

# *Like A Virgin*

**Place:** “Inspiration Point”—a hillside in West Vancouver

**Time:** Present; about 10 p.m. on a mid-October Friday night

**Characters:** Lenny, 24; Roxanne, 25

**LENNY** is a very good-looking but reserved heterosexual male, who is also a virgin. A half-dozen of his female university classmates—attracted to Lenny, however weary they are of his apparent disinterest in them all—had taken the initiative in asking him for a date. After politely turning down the fifth young woman within a three-day period, Lenny finally gave in to the pressure (and his sudden attraction) and accepted the sixth woman’s request for an evening out. He had first talked to the woman, Roxanne—a provocative, attractive dirty-blonde in his Chemistry class—four weeks earlier on the second day of the semester, when she tried to start a conversation with him after class. Later, at the end of their date, Roxanne insisted that she and Lenny drive to Inspiration Point, “just to go look at the beautiful lights in Vancouver”.

**ROXANNE**, aside from her good looks, is the antithesis of Lenny. She is very out-going, fully understands and accepts her intense sexuality, and is, to say the least, not a virgin. The moment she saw Lenny on the first day of Chemistry 100, she was attracted to him and wanted to get to know him much better. She can easily tell that Lenny is reserved and finds him all the more alluring because of that trait. She, however, is convinced that once (not *if*) she decides to make a pass at him, Lenny will love it, just as did all of her other dates.

**Scene:** Lenny and Roxanne walk onto the stage, the latter carrying a wool blanket and the former holding a six-pack of canned beer. They settle amongst some opaque, seven-foot-tall bushes, which leave them surrounded, except for the audience’s view of the couple. Roxanne spreads out the blanket (approximately 10-by-10 feet) onto the ground and sits down close to the blanket’s centre; Lenny remains standing while looking at the surrounding bushes, appearing uneasy. He peers around the bush and off to the side of the stage.

**LENNY:** There’s a better spot over there (*With a nod of his head towards the spot he’s indicating, then looks at ROXANNE*).

**ROXANNE:** (*Looks at LENNY*) Why? What’s wrong with this spot? (*Takes a can of beer and opens it. Having been shaken from before, beer springs from the can and onto her blouse*) Oh, shit! I knew I shoun’t’ve thrown them into the back seat (*Carelessly wipes the beer off with her hand, then takes a sip of beer*).

**LENNY:** (*Sits down on the edge of the blanket, leans back onto his hands, stares straight forward into the audience and tries to appear confident*) Yeah, it’s good enough.

**ROXANNE:** (*Takes another swill of beer, then looks at LENNY*) Aren’t you going to have one? (*Begins twisting a can from the plastic grip rings*).

**LENNY:** (*Looks somewhat puzzled at ROXANNE*) No, I don’t drink. Remember?

**ROXANNE:** Oh, I thought you meant hard stuff, like whiskey, rum ...

**LENNY:** No; all alcohol. (*Looks straight ahead, then nervously jokes*) I'm so clean of alcohol, I'd probably get drunk just from sniffing your empty can.

**ROXANNE:** (*Giggles. Looks straight ahead into the audience. Pause. Looks aside to LENNY*) Haven't you ever gotten drunk, or even just buzzed?

**LENNY:** (*Does not return her look*) Once; and that was it. The first day of final exams in eighth grade. Me and a friend were mixing different kinds of liquor from his dad's mini bar at his place. It tasted horrendous. Nick was drinking faster than me and was already drunk by the time mine hit me. It was like, I'm totally sober, then all of a sudden—*boom!*—it hit me like a rock. We had great fun for about twenty minutes before I passed out. When I came to, Nick was forcing black coffee down my throat. He wanted me sober by the time his dad came home from work. "My dad'll thrash me if he catches you here—drunk or not!" He would've, too. (*In an incredulous tone of voice*) And he's a social worker—can you believe it?! (*Pause; he then dares to look aside back at her*) Do you drink much?

**ROXANNE:** (*Caught staring, and rather absent-minded*) Hmm? What?

**LENNY:** Do you drink much?

**ROXANNE:** (*Briefly looks away, then back at him*) Not really. Mostly on dates; mostly beer (*Looks straight ahead and takes a couple gulps of beer before looking back at LENNY*) Have you gone out with any of the other girls in the class?

**LENNY:** (*Looks straight ahead; appearing and sounding rather nervous*) No.

**ROXANNE:** (*Brushing her shoulder-length hair back with her hand*) I see them flirting with you, but you don't seem interested (*Looks straight ahead and takes another couple mouthfuls of beer*).

**LENNY:** (*Does not respond. Pause. He looks at ROXANNE*) You sure handle that beer like a pro (*Pause. ROXANNE looks at him; he looks away and begins scanning the audience*) Man, those lights must suck-up a lot o' power (*Pause*) Don't you think?

**ROXANNE:** (*Looks into the audience*) Yeah ... (*Takes a couple mouthfuls of beer*) ... A lot of power (*Finishes her can of beer with a final gulp, crunches the can in her hand and throws it onto the stage in front of her. Looks at LENNY, who continues scanning the audience*).

**LENNY:** (*Uncomfortable with ROXANNE's staring at him, but tries to conceal it*) They're something (*Forces himself to look at her*) The lights?

**ROXANNE:** Yeah, they are (*Scans the audience, then looks down at the section of blanket on front of her; she then looks down at her blouse as she starts unbuttoning it*). I'd better get this beer out before it stains.

**LENNY:** (*Somewhat alarmed, he looks at ROXANNE's blouse as she opens it. He then looks straight ahead and tries to appear calm*) Maybe ... (*Looks at her, then nods his head towards her side of the stage*) ... Maybe I should go over there while you ...

**ROXANNE:** (*Looks at him; then looks down and undoes her blouse's bottom and last button. Takes off blouse, and puts it on her lap*) Don't worry about it, I'm wearing a bra. It'll only take a second to wipe it off (*Pulls a handkerchief from her purse, dabs it on her tongue and wipes the beer spot for about ten seconds*). Good enough for now (*Stuffs the blouse, along with the handkerchief, into her purse*).

**LENNY:** (*Becoming visibly uncomfortable. Looks at her*) Maybe we should get going. I had a hard time concentrating in class today because I got to sleep late ... (*Pushes himself forward as if to get up*).

**ROXANNE:** *(Looks at LENNY with a slight smile)* What for? It's Friday—remember?—you can sleep-in tomorrow *(Takes another beer, opens it and takes a swill. Looks into the audience)* Plus we just got here.

**LENNY:** *(Looks straight ahead, and settles back down onto the blanket. Pause. Looks at ROXANNE, then down at her chest, then back up at her, as she takes another swill of beer)* Aren't you cold? *(Looks ahead. Quietly, takes a slow deep breath and lets it out; he looks aside back at ROXANNE. Talking quietly)* Could you ...?

*(Roxanne puts her beer down, places her hand on LENNY's leg and kisses him on the neck, cheek, then on his mouth. Her kiss turns into necking as she attempts to pull off his shirt over his head. He forces himself from her).*

**LENNY:** What're you doing! *(Gets up abruptly, resulting in her grip on his shirt slipping, her long finger nails accidentally scratching his bare abdomen, leaving noticeable red marks. He pulls his shirt back down).*

**ROXANNE:** *(Stunned; looks up at LENNY)* What's the matter?

**LENNY:** I barely know you, for Chris' sake!

**ROXANNE:** *(Pulls her shirt out from her purse, puts it on as she gets up and quickly begins fastening the buttons; neither she nor he notice that an opened can of beer accidentally toppled over. She says quietly, almost as if to herself, in regards to his offence by her sexual advance)* Sorry.

*(LENNY squats and grips onto his blanket to take and notices ROXANNE is still standing on it, still somewhat stunned. He gives her a "do-you-mind?" expression; she, having just fastened the top and last button, promptly steps off the blanket.)*

**LENNY:** Thank you.

**ROXANNE:** *(Bends down to retrieve her remaining four unopened cans of beer and notices the spilt beer)* Ah, damn it! *(Wipes beer off the blanket).*

**LENNY:** *(Much more calm)* Forget about it.

**ROXANNE:** *(Looking at LENNY as he gets up and quickly folds the blanket. Says quite sincerely)* I really am sorry, Lenny. If I'd known you'd feel this strongly 'bout it, I'd ... *(Pause)* Oh, no.

**LENNY:** *(Finishing folding the blanket; he's interested in ROXANNE's sudden alarm)* What?

**ROXANNE:** *(With a rather worried expression)* Are you gay? 'Cause if you are, I really didn't ...

**LENNY:** *(Looks at her with a disenchanted expression, while holding the folded blanket in his hands. Sarcastically)* No, I'm not gay *(Pause)* Just because I'm not into making out with you on a first date doesn't mean I'm gay *(Brief pause)* Man, who do you think you are?!

**ROXANNE:** *(Shrugs her arms and shoulders. Asks sincerely)* Then what's the matter? *(LENNY shakes his head, turns and walks around the blueberry bush and off the stage; ROXANNE follows him. Lights dim and curtain closes).*

## SCENE 2

**Place:** an apartment suite in West Vancouver

**Time:** the present, at about 11 p.m. on a Friday

**Characters:** Lenny, 24; Dick, 25

**LENNY** is a very good-looking but reserved heterosexual male, who is also a virgin. A half-dozen of his female university classmates—attracted to Lenny, however weary they are of his apparent disinterest in them all—had taken the initiative in asking him for a date. After politely turning down the fifth young woman within a three-day period, Lenny finally gave in to the pressure (and his sudden attraction) and accepted the sixth woman’s request for an evening out. He had first talked to the woman, Roxanne—a provocative, attractive dirty-blonde in his Chemistry class—four weeks earlier on the second day of the semester, when she tried to start a conversation with him after class. Later, after dining (and towards the end of their date), Roxanne insisted that she and Lenny drive to Inspiration Point, “just to go look at the beautiful lights in Vancouver”. However, once there, she initiated oral sex with him (to become intercourse, in Lenny’s mind). Lenny, feeling used and humiliated, immediately took a 30-minute shower upon his arrival back at his apartment.

**DICK** is Lenny’s overweight and sex-craved (also heterosexual) roommate, who has worn the same L.A. Dodgers baseball cap since he turned sixteen. Although not a virgin, Dick, who barely earned a Grade 12 equivalency certificate a few years prior, has had virtually no sexual relations in his lifetime, and he resents that fact. Indeed, Dick would have sex with almost any woman that was willing to engage in such with him, though none have been so for the last five years. Dick and Lenny have known each other since they were in Grade 1 and are good friends; however, Dick cannot help but feel fairly cynical about the fact that women are attracted to Lenny while quite-seemingly repulsed by Dick—all the while Lenny turns the women away. (“I guess the irony is lost on you, eh, Len,” Dick would frequently say to his pal).

**Scene:** Lenny walks onto the scene: A living room, in which Dick is sitting on a ragged, orange couch, watching *Love Connections* on TV. Except for a lit, six-foot-tall, standing-lamp behind one end of the couch, the room is darkened by the nighttime. Lenny sits down at the opposite end of the couch from Dick and stares at the TV-set screen.

**DICK:** *(Without looking at LENNY)* How’d it go?

**LENNY:** *(Without looking back)* Oh ... okay, I guess.

**DICK:** *(Glances at LENNY, then looks back at the TV screen; a disenchanted facial expression)* Did ya finally get some? *(A brief pause)* Ya did, didn’t ya. You’re a pig; ya know that?

**LENNY:** *(Looks at DICK, with irritation)* No, Dicky, I didn’t “get some”. And you’re the pig. All you want is sex. *(Looks back at the screen, slowly shaking his head; he calms down somewhat)* You’ve no idea what it’s like for me, do you?

**DICK:** No idea *what's* like?

**LENNY:** No idea how I feel about women and sex.

**DICK:** *(With cynicism in his voice, he looks at LENNY)* I know that you could have all the women and sex in one day as I could in a plethora of lifetimes! What else do I need to know?! *(DICK looks back at the TV-set screen).*

**LENNY:** *(Pointing to the screen, and showing frustration)* No wonder you watch this crap—you're obsessed with "Sex Connections"! *(DICK quickly changes the channel with the remote control. There's a 10-second silence as they both continue staring at the TV screen, not really aware of what they're watching)* My date really hit on me tonight. I can't believe it!

**DICK:** *(Gives LENNY a strange look)* Well of course she hit on you—she was your date, wasn't she? What; isn't she good-looking enough for ya?

**LENNY:** *(Slightly irritated, but continues to stare at the TV screen)* Yeah, I do find her physically attractive. But she wanted to ... you know ... *do it*. I told her I wasn't into it so soon. You know, in essence, it was a sexual assault. I can't believe it.

**DICK:** *(Looking both stunned and disillusioned at LENNY)* What'ya mean, "sexually assaulted"?! How can you be raped by a girl?!

**LENNY:** *(Quite irritated; finally looks at DICK)* I didn't say "rape"! *(Looks back at the TV screen, then calms down a little after a brief silence)* I pushed her off me, and then I drove her back to her place. *(Slowly shaking his head)* She asked me if I was gay. When I said, No, she was left totally bewildered *(Lifts up his T-shirt to expose the scratch on his abdomen)* Look what she did! I don't believe it!

**DICK:** *(Looks back at the TV screen)* I'm surprised ya didn't call the cops, ya sissy. Maybe you *are* gay? "Was Roxanne too much woman for ya?" they'd ask. *(He laughs somewhat nervously)* "Or was she just not gentle enough?"

**LENNY:** *(Says matter-of-factly)* She wasn't too much woman for me; I just wasn't interested—that's all.

**DICK:** *(Unconvinced, looks at LENNY)* I think ya just wanna stay a virgin, forever. *(Begins singing)* Like a vir-gin—ooooh!—touched for the very first time / Like a vir-ir-ir-ir-gin, when your heart beats ... next to mine ...

**LENNY:** *(Quite annoyed, looks at DICK and interrupts him)* Man, you're an idiot, Dick! I'm not a virgin—I've been telling you that for the last decade!

**DICK:** *(Lets out an abrupt and somewhat-nervous laugh)* Yeah, right! I'll give ya ten grand for every woman you've boinked! Hell, I'll give you a grand for every woman you've kissed!

**LENNY:** *(Snarls)* Hey, fat boy, when I'm ready to boink, I'll boink—you got that straight?! You're just jealous you don't get any! *(Somewhat-nervous laughter)* If you didn't get Becky drunk on your 20th birthday, you'd be a virgin, too. *(Singing)* Touched for the very first-and-last time / Like a ...

**DICK:** *(Interrupts LENNY, angrily)* Shut the hell up, ya goof!!

**LENNY:** You shut the hell up, goof!! *(They both look back at the TV screen. Fifteen seconds go by as their emotions settle down).*

**DICK:** *(Takes a deep breath, then lets it out)* Look. I like women, and I like sex; but neither seem to like me. And it rips me apart at the seams to see you reject all of these gorgeous women. You've no idea what it's like *for me*.

**LENNY:** *(Says calmly, looking at DICK)* There's nothing *I can* do about the way women perceive you. And, unlike you, I don't particularly enjoy having someone force herself on me. *(Looks back at the TV screen)* So, if you don't mind, let's forget the whole thing,

okay?

*(Both are silent for about 30 seconds, while the introduction song to The Facts of Life plays on the TV set).*

**LENNY:** *(Takes a deep breath, puffs-up his cheeks with air, then lets it all out in a burst)*  
Ah, the hell with it!

**DICK:** *(Looking at LENNY)* What?

**LENNY:** *(Nodding his head)* I'm going over to Roxanne's, and if she's still into it, I'm going to do it with her *(Gets up and marches off the scene. After watching him leave, DICK looks back at the TV screen, aims the remote control at the set and turns up the volume. He pulls his legs up, curls up into the corner of the couch and watches The Facts of Life with interest).* ■

*Simpsonic / Simpsonian* adj. *The ridiculously or bizarrely entertaining, humorous or hilarious.*

## ***THE SIMPSONS: Morality from the 'Immoral' & Truth from the 'Absurd'***

Contrary to the perceptions of many television viewers, Matt Groening's *The Simpsons*—a PG/14+/PGv/TVG/TVPGD rated (depending on the episode content and national origin of transmission) animation about a hilariously idiotic father (Homer Simpson), a ridiculously big-blue-haired mother (Marge), a contemptuous and very mischievous son (Bart), a very intelligent and humanitarian daughter (Lisa), and a soother-addicted infant girl (Maggie)—is one of the most moral and enlightening animated programs on modern TV, especially when considering the typically-socially-liberal audience for whom the show is generally produced.

In this satirical cartoon, intended for consumers with an adequately-mature mind (which admittedly can be subjective terminology and point-of-reference), *The Simpsons* mocks the imbecilic, hypocritical, callous and even mean-spirited attitudes of much of American society, including those of elements within entrenched, established religions and public institutions (e.g. political office and the justice system).

Yes, without doubt, the show can get overly bizarre and/or quite crude in its humour: A very-good example is the episode in which the Simpson family (who reside in Springfield, Kentucky, U.S.A.) go to Japan, and Homer relieves his bowels into a hotel-washroom toilet bowl with a built-in camera at the very bottom; and meanwhile, his family incidentally (though very briefly) catch the grotesque action on a video screen in another room. Another worthy example is the annual *Simpsons* Halloween Specials, in which the viewer can see, among many other things, the attack of a mysterious gas that turns people inside out, with the odd globs of blood splattering, for effect.

Nevertheless, it can justifiably be said that such a sacrifice—i.e. having to watch a very-few potentially crude and somewhat disturbing *Simpsons* scenes—is worth it, since the show in return mostly procures heart-lightening laughter.

While “truth” is typically universally defined, “morality” can easily be more complicated, especially with the prevalence of moral relativism in contemporary society. Nonetheless, *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) defines “morality” as, “[the] principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour ...” Adding to the above, to utilize my own point of reference for this essay's thesis statement, let the definition of “morality” also include: ‘To not practice greed, selfishness or the exploitation of others; to hold respect for all life and the planet on which that life exists; to feel and show consideration and compassion toward all life; to do one's very best to not feel ill will nor practice ill deeds toward others; to practice what's obviously in all children's best interests; to treat all beings equally and fairly, and—most importantly—to avoid (to the very best of one's ability) causing pointless, gratuitous suffering.’

Those who consume *The Simpsons* episodes as frequently and enthusiastically as I, will likely, if they are objectively truthful, attest to the fact that the show parodies

virtually all aspects of society. For the very most part, the show does not shield any proverbial sacred cow; rather, it exposes, ridicules and publicly re-examines basically all aspects, good and bad, of society.

Of course, the acts of societal idiocies and hypocrisies which *The Simpsons* mocks are too plentiful to include in this essay in their entirety; and the ones that will be included in this essay will be categorized:

### **HOMOSEXUALITY**

Although *The Simpsons* does not promote the homosexual lifestyle, it nonetheless has a favourably tolerant attitude towards homosexual persons and their lifestyle; it also humourously mocks the unjustified homophobia displayed by some of the heterosexual characters.

Also, *Simpsons* consumers should note the homosexual character, Waylon Smithers, a rather noble man who devoutly admires his boss, multi-billionaire nuclear-power-plant owner Montgomery Burns, almost to the point of worship; indeed, Smithers is quite faithful to his boss, for whom he both lusts and holds love. Sure, Smithers can occasionally be a malicious character, but is so basically only when his relationship with Burns, in some manner or another, is being threatened.

A *Simpsons* viewer might recall the episode in which Smithers is portrayed as one with a tortured conscience when his boss orders him to have employee Homer Simpson severely beaten by hired goons (a consequence of a nasty letter to Burns by Homer); and even with Smithers' intense devotion to Burns and his wishes, Smithers is nonetheless compelled to do the moral/humane thing by not having Burns' order carried out. (Albeit, Smithers also had in mind the fact that Homer's son, Bart, donated life-saving blood to Burns.)

Smithers also (reluctantly and gently) rebukes Burns in another episode in which Burns, going mad and absolutely corrupt with absolute power, steals an oil well that was supposed to have greatly benefited the Springfield school, under which the oil pocket was situated. And Smithers challenges the (im)morality of Burns' deeds when the latter plots, through the use of a giant shield, to literally block out the sunlight from the dwellers of Springfield, so that the residents would be forced to purchase and consume even more of his power-plant electricity to light-up the darkened town. (Also in that episode, Smithers sadly reveals the fact that Burns "is the closest thing I've ever had to a friend".)

Admittedly, however, the show does simultaneously make Smithers' subtly-expressed homosexuality humourous to the average heterosexual viewer through Smithers' unorthodox focus of his adoration and lust: an evil, very ugly (physically and non-physically), withered, cruel, very rich yet very miserly, liver-spotted and scrawny 104-year-old man.

But on the other hand, in another episode, though allowing stereotypically-gay characters—i.e., blatantly flamboyant and feminine—to be the butt of the show's humour, *The Simpsons* mostly mocks the hilariously (albeit insensitively) homophobic attitudes of Homer ("Bart's going to grow up straight, for once!" in reference to Homer taking his son Bart on a deer-hunting trip) and his closest pals, Barney Gumble (the town drunk) and Moe Szyslak (the bar-owner and -tender). Furthermore, that episode's main guest and openly-gay character is portrayed as a very fun, intelligent, tolerant and quite-forgiving man, who also eventually becomes the hero by saving the three homophobic

men and Bart from a small herd of violent reindeer.

And at least as favourable to the “homosexual person” was the episode in which Homer, through the use of a new-breakthrough product on the market, grows a full head of hair, literally overnight. Thus, when Homer gets noticed and promoted by Burns (because of his new hair, of course), Homer must hire an assistant, Karl; and Karl turns out to be an absolutely great human being, who also is obviously (at least to me) a gay man. Indeed, the actor who does Karl’s extremely hoarse voice is an openly gay man).

### **FIREARM-OWNERS RIGHTS MENTALITY IN AMERICA**

Not surprisingly, *The Simpsons* also mocks Americans’ rampant gun-ownership mentality and its obvious resulting dangers.

One noteworthy episode had Homer almost-effortlessly acquire a handgun to “defend my family” and championing completely unhindered gun-ownership rights; and being the utter fool that he is, Homer very-dangerously handles his firearm to the point of absurdity (e.g. opening his can of beer with his handgun). And while staunchly supporting unconditional gun ownership supposedly to defend national sovereignty, Homer asks his daughter Lisa, “How would you like it if the King of England came over and started pushing you around?” Also, when Bart asks him if the former can hold the handgun, Homer tells him, “Only if you clean your room”.

### **IMMIGRATION & FOREIGNERS**

Judging from the show’s parodies on this issue, the story/script writers of *The Simpsons* likely sympathize with the plight of immigrants at the hands of intolerant, bigoted and often-ignorant American-born citizens. (Bart proves that he’s of the latter with his ironically-ignorant reaction to sister Lisa’s rational assertion that one should not judge another nation especially when one has not even been to that nation: “Yeah, they do that [prejudge] in Russia,” he says, oblivious the fact that he’s never been to anywhere near Russia.)

One episode on this issue began with the Springfield community demanding basically unlimited protection from stray bears—including a stealth bomber as a part of the new “Bear Patrol”—but end up focusing their outrage over a small tax increase because of the expensive “Bear Patrol” at the mayor, Diamond Joe Quimby. (Homer idiotically calls the tax “the biggest tax increase in [U.S.] history”; however, Lisa immediately rebuts him: “actually, Dad, it’s the *smallest* tax increase in [U.S.] history”. Regardless, Homer rebuts his daughter with his irate, brainless suggestion: “Let the bears pay the Bear Patrol tax; I pay the Homer Tax”; and Lisa again corrects her foolish father: “You mean the Homeowners’ Tax”.)

At another point in the episode, Homer says to Lisa, “There’s not a single bear in sight—the ‘Bear Patrol’ is working like a charm”.

“That’s specious reasoning,” Lisa retorts.

“Thanks, honey,” Homer says to her, adoringly.

“According to your logic,” she says, picking up a stone from their lawn, “this rock keeps tigers away”.

“Hmmm. How does it work?”

“It doesn’t.”

“How so?” Homer asks further.

“It’s just a rock,” she says. “But I don’t see a tiger, anywhere.”

“Lisa,” concludes Homer, while pulling out his wallet, “I want to buy your rock.”

As for the town’s mayor, he soon, in a cowardly and typically-political fashion, blames “illegal immigrants” for the miniscule \$5 “Bear Patrol tax”. “Tackling this issue calls for real leadership,” Quimby boasts to his assistant, just before the scene changes to one in which the mayor is making an announcement to the townspeople: “Your taxes are high because of illegal immigrants,” he erroneously accuses, to the agreeing grumble of the gathered mob. “That’s right—illegal immigrants.” He goes on to say that the town needs to get rid of them through Proposition 24 (which eventually passes with ninety-five percent of the popular vote). Of course, the town gets all riled up—with the obvious exception of the foreigners, the much-more-enlightened Lisa and her compassionate mother, Marge. One town bully child, Nelson Muntz, tells a foreign exchange student, “Hey, German boy; go back to Germania”. The episode is, rightly so, rife with ironic examples of blatant hypocrisy, such as that by Moe; although he’s one of the most vocal supporters of Proposition 24, he, while donning a fake moustache, ends up being one of those taking the last-minute citizenship test. Also, in one scene, while charging that the illegal immigrants should at least learn proper English if they wish to stay in the U.S., Moe is shown painting onto a large wooden sign the revealing proclamation, “United States for United Statesians”. But after Homer sees the proverbial (humane) light, he makes a hilarious attempt at some last-minute coaching of illegal-immigrant and convenience-store clerk Apu Nahasapeemapetilon in anticipation of the latter’s taking of the U.S. citizenship test. Ironically, though, it turns out that Apu knows far more about the U.S. and its history than do the American-born Homer and other proud, born-in-the-U.S., anti-immigration thinkers. Homer, while trying to teach Apu about the U.S. presidential election system, ignorantly and foolishly makes a reference to the American “electrical college”.

### **TREATMENT OF ANIMALS**

I, a meat eater, found that the only issue on which *The Simpsons* apparently takes an ideologically partisan, albeit also informative, position is that of meat-consuming society, even at the risk of offending/losing a large portion of the show’s meat-eating fans.

In that most profound episode on this very worthy issue, he parodies (i.e. mocks and intellectually exposes) the barbarity of the inhumane, claustrophobia-inducing, production-line conditions that carnivorous society utilizes for producing the meat we so crave.

In one scene, Lisa Simpson, who is just acquiring a vegetarian philosophy and has expressed her moral concerns to her school’s principal, Seymour Skinner. In turn, he decides (for the sake of having “open dialogue”, he claims) to have Lisa and her class watch a pro-meat-consumption, meat-industry propaganda film titled *Meat and You: Partners In Freedom*. In that film, the contents of which are wallowed-up by Lisa’s classmates in conformity to the meat industry, “actor Troy McClure” tells “Jimmy”, a coached little boy, how important and not immoral meat-eating and the meat industry are. Jimmy—who tries to regain his composure following his quick tour through a slaughterhouse, in which he witnesses the assembly-line slaughter of cattle—asks/tells McClure, “I have a crazy friend who says it’s wrong to eat meat. Is he crazy?”; to this,

McClure matter-of-factly replies in his typically-buoyant voice, “No, just ignorant!”

Later on in the episode, when Homer throws an everybody’s-invited all-meat-barbeque, Lisa gets mocked by all of the guests when she offers them a large bowl of iced tomato soup and tells them that thus nobody there needs to eat the meat. “Go back to Russia!” is Barney Gumble’s opinion of Lisa’s vegetarian suggestion.

Not surprisingly, towards the episode’s conclusion, Lisa, observing the plethora of pro-meat-eating advertisements all around her and ready to give in (though she doesn’t), frustratingly exclaims, “Uuuugh! The whole world wants me to eat meat! I can’t fight it anymore!” She goes into the Kwik-E-Mart, purchases what she believes to be a regular hot dog and bites into it: “There! Is everyone happy?!” Then, Kwik-E-Mart clerk Apu (a vegetarian Hindu), having asked her what she thinks of the new Veggie Dog prepared-products, takes her upstairs onto the store’s roof, where he keeps a garden along with *Simpsons* guest-stars Paul and Linda McCartney (known vegetarians and animal-rights activists). Lisa rhetorically asks them, “When will all those fools learn that [meat-eating is not necessary]?”

In another episode about a travelling carnival and two of its employees, Homer and Bart were at the last second spared from having to bite off the heads of live chickens to practice for the carnival’s freak show. Homer stuffs the two chickens back into a small cage already inhumanely packed full with other chickens; as he does so, he quite-ironically reassures the two chickens how fortunate they are to still have their heads attached: “You must be the luckiest chickens in the whole world!”

*The Simpsons* again brilliantly exposes meat-eating society’s hypocrisy in one particularly hilarious episode in which Homer acquires a love and adoration for a lobster he bought in its infancy to raise/grow for the sole purpose of eventually harvesting for his consumption. However, Homer unexpectedly becomes quite attached to the baby-eyed lobster and instead decides to keep it as a family pet; though he later accidentally cooks his good crustacean friend when he attempts to pleasure his pet by treating it to a nice, relaxing hot bath. Homer, while in bitter mourning, nonetheless eats the meat from his beloved pet; in fact, as he weeps, Homer simultaneously savours eating the delicious lobster meat, in between mournful sobs, with every mouthful of his cherished pet. Homer’s ludicrous behaviour is indicative of society’s (general) claim to love some animals while allowing other animals to suffer so we can enjoy eating a delicious slab of meat for but gratuitous purposes.

In another episode, the Simpsons go to a new restaurant at which one can choose a live cow to have slaughtered right before you. In response to Lisa’s revulsion at the very thought of such, her mother says to her: “Maybe the animal likes to be the center of attention”.

### **THE JUSTICE SYSTEM & ITS CORRUPTION**

According to *The Simpsons*’ parodies, the justice system (at least in the U.S.) is, at best, incompetent and sometimes even corrupt.

In one episode, multi-billionaire Burns gets caught and arrested, tried for and convicted of repeatedly depositing barrels of his power plant’s toxic waste in city-park tree trunks. Having been ordered by the judge to pay a large fine to the town as punishment, Burns, who’s bodily restrained, tells Smithers to reach into the former’s pocket to give the judge the fine money, while adding, “Oh, and I’ll take that statue of

Justice, too”. The judge, in return, slams his gavel down hard and exclaims, “*Sold!*”

When Burns, in another episode, romantically pursues Marge but then fires her when she refuses his advances, she hires the inept (and thus quite cheap to hire) lawyer Lionel Hutz. Marge, Hutz and Homer meet with Burns and his plethora of high-priced lawyers, and at the sight of Burns’ expensive, multitudinous Dream-Team, Hutz runs off screaming in panic. A downcast Marge then suggests that the two of them go home— “Well, I guess that’s it; people like us can’t afford justice ... We might as well go home”.

### **CULTURE OF VIOLENCE**

Apparently, the biggest jab that *The Simpsons* takes at contemporary society is directed at the infestation of violence in American (and Canadian) entertainment.

The most prominent indicator of violence in *The Simpsons* is when Homer, furious at Bart, throttles the boy’s neck, basically for some mischievous act on the boy’s part. Although this behaviour on Homer’s part is not tolerated in our society, it’s still paraded as humor within the show. However, though not explicit, Homer’s violent behavior is designed to act as a negative characteristic on his part, mostly by the hysterically-emotional expression on his face as he assaults the boy.

Having pointed the above-mentioned out, in one quite-memorable episode, Marge takes up the cause of eliminating—or at least reducing—gratuitous cartoon violence after her infant Maggie hits Homer on his head with a hammer, after having just watched a typically-violent scene from the show’s children’s cartoon, *Itchy & Scratchy*; one of the cartoon’s two characters (*Itchy*, the mouse) hits the other character (*Scratchy*, the cat) on his head with a large mallet. (It should be noted that the *Itchy & Scratchy* cartoons solely consist of that mouse viciously dismembering, beating, burning, blowing-up, etc., the cat.). Towards the end of that *Simpsons* episode, Marge is asked to take up the cause of banning the genital-revealing sculpture of Michelangelo’s *David*; however, when she, for artistic reasons, respectfully declines, adults who had defended/tolerated the gratuitous cartoon violence of *Itchy & Scratchy* were quick to demand the censorship of the frontally nude *David* sculpture. This scenario is indeed quite typical of American mainstream TV-entertainment, in which you can see a man cave in another’s chest, but you cannot view a woman’s bare breast.

Nonetheless, in *The Simpsons* world, all children (with the notable exception of the unusually-pacifistic Flanders boys) absolutely love *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*. Bart and Lisa are frequently shown breaking out in fervent laughter when watching the hideously-violent cartoon, which any objective viewer will accurately perceive as being about as humorous as a headache, i.e. not the least bit funny—a fact which is very likely the show’s creators’ full intention: for much is said about society’s children, and society’s morals, when such a gratuitously-violent cartoon amuses the youth and keeps them intent on their continuous consumption of the cartoon. For example, in another very memorable episode where Bart and Lisa have just watched the cartoon and have cracked-up laughing, Bart immediately asks of Lisa, in a quite serious and sincere tone of voice, “If I ever stop loving violence, I want you to shoot me”; and to his request, Lisa, who’s uncharacteristically fond of the intensely-violent cartoon, assuredly agrees.

Also quite memorable was the episode in which Bart and Lisa battle each other on opposing Pee Wee ice-hockey teams and become violent with each other—both on and off the ice—for no other reason than a “little, healthy competition”. During the games,

the audience members are also filled with anger and rage because of this competition, and mindless violence breaks out amongst them.

Although *The Simpsons* viewers are very unlikely, if there's any chance at all, to see violence endured by any of the female characters, the opposite goes for the male characters, especially violence against the latter's most sensitive and vulnerable part of their bodies—the genitals.

Note one such groin-bashing-humour episode, where Homer builds a small tennis court in his yard. He playfully and (unfortunately for him) successfully pulls open the front of his shorts to catch a pop-fly-like return of the tennis ball—"It's *in* the bag," he says, cockily—though not without literally keeling over sideways onto the tarmac in excruciating pain.

### **WEALTH & POVERTY**

Watching *The Simpsons* forces the show's consumers' to (a large extent) acknowledge our society's wealth gaps, poverty and food wasting; although in one episode, included was a reference (through the mouth of the most passive, friendly and perhaps quirkiest Christian in town, Ned Flanders) to some welfare recipients as being those who "just don't feel like working—God bless 'em".

In the episode where Bart ruins the family Thanksgiving Day turkey dinner, Smithers prepares for his master, Burns, a many-course dinner that would feed a multitude. Burns takes a tiny bite of turkey and says, "Mmmm—delicious! Smithers, every year you outstrip yourself in succulence ..."; and to this, Smithers replies, "Would you like some candied yams, sir?" Astonishingly, Burns casually tells his minion, "No—I couldn't eat another bite"; and gesturing to the plethora of untouched prepared foods on the long table, Burns instructs, "Now dispose of all this, Smithers". But Burns then adds, "However, I do have just enough room left for some of your delicious homemade pumpkin pie". (All the while, Bart, who has run off away from his angered family, is so hungry that he plots how he can make off with Smithers' pie, which is cooling off on a mansion windowsill.)

In another episode, *The Simpsons* takes a much-deserved jab at capitalist society and its allowance of the wealthiest of citizens to pay the least—if any at all—income tax, through their utilization of tax-law loopholes. In that episode, while all of the working stiffs in Springfield are hurriedly filing their tax forms on tax deadline day, Homer, having gotten the previous tax year confused with the current one, foolishly believes that he already has done his duty. But when Marge and Lisa enlighten him on the matter, Homer does his tax-form preparations and filing at the very last minute; and as a result of his ludicrous sloppiness, he ends up getting audited by the IRS. Meanwhile, multi-billionaire Burns asks Smithers if they (i.e., Burns, through Smithers) had filed his tax forms and how much he'd have to pay; and Smithers replies that, "Actually, sir, with our creative accounting we're only paying \$3 a year". Burns then curses the tax-grabbing IRS for soaking him and irately expresses his displeasure to Smithers, "You're right—we're getting screwed!"

As well, through another episode, the show takes a (perhaps also deserved) jab at chronic-billionaire Microsoft-chairman Bill Gates. When Homer decides to start up his own website-service business, Bill Gates, with the aid of two goons, "buys out" Homer's new enterprise; but rather than pay Homer, Gates has his goons tear apart Homer's

meagre desk and equipment. At Homer's astonishment, Gates maliciously giggles: "You don't think that I get rich by writing cheques, do you?"

However, *The Simpsons* does not fail to implicate perhaps life's most bitter of ironies and greatest injustices: i.e., very/too often those who need greater wealth the very least—those who are the richest—are the most likely candidates to receive the loot.

Such as with the episode in which Kent Brockman, the very-well-paid Emmy-winning newsman for Channel 6, reads out on air the big-jackpot-a whopping \$130,000,000-lottery's winning numbers and realizes that indeed *he* is the winner. (Making multi-billionaire Burns the winner would have been pushing it a little too far.)

But the Burns character was utilized as such an example in the episode in which Marge becomes a Springfield police officer. Kwik-E-Mart clerk Apu, believing Marge to be just another typically-corrupt Springfield police officer, places down a thick wad of bribe money down onto the checkout counter for Marge to take. However, both turn and face in opposite directions, each expecting the other to remove the money (a fair amount a cash, from appearances), though both refuse to budge. But sure enough, Burns happens to be walking by (though neither notices him), sees the vulnerable wad of money and exploits the situation by taking the cash, unseen. A couple of seconds later, Apu and Marge finally turn around to see the money gone, each convinced that the other had taken the bribe money: "That's better," the two say, simultaneously.

### **POLITICS & THE ENVIRONMENT**

In *The Simpsons*, politicians and ecological degraders, along with the gratuitously and greedy rich, receive the brunt of the show's often-stinging parody.

During one episode, Bart, one of two class-student presidential candidates (who was nominated by the purple-haired twins, Sherri and Terri), tells his classmates, "I had a speech ready, but my dog ate it"; to this witticism, he, of course, receives an approvingly amused classmate audience.

Furthermore, when his concerned political opponent, Martin Prince, competently points out to his peers that an asbestos sample taken from their very own classroom infrastructure revealed a health-hazardous 1.74 parts per million of cancer-causing asbestos, Bart declares that his opponent's promise to remove the hazardous element is wrong: "That [the amount of asbestos in the school's structure] is not enough! We demand *more asbestos!* *MORE ASBESTOS!* *MORE ASBESTOS!* *MORE ASBESTOS!* ..."

To top off his ludicrous demagoguery, Bart politically slams his opponent: "He [Martin] says, there's no any easy answers; I say: *he's not looking hard enough!*"

Of course, in response to all of Bart's demagoguery, his fellow students wildly cheer him on; though justice wins out at the end; for, while his classmates are foolishly careless enough to vote for Bart, they are also foolishly careless enough to forget or simply not bother to cast a ballot for their favorite demagogue candidate, Bart. Thus, Bart loses the election.

As for "democratic" politics, *The Simpsons* drips with cynicism on the subject.

In one episode, in which Sideshow Bob ("Robert Underdunk Terwilliger") fraudulently gets himself elected (briefly) as mayor of Springfield, sitting mayor Quimby expresses his main concern while in political office—doing what the mob-like masses of the town want of him so that he can get perpetually re-elected: "If that is the way the winds are blowing, let no one say that I don't also blow."

In the particularly hilarious episode about Homer's campaign for and election to the office of sanitation commissioner—an unforgettable episode in which the show mocks the near-insanity with which too-much of society treats its solid waste—Homer's utterly-lazy (non)response to bartender Moe's suggestion that Homer come up with a catchy election-campaign slogan is to whine, "Awwwwwe! Can't somebody else do it?!" But ironically his whine, thanks to Moe's exploitive thinking, turns into Homer's winning motto, "*Let somebody else do it!*". (Relevant to this episode and its message is that of another in which Homer matter-of-factly explains to daughter Lisa about politicians' purpose: "The whole reason we have elected officials is so we don't have to think all the time.") In order to fulfill his crazy election promise of having the homeowners' job of getting their own refuse to the curb done for them, Homer, desperately requiring the funds with which to pay the wages of the extra garbage collectors, agrees to accept with open arms the syringe (etc.) infested refuse of neighbouring towns. Homer—typically unable to foresee past the end of his stubby nose—then packs so much garbage into the ground that he simply leaves no more space in which to hold further waste; thus the trash begins to literally pop up through the ground elsewhere—and in quite poetic manners, too: it pops up through the green at the luxurious local golf course right where the rich and famous are playing their sport; and up through the podium at the town hall, right into the face of the adulterous, corrupt mayor Quimby. When the town has had enough of this repulsive mess, Homer simply and literally ups the town of Springfield onto large moving trucks and has it moved to ground not yet befouled by man.

In another episode, an oil freighter becomes grounded and a crude-oil spill occurs at Baby Seal Beach. When Lisa, who's watching the news in the company of her family, learns of this disaster, she laments, "Oh, no!" And Homer, being the incredibly idiotic buffoon he is, gently reassures her: "Don't worry, sweetie; there's lots more oil where that came from."

And Homer's ridiculous reassurance to Lisa sounds just like something Burns would say. Indeed, environmental/ecological concerns are way beyond his narrow scope; for example, when Lisa asks Burns if his power plant has a recycling policy, a quite bewildered Burns looks wide-eyed down into Lisa's face and barely pronounces, "ree-cyy-ccliing??" He then scans his mental dictionary, in which such a revolutionary, radical concept as "recycling" is nowhere to be found.

However, the absence of a power-plant recycling policy pales in comparison to Burns—in the episode in which he unsuccessfully runs for governor of state (where ever that may be)—permitting, amongst some other atrociously-dangerous power-plant practices, one of his nuclear-reactor's cracked exterior casing to be sealed with a piece of chewed bubblegum: "I'm just as shocked as you are!" Burns attempts to convince the unconvinced safety inspector.

### **THE MEDIA**

Not surprisingly, *The Simpsons* throws much-deserved jabs at the media, both news and entertainment.

Although the rest of the episode was unrelated to media conduct, the very beginning of one episode had Marge opening up the day's mail at the breakfast table, which is surrounded by the Simpsons family. "It's from *The New Yorker* magazine subscription department," says Marge, disappointedly, reading the contents of one letter.

“They’ve rejected our subscription application, again.” Obviously, no publication would turn down a subscription request; however, anyone familiar with the aristocrat-like, ivory-tower publishing policy of *The New Yorker* would understand the above-mentioned dig at that publication.

As for parodying the news-media’s influence (usually negative, in this animation) on the often-gullible masses, *The Simpsons* makes its mockery through its cocky and confident character Kent Brockman, the local news anchor and host of *Springfield Action News*, *Eye on Springfield*, *Smartline* and *My Two Cents*. In the episode about a staunchly-feminist-minded babysitter’s (mistaken, though sincere) accusation that Homer sexually harassed her, Brockman notes that a local public-opinion poll found that 98 percent of the public believes that Homer is guilty of the accusation made against him; though (unfortunately, according to Brockman’s tone of voice) the poll is not legally binding—though it will be binding if a referendum on a relevant Proposition is passed by the people, he adds.

The entertainment media receive a figurative slap in the face via *The Simpsons*, particularly in one area all too prevalent in and typical of Hollywood clichés—an area that apparently will never become too tiresome, and especially never too immoral, for entertainment-media consumers: i.e. swift whacks to the male genitalia, where the unfortunate recipient keels over in excruciating pain:

Such is one episode in which Springfield holds a film festival, and Homer acts as one of the judges. One film, titled *Man Getting Hit by Football in the Groin*, is produced and submitted by Hans Moleman—a shrivelled, short, myopic, elderly Springfield resident, who’s also a hapless driver that wears glasses with lenses two-inches thick. His film consists of naught but him stepping out of his house only to have a thrown football land in his groin. He, of course, drops his walking cane, clasps both hands over his crotch and falls over sideways onto the ground, trembling with what us males know to be unimaginable suffering. Homer, unlike the rest of the judges and audience, breaks out in roaring laughter, barely containing himself in his seat: “This contest is over!” Homer laughs. “Give that man the \$10,000!” (A prize that doesn’t even exist.) Marge, sitting next to him, embarrassingly and angrily informs him, “Homer, this isn’t *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. Later, after Marge has scolded him for his stupidity and lack of professionalism, Homer, who holds the tie-breaking vote, weighs the pros and cons on which way to vote: “... but *Football In The Groin* has a football in the groin”. And near the end of the episode, *Man Getting Hit by Football In The Groin* is entered and played for another audience at another film festival (though not in Springfield); but in this version, Hans Moleman is replaced with an animation version of actor George C. Scott, who keels over sideways onto the ground and painfully groans after getting hit by the football—“Ughhhh! ... my groin!”

## **CHARITY**

It is in that same episode about the crude-oil spill that *The Simpsons* duly exposes the propensity of the people, as a whole, to be choosy about which charitable/social cause they will support, usually depending on how fashionable that cause happens to be.

When Lisa, rather desperately, coerces her mother (Marge) into making the extensive trip (by car) to Baby Seal Beach to help clean oil off of all the cute animals, they are immediately told upon their arrival, and much to Lisa’s disappointment, that all

of the oil-covered animals have already been allocated to Hollywood superstars for public-relations purposes. This parody is quite warranted, for there are, for example, many food banks in reality at which a potential volunteer will find an actual *waiting list* for volunteer-work positions.

### **POETIC JUSTICE**

Through *The Simpsons*, the viewers quite-often are treated to a strong sense of poetic justice.

Especially so is with the episode in which Burns is non-physically forced to chew on a chunk of a genetically mutated fish—caught by Bart and nicknamed “Blinky”, due to its third eye—when he runs for the office of governor. (The Burns-candidate-supporting Homer, as idiotic as he is, dismissingly accuses his wife, “I bet before the papers blew this whole thing out of proportion, you didn’t even know how many eyes a fish has”.) The media cameras focus on him as he attempts to score political points by eating dinner with the “average” power-plant employee and his family, who coincidentally happen to be the Simpsons. But Marge, who’s campaigning for Burns’ environment-friendly political opponent and had been begged by Homer into preparing the dinner for Burns, prepares “Blinky”, which had resided in the creek severely polluted by toxic refuse from Burns’ own power plant. Marge serves Burns the first piece of “Blinky” (with the skin still attached) and then waits for him to take a bite; and when Burns can no longer hold the foul piece of grotesque mutated fish in his mouth, he spits it out right across the entire table and onto the floor, all of which is fully captured by all of the story-hungry photojournalists in attendance. (One reporter phones-in the thesis of his planned story: “Burns can’t swallow own story”.) Burns, with Smithers’ assistance, then begins angrily overturning and breaking the Simpsons’ living-room furnishings, presumably as his retaliation for Marge’s/Lisa’s trickery and destruction of his would-be political career; and Burns almost-immediately having exhausted himself, he and Smithers leave the residence, the former telling the latter, quite incredulously, “It’s ironic, isn’t it, Smithers ... [the Simpsons] cost me the election; yet if I were to have them killed, I would be the one who’d go to jail. That’s democracy for you!”

### **ETHICS, MORALITY & RELIGION**

It’s through the multi-billionaire, nuclear-power-plant owner Montgomery Burns that *The Simpsons* exposes the evil behaviour that virtually absolute power and seemingly unlimited wealth can procure from the corruptible human mind and will. However, the show does not let the common folk off easy with its parodies of human misconduct.

In an episode in which Lisa uncharacteristically cheats on a school test, every external element around her is intensely pressuring her to not admit to her cheating, mostly in order to keep her school’s grade-average high enough to acquire greater government funding. Indeed, she must eventually rub directly against the proverbial grain by *forcing* her school’s officials to hear her professions of guilt. Admittedly, though, the fact that there are some truly virtuous characters—however few—in society is indicated through *The Simpsons*’ utilization of Lisa and (in that same episode) her adamant insistence on confessing, with only justice and her cleared conscious to be gained.

In another episode, the show’s creators appear to have pushed the proverbial social envelope too far to the liberal end of the ideological spectrum when they produced

an episode that was apologetic of bawdy/whore houses. When one such house was discovered in Springfield, the sole focus of the show was to expose the hypocrisy of the puritanical members of socially conservative society, to the point of appearing quite apologetic to the aforementioned, sordid profession.

Also, there are many who'd feel offended by the episode about the origins, and the citizen partisanship within each, of the towns of Springfield and neighbouring Shelbyville, through which the show alludes to one particular religious sect and its propensity towards polygamous unions (a.k.a. plural marriages) within their religious tribe: The towns were established many years before when Jebediah (Obadiah Zachariah Jedediah) Springfield and his supporters parted ways with his counterpart, Shelbyville Manhattan, and his followers because the latter wanted to commence their new community (having just arrived in the wild, untamed land) by allowing the men to "marry our cousins". Asked by Jebediah, however, "why would we want to marry our cousins?", Shelbyville replies, "Because they're so attractive ... I thought that was the whole point of all this [the migration]". When Jebediah refuses to go along with such a social order, Shelbyville angrily denounces his counterpart by insisting, "I tell you, I won't live in a town where a man can't marry his cousins!" Thus, each, along with his followers in agreement, went his own way to establish his town.

In the realm of religion and theology, *The Simpsons* points out an apparent conflict of faith/ideas present in the practice of prayer—i.e. why would the Creator grant good fortune to one person who prays for it, while rejecting another person's prayer for the same good fortune? In one episode, Homer basically forces Bart to become an expert at miniature golf and to compete against the son of Ned Flanders, his very Christian and kind-hearted neighbour—a person for whom Homer feels and expresses utter, without-reason contempt; and it becomes a match on which Homer goads Ned into agreeing to bet, the loser's father being the one who'd have to mow his lawn donned in his wife's Sunday dress. On the day of the big game at the golf course, Homer finds the Flanders family praying, in a circle while holding hands; and to this, Homer mockingly informs his neighbour, "hey Flanders, I already asked God to let Bart win, and He can't very well let both of them win".

In many episodes, attorneys are the show's favourite targets.

In the episode in which bully-boy Jimbo Jones joins Homer's 'order-enforcing' posse but then later discovers that the posse is not what he'd thought it would be, Jimbo bitterly proclaims that he has thus given up on justice and integrity and therefore might as well join a very-well-paid though morally-corrupt profession: "You let me down, man. Now I don't believe in nothin', no more: I'm going to law school". To Jimbo's decision, Homer lets out a disapproving bellow, which reverberates throughout the area—"NOOOOOO!"

*The Simpsons* also takes a deserved dig at contemporary society's prevalence towards moral relativism in the episode in which Bart and an initially-hesitant Lisa fool their babysitter, Grampa (Abraham) Simpson, into giving/buying them whatever they want (e.g. junk food, coffee, a large damaging party at the Simpsons residence). When Lisa reveals her troubled conscience to Bart, the sneaky boy reassures her: "Lisa, in these turbulent times, who's to say what's right and what's wrong."

But the animation deserves credit for taking a warranted jab at what's commonly considered by society to be one of this planet's greatest evils—Big Tobacco.

In the episode in which Lisa eventually becomes Little Miss Springfield, Laramie Cigarettes, the (not-surprisingly) corporate sponsor of the little girls' beauty pageant, briefly uses her to sell their nicotine product, until she takes a bold and daring stand against being "a corporate shell". In fact, the morally-corrupt Laramie president, Jack Larson, has his cigarette company's ad-producers put Lisa on a Laramie ad poster, in which Lisa, kneeling in prayer by her bedside with a lit cigarette in her mouth, says (with her words in large print): "God, Please Bless Mommy, Daddy and Laramie Cigarettes".

### **THE MASSES**

Humanity, according to *The Simpsons*, can be (as a whole) selfish, inconsistent, quite ignorant and irrationally reactionary.

In one episode, Mrs. Edna Krabappel, Bart's Grade 4 schoolteacher and the head of the teachers' union, is at considerable odds with Principal Skinner, regarding the formers' salaries and the school's serious lack of instructional supplies. The students' parents meet with the teacher and principal in the school's auditorium; there, the parents are led back and forth like sheep to the points made by Krabappel and Skinner: "We're doing it [teachers seeking more money] for your children," Krabappel emphasizes to the parents, who all mutter in agreement to one another. (To this, Reverend Timothy Lovejoy's wife, Helen, makes her typical and somewhat-hysterical exclamation, "Won't somebody PLEASE think of the children!!") But, responds Skinner, "We [the school employers] have a very tight budget—in order to give the teachers a raise, we'd have to raise taxes" (a prospect against which the parents mumble in discomfort). However, Krabappel reminds them all that, "It's your children's future," again to which the parents all concur. And to this, Skinner lifts his hand in view of the parents and simply rubs his thumb, forefinger and index finger together, and the parents murmur and grumble, "oh, no—more taxes". And so forth it goes, to and fro. It's quite clear that the parents indeed want it both ways—to have their proverbial cake and eat it, too.

### **TODAY'S YOUTH**

Perhaps the greatest (though admittedly understandable) misperception held by critics of *The Simpsons* is that the show downplays, or perhaps even promotes, disrespect by youth toward their elders.

Indeed, many viewers often misinterpret Bart's apparent irreverence for his father—frequently referring to Homer by his first name, in one episode Bart, while watching TV, casually tells his father to "Crank it, Homer"—combined with the boy's disrespectful attitude towards virtually every other authority figure, as a negative influence on the younger viewers. Well, aside from the fact that the show is not produced for an under-14 (and very impressionable) audience, Bart's behaviour is implicitly marked as an undesirable factor of his character that will likely result in an undesirable future for him in society, not to mention his current dismal status academically and amongst the school officials. Lisa, on the other hand, is hard-working, considerate and respectful towards others—young people as well as adults; and she is portrayed as being one who's very likely to achieve great accomplishments and status in life. Whenever there is disrespectful behaviour in the show, it implicitly reflects poorly (for the astute viewer, anyway) on the characters displaying their irreverence.

On the issue of whether contemporary children are taking on greater adult-like

responsibilities and dangerous habits at an earlier age than in previous generations, according to *The Simpsons*, the answer should be obvious: In one musical episode, Bart sings a request of his father, “*Can I be a booze hound?*” and Homer replies in song, “*Not till you’re fifteen*” (as if Homer is being a responsible parent in requiring this irresponsibly-low minimum age of his son). And in another episode, Homer replies to Bart’s request for some beer with an idiotic, “No, Bart; that is for Daddies and kids with fake IDs”.

However, it’s quite worthy of mention that *The Simpsons* does not completely portray a bad-brat Bart Simpson as but a proverbial “bad seed”, or create him as a write-off that was a lost cause since conception (albeit, during an ultra-sound, Dr. Hebert tells a very-pregnant Marge, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear he was mooning me”). Indeed, one episode offers a revelation into Bart’s very-first year of schooling—a time at which Bart was actually enthusiastic about school and uncharacteristically behaved himself. It was only when his teacher seriously discouraged Bart—at one point blatantly letting him know that he has no hope of acquiring talent(s) and thus achieving a fruitful life. In fact, Bart becomes such a despondent little boy that he pencils a large stick-figure drawing of his unhappiness and death, a drawing at which Homer screams, “Aughhhh!! Burn it!! Send it to Hell!!” Then, after reaching a climax of discouragement at school—and, to an extent, even at home (Homer, though with good intentions, builds Bart a horrific-looking clown-shaped bed)—Bart suddenly perceives (or, perhaps, *realizes*) that the closest he’ll come to having a productive talent is making his classmates laugh by his acting goofy; when principal Skinner tells him out-flat that it’s the precise point in his life at which he is at a crossroads, of being an achiever or a loser. Bart’s response to Skinner, after some seconds of contemplation?: “Eat my shorts”; to which Bart’s fellow students laugh and applaud.

But then again, one can discount the above by simply recalling the episode in which Bart is in his first few years of life and he (assumably amongst other misdeeds) lights his father’s tie on fire, as well as flushes his keys and wallet down the toilet; not to mention, cuts off all of his baby sister’s (i.e., Lisa’s) hair, so that she would not appear so adorable to her new parents, Marge and Homer.

Furthermore, we’re existing at a societal point in time at which it’s somewhat fashionable to suppress any “blame” in life towards those who may have left us scarred—physically, emotionally or psychologically.

**A**dmittedly, *The Simpsons* occasionally includes annoying aspects—such as its inclination towards frequently exposing the bare buttocks of only the male characters, its confinement of wedgies against only the male characters and its bewildering propensity for the inclusion of wisecracks particularly aimed at the French (Bart even makes an outrageous, erroneous serious-toned reference to that ethnic group’s collective foul odour!).

Also, for many viewers, the show goes too far in a few of its jabs at Christianity that appear more ideological than humorous, perhaps overly-philosophical enough to be construed as naught but political *Simpsons* script-writing—such as when devout-Christian Ned Flanders makes sure to burn tangible evidence of a godless universe while his two pacifist sons view a Christian-cartoon-show character telling his talking pet dog (and thus conveying to the Flanders boys) that he has just finished “making a pipe-bomb

to blow up the Planned Parenthood clinic”.

Having said this, however, the show’s creators make a wise choice in allowing *The Simpsons* to be produced mostly with the morally gray area in mind. Such is done by having Homer and Lisa sneak inside (“break into”) a museum late at night so Lisa can have what would be her last chance to experience the presence of ancient Egyptian artifacts on display. Also, episodes were produced in which Homer reveals his albeit-rare compassionate and decent side; for example, when he wishes misfortune on Flanders’ new business (a store selling items for only left-handed people) but at the end expresses sincere sorrow for Flanders’ misfortune and thus enables the business to recover. For in so doing, the show more reflects real life, which rarely consists of the proverbial moral black-and-white/good-and-evil.

*The Simpsons* blends genuine humour with the vulnerability and corruptibility of human nature to produce a hilarious TV program. Granted, it could be more explicit in some of its moral stances; however, through its implicit morality, the observant viewer receives the same relevant message without the often-discomforting force and rigidity usually experienced with explicit morality. ■

*The following fictional account is based on a radio-broadcast sermon to which I once listened. It was titled, "A Bird's Eye View of Hell," which was given by a (now long deceased) renowned, rather conservative preacher.*

## ***That Other Place***

**“T**his isn't the way it's supposed to be,” Randall mumbled to himself. He'd spent his corporeal lifetime believing—as his parent-manipulated, religious thought process had dictated—that Hell was a fire-and-brimstone existence; he'd always believed that Hell was the devil's domain, consisting of lost souls weeping, wailing and gnashing their teeth. He had indeed believed that Hell was basically an existence consisting of unrelenting misery and/or pain, thus being there would be nothing short of sheer hell.

But the place in which he currently existed was not at all what Randall had expected. When his Ford pick-up truck ran head-on, at 176 kilometers per hour, into that concrete meridian—a direct result of the 13 beers he'd recklessly consumed just twenty minutes prior—smashing face-first through the windshield and into that cement structure, Randall was dashed into eternity so instantaneously that he hadn't even realized he'd been killed. Or at least he didn't *immediately* realize the fact. It did take him an indeterminate portion of physical-universe time (*perhaps even centuries ... who knows?* he thought), in the sense that time passage is noticeable only in the physical universe. For, in the hereafter, an extra-dimensional reality, “time” does not exist, thus neither does the anxiousness often experienced corporeally by the passage of time. To Randall, the dead Randall, one second might as well be one day, one year, one millennium—or a million millenniums, for that matter; he didn't notice the passage of physical time at all.

Perhaps most notable was the fact that not only was it not extremely hot there, but it was actually quite comfortable in a climatic/environmental sense. It then occurred to him, however, that there was an inexplicable *absence* of temperature—no warmth, no coolness, no nothing—a sort of meteorological neutrality. And not only was the place not a cavernous pit of molten lava with condemned souls screaming in agony, but everything was elevated, like being at the peak of a mountain. Furthermore, while surrounded by an overcast sky, the peak had a rather flat surface (seemingly to Randall, about two square kilometers) covered with dry, light-brown dirt and jagged pebbles. Looking up, Randall could see that there wasn't a sky; rather, it was more of an opaque, grey dome.

Randall often experienced the urge to go over to the edge of this place and look down. But every time he'd commence the troll, an instinctive cognizance that he should not dare go look overwhelmed him every time, leaving him filled with anxiety such as he'd never experienced (in memory) and never thought possible. Immediately following the punishing rush of intense anxiety—an anxiety that actually left behind it an inexplicable burning sensation—Randall would decide to never again entertain the notion of looking down off of the edge. Yet he would nonetheless again and again consider and then carry out what he obviously should not have—like the proverbial forbidden fruit into which he was not to bite. Very likely neither were all of the other souls to look down over the edge, he figured.

The others in Hell with Randall were a countless multitude, and he simply could not understand how the universal laws of time and space so familiar to him in his corporeal lifetime were so fantastically defied there. For, the plethora of entities surrounding him actually fit onto the apparently small surface, which was that place called Hell, or at least some part of it. He was quite sure that so many fitting into so little had to do with their, what he thought of as, “phase of existence” and “variable realities.” (Randall impressed himself with his utilization of such notions of advanced physics, his lifetime experience including but a Grade 12 education and some years of *Star Trek* watching.) Each of these souls, he observed, seemed to exist in its own reality or dimension, since every soul was slightly more or less translucent than all of the others. Every soul was to some degree translucent or hazy (including himself), and although aware of its fellow souls (he noticed how each noticed all of the others), each was nevertheless consciously confined to its own reality or dimension.

Randall, however, still found these theories to be at least somewhat contradictory, because how, he questioned, could each soul be aware of all of the other entities when each was in its own reality? Regardless, he often enough found his inability to communicate with his fellow spirits to be quite unbearable at times, particularly since the semi-transparent specters numbered so very many yet were all completely unreachable.

But then it came—a disembodied voice; and judging from the others’ sudden reaction, it must’ve been audible, perhaps through mental telepathy, to every soul there. A voice, which told the occupants of Hell, including Randall, that they were all to take part in a profound “field trip.” Every soul confined to Hell was going to “visit Heaven.”

*My God!* thought an excited Randall. *We’re actually going to experience Heaven!* “Furthermore,” continued the voice, “those of you who choose to do so may remain in Heaven for eternity.”

Randall could not believe what he’d just heard: *We can actually stay there—forever?!*

“But understand this,” the voice resumed, “those of you who wish to come back to Hell must be ready to do so by the designated returning time, otherwise you’ll *have to* remain in Heaven—for eternity.”

*Christ! Is this a joke?!* Randall thought. *We’ll “have to” remain in Heaven?! Who in the hell in his right mind would not want to stay in Heaven, forever? “You drive a hard bargain!”* Randall called out, in a quite annoyingly sarcastic tone. He smugly chuckled to himself at his own clever retort.

A rumble of considerable discontent then reverberated throughout Hell; he’d obviously pissed off someone big there with his ridicule. Still not intimidated, though, Randall yet again mocked the source of the voice: “Whenever you’re ready!”

As the rumbling ceased, Randall, along with all of the other souls, experienced a great change in their Hell-bound status. They had indeed left Hell for another place, another reality—a heavenly one. And not surprising, because in the hereafter time and space are non-existent, the “trip” from Hell to Heaven was literally instantaneous.

The trip from Hell to Heaven was instantaneous in the most literal sense of the term (as it indeed should be, Randall felt) even though Hell and Heaven are an infinite distance apart. Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, ie. that an infinite amount of energy is required to achieve the finite speed of light, a contradiction of sort, never did make sense to Randall; what did make sense to him was that the speed of light was not an infinite

speed—contrarily, an infinity from being infinite—but rather only too limited when considering that it takes light years just to reach our closest, neighboring star (while also keeping readily in mind that, according to a German supercomputer simulation, there are about 500 billion galaxies in the universe and within that, astrophysicists believe that there’s an atom of matter for every 88 gallons of space). Therefore, Randall figured, to travel an infinite distance requiring an infinite speed, thus literally doing so instantaneously, would truly require an “infinite amount of energy”—contrary to the finite amount of energy required, one might logically conclude, to achieve the relatively sluggish and obviously quite finite (185,000-or-so miles per second) speed of light.

Randall made the infinite trip. There, he felt that the change that had occurred was nothing short of uniquely incredible: the difference in the entire environment and a soul’s new condition—or more accurate, the suddenly unbearably more-noticeable condition. For, though the “trip” from the dwelling of the damned to the House of God was basically unnoticeable, Randall and the others who’d come with him unexpectedly found themselves at the point of extreme discomfort. Surrounded by countless Blessed souls who’d all arrived in Paradise at the moment of their corporeal death, all of whom existed in a state of, for lack of more accurate terms of reference, the very purest of gold. It was a gold that was far beyond the purest gold found in the physical universe—a gold almost radiant white. Indeed, this gold did not tolerate even the tiniest hint of the foul dirt or impurity of sin; thus was the state of being in and of Heaven, the Kingdom of God. So pure was this place of gold, this place of eternal peace, that the visiting unfortunate souls—in their mud-covered, sinful condition, from that other place called Hell—stood out like pitch-black sheep amongst those of the purest of white.

Randall and his dirty ilk each felt about as comfortable in Heaven as would a drop of ice-cold water released into scorching-hot oil in the corporeal realm. And they did not want anything more than to leave the House of God, and immediately so. “I want to leave!” Randall asserted, with all of the other dirty souls in total agreement. “And I want to go right now—back to that other place!”

“Whenever *you’re* ready,” the voice then responded, mockingly repeating word-for-word what Randall had earlier sarcastically, arrogantly said to it.

Just as before, the ‘trip’ was instantaneous—they were back in Hell and feeling quite at home, like a well-fitting leather glove on a very familiar hand. However, he also then noticed what was up to that point unnoticeable, at least to him—not a single, tiny spot on his spiritual self was free of this sin-induced filth of Evermore. He also noticed that his dirty state of being, in fact, actually blended-in quite well with the filthy, sin-smearred environment of Hell.

Yes, obviously, had Randall been of a different nature in corporeal life and was destined for Heaven—though in a purest, sinless state of being—he’d have willingly went; for, while very briefly in Heaven, he had sensed that for those who truly belonged, there’s a far better state of existence in Paradise than there is in Hell. But, already in Hell ... *I would not have believed it had I not gone there for myself*, he thought, contentedly realizing he was to spend an eternity, albeit one of a timeless effect, in Hell. He was convinced that, because of his sin-stained soul, there was a worse place than Hell for him. Randall, forever stained with non-forgiven sin (though ‘forever’ did not really mean anything there), actually literally preferred to spend an eternity in Hell, had corporeal-realm linear-time applied, than a moment in Heaven. ■

## *Something In This House: A Ghost Story*

“It really is a beautiful house; nowhere near a mansion, but elegant nonetheless,” Vera reassured her husband, turning her head to him.

Though Steven focused his attention on the road ahead, his wife noticed how the bright, late-morning, November sunlight was cutting through the crisp, cold air outside and piercing the driver’s side window. The sunlight landing on Steven somewhat illuminated his earlobe-length, chestnut hair, leaving Vera to relish how nice he’d look with a moustache of the same color. She also noticed the sunlight flickering off of the thick, 24K-gold chain and Christ-bearing crucifix around his neck; she also felt that such pure gold would look far better on a black T-shirt instead of the white one he was wearing, with his worn Levi’s denim jeans.

“Why hasn’t your sister sold it to somebody else, by now?” Steven asked, with noticeable anxiousness in his voice. “Plus why so cheap? And even so much *more* cheaper to us?”

“I already told you,” she firmly yet patiently replied, “Mom and Dad made Alley promise that she’d somehow keep the house in the family.”

Neither said anything more after that, until they reached Charlottetown.

Although Vera didn’t mind leaving Toronto, Steven did. His psychiatrist told him to either get away from the stressful urban setting or eventually be admitted to a hospital psyche-ward. He’d studied for and earned an advanced degree in structural engineering, and now it seemed that he didn’t have the nerves to cope with the stress-load of designing, mostly, large bridges—i.e. with many lives depending on his competence—throughout Canada and the United States. (He did, however, feel good and particular pride in having played a large role in the construction of the longest bridge in the Western hemisphere: the thirteen kilometer Confederation Bridge, which he’d likely be crossing fairly often while living in the ‘Garden Province.’) He felt even worse knowing that Vera had sold her small seamstress business to have more time for her on-the-edge husband.

Regardless, both intended to try to make the best of their big move from Ontario to Prince Edward Island.

“Make a left here, on Hemlock,” she instructed, while pointing. “There it is—#476—the one with the old oak in the backyard. The place hasn’t changed a bit.”

Getting out of the car, Vera walked towards the front door while gazing at the three-leveled structure (including the attic floor but not the basement). Despite its considerable age, the house’s recent white coat of paint gave it a respectable appearance, somewhat like a brand new three-piece suit and snazzy tie on an old man. Perhaps most noticeable was the double-door, front entrance being preceded by a small portico.

Her hand shading her eyes from the sunlight, Vera was hypnotically-like fixated on the house, penetrating its walls with her memories.

“C’mon, Steve; let’s go in!” she enthused, spinning around to lead him in by the hand. “Steve?”

Vera looked to her right and left, then made a full rotation: “Steve?” she called out, making her way towards one end of the house, then the other. “Where are you?”

Becoming a bit impatient, she peeked around the corner, where she found him squatting and staring down into the house’s basement, past the opened root-cellar shutter doors.

“Steve? Didn’t you hear me call? ... *Steve!*?” Vera insisted on receiving a reply from hubby, though before looking up to the house’s two attic dormer windows. It was as though she’d been mentally beckoned to acknowledge a presence beyond from those windows. Staring into them, a blank expression on her face, she thought how those windows, each sectioned into quarters by perpendicular wood strips, looked to her like angry eyes; and the root cellar entrance, through which Steven was still looking down, looked like an angry mouth. She recalled how 28 years earlier (especially around Halloween), she, a little five-year-old, and her sister Alley would pretend that the house was indeed possessed by an aggressive spirit, which expressed its displeasure through those angry eyes and mouth.

Inhaling deeply, Steven looked up to his seemingly entranced wife. “Look at these doors,” he said, breaking Vera from her hypnotic gaze at the windows. “They must be at least a couple hundred years old.”

Vera, ignoring the old shutter doors themselves, peered down the stairway leading into stark darkness. As she gazed, her straight, chest-length, thick, blond hair—indeed so shiny clean and smooth that one could tell she meticulously grooms it—slipped onto her light-brown brows, somewhat covering her baby-blue eyes. Pulling her hair back, she said, “It’s so bright out here, you can’t see a single thing down there.” Shutting the root-cellar doors, she asked Steven, “How did you unlock them? Weren’t they locked?”

“Ahhh, no, they were unlocked.”

“Alley must’ve left them unlocked—I can’t believe it!” Vera incredulously assumed, without hesitation. “Figures; she never did give a damn about my security ... Whatever; let’s get inside.”

They went back around to the front of the house, to its main entrance door, where Vera futilely searched her purse for the house key she was sure Alley gave her before they’d left Toronto.

“Where’s that damn key?” she muttered with frustration. “I *know* I didn’t leave it behind at Alley’s.” And Steven standing right behind her, though not saying anything, seemed to only agitate her somewhat over the matter.

“I can’t find the damn key Alley gave us!” she snapped, pulling her hand from her purse, shrugging her shoulders in angered bewilderment. “I *must’ve* gotten it from her.”

“Calm down, hon. We’ll get a locksmith over,” he reassured her as he, perhaps out of instinct to ensure that it was in fact locked, grasped the doorknob and turned it. “Hey, look—it’s unlocked.”

Vera stood there rather stunned. “I don’t believe it,” she said, exasperated, looking at her husband, “That bitch! How could she be so careless and inconsiderate?!”

“Well, we might as well go inside,” Steven suggested, pushing open the door.

Inside, the house was left waiting for them indeed the way promised by Alley. All of the furnishings were covered with plain-white, cotton sheets; and everything expected was there: the carpeting, beds, cleaned bathrooms, electricity and water works. Directly ahead from where they stood, across the living room, was the kitchen entrance, an opening in the shape of a stereotypical gravestone. The kitchen had checkered, light-orange and dark-brown linoleum floor tiles, on which stood the General Electric appliances, all eggshell white. However, the walls, which had the same orange color of the floor tiles, were bare of any paintings, pictures, portraits or ornaments, etcetera. Adjacent to the kitchen entrance by about two meters was a plain, solid-wood door to the stairwell leading to the completely-below-ground-level basement. And adjacent to that door was the beginning of the rather-extensive hallway, which itself led towards one side of the house but then made a 90-degree left turn towards the rear of the residence, ending near a sliding-glass, back door. On the other side of

the kitchen entrance, again by about two metres, was the ground floor's sole washroom, with all of its contents (including the walls) of a uniformly, bright peach pink colour. The hallway, like the rest of the house (except the kitchen and attic), was covered with crimson-red carpeting; and its walling, from which hung an old family portrait, was painted beige.

The living-room was unremarkable, with its all-maple furniture consisting of a leg-less coffee table (with a beverage-cup ring stain at one end), a dominating compartment at its mid-section, a long black-leather couch which appeared quite comfortable, two lamp tables (basically looking much like the coffee table though holding atypically plain-looking lamps), one at either end of the couch, and a 24-inch Electrohome color television set. The living-room walls were an off-white color with another though more recent family portrait (the subjects of which were all about five years older than they were in the first portrait) hanging a meter above the TV set; a large sliding-glass door faced the street, its curtains, not surprising, crimson red quite like the residence's dominating carpeting color.

Opposite of the basement stairwell door, at the hallway's entrance near the kitchen entrance, was the stairwell leading up to the second floor—a stairwell followed up on both sides by the fancy, Cherry-wood railings. The second floor's three sole bedrooms and one bathroom, to fulfill the wishes of Vera's mother (while alive), were all painted sky blue. Just past the third and final bedroom, at the end of the hall, was the stairwell (albeit relatively short) to the attic, and except for its two dormer windows and the cardboard boxes brimming with old things and outgrown clothes, everything sat Oak-wooden and vacant.

Vera wasted no time in going through the house, ASAP, to pull off all of the covers from whatever they were covering and opening every closed set of curtains. The curtains opened, bright daylight burst into each room, illuminating all of the disturbed films of dust. *Man, look at that dust!* she thought, deciding that the house's every orifice should be opened for much-needed ventilation, though she settled for a couple windows.

On her way to the kitchen to check on the appliances, Vera recalled her sister telling her that the refrigerator would be freshly stocked the day before they were to arrive. It was all so convenient—until she opened the refrigerator door and was greeted by a blast of foul, rotting odor. All perishable foods inside (the meat, vegetables and fruit) were of the ghoulish, gray-green color of mould. *It's as though they've been sitting in a dead fridge for months*, she noted to herself. "My God! How!? ... *Oh, shit!*"

Pulling suitcases from the car, Steven mentally experienced an irresistible compulsion to gaze up at the second-floor bedroom window. His chestnut-brown eyes stared through the window as though he might see his wife up there looking back down at him. "Hmmm ...," he hummed before getting back to business, grabbing the last suitcase. Locking the car doors, his arms full, he made his way back to the house; and that's when everything in his head began to spin.

Instantly dropping the suitcases, he closed his eyes for a moment then slowly opened them. Rather than subsiding as he'd hoped, the spinning decided to suddenly move to his stomach, which he covered with his arms. It was like there was a rodent down in there, racing along the walls of his stomach, causing the organ to rapidly rotate. He was sure he would vomit.

"Steve?" The sudden sound of his wife's gentle voice seemed to release his whirling gut. Steven inhaled deeply, then picked up the suitcases lying all around him on the gravel driveway.

"I must've gotten up too quickly," he mumbled to himself, making his way back to the house.

Closing the door after him and leaving the suitcases on the living room floor,

Steven's attention was attracted to the sudden activation of the television set. He stared at the set with mystified eyes as the stations changed, one by one, about a second between changes.

*There must be a crossing of remote signals with one of the neighbors who are watching TV*, he thought, dismissively. That thought, however, was just before he noticed that the TV-set channel knob was turning by itself. *And this isn't even a remote-controlled set*, he realized. "What in the hell is going on?" he quietly demanded, just prior to being startled by a tap on the basement stairwell door behind him.

"Steve?" came the muffled voice from the other side of the door.

"Oh; it's Vera," he said, with considerable relief, and opened the door for her.

"What're you watching, Steve? Babewatch?" Vera snickered, knowing full well that her husband did not in the least like her suggesting that he watched such carnal programming ("I was only checking out the boat they're driving," he would claim when caught watching *Baywatch*).

"No, I'm not watching 'Babewatch'," he snapped, sarcastically. "The TV's going crazy. Look," he said, turning his head to the television set.

"What? What's wrong with it?" she asked, peering around Steven's five-foot-eleven-inch frame, and at the set. "It's not even on."

Steven was quite perplexed and very much looked it. "A second ago, it was ...," he explained, but paused, "... it was changing channels by itself. I'm telling you."

Vera was too enthralled by being back, after so many years, in her childhood residence to worry about the crossed wires, or whatever, of a television set. She turned around and looked down at the knob of the basement stairwell door: "Oh, yeah; that's right—it locks from *this* side," she realized. "We've got to change the doorknob or something."

Steven was still left mesmerized by the mystery of the changing channels but nevertheless turned his attention away from the set and onto his wife. "What were you doing down there, anyway?" he questioned her.

"I went to see if there's any unspoiled food in the deep freeze, but the lid's jammed." She shrugged her shoulders, before realizing that she still hadn't informed her husband of the rotten food. "We were left with a fridge full of moldy food, you know."

"What do you mean, 'full of moldy food'?" Steven asked. "All of it? What, isn't the fridge working?"

"Yup," Vera returned, shaking her head, "and I called the power company; they said this area hasn't had an outage in over six months."

"Well, I guess I'll have to go to the store, then; though I'm not at all hungry," he reluctantly volunteered, recalling the recent urge to throw up onto the driveway. "But I still want to try and pry open the deep freeze ..." He then smiled and interlocked his fingers onto the back of his head: "Actually, I think I'll take a nap first; do you mind?"

"Not at all," his wife replied, sympathetically. "You do look tired."

As Steven hauled the suitcases upstairs and helped himself to one of the beds, Vera emptied the spoiled food from the refrigerator into a Glad garbage bag and dumped it into the waste can outside.

Although he slept well the night before, Steven was sleepy and felt that he needed a daytime nap, as though he was four years old rather than his thirty-four years. He didn't even think about exploring what may be for him and Vera the rooms of a house in which they would live for quite some time. *Right now all I need is a bed*, he thought, turning into the closest bedroom. It was only one-thirty in the afternoon, but he nonetheless needed some decent shut-eye.

Unlike Steven, though, Vera *was* hungry; and, not feeling like making the trip into

town to the grocery store, she decided to whip up a batch of pancakes from the Aunt Jemima dry mix she'd found in the cupboard. The mix, and the adjacent preservative-filled pancake syrup, didn't appear to be too old for human consumption.

As Vera poured the mix into a bowl—"at least Alley didn't screw me up in the dish department," she mumbled—an uncontrollable stream of memories and thoughts flooded her mind. She went into such deep memory and thought that all she could see were the images in her mind's eye—a mental plane on which she was simultaneously conscious *and* lost in a trance.

Vera found herself standing before a heart-shaped mirror in the bathroom of what appeared to her to be a hotel honeymoon suite. She donned nothing but a purple, thigh-length nightie (the one her new husband had just bought for her), and she was slowly brushing her just-washed hair. In the mirror, she could see, through the open bathroom doorway, Steven standing by the double bed and releasing a few drops of Old Spice onto his hands; he rubbed his palms over his bare, muscular stomach and neck before running his fingers through his hair. Turning to his fresh bride, he smiled at her reflected face, pulling and snapping the elastic waist band on the front of his poppy-red boxer shorts (the ones his new wife had just bought for him). She smiled back at him as he tiptoed up behind her, pretending that she couldn't see him. She looked back at her own reflection as she made one last brush stroke. She then looked back at the man—for he now was some stranger she'd never seen before—who wrapped his brawny, tanned arms around her neck and passionately kissed her neck, while sliding his hands onto her breasts. His arms and hands were chilly, which somewhat puzzled Vera, for she didn't feel the environment's temperature to be any less than comfortable. He looked up into her reflected face, his dark brown eyes piercing her eyes, and he gave her a mischievous grin. His hair was thick, intensely feathered and as dark as his heavy moustache. *Who is he*, Vera thought; however, her feelings toward him were the same feelings she felt for Steven and, hence, felt no reason to resist. In fact, she was quite turned on. The coldness of his hands caused goose pimples to erect on her skin, yet Vera—for some reason, she hadn't a clue as to why—did not at all mind, but in fact rather liked it. The coldness seemed to her to make her feel ever more alive. His hands then slid down the front of her nightie as she closed her eyes and tilted her head to one side to allow her lover's face as much room as possible. With his hands on the front of Vera's bare thighs, he slowly ran his hands up under her nightie and up onto her firm belly; he began sliding his hands onto her waist, then back onto her belly, making ever so sure that he caressed her smooth skin without tickling her.

"Mmmm," she moaned with pleasure, as his hands slowly moved up onto her breasts, pressing her nipples.

The image of their lovemaking in the heart-shaped mirror grew fainter, with the effect of some sort of worsening tunnel vision. The kitchen counter suddenly appeared to her, but she still felt the hands.

"Steven—come on, I'm busy." But the hands continued. "Steven, I'm not into it right now," she blurted and broke free of the engulfing arms and hands. However, the groping was instantly replaced by what felt to her like an abrupt rush of blood up into her head; and she supported herself by leaning onto the counter while taking deep breaths.

"Steven?" she asked, between breaths, gradually regaining her composure. "Steven, where are you? ... Steven, you're acting like a clown, you know."

Finally able to stand on her own, Vera turned and started towards the living room. Just when she was walking through the tombstone-shaped kitchen entrance, she quite clearly heard heavy footsteps racing up the stairs and into the bedroom, in which Steven was

napping, followed by the door shutting. Looking up the stairwell, Vera grinned; she dismissed the entire event as an erotic daydream resulting from a very spontaneous urge for sex and her husband's great timing. "Stevie, you prankster," she said, and went back into the kitchen to her pancake mix.

Steven awoke into darkness. He thought about the nightmare he had just endured and rubbed the back of his hand on his lower back. It felt sore, as though he had been poked. Although he couldn't really understand why, he felt rushes of fear, like alternating hot and cold flushes, surging through his entire body. "That *is* weird," he mumbled. *And why can't I remember even coming in here? Man, I must've been really sleepy.*

Again, Steven thought about his bad dream—one not like anything he'd had before: In it, he was laying on an inflatable mattress floating about what seemed to him to be a mile up in the air. As he lay there, something—*it was like a bony finger*, he recalled hypothesizing while in his dream—was jabbing him up into his lower back; *something which must have been inside the mattress*, he thought. He recalled freaking out in the dream at the very idea of there being something *alive* in the inflatable mattress.

Steven began to feel quite on edge; and he also felt like he was starting to dislike the house. "Get a hold of yourself, Steve," he demanded of himself, turning on his watch's night light to check the time, then getting up out of bed. It was ten-nineteen at night. "And get that freezer opened so you might not have to go to the store."

Opening the bedroom door and starting down the stairs, he could hear the sound of stations changing on the television set. *The channels are turning again*, he mentally alerted himself.

"Oh, shit, not again," Steven groaned, loud enough for Vera to hear him.

"Steve? Is that you?"

"Vera?" he returned, very much relieved. He continued down the stairs, and he bit by bit could see his wife kneeling on the carpet with her hand on the TV set's knob; her head was slightly turned facing Steven.

"So, did you have a good snooze? Or are your hands still tired?" she asked, insinuatingly, with grinning lips.

"What do you mean 'tired' hands?" he returned, rubbing his still-sore back. But ignoring her query, he inquired, "Did you try the deep freeze again?"

"No; I thought *you* were going to," Vera innocently replied. "The flashlight is on the kitchen table."

With reluctance, Steven made his way below with flashlight in hand (he never did like going down a flight of stairs into a basement, especially a basement so new to him). He could hear the light buzzing of the freezer's motor and moved the light beam towards the noise until the light connected with the cream-colored, cubical appliance. He hesitantly made his way towards the machine.

It was then that his heart stopped. The icy thing that ran up along his forehead and into his hair was not what Steven was at all expecting. His arms went out of his immediate control and spastically thrashed at the light bulb and its on/off chain, both hanging from the ceiling, breaking the bulb in the process. With pieces of bulb glass raining down on him, Steven instinctively shielded his head with his arms. For a couple of seconds, he didn't know what the hell had happened.

Back in control of his senses, he stepped up to the freezer and pulled up on the lid's

handle. It wouldn't budge, and yet there was no keyhole or apparent locking mechanism. Then came a mental voice in his mind saying that the problem may be located *behind* the deep freeze. He illuminated the sides of the freezer and moved himself around to one side where he could feel the rear of the lid. Stretching his fingers, he could decipher that there was about twelve inches between the freezer and the brick wall behind it. *The root cellar must be on the other side*, he figured. He moved into a position in which he could shine the light behind the freezer to get some sort of clue as to what might possibly be holding down the lid—*the little bit of effort couldn't really hurt*, he thought.

“What the Hell's that?”

The dimmer outer edges of the ring of light caught the object wedged between the wall and freezer. Shifting the flashlight to his left hand, he reached down, grabbed the book-shaped object and pulled it out from its hiding spot. “It's a photo album,” he said, shining light on it.

Steven was too curious to bother dusting off the album's vinyl surface. He opened it and held the light to it. The first page held four photographs: one was of a baby; two were of Vera's younger sister, Alley, in her mid teens; and the fourth photo, taken at about the same time as the previous two pictures, was of Alley and Vera. Vera being only one year older, they could have passed as childhood friends. Steven anxiously flipped a clump of pages, which led him near the album's end; there, he found another photo of Alley (again in her mid teens) standing outside the house, adjacent to the front door. Also on the page, below the photo, was a yellowed newspaper clipping which read:

*CHARLOTTETOWN, October 14, 1967—The bodies of two men and a woman, all appearing to be in their late twenties, were discovered yesterday morning inside a residence at the north end of town. The deaths have been classified as a double homicide and suicide or, according to police Constable Jeff O'Hagal, “possibly a homicide and double suicide”. The two deceased males, each of whom had a gunshot wound on the right side of his head, were known to be good friends.*

*The corpses were discovered by a neighbor who had heard gun shots in the early morning hours. The neighbor, who wishes to remain anonymous, minutes later went next door where he found the female, bleeding from a bullet wound to the back of her head, laying in the open doorway of the residence's rear entrance. Police, who were immediately called to the scene at 476 Hemlock Drive, believe she was trying to flee the scene when she was shot.*

“Oh, Jesus, that's right here,” murmured Steven. “This must've happened just a couple years before Vera's family moved in.”

*Upon entering the basement of the residence, the story went on, police discovered the two deceased males, one of which tightly held a handgun. Police found identification on the bodies but would not release their names until the notification of next of kin. The residence is owned by the currently vacationing parents of one of the deceased males.*

*Police did however disclose that the female was a local Sunday school teacher whose husband had reported her missing the night before; and the two males were known to authorities and some area residents as having been involved in occult activity. “They [dead men] often referred to themselves as ‘Beelzebub's Boys’,” said O'Hagal.*

Steven stood there quite stunned. Nonetheless, he immediately felt compelled to turn the page, where he found another yellowed newspaper clipping:

*CHARLOTTETOWN, October 18, 1967—Police investigators have discovered that finger*

*prints gathered at the scene of a grisly Island murder in June, 1965, match those of the two men found shot dead along with a woman last week at 476 Hemlock Drive. "They're definitely a match," said police Constable Jeff O'Hagal.*

*The two deceased males have been identified as life-long Charlottetown residents Billy Snarden and Lorne Pettersberg, aged 27 and 29, respectively; the deceased female, a city resident who appears to have been raped before her murder, has been identified as 26-year-old Susan McPhelson.*

*The June, 1965, murder of drifter Thomas Parks, whose carcass was discovered in downtown St. Peters with its skin completely removed, had until now been unsolved.*

"That witch," Steven grumbled. "No wonder she has this place so cheap on the market."

He snapped the album shut, with intent to whirl around and run to and up the stairs. But he was violently foiled: Steven found himself falling hard onto the cement floor and gasping for breath; it felt to him like a fist had smashed into the mid section of his back. The flashlight was history, and he knew it, for it was launched out from Steven's grip and into some dark corner of the basement, its small bulb shattered.

"Oh, God," he groaned in pain, desperately gasping for air. Gradually, he collected himself up onto his hands and knees, but only to receive a swift kick up into his gut. It took a good thirty seconds for Steven to get back up on his feet and twice turn around: "Where the Hell are you, you son of a bitch?!" he screamed into mostly darkness. His left arm was embracing his battered abdomen, while he held up his right, fist clenched. "Where the Hell are you?!"

The only light leaking into the basement's darkness was that coming down the stairwell from the living room.

But no one was there. He looked up at the stairwell door and decided to make a run for it. He thought he was going to make it; however, when he reached the top of the stairs and the open doorway, it was like he had ran hard into, head first, an invisible steel wall.

**I**t was at the bottom of the stairwell that Steven regained consciousness and gave his head a slight shake. Daylight from the overcast sky outside was illuminating the light-brown curtains covering the two basement windows. He looked at his watch; it was nine-fourteen in the morning.

*The creep must be long gone,* Steven concluded. However, it was ever so much occurring to him that perhaps nobody—at least not in physical form—*was* there.

It was during that thought that Steven suddenly felt a deep cold all around him, accompanied by a very foul odor, which reminded him of those rotten-egg-like farts that reek up the entire room when released. With the chill and stink, which were getting even worse, came two shoves to Steven's chest—not hard enough to knock him down but enough to (he would later say) knock a little dose of reality into him.

Having observed that the shoves originated out of nothingness, Steven decided *that's it, I'm getting the Hell out of this house.*

He looked up the stairwell and went for it, thinking that if he very soon did not get out of that basement he might not live to greet noon. He made it up the stairs, through the doorway and into the living room. Surprised that he wasn't intercepted by whatever had attacked him, Steven turned around to look down the stairs to see if he was followed by anything receivable by the eye's retina. Nothing. Except for that coldness and stench, which

had become even more intense.

Then came the convincing sign of what he had feared: The basement stairwell door, all by itself, slammed shut with such force that Steven's hair blew back and the house shook as though hit by a 4.0 earthquake.

"Why did you slam the door?" came the inquisitive voice from behind him. Vera, who had just awoke from the couch, stood there with an innocent and bewildered facial expression. "What's the matter? Were you down there all night?"

"Vera, we have to get out of here—out of this house!" Steven insisted, still breathing heavily. "There's something very wrong with this place. My God, this can't be happening." He now seemed to be addressing only himself.

"What do you mean, get out of here?" she asked, incredulously, "we just got here."

"Vera, let's go!" he frantically ordered her. "I'll explain in the car." He gripped her arm and started gently pulling her towards the front door.

"Steven, what's with you? Let go!" she shouted, yanking her arm out from his grip.

"Vera, come ...," he began to say but was interrupted by thumping—then becoming loud banging—within the hallway wall. The banging, a couple seconds apart, moved down the hall and around the bend, a ninety-degree right turn towards the back door. There, near the back door, a last thunderous slam inside the wall reverberated throughout the entire house.

The two looked into each other's wide-open eyes. Steven, with his wife right behind him, crept down the hallway. He flicked on the hall light and clenched his slightly raised fists. Reaching the bend, he poked his head forward to peek around the corner.

Nothing was there (visible, anyhow); except for the back door, which held a twenty-square-inch window and led out to a small patio. Steven was just turning his head to look at Vera when the gold chain around his neck instantaneously, and firmly, tightened. Whatever had Steven's necklace strangling his throat also pushed him back against the wall and held him there.

"Vera," he gasped, trying desperately but unsuccessfully to slide his fingers between the constricting gold chain and his choked neck. The small amount of air he managed to inhale through his nose revealed that familiar cold, foul stench. "Vera, help me."

Steven was beginning to feel the consequences of a brain almost completely deprived of oxygen. A cynical voice in his dying mind reminded him that he wouldn't be in this deadly mess had he not been so materialistic and vain in his insistence on acquiring a thick and very strong gold chain to go with the gold Christ-bearing crucifix; and, added the cynical—*the evil*—mental voice, was it not bitterly ironic that this symbol of Jesus Christ the Savior, rather than 'saving' him, was going to *kill* him.

Starting to black out, Steven, realizing that this was his very last chance at sustaining his life, allocated all of his remaining strength in finally getting his fingers underneath the constricted gold chain and lunged his upper body forward.

The gold chain snapped, and he was left on his hands and knees. His neck gradually allowed more and more air into his lungs. Following a head rush, his vision and cerebral capacity slowly normalized.

"Vera?" He turned his head to look at his wife. "Why didn't you ...," Steven said before drifting off.

His eyes met the broken gold chain and crucifix lying on the carpeted floor, and he slowly reached out his shaky hand to retrieve the gold. But he was beaten to it. The broken trinket appeared to throw itself up, on about a forty-five degree angle, into the air and around the hallway bend.

“What the ...,” he muttered in utter disbelief. He saw it but still couldn’t really comprehend what was happening—his human instinct wanted to deny anything that was unnatural. And what to him was almost as unnatural as a self-propelling inanimate object was the sight of his stone-faced wife appearing from around the bend. Both of her arms hung at her sides, but one of her hands held his broken jewelry. Then her blank stare at Steven, who could once again sense that cold stench, became bold, yet quite unwarranted, rage.

“Why are you playing these head games with me, Steve?!” Vera demanded. “Either you settle down in this damned house or leave!”

Steven was astonished by what he was hearing. *Can’t she see that something very wrong is happening here?* he thought.

“There’s something in this house,” he told Vera. “I’m going to leave, but I am not going to leave you here.”

“I want you to leave, now,” she replied bluntly. “You never did want to live here. This is where I’m going to live forever.”

“What’s got into you, Vera? Why are you talking like this?”

“Leave, now, Steve.”

“I’m not leaving you behind,” he insisted, gripping her arm.

“Let go!” she yelled, pulling her arm free. “Now get the hell out!”

Though completely stunned, Steven realized that his wife, in her current state of mind, was not about to leave the house willingly, and he wasn’t about to physically force her. He knew that he had to leave, immediately, on his feet, or else he would be leaving in a body bag. *And maybe when she comes back to her senses,* he thought, *she’ll see the proverbial light and then want to leave.*

“If you don’t come back to me,” he solemnly promised, “*I will* come back for you, hon.”

Steven turned, and, before he could reach for the doorknob, something twisted the knob and slammed the door open, barely missing him as he jumped back. The force of the door slamming open drove a pocket of cold outdoors air accompanied by that rotting stench into his face.

He marched through the doorway and onto the patio. There he saw what he always had thought was only seen in movies like *Poltergeist*. And he finally saw what had been viciously assaulting him almost to death.

The four entities—and Steven was sure they were indeed ghosts—stood (or, more accurately, floated) on the lawn only about two meters from the Oak tree. Although they were translucent—like holograms which were devoid of color and seemed to fade into nothingness just below the knees—Steven could discern that two of them were male; both stared at Steven and were approximately his own build and height. The third entity was female, and the fourth was but a complete blur. One of the male spirits was standing to the fore, and he beheld a facial expression—and only their faces could be made out—which a living, decent human being could only describe as malevolent and sinister. The second, adjacent male entity stood about three feet to the left and two feet behind the first entity (as though he was somehow subservient to the first); the look on his face was one of somewhat subdued contempt and malice. The female spirit, which stood at a height of around five foot six and about three feet behind the second male ghost (they could not be called men), had a pitifully sad expression that stared down at the grass.

*My God. Could these be ...?* Steven asked himself, *could these be the three people ...?* He then looked at the fourth entity. *But who—what—is that?*

It was then that the female and two male spirits drifted, one behind the other, over the

lawn toward the house. Gradually, each sunk into the ground as he or she approached the side of the house; and, one by one, each was absorbed into the wall and down into the basement where, some three decades earlier, each left the physical world for eternity.

“Holy shit,” Steven whispered. He then looked back at the remaining entity, which had until then been faceless. The spirit drifted towards Steven and revealed its nature. Its face, becoming clearer, was one from a hairless and frightening being: its eyes were small, black and completely circular like coat buttons; its nose and mouth appeared to be somewhat humanoid but were definitely non-human, and the lips on what must have been its mouth were very thin and expressed unconditional malice.

The entity—*a demon?* Steven thought—moved forward up to the two stairs of the patio, only a couple meters from Steven. There, it simultaneously screamed and groaned—Steven was sure it was communicating its hatred of him—before bolting away at high speed, following the path of the three human spirits down into the basement.

For some seconds, Steven stood there feeling a mixture of utter astonishment and enlightenment. He then looked at his car and went for it. Starting the engine, he put it into reverse and floored the pedal, leaving behind a trail of airborne gravel dust.

On the highway out of Charlottetown, Steven recalled how he first met Vera, courted her—*loving every second spent with her*—and then married her, until death would them part. He clearly remembered all of the great times they had together. But then he chastised himself for recalling such great times as though they’d be the very last.

*If you don’t come back to me, then I’ll come back for you,* he insisted of himself. *You can count on it.* ■

## *Something In This House: A Closure*

“Vera? ...,” he whispered. “Vera?”

The house was darkening by the sunset, and Steven’s eyes were adjusting to it. “Vera?” he persisted, taking each step through the hallway with intervals of a few seconds. On one side of him was the doorway to his room, and about two meters after that on the opposite side of the hallway was Vera’s room. *How did I get here?* he asked himself. *I don’t even remember coming back to this Hellhole.*

Slowly passing by the first doorway, a tangle of disembodied voices bombarded him from inside his room. To Steven, the voices did not seem to be saying anything, though he did receive an impression of displeasure from them.

“Vera?” he called, his next step placing him at the doorway of Vera’s room, “where are you?”

Steven gradually turned his head to look in to the room.

“Vera, wh ...,” he began to call again, but was abruptly interrupted by thunderous banging on the walls from within Vera’s room. He felt a rush of terror surge through his body. Nevertheless, he forced himself, though slowly, to go into that room and face the evil inside. The slams from within the walls were from a source fully aware of not only Steven’s presence but also of the object of his attention. For the banging stopped at the very second that his eyes met the horrendous sight. Before him, hanging from a thick noose, was his beloved wife. Her lifeless body was robed in a nightgown, which reached down to the ankles of her bare feet. On the floor below her was a wooden chair lying on its side.

“Oh, Jesus,” Steven moaned to himself in agony, beholding the lifeless body of his best friend and lover. He looked at her face and her half-closed eyes. “Oh, Vera, what’ve you done. Oh, God!”

He put his hands to his face as he began to bitterly weep. The fear that had dominated him had suddenly turned into sadness and then anger; the combination of the emotions left him trembling.

“You bastards!” he yelled out to the entities. “You sons of bitches!”

Almost immediately, Steven got a response. Vera’s corpse, as though being pulled by an invisible force to one side by her feet, swung away from Steven before coming back at him twice as fast. Standing there stunned and frozen—*why can’t I move?*—Steven received a swift blow to his face by his dead wife’s feet, a blow which drove him backwards with a great force.

Before his back could slam against the wall, he woke up, letting out a loud yell into the darkness of his hotel room. He sat up in his bed and slid his fingers through his sweat-damped hair. He was fully awake, and everything came back to him: arriving at and being driven from the house by spirits intent on not having him reside there; and, worst of all, having to leave his beloved Vera at that place.

*Why would she want to stay there?* he queried himself. *Didn’t she see them? Couldn’t she see what was going on? It was as though her brain was in some sort of suspended animation or something.*

Steven, who had fallen asleep in his sweat pants and T-shirt, got up and felt the

wall for the light switch. The room illuminated, he looked at the wall clock, which read 4:37 a.m. Sitting down on the foot-end of the bed, Steven, who wanted some answers as to his wife's inexplicable behavior, thought about the photo album; he felt confident in his original assumption upon finding it in the basement that *it must have belonged to Alley. Vera would never have kept from me such a history of her own home*, he figured. *I'm going to give her a call—and right now.*

He grabbed his wallet from the night table and pulled out Alley's law-firm business card. He turned it over, where her home phone number was hand-written in pencil. He picked up the phone receiver and dialed; he could feel his heart race as he pressed the buttons. It rang three times before it was answered.

"This better be important," came the sleepy voice at the other end.

"Hello?" Steven replied, "Alley?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"It's Steve—your brother-in-law."

"Oh," she said, rather surprised. "Hi, Steve; is everything all right?"

"Sorry about waking you up, Alley, but it couldn't wait."

"What is it?"

Steven hesitated for a second, wondering how in the world he was going to explain what had happened and how his sister-in-law would react to his explanation.

"What is it? It's that house, Alley, that's what it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Well ... well there's something there," he began his task of telling a well-educated lawyer that the house in which she grew up is haunted by ghosts. "Something not right ... *something evil.*" There then was silence. "Hello? Alley?"

"I'm here, Steve," she answered.

"I know this'll sound nuts, but I'm ...," he began, before she politely cut him off.

"Actually, it doesn't sound nuts at all," she said. "I just figured that if it happened, it would've taken a while longer for things to happen and for you guys to notice."

There was dead air, again.

"So you *knew* about ... about them—the haunting," said Steven, rather angrily.

"And that *was* your photo album behind the deep-freeze. Why the hell didn't you tell us? That was really ..."

"Wait a sec; *my* photo album? I didn't have a photo album," she returned. "I don't have one—and never did."

"What? It isn't yours?"

"Nope. Besides my father, Vera was the only one in the family that had one; and Dad's is here at my place."

"My God. I can't believe she would keep that house's violent history from me. Her demeanor said 'everything's normal here'."

"Violent history?"

"Yeah, a murder-suicide happened there!"

"A murder-suicide?!" Alley said, astonished. "What happened?"

"I take it Vera never told you, either," Steven replied. "Two men—Satanists, in fact—shot dead a woman, who was a Sunday-school teacher, before they shot themselves. I think the woman's body was found near the back door; the two guys were found dead in the basement."

“Oh, Jesus!”

“Yeah. And then the police learned that the two had skinned alive some drifter a couple years before. Like these guys were really evil.”

Alley’s brief response was preceded by three seconds of silence. “God!”

“Man, I still can’t believe Vera would keep all this from us for so long,” said Steven, “and I can’t believe she’s still willing to stay there regardless of that place’s background.”

“You know what, Steve?” Alley said, “I really don’t think it matters at all to Vera how haunted the house is.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that Vera doesn’t fear ghosts; it’s hard to know if she even believes in them.”

Dead silence again. It then occurred to Steven that he could not recall a time when Vera and he had discussed the topic of ghosts and demons. “Why would she be like that?” he asked, “and why would she be so seemingly blind to what was practically right on top of her?”

“Her strange behavior very likely has something to do with the haunting,” Alley replied, and added, “and whatever is in the house is attracted to her.”

“What ... What do you mean?”

“Just what I said—attracted to her. When we were little girls, I once awoke to the sound of groaning, but nobody was there. And when I looked across the room to Vera in her bed, she was actually levitating off of her mattress. I called out to her, but she seemed to be out cold.”

“She was floating in mid air and wouldn’t wake up?!”

“Yeah; she only came out of it when it let her back down,” Alley returned. “It was as though it got right inside her head, like it had mental control over her.”

“Wow, I’d never have believed it ...”

“And the attraction went as far as being sexual: Another time, when Vera was sixteen, we were watching TV; I was on the couch, and she was lying on the carpet. She rolled onto her back, and her face went completely blank—she just stared up at the ceiling. Then she slowly lifted up into the air, head first, until she just hung there, vertically. Then her nightgown slid up until its rim was to her chin, and her underwear slid down.”

“Oh, Jesus!” said a stunned Steven.

“I could see her slightly move as it groped her.”

“Did it ...?” Steven attempted asking.

“I know what you’re thinking, and as far as I could tell, it didn’t penetrate her ... as far as I could tell, anyway.”

“Actually,” Steven informed his sister-in-law, “from what I’ve seen, ‘it’ is actually ‘them’—there were four of them: two men, or they *were* men when they lived, and a woman who looked quite sad; the fourth was ... well ... I don’t think it ever was human.”

“You mean a demon of some sort?”

“Whatever it was, I could smell and feel its presence: a cold stench—a horrible, rotting-egg-like stench—would encircle me whenever something would move by itself.”

“You know what? I remember that, too,” said Alley. “At first I wasn’t sure Vera

wasn't just passing a wind that was catching a ride with a cold breeze through the house. But after a while, after reading up on typical hauntings, I put two and two together ... What else happened to you guys while you were there?"

"Nothing seemed to happen to Vera—at least that's what she'd say if she were here right now; but she stayed behind, with the perception *I* was off the wall and screwing with her mind, that nothing at all was wrong. You know, it was just like with you two as girls, Alley—she seemed to be on another planet."

Steven then put his thoughts to the beginning of his ordeal. "I remember when we got there, I was quite abnormally drawn to the storm shutters leading to the basement; which were unlocked, mind you. Vera assumed quite confidently that you had left them unlocked."

"But I didn't leave them unlocked; I locked everything up after myself the day I left the place," Alley denied. "I *know* I didn't leave them unlocked, because I'm a compulsive checker—I must've checked all the doors three times, for Christ sake!"

"Well the storm shutters and the front door were unlocked when we got there. And Vera was sure that she'd gotten the key from you."

"I *did* give it to her—I had a copy of it made the day before. Maybe she dropped it on her way back to your car," Alley said, adding cynically, "she's like that. I'm surprised that she didn't blame me for the missing key. When we were young, she thought that everything wrong was my fault. You know, Vera was convinced that Mom and Dad favored me, because I was the youngest; but the fact is, *she* was the favored one, and she was absolutely blind to that fact. And she hated me! You know what? I used to notice a coinciding of that unusual 'cold stench' with her displays of absolute hatred and contempt for me. Sure, she and I had many good times, but they seemed too few to me."

"Hmm," was Steven's reply. He hadn't known the other side of the proverbial coin of his wife's and sister-in-law's relationship.

"Anyways, continue, Steve. Sorry for going on like that."

"Not at all ... Everything was O.K. until I took the luggage from the car. I took one step, and my head started spinning. I thought I was going to puke, but then it stopped," Steven began. "And when I walked into the living room, the TV set was on, and the channel knob and channels were turning *by themselves*; but when Vera came up from the basement, the turning stopped. And that night, I had the weirdest dream: I was way up in the air on some sort of mattress, with something bony poking me in the back, up through the mattress. Something was inside the mattress. And when I woke up, my back was sore!"

"What else happened?"

"Vera told me the freezer lid was jammed, so I went to check it out. Then that proverbial something-in-my-head told me to check around the box; and behind it on the floor, I found your—I mean *Vera's*—photo album. I opened it and found the old newspaper clippings about the murder-suicide."

Alley asked Steven to continue recounting his experience: "So is that when you left the house?" she asked, "after finding the photo album?"

"When I tried to run up the stairs to show Vera, I was viciously attacked; I was actually knocked out for some hours. And when I came to, I ran up the stairs, and the door slammed shut by itself behind me."

"What did she say?"

“She asked me why *I had* slammed the door. When I told her we had to leave—that something was definitely wrong with that house—and took her by the arm, she got really angry with me. She simply didn’t want to leave. But then again, she didn’t get clobbered like I did, and she saw nothing wrong.”

“Then what happened?”

“There was intense banging along the hallway wall to the back door. Then they just about strangled me to death with my own gold chain ...”

“God! Didn’t Vera help you?”

“No, she stayed around the corner out of view; but I don’t think she would’ve done anything to help me anyway,” added Steven. “And get this: my broken necklace flew up and around the hallway bend *by itself*. Finally, she came around the corner, with a blank stare and the necklace in her hand. When I asked why she didn’t come to help me and told her we had to leave, she got really pissed off at me; she asked me why I was playing head games with her. And that cold stench was there, too ...”

“... Just like when Vera got viciously mad at me,” interrupted Alley, “that cold air and foul odor.”

“Yeah,” Steven returned, in an enlightened tone of voice. “Anyway, I tried to take her by the arm, but she absolutely refused to leave. She was convinced that it was all just me; she said that I never did like that house, that she was going to live there *forever* and that I should get the hell out.”

“That sounds like Vera,” said Alley.

“But that’s just it, Alley—that was *not* the Vera I married and lived with all these years. It was someone else, like she was possessed or something ... Then I told her I’d be back for her, and that’s when I saw them, by the tree.”

“What did they do—just stand there?”

“At first; then one by one, the three human spirits floated to the basement’s outside wall and disappeared down into it. But the one that looked malicious—its face was hideous—that looked evil, floated right up to me and screamed like nothing I’d ever heard before; that sound simply could not have come from anything human.”

“Then what?”

“Knowing that I wouldn’t be able to convince her to come, I drove off and came here, to this hotel.”

“Wow,” said Alley. “You know that if I hadn’t experienced what I had as a girl, I would not believe what you just told me, and I wouldn’t believe what *I told you*.”

“Yeah ...” he said, absent-mindedly, for he was thinking about his wife in that house. And those thoughts became too much: “I can’t stand it anymore; I have to go get her, and right now.”

“Do you want me to go with you? I have three days off; I could be out there in a couple of hours if I ...”

“No,” Steven cut her off, immediately deciding that, “it’s better if I go alone ... less risk that way. Plus I want to go get her *now*.”

“But I could at least wait in the car and get help if you’re in there too long.”

“No, you can do that from your place; if I don’t call you back by two hours from now, call the cops, O.K.?”

“Yeah,” Alley replied, admitting to herself that she’s actually relieved to not be going with her brother-in-law. “Be very careful.”

Steven's thoughts, though free of caffeine, raced all the way to the house. He kept thinking about what he'd say to Vera to talk her into leaving that evil place—to convince her, once and for all, of what are spiritually occupying the residence which she grew up in and very much admires. *If she absolutely refused to leave there just one day ago, why would she give in now?* he asked himself. *That's assuming that she's even still alive in that hellhole!*

"Don't even think it, Stevie," he instantly corrected himself out loud. "She's fine. And if they didn't hurt her all those years, why now?"

The morning sun had just finished fully exposing itself as Steven turned onto Hemlock Avenue. He slowed the car down to a crawl turning into the driveway, shutting off the engine while still slightly rolling. He cringed as the gravel and tires ground together. The house looked dead from the outside. He left the keys in the ignition—*I'm not going to be shuffling for them as I have to bolt out of here*—and quietly opened the car door; he got out (with great effort not to grind the gravel beneath his sneakers) and gently closed the door. Slowly heading towards the front door, all the while looking up at the attic windows, he couldn't brush off the sensation that he was being watched by something up there. *A cliché, or what*, he mentally snickered to himself, climbing the front-door stairway's three steps.

The door was unlocked, though that fact didn't surprise him. Steven wrapped his hand around the doorknob, preparing himself for whatever was inside. He opened the door and looked around the physically unoccupied living room. The early sunlight reached through the open doorway and across to the hallway. He looked past it all and into the kitchen, which was illuminated because its windows' Venetian blinds were not released. It, too, was free of Vera's presence. The pendulum on the clock on the kitchen wall was the only sound disturbing what would've been dead silence. But to Steven, the pendulum's mellow rhythmic swinging seemed to be gradually getting louder, perhaps because he sensed other, ghostly movement in the house; he felt that the solitary sound of the pendulum was deceptive.

"Vera?" he called, his wide eyes scanning the environment. "Vera, where are you?"

Steven stepped inside, leaving the door ajar after him. Taking four more steps, toward the kitchen entrance, he looked around. He increased his visual scope to include the top of the stairway leading to the second floor. "Vera?"

At that point in his adrenaline rush, a vehicle speeding by outside would have startled him; so when the basement-stairway door before him and the front door behind him simultaneously slammed open and shut on that breezeless morning, he nearly blacked out from the shock. "Christ," he gasped, his heart racing and legs shaking. "Oh, man."

Then, as he'd expected, followed the cold stench. "Oh, no," he mumbled, preparing himself for a brutal assault. But rather than simply go down as a victim, Steven mustered up the mental strength to yell at the entities: "I want my wife back, you dead stench-filled ...!" His trembling fingers clenched into fists. "I'm taking her away from here!"

There was no response. Steven had prepared his average-sized body frame for a physical attack, but there was none. His fists gradually released back into trembling

fingers, and his shaky hands dropped to his sides. He looked around for a sign of the entities—the proverbial swinging chandelier, if not something else—but there was nothing.

His heart rate approaching normal, he took a few more steps into the living room and toward the kitchen. “Vera, answer me, for Christ sake,” he called out, walking into the kitchen. “Vera!”

Then he heard it. Thumps from below came up the basement stairwell. Steven’s heart began racing again, and his adrenaline flowed. Somehow he knew that whatever was climbing those stairs was not his wife; he knew it, if not from intuition, then from the way it climbed the stairs—it simply did not *sound* like Vera.

He froze as the footsteps reached the closed door at the top of the stairwell; holding his breath, he couldn’t help but anticipate that the door was about to violently slam open. It didn’t.

Whatever had climbed the stairs apparently was not going to make the first move. Steven realized that he could either just stand there and wait for something to happen or else take the initiative and confront it.

Going for the same door which he had only a day earlier raced through and had slammed shut immediately afterwards, Steven tried to prepare himself for the malevolent force he expected to be awaiting him on the other side. He wrapped his trembling hand around the doorknob and slowly turned it.

When the door knob broke free from his grip and the door swung open independently of physical contact, he went numb and stood there, slack-jawed, staring down the empty stairway as a cold stench engulfed him. He could smell and feel the cold stench—the supernatural—leave him and flee up the second-floor stairway behind him. Quickly following that were two consecutive gushes of cold stench, swirling around him before slamming the door shut and also surging up the stairs toward the bedrooms. Steven turned his attention up in that direction, his face meeting the thunderous reverberation of the slamming upstairs-bedroom door—Vera’s bedroom door.

The ensuing silence didn’t fool him; and he knew that although the spirits were at that part of the house, he nonetheless had to go there, for that was where he was sure he’d find his wife.

Steven turned the rest of his body to the stairway and began his ascension. With each step, he planned his response to a physical assault by the entities. *What can I do?* he asked himself, rhetorically. *I can’t even see it coming.* Reaching the top of the stairs and then the closed door to Vera’s room (her room was the very first on the left), he attempted to brace himself, physically and mentally, for what was in that room.

He grasped the doorknob, turned it quickly and pushed it open with some evident authority. With only the foot of Vera’s bed in sight, Steven could see the bottom half of his wife’s pink nightgown and a protruding pair of pale-white feet. He took a few more steps, allowing him a greater view of Vera.

What Steven then saw was the end of his wife’s life and in an emotional sense the end of his own life. There she lay in her bloodstained bed, her arms and their cut wrists straight at her side with a large kitchen knife in her right hand. And perhaps such wounds not being enough to allow her life to completely drain from her body, a gash had also been made across Vera’s slender neck, from ear lobe to ear lobe, leaving her jugular severed.

Nausea overwhelmed Steven, and he felt as though he was about to faint; however, he was determined not to let himself lose consciousness at that time and place.

Walking slowly over to the bed's footboard, he looked down at his dead wife's face, her half-closed eyes still seeming to be looking back at him. He easily noticed her well-groomed, straight, blond hair; she had obviously very recently washed it (he could smell the delicious fragrance of her favorite scented shampoo) and brushed it thoroughly just before taking her life, making herself as presentable as possible without a professional beautician's hand, all for whomever would find and remove her corpse.

"Why did you do it?" Steven cried, knowing that she hadn't been depressed for the many years during which he'd known her. "They got inside your head, didn't they ... Those rotten bastards!!"

His initial fear replaced by utter despair, tears streaming down his cheeks, Steven then walked over to Vera's side and lifted her limp body up into his arms. "I won't leave you here—with *them*," he mumbled before letting out a burst of heavy sob.

Looking around the room, he asserted, "*I won't leave her again!*"

He left the room and descended the stairway without incident, although beginning to notice that he wasn't at all fearful anymore of the spirits' malicious potential. But with his wife—both lover and best friend—was dead, and, to his lamenting mind, what worse harm could conceivably come to him; they already did the most damage to his life which he felt was possible. And he felt no doubt that they'd indeed been the cause of Vera's suicide, that they had screwed with her mind until she destroyed herself.

But stepping down from the last stair, Steven, for a brief moment, questioned whether the entities had really managed to destroy Vera, since before him stood a translucent image of Vera or her figure, though her deceased body hung from his arms. The energy that was her precious life force, her consciousness or soul, stood not even four meters away. Her spirit stared at him with a blank, emotionless expression on her ashen face. The rest of her, although not blurred, was indistinguishable but rather a grayish-white form that was neither naked nor clothed.

"Vera?" Steven gasped. "Vera? Is that really *you*?"

He glanced down at her corporeal form, then back up to where he'd just seen her 'ghost,' however she was gone, and so was his fleeting glimmer of hope.

Then, considering what Vera's spiritual presence would mean, he soon felt that he actually preferred the concept that the image of Vera's ghost was naught but his aggrieved mind grasping for figurative straws. Because if it truly was her soul, he would really not be able to take Vera from there; she would remain there for as long as she felt such a strong attraction to that house, perhaps even much longer. Even worse, he would have to leave her consciousness behind in the company of them—the foul beings that had viciously attacked him and then drove Vera to kill herself.

Steven, gently placing Vera's body onto the front passenger seat, intensely felt that there was but one positive thing he could do about his wife's death, other than give her a beautiful funeral: He could capture the strongest essence of Vera in one particularly special memory and cherish it, as cliché-like as it sounded in his mind's ear. A memory of a very special time: when they walked down the church aisle, hand in hand, to be wed—till death did them part. ■

## *Let's Step Outside*

The Laser Palace arcade, though a few mocked it as the Loser Palace, was well-occupied that afternoon, and being a wet day exacerbated the humidly stuffy atmosphere within. Nevertheless, upon entering I went straight for the *Space Shuttle* pinball machine and plugged in two bits.

Removing my worn, wool insulated, denim jacket, I noticed Barney standing next to an adjacent video game, staring at me.

*What's his problem?* went through my mind, as well as some concern.

Returning my attention to my pinball machine and pressing the start button, Barney spoke: "Michelson was up here, and he's looking for you," he informed me, a little too gleefully for my comfort. "He's drunk."

John Michelson was a tough-guy wannabe, known to get drunk and then into street fights; it was even alleged that he was an "experienced" fighter while under the influence of moderate amounts of alcohol.

"Thrills," was my brave façade response. However, the truth was, I really wasn't into a physical confrontation, and I began to wish I'd stayed home that bleak weathered Monday afternoon.

Barney—a.k.a. "Burney," because of his propensity towards selling underweighted cannabis allotments—was a smalltime, small hearted drug dealer. His faded denim upper and lower body attire plus weather-beaten Dayton boots, all complimented by his scraggly head hair, did everything but make him look the least bit trustworthy. Just his rowdy, worn out appearance alone should've served to warn those of a pacifist predisposition to not deal with him, for he simply couldn't be counted upon to practice business ethics of the scrupulous sort.

As for John and his dealings at the time, he was facing a likely four years of jail time for rape, and he was 'living it up' while free on bail pending a ruling on a defense motion for the judge to grant him an appeal of his conviction. His friend Greg, and his own older brother Rod, I'd heard, testified for the prosecution against John in exchange for reduced sentences for themselves. (The victim testified that the three, without doubt extremely intoxicated, assaulted her after they picked her up hitchhiking.)

Not wanting to be obvious about my intimidated mindset by leaving the arcade too soon, I decided that I'd leave after a game or two. Or so I thought.

About five minutes into my game (I was doing well on that pinball machine for a change, just my luck), within my peripheral vision I could see the door open; sure enough it was John. But just as quickly as he'd entered, he'd disappeared amongst some video games. *Where in hell did he go?* I thought, my adrenalin flow increasing.

The next thing I knew, he was standing behind me at my four o'clock, and I could smell the liquor on his breath.

(It's noteworthy to clarify that I was at a crossroad in my very troubled youth at which I was just beginning to stand up for myself against bullies and other wannabe-tough-guys-at-others'-expense skid folk.)

"Let's step outside," he immediately insisted.

"When I finish my game," I counter-offered, still attempting to maintain a

confident demeanor.

**J**ohn and I went back about three years, though we only knew each other by looks. The first time I came across him, I was walking along Marine Drive by the White Rock pier one summer day in 1982, as he was walking in my direction accompanied by two younger boys (one likely was his younger brother Gerald, and both appeared to be in admiration of the bigger John). As they approached me and passed by, John gave me a nasty look. Not wishing to initiate a physical confrontation via the always risky ‘stare-dare challenge,’ I returned my gaze back to straight ahead.

It would be about two years later that John would unconvincingly behave courteously towards me, as though he’d never seen me before. Initially, I theorized that perhaps his chivalry was at least in part due to the two new friends—beholders of renown no-nonsense attitudes and respectable reputations as true-to-their-nature tough guys—with whom I’d begun associating.

Consequently, I presumed that John, unlike that first time by the White Rock pier, no longer had a problem with my presence.

It indeed seemed to be as such, until I persistently refused to “front” John \$25 (i.e. pay first, and then hopefully receive your cannabis soon-enough after his disappearance) for a supposedly real eighth-of-an-ounce plastic sandwich baggie of cannabis. He adamantly felt that I should trust him with my money as he’d disappear between some houses, allegedly to the residence of some super-paranoid-as-per-usual drug dealer who supposedly refused to face most of his customers.

Regardless of his assurances that there was nothing for me to worry about, I nevertheless insisted, though to no avail, that I go along with him and (most importantly) my money into the presence of the dealer. (Soon after that unfortunate disagreement, my then closest friend informed me that John was well-enough known to, at the least, pinch a couple joints’ worth of cannabis for himself or even go as far as help himself to all of the cash or cannabis.

As it happened, following that incident John decided that, like old times, he didn’t like me after all, therefore he commenced erroneously, maliciously propagating around the scummier side of town that I was in fact a police informant or “a rat.”

*If Frank isn’t an informant, he wouldn’t insist upon coming with me to the dealer,* was his flawed yet self-serving logic.

It wasn’t long before he and a couple of his ‘tough guy’ friends expressed their contempt for me one Saturday night by throwing little pieces of rolled-up paper at my head while I was racking up yet another top score on the *Star Wars* video game (naught but an enough-practice-makes-perfect accomplishment though nonetheless seemingly earning me even more contempt from the trio). But what was I to do—try fighting off all three scumbags? Not bloody likely, for John alone was enough for me way back then.

A day later, I was drinking a mickey of Southern Comfort at the same said closest friend’s residence, with the previous night’s unmerited bullying I’d endured lingering in my thoughts. With the liquid courage alcohol consumption increasingly motivating me to express my anger and requisite physical vengeance, I foolishly decided to even the score with my nemesis. By the time we’d driven uptown to the arcade, I was as obnoxiously cocky and extensively motor-functional disorientated as a drunk could be—and I’d end up receiving a bruising for it.

I went inside the Laser Palace and called him out onto the paved parking lot. Once outside, with a dozen or so onlookers from the arcade around us, things got physical, with me monopolizing the receiving end of the action.

For a short period of time, perhaps six to eight weeks following the altercation, I felt psychologically as well as physically emasculated by his presence; meanwhile he, on the contrary, doubtlessly felt superior. But it didn't take me very long to rebel against that strong sense of subservience, and I began giving *him* dirty looks. More so, the occasion would soon arise whence I even gave him an unmistakably firm shoulder bump as we passed each other on my way from the Laser Palace to the local Muffin Break coffee shop.

“Not good enough!” was John's silent yet quite physical response, as he suckered me. It was clearly an impaired, clumsy attempt at getting me into a solid headlock, for I readily slipped my head out from his clasping arm. He nevertheless continued his attempt at wrestling me into a position favorable to him, all as thoughts of debilitating dread raced through my mind

Perhaps the most intense, stomach-turning thought was the one undoubtedly from within my defeatist psyche which let me know as I was hit two or three times that I was in a bad situation, in a bad place infested with bad people.

We landed on the barely carpeted, cement-based floor and tussled for but a moment, each determined to get on top of the other thus gaining dominance. Fortunately, I got him on all fours, with my right knee pressed down onto his back.

“Now it's your turn,” I said as I initiated repaying his assault, directed to his head. However, with a sudden burst of kinetic energy, he threw his body mass upwards and me off of his back.

John's friends and allies took him outside to wait for me as he took in some fresh air. I, on the other hand, remained inside with my boney legs feeling like buckling. Meanwhile, I began futilely squinting about the floor for my glasses, which I'd eventually reacquire two days later, all twisted up and useless (except for a few spare parts for future specs requiring them).

I had fear in my heart, while his held drunken rage within. The two extreme opposite ends of the psychological/emotional spectrum greatly interact thus feed from and get depleted by one another; thus, each is increasingly intensified and usually results in one triumphant winner and one lacerated loser.

About ninety seconds later, John walked back in and towards me with his forefinger motioning me to, “Come here, Frank.”

“No way, man,” I declined, waving my hands in the negative as he approached me. He then began angrily rambling incoherently about my ‘offenses’ committed against him, though in reality all being either just alleged or in factuality.

Perhaps feeling confident that I wasn't going to strike back judging by the panic likely showing in my eyes, he laid one on my left cheek. But my unpredictable hair-trigger-fury-when-hit reflex, rather than any fear I had felt, fully revealed itself and dictated my temporary ‘psycho’ physical response to his surprisingly weak blow. As his arms covered as much of his face as possible to block my rapid succession of uppercuts, our ‘winning/losing’ roles up till that point were already shifting: I had become the aggressor while, it appeared, he became the stunned and much less presumptuous.

*By utilizing the derogatory term ‘psycho’ to describe my very rare mental state, even during such a horrible experience, I’m expressing how some altercation spectators perceived me when I so dramatically lost my temper composure control the instant that an angry, rambling John blatantly drifted me one to the cheek. In fact, I discovered exactly what was/is meant by the phrase, “I saw red” or “seeing red,” for that’s what I saw—just like a very light red tinted, transparent filter instantly placed over each eye’s pupil.*

*Also noteworthy is that, from considering my 20/20 hindsight observations over many years, there has always been for me, and for most males with whom I’ve dialogued this topic, a purely psychologically based—but translated and carried over to the physical—advantage to me waiting for my opponent to take the initiative and physically strike first, a fact likely reflected by the typically male expression or invitation to “go ahead and lay one on me,” while the provoker repeatedly taps his forefinger upon his chin. Perhaps it’s a congenitally acquired instinct ingrained upon our species’ psyche, particularly as Neanderthals, so we’d not kill ourselves off as a species—via both by massive numbers of deadly beatings and the resultant insufficient quantity of semen providers to maintain our race’s existence—by instigating gratuitous deadly violence en masse. Therefore, we survive (in this sense) because, if only a first strike results in this violence, avoiding that first strike in the first place significantly reduces the risk of such form of self-annihilation.*

Having observed the said turn of events, the arcade attendant—short, but with a conspicuously heavy build (perhaps through steroid use, being in vogue back then)—jumped me from the side and held me to the floor. Again John went outside to await my eventual exit. When I did so only a couple minutes later, my exit was without choice, according to the attendant, who had intervened on a total of three occasions during that day’s arcade altercation by diving on me and only when I’d finally let loose on John.

I was outside for a few seconds before my debilitating fear again ridiculously turned me into a limp noodle, thus enabling him to easily throw me down onto the red brick walkway like I was naught but a ragdoll.

Immediately after dropping his knee onto my abdomen (or perhaps my chin, though I don’t recall feeling any notable impact, pain nor further facial lacerations), I threw a punch upwards that connected with his nose area but was too weak to draw any blood.

Separated once again, I then sufficiently sensed the thick air of contempt felt for me almost all around in order to walk away.

I walked away with my coat over my shoulder, a gash on my cheek and mangled glasses left behind somewhere inside the arcade. *What a day*, I thought, spitting out some reddish saliva, which was followed by my tongue sliding across my two very loose upper-front teeth.

But it all wasn’t over as of yet: “Frank!” came the cry from somewhere behind me.

John was running towards me without his T-shirt, Clint Eastwood style, and closely followed by his mob-like supporters.

I hastily looked around for the locale of my choice to endure yet another round; I ran across the street, stopping at an old shopping mall’s parking lot, maybe even disappointing some who would’ve taken pleasure in watching me flee the entire scene.

I tossed my coat aside and watched the maniacal Clint charging at me.

With the arcade spectators right behind him, John stopped about a meter from me. He threw a fist and a kick at me with both off their mark, as I simply pulled back; however, his misdirected kick caused him enough imbalance to fall to his hands and knees. He obviously was wearing thin, tiring and losing body co-ordination, all at an increasing rate.

Of course I wasn't at all in a merciful mood after having to deal with such an obnoxiously inebriated, violent punk and to such a nasty degree. I physically explained to him that he should've remained back at the arcade or very near it.

My succeeding kick into his horizontally orientated abdomen was easy yet satisfying. I went down on my knees, awkwardly wrapped my left arm around his head and face, then began delivering for a second and final time a succession of rapid uppercuts to his face, which that time wasn't blocked at all by anything.

In turn, perhaps intended to literally cost me a digit, he bit into my forefinger, since my left hand's fingers happened to be gripping that area of his face. As he bit with increasing jaw strength, I transferred the pain to my finger to the intensity of and rate at which my right fist delivered additional uppercuts.

It was somewhat like a who'll-blink-first standoff—which of us could endure the most intensifying assault, for the longest time.

Biting into my finger as hard as he could, he seemed to realize that he was getting by far the worst of the tradeoff and threw himself upwards sufficiently forceful to throw me off, causing me to lose balance and land on my back.

As I lay there vulnerable, he attempted to gain total advantage by solidly positioning himself above my head and shoulder region. However, as he tried to get around my feet, repeatedly dodging left to right then back again, I rotated my grounded body so as to kick him away if he tried to get close enough to evade my feet.

Luckily, the embarrassing conduct lasted no more than 15 seconds before some older, larger guy brought it all to a halt.

I suggested that we settle any remaining differences another day, which never did come, with nothing but silence from John.

Re-engaging my walk away home, I looked at my bloodied finger and noticed that, ironically, John had viciously bitten square on and deep into a large wart thus permanently annihilating it.

With many townsfolk eyes witnessing the ugly violence, not to mention my lacerated face, the police not surprisingly were summoned. The police officer who'd intercepted me with his cruiser made a notable effort to be sympathetic while insisting that I go to the emergency ward of the local hospital to be checked out for any unseen physical trauma (e.g. brain hemorrhage).

Once there, given the doctor's O.K. and feeling somewhat foolish, I went through some tedious paperwork with a staffer. All the while I couldn't help but repetitiously wonder how in hell I got into such a mess—as though it was *my* blunder or character flaw that was at fault.

Leaving the hospital, though, I once again was forced to endure John's (fortunately very brief) presence, for he was taken to the hospital by another officer shortly after I'd arrived. John sat slumped forward in a wheelchair, his head hanging down as though he'd passed out. It then fully dawned on me that he was the reason I was

at the hospital and faced with the prospect of a catastrophizing, overemotional mother greeting me in shock when the officer drove me home.

“Goof!” was the last and only thing that I’d say to him as I, flanked by the officer, left the hospital. (Yes, I did see him one last time as we exchanged a stare dare glare one day by the beach front adjacent to the White Rock pier—in fact, just meters from the very spot where he’d given me that first ugly look and, as chance would have it, a blatant stare dare likely for no other reason than just to be a tough guy in the eyes of a couple kids.)

“You know, you can always lay assault charges,” I was informed by the officer, who’d learned from some honest source which of us had indeed instigated the brawl. “But from what I’ve seen, he got the worst of it.”

“Nah,” I replied, still picturing Mom suffering a large stroke when she’d see my face, no matter who “got the worst of it” or the least. “Just let it be.”

*(The Laser Palace arcade was shut down only days later by a Surrey city council greatly embarrassed by and therefore fed up with all of the criminal activity frequently occurring there. The fight was simply the cliché straw that broke the camel’s back.)*■

## ***Why Do They Hate?***

Oh, Lord, why do so many one another hate  
—neighbour against neighbour, nation against nation;  
don't they know the hour is nigh when it'll all be too late  
for them to convince You to not damn Creation?

All too readily, Red resents Yellow, White stabs at Black,  
relentlessly; Yellow despises Red, Black beats on White—  
compassion and forgiveness they collectively lack,  
they do naught but argue, threaten, then physically fight.

Their fighting causes innocents' flesh to be torn, them to mourn,  
the fighters' ignorance and hate insist upon their continued wars  
—bloody wars leaving countless to cry out, “Why were we even born!?”  
because the evil will not stop till the fighters have all settled their scores.

Theistic person, *please*, practice the true teachings of your religion,  
telling you to love and forgive your enemies as ye do yourself  
so that you and those you hate may break from brutal tradition,  
rather place your vile venom and bigotry on the very back shelf.

People, people, while on spaceship Earth you're all confined,  
your hate will continue to grow until your frail race does fall  
and your self-destructive nature annihilates all mankind  
because you allowed your differences to form a formidable wall.

## ***ODE to the Infinite, the Finite & Our Foolishness***

Life's irony's the view we benefit  
from physical, material delight  
as though naught counts but what's felt or in sight  
while ignored our souls are desperate  
for what should count the most—*the infinite*;  
yet we'll go on till it's too late, despite  
much instinct in us of what's truly right,  
that life's content is so inadequate.  
Regardless, to that same life we cling tight  
since but the physical seems definite  
thus for material matters we fight—  
like the blind-mind addict's barbiturate—  
while Great Hereafter's placed post-the-finite,  
so skewed are values foremost we'll permit.

## *No Favors Are Done*

The source of the magic enabling them to dream such  
was besides the point, for the dream would be shared  
by both husband and wife, both wanting a child very much;  
they so desired a child, for whom they'd have much cared  
although their ovum and sperm had yet to touch,  
the child—"Sammy"—would've been the greatest reason they'd paired.

Thus the two adults stood (naked) before Sammy in the dream,  
Sammy, who was indeed the consciousness, the soul,  
the child who appeared (naked, too) through God supreme;  
then the miraculous occurred, with the goal  
of parents meeting their one offspring, God did deem,  
even before the twain conceived—played their role.

"I was told you two are to be my mom and dad,"  
said Sammy, "and you're to be responsible  
for my life, health and wellbeing during times good and bad";  
Sammy then smiled at them with love demonstrable  
which in turn compelled them to return the smile, then add,  
"Child, we will care for you and are capable ...

... Though most important," they said, "*we'll give you life*";  
then Sammy pondered for a moment and said, "In such  
a world, the 'life' you will 'give' me will hold much strife,  
a world in which I may suffer pain and bleak dread,  
suffer afflictions, perhaps AIDS, or someone's cold, twisting knife  
—I may 'live' so much that I just may envy the dead ...

... Though life can hold much with which others to bless,"  
concluded Sammy, "know that you do me no favour  
by placing me into a world which seems to regress  
—its populace practicing evil behaviour,  
a reality causing so many so much distress—  
and offers very little for the good to savour."

The man and woman, in stunned disbelief, then replied,  
"We hadn't expected that you would feel such,  
so intensely averse towards life, its painful and cruel side,  
we wouldn't want you to suffer, to endure so much";  
thus, the couple soon awoke, exchanged a sad glance and cried  
over the unborn soul—the Sammy they would never touch.

*“Empath, noun: (chiefly in science fiction) a person with the paranormal ability to apprehend the mental or emotional state of another individual.”*

*—The New Oxford Dictionary of English*

## ***In All Due Fairness: A Divine Manifestation and Intervention Over All Earthly Suffering***

**“I**t has continued for too long,” the Creator firmly decided late New Year’s Eve, 1999, having taken note of humankind’s temporally-aware condition. “I did not realize that so much miserable time had lapsed. Nonetheless, belated change for good is better than naught.”

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000, everyone on Earth awoke to a suddenly far superior existence than just hours before, indeed a Great Change. It was, and would always remain so, the most profound change ever; one that favoured the materially, physically, mentally and spiritually poorest people everywhere.

All healthy and wealthy people of the world, the fortunate large majority, inexplicably—though it actually occurred by way of divine simulation—experienced the bitter ailments and enormous wants plaguing their fellow human and four-legged beings. Not at all surprising, it was only through such involuntary telepath-like empathy experienced by the fortunate that utmost efforts were made by them to ensure as-pleasant-as-possible lives for literally all of those unfortunate souls.

The first spectacular alteration well-noticed in the Great Change was that, henceforth, any hunger pains endured by some were unavoidably universally felt by all; thus the well-fed were irresistibly compelled to do their very best at alleviating hunger in its global totality. In return, those who had suffered prolonged starvation awoke to an exceptionally strong sense of relief from the persistent unquenched pains. Uniquely amazing, the great relief was felt long before the arrival of food-aid shipments anxiously sent mostly by fully developed countries—food gratefully given because the planet’s privileged were abruptly feeling what had consumed the very hungry for so very long. And in return for that purest of empathy expressed through both mind and practise, by feeding while feeling all Earthly hunger, the fortunate folks’ own starvation cramps—all of which came to be recognized more as some form of sympathy pains—were themselves alleviated.

Then, again unprecedentedly profound, every fortunate person who’d never been tormented in such a grievous manner instantly began empathically equally sharing in the anguish suffered because of the greatest personal loss that fate seemed to apathetically reserve for those few so extremely unlucky—that of a parent who’d lost a child to torture and murder. In rehabilitative return, those unfortunate parents who’d suffered the unjust extreme loss and cruel crime felt so very great a relief of their affliction, since every fortunate person on the planet also bore a tiny portion of that emotional turmoil in its collective entirety. In the Great Change scheme of things, when all members of ‘the world community’ genuinely empathically shared in such terrible loss, it was to be a literal sharing of grief, just as though each and every person was each and every child victim’s parent.

In further such divine intervention, every person who'd intentionally caused suffering, justly yet involuntarily sustained the more intensely bitter side of truly empathic justice. If one had shot another person, he then experienced the same excruciating pain and terror suffered by his victim. If one gratuitously harmed a harmless stray animal—a neighbour's benign beloved pet being the example divinely considered, (non-human) animals being intellectually incapable of malicious acts simply for the sake of malice—the offender thus experienced both that animal's suffering as well as its owner's emotional anguish.

Regardless of how minor the bad deed, the perpetrator was always left experiencing, through divine simulation, the precisely same resultant physical and mental turmoil. Furthermore it quickly became realized by all that, even without the unfortunates' and victims' awareness of the unexplainable sudden Great Change, their cause was still equally endured in due fairness by all fortunate persons and perpetrators. Indeed, soon put into newsprint was the old-school journalistic mission statement: the comfortable were being empathically afflicted, while the afflicted were contrarily comforted through similarly empathic means.

The figurative thesis statement of the genuinely just function of the Great Change was rather analogous to a fiscally imprudent national government squandering a large sum of the public treasury. With the impact of the monetary shortfall shouldered equally via a negligible tax increase placed upon every service-recipient citizen, each endured but a miniscule portion of the collective monetary damage.

There was also beauty within the vast newness expressed through excessive wealth, albeit under the vast weight of overwhelming divine compulsion, being fully distributed to the countless in most need. In great return, the newly-forced-into-philanthropy were alleviated of the clinical depression that typically accompanied their unquenched thirst for progressive purpose in their lives to replace the melancholy manufacturing meaninglessness of faithfully reading *The Wall Street Journal*.

What amazed everyone in every nation by noon that New Year's Day was the unanimous hundred percent effort made by the planet's fortunate residents to significantly better the lives of their fellow though unfortunate human and four-legged beings.

Amongst the few seriously dreading the Great Change the very most, not in the least surprising, were the bigwig CEOs at the insidious helm of the giant tobacco industry. There was no denying that their PR reps and senior henchmen knowingly caught and firmly maintained within their deceitful web for many lucrative decades billions of addicted people who abused the vicious health-hazard product thus severely sickening before prematurely dying.

The said offenders awoke to specifically feel what it was like to incessantly worry over their loved-ones' inevitable future financial difficulties due to their debilitating smoking-related illness or death. They suffered the same continuous anxiety suffered by their countless smoking patrons, though particularly those not covered by any adequate medical insurance or sufficient savings to ensure their families the necessities of life.

Then, the same offending moral-fibre-bottom-feeders experienced a divinely-induced simulation of the stunning stinging sensation frighteningly felt by a chronic smoker whose collapsing lungs are undergoing serious blood-vessel breaches. The tobacco product profiteers coughed uncontrollably until imminently releasing globs of

blood into the sink. Yet, although they were in fact experiencing the physical sensations and visual effects caused by their own menacingly toxin-laden creation that's promptly promoted worldwide, the divine act of the Great Change nonetheless spared them from the actual physical damage that would've been so poetically justified.

Again very profound events occurred, involving elected and appointed officials who had knowingly allowed lifelong crippling diseases to infect large quantities of banked emergency blood supplies. Of course, collective humankind being what it was, the inexcusably inhumane crime was committed for the single-minded immoral purpose of increased ill-gotten personal-profit and government-coffer loot. But the guilty were all individually made to make significant empathic amends, especially as they had permitted sickness and death to prolifically spread by way of their personally-convenient silence. The perpetrators awoke in terrified bewilderment to mandatorily suffer the same horrendous consequences that they'd caused multitudes of young and old alike to needlessly suffer by way of Hepatitis C and HIV. All perpetrators experienced "a bleed," during which blood accumulated in the stomach until the pressure increased sufficiently to have the blood horrifically burst the wall of the esophagus. Exactly as would many Hep-C victims, those responsible for the disease infection and rampage within the blood supply literally felt the life flow out of them as they regurgitated their own blood, just prior to complete liver failure.

Henceforth, the offenders were unavoidably self-compelled to devote the remainder of their lives alleviating their own simulated symptoms of the deadly blood illnesses they had allowed to flourish. And yet again in return was the immense relief of the actual illness and symptoms excessively suffered by those innocents unjustly infected because of the monetary and political gain by others so poetically brought to bear for their great misdeeds.

Furthermore, through divine inducement did all other diseases immediately become broadly acknowledged; thus, medical research into them, to procure both treatments and cures, increased exponentially through exponentially greater funding to the point of surplus monies, almost entirely by multi-national corporations.

Dominantly flanking that just cause, the few yet overly-privileged pharmaceutical industry insiders—until New Year's Day, 2000, their freshest fruits monetarily inaccessible to the virtual totality of Earth's large majority impoverished populace—empathically endured that suffered by the countless unduly unfortunate folk unable to afford the extremely expensive medication. What else could the empathically penancing over-privileged mass-pill-peddlers at all do but to make the greatest possible effort to ensure that no person, regardless of wealth and Earthly location, was ever again left wanting of equal access to top-quality medical treatment.

Also highlighting the first day of the rest of humanity, the mass beneficiaries of superfluously profitable gargantuan corporations began to truly feel the debilitating anxiety and hopelessness suffered by the plenitude of employees they'd fired. They were fired people heavily reliant on their jobs in order to provide food and shelter for their families but left destitute due to "down-sizing" for the sole soulless goal of enabling even greater financial-beneficiary yields for all corporate insiders. Irresistibly complying with their inexplicable compulsions to halt all needless terminations of employment regardless of the negligible negative effect upon their grand profit margins, the corporate mass beneficiaries discovered that the unpleasant 'sympathy anxiety' they were suffering was

quickly alleviated simply by their miniscule fiscal sacrifice for the sole yet far superior sake of their employees and relevant loved-ones.

Furthermore, the same overly privileged business tycoons residing easily in their extravagant mansions while feasting on figurative or literal truffles and caviar, also empathically endured the same great angst suffered by the forlorn massive-majority poor typically languishing throughout the undeveloped world. The overly-privileged had long retained the shamefully shabby employment of the deteriorating poor for but pennies per hour, with so very many withering away under the worst of working conditions, often for eighteen-hour days.

But out from such inhumanity poured profound moral freshness solely because of the Great Change, gratefully offered and generously accepted was the sudden yet long overdue many-fold increase in wages paid and quality of working conditions.

The corporate masters then went even further by hastily insisting upon such wearily impoverished laborers' lives in every aspect becoming generally aligned with those enjoyed by laborers throughout the developed world. Meanwhile, average workers in the developed world were themselves straightaway brought up to par with their far more generously salaried fellow labourers and countrymen. Most significant in the demonstratively vast newness in universal labour practises was that, because of their extensively improved wages, working conditions and therefor much healthier lives, the said undeveloped-world labourers were finally enabled—with full credit going to their employers' 'sympathy symptoms' or divinely enforced empathy—to relish their weekends, *away from work*, to freely spend them with their loved-ones or even with their own untroubled thoughts.

Yet in primary profound intent was the Great Change so aptly defined, as all persons directly or indirectly responsible for mass-scale torture and murder were those at the highest peak in the order of the lowest moral fibre to be found anywhere on Earth, and for their vilest of misdeeds they were henceforth foremost empathically forced to justly correct and compensate.

Having so abundantly utilized the mightiest armament to cause incalculably prolific suffering, weapons so readily peddled to them by powerful nations' worst human beings—the latter being vastly armed yet minimally self-allotted humane responsibility thus to suffer uniquely great empathy—various tyrants of so many war-torn territories found their divinely-induced 'sympathy pains' of the utmost unbearable kind. As they quickly realized, any forthcoming relief would, first of all, have to be preceded by the total relinquishment of their blood-stained loot to their surviving victims and families of such. Secondly, though of greatest importance, the relatively meagre material recompense would itself have to be immediately followed by such greatest of offenders, without any exception, devoting the remainder of their waken lives toward naught but doing their utmost to alleviate suffering they'd brought upon the multitudes.

Although they could never, even in multiple lifetimes, even come close to empathically experiencing all of the needless anguish they'd so cruelly caused, they nevertheless were ultimately even greatly gratified to just be permitted to lead their remaining days in that precise penancing direction. To spare their victims some suffering—to genuinely sympathetically endure the simulated agony for which they were responsible—was all that they'd ever again passionately crave. Henceforth were the worst of Earthly perpetrators so sincerely grateful for their opportunity to perform a

penance so perfectly befitting—one so earnestly paid in all due fairness—that any of their own empathic suffering or sympathetic pain alleviated in return was for them purely charitable divine icing on an already rich cake.

From that January 1<sup>st</sup> of the new millennium, the very first day of the Creator’s Great Change, not one single person would receive any satisfaction whatsoever from another’s misfortune. Quite the contrary, in fact. Since sensitivity was divinely ruling the day, fortunate people soon began experiencing exactly that afflicting unfortunate people—regardless of the fortunate folks not even being at any fault.

In the process of so fully sensing and acknowledging others’ plights, fortunate people actually imminently became insufferably weary of others experiencing any burdensome health or event in the first place—great weariness felt because of pure sympathy, following the brief period of feeling such for but self-serving personal relief in exchange. No longer did one person enjoy comfort and pleasure while another agonized over sadness and misery. All pleasure and pain were shared or, in another sense, balanced out equally across the planet.

“Unfortunately, if a great menace and resultant miserable misfortune fail to ‘hit home very hard’ and literally directly negatively affect, as a good example, an offending leader’s very own most cherished—his wife and especially his children—truly progressive action, at least on his part, will not readily happen, if at all. Such seriously flawed human nature might have been both identified *and* rectified millennia ago,” said the Creator in conclusion. “Nonetheless, it is indeed better late than never.”■

## *The One That Got Away: A Story About a Fishing Net*

We had talked about it for so long and were finally putting words into action. My good friend Al and I, both 16, had made the monotonous bus trip from White Rock to the fishermen's dry dock in Steveston and gathered enough material to put together our own miniature gill net. It was about four by three meters in size and consisted of a piece of light-green web hung from a thin, yellow rope and weighted down by a lead line. The net was small enough to carry down to the Little Campbell River in a black, plastic garbage bag, with room to spare for any salmon we might catch that night.

It was early October, 1984, and the salmon were migrating to spawn. They were making their way into Semiahmoo Bay from Washington state waters and then into and up the Little Campbell. Al and I had witnessed, with understandable envy, the sport fishermen catching their quota day after day during the prior couple weeks; and we, particularly Al, felt confident that we would do at least as good.

Al, always the one to take most of the risks involved in our joint ventures, had crawled across a fallen tree bridging the four-meter span at that point on the river.

"How can we miss," said Al, securing his end of the net around a tree on the south bank, which was Indian reservation land. "The fish can't pass without hitting the net."

We sat down on opposite banks and lit up our cigarettes. Sitting there silently, mostly for fear of scaring away any fish, we stared at the seemingly lifeless water flowing through our empty net for about fifteen minutes before I looked up. The falling darkness was absorbing the many tree branches above us. The night meant we had to work in the dark but also meant that any unwanted attention on our activity was unlikely.

"Something would've hit by now if there was anything here," I said to Al and suggested we move on.

"Yeah, you're right. Not a single jumper," he replied and flicked away what was left of his second cigarette. "Let's hit the golf course."

In case we failed to reap harvest at our first fishing spot, the contingency plan was to try our luck at the nearby South Surrey golf course. It was cut in half by the river, which could be crossed on bridges at various points. To get there, we had to cross the freeway—underneath which flowed the river—jump a deep but narrow ditch and slip through a small gap in a tall fence. Al led the way, assuring me that the first bridge was near the lighted pole penetrating the darkness before us.

But as we walked over the kept golf-course grass and the bridge revealed itself, the more skeptical I felt about the new location—it all just seemed too sterile for fish to travel through. The only thing I could picture us catching was perhaps a cold. Al, on the other hand, appeared to stride towards and onto the bridge with optimism.

He stood at its center and peered down into the black river. "They're here," he said with confidence. "Let's throw it in."

Except for the wood floor panels, the bridge was metallic and stretched about fifteen meters across. And, quite unlike our first spot, the river's bed and banks through the golf course were made of cement.

"This is too sanitary," I said to an ignoring Al. "We'll get nothing here."

We set the net and seated ourselves. Al lit up a cigarette, and, just like the contagious yawn, I followed his lead. Waiting for any sign of marine life, we stared down

into the darkness blanketing the flowing river. If not for the brightly lit freeway a few hundred meters before us and the lamp post about thirty meters behind us, our eyes would've been completely useless.

The net had laid dead in the water a good forty minutes, and not one jumper for encouragement. I looked at Al, and he looked back at me and mumbled, "Don't say it; I don't want to leave yet."

It was probably too early in the season, I told him. "We'll come back in mid October when the salmon..."

*And there it was.* A heavy, yet unseen, splash below us. Both of us fell silent and looked down past our dangling feet into the darkness, but all that was left was the gentle rippling of the river running its course.

*And there it was, again*—another great splash right where our net lay followed by continuous splashing.

We jumped to our feet and pulled up the net. Squinting, we could see the entangled fish thrashing for its life like a black fly freshly caught by a spider's web. Although being Al's first, he picked the slimy salmon from the net like a professional. It was a beautiful five-pound Coho and hit hard the bottom of our plastic bag.

"See, you shouldn't be so negative," he lectured me, as we once again dropped the net. "And there's more from where that baby came from."

And he was right. Less than a minute later, another big splash overwhelmed the tempered sound of freeway traffic.

"We're going home loaded!" Al cried. He pulled the net up on his own and picked the salmon free.

In his excitement, he clumsily gripped its slimy back and it slipped from his grasp like a wet bar of soap. The fish slapped the bridge's wood floor and slid towards the edge. As though his very life depended on it, Al dived onto the floorboards to save the catch. But the fish was gone.

With a fierce curse, he got back up. We reset the net, and Al apologized while assuring me that such bungling would never happen again. And, once again, he was right.

We fished fruitlessly for the next couple hours before heading home at 1:03 a.m. On our way home with our one fish, I told Al that somehow I knew we wouldn't be catching any more salmon from the river—ever.

"Don't worry, there'll be other nights and other fish," he interjected. "And at least we got one, tonight ... eh?"

There *were* other nights, but all were fruitless. As for that first night—and first and last gill-netted salmon, and the one that got away—I, unlike Al, went home feeling cheated and bitter. I could not help but feel that we had left that river with our proverbial glass half empty, whereas Al saw the glass as half full. ■

## *The Very Last of Nine Lives*

Ceso was a Tomcat on his deathbed. He'd had a life full of injury, mostly through catfights of his own making; however, it was his recent stroke, which left his right leg paralyzed, that was soon going to result—directly or indirectly—in his death. Though Ceso (pronounced Sesso) knew full well that his human family members loved and adored him since the very day they had adopted him as a rejected, black, runt kitten, he also knew that the one closest to him, Jordan, reluctantly intended to put him to sleep if his grim condition did not improve. So there he laid, a very sick, 12-year-old cat, on the sitting-room's carpeted floor, in the summer sunlight piercing the window.

But, letting out one of his frequent hairball hacks, Ceso noticed movement through the corner of his eye; he turned his head, and, to his dismay, it was a black kitten: Jordan had just brought her home from a household out near the farming community. The kitten, 'Mimi,' slowly walked into the sitting room, followed by Jordan, who formally introduced the two felines to each other. Jordan then left the room and hadn't been gone at all long before Ceso hissed at Mimi. He, spitting and growling at her, then got up onto his somewhat weakened front legs, with his ears pulled back. Their eyes met, and the two felines locked into a telepathic connection.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?!" he demanded of her. "This is *my* place!"

Mimi replied with a little hiss of her own; her ears were also pulled back, and her tail went up, with its hairs stretched erect. It was a tense, six-second silence that followed, as they stared at each other with wide-open eyes.

"I'm not stupid," said Ceso. "I know why you're here—and I know that it's not companionship for *my* sake."

Having said that, he relaxed and laid back down onto the carpet; Mimi did likewise.

"Maybe *you* know why I'm here, but *I* don't," she retorted. "I want to go back and play with my brothers and sister. Why am I here?!"

"You're here to take my spot, as family cat—I'm on my way out. I'm going to die."

"Die?!" Mimi asked, as her eyes widened. "Where? *Here*?!"

"No; he'll take me to the doctor, who'll do it, but I was told that it's painless. Besides, it's my time to go," Ceso informed Mimi, then took in a deep breath and let it out. "I'm beat. And I feel terrible."

"Is that why you're going to die? Are you really old, too? How old are you?"

Ceso then let out an intense hairball hack before stretching out his good leg. His neck muscle then briefly twitched because of a flea bite.

"From what I've been told, I'm 12 years old. But the last time I went to the doctor's, he said that 'physiologically' ..."—Ceso, curling his paws into quotation marks, explained—" ... I'm more like sixteen years old, probably because of all the beatings I've endured at the paws and teeth of other cats." For effect, Ceso swung his right paw at Mimi's face, intentionally just missing her. "You know something? I think I'm lucky to have made it past kitten-hood, at all."

He laid his chin down onto the carpet and slowly stretched out. All was then still and silent for about twenty seconds, as Ceso fell asleep.

Mimi then slowly crawled up to Ceso's paw and sniffed it; her eyes opened wide, before letting out an inquisitive yet gentle, "Meeoooooww?"

"What?! ... No, I'm not dead, yet," Ceso declared, lifting up his head and eyes opened wide. "I said that he would get the *doctor* to do it, didn't I?" A brief silence ensued, and Ceso's neck muscle again twitched as his eyelids relaxed.

"Why were you lucky to have made it past kitten-hood?" Mimi inquired, just a second before Ceso let out another hairball hack.

"I was locked out of my birth home when I was just two months old—and on a very cold, foggy autumn night, at that. Left to die."

He then reached over his good leg to scratch his neck before continuing with his story: "I walked out through the open back door and into the backyard, with its tall, wet grass—way over my head. Then the door slammed shut and locked behind me."

A few seconds of silence followed before Mimi asked, "Didn't you go back and cry?"

"Till my throat was raw and sore. Nobody answered. Though, early the next morning, Jordan came through his backyard and into mine after he'd heard my persistent crying. He picked me up and put me into his coat, then knocked on the door. Nobody answered, so he brought me here and adopted me," he replied, as he stared out the open window on the opposite side of the room.

"Remember, Mimi: just give him a lot of purring and murring, and he'll give you great back massages—he calls it *petting*. It's said that this exchange of good deeds is physically beneficial to both pet and host—both are healthier for it and thus even live longer for it all. Maybe it's true ... "

Ceso's neck muscle twitched, again, and he reached over his good leg and scratched his neck rapidly, with his eyes open to their fullest.

"F!@#\$!\*g flea! They can make life a real bitch, you know! Why the Creator allows their parasitic existence is beyond me!" Ceso cursed, before settling down somewhat. "I guess I'll be able to ask Him 'why?' myself, soon enough." His eyelids then slowly settled.

"What about the others?" asked Mimi. "Weren't there other kittens?"

"You mean siblings? Yeah; two sisters and a brother," he replied, letting out yet another hairball hack. (I actually had another sister, but she died at birth.) But they didn't have an obsession with open doors, like I did. I had a tendency to wander through *any* open door, especially the back door. Mr. and Mrs. Shultz probably thought I was in the house with the rest of the kittens, then shut and locked the door just before going away, somewhere."

"Somewhere? *Where?*"

"If I knew where, don't you think I'd tell you that in the first place?!" was his abrasive answer. "You're not too bright, are you, Mimi?"

Then, to her amazement (eyes opened wide), Mimi noticed and stared at the small, cloud-like formation just above Ceso's left eye's pupil. "What's that?! What happened to your eye?! Does it hurt?!"

"It's called a battle scar," he returned. "And, no, I don't feel anything, anymore."

"Battle scar?"

“I got clipped by Bonzeye, two houses down,” Ceso said, half closing the scarred eye. “He’s a real creep, you know. Stay away from him. He’ll scrap you whether or not you’re a girl.”

He then let out another intense hairball hack, as Mimi inquired, “How long ago did it happen?”

“A long time ago—alright?” Ceso replied, before yawning.

Mimi, suddenly sitting up, and her eyes opened as wide as they’d go, saw that he had only one fang in his mouth. “*What happened to your teeth?!*”

“*Too many questions!*” Ceso snapped, his eyes opened wide while letting out a reverberating hairball hack (the hacks seemed to only worsen).

Mimi took a step backwards, and a dozen seconds of silence passed as Ceso regained his composure. Completely disregarding Mimi’s latter question, Ceso went on about Bonzeye: “He clipped me just before I got ‘neutered’”—Ceso again curled his paws into quotation marks—“about eight years ago.”

A brief silence followed, and then Mimi asked, “neutered?”

Ceso seemed to have not even heard her one-word query, but rather he mused: “Now that I think about it, maybe the two incidents are somehow related. It’s said that cats—especially males—get into a lot of fights when they’re not neutered. And that fight with Bonzeye was the fight of my life,” Ceso emphasized, again half closing the scarred eye. “I was gone for three days; he, Jordan, told me that he and his family thought I had wandered off somewhere to die. I almost lost my eye, you know.”

“What about your teeth? Did Bonzeye knock them out, too?”

“No, Bonzeye didn’t ‘knock them out, too’,” Ceso corrected her, with thick sarcasm. “They fell out.” He then stretched his body, his eyelids relaxed, and a muscle twitch appeared to move from the tip of his tail, along his back and up to his neck.

“*Fell out? You are old!*”

Ceso took in another deep breath, sighed and then released what would be his very last hairball hack. Following another moment of silence, Jordan walked into the room with a pet’s traveling cage and with heavy tears in his eyes. He slowly picked up Ceso and gave him two kisses on his cheek. The two felines stared at each other as Jordan slowly, gently placed Ceso into the cage, closed the cage door and left the room. ■

## *In Defence of the True Hero*

The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines “hero” as, “a person, typically a man, who is admired or idealized for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities: *a war hero*.” To me, ‘heroism’ consists of a selfless act, which one is afraid to carry out or simply does not feel like carrying out, but one does so nonetheless. However, nowadays, ‘heroism’ is loosely assigned, such as if one helps an elderly and infirm or disabled person cross a busy street, the kind act can be branded as something special, noble or perhaps even ‘heroic.’

A true ‘hero’ would, for example, be a UN technician who seeks out concealed or buried explosive devices in foreign territory (e.g., Croatia) and defuses or safely detonates them, regardless of the danger involved. He could be afraid of inadvertently triggering off an explosive device and killing himself, yet he does it anyways, to perhaps spare some child’s life or limb.

A good example on film is the 2010, Oscar-winning action/drama *The Hurt Locker*, which is an excellent expose of such true heroism by U.S. soldiers who seek out incendiary explosive devices (a.k.a., IEDs) in populated areas and defuse them to hopefully save the lives of Arab civilians, especially children.

In an alternative form of motive for heroism, the 1992 hit movie *The Accidental Hero* (or commonly referred to as just *Hero*) has Geena Davis, who plays as both ambitious, award-winning TV reporter Gale Gayley as well as one of many passengers on a large, downed and burning DC-10 jetliner who personally gets rescued by the film’s hero, Bernie Laplante, well-played by actor Dustin Hoffman. This hero, however, isn’t dissuaded from assisting the endangered passengers due to fear, but rather he’s reluctant to assist in the disaster due to his *apathy*.

Bernie, before learning that he could make an easy million dollars if he comes forward as the real hero, is at first not interested in coming forward to rightly take the credit for his heroic act; he, the lone soul in the area of danger at that point in time, simply didn’t feel like coming forward. (Just like when he, while somewhat whiney, dragged himself to the wrecked, burning plane to see what he’d be expected to do—his character just didn’t feel like it. It was not as though he was scared or anything; he plainly came across as not interested.)

Sure, Bernie is a two-bit criminal and a deadbeat dad (though, to be fair, he, in his own way, truly cares for his son); however, the poetic injustice of the fraudster/drifter John Bubber, played by actor Andy Garcia, receiving the credit—and the million bucks (only for starters, for sure)—can make one nauseated. And, speaking of poetic injustice, Bernie also literally gets trampled on as desperate passengers, one by one, hop off of the burning plane and onto him!

Even Bubber—who gives hero Bernie a ride into town (because of more poetic injustice: Bernie’s beater car literally gets tumbled out of the way off of a small bridge by firemen to make needed room for fire-trucks and ambulances shortly later arriving at the scene) and easily learns from Bernie enough facts about the crash and rescue to fraudulently take the hero’s credit—defines what a real hero is: “It’s something you do that you wouldn’t do if you [first] stopped to think about [getting involved].”■

## *That Cat, She Invades My Dreams*

She lays by his large bare feet  
at the foot of his large bed  
though in his dream they will meet  
—meet they will in his still head.

For she, mystic black feline,  
has been in his dream before  
and will not ever decline  
to do this alleged ‘folklore’:

A myth, though, it surely can’t be  
that when her claws touch his toes  
the deep dreaming which does he  
is that about which she knows.

A myth she practices not  
and his dreams she does invade,  
his dreams which shouldn’t be sought  
though her he has not forbade.

She places her finger nails  
on his vulnerable feet  
knowing that when she prevails  
at his dream feet they will meet.

In his dream he walks a street  
then feels prickling upon his toes,  
so he looks down to his feet  
and the sensation yet grows.

Nothing of her could he find  
in his dream violated,  
but back to his conscious mind  
he slipped and to her stated:

‘Mimi? It’s you—you *rascal!*’  
as his stretched feet cuddled her  
that soft and sweet animal  
whose response was a quick ‘*murr*’.

From the mattress she jumps down  
and to the sandbox she goes  
when he says, ‘you little clown;  
next time, leave alone my toes’.

But, she thinks, ‘*again we’ll meet  
when you’re dreaming fast asleep,  
and the still toes on your feet  
from my paws you cannot keep*’.

## *You've Gotta Love 'Em For It*

Whenever I observe stress in the facial expression of my mother, a typical senior, I also observe how that stress drains from her face and is replaced with joyful adoration when our pet feline enters the room: “Hi, sweetheart,” she’ll say. And I know that countless other seniors—not to mention myself (whether consciously or subconsciously)—with pets also experience the emotional benefits of hosting a cherished pet.

As for our pleasantly docile current pet cat, his predecessor had on occasion bitten and/or scratched me when she’d gotten irritated—or teased, of which I’m known to be guilty—yet she was nonetheless cherished her for being herself and for the therapeutic benefits just her presence alone bestowed upon us.

Because they have scent glands on their cheeks and hips, cats tend to (adoringly) rub their hips and cheeks against their human hosts’ legs (or other parts of our bodies when we’re sitting) as a sign of both affection and to mark us as their territory. This is also why they just love to have their cheeks scratched.

Admittedly, though, many cat lovers misinterpret pet felines’ licks along their hands, arms or even cheeks, as affection, while the cats most probably are simply savoring the natural salt on their hosts’ skin. Regardless, many of us love watching/feeling our cats’ adorable pink tongue enjoying the salt. Also, when a host is feeling depressed, a pet cat’s sweet purrs and murrms can lift one’s heavy heart, and one’s left only desiring to hear some more of the feline’s soul-soothing chatter.

So, being a fan of felines myself, I often enjoy the presence of others’ pet felines. Indeed, when I missed an editorial-board-members’ meeting of a publication to which I often contribute (I got my days mixed up and thus made the long trip from White Rock to Vancouver apparently for naught), I nevertheless felt some gratitude by the fact that I got to visit and pet the black cat—who happens to look just like our family cat—at the veterinarian clinic near my destination (i.e. I felt it was not a totally wasted trip).

My mother says that, “humans are the real ‘animals’; it’s the animals who are human[e].” For so long, domesticated animals have been abused and discarded like trash if they were not adored by some animal lover. Ironically, this cruelty occurs while the abusers are ignorant to the healthy reciprocal relationship—some animal lovers would even go as far as to describe it as somewhat symbiotic—existing between animals (many of us see them as family members) and their loving and appreciative human hosts, especially physically and/or mentally ill hosts.

Indeed, animals have an influence over humanity that many in society cannot fathom. And this beautiful reality of animals’ positive emotional influence over their human hosts can be beneficial to the animals, as well. Besides numerous studies revealing the health-benefits to humans (their high blood pressure is alleviated, for example) when in proximity, and especially when in physical contact, with a domesticated animal, the fact is, when a cat or dog, for instance, is lovingly petted down along its back, it acts as a sort of soothing and healing massage, and that animal’s lifespan and good health increase considerably.

Many health-care homes are already adopting cats and/or dogs to reside at the facilities, and the data available has revealed the improvement in the health of many patients since the facilities' adoption of the pets. In a June 14, 2000, *Vancouver Sun* article it was written that scientific proof reveals a "powerful man-beast bond that transforms lives, alleviates depression and disease, gives direction to the blind and comfort to the lonely and fills homes with a measure of uncomplicated joy that is impossible to fully appreciate until it is gone." This fact has but vastly increased in awareness and even measurability since then and will almost certainly continue to do so.

All of which is why I was pleased to read in a news story some time ago that the B.C. branch of SPCA had a limited-time "moratorium" on its non-health-related euthanasia of excess unwanted animals, the vast majority of which were/are felines. To solidify a no-kill policy within SPCA policy would undoubtedly be a spectacular achievement in the history of "humane" humanity.

It's very true that when a pet animal's host—especially a person with mental illness—loses his or her pet, it's difficult to be philosophically positive about the loss, such as the thoughts regarding the matter put forward by Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." It all seems to go out the window, though, especially in regards to my own tendency to get over-attached to my pet cat(s), presently and even from my past.

However, it seems that in the long run, those of us who love our pet animals, do benefit greatly, as do our animal companions themselves; although the sad reality is that such mutually-beneficial couplings and compassion for pet animals (and for other domesticated animals, for that matter) in general, are nowhere near as prevalent as they really could be—and definitely should be.

**O**n the much more unpleasant serious issue of needlessly suffering cats, currently tens of thousands of stray, homeless and feral cats are roaming Surrey (B.C., Canada) parks and streets. Incredibly and extremely sad, many are domesticated yet nonetheless abandoned by their owners, left to fend for themselves against the wilds; and even with the plethora of deforestation due to relatively massive development, Surrey is still filled with much forested hide-outs for very hungry coyotes salivating for such easy prey as aimlessly wandering docile-natured domesticated cat and kittens.

Meanwhile, humanity's overall apathetic (if not outright callous) inhumane streak is to blame for this totally avoidable suffering of fellow sentient mammals. It seems that many people in our 'civilized' society allow themselves to dismiss it all, since one way or another by being preyed upon by bigger wild animals and mass euthanasia, that enormous yet gratuitous quantity of feline misery should soon enough diminish.

Furthermore, the last that I'd heard Surrey city council had refused to fund a desperately needed spay-and-neuter program, claiming that taxpayers already give enough to the local SPCA.

Absolutely unbelievable! These animals experience great suffering, be it at the biting sharp-toothed jaws of a large predator or left without shelter in the biting cold.

What really burns me, however, is that the same Surrey council, while refusing to allocate any additional funding towards a desperately needed universal source of emergency spaying and neutering of these suffering felines, also refuses to fully outlaw all pet-cat owners from allowing their felines to wander outdoors unattended, nor to

strictly enforce the spaying and neutering of all adopted cats and kittens unless specifically licensed to breed their felines through humane means.

It may sound unfeasible and inconvenient to some uncaring feline owners who just want something soft to stroke now and then as though the pet cat/kitten was about as susceptible to pain and suffering as a stuffed toy animal, but such a desperate inhumane situation definitely calls for assertively meaningful compassionate action ...

... Plus, let's face it: cats have been sufficiently superficially unfortunate to have been cursed with snake-like 'vertical slit' pupils' and open-mouthed, fanged hiss when feeling threatened and/or frightened. Thus they'll likely remain entangled within a half-witted Hollywood-cliché implicit condemnation for the foreseeable future.

Yet, perhaps resulting from past bulk contemptible treatment of their species cats already innately sense that they're somehow meant to be but a popular target of persecution as they've been throughout history. Indeed, those cats unfortunate enough to be born black were once demonized and thus ordered to be slaughtered *en masse* by the early Church—until, of course, humane citizens strongly protested the church's death warrant on all of those innocent cats.

From a contemporary perspective on their (lacking) value even as just sentient life forms, feline unpopularity has made it easier for some conscience-challenged people to practice their own 'homemade' versions of cat euthanasia. For example, I recently read a disturbing news story about ten kittens from two separate litters being found taped shut in a cardboard box and left behind a Greater Vancouver area garbage bin on a sweltering summer day. A local vet was reported as stating that the kittens wouldn't have lasted another hour for great lack of necessities of life, including fresh air.

Then some weeks later I read a disturbing news story about a man convicted of killing—or, as he suggested via semantics, put to sleep—his own pet cat with his own bare hands by strangling him ('Oreo' was his name) to death. My cynical side cannot help but to deride the inhumane side of collective humanity that may consciously and/or subconsciously feel, *Oh, there's a lot more from where they came ...*

As a priority rule and not as a half-assed effort, they should be collected and spayed or neutered; perhaps their eventual great reduction in number will then translate into proper appreciation or at least respect as sentient life.

Furthermore, it would greatly help if respective city halls ordered that pet cats be confined indoors when not on a torso-brace leash and accompanied by their owners. Yes, pet cats likely will go through 'outdoors withdrawal' and cry a raucous by the front door; however, keeping them healthy and safe should make their finite whining worthwhile.

As for their misperceived worthlessness as pets by many people, cats can be very pleasant if they receive enough genuine affection, including verbal attention. Besides physical contact, such includes frequent talks to them (judging from my cat's behavior, they can appreciate an enthusiastic talking to). As with dogs, it's often a case of the appreciative cat owners receiving pretty much what they put into their pet cats. ■

## *Scheming, Scamming*

They thought and schemed, as they rode the bus. It was 6:07 in the evening, an evening in which the mid-October sunset lit up the broken clouds (the few that were there) with a spectacular fire-red orange. It had been a mostly clear and warm day, so, being young, they hadn't concerned themselves with the night's impending coldness (however, are youths really known for their inclination to adequately plan for the future, be it a day or a decade?); but then again, they didn't need to concern themselves with the night's weather, for they were going to spend the sunless hours inside a temperature-controlled airport complex. It was a long bus ride, and the two boys hadn't felt like spending it in conversation; so they both just sat and stared out the window. And thought. Schemed. Of course, each one's corrupt thoughts were distinct from those of the other, though to a minimal extent. While Geordi was worrying about how to not get caught by the authorities, Rob was pondering how much food and plays on the coin-operated video machine he should steal at the expense of the airport facilities. And as for *who* would do *what*, it had already been settled: Rob would do the dirtiest of the work, while Geordi, because of his paranoid and fearful nature, would 'keep six' or, in other words, look out for airport security. The fact that Geordi was in possession of marijuana (albeit a small amount) definitely exacerbated his anxiety in regards to being caught. Nonetheless, he was determined to assist his friend, and it soon would be time for him to do so.

The bus slowly rolled along the airport's third-level passenger drop-off, and they glanced through each passing glass door, hoping that they wouldn't spot any security personnel. They didn't see any, though that fact didn't make a difference, for they knew quite well from previous excursions to the airport that such personnel were indeed in there, somewhere.

Stepping off the bus with Rob right behind him (Rob, who habitually had his black sweatshirt sleeves pulled over his hands), Geordi immediately pulled out his pack of Export 'A' Mild cigarettes from the breast pocket of his thin, faded jean jacket. He was already down to half a pack, which meant that they would have to conserve by sharing each cigarette. Nothing new. "Geord, light up that smoke—I'm dying!"

"You're always dying," Geordi sneered through the corner of his grinning, cigarette-clasped mouth. Lighting up the cigarette, his hand was trembling, which was due to anxiety, and the nicotine was definitely not going to help. He took three deep drags (the allotted number) from the cancer stick and then passed it to his friend. Rob, taking his drags, showed no sign of the same quivers afflicting Geordi, but neither of them brought up this fact. Geordi took the last puff, dropped the spent butt onto the marble-tile floor and stomped it out.

He then gave Rob a worried facial expression, one that was a revelation as to Geordi's true anxious nature. Because although he, like Rob, was raised in an adequately financed household, Geordi, unlike Rob, actually did not hold the crooked character of a thief; rather, Geordi was instinctively a reasonably honest lad who was but seeking some adventure through Rob, his friend of about seven years. Though he knew the potential judicial consequences of his criminal activities with Rob, Geordi (a small-framed boy with hazel eyes and brown hair, matched in color by a peach-fuzz mustache) nevertheless

was willing to take that chance as long as he was granted some excitement in exchange. Geordi's case was very much the proverbial good-but-restless boy getting involved with the wrong crowd. On the other hand, Rob (a rather large, brown-eyed, blonde-haired lad with conspicuously-distinct acne) was quite the scoundrel, and his mischievous facial expression reflected his true nature. Perhaps his troublesome character had to do with his having been discarded at a very young age by his biological parents and adopted by a couple (though, not to be mistaken, a wealthy and emotionally-stable pair) whose lives involved frequent cross-country moves. Regardless of the possible reasons for his misbehavior, the teenage Rob actually seemed to *crave* trouble and run-ins with the law.

However, it should be noted, the boys' behavior was affected when they consumed marijuana: stoned on pot, they, especially Geordi, would become paranoid and not so willing to bump into the law. And having smoked some potent marijuana upon their arrival, and again about five hours later, at the airport, they mostly sat and observed the arriving and departing jetliners in a state of intoxicated awe, quite comfortable passing-by the necessary hours doing so and steering clear of trouble.

"Let's go rack up some Donkey Kong," Rob proposed. Translation: *We shall illegally lift out the transparent, plastic cover from a video game called Donkey Kong, reach down into the machine and, using the forefinger, engage the coin sensor exactly 198 times; doing this will cause the machine to give us 99 games* (for it was two quarters per game), *and engaging the coin sensor two more times* (one flick representing each phantom coin) *for another game credit would cause the 99 game credits to turn into a flat 00.* "Or should we pig out first?"

"I'm into both," Geordi responded.

The night could go smoothly or roughly, all depending on timing. To go here too soon or there too late, could mean getting arrested. Although Geordi was only fourteen years old and Rob fifteen and both would, if caught, only receive an inevitably-erased juvenile criminal record, getting busted would unquestionably also mean banishment from the airport. Which, according to the boys, "would really suck".

It was 11:54 p.m., and from previous 'all-nighters' to the airport, the boys knew that in a few minutes security would be reduced by half for the rest of the night. Rob and Geordi would thus be enabled to steal their meal with much more ease than otherwise, a reduction of pressure that they appreciated.

"It's 12:06; let's go do it," Rob said to a quiet Geordi. "Plus I've got the atomic munchies."

Out of all four snack bars at the airport, only one was a reasonably safe target. It stood on the right side, or north end, of the building and was mostly sheltered from view. The food in the plastic display cases were removed at closing time (which was at 6 p.m.) and put into cooling lockers behind the counter. To the boys' gratification, the lockers weren't locked.

"I'll cough if anybody comes," Geordi whispered to Rob, "and if I do, freeze till I say so."

"I know," Rob replied, with a hint of arrogance, "I know."

As Rob jumped behind the snack bar's counter, acquired a large black plastic bag and commenced filling it with various pies, Geordi stood still next to the gray-blue bank-teller machine sign; the sign served as good camouflage because of Geordi's clothing, and, being only fifty feet from the snack bar, it also served as the best lookout location

for the scam. To his left, he could see past the Japan Air Lines check-in counter; and to his right, he could see down to the northern-most door. Straight ahead, his eyes went southward—past the News Views store, past the snack bar and past the Jet Set Sam seafood shop—to the entrance of ClassAct Restaurant. If anyone was to catch them, it couldn't be by chance; it would have to be premeditated (unless, of course, Geordi wasn't doing his job properly). Rob didn't make the slightest sound, but each minute longer he spent grabbing grub from the lockers increased by so much the chance of them getting caught.

Before sixty seconds could pass, however, Rob had climbed out from behind the counter, hauling the filled bag with him. He trotted towards and then past Geordi, who, taking a last look around, followed close behind.

They would wolf down the goods at the same part of the building as last time: 'the TV chairs section', at the very northeastern corner of Airport Level Three. At that location, there were also a few video games—Asteroids, Phoenix, Grand Prix and Battalion, though all non-penetrable—but not the favored Donkey Kong, which was on Level One.

"What'd you get?" Geordi asked.

"Everything," Rob replied, excitedly, his heart pounding. He reached his arms down into the bag and pulled out a twelve-inch apple pie and a cherry pie of the same size. He reached in again and extracted a fourteen-inch chocolate cream pie.

"What took you so long?"

"The first three lockers only had salads."

"I guess I get the apple, eh?" Geordi correctly assumed, since Rob did the riskiest part of the job and thus gets preference. Soon, each had a piece of fruit pie in one hand and cream pie in the other. "Yum," grunted Geordi, with a full mouth. They stared into each other's blood-shot eyes for a few seconds before breaking out in laughter.

Unlike the last time they pulled this scam, this time all of the stolen snacks got consumed. There they sat, with full bellies, next to the emptied plastic bag and three disposable-aluminum pie dishes. "I'm glad you didn't get any of that jelly shit, again," said Geordi (he obviously didn't have a taste for Jell-O); he pulled out a cigarette and released an intense belch.

"Not so loud," cautioned Rob. "Let's go; I'm into some Donkey Kong, now."

Having descended the stairs (the escalator was shut down during graveyard shift), the two outlaws looked straight ahead as more and more of the ground floor, including the small assortment of video machines on that level, came into sight.

"Good, it's still there," Rob said, with some relief. "And nobody's around."

They walked directly over to the Donkey Kong video game. Helping turn it around so as to have it facing the brick wall and their scamming out of view, Geordi took a glimpse at the stairway (the only real threat of a surprise visit) and then gave Rob the okay. Rob made a sincere effort to not make noise while removing the transparent plastic screen off of the face of the machine, for he easily recalled the second time they were there and two security guards popped out of thin air just as the boys were turning the machine around. He could not believe how close they'd come to getting busted. If it were not for Geordi's quick wit—"we're turning it because of the light reflection off the screen"—and the fact that he also had five quarters in pocket, things could have easily went bitter.

Rob reached down inside the machine and began repeatedly pressing the coin-sensor mechanism. The game-credit numbers at the top right-hand corner of the video screen went up—01...02...03...04...and all the way to 99. Getting rid of the credits would be no problem: pulling out the plug and then re-inserting it would erase all of the credits and any evidence of the video scamming.

“Let’s play,” said Rob, with satisfaction, while positioning the screen back in place.

Then it came, and it scared the shit out of them.

“What’re you doing?” asked a tiny voice.

The boys jumped to attention. They looked up and then down to the left, where stood a little girl with pony-tailed red hair, staring up at them. She was there the whole time.

“Scram!” Rob angrily denounced her; and she ran off.

“She’s only a kid,” said Geordi, dismissively. “Press the start button.”

Their first game was a quick one; however, it was no surprise, considering that they were only warming up and the shock they’d just received from the little girl.

“I’ll go first this ...,” Geordi began, but he was interrupted.

“Are you guys paying for those games?” the alien voice asked, which seemed to come from nowhere.

The boys, rather stunned, turned to meet the large-mustached face of an average built man, with the same little girl standing about thirty feet behind him.

“Who the hell are you?” asked Geordi, attempting to appear fully confident.

“It doesn’t matter who *I am*; my daughter says that you had the lid off that game and you were inside it,” the man accurately accused them. “I’d like the two of you to come with me.”

“Yeah, right,” was Rob’s nervous response; he obviously knew that the man was not a threat while he and Geordi were together. “We’re leaving; let’s go, Geord.”

It was almost 1:15 a.m., and the buses had already stopped running for the night. The boys, who had gotten into trouble because of their criminal activity, had to spend a good portion of the night walking to the bus stop at which the earliest bus would arrive. They did not have much of an alternative—it was too cold to spend the night sitting outside somewhere on the expansive airport grounds.

“I can’t believe we got screwed because of some little kid!” Geordi said.

“Yeah, majorly screwed,” emphasized his friend.

Yet both also realized that it was basically bad luck which had nailed them, although they were actually quite lucky that security didn’t get them. But what they had trouble acknowledging was that they were now paying the price for what was nothing other than their corrupt deeds, their scheming and scamming. ■

## *The Maverick*

The August westerly wind was known for its relentless ruthlessness; thus there wasn't a skipper anywhere particularly eager to prove his manhood against a westerly wind blowing forty nautical miles per hour against Vancouver Island's west coast. There were, however, plenty of skippers who felt intensely obligated to do their share of the salmon gill-netting in order to put food on their families' dinner table, even if it was under Mother Nature's obnoxious conditions. Though, fortunately, Her conditions were forecast to subside to twenty-five knots by nine o'clock that night, at about the same time the salmon typically began gilling in the nets' meshes. Indeed, all of the gill-netters anchored or tied to the wharf in Port Renfrew (a.k.a., Port of San Juan or San Juan Bay) knew that they had to go out into the very rough Strait of Juan De Fuca in only a few hours' time. All, except for Tom.

Tom was an old, "retired" fisherman of Japanese descent; and for the preceding five years, he had fished only locally along the lower half of the Island's coast, more or less just to keep himself busy. The small number of salmon he seemed always destined to catch was never enough to merit any deduction from his retirement pension cheques of \$992.56 per week. Although, when the weather was bad, especially during a westerly wind of thirty knots or greater, Tom sat cozy on his eleven-meter gill-netter, *Maverick*, while the younger fishermen ("whipper snappers," he'd call them) got beaten up by the tall, sharp waves. Tom would usually tie to the wharf at Port Renfrew, where he could safely, lazily watch from the *Maverick's* pilot seat all the whipper snappers untying their fishing vessels or raising anchor before heading out to fish in dirty westerly winds. He was also known to anchor down in Pachena Bay, Nitinat or other sheltered locations south of Cape Beale where he could pull out his binoculars and watch the gill-netters rolling uncontrollably, even with their stabilizers fully utilized.

"I've had more than my share of westerly beatings in my years," Tom told Mike, his traveling partner and good friend. Mike, with his son, Michael Jr., stepped into the *Maverick's* cabin to greet Tom before he and his son left port for the fishing grounds that evening. "You're young and strong—you can do it now. And young Junior, too," he laughed, pointing his old, wooden back scratcher at Junior. Tom's back got itchy frequently, probably for his lack of bathing, though he would blame it on his seventy-one years of age, his shirt or both. He'd almost always have his scratcher in one hand or the other, when he wasn't cooking or on the *Maverick's* outdated pump-action toilet.

Michael Jr., a month less than nine years, smiled back at Tom. Seeing Junior's large grin with its missing front tooth and his uncombed hair, Tom couldn't help but feel nostalgic and recall his own youth, a time when he himself fished for salmon with his long-gone father. The fact that Junior was of Slavic heritage and had dirty-blond hair didn't cause Tom to see the youngster in a different light than that in which he saw himself as a Japanese-Canadian kid. Boys were boys, according to Tom, and they all had more in common than about which they themselves knew.

Junior heard a slight commotion on the wharf and looked out through the sea-salted window at another fisherman getting ready to go out. Curious, the boy ran out of the *Maverick's* cabin and jumped down onto the wharf, leaving the old boat gently

rocking in his wake.

It was only the second season of fishing for Junior, and he'd known Tom for about as long. Mike Sr., on the other hand, had first met Tom when the former built and launched his first boat, *Buckaroo*, twenty-one years earlier. And it was on the *Buckaroo* three years later and six miles outside of Cape Beale that Mike, not yet packing an exposure suit on board, would almost certainly have perished had Tom not risked everything by coming out to get him:

Mike had been cod fishing twelve miles off the Cape in calm seas when he started his way back to Bamfield because of a whole-gale-force westerly wind warning broadcast over the radio with very short notice. Almost half way into Bamfield, the *Buckaroo* experienced a failure of its electrical system. It was Mike's third season fishing and there he was, powerless in the water while the wind picked up about five knots every hour. But what made his situation potentially fatal was the fact that both of his two-way radios—his only links to the Coast Guard station in Bamfield—were dead.

Almost six hours passed before Mike had recovered enough of the *Buckaroo's* electrical system to power his small two-way 'Mouse' radio. However, his recovered ability to transmit a distress call to the Bamfield Coast Guard station was in vein: the station radioed back that their only able vessel, *Goliath*, had left Bamfield earlier that day and was outside of Sooke seventy-one miles down the coast. The wind had reached fifty knots, and the *Buckaroo*, now six miles off the Cape, was being thrown about by waves a couple dozen feet high.

Tom and his *Maverick*, meanwhile, were sheltered at Pachena Bay, approximately eleven miles from the *Buckaroo* and about two hours' travel. Tom had been carelessly flipping channels on his Mouse and caught Mike's distress call. Though he was a fairly able-bodied seaman and somewhat knew Mike, Tom was still understandably hesitant to respond to the call; to respond would basically oblige Tom to risk his own life by having to go out into the storm and tow the *Buckaroo* to shore. But when he heard the Coast Guard's negative response to Mike's urgent call, Tom knew it was a life or death situation.

It was three in the morning when the *Maverick* returned into Pachena Bay with the *Buckaroo* in tow.

“You goin’ out tonight for the opening?” Tom asked. Mike casually leaned against the counter next to the *Maverick's* cabin door. Tom, squatting before his dark-green Coleman gas stove, stirred his boiling pot of short grain rice and occasionally cursed it for taking so long to cook. Laying on the floor next to the Coleman was an old aluminum pan, its slightly warped base covered with three fillets of Red Snapper—“I always catch enough to eat,” Tom would always say—generously coated with garlic salt.

“The Westerly's dirty,” said Tom, looking up at Mike, “but I heard the test set was good—five hundred Sockeye in one drift” ...

Listening to the results of the test fishing catches was Tom's pass time, since they revealed how plentiful the salmon were and how they were behaving each season. In fact, the very first thing he did upon waking up each morning was turn on his Mouse and wait for the local test fisherman to call up the local fisheries patrol vessel and report his catch from the night before. During winter and spring, when the salmon fishing season was off, he couldn't help but sit on his boat and anxiously await for the first test set of the season.

With the old gas heater working, it was always warm enough during those cold months inside the cabin on Tom's thirty-three-year-old vessel, and he always had enough to eat. Although he enjoyed spending hours listening to his short-wave transistor radio, it was nonetheless often depressing for him during the "dead season" (as he referred to those many non-season weeks). For him, there was no action around—no fish, no fisherman, no nothing. On occasion, Mike would ask Tom if he'll ever get himself a home on dry land or at least go visit his relatives in Richmond more often. Tom's response was predictable, for he would always half-jokingly reply that he would get "motionless sickness" if he lived on shore. Furthermore, Tom would add, the cooking his relatives forced upon him during each of his visits was somewhat less than enjoyable.

**"I** have to go out, or I don't eat," Mike replied, his eyes fixed trance-like on Tom's pot of steaming rice. "I'll just take it a bit slower in this wind."

Mike turned his head and peered out through the cabin window to check on his son. Junior was kneeling on the wharf next to their vessel, *Sea Gull*, and gazed down into the Port's emerald green water. "Are you going out, Tommy?"

"Only if the wind drops at least fifteen knots," answered Tom. "And even if I do go out, I don't trust my engine. It stalled on me twice last week, you know." He lifted a teaspoon of cooked rice to his chin, gently blew on it and cautiously put it into his mouth. He then took a jar of seasoning salt from the tattered wood cupboard and shook an orange film onto the rice. Putting the pot of rice aside, he placed the pan of fish on the Coleman stove. "I'll be on the same channel, either way."

Mike glanced up at the cabin's ceiling to the old, yet still efficient, Mouse radio. It was on and tuned to Channel 33—the scarcely used frequency, but still Tom's favored one and lucky number. It was the same radio and channel on which Tom had received Mike's distress call eighteen years earlier. It was not at all lost on Mike that it was due to that radio being on and listened to by a charitable, brave person that he lived to meet and marry a beautiful woman and father a beautiful son. Next to the Mouse was the radio mount, which he had given Tom as a Christmas present to hold the new VHF two-way radio Tom said he'd eventually acquire. All of the other fishermen had already installed the state-of-the-art VHF radio on their boats, but, like with the exposure suit, Tom simply didn't think he would ever get use from it.

"See you later, Tommy," said Mike, turning to leave.

Mike was a large man; and when he, in contrast to little Junior, stepped off the *Maverick*, the vessel rocked intensely and many times. "Let's go get 'em," he told Junior, referring to the fish they hoped to catch that night. Junior, jumping to his feet, ran enthusiastically behind his father onto the *Sea Gull*. There, Mike turned to see Tom smiling at them and waving farewell with his wooden back-scratcher.

**T**om had fished salmon since he was about Junior's age. He started fishing with his late father, Tom Sr., and had a bounty of fishing stories to tell those who really wanted to hear them. On one winter day while Mike was putting fresh anti-freeze into the *Sea Gull*'s engine, Tom told Michael Jr. about Tom Sr.'s gill-netter, *Ocean Fly*. It was powered by an Easthope Bros., single-cylinder engine and took many hours to travel what modern engines could do in one hour. "It had one piston," Tom laughed, using his flattened, aged

hand to demonstrate how the vessel rode up and down the waves. “Pah, pah, pah, pah, pah, pah-pah-pah-pah-pah, pah, pah, pah, pah, pah . . . Four knots, all the way up to Skeena.”

Michael Jr. was impressed because of the 433 miles’ travel up the British Columbia coast to Skeena River. “Whoa! That must’ve taken ya forever,” Junior chuckled, and then inquired, “how long did it take ya ta get up there? A month?”

“Six days, with only six-hour’s sleep each day,” Tom returned, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “and most of that travel had to be with the tide.”

Tom also impressed Junior with the seemingly low prices paid to fisherman by fish companies for salmon in those days. “We got seven cents a pound for Sockeye, a nickel a pound for Spring,” said Tom. “For Chums, we got sixteen cents a piece; five cents a pound for Coho, and nine cents for each Pink . . . I’ve come a long way since those days, eh?”

A long way Tom did come, and it showed on his worn face. His dark, tanned skin was wrinkled and blotched with liver spots. The unkept, greasy hair which reached out from beneath the Uroko cap he usually wore was a tell-tale gray; and it seemed that for every yellow, decaying tooth he had retained from all of his dentist-free years, there was an adjacent empty space. Whenever Mike would insist that he go see a dentist, Tom would defuse the urgency of the matter by joking that the dentist might want to replace the missing teeth and, thus, leave him with more teeth about which to worry.

**M**ike and Junior took the *Sea Gull* out of Port Renfrew at about six-thirty that evening, alongside about three dozen other gill-netters. The *Sea Gull* left the Port at a slow five knots but would still make it to Mike’s favored fishing location in time for the eight o’clock opening. Although the wind speed had dropped considerably, down to thirty knots, the vessel’s windshield nonetheless got slapped by wave after salty wave. Mike wondered whether Mother Nature would do what She was forecast to do—calm to an easier twenty-five knots. Meanwhile, Junior, who sat in the pilot’s seat, was getting more of a ride than for which he had earlier hoped: each formidable wave the *Sea Gull* charged into had the somewhat effect of a car going up and off a ramp and eventually slamming down onto the ground. He in fact soon found the riding rough enough to compel him to go down into the hull, climb onto his bunk and cower under his wool blanket. It was nearly an hour before the wind was supposed to drop to twenty-five knots when Junior, intending to pick fish from the net with his father later that night, dozed off towards sleep.

Just before losing consciousness, Junior recalled how he and his father, the year before, bucked a twenty-eight knot westerly up the coast on their way to Spring salmon fishing in Port Alberni Inlet. He had curled up in his bunk while Dad piloted the boat through waves which pounded the vessel’s bow so intensely that Junior was convinced that one salty wave would eventually break through. To his father the next day in Port Alberni, he humbly admitted to, the stormy night before, having recited “the Hail Mary and Our Father at least fifty times. I thought we were dead for sure.” Though Mike Sr. acknowledged the roughness of the previous night’s travel, he nevertheless was amused by his son’s exaggerated perception of what constitutes life-and-death weather. “I remember taking on a fifty knot northwesterly in ‘84 on front of the lightship,” Mike recounted to an intrigued Junior. There was a hint of pride in his tone of voice as he told

his son about the storm he'd endured by the lighthouse (a.k.a. lightship) at the Fraser River's mouth. Unlike conventional lighthouses, the lightship had a wooden-stilt foundation built right into the ocean floor. "I've been 490 miles up the mainland to Nass River and have fished halibut on La Perouse Bank twenty miles outside Ucluelet, and I've never experienced anything as bad as that night at the lightship. It was so bad because there was the strong wind and waves meeting the strong tide going out of the river."

**I**t was ten minutes to nine when Mike looked at the green image on the radar screen. Radar and loran technology easily enabled him to know that he, indeed, was exactly at the spot on which he wanted to fish—five and a half miles off Owen Point. He took the *Sea Gull* out of gear, put on his rubber boots, apron, sleeves and gloves, and went outside on deck to prepare the net for setting.

Stepping down onto the vessel's rolling stern, he spent the next few minutes staring into the dark gray clouds and feeling the wind upon his face. He thought about how much he distrusted Mother Nature. In a trance-like state of mind, he began to realize—perhaps for the first time in his entire fishing career—how truly apathetic She had been towards him, and other fishermen, for so long. He then looked at the western horizon, from where came the wind and the clouds and silvery waves diverged.

His trance would have continued if not for the sudden blare from the VHF radio's Channel 78. It was the captain of the fisheries patrol vessel, *Pachena Rock*, formally announcing the commencement of the gill-net opening. Mike put the *Sea Gull* into forward gear and started rolling out net from the drum.

Releasing gill net into the Strait of Juan De Fuca, he noticed that the wind, in a matter of seconds, ceased to blow and the waves settled. He again looked at the horizon. He felt nothing against his face, whereas, just a minute before, he had felt a formidable twenty-five knot wind. But it didn't take very long for Mike to realize what Mother Nature was telling him. This was like a brief hint—not that She gave a damn about Her victims—that She was about to unleash vicious forces onto those mortals who just happened to be in Her path.

Mike immediately took the vessel out of forward gear, engaged the drum's transmission and started wrapping the net back on board. And, as he was doing so, he felt a subtle westerly wind. It became stronger and stronger with the passing of each wave, which were increasing in size. The *Sea Gull* was pushed onto its starboard side then, as each wave passed underneath, was released and rolled onto its port side. "And the ride's just beginning," he mumbled.

With the net all on board, he lowered the stabilizer poles and dropped their weights into the water. At the same time, he thought how proper it was that Junior sleep, or at least hide under his blanket, through the kind of weather that Mike believed was shortly to come.

He stumbled into the cabin, reduced the throttle and put the *Sea Gull* into forward gear. He turned the steering wheel and the vessel northeastward, back towards Owen Point. The waves had increased in height to almost ten feet, and he felt that they would double in size once the wind reached the same forty knots it had earlier that day.

Mike looked at the radar screen and was surprised to see that he was only about four and a half miles from Owen Point. The tide had taken them inshore a half-mile since

he started setting the net twenty minutes earlier; however, the tide *should have* been pushing them out in the direction of Neah Bay in Washington State. Mother Nature's unexpected act just might inadvertently have saved him, Junior and the *Sea Gull* by allowing them the extra five minutes they needed to beat the weather.

By the time they pushed past Cerantes Rock and into the Port's mouth, the wind had reached whole-gale force out in the Strait. And the waves, instead of attacking the vessel's port side as they had been out in the Strait, were now coming from directly behind, giving the vessel worthy pushes into the Port. Each wave lifted the stern, rolled beneath the boat and then raised the bow before gently releasing it; the wave then continued forward, giving way to its countless ensuing white-capped counterparts, all appearing out from the dark. The *Sea Gull's* advancement towards, and proximity with, the Port's small beachside town made the storm outside less and less relevant. Mike felt great, for they were breathing and healthy, ready to fish another opening.

"Where are we?" came Junior's voice, up from the hull. He climbed the three old, creaky, mahogany plywood stairs up into the cabin and stood next to his father. His sleepy eyes looked at the red light reflecting off of the compass's white direction marks and then noticed the faint lights from the small houses on shore. He then looked down at the green image illuminating from the radar screen before looking up at the clock's fluorescent blue numbers and arms. "It's only eleven-fifteen. Aren't we fishin' tonight?" he asked, gazing up at his father's blank face. "Dad?"

Mike Sr. looked down at him and smiled. "No, it's too rough. Tomorrow night's opening, if the weather's better."

Having extracted the stabilizer weights from the water and retracted the polls, Mike docked the *Sea Gull*. He returned into the cabin where his son announced that the *Maverick* was gone. "I guess he went out," said Junior, with little surprise in his voice.

His father, however, was quite surprised and becoming concerned until he looked across the Port. There, where Tom often anchored down during strong winds, was a set of green and red cabin lights. "That's probably him over there. There's more shelter on that side," Mike said, before snickering, "so he can sleep deeper."

Mike shut down the *Sea Gull's* clattering diesel engine, the sudden silence forcing him to acknowledge the ringing in his ears. He opened the cabin window and stuck out his head to feel, with his face, the wind. He wanted to know how much of the wind, along with the lights from other retreating gill-netters, from the Strait was making its way into the Port.

"It's so powerful. Even in here, we ...," he whispered until he was abruptly interrupted by a loud, sharp burst of static from the VHF radio. He stepped back, reached up and turned it off. He then reached over to his Mouse radio to do the same, but the knob did not turn, for it was already off. He had forgotten to turn it on. *What's the difference*, he thought, *the only reason there was to have had it on was Tom, and Tom didn't go out; Tom's at the other side of the Port.*

Senior and Junior slept soundly all night—it can be quite soothing listening to a storm outside while one is safely inside; and they were awoken by the thump of Junior hitting the hull floor, having rolled off his bunk. Without hesitating, they arose and climbed the stairs to meet rays of dawning sun piercing the cabin window. Mike looked out at the trees on the hilly landscape surrounding the misty Port and saw that the wind has

subsided considerably. “It couldn’t be any more than twenty knots out in the Strait,” he informed an uninterested Junior.

Yawning, Mike turned around to see the *Maverick*’s reserved spot on the wharf without the *Maverick*. “Oh, yeah,” he mumbled. Turning to look across the Port, he of course expected to see Tom’s vessel anchored there with its bright turquoise cabin.

“That’s not Tom,” he said, then looked to the Port’s interior. “Where the Hell is he?”

“What’s the matter?” was Junior’s muffled reply from behind the drawn plastic curtain in the hull, where he was peeing.

Mike looked for Tom amongst the gill-netters anchored a few hundred feet away, closer to the beach. But he could not see his old friend anywhere. Quickly getting into his pants, and not bothering to put on socks, he hastily slipped into his shoes and marched out onto the deck. He thoroughly scanned the Port but still couldn’t see the *Maverick* anywhere. He slowly walked back into the cabin where Junior was putting on his pants.

“He’s not there,” Mike said to his son, who was already shuffling in the cupboard and fridge for the Cheerios and milk. “That wasn’t him on the other side last night.”

Then it occurred to him: Tom could have gone down to Sheringham Point to fish and then went into Sooke to escape the bad weather. *Of course, this is Tom we’re talking about—the fisherman of all fishermen, though perhaps the oldest one on the B.C. coast. Wherever he is, he’s just fine.*

“No need to worry—Tom’s all right,” he assured Junior, who really wasn’t the one who needed assurance. “Let’s eat.”

As they ate, Mike continuously reassured himself that if he, Junior and the *Sea Gull* could escape a storm, Tom and the *Maverick* certainly could. *Besides, if Tom got into trouble, he could’ve radioed me for help at any ...*

“Oh, shit!” he blurted, looking up at his Mouse radio. “It was off the whole time.”

“What?” said Junior, simultaneously stuffing his mouth with cereal and looking up at Dad.

“Tom,” Mike replied. He returned Junior’s look with a concerned, guilty expression. “Tom might’ve called us last night, and I forgot to turn on the radio.”

“It was on,” countered Junior, “I could hear it.”

“Yeah, the VHF; but I forgot to turn on the Mouse. It was off when we tied up last night.”

He dropped his spoon into his cereal as he swiftly got up from the folding table to switch on the Mouse. Having turned the dial to 33, he repeatedly called for the *Maverick* but only received dead air. It then struck him that it wasn’t even yet seven in the morning and that Tom, wherever he was, could perhaps still be asleep.

Mike turned to sit back down to finish breakfast only to be distracted by a brief yet intense reflection of sunlight from without the cabin. He looked for its source out in the distance and found it to be the windshield of the Coast Guard vessel *Goliath*, which was crawling into Port. Flanking the *Goliath* on its port side was the fisheries patrol boat *Pachena Rock*, and on its starboard side was a purse-seine-fishing vessel.

“What’re they doing?” Mike asked himself out loud. He retrieved his binoculars from under the pilot’s seat.

“What is it, Dad?” Junior inquired, refilling his bowl with Cheerios; he stopped to get up and see what had caught his father’s eye. “What’s there?”

Mike knew that the three vessels were together, for their configuration and proximity from one another maintained consistency. *But why are they going so slow?*

Then it showed itself. A dark towline extending from the *Goliath's* stern and down behind it, into the water. "It's towing something," he said, pulling his face away from the binoculars to glance at his son, then turning back to the binoculars.

For a dozen seconds, all that could be heard in the cabin was the sound of wind blowing through the *Sea Gull's* two air vents. *Is that a hull?* Mike thought before verbalizing, "Yeah, it's towing a capsized boat. Looks like somebody didn't make it back in last night."

Junior instantly dropped his spoon to get up and see what he had not yet seen during his two salmon-fishing seasons: a fishing vessel—and perhaps its captain and crew—which succumbed to Mother Nature's fury. "Let me see," he insisted, reaching for the binoculars still in his father's hands. "Let me see."

Mike passed the binoculars without moving his stare away from the object of well-worthy attention.

"Where?!" demanded Junior, anxiously looking around with the binoculars. "Where is it?! Oh, now I see it."

Soon, Mike could see, without the magnification from a visual aid, the capsized vessel's white though algae-stained bottom, persistently overtaken by incoming waves, with the hull the most visible in between waves. He then looked at the *Goliath's* deck, where four men were carrying what appeared to be a stretcher. Along it lay a corpse—*what else could it be?*—wrapped in some bright-yellow material; it was the same material he'd seen twice before used by a Coast Guard to contain the cold, wet bodies of men who'd drowned or lost their mortal fight with hypothermia.

"What boat is it, Dad?" Junior asked calmly, returning the binoculars to his father. In Junior's eyes, Mike knew of every fishing vessel on the coast.

"I can't tell for sure, yet." Mike again placed the binoculars to his eyes. On the half-protruding hull was the vessel's inverted name; the letters, caught in the water's bobbing surface, were typical black. He strained his eyes somewhat to make them out.

"M ... A ..." *V-E-R-I-C-K.*

He then fully realized, with the brisk sensation of a strong electrical current passing through his body, what he was seeing and what it all meant. There it was. And there *he* was, laying—cold, wet and dead—on the *Goliath's* aluminum deck.

"It's Tom!"

*When the wind had calmed down enough for Tom last night, Mike deduced, he went out fishing and was caught in the storm, maybe because his engine stalled again. He probably radioed me for help on the Mouse but failed to get through, because I had failed to do something so simple as turning on the damn radio—as I was supposed to do.*

Mike dropped the binoculars into Junior's hands, fired-up the engine and ran out onto the wharf to untie the *Sea Gull*.

His thoughts raced through all the years he'd known Tom—a man who had been his traveling partner, good friend and, at one time, even his savior. And how did he repay him? By not even being a familiar voice on the radio at Tom's moment of greatest need—as Tom had been there for him. ■

## *The Maverick: The Last Echoes of Tom Ito*

A desperate Tom Ito, the skipper of the thirty-six-foot-long gillnet fishing vessel *The Maverick* transmitted a mayday out to any fish-boat operator and coast guard vessel within the range of his radio transmission during a storm. Tom did this again before specifically transmitting a message to his friend, Mike Winter, on his two-way ‘mouse’ radio; however, Mike, also Tom’s decades-long commercial-fishing travel partner, was at that time safely tied to a sheltered wharf in Port San Juan with his eleven-year-old son and (limited) deckhand, Michael junior, and with both VHF and mouse radios turned off.

This occurred during an atypically unrelentingly-rough, forty-knot, whole-gale-force westerly wind on the west coast of Vancouver Island, although the extremely perturbing fact of the matter was that Tom had drowned (or succumbed to hypothermia) that night.

All of which was why Mike understandably found himself quite stunned to hear Tom Ito’s ‘voice’ in a mayday distress-call transmission on his mouse radio, during one rough night’s salmon fishing near where Tom had drowned eight days over three years prior. He then became outraged, logically assuming that some scumbag fisherman was pulling a very low stunt. He immediately grabbed his radio mic to transmit exactly what he thought of the extremely disrespectful stunt and the perpetrating scumbag, but there was no reply.

By the very accurate simulation of the ‘voice in distress,’ it was as though Tom was actually out there, but Tom wasn’t. He could not possibly be.

During the stormy night on which Tom had died three years prior, weather satellites focused on monitoring very unusual atmospheric conditions due to the largest solar-flare storm to bombard Earth’s electro-magnetic field ‘shield’ in over a half-century, transmitted their readings to, amongst other agencies around the globe, Environment Canada, relaying data and graphic imagery of the atmosphere over North America’s west coast, from Alaska almost all the way down to Mexico’s southern-most territory. While all of the fish boats situated on the west coast of Vancouver Island that night could not view the “Most brilliant display of colored sky waves” (*The Oregonian* newspaper’s front-page headline read) because of the thick storm clouds overhead, it, the solar-flare storm’s radiation, nonetheless had a considerable effect on much of Earth’s spectrum of electro-magnetic radiation—quite notably severely affecting fish-boats’ two-way radio transmission/reception. Regardless, the approximately seven-dozen salmon-fishing boats there still plowed the south-eastern, lower two-thirds of the area open to salmon gillnet fishing (from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m. the next morning), while, except for Tom later that stormy night, Mike (with junior, of course) was the only fish-boat skipper netting the lonely, north-western section of the fishing area—almost as far north-west as the area-boundary grounds favoured by Tom.

Even though ninety-five percent of the entire planet’s high skies was intensely affected by the solar-flare storm, according to all weather satellites’ meter readings and video footage, the continent’s entire west coast received by far the greatest brunt of the sun’s raging radioactive solar-wind energy, especially the mid-coastal-region of B.C. and all the way down to Sacramento.

Then, three years (and eight days) after that greatly-unique night, after Tom’s icy-

cold death, an almost equally significant solar-flare storm bombarded approximately seventy-five percent of Earth's entire atmosphere for almost forty-nine hours. At some point during that time on a cloudy, early-August night of sockeye-salmon gillnet fishing on Vancouver Island's west coast (as cloudy as the weather forecast predicted for the following three days) just four and a quarter miles outside Port San Juan, while the "most brilliant display of colored sky waves" was being totally missed by Mike and his other, youngest son, Peter, coincidentally himself eleven years of age (not to mention also missed by the other hundred or so salmon gillnet boats out there)—a sudden, totally unexpectedly loud blast of static broke out on Mike's mouse radio, followed by a crackling voice which gradually cleared-up audibly after a dozen seconds or so.

"This is an urgent distress call from *The Maverick*. Mayday! Mayday! I have lost my starboard stabilizer pole and weight; I am bracing for a full capsizes as a result of the drag caused by the lost stabilizer!"

"That ... That sounds like ... ," Mike muttered in simultaneously growing disbelief and bewilderment.

"That sounds like who, Dad?" asked the boy.

"Like old Tom!" Mike finished as he ran from the boat's deck and into the cabin to both turn-off the VHF radio and to adjust the mouse radio's squelch and volume. "I swear, it sounds exactly like old Tom!"

He adjusted its knobs, but the radio went silent. The father and son stared into one another's eyes during the following dead air, with anticipation of further distress-call overwhelming Mike. He finally pulled the mic from its hanger and fruitlessly double-clicked the transmit button six times, about a half-dozen seconds apart.

"It distinctly said, '*The Maverick*,' didn't it? ... Peter, I'm ... ," he firmly asserted his need for a solid confirmation from his son, for Mike was beginning to disbelieve everything he'd heard only a couple minutes before.

"What? What did you say, Dad?" The boy broke free his full attention from the peculiarly-old, odd design of his father's relatively-ancient, army-green, two-way 'phone' radio, which Mike hadn't used for decades, though nonetheless kept it stuck in its usual spot, mounted on the cabin ceiling.

"The voice, the mayday—didn't it say it was coming from '*The Maverick*'? Didn't it say, 'This is an urgent distress call from *The Maverick*. Mayday! Mayday!?' And then it went something like, 'I lost my stabilizer and am bracing for a capsizes because of drag' or something?"

"Uh ... yeah, I think so," Peter hesitantly replied, sounding as though he was just trying to appease his dad. "Why? Who do you think it was? You said some guy named Tom, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Mike affirmed, again while seemingly stuck in a rather absent, distant stare into his son's blue eyes. "I mean, no ... No—it couldn't have been." Actually, he wasn't sure of anything at all, at that point. Except that it was about time to pick up the net, which was Peter's favourite part of gillnet-fishing for salmon, though picking up catching-gear was his favourite part of any kind of fishing, for that matter.

"Dad, he sounded kind of funny, like with a growly ... well, he sounded old. Didn't you say, 'it was just like old Tom,' or something like that? Is he your friend?"

"Tom *was* my friend, yeah," he finally informed his curious offspring, as he put on his rubber gear for the wet-net fish-picking.

“What do you mean, ‘was’ your friend? Aren’t you friends anymore? Dad? Dad?!”

Mike’s stare and thoughts whisked past little Peter’s head, out through the cabin’s front window, way out over the Strait of Juan de Fuca’s bobbing salt-waters, into the darkening sky and way back through the twenty-six years during which he’d known Tom quite well, both as a fishing partner and as a good friend. As fishing partners, they would year after year run their boats four to five dozen hours, sometimes twenty-four hours non-stop, from the Steveston wharfs in Richmond, all the way up to Skeena River; sometimes even farther, right up to the Alaska panhandle’s invisible boundary, which would pierce the large clump of American and Canadian fish boats catching boundary-less salmon.

Not surprising, his thoughts came to the finale of three years prior, one in which he and his other, eldest son Michael junior (his deckhand that year) watched the capsized, crushed cabin of *The Maverick* being slowly towed into the port—though worst of all, Tom’s corpse, wrapped in a bright-yellow body-bag, on the cold, wet deck of a coast guard vessel.

“Dad?!?” Peter gave a final, verbal jolt to his father’s appearance of paralysis, which snapped him back to full awareness.

“What? What is it, Peter?”

“Tom—what happened to your friend, Tom?” the boy again queried, becoming somewhat anxious. “Aren’t you two still friends?”

Mike considered for a moment whether his youngest son would likely handle the potentially-intense topic of death-on-the-big-stormy-ocean with as much maturity as he had a year earlier with the topic of death in general, before replying: “Tom Ito and I were friends until he drowned three years ago (exactly three years and eight days, really). In fact, he died during a very bad storm outside Port San Juan, about twelve nautical miles due west from here—‘magnetic west,’ actually.”

Young Peter stared straight ahead in the direction of his father’s old yet still quite reliable compass, just above the boat’s steering wheel at the pilot’s seat, when he attempted to clear up the matter for himself: “I don’t get it, Dad. I thought you said it was Tom, ‘old Tom,’ that called out ‘mayday’ over the radio last night? Do you mean he died last night? I’m really confused, Dad.”

“It just couldn’t have been Tom on the radio last night—it’s simply impossible.”

Mike forced out a fake chuckle as he continued attempting to convince himself of such impossibility. “It *had* to be a hoax or maybe an attempt at a very bad joke, in very bad taste.”

Mike adjusted his right and then left rubber sleeve before turning to open the cabin door to make his way to the stern while uttering, “There’s no such thing as ghosts.” That was when Peter it was then that Peter abruptly alerted his father of the red flare speeding up into the sky before slowing down, arcing over and barely descending: “Dad! Look!”

Mike readily turned and hastily shuffled the few steps to the cabin’s front window, easily spotting what he immediately recognized as a distress signal. “It’s an SOS flare, without doubt,” he said in a mild tone, while holding on to what could be referred to as his fish boat’s wooden dashboard with both rubber-gloved hands spread apart; it was all that he could do to add greater stability to that of his already well-practiced sea-legs while enduring the rough weather and waters. As his father looked

down at the radar screen in bewilderment, for it showed absolutely zero objects anywhere within a ten-nautical-mile radius of the estimated flare-launch point in the strait, Peter meanwhile sat quite sturdily on the old, worn varnished-wood pilot's seat as the boat rocked and rolled about. The boy just commenced his next query when he was interrupted. "Dad, what do the letters SOS stand ... ? Oh, look, there's another one!"

Mike then realized that he may be the lucky skipper who'll have to buck the formidable thirty knot, westerly wind and its accompanying two-metre waves to reach the vessel in distress. "And there's yet another," he noted, calm yet concern in his voice.

"The guy must be in real trouble—three flares, and only about a half-minute apart. I wonder who it is? It's quite rare to see, and it can really make one think ... you know, about good and bad luck."

Sitting next to his standing father, all in brief silence, Peter asked, "What are you going to do?"

Mike stared out at the three flares gradually making their sluggish way downward into the choppy strait, before deciding, "I'm going to release the net and go offer assistance. I really doubt that those flares came from the same creep who made the phony mayday, in old Tom's name."

He was out and then back in the cabin post-haste; and engaging the clutch with forward gear, while feeding diesel into the piston cylinders, Mike turned the bow twenty-seven degrees to starboard, placing the vessel directly into the compass-reading he'd quickly, accurately marked down when the flares were launched (a trait of a true skipper's competence, which he's topnotch at retaining).

Again he looked down at the radar screen to see if anything at all was showing since he last checked, when the flares went up, but the screen showed naught except the normal green, distance-measure rings. He even switched the radar unit to one-hundred-percent parameter scan capacity, totaling twenty-five nautical miles radius of potential detection of as small an object (with even a minute amount of metallic element within it) as one cubic metre.

But, nevertheless, nada.

After about three-quarters of an hour, Mike knew that the two of them had travelled more than twenty nautical miles in the proper direction while flashing his ultra-bright, sealed-bulb searchlight over as much area as possible, considering the wave heights and disorienting, lit-up whitecaps.

"I just don't get it—nothing on the radar and right from the get-go, even as the flares shot up; where in the hell did they come from?" Mike said, exasperated, turning to see and hear Peter's non-response, "Pete?"

However, his boy and summer deckhand was asleep in the pilot's seat, his head leaning on the sliding window to his left.

"There's absolutely nothing out here."

Pulling the boat out of forward gear after cutting off the full flow of engine fuel, he first helped Peter slowly get up and climb down into the bunk bed below. Then Mike immediately again placed the clutch into forward gear, although only at idle revolution, as he rotated the steering wheel as far as its hydraulics would allow, to make an approximately 180-degree about-face and head back to pick up a very disappointing eighteen salmon. The return trip, however, was helped along with a conveniently assisting push from three factors: the strong westerly wind (almost from directly astern),

its resultant and accommodating waves and a fairly strong tide—all basically in the same direction.

Mike cut his losses (in fuel, wear and tear, etc.) after rolling up the extensive 1,800 foot long (thirty-six foot deep) jelly-fish-soaked net onto the drum and, at precisely 3:11 a.m., went a steady eight knots in speed into Port San Juan to anchor down for the next thirteen hours or thereabouts.

The alarm clock awoke them at five in the afternoon that day. Just over an hour later, another of Mike's fellow fishermen and long-time friends, Dan Derkevic, skipper of the gillnet-fishing vessel *Optimist*, pulled up alongside the *Sea Gull* and flimsily tied the two boats together at their mid-sections.

"It was really ugly last night, eh, Mike! And no fish!"

Inside the *Sea Gull*, young Peter pump-flushed the toilet and then climbed up the three stairs from the hull, into the cabin, where he sat himself onto the pilot's seat and listened to the conversation going on out on deck.

"Yeah ... We, me and my son, came back in a bit early after picking up our only set—eighteen pieces—at the same place as usual."

"I got fifty-six sockeye for the whole night," Dan returned, then questioned,

"Why just the one set? Too rough?"

"No, we went to answer a distress call; three flares were fired, each just a few minutes apart. But when we got there, we found no boat, no net, no body, no nothing; there hadn't even been anything on the radar for the entire three-and-a-half hours since the first flare went up. It was totally inexplicable. So, we came back here."

"Really?! Three flares?! I didn't see anything, neither did everyone—about two dozen fishermen—I've talked to all day. Then again, I think we all fished well southeast from you, all night, as we usually do."

"Somebody else *must've* seen something—someone *had to've*! And then there was that sickening hoax mayday call ... How could it all have gone missed, altogether?!"

"Really," Dan became quite interested (though it doesn't take much to intrigue most fishermen). "How did the mayday go—what did it say, exactly?"

"Well, without getting into the entire word-for-word thing, it, *he*, identified himself as Tom Ito, from *The Maverick*. Do you remember him?"

"Yeah, the boat that capsized in that bad storm here a couple years back; it was that old Japanese fellow who drowned."

"Actually, it was a bit over three years ago," Mike corrected him such, instead of getting into the nitty-gritty of the 'plus eight days.'

"And the voice—the whole thing, it was so creepy, because it actually *sounded* like Tom; it really did."

"Yeah, I remember the night he drowned, shortly after his distress call," Dan added. "The cabin was crushed when the boat flipped over, after losing its right stabilizer pole and weight, then was dragging it till he finally rolled over."

"I remember it too well. I missed his distress call. I didn't turn on my mouse which is all Tom used—channel 16; I guess it just slipped my mind. I only had my VHF on that night, though I typically keep the mouse on, especially back then to keep in touch with Tom, if need be ..."

"Go figure, eh," Dan sympathized. "That's a real bitch."

“Uh ... Did you say he lost a stabilizer pole and weight and it dragged him under?”

“Hmm. And I heard he managed to fire-off a few from his flare gun, three actually, which were spotted only by two seine boats, travelling northwesterly in his direction, who also heard the mayday, but they were too late to assist.”

“You know how Tom fished the top blue-line, alone as usual—except when you were around, but I heard that night you weren’t. Other than the two seiners, there wasn’t anybody else around to see, hear or help him. Plus, Tom used those much-cheaper flares that aren’t even produced anymore—the ones that didn’t light-up a good chunk of the sky like the quality flares now do.”

“Tom lost a stabilizer and then got off three flares,” seemingly summarized a still-somewhat-stunned Mike. “I never heard about that ... And the guys who knew anything about the incident that most other guys didn’t, would’ve told me, for sure, because Tom and I went back many years.”

“I guess I’m telling you now ... I always thought you knew,” Dan somberly closed the discussion topic, with the utmost respect and consideration in tone of voice. “Well, Mike, I guess I’m going to get my position outside a bit earlier than usual; the weather’s not too bad, according to the forecast.”

Mike untied the binding line and wished Dan a good night’s fishing. Closing the cabin door behind him, Mike looked at his son, though with his thoughts a great distance elsewhere.

“How could anybody not have seen those distress flares and also not heard that mayday?” Mike rhetorically asked himself and, to a lesser extent, his son. “Then again, it was after all transmitted over the mouse radio, which nobody except us (and out of habit to catch the very rare transmission of interest) and a couple of Japanese fishermen back on the Fraser River even have anymore, let alone ever use; it’s known for its antique-like-weak, short-range signal. And the flares weren’t at all that bright. I can’t imagine why anyone would still use those, especially when such night-sky-lighting flares are the only ones on the market for safety reasons.”

(As for Peter’s thoughts on his father’s rambling bewilderment, the still-somewhat-sleepy boy rolled his eyes over to give Dad, who was staring out the front window, a blank look.)

“Plus, why would anyone publicly impersonating—and doing an unbelievably great job of it—a dead man’s voice ... ,” Mike again asked rhetorically, though this time incredulously, “ ... only on a mouse radio which, again, virtually nobody even carries or uses?!”

Mike threw his arms up in complete, frustrated confusion before pretty much concluding that, “It just makes no sense. It makes no sense at all! It’s as though last night didn’t even happen at all!”

All of the mystery of that night on Vancouver Island’s west coast would linger in, sometimes even nagged at, Mike’s psyche for months and years to come and go—though not to a mentally dysfunctional degree or frequency.

Although, it was during one Saturday evening alone with his wife almost five-and-a-third years later, watching old movie videotape cassettes and DVDs, that she came across and plugged in the Spring 2000 hit movie *Frequency*. The movie’s plot revolved

around a combination of supernatural and astrophysical concepts, which had a mysteriously-amazing temporal phenomena occurrence caused by an atypically significant, prolonged aurora borealis event, itself the result of consistent, unusually-violent solar-flare storms originating on the sun.

During the movie, however, Mike, though obviously aware that he was viewing pure fiction, noted that the extraordinary two-way, short-wave ham-radio-set phenomena experienced in *Frequency* was not like that which he and son Peter had experienced during the extensive solar-flare-storm that particular night on the rough waters of Strait of Juan de Fuca.

For one thing, the movie's two main characters—a (at first, 'deceased') father and his adult son—were fully conscious as they conversed (real-time-like) through three decades of temporal distance, notably changing history a few times while they were at it; whereas whatever Mike and Peter saw and heard, especially when recollecting that night with 20/20-vision hindsight, did not come across as being conscious or real-time at all but rather more like a prerecorded voice (i.e. Tom Ito's) and image (i.e. the distress flares) being played—perhaps even more than the one time of which Mike and son were aware—about three years after the actual tragic event occurred.

“Like comparing pure science-fiction with a residual haunt.”

“What was that you said?” asked his wife.

“Oh, just thinking out loud about something that this movie made me recall,” he responded, pulling her a bit closer to him on the couch. “So, do you know who wrote this movie or if there's a novel about it, called *Frequency*?”■

## *The Cynic, His Reality & the Somewhat Cynical Angel*

When his next-corporeal-form-to-be was completing its ninth month of gestation in his next-mother-to-be's womb, the cynic's pre-born soul was met (just like the time before and the time before that) by the Angel of Newborn, who readily revealed to him that his imminent next life would indeed be difficult.

"Well, you know what they don't say," the cynic replied to the angel. "You lose some and then you lose some more."

The angel then further stated that one of the purposes of the cynic's next life would be to contribute, through his purchases of relentlessly losing lottery tickets, towards the large prizes won by others—others, who mostly consisted of persons needing the plethora of prize monies about as much as very large cities need more concrete and Earth needs more ocean.

And the angel also told the cynic that his next life would be filled to the brim with even more cynically bad luck.

"For example," said the angel, "it will rain if you fail to bring your umbrella with you on your long walks, and likewise the opposite."

"Really," the cynic replied sarcastically, "you don't say."

"And in this life, you'll be confronted with the never-published-writer's quite-bitter Catch-22."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you'll not be able to acquire a good-writer reputation until you get published, but you'll not get published until you acquire a good-writer reputation. Also, no matter how good your writing is, there will *always* be at least one writer's material that's better."

"Figures," the cynic replied, nonetheless releasing a frustrated sigh.

"Indeed," the angel nodded, so as to not needlessly, cruelly encourage the cynic to hope for anything else, but then added. "Though there's always the exception to every rule, but ..."

"But what?"

"... But it'll never be you: That kind of break simply is not in the hand of cards about to be dealt you in your new life."

"You know what, angel?" returned the cynic. "I'm not the least bit surprised, considering that lives for me are always the shitty way they are. Hell, even if my name would be the only one placed in a prize-draw hat, Fate would still find a way to deny me my win."

"Yes, I recall one of your previous lives—it indeed was cause to be cynical."

"And that's an understatement," the cynic added, emphatically. "I recall in one life some ideas I submitted to city bureaucrats and other public-sector policy makers getting rejected because my ideas simply made 'too much sense'. For example, I said to one bureaucrat that perhaps electrical and telephone wires would be much less trouble if they would run underground; but the bureaucrat replied, 'that is no good: the repairmen would have much more trouble accessing and repairing the wires, such as when trees

would fall on them' ... And that experience was as cynical as that of the public bus system in one life (man, was that system cynical). The bus driver would always arrive at my bus stop on time when I was late, or early when I was on time; and he made sure to turn on the heater only when it was comfortably warm weather and thus not needed at all, while he'd keep it off when it was a notably-cold climate and the passengers could definitely use the heat."

"Not surprising," the angel agreed, rolling his eyes.

"And I also recall rebutting a newspaper's letters-editor's claim that the news-media are but a reflection of the sentiments held by the society within which that news-media circulate. I then suggested to him that overall society ideology may be but a reflection of the opinions held by the news-media that circulate within that society. So he said that he'd prove me wrong, and he acquired mass public agreement that such opinion as mine is 'not fit to print' since 'it's in such error'."

The angel nodded and then added that, "I recall as well that you'd be able to know that your letter-to-the-editor got published by the fact that there was a major snow or rain storm, meaning that many—if not the majority—of newspaper copies thus did not get delivered or got soaked and therefore not read."

"Yeah, that really pissed me off," said the cynic, exasperated, before adding: "But do you know what really burned me bad? It was when the best parts on good TV shows and movies—you know, those parts that you most wanted to see—made great indicators of serious about-to-occur interruptions of my viewing ability."

"Yes; and, also, when something very positive happened to you," said the angel, "it seemed to indicate an imminent crisis or negative event meant to keep your rare and brief moment of satisfaction in check."

Both the Angel of Newborn and the cynic then went into a moment of silence and thought.

"Anyway," the angel broke the silence while giving the cynic a gentle nudge towards the bright light of Newborn, "it's your time to go, now; it's your time."

"But don't you have any last words of advice or enlightenment for me?" the cynic requested, slightly resisting the angel's subtle push.

"Yes, I do: Now, remember, the more you'll want something, the less likely you'll attain it; and, of course, the less you want something, the more likely you are to receive it. Consider it an inversely proportional kind of bitch luck."

"You could've told me something I didn't already know and expect."

"Now," the angel concluded with a mild chuckle, "go get a life."

"Oh, yeah—that's *really* funny ..."

## ***ODE: to Toto & Socks***

Oh, dear pets, my heart from loss did corrode,  
you I miss in this life as this life mocks  
me with the loss of my two dear cats, Socks  
and Toto; yes, bitter Fate had not bode  
well with me, as upon me life bestowed  
a Christmas stocking full of jagged rocks,  
just grant me a case of the chicken pox  
but no more loss to my mind overload.  
At my miserable door—trying to goad  
me with my felines gone—Death indeed knocks  
as I try to relax in a mild mode:  
picturing them watching birds in large flocks  
then eyeing each other, like with a code,  
as apart they depart, away each walks.

## ***ODE: to Christ: Payment in Advance & in Full***

I use Christ's name in vain, I have displayed  
in the worst way and everything I've done  
requires redemption from Him, the One,  
in advance of all the sins, I'm afraid,  
I'll have committed in life; when I'll fade  
into the hereafter, I will have none  
of the stains of sin that the devil's spun,  
since Christ, for all that I've done, will have paid.  
Thus, knowing that I'll blaspheme Him, have laid  
against Him (though I do not my Lord shun)  
my most foul of thoughts, it has been conveyed  
to me that I need Him, the Father's Son,  
to pay for me with His blood as He prayed  
to Heaven, which gave Him nowhere to run.

## *Society Earth and Beyond Its Rebirth*

(November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

With a superficial knife wound to his waist the young man ran along the Manhattan sidewalk, calling out for assistance while panting heavily as he passed one closed shop after another. It was just minutes past midnight, and onlookers walking both sides of the street did nothing at all to help; instead, they gawked at his serious predicament, desperately seeking sanctuary via an open and lively business.

He turned his upper body to his right as he continued his flight (though gradually slowing to a jog) to see how far behind him his pursuer was, all the while aware of the cut to his side but unaware of its severity. He did know, however, that the shadowy figure maintaining a distance of no more than 40 metres behind him was the same scumbag who cut him. And such inhumanity for naught but his small amount of money and cheap wristwatch (twenty bucks), a grand total of forty-five bucks.

The young man would've willingly handed over everything, but the thug wasn't used to such willingness, at least not without adding one or two more slashes with his seven-inch switchblade.

"You can have everything I got!" the young man tried shouting as he panted, becoming even shorter of breath than before. "What the hell do you want, for Christ sakes?!"

He then spotted sanctuary. A bright neon-light sign, which blared "OPEN," just above the door of one of a half-dozen or so nightclubs in that small region of Manhattan. "Oh ... thank God!" he gasped, then worked on catching his breath after arriving at the Plexiglas protected entrance-fee-collection booth.

The nightclub's Plexiglas fortified entrance door was entirely covered from the inside by an opaque, red, felt curtain, with everything else external being the red brick sidewall right next to where he stood. He could hear the soothing sanctuary-safe sound of boisterous, open-for-business activity from within getting out through the one entrance.

He grabbed onto the door handle and pulled with all of his strength and weight behind his effort. Only his blunt grunt was the result, as the door refused to budge an iota.

*This isn't happening!* he mentally shrieked.

Out came another such grunt when he again futilely yanked at the solidly locked door.

*But the light's on!* his panicked thoughts continued reverberating, as he yanked even harder at the door, twice more. *Why the f— is it shut?!*

"Uh ... Thirty bucks, mister."

"What ... ? Where the ...?" he muttered, looking around desperately for the disembodied request for the nightclub entrance fee.

"I said, thirty bucks cover-charge ... if you want to get in."

He looked at the booth beside him and the twenty-ish booth attendant within, staring back out at him apathetically.

"What? Thirty dollars?" he said, letting out a breath and behaving as though he never experienced a nightclub's pay-booth before.

He anxiously fumbled about while pulling out a twenty from his right pocket and a five from his left; then he reached into his back pockets but found only lint.

“All I have is twenty-five—*really*,” he began to beg, turning his head to see how close behind the scumbag was.

There, no more than fifteen meters away, he could see the menacing thug, though only a shadow figure within the entranceway of a closed-for-the-night classy-appearance hat store.

“Hey, mister, do you have thirty bucks or not? ... Look, I have to go use the john.”

The booth attendant stood up and walked through a rear door within the booth, and completely out of view. The booth light then went dim, although the nightclub’s innards remained quite active, and the neon light was still on, bright. However, he was still locked out tightly, to failingly fend for himself, his very life, simply because he was five dollars short.

His sole surviving family member, a young-adult little sister sunk deep in heartache and frustration, had those exact words engraved on her big brother’s gravestone: “His brief life cut short simply because he was five dollars short. Brandon Gridner, February 29, 2002 – November 12, 2017.”

***‘How Many More Must Greatly Suffer or Die for Others’ Gratuitous Monetary Gain & Simultaneous Societal Mayhem?’***

**(June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2042)**

**W**ith significant social-activism momentum building on local, regional, national and international scales for just a few months short of a full quarter century—ever since the tragically gratuitous, brutal killing of Brandon Gridner, for almost no monetary gain. It was an atypical cause for such a mass movement that was triggered within the New York City region; nevertheless, his story, his totally meaningless murder due to being but five dollars short of accessing asylum from a killer, soundly resonated with the people of America, followed closely by Canada, and beyond, from that day onwards.

There followed a great weight massive move forwards with such a historically unprecedented, revolutionary concept to gradually (over a ten year period) eliminate the entire globe’s monetary and precious-metals exchange systems, along with all stock/bond trading methodologies—i.e. making money off of others’ gains and losses.

The progressive movement indeed was almost entirely potently propelled by an enormous and inexcusably immoral gap between the superfluously wealthy top one percent of the planetary population and the struggling or outright impoverished bottom ninety-nine percent, the latter which lacked sufficient means by which to maintain an average quality of life and/or lifestyle (an ‘average’ based on a new, relative Earthly scale).

Of greatest concern, however, was the most critical juncture in Earth’s existence involving the inhabitability of the planet in regards to its air, land and water. Either the planet’s populace made a figurative ninety-degree turn towards one likely outcome or perpendicularly towards the other likely outcome.

One choice of course change would eventually result in a world of genuinely pristine eco-systems, thus safely breathable air and truly clean drinking water, etcetera. Accompanying this true progress in cleaning up Earth’s life-sustaining environment, was

a complete cessation of *all* hunger, incessant though needless serious illness and great suffering, etcetera.

A course change towards the other direction, however, would be regressive, imminently leading humanity (not to mention its fellow Earthly creatures) back towards nightmarish, global scale, coal-dust-dark-gray, industrial-revolution-like existence. Eventually, it would result in a catastrophic planetary environmental consequence—one that would pollute Earth to a hopelessly prolific, profound degree.

Maintaining the same course straight ahead was also a path with a very bleak outcome for Earth's various life forms, just of a different lot of negative occurrences taking a little longer to reach fruition (of course, periods of time relative to Earth's great age).

Contrary to Big Capitalism and Industrialists' cynical critiques against any slowing, let alone the ceasing of their unrelenting mass extraction of Earthly minerals and other natural resources, the diverse peoples, ideologies and cultures all over the planet wisely chose the correct, truly progressive course change that spared 'spaceship' Earth and its life so much agony and loss.

In less than five and a half decades, every nation of the world quite successfully initiated, managed and maintained an environment purification project involving every aspect of Earth's air, land and waters. In fact, efforts proceeded so successfully that many cases of severe ecological toxification were actually halted then reversed back to a global environmental status of pristine eco-system sustainability, something not witnessed for three to four centuries in some major European nations.

"It all turned into like some version of Earth society from those very old *Star Trek* movies and television series I used to watch as a young boy," a 103-year-old Canadian man of amazingly sound memory was quoted by *TIME* magazine's April 10, 2138 issue.

***'We Made the Right Choice for Progressive Change & We Live Quite Well By It!'***  
(June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2142)

**T**o the day, exactly one hundred years had passed since that one spring morning, Earth's populace began accumulating in every capital and major city across the planet just a few hours after a New York City gathering became the launching point for the most profound cause to date in human history. Planet-wide, the peaceful yet cohesive demonstrators all made the utmost insightful choice of their lives and their future as a 'collective humanity.' The people, about 10.23 billion in number, redirected their destiny towards an absolute elimination of all pollutants, mostly in the form of insidious bio-toxic substances, followed by a 180-degree reversal of the global pollution crises that had reigned for much too long and for too much of the wrong reasons.

All the while, truly effective population control also became and remained a reality, soon eliminating such past ordeals as the mass famines of Africa, particularly during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. On the other front, to stop mass famine suffering, the elimination of all forms of planetary pollutants such as ozone-depleting greenhouse gases over decades of environmental progress virtually totally resolved previously precarious irregular global weather systems that caused massive-scale crop-destroying devastating floods, permafrost and drought. But human ingenuity received the most credit for the exponential increase in agricultural efficiency bio-technology and eco-friendly fertilization of crops.

Perhaps most profound, wars, be they ‘civil’ or transnational, and genocide naturally became without-exception unacceptable concepts, let alone options for any reason at all. Simultaneously, respect for life extended to all animals, translating into vegetarianism becoming the culinary-art-form-to-perfect for the twenty-second century and well beyond.

Also, the refreshing fact that no nation any longer utilized the innately abused monetary system imminently ensured that stockpiles of gold bullion would no longer almost entirely represent gratuitous wealth and monetary value but rather would be melted down for progressive use as constructive elements for clean, green technologies, etcetera.

In this new era, every person on the planet could be employed according to his or her talents, mostly acquired through universally accessible higher learning institutions, therefore contributing towards positive societal or global functions to varying degrees of skills progression, in the manner which he or she genuinely desires. Hence, all citizens could acquire the skills and professions of their own choice, to their own fulfillment, while experiencing a real sense of accomplishment and thus satisfaction—without having to suffer any anxieties whatsoever over potential or actual financial obstacles (i.e. late home mortgage payments followed by bank foreclosure).

Every person began thinking for him- or herself: *How exactly does a person truly, justly “earn” \$100 billion—in both a moral sense as well as that of a universally accessible contribution to society?* One would conclude that to “earn” so many billions of dollars, the lucky person would be performing some super humanitarian feat for the planet’s populace or spaceship Earth itself through that person’s pristine upkeep of the planet’s eco-systems. Or the multi-billionaire would have eliminated starvation or alleviated at least a large chunk of the mass suffering occurring 24/7 around so much of the world—for example, through his mass distribution of much needed medicines.

*It simply cannot be done—not from a moral perspective,* it was agreed upon by all.

Salaries and wages were no longer allocated within the same marginalizing framework that in the past resulted in large, unjust gaps between the personal wealth and therefore quality of life of one extremely small portion of the populace compared to that of the vast majority of Earth citizens. Instead, all were accorded secured computerized “credits” with the ‘payout’ based on the time and effort that ‘employees’ put into their profession, the quality and quantity of their education/training as well as the “human and environment responsibility” involved in their profession.

All said, there would not be lingering desires for superfluous mass credit accumulation—a concept of ‘savings’ that was decidedly left behind in the socially dysfunctional past—because no one would be left to want of any necessity of life or moderation of lifestyle comfort.

There was to no longer be any enduring temptation or compulsion to hoard anything, let alone monetary wealth. ■