction to *Mother Night*, 'Lies told for the sake of artistic effect...can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth' (in Alan 1991: 55). 'In fact, *Slaughterhouse-Five* seemed to be saying, our most profound experiences may *require* this artistic uncoupling from the actual' (Saunders 2008: 79). It is the powerfully creative use of 'reality,' of 'truth.' It is performative.

The ideas explored by J.W. Austin and John Searle in the 1960s concerning constative and performative speech—Speech Act Theory—can apply to fiction as well, particularly the explicitly self-revelatory sort examined herein.<sup>33</sup>

'Austin points up the way in which our utterances can be *performative*: words do something in the world, something that is not just a matter of generating consequences ...they are actions *in themselves*, actions of a distinctly linguistic kind.'  
(Loxley 2007: 2)

We write our own lives. 'We are what we pretend to be' (Vonnegut in Klinkowitz 1982: 66).

[...] The second rule for fitting in is to think everything beautiful! Everything—that is to say, including things that are not beautiful in reality. [...] One day one finds that everything really is beautiful—and lo and behold, within a few years of ceaseless lying the lie will have become the truth... (Grosz in Kranzfelder 2005: 6-7)

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<sup>33</sup> I say explicitly, because, as Mary Tomlinson, an editor at Bloomsbury, remarked when we were leaving a play, 'it was all about memory, as is all fiction and should be.'

Scripto ergo sum. '[L]inguistic acts don't simply reflect a world but that speech actually has the power to *make* a world' (Jackson 2004: 2 in Loxley 2007: 2). Just like the fallacy of memory—and thus absolute truth—has a direct forward reverberation. If the memories of events are fluid, open to multiple, sometimes startlingly contrasting versions, then the very perceiving of the events could (or must) likewise be fluid. Memory isn't faulty, or fragile. Reality is. Identity is.

And utterances can create that identity, our place in the world. 'The utterance is not setting out to *describe* a situation, an event or an action: it *is* an event or an action' (Loxley 2007: 8). This is very clear at one point in *My Ice Age*: the realizing, the coming to terms with being gay. One afternoon, after months of perplexing struggle, I actually said it, out loud, after checking all the rooms and even under the beds to make sure that I was alone. I said, 'I am gay.' It was a struggle, as one imagines it would be anywhere, let alone alone in the arctic. Particularly in the eighth grade. Poor Tracey Fisher and David Van Ember, classmates, one of whom I left heartbroken, the other just mightily confused.

## 5.4 RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

But how do I unite this mosaic, these otherwise discrete episodes of a picaresque journey, these reflections of the world 'in broken mirror, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost' (Rushdie 1991, 1992: 10), even with the caulk of alienation? How to prevent *My Ice Age* from being a string of temporal connectives, of 'and then this happened...' ?

I don't. I embrace it. As Saunders discovers with his reading of Vonnegut in the Sumatran jungle, simple, self-reflexive, purposefully stumbling writing is an effective tool in manipulating the reader into acquiescence. It's a way of getting liked.

Write informally, conversationally—temporal connectives being, as we have seen, emblematic of spoken conversation. It's not a mistake if you do it on purpose.

Be honest. The voice will be of a humbly and admittedly unreliable narrator.

But more importantly I want to create two worlds, juxtaposed and contrasting. My use of two registers can be described in terms of code-switching as I purposefully include a switch in the intimacy cline. Not code-switching in the traditional sense (i.e., change of language, dialect) but what Sarangi (2000) calls 'con/textual shift,' where 'speakers use their language differently from how they were using it before: they have "done" a register/genre switch without necessarily engaging in a change of language or dialect: in other words the con/text has been reclassified' (30). I found that when I write about Repulse Bay the voice is very distant, arid, almost shell-shocked. I feel it is not engaging, that it is desolate, barren. Not unlike the arctic itself, and very much like my experience of it. '[C]ode-switching in itself is perhaps not a linguistic phenomenon, but rather a psychological one, and its causes are obviously extra-linguistic' (Auer, 1998: 32). I want the Los Angeles segments to be more companionable, faltering, as we've seen with Vonnegut and Saunders. 'Formality tends to increase in direct proportion to the number of social differences between the participants' (Chambers, 2003: 4); my use, then, is to decrease social differences and forge a communion.

It's not *what* you say...

## 6. 'THEY EAT THAT SHIT UP'

When I initially engaged my youthful experiences in the north for a writing class, the reception was exuberant. 'Yes,' my dad said when I told him, 'they eat that shit up down there.' But my attempts at writing a fictionalized arctic Bildungsroman left me bereft—I suppose I don't like adventure stories—and also, of more interest (the muse, as it were, had descended) were my more recent experiences in L.A., which I also wanted to write (certainly gay Mensa meetings had no place in Jack London style narrative). I recalculated and proceeded in autobiographical mode. As I was writing a theme began to emerge. Any autobiographical narrator is

both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present. (Smith & Watson 2010: 1)

The refractions of the past in the present, and of the present on my past, highlighted the fact that *My Ice Age* was about an outsider, and an outsider everywhere. But writing as an outsider was not meant to be an isolating exercise. By reaching out, by opening up, 'autobiographical works not only juggle the relationship of the private to the public in a complex network of relational attitudes and circumstance, they do this specifically by opening their wounds to public probing' (Gibbons 2009: 24). It's about creating a community, a band of outsiders. Alienation, I've found in my amateur psychological field studies, is nearly universal; to some degree we all feel apart, somehow, sometime—it's the nature of being individuals. That's why we seek religion, clan allegiance, why we join book clubs or the NRA, march in parades, exchange gifts at Christmas. An outsider

is like an underdog, and audiences empathise with underdogs—literature, film, and cultural iconography is rife with them.

Life writing creates a 'pact' or 'contract' in Lejeune's notion, as discussed in Gibbons (2009: 22) and 'autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life' (Smith & Watson 2010: 14), or 'communicative exchange' (ibid.: 16-17 ). But besides creating a communion, the life writer is also charged with defining the nature of the exchange, of the relationship, most clearly through the use of register: 'linguistic behaviour as a set of *acts of identity* in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles' (Auer 1998). But there is also the nature of the narrative, and the expectations of the autobiographical form. Is its mandate to be factual?

The boundary between the autobiographical and the novelistic is like the boundary between biography and life narrative, sometimes exceedingly hard to fix. Many life writers take liberties with the novelistic mode in order to negotiate their own struggles with the past and with the complexities of identities forged in the present. (Smith & Watson 2010: 11)

As I detail in Chapter 3, 'Fata Bromosa,' the nature of memory is highly subjective and protean. 'The latest developments in brain science confirm the extent to which memory...constructs the materials from the past' (Eakin 1999: 291); 'the body changes, consciousness changes, memories change, and identity changes, too, whether we like it or not. (ibid.: 298). So autobiography as reportage would be, I believe, not only pompous and delusional, but wrong. Why not have fun with it? Autobiographies (the good ones) and biographies (ditto) don't just relate facts, they tell a story, and they *read* like a story. In my writing, my memories are skewed, perhaps, to highlight outsider status; selected,

amalgamated. As David Sedaris, perhaps the preeminent life writer in America today, has said in many interviews, his writing is ‘about 70% true.’ Never sacrifice a good story for the truth. Good stories are more reliable anyway.

I chose to do an analysis of the sociolinguistic methodology of Vonnegut and Saunders (as opposed to, say, an interrogation of autobiography theory) as I was seeking to investigate the mechanics of developing a voice in my own writing. My research proved fruitful and invaluable influential. Not, specifically, in the use of register as I am not writing in the language of the subdivision (Saunders) or a child’s primer (Vonnegut); nor is my subject middle-America, but more rarefied: huts on the shores of frozen Arctic inlets and hotel conference rooms with Elliot Gould. And, most obviously, the influence was not on the specifically generic form, as I am not writing fiction (in the traditional usage; see above). The effect and influence on my own creative work is therefore not in the product but in the process; studying the precise use of non-standard language helped me find a voice that allowed me to write *My Ice Age*.

Analysing the calculated simplicity of the voices of Vonnegut and Saunders, I discovered a means of creating—and manipulating—a register as well as the nuances and effects of its employment: a constructed informality that, being a restricted code (see p. 36), created an intimacy cline (see p. 131). By writing as though it’s unplanned speech (see section 4, pp. 73-106) an author is wilfully, consciously locating himself in the readers' community, or a community of readers.

The voices of Saunders, Vonnegut, and myself are, of course, constructs. Saunders is not really writing to be the voice of subdivisions gone to seed but as satire of American somnolence and corporate branding as personal identity. And Vonnegut is not really writing for children, or aliens. Their intended readership is not that of *Guns & Ammo* or *TV Guide*—because even those publications don't write how their readers talk—but it is for readers of literature, perusers of *New York Times* best-seller lists, subscribers to *The New Yorker*. Analysing how these authors created humour and a sense of joy in their writing, as though they were having fun, was liberating for me as a writer. Writing as a public scold, all diatribe and opprobrium, particularly in America (examined in section 2, pp. 12-31), makes people recoil, wish the writer would just hold his horses (as it were), back up the truck (as it were), take a chill pill (as it were). For the writer, revelling in his (constructed) faults and the willing suspension of authorial superiority means the audience is more receptive. Who do you want to spend time with more, Will Rogers or Joseph McCarthy? Jimmy Stewart or Lionel Barrymore? We don't like a harangue, we don't like lectures, we like an underdog at sea in this crazy world. If Saunders wrote critically of Sea Oak he would be classist, elitist, out of touch. And, most importantly, not funny. But writing using the register of 'a dangerous shithole' he is incisive, presciently satiric, frequently hilarious, and preternaturally observant. Saunders lets the voice speak for itself. A joke isn't in a punch line, it's in the delivery.

I myself write from construct of outsider, not from a lofty position but instead with a sense of breathless wonder. Observe dispassionately and describe—as Vonnegut does in *Breakfast Of Champions*—but don't hector. That would be churlish, and hateful, and not



at all American. The spectrum of humour is wider if you're writing from below—as an outsider, a man from Indianapolis.

The comedy of Vonnegut and Saunders, and in all humility what I hope is my own, is the comedy of bemusement. Just as Vonnegut drily explains American symbology, or Saunders describes the quotidian tribulations of midwestern underachievers, I write as an outsider, detailing the contents of a display cabinet at the Marilyn Monroe Fan Club, or the tourist lures at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery.

Humour makes writing informal as it assumes an in-on-the-joke in-group, and could be considered performative in that it creates a community of shared amusement (or intent thereto). My own intended effect is to welcome the reader in, to a sense of shared outsidersness: the sidecar model of literature, to use Saunders model (see p. 109).

Writing informality, thus forging an intimacy cline, has as its desired outcome (as with all convergence) social integration (see p. 22). This is accommodation, non-offensive, submissive, treating the audience as a friend, confidante. Using an informal register is like shaking hands in its original implication: to show that you are unarmed. I'm your friend. I trust you first.

## **MY ICE AGE**

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EDGE OF THE KNOWN WORLD

I looked out of the window as the airplane banked seeing for the first time the huddle of desolate rectangles on the arctic tundra that were the buildings of Repulse Bay. My new home. I was eight years old.

We'd flown for hours and there had been nothing: no trees (we were well above the 'tree line,' the line where the winters were too cold for trees to grow), no towns, no power poles, just the odd herd of caribou and the endless, empty tundra. There were no roads, no playgrounds, no toy stores, no Kentucky Fried Chickens.

Repulse Bay was a tiny Inuit settlement noteworthy for being the only settlement situated directly on the Arctic Circle. It wasn't really. That's just what they told the tourists. Or *would* have told the tourists, if they actually had any. The real Arctic Circle was actually about two miles south. Beside me, looking out of the other window, was my brother Paul. It was a small plane, as only small planes could fly into Repulse Bay, and the sound of the engines prevented us speaking. The plane dipped, circling for the descent. My mother reached back and squeezed our hands. My father, next to the pilot, looked straight ahead out of the cockpit window.

That was it? Repulse Bay was just a little blemish on the shore of the Hudson Bay, at a distinct disadvantage with the elements and the silent surrounding tundra—just a stash of little boxes. The last road out of Winnipeg going north ended at Churchill, a thousand miles to the south. The tiny plane tilted with a

jerk, going downward. My father turned around and smiled reassuringly. I liked our old home.

The plane lurched, the pilot tried to keep it steady, as the gravel runway came up before us. The runway was gravel because asphalt or concrete would have cracked and crumbled in the harsh seasonal extremes: in the winter the temperature was usually around fifty or sixty degrees below zero, and in the summer the sun never set, it just travelled in a lazy circle around the sky. The ground around the runway was littered with the charred and tangled husks of airplanes that hadn't made it. The wrecks were left where they had crashed and pilots flying into Repulse Bay navigated using the twisted fuselages as guideposts. They were like the carcasses of the skinned seals and walruses and half-eaten whales that were left where they were. Where were you going to move them to? A hundred feet out onto the tundra? A hundred yards? Why bother? Repulse Bay didn't have a sewage system or a garbage dump. Humans were just another part of the ecosystem up there, and not an overly important one.

Our plane managed to touch down on all of its wheels, spewing up the loose stones behind it. We careened and skidded to a stop in front of a waiting crowd, all dressed in sealskin parkas and *amoutees*. We unbuckled ourselves as the pilot opened the door of the aircraft. The first screaming breath of Arctic air nearly made me choke. It was so clean and crisp that it hit me like a fist in the lungs. I had to adjust my breathing to little shallow sips.

Waiting by the side of the runway were two hundred Inuit, more or less, all grinning, with discoloured teeth, their smiles creasing their brown faces and turning their eyes to slits. They crowded in closer, the weathered faces of the

men, the green, encrusted noses of the children, the women dressed in *amoutees*, the pull-over, parka-type coat with the wide deep hood where babies were stowed. Everyone in *kamiks*, the laceless boot, made of sealskin, seal leather soles, all sewn with the dried sinew from the spines of caribou. No zippers or clasps or buttons. The entire population of the settlement—which also included a handful of white people—had turned out to meet us. Or so we thought; they were actually there to greet the sacks of mail. We, too, would soon learn to mobilise when a plane would radio that it would be attempting to land and the cry of ‘*tingmisuk*’—‘airplane’—would travel through the settlement. Not a lot happened in Repulse Bay, so the arrival of a monthly plane, or perhaps the suspense of whether or not it would crash, was a major social occasion. Also travelling with us, and the mail, and our meagre belongings (too meagre, I thought, as a eight-year-old boy, having thrown a tantrum when my Tonka Toys and Erector Set were given to the church) were, well, canned goods. That sort of thing. Nails, maybe; hammers. Nothing perishable (it would have perished by then), just sturdy things. No luxuries because the cost of shipping anything that far by air was prohibitive. Occasionally there were the octagonal metal containers that held the reels to a 16mm movie.

Breaking through the phalanx were Father Revoir and Father Didier, the two priests that ran the mission—our new home—who approached and greeted us. The Fathers were French-Canadian missionaries. Father Didier—taller, thicker, with a mat of grey hair—spent his days translating the bible into Inuit. Father Revoir—shorter, rounder, a thin reddish fringe circling his bald pate and continuing uninterrupted down his cheek, over his chin, and up the other side—

was my dad's new boss at the Inuit Co-op. Father Revoir looked like he might have some leprechaun in him; Father Didier looked like he might have tree sap.

We walked down the steps of the airplane—as I discreetly gasped for breath—and were folded into the crowd. Father Revoir introduced us to the nearby Inuit, and to the nearby white people, to Elizabeth the nurse, to Mr. Pembroke, the schoolteacher. Without being asked everyone grabbed a bag and, with the settlement trudging behind us, we began our parade up the rocky hill to the Mission. Off to the side of the runway I saw a collection of stacked and carefully balanced boulders. I pointed to it and Father Didier explained that this was an *inukshuk*, a 'stone man.' They were used as decoys by the Inuit to get the caribou to herd toward the waiting hunters. Of course the caribou would never come near the settlement, so the *inukshuk* I saw was just Repulse Bay's tourist attraction.

We passed the squat, tin-sided trailer—the Nursing Station— where Elizabeth the nurse tended as best she could with the broken bones, the pregnancies, the parasites, and the infections of the settlement. There was no doctor in Repulse Bay, just Elizabeth the nurse, a brusque woman who had been raised in Germany on the wrong side of the Nazi regime, raped by American GIs, and finally escaped, but only after the SS had knocked out all her teeth.

Adjacent to this was the Transient Center, certainly a model for concision and honesty in branding. It was basically the only semblance of a hotel that Repulse Bay had. But not really a hotel in the common understanding of the word. Or even a hostel. It was just the only place to sleep in Repulse Bay if you didn't live there and didn't know how to make an igloo. Prospectors, or arctic

government men. Tundra pilots. That sort of man. People who veered away from civilization. Like us.

Beyond the Transient Center was the one-room schoolhouse. Down closer to the water was the Inuit Co-op—dad’s job. The Canadian Arctic Coöperative Federation Limited, or CACFL, or ‘Cack-full,’ as my dad used to say, and then laugh. I never got the joke. I’m still not sure I do. But I think it’s dirty, judging from the stern looks my mother gave him when he said it. Further over was the Hudson’s Bay Company, which was the last building in the settlement and thus marked the outside edge of Repulse Bay. And that was it. That was all the stores, all the businesses. And the Co-op and the Hudson’s Bay Company were just trading posts, really. There really wasn’t much to buy there. Just the tools and canned goods that we’d flown in with. Maybe some blankets, some pots, some Pilot Biscuits. The Inuit would bring soapstone carvings into the Co-op, or untanned seal pelts and caribou hides, and trade these for money, which they would turn around and spend on a chisel or the odd tin of food. Outside the building, in a pile against the back wall, were chunks of green soapstone cut into manageable sizes that were free to just take away, but with the tacit understanding that any carvings made with them would be brought back to be sold at the Co-op. Not that there were a lot of options—it was either there or the Hudson’s Bay Company. Not much difference.

Beyond the buildings was Repulse Bay itself, an offshoot of Hudson’s Bay, still covered in pack ice, ice thick enough to walk on, despite the fact that it was late June and the sun was now up twenty-four hours a day.

Scattered between the runway and the edge of the water, from the Hudson's Bay Company to the mission, were the houses of the Inuit, all painted a blue-grey, all rectangular, all with small windows, most with racks made out of bones—whale bones or caribou bones: big bones—for stretching seal skins. Identical little boxes. These were the new 'Government Housing,' I suppose because the government couldn't have its citizens living in houses made of snow or skin. The Inuit still used igloos, in the winter, and caribou hide tents, in the summer, when they were out on a hunt, but back in the settlement they had their one-room plywood huts. Also, attached to the bottoms of the houses were what appeared to be large wooden skis, or pontoons. This didn't make it seem very permanent.

As we threaded our way through the settlement toward the Mission I noticed the goo underfoot that made our shoes stick. It was everywhere. The ground—rock, moss, and lichen—was covered with clumps of viscous, sticky gum; some stuck to bits of bones, some with feathers stuck in it. Dog shit, human shit, bones with hunks of meat still hanging on, sticky opaque bits that could have been anything: offal, decomposition. Seals were skinned and their naked fatty carcasses were just dropped and left to bloat and rot in the sun. Caribou were butchered and the remnants just left where they fell for the dogs or the arctic foxes. Faeces were left where they fell. It was all just part of the ecosystem. Later, when I was in High School, my mother took up writing. She was working on a book about our life in the North. She called it 'Paroxysms of



Nausea.<sup>34</sup> It was either that or the less vivid *Amai*, which means, in Inuit, 'maybe today, maybe tomorrow.'

We didn't need to be told to avoid the mottled husky dogs, eyeing us as we passed, tethered to the rocks in tangles of chains. They watched us silently as we walked by. One suddenly snarled, which started a chorus of snarls. We all moved back, sideways, but kept on walking. One husky lunged, then they all lunged, teeth snapping. They dove at us but the chains around their necks yanked them backwards. The trouble was, in the tangle of chains—and the goo—you never knew which chain was attached to which dog. You never knew if you were safely out of range.

At last we reached the edge of the settlement and the top of the small rocky hill where the Mission was perched. It was a two-storey square building with aluminium siding, pale yellow with pale green trim. We would live upstairs with the priests, Paul and I in a room with bunk beds, my parents in a room off the kitchen, and Fathers Didier and Revoir off in a wing by themselves. On the main floor was the chapel. There was a daily half-hour mass in Inuit, with alternating priests.

As my parents settled into the Mission with our belongings and had adult talk with the priests, I went for a walk along the pebbly beach and met my first friend in Repulse Bay, an Inuit boy named Eliuk. Small wavelets on the skirt of water that lined the mass of ice on the bay hit the loose stones at our feet. Soon

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<sup>34</sup> I talked her out of it; although an excellent name for a band in San Diego's underground music scene, it might be off-putting as the name of volume of narrative poetry.

we came across the mouldering carcass of a skinned seal—left with only its coat of blubber—fermenting in the late June sun. Eliuk reached down and stuck his finger into the eye socket. He twirled his finger around the rotting eyeball. ‘We eat these,’ he said, ‘like candy.’ Dear God, I thought to myself, get me the hell out of here.

So I left. As soon as I possibly could. When I was seventeen, with the flush of invincibility that adolescence brings, I dropped out of high school and rode my ten-speed bicycle down to Los Angeles. I couldn’t wait to leave the caribou meat, the ice, and the isolation for the palm trees, the movies, the feeling of actually being on the map. I got my bicycle to Vancouver, loaded up my saddlebags, strapped on my pup tent and sleeping bag, and set off.

I took out my map and traced a direct line down to California, the Pacific Coast Highway. I had never seen a freeway before, so when I got to the onramp and saw the sign that said ‘No Non-motorized Vehicles’ I just assumed that they’d made a mistake. It was a *road*, wasn’t it? So I got on it. I didn’t get a mile before the Highway Patrol stopped me.

Taking the back roads, I rode for hour after hour, miles and miles without speaking to another human being. When the sun set I found a campground, pitched my tent, rolled out my sleeping bag, and slept. In the morning I rolled up my sleeping bag, packed up my tent, strapped everything to my bike, and started off down the road again. The hypnosis of the pedalling and the droning wind in my ears made human contact, when it finally came in the form of a waitress in a roadside restaurant in Centralia, unduly momentous. I sat alone in a booth. As she came over with the menu I grinned, wide-eyed. ‘Coffee?’ she

said. I delighted in the sound of a human voice—it'd been a couple of days, and many miles. I nodded vigorously. I think I giggled. When she came back with the coffee and took my order it was like first contact. 'Cottage cheese or fries?' I wanted her to stay, to keep talking to me, even if it was just saying, 'cottage cheese or fries.' When my food was ready the cook brought it over without smiling. The waitress stayed behind the counter, peeking out from behind the cash register.

The autumn rains started when I got into Oregon. Pedalling down the coast, up and down the tiny endless hills, the rain dumped down. Coastal rains. I managed an average speed of about two miles an hour. My rain poncho acted like a sail, pushing me backward as I stood up on the pedals to try to use my weight to make them move. The rain bounced up off of the road and was thrown up by the wheels so the poncho also acted as a water trap. I had to stop in Coos Bay before I drowned. There was a movie theatre showing a matinee double-feature of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and *Concorde...Airport '79*. I put my bike in Left Luggage at the Greyhound Bus Station and went into the cinema. There were probably five other people in the auditorium. I took my shoes off and put them on the seat beside me. I then took my socks off, wrung them out, and laid them over the seat back in front of me, hoping that the duration of a double-feature would be enough time for them to dry out. 'Spock,' Dr. McCoy said, choleric and slightly prissy, as usual, 'this "child" is about to wipe out every living thing on Earth. Now, what do you suggest we do? Spank it?' Mr. Spock arched one eyebrow, as usual. 'It knows only that it needs, Commander. But, like so many of us...it does not know what,' he said and I thought, barely paying

attention to Mr. Spock, that at that moment I must truly be one of the most pathetic creatures on earth, and wondered, at the age of 17, what the hell I had done with my life.

I've always had a longing to be someplace else. I didn't want to live in the Arctic. Even at that age I only wanted the bright lights of, say, a New York City. Or anywhere. And then, much later, I was in Los Angeles, and the longing to be someplace else was still there.

There were daily signs to remind me that perhaps my time in Los Angeles must draw to a close. I hadn't had a paying job in a while, my television and movie scripts garnering interest at first and then silence. I arranged to have lunch with my entertainment lawyer, hoping that he might offer some hope for my gasping career, some reason for me to stay in Los Angeles. As soon as I mentioned possible projects he could help me with he stopped smiling, and glazed over, like a shade of disinterest had been pulled down over a window. He changed the subject, pointing out that Joan Collins was sitting in the corner of the restaurant by herself. Outside the restaurant he hugged me, then reached down and squeezed my ass.

The final sign came when I returned to my car after visiting a friend who lived on a fashionable street in West Hollywood. There was a piece of paper left under my windshield wiper, handwritten—or, rather, scrawled by hand—which read, 'Don't park this piece of shit in our neighbourhood.' That was my seminal L.A. moment. Granted, my car was a functional wreck. It had been broken into

and the only thing that was stolen was the anti-theft device. Most of my cars have been disposable, most would have dissolved in one good rain.

But that wasn't the point.

I went to my local psychic to find out what I should do. My local psychic was in the Psychic Eye bookshop. There was a row of cubicles with curtains along one side of the store, like confessionals, where at any given time there were at least three psychics working. No waiting. I asked my psychic about getting out of L.A. She told me I had to stay. So I stayed. Reluctantly. Perhaps I should have gotten a second opinion. If I couldn't move away at least I would move.

It seems that every old apartment building just off Hollywood Boulevard was not only once the home of some famous actor from the Golden Age, but is also managed by someone who claims to have been on brink of becoming one himself. It is in the lobbies of these mouldy old buildings that one gets a glimpse of true optimism in all its unreason, stars that continue to shine in eyes that have long since gone milky. These apartment managers—hair blow-dried and haphazardly arranged over bald spots, lacking diligence when it comes to matters of dental hygiene, tenaciously holding onto the '70s notion that tight pants are sexy— all seem to have been drinking buddies with Lee Marvin or James Coburn or Rock Hudson, and before one is even able to ask about the strange smells coming from the carpet, they inevitably produce a creased and weathered 8 x 10 photograph in a plastic frame. The photograph is of a row of cowboys or gangsters or newspapermen and the building managers say, 'That's me in the back; the one in the hat.'

I decided to move to Venice Beach. Perhaps the beach would inspire me, perhaps I could find what I was looking for there, whatever it was.

Venice was the end of L.A., the end of the line, the end of the New World. It was bohemian, a place where what you drove didn't matter, where artists lived. This was where Jim Morrison formed the Doors, where Orson Welles filmed the Tijuana scenes for *Touch of Evil*, where you can spend an afternoon at Muscle Beach. The manager of my new building wore combat camouflage and looked like Jerry Garcia, and my landlady was a grand and regal doyenne who wore sunflowers in her hat, and it was for her that I later painted my tableaux of anthropomorphic cows on the rent envelopes (a bovine *Birth of Venus*, a taurine *Ecce Homo* that I called *Ecce Bovo*) which, I now believe, helped me escape a rent increase for four years.

My new building was on Ozone Avenue, one of Venice's walking streets.<sup>35</sup> The tenants included a bartender/screenwriter, a picture framer/screenwriter, an unemployed/screenwriter, a successful screenwriter (he had actually sold something). Plus you could see a sliver of the ocean, obliquely, from my front window.

On my first day I woke up to the hazy sunshine of a beach morning. I breathed in deeply. The air was flavourful here, thick and tangy with sea mist. I put on my shorts and T-shirt and sandals and headed out my door to the Venice boardwalk. Next to my apartment was a large building, the entire windowless wall facing the sidewalk was painted with babooneries fashioned after Chagall—

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<sup>35</sup> Where, besides my building, you could find a tiny house with children's dolls nailed to the door, or a house with a massive Styrofoam snail shell on the roof.

bright, primary colours and fanciful figures of, I gather, allegorical subjects. I presumed artists made this their home, some sort of Bohemian community centre. As the door had been propped open I wandered over and had a peek.

The interior of the building was a makeshift ballroom where septuagenarians danced with octogenarians. Or perhaps dancing might be the wrong description, for there was little rhythm or joy. They seemed only to be responding to the peevishly barked commands of a short-tempered dance instructor who was playing—and I'm certainly no expert here—Hungarian folk songs over the PA. She shouted at the roomful of bobbing and shuffling dotards whose faces were clenched in concentration yet were still knocking into each other and flying off in different directions, like atoms in a gas. This place was not a bohemian artists' gallery at all; it was a housing for old people. Well, perhaps not a housing, since they didn't sleep there (or weren't supposed to, anyway). It was their place of fun.

I ducked out and turned onto the boardwalk.

The Venice boardwalk is a microcosm of civilisation, a virtual diorama of the extremes of human behaviour. Jockeying for position and for the transitory attention of passers-by was a variety of hucksters, fakirs, and conjurers, like the snake charmers and moneychangers of Baghdad and Babylon in old Biblical movies, only the fakirs lying on beds of nails had become a fakir lying on shards of broken wine bottles spread over a tarpaulin (and on whose chest you can stand while he does so, for only a one dollar donation). And even though cobras as entertainment (or so I assume) are outlawed in Los Angeles County, chainsaws were still legal. Robust young men now tamed these instead, tossing three, four in the air at a time, juggling them as they chatted with tourists. Old

meets new; ancient confidence games and even more ancient prostitution sharing sidewalk space with inebriates and college students.

I walked down to the water's edge. I had to climb over a steep berm that had been bulldozed into place to protect the shore from the surf of the *El Niño*. As I descended towards the incoming waves I briefly held my breath at the rush of the smell. It was not just the smell of a beach a low tide. It was the smell of raw sewage, which was not surprising as L.A.'s toilets are emptied into Santa Monica Bay. The berms also acted as a trap for the various detritus that the ocean threw up. There were innumerable disposable diapers and hypodermic syringes. There were huge tangles of multicoloured electrical wiring. There was an agitator from a washing machine.

To avoid the crowds on the way home I cut through between two shops and was forced to avert my eyes. I'd inadvertently stumbled into the centre of a circle of immodest, naked surfers pulling on their wet suits in the parking lot. I moved quickly through the parked cars and out into Speedway, the alley that runs parallel to the boardwalk. On a chain link fence that cordoned off the parking lot was a very large-cupped brassiere fastened to the fence with wire. I'd say that the bra had to be at least a double-D. Not, of course, that I know what a double-D looks like, but it sounds big. Woven into the metal links surrounding it was an array of dried flowers. Above it was a banner—written in lipstick on a length of paper towels. It read, 'FREE MYRNA' but, as there was no punctuation, I couldn't tell if this was an offer or a call to action. I moved past it and headed toward Ozone.



I walked between a concrete wall and a line of pungent dumpsters. I became aware of a strangulated singing, a voice that sounded like sped-up audiotape, pitched slightly too high, like in a cartoon. It was singing, this voice, a lament, an elegy to lost love. The lyrics were, more or less, *'fuck love . . . fuck fucking love . . . fuck the women . . .'* What it lacked in subtlety, and meter—and a recognizable rhyme scheme—it made up for in heartfelt simplicity. But the voice remained disembodied, though it seemed to be getting nearer. *'Fuck love because . . . fuuuuuck love.'* I looked up to the roofs of the buildings; looked down the length of the wall; looked between the dumpsters. There was no one there. Then I noticed, despite his adaptive camouflage among the snack wrappings and newspapers cluttering the alleyway, a small, partial man, a strange little stunted abdomen on a skateboard. Out of the front end was a little wrinkled head; out from the sides near the end were two little pseudopods that propelled the wobbly platform forward. *'Fuck loooooove . . .'* he crooned, plaintively, beseechingly. I averted my eyes once again, but was too late. He'd seen me. His little flippers stopped pumping. He stopped singing and snapped his head in my direction—narrowing his already squinty eyes—and nearly toppled into the litter. *'You know what I'm talking about,'* he said.

How does one respond to a man who was little more than his embryonic, tadpole self—the simplest of tubes encased in the barest minimum of flesh?

*'Yes,'* I said politely, *'I do.'*

He kept looking at me, squinting, for a moment more. Then he faced forward and his flippers found purchase on the sandy asphalt and he started to move forward. *'Fuck love,'* he sang, *'fuuuuuck loooooove.'*

## CHAPTER TWO

### CRACKS IN THE ICE

‘Repulse Bay,’ my father would say in the months preceding our departure from Winnipeg, ‘that’s where all the repulsive people go.’ And then he would laugh. And so he up and moved his family there.

We left Winnipeg on a train, heading first to Churchill, Manitoba, where all roads and railway lines ended. Once there we would catch a plane to the Arctic Circle. I loved the train, the little compartments, that fact that everything folded up into itself to become something else: a bed became a table, a sink became a mirror. I loved that fact that when I flushed the toilet in our cabin I was actually just opening up a little circular hatch that let out directly onto the tracks. I spent the two days of the trip mostly in the bathroom, hunched down over the toilet and holding down the flusher.

When we arrived in Churchill we were greeted with the news that our flight was cancelled, so we checked into a motel. The planes that flew to the settlements were very small, and very erratic. There could have been a reason for the cancellation, but it was never clear. We would just have to try again the next day. Amai.

The motel in Churchill was the kind with rooms where the curtains were always drawn shut, rooms where people spent the days waiting, rooms that felt decidedly adult, not a place for children.<sup>36</sup> The thin bedspreads and the curtains with cigarette burns were stained and musty. Through the cracks where the

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<sup>36</sup> They were the kind of motels that I would later associate with the derelict side streets off of Sunset Boulevard where speed freaks and worn-out hookers lived

doors had been left ajar to let out the stale cigarette smoke I could see the bedside lamps that were the only illumination, even at noon, and the bottles of rum that sat on wobbly tables. It was the kind of outback motel where people were resigned to linger with little or no anticipation. Hoary men with rheumy eyes, men who'd been down in mines too long or out on ships too long and who smelled sour. A garrison of alcoholics and that bizarre race of people who still seek frontiers—anachronistically and against all odds—in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. My parents accepted invitations for a drink from these neighbours. There was not much else to do to pass the time.

When I stopped by to ask my parents if I could go off to play or request an advance on my allowance the men would go silent, uneasy around children. There were guilty chuckles from the men who pulled you close and gave you silver dollars. Not dangerous men, just drunk men, just frontier men. I'd grab the money and run out the door.<sup>37</sup>

Churchill was not a big town and had very few attractions. No cinemas, no playgrounds, no shopping malls. Paul and I headed to the dump and watched the polar bears tear through bags of garbage. But then my parents found out and made us stop. Every morning we thought we'd be flying out and would go to the airport and wait for several hours, and day after day the plane would be cancelled for one reason or other and we would return to the motel. 'Amai' was the first word we learned in Inuit. But then one day we didn't have to return to the motel.

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<sup>37</sup> I also had a pathological fear of hippies, no doubt due to the anti-drug commercials they used to air during the after-school cartoons in Winnipeg, where they were depicted as carnivorous, tie-dyed zombies. When I saw one I would run screaming into my mother's arms. Things have changed.

The day after we arrived in Repulse Bay and had settled in at the Mission Father Revoir and Father Didier took us for an afternoon hike across the bay. Although the bay was still sufficiently frozen over that walking across the ice was possible it was thawing, and quickly. The melting created run-off, streams of ice water running through beds of ice, that sculpted the ice surface into a surreal landscape of intricate and glistening spires like fields of glacial stalagmites. Walking further from shore the ice groaned and cracked, dull echoing explosions that we could feel as it shifted deep beneath our feet. The incessant sun widened the fissures that veined the surface leaving sharp, jagged crevasses that we looked into and saw the descending layers of ice, hard-packed, and getting bluer and bluer as they went down. Circular bowls of salt water were scattered across the icescape, formed as the seawater made its way up through tiny cracks. In each of these bowls was a single frond of seaweed that had managed to prise its way through the ice and create its own little pool, like a seaweed museum, each in its own display case, like daisies set in finger bowls.

We reached the far side of the bay and stopped on the shore to have a picnic. Our lunch consisted of tinned tuna and Pilot Biscuits. Pilot Biscuits were a staple in the north, round, about the size of a small pancake, and tasted like stale unsalted soda crackers. They were hard enough that insects and vermin couldn't dig into them and could hurt pretty bad if thrown with any force. Practically a non-perishable food item. A Pilot Biscuit will still be around long after the pilot has been dead and buried.

On our trip back across the bay the terrain of ice had changed unrecognizably in just a few hours. Over the course of half an afternoon the ice had become dangerous, a dripping, blinding landscape that was crumbling around us. The crevasses had widened. Caverns had opened up to rushing rivers. My mother became panicked despite the assurances of the priests. She took my hand and didn't let go, holding it tightly as we jumped together over the new cracks and widening flash streams.

A week later we crossed the bay again, only this time in kayaks. The bay had cleared of packed ice, only a few dwindling floes remained. We were headed for Naujaat ('seagull'), several miles away down the peninsula. I was in an open kayak made from whalebone and taut caribou skin, with my father paddling in front. As we travelled along we passed tiny little chunks of ice the size of a fist, little tiny icebergs, delicate clear shapes bobbing alongside us. I wanted to collect them and take them home. I reached out and grabbed one from the freezing water and set it on the bottom of the kayak. I watched my Dad's broad back as he dipped one end of the double-headed paddle and then the other. The little bergs were irresistible. I scooped out another one. Then another; every piece that was within my reach. I tend to collect things. My father didn't turn around. It didn't take long before I had a rather large collection, and it didn't take long for my collection to start to melt. When my dad felt the water seeping into the seat of his pants he turned and looked back to see me with chunks of ice piled up between us on the bottom of the boat. He thought I'd lost my mind and told me to throw them back overboard. I thought he didn't appreciate beauty.

We passed a cliff where a herd of walruses had settled to loll in the sun. We steered clear because, well, because they were walruses. They were also mating walruses, mating territorial walruses. My dad later came back to this cliff and found a carcass of one of the bulls that hadn't made it. He thought he would cut off the head: the tusks were pure ivory and valuable for Inuit carving. Plus it would be cool to have a walrus head. He took out his pocketknife. The blade snapped before he could even pierce the skin. The hide of a walrus is thicker and tougher than an elephant's, or at least just as thick and tough. He never got his tusks, but one of the Inuit hunters presented him with a walrus penis—they called it an *ussuk*—a three-foot long bone, also pure ivory. He prized this, polishing it until it shone. It was one of the few possessions that he brought with him in the four-seater plane that would eventually take us away.<sup>38</sup>

Naujaat was as forlorn as the rest of the tundra. The grass there was longer than I'd seen elsewhere, moving in waves from the steady wind off of the bay. It was the ancient site of Repulse Bay and the ground was pocked with rectangular indentations that had been the homes. We stopped to eat: tinned tuna and Pilot Biscuits. On the hills around us was a line of ominous *inuksuit* keeping silent vigil. These picnics filled me with fear. Out on the tundra we were in a primordial world. The vastness of the landscape, the lack of population, the silence frightened me. We were so small. There was never a sense here that we were in control of things. The wind blew, and for the first

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<sup>38</sup> This got me into trouble recently. I was at a dinner recently, set up to introduce me to several feminists who could be instrumental in securing me a faculty position at a university. We were talking about our childhoods. They talked about their families growing up in the Raj, and the heirlooms their forebears had managed to procure. I wanted to join it. I piped up, 'My father has a walrus penis.' One of the women turned to me. 'That's rather an intimate matter, don't you think?' she said.

time I realized that the wind didn't care. The land didn't care that we were on it. Things would go on as they had done since the last ice age.

My friend Curtis told me once that L.A. is the only place where you can die from encouragement. Everywhere people are dauntlessly, irrationally forging ahead, abetted by friends and agents. I went to Kinko's one Tuesday at 2 a.m. to photocopy a script I'd just finished and needed to mail out in the morning. When I'd made my copies and went to the cash register to pay, the clerk (a homely, portly, gap-toothed, jug-eared, no-necked fellow with retiring hair) said, pointing at my script, 'Hey, do you think there's a part for me in that?'

'Well,' I said, put on the spot, 'perhaps.' At which point he reached beneath the counter and produced his headshot and resume and gave it to me.

Kinko's. 2 a.m. Marina del Rey. This unrelenting optimism can lead to years turning to decades. Or, as John Barrymore was reported to have said, you wake up twenty years later under a palm tree with a bottle of scotch and wonder what happened to your life.

I sent my friend Andy a script. He had had little success as a writer and was now interested in producing. And I really needed a producer. It was a script I'd worked on for years, based on a short story I had written in college, and had even pretty much cast with my first choice of actors. I hadn't heard back from Andy for a week so I called it up.

'Hey, Andy, did—'

'I read your fucking script,' he said, 'it was the worst fucking thing I've ever read. It was fucking awful.' I was at a loss for words. He was telling me I had an ugly baby. To my face.

'I—'

'And you stole it from me. You stole my script, you motherfucker!' I was confused. It was the worst thing he'd ever read, yet he'd written it?

'I'm sorry you feel that way,' I said, 'I'll just swing by and pick it up.'

'You can't!'

'What?'

'You can't. You can't pick it up. I burned it.'

This was a good friend, a friend who I'd spent evenings with just recently.

'You what?'

'I burned it. It was so fucking awful, I burned it.'

I sensed things were getting a little psychotic. He didn't have a fireplace.

'Andy, I'm coming over to pick up my script.'

'I told you. I burned it.'

'You didn't burn it. I'm coming over. What are you doing right now?'

'Drinking vodka.' It was ten o'clock in the morning.

'I'm coming over.'

'Fuck you.' A week before we'd gone to a movie.

'Leave it outside on your patio.'

'Don't come over.'

'I want my script back.'

'It's not even here. It was so bad I couldn't have it in my house. You fucking thief.'



‘So it’s not burned, then. I’m coming over tomorrow afternoon. Leave it outside on your patio.’

I hung up. I went to his apartment the next day and found my script behind a flowerpot. The cover was on inside out. This was no accident. It meant taking the entire script apart and reassembling it. I noticed on the cover a number had been written in pencil and erased. It had been logged in at a production company.

Things seemed to stall for me. I couldn’t find a producer who wouldn’t claim to burn my scripts, my contacts were dwindling, and my phone wasn’t ringing. A good friend, concerned, who worked as a casting director, managed to get me an audition for the part of ‘frustrated father’ in a breakfast cereal commercial. I had no other prospects, so thought perhaps this might be my true calling. My friend and I didn’t speak for months after the audition.

I decided that I would make a film myself. I would write it, produce it, direct it. *Birds Die*. It would be the simple story of three friends, a lumpy, poetry-spewing waitress (I’m quoting from my own press release), a laconic and sinister mortician, and a punk rocker turned embalmer. It would be about the funeral preparations for a distant aunt. Nothing pyrotechnical, no car chases or stunt doubles, just a simple story with characters.

My first job as producer was to raise funds. Having canvassed all of my friends and getting credit cards until I could get no more, I still needed money. I decided to hold my own personal walk-a-thon, my very own *Birds Die* Walk-a-Thon. I would go from downtown Los Angeles to the Pacific Ocean following

Wilshire Boulevard, a distance of 18 miles, more or less. I would get people to pledge me by the mile. Most pledged out of disbelief. Some out of schadenfraude.

Early Sunday morning my friend Todd picked me up in Venice and drove me to One Wilshire Boulevard. The streets of downtown were deserted, the looming buildings dark and lifeless. With no fanfare, I set off. Todd followed me for two blocks then honked and waved goodbye.

It was a bright morning. I was wearing the blue cotton shorts that I wore to the gym, a *Birds Die* Walk-a-Thon T-shirt that I'd had printed up, and a pouch on a belt. I had started early, at sunrise, because I wanted to make it through MacArthur Park before the junkies were roused by the heat. Cautiously I crossed Alvarado, and into the park, leaving the buildings on the other side of the road.

The park was still quiet. Nothing rustled yet from under the shrubs. The lawn was strewn with beer cans and wine bottles and burrito wrappers from the night before. Behind me I heard the deep grumble of an engine turn onto Wilshire and slowly approach. I didn't turn around. I didn't like turning around in L.A.—that could be confrontational. And I was alone, without a phone. The car drew up slowly beside me. I peeked over without turning my head. It was monstrous, blue, growling low-rider. As it slowly crawled ahead I saw three faces in rear window looking back at me: sinewy, mean, with prison tattoos on their necks. I kept my pace. From the passenger's window a face popped out, looking back. Eyes narrowed, moustache, deadly calm.

'Nice shorts,' the man said. He didn't smile. He continued to glare as the car moved down the road. It turned right, in front of me, and onto Park View, and moved out of sight. I let out my breath. I was sweating. I walked faster.

As I was nearing the end of the park I heard from behind the low growl of the blue car turn again onto Wilshire. I made it to the intersection and jogged across the red light to the relative safety of the buildings on the other side.

Soon I arrived at the La Brea Tar Pits and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Traffic was picking up by this time. I ploughed past the young families on the sidewalk on their brief journey by foot from their parked cars to the stores and restaurants. Sunday outings.

As I crossed La Cienega and started into Beverly Hills I was looking dishevelled, sweaty and dusty, disoriented, my footsteps becoming plods. The taut dowagers of Beverly Hills leaving Saks and Neiman Marcus and Barney's laden with bags curled their lips at me as I passed them, pulling their furs tight around their shoulders, recoiling as if they were smelling poo. Safely past the dragons of Beverly Hills I made my way through Westwood and under the San Diego Freeway and soon entered Santa Monica. I was getting close. I could smell the ocean. As I lumbered along, crossing Centinela Avenue, I saw something move swiftly in the corner of my eye. I pulled back just as a half-eaten sandwich sailed past my head. I looked over in the direction from which it had been launched. A grizzled, homeless woman on a bus bench scowled at me. What had I done to so offend her that she would throw her sandwich at me? I mean, she was homeless: that sandwich must have meant a lot to her.

At last I was nearing the end. Tenth Street, Ninth Street, Lincoln Boulevard, Seventh Street. Finally I reached the end and crossed Ocean Boulevard, hoping to end my journey—meaningfully, with a big gesture, a big bathetic gesture—at the base of the statue of Santa Monica that ends Wilshire and is framed by the blue background of the Pacific. But I was unable to end it there, clinging to feet in the plaster robes. There was a ten-foot tall chain-link fence keeping me away. Repair work, I gather. Or maybe to protect her, like the poor, eroded statue of Myrna Loy in front of the Venice High School that was kept in a cage, like a jungle animal or a dancer in a titty bar. I clutched the chain-link and looked through it to the ocean in the distance. I sat down, back against the fence, and waited for Todd to pick me up.

For the premiere of *Birds Die*, I rented the movie theatre in the Hollyhock House, a Frank Lloyd Wright dwelling turned museum, in Barnsdale Park, perched on a hill at the crossroads of Vermont Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard. I went over early, with the cases of wine, the souvenir pens I'd had printed up, and all the food that my friend Natalie had spent the last two days slicing, chopping, and arranging into lovely colourful patterns on plastic trays.

I took the film up to Tom, the projectionist, so that he could check the sound levels. I was in a bit of a panic because Angelyne was due. I'd arranged for her to arrive by 7:00 p.m., which would give me enough time to stash both her and her pink Corvette away and not ruin the surprise.

What is this Angelyne? An entity, an unexplained phenomenon, a Los Angeles myth: pert little nose, a shellacked fountain of blonde hair, a cartoonishly red and puckered mouth, and breasts like bowling balls. When I'd

first arrived in Los Angeles, years before, I was fascinated by this unduly bosomed minx that stared down at us from billboards everywhere we went; her image—pouting behind sunglasses, draped over the hood of her pink car—could be seen when driving out of LAX, hovering over Laundromats in the Valley, bracketing Jiffy Lube and Pep Boys on Santa Monica and Sunset Boulevards, completely wrapping a four-storey building at Hollywood and Vine. She watched us when we were stuck in traffic, silent, scrutinizing, like a deity; we could place our own hopes and fears and wisdom onto the blank, bulbous canvas that was Angelyne. On all the hundreds of billboards there was no hint that she was advertising anything—and she wasn't an actress as far as we knew, or a recording artist, or a politician—and her billboards had no other information than, simply, 'Angelyne.' She was part of our lives, and friends and I eagerly traded sightings. Everyone seemed to have one. Most claimed to have been stuck behind her on a freeway, or to have seen her pawing through the cantaloupes at Alpha Beta.

Needless to say I was a proud, pink-card-carrying member of the Angelyne Fan Club. I had called the number on the card a month before to see how much it would cost to have her appear. I thought it would help, add a sense of occasion to the evening, fluff the audience, as it were. And being slightly stage-fearful, I thought it might be a good idea to have such a Hollywood icon/travesty read my thank-yous for me.

'\$2000,' said Scott, her manager. I explained the limited scale of both the evening and myself and politely declined. He called back the next day, his voice slightly more highly pitched as though constricted with desperation, and left a message saying that Angelyne would take a thousand. Being busy, I never got

back to him, and the next day I had two messages from him, each with escalating...well, hunger. And the price kept going down. I finally returned his call. Angelyne would not only read the thank yous, but would pose by her car for photos after the screening. I wrote a check for \$200 as a down payment.

As I paced backstage at the Barnsdale, I got a call from Scott. He said that Angelyne would be a little late. This didn't bode well. The element of surprise (perhaps in this instance the element could be better described as shock) was what I wanted. Who would care if Angelyne read names from the stage when they had already seen her wandering around out on the lawn? I suggested to Scott he drop her off at the loading dock and then sneak away to park the car. He fearfully told me that no one drives Angelyne's car except for Angelyne.

As the screening drew near I ran between the lobby, the green room, and the loading dock, looking for her. Jogging through the theatre auditorium I saw Tom was playing the film. I noticed that the print was so dark it was almost black. Guests had already arrived. I ran into the lobby through thickening clots of people hanging around anxiously, drinking the wine, and up into the projection booth. Natalie asked me, 'Should I serve the food now?' I glanced around: people were reaching over the bar and peeling back the Saran wrap, pulling the hors d'oeuvres away by the handful.

'Feed them now,' I said. Placate the beast, for disaster was looming large. Up in the booth Tom said that the mirror in the projector was broken.

'Do you have a spare?' I asked.

'Nope,' he said. He was a nice man, an honest man; he wouldn't look into my eyes, and his voice became barely audible with the guilt and the shame. His

demeanour was betraying a gloom so profound I knew we were in very deep trouble.

‘Can you get one?’ I asked, ‘Can *I* get one? From Mole Richardson or Wooden Nickel...’ or any of the other equipment houses in Hollywood? We’d just made a movie. Catastrophes were commonplace, and running off to a 24-hour camera supplier or film warehouse was a matter of daily occurrence (we’d had to do it when we ran out of stock in Fillmore; we’d had to do it when we forgot the film magazines in Riverside; we’d had to do it when the generator exploded in Tujunga). Tom said that it wasn’t something that people kept in stock: a mirror usually lasted the lifetime of the projector. He said it would take at least a month and a half to order one. I walked down the steps and peeked at the crowd. People coming down the stairs had to stay on the stairs. The woman playing the African harp could barely be heard over the din. I couldn’t cancel, get all these people to come back, make Natalie slice up all the vegetables again. Get Angelyne again.

Tom asked if I had a video of the movie. Despondent, too panicked to be angry, I said ‘No.’ I had some Beta tapes back at home in Venice Beach, tapes we had used for mixing the soundtrack, but it would take over an hour to get there and back, and it was already five minutes after eight. Then I remembered that I did have some tapes, fifty of them, in the trunk of car, the copies I’d brought to give to the cast and crew. But I had planned to show a *film*. I could have shown a video, and shown it with better resolution and for a lot less money, at home.

A man approached and I thought he was going to ask me for spare change. I backed away and then he introduced himself as Scott, Angelyne’s manager. He told me that Angelyne was in the Museum Staff parking. She was

my big surprise, and a lot of people had already arrived. And her car was extremely distinctive, being a pink Corvette with 'Angelyne' plates. I told him to drive to the loading dock and to meet me there. He left to get Angelyne, I ran to the loading dock. She drove the wrong way down the driveway, causing perplexity among my last arriving crew members. She manoeuvred in next to a police car that was already parked there. I was still dizzy from the news about the projector, and nervous about the throng of people, when Scott got out of the passenger's seat of the Corvette. Angelyne stayed in the car. I leaned up to the windshield and squinted inside. She drew back. I welcomed her through the windshield with gesticulations and she rolled up her window and snapped the door locks. I yelled that there were some dressing rooms inside where she could be comfortable. She made frantic hand signals through the windshield at Scott, and Scott turned to me and asked, 'Uh, did you have a check for us?' I told him that I certainly did, but, seriously, wouldn't she be more comfortable...

'Angelyne needs to see the check.'

Oh.

I ran inside and got my checkbook. With great flourishes of the elbow, I signed the check. I handed it to Scott. He scrutinized it. Then he held it up to the windshield and Angelyne leaned forward. Satisfied, she unlocked her door and emerged.

'I'm so tired. I don't even want to be here,' she said. The billboards hadn't changed in twenty years, and even then they had not only been airbrushed but also over-exposed. Angelyne, in the flesh, was easily in her sixties. She looked me up and down, her crimson lips gnarled in a sneer. Her face was powdered completely white, her nose had been whittled so repeatedly



that all that was left was a little piece of pared cartilage floating free in the concavity that was her sinus. Her arms, glimpsed from under her boa, were sticks with flaps. With laborious clomps she walked toward the loading dock. She told me that she might not stay for the screening, she was so exhausted. According to our agreement she was expected to not only stay for the screening, but to remain afterward and sign autographs. No doubt for an additional price per photograph.

I got her up the stairs of the loading dock where she promptly star-struck (*star-bludgeoned* might be more apt, considering how hard she worked at it) the security guard, who couldn't break his gaze from her breasts, and Angelyne was more than happy to coo and shake them. Tom came backstage to tell me the crowd was large enough to push the envelope of health and safety regulations, and getting restless, and had wolfed down all of the Natalie's cheese cubes. I told him to open the doors. I explained the new plan to Angelyne—she would simply introduce me, and I would say the thank yous (I'd grown apprehensive about allowing Angelyne too much leeway).

'I'm tired. Isn't there anywhere to sit?' she whined. Tom said that we could put Angelyne on a stool, raise the screen to reveal her, then hit her with a spotlight. That way she wouldn't have to move at all.

As we were waiting for the lights to flash—Tom's signal—Angelyne said to no one in particular, 'Why am I here? What's this even for?' I could've been asking her to introduce a bestiality convention, for all she cared, as long as she got a check. I told it was for a film called *Birds Die*.

‘Ooooooh,’ she said, ‘I just saw a dead bird yesterday. But I couldn’t relate to it because it, like, had no life in its body, and I, you know, I’m still alive.’ I begged her to tell the story to the audience.

The lights flashed. I peaked through the curtains to watch the audience and, like a game-show host, I welcomed the audience to the world premiere of *Birds Die* and announced, as the screen rose, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the one and only Angelyne!’ The spotlight hit her and the audience gasped. After a moment of stunned, suspended time, they exploded in applause.

‘I’d like to introduce the director,’ she squeaked, giggling like a pin-up, ‘He’s not nervous at all!’ That was it. That was six hundred dollars worth of Angelyne. I walked out onto the stage and took the mic from her. I thanked her, and told the audience to ‘Give it up for Angelyne!’ Our arrangement had been that, after I took the mic, the screen would descend again, with me in front and Angelyne remaining seated until it came down and she could retire backstage. I started my speech, my five pages of gratitude, and I noticed that people were looking past me, concerned. Then they started shouting, ‘Look out, Angelyne, look out!’ I turned around and instead of staying seated Angelyne had decided to get up out of her chair and spin aimlessly. As she did so the screen continued to come down, all thousand pounds of it. I was about to lunge and shove her out of the way but luckily she sort of just spun away upstage as the screen hit the floor with a thud. My film nearly became famous as the night that Angelyne was crushed before a live audience.

**CHAPTER THREE****FATA BROMOSA**

It was another small plane, one of Delta's less prestigious routes, two seats on either side of the aisle and just enough overhead storage for lunch in a brown paper bag. A man with a walrus moustache and a greying mullet came stooping down the aisle.

'Is this seat taken?' he said to another man with a walrus moustache and a greying mullet in the seat in front of me.

'Yeppers. Been saving it for you, eh!' Some chuckles, like some tribal recognition ritual. The man flopped down.

'Looks like we're in cattle class, eh?'

'Can't win for losing.'

'It's all going to hell in a hand-basket.' Less clichés than an arcane rite, a test and a show of clan membership.

'I think it's about time for a beer, eh?'

'Yeppers.'

There's a look, a special look, something intrinsically Winnipeeggy about these people—a tired and dusty people—that is instantly recognisable. It's resignation; a sallowness, a greyness. Pinched, but not mean. A sag of defeat.

The stewardess was sitting on the armrest chatting with the couple across the aisle. 'So you spent some time in New York City, eh?' she said.

'Yeppers. But glad to be getting back. Headed to Moose Jaw.'

Saskatchewan. Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. My mother's hometown.

‘So did ya get the chance to see the sights? See any shows while ya were down there?’

‘Yeppers. Went to see that “Hairspray.”’

The plump wife pitched in, leaning over her husband. ‘130 bucks each! American!’

‘130, eh?’ the stewardess said, ‘Jeez. Did a meal come with that?’

‘You’re here just in time for run-off season,’ my cousin Greg said when he picked me up at the airport. Run-off, as a season—though semantically inviting—is when the snow and ice melt, pulling up gravel and dirt, carving potholes in the terrain like an annual microclimatic ice age would carve out the landscape. The landscape here being the pavement outside of Rotunda Towers. Greg is the same age as I am and he, like all my many other cousins and their offspring, all live within two miles of my aunt and uncle. My aunt and uncle live in the house that belonged to my grandparents. Whole lives, generations, spent in a grey, dusty, resigned two-mile radius. Greg has worked in the same plumbing supply warehouse since he was nineteen, twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five Christmas parties at A-One Wholesale Plumbing. He has a mullet and a dog named Kahlua.

Greg pulled his rumbling mud-splattered LeSabre out into the traffic on Wellington. The car groaned when it pitched, like the weathered timbers of a ship at sea. ‘So how was your flight?’

‘Fine.’

‘Were you in cattle class?’

‘Yeppers.’

I had come back to Winnipeg for my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. When they left the north they retired to a cabin on a lake in southern Ontario. They were, as far as I know, the only year-round residents. You couldn't drive to it, their cabin. You had to park a mile or so away and trek through the woods. If you wanted water you had to haul it, or melt snow in the winter. If you wanted to stay warm you had to chop wood. There was an outhouse up on the rocks about a hundred yards away. When they decided that they were getting too old for another long winter in the wilderness, they moved to Winnipeg. To Rotunda Towers.

Greg pulled to a stop. The door squealed when I opened it.

'Thanks for the lift,' I said.

'I'll be over later with Kathy.'

'Great,' I said, and slammed the door in a plume of rust.

Rotunda Towers. Nothing rotund about it. Or towering, really; its cinderblock bulk gave it more heft than height. I suppose it does dwarf the Dakota Motel/Hotel, which sells cold beer from a window in the back, or the Jolly Mug restaurant at the other end of the parking lot. I always thought that Rotunda Towers was a great name for a drag queen. But I kept that to myself. From the shores of Repulse Bay dodging polar bears to periodically digging a new pit for a toilet in southern Ontario to this, to Rotunda Towers. Some of the lighted letters that spelled out 'Rotunda Towers' above the door had fallen off. But the place had a severity, a air of pragmatism, and so the letters had been left

off. Like, you know what it's called, and we already lit it once, what possible use besides wasteful sentiment to light it all up again? Fill in the blanks, for Christ's sakes! What are you? Idiots?

The elevator door opened and a small woman with a mat of greying hair started and quickly withdrew into a corner. 'Hello,' I said, smiling. She didn't look up. Her jaws and lips twitched, miming a greeting, but no sound came out. The overhead light, an exposed 100-watt bulb, was flickering. The woman was coming up—apparently, as there was no other option—from the basement. She was in a dressing gown and slippers.

'Goodnight,' I said when we got to the fourth floor. I got out. She turned and faced the wall as the elevator closed behind me.

I pulled my suitcase down the hallway lit with low wall sconces, with low wattage bulbs, that gave the place a murk redolent of prisons at dusk—in autumn—or low-level Soviet office blocks. There were no windows: there is no springtime in the corridors of Rotunda Towers. An emaciated man, a silent ashen wraith, passed me without acknowledgement, carrying a plastic shopping bag full of empty liquor bottles to the trash chute. There were smells in the hallway, so many smells. Pungent smells, like fried cheap food, not clean smells. Mingled smells. There were stains in the carpet. Not just the big, amorphous ones that could be alcohol or vomit, but, eerily, leading down towards my parents' door, a series of small stains, repeating regularly, first on one side, then the other, and pretty much circular and well-defined, unlike the stain of spilled

grease or piss, which tend to go all over the place. There were shopping carts from the Dakota Family Foods For Less left angled along the walls.

‘So how was the flight?’ my dad asked, sceptically.

‘It was fine.’

He seemed to doubt this. You see, the world was going to hell in a hand-basket. You can’t win for losing. We were sitting in the living room. There was an industrial size box of rubber gloves on the coffee table. That didn’t bode well.

When I was ten my I had my tonsils out. My father came to visit me in the hospital one afternoon. He brought me some comic books. He sat in the chair next to the bed and stared straight ahead. I looked down at the cover on the stack of comics on my lap. The decomposing head of the narrator, with tufts of grey hair on the sloughing skull, the eyes lurid in their orbits, the toothy grimace dripping—what was that? Saliva? Something sticky and oozy—and made even more toothy due to the disintegrating cheek flesh. *Tales of the Unexpected*. *Creepy*. *Eerie*. We didn’t say a word to each other. We wanted to, it was awkward, but we didn’t know what to say. After about ten minutes he looked at his watch and said he better get back to work. I said thanks for coming.

My Aunt Lil and Uncle Bob stopped by after dinner and Greg came by with his girlfriend. We were sitting in the living room ‘visiting.’ ‘It’s nice to just visit,’ my mom said, patting me on the knee.

‘So how was your trip?’ Uncle Bob said.

‘Fine,’ I said, ‘fine.’

'It's cattle class up from Minneapolis, eh?'

'Sure is.'

'Remember when Bonnie met Garth?' my dad said. Bonnie had been Greg's girlfriend, years before; before Kathy. 'Remember how she said she wanted to cure his homosexuality?'

I got up to go to the bathroom. I didn't need to hear the story again. It wasn't even very good. There wasn't even a punch line. When I came back and reached for my glass of water I saw that my mother had stuck a nametag on it with my name written in felt-tip pen. I looked over to her. She smiled. I looked down at the cup next to her arm. No label. I looked on the coffee table, where everyone else's glasses and mugs were. No labels. Mine was the only one. No one said anything. No one seemed to notice.

The next morning I decided to go out for a walk. I thought I'd head to the dusty shopping center across the road, with its rusty metal siding and cracked parking lot.

'Do you want anything?' I asked.

'Tancie and Mary will be here later,' my mom said, 'so maybe get some chips.' Tancie is my brother's wife. Mary was her mother. My brother wasn't coming. He doesn't like anyone. Seriously: no one. He is tattooed, from his cuffs to his collar. He has a samurai scenario covering the entirety of his back, and a fanciful bit of chinoiserie on his left calf. At his wedding dinner he said, 'Hey Garth. I got a new jaguar.' 'Oh,' I said. He unbuttoned his shirt and showed me an inky black jaguar, snarling, from armpit to armpit. He rides the biggest chopper that Harley Davidson makes and works on off-shore drilling



rigs. As brothers—as people—we're on either end of the spectrum. What, my poor parents couldn't manage to get one in the middle somewhere?

The flagship of the shopping center was the Dakota Family Foods For Less. There was also the Dakota Motel/Hotel that had a sign, stylish, I imagine, in 1952—Modern! Atomic!—where the yellow neon '-tel' was always on, but the garish reddish pink 'MO' alternated with the equally garish soapy blue 'HO.' HO MO it flashed in the night, HO MO HO MO. The business, I gather—as it didn't really look much like a HO, but more a rundown MO—was from the 'beer parlour.' Further down the Dakota shopping plaza was an indigent pharmacy, a Manitoba Liquor Commission, and the EverythingForABuck! I returned to Rotunda Towers with my bags. I thought, since Tancie was imminent, that I ought to lay in a good amount of Absolut as well. The nurse was already there when I got back. As I kicked the door shut behind me, my arms full of bags, my mother turned around in her chair. 'What? There weren't any shopping carts around?'

The nurse came every day to dress whatever wounds needed dressing and to berate my dad.

'This is our son, Garth,' my mom said. The nurse shook my hand but didn't smile. It was a needless waste of valuable time, all this hand-shaking and smiling.

'Pleased to meet you,' she lied.

My dad cleared his throat. 'When Greg's old girlfriend, Bonnie, met Garth...' What, again? Was it absolutely necessary? I'd only meet this woman. Why should she even remotely be interested in my sexual preference, let alone

Bonnie's interest in my sexual preference? And why did Bonnie even know? Why was this a topic of Bonnie's obsession? And now, four years since anyone had even seen Bonnie, why did everyone else need to know?

'I'm just going to get a refill on my coffee,' I said, needing to get out of the room. I picked my mug up off the end table and there was a label on it, my name, in my mom's handwriting. My mother was in the kitchen. My dad and the nurse were both hunched over his foot.

'You better watch this gout, Ernie,' she grunted.

'Fuck gout,' my dad said.

'Can't win for losing, eh, Ernie?' Gruff assents.

Not ten years before he was eking out his survival in the woods. Now he plays *Diablo II* on the computer. If once our conversations were stilted, now he'll talk for hours, long distance on holidays, detailing how, in the tenth level, he has been battling with the laser-breathing soldier-mutants.

'Oh, yeah. If it's not one thing it's another.'

'I hear ya.'

'Can I get you a cup of coffee?' I asked the nurse. I wanted to see if she'd get a label.

'Don't plan on being here that long,' she said.

'No problem,' I said, 'half a cup! How do you take it?'

'I got the pail,' my mom said, wheezing, tottering out of the kitchen with an ice-cream bucket full of steaming water. The nurse pointed next to my dad's chair without looking up.

I picked up Tancie and Mary and brought them straight to my parents'. The arrival of a new clan member from afar required the others to assemble around the fire, to sniff them, and to reaffirm bonds.

'Hey Garth, want some gluck gluck nulk?' Uncle Bob said, and everyone laughed, again. These old stories, memories that have solidified into myths, our creation myths, had more than a little of the liturgical about them. The repetition, the sense of ritual, how they're delivered like incantation, the expected (and delivered) response cementing our common kinship, our common identity. This sense of inclusion—strengthened by the exclusion of the uninitiated—in possessing the arcane knowledge of these rituals fostered a sense of tribe safety. Families, in the confines of their living rooms, are like Mystery Cults.

I laughed too. I pretty much had to. 'Gluck gluck nulk' was how I used to say 'chocolate milk' when I was—what?—two? Families can make the sturdiest adult crumble into a babbling, wet-seated child. You are whizzed back through time like stepping into a wormhole to your younger self, your vulnerable self.

Then dad jumps in. 'I remember Garth was bawling about something in the back seat of the car and Paul turned around to him and said, "Will you just shut up, for Christ's sake?"' And then he guffawed. 'Garth was always bawling about something,' he muttered. Whoa! That seemed mean. I don't remember it like that. I suddenly felt uncomfortable. In fact, all my dad's stories, all his memories, seemed to have been recast. I tend to have a good memory and I certainly don't remember my youth that way. I was very happy, with lots of friends, and running the drama club. My dad suddenly seemed to remember me

as always the butt of Paul's jokes or manly cruelty. He appropriated things that happened to me—if they were good—to Paul, even though Paul wasn't there.

So intoxicating is the power of these rituals of clan solidity that Tancie chimed in with memories that she wasn't even there for.

'Remember when Paul set Garth's GI Joe on fire and Garth ran away crying?' Har har har!

Well, the story was true, in a way, only it was me who'd burned my Crewcut Astronaut GI Joe in a very odd cremation ceremony with my cousin Jeri Lynn, and I even wrote a poem about it. Paul was nowhere around. 'Paul was always beating the shit out of Garth!' she said, and took a gulp of Absolut. Well, Paul didn't really start growing until after puberty, so it was generally me that did the beating. Plus—and this is important—she wasn't even there. 'Yeah, Paul would be out hunting and Garth,' Tancie nodded dismissively in my direction, 'well, *she'd* be inside all the time baking.' My childhood was being stolen from me! Anyone who knows me even fleetingly knows that I couldn't bake a cookie to save the pandas.

Tancie was not in good shape, like everybody else. She has problems with her knees and severe problems with her back and there comes a time when even the tumblerfuls of Absolut and handfuls of painkillers stop working and Tancie starts to lock up. So I drove them back to the Holiday Inn on the Pembina Highway. Mary was in the back seat, Tancie was sitting beside me.

'I'm really glad you made it,' I said. I was still being civil because I didn't know what else to do. I wasn't sure if I'd become insane, or they had. I'd thought I'd go for civil until I knew for certain. 'It really means a lot to mom and

dad.’ I commended her on her courage, her stoicism. It was a brave and selfless thing to do, what with her being in her condition and all.

‘Shame Paul couldn’t be here,’ she said.

‘Yes, it would have been nice, but—’

‘Well, you and your brother are totally different,’ she said, ‘I mean, he’s a man’s man and you’re a...man’s woman.’

I was stunned. She was being serious. It wasn’t maliciousness, it’s just that she’d gotten all of her knowledge from watching the gay neighbors on television shows. It seemed she’d thought gays were a good thing to have as, well, as a sort of pet, but she’d never actually seen a real live gay (not living in a remote valley in British Columbia with a cabal of Harley Davidson afficiandos).

I told her I wasn’t any sort of woman.

We drove on in awkward silence. Eventually Tancie leaned over, put her hand on my arm, and said, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine,’ I snipped.

She thought for a minute. ‘What’s the matter, hon? Do you have AIDS?’

When I got back to Rotunda Towers both my mom and dad had gone to bed. I went into my room and got ready for bed myself. In my suitcase was my anniversary gift for them, a hardbound book I wrote about my memories of growing up, particularly growing up in Repulse Bay. My mother had done something similar for my grandparents on their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary (she’d called it, prophetically, *Let’s Play Northern Pole*; I called mine, *Magic Lantern Slides, binaries and confluence; Personal Reminisces [sic] of an Extraordinary Childhood*. Concision apparently skips a generation). I thought they’d appreciate the continuity of

gesture (as well as the sentimentality: the burden falling to me as the gay son as my brother was certainly not going to offer any). When I was making the book I had suddenly been struck by a sense of unease. It occurred to me that it was unsteady ground, memories, that these were in fact *my* memories, and not clan lore because I'd been away, and they had gone unpractised and unagreed upon. That night had proved it: memories are highly untrustworthy.

I heard a strangled and urgent voice coming from the hallway. I ran out to see my dad on the floor. He had fallen over on the way to the bathroom. I turned on the lights.

'I'm okay,' he said, 'I fell soft.'

I put my arm around him and struggled to get him upright. His leg seized up.

'Fuck...this fucking thing... .' His eyes were furious with humiliation. He thrashed and slipped out of my grasp, sliding to the floor. 'What the fuck are you doing?' The way he hit the hard plosive of the 'ck' made the word harsher than I ever heard before, making it a true swear word. His eyes flashed at me with vulnerability and fear and recrimination. We never look into each other's eyes. I grappled a chair and pulled it over and eventually got him into it. 'That's got it,' he said lightly. Like all was well.

'Can I get you anything?' I said. It had been an excruciating naked moment. We were just going to ignore it? 'A glass of water...?'

'I'm fine. I can manage from here.'

'Okay,' I said, 'All right. As long as you're all right. See you in the morning.'

'Sleep tight.'

'Will do.'

'If Tancie calls me "she" one more time I'm going to kick her in the tits and hide her vodka,' I said. I was in a car with Sidney, my old girlfriend from high school. She'd come from Toronto for the anniversary. And though we met as teenagers in the Arctic, we both happened to have been born in Winnipeg. We'd taken the car to go for a drive, to go and see the neighborhood where she grew up. 'You'll only be disappointed,' my dad had said to Sidney. Why? What expectations did he possibly think she had? Especially since Winnipeg has sort of missed all the economic booms for the last 70 years and absolutely nothing had changed. No buildings had been torn down (I mean, why bother?), no new buildings had been built. Chances were that Sidney's old neighborhood would be exactly the same as it had been when she lived there, just like every other neighborhood was exactly the same. The drugstore, the Dakota Ho/Mo-tel, and the Jolly Mug restaurant were all exactly as I remember them. A little faded perhaps, a little dusty, but they were faded and dusty back then.

'It could be worse,' Sidney said, 'at least Tancie's not trying to cure you.'

'Oh, Christ!' I sunk down into the passenger's seat. 'It's like he's on a loop.'

'I mean, she likes you. I just don't think she's knows how offensive she's being.'

'Too much TV, not enough life. Not like you! You embraced the gays, and the gays embraced back!'

Oops. Too far. Still a bit of a sore spot.

I looked out the window at the endless blank houses and two-story apartment buildings and the dry brown lawns and the listless dry-cleaning stores or convenience stores or dollar stores.

‘It’s weird,’ I said, ‘all the windows are really small here.’

‘Why would you want bigger ones?’ she said. She’s right. What? To see more Winnipeg?

‘I know! It’s like the overwhelming theme here seems to be resignation. It’s like, why bother to make the buildings pretty?’

‘Like, tired grey blocky buildings were good enough for East Berlin in 1955, they’re good enough for us.’

‘I know, right? Why bother washing the car? It’s only a year ‘til the next run-off season anyway.’

‘Why bother buying new clothes?’

‘Why bother taking shopping carts back?’

‘Why bother even washing your hair?’

We laughed, but it didn’t make us happy. Were we Winnipeg, too, at some deep fundamental root of us?

‘Greg told me that houses sell very cheaply here,’ I said. Sidney shrugged and sighed.

We found her old house, and went by her old school. Then we headed over to my old house, where I have my first memories, and walked down a park that lead from my school to Westmount Drive. It had seemed vast when I was young. It still seemed vast.

‘So,’ my dad asked when we got back, ‘were you disappointed?’

‘No,’ Sidney said.



‘Hmmm,’ my dad said suspiciously.

The night before the anniversary party my mom and dad had everyone over to dinner. Aunt Lil and Uncle Bob came over, Greg and Kathy, Tancie was seated beside me—‘you two seem to get along so well!’ my mom chirped—Sidney on my other side, another cousin, and still one more cousin.

‘...so I just went for a walk in St. Vital Park,’ Mary was saying to my uncle.

‘Oh, you can’t do that anymore,’ Uncle Bob said, ‘Winnipeg’s the murder capital of Canada.’

‘Oh, is that right, eh?’

‘Yep,’ Uncle Bill said, ‘the world is going to hell in a handbasket.’

Mary clucked her tongue, ‘You can’t win for losing.’

‘Remember when Paul refused to eat his oatmeal?’ Tancie started, ‘And he sat at the table for days, because it had lumps in it? And you couldn’t make him?’ Again the story had happened, more or less, but it was me, not Paul who refused to eat my food, and it was peas, not oatmeal, and it was hours, not days. And instead of Paul’s bravura being marvelled at as he bested us all with his stoic, he-man fibre, I was scolded for acting spoiled.

Aunt Lil turned to me and said, expansively, ‘So, Garth, tell us about you. What’s happening in your life?’

‘Well,’ I said. Everybody turned. ‘I’m working on my Ph.D, just about finished, and teaching at the University...’

‘Can’t you ever be serious?’ she asked. Conversation stopped. She was waiting for a reply. Everyone leaned forward, expectantly. This was, apparently, not a rhetorical question.

‘Um...’ I thought I was being serious. They waited.

Dad broke in: ‘Remember how Bonnie wanted to cure Garth’s homosexuality?’ Why, with every person who enters the apartment, even the same people? What was he saying, really? And why was no one stopping him? They stopped Grandma Twa when she started repeating stories about being a warden in the women’s prison or growing up in the Winnipeg Home for the Friendless.

‘I know how to make Garth go off his food!’ Tancie said to the table, excited, and giggly.

Oh, Christ.

She took a big dramatic pause to fuel the suspense. ‘Sex with women!’ she brayed. She turned and bellowed in my face. ‘Sex with women! Sex with women!’ I dropped my silverware.

‘It doesn’t really work like that, Tancie,’ I mumbled.

‘Sex with women! Sex with women!’ she chanted.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, ‘I’m just going to get some water. Which glass was mine again? Oh, yes. The one with “Garth” written on it.’

The morning of the party I felt like the least qualified person to make the speech. Apparently I’d walked into the wrong life.

‘It’ll be all right,’ Aunt Lil said when she found me hyperventilating outside the Christ The King gymnasium. It already wasn’t all right. It was like

they were ganging up on me, with their distorted realities. It was like sharks, a frenzy of memory sharks. Maybe I wasn't fighting back hard enough. But I didn't expect I'd have to fight for my right to claim a happy and well-adjusted childhood.

'You do it,' I said, 'you're her sister.'

'Don't worry! It'll be fine!'

We'd hung up paper streamers, some gold balloons, put paper tablecloths on fold-out tables, erected some partitions to hide the sports equipment and make the gym seem not so cavernous. People began to arrive, mainly old people.

'Garth, you remember Edwina Dewey?'

'Uh, yes,' I said, having no recollection of meeting a former neighbor of my aunt's from thirty years before. 'How are you?'

'Oh, you've grown up!'

'Yes. Tends to happen.'

'I remember when you were a little boy...'

Don't even start, Edwina Dewey. Go have a drink. 'Excuse me, I have to go hang some balloons up.'

'Oh, Garth,' my dad's voice, from behind me, 'You remember Merv and Emil?'

'Hello,' I said, smiling, offering my hand. Merv grimaced and only shook my hand because I wasn't taking it away. It all came flooding back then, Merv and Emil. They were my dad's old workmates and the only two people, as far as I know, that became almost vicious when I came out to my parents when I was sixteen. Certainly the only ones who were ever nasty to my face. Merv,

particularly, looked at me from then on with narrowed eyes and a sneer, not unlike a viper ready to strike. They were brothers and lived together, had always lived together, and neither had ever been married. Hardly ones to judge.

A priest tapped on the microphone. Everyone took a seat. I think someone sang, I can't remember. But someone handed me the mic.

I talked about growing up, about having been given the joint gifts of love and a sense of adventure, and talked about life in the Arctic. I was aware of something, off to the left, someone talking. It was my dad, in his Christ the King wheelchair because it was going to be long day, talking to Merv and Emil. Every time I'd start a new sentence he'd talk over me. After I told each anecdote about how great I remember my childhood being, my Dad broke in with, 'Yeah what really happened was... .' He was heckling me. And I was doing a tribute to him. As I continued I saw Aunt Lil and my Mom turning to look at Dad, stare at him reproachfully, ignoring me. Then several others turned. So I talked louder, plus I had a mic. Dad in turn started talking louder. Soon I'd lost the attention of entire party. I stopped what I was saying. 'Am I being heckled by my own father?' People laughed nervously.

Afterwards when I was making my way up to the bar under the basketball hoop my dad he came up to me. I thought he was going to, I don't know, say how much my speech had really meant to him.

'I didn't know you had so much bullshit in you,' he said. But he lingered. There was something else in his eyes when he looked at me, something that he didn't have the language for: he was saying how much the speech really meant to him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

2%

One March, in Los Angeles, I decided that I needed to know what my I.Q. was. I don't know why, exactly. Maybe I had read about someone else's somewhere, and decided that I needed to know mine. I can be forgiven for this; I was halfway through an unmedicated four-year depression.

I wondered where exactly I might get one of these IQ tests. They had of course been long since abolished by the time I was in grade school because of their eugenicist stench. So I called up the UCLA psychology department. I asked the psychology department receptionist. Ice crusted her voice. 'We don't *do* IQ tests,' she said slowly so as not to let any of the contempt go unnoticed.

'I know,' I said, attempting a conspiratorial tone, letting her in on the fact that I was as socially conscious as she and her department were, that I was in on the joke. 'It's just . . .' But then, how to explain my curiosity without sounding like a craniocrat?

She interrupted me. 'They've long since been proved to be culturally biased.'

'Oh, I know,' I said with a chuckle. Who could be more culturally unbiased than myself, growing up without television, growing up without *The Brady Bunch* or *Gilligan's Island* or McDonald's or Hot Wheels? I was practically a cultural invalid. 'I just . . .'

'The only people I know that would use IQ tests are. . .,' she said, her tone saying *that would sink so low as to use IQ tests...* She breathed in sharply, barely managing to stomach forming the word, a dramatic gulp to keep her bile down, '... Mensa.'

I had done well in school, I knew I wasn't stupid, but I never thought that I actually would be Mensa. Mensa Adjacent, perhaps. But it might be fun to take the test. I had never met a Mensan before, at least not knowingly (but as I came to find out, Mensans are not prone to letting their status go unknown). Mensa was one of those mythic urban things: you long heard of them—and, in the case of Mensa, usually as the punchline of a joke—but had never actually seen one.

'Thank you,' I said to the UCLA receptionist, 'I apprec—' She hung up.

So I called up the Los Angeles chapter of Mensa.

'Hello,' I said, 'I'm interested in taking an IQ test.'

'You're interested in joining Mensa,' the man said, although that was not what I had said. 'Do you think you're eligible?' I didn't get a chance to answer. 'Well, ' he became smug, 'you must if you're even calling. Why don't I send you out a preliminary test? That way you'll know and you won't waste any more of your time or ours. It won't be official, but it will give you some idea.'

They sent me the test. It seemed simple, like there could be no wrong answers. I had to look at spirally shapes (or round shapes or boxy shapes) and then choose another spirally shape that it most closely resembled. It felt more like guessing than logic.

'Congratulations,' the man said several weeks later. He'd called to inform me of my good news. I had done well enough for them to deign to let me take the real, timed, observed test. He told me the date and gave me the address: 'It's in the Valley. 165 E4.'

165 E4? I was confused. I was uncertain as to what he was referring, what secret code he assumed I knew, just by virtue of the suspicion that I might have the right Mensa stuff, the Mensa mettle.

He sighed. I was new. I would learn. 'Thomas Brothers Guide page 165. Grid coordinates E4.' One of the privileges of being Mensan was finding arcane codes for the simplest things.

'Listen, even though you're not a member yet,' even though I had yet proven myself, 'we're having a get-together this Saturday night if you want to come along.' He was taking pity on my Mensa virginity, or so I thought at the time. Actually he, like all the Mensans I would subsequently meet, was just lonely. He continued, 'It's at the International House of Pancakes on Sunset Boulevard. 8 o'clock.'

I shuddered. Why would I join a group in order to go to the IHOP on Sunset Boulevard on a Saturday night? Wouldn't the reason for joining an exclusive club, undeniably elitist— and pale and malnourished—be precisely so that I wouldn't have to spend Saturdays nights at the IHOP on Sunset Boulevard? It was at this point that my unease took hold.

'Thank you,' I said, 'I'll try to make it.' I didn't try. I had plans.

I managed to find 165 E4 without any problem, which boded well and filled me with confidence. Perhaps I was a Mensa after all, perhaps I'd finally found a place where I belonged. I pulled into the parking lot of one of the anonymous strip malls off Ventura Boulevard. The address was a dusty storefront that could have been an insurance agency that had gone bankrupt or

an employment agency that had gone bankrupt or a pet store that had gone bankrupt. It was a Saturday morning, the hazy, scratchy, late Spring sunlight streaming in through the warped vertical blinds. The carpet was worn in places, burnt in others. A few modular tables had been scattered around the room. There were four of us taking the exam, sitting as far apart as we possibly could; shy, sort of embarrassed that we were caught taking a Mensa test, furtively peeking at each other, guessing each others' intelligence quotients (even though we knew that that was small). Our discomfort was not allayed by the appearance of our test giver, our Mensa mentor, our Virgil into the realms of uber-intellectualism. Louise—'Lou. Please.'—was large in a sloppy way, wearing a threadbare housedress without any sleeves allowing her dangling, cockled flesh to fall freely from the underside of her upper arms. Her thick-toed feet were encased in flip-flops. Her greying black hair was dirty, greasy, flecked with dandruff and combed straight back from her forehead. She was sporting heavy-framed glasses that had barely been fashionable 15 years before, with opaque fingerprints visible on the lenses, and stuck to the fingerprints were what looked like cookie crumbs. She was lordly, secure in the fact of her own IQ. If I would have seen her on the street I would have thought that she was at least mentally deficient, if not mentally ill. I learned that knowledge of one's IQ and socialization were inversely proportionate.

I got accepted. I got in. I was on their list. Was it that easy? I can see now why they no longer put much stock in IQ tests. Soon I received my membership card, which I kept in my wallet, next to my Angelyne Fan Club card.



I also started getting the Mensa magazine. It was called LAMent. I can understand the attempt at word play, but it sent out a perhaps unintentional message. Not an incorrect message, but not perhaps one that they wanted to broadcast so widely.

I opened the magazine with trepidation. What if I couldn't understand the writing? What if my score had been a fluke, if I had somehow made Lou so flustered that she had mixed up the exams?

Very few pages in I realized that spite was the *lingua franca* of the community. There were pages of public epistolary feuds between members. What was troubling was that the arguments seemed less philosophical than purely childish; to wit: 'she was projecting her own anger onto me when I called her husband a horse's ass . . . now to Herb, who questions my taste . . . would anyone else care to exchange verbal barbs? Shields are up and warp drive is engaged, should escape to another galaxy become imperative.' I was cringing. These were people I hadn't encountered since I was fifteen-years-old, before I had made any friends in high school, in basement rooms, still making models from kits while all the other kids had discovered necking. This was my new club, my new niche, for which I should display my membership card with pride, as I was told to do by the accompanying letter, and with whom I would spend many enjoyable Saturday evenings at IHOP on Sunset Boulevard. In the back was a page devoted to new members, Mensans in need of meaningful connection, people with interests like 'Bible study and cats,' and 'he'd like us to know he has a fantastic armadillo collection,' and 'Math' ('most notable accomplishment is memorizing pi to 140 decimal places'), and, my favourite, someone whose most notable accomplishment was 'fur cleaner.'

I noticed a pronounced inclination for the Mensans to continually insist on how much fun they were. 'Having fun is one of Mensa's prime objectives,' wrote the editor of the national Mensa magazine, going on to cite an example: 'they play Hearts together, sometimes for an entire weekend.' That *is* fun. Or 'we had thirty-three party-goers, all having fun!' Having fun is fun! For real high jinks I was considering travelling to a Phoenix meeting, featuring Phlights of Phancy and Phoenix Phiesta XXII. Or, if I could stand the jollity, 'The Smarty Gras.'

They also liked like to eat. They liked to eat in a big way. In a big, obsessive way. Every meeting, every gathering, every time a Mensan left his house or met other Mensans was an occasion to eat. But not just any food. They craved food seldom seen outside of trailer parks in rural Alabama,<sup>39</sup> food made with cookies and marshmallows, or fried and then deep-fried. Mensa might indeed have been rife with amateur physicists and philosophers, but there were obviously no nutritionists.

I closed the magazine. Christ. Yet another minority percentile that I could feel alienated in.

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<sup>39</sup> I know. I've eaten there.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE EXPANDING HORIZON

As I approached the school I could be forgiven for mistaking it for war-torn, say, Kabul. Locke High School was behind a twelve-foot high fence topped with razor wire. The walls of the school were pocked with what looked like mortar-shell craters and most of the windows were smashed. Locke High School was voted the worst school in America. My students told me that.

I'd been given the number of a woman named Bev who was looking for volunteers to teach at Locke High School, in the heart of that part of Los Angeles where one isn't supposed to go if one is not seeking drugs or suicide. You're certainly not supposed to go there if you're white. I'd heard of Watts. It was where they'd had those race riots in the 1960s. It was where the Rodney King riots happened in the 1990s. But I had never been. Nor had anyone that I knew.

Driving to Watts was like driving into a foreign country, one that I'd seen on the news. The stores were different. They stocked food that I'd never seen before. The houses were a shambles and left a shambles. Old rusty metal things filled the front yards and had weeds growing out of them.

My actor friends on Ozone Avenue told me that I would die if I went there. But, oddly, I felt safe. People on the sidewalks stopped and openly stared as I drove past, but not in a threatening way: in a stunned way. Like, what was this crazy white man *doing*? The only white faces that the people ever saw down there, my students also told me, were police.

To get into the school I had to pass through a small opening in the wire fence held open by an armed security guard. The faculty bathroom, kept secure under lock and key, was worse than anything I'd seen in Tijuana.

I was going to work with the students interested in drama. My job would be a sort of dramaturge, listening to what they wanted to write and offering whatever guidance I could, asking questions to get them to focus, and typing it all up. They were eager and open, which surprised me, considering how lousy their education had been. I mean, they don't get books, like we did, or nutritional food. One of the students I worked closely with was a girl called Cece. She told me about how she broke the news to her boyfriend and mother that she was pregnant—when she was thirteen years old—and how she then had to attend Riley High School.

'Riley High School?' I asked.

'Riley,' she said, 'you know.'

I shrugged.

She sighed. Then, as though explaining to a lazy child, 'The high school for pregnant girls.'

A whole high school of pregnant teenagers? Cece told me that instead of getting gold stars for attendance, like at Locke High, they were awarded 'Pampers or baby wipes or even baby clothes.'

'Now, pregnant girls like to eat,' Cece said, 'but not even pregnant girls can eat the food they served at Riley. They gave us watery chicken nuggets with ketchup. I said the chicken nuggets taste like frozen meat and the peaches was frozen, too. I told my mama about the food and she started bringing me good food cause I was pregnant. Good stuff like Popeye's Chicken and Pizza Hut and

Jack In The Box.’ It was startling to consider that, comparatively, Jack In The Box is health food for a pregnant teenager. She also told me about some friction she had with a girl called Genesis.

‘She wanted to fight me and there was no way. She was only three months pregnant and I was seven months by this time and moving slow. It took me a long time to get up. She was a lot lighter and quicker, so I wasn’t going to fight.’

I would take our conversations and try to wedge them into a narrative flow on my computer, because I had one. But there is cultural difference to the way we would deliver dialogue, to how one might deliver an expletive or epithet for optimal character development. For example, the term ‘bald-head chicken-head.’ All of my previous experience left me wanting. Should it be said under one’s breath, thrown away, said with subtle irony? For a pregnant Riley High School girl to say ‘bald-head chicken-head’ under one’s breath would be a sign of weakness, of cowardice. Inflection is everything; it was the difference between excruciating social humiliation and triumph. One has to be very careful.

Also, the grammar. Do I correct, for example, ‘How you even get pregnant looking like a horse-mouth?’ and ‘Babies is a big responsibility’? If I left it as they said it, would they think it patronizing? If I corrected it, would they think it patronizing? I called up Bev. She said she often had the same problem. And she was never sure. I decided to go with verbatim.

It is very hard to become part of the second worst school system in the United States. They make it very difficult.

I called around to friends to find out if anyone knew a teacher so that I could ask. No one did. It's very easy to find actors in L.A., not so easy to find a teacher. I finally located one (the ex-boyfriend of an actor I'd met at a party) who suggested I try the Van Nuys Adult School.

'You'll need to get a greenie,' the ex-boyfriend of the actor said, an odd note in his voice that lent a sinister weight to the term 'greenie.'

'A 'greenie'?' I asked.

'It's the form they'll give you so you can teach,' he said. He sighed. 'Don't worry. You'll become well acquainted with greenies.'

I went to see the principal of the Van Nuys School, a rumpled and unpigmented man who avoided looking me in the eye. He showed me into his office, offered me a chair, and sat behind his desk with my resumé. I sat at the edge of my seat hoping not only to convey my eagerness with my body language but also because it was the only way I could see him due to the rampart of papers stacked several feet high around top of his desk. He looked over the resumé without smiling or excitement. I sat grinning, eager to answer any questions he might have and to elucidate him on my qualifications and my dedication to the noblest of all professions.

'All right,' he said, 'I'll have Enid type you up a greenie.' He grinned ruefully.

'A greenie,' I said. He didn't ask me anything about my background or education or why I wanted to be a teacher. He looked into my eyes for the first time.

'It's not even green,' he said. He waited for my reaction. He gave me no clue as to what an appropriate reaction might be; he just looked at me, waiting.

Was I supposed to chuckle at the irony of it all? Was I supposed to make etymological enquiries?

‘Oh,’ I said.

Apparently I’d failed. He looked down again, sad.

‘You take it to L.A. Unified, downtown. There’s a lot of paperwork to fill out, and it’ll take some time, so don’t be discouraged. But plan on spending the whole day.’

‘I really want to be a teacher,’ I burst in, thinking I needed to make him believe in me, in my passion, ‘because without all the inspirational teachers in my life I wouldn’t be—’ He sighed and got up from his desk. I hadn’t even gotten to the part where I thought teaching was the most unselfish and—

‘Once you get your employee number,’ he said wearily, ‘you’ll need to call us back. They won’t call, you have to. Have you ever been in an ESL class before?’

‘No, I—’

‘Come back tomorrow and sit in on a few.’

I left his office, passing pinch-faced, vitamin-deficient spectres dragging themselves through the teachers’ lounge. With hard work and determination I hopefully would soon be joining their ranks.

The next night as I drove past Victory I started seeing electric amoeba swimming around in the corners of my eyes. I pulled into the parking lot of a boarded-up fast food outlet. I felt like I was going to vomit: I was experiencing my first migraine. I put my seat back and lay very still, breathing shallowly, and waited. After half an hour I gingerly lifted my arm and checked my watch. I

could still make it in time. I brought my seat back up, swallowing carefully, and put the car into gear.

The principal met me and took me to a hut-like structure out behind the school. He introduced me to the teacher, Mrs. Gerwig.

‘Please, have a seat,’ she said. She seemed anxious. The students—adults, mainly; skinny, dusty cowboy boots and big shiny belt buckles—milled, expectant. Something was happening, something important, and I had wandered into the middle of it.

Miss Gerwig pulled a piece of paper out of a Lucky’s plastic grocery bag. ‘Thirty seven,’ she said, enunciating. A brief anticipatory rush, then incomprehension, and more milling. ‘Num-ber thir-ty sev-en,’ Miss Gerwig said slowly. Some murmuring, some urgent consultation down the rows of desks. She turned the little scrap of paper around to show the number. ‘Number thirty-seven.’

‘Si!’ a man shouted, his voice squeaky with delight, with a stringy moustache and a dark, sun-bevelled face. He grinned, showing the silver perimeters of his front four teeth. He jogged up to the teacher’s desk. ‘Here you are, Gustavo,’ she said, pulling a can of Dinty Moore Beef Stew out of a paper bag. He was delighted.

‘Gracias!’ he said before quickly correcting himself, ‘Tank you, Mees.’

Miss Gerwig kept the students in class by raffling off provisions.

I was placed with a tiny man named Rodrigo. Rodrigo and I went through the various pronunciations of the past tense of regular verbs. He kept the loaf of Wonderbread that he’d won earlier close beside him on the desk.



Our school in Repulse Bay started earlier than the schools down south as they had to let out earlier in the Spring so the Inuit boys were free to go on the annual migratory seal hunt. It was a one-room schoolhouse, each row of desks represented a grade level; I was in grade three, therefore I was in the third row from the left. There were four desks in my row. My brother Paul was two grades ahead of me, two rows over. He was the only one in the fifth grade, sitting in a row by himself. Every morning we stopped classes for our dosage of KLIM, a powdered milk mixed with boiling water. We lined up at 10:30 sharp as a young Inuit woman doled out cupfuls to each student in turn, not unlike prisoners of war. I think this break was mandated by the Canadian government. I'm not sure. As a sort of *noblisse obligé*. Another attempt to civilize, like rectangular plywood housing. We were also presented with a frighteningly hard, thick, square biscuit. Your teeth couldn't penetrate it without first spending a morning sucking on it. It was more a starchy lollipop than a cookie, really. KLIM was MILK spelled backwards.

Our teacher, Mr. Pembroke—another white man somehow provoked to move his entire young family to a remote Arctic settlement<sup>40</sup>—would preside over the rows of grades, expansively giving instruction and setting a task to one row before moving on to the next, only to repeat this procedure until it came time to go home. He was also the principal and the official in charge of truancy, being the only person on staff except the KLIM lady.

One day Mr. Pembroke decided to give us a little treat, play a little parlour game, or perhaps it was a manifestation of his own frustrated ambitions.

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<sup>40</sup> I wonder that this trait is not some as yet undiagnosed personality disorder, in the cluster that defines agoraphobia, only more severe.

He told us to put away our books and then announced that he could make a rhyme out of anyone's name. To prove this, he started at the head of the sixth-grade row.

'Ipiktok, Ipiktok, choked on fish hook.' This was easy, I thought even then. All the names were in Inuit and most ended in '-uk' or '-ak' or '-ik.' How difficult was that? Putyuk, Ukluk, Eliuk, . . . hook, book, cook. And any names that didn't were biblical names, and those had already been rhymed. He came to my brother, Paul. Tall, small, maul . . .

He grandly stepped over to the next row and moved down. 'Ruth, Ruth, has only one tooth.'

He came to me and I saw that he was stumped, just for a second. He frowned philosophically. 'Garth,' he said. His eyes scanned the ceiling. He paced. 'Garth.' The self-satisfied, grin crept back over his face. 'Garth, Garth . . . sitting by the hearth.' He moved on, still smiling, still pleased with himself. 'Maguyuk, Maguyuk, always has good luck.'

I felt cheated. The *hearth*? What the hell was a *hearth*? Nothing fun and visual like Naktok smashing his foot with a rock. I honestly thought that he'd made the word up.

I went home that night and asked my parents what a hearth was. 'A hearth?' they said, but they said it like they were saying 'hearse' with a lisp. Which only made things worse. It means my name would have to be 'Girth' to rhyme.

When winter came the sun went down sometime in early October and the snow stayed. Without trees the wind off the bay blew unhindered, forming

dunes like the Sahara. One morning Paul and I set off for school as usual. Not a long walk. We climbed to the top of a snowdrift that had formed outside of the Mission and the wind caught us and blew us back down. We laughed. We tried it again and, again, we were blown back down. My mother, watching from the window, ran to the door and called us back inside. I suppose that she was afraid that we could have been blown out onto the blackness of the frozen bay and be lost forever. We didn't have to go to school that day.

I drove downtown to the L.A. Unified School District precinct, a large, humourless building, beige and boxy, and imposing like a penitentiary, perched on the lip of a hill and dangling over the Hollywood Freeway.

My preliminary meeting was with Brad Weiss, a fatigued man, the fluorescent lighting adding a greenish tinge to his adult acne. He had me write in my birth date and social security number and sign my name repeatedly on all manner, size, and colour of forms. He then sent me to a woman named Rosemary. Well, he sent me to wait for Rosemary, who would be free in about an hour. Her receptionist sent me down to the basement where there was a break room. Windowless, lit with sputtering overhead lights, and equipped with a coffee vending machine. I paid my 45 cents and the machine whirled into action. No cup descended and the hot coffee spewed directly into the drainage tray, splattering my new pants from The Gap.

Rosemary treated eagerness with suspicion. Or maybe it was envy.

'I don't see in your transcripts a U.S. constitution class.' She seemed surprised; she apparently assumed that everyone had taken one. I was surprised too: I'd never heard of one.

'No.'

She smiled as though her condescension had been justified. 'Well, you're going to have to enrol in a class in the U.S. Constitution at UCLA. Or you can take a test to fulfil the requirement. That costs \$50.00. So I can only give you a one-year certificate instead of a five-year. After one year you have to apply all over again and pay the fees.'

Speaking of fees...

'Did you bring the money orders?' she asked.

'Money orders?'

'No one told you about the money orders?'

'No one.'

'Brad didn't tell you?'

'No one.'

She grabbed the phone and left Brad a terse message on his voice mail, and then turned back to me.

'You could've been getting the money orders while you were waiting to see me.'

'Had I only known.'

'I need a money order for \$75.00 made out to the Regents of UC, and a separate money order made out to L.A. Unified for \$55.00.'

'You'll take a check?' I asked, only being polite.

'Only money orders.' Why wouldn't they take a check? It was certainly not for lack of I.D.

'I have credit cards?'

'Money orders only.'

I returned a week later with test results and money orders. This meeting with Rosemary consisted of her clipping all of my paperwork together and sending me to yet another forbidding grey compound, where I was to sign, date, date of birth, and social security number yet another sheaf or two of forms. I was then sent back to the building where I had started and told to go up to the second floor to the health office where I sat in one of the classroom desks that were set up in a line down the hallway. I settled in.

Beige painted walls, acoustic tiles, humming fluorescent lights, little cubicles occupied by pallid, purple-lipped, pear-shaped people who collected ceramic babies with angel wings in nighties, kitties, or '*Love is...*' paraphernalia.

Nurse Reno came into the hall and called out my name.

'Here,' I said.

She turned around without a word and walked back through to door. I scrambled up and followed her.

'It says here you're in therapy,' she said, pulling her chair tight against her desk. I had told my physician because I like him and wanted his opinion. He said that since I'd told him he had to write it down on the form, but he also wrote that I had no mental diseases, personality disorders, was not on psychotropic medication, and that he had not even referred me to see a therapist. Then he had signed it.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘isn’t therapy a good thing?’ I smiled warmly.

Nurse Reno did not smile.

‘Has your therapist prescribed any medication?’

‘Nope,’ I said, ‘just therapy. She’s not even a psychiatrist. Just a plain old therapist.’

‘What’s her degree?’

‘Um...’ I said. I really didn’t know. My predisposition to blind trust is actually one of the things we were working on.

‘Why are you seeing her?’ Nurse Reno’s voice was getting higher and her words are speeding up.

‘Well, all my friends are seeing her,’ which was true, ‘which made me feel inadequate.’ Nurse Reno tensed up. Mental health jokes are never funny to a nurse, I learned.

‘I see.’

But wasn’t an unexamined life not worth living, I wanted to quote, thereby not only defending my mental health but also scoring some literary points that she might pass on to the principal at Van Nuys Adult School?

‘We need to see her notes,’ Nurse Reno said.

‘Her notes?’

‘All therapists take notes. We need them. She can fax them over to us.’

‘But I’m mentally sound. A physician filed a report saying so.’ I have nothing to hide, but that doesn’t mean I should relinquish my right to privacy. All I do in therapy is whine about failed relationships and my low esteem; I didn’t really want to share that with Nurse Reno.

'It's the rules!' Nurse Reno screeched. Twice (after a rattled breath): 'It's the rules!', like an entreaty, like an angry prayer, like a crutch. Having my therapy notes entered into public record was not something I felt comfortable about. It was ludicrous to even suggest it. I told Nurse Reno so.

'It's doctor to doctor!' Nurse Reno reasoned at the top of her lungs.

'But I've never seen this L.A. School District doctor. Why would he insist on my therapist's notes?'

'It's the rules!'

'But I'm not comfortable with that. I don't think they can get a therapist's notes even in a murder trial.'

Nurse Reno had had it with me. She slammed my file closed. 'You'll have to see Dr. Beer.'

'Fine.'

'You'll have to make an appointment.'

'Fine. I'll wait.'

'He's at lunch. He won't be back until two o'clock.'

I checked my watch. It wasn't even noon yet. He must've been hungry.

It suddenly occurred to me that the karma being played out here might not be my own.

*'Love is . . .'*

Feeling somewhat tender after being mauled by Nurse Reno, I went to the next floor up to get fingerprinted. This was done by an automated machine, no ink. The fingerprint receptionist typed in my name, but my place of birth stumped her. 'Winnipeg?' she said. But that's all right; it stumps me

sometimes, too. With the entry for 'State' the receptionist had to scroll down through a list of options. Quite a long list, as it turned out, which included things I didn't even know were states. 'Manitoba,' I said, leaning over and pointing, 'There it is.' 'Manitoba?' said the representative for the L.A. Unified School District, 'is that the country?'

When my brother and I got older we moved to Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. Yellowknife was on the northern shore of Great Slave Lake and was an outpost of ten thousand people. It had the only high school in the arctic. Being the only high school within a thousand miles had only one advantage that I can think of. No sports. We couldn't form teams because there was no one around to play against. That saved me from that particular pubescent anxiety, at least.

Next to the school was residence housing called Akaitcho Hall. This was where the Inuit children from all the settlements would stay when they came to Yellowknife for school. It scared me. It had the hardness of a prison. I didn't even like to go in the doors. An Inuit youth is very rough one. These are kids who kill things. For a young soft gay boy that kind of energy is frightening. In Repulse Bay, as well, the games the kids would play were always tough. Shows of strength and virility, like leg wrestling. I only wanted to go to a drama class.

In Repulse Bay I would try to learn one or two new Inuit words every day as they came up, for example '*tingmesuk*' for airplane, and '*ook-pik*' for 'arctic owl,' '*igvee*' for 'you.' One day my friend Eliuk and I were out hunting *sic-sic*—



ground squirrel—on the tundra. He accidentally set off a trap when he was priming it and nipped his finger. He said, '*koayakna*.' I asked him what that meant. He said, 'never mind.' I dutifully wrote this down, '*koayakna*...never mind.' With the burgeoning of new adolescence concerns—like my obsession with David Bowie—by the time I got to Yellowknife I had forgotten the majority of my Inuit vocabulary. But, for some reason, I always remembered '*koayakna*.' In my social studies class I sat next to two Inuit girls and with the cocksurety of youth I thought I might try to impress them with the breadth of my knowledge. I told them that I knew some Inuit words. They asked for an example. I said, '*koayakna*.' They blushed. I couldn't understand why. I taunted them, singing it over and over again. They were horrified. Apparently '*koayakna*' doesn't mean 'never mind' at all. It means, basically, 'oh, fuck.' This cooled any further social interaction with these two girls, and made social studies that semester very uncomfortable.

The first thing Paul and I did on school mornings in Yellowknife was turn on the radio—CFYK—to hear the weather. There really wasn't too much weather during the winter—forty-below and dark—but we didn't have to go to school if the temperature dipped to fifty-below zero. Centigrade or Fahrenheit, it really didn't matter at that point; I believe the scales merge somewhere around that level anyway. I would walk to school, even in the deepest winter, in my running shoes. My parents didn't like it. They wanted us to wear our new sealskin *kamiks*. But I had my image to consider. So in my running shoes, with my massive parka zipped up all the way so that the fur-trimmed hood formed a tunnel away from the face, I would set off. Within minutes of going out the front door the fur on my hood would be caked with ice from the condensation of my

breath. The reason for the tunnel was to trap warm air. Breathing in winter was always a problem because your lungs could get frostbitten. I walked to school in the dark, the stars fiercely brilliant, the crunch from my steps on the frozen ground and my measured breathing echoing loudly in my hood. There was never any traffic. Cars, basically, were turned off in October and left until the following Spring. If you did try to start one up, and you actually got it started, the engine would crack, the frigid metal unable to withstand the sudden jump in temperature. The only cars on the streets in the winter were a fleet of taxis, maybe a dozen in all, and these could run because they were never turned off. They would leave the engines running when they got gas, kept them running during shift changes, kept them running when they were parked. As I walked resolutely I wouldn't turn my head, afraid that I might dissipate the cocoon of warm air sealed in my parka. Around the streetlamps were auras from the ice fog. I would usually take a shortcut across the lake, skirting The High Rise. The use of the definite article was because it was the only building taller than three stories in Yellowknife. On my way home after school most evenings I would pause as I crossed the lake and look up as the northern lights which generally started around that time. Huge undulating swaths of colour, red, blue, yellow, green, purple. It was like lying on my back and looking up at God's stage curtain. They would start to undulate slowly at one end, and then speed up and snap like a whip. Some nights they would fill the whole sky, from horizon to horizon. What was most haunting was that despite their hugeness they were absolutely silent. They looked like they should make some noise.

By the time my papers came through from the LA Unified School District classes were over for the year. I was subsisting on the last dusty inches in the boxes of dry foods from the back of my cupboard so on a friend's advice (an actor friend of a director friend) I went to apply at the Princeton Review, which held classes in the summer preparing students to take the SAT. Being rejected by academe, I decided to use my powers for evil.

This was not education in Math and English, but education in passing a test in Math and English; in other words, teaching rich kids how to cheat. Or perhaps 'cheat' is too strong a word; perhaps 'finding easier ways' would be better. I called up and the woman, Denise, told me to fax my resume, that they would soon be holding 'mass interviews.' Mass interviews? The term smacked of piles of devout corpses. I grew uneasy.

As part of the mass interview each prospective teacher had to prepare a five-minute lesson on the subject of their own choosing. I decided to teach 'Words Never to Say to an Inuit' (effectively, how to swear in Inuit). There were six of us in the small, bright, white classroom: three blonde girls who looked like they'd just come back from tennis lessons at a Bible Camp, an eager freshman who looked anxious about when he'd finally have his first shave, and a Princeton Review teacher trainer. The trainer, like all the trainers, looked like the host of a children's television program. After well-received lessons in snowboard safety and how to make an origami swan, it was my turn. After the first, oh, I don't know, fifteen seconds, I realized the class was paralyzed with embarrassment. I began to blush myself.

*‘Koayak ananak,’* I said, pushing on, ‘the operative word here being *ananak*, which means “mother.”’ The blonde girls looked down at the tabletops. The Princeton Review trainer pushed himself into the wall.

Somehow I survived the mass interview and was back on Monday for the weeklong training.

The training was skewed young. All the people in the Princeton Review office or teaching Princeton Review classes were in their twenties and had the buoyancy of Mouseketeers. There were a few of us trainees in our thirties, but not many. When a teacher had to take notice of one their big, ‘fun’ smile would become something more like a fear. When I greeted the instructors after class, in the hallway or coming up the stairs, they would avert their eyes and look nervous.

On the third day we came back from lunch and there was an empty desk where once there had been a thirty-six-year-old. There had been no announcements, no goodbyes, no acknowledgement. There was no evidence that they had been there at all. On the fourth day, after our mid-morning break, there were two empty desks where I had moments before been chatting to two thirty-year-olds. Disappeared, without a trace. No one said anything, particularly the two thirty-year-olds left, myself and a woman named Theresa. It was like a geriacidal horror movie. On the last day Theresa and I didn’t speak to each other, didn’t look at each other, and sat on opposite sides of the room. By mid-morning it was like Theresa had never existed. I sat mute in the back, covered in cold sweat.

Before I could sneak back into the room after lunch I was stopped by one of the Princeton Review office workers.

‘Hey, guys! Good lunch?’ I heard the trainer in the classroom said, addressing the students. I could just see my empty desk over the shoulder blocking my entrance.

‘I better get in there,’ I said pathetically, ‘the class is starting.’ The office worker closed the door.

I was cut—I was unhired—because I was deemed, and I suppose it was inevitable, ‘not fun enough.’ It seemed all people over thirty were ‘not fun.’ But of course I was fun! I was in Mensa! We weren’t cut, officially, because of our age, of course, because that would be illegal. Officially it was because they didn’t think we were capable of handling the material: tenth-grade math and vocabulary.

It was after my defeat at the hands of Princeton Review and the hard-earned truth that I was not fun that I became even more determined to be a teacher, even if I had to volunteer to do it.

On the evening of the performances at Locke High I drove down to Watts and walked into the auditorium. I had the only white face. I found a seat and the plays began, with the house lights still blaring. Cece’s performance was a tour de force of pragmatism.

‘I was worried about tellin’ my mama most of all,’ she said with her usual steely, unemotional resolve.

Benisha, also in her class, entered from the wings. She was playing her mother. ‘You what?’ the girl said.

‘Mama, I’m gonna have a baby.’

‘Oh, no, you didn’t!’ shrieked a woman from the audience.

‘You better not be saying,’ called another one.

Benisha was significantly more histrionic, and began to hyperventilate and blubber. ‘My daughter! My baby!’ she sputtered and walked off the stage to a smattering of impassioned applause.

‘Pretty soon I was going to Riley and the girls there was mostly okay. ‘Cept for one.’

Larinda, another student—in the role of Genesis—stepped onto the stage. At the last minute she improvised and stuck a jacket under her shirt to simulate a third trimester pregnancy. She played it large, with none of the admirable restraint of Cece, who stood back and patiently waited as Larinda marched back and forth across the lip of the stage, milking the audience, shimmying as they whooped.

The feature presentation for the evening was a play written by Locke High School’s drama teacher.

This was unlike theatre that I was used to. It was not the theatre of attention and quiet respect. It was call-and-response theatre. The parents in the audience, particularly the mothers, would scream out, say, ‘you better not go there, girl!’ to the actresses on stage and, disconcertingly, the biggest response—a huge, spontaneous burst of applause and laughter and shouts—went up when the mother character slapped her daughter. I gasped, even though the girl had earned the slap. Later on came another disturbing moment—the firing of gun by the son into his mother's stomach provoked unrestrained laughter. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps I am so unaccustomed to the etiquette of gunplay I can't recognize absurdist comedy when I see it. After that the set fell down.

There was an unfamiliar discipline to the production. The actors would not only talk to friends and family members in the audience (from the stage) when they didn't have lines, but would jump down and into the audience to sit with them when their scenes were over. And the prompter, there to help the actors who forgot their lines, which was frequent, read the lines to them from the wings. Unfortunately, she read them into a live mic. The actors themselves weren't mic'd.

At the back of the auditorium was a folding table that served as a concession stand. It had a handwritten menu, at the bottom of which was written, 'NO FOODSTAMPS.' They sold nachos, which consisted of an open bag of Fritos with liquid cheese poured into it.

'Can I have a Diet Coke, please?' I asked.

'Coke?'

'Yeah, sure.'

'Garth. Hey, Garth.' It was Cece. She was carrying a drooling, smiling toddler. Beside her was a square shaped woman in a floral dress. She was wearing bright red lipstick. She was beaming.

'I want to introduce you to my mother,' Cece said.

The woman took my hand in both of hers and looked closely and directly into my eyes. 'Thank you,' she said.

## CHAPTER SIX

10%

It's never easy, I suppose, growing up gay. Doesn't matter where you are.

The days in Mrs. De Jong's homeroom, in Yellowknife, were torturous, afternoons that stretched the fabric of time itself. Puberty had arrived. In the desk behind me was Tracy, a vaguely lapine girl, straight blonde hair down her back, listened to Bowie and Queen, like I did, a member of the KISS Army (but secretly listened to Eric Carmen on those cold nights when, really, no one understands you). A shy tilting of the head when she saw me, a shy smile. Just my type, or so I was led to believe. Secret notes passed forward ('GOD!!!! This is SOOOOO boring!!!! Are you going to the Snack Box after school?'). Her best friend wanted to fix us up. But there was something holding me back, some twinge.

In the desk in front of me was David, a vaguely lapine boy, straight blond hair, soft, not into sports, a house full of sisters. I could recognize promise even before I knew I was recognizing it. As the afternoons pulled like taffy into eternity, the seconds hanging suspended like the dust motes caught in the shafts of afternoon sunlight. '...past imperfect blaaaaaah ...the correct use of a gerund blaaaaaah ...quiz next Thursday...' I allowed my knee to drift inward and gently rest on David's hip. At which point I squirmed, stewed in delicious, mysterious erotic agony. 'It's all right,' I told myself, 'I can like David, just for today. Tomorrow I'll start liking Tracy.' The next day my knee drifted inward toward David again and Tracy's notes went unanswered. I made another



promise, 'This is *definitely* the last day. Tomorrow I will definitely starting feeling this way about Tracy.'

In the Northwest Territories at this time there wasn't a whiff of gay. Like in all frontier towns gays were apocryphal, something you heard about other people beating up. We didn't have television like they had in the south. We only had one small bookstore. And one movie theatre that showed movies that were six months, sometimes a year, old. Not exactly a hub of progressive thought; in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Gay Pride was well behind the need not to die in the cold or starve to death on the tundra. Yellowknife was, like all rugged outposts, unforgivingly heterosexual.

Gradually, grudgingly, coming to terms with the fact that Tracy and I would never be a couple, I got home from school one day and found myself alone. My brother wasn't there yet, and both my mom and my dad were still at work, yet still I checked and rechecked all the rooms to make sure that no one was there to hear. I was at a point where denial was ludicrous. I went into a back bedroom and shut the door tight. 'I'm a homosexual,' I said out loud, horrified. I actually said it like that: 'homosexual.' Now it was a fact. Suddenly I panicked and dove to the floor. I'd forgotten to check under the beds. I actually did this. As though my mother routinely climbed under the bed, silent, waiting for hours, just because.

So I was out, or at least aware, at least out-leaning—15 going on 16 and invincible, full of the potent and blinding cocktail of teenage hormones, adrenalyzed, testosteronized, able to take on the world and no longer able to listen to reason. I wanted to go, go to where there were people like me, go South,

to my destiny, my real life, with my gay brothers and sisters. Pride on! We shall overcome! I would have to lie low until I was old enough to leave. I believed that there were no homosexuals in Canada, let alone Yellowknife. I thought that they all lived in New York City. I hadn't even heard of San Francisco. The farthest south I'd been at this point was Medicine Hat.

I discovered by accident that there were gay people in Canada. Two days before my sixteenth birthday I went to Calgary to spend time with my favourite cousin. While she was at school I decided to go downtown where I fearlessly headed to The Love Shoppe, a place that was always forbidden—one had to be 18 to enter—a place that housed titillating secrets and untold pleasures. I think pornography was illegal in Canada at that time; I certainly couldn't find any. The Love Shoppe offered sex, but under the uxorious guise of 'Marital Assistance.'

Almost sixteen, at the high flowering of puberty, independent, individuated, surly, with pubic hair and confidence and new adult musculature, I ventured into the store. Hushed, shades of sensuous red dominating the décor, tasteful shelves of lubricants and dildos in discreet packages, diaphanous G-strings and flouncy brassieres. And books.

The mere hint of the naughtiness of it all made me dizzy. I'd never seen explicit material before, just the perfunctory communal leafing through old Playboys found under the beds of my friends' older brothers. As I walked slowly down the aisles I was suddenly locked rigid, breathless: there, in a display rack, was a book called *Loving Someone Gay*. I was staggered, delighted, petrified. I looked around to see if anyone had seen me notice it. A businessman was

flipping through the greeting cards. Two stenographers were in a deep and serious conversation while closely inspecting a set of Vaginal Ecstasy Pearls.

I picked up the book. My heart was crashing in my chest. I quickly put the book back. I walked to the next aisle, blind even to the provocative models on the packages of male underwear.

I went back to the book. I picked it up and walked quickly towards the counter at the front of the store. The businessman cut me off and I did an abrupt turn into the massage oils. I looked at the two stenographers. They seemed to be reaching a compromise. I ducked back behind a shelf of scented candles as they slowly made their way to the front. Before I came into the store I was worried about being humiliated because I was underage. Now I worried that I would be humiliated in a much deeper way. I put the book back and moved to the plastic handcuffs and silk whips.

After the two women had left I tensed. I was alone now in the store—opportunity was mine. I quickly walked back and picked the book up again. I took a step but stopped. Outside, on the sidewalk, a man in a sports jacket turned and peered in the front window. I'd lost. He was going to enter. I was about to put it back on the rack and give up but then the man turned and continued walking. I'd been given a reprieve. This was my chance. I resolutely made my way up to the counter, head down, eyes down, my cheeks pulsing with heat. The clerk, an elfin man with glasses, slowly picked up the book. He rang it up. *'Loving Someone Gay,'* he said, *'it's a very good book.'* I was breathing through my teeth. He slowly put the book in a bag. *'Are you gay?'* he asked brightly. I took the bag.

‘Yes!’ I said, squeezing it through a restricted throat, and ran out of the store.

For the next two hours I wandered around the malls of downtown Calgary, dazed. The clerk had been the first person I’d ever told. I had to go back to talk to him. I kept on walking, rapidly, pointlessly, passing through stores, oblivious, edgy, my mind reeling. Finally, I steeled myself and headed back. The bell above the door tinkled as I entered. He smiled. There were no other customers.

‘Hi.’ I was blushing again. ‘I bought a book here this afternoon?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I remember. *Loving Someone Gay*.’

‘Yes. It’s just, well, I’ve never told anyone that I’m gay.’

What an odd afternoon he must have been having. ‘You may be interested,’ he told me, ‘in a GIRC meeting we’re having tonight.’

‘GIRC?’ I said. I still had so much to learn.

‘Gay Information and Resources Calgary.’

A gay meeting? In Calgary? There were gays in Calgary? How could that be? My uncle was a cop here—how come he didn’t know?

‘And afterwards we’ll probably all head out to the bar.’

‘The bar?’

‘The gay bar.’ He grinned. ‘Well, one of the gay bars.’ *One of them?* ‘You should come along.’ I’d never been in any bar before.

Was it that easy?

I had no intention of coming out to my parents because they just wouldn’t understand. My father was born in Brandon, Manitoba at the start of the

depression and my mother was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. And as if—and I'm trying not to be uncharitable here—that wasn't enough to earn them a place in the Rube Hall Of Fame, they sought to fortify it by moving us as far away from civilization as they could at the first opportunity. What did they know of the world? They seemed to know enough to want to hide from it.

One night we were watching a programme on Yellowknife's version of T.V. (actually videotapes of television from Edmonton that were piped into our homes a week later) and there was mention of a homosexual. I don't even think there was one on camera—just a passing reference. 'Eeeeeuuuuwww,' my mother said, wincing in disgust, turning her head away and making a lemony face as though somehow a dump truck of cess had been erroneously delivered to the centre of our living room.

So I thought it wise to keep the whole gay thing to myself.

When I decided to make my move, to drop out of high school and move to Los Angeles (I'd become more world-wise by this point, and L.A. was not only a hub but also had the movies), I had no intention of telling my parents, but I did have to tell them I was moving. I decided to use the strategy of divide and attack, going for my mother first—she'd be easier—and cornering her away from her home turf. I stopped in unannounced to the doctor's office where she worked, hoping the element of surprise would help me keep the upper hand. There at work it would have been awkward for her to scream and sob and throw things. I told her that I needed to speak to her privately. She led me to unused office in back. 'Sit down,' I told her. She did.

She was calm, wary, stony. She sat rigidly, her mask severe and giving nothing away. I had never done anything like this before. I sat on the edge of a

desk facing her. I wasn't smiling either. We were like two generals on opposite sides.

'I have something to tell you,' I said.

She didn't respond. She looked at me without blinking. Her jaw was set.

'Go on,' she said finally.

'I . . . I'm leaving Yellowknife.' Now was the time I braced for, when she would flail in hysterics, break office furniture. I winced. This was more than just leaving home, it was dropping out of school, it was moving thousands of miles away.

Her expression hadn't changed. I wasn't expecting that.

'I see,' she said. She was immobile. Her eyes didn't move from mine.

And then, calmly, 'May I ask why?'

I was flabbergasted. She wasn't going to try and stop me? Didn't she care?

'I . . . I . . . I hate Yellowknife.' It was *my* voice that betrayed hysterics.

'I see,' she said. She finally moved, leaning forward slightly. She continued, calmly. 'Is there another reason?'

She'd done it. I was done in. We both knew exactly what she was talking about.

'Yes!' I said, gasping.

She nodded, pursing her lips. 'Your father and I have known for about a year now.'

What? *I'd* barely known for a year.

Sex wasn't something that we'd ever talked about. Only once that I can remember did the subject even come up. My mom, my dad, Elizabeth the Nurse,

and I were sitting together in the Transient Centre. They were adults and I wasn't really paying much attention to them. I suppose they might have been talking about Isabel, a young Inuit girl, and her pregnancy. Suddenly alarmed, Elizabeth turned to my parents. She grudgingly had acquiesced to watching what she said around Paul and me after she'd stopped by on her way back from one of the houses in the settlement to tell us that she'd just found a dead baby that had been kicked under the bed after the mother miscarried the week before. She nodded in my direction. 'Does da boy know where babies come from yet?' My mother smiled. 'We answer the questions as they come,' she said. Elizabeth grunted. She turned to me. 'You order zem from za Eaton's catalogue!' and then she cackled. I, of course, already knew where babies came from. I had found out what the word 'fuck' meant when I was six, in the school ground in Winnipeg. My best friend Gerald Klassen told me. 'It's when a man sticks his pickie in a woman's hole.' Gerald called the penis a 'pickie.' He was of Dutch descent. I'm not sure if that has anything to do with it.

Looking back, I suppose, it would have been more surprising if my parents *hadn't* known. When we briefly lived in the south in a small rural town called Eckville, Shirley Nelson and I would put on shows at every assembly. We didn't have a formal drama department, and we weren't asked to perform, and we didn't ask if we could, we just did it. One of our shows, which—like all of our shows—we wrote, directed, and starred in, was 'The History of Music.' The format was that of a variety show, the humour rather simplistic (in keeping with it being written by preteens). In one of the skits—'Opera Singer'—I dressed up in one of my mother's old housecoats stuffed with pillows and put on one of my

grandmother's old wigs and sang in falsetto. In another I borrowed the plastic fruit from the centrepiece of the dining table and dressed up like Carmen Miranda and sang 'Coconut Woman.' I can only now imagine the pride that my parents must have felt sitting in the audience. So no wonder my mother wasn't surprised. Then there was an 8 mm film that I'd found in a box of home movies recently. It was taken at Christmas, in Winnipeg. I was around four- or five-years-old. My father is shooting the movie, standing in the hallway and facing toward our bedrooms. On his cue my brother Paul emerges from his bedroom driving his new remote control race car down the hallway in front of him, shoulders squared and his lips vibrating with simulated engine sounds. After Paul has gone past and out of frame, I—again, on cue—emerge from my doorway. In front of me was my Christmas present—a remote control pink poodle. It takes several dainty hops, then stops to sit up on its haunches and yap. Then down again for more dainty hops down the hallway. Travelling behind it, holding its leash, is me, hand on hip, mincing, just taking a stroll down the Champs-Élysées. How could they *not* have known? Or, more importantly, what did they expect, giving me an electric poodle for Christmas?

I boarded the Greyhound bus in Yellowknife. My parents had told me that they were not going to stop me. But if I did choose to leave I was on my own. I was stunned. I thought they'd loved me. This didn't feel like they loved me. But I had carelessly mistaken them for provincial hicks. If they would have stopped me I'd never have forgiven them. They were much smarter than that. So they let me go. How can a 17-year-old high school drop-out make it on his



own, with no knowledge of the world, no experience? They thought I'd call them in couple of days, pleading for rescue, at which point I would be rescued.

So the Greyhound bus pulled out of Yellowknife and I had a suitcase that my grandmother had given them for Christmas, and \$50 that I'd managed to save up.

There is one road leading to the south. It is unpaved and bleak, made not of gravel or even sand but, I think, dun-coloured cement dust. No matter how tightly you close the windows the dust gets in, hangs in the air, coats your nostrils, is there to be hacked up in the mornings. There are also horseflies; large, winged carnivores that don't just bite, like in the south, but butcher, flying off after a strike with large chunks of flesh clenched in their jaws. Insects up north have a mutated life span. It is short, but it is Mesozoic: the 24-hour sunshine of summer tricks their metabolisms and allows them to grow to prehistoric sizes. The mosquitoes in Yellowknife flocked like birds. If you were out walking and you stopped to talk, within seconds the cloud of mosquitoes would be so dense you'd be unable to see your companion.

This was my bus ride out of the north.

It's a long journey—several days—with stops in tiny native communities—homes to the Dene, the Dogrib, the Metis—forlornly clinging to the rocks; past the tenuous shacks of the towns of Rae and Edzo, to Fort Providence where we had to cross the MacKenzie River. It was early autumn so we could still cross; later in the season when it got colder, it would be impossible to leave to Yellowknife by road due to the freeze-up—the ice forming on the river was too solid for the ferries. You had to wait until it was completely frozen, then they cleared an ice road and you could just drive across. In the deepest

winter they even opened an ice road that crossed Great Slave Lake—a large lake, it would have probably even been a Great Lake if it had had the fortune to be in Southern Ontario instead of in the desolation of the Northwest Territories—a road a hundred miles long over the ice that was twenty to thirty feet thick, thick enough to support the weight of trucks as big as semis. This was how we got our groceries from the South in the winter. For fun we used to drive out onto the ice road and bumper-hitch: grabbing onto the bumper and ski behind in our running shoes, crouched, the exhaust pumping into our faces, as the car sped and veered over the ice.

On I travelled, through Hay River, on the southern shore of Great Slave Lake across from Yellowknife, Enterprise, Slavey Creek, Indian Cabins, Meander River until, at last, High Level, the first weak hint of civilization. It was in Alberta, a sign that were, relatively, in the South.

It was naïve to think my parents would have let their 17-year-old son just leave unprotected. I found out later that my dad had taken off work and flown down, secretly tailing me to make sure that I was all right, but giving me the freedom to fail—or succeed—on my own.

It may not be easy to grow up gay, but there are places where it's very easy to *be* gay. Gays flock and aggregate, drawn to metropolises all over the world. In L.A., for example, it's very easy to be gay. There are bars and parks, our own gay bookstores and restaurants and billboards and pharmacies and supermarkets and whole neighbourhoods with almost nothing but gays, where the side streets at night become more active than clubs, where certain notorious

parking garages and laundry rooms become more active than bathhouses. There is even a gay traffic school.

The class was held in the cafeteria of a boutique hotel tucked off into a side street in West Hollywood. We the offenders shuffled in, our citation slips clutched in our hands, wearing our newly washed and taut blue jeans, and took our rattan chairs. A busty young man slowly came down the stairs, his wig a blonde bob, dressed in a shiny vinyl blouse, fingerless black lace gloves, a tight skirt made of what looked like puckered black leather, leopard-patterned nylons, a large wooden crucifix around his neck and a pair of chrome handcuffs hanging from his belt. This was our traffic school instructor. At the bottom of the steps he turned to us and said, 'Y'all doin' all right?' in the *basso profundo* of the drag queen. 'If my outfit shocks you, it's all right. I'm changing at the lunch break.' He made his way to the front of the class. 'Hey, Power Lesbian, how are you this morning?' He stopped and glared at a man in the back. 'Oh, you tired queens and your cell phones!' His name was Shimmy Maxx.

The first thing he did was put on a Cher video for us while he set up his teaching aids: a collection of Barbie dolls, one of which was in a little toy wheelchair (traffic safety?) and one he inexplicably called his 'Time Travel Barbie' with her 'Black lover, LaKisha. They've been in L.A. for three years.' He also had one of the original Gay Bob dolls, which is like a Barbie only it's a man and has an elephantine penis. He placed Gay Bob astride a little toy motorcycle, but it kept falling over. 'Gay Bob's a top—he's not used to spreading his legs.'

As we sat watching Cher he interrupted us to ask, 'Is there a lesbian named Luna here?' to which someone replied, 'No, but there's one in San Francisco.'

He shut off the video and scanned the class ('I always have to do a swipe to see if there are any celebrities or old tricks'). 'My boy name is Avery, but don't piss me off or I'll sign my drag name to your paperwork and then you'll be in trouble.' He told us that he used to be a psychiatric nurse in Texas.

A pumped-up man wearing a tight, gauze-thin T-shirt came down the stairs looking confused. He had a citation slip.

'Queen,' Shimmy Maxx said, fluttering around him, 'you're late! Grab a chair.' But the room was almost full. 'This class is so big I don't know what to do with it,' he said; the class laughed. Shimmy looked around for a vacant spot. He pointed to a black man in the back. 'Why don't you go and sit next to Mr. African American Goddess.'

'You're gonna learn a lot here today,' Shimmy said after we'd all signed the clipboard going around, 'like before you do something illegal, check to see if there's a cop watching. First let's get to each other a little more intimately. I want y'all to go around the room and tell us your name, your star sign, and what you're here for, besides picking up an afternoon trick.'

'Hi, I'm Dave. I'm a Virgo. I made a U-turn on Fountain during rush hour.'

'Miss Thing, were you high?'

'I'm gonna talk about reality and then I'm gonna talk about what I do,' I couldn't help but admiring talk of reality coming from a man in a tight black

dress and stiletto heels. Shimmy went into some detail about honing one's skills for the peculiarities of driving in Los Angeles, like the 'Asshole Factor,' one aspect of which is that for every red light you can expect two cars to run it, and the precautions necessary for accelerating through crosswalks.

After lunch Shimmy Maxx had indeed changed outfits, eschewing the dominatrix severity of the morning's ensemble and opting for more 'Spring Fever, 1974': sleeveless blouse patterned with Happy Faces surrounded by daisy petals, white hot pants, and white platform shoes with seven inch heels. 'Just for the record,' he said, as he walked through the class, 'this is a fake ass. My boy ass isn't really this fat.' Again, we focused on data peculiar to this class and to this city. We learned, for example, that gay people in jail are called 'K-11s' and are given a different colour uniform to distinguish them from the general prison population. 'But I don't care,' Shimmy said, 'I'll make it mine and I'll make it fabulous!' Also, with regards to driving under the influence, in Los Angeles the favoured intoxicant is methamphetamine. This is in contrast to Texas, where 'everyone drinks. Especially the lesbians.' As the class was drawing to a close Shimmy came through, bending over to sign our certificates of completion. This prompted some faux-wolfish sass. Shimmy turned and looked at us. 'I have a fake pussy, but I never wear it.' And went back to work.

Perhaps I wasn't taking Mensa seriously enough. Perhaps I ought to give it another shot. I mean, defensive shotgun and folk singing were not for me, but maybe there was, I don't know, a gay Mensa group.

There was. I called right away. Now I was on another mailing list, for the Gay Mensa newsletter, GLADRAG and even more social opportunities. There

was a special gourmet potluck with an Academy Awards party afterwards where one could watch the entrances on the red carpet while discussing the trends of the twenty-first century. I'd rather go to a party with the stupid people and just make fun of the outfits. Ballots would also be available for an Oscar pool—the winner gets an extra dessert. And as if that wasn't fun enough, they'd also discuss 'the separation of church and state, and the abundance of Born Again and "This is a Christian country."'

The next Gay Mensa meeting, however, promised a discussion, with guest speaker, on the 'Special problems of Mensans: Their social skills, sometimes wanting, and why, and the weight Problems of the Highly Intelligent.' At the bottom was the request, 'Please keep the drive open so people can get to the front door.' They couldn't use the sidewalk? They needed to use the driveway? How big were these people? I called to get directions.

'Give me your birthdate,' the man who was hosting the meeting said. I did. He hummed pensively.

'Still no Scorpios. I did a chart graph. There are lots of Aquariuses, but no Scorpios. There must be something significant in that. Oh, and could you bring a salad or fruit?'

The directions were 82 D6 (old Thomas Brothers, 34 B8).

I walked up the driveway with a bag full of carrot sticks and some grapes. I was led into the back and dominating the entire lawn was a table laden with sugary foods; cookies, brownies, huge sticky cakes, bowls of marshmallows in tapioca. Looking around the yard I felt something that I never felt in L.A.: young and thin (I didn't even feel that way when I was young and thin). I was the ingénue. The others were all either prematurely aged, or very fat, and all seemed

to have grooming difficulties. They eyed me suspiciously, bursting with IQ defensiveness and dying to ask me what my score was, worried.

I went to join the circle of men sitting under a tree on bowing deck chairs, eating something—something with raisins and M & Ms in a thick creamy pudding—off of paper plates. One fellow, round and pocked like an asteroid, somehow steered the conversation around to the further parsing of Mensa categories, the existence of which I assumed was a special Mensa secret, since I'd never heard of it before. Apparently, the top 2% is not enough to make one feel smug. There's a further distinction, the top 2% of the top 2%, which puts them at the 99.9 percentile. They are the ISPE. They obviously knew that it was pointless to even define the acronym for me because I didn't stand a chance. But then—I was aghast—there was even a further distinction called Prometheus.

They were gentle with me, being the ingénue after all. They explained to me that Mensans have a unique way of defining epochs: instead of the distinctions that normal people made between AD and BCE, the ISPE guy defined it as 'Before Monty Python' and 'After Monty Python.' This made me unaccountably angry: something felt forever ruined.

Later as I floated around the lawn, uneasy about getting too close to any of them, I came face to face with the large ISPE fellow, helping himself to more cream soda, specks of brownie up near his nostrils.

'So, what does ISPE stand for?' I asked, attempting small talk after he'd broken the ice by mentioning that mini marshmallows are preferable to the large ones when creating a cream cheese and tinned fruit casserole.

‘International Society for Philosophical Enquiry,’ he said. Then he went on to tell me that he ‘wrote some fuck/suck stories that were published.’ He leaned in and smiled. ‘If you’re not busy next Sunday we’re having a little party in valley. Food from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m.’ He winked and took a bite of a Twix bar. ‘After that is the nude spa party.’



## CHAPTER SEVEN

## ANNEXATION

I got the catalogue for The Learning Annex in the mail. Certainly they came regularly, like the El Nino, or career disappointment, appearing in the mail box or in yellowing stacks outside the Koo Koo Roos and the 7-11s. Though not the only academic institution in L.A.<sup>41</sup> it was the only one that I knew of that had Elliott Gould in a small box on the cover of its catalogue.

Usually I throw the Learning Annex catalogue away—I just don't have the energy—but that little picture of Elliott Gould in the upper right hand corner stopped me. It was the 'Los Angeles Guide to Summer Fun' issue. It wasn't necessarily the fact that Elliott Gould was on the cover of the Learning Annex catalogue, but the quality of the photo itself. Mr. Gould looked . . . well, he looked just a little a sad. Like in the photos on milk cartons. Not precisely in focus, grainy, unposed, discomfited, candid, and sort of guilt-inducing because the photo was never meant for publication (on a milk carton, let alone a mass printed catalogue). 'Have you seen me?' I thought when I saw the photo, 'please call the LAPD hotline . . .'. And it occurred to me, when had I seen him last? On some sitcom, playing someone's father? Mr. Gould was posed against a background of wood-panelling, the flash reflected in its finish. He wore no make-up or fresh laundry and looked pained. His sweatshirt was askew and he hadn't combed his hair. The humiliation was palpable, like in a police mug shot,

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<sup>41</sup> I'd already gone to the University of Southern California where, in a requirement-fulfilling 5-unit Oceanography course with 200 students, at \$500 a unit, I overheard a frighteningly blonde, buxom sophomore behind me say, 'Have you ever, like, noticed that smart people are, like, rilly, rilly ugly?' Her blue-eyed, bob-nosed friend replied, 'Totally!'

which it also resembled. The title of his course was ‘How to Survive in Showbiz.’ And it cost \$39 (\$29 if you’re a member); \$39 to learn all about surviving in the showbiz with a former Oscar nominee and the man to whom Barbra Streisand gave a son. It sounded like a bargain. I was hooked. I flipped through to see what else my life was missing, to see how else I could make my summer fun.

‘How to Write a Movie in 21 Days’—which offered the answer to the question, ‘Who am I and how much can I get paid for it?’

‘How to Make Money as a Nude Artist’s Model.’ I was intrigued at the placement of the adjective.

‘How to Win at Craps.’

‘How to Write a Book or Novel in 3 Weeks—or Less!’

‘How to Access the Goddess Within You.’

‘How to get a job on a cruise ship.’

I had a dog, so of utmost urgency was ‘Telepathic Communication with Animals.’

We met on a Tuesday in the Writers Room at that Ramada in Culver City (‘Fox Hills adjacent’ said the directions in the registration packet). Anxious, I arrived early. As I sat on one of the folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle the room filled up with I came to regard as a typical L.A. gathering (living, as I did, Santa Monica Adjacent). A Samoan man in a tight-fitting ‘Orange Slice’ T shirt, a number of sociophobic shut-ins (my demographic), a coterie of done-up doyennes, and two big black folk in exercise wear and baseball caps with ‘JESUS’ written across the fronts in gold capital letters.

A woman came to the door and peeked in. 'Is this the telepathy class?' she asked generally. This was obviously the right course for her.

The instructor, Carol, walked in with her dog Jesse, a very patient and kindly dog, who crotch sniffed me as he walked by. She had brought Jesse 'for practice. Go ahead, ask her a question.'

The black lady with the 'JESUS' baseball cap took it upon herself to start the introductions, unbidden. 'I'm a psychic,' she said, 'I've seen things since I was a kid. But I'm on the network now.' We moved down the line. I don't think Carol expected us to introduce ourselves, but she went with it.

'I'm a medium,' said one large woman.

Things got a little competitive; one woman with the manic eyes of someone on the verge of becoming invisible said, 'I've always been psychic, too. My friends all say I'm psychic. I know what every single one of my cats is thinking.'

There were Grey-haired women, long past the point of caring what society dictated to woman about their appearances, dressed in cotton pastels, low heels, and turquoise jewellery from Sedona.

Is it safe to be at an ESP class and think derisive thoughts? I shifted in my chair.

The crowd was almost all cat owners, and almost all female. And there was Juan, who had that moist look about his eyes, a little too eager to talk, ready to cry.

Why wait until the end of the seminar to start the marketing push? Before Carol bestowed our first berry of knowledge she assaulted us with a barrage of pamphlets offering all-day seminars at her studio in Agoura, six-day workshops

where we could bring photographs of our pets, communicate long distance, and council animals with physical problems from around the country. She also offered private consultations (emergency sessions; fee—\$75. Tutoring; hourly fee: \$100. And the last item—Returned Check; fee: \$20.). We were given the chance to buy audio tapes of the seminar—before we'd even heard it—for \$15. VHS tapes for \$39.

As Carol was handing out brochures a woman in a 'Built To Last' T shirt asked, pointing at a pamphlet featuring a picture of a cat, 'Is this yours?' Carol said, 'Yes. She's passed on.' The woman in the T shirt nodded sympathetically. 'So's mine. She came back.' Carol nodded sympathetically.

Carol told us we should practice with animals that we didn't know, asking questions that were verifiable. Well, not ask questions but 'invite answers.'

We started with a little bit of light grief counselling to break the ice. 'How do we know when to say goodbye?' A specific problem for the group as many present insisted that they've had the same pet but many successive cats. Carol's comment that 'a lot of us have specific ideas on what to do with remains' brought enthusiastic audience response and admirable creativity.

Carol segued into a truncated session of role playing to deal with Body Balancing with your pet, something dealt with at length in one of her other seminars advertised in her brochure and that cost a lot more than the Learning Annex had the conscience to charge.

After the first forty-five minutes were spent selling seminars that she made sound a lot better than the one we had just paid for, she lead us through a guided meditation so that we could all find our still point. 'Sometimes we

connect better if we visualize being the animal. It's Gestalt.' It is also important, Carol tells us, to learn to focus on an animal 'so other animals don't respond. All animals will want to when you start to send out.' I had a sudden chilling image of all the seagulls in the neighbourhood suddenly braying underneath my bedroom window. I'd have to watch that. Oops, I wasn't focusing. I wonder if Carol picked that up. She looked at me. 'We process forty thousand thoughts a day. Get off-line or animals will get a busy signal.'

She walked around the class. 'It is important to give your pets jobs, if they want them. This is especially important in multi-animal families. Ask them what jobs they would like to do. For instance, to be the official lover, the official announcer, be the guard of the house, or the hunter. You can offer your cat the job of official spider catcher. They like that. Don't impose your feelings on them. Ask them how they feel. They can't really diagnose themselves.'

A woman named Esther piped in. 'Sometimes they can dialogue better than vets. My cat has a full understanding of medical lingo.' Carol was impressed. Or acted like she was. 'Some animals feel that vets are money grubbing. My cat did but wouldn't say because she was too polite.' She started strolling again. 'Now, tenacity pays off. The connection may be fuzzy at first—'

'Like some people I meet,' it was Esther again, 'But animals are smart. Finally, someone on my level. But some people are so dumb you just can't communicate with them.' Esther, point made, position clear, went on, 'Have you ever met a dog with knowledge of a previous life?'

'Later, Esther.' Like a dog, I was getting a very clear image of the 'send out' Carol was sending out to Esther, but Esther wasn't. Esther was being fuzzy. 'I want you to visualize your precise feeling. Then put it on the floor in front of

you. It's your intent that matters. Place it there, then receive back into your heart centre, then put it over on the chair away from you, then imagine sending it to a bird flying above.' I furiously reread my notes. What? Send your visualized feeling to sit in a chair and then send it to a bird?

'Now, let's put our new knowledge into practice. We're going to use Jessie here.' Jessie sidled up next to her in the middle of the room, sitting on her wagging tail and panting. 'I want you all to get a colour from Jessie.' We all concentrated. 'I'm getting bananas,' one girl said, confused. Carol clapped once. 'Wonderful! Bananas are Jessie's favourite food.' The girl flushed, astonished at herself and her newfound powers. But bananas aren't a colour. Focus, Jesse, focus!

Carol turned to Jessie. 'Jessie,' she said, 'I'd like you to share with all of us what your favourite activities are?' Again, everyone hunkered down to concentrate.

'Anyone?' Carol said.

'Water?' Juan said.

'Yes! That's true. Jessie loves the water.' Jessie was a retriever.

'Bones?' a woman next to me ventured.

'Perfect! Jessie just loves bones! Anyone else?'

How hard was it to guess a dog's favourite activities? There are only three.

'Lying on the couch?'

'This is amazing!' Carol said, 'Now,' she turned back to Jessie, 'please share with us your dislikes.'

There was little need for concentration now as the group was experiencing a psychic awakening.

‘Having a bath!’

‘Yes! Having a bath!’

‘She hates not being acknowledged as a living being,’ said Esther.

‘That’s a major one for Jessie.’

‘People walking on her?’ Good God, whose doesn’t hate that?

Carol gave us some sample questions to ask our pets at home: share with me what your favourite meal is. Tell me who your best friend is (a risky one for dog owners, that; could be a myth smasher). Share with me what you like about being a dog (or cat, horse, bird, etc.). I’d like to know how you feel about what your purpose (job) in life is. I’d like to know if there’s anything you want me to tell your person. Share with me anything about your past you would like to tell me.

The last half hour was spent hawking a line of video tapes designed to communicate with special needs pets.

I went home and looked intently at Eric, my dog. This made him worried. I went to the fridge and gave him a raw hot dog. It seemed our level of communication was fine.

One of the most intriguing seminars advertised in the Learning Annex catalogue, and one that I enrolled in with no small amount of trepidation, was ‘Between the Sheets—how to become a great lover with Dr. Ava,’ a seminar that promised to teach us the ancient secrets of the Venus Butterfly Technique.

I was already blushing when I got to the lobby of the hotel because, frankly, I had no cunninlingual interests whatsoever, except maybe vaguely anthropological ones, and I was sure that was blatantly transparent. But the brochure promised a 'sizzling seminar' and who could resist that? Even if the promised revelation of the 'Mystery of the G Spot' was a mystery that, personally, I rank behind crop circles. Would my fellow students know this? Would Dr. Ava? I was sure that I'd be spotted, uncovered, shunned. Maybe even beaten up.

Outside the door to the conference room a dowdy, prim woman sat at a folding table handing out nametags. She wore an understated beige pant-suit that emphasized her thickening middle-aged frame, and had neatly coiffed, conservative, frosted hair; less a Beverly Hills matron than a trusted Beverly Hills housekeeper who was paid a decent wage. As I approached she smiled up at me with the gleaming eyes of a zealot. I gave her my name and she handed me my nametag. 'Go on in,' she said sweetly, 'there's some sex toys set up that you can look at. They're for sale at the break.'

The room was warmly lit, with red upholstered walls. Sort of vaginal. I glanced at the table in the back. It was a bonsai forest of dildos, most prominent was the hurtful looking utensil called the 'Mega Clit Blaster.' There was also a CD for sale called 'Dr. Ava's Hot Lips.' I didn't want to linger, though, lest someone engage me in conversation. I needed to remain as inconspicuous as possible. I went to the last row and sunk down into one of the soft, red armchairs. I looked around at my fellow explorers of secret knowledge. I grew progressively more frightened. There were only three woman (secretaries or travel agents) and several dozen men, all of a certain age and hairline. These



were men with chest hair. These were men with big gold medallions nestled in their chest hair. One grey-haired man wore a trucker's cap.

From the back of the room, striding confidently down the aisle, she arrived: Dr. Ava, esteemed author of *The Stock Market Orgasm*, tiny, but bulbously tiny; orbicular; big thick glistening lips; dark, hooded, Between-the-Sheets eyes, dressed in a tailored business skirt suit—an exaggerated little cartoon character. A man with a lisp spoke without raising his hand, 'Are you going to be giving a sex talk seminar?' She ignored him. Everyone followed suit.

'Let's have a show of hands,' Dr. Ava purred, 'how many of you are single?' All hands shot up. I raised mine as well in order to blend in. Plus I was single. 'This is a seminar on how to become an expert lover,' she continued, 'I've been doing this for a decade. I have an answer to every question.'

As she spoke about her qualifications—two doctorates, one in psychology, one in human sexuality—the beige name tag lady wandered to the front and sat, with her back to the audience, in front of an overhead projector that had been set up next to Dr. Ava. She began to sort through transparencies, her posture that of someone with a back injury. Dr. Ava went on to pitch her book, *The Stock Market Orgasm*, explaining that the title was alluding the 'dips and thrusts of the stock market.' She then promised the more lucky of us, the more cooperative of us, 'Fun Gifts.' I perked up. I like fun gifts! As an example she displayed a set of vaginal beads on a string. Fun is relative, I realized.

'We flirt when we are single, and then we stop flirting when we are in a relationship. But it's necessary to keep on flirting. What are some flirting techniques? Come on, I need some volunteers.' No one moved. 'Hey, this is easy! Wait 'til we get to the Venus Butterfly Technique.' Oh, God. My throat

constricted. One of the women—large-hipped and in a jaguar print leotard—giggled. A man with carefully swept back hair—The Dry Look—tentatively raised his hand.

‘Yes?’ Dr. Ava pointed at him.

‘Um,’ he said softly. A sensitive, white zinfandel type. ‘Singing a person a song? Playing them an instrument?’

‘Well, yes,’ Dr. Ava was being gentle, ‘but what about simple eye contact? Or compliments? Now I want you to turn to the person next to you and give them a compliment.’ I was in a row by myself. I held my breath. No one turned to me so I gave myself a compliment: ‘No one knows you’re here.’

With the ice broken, Dr. Ava now set us a new task. ‘How many of you men can take off a woman’s bra with one hand, and with your eyes closed, in less than a minute?’ Most of the men’s hands shot up. ‘Prove it,’ she said. She called on a man wearing tight jeans and an untucked shirt. He jumped up and sprinted down the aisle, grinning at the thought of Dr. Ava’s massive cans.

‘Susan?’ Dr. Ava said just as the man approached. The nametag woman pushed herself up out of her chair, groaning with the effort, and ambled over to Dr. Ava. She stood unsmiling, shoulders stooped, as Dr. Ava pulled out a red lace bra and fasted it over Susan’s beige pant-suit top. She then blindfolded the man and he went to work on the bra, Susan stock still and bored while Dr. Ava brought out her stop watch. The man was triumphant. Susan, braless (at least on the outside), shuffled back to the overhead projector and sat again with her back to us. Dr. Ava awarded the man with a Fun Gift—‘Sweet Cherry lubricant—sugar-free, non-staining!’

Next up: Erogenous Zones. ‘You need to discover your partner’s erogenous zones. Here’s a little game you can play. One partner will be the giver, the other the receiver. The receiver will lie naked while the giver kisses up and down, a half inch at a time. The receiver rates each inch on a scale of one to ten. The giver must memorize the inches that rate a seven and above. This game is an alternative to massage. After all, sex is adult play.’ Dr. Ava’s Aphorism #1.

She asked Susan to get out the charts. Susan brought out two easels, one with a drawing of a naked man, the other with a naked woman, each with the sexual maturity of a child’s cut-out doll. Dr. Ava brought up two more volunteers and gave them sheets of sticky dots. ‘Now I want you to place a dot on what you think are possible erogenous zones.’ The grey-haired man with the trucker’s cap—which he still hadn’t taken off—laboriously placed his little dots. When he stood back, satisfied, members of the audience started to shout out correctives. He hadn’t put a dot on the vagina. ‘Do I have the wrong concept?’ he said as he dejectedly made his way to his seat.

Dr. Ava walked to each chart and studied it, nodding thoughtfully, if not dramatically. She turned suddenly and said, ‘Has anyone ever had their eyebrows licked?’ Awed silence. Dr. Ava stepped forward. ‘I tend to go for behind the knees. My husband says it’s where his orgasm settles.’ Erogenicity or hygiene? She went on to explain that every place on the body is a potential erogenous zone. ‘Even toe sucking.’ There were gasps of amazement. ‘Does anyone know the name for toe sucking?’

‘Shrimping,’ I peeped involuntarily from the back. Oh, God! I’d blown it! It had just sort of slipped out. Dr. Ava’s jaw dropped as she stared at me. Every head turned slowly to face me. ‘No one, in any of my classes, has ever known

that. You,' I pulled my jacket tightly around me, 'come on up here.' I was mortified. I wanted to blubber that the only reason I knew it was because a friend of mine with a foot fetish had looked it up on the internet just the week before but, with Dr. Ava's instigation, people started clapping their encouragement. Red-faced, I made my way up to Dr. Ava. Oh, God, what was she going to make me do? I looked over to Susan's thick-ankled feet. Fortunately I got away with a bottle of the thick red lubricant (sugar-free, non-staining) because Dr. Ava was anxious to move on to kissing.

'The bottom lip is more sensitive than the top lip.' I didn't know that. I guess that's what comes from being Ph.D in the subject. 'But my favourite is to wrap your lips around your lover's tongue and suck passionately. After all,' she paused. Dr. Ava's Aphorism #2, 'Kissing is just facial intercourse.'

Still on the mouth, we moved on to Sexy Sounds. Fighting in the bedroom is not allowed. Also, rating your partner's sexual performance is not wise. But making love in silence 'is like watching a movie with the sound down. For those of you a little shy, there are two words you can say that are non-sexual and very powerful—"yes" and then your lover's name.' But you need to have a sexy voice: 'the components of a sexy voice are: gentle, husky—' I was with her there '—playful, foreign accent—' What if you were already foreign, but not playfully so? What if you laugh? '—baby talk—' which could be more alarming than sexy '—aggressive, breathy, excited, whispery.' She then asked for volunteers to give their best sexy line. The vagina-lost man in the cap volunteered. 'Baby, you look good to me.' The skin crawled at the back of my neck. He sort of growled it, sort of sniggered it, and sounded exactly like how child molesters and rapists talk in the movies. A man in his fifties, dressed and build like a sanitation

worker, jabbed his arm in the air. He cleared his throat, 'I call this "Breakfast Orgy." My juicy oranges are ready to burst their shiny skins, my juices filling your glass. With a sudden explosion my steaming milk shoots up...'

The man in the cap bounced in his seat. 'Yeah . . . I knew it . . . baby, you good.' Dr. Ava was also impressed and had us all give the man a hand.

Dirty talk lead naturally to fantasy and role play, which Dr. Ava endorsed wholeheartedly. 'Pretend one of you is a priest, or a nun, or a virgin . . .'

'There ain't no virgins left,' the man with the cap muttered. I wondered if Dr. Ava had a duty to report sex offenders.

Cross-dressing was also a good idea because, as Dr. Ava explained, 'it doesn't make you gay to wear panties.' This then segued easily into sexuality. Dr. Ava was a pro! After a brief explanation of the Kinsey scale, Dr. Ava informed us that we were all bisexual.

'Freaks,' the man in the cap said menacingly.

We moved into the part of the evening that resembled an Amway meeting. Sex toys. But so as not to pressure us to liquidate her boutique, Dr. Ava explained that many everyday, ordinary household items make excellent sex toys. 'Rolling pins,' Dr. Ava said. I gasped. But then Dr. Ava finished her sentence, 'make excellent back massagers. I myself have a vibrating hair brush, but, then again, I *am* a sexologist. Spatula spanking is common and fun. Drinking straw. Toothbrush between the fingers works on the nipples, the clitoris—I wanted to hear more about the drinking straw. '—or the perineum, that stretch of land just south of the anus. Clothes pin are also very handy for nipple play.'

The man in the cap harrumphed. 'Does women like pain on the nipples? I'm confused.'

Dr. Ava, with the help of Susan, brought out a batch of toys, the first being the Pocket Rocket, 'the number one vibrator in America!' she said proudly. That was followed by a miscellany of rubbery and metal, flesh-coloured and day-glo, life-like and aeronautical, large and very large phallic penetration devices. The men, of course, grimaced when they had to handle the bobbing life-like penises, passing them along quickly, all but throwing them, and wiping their hands on their pants. There was one called the 'Egg Beater' which 'finds the G spot . . . and a man's prostate.' There was 'The Dragon Lady—the Las Vegas of vibrators. It does all sorts of things—oscillating pearls, 360° spinning head . . .'

As we sat wincing as the parade of dildos made their way up and down the rows, careful not to hold onto them for too long, careful to grunt with displeasure every time a new one was placed in our hands, Dr. Ava continued, 'A lot of people are into anal sex. There are many advantages. You can remain a virgin, the anus is tighter than the vagina, there is no fear of pregnancy, it's less intimate . . .'

At this point she brought out her line of butt plugs, in an enlightening variety of sizes. These were passed on *very* quickly.

This was the ideal time for a break, what with the feel of great rubber penises still fresh in our hands. Dr. Ava was saving the Venus Butterfly Technique for the finale. Everyone got up, some heading to the bathroom, some going out for a refreshment. I scrunched down in my seat. A balding man waited until everyone had left or was otherwise occupied and approached the table at the back. He gently began to fasten and unfasten the red lace bra that Susan had left on the table.

The second half of the seminar was focused on oral sex, where I learned that the clitoris has 8000 nerves. That's a lot! Dr. Ava exhaustively detailed the myriad ways in which to orally stimulate the organs of a woman. There were 'Painting the Fence,' 'The Windshield Wiper,' and 'The Tornado.' I've blocked out the details. I learned that the G-spot was named for a fellow called Ernest Graffenberg. Also, there's an H-spot, which is the prostate gland on men. I don't know who that's named after.

Finally we were to learn the secret of the 3000-year-old Venus Butterfly Technique, legendary because it is the cause of not only multiple orgasms, but multiple internal *and* external orgasms. 'Oh, goody,' said the big-hipped woman in faux-leopard, 'that's my favourite!' I tried to follow the procedure but, being unfamiliar with the terrain, I quickly became lost. It involved a lot of licking and humming, I think, with variations on tongue strokes and timings and, finally, two-finger insertion when you've reached 9.5 on the pleasure scale. 'This technique is so powerful,' Dr. Ava bragged—or warned—'that your woman can even ejaculate.' Stunned silence. Then, from the back (but not me), 'Like a man?'

'Oh, come on!' said the man in cap. His threshold had been surpassed.

Dr. Ava wrapped things up with a few sexual health maintenance tips—'sexercises'—that we could all do at home. Women just had to flex. Men, however, have to do penile lifts. Twenty reps a day, three times a day. First one must start off with a tissue draped over the knob, then, as strength increases, move on to a dishtowel.

It was a Tuesday night and I drove the five blocks into Santa Monica. It was the long awaited Elliot Gould night at the Double Tree Hotel. I was less

eager to share the same room with a living Hollywood legend<sup>42</sup> and find out ‘How to Survive in Showbiz’ than to see exactly what kind of person might show up. Alarmed, I realized, as I sat there in the back row, my yellow writing pad on my knee, my ‘House of Tattoos’ ballpoint pen poised, my eyes wide and raving due to two months of worsening insomnia, wearing a jacket despite the July heat, that I was by far the scariest person there. To my relief a soiled man shuffled in carrying old newspapers in a plastic shopping bag.

Elliott Gould entered from the back of the room and made his way to the podium. He frowned perceptibly at the twenty people sitting in the fifty seats, and started the evening by telling us that he got 15% of the take. Is this the man I want teaching me how to Survive in Showbiz? In the row in front of me a wino fumbled with a portable tape recorder.

Mr. Gould went on to outline the evening. ‘I’m terribly linear,’ he said, a pre-emptive apology, ‘and I’m not really a “how to” kind of person.’ I wondered why, then, the course hadn’t been called, simply, ‘Survive in Showbiz,’ like a command? He seemed somewhat baffled that he was there, like this was a

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<sup>42</sup> I had already done this in the Venice Post Office. As I waited in line Elliot Gould came in wearing baggy shorts and sandals, speaking very loudly into his cell phone — to Barbra? To Donald Sutherland? — as he stood at the end of the line. I suppose it had been many years since he’d needed to dodge the paparazzi, had needed to avoid public spaces or make himself inconspicuous. Indeed, he seemed to be intent on being as conspicuous as possible. But even here, on a weekday afternoon in the Venice P.O., he was upstaged. At first, only by a smell. As the line moved slowly forward, as I listened to Elliott Gould’s boisterous side of a telephone conversation, I gradually became aware of a terrible reek. It smelled like rot, like the beach on a hot day at low tide. As the smell grew stronger, I turned and, several people behind Elliott Gould, a homeless man had joined the line. Could one unwashed human smell that bad? The line shuffled forward. Elliott Gould became silent. The air in post office was becoming almost unbearable. I reflexively turned around again. This time I saw what the source of the odor was: it was not the homeless man, it was the dead manta ray that he was holding by the tail. The fish was about the size of a large dinner plate and had obviously been dead for some time. I got my stamps and stepped aside. I didn’t leave. I wanted to see what was going to happen. When the homeless man got to the counter he opened up the bullet proof slot where one would put packages and dropped the manta ray in it. He wanted to mail it. There was a tense moment. There was some hushed discussion between the homeless man and the postal clerk. After a minute or two, the homeless man opened up the slot again and took the manta ray by the tail and left.



dream and he wasn't wearing any pants. He went on to tell us, non-linearly, that his quality in film was 'vulnerable,' and that he went to China to film once, and was often employed through Berlin. He paused. 'Please, ask questions at any time.' No one did. He shifted his weight. 'Show biz is a religion,' he said, and then quickly, 'Ignorance worked for me as to what my mission was.' I sensed he had just made a valid existential remark, I just didn't know what it was. I wrote it down on my yellow pad anyway. The man with the newspapers raised his hand. He began rocking—not violently, but alarmingly—self-comforting.

'Yes?' Elliott Gould said.

'I've been told I look like you,' the rocking man said. He needed dental work.

'Oh,' Elliott Gould said, not sure exactly what to say.

'That's a compliment,' the rocking man said.

Elliott Gould shifted his gaze to the other side of the room. "'Hollywood, Here I Am'" is the first thing I memorized. I sang it—' He was interrupted by a violent burst of applause from the rocking man. '—on Vaudeville. I used to follow Smith and Dale, the original Sunshine Boys. I used to sing it four times a day. They gave me the highest dressing room in the Palace.' Several well-dressed older women in Gucci who had come together clucked knowingly. Beside them a young, scrubbed boy, fresh off the farm and who looked hurt in a deep way scribbled furiously on a sheaf of loose paper. 'I graduated high school, but my real education is my experience. One needs a healthy ego to be effective when paid to be.'

What?

'Mr. Gould!' the rocking man shouted out and then he raised his hand.

'Call me Elliott.'

'Oh, it's okay to call you Elliott?'

'Yes. I just said it is.'

'Did you know Steve McQueen?'

'Yes, I—'

'He O.D.-ed on cancer,' the rocking man said. There was an immediate tension in the room. 'I watch E! Channel.'

Elliott Gould took a breath. 'We are all made of perishable matter. All perishable matter will rot,' he said. A wonderful recovery, I thought; he'd regained the audience. 'Actually, in *California Split*, Steve McQueen was originally cast in the role I eventually played.'

'Steve McQueen was my idol,' the rocking man said, evidently beginning to mistake the evening for a conversation, 'like you were. I have a good memory.'

Elliott Gould cleared his throat. 'With regard to my films, some are better, some are not. Actually, the brilliant and great Barry Diller wants to make a sequel to *M.A.S.H.*' For some reason this prompted him to say, 'Steve McQueen was special. I can't say he was an intellect. He didn't know his left from his right. But genius is defined as "one of a kind." An eggplant is also one of kind.' I made to note to look up 'genius' in the dictionary when I got home. 'Vegetation is most intelligent. It just is.'

I was getting confused. I needed sleep. He then, in another spectacular display of non-linearity, read us some poems from a book called *Baseballogy*.

At this point a seductive woman entered in an iridescent purple tube top, clacking high heels, her cheeks artlessly rouged, and wielding an oriental fan and a goblet of water. She noisily made people move over so she could sit down.

Elliot Gould cleared his throat. ‘The word “career” is derived from the Spanish word meaning, “an obstacle course like a race track.” Now, I am not a great singer, or dancer, or actor, but I have a lot of *chutzpah*. It was while I working the midnight-to-eight shift as an elevator operator that I auditioned for the show *I Can Get It For You Wholesale*.’ Oh, good, I thought, now some juicy gossip about Barbra Streisand. As Elliott Gould detailed his and Barbra’s whirlwind romance—causing a skinny homosexual in a *Yentl* T-shirt to get up in a huff and leave—I became uncomfortably aware that I was being watched. I slowly looked over and saw that I had become the focus of the rocking man’s attention. He didn’t look away when I turned to him, but continued to stare at me, unsmiling. Oh, God, I thought, did he recognize something in me, something like kinship, with some special territorial sense that sociopaths have? As Elliott Gould segued into the *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* years, he again caught the man’s interest. I exhaled, relieved.

‘Mr. Elliott!’ he called out, ‘Mr. Elliott!’

But Elliott Gould’s attention was elsewhere and he ignored him. It was on the woman with the severe hair in the purple tube top and the tightly-cinched belt that had a large gold lion’s head for a buckle.

‘Why are you so happy?’ Elliott Gould asked her. The rocking man snapped his head and stared at her jealously. She giggled and thrust out her great chest. The rocking man snapped his head back to stare at Elliott Gould,

who said to the woman, who was vigorously fanning herself, 'Oh, you have a fan.'

'I am a fan,' she purred, 'a very big fan. That's what I'm so happy about.'

'Glad to hear that. By the way, how much did you all pay to come here tonight?' Surely he knew. He was getting 15%, after all.

'\$39!' the rocking man shouted out.

'Is it worth it?' Elliott Gould said humbly.

'Well, I was going to see Steve Allen, but he died.'

'All right,' Elliott Gould said, 'I think now would be a good time to take a break.'

'I have a learning disability,' the rocking man said without being asked, 'my dad was plumber.'

'Do you live alone?' Elliott Gould asked him, putting on his jacket.

'I have a friend. A Latin lady.'

The fresh-scrubbed farm boy shyly approached Elliott Gould. 'I have to ask you a question,' he said, blushing. I went to the bathroom.

To kill time I went to the snack kiosk in the lobby. As I was lingering by the candy bars, suddenly, close, I feel a great presence. I looked beside me and up at Elliott Gould. I grabbed a bag a trail mix. He looked at the bag in my hand. 'Sort of healthy,' I said to him.

He snorted. 'Sort of healthy,' he said, mimicking me. He grabbed a bar of chocolate and pushed past me.

During Part Two, Elliott Gould said that fear and ignorance drove him out here, out here to Hollywood. 'I do know now that I don't want to live here. It is a different mentality now than it was in Hitchcock's day. It's more automated.

But resentments are like barnacles on a boat. You got to keep scrubbing.’ I would have thought the chocolate bar might have boosted the energy of the evening but, oddly, things had definitely taken a more melancholy turn. ‘Everything is abstract, except what you feel—and I was told what to feel. All I wanted was to feel pleasure.’ He went on, more to himself now, about the movies that he wasn’t in. Woody Allen offered him *Deconstructing Harry*, but he didn’t take it.

‘Comedy,’ he said mirthlessly, ‘that’s the greatest tragedy. Now I’d like to open it up for questions.’

‘Were you ever on the Tonight Show?’

‘Yes. Johnny Carson said I was the most difficult guest that he’d ever had.’ This sent the rocking man into a rocking frenzy.

‘Who’s going to win the SAG Awards next week?’

Elliott Gould completely bypassed the question and went off on a riff about Spinoza and a movie called *Hunger of Hoffman* that’d been shot in the Netherlands.

‘Have you ever done comedy?’ a man wearing loafers asked, ‘that’s the greatest tragedy.’

‘I just said that.’

‘Have you ever thought of directing?’

‘I believe that no one is more important than anyone else. I need to understand myself before I can start directing others.’ He checked his watch. He added, in quick succession, a summation, a sort of giving us our money’s worth, ‘To be selfless is the greatest thing you can do—to give up yourself for something higher. People say don’t be altruistic. They say it all the time. Business is purely

a barter system. But in business it's important to be in control. Like the Chinese; we'll tell you what to think, what to do. Recognition from outside means nothing at all. It's got to be self-recognition. Life and death are only part of the process. Pain is just purification of the past. In life, balance is much more important than success.'

One of the middle-aged Gucci woman slapped her face in an histrionic gesture of shock worthy of Vaudeville.

Elliott Gould was taken aback. 'What was that?'

'What was what?' the woman said.

'You just . . .' he said, and then he imitated the gesture.

'You just said that balance is more important than success,' she said incredulously.

'It is to me,' he said. Then he added, brusquely, 'obviously it isn't to you.'

'What do you think of Rodney Dangerfield?'

'Were you a close friend of Natalie Wood's?'

What did all this have to do with Surviving anywhere?

The rocking man had the last word. 'I went to a celebrity look-alikes, and they said, 'Yeah! You look like that guy.' But they wouldn't pay me a dime for my time, so I left. Then I went to Jay Bernstein, but the guy wasn't there with a camera.'

This was promising to be a long story. People began to trickle out hoping to survive the traffic on the Santa Monica Freeway.

**CHAPTER EIGHT****ANIMAE**

I stepped out of the Mission one morning after breakfast and stopped. I surveyed the settlement. Something was different. It was the wrong settlement. Or maybe the right settlement, just shuffled. The houses, pretty much identical wooden rectangles, all painted a blue-grey, were mixed up. The bay was the same. The Co-op and Hudson's Bay Company were in the same place because they were anchored there. It was just the houses were rearranged. I looked off up behind the Mission. I saw my mother, who'd gone out earlier for her morning walk, standing on a rocky outcrop watching, up on a hill, several Inuit women in amoutes chasing an old-fashioned ringer washer machine as it bounced across the rocks. She had told us about this: somewhere someone had found an old washing machine and the women had patched into the inchoate power supply and led an extension cord up into the rocks. They were using it to clean fresh seal skins. When the washing machine went into spin cycle, however, it tended to bounce away from them and they had to chase it over the rocks and hopefully save it from crashing.

The houses all had large skis on the bottom, like big pontoons, really. The government had given Repulse Bay a bulldozer, because, I suppose, every settlement ought to have a bulldozer. But there was little really to do with it, so every once in a while the Inuit, to fill the time—with twenty-four hours of sunlight without much else to do—just moved the houses around, just rearranged Repulse Bay. It was late summer, sort of lull between migratory hunting seasons, and school was out. It was something to fill the time. I headed

down the rocks and walked around the houses, looking in windows. After knocking on a few wrong doors, I eventually found Eliuk's house.

As we strolled through the settlement he bent and picked up a piece of whale bone lying on the ground, like someone might pick up a rock to skip on the surface of a lake. He pulled a rasp out from his back pocket, and with two or three casual flicks he fashioned out of the porous and brittle bone a perfectly acceptable, if a shade minimalist, duck. We detoured toward the Co-op and went to the carving counter where the clerk, an Inuit girl, bought the carvings. Eliuk placed the bird on the counter. The girl reached into the till and handed him a quarter. He turned around and grabbed a can of Coke off the shelf—the sea-lift had made its annual stop on its trip up the Hudson Bay and we had Cokes, prohibitively expensive to ship the rest of the year, for about a week before the supplies ran out. Eliuk handed the quarter to the clerk and, as we walked out the door, she dropped the little carving into a box on the shelf behind her. We headed down toward the beach. Eliuk upended the Coke and drank it in three overlapping gulps. He threw the can on the ground and we continued walking.

The Inuit in Repulse Bay, like the Inuit in every settlement, carved soapstone. It was art, it was industry. Soapstone is a fairly soft rock that ranges in colour from light moss green to black. The stone is almost unique to each settlement; you could tell immediately where a carving came from. Sometimes the carvings were huge, sturdy enough to sit in the lobby of a bank in Iowa, or on a sidewalk, next to a bench, too big to be stolen. Some could be as delicate and fragile as a china teacup.



Paul and I went almost daily to the house of Suzanna, the mother of among others, a boy my age, also named Paul. Inuit Paul. Suzanna would teach us soapstone carving.

Suzanna led the way to the Co-op to choose some rocks, her baby in the hood of her amoute. She bent down and picked up rocks, considered them, then tossed them aside. We were beside her, pawing through the rocks—from thumb-size nuggets to chunks the size of bread loaves—until we found one that might be right. I picked one up and showed it to Suzanna. She straightened and beckoned to me to hand it over so she get a better look. She took it in her hand and bobbed it, getting the heft. She turned to me and asked what I saw in the stone. She told us that the carving was already in the stone, we just had to release it.

‘A walrus?’ I said, ‘A seal?’ Considering that we had spent our lives until then in Winnipeg it seems strange to me now that we didn’t see, I don’t know, a fire truck, or a lunar module. But there was no question that the carving would be some Repulse Bay thing, a hunter or a Repulse Bay animal.

Suzanna pursed her lips and studied the rock more intently. She turned it over in her hands and held it out again, a different side facing out. The rock was a completely different.

‘A whale? A ptarmigan?’

Once we had selected our rock we headed back to Suzanna’s and sat on the step of her plywood box and carved. First we used very coarse chisels, to get the rough shape, gradually moving to finer and more delicate files for details. Being somewhat of a neophyte I had trouble with the intricate parts, like the wings or beaks of a bird, or the snout of a seal. When it came time for that I

would hand it over to Suzanna who, with only a few economical twists of her chisel, would fashion a perfect set of nostrils.

Instead of watching cartoons on TV in the morning like we used to, we'd head to Suzanna's, pick up our carvings from the day before, and sit down to work on them. Suzanna carved with us, taking time out to roll up cigarettes from her tin of tobacco. Her toddlers ran around naked out in front of the house, pooping where they stopped. There was little modesty in the Inuit lifestyle, little room for it. The first breast I ever saw was one of Suzanna's when she flipped it out of her amoute to breastfeed her baby. Sometimes just for fun she used it like a water pistol to squirt one of the children passing by. One day, as Paul and I dutifully carved and she sat feeding her baby, Inuit Paul walked by. Without a word he leaned down, took her nipple, had good drink, and, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, continued walking.

To polish the carvings into a green shine we used animal fat and mixed it with the fine dust from the filing. We vigorously rubbed that into the stone until the carving had a glossy sheen. It would take Paul and me maybe a week to carve, from raw rock to glistening polar bear. The last step was signing our work by carving our names into the bottom with the point of a chisel; our names, that is, in Inuit. The Inuit alphabet is made up of syllabics so I would carve four characters—Ga-Ti To-Wa.

With our finished carvings we followed Suzanna back down to the Co-op to sell them. Generally the girl at the counter paid by size: a carving the size of fist might get five dollars, one the size of a toaster got twenty. Paul and I usually got a little more, the rationale being that we were two little white boys and thus our work was significantly more exotic. These carvings were then packed up

and shipped to galleries in the South where they sold for hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. It was a month or so before my parents found out.

‘You what?’ my mother said. Her eyes were wide and her shoulders tensed as she bent down toward me. She was angry. Actually, more horrified than angry.

I shrugged and looked down. I knew I had done something wrong but I had no idea what it was.

‘But we just went with Suzanna. She sold hers.’

‘But Suzanna is an Inuit! You’re not.’

‘But I made five dollars.’

The next day we were rushed down to the Co-op to identify any of our carvings. Paul and I had to promise *never* to sell our carvings to the Co-op, or to the Hudson’s Bay store. Ever. Instead we could bring our carvings home and get a fair market price for them in order to earn spending money. It was too late for some, however, which had already been shipped south.

I get a twinge of delight knowing that on some collector’s shelf, or maybe even in some distant museum, there is one of my works, a soapstone carving not made by an Inuit at all but by some little eight-year-old white boy.

Every once in a while they found room on an incoming plane for a several aluminium canisters containing a film. These would be 16mm prints and we would get a movie night. They were shown in the schoolhouse, with the desks pushed back and folding chairs set up and a pull-down screen placed in the front. There was no recognizable logic in what films they sent or when, but it didn’t matter. They would show the films in whatever order that they pulled the

reels out of the cans. We might start off with reel four, then break to load up reel two, then maybe they would show the beginning and finish off with a reel that was somewhere in the middle. It didn't really matter because most of the Inuit didn't really speak English that well, but the whole settlement would show up anyway. I loved having a movie again, who cared if it made sense. One night they showed *Irma La Douce* starring Shirley MacLaine playing a hooker. I think that the Catholic Legion of Decency had banned it, because when Mom and Dad asked what we saw when we got home that night, with Father Revoir and Father Didier sitting reading in the room, and we told them, we got into trouble.

The most memorable film I saw in Repulse Bay—or perhaps ever—was on the night that they showed *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*, a Disney assembly line confection of the sort they used to churn out in the 1960s when the company was on the verge of no one caring anymore. It was innocent enough, with Sean Connery cavorting around a Burbank backlot that was dressed up like County Cork with a bunch of midgets. But there was one scene, as a horse and carriage rounded a steep road at night, when a banshee appears and comes screaming up to the camera. The Inuit grabbed their chairs and rushed to the back of the room, huddling in fear. After the banshee left the screen it took a little while for them to trust again and, reluctantly, they dragged their chairs back in front of the screen.

I was driving slowly, looking at the house numbers. It was one of those rare middleclass Westside neighbourhoods that still had a surfeit of street parking. The houses were all single-storied with wide lawns. I could drive slowly because there was no traffic, and the street was wide enough to support a

Veteran's Day Parade. Actual trees with actual leaves lined the sidewalks. It was Sunday and I was here for the regular weekly meeting of the Marilyn Monroe Fan Club.

My friend Richard, who'd invited me, hadn't arrived yet. I found the right house and parked across the street.

A meandering clump of Marilyn zealots walked by on the sidewalk; I knew they were there for Marilyn because one was carrying a plateful of cookies covered with Saran Wrap, one was wearing an Lucille Ball T-shirt (I can't explain why but these things tend to go together), and one was cradling a Marilyn Monroe doll in a box like a baby in a coffin. The one with cookies—short of stature, greying of hair, thickening of waist, wearing a floral print shirt, white trousers, and white loafers—broke away from the others and came over to my car and rapped on the window.

How pleasant, I thought: they see that I'm obviously a newcomer and have come to welcome me. I leaned across the seat and rolled down the passenger's window and smiled.

'You're parked too far away from the curb,' he said.

'Oh,' I said and opened my door to check. Odd to find such civic-mindedness. Was parking enforcement a hobby? I was no further from the curb than the other cars, or, indeed, than I ever park. It was certainly splitting hairs as far as traffic infractions go. Why did he care how far from the curb I parked? Then I noticed in his eyes that distinct look of someone with sociopathic boundary issues. Though the eyes were definitely pointing out, they were actually seeing in. He saw the world and all its contents as somehow centripetal to himself, part of his personal realm. And I was abusing this.

He stood up, turned, and walked away with quick little steps like an overwound mechanical duck. Secure in his absolute authority, he didn't bother to turn around to make sure that I'd corrected my error. I turned the key in the ignition and wedged my car an inch further toward the curb. Richard rapped on my window.

'Ready?' he said, throwing his backpack over his shoulder.

'Oh, yes,' I said.

'Hi. Jeff?' Richard said to the aging man, face etched by endless summers, with too tight jeans (yet revealing no bulge) and a mop of preternaturally yellow blond hair.

'Yes?' he said, like we'd annoyed him.

There is a certain confection quality in particular types of older homosexuals (like, say, ones who are presidents of Marilyn Monroe Fan Clubs), like meringue.

'I'm Richard. And this is my friend Garth.'

'And...?'

'Well, just hello, I guess.'

'Great. As you can see I'm slightly busy. There's refreshments so help yourselves.' With a backhand wave in the direction of the kitchen, a quick dismissive flip, he was gone.

Scanning those present, I soon realized that the obsessional fervour, purblindness to social cues, and raw churl hinted at by the self-appointed Commissioner of Parking were what united the membership of this otherwise disparate group —besides, of course, their ghoulish fixation with a tortured

movie actress who's been dead for four decades. There were numerous older men, eerily tanned in February (tanned, as in a big-game-hunted rhino hide), with too many large rings, and tinted hair as natural as icing on a cupcake. There was a handful of woman—women impervious to fashion trends—firmly ensconced within the brackets of middle age. There was a regiment of three young men with very large biceps (though still somehow skittish) and tattoos, who moved together as one and looked away quickly when you caught them looking at you. There were two or three younger woman, heavily made-up, and all blond, who might have been pretty were it not for the eager neediness.

Richard and I weaved our way into the kitchen. On a little table in the centre was a crystal punch bowl full of grape Kool-Aid. Around it were plates of intensely sugared cookies, and napkins in lily napkin rings. An asthmatic dachshund limped over and looked up at the cookies. On every inch of wall space were photographs of Marilyn Monroe; in the living room, in the kitchen, down the hallway. I looked through the open door to bathroom, off the kitchen. Above the toilet was a mirror with Marilyn Monroe's face on it.

A small room immediately off the dining room had been turned into a shrine, a temple—figurines, telephones in the shape of Marilyn, Marilyn posters on the walls—and was rather shabbily furnished for a place of worship, I thought. Several armchairs were worn and ratty and a wooden table in the middle looked like it had been found out on the curb. 'All the furniture in this room was hers,' Jeff said grandly to no one in particular, standing vigilant, with his arms crossed, in the doorway. The shabbiness made sense then, albeit macabre sense, 'It was what was in the house when they took the body out.'

Laid out on doilies was a selection of Marilyn books, and dusty bottles of Marilyn wine, and some Marilyn matchbooks. In a little frame was a cancelled check. 'It was the last check she ever wrote,' Jeff called out to me. I leaned in closer. 'It was made out to her housekeeper.' I saw that there was yellowed piece of paper stapled to it. It was a notice from the bank—the check was returned with the handwritten explanation, 'Deceased.'

I heard tiny tip-taps and looked down to see the dachshund enter, with two more equally fragile dachshunds arthritically trailing behind it. How redeeming, I thought, a dachshund lover. Then I noticed the framed photograph of Marilyn with her three dachshunds.

There were books, shelves and shelves of books—the *Some Like It Hot* cookbook (a commendably imaginative tie-in, I thought). And dolls, many, many dolls; two foot high Marilyns in sequined gowns, a Seven-Year-Itching Marilyn (clutching a miniature rotary fan), Barnyard Marilyn in gingham and with brown hair (I'm sure there are others much more qualified than me to be curator), all lined up in their little cardboard boxes strapped open with sandwich bag twist ties.

I noticed a woman—statuesque, stately—who was looking nervous. She seemed out of place because she seemed, well, normal. She was standing, fearfully, very close to a British man. 'I knew I shouldn't have come,' she whispered to the man, 'I want to go. Definitely. Let's just go.'

'We can't just go,' he whispered back.

'Why not?' she said. Then, horrified, 'I think that's part of my costume!' She was pointing at the tattered pieces of a dress, under glass next to a license plate that spelled out 'MARILYN.'



'You don't need to pick it up,' Jeff said sharply to two men admiring an 8 x 10 in a frame, 'you can see it perfectly well without getting your fingerprints all over it.'

I was standing in front of a glass case of dolls.

Jeff snapped his attention to me.

'Nice dolls,' I said, for something to say.

He put down his Kool-Aid. 'The Franklin Mint does a horrendous job,' he said, opening the case. He took out a Marilyn in a sparkly low-cut gown. 'I dip the heads in acetone.' He seemed a lot friendlier when he was in the comfort zone of his obsession. 'Strips off all the paint. That way I can do the make-up myself.' He flipped the doll around more roughly than I would have predicted. 'I mean, look at this,' he said, 'she's supposed to be drunk.' It was the Happy-Birthday-Mr.-President doll, and indeed in his version her eyes were loosely hooded and her mouth a little too realistically sloppy.

'Fascinating,' I said, sincerely.

'Then I have to do the hair. I have to rip apart three dolls to get the right amount for just one good one. Look at this,' he said, pointing to the widow's peak, 'it takes me days. And for every one! And don't get me started on the costumes! I don't think the Franklin Mint even watch the fucking movies. This,' he shook the little Marilyn in my face, 'I took every miniaturized sequin off and glued them all back on again by hand in the proper pattern.'

A woman with the build of a hyena came over and pushed in between us. She bent close to scrutinize the doll in Jeff's hand.

'This doll has a much prettier face than some I've seen,' she said. Jeff couldn't help a little smile to himself and put the doll back in the case.

Richard and I went into the living to get seats. He put his backpack on the chair. 'Be right back,' he said, 'just going use the bathroom.' In front of me the nervous muscle boys were whispering without any audible sound. Across the aisle was the parking Gestapo, sitting with his arms crossed. A portly man walked up to him and asked, 'Is that seat taken?' The parking Gestapo waved him away, 'You can't sit there. These chairs are too dainty.'

The hyena-built woman who'd approved of the faces on the dolls walked up and looked down at Richard's backpack. She looked at me. She shoved his bag onto the floor and threw her purse and sweater on the chair. She walked into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of honey cashews out of a glass bowl.

Richard was angry that I let his seat go and didn't stand up for him.

'Look at her!' I said, pointing to the kitchen. The woman was going at a plate of chocolate chip cookies like an angry terrier.

'Oh,' he said. We quietly found another place to sit.

Jeff stood at the front and called the meeting to order. 'We have lots of things to do today,' he said, the first being to pass around the basket to collect two dollars from each of us. Next he showed us all the new stuff he'd gotten since the last meeting.

'I finally managed to find a copy of this,' he said, holding up a Marilyn Sing-A-Long Songbook. He offered to pass it around, but he said he wanted it back, 'I'm not kidding.'

'Next is my new vintage Marilyn calendar. No one's even seen this yet.' He brought it up and held it above his head. There was a barrage of flash bulbs.

‘The Marilyn Memorial went really, really well,’ he reported once he’d put the calendar safely away, ‘I’ve got a photo album that I’ll pass around.’ The fans had gathered at Marilyn Monroe’s grave in Westwood with flowers and had set up portraits of her on easels. Then they had taken turns at the pulpit, eulogizing her. All was recorded in photos. My favourite was of a middle-aged woman who surprisingly had not gone to the hairdresser that week in anticipation of the memorial. The photo was of her face, in profile, pushed up hard—so hard, it made lips stick out—against the marble wall of the crypt, next to the little brass plaque that read ‘Marilyn Monroe, 1926-1962.’

‘Oh, and before I forget, Ron Boubier passed away. I went to his funeral and got up and spoke about how much this club meant to him and to Marilyn.’ To Marilyn?

‘Does anyone else have anything they have to share?’

A man stood up. He pulled a book out of a plastic Ralph’s bag. ‘I got this new book by a man who actually built a little house out of balsa wood replicating hers and took photos of it.’

‘I’ve had that one for months,’ the parking fetishist said.

Jeff announced the first guest, a woman named Marian, an actress, who’d been one of the members of Marilyn’s all-girl band; the only one with lines, as a matter of fact.

‘I just came by to say hello.’ The voice was behind us. We all turned around. It was the uneasy woman from the shrine. She was standing by the door. I couldn’t see from where I was sitting, but I think her hand was on the door knob.

‘Come on up!’ Jeff said. ‘Everyone, doesn’t she look great?’

‘You look great!’ the group started to chant. And she did look great. She was spry and handsome and certainly intelligent enough to be frightened to be the guest of honour. ‘No, really, I—’

‘You look great!’

She was finally cajoled up front. She told several anecdotes about spending ‘four weeks in a bunk with Marilyn. I was black and blue, I couldn’t walk.’

She said she was sorry, but hadn’t brought any pictures with her. That was no problem, however, because Jeff reached behind her and opened a filing cabinet and hauled out a massive handful of movie stills.

She began to look through them. ‘Where’d you get this?’ she said, lifting up one photo, ‘I’ve had three names since then.’

‘Hold it up!’ came a pissy voice from the back row.

‘Yeah, come on! Hold it up!’

One would think that there’d be some degree of, I don’t know, reverence afforded to such a woman, not only because they should have been respectful of any woman her age—or any woman, for that matter—or any one, really—but also because she had once spent a month on the set with Marilyn Monroe.

She held up the photo like a school teacher. It was group photo of all the band members with Marilyn.

‘Well, what are their names?’ the pissy little man said.

Marian reeled them off, using just their first names. She went through several more photos, offering comments like ‘She’s dead, now,’ ‘She’s in Palm Springs,’ and ‘He was drunk all the time.’ ‘I do have this,’ she said, holding up a photo of the girls on the beach flanking Jack Lemmon and Marilyn, ‘I paid eight

bucks for it.' The Lord of Parking stood and walked right up to her face and without asking took her flash picture from two feet away. Then he did it again and then sat down without a word.

As she tried to leave she noticed a picture on the wall of Marilyn, looking particularly vibrant.

'That's absolutely beautiful,' she said.

A man with a neatly trimmed and dyed moustache, holding a Diet Coke, said, 'Next time you're in Palm Springs you should stop by the Desert Palms. They have loads of pictures like that.' He didn't mention that the Desert Palms was a gay sex hotel.

'You have a wonderful electricity,' the Pope of Parking said and she angled herself out of the door. The Englishman, who was up next, looked bereft.

Jeff introduced him as Paul Kerr, a filmmaker for the BBC who was doing a documentary on *Some Like it Hot*.

'Who have you talked you?' was the first question, before he'd even made it to the front of the room. He mentioned some names, and offered thanks to Marian, and said he'd recently spoken to Tony Curtis, who has said some not very nice things.

'He's a Gemini so what do you expect,' said the pissy man in the back.

'I'm moving my chair so I don't have to stare at *this* asshole all night,' the parking Hitler said and glared at the man in front of him before moving his chair into the aisle.

I kept trying to catch the eye of this man from the BBC because it suddenly became important to me to let him know that I wasn't one of them.

He was careful to defer to them in all matters of Marilyn as he saw early on how ruthless and proprietary they were. He slipped up near the end, however, when he let it be known that *Some Like It Hot* was not, indeed, his favourite comedy.

‘But it is the best comedy,’ a man with the moustache said to him.

‘That’s fine if you think so,’ Paul said.

‘No. It is. It’s been proven.’

‘All right. It’s just not my favourite comedy.’

‘But it’s recognized as the favourite comedy by the American Film Institute.’

‘That’s fine. But they didn’t ask me for my opinion. Did they ask you?’

‘What is your favourite Marilyn movie, then?’

This was not so much a question but, as the tone indicated, more of a threat. Cornered, Paul faltered, wary that whatever he might say could bring down the wrath of the room and things, potentially, could get violent. Luckily Jeff interceded.

Dana Goodwin was the last special guest for the afternoon. A sexually indeterminate man of advancing age, he’d recently acquired a vast number of Marilyn photographs and transparencies—they were of such good quality, he informed us, that ‘you can see the varicose veins,’ he said, pointing to a photograph.

‘Of course, Sheila is furious,’ he spat. Sheila’s was apparently a name well-known in this circle—no last name was even necessary—and universally reviled. Luckily for those in attendance, clucking and snorting at the mere

mention of her name, she was too ill now to travel. She was, apparently, the widow of the man who took the pictures.

‘If she was here she’d try to take them from me,’ Dana Goodwin said, ‘she’d say they were hers. But I paid good money for them and they’re mine and I’m not giving them back.’

In a rather unchivalrous ploy to further sully Sheila’s character in the hypothetical free-for-all that would that very afternoon have taken place had Shirley not been bedridden, he said that she’d only met her husband the photographer twenty minutes before they were married and guided his hand to sign the marriage license. No prisoners were taken in the war of Marilyn memorabilia.

‘I could’ve bought five houses with the money I spent on all these photos,’ he said.

He held up a photo of what looked like Marilyn in prayer. One of the muscle boys blurted breathlessly, unable to stop himself, ‘There’s a word for it—sheer perfection.’

‘You’re so lucky,’ the woman who stole Richard’s seat said peevishly.

Dana next held up a photo of the unaugmented Norma Jean Baker, taken in profile.

‘If you compare this nose with the one in her autopsy photos, you’ll see it’s the same nose,’ the man with the moustache said.

‘That’s because she’d already had her nose done when those pictures were taken,’ Jeff said.

‘She didn’t have any surgery until she went blond,’ the man in the Lucille Ball T shirt countered.

'She never had her nose done. When she had her hairline raised, taken back toward her ears, it changed the whole proportion of her face,' the Parking Gestapo said. They all grudgingly ceded to that.

'Well, she did have her jawline strengthened,' Jeff said.

I gasped. 'Jawline strengthened?' I whispered to Richard, 'what does that even mean?'

There were angry cries of 'Pass them around!' but Dana refused. He did have some lesser pictures, however, that he was willing to pass around, and these were like sardines to seals.

'I have some colour prints for sale,' he said, in conclusion, 'but only call if you're serious. I don't want to be bothered by nonsense. I'm a private person and I want to keep it that way.'

The meeting ended and Jeff thanked the guests and the fan club members. 'Please enjoy the dolls some more.'



## CHAPTER NINE

### ANCHORS AWAY

I opened my mailbox and there, along with a past-due notice from Pier One Imports, a book of coupons from Sav-On, and a new Learning Annex catalogue, was a tawny envelope with the logo of buffalo on the upper left-hand corner. The envelope was tantalizingly thick. I turned it over in my hand, trying to boost the moment into some sort of ceremony, or narrative climax, or epiphany, instil it with some sort of consequence and weight. Could this be the mystery solved? I opened the envelope.

### BIRTH FAMILY BACKGROUND

#### FOR

#### GARTH TWA (ERIC MICHAEL)

My birth mother had named me? Eric Michael. For someone so used to being Garth, so tied up with being Garth, this was, well, a blow. Like a physical sensation, like a blow. I was once, briefly, an *Eric*? It was an A-bomb to the foundations.

My parents had asked Paul and I when we were in our 20s if we wanted to locate our birth parents and offered to help us if we wanted. Incredibly magnanimous, I thought. Of course I said no. How rude would that have been? These were my parents, the people who bathed me, taught me to ride a bicycle, walked me to school on our first morning of first grade. They created our lives. You don't thank that by sticking up the fingers and going looking for a stranger to start calling 'Mom.' But there's always the curiosity. And you can easily

convince yourself—well, I can—that the interest is purely anthropological. So I contacted the Manitoba Post-Adoption Agency and didn't mention it to anyone.

'You weighed 7 lbs. 5 ounces and had a head and chest circumference of 13 1/4 inches and 12 1/2 inches, respectively.' It was sort of unsettling. The precision made my baby self tangible...palpable. I mean, who knows that kind of stuff about themselves? The letter had been prepared by someone name Rose-Marie Mallory-Emery, 'a brief social history prepared from file material collected at the time of your birth and adoption placement.' Rose-Marie had used the second-person, which, as a tense, is quite confrontive. It's unequivocal, aimed directly; there is no third-person possibility of hedge room for detachment. 'You were a normal, healthy newborn. You were placed on Carnation milk formula.' I don't think many people experience, have it thrust upon them with such immediacy, their first meal. People don't actually think—well, most people—specifically about suckling the teat (metaphorically, in my case) in such an undeniable and vivid way. If they do know it, it's knowledge that's always been there, like the Treaty of Ghent, just part of the white noise of the past, not a present-tense, active scene. It's something fogged in the continuum of connectedness, not a sudden new fact that you have to process with your already-in-your-thirties mind. I personally had never thought of it before. Carnation milk formula. It's like some kind of re-birthing therapy, like being a spectral witness at your own birth.

'Your birth mother suffered no illnesses while pregnant and consumed an adequate pre-natal diet. She was in labour for 13 hours and 13 minutes, delivering you spontaneously, head first, with no complications.' She was

becoming real. A baby me was becoming real. 13 hours—I'd had a tough time saying goodbye. Still do—and 13 minutes.

Oh. 13, 13. That did not auger well.

I suppose a feeling of being terminally unhinged from the universe inevitably arises when you're adopted. You can never look into someone's eyes and see your own. You don't feel like you share your DNA with anyone. Not like everyone else, who have the unearned comfort of seeing how, say, their nose will turn out. Being adopted, in a biological sense, is being alone. There is no physiological clanship. No one *has* to love you.

Of course, there's the contingent truth that your family has *chosen* to love you, as the old saw goes. And then also there are abundant examples of nuclear groups, tribes that have leeches off the same DNA, who have no love whatsoever for each other and, in fact, for whom the genealogical attachment is a debilitating burden. But we're not talking about rationality here; this isn't about reasoning or reasonableness. This is primal territory; this is Jurassic emotion, stuff so deep there are no words for it, because it came before there were words. It's not about love, or nurturing: it's about that uncleavable connection.

'When your birth parents' relationship ended, your birth mother did not feel capable of raising you on her own. She felt that placing you into a two parent family which could guide you through to adulthood was in your best interests.' I'm starting to like Rose-Marie Mallory-Emery. She had a kind way of putting things. 'Your birth mother named you Eric Michael and requested that you be raised in the Catholic faith.' Neither took with any permanence.

The hospital listed was the Holy Cross. I looked it up.

It was a Salvation Army Hospital. I was born in...a charity? To me the Salvation Army was synonymous with repressive spinsters frowning and self-denying. And hoary, beaten men, tunelessly pounding on drums, wearing musty military uniforms two sizes too big. I mean, no offence to the Salvation Army. If it weren't for them I would've been born in a storm drain. But they, in my mind, were the Dickensian face of proselytizing and judgmentalism, punitive self-restraint and discipline, and capable of actually making Christmas unmerry. How humbling.

'I regret that I have neither further nor more recent information to share with you, as we have had no contact with our birth family since the time of your adoption placement.' What were they afraid of, the cowards? It's behaviour like that that can make a person feel like a mistake. 'I do hope, however, that this will give you a greater sense and understanding of your roots.'

My childhood, so as not to be misleading, was idyllic (at least in my opinion, at least at the time). My family was close; my bonds are deep, lasting. I really don't want to seem ungrateful. My parents are indisputably my parents. I honestly believe, in whatever metaphysical way that that requires, that I was born to be their son. They formed me in ways far deeper than simple genetic material. We're quite malleable as babies, even physically. I sort of look like my mother. I feel as I write this that I'm desperately trying to throw grappling hooks to save myself from being pulled into a pit of mawkishness, but how else to discuss sentimentality but sentimentally? My mother told me one morning recently, as we were having coffee and bran, that she was so happy I was her

baby. She said that sometimes when she was feeding me she got a ‘strange feeling in my breasts, and a strange sensation in my private parts. Like I was giving birth to you.’

Every scrap of memory I have is with them. My earliest: I’m sitting on the living room floor in Winnipeg. I must have been under a year old because my vantage point is no more than a foot and a half off the polished dark wood floors. Colours are deeply saturated and slightly misty. I’m looking to my left where my mother, in her deep-red terrycloth bathrobe, has gone down the four steps to the front door and is reaching out to get the mail from the mailbox. I recall an enveloping warmth of safety, of security, of happiness.

But you just can’t help wondering. Purely biological, this curiosity. Rose-Marie Mallory-Emery also included a photocopy of the original ‘Social History’ from The Children’s Aid Society, typed up on an old manual typewriter in some dreary 1960s municipal office in downtown Winnipeg. All identifying information had been redacted with White-Out. My birth mother’s name, and her hometown, and her birthday, are left a sloppy blank. When syntax would have been jeopardized by just leaving a gaping hole, someone at the Post-Adoption Agency had written it in ‘she’ or ‘her’ in ballpoint, or referred to her, when a pronoun wouldn’t quite make sense, as ‘B.M.’ Also, someone had taken a ruler and underlined various words and phrases—some of which seemed capricious—or like cryptic clues. What did these underlinings secretly reveal about B.M. Or maybe, perhaps more to the point, the mind of the underliner? I was an archaeological sleuth trying to tickle hard facts out of arbitrary stylistic flourishes. I wasn’t even sure of what I was looking for. Perhaps a missing link, perhaps a Rosetta Stone, perhaps the Dead Sea Scrolls. Would mysteries be

solved? I'm not even sure what the mysteries were. Mysteries of identity, and maybe not even particularly genealogical, but deeper things.

'He has a dark complexion and black hair,' the clerk-typist from long wrote. Hold on. Have they got the right baby? My hair turns reddish in the sun, and I burn quicker than a prawn on a hibachi. Maybe my search was complicated in far deeper way. Maybe Garth Twa was not who I was looking for. Like in a movie. I've always had the feeling that I've been untethered. Unable to conceive of, well, of being conceived. It's not schizophrenia, like I think I'm an alien, or not human, but, well, where's the forensic proof? It's not that I have any real doubts, but if I did...

Anyway:

'He is quite a short baby with a small head and small, regular features.'  
*Quite* a short baby? Sounds like a bit of an opinion, Matron. One would call that, linguistically, an adverbial stance maker (attitudinal). Within the first few lines the personality of the writer was coming through, a mindset very different from that nice Rose-Marie. This 1960s Salvation Army sergeant was not doing the organization any favours, image-wise. Let's try to keep it objective, shall we Matron? Let's not let our rather rigid worldview colour our work, shall we?  
 'Quite' short? Small head? Yes I was quite short and had a small head. I was a baby, for Christ's sake. Give a month or two. Not all orphans have to be wastrels.

B.M.'s race is 'Scottish-English.' Is Scottish-English a race? Religion: Anglican, underlined. Very important, that. Her education is then detailed. It appears B.M. 'completed grade twelve, taking a commercial course. She had to repeat grade 10.' Had to repeat grade 10? What was this mischievous minx up

to in high School? No doubt ditching classes to smoke cigarettes and listen to Elvis Presley records. Her best subjects were Spelling and Typing. Notable achievements. Nothing to sniff at, Spelling and Typing. It also appears she was rather an aficionado of badminton.

Employment: 'worked as a clerk typist for the *Armed Forces*.' She knew how to exploit her natural talents. Well done! She also 'seems to have enjoyed her job and got along well with her fellow workers.' Health: 'no serious ailments, she is now in excellent health' though she has 'worn glasses since age of 7.'

'*She* is 5'51/2" tall and weighs 130 lbs. She is big-boned but her weight is well distributed and she has excellent posture' Big-boned? The gold standard of euphemism. And if it's all bone weight wouldn't it automatically be distributed well because, I mean, it's the skeleton? But at least she had excellent posture. 'Her features are regular with a roundish face and a pleasant expression.'

Perhaps less than B.M., I was getting a very clear picture of the dour nurse typing this, her hair up like a pecan bun, Diane Arbus metal cat's-eye glasses, staunch by nature, but made stauncher still because *her* world, the one that'd been through the war, that thought itself modern for buying Harry Belafonte records, that may still be in power but there was change in the air. Hippies were beginning to gather in parks. Matron was steeled for the fight. This damn younger generation with their sex before marriage—the tide was still a trickle, it could still be contained. The proper world could still win out, by brow-beating one B.M. at a time.

‘Her hands and nails are well cared for and nicely shaped.’ At last, the crux: a picture of what was truly important about a woman in 1962: nicely shaped nails. That’s all right then. She may be knocked up and left at the alter, but she keeps her nails clean. ‘...and she is always neatly and attractively dressed.’ And I presume with confidence that she was attractively dressed as a typist and not like one of those Haight-Ashbury whores.

‘Personality’: this ought to be good. I can just imagine Matron with her #2 sharpened and at the ready. Yes, we will help you. But we won’t forgive you. That’s up to our disapproving God, so good luck there. ‘*B.M.* is quiet, placid and rather a slow thinker.’ Rather a slow thinker? She graduated high school didn’t she? Albeit having to repeat grade 10, but still. That could show admirable perseverance. ‘It is not easy for her to make quick decisions as she likes to be methodical and thorough.’ Though not with contraception, apparently. ‘She is a follower rather than a leader but she has a very good sense of responsibility and can face reality fairly well.’ Always a good trait, to be able to face reality fairly well.

It was still hard to make any connection between this woman being written about and myself. It was something, I think, I’m just not used to. Was there some residual anger? Possibly. Possibly for not wanting to find out about me. Wasn’t she curious? Perhaps she was as apathetic, placid, and undemanding of life as Matron suspected. Giving me up at birth made sense. But this felt like rejection. I mean, not that I was looking for acceptance. From her, that is.



‘*B.M.* is able to relate intelligently and has a nice, even voice, but somehow she seems to have little motivation for social conversation—’ with you, that is, Matron, ‘—and seldom elaborates. Her sense of humour is keen and her personality is pleasant and friendly.’ Why the underlining? ‘She is resourceful, sympathetic, kind and conscientious; sometimes withdrawn and slow to make friends. On the whole, *she* demands little from life and resignedly accepts what comes along in an almost apathetic manner.’ Sweeping generalizations, really. I see this woman through staunch matron eyes, a leaden-eyed girl, though pleasant, 20, probably sang along with 45s of the Shirelles, probably had one of those Hula Hoops and that new Frisbee thing. A dull and stupid girl. How does this humourless crusader presume to know what this girl demands of life? She’s docile and unwed. ‘This gives her the appearance of being even-tempered and contented.’ Like a cow. What do you want from an unwed mother at an unwed mothers clinic in a time and place more post-war than flower child? Are you looking for a fight, Matron? The Beatles hadn’t even gone psychedelic yet.

Of course she’s dull and resigned and almost apathetic: she’s scared shitless. She’s pregnant, alone, with Quaker parents, and now sitting on a metal chair being looked down at by a religious nurse in an army unit who’s clenching her jaw so tightly there are sparks and silently castigating her for the sin (me) that she’s carrying in her belly like a smack in Jesus’ face, and judging her nails.

But years later times have changed and become less staunch.

Like with Rose-Marie with her bottle of White-Out.

‘Although Diane says she had no special interests at school...’ Hold on. What’s that? *Diane*? The woman who bore me, her name is Diane? Looks like

Rose-Marie let that one slip. Or was it on purpose? Was Rose-Marie Mallory-Emory taking pity on me, giving me a nugget on the sly? She can't, Rose-Marie, by law, tell me details. She must, by law, white things out. But she can, unpunished by law, be neglectful. Be absent-minded. Be selectively careless. It seems Rose-Marie is not as draconian with her white-out as she perhaps ought.

'*She likes reading and watching TV. Swimming is also one of her FAVOURITE times.*' Besides the questionable usage that item was intriguing for what was excised: what synonym of 'favourite' was too sensitive, too revealing, that it had to whited-out and replaced, by hand, with the word 'FAVOUITE'? She smokes quite heavily—'while she was carrying me? May explain the small head—'but drinks only socially'—well at least there's that—'and has no nervous mannerisms.'

Acquaintance with Father: 'She has known him for 1 1/2 years. Although they were engaged to be married for several months he broke off the engagement for undetermined reasons.' There is a world in that sentence, a history and an unknown alternative history.

Attitude re Adoption: 'Eric's—' still startling to see in print—'adoption was not a difficult decision for B.M. because in her mind the P.F.'s refusal to marry her leaves her with no alternative for the child.' He refused? What a dog. 'She has not even seriously considered keeping him by herself. The most difficult time for her was the one occasion when she saw the baby as she believes him to resemble the P.F.' Now that was a cannonball to the thorax. I knew I was reading about someone from the past, but we'd actually met. For some reason

I'd never considered that. And it had been her 'most difficult time'—she recognized someone in me. That's something I've never been able to do, recognize anyone in me. For just a flash she didn't want to let me go. For a quick instant there were ties, genetic ties, genetic recognisability. There was still a chance. I literally gasped when I read this. She looked in my face. I've always had the sensation of floating free, resembling no one. I was identifiable.

A devastating scene suddenly sprang into my mind. This girl, Diane, hair in a beehive, in white go-go boots, leaning over an operating table, arm outstretched toward the little swaddled bundle—rather short with small regular features—that is me being taken away by a severe nurse clucking her tongue, catching a glimpse, which isn't what she wanted to do but did it accidentally, and crying out, 'Noooooooooo!'

And there was more. An entire mirror-universe family that I would never know, people who could recognize—for better or worse—my features. Like my M.G.F. '(your grandfather),' who was 'Anglican and a regular church attender,' the emphasis being on the fact that the Anglican was a regular church. 'He drinks and smokes. His outside interests are most varied: he curls, paints, is active in drama work and is a Member of the Board of Trade. MGF's health is very good. He has his own teeth and wears glasses for reading only.' And interesting world, the past, where having one's own teeth is an enviable attribute. My M.G.M.—'(your grandmother)'—'partially completed a Nurse's training course. ...She drinks and smokes. Also very fond of sports, she curls with her husband.' Curling was apparently an estimable sign of community standing in these drinking, smoking days at the dawn of the 1960s. 'M.A (your

*aunt*)...’—I have an aunt? All this genetic confluence was overwhelming—  
 ‘...Her height is 4’ 3” and she weighs 82 lbs.’ What? There’s a dwarf in the family? But then I noticed this: ‘Cynthia is in grade 5 at school.’ She was only 11 years old. Phew.

Wait a minute...Cynthia? Another slip. God bless Rose-Marie Mallory-Emory. Diane and Cynthia.

P.F. is much sketchier than B.M. No, I think I’ll call her Diane. P.F. didn’t even have the spine to face Matron himself but ‘wrote out this information and the M. brought it to our office.’

‘The p.f.’—note that he doesn’t even get upper case. Matron is unrelenting—was ‘*probably anglo-saxon*.’ What elision could have possibly been made for race? Some dismissive slur? ‘Education: The father completed grade 9 and part of grade 10 and his best subjects were Maths, Science and History. He rates himself as having had average ability to get along with his former teachers and classmates.’ Well! Part of grade 10! Not a complete loser after all. What else?

‘Employment: Immediately after leaving school, the p.f. had a milk route for 4 months.’ My father was a milkman? A milkman! I carry the genes of a milkman? Will the humbling not end? Oh, but then he was only 15 years old at the time. In that case, considering, it was actually impressive, getting a job as a milkman. A horny buck irresponsible milkman. ‘Following this he worked as an assistant baker for 3 months and then he was employed by a combustion engineering firm for the next 3 months.’ Obviously—of course obviously—he

had commitment issues. 'He claims'—the matron doesn't believe him. She thinks he's a deadbeat—he left all those jobs because of restlessness. Finally, in July 1958, he joined the *Armed Forces* and is with them now as an electrician.'

I'm with the matron. I'm not liking this guy, either.

'~~He~~ is submissive and more or less a follower.' More or less a follower...what does that mean? And what is this fixation of Matron's with timid followers? Who's in charge? Oh, that's right. A merciless God is. 'He does not have an outgoing personality but is sometimes moody and excitable. He describes himself as being reasonably even-tempered. Smokes and drinks but has no nervous mannerisms.' How did these two withdrawn, sullen, ill-tempered, chain-smoking, alcoholic wallflowers even get together?

There are five uncles and one aunt. 'The p.f. said that he and his family enjoyed close family relationships. He himself was particularly close to his sister.'

A large family, untroubled by intellectual vigour. Not one of them was even slightly curious?

Some months later I got a phone call.

'Hello? Is this Garth Twa?'

'Yes. Who's calling?'

'It's Anne-Marie Mallory-Emery.' It suddenly became impossible to swallow.

'Yes?' I managed to squeak out.

She was reluctant. 'I have some bad news, I'm afraid. Your birth father has passed away.'

'Oh.' I don't know what I felt. It wasn't sadness. But it was something. I would never meet him.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'It's alright. I never knew him.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine. Can you maybe tell me his name?'

'I can't do that.'

'No. Not his whole name. I mean...just his first name.'

'I'm sorry. I can't do that.'

'I mean, just so I'll know. Just...' curiosity.

'I'm sorry.'

## CHAPTER TEN

## HUMILIATION AND THE SOUR-TOE COCKTAIL

I hadn't returned to the north since I fled and my parents retired to Winnipeg. Except in nightmares; frequently I return to the north in my nightmares. Tossing in bed, sweating, gnawing the pillowcase, I'll be wandering the streets of Yellowknife, the snow along the curb as high as my head, the streetlights haloed in the perpetual ice fog of a 50-below-zero dark day. In my nightmare I can't get out, can't find the airport. I walk down the roads like corridors in a maze made of ice, the houses part of the night, the weak lights in the windows unwelcoming, defensively hostile, and I walk further to the outskirts, to our home. It is less a nightmare than a sense memory. It's basically my adolescence.

I might never had gone back—happily—had I not been sent back to cover the Frozen Turkey Bowling at the annual Sourdough Rendezvous in the Yukon Territory. Matt, a friend from college, had become the editor for *Out Traveller*, a gay travel magazine, for travelling gays. He said that Porsche was unveiling a new SUV and to show how tough it is they were having a press junket in Whitehorse, the capitol of the Yukon Territory. He said, 'You're from around there, aren't you?' Indeed I was. From around there. Repulse Bay is several thousand miles from Whitehorse, but I guess the arctic is the arctic. So Matt asked if I would go and represent the magazine. Represent, basically, the gays. But I have never felt that I was an indicative specimen of gay, an exemplar of gay. But, as Matt wanted an article from it, I thought it was a very good idea. And I was sure it would be lavish. I mean, it was a Porsche press junket, not one

for Tata. And my first assignment as a travel writer! I said thank you, I'm honoured, of course I'll do it, but wasn't there something in Aruba that needed writing about?

I am not a car person. It isn't mere disinterest. It's active dislike. Even revulsion. The sight of motor, even the sight of spark plugs or air filters in the supermarket, sends me spiralling into depression. Sports do the same thing. Me in a car, any car, test-driving it?

I wrote to Matt repeatedly over the next weeks and, as is my wont with Matt, even when writing about something serious (for example, writing to my new editor about my first assignment), I tend to be a bit irreverent, if not downright vulgar, in my emails. I think in one I addressed him as 'Dear Salad Cream'; perhaps not the rudest salutation that I've been known to use, but still a little dirty if you choose to look at it in that way. I think in that email I went on about, if I remember, the specifics of Inuit gay porn (of which there is no such thing, as far as I know, so had to make it up). I'm not sure. I do know I kept referring to Porsche as Porch, on purpose. Anyway, Matt wrote back with an email titled 'whoops.' It appears he accidentally forwarded this email to Porsche. 'Dear Salad Cream.' How is that possible? How is possible to just forward, accidentally, an email? He had harangued me relentlessly that I must act professionally, that I was representing a large and distinguished publishing empire that was courting lucrative and prestigious advertising revenue. This was certainly not a great start, and it wasn't even my fault. He told me I should write to Porsche and apologize. It was the second most embarrassing thing to ever happen to me.



On the plane to the Yukon—in coach—I sat in the clammy puddle from the coffee that I’d spilled while trying to regain my balance after whacking my head on the open door of the overhead bin. I looked out over the pristine mountains of British Columbia. ‘Pristine mountains of British Columbia’: I wrote that down on the pad that I’d bought especially for the occasion. A special journalist’s pad for my first journalist assignment. I would need all of the journalistic integrity I could get for the Porsche test-drive, considering the uneasy relations after the ‘Dear Salad Cream’ incident. Next to me was a woman named Nancy. She lived in Whitehorse. I thought I would do some preliminary research. I asked her what the population of Whitehorse was now, my pen poised. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘the population is declining because of the closing of all the minds.’ What? The closing of the minds? It sounded all too familiar, like the kind of place where a fairly butch young man could be called a ‘faggot’ at his after-school job. ‘The closing of the *what?*’ I asked, needing to be sure. ‘The mines,’ she said, ‘They’re closing down the old gold mines.’ Oh. *Mines*.

I told her I used to live in the North. ‘You won’t recognize it,’ Nancy said, ‘we got a Walmart.’

I turned back to the window and looked down at the mountain tops and vast stretches of untouched snow. This was a world that was uninhabited.

‘And a MacDonald’s,’ Nancy said in a tone that I recognized as pride.

As I disembarked the plane in Whitehorse—whose airport code, I’d noticed from the luggage tags, was YXY...wasn’t that a genetic disease? Wasn’t that Jacob’s Syndrome?—I recognized that familiar arctic tang, the air so fresh it

was barely recognizable as air, and so you take tentative breaths, like it was going to hurt you.

On the first night they—‘they’ being the Porsche engineers, the Porsche PR men, the professional drivers—wanted to take us—us being Petrina, a television journalist from Toronto who was sent at the last minute instead of her boss (and a girl! Thank God there was a girl!) and myself—to dinner. In the lobby of the hotel the Porsche men seem nice enough, although a little hesitant, a little scared. Like they had to be nice to me but were afraid that I would ask to ride with them. The rest of the journalists were stranded in Edmonton due to bad weather. ‘This is the finest place to eat in Whitehorse,’ said Bob, a man with the demeanour of a reptile (which I envy), leading the way into the parking lot. He seemed to be the spokesman, the coordinator, for the different Porsche factions. Or maybe he was just the most gregarious. So Petrina and I, with four PR men each, drove out down the highway a little ways, out past the airport, to a wooden building with ‘STEAKS’ and ‘PIZZA’ hand-painted on the wall above the windows. This was the finest that Whitehorse had to offer? This was like Yellowknife all over again.

The men traded the clichés that vigorously heterosexual men use for humour and bonding. They flirted with Petrina, who smiled. They all had roles. They had scripts. With me, the one who had written fulsomely about fictional (but how were they to know?) Inuit gay porn, they didn’t know how to behave. The world of test-driving luxury cars was not a world with a large and vocal gay presence. They had no script for me. And as they couldn’t just beat me up (perhaps a social interactional option under different circumstances) it was vaguely uncomfortable.

The next morning we had the introduction into the powers of the new Porsche SUV, the Cayenne, like the pepper, as opposed to the Cheyenne, like in *Cheyenne Autumn*, the 1964 John Ford movie with Sal Mineo as an Indian, which is what I kept calling it. The other journalists had arrived in the middle of the night. These were hoary men, men who looked like they belonged in the Yukon Territory, men with bellies in flannel shirts and untrimmed facial hair, with steely, unforgiving eyes like high school principals or sportsmen or other male authority figures I still studiously avoid. They glanced at me—a glance was all that was needed—seeming to dare me to even mention choreography or fashion so that they could give me a good backhand cuff with their thick-knuckled hands. These men not only seemed to understand the presentation detailing things like ‘torque’ and ‘struts,’ but seemed to enjoy it. They took notes and eagerly asked questions. Quite seriously, without irony, Bob and the Porsche men told us ‘We build emotions.’ *Emotions?* What the hell kind of girly talk is that for car men? I scribbled it down, the first note I had taken.

We were told that we would have to partner up, that there would be two men to a car for all the tests. I felt queasy. As the Porsche men were waxing lovingly about the Cayenne’s differential I turned to catch the eye of Petrina. She made a gesture that we be partners. Thank God. Someone who wouldn’t chastise or dismiss me when I drove the Cheyenne into a snow bank or couldn’t find the differential.

Our first stop was Annie Lake, like in the Broadway musical, where we took possession of our vehicles. First they showed us the engines. The hoary men scribbled madly. I was standing next to Bob. I felt the need to say something. I nodded toward the engine. ‘It’s pretty,’ I said. He got that look on

his face that sort of resembled a smile, but was more like panic. Sort of like a rictus, actually.

Petrina and I got into our SUV and, with Pierre, our driving instructor (also a stroke of luck for us as he seemed the only one with a sense of humour) we drove out onto the ice, which had been cleared of snow and set up with traffic cones. There we drove around these cones. We did it in different gears and different . . . whatever, differentials or torques or whatever (it was all gone before it even got to my ears). Then we had lunch in a tent set up on the ice (Arctic char and, whimsically, poppadoms).

The next day we set off to Fish Lake to drive on some more ice. Thoughtfully, Porsche decided to give us a special Yukon treat at Fish Lake and while some of us were driving endlessly around the ice in SUVs, others got to drive around the snow in dog sleds. Now, these were not the dogs I remember from Repulse Bay. *Those* dogs would not hesitate to rip your arm off at the shoulder, not even for food but just for sport. The dogs I was used to were Inuit work dogs, built like werewolves in horror movies. These dogs were smaller, sleeker. These dogs wagged their tails. These dogs wanted to kiss you. These were racing dogs, bred for the cameras at finishing lines. Petrina and I took turns, alternating between mushing and riding in the sled, snug like a baby in an amoute. That night was our final banquet of pasta and caribou tips, again in the tent out on the ice. They'd done the interior up in—fittingly—a northern theme, something along the lines of 'Early Trapper': the walls of the tent, and in judicious places hanging down from the rafters, were the pelts of muskox. I made a joke to Bob, sort of ironic and liberal-bashing in that he-man way that would get me, I don't know, perhaps not a manly slap on the back but at least

not avoided. Something about PETA and cans of red paint. Bob quickly assured me that all the muskox remains hanging around us were the result of muskox suicide. 'Har, har, har!' Some of the hoary men stayed to watch for the northern lights. Not me. I crawled into the back of a Cayenne and waited for someone to drive it back to the motel.

The next day I was out at the Whitehorse airport at noon. The airport was right next to the museum that boasted a 'Giant Beaver,' which I would have really liked to have seen. Whitehorse is a small town, and so the airport is convenient, a short ride from main street (so is, really, everything else. Wilderness is a short ride from downtown). People tend to go to the airport all the time just for something to do. And everyday at noon there is a plane from Vancouver, which turns around and heads back to Vancouver. I was taken there by a man named Jim, my connection to Yukon tourism. I don't think we got off on the right foot even before we met. Matt had made a point of asking him about gay life in Whitehorse. That's fine, if one gets to stay behind in New York and attend cocktail parties and marvel that places still exist where being gay isn't embraced, but it's another to be several thousand miles away from any city—thick into enemy territory, as it were—asking people about it. I mean, these people didn't even have television until a few years ago.

There are no gay bars in Whitehorse, but if one is lucky he might be able to drop in on one of the Gay Potluck Suppers that are held intermittently. In the North—and this is a new development from when I grew up there—they have not only the usual designations of the international gay community—Gay, Lesbian, Bi, and Transgender (and counting)—but also a new one for me—Two-Spirited. I liked the sound of it, kind of mythical and mystical (though I suppose

it still does indicate that there is something wrong with them. Like, vaguely psychotic). Oddly, the term originated in Winnipeg, at the Third Annual Inter-tribal Native American/First Nations Gay And Lesbian Conference. At first I'd thought they were calling them 'too spirited,' which, though harsh, was apt, but not something you'd want to put on promotional literature. Unfortunately there were no Two-Spirited Pot Luck Dinners planned for my brief stay.

At lunch at the airport with Jim, in the cafeteria ('Due to the dramatic rise in the cost of turkey, please add 75¢ to your order if you are ordering a turkey sandwich.' And no wonder if you're going to use the town's supply of turkeys to bowl with) I referred to growing up with the Eskimo. Jim took great offence at the term 'Eskimo.' But I did in fact grow up with the Eskimo. That's what they called themselves back then. They didn't seem unhappy about it.

Jim was to be my guide for the annual Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous. An 'antidote for cabin fever' as the brochures advertised. A festival of northern delights! 'Yukoners!' the brochure also proclaimed, 'They know how to party! Rendezvous is rowdy and the Rendezvous Queens are cool!' There were such events as Chainsaw Chucking (wherein, I suppose, the participants threw chainsaws around. This was no great draw for me. After all, I'd lived in Venice Beach for all those years, where people chucking chainsaws was an everyday event). There was also a Whipsawing contest (I'm still not sure what that was about), a Flour Packing Contest, the Solid Gold Communications Axe Throw, a Tug-a-Truck (how butch *were* these people?), and the crowning of the Sourdough Queen, who, last year, because of global warming, had to make her procession ankle-deep in slush and be crowned in a mud-sodden dress. For the inevitable romantic that a Sourdough Rendezvous brings out in even the most bitter of us

there was the Sourdough Hip Hop and The Dating Game/Kielbasa Eating at the Caribou Club. Sorry, that needs to be repeated: a dating game combined with a sausage eating contest.

That night Jim took me to the event that I had not only circled in my Sourdough Rendezvous Guest Pack Guide but had put stars next to in the margin: the Hairy Leg Contest for Women. It was held in the hotel saloon, where all the hair competitions took place, and we found chairs right on the floor next to the judging. The evening started with the beard contests. Penny Pillows, an emaciated middle-aged woman done up like a 19<sup>th</sup> century Klondike whore, was the sole judge. The men, all in denim shirts, suspenders, work boots—none of it being a costume—lined up on the stage. First up were the contestants who had entered clean-shaven three months before. Penny Pillows walked down the line and ran her hands through the men's beards. Who could notice the beards with the spectacle of Penny Pillows getting increasingly . . . involved . . . with the beards as she went down the line. Next up was the Old Growth category. These men were obviously more comfortable skinning a muskox suicide out on the tundra than they were in eating with utensils in a township. One got the feeling that this was the first time in a long time that they'd washed or combed the food out of their hair. It looked like a casting call for Jehovah. I certainly don't think I would've gotten near their beards, let alone run my fingers through them. Penny Pillows knelt so her face was level with the long, grey, tangled clumps inches away.

Finally, the Hairy Leg Contest for Women. They had three categories—Longest Growth, Densest Growth, and Most Horrific. I was surprised to see that the contestants were normal, attractive women. Youngish, certainly not the

female counterparts of the bearded men. But then they rolled up their trouser legs. Penny Pillows, bellying up to our ringside table, confidentially informed me that they used to have a contest for women's armpit hair, but too many people got ill when some of the contestants came in with their armpit hair in braids.

It was between the Old Growth Beard competition and the Hairy Leg Contest that I heard about the Sour Toe Cocktail. This is a specialty of Dawson City, a few miles up the Alaska Highway. Apparently, awhile back, a miner or trapper or someone of that sort had lost his toe to frostbite. The toe had to come off. It occurred to the owner of the saloon at the Downtown Hotel that wasting a blackened, semi-mummified toe would be inexcusable, so he decided to pickle it. Then—again in a process of thought that I personally am unable to follow—he decided that it would make a good garnish to a drink. Hence, the Sour Toe Cocktail. He will fish the toe out of a jar of formaldehyde and put it in a shot glass and fill up the glass with the liquor of your choice. You get a special certificate if you not only drink the drink but let the toe, with its toenail that seemed to grow after separation, touch your lips. Several years ago some bibulous adventurer accidentally swallowed the toe. News got out on the wire, and soon the proprietor of the Downtown Saloon was inundated with toes that people had sent from all over the world. Now he's got a jar of them, resembling the jar of bobbing olives that one is more accustomed to finding in a bar, and he can offer guests 'a foot'—a cocktail containing five coarsened, prune-coloured toes in the glass. One has to wonder at the legality of the Sour Toe cocktail. But this is a man's frontier, and a frontier has frontier law.



Jim and I left the saloon and stepped out into the bitterly cold night. Barely ten steps down the sidewalk I was seized by the arms and hauled into the street and thrown into a cage. I'd been caught by some Klondike Keystone Kops who informed me that I had violated the Rendezvous law that I must wear my Rendezvous button at all times. What Rendezvous button? Jim stood back, smirking, and I can't help but describe it as malevolently. He flicked his own lapel button. Why hadn't he told me? 'Sorry,' I told the Kop, 'I didn't know. I'd like to buy one, please.'

'Too late!' he said, 'You gotta do your time!'

Jim chuckled and started walking away. 'We're just going to grab something to eat.' And he left me. Jet lagged, hungry, alone in a freezing Arctic wind and perhaps well on my way to adding to the jar in Dawson City, in a metal cage on Main Street, Whitehorse. That'd teach me. Damned homosexual, growing up with the *Ess-kee-mos*.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### DENIAL AND ACCEPTANCE

Death was not a surprising thing in the Arctic. It couldn't be ignored. We were at a distinct disadvantage, us humans, tenaciously clinging to the rocks on the shore of Repulse Bay: not as fat as seals, not as hairy as polar bears, not as fast as caribou.

The simple dispassionate fact of death was everywhere. It was unambiguous. We wore animal pelts, not disguised—like in the south, with clasps and buckles and department store labels sewn on—but definitely the skins of dead animals, untanned, and that began to smell after we wore them for a little while and the heat from our bodies had begun to soften them up. Most of the time we saw the animals in the throes of death, saw the blood in the nostrils, saw the carcasses lying rotting between the houses. Pieces of the animals that we didn't eat or wear were scattered in the rocks and moss around the settlement and sticky hunks would sometimes cling to the bottom of our *kamiks*. Our mittens were made from the untanned skins of caribou, with remnants of dried fat and blood still attached, sewn together with thread that was actually the sinew that was peeled off in strands from their dried spinal cords. I used to visit the schoolteacher, Mr. Pembroke, on Saturday mornings, who promised to teach me taxidermy. I wound up just playing Lego with his kids.

And our food was unambiguously carcasses. Nothing came from packages; our food put up a struggle. We usually had to gut and skin it. Our

diet in Repulse Bay consisted of only two fresh staples.<sup>43</sup> Both, I later found out, were considered delicacies down South. To my nine-year-old palate, however, they were interminable. This first was caribou, a dark, musky meat that tasted like a cross between liver and tough beef, neither of which I found inviting on their own let alone combined. We had caribou roasts. Caribou steaks. Caribou stews and caribou soups. Cold caribou sandwiches. I came home from school in Yellowknife one day to find my mother grappling with a whole half of a caribou on the kitchen floor. It was skinned but its great testicles were still attached, lopping from side to side and she wrestled with it, bloody handsaw raised, looking for the best point of ingress for dismemberment. She groped the slippery carcass as it slid out from under her. Finally she clutched the balls and got a sturdy grip and started hacking away. Luckily I was already gay by this point.

Or we had Arctic char, a fish with pink flesh not unlike salmon. Char fillets and baked char. And char steaks. And char stews and char soups. No hot dogs, no pizza, no ice cream. Children can be very picky eaters; I was one of those children. This was not the most logical thing to be when the nearest supermarket was three thousand miles away. I was too young to appreciate the fact that if it weren't for the goodwill of the Inuit we would have starved to death.

We never ate the eyes of anything, and I was at least glad of that. To the Inuit, the animals' eyes were the best part. Often I would see a friend at school

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<sup>43</sup> Or three. We sometimes ate ptarmigan if we were lucky and fast.

rolling the eye of a caribou around in his mouth and gnawing on it like a jawbreaker.

We had no regular supply fruits or vegetables. Father Didier had built a little greenhouse out on the tundra where he managed to grow some scrawny lettuce. Little puny leaves because the short growing season tended to dwarf all vegetation—no plants on the tundra were ever able to attain a permanent height greater than, well, moss. But by the end of the summer we managed to harvest little daily salads of stunted leaves.

We did eat *maktar* once. *Maktar* is a layer of whale skin with an equal layer of blubber still attached. The Inuit in Repulse Bay only ate the *maktar* from the whale because the government told them that the meat was tainted with mercury. The Inuit at Kugaaruk, however, told us that they had been told that the meat was all right, that the *maktar* contained the mercury. So they ate the meat.

*Maktar* could be cooked or eaten raw. Most of the Inuit ate it raw because most of them ate it on the spot. Dad tried it raw and said it tasted like coconut, albeit greasy coconut. Mom insisted on cooking it before Paul and I could eat it. It supposedly tasted like rubbery hard-boiled egg with a layer of gristle attached. Perhaps it just felt like hardboiled egg. I swallowed it without chewing it or tasting it and got a St. Christopher medal from Father Didier for doing it.

We only tried the *maktar* of the beluga whales (which were relatively small in whale terms and therefore had much thinner skin). In the late summer a mother blue whale (which was very large in whale terms) and her baby got trapped in the bay. Repulse Bay mobilized. The men grabbed their harpoons, loaded into their kayaks, and paddled out and surrounded the two whales. The

rest of the settlement watched from the shore. Killing the mother was impossible—it was too large—but the men managed to kill the baby. The idea of killing a baby whale makes my friends, now, howl in anger. But it was hunted, not harvested, by men in kayaks with spears, and it fed the settlement for months. Hunters often died in the hunt, more often than whales did.

It took the rest of day for the settlement to haul the dead baby up onto the shore. That, I realized, was what the bulldozer was for.

When I'd be out walking with Eliuk we'd regularly detour down by the carcass when he got hungry, and, using his *ulut*—a semi-circular blade with a bone handle that was the sole piece of cutlery (and utility knife, and scissors, and beard trimmer) for the Inuit—he'd hack off a chunk that he would then eat like an apple as we continued to wherever we were going. The Inuit ate the flesh off of the whale even as it began to turn, when it began to bloat and smell, when the smell became so strong that we could smell it all the way from the Mission. They only stripped and ate the one side of it, though, as it was too massive to turn over, even with the bulldozer.

We never tried the blue whale. The *maktar* from it was so thick that I think even my father found it unappetizing. One day just after the hunt, on my way to Suzanne's, I saw a little girl, naked, maybe three-years-old, standing in the doorway of her little plywood house with a huge hunk of the blue flesh gripped in both of her fists. She was unable to open her mouth wide enough to fit it in so she just nibbled at the edges.

For fun we would go and hunt things, usually *sic-sics*, the Arctic ground squirrels; there wasn't anything that Inuit boys wouldn't trap. Then they would

skin them. *Sic-sic* fur wasn't good for anything, except practice. Inuit tended to be very good at skinning. We once got a gift of a skinned Arctic fox without an incision in its belly, just a tube of fur, the fox having been pulled out through one of the ends. They were that good.

We used to go and hunt lemmings as well. Not for any trophy, of course—lemming pelts had the utility of, well, mouse pelts—but instead for the sheer joy of killing. Lemmings could usually be found under rocks and so we lifted large flat rocks and watched the lemmings scurry. We then would chase the lemmings, rocks held aloft, and at the opportune moment heave the rock down and crush them. Just for fun. The childhood of the Inuit was not a soft childhood.

In the summer the Inuit men would follow the caribou migration, living in tents made from caribou skins. One day Elizabeth the nurse came over to the mission to tell us that the settlement's shaman, Victor, an old man, was very ill and had been found in his tent out in the tundra. He was alone, too ill to move, with his young son, Isaiah, who was about a year and a half old was crawling around outside the tent, naked, infested with ringworm, playing in feces and offal, foraging for something to eat. The Inuit brought Victor and Isaiah back to the settlement and Victor was put under the care of Elizabeth in the nursing station. Because it was summer and the men were away Elizabeth came to Mission to ask if Isaiah could stay with us while Victor convalesced. The Inuit women had a lot to do, taking care of their own children and having to run the household single-handedly. Also, the mission was indisputably cleaner than anywhere else.

As soon as Elizabeth delivered Isaiah my mom put him in the bathtub and took a scouring brush to the worm infestations, scrubbing them until they bleed and the worms came out. Isaiah screamed. After she dried him off she dressed him in a pair of my old pyjamas, rolling up the legs, pulling the elastic waist up to his chest, and knotting the sleeves at the ends so his hands weren't free to scratch and open and infect his wounds. She fashioned a little nest of blankets and pillows on the floor at the end of their bed for him. They were woken up that first night by Isaiah sobbing. He stood at the foot of their bed, his little head just peeking above their feet.

*'Ananak,'* he sobbed, *'Atatak.'* Mother, Father. They made a space between them and Isaiah climbed in.

Isaiah became part of our family immediately. It was effortless; it seemed natural. He was at the table for dinner. He was with us when we went for picnics on the tundra. Paul and I would play with him. When my Dad would go to work at the Co-op my mother would go to the Transient Centre and bring Isaiah with her.

Oddly, we spoke mainly Inuit around him. Since we had no television in the evenings we would sit around and pass Isaiah back and forth and say, *'Kunik! Kunik!'* and Isaiah, giggling, would crinkle up his face and push his nose onto ours. *'Kunik'* is the Inuit word for 'kiss.' We would laugh and Isaiah would laugh and we would pass him down the line.

The tundra is a vast, fathomless stretch of flat ground covered in moss and lichens with the odd patch of hardy grass. Under the spongy top layer was a

level called the permafrost. The depth of this layer varied, depending how far north you were. In the summer things would start to thaw and they would continue to thaw until Autumn when things would start to freeze up again. The permafrost was the layer down to which the thawing took place. It was ground that had not been unfrozen since the last ice age. Repulse Bay was quite far north, so the permafrost was fairly shallow. Because of this it was impossible to bury people when they died. Instead, the Inuit would put the dead in plain wooden boxes directly onto the ground and then cover the boxes with rocks, rocks themselves that were the oldest rocks on earth. The tundra is basically a desert and these conditions would pretty much mummify the corpses. It was too cold, too dry to rot. In Kugaaruk, ostensibly our neighbor, being only 250 miles away by dog sled, one of the cairns had crumbled and the corpse inside, an old woman, had somehow poked herself—rigid as a board—diagonally out of the box; the eye sockets empty, the skin tight and black and leathery, a few wisps of hair clinging to the skull, the desiccated lips pulled back in rictus. No one, of course, would touch her. No one would pop her back into her box. It was a combination of fear and respect and superstition.

At the reception desk at the L.A. Coroner's Office I was surprised to see a candle in the shape of two hands clasped in prayer in a fluorescent-lit display cabinet. This seemed... sentimental. Not a quality I presumed would have been nourished there. I always thought of the L.A. Coroner's Office in film noir terms, with men who kept their hats on indoors and smoked unfiltered Camels and who growled things like 'a couple of lead valentines in his ventilator shaft.' I thought the public image would be more clinical. Under the candle was a



bundle of dead and dusty roses, black and dry, sitting alone on a shelf. On the wall were a dozen or more framed 'Awards of Merit' from the 'Productivity Commission.' I suppose as civil service goes, being in the L.A. Coroner's Office gives you sort of an unfair advantage as far as productivity is concerned. I was there with a friend who was doing research for a screenplay.

Death in the Arctic—like whale migrations, like winter—happened. Death, of course, is treated very differently in Los Angeles. And why wouldn't it be? Aging is avoided, let alone dying. By the time you die in L.A. you've generally been long forgotten. What we know of death is what we see in the movies: it comes, satisfyingly, to the iniquitous or is attenuated by a make-up artist and is not unattractive.<sup>44</sup> Or else death is a tourist attraction, from the Graveline Tours, where visitors pile into a refurbished—though non-air conditioned—hearse to drive around L.A. and visit the death sites of famous people, to the Museum of Death, located next door to a gay bathhouse just off Hollywood Boulevard. There is no reason why death can't be fun!

The coroner, C. Scott Carrier, was a very cheerful man, eager to chat, even though, as he said, he was busy. Productive. 'Death never takes a holiday,' he said; a *bon mot* and I suspected we were not the first to hear it. I don't even think he was the first to say it; that might've been Fred MacMurray or William Powell. He also told us that on that particular day they had 400 cases 'in house,' and that they performed over twelve thousand autopsies a year: 'We don't autopsy every body. It's not necessary and wouldn't be cost efficient.' He kept interrupting our

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<sup>44</sup> See Greta Garbo's ravishing robustness as she dies of consumption in *Camille*, or Joan Crawford's gravity-defying traffic cone breasts—on a woman of advanced middle age, no less, a woman who's been confined to a wheelchair for four decades—in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*.

questions to tell us how difficult our jobs—the jobs of movie folk—are, that ‘your industry is a killer.’ He said this more than once, I guess hoping we’d eventually get the joke. He told us that he’d started in the funeral trade, then in 1967 moved over to the Coroner’s office. That would explain the, well, maudlin touch of the wax hands that we had seen in the foyer. Unasked, he told us that dead bodies are not put in body bags, but in clear plastic sheets, ‘wrapped up just like you would a burrito.’ Well, perhaps not exactly like how *I* would wrap a burrito. I sensed that he was giving us his full routine, perhaps looking for a second job.

On his wall were engraved brass toe-tags that had been mounted in attractive oak frames. One had his name on it. This was a sideline of his. He gave us his official card, from the L.A. Coroner’s Office, and then his personal card, in the shape of a toe-tag, embossed with the logo ‘Toe Tags <sup>TM</sup>’. We too could have our names embossed on a metallic toe tag for just \$21.95. ‘Just for laughs and giggles,’ he told us: the Los Angeles Coroner told us. Laughs and giggles. On our way out he suggested we stop by the gift shop. I was shocked. The L.A. Coroner’s Office had a gift shop? It was called ‘Skeletons in the Closet.’ For laughs and giggles, I would assume. Who, exactly, would shop there?<sup>45</sup> Mothers who had just come down to identify their bullet-riddled children?

Walking into the shop, which was just converted office space on the second floor, we were greeted by a sign that said, ‘Shoplifters’ next of kin will be notified.’ On the left was a shelf full of their signature item, the chalk outline of a body on a beach towel. Very popular. Hanging next to that was ‘Body Bag Garment Bag,’ zipper in the front, embossed with, ‘Los Angeles Coroner’s

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<sup>45</sup> Besides me, of course.

Office.' There was L.A. Coroner's gift soap, L.A. Coroner's sweat bands, L.A. Coroner's boxer shorts (called 'Undertakers'), all with little chalk outlines of sprawled bodies. There were pens and coffee mugs and T-shirts. There were fridge magnets and key chains and bar-b-que aprons that said 'L.A. County Coroner has—,' over the pocket on the right side was a chalk outline of a hand, '—spare hands,' and over the left pocket a rendering of 'spare ribs.' They sold a little plastic skull 'with fine anatomical detail, spring mounted jaw, snap-off top of skull.' L.A. Coroner pillowcases, with a series of 'ZZZZ's' coming from the chalk outline of a body. Pens, watches, flashlights, cuff links. A welcome mat with a chalk outline of a body that said 'L.A. Coroner's Office—Keep Cool!' A sign by the cash register said 'Checks accepted with two forms of I.D. or Dental Records.' Death is a hoot!

I grabbed a catalogue on the way out; on the front it said 'Part of you thinks it's in poor taste.' On the inside it says, 'Part of you wants an Extra Large.'

The Hollywood Forever Cemetery is located in the heart of Hollywood, abutted on one side by Paramount Studios—the water tower in the backlot visible from the gravesides—and on the other side by the stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard famous as an open-air market for the male prostitutes.

The cemetery has been there for many decades and is the home to many famous corpses—Rudolph Valentino, Tyrone Power, Cecile B. DeMille—but it has recently changed hands, and the new owners are out to boost business. First they changed the name from Hollywood Memorial Park to Hollywood Forever to tap into the lucrative tourist trade, then they planted new signs in old lawns—'Garden of Memories,' 'Garden of Moses' (for the Jewish clients), 'Secret

Gardens,' 'The Fairbanks Lawn' (named for its most notable corpse), 'The Garden of Legends'—and installed interactive video screens that offer a banquet of surfing delight. One can search for gravesites or spend time paging through video scrapbooks of any of the deceased with whom you might wish to better your acquaintance. Even the mausoleum and columbarium have splashy new banners featuring 'Architectural Renderings' of the future refurbished sites, complete with smiling, smartly dressed people apparently visiting from the 1960s. They're even looking to add attractions to encourage repeat visitors—like when Disneyland or Magic Mountain adds a new rollercoaster every year—such as showing old films on the side of the mausoleum or seeking to secure the famous remains of dead stars who are either homeless or facing imminent eviction, like Jim Morrison in Paris. They managed to get a hold of Ann Sheridan.

And what a democracy is this twilight land! One can trod upon the earth covering the bodies of immortals of the screen like Jayne Mansfield nestled among the housewives of Burbank, or visit the late and exalted Cecil B. DeMille lying eternally next to two fellows who wish to be known familiarly as 'Phil and Ernie.' There may be Tyrone Power and Frances Drake, but nearby is the fresh grave of someone who hadn't quite reached the age of 25, which was strewn with tributes of flowers, CDs of rap recordings, and even his favourite can of spray paint. And the biggest, most ostentatious grave in the park—the crypt surrounded by its own lake, and girded with ionic columns—is not the grave of movie star at all, but of William A. Clark, railway magnate, tobacco opportunist, and, most notably, the man who bought himself a seat on the state senate. And

now he was lying on his own island as mere show people lingered on the shore.  
Capitalism in action!

I headed on to certainly the most visited site in all of Hollywood Forever, the mausoleum where what is left of Rudolph Valentino is kept. Outside, parked in a low-end Japanese car, was a woman sitting behind the wheel and combing out a wig. This place gets that sort of thing a lot. This is where, yearly, people drive around on Valentino's death-day with mannequins dressed up in black veils planted in the back seats of their convertibles.<sup>46</sup>

I drove to what looked to be an interesting ivy-covered building but instead turned out to be a utility shed for Paramount Studios. I was forced into an abrupt right-hand turn and saw that I was heading for the exit to Gower Street. At the last minute I executed a sharp U-turn and saw, wedged into a corner, separated from the rude turmoil of rush hour traffic by an underwatered hedge and a chain-link fence, a placid little spot boasting not only an eternal flame, but also a bronze plaque commemorating Anne Frank. I parked the car and got out. I then noticed a slab of upright rock, and in front of it a Neolithic bench, likewise carved—crudely—out of rock. Imbedded in the slab was a television screen, open to the elements. It was an intranet of corpses, one of the interactive gravestones that were placed around the park. Most of these were located in logical places, like, say, the intersection of two hallways in the columbarium named 'Abbey of the Psalms,' but I was astonished to find one tucked off into the wilderness of the Anne Frank Nook.

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<sup>46</sup> To uphold the tradition of The Lady In Black, or armies of Ladies In Black, who yearly visit the grave of Valentino.

I sat on the bench and read the instructions ‘TOUCH ANYWHERE TO BEGIN’ and I did as I was bidden. The screen came alive in a flourish of comforting images of soft-focus flowers and watery landscapes, accompanied by swelling violins coming from speakers hidden in the bougainvillea. I saw the instruction, ‘PRESS HERE FOR VOLUME’ and I did, as much as it would go, and nearly succeeded in drowning out the car horns from the traffic jam not ten feet away in the real world.

I was given various options, such as ‘HELP,’ ‘MAP,’ ‘QUIT,’ ‘PAGE UP,’ and soon learned that I could locate anyone buried in Hollywood Forever. I touched the screen and typed in ‘Valentino’ and Rudolph’s face appeared, to a swell of Tango. I hit ‘TRIBUTE’ and there was a montage of film clips and still photos. I hit ‘QUIT.’ I thought I might see who else they had buried here. Seeing shots of famous dead people is commonplace, but on one’s journey paging up to find them one is treated to passing snapshots of unfamous dead people. It was unnerving. As I typed I looked over my shoulder to make sure that no one was watching. A parade of people—all dead now—at home or on vacation flashed by, just ordinary dead people, people who didn’t know me. The shots were candid, not arranged by studio publicity departments, and were emotionally naked and private, the subjects looking at the photographer with an intimacy that wasn’t aimed at strangers. I was, however, stopped by the photo of one man whose hair was done up in a silver-grey Prince Valliant and who was grinning that wide, histrionic grin one usually only sees in drag queens. Attracted by his hair and unable to stop myself, I clicked onto the cropped, thumbnail photo and the frame filled the screen. The photo was taken in the very cemetery where he was buried and featured him mugging in front of

Valentino's mausoleum plaque. The tourist had become the tourist attraction—for eternity.

One afternoon my mother and I stopped by the nursing station to spend the afternoon with Elizabeth the nurse. Whether she actually needed me to do it or she just wanted me out of the room, Elizabeth told me to take a glass of water to Victor who was in a bed next door. I filled a glass and took it to him. He was old, and thin from his wasting illness. I thought of the mummy of Kugaaruk. I ran back out the door still holding the glass of water. Elizabeth rolled her eyes and became sharp in her Teutonic way. She had little tolerance for such lack of backbone.

'Just give it to him!'

'But I can't. He doesn't speak English.'

'Just make za motions! Za motions!' She mimed pouring water down her throat. 'Now go!'

I went back into the room. Victor smiled at me sheepishly. He was as unsure as I was. He had no idea how to deport himself in a white man's hospital. I placed the glass of water in his gnarled hand. He looked at me expectantly. I made the motion of bringing a glass to my lips. He nodded, excited. We had made headway. He drank the water and handed me the glass. I ran out of the room. He died later that day. I had given the shaman his last drink of water. Since then I have often wondered if this had been a good thing or a bad thing, this giving a last glass of water to a shaman. It could go either way.

After Victor died my mother and father made it known that they wanted to officially adopt Isaiah. Something very peculiar and decisive happened within the settlement. With very few words spoken about it there was suddenly a palpable division. For all the openness of our welcome, for all the inclusiveness into the domestic and social life of the settlement—from the soapstone carving lessons to the hunting trips—it became, when we wanted to adopt the shaman's son, very clear that we were outsiders. We were the *kablunak*, the white men, and they were the *Inuit*, the People. They became rigid, their constant smiles disappeared. Isaiah went to live with his extended family and they in turn stopped visiting us. We hadn't meant any harm.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### WINTER WONDERLAND

Summers die quickly in the arctic. The days, in August, shorten rapidly as though scythed, until, by the time you get into October, the sun only came up for an anaemic little arc barely using any sky, before setting, then soon just popping up over the horizon and then right back down again, sunrise and sunset being the same thing, then a mere blush in the east, then darkness.

Things haltingly got back to normal after a few weeks or so, and the settlement began to warm to us again. School started, and in the evenings, instead of running around on the tundra crushing lemmings, Paul and I would climb into bed with my mom, one of us under each arm, and she'd read stories.

We tried very hard with holidays up in the Arctic. We really did. And the Inuit were perfectly game. They wholeheartedly got into the spirit of Halloween. All the children in the settlement managed to scrape together costumes. This was not easy considering that neither the Co-op nor the Hudson's Bay Company had apparel departments. And the frames of reference were somewhat limited. Without television and comic books, where were we to find inspiration? So with no costume supplies, and the imperative to survive dictating that you needed to include a parka in your costume—or die—the only option was that everyone dressed in their parents clothes, going as, well, their parents. By the end of October winter was pretty much locked in. The snow covered everything, and in Yellowknife the ice was thick enough to build a highway on it.

So there we were, bundled up in our parents' parkas, going trick-or-treating around the government houses. I don't know what I expected—there was no candy in Repulse Bay—but I didn't expect fish. That's what we got. Whole frozen fish. And also whole packages of Pilot Biscuits. When we got back to the mission it was well past our bedtime and, well, I didn't care so I just threw my pillowcase in the corner of my bedroom. The next day my dad came in and saw the bag. It was soggy. He peeked in. All the fish had thawed. 'Ooo,' he said, hefting up a massive arctic char in both hands. He skipped into the kitchen with it, laughing.

Christmas in the Arctic certainly provided all the traditional totems of the holiday—snowy landscapes, hymn singing (albeit in Eskimo), decorations—but it was hard to buy into them, even considering our privileged proximity to the North Pole. We had a plastic Christmas tree because you couldn't get real ones on the tundra. Besides, the Eskimos are afraid of trees, not being used to them. We had Christmas cards with snowmen on them, but we never made snowmen. Not in fifty below.

And reindeer, well, we ate reindeer. No magical creatures, these. They were food.

I didn't really learn the true meaning of Christmas until I moved to Los Angeles and saw a parka-clad Santa and his caribou suspended between two coconut palms over the intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards. Now that was magic! That required suspension of disbelief. As did my pilgrimage to the Christmas Spectacular at the tautologically named Universal

World Church, where Miss Velma, Doctor of Botany, standing amid a forest of spinning, gold-flocked fir trees, anointed the faithful with the Oil of Youth given to her by Jesus Christ Himself.

*The world church covers the world* was the inscription on the plinth of a homemade globe that, well, that at least got North America right. The globe dominated the lobby of the white, hangar-like church, on Lake Street, wedged between Koreatown and downtown, and was flanked by two Christmas trees flocked with gold marshmellowing. I stood stunned, but this was just a tease of things to come. I walked through into the church proper.

The pamphlet had said *Miss Velma Invites You To The Magnificent Golden Christmas Spectacular!* which was not an invitation that I dared to refuse. On the front of the pamphlet was a full-length picture of an unsmiling Miss Velma superimposed on a close-up of flowers: platinum white hair cascading to her shoulders and dressed in white robe, looking water-retentive and not a little uncomfortable about it. This was captioned 'Dr. Velma Jagers (Miss Velma)', and under that, *'TRULY, THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A WOMAN LIKE "MISS VELMA".....[sic] PEOPLE TRAVEL FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TO RECEIVE HER MIRACULOUS ANOINTINGS WITH THE OIL OF YOUTH AND TO RECEIVE THE ADMINISTRATIONS OF HER POWERFUL PRAYERS TO SOLVE THEIR EVERY SPIRITUAL, MENTAL, PHYSICAL AND FINANCIAL PROBLEMS [sic]...'*

The church was cavernous, rows of pews leading up to the stage where musicians and singers were beginning to assemble. Gilt stars were taped onto the piano, and lining the central aisle were waist high plaster columns, each supporting an identical angel. Curtains of tinsel hung from the ceiling, and a

forest of gold-flocked Christmas trees crowded the congregation on either side. At the back of the stage, peeking through a pocket of glittering trees and spinning golden stars, was a gigantic American flag made out of spangles.

I sat in one of the pews. More than even the *beautiful and inspiring illustrated message and musical program...* with the *Special Feature: Dr Jagers* [Mr. Velma] *singing 'The Impossible Dream' and poem: 'When God Makes A Man!'* I was anxious for the *Special! Everyone will be anointed with the oil of youth at the Golden Altar of Prayer.* The magic oil of youth? Now there would be some true Christmas magic.

Oh, come all ye faithful, indeed; the congregation was made up of black and white and Hispanic and Korean and gay and straight. The gay ones were the gigglers. Two of them were in fact giggling in the pew front of me. I was in the row with the destitute and homeless. A scrawny woman flopped down next to me with two huge plastic bags. She slipped off her shoes and opened up one of her bags and pulled out a gold-painted parka and put it on. It was her special Miss Velma outfit.

The twenty-four elders—storm troopers with names like Dr. Sergio—patrolled the side aisles with their arms crossed in front of them and looking stern.

The musical director came out to lead the Miss Velma Singers. He was a jowly man with hair that looked like a black-dyed shammy and which gave him a vaguely simian look, like a simian Beatle. He wore a white suit, taut at the midriff, with gold appliquéd swirls on the lapels. The singers all wore matching floor length rayon dresses in a muted rainbow of pastels, each with sequins—some more, some less—glued haphazardly onto the front. Since this was a

Christmas Spectacular—indeed, *The Most Beautiful Christmas Drama ever Presented in California!*—showmanship was paramount. ‘*Lighting One Little Candle*’ featuring Cicely Majeed with the Miss Velma singers and their candles had the singers bring their candles—their candles being plastic flashlights—close to the candle-flashlights of their neighbour, and then, as though it were catching flame, the singer surreptitiously—as surreptitiously as untrained actors can be—reached over and flicked the switch to light the bulb. This being an extravaganza, they also had gold painted sleigh bells to shake during ‘Golden Bells’ (a playful rewriting of much loved classic ‘Silver Bells’ so as to fit into the theme and décor) and for ‘*The Little Drummer Boy*’ featuring Dale Hetler with the Miss Velma Singers with their Drums there were little toy drums.

At several points in the program the musical director—in the middle of a passionate passage on the piano, say—abruptly got up, ecstatic, to histrionically conduct the singers and—miracle of miracles!—the piano solo would continue without so much as pause.

Miss Velma was introduced by, I think, the pouchy Beatle leading the singers, though I couldn’t be sure as sometimes it was difficult to tell where the voices were coming from. ‘The most powerful woman in the world,’ he shouted, ‘the discoverer of Israel—’ *The discoverer of Israel?* Wow, she did look good; perhaps there was something to this Oil of Youth. In any case she looked like a seventy-year-old country and western singer.

The most pressing matter for Miss Velma was detailing how lavish and expensive her Christmas set was. Her archangels, Gabriel and Michael (as she said their names the golden stars—probably 6 feet in diameter—above the statues started to spin and spotlights hit them from the below) ‘weigh one ton

each, and are made from solid birch and imported from the north of Spain.’ Michael even had a ‘flaming’ red neon halo that apparently twirled, Miss Velma promised, except that there wasn’t enough room. She gushed about ‘our tree of life, behind the curtain...solid gold, twenty-four karat... adorned with all twelve manner of fruits’—we weren’t allowed to see the tree, or the twelve manners of fruits, but a friend once sneaked over for a peek and said it looked like Miss Velma and Dr. Jagers were building a space ship out of gold.

She did have a *Christmas* tree of life, however, which we were allowed to see: gold flocked, with gold Christmas balls, and gold lights, in front of three floor to ceiling gold tinted mirrors. ‘Can we get the lights on in the back?’ Miss Velma said into her microphone. The tree began to spin. Her voice became scolding, ‘I said, can we get the lights on in back?’ So far the service seemed less Pentecostal than inventorial.

After another song by the Miss Velma Singers, she went into a rambling sermon with such circumlocutions as ‘it’s time to complete the completion with the holy of holies’ and lots of citing of Revelations and millenniumism.

Miss Velma then went to side of the stage and stared up to the heavens while a pre-recorded history was played over the speakers. Miss Velma was acting, pretending like she was contemplating, solitary, and the voice was the voice-over to her meditation. While it intoned about the lonesome night that Jesus came to see Dr. Jagers in a Los Angeles motel room in 1952, arriving in a bubble, a light came on above an elevated statue of Miss Velma and a smoke machine began to pump smoke out from her feet. No—it was not a statue of Miss Velma at all; it was Jesus Christ, only the long tresses of shoulder length hair had been painted an absence-of-darkness white, and the beard painted over

with flesh-coloured paint, which, although it gave the face a more feminine aspect, also left a rather jagged chin that looked like some rare though chronic skin disease. The voice related how Jesus appeared with a neck wound and that Miss Velma had healed it. His neck? When did he hurt his neck? Then the musical director, or even perhaps it was Dr. Jagers backstage, intoned a litany of paeans to her as Miss Velma fidgeted, rhyming 'lonely' with 'only,' and 'disappoint' with 'anooint.'

And we, too, were going to be anointed—Miss Velma promised—but I couldn't quite make out with what. Miss Velma was, as might be expected, from the South, and she spoke in a soothing yet nonetheless obfuscating drawl. For instance, she pronounced 'I am tired' as 'I am tarred' (which might have not been too far off the mark in a not so different a time and place). I strained to hear: I believe we were about to be anointed with the 'Memory Lamb,' but that didn't make much sense. Then I thought she said 'Mammary Lamp' which made more sense, but sounded slightly inappropriate, considering.

The scrawny woman in the tattered gold-painted parka leaned over and asked if I was planning on getting anointed with the oil of youth. Most assuredly, I informed her. She smiled and said, 'We like to remove over shoes before approaching the golden altar, praise Jesus.' At the risk of losing my favourite running shoes, considering the neighbourhood, I calculated that it was worth it if I was going to have my aging process not only stopped but reversed. Dr. Jagers claimed, testifying as to the miraculous powers of the Oil of Youth, that, 'from the neck down I have the skin of an infant.'

The twenty-four elders swept wordlessly through the room and ushered the rows of worshippers systemically down the central aisle. As we walked

without pause through the rows of identical squat Corinthian columns the plaster angels that they were supporting started to spin. I looked over and saw that the floor in front of the choir and Miss Velma's pulpit was covered in a blanket of artificial fleece snow, here and there dotted with little cartoon lawn animals like bashful rabbits and grinning fawns. As we each in turn approached the Golden Altar an Elder was stationed every three feet, shaking our hand, wishing us the blessings of Christ, but also eyeing us suspiciously, trying to ferret out any lunatics or miscreants. At last I was in front of Miss Velma. Her grey eyes were glazed over and she looked past me, not focussing on anything. She briefly held the front part of my head in both of her hands, and with the inevitability of a conveyor belt I was gone and replaced by another supplicant. I noticed the faint scent of artificial strawberry coming from my hair, like the lubricant that Dr. Ava had dispensed in her seminar. I furtively reached up and touched my head where Miss Velma had. I brought my fingers to my nose. I smelled the distinct under-scent of fish. I believe Jesus' Oil of Youth was cod liver oil with strawberry scented cologne added to it. Cod liver oil is very good for the skin. Perhaps there might be something to this Mammary Lamp business. At least for my forehead. Unfortunately, this was not my last stop of the day, and I would have to go to a job interview smelling like strawberry fish.

I was disappointed that Dr. Jagers (Mr. Velma) didn't sing 'Impossible Dream' as promised, but he showed up at the end, stumbling into the front row—either drunk or just really fragile—from the wings. Miss Velma pointed him out. He struggled to his feet, frowning, and managed a quick wave before he had to use both hands to balance.



Back in our pews, the ceremony over, the emaciated—yet somehow inner-illuminated—lady next to me took off her gold parka and put it back in its plastic bag for another week. She slipped her scuffed and thin-soled shoes back on. She smiled at me. ‘Do you think you might be coming back?’ she asked. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘I certainly think so.’ ‘That’s fine,’ she said and took my hand. ‘Merry Christmas.’

With winter settling in decisively, we were going to be locked in, really, for months, so my mother wanted to be sure she got in a good long walk everyday before the days closed into darkness. One afternoon as she was getting ready to go out a young woman, Isabel, stopped by unexpectedly. My mother took off her coat and offered her a cup of tea and they sat down to talk. Before my mother could even pour the tea Isabel took my mom’s hand in her own and laid it on top of her swollen belly. She looked into my mother’s face and grinned. ‘This is for you,’ she said. She was going to give us her baby. It was alright to adopt an Eskimo child, just not the shaman’s son. We had become part of the extended family of Repulse Bay.

On her walks my mother usually set off behind the mission, heading over the rocky terrain, up to the little lake where we pumped our water, and crossed over behind the airstrip. Thin ice was starting to form on the lake, and looking out across the bay we could see the pack ice moving in. In the mornings, as we ate breakfast, we could see the narwhales lancing up through the thin ice with their tusks to clear openings.

I arrived home after school one day and Elizabeth the nurse was there with my mother who had her arm supported by a pillow in front of her. She had been walking—as usual—past the dogs tethered by chains. One began to growl, which they did, and leapt toward her. She knew they were secured, and that she was far enough away, but when the dog kept running toward her and was not yanked back she realized that in the tangle of chains and moss and muck that it was the wrong chain. She jumped backward, and slipped, and fell into a rocky ditch. The husky was yanked back in time so it couldn't reach her, but, as she tried to break her fall, she had severely jarred her shoulder. Elizabeth was there, but there wasn't anything she could really do. Just rest. There was no reading that night.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### DAYS DRAW IN

We were too young to understand exactly what was happening. Mom was getting thinner and thinner, the bones of her shoulders and hips distinct under her long-john pyjamas. She was in bed pretty much the whole day, immobile, and not able to eat. We had to be quiet now. Dad looked worried, the priests looked worried, and Elizabeth—when she came out of my mother's room closing the door behind her—looked worried. The adults spoke in whispers, and stopped speaking when we came close. My mother had contracted the stomach ailment that had killed Victor, the shaman, as well as developing calcium tendonitis from the fall on the rocks, and that had led to infection. There was nothing, really, in Elizabeth's arsenal to make her better. One day, as she drifted in and out of consciousness, skeletal, the dim orange light coming from the lamp on the table beside her, she woke up to see half a dozen of the settlement women—women she'd taught to make pies—squatting around her bed, chanting. Chanting her into the afterlife. To my knowledge she's only ever used the word 'fuck' once in her life.

I'd sent tapes of 'Birds Die' to numerous festivals and instead of finding the usual large package containing my press materials addressed in my own handwriting in the return envelope I'd been asked to provide, I received a single thin letter from the Brooklyn Film Festival. I'd been accepted. My first film festival.

There were no rooms in New York City for the weekend after Labour Day, except a few errant ones that cost for one night what I paid in a month's rent. Boy, I thought, this Brooklyn Film Festival is a bigger deal than I'd realised. But I then I saw on the news that there was a summit at the United Nations, a collection of world leaders unprecedented in number and respective sizes of their entourages in the history of the world. I felt relief and deflation at the same time; having isolated myself in my Venice apartment for so long I had trouble understanding my place in the world. I called every friend and acquaintance from my graduate days at Columbia. They were now struggling writers, mostly, and already having to sleep with their faces next to the sink.

On a second pleading call to a former classmate from one of my seminars who apparently was nurturing some unspecified grudge the origins of which I was completely unaware—had I been unduly harsh on her inelegant, ill-advised experiments with litotes in some short story?—she reluctantly came up with several possibilities which sounded alarming and could easily have been revenge. The Habitat House? It sounded like a rehab facility. Or a Scandinavian furniture outlet. I called and they had rooms, which alarmed me further. East 57<sup>th</sup> Street and available, with every diplomat in the world descending on the city? People, it seemed, would rather stay in New Jersey than stay at the Habitat House. My aggrieved friend said, haltingly, 'It's...minimalist.' I suppose a window would be considered rococo. I was just worried that something was going to burrow into me while I slept and lay eggs under my skin.

My unease was unmerited, however. The Habitat House was, indeed, 'minimalist,' like one of the better prisons. But it had a tautly made bed and was warm and dry.

On my first morning I had breakfast in the Tramway Diner, right under Simon and Garfunkel's 59<sup>th</sup> Street bridge. I wasn't feeling groovy, however, I was anxious. Emerging from a protracted depression, during which I could only safely keep company with late night talk radio and had grown addicted to 'Love Line,' my social dexterity had atrophied, had seized and hardened and become useless like the arm of a Sadhu ascetic in India which he holds upright until it petrifies. Was I good enough to be there, there at the Brooklyn Film Festival, oddly not even held in Brooklyn? I didn't swagger like the others.

Like the homunculus in front of me in the line to get our welcome packs. Kenny Goldie, with the blinkered confidence of someone who already had a relative in the business, an uncle, probably, who could beat an unemployed sitcom actor into appearing in his nephew's short film, a film financed by parents with narcissistic personality disorders. The entire lobby knew Kenny Goldie's name by the time we'd peeled the backs off of our adhesive name tags. Kenny Goldie was someone I knew well—Los Angeles is thick with Kenny Goldies—the ones who dream not of art, not of an outlet for creative expression, but of four-quadrant openings and 'tween' franchises.

As I headed to the men's room I was stopped by Leda, the manic though low social-functioning despot of the film festival who was prematurely grey and generously built.

'Oh, you're Garth,' she said, 'I'm Leda. Nice to meet you.' She pronounced her name 'LEAD-a' as in 'lead weights' or 'lead poisoning,' not 'LEED-a,' as in 'lead me not into temptation,' or, indeed, like the mythological consort who was compromised by a swan. 'So you got here. And did you bring your film?' She asked it as though she was expecting me to be stupid.

‘Yes. I gave it to the projectionist at the registration desk.’

‘I hope it’s all right,’ she said, expecting it to be faulty.

‘Um,’ I said, still trying to be pleasant, ‘it should be. I screened it before I came.’

‘Where are you staying?’

I briefly—aiming for nonchalance—detailed my struggles to find a hotel room.

‘You could have stayed with me and Mr. Fibbers,’ she said. I hadn’t realised that had been an option.

‘I, uh, how kind, but...’

‘Kenny!’ she yelled, ‘Kenny! Excuse me. Kenny!’ and she ran after Kenny Goldie.

I continued into the men’s room. As I stood at the urinal Kenny Goldie came in. ‘Hey,’ he said to the man standing next to me, ‘come to my film tomorrow.’ He handed the man a postcard for his film, but the man was urinating and indisposed to grab it. Kenny Goldie leaned over him and wedged it between the porcelain and the tile. On his way out he knocked on the stalls and slid postcards under the doors. His film was about a weedy, pushy little man who looked a lot like Kenny who was trying to get a girl and resorted to eating brains to win her over. High concept, they call it.

The next day as I came up the street to the cinema I saw Kenny Goldie again, this time half a block away and leaning over a sprawled wino on the sidewalk. Kenny was attempting to get him to come into the theatre for his film. The wino just whimpered and tried to pull himself behind a garbage can.

The screening was smallish, mainly the filmmakers and their entourages. As the lights began to dim Kenny leapt up. 'Hold the lights! Hold the lights!' he yelled as he dashed up the aisle. He climbed up onto the stage and announced that he wanted everyone to stay so he could have his own Q&A. His was only one of five films in the programme. He was his own Hollywood seminar in sheer indestructible nuggets. He had what it takes to steamroll his way into the industry. I myself, however, have a moral reticence when it comes PR. I sort of crouch down in a corner and look afraid whenever anyone approaches me.

After the screening Leda stopped me at the exit. She said she liked my film, and after the screening she told me to come to the awards ceremony the next night. Hmmm. She never asked me to the parties or anything, just the awards ceremony. Well, I definitely would be there. Perhaps I was up for some honours. Or, perhaps Leda was only looking for a date.

The next night, wearing a previously fashionable suit handed down to me by an ex-lover who had gained weight, I sidled through the lobby of the 59<sup>th</sup> Street theatre and took a seat in the back. Leda walked up onto the stage in a confirmation dress and stood at the podium.

'Before we start with the real awards,' she said, 'I have a few of my own personal awards.' She named two people and asked them to stand up. They did, flushed, excited, exhilarated, award-winners!

Leda continued, 'These two guys show up at my house—at my house!—and then complain how I'm not looking after them when I'm here twelve hours a day in the theatre and I have hay fever and there's no air-conditioning. Sit down!' Shocked, excoriated, they sat down. Next she announced the names of two other filmmakers and told them to stand up. They did, although reluctantly.

They knew they hadn't shown up at her house, and, as far as they knew, were innocent of possible affronts to Leda's idiosyncratic sense of decency. Leda started: 'These guys brought a bunch of hard rock people to the screening, which is great, but then they come to me and complain because they're making too much noise and that I need to do something about it. Their own guests! I never heard of such a thing! I just wanted to get that off my chest. Sid down!'

Apparently Leda had just wanted a date. They gave awards for Best Feature with a Brooklyn theme. Granted, it was the Brooklyn Film Festival, so it should be so and it was just. They gave an award for Best Feature with a New Vision (whatever that means). Best Documentary Short, Comedy. Best Experimental Documentary. Best Italian-American filmmakers. The Coen Brothers Award for Duo Filmmakers, which was given to brothers who directed films, and it was given to two sets (which seemed like all there could have possibly been in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Brooklyn Film Festival). Best Diverse Filmmaker (again, what?): this was also given twice. Best Documentary with a Jewish Theme. Best Narrative with a Jewish Theme. Best Film with an Asian Theme. Best Film with a Nuyorican Theme (how many were there?). Best Film about Filmmaking. Best Short that feels like a Feature, usually not a compliment, and never worth honouring. Best Teen Drama, Best Sibling Drama. Really, there weren't all many films in the festival; it only lasted three days.

Best Film with a Mental Health Theme. Best short Revenge Comedy. Best Scottish Filmmakers. Best Andorran Filmmaker. Before handing out the Best African-American filmmaker Leda said, 'And I understand you guys cause my daughter and me, though mine is grey now, we both had the kinky hair.' There



were seven writing awards, eight cinematography awards. Best Animated Documentary. Best Feature with a Sicilian Theme. Best Docu-Drama (still a genre I contend to be superfluous, if its any good). Mother Africa/Sister Sicily Awards (I draw attention to the use of the plural). The categories were so specific as to render the notion of competition moot.

In fact it was tough not to win an award. There were four pages of them, single-spaced. But I didn't win one. What, they couldn't come up with an award for Gay co-dependent filmmaker making a movie about fictional dead aunts? Best film made by a guy with brown hair who lives in Venice Beach, California who doesn't like mushrooms?

Kenny Goldie won four. He won Best Kick in the Groin. A pleasing thought. He also won Best Sci-Fi Short. Leda, with her usual aversion for boundaries or propriety, said at the podium, 'I hope that category is all right, I couldn't figure out what category to put it in and neither could Kenny.' Oh? They discussed what award to create so his film could win? Perhaps I should have partaken of the wine and the cheese; perhaps I should have compromised my integrity, tempered my quease, and succumbed to Leda's hunnish advances.

I skipped the Awards Night after-party—a victorious Kenny Goldie was beyond my endurance—and caught my plane back to Los Angeles. Driving my 1989 Tercel (in need of body work and new exhaust) I had just gotten onto the 101 when my car sputtered and slowed to halt. Out of gas. Out of gas on the Hollywood Freeway. With the metaphors in my life, who needs Country and Western music?

Mom was not getting any better. Although Elizabeth the Nurse used every pill in her cabinet, and injected her with every serum she had on hand, mom continued to waste away. Because of the weather no planes were coming. Finally, out of desperation, my dad and the priests contacted the Bishop of the Northwest Territories—Bishop Robideux—who personally arranged for a plane to come and pick us up.

Paul and I were told that we were moving back south so that mom could go to the hospital. Dad told us that the plane they were sending was only going to be a small one so we could only bring essentials. We'd already reduced everything to essentials when we'd moved up there. We had to leave everything, basically, behind; one small bag between the two of us. Our stuff, what stuff we had, would be sent later. Maybe. Amai. Considering that most of our stuff hadn't even made it up to us to begin with, and the fact that we never knew when a plane was coming, if it was coming, and what had managed to be squeezed onto it depending on fate or luck, we pretty much knew that this was going to be it.

In the morning we'd get dressed and sit in the kitchen with dad and the priests having breakfast. Outside it was dark, the endless winter night, the wind constant. We waited until the radio crackled. No plane was coming that day, so, sighing, we put on our caribou skin parkas and sealskin kamiks and headed to the schoolhouse. We did this for a week before one morning the call came in that a plane was coming in.

We heard the buzzing overhead and soon saw the lights in the dark sky. The plane was an Aztec, tiny, and far less comfortable than most cars on the San Diego Freeway.

We scrambled up the icy rocks carrying our small bags, the wind sending needles of snow into our faces. We walked up past the whirring blades of the propellers. The engine had not been shut off because, in the extreme cold, it wouldn't have started up again.

Paul and I were wedged into the back seat with my dad. My mom was put into the front seat, next to the pilot. Once inside and strapped in, we briefly taxied along the bumpy ice and then shot straight up, pitching to get level. It was loud, with the propellers right next to us. Up front my mother stared at the control panel. She was intent. She was staring at the gas gauge. It read 'E'. 'Excuse me,' she said to the pilot, making evidently transparent conversation, 'what's that little "E" stand for?'

The pilot looked over. He reached down and flipped a switch. The needle bobbed up off of 'E' to the halfway point. 'We're running on the auxiliary tank,' he said.

We flew low and straight for Coral Harbour, where a plane was being held, waiting for us, a hulking, massive Hercules, grey, cavernous, full of a cargo of polar bear skins, and burning thousands of dollars worth of fuel every minute it waited. They couldn't wait much longer. Our pilot, as we neared Southampton Island, didn't have time to circle, to descend with any degree of finesse. The sharp change in pressure stabbed our eardrums and Paul and I screamed in pain as we plummeted out of the dark, freezing, Arctic sky.

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