

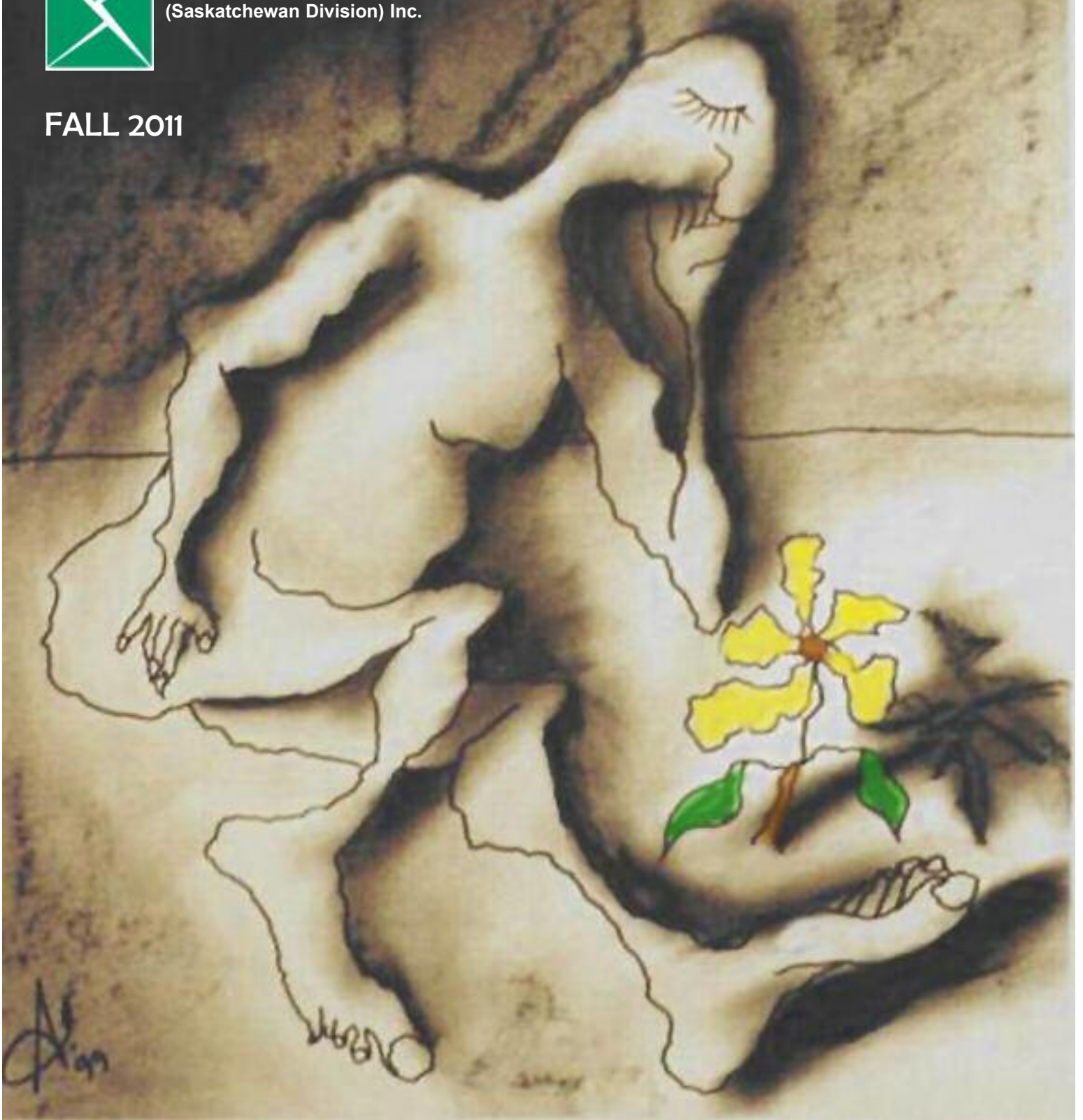
TRANSITION



CANADIAN MENTAL
HEALTH ASSOCIATION
(Saskatchewan Division) Inc.

Writing the *funny* in crazy

FALL 2011



TRANSITION

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(Saskatchewan Division) Inc.

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Founded in 1950, The Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc. is a volunteer-based organization which supports and promotes the rights of persons with mental illness to maximize their full potential; and promotes and enhances the mental health and well-being of all members of the community.

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3. Maximum manuscript lengths: articles – 15 pages; all other prose – 10 pages; poetry – 10 poems or 10 pages, whichever is less; visual art – 10 pieces.
4. Reprints and simultaneous submissions (to several magazines) are not considered.
5. Turnaround time is normally one issue or 6 months: do not send a second submission before the first has been reviewed.
6. Payment is \$25.00 per printed page (\$12.50/half page); \$20.00 per published visual art work; and \$100.00 for cover art.
7. Electronic submissions are preferred (with full contact information and a brief bio). Submit manuscripts in Word or WordPerfect format (12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced, 2.5 cm margins) as e-mail attachment to: contactus@cmhask.com or directly to the Editor at tdyck@sasktel.net.
8. Or send hardcopy manuscripts (typed, one-sided, 12-point, double-spaced, 2.5 cm margins), together with full contact information, a brief bio, and self-addressed, stamped return envelope with sufficient postage, to:

TRANSITION
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2
EDITORIAL: TED DYCK
Writing the funny in crazy

2
DIRECTOR'S REPORT:
DAVID NELSON
Need follow through on
provincial election

LIVING THE LIFE

3
MORRISON, IAN
Healing through humour

5
JOHNSON, BRAD
My Story

WRITING THE LIFE Non-Fiction

11
FAHLMAN, JEAN
Men and their boy-toys

12
FERGUSON, CAROL
My tongue is shriveling

13
FLAATEN, NORVALD
Humour

14
HURDLE, CRYSTAL
Look into my eyes

15
LOEHR, BRENT M.
Strange animal

16
ELIZABETH MCGILL
Crazy characters

17
MJM
Freewriting exercise:
Humour - no laughing matter

18
PARLEY, KAY
She only had to show them once

19
KIMBER, ELAINE L.
with introduction by
JENNIFER HOWIE
Conglomeration



Table of Contents

WRITING THE LIFE Poetry

23
AMATO, TAMRA J.
Depression
On Grandma Thora's farm

23
BRAUN, GORD
My one true love

24
ENNS, VICTOR
Jimmy Bang's Limbo Blues
Jimmy Bang's Sedentary Blues

25
harding-russell, gillian
Ernie with the moon face
The Greeter

26
JOHNSON, NORMA
Razor

26
MUIRHEAD, LAURIE LYNNE
Full circle

26
MORRISON, ALEC
The Houdini Effect

27
SKELTON, JAMES
Paper India
Karmic relationship

27
SNOW, JEFFREY P.
Nobel Prize
Reconciliation

WRITING THE LIFE Fiction

28
BAGGOTT, KATE
All dressed up

30
BIASOTTO, LINDA
Uncle Vegard's eulogy

34
ISBISTER, ARNOLD
Solomon and David

37
LOVATT, CHUCK
Tharn!

40
MACDONALD, GLADYS
Crazy Hazey

41
VASILESCUE, JENNY
My purse

Reviews

43
GROBOWSKY, IRENE
Feisty and funny

44
RASMUSSEN, LAURIE &
REMPEL, CAROL
Flower Child: An R & R Review

45
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS



Writing the *funny* in crazy?

BY TED DYCK

I suspect that some of our readers will take offense with the subtitle of this issue on humour. How can we, after all, show such disrespect to the tragedy of mental illness as to call it “crazy”? How dare we even suggest that there might be something “funny” about it?

Well, here's how: like Black Americans reclaiming the word *Nigger*; Aboriginal Canadians asserting their rights to the term *Indian*; women challenging the patriarchic meaning of *slut*, LGBT the word *queer*. And while we're at it, like all of us changing the meaning of the word *consumers*.

You see what I mean. One of the best ways to diffuse a stigma, to explode a stereotype, to make all of us think about what we're saying is to use those terms which hide stigma and stereotype in ways that show them for what they are – conventional labels posing as objective truths.

To use *crazy* in place of *mentally ill* is to perform a double duty: first, to shock the reader by using a brutal word from the

past; and second, to suggest that it has been hijacked by another misnomer. For *illness* too is a metaphor that brings the baggage of the medical profession's model of *physical* illness to bear on *mental* states: *cause*, *symptom*, and *cure*.

Equally, there are many things that are *funny-haha* about *crazy* – the hilarity of trying to understand oneself, the bitter sweetness of being-in-time, the absurdity of the human condition, . . . In short, Ian Morrison's “Healing through Humour” article, below.

So all of us can *write the funny in crazy*, knowing that we're doing it because it works – though of course not sure of exactly why. Some say it's because writing is *confessional* – there, it's out on the open at last, no more worrying about they will think. Others say it's because writing is *editorial* – we don't just *write*, we *edit* what we write, we *re-shape* our own stories. Yet others say it's because writing is *ecstasy* – it's the *pleasure* of saying well what you're saying, the *relief* and *bliss* being out-of-yourself for even a moment.

Think about it. Write about it.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Need follow through on election promises

BY DAVID NELSON, RPN, RSW
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This is a very exciting time for mental health in our province. Election promises made during our recent election have included rebuilding SK Hospital at North Battleford, 80 community residential beds for complex needs clients, and 40 beds for persons who require a “step down” or part way to community from inpatient care service.

A major improvement announced for benefits in the SAID (Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disabilities) is also key to many persons with mental health needs.

These initiatives, along with the momentum growing from work the Mental Health Commission, Canadian Mental Health Association and groups like the Schizophrenia Society are doing, are building a ground-swell of understanding to the needs of those requiring mental health services.

Things we need to push for over the next four years are:

1. We should have a comprehensive, multi-year provincial strategy for improving our mental health system. Saskatchewan is far behind in monies it provides for mental health compared to other provinces (i.e 5% vs. average 6.1%). This represents a shortfall of over \$40 million compared even to other provinces' underfunded systems.

2. We need to ensure that mental health is critical in all new initiatives including health human resource planning, primary health care redesign, lean initiatives, community health care and health promotion initiatives.

3. We need to ensure representation in collaborative bal-

ance and care initiatives by people with lived experience, including persons with mental health issues and their families.

4. We need to encourage Government to follow through on commitments made regarding SK Hospital North Battleford and complex needs and step-down beds.

5. We need to ensure an adequate reasonable benefit structure for those with mental health issues in the SAID program to ensure adequate income for healthy living both physically and mentally.

6. We need to ensure that the Provincial Mental Health Strategy includes and adequately supports infrastructure, salaries, transportation and other resources needed for services delivered at the community level by not-for-profit mental health agencies.

7. We need to ensure adequate social housing and other supported housing for persons affected by mental illness.

8. We need to ensure adequate assisted/supported employment opportunities for those affected by mental illness.

9. We need to ensure that resources are made available to Regional Health Authorities to provide adequate and ongoing smoking cessation aids and programs, especially when persons are not able to smoke in inpatient units.

10. We need to ensure that the Justice and Corrections systems consider and provide for mental health/illness requirements in their delivery of services and that this is incorporated into release plans of inmates.

We look forward to working with the mental health and addictions community in Saskatchewan to move forward these important initiatives.



Healing through humour

BY IAN MORRISON

My name is Ian Morrison and those of you reading this might be wondering what Healing through Humour is all about. I will get to that momentarily, but first I'd like to let you know who I am. I've been a comedian since I was 13 years old. I am a graduate of Humber College's Comedy: Writing and Performance Program in Toronto Ontario and am a published author. I have done comedy in music, stand-up, and print. What makes me qualified to do this project in the mental health community is that I have had severe Obsessive Compulsive Disorder for the last 22 years.

Healing through Humour began at a low point in my life. Years after I had graduated from Huber College, I thought stand-up comedy was no longer an option for me. I got to a point where I hadn't been taking care of myself or my illness and my life had all but fallen apart. During the time when I was attempting to get my life back together, I was asked what I wanted to do. The key point was that it was what I wanted, not what I expected other people to want me to do. The only thing that I've ever known how to do is tell jokes, so I said that I wanted to do stand-up comedy, not really believing that this was still possible. I was at a point where I didn't think that anything good in my life would ever happen again. I was on a road down to a place that was more frightening than I ever could have imagined.

So with that we looked into another program that teaches comedy to people living with mental illness and it was not the right fit for our province. The people at CMHA in Regina,

whom we had gone to for help in starting a program, asked me to design my own program that, would be a better fit for our province and city. I figured that I had nothing else to lose so I took the knowledge I obtained about comedy over the years and developed a program of my own. It was based partially on the teachings of Judy Carter whom I had heard speak and is a stand-up comedy instructor in Los Angeles. Judy would teach things such as joke structures and topics as well as bad habits which you should avoid. I also included my own musings and

theories I've picked up over the years, like if a joke doesn't go over well, just keep on going with your act as though nothing has happened.

With the program written all we had to do was find the students. We had assembled a board of directors from several of the mental health communities around the city, organizations such as the Schizophrenia Society and the South Saskatchewan Independent Learning Center (SSLIC). We were going to have our first session of classes at SSLIC, who had graciously donated the space for this course to take place. We put out the word in the mental health community and had a much larger turn out than I had anticipated. After the introductory session had taken place, we had eight permanent students that were going to participate in the program.

For the first class everybody was apprehensive to say the least. Nobody knew what to really expect of a man who said he was going to get them up on a stage to tell jokes. I'd like to say that you can't teach a person how to be funny, they're either funny or they're not, but you can teach people to take advantage of that sense of humour and give them the tools to put it into a performance. Every time we do healing through humour, we start out with lesson number one, which is a lot of information to take in at one time. I give you hints on the habits that a lot of comedians use when they perform. These things include both things that you want to avoid and things that a lot of comedians have success with. There are no steadfast rules when it comes to comedy; if people laugh then it's comedy. But there are certain techniques that are no longer done because they are considered cliché, such as tapping the microphone and asking if this thing is on. And you never call attention to the fact that the joke you just told never got a laugh in the past. As I tell my students, and will tell anybody that asks, if a joke tanks, don't sweat it.

Once we have gotten through these dos and don'ts, we move onto the core of lesson one which is the joke style. Joke styles and examples on how to write these styles of jokes are what will take up the rest of the next five lessons. I'm not going to go into all of the lessons of the course as I don't want to reveal my hand, but here's an example to give people a better understanding of what stand-up comedy is all about. One of these joke styles would be list making: you list three examples of something, and the third example on the list is the punch line of the joke.

After these lessons, we practice our routines for a couple of weeks to prepare for the very much feared public performance. The best way of preparing for this fear is to be as rehearsed and organized as possible.

The first show that we did was at SSILC where we had been holding the classes for the first two months. It was supposed to be an intimate show for family and friends, which it still was, but we had over 60 people show up and not enough chairs. Some stood and others sat as I introduced myself and the program and then got the show underway. To everybody's surprise, the entire group did an exceptional job and an enjoyable time was had by all who attended. One of the best per-

The CMHA (SK) Writing for Therapy Project

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formances of the night was by the student who had been the most intimidated by public performance: that was a night where she conquered that fear.

Once that first show was over, we moved onto our second class of all new students. The interesting thing that occurred while the other class was ending was that people didn't want to leave the group and wanted the classes to continue. This was something that was unexpected but greatly appreciated. So the plan was that we would meet one night with the old group and one night with the new group, and at the end of the new course we would all do a performance together. In the end, the comedian count was a whopping 14, so needless to say we needed to find ourselves a bigger venue.

The best place that I was able to think of was the theater inside the Mackenzie Art Gallery where I had performed when I was a kid. I had done several shows there, and it also held a special meaning for me as I was on that stage when my oldest niece was born. The theater was available and they gave us an awesome rate (despite the course being free, the rental of theaters is not), and with that the show was a go. During the time leading up to the show the original group worked on new material and the new group was going through the course that group number one had already completed. Nerves were high for both groups, nervous for the new because they had never done this before, and nervous for the old because this would be the first time that we would be doing sketches.

The sketches in healing through humour happened by pure accident. Although I had studied sketch comedy in college, it had never occurred to me that the group would be doing sketches. But one day one of my students brought in a series of sketch ideas that were based on things that had happened to him in his life. The first two sketches were about humorous experiences while he was in the army, and the third was about a funny letter he had received from the company that produced his vehicle.

The second show was much larger than the first: we had 14 comedians in total, almost double from the eight we had for the first show. When we entered the theater for the pre-show preparation there was a lot of things we had to get done in a very short span of time. So much in fact that we would later have dress rehearsals the day before the show to make sure everything that was needed to get done got done.

Before I get into how everything for this went down, I want to take a minute to tell you about the frustrations we would go through trying to get a well-filmed copy of our performances. We had hired a person out of the yellow pages, but unfortunately the tape of the show turned out poorly both visually and audio-wise, and we ended up having these same problems for the next show as well.

People who have never been involved with a public performance may not know that in the history of the world no show has ever started on time. The show was scheduled to start at 7

p.m., but we held the curtain for a few minutes to make sure that we got as many people in the theater as we could. Once all the people were in their seats, one of the students introduced me and we were on our way. The way our shows work is that I come out first and welcome the audience to the show, explain what the group is all about, and then bring out the first comic. Once the show was underway everything was running relatively smoothly. I say relatively because, like not starting on time, no show in the history of time is without its hiccups, such as costume problems or lighting difficulties, of which we had both. The audience received the material and enjoyed the show, and we got many of those people to attend our next performance.

The next show was an interesting one, as we had gone from 14 comics to five. I had started the third class, but we only had one participant this time, and that would be the same for the next class as well. The next show was to date the best performance that the group has ever been a part of. This is not to say that the other shows were not well done, but for this one we had a better idea of what exactly is it that the group wants to represent, that representation being the joy of public performance and the ability to beat the fear of anxiety. Not to mention that all but one of the performers had already gotten a few shows under their belt and were a little bit more relaxed, well as relaxed as people living with anxiety issues could be.

At the end of the show when everybody's sets had gone over well, we ended the performance with "Fight for your right to party" by the Beastie Boys, a huge party song from the 1980's, which was a huge surprise for the audience but at the end we received a standing ovation. This was the first time in my life that I had been a part of a standing ovation, and it floored me. The closest I'd ever come to that before was when my band played a show that was standing-room only.

After that show was over, we were all on a pretty huge high. We kept meeting once a week, and I also started out with three new students, but after a few weeks I was once again down to only one. We continued working on material and ran into multiple complications and went into filming a show for a DVD with a professional. As happens more often than not in live performing, it was just not our night to shine as much as we could have. We learned our lesson, and now know what things we need to fix for the next show which will be in January 2012.

If you want to see how the group is doing or want to show your friends our website, feel free to visit www.healingthrough-humour.com and browse around. We will be adding more content soon. And if you ever get a chance or know someone who would like to be a part of our program, feel free to e-mail me on our website or phone CMHA Regina at (306) 525-5601.

And if you take anything away from this piece of writing, remember that you'll never be worse off for having a good laugh, well, unless it's at a funeral, then don't. Take care.

In the end, the comedian count was a whopping 14, so needless to say we needed to find ourselves a bigger venue

My story

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Foreword

I used to think that once I did all of the right things in life, once I had lived up to all of the expectations that I and people had for me, I would finally understand why I was striving for a house, a career, a family, and all of the wondrous things that I had ever imagined doing. Once I had done them, the reason for the insatiable need to do them would suddenly become clear. Once I had done them and reached the place that I had always wanted and expected to be, I would have gained the wisdom that I needed to make the rest of life easy. From that point on, everything would make sense.

But the truth is that after accomplishing these things I was twice as lost as when I had started. I had no inkling of where I was, and how to get to where I would be happy and wise. In fact, at this time I was anything but happy and wise, after doing what I had thought I should do to get me to the place of success. In reality, only the hard things, only the unexpected missteps that have thrown my life way off course and have pushed me to reassess that life, have given me any insight and any clue into the sort of life, for me, I should be living.

My life, after being the model young man, the person who would not only strive for excellence, but achieve it, suddenly started to go wrong. Suddenly and without warning, my life turned a full 180 degrees, and there was absolutely nothing that I could do about it, except hold on with everything that I had.

1. First symptoms: California and back

I left home when I was 16. Estevan, a small city in oil country with a population of about 11,000 people, was not a very exciting place to grow up, but it was home and I had quite a normal childhood. Nothing out of the ordinary, except for my dad, who held dual citizenship in the U.S. and Canada. From the time I was 10 years old, my dad had lived in California, mostly down in the San Francisco Bay Area, but by the time I had turned 16, he was living in northern California, in a city called Chico. He had met a woman who lived there and had moved up there so that they could get married. I and my four brothers and sisters (two of each) all flew down for the wedding. After the wedding I stayed in Chico to live with my dad and his new wife.

My dad's new wife was a little peculiar. She seemed to have problems that seemed to be driving her in a bit of a negative way, and before long she was taking these problems out on me. My dad had been having health concerns since I was about five, when he had contracted Lyme disease, and after not being diagnosed with it until a year and half later, had developed complications from it that affect him to this day. He had met Christine when he was very ill, and she had taken care of him, so I guess he had been willing to overlook a few of her idiosyncrasies in favor of companionship.

When I first got to Chico, I started school right away, and also started doing data entry at a small computer company.

Beyond this, I also volunteered at the Salvation Army so that I would be as busy as possible. But the time that I was home was starting to be very hard for me. I became the focal point of Christine's aggression. She would walk back and forth in front of my bedroom door, yelling at me, and whenever I dared to leave my room, she would regularly sit me down at the kitchen table to tell me all of the things that I was doing wrong in life.

Since I hardly knew this woman, and was gone almost the entire day, everyday, I was baffled by this behaviour, and after a few of these sessions where I sat at the kitchen table and she ran me down, I began to wonder whether something was seriously wrong with her. My dad was constantly at work, or sick when he wasn't, and I didn't bring this up to him until I thought that it had gone farther than I could handle.

My life went on like this for six months, when I arrived home one day to discover Christine's diary open on my bedside table. It was open to a page where other people (who I could only assume were friends of hers) had written in it, in sympathetic tones, describing how they wished that she could be rid of such a terrible step-son and be free of my endless misbehaviour.

This was too much, considering that I made sure that I was rarely home, and when I was, I tried to be polite. I showed the diary to my dad, and told him where I had found it, and when he approached Christine about it, she was adamant that I had stolen it from her room. My dad, by this point, had been dragged into a few of the arguments when Christine had vocalized her problems, and I think was starting to see that they would not be easily solved, if at all. So my dad, after six months of marriage decided to end it, and he and I moved into an apartment where we could figure out where to go from there.

It was at this time that my dad explained to me that Christine had actually not had an easy life, and had been molested, more than once, when she was a girl. This brought a lot of things into focus for me, but at the same time, being under the strain of a sick father, and being the catalyst for his failed marriage, my world became darker. My reality had shifted a little in a way that could only be chemical, from the strain of all of this, and as hard as I tried, I could no longer quite get my brain to be what it had been my whole life. Everything that I did was harder, and no matter what I did or how hard I tried, I could no longer feel like myself. With my basic feelings changed, and with my thinking a lot less clear, my life suddenly felt a lot less easy than it once had.

I now know that the experience I was going through was the prodromal phase of schizophrenia. This means that my symptoms were early indicators that I had the genes that could bring about schizophrenia, but did not yet have all of the symptoms that was this disease. Instead I only had slight symptoms, which is what having prodromal symptoms means.

After living in the apartment for a few months, my dad and I, drove across country to Manhattan, New York. I spent some time in a town house that my aunt rented, some with my cousin and aunt in upstate New York, and when my dad moved to upstate New York also, I divided my time among his place,



LIVING THE LIFE

my cousin's place, and the town house in Manhattan. During this time I was employed as a caterer at a retreat center in Connecticut. After a year and a half of dividing my time between New York city, and upstate New York, I was starting to get homesick, so I moved back to Estevan, where most of my immediate family still lived.

2. Up and down: Kelowna and Ottawa

In Estevan I found out that most of my boyhood friends were now into drugs, and working either on the rigs or in similar jobs to pay for the huge drug binges that took place just about every night. I stayed for just three months, till I realized, after doing some of the drugs like ecstasy and mushrooms among others, and constantly drinking with my friends, that this was not the life that I wanted. So when my grandfather in Kelowna, B.C., asked if I could give his caregiver a break, I immediately said yes, and took a bus out to Kelowna.

My grandfather had emphysema from years of smoking, and while I looked after him for a month, I started to think about what my next move in life would be. My oldest sister, Robyn, had been a cook for a tree planting company, and had that year decided to give the tree planting side of the company a try. When I heard this I thought that tree planting may be a good idea for me, so I got some numbers, made some calls, and just before the planting season started, I got a call from the company that my sister was going to plant for and was offered a job.

I learned a lot of things while out tree planting. I learned that even if my mind wasn't performing at a 100 percent, I could make my body perform as I needed it. I learned what determination really was, as I pushed myself to do the job in spite of weather, terrain, what I felt like, and the barriers that I had inside of myself. I learned to push myself despite everything else. It was in tree planting that I learned that no excuse would do for failing to accomplish what you set out to, and that sometimes you have to use everything inside yourself to do it.

So for the first half of the season I absolutely hated it, and for the second half of the season after I had broken through all of my internal barriers, I had never felt as good and as free, as if I could accomplish anything I wanted in my life. It was wondrous. It was a natural high that I completely loved, and after it was over I decided to move out to Ottawa with a friend whom I had met tree planting who was from there.

When we arrived in Ottawa we both got jobs at a company that did apartment renovations. So while we worked during the day, during the night we spent our time exploring Ottawa, the countryside, and going on trips to places like Montreal. We would hit up casinos, go shopping at the most expensive stores, trying to pass ourselves off as people who actually had some money, and tasting all of the culture we could, in as short of time as we could.

After almost six months of living in Ottawa I received two phone calls in the same week. The first one was a shocker: my sister told me that my best friend, who was the person that I

had been closest to for almost my entire life, whom I had been inseparable from for almost 16 years, had just drowned in a river while camping with friends. This itself was a blow that was devastating to me. But then later on in the week I received another telephone call to tell me that my grandfather had passed away as well.

This was altogether more than I could handle, and my world began to change fast. I could barely hold myself up under the crushing weight that was on my shoulders. These were two of the relationships that I depended on the most in my life. They were two people who had more meaning to me in life than just about anyone else. I was left gasping. So immediately after returning to Ottawa from the funerals, I called my dad who was at the time living in Victoria, B.C., and, desperate to be closer to family, asked if I could move out there with him to try to figure out my life again.

3. A major episode and misdiagnosis: Victoria

After I moved out to Victoria, I didn't feel that I had a lot to give, and soon became withdrawn into myself, where I tried to internalize most of what I was feeling, since I had no idea



A TREE PLANTER IN NORTHERN ONTARIO
FROM WWW.WIKIPEDIA.ORG.

What was surging through me was paralyzing me. I had never felt anything like it in my life . . .

how to deal with it. I started to feel such emptiness and such terrible anguish that I could hardly function. My will to do anything in life was gone, and I was simply trying to hold on from moment to moment. I was in so much pain that just doing this took all of my strength. One night while sitting in my dad's car as he ran errands, something in my reality changed again.

When I say change, I mean that while sitting in the car, internalizing everything that I felt, my reality suddenly exploded, and became hugely different. All of a sudden everything that I was thinking and feeling changed, and in a moment's time, what was going on in my head and what I was experiencing was multiplied by 10. It was like a sudden storm had enveloped me, and my world became a hurricane of things that I did not understand. I had so many thoughts going through my head that I couldn't keep tabs on even a small number of them. I had so many feelings surging through me that to just sit there and go through them took much more than I had inside of me. There was so much there, surging through me as my reality, that I was massively overwhelmed, and all of my endurance were stretched far beyond what I was equipped to handle.

When my dad got back to the car I couldn't breathe. What was surging through me was paralyzing me. I had never felt anything like it in my life, so I turned to my dad, and said "Dad, I think that I need to go to the hospital." It was the only thing that I could think of. My dad looked at me and said "OK," and within minutes we were there.

We arrived at the hospital and got in to see a psychiatrist, but things hadn't begun to make any more sense than when I had first started to experience them. As a matter of fact, the longer that I went experiencing what I can only describe as a storm of thoughts and emotions, the more things began to get chaotic and make less sense the more time went on.

The psychiatrist who was on call, sensing my distress and my complete inability to be in the moment, admitted me to the psych ward, where I had blood taken and was given a moderate dose of an anti-psychotic which immediately took the edge off the storm that I was experiencing. And while the storm still went on, I was able to focus on things that were going on outside of it, and was able to gather myself up, and begin to take stock of what was happening to me.

I stayed that night in the hospital. In fact I stayed there for almost two weeks, since it was a busy place, and I had to wait for the resident psychiatrist to be able to talk to me. In that time I was only spoken to twice by the psychiatrist. I tried to keep to myself since I wasn't really sure what I would encounter while I was there. My mom flew in to Victoria so that she would also be able to meet with the psychiatrist. After almost two weeks were up, I, my mother, and my dad, all sat down with the psychiatrist to have my situation explained to us, since after this meeting I was going to be discharged.

The psychiatrist told me and my parents that what I had was psychosis, which is a general term for a type of mental instability, and then proceeded to explain to us how I also had an Anti-Social / Borderline Personality Disorder. Our mouths

hung open for about a minute. I started to wonder to myself how this psychiatrist, after two 15-minute sessions, during which I basically just kept quiet, was able to come to such conclusions. My parents started to tell the psychiatrist that those diagnoses didn't sound at all like me, but he immediately cut in with "Parents are often in denial about their children," and then excused himself and went to complete my discharge from the hospital.

I was so unsure about what it was that I was going through, that I really just wanted to be home, and in all honesty, at the time I didn't even know what an Anti-Social/Borderline Personality Disorder was. When I asked my dad, he said that essentially it means that you are a psychopath and that you have no conscience. I was left wondering quite seriously what on earth a kid who has just had multiple deaths in his life, and who kept to himself, and who essentially just read books the entire time that he was in the hospital, could possibly have done to lead a psychiatrist to think that he was a psychopath. The only conclusion that I could come up with at the time, and my dad seemed to think this also, was that this doctor must have had a bit of a god complex, to not be able to see just a normal kid, going through a rough time. I did know however that the psychosis diagnosis was correct, but I wanted it to be narrowed down a little more than that. When I arrived home, I started seeing the outpatient psychiatrist, so that I could actually figure out what was going on with me.

4. Schizophrenia: diagnosis and experience

I was staying with my dad at the time, and since my dad's brother, my uncle, had had schizophrenia from a young age, and had had issues with it for pretty much his entire adult life, my dad had some experience dealing with what I was going through. So while I tried to figure out what the hell was happening to me, and talking to my dad when I needed to, trying to make sense of it, I was also talking to the head psychiatrist at the hospital, trying to figure out what it was from a professional's standpoint. This part of my experience was the hardest, but it was also the time in my life that I learned the most about what was happening to me. I saw the psychiatrist for a little less than a year, when, explaining to me that first diagnoses are often wrong, he told me that I had schizophrenia.

It took so long for me to be diagnosed because the only psychiatric test for schizophrenia is whether or not you hear voices, and if you want to be diagnosed with schizophrenia basically all that you have to do is say that you hear voices that aren't there. My problem was that I had such a storm of things going on in my reality every waking moment that when the psychiatrist would ask if I heard voices or not, I would try to think about what my experience in that moment was, but the ability to think at all clearly and to process things was out of my reach. So while part of me could get a sense of what was going on, and part of what was going on was hearing very clear voices, the ability to process, and to be sure about things was not at the time something that I was capable of doing.



You have to understand that after my mind had exploded and become a constant shit storm, I was still myself, I was just going through so much mentally that there was nothing left over to deal with what I was going through. The medications for Schizophrenia are very heavy, and it takes a significant period of time just to get used to being on them, for when you first go on them they change your reality in a serious way. By the time I started to get used to the medications, and the medications started to help with the symptoms (anti-psychotic medication takes time to build up in your system), and I had started to acclimatize myself to my new reality, almost a year had gone by. It took that long before I could tell the doctor that, yes, I heard voices.

At this time I also learned that many psychiatrists, even good ones, have never been on medications, have never experienced any psychiatric symptoms themselves, so what they know is quite limited, and their treatments may contain much guess work, much trial and error. It took almost two years of bouncing around on different combinations of different drugs, before I found one that started to make me feel like myself again.

I'll try to explain to you what experiencing the symptoms of schizophrenia is like, but where to begin, where to begin . . .

When it first started, my thoughts changed from straightforward ones running through my mind, my feelings changed from those that came from myself, into a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions that didn't seem to come from me, that didn't seem to match up with anything that I had experienced. I've had people say that I just wasn't strong enough, but for me it wasn't a slow steady decline where I gave in to my fears and insecurities. While it first happened I could actually feel my brain chemistry change, and in a split second, everything for me had changed. Being strong didn't even enter into it. Take my word for it when I say that if your brain chemistry is going to change, then there are no choices, you can't be strong and make it stop, it is going to do what it is going to do. I also understand that some people just look for excuses to feel superior to other people, and to them I say good luck with that, I'm sure you will have a very happy and fulfilling life (yes that was sarcasm).

My own theory about what happens in such an experience is that the subconscious part of the brain explodes into the conscious part of the brain. When my brain chemistry gave out, it allowed the subconscious part of the brain to come exploding into the conscious where we experience our reality. The explosion of feelings and thoughts that seemed to come from anywhere but me, that seemed not to fit what I had gone through, that completely changed my reality, must have come from my subconscious. This is really the only explanation that makes sense to me.

The subconscious is that part of the mind that we are unaware of in the reality that we experience. It processes every bit of sensory information that we receive. If you have a dream, and it feels strangely familiar, yet also strangely unfamiliar, then it likely comes from the subconscious. In schizophrenia, I

believe that when the brain chemistry changes, our reality becomes aware of things going on in the brain that we normally would not know. Either that or we are possessed by demons (umm, yes, in case you're wondering, that's a joke).

As time went on for me, and I found a medication that allowed me to again live in reality and experience things from moment to moment, as they actually were, that pushed the symptoms of schizophrenia into the background a little more, my thinking began to come into focus, and I was able to think as myself again, and again with clarity. One of the stronger symptoms of schizophrenia is disorganized thoughts, and as I began to feel things that were a part of me and were coming from myself reacting to the actual reality that it was again my privilege to live in, I started to feel like myself for the first time in over two years.

And, yes, I did hear voices, also, more than one to be certain, and sometimes quite loud and distressing. But as time went on I began to understand myself in new ways that I never thought that I would. I began to see what parts of myself the voices were coming from, what insecurities, what doubts, and also the opposite, what arrogant parts, what confident parts, and that without medications I was powerless to make them go away. For me it was like an education into the deepest recesses of myself, and even when the stress levels were high and the voices were loud and commanding, I still learned how to be in the moment and how to function with varying levels of success.

5. On and off, up and down: Estevan

After about two and a half years in Victoria, I decided that it would be good for me to move back to my hometown. I had been living on my own, and had tried employment a couple of times, but when I made it back to Estevan and had the support of most of my family who were still there, I decided that now was the time to really push myself. I got a job with a friend's dad who owned a small concrete company with his cousin, and was looking for someone to help. They were good hardworking people, and I enjoyed working for them.

Near the latter half of the concrete season, I needed to know at what stage my illness was, so I went off my medication for the first time since being diagnosed. The symptoms came rushing back. The stress of a physically demanding full time job with the full force of schizophrenia bearing down virtually cut me to pieces as I forced myself to remain in the moment to do the job. But the full storm of my illness was breaking me down a little more each day, until right at the end of the concrete season I opted to quit a little early. I had nothing left to give.

Even as I went back on my medication, I was barely hanging on to reality, and decided to go into a neighboring city's psych ward for a few days so that I could be removed completely from the stress of my life and try to weather the worst that my illness would give. Back home, I made the mistake of using alcohol to try to give me a temporary respite if the symptoms were bad, but the next morning I would have to deal with

I was just starting to hit my stride, when I again decided to go off my medication.

even more symptoms for the first few hours. I tried to drink my problems away for a couple of months, but I could sense some serious difficulties with alcohol forming. It was not easy to quit, and with so much time on my hands, I realized that I would need something to keep myself busy. A friend of mine from the church that I inconsistently attended phoned me and asked if I would like to help with their youth group. Having always enjoyed and gotten along with kids, I told him that I would love to, and as I started to do the youth group I also started to go to church regularly.

When the concrete season got back up a month later, I felt like I was doing quite well. I started to excel at my job, enjoy time with friends, and volunteer where I could. A little later I got a better job working asphalt (paving), with longer hours, but I enjoyed both it and the bigger pay checks. I was just starting to hit my stride, when I again decided to go off my medication. I wanted to feel free of my illness, and putting my faith in God that he would heal me, I went off.

Just as it takes time for these medications to build up in a person's system, it takes time for them to come out of the body. For the first three months I did extremely well. With less medication, I felt less drugged, and the symptoms of my illness seemed to be minor at best. Then one day while I was working in the scorching sun for too long, I got heat stroke, and every-

thing started to go downhill. I immediately started to hear voices, I started to have very serious delusions in a way that I never had in the past, so I had to take some time off work

When my sister came to visit me one day and took me to a movie, she couldn't help but notice how poorly I was doing. I walked out of the movie half way through, and on the way home the delusions came on so strong that for the first time in my life I could no longer distinguish them from reality. I thought that all of the passing vehicles were yelling at me. I thought that I could somehow hear everyone's thoughts while they were in the movie theater.

A person who hasn't experienced schizophrenia can't know how painful it is. Even when the delusions are bad, the schizophrenic still knows they aren't real, and that he's still himself. But when they are at their worst, his experiences are about 10 times as intense as normal reality and come from the deepest recesses of himself, where the most painful things lurk. Such is the power of the subconscious that when it takes over one's reality, as it does when the schizophrenic is very ill, it's like being in a waking hell. Just hanging on is all you can do.

So that night as I sat in my bedroom of the house that I shared, my sister came by with a couple of friends and asked me if I wanted to go with her. I was completely caught up in the delusions, but I agreed, and with her two friends there in



BARISTA BY JAMES SKELTON



case anything happened, my sister drove me to the neighboring city that had the facilities, and admitted me to the psych ward.

6. Recovery

During my time in the psych ward I was truly disconnected from reality. I had sweeping delusions, and regularly thought that the voices that I heard were actually other people's thoughts. I would keep running out of the ward whenever the doors would open because I thought that I was going to be killed. One time I even made it five miles out of town on a gravel road heading back to Estevan, wearing absolutely nothing on my feet, and only my underwear and a flimsy little hospital night gown. Luckily for me, a police officer found me down the gravel road and took me back to the ward.

Eventually, after a few months of being back on the medication, I came back to myself, but while I was in the hospital every member of my family moved from Estevan. They had all been planning to go for some time, and I think that they knew that I would not have wanted them to stay for me, since my family are all a little too unique to settle for a town like that. The difficulty for me was that while the symptoms of my illness were now almost manageable, the new medication was incredibly strong stuff. They had put me on it because it was an injectable medication, so that they could be sure that I would take it, but it was severely debilitating.

After the hospital I went into a group home for a few months, and then was placed in an apartment while I tried to get back on my feet. During this period I attended the Canadian Mental Health Association Branch in Weyburn, where I found support and strength among my peers.

It would take me a year and a half to get off my medication and onto better stuff, during which time the medication robbed me of much of myself. Instead of having way more than I needed or wanted going on inside of me, I had nothing. The medication took away my ability to think or feel anything. It took away my energy, my motivation, and really and truly, my basic ability to do anything in life. I was empty, a walking zombie with me buried inside so deep that during that year and a half I was virtually not there.

But that brings me to the present. I have been on a new medication for about a year now. A good medication this time. I've been fighting constantly to get all of myself back. Struggling to get all of the strength that I had and more, because I know that in the future, with this illness I am going to need it. I am learning how to be a human being again. I am about to rejoin the workforce. And I feel as though this whole experience has not left me without wisdom, part of which is to keep myself open and learning for as long as I can. I think that having had to fight so hard to just be myself, and having so much taken away from me for so long, I now realize just how precious the ability to live is. These days I try to take nothing for granted, and while I will continue to lose and gain as we all do, I won't waste a second, because a single second of happi-

ness is more than I've had for years. I don't know how long even the slightest happiness will stay.

Most of the population is both fascinated by and afraid of a mental illness like schizophrenia. Having spent a significant portion of my time with other people who have mental illnesses, as well as having one myself, I can tell you that having a mental illness doesn't make you a bad person. Almost every single person I have met who has a mental illness is a good person, who like everyone else is just trying to make it in this life. The only difference is that the mentally ill are going to be judged more harshly, just for the fact that their brains require a medication to function like they should.

I had to learn that lesson the hard way. I had to go through such lows, when I had such high expectations, to realize that no one is going to have a perfect life. Everyone has the ability to bounce back and recover from incredible hardship. The trick is, when you do bounce back, try to be a wiser, better person for the experience. Don't settle for less.



ART BY HENRY PETERS



Men and their boy-toys

BY JEAN FAHLMAN

Men love their mechanical macho toys, the more powerful the better. The roaring VROOM VROOM of the engine gets their own inner engine-juices stirring.

Men so love their toys that when they design kitchen appliances they apply the same powerful motors. Take my mixer (please) which is so powerful, even on low speed, that lumps of dough splatter the walls. Turned on full speed the mixer might take off like a helicopter, dragging me along. I don't dare try it.

I love making bread products which require a lot of flour, which in turn requires using the electric mixer. No matter how gently I add the flour into the liquid and begin cautiously stirring it with the mixer, the flour rises in a misty cloud, covering my glasses, clinging in my hair, turning me white in a minute. It was a man who designed mixer motors, no doubt about it.

Every motor designed by a man is powerful. Men approach a motor with total confidence and mechanical intuition. When I hauled grain I approached the grain auger motor with trepidation and a prayer – "Please God, let this motor start and keep running after it does start." God apparently had more important matters to deal with so I was on my own. Sometimes I had to drive several miles back to the combine to tell the combine man I was unable to unload the grain because the auger motor would not start. Not even after 50 pulls on that blasted starter rope, while standing on a pail so I could even reach the starter rope. Life on the farm is dangerous.

When a motor defies a man, refusing to start, he utters a few choice words – "Get going you ##%&##." When all else fails, he gives it a good kick or a crack with a hammer. When I tried cracking a stubborn motor the same way nothing happened. Perhaps I should have used the loud expletives it was accustomed to hearing.

Men's love of motors naturally extends under the car and truck hoods. I don't know or care what is under the hood if the colour is right. My husband had a penchant for trading vehicles often so sometimes I was looking for the wrong colour in the parking lot. Hmm, is it white, no, that was the last car, or the second last.

Car motors can be obstinate. We had one car with an automatic choke which didn't seem to realize it was automatic. It continually refused to start. I was instructed in the way to easily coax it to life, by simply using a comb or a pen to prop open a lid. I had to open the hood, of course, and sprawl across to reach this little doohickey lid. One cold night when I had my mother with me the automatic choke refused to do what it was supposed to do. "Don't worry," I assured, her, "I just need a pen to prop open the choke."

"Do you have a pen?" she asked. Does a writer have a pen? Do fish have fins? Do men love powerful motors?

Another cold day when I came to the car, parked in front

of a barber shop, the choke refused to choke. I was all dressed up in a Royal-like hat and my fur coat, feeling rather upper-class. I was worried about getting oil off the motor onto my coat when I opened the hood, dug out a pen, got up on the bumper to sprawl across the big motor to reach the doohickey and prop it open. I noticed some men in the barber shop window were watching and smirking at my efforts. I mustered my dignity, got back under the wheel, turned the key and the motor roared into life. I went to the front of the car, retrieved my pen, closed the hood and drove away, resisting the impulse to thumb my nose at the men who were not laughing any more.

What, did they think I didn't know anything about motors? I was glad when that car got traded though because I didn't need to know any more about what was under the hood.

The powerful motor in motorcycles raises the bar, allowing men to indulge in their love of speed and power. They pass every vehicle on the road, forgetting that farmers tend to cross the road in slow-moving tractors, without bothering to look for traffic.

For those too timid to drive a motorcycle, there is always the all-terrain vehicles, or snow mobiles, so old guys can still roar up and down gullies and hills. Seeing an aged fat fellow on one of those toys makes me think they were deprived of having a tricycle so they are making up for it now. Give 'er the gun, fellas, on your powerful boy-toys, but just try and ease up on the motors you put in my mix masters.

Vacuum cleaners have not been overlooked by men seeking power. A vacuum can suck up a pair of pantyhose from under the bed in a flash, or grab the drapery cord and bring them all crashing down. The vacuum smokes and gags and eventually gets choked by the cord around its neck. The powerful motor burns itself out. Oh, Oh.

The computer is my toy but its workings are a mystery. The first printer I had was a lemon, driving me to consider using some of the rough language, and the hammer method, on it. Printers are sensitive, fragile things (like us ladies), so I never let my husband near it in case he gave in to the impulse to give it a kick. That may have worked with farm machinery but I suspect it would be the demise of a printer or computer even though it is tempting.

When it comes to gas lawnmower and roto tiller motors, a man is invaluable to have around. I could pull on that blasted starter rope for 20 minutes, but when a man comes to the rescue he yanks once and the motor burps and belches into life. That was because I had it primed and almost ready, no doubt.

I bought an electric lawn mower and we get along famously. So far I haven't cut the cord or needed to call in a man to plug it in. I don't think electric mowers make enough of that powerful VROOM VROOM noise so no danger of a man wanting to give it a kick.

The redeeming thing about the love men have for motors is that they are kept busy and happy with their boy-toys, so that allows us ladies to indulge in our own fascination with shopping.



My tongue is shrivelling

BY CAROL FERGUSON

I must have been born laughing and talking because I've always been a chatterbox and a giggler. I can see the funny side of any story. I recently found the following proof that we really are created from the dust of the earth: a mud pack can rejuvenate your face.

My mother made sure I spoke clearly. She probably realized she couldn't win the battle to shut me up. The following two lines of a poem I wrote didn't put her mind at ease:

Not much about buttons can give me the slip
but I've never found one that could **BUTTON MY LIP.**

That all changed the day my tongue started to shrivel up. I don't usually pay much attention to my tongue but one day I looked in the mirror and gasped! My tongue had shrivelled up and looked like road kill. That was the last time I looked at my tongue.

I sounded like I had new dentures but I have my own teeth although they are taking leave at about one a year. When you have a chronic talking syndrome you begin to worry when people can't understand what you're chattering on about. And so began the round of doctors. One checked my throat but it was okay. One checked my stomach and that was okay. What did that have to do with my tongue? Finally I had an MRI.

A lot of people get up tight about having an MRI but I found it quite amusing. When the machine started knocking it reminded me of the song, "Knock three times on the ceiling if you need me." It's hard to giggle and stay perfectly still but the scan did prove what people often said about me. They did an MRI of my brain and found nothing.

One doctor tried to get to the root of my problem by sticking needles into my muscles. He even stuck one through my neck all the way into my tongue. Yowwww! He solved the mystery but then he sent me off to play the Diagnosis Game. It's kind of an unwritten rule that if the diagnosis is really bad they don't tell you.

Here's how the game is played. Every doctor you see rattles off a list of what it might be. After you see a million doctors and have a million lists you have to compare all the lists and by process of elimination guess the right one and diagnose your own ailment. I finally guessed right. I wish I had a disease I could spell, like mumps or flu or hives or gout. But I ended up with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. (I have it written down so I can peek if I have to write it out.)

The interesting thing is the name of mine is even longer, Bulbar Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. For the sake of non-medical humans they have shortened it to ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Bulbar means that it affects the mouth and throat first. So now I have no muscles in my mouth, hence the

shrinking tongue. Try that on for size. I can't drink through a straw, can't blow up a balloon, can't whistle and can't kiss. Now that's a bummer! I'm part English so a lack of mouth muscles isn't so noticeable. They say the English have no hips, no lips. Double Whammy!

How best to explain ALS? The Zinc and Copper in my brain were once married and planned to live happily ever after, but then Zinc and Copper had a falling out and divorced. They split up and each went their own way becoming free radicals (not to be confused with free spirits). Neither zinc nor copper gave a thought about how their divorce would affect the poor Muscle children they were responsible for. After being totally neglected and not fed properly they got weak and angry and withdrawn till the entire 'muscle family' was dysfunctional; Arm Muscle, Leg Muscle, Neck Muscle, Heart Muscle and let's not forget the Tongue Muscle.

I drool a lot because of my shriveled tongue. Paper towels make good 'diapers' for my mouth and I use hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of them. I wrote to a paper towel

company and thanked them for such an absorbent product, hoping for a complimentary year's supply. All I got was a thank-you letter and the paper it was written on wasn't even absorbent. Can you guess what I have in common with Sumo wrestlers and football players? I'll tell you later. I used to be self conscious about my drooling until I watched 30,000 people at a Rider's game spitting sunflower seeds on the floor.

I can't speak any more so I have recruited a white board to be my mouth. That has its advantages. I can write jokes and make the people around me laugh and I never get blamed for the disruption. The down-

side is I'm speechless in the dark. I also can't 'talk' to anyone who's blind or can't read. I guess the term 'deaf and dumb' is ingrained in people's minds because most people assume that if you can't talk you can't hear. I jokingly wrote to a lady once that I'm not deaf, just 'dumb' but she wasn't impressed.

ALS doesn't affect your mind and my mind has become sharper. I have solved the mystery of how geese know when to fly north. It's when MotherGoose has a hot flash and squawks, "I have to go somewhere cooler." Suddenly geese fly north by the thousands. That proves the old saying, "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." I'm also smarter when I'm shopping. If I save \$10 on slacks and \$30 on a sweater I can then pay \$40 for a new blouse and technically it is free.

I have kind of been looking for a man but he has to be a total man because most men my age are not all there. He could have had knees or hips replaced. His hair could be grafted in. He could have a glass eye. If he had a heart transplant it might



not even be him that loves me. Add dentures or implants and you end up with a person who is just kibbles and bits. I continue to look.

Have you guessed what I have in common with Sumo Wrestlers and football players? None of us are on a diet. I bet you guessed that one wrong! Did you know that you can't donate blood if you don't weigh enough? So why is there a blood shortage in Canada when we have an epidemic of obesity? Every overweight person should donate blood regularly. I might introduce that as a private member's bill in parliament and make it mandatory. Have you seen a fridge magnet that says 'I'm not fat, I'm fluffy'? I don't have one. I am looking for one that says 'I'm not skinny, I'm svelte.' Hey, that might be a new niche market.

Are you, like me, tired of hearing diet stories? Our society is being inundated with diet ads. There are even weight loss competitions during half-time at Rider's games! I call that a FOUL. At the least, unsportsmanlike conduct! Do you know how depressing it is for non-dieters to find anything that doesn't say fat free or lower fat content? Hellooooo. Not everyone in this country is on a diet. My goodness, there's even low fat

cheese. The lady in the Bose commercial said it right. HOW COULD THAT BE? Isn't cheese MADE of fat?

Therefore, just to get even here's the other side of the platter.

I am addicted to chocolate, especially Icy Squares, melted, eaten by the spoonful.

I eat mashed potatoes and gravy twice a day. Oh yes!

I love KFC, especially that incredible spicy skin.

I love brown sugar sauce on Christmas pudding, gingerbread, even ice cream.

I put four spoonfuls of sugar on my Rice Krispies and at least three in my coffee.

I never decline whipped cream on anything and I eat cheese cake of any kind.

I add double melted butter to my popcorn plus chili powder and shredded cheese.

I have milk shakes every day and if I need an extra boost, I add Boost to my milk shake.

One thing I can't eat is cotton candy. It melts in my mouth and runs out.

All this talk about eating has me drooling. No, wait. I do that all the time anyway.

Humour

BY NORVALD FLAATEN

These humorous incidents occurred at the former Saskatchewan Hospital in Weyburn during the time the late Tommy Douglas was Premier of Saskatchewan.

At one of Premier Douglas's visits to the hospital, he was approached by one of the residents who asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Tommy Douglas, Premier of Saskatchewan," he replied.

"You will soon get over that," said the resident. "When I first came here, I thought that I was Napoleon."

Later on that same day the Premier was visiting the outside gardens of the hospital and was impressed by the large red strawberries grown there. He talked with one of the workers who was a resident of the hospital and asked him if they used manure as fertilizer to put on the strawberries to make them so nice and large.

"No," replied the resident. "We use cream and sugar on our strawberries, as that makes them taste

much better."

Another humorous incident occurred with one of the staff members who had just started to work at the Saskatchewan Hospital. He was assigned to take a group of residents (12 in all) out to work in the gardens, as that served as a beneficial occupational therapy for them. Those were the days when they used the Power House whistle to notify both residents and staff that it was meal time. When the whistle blew at noon, the residents dropped their tools and ran to the hospital. The new staff, not being informed as to what would happen, became very fearful that all his residents had escaped, and now he might lose his job. There was only one thing to do and that was to report to the boss, who was then called the Chief Attendant. The new staff stood trembling in front of the Chief Attendant's desk and tried to explain that all 12 residents had escaped. The Chief Attendant, knowing what had happened, assured the frightened man that all his residents were now safe in the dining room having their lunch. Then with a twinkle in his eye he looked up at the staff and said, "You are sure lucky you found your way back yourself."



Look into my eyes

BY CRYSTAL HURDLE

My best friend Susan has recanalized. Hallmark hasn't a card for this happy event. It's been months since she phoned me early summer cancelling an outing. *I felt strange yesterday after sneezing, so I walked to my doctor's. She wants me to go to Emergency. My pupils are different sizes.*

My cold dread.

Later that same Thursday, she says, *Apparently, something neurological or cardiovascular.* CAT scans and other tests later. I'm relieved that it's not a stroke. There'd been a diagnosis of menopausal migraines a few years back. Something similar?

On Monday, I pick her up for Reading Group. She says she's on my way – so patently false – but I register she's uneasy driving. Five of us discuss the unreadable Snow, a mystery as to how this so-called literary mystery has earned such accolades. Even the hostess, whose choice the book is, has been unable to finish it. Susan says, *I have pins and needles in one arm. Now the other leg.* One side of her face droops. She says she'd like to be taken to Emergency. Meg volunteers, but Susan wants a cup of coffee first: After hummus and dolmades (and coffee), the tingling has ceased, or so Susan says, and the drooping is less noticeable.

I'm relieved that her symptoms can't possibly be a stroke. She's just had the ALL CLEAR, she's only 55, she's my best friend.

Though we demur about her decision, none of us force her hand. This is Susan! Fearless natural leader, sun around whom we, lowly planets, unnamed asteroids, revolve. I drive her, not to Emergency, but home. *Look into my eyes*, she says. The hazel flecks. The asymmetrical pupils' size.

Three days later, her partner drags her to Emergency again. Susan says, *It's only bad allergy*, strangely localized in her head. This time, the doctors do a cat scan with dye and can see stroke signs in her brain. The problem: a dissected interior carotid artery. *My brain blew up*, Susan emails. A more technical term is "brain insult," which we laugh merrily over.

She tires easily. Her doctor warns her not to exercise, not to do housework, and as an afterthought on a later visit, warns of no sex. This to former fireball Susan, who has carried into her back yard trees bigger than she is, got up at five to walk to the sky train to get to an early class. Now Susan reclining looks longingly at a rake, a broom. Her family doctor, while a specialist in the brain, has not had a case like Susan's before. *I always knew I was unique*, she echoes.

Susan feels stressed after a rapid shower when I turn up earlier than she expected. In the car, she says, *I'll just sit here for a minute and not talk, get my equilibrium back.* Later, she says, *It's funny. It's like the words are rolling in front of me and I have to decide which ones to use. On a screen.* She searches for words. Mixes some up though hardly noticeably.

I give her Betty McDonald's *The Plague and I*, a memoir about being institutionalized at a T. B. sanatorium. Light, frivolous, outrageous! It never fails to make me laugh and is perfect sickbed reading. Susan cannot read it.

We walk locally to have a quick lunch. We wait until the walk back to see if she can tolerate the extra five minutes a wee shop will take. *Look into my eyes*, she says.

She is my favourite thing to read.

She cannot read. This dismays me inordinately, but I suggest other activities. I frantically search the web for "dissected interior carotid artery," but there's not much and none of it good. I feed her small bits, cautiously doled out. I read about the growth of an adjacent artery, possible, in three to six months. Susan clings to this duration. There's no surgery, just hope. A big maybe.

The ability to read comes back, albeit slowly. Beta blockers help. She's happy at getting through an entire issue

of *The Georgia Strait*. Newspapers, okay. Then mysteries, whole swaths of them. Sue Grafton's alphabet. Susan's now up to the very latest, U is for Undertow. But perhaps U is better for Unequivocal, Unsnarl, maybe Unsung.

The latest mystery by Marcia Muller has Sharon McCone suffering locked-in syndrome, solving the mystery of her assault from her long-term care bed. She wills people to look into her eyes, to intuit the truth there. Susan is her own mystery, and the solution must come from within. Can I be Watson to her Sherlock? But what can I do?

I phone, email, arrange early lunches for when her energy is good, or good enough. I send her more cards. It is so little. Some are simply words that can be rearranged. *Enjoy. Passion.*

I can't take the stress. I overdid and was knocked out the next day. Still numbness. Now dizziness. A pain in the back of my head . . . What was that word?

When she feels well, she writes, as before, like a dream. Like a demon. We joke about titles for her memoir. Brain Insult is the obvious one, as are jokes about suicide and self-pleasure when one has been instructed not to have sex.

Social groups of three are too big. She can't follow the cross conversation. (How will she teach? Thirty-five conversations at once!) She can't multi-task, she who folded laundry while talking to her kids, preparing both dinner and the next day's class. But she is getting better. Fewer naps. Longer outings.

When Susan hears she's recanalized – though the new artery is narrower than the old (what will that mean?), she celebrates by . . . vacuuming. This is so Susan. *It's been months*, she says. *Maybe a jog next week.*

V could be for Vacuuming, though I hope Susan will be beyond only mysteries by the time the next Sue Grafton comes out. Nevertheless, I want it to be one she can suck pleasure from. V is for Vigour, V is for Vanquish, but the best title would be V is for Victorious. So I say to Susan. We'll just have to hijack Grafton: *Look into our eyes.*

She cannot read. This dismays me inordinately, but I suggest other activities.

Strange animal

BY BRENT M. LOEHR

Bill Lee is an eccentric former professional baseball player whose antics on the field and in the public eye are engrossing. Crazy beards, outright defiance of marijuana laws, wearing a beanie with a propeller and even donning a gas mask on the field all contributed to the legend of the man nicknamed The Spaceman. A student of philosophy and mysticism, Lee has spewed his fair share of quips. He offered on brain hemispheres, “You have a left and a right. The left side controls the right half of your body, and the right side controls the left half. Therefore, lefthanders are the only people in their right mind.” He was once fined by Big League baseball for nonchalantly informing a reporter that he “liked to sprinkle pot on his pancakes.”

The early part of his career predates my birth. From 1979 to 1982 though, I knew him as the quirky lefthander who occasionally threw that silly lollipop-style lob pitch to my favorite Expo at the time – Montreal catcher Gary Carter. Part cartoon character, Bill Lee was a successful pitcher whose free-spirit antics often overshadowed his playing ability. Lee won a College World Series while playing for the University of Southern California and had three consecutive 17 win seasons with the Boston Red Sox. He made the All Star team in 1973. Later in his career, Lee butted heads with manager Don Zimmer and was shipped to the Montreal Expos at the end of 1978. His career in Major League Baseball ended in 1982 (when I was in Grade Two) after he was released for protesting what he thought was the mistreatment of teammate Rodney Scott. In his book, *Have Glove Will Travel*, Lee offered, *When the trainer brought over my game uniform that night, I ripped it down the middle and draped it over (Jim) Fanning’s desk. I scribbled a note, informing the manager that one of his pitchers had just gone AWOL. “I cannot put up with this bullshit,” I wrote. “Going over to the bar at Brasserie 77. If you want to, come and get me.”* He never appeared in the Big Leagues again.

Blackballed, Lee continued to play the game he loved. Anywhere. Everywhere. World-wide. During that time I was travelling with Major League Baseball overseas as an Envoy Coach – promoting, developing and introducing the game across Europe and Africa – and came into contact with him. I had a blog section on my website called *Have Glove Will Travel*. Someone in Lee’s camp came across it after googling reviews on Bill Lee’s new book which was coincidentally titled the same as my blog at the time. The man emailed me, complimented me on my stories and suggested Bill Lee come out to Saskatchewan to play baseball sometime. That winter at the American Baseball Coaches Association convention in Nashville, Tennessee, I met Lee at a booth where he was promoting a Canadian baseball bat company. We shared stories of baseball in far off locales and talked a bit about peddling bats “up North.”

When his book became available in Canada I ordered it and learned of something else about him that piqued my inter-

est – his brief ‘political career.’ I guess we had another thing in common beside our passions for baseball and travel: we both had agreed to run in a political election that we had no chance of winning.

I ran for Member of the Legislative Assembly in Saskatchewan for the provincial Liberal party in 2007. A dominant force in the early part of the province’s history, the party had pretty much dropped off the political landscape by 1975, save a time as Official Opposition in 1995. My great grandfather was the Humboldt MLA for a term beginning in 1948 – I felt a bit of a duty to be the standard-bearer for the Liberals in the constituency that election. Call me crazy, but I enjoyed the running even though I had zero chance of winning.

Bill Lee’s candidacy in 1988 was even more implausible. Ridiculous, actually. Bill Lee thought big . . . he ran for *President of the United States*. Well, sort of. He ran on a Canadian ticket. The Rhinoceros Party of Canada was a satirical organization making a mockery of federal elections for decades following its inception in 1963. When asked about the aims or goals his candidate would work towards upon election, Rhino founder Jacques Ferron said, “The same as yours – nothing!”



FACE IN A BUILDING BY NYLA RANEY



Past campaign promises of the Rhinoceros Party of Canada had included:

- Repealing the law of gravity
- Providing higher education by building taller schools
- Ending crime by abolishing all laws
- Putting the national debt on visa
- Changing currency to bubble gum, so it could be inflated or deflated at will
- If they somehow won an election, they would immediately dissolve and force a second election

One candidate – upon receiving free television air time offered to political parties – stated: “I have but two things to say to you: celery and sidewalk.” In 1988, the Rhinoceros Party ran a candidate named John Turner in the same riding as the Federal Liberal Leader, former Prime Minister John Turner. Some were not amused – especially when some Rhinos finished second in their ridings. The party was squeezed out entirely the next election in 1993 – their last federally – when new rules made it mandatory for parties to have a candidate in at least 50 ridings with a cost of \$1000 each.

Bill Lee’s run was ludicrous – as intended. When I talked with him earlier this year he reminisced that he had wanted Hunter S. Thompson as his running mate, saying, “Who knew more about vice in America?” Lee’s platform included banning guns and butter since “they both kill” and he now claims that had he been elected, a team from the Dubai would be in the American League East and “hash prices would have plummeted.” He said he was first approached to run by Charlie Mckenzie, the head of the Rhinoceros Part in Quebec at the

time, and agreed to participate as he was told he was “guaranteed to win.” Donors to his campaign were limited to giving a maximum amount of 25 cents since “we thought it was a two-bit office anyways.”

Lee of course did not win. In fact, he did not even make the ballot. Surprise. He may have upset some people for lamprooning the political process – others perhaps applauded him for it. If there is one thing Bill Lee gets across in the clips I have viewed and articles I have read about him it’s his desire to shake things up a bit, stand up for what he believes, and protest when he thinks he has been crossed – sprinkled with humour and stirred with gonzo. Talking to him in person, the Shakespearean offering ‘to thine own self be true’ rings out as does his evident enthusiasm to connect, reach out, and interact with people.

In his book *The Wrong Stuff* Lee writes, “If I accomplished anything as a player, I hope it’s that I proved you could exist as a dual personality in the game. I had to pass through the looking glass every time I went out on the field. Away from the ballpark, I tried to care about the earth, and I wasn’t concerned with getting ahead of the ‘other guy.’ On the mound, I was a different person, highly competitive and always out to win. Who I was off the field fed the person I became on it. I hope I was able to make more than just a few fans smile, while showing them that the game shouldn’t be taken too seriously. If I am remembered by anyone, I would want it to be as a guy who cared about the planet and the welfare of his fellow man. And who would take you out at second if the game was on the line.”

Crazy characters

BY ELIZABETH MCGILL

Punks

A motorcycle parked on the asphalt drive of the manufactured home is the first clue. Open the garage door to reveal a 50s diner complete with black and white checkerboard tile, chrome table and chairs with red vinyl upholstery studded in silver, and a fully loaded juke box blaring “My Girl.” The biker wears a black leather vest and chaps with fringes. As he roars around the park, he revs the Harley. The babe on the back wears a leather vest with no shirt underneath. Her long bleached hair rides the air.

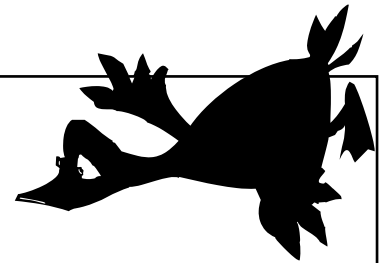
Fashion Queen

You know the one. She dated the football quarterback and was homecoming queen. She dresses like a high school

senior, but her décolletage is crepey and sun-damaged from too much oil and iodine solution. She’s still a flirt as she makes her way around the tables asking, “What does a girl have to do to get a drink around here?” all the while batting her fake eyelashes.

Losers

These are the unfortunates who are always on the fringe, never quite gaining the acceptance they crave. As everyone around them appears to be having fun, they hover around the spiked punch bowl valiantly trying to be noticed. Think knee high pantyhose with a short skirt. The male equivalent is a polka dot bow tie, suspenders on knee length shorts, and black oxfords with white socks.



MJM Freewriting exercise: Humour – no laughing matter

Darrell Downton

I am tired of laughing and its excessive joy. It produces endorphins, a natural high that is good for us. Humour is no laughing matter – the antithesis. It takes too much energy to think of something funny, even though laughter is very good for mental health. So for this reason we don't write about laughter anymore. Who was the person who thought about this topic? He should be fired because I can hardly think of anything to write. I can say this because I am that person. The anti-topic theme writer for TRANSITION. That is why they pay me the big bucks, and that is no laughing matter.

a b c d e

Laurie Rasmussen

What's so funny? I mean, really, what's so funny? With the state of the world as it is, it's really hard to find anything to laugh about. I think the only thing that's keeping me going (today) is the emergence of the NDP – New Darrell Party, that is, and all the crazy politics that have been following this party (according to Darrell Downton, new NDP founder and leader). But seriously, what else is there really to laugh about? I don't know, but I'm really trying to think of something. Come on, think, think, think. It seems anything I am thinking about writing down as funny has some kind of sad slant, sad truth about it. Oh, to be laughing one minute and crying the next

f h i j k

Gloria Morin

So you look at food and it looks good but then you start eating it and you've lost all desire to eat anything at all. Your first choice is to go back to bed, pull the covers over your head, and weep and weep until there aren't any tears left and then you get up in the morning knowing the dog is counting on you to walk it and you ask everybody else to do it and they refuse so you tie the dog up in the back yard and after a while the dog whines and barks – you feel guilty so you get out of bed and walk the damn dog so it can at least have a shit and a piss – your mom calls and says let's do an Alaskan cruise in September and you say sure why not one week of missing school – not so bad a thing and then you're not even sore – looking forward to that even.

Carol Rempel

As the gullible one in my family, let me assure you HUMOUR IS NO LAUGHING MATTER! In fact, in the year following the L.A. riots, I was on vacation with my husband in Florida and racial tensions were the hot topic on every TV and radio station. Still distracted by the term "reverse racism" as we turned off the car radio and entered the KFC, I gazed blankly at the menu board above a line-up of all black staff staring impatiently back at me. Suddenly I felt very white. Sensing my inner tension, my husband – the funny man – nudged me and whispered, "Look – they're going to charge us extra because we're white!" He pointed to the menu board where it was there in black and white: "EXTRA CHARGE ON ALL WHITE ORDERS." My mouth dropped in shock. Outraged, I prepared to march out of the restaurant in loud protest. Reeling me in, my husband began laughing and tenderly explained the concept of premium breast meat until I got the joke and started laughing, too.

So . . . ya . . . humour is no laughing matter – until you can laugh at yourself!

o p q r s

Adam Staite

I dont know things that are funny I do know what is funny to me Brainsauce and bullet holes people falling when theyre thinking they should rush children complaining cause they have no fucking glue on things that stick should be rules what they do to be cool fit in like bullies theyre funny to me whom do they really think theyre impressing not me thats for sugar makes me sweet things amuse me like punishment by force accidents when being dumb try to see eye to eye with me nice try Im short you look right over cant see me Im down here 5'6 isn't that bad having troubles seeing me coming anyway heights some of a disadvantage or advantage when having to break bodies down Water silent and drownfull Im more than a cup full sorrows thick cant swallow it guilt twice as heavy cant carry it all drop some off on ya see if then you can still keep up been down since 86 still am crawling through most this bodies brand new to me terraforming my new life powerman rustics Barely enough flesh to cover the dirt left behind good thing it doesnt get spoiled by others filth when Im out drifting most know to stay away from this longevities deteriorating need find a new place to set my feet upon Falling in graves my first recognition staying up something I havent learnt yet dont know if its even possible but what is there unless we try only skies be our limit till we can succumb to pressures of the great blue sea



She only had to show them once

BY KAY PARLEY

In the days when mental hospitals were extremely regimented, any story of a patient putting one over on the staff was always a highlight.

A former psychiatric nurse told me this story. She was working in a hospital where periodic inventory of hospital-owned clothing was mandatory. At such times, staff would have to count every item in the store room. They also had to count what patients wore that day, so they'd line up at the door when patients with regular jobs in the hospital were coming back to the ward after the day's work. One nurse would hold the inventory, marking off each item as listed, while one or two others checked to see what each patient was wearing. They called this procedure "Counting on the hoof," which gives us some idea of the degree of respect shown to patients in the 1940s.

One of the patients decided spontaneously that enough was enough and proceeded to turn the tables. Being in the whirly-gig phase of a manic state, she lacked inhibition and had enough nerve to do something about it. As the nurse reached up to pick up her skirt, quick as a flash the patient grabbed the skirt of the nurses's uniform, raised it high, and called loudly, "One pair of panties, one garter belt . . ."

Whereupon the nurses laughed until they could hardly stand. What's more, it wrote "finis" to the degrading practice. They never took inventory "on the hoof" again. She only had to show them once.

When mental hospitals were a heady mixture of personality types all crammed into too small a space, the manic patients offered the originality and the unexpected surprises. They were the bright spots.



ART BY HENRY PETERS



Conglomeration

BY ELAINE L. KIMBER

INTRODUCTION BY JENNIFER HOWIE

This play was written about four years ago by my mother, Elaine Kimber, who passed away a few months later in July of 2007. I came across it on her computer recently, and I recall her telling me at one time she had been writing a play.

My mother suffered an entire lifetime of mental illness, having seen dozens of doctors and psychiatrists over the span of about five decades. Mental illness had been a constant shadow surrounding members of her family. Her maternal grandmother spent time in the infamous Weyburn Mental Hospital where they were certain that removing her thyroid would put a stop to her illness. She didn't live much longer after her surgery. My mother's illness was brought on in the late '50s, after being sexually abused by a female physician. In the late '60s, she was told by a psychiatrist that being sexually promiscuous would ultimately release her from the voices inside her head. Although she tried to question this seemingly ridiculous prescription with her family doctor, to my complete horror, this man only made her illness worse by offering to sleep with her. My mother became pregnant with this doctor's child. He paid for her to have the baby aborted. She told me that, because he was of another nationality, he was afraid the baby would, in his words, 'come out looking like me.'

She was haunted by this decision for the rest of her 63 years until she passed away from cancer. It comforts me to imagine that perhaps this doctor died an equally tormented death, just two years later. It comforts me that I took it upon myself to contact this doctor's daughter via a social networking site just so that she might be aware of what kind of man her father really was. It comforts me to think that in some strange way I have that doctor to thank for my own life, as my mother was so guilt-ridden over that abortion that she made the decision to keep me a few years later when she became pregnant again.

I grew up in small town Saskatchewan, raised by a single mother, assisted by her parents. My mother was in and out of the hospital many times during my formative years. When I was in the third grade, I won a story writing contest at my school and Gertrude Story judged our entries. I remember reading my story about my mom and my visits to see her in the hospital. It was what I thought was a normal way of life for every kid. I was given a Mickey Mouse pencil case and \$25 for my writing efforts and it was, by far, one of my proudest moments. I'm not even sure if my mother was there to hear me read the story. I think the hospital staff may have let her come home for the day just for that reason. I thought the fourth floor of the Swift Current Union Hospital was a great place! The patients did jigsaw puzzles, made crafts, played the piano, watched T.V and at Christmas time, the nurses even gave me a gift, a beautiful, turquoise glass bird-shaped bottle of Avon's

Sweet Honesty perfume. I remember my mother's friend, a woman named Jean, who had difficulty with her short-term memory, but could remember things from the past, or maybe it was the other way around. My mother didn't seem like Jean. I didn't understand why my mother had to spend so much time in the hospital, not for many years. My mother tried to take her life at least two times that I am aware of.

But the older I became, the more embarrassed I became about my situation, growing up in a single-parent home, being raised on welfare, by a mother suffering from mental illness. I hated having a mother who wanted to sleep all the time, who was unemployed, who wasn't involved in the community like other parents, who cried more often than she smiled. I hated the dresser drawer full of pills in all the colors of the rainbow that she seemed to rely upon to make it through each day. She lived off of a steady diet of coffee, cigarettes and prescription drugs.

She tried her best. I see that now, being a mother myself. But I unfortunately see pieces of her when I look in the mirror today. I am more like my mother than I had hoped to become. My biggest fear is now my reality. Although I am married, employed and involved in my community, I too, struggle with depression. I struggle to get out of bed each and every morning, get the kids ready for school and make it to work at my office job that I struggle to enjoy. I struggle to enjoy spending quality time with my husband and children who love me, when most of the time I am not loving myself because I can't seem to snap out of my melancholy. But I do it. I am proud that I have broken the cycle that I read about in *The Regina Leader Post* one morning about how children who grow up with parents relying on welfare are pretty much destined to do the same. If it wasn't for my grandparents' financial assistance, I shudder to think of the poverty we would have had to live in. I honestly believe that the children of people whose only option is to collect social assistance, people who have a legitimate reason for doing so, will not be the ones repeating the pattern. Sadly, for most of the time I knew my Mother, this was her only option.

My mother was an educated, intelligent woman with many talents who, during happier, healthier times in her life, did have some very good-paying government jobs. She excelled musically and academically in high school and went on to complete a secretarial course afterwards. She tried on occasion throughout my childhood to work at some part-time jobs even though there were not a lot of opportunities in small-town Saskatchewan. In fact, at the age of 63 years, she was working part-time after moving to a new city to be closer to me and my family. I was more proud of my mother in those three short months we had with her than I was throughout the entire 33 years I knew the woman. She was probably the happiest and most confident I had ever known her to be, when we received the shocking news that she was full of cancer in May 2007. Less than two months later, she passed away. I've heard that a



person dies the way they lived their life. My mother was a tormented woman so I can attest that the previous statement is true. Her final days in the hospital and, ultimately, her death were not peaceful.

I hope and pray that my own children do not have to follow suit and head down the road towards happy pills and counselling sessions. There are still so many ignorant people among us who are too quick to offer up their opinion when it comes to dealing with mental illness. Growing up with my Mother has made me a much more compassionate and caring person than I probably would have turned out to be otherwise. I only wish I had gotten to know her for the person she truly was and not based on her mental illness. I wish I had access to her medical records that could possibly provide me with a greater insight about her illness and how it was treated as knowledge progressed throughout the decades. In addition, her records could provide valuable family medical history that someday we may

need.

On a final note, my mother chose the song "Hold on Tight" by Electric Light Orchestra as the theme song for this play. I encourage the reader to google the lyrics. When I did just that, I immediately understood my mother's connection to that song and why she chose it for her play. We played that song many times in her hospital room during her final days, and it was played as the processional song at her funeral. I seem to hear that song many times on the radio these days, especially when I am feeling down myself. For those of us who do suffer with depression or any form of mental illness, some days that's about all we can do, just "Hold on Tight to our dreams." My dream is that one day those suffering will finally be free from their anguish and pain.

If anyone reading this happens to have known my mother, I would love to hear your story. If anyone reading her play can relate to it in any way shape or form, I'd love to hear about that too.

Conglomeration (the play)

Characters: Mr. Iam Unhappy – patient
Dr. B.S. Quack – psychiatrist
Ms. Godsgift ToMen – social worker
Ms. A. Friend – intelligent person
Narrator

Setting: Bilingual country on another planet in another solar system

Time: Sometime in the past on that planet

NARRATOR: *[Walks on stage in front of closed curtains.]* Good evening! And welcome to our show! You are about to meet a conglomeration of characters, Mr. Iam Unhappy, Dr. B.S. Quack, Ms. Godsgift ToMen and Ms. A. Friend. Our story takes places in a bilingual country on another planet in another solar system, sometime in the past on that planet. Sit back, relax, please remember to turn off your cell phones and refrain from smoking as we gain a greater understanding of the mystery of mental illness. *[Narrator walks off stage.]*

ACT ONE

The scene is a psychiatrist's office. There is a big brown desk with only a black rotary telephone, a pencil and a piece of paper on the desk. An intercom system is in place. On the walls are many framed certificates. Dr. B.S. Quack is sitting at his desk. In walks Mr. Iam Unhappy.

DR. QUACK: Hello there, my name is Dr. B.S. Quack.

MR. UNHAPPY: Good afternoon Dr. Quack. I am Iam Unhappy. *[Tears roll down his face.]*

DR. QUACK: Why are you unhappy, Mr. Unhappy?

MR. UNHAPPY: I am not sure, but wonder if it is because I am working with carbon tetrachloride all day long and may be poisoned by the fumes. *[Carbon Tetrachloride is a colorless, nonflammable, poisonous liquid having a strong odor. It is used to make refrigerants, aerosol propellants, and pharmaceuticals. It is also used in petroleum refining and as a solvent. Until the mid-1960s, it was used as a cleaning fluid and in fire extinguishers.]*

DR. QUACK: Nonsense! Do you know where you are, Mr. Unhappy?

MR. UNHAPPY: You know where I live and my business and private telephone numbers. You couldn't possibly mean where I am at this moment!?

DR. QUACK: Precisely, that is what I mean.

MR. UNHAPPY: *[Stares at the psychiatrist for a good two minutes.]* I don't answer questions to which the questioner already knows the answer.

DR. QUACK: *[Quickly writes on the piece of paper on his desk. Then he looks at Mr. Unhappy again.]* Say the months of the year backwards in both official languages.

MR. UNHAPPY: *[Stares at the doctor in amazement for some time.]* I absolutely will not. How is this even pertinent to my problem?

DR. QUACK: *[Takes a pack of cigarettes out of his desk drawer.]* Would you like a cigarette?

MR. UNHAPPY: Yes, unfortunately. You see I am terribly addicted to nicotine and am not able to refuse one at any time

even though I am trying to quit and haven't had one in five days. [Dr. Quack gives Mr. Unhappy a cigarette. Dr. Quack writes something on the paper on his desk and lights one up. He then stares again, with a confused look on his face, at Mr. Unhappy, at the same time as the patient lights up his cigarette.]

MR. UNHAPPY: [With a look of confusion on his face.] Wacky Tobaccy Cigarettes?

DR. QUACK: [Ignores the question.] Can you say the days of the week backwards?

MR. UNHAPPY: [Shifts uncomfortably in his chair.] Yes, in both official languages, and in Klingon also. [Dr. Quack writes furiously on his paper and looks at the patient for a long time. Dr. Quack looks very confused.]

MR. UNHAPPY: [Angrily, he stands up very shakily.] Is this some kind of an intelligence-quotient test? I am not going along with it as I work for the Department of Good Works and had to pass a more intelligent test than this to become employed by that department. [He sits down again.]

DR. QUACK: [Still has a confused expression and very slowly writes something else down while dragging on his cigarette.] My dear Mr. Unhappy, how is your sex life? I suggest you have sex with many women or you will not get well!

MR. UNHAPPY: [Speaks in a loud voice.] WHAT? [He falls off his chair . . . and then returns to it staring incredulously at

the doctor. At this time, an intercom system in the office comes on and a male voice says: "What are you going to do now? What are you going to do?"

MR. UNHAPPY: Did you hear that Dr. Quack?

DR. QUACK: I heard nothing. You must have imagined something. [The intercom comes on again. "What are you going to do? What are you going to do now?"]

MR. UNHAPPY: There is nothing wrong with my ears or the ears of the audience also! [He gestures to the audience.]

DR. QUACK: You and the audience are hearing voices!!!

MR. UNHAPPY: Exactly what I thought you would say. I can prove nothing. [He takes a drag off his cigarette.]

DR. QUACK: [With a confused expression on his face, takes another drag off his cigarette.] Here is my diagnosis. You have schizophrenia, Mr. Unhappy, and have to take overdoses of riboflavin! Also, you are allergic to milk and must drink no more of it! You have to eat eggshells! Your thyroid hormones are not working and so I am going to put you on levothyroxine! You may have to have your thyroid and parathyroid glands removed! You are hypoglycaemic and have to follow a high protein diet with NO sugars, carbohydrates, or fats! Also, you should take lithium carbonate because you are bipolar and chlordiazepoxide so that you will not give a damn! I am going to take you to an office down the hall to see a social worker, Ms. Godsgift ToMen, who will help you with your personal problems! Remember, never drink pineapple juice after sunset! [Dr. Quack takes another drag off his cigarette and writes out a prescription very slowly, gives it to Mr. Unhappy, then both men walk out of the room and the curtains close.]

ACT TWO

The curtains open on a similar desk in a similar office, but the rotary telephone is red. Also, an intercom system is in place. A pretty woman is sitting at the desk with a smile on her face. Dr. Quack and Mr. Unhappy enter the room—still smoking.

DR. QUACK: [Very slowly.] Ms. Godsgift ToMen ... here is a patient of mine who needs some assistance sorting out and solving some personal problems. He is financially well off as he is employed by the Department of Good Works. His name is Iam Unhappy. [Dr. Quack takes another drag off his cigarette and swaggers out of the room.]

MS. TOMEN: Hi Iam, how are you? Just call me Godsgift and have a chair. What can I do for you?

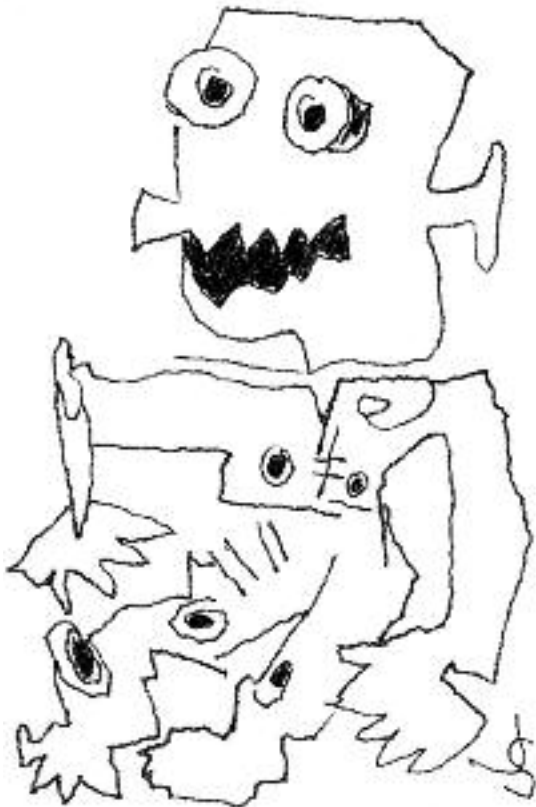
[She opens her desk drawer, takes out a cigarette, and lights it.]

MR. UNHAPPY: [Sits down.] I don't really know, honestly I don't know. [He takes another drag off his cigarette.]

MS. TOMEN: With how many women have you had sex?

MR. UNHAPPY: None.

MS. TOMEN: [Takes another drag.] We will have to change that or you are not going to get well. If you do not know of anyone to do this with, I will offer my services for you to become well.



GOOGLE EYES BY JAMES SKELTON



WRITING THE LIFE – DRAMA

MR. UNHAPPY: WHAT!!!? [*He falls off the chair and then returns to it, staring in astonishment at the social worker.*] What have I got to lose? [*By this time lam is in a state of shock and disbelief and starts pulling at his hair with his free hand. At that moment the intercom system comes on and a male voice says: "What are you going to do now? What are you going to do?"*]

MR. UNHAPPY: I suppose you did not hear that.

MS. TOMEN: Hear what?

MR. UNHAPPY: I'm not surprised at your reply.

MS. TOMEN: By the way, do you smoke Whacky Tobacco Cigarettes?

MR. UNHAPPY: [Looking confused and puffing on his cigarette.] Usually, I smoke Conglomeration Cigarettes.

MS. TOMEN: [*Takes another drag.*] Really? [*Act Two ends and the curtains close.*]

ACT THREE

The curtains open. The scene is a few years later. Mr. Unhappy is in a country cafe with Ms. A. Friend, an intelligent person. They are sitting at a table deep in conversation.

MR. UNHAPPY: Ms. Friend, I am very glad I met you. You know, Ms. Friend, still I am unhappy. For awhile I was quite delusional and paranoid; however, carbon tetrachloride has now been banned.

MS. FRIEND: Mr. Unhappy, I know Dr. B.S. Quack and Ms. Godsgift ToMen as casual acquaintances. Dr. Quack tells everyone that he or she has schizophrenia. Dr. Quack has lost his

medical licence. Also, the only thing wrong with Godsgift is that she likes men too much. Just forget about the intercom system. There is still hope. You will find help.

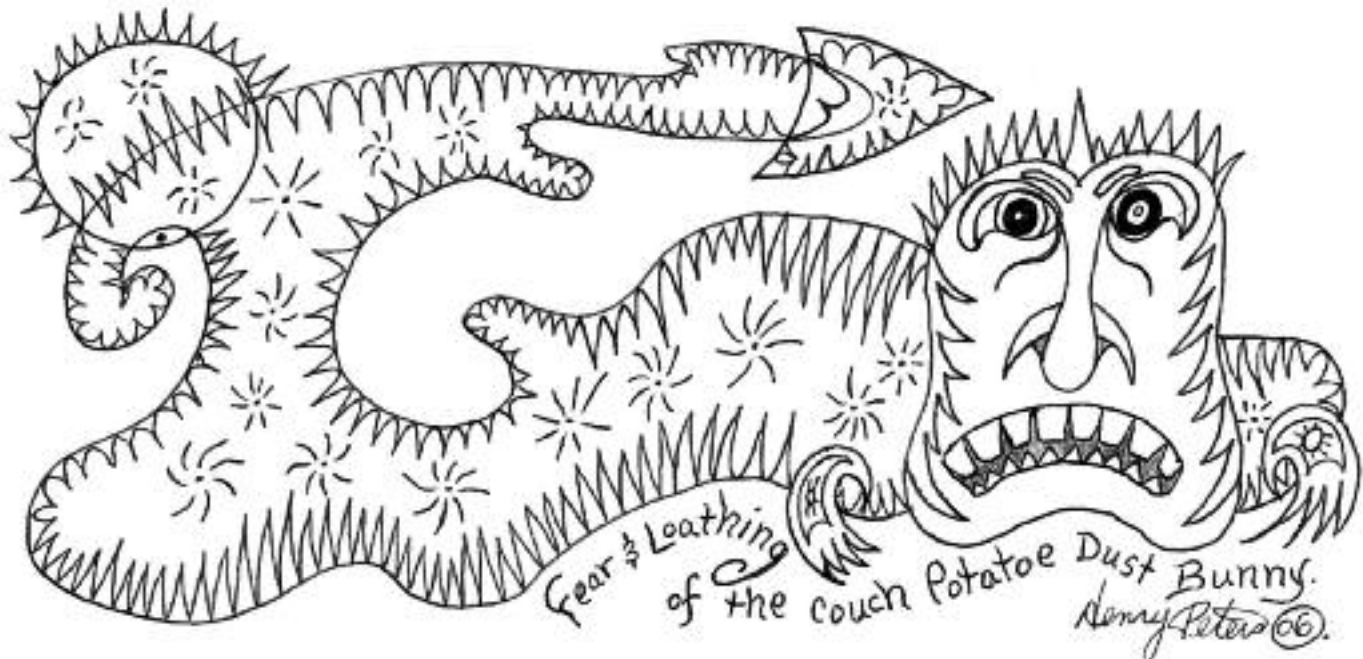
MR. UNHAPPY: I know I will. Luckily, I didn't have my thyroid, and parathyroid glands removed! I think I passed out a time ago because I was taking levothyroxine! I wish I could shred my ridiculous file! [*Curtain closes. Curtain opens and all actors come back on stage and wave at audience. Dr. Quack is still smoking. Curtain closes.*]

NARRATOR: [*Walks on to stage in front of closed curtains.*] Here are some questions that might be in one's thoughts later ... and the answers to those questions.

Question: Who should be plugged into the provincial grid?
Answer: Absolutely no one.

Questions with no answers: How did Mr. Unhappy light his cigarette since he had quit smoking five days ago? Who spoke on the intercom system? What happened to Mr. Unhappy? Where the hell is the ashtray? More Questions: How did Dr. Quack know: Mr. Unhappy had schizophrenia? Mr. Unhappy had hypoglycaemia? Mr. Unhappy was bipolar? Mr. Unhappy had thyroid problems? Mr. Unhappy was allergic to milk? One should not drink pineapple juice after sunset?

Answers: BS; BS; BS; BS; BS; and BS!!!! [*Narrator bows and then stands up.*] There is a box at the exit of the hall for donations to our country's mental health association! Please give generously! [*He waves as he leaves the stage. Loud music starts to play: "Hold on Tight" by Jeff Lynne; performed by Electric Light Orchestra.*]





Depression

BY TAMRA J. AMATO

Out of the dark, dark cavern
off the worn corner of my bed.
Most minutes are free from
the words, dead, dead, dead.
Amazed to take a shower
then walk the dog,
I want to play, kiss a prince, love a frog.
Even get dressed up and comb my hair.
Go out looking normal,
see if I'm "all there."
When did I start singing?
When did joy leap –
into the arms of wonder
above the dark
above the deep?

On Grandma Thora's farm

BY TAMRA J. AMATO

I hide in Grandma Thora's room.
A velvet and wood reserve,
forbidden to children.
Grandma's heavy, hunting feet
thunder over hardwood floors toward me.
Curled up tight – like a snake,
praying my thumping chest doesn't climb
over her huge scolding voice,
and betray my hiding place.
Grandma Thora is in cahoots with God –
She is as scary as His commanding bible.
The book, that I didn't ask for, is my birthday gift.
I'm ashamed of my disappointment
that stepped into me when
I tore off the wrapping paper
and found only God's word.
King James in leather is not what I want.
I carve into the skin-thin title page
with a sharp tipped pen,
"Damn you! Go to Hell!"

God, I'm dead now for sure.

My one true love

BY GORD BRAUN

We play what first appears to be
a harmless little game
I tell her she's my one true love
she tells me I'm the same

We fondle at a distance
and pretend that we're above
using crude suggestive words
as substitutes for love

They warned me not to go online
when looking for a date
Beware the lonely housewife
they told me but too late

She hugs me with emoticons
I feel a little sick
She says she's blonde and 25
but won't send me a pic

She makes me nervous when she says
she thinks of me a lot
her living half a world away
her married, and me not

Feelings started everything
I cannot help but feel
it's gone too far and gotten far
too real and too unreal

I led her on, she took me in
so who was leading who
It's time to quit this hobbit hole
but how, what should I do

I make myself "invisible"
to ward off an attack
Or else she comes online and says
"I love you, love me back"

I wish that I could disappear
just leave and not return
but I gave her my location
when I still had much to learn

Weeks go by, a while since
she tried to reach me last
I try to shake the craziness
and stow it in the past

She doesn't phone or email
and I think I'm in the clear
Then one day the doorbell rings
My one true love is here



Jimmy Bang's Limbo Blues

BY VICTOR ENNS

(for Dorothy Parker and King Biscuit Boy)

Can't focus
on self-immolation.
My razor's got
too many blades +
I'm too shy
for death by cop.

I'm just too depressed
to die.

Don't have the gas
for asphyxiation.
Won't get up
to hang a noose.
Can't figure out
what screw is loose.

I'm just too depressed
to die.

Kevorkian won't return
my email. He's dead too
now, I suppose. There's
got to be
an end to this
somehow, all I know is

I'm too depressed
to die.

The river ice is jammed
too close against the bridge.
The web wants to help
put me away,
but all my research
has to wait another day

I'm too depressed
to die.

Got to keep living
'cause I'm too depressed
to die.



Jimmy Bang's Sedentary Blues

BY VICTOR ENNS

I've got the sedentary blues
I say I got the sedentary blues
Can't even bend over to tie my shoes.

Saw the Mexican woman on Ellice Avenue
Saw the Mexican woman on Ellice Avenue
Wearing a floral print dress over a pair of red shoes.

There were no straps on that dress
I said, there were no straps on that dress
Her breasts held it up pretty fine.

But I've got the sedentary blues
I say I got the sedentary blues
Nothing is all I can do to make her mine.

Hayek not Zizeck on my mind,
I said, Hayek not Zizeck on my mind
Hypothalamus working overtime.

But I've got the sedentary blues
I say I've got the sedentary blues
Nothing is all I can do.

Ernie with the moon face

BY gillian harding-russell

small-button nose cute as a bub
travelling the neighbourhood, had
to be retrieved by his brother, truculent
resentful it had to be him his mum
sent over every time. Now thirty-eight

Ernie's ecstatic among the Christmas candles
turkey with stuffing and cranberry sauce, Dad's
homemade plum wine raised to a toast for the good
of humankind and the good old days, his brother
there to slap his shoulder: Good old Ernie, do

you remember? Until it's time for dessert and after
when misery sits close around his tearful jerks of No no
no! wailing all the way to the car, mother doting
on his laughable dear presence a moment before, now ruling
him with clenched manner to get into the car

immediately! Who can blame her? (Such a burden
the neighbours always thought, glad it wasn't them)
where he must face what must be: his child-like beatitude

betrayed. *That* his mum would deny: Ernie just doesn't like
change: wasn't he happy when they picked him up
at the Group Home, laughing gleefully beside
foster parent Paula and the presents

she made him buy with his money earned
at Cosmopolitan Industries- 'Ernie earned' it, get it? she said.
I mean what do you expect? Some parents don't
even bother to bring the grown-up 'special' kids down
for the holiday.

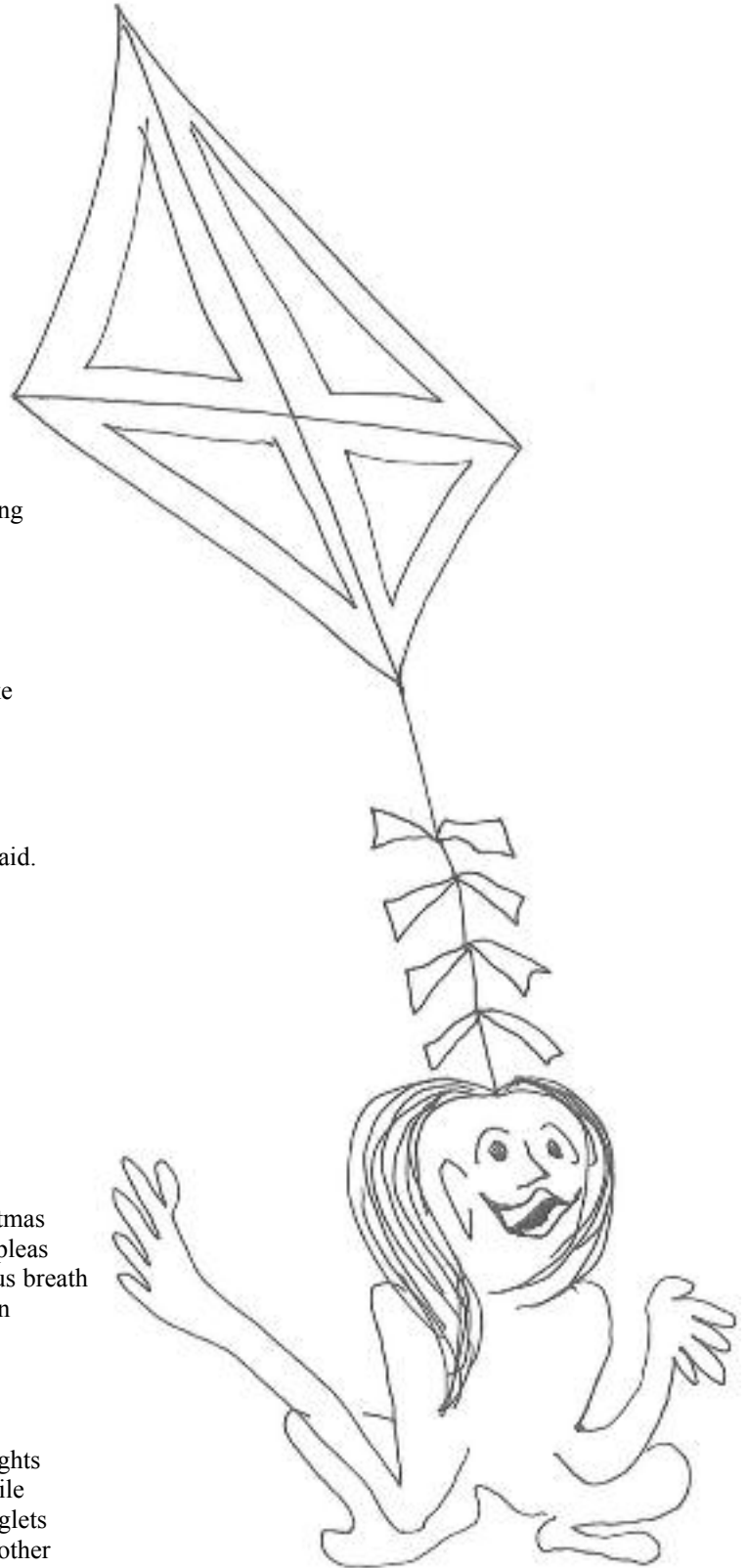
The Greeter

BY gillian harding-russell

Uncle Ernie meets you among the windy snowflakes
swirling like feathery birds around the front door at Christmas
child man-hairy arms open wide to greet you, grunts and pleas
to come in, come in and he, with fuzzy heart and tartareous breath
even says a version of your name you recognize in lumpen

vowels so you wade happily into his big kid joy

at forty (back from the Group Home
for the holiday) and offer to take him for a ride
around the snowy streets to gaze at red-green-blue-gold lights
- trees and santas and reindeer standing on the lawn - while
Grandma cooks the chicken for supper. His niece with ringlets
who only started speaking a year ago informs her baby brother
beside her in the car seat, *Uncle Ernie speaks good French!*
(French the only other language she's heard about at three).



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



Razor

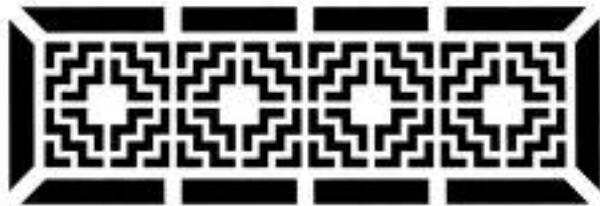
BY NORMA JOHNSON

Raised in a world of ice cream cones and T.V. dinners.
Followed fashion like fleas follow a dog.
Grooming ritual more important than eating.
Life was another party, a better high.

She spiralled into a destructive path of excess.
Measured every fat gram, digested empty calories.
Hiding a low-self-esteem, in a charade of tomorrows.
Defensive answers came with morphine speed.

Common sense smothered, voices of reason blocked.
Unaware of the black acid dissolving her brain.
Like a bottle of old memories, stuck in the past.
Delusional about a winning recipe for life.

Soon self-isolation, overcrowded her growing anxiety.
Bone grinding charade, became a buffalo on her back.
Until the day she was found rigid in her chair.
Make up on and smiling face – open to promise.



The Houdini Effect

BY ALEC MORRISON

Robyn, the big nurse, he was about 280 lbs I'm guessing. He put the jacket on me. I remembered seeing a show about Harry Houdini and they said he would flex when having a straightjacket put on, so that when he relaxed it would be on looser than they thought. So this is what I did. Robyn left me in the solitary cell to "reflect," haha. I remember feeling so relaxed, probably from the drugs they had injected me with when they took me down. I didn't like having this thing on, restricting my arms, it was so hard to even sit up from lying down. So I sat up, got my left arm over my right shoulder, then got my right arm over my left shoulder. I then heard a "Klunk.." I felt my right shoulder dislocate, but I felt no pain and was still calm. This dislocation made it easier to get the rest of the way, above my head, and then finally off. It felt good to be free. The big guy came in maybe five hours later for my meal and I remember him being stupefied by my escape. The two "hands" on the jacket were still bound tightly, so he couldn't understand it. He ended up putting it back on me and left. I did the same act again, only quicker this time. I did pop my shoulder back into place after both escapes but I do feel slight discomfort nowadays when I clasp my fingers and sit with my two hands supporting the back of my head.

Full circle

BY LAURIE LYNNE MUIRHEAD

You told me sister to keep my brats away
did not want them crawling across your cottons
leaving paw prints on designer whites

Spent hours scrubbing chocolate
from sixty dollar sweaters
mumbling to the bathroom basin
while I lectured my two darlings
licked chocolate from their fingers
and drank cold tea
some days, wondered why you came

You had no children then
yet knew everything about them
years of training told me
doing everything wrong
feed them only vegetables
no chocolate! no chocolate!
have them nap every four hours
don't rock them don't spoil them

Time has its way, my brats have grown
your two are toddlers
writing on walls with red crayon
pulling up plants, making soup in the toilet
while you and I play scrabble in your kitchen
drink hot cinnamon tea, chat about our children

Paper India

BY JAMES SKELTON

Lone tree of prayer
Prayer tree
Making a paper India
With reeds that whisper those prayers
In the wind
A bowl and a lotus
The gift of today
A gift from the a paper India
Paper lotus flower
Dissolve
In a bowl of water

Karmic relationship

BY JAMES SKELTON

If I could have now
What I so needed then
I do
To you
I shall write for once
I always felt I could not
Without words
I hope that in the end you will
Say
Somehow
In some way I have
Been a friend

Nobel Prize

BY JEFFREY P. SNOW

Dear Dr. Simon:

We thank you for submitting your manuscript entitled "Obsessive Poetic Expression: A Case Report." The three reviewers spoke with essentially one voice (see appended reviews). After careful reading of your manuscript I concur.

The Editors

Reconciliation

BY JEFFREY P. SNOW

You wear the sourness of committed disapproval.
Today you are an angry bust.
Today your face writes a report that poses questions.
Today your eyes tell me it is OK that I will always feel alone.
Today your eyes are blue. I was once told that my blue eyes please.
Since then I have supposed they really are not blue.
Today your blue eyes giggle because tomorrow
I am going to tell my therapist I cannot face sex.



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



All dressed up

BY KATE BAGGOTT

When my best friend was heartbroken, I brought her soup and ice-cream, cookies and cucumbers. I sliced up the cucumbers to place over her swollen eyes. I brought her cups of sweet tea and I listened to her love stories.

When my best friend was heartbroken, I offered to call my brother and two or three of my larger cousins to teach that bastard a lesson. When she didn't go for that option, I offered her my brother or her choice from two or three of my larger cousins as potential replacements. I pretended to be insulted when she rejected the very idea of dating a male equivalent of me until she laughed out loud.

When my best friend was heartbroken, I medicated her with music and mango juice cut with vodka. I made her go swimming, I made her eat broccoli and I made lists of all the times I'd heard boys and men tell her how beautiful she is, how smart and how fantastic. I reminded her of all the declarations of love she'd turned down in anticipation of something perfect. Some perfect love that was still waiting in the great, big, beautiful out there.

When my best friend was heartbroken, but obviously on the mend, I would tell her to get all dressed up and I dragged her to the nearest dance floor. And there, the real healing of her broken heart would commence.

When my best friend was ecstatic, when she was truly, truly in love, I didn't even see the signs. I did nothing at all.

I knew his voice, but I wasn't a fan. Radio Guy was a fixture on the city club scene. He championed new bands on his show. He gave people who couldn't keep their own ear to the ground tips on where to go and what to listen to. He was also old. He was at least 35 and, as my mother would say, if a man isn't married at 35, there is obviously something very wrong with him.

When my best friend introduced me to Radio Guy it was dislike at first sight. I hated the straggly goatee, the pierced eyebrow, the dyed hair. I hated having to shout because his hearing had suffered after so many years of loud music. Mostly, though, I hated his comments on the superiority of radio.

"Think about it," he liked to direct to all who were listening. "There would be no popular music, no youth culture if it weren't for radio. It's all about kids up in their rooms all alone, listening in and tuning into each other's waves on the airwaves. It's a thing of beauty no other medium can match."

Whatever, I thought. It wasn't as if radio was, or ever had been, the Internet. Besides, Radio Guy was all one-way communication. He talked, we listened.

"It's a new sound, babies," he'd say during a good show. "Different influences are coming into play. They're the kind of influences that are just right for right now. It won't last more than a year, but what a year it will be."

"Let me take a note of that," I'd say. "Will there be an exam at the end of the night?"

"Isn't he the coolest?" my best friend asked. I did not notice she was out of breath. I did not notice her eyelashes fluttered or that she was all smiles all the time. If I had noticed, I would have tried harder to like Radio Guy.

"Sure," I told her. "Except for the goatee, the pierced eyebrow and the hair dye. He's trying too hard to look younger than he is."

"He cares about how he looks," she defended him, "he is his own creation."

Her cheeks may have been flushed as she defended him, her voice might have gotten sharper with me.

"Do you think there's a male equivalent to the old saying 'mutton dressed as lamb'?" I asked my best friend. "Sheep skin leather dressed as ram, maybe?"

"You lost me as soon as you said sheep, it made me all sleepy dreamy," my best friend said. She blushed and I did notice, but I didn't stop to think about what her blushing might mean.

It wasn't long before our every move was dictated by Radio Guy's work schedule. Where he was listening for research, where he was conducting interviews, where he was doing a live broadcast, we were there too. I kept my best friend company until the moment the microphone was switched off and she ran to his side.

I hated the way he introduced her to the bands he was interviewing.

"This is my girlfriend," he'd say with his arm looped all the way around her. He said it as if being his girlfriend was her job, as if she didn't have any other role in life.

And I will make one concession. I knew Radio Guy was a decent kind of man, especially for his age. There were so many girls hanging around. There were dozens of girls who followed Radio Guy from one show to another. Girls whose skirts were shorter, whose hips swung more freely, whose suggestions were louder, but Radio Guy only had eyes for my best friend. I did notice that.

I took cabs back to my house alone and he walked her home. Radio Guy started showing up at my best friend's apartment before the three of us went out. My best friend had a collection of vintage dresses. She mixed fifties dresses with eighties costume jewellery or seventies jeans with sixties boots and hot rolled hair. He encouraged her to stick with one period at a time. Together, they sought out giant cocktail party rings, necklaces, hair snoods and embroidered handkerchiefs at flea markets and charity shops. Instead of a woman with her own unique style, my best friend started to look like someone who was always wearing a costume for a period drama.

"You're all dressed up all the time," I told her.

"I know," she said. "Isn't it great? I feel like my whole life is one big special occasion. It's so good Carina, to have occasions instead of one crisis after another."

Anti-fashion style was a casual interest that became her new passion under Radio Guy's influence. I tried to send out a warning.

My best friend held Radio Guy's hand for hours and hours over several Saturdays at the piercing and body art studio.

"Doesn't it worry you?" I asked. "You two seem to spend a lot of your time together focussing on your appearances."

"Nope! It's like a treasure hunt. We even pretend to be fur traders or pirates sometimes," she said. "Besides, it's not like we're wasting our time at the gym just to look better. What we do is way more fun."

"You play imagination and dress-up," I told her. "You're like a pair of five year-olds."

"It's so awesome," my best friend said.

The longer my best friend stayed with Radio Guy, the odder they became.

Even when they weren't together, she spent hours searching for special items. She bought him used souvenir t-shirts from maritime festivals.

"He collects them," she said. "The lobster and the potato are both cultural themes we're exploring."

"As a wardrobe or as a meal?" I asked.

"Both," she said happily.

I was confused, but I watched as she designed and assembled dazzling piercing posts for his eyebrow from pieces of costume jewellery and Mexican beads.

"Are they from a theme the two of you are exploring too?" I asked.

"No, they're just cool," she said. "Guess what he's going to get pierced next?"

I blocked out the answer.

When they had been together for six months, Radio Guy gave my best friend a 1950s heart pendant.

"You're my best girl," was written across the heart in gilt script. She pinned it to her sleeve. It seemed like a dangerous move to me, but I had finally started to clue in.

My best friend held Radio Guy's hand for hours and hours over several Saturdays at the piercing and body art studio. He had a hole in each of his earlobes slowly stretched to fit body jewellery made from the tips of pygmy goat horns. He looked like a cross between a computer programmer, the Greek God Pan and an Amazonian Indian.

I was opposed to neo-tribalism for political reasons. Stealing other peoples' cultures, did not sit well with me. I'd been brought up by my university to have more respect for indigenous cultures than that.

"The elder warrior casts his gaze over the great desert plains of the urban streetscape," I narrated from my seat across the aisle of the street car from my best friend and Radio Guy one evening. "He scans the alleyways for prey, for some sacrifice to make to the great spirits of radio."

"That's what I was going for," Radio Guy told me. "I needed more of the urban warrior in my life."

"A trip into the rainforest was too difficult to schedule?" I asked him.

"Right, whatever," he said. "You're always so negative Carina."

So, Radio Guy didn't like me either. That was obviously his problem. Everyone liked me. Just ask all the programmers I'd worked with over the years.

"She just doesn't understand men," my best friend told him, shaking her head sadly.

"What's there to understand?" I protested, but my best friend had more to say. "The only difference is that they like beer more than we do."

"She doesn't know how the symbols from the past are still potent while all our gender roles are changing in this crazy modern life," she continued.

"I had no idea you were so traditional," I told Radio Guy.

He shrugged and straightened out his fancy vintage t-shirt so that everyone on the street car could read the full text "Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, World's Biggest Potato Party, August 1974" that was printed on it.



ART BY HENRY PETERS



“I had no idea you were so primitive either,” I said after I finished reading his t-shirt.

“I think I could get a lot more traditional,” he said, but he wasn’t talking to me. He was staring into my best friend’s eyes. “And a lot more primitive,” he growled at her, and tickled her waist.

My best friend squealed with delighted laughter. I couldn’t help but notice that. Neither could the rest of the passengers on the streetcar who turned to stare with looks of disgust, amusement and everything in between. I am not sure how I looked when I stared at them too.

“You’re just perfect,” she told him. “You are the most perfect primitive, traditional man.”

“And you are just perfect for me,” Radio Guy said.

“What is this?” I asked. “A movie?”

“Oh Carina,” my best friend sighed. “You’re always so negative.”

“I am sorry,” I said. I was sorry. “I am really very happy for both of you.”

“I think we can all say we’re happy for them,” said the woman sitting next to me on the streetcar.

I had a feeling of ominous dread in my belly, but I didn’t say a word about it. I had been accused of negativity often enough for one day. When this relationship ended, I thought, my best friend would need more than soup and ice-cream. She’d need more than cucumber slices on her swollen eyes and mango juice cut with vodka. I just hoped, when the time came, I’d know what to do for her.

Uncle Vegard’s eulogy

BY LINDA BIASOTTO

On a day as uncompromisingly chilly as my Uncle Vegard’s disposition, I received a call at work.

“Jon, Daddy’s dead. Get over here right now.”

I listened to the dial tone before closing my cell phone, trying to decipher what had just happened. The phone rang again.

“And pick up Aunt Mona.”

Aunt Mona was my Mother. I realized the calls had come from my cousin, Thelma. Uncle Vegard, dead? How? I knew the news would devastate Mother. While driving to her apartment, I tried to come up with the best way to tell her, but when she opened the door, I forgot my prepared speech.

“Uncle Vegard’s dead!”

She turned white as her hair. I led her to the couch and gave her a glass of water. When she felt better I grabbed her coat and purse, and then helped her downstairs to my car. She sat ramrod straight during the entire drive, talking to herself. I thought she was praying until I realized she was rehearsing a speech to give her sister, my Aunt Gerda.

We entered the front door without ringing the bell. My cousin, Derek, sat perched on the edge of the sofa, watching a football game and tossing back a can of beer. He waved, “Hi, Aunt Mona. Hey, Jon, long time no see.” Like we’d dropped in for tea and a chat.

At the sight of the beer, Mother stiffened, so I guided her toward the hallway. Thelma flew into the room and grabbed my shirt. “Jon!” She laid her head against my tie. “I can’t believe Daddy’s gone.”

Feeling inadequate and clumsy, I said, “I’m sorry,” and patted her back.

Aunt Gerda, her white hair wrapped in blue rollers,

appeared briefly in the hall hunched over an ashtray and a pack of Players Menthol. She disappeared. Mother hustled after her.

“I’ve called the funeral parlour,” Thelma said, her face wet. I fished in my pocket for a clean tissue and she blew her nose. “There isn’t much to do. Daddy had everything planned and paid for a long time ago. It was just like him to be so thoughtful.”

Aunt Gerda hove into view again with Mother trying to deliver the condolence speech she’d rehearsed. On her next pass down the hall, Aunt Gerda stopped cold and stared as if she couldn’t remember who I was. She jerked her head to one side. The third time, I realized she wasn’t working out a kink in her neck: she was signaling me.

I sidestepped Thelma and followed Aunt Gerda into the bathroom. She shut the door and stood with her back against it. I didn’t know where to stand in the tiny room. Sitting on the toilet seat was out of the question, so I leaned against the sink.

“The funeral’s Thursday.” Aunt Gerda stubbed out a cigarette. “That gives you three days to write the eulogy. Keep it short. Say that Vegard worked all his life at the same factory. That he was a religious man who studied the scriptures all – the –.” She squeezed the butt until there was nothing left but limp paper. “Time. Now get out, I have to go.”

Before I could get, she grabbed my arm. “And don’t forget the resurrection.”

“Pardon?”

“Vegard didn’t believe in heaven or hell. He’s asleep until the resurrection.”

“Okay.” I reached for the door.

“Vegard isn’t in hell.” Aunt Gerda set the ashtray on the sink, pulled the cigarettes and lighter from her pocket.

I grabbed the doorknob. “Sure.”

Behind his back, I'd called him "Viking Vegard" because he was the strongest, toughest person I knew.

"He's not —" She flipped the lighter. "burning." She jammed the cigarette against her teeth.

I escaped to the hall.

Everyone knew that Uncle Vegard spent hours at a time huddled over a desk in the attic, reading the Bible and making notes until the boxes of notebooks filled an entire closet.

Before I could track down Mother, Thelma waved me into her parent's bedroom and gripped the sleeve of my jacket. "You have to give the eulogy, Jon."

I said I would. And then I saw a ladder across the bed.

"Start with Minnesota. Tell how Daddy won skating contests when he was little."

Rapping at the bathroom door and Mother's voice. "Gerda? Are you all right?"

"Leave me alone. I'm taking a pee."

"How he loved music and played the tuba."

"Uncle Vegard played the tuba?"

"Daddy took a few lessons when he was 13. I'm sure if he'd kept at it, he would have played in an orchestra. But the most important thing is that you say what a wonderful family man he was, how loving and sensitive. Now get out; I have more people to call."

I leaned against the wall in the hallway feeling as though I'd finished a few speed skating laps, myself. Uncle Vegard, loving and sensitive? Once, when I tried giving him a hug, he went silent and his entire body stiffened. It was like hugging a tree.

I joined Derek. A loner who perched at the edge of our family gatherings, he now gave my arm a spirited punch. "Hey, Jon, want a beer?"

I was about to ask if he had anything stronger when I heard Mother opening cupboards in the kitchen. I shook my head.

"Suit yourself. We're half-way into the third quarter and the Bombers are working on a first down."

How could I ask the delicate question of what had happened to Derek's dad? Derek slammed the beer bottle onto the coffee table and turned to me. I couldn't tell if the shine in his eyes came from the beer or from unshed tears.

"So this morning he decides to change the light fixture in the bedroom. It's only been broken two years. Gets the ladder and up he goes. But he forgets to switch off the breaker. It couldn't have been much of a shock, but he falls off the ladder anyway. Bonks his head against the dresser and breaks his neck. All my life I wondered what could take out the old man and in the end it was his own stupidity." Derek turned back to the TV. "Come on. Pass it."

A chill ran down my own neck. Poor Uncle Vegard. I squeezed Derek's shoulder. "I'm giving the eulogy. Is there anything you'd like me to say?"

He shrugged off my hand. "Whatever. If you want to say my old man was a cold-hearted son-of-a-bitch, then go for it."

Aunt Gerda, trailed by a haze of smoke, marched across the living room to the wall, pivoted and marched out again.

From the kitchen came the chop-chop of a knife and Mother's squeaky rendition of *Now the Day is Over*. Thelma's loud wails mingled with a siren blast from the game on TV.

"Touchdown!"

My body itched to run. To open the front door, jump into my car and hit the gas. But I couldn't leave Mother. So, uneasy as a pup chained to a post, I stayed.

Later, when I drove Mother back to her apartment, she didn't speak until I unlocked her door. She looked up at me with a pleading expression. "Jon. About the eulogy. Will you remember to say that Vegard was a gentle man?"

"Of course," I said, kissing her goodnight. But on the way downstairs, I shook my head. Uncle Vegard, gentle?

Behind his back, I'd called him "Viking Vegard" because he was the strongest, toughest person I knew. Each day he worked out with his own set of dumbbells, managing to maintain an outstanding physique well into his 70s. If something had sliced his arm in half, he'd merely toss a bandage around the pieces and keep going. To him, anything less would have



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



been a compromise with his manhood.

Once, when I was a kid, Uncle Vegard's finger was infected and he asked Aunt Gerda for a sewing needle. He jabbed his finger with it and I watched in admiration as pus squirted into the air. And he hadn't bothered to sterilize the needle.

I drove home with the eulogy doing a slow burn up my throat. After tossing back a capful of Pepto-Bismol and a tumbler of Tequila tranquilizer, I slept like a rock.

Next day was Saturday, my day to sleep in. But Thelma called and begged me to go to her place right away. I rushed to her condo and she met me at her front door wearing a pink bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. Her uncombed brown hair stuck up at the back of her head like bedraggled chicken feathers.

She clutched at my leather jacket. "Jon, she's throwing out Daddy's things!"

Aunt Gerda had stayed up all night stuffing Uncle Vegard's clothing into plastic garbage bags she then hauled to the back lane. She'd set aside his watch and ring for Derek, and then told Thelma to pack Uncle Vegard's notebooks into her car.

"I should have been the one to get Daddy's watch or ring."

Thelma waved at the cardboard boxes jammed into her living room. "Twenty-eight. What kind of inheritance is that?"

There was only one thing to say. "Would you like a drink?"

An ounce and a half of Scotch later, Thelma quit crying.

"I can't believe Daddy's gone. Have you written the eulogy?"

"Not on paper. But there's plenty of stuff in my head."

Thelma pointed her glass at me. "Make sure you say what a great skater he was. And did you know he once played 56 games of Solitaire at one sitting? Do you think it would be appropriate to mention Daddy loved me best?"

I shook my head no.

"But I know he did. So why is my Mother giving his watch and ring to Derek? He's not even sorry Daddy's gone."

"Your brother," I said, "is not a heartless man."

"He holds grudges." Thelma stood and poured herself another Scotch. "He still hasn't forgiven Daddy for the time he threw Derek down the stairs."

"Threw him down the basement stairs?"

"Of course not. Only down the back steps."

"Why?"

"I can't remember. Derek's always been a pain in the ass. I'm sure he deserved it."

The only person in the family famous for his tempers was my alcoholic father. Mother had held Uncle Vegard up to me as a shining example of a nice family man. Now I wondered if Mother's idea of a "nice family man" was anyone who wasn't a booze-enraged wife-beater.

When I saw Thelma whimper again, I passed a tissue. "You got the best part of your Dad."

She wiped her nose. "Huh?"

I motioned at the boxes with my highball glass. "You've been given his thoughts. His very mind."

The dawn of appreciation lit Thelma's face. I was a healer.

"You're right." She jumped up, unfolded a carton and pulled out a Hilroy scribbler. "Here," she said, handing it to me. "Use some of his writing—some of his mind—in the eulogy. Don't you think that's a good idea?"

I said it was.

"No, don't read it now, you'll spoil the spontaneity. At the funeral, open it at random. Don't you think that's a good idea, too?"

"Sure." I took a large gulp of Scotch.

The day of the funeral dawned rainy and cool. When Mother and I arrived at the funeral parlour, the director led us to Aunt Gerda waiting on a cushioned chair. She looked like someone about to have all her teeth yanked. Thelma paced and sobbed, clutching a wad of tissue. Derek had yet to show.

Mother sat on my left and took Aunt Gerda's hand. I sat with the blue notebook and a sheet of typed paper across my knees, being discreet about wiping my sweaty palms on the seat cushion.

It had taken me four hours, eight rewrites and several glasses of Jack Daniels to finish the eulogy. I'd opened the notebook and read a couple of paragraphs. It was flowery stuff like poetry, sure to not ruffle anyone's feathers. I marked the page with a piece of thread

that even Thelma wouldn't notice.

Aunt Gerda came to life when the director asked if any family wished to see the deceased. "No. Vegard did not want anyone to see him."

Thelma raised her chin. "I want to see my Daddy one last time." She flounced after the director.

Mother pulled her hand from Aunt Gerda's and followed Thelma.

I left the paper and notebook on my chair to follow Mother.

Because Uncle Vegard hadn't wanted to waste any money on what he called extras, his body wasn't embalmed. It lay shrunken, encased in layers of plastic. Even in death, he kept us from touching him.

Mother, who'd gripped my arm so hard that I could feel her tremble, let go and threw herself partway into the coffin. "Vegard, Vegard!" she wailed into the plastic.

When I could move again, I pried her loose and half-carried her back to the waiting area.

Aunt Gerda glared, her eyebrows raised like they'd been glued onto the middle of her forehead.

Derek, dressed in a suit without a tie, slouched into the waiting area. We then followed the funeral director to the first row in the half-filled chapel.

The pastor of Uncle Vegard's church spoke for a long time

*It had taken me four hours,
eight rewrites and several
glasses of Jack Daniels to
finish the eulogy*

*I reread the last line.
Looked up to see Derek
laughing. Or was he crying?*

about how Uncle Vegard was asleep until the resurrection, waiting for Jesus to raise him. I was off the hook on that subject.

Then it was my turn. I would please everyone: Aunt Gerda, Thelma, Derek and Mother.

Even Uncle Vegard, in case the resurrection did happen and he'd have a future opportunity to talk to me.

When I set my notes onto the podium, my hands shook, so I rested the palm of my right hand on the notebook and grabbed the podium with my left. Thelma gazed at me like a starved woman eyeing a juicy hamburger. Derek stared at the floor. Aunt Gerda pressed her lips together. But Mother nodded encouragement and I cleared my throat.

"Vegard Olafson was born in 1932 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the youngest of eight children. He moved to Canada because he was a conscientious objector during the Korean War. He got a job sweeping floors at the Winnipeg

Garment Factory where he was a loyal employee. Over the years, he was promoted many times. He worked hard to provide for his family."

Thelma blew her nose.

"Uncle Vegard loved classical music. His love for music showed his gentle side."

A tear slid down Mother's cheek.

"Uncle Vegard had a tough side, too. I remember this one time, when I was a boy...." During the story about the sewing needle, a few people chuckled.

"He also played a lot of Solitaire. I guess you could say that, in some ways, Uncle Vegard was a solitary man."

Derek raised his head.

"Who loved his family?"

Aunt Gerda blinked back tears.

"Uncle Vegard had a big interest in the Bible. He would study it for hours and make notes. I'm going to end with some of those words." I tapped the notebook. "This is dated 1964."

I slid my fingers along the top of the scribbler. No thread. I lifted the book, trying not to be obvious. My marker had disappeared. All right. No need to panic. I'd find some more flowery stuff and read that. Clearing my throat again, I began:

"There are many voices in the night, and I hear them all. Choirs of angels. Instruments from heaven. The wind plucking the trees overhead."

Sobbing ceased. There was a wide movement, as though the mourners, en masse, were leaning toward me. Encouraged, I pushed on.

"But the most wonderful sound in the darkness is the voice of my beloved. She says my name and the air moves with the sweet scent of the grape blossom. She comes to me beneath the yew and lays herself down."

A restless shuffle, a staccato of cleared throats. A nervous pressure against my spine hurried me. "Oh, who will save me from the torment and pangs of this desire? Who?"

A command like a drum roll: "STOP!"

Unnerved, I read faster. "Who? My own truest darling, my heart and soul, my Mona."

I reread the last line. Looked up to see Derek laughing. Or was he crying? Thelma's face twisted in rage and she moved forward from her chair, as if to leap onto the stage and tear me to bits.

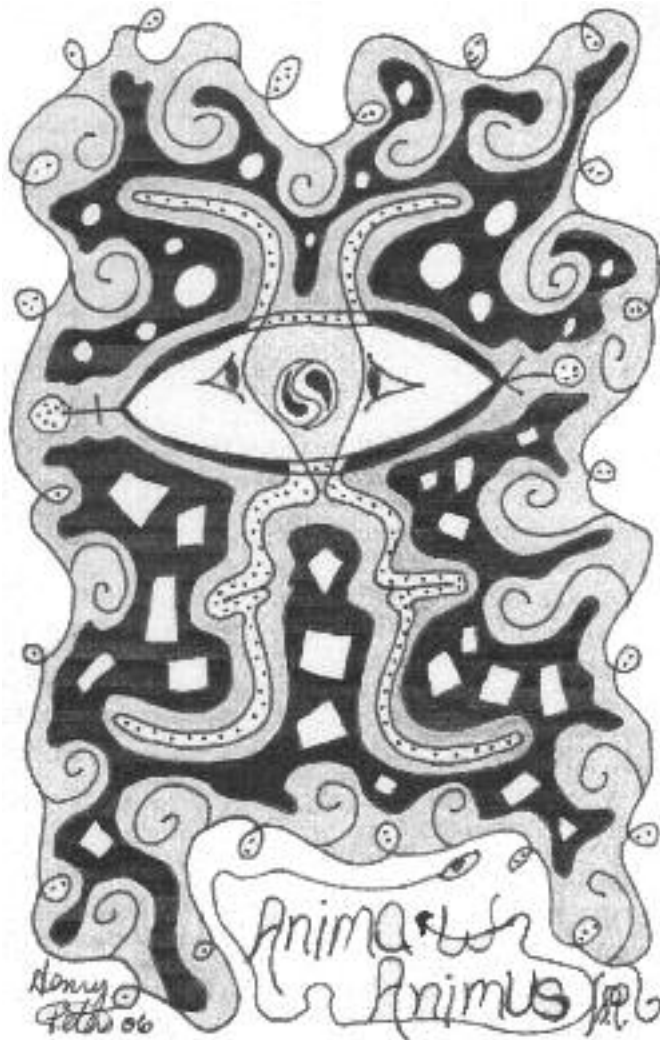
But I could redeem myself. I flipped forward a page. Went to another. Picked up the notebook and fanned through it. Mother's name jumped out at me a dozen times. How had I missed it the night before?

Jack Daniels.

Aunt Gerda charged for the door. I wanted to shout, "I'm sorry!" But now that the damage was done, my lips had quit working.

And there was my Mother. Dear, sweet Mother. Gazing up at me, her face lit by a benevolent smile, the kind you see glowing on the bright portraits of saints.

Redeemed, I picked up the notebook and left the podium.



ANIMA/ANIMUS BY HENRY PETERS



Solomon and David

(An excerpt from a novel-in-progress)

BY ARNOLD ISBISTER

I was back home on my reserve visiting our ‘bestest bar’ waiting for someone familiar to walk in. I had just finished a seven-day work schedule and needed that familiarity a home and its people bring. This was the summer of 1976, give or take a year. I had been a Maximum Security guard for 10 years now dealing with disturbed inmates that no other penitentiary wanted. Little did I know that ‘life repeats itself’ in mysterious ways. Although comical, and we all laughed back then, the extended story of the storyteller had a sad end.

I sit there with my solitary beer feeling restless as the time dragged and nobody came. Finally the pub door opens and in steps a dark figure outlined by the glare of the setting sun. His features slowly emerging through the dark shadows, I begin to recognize the face. It is Solomon! Solomon was one of 12 children, all of whom were named after some biblical figure, as was the custom back then, especially for those parents who had found the Lord. In this case Solomon and his brother David never quite lived up to the wise men they were named after. Now, he glides smoothly yet cautiously through the blinding sunlight like a revelation. Stopping momentarily, he cranes his head, squints his eyes, then marches across the threshold in bold calculated steps to make sure he doesn’t trip. Solomon parades through the tables straight to the back where I am. He comes closer, sees me in the dingy dark through a cloud of smoke, and sits down. He’s got this big smile on his face like that cat in Alice in Wonderland. Something’s up. Already I’m on alert cause he’s smiling too much like a salesman selling vacuums. In his plaid lumberjack shirt and tattered blue jeans, Sol keeps inching his chair closer to me like he’s got a secret. Finally he sets himself down, his chair next to mine.

“Watcha doing here?” he asks, his voice slicing through the Waylon Jennings wailing “Amanda” on the jukebox in the corner.

“Came for a visit. How are you doing?” I say.

“Pretty good. How 'bout yourself?”

“Good, good,” I say, while he smiles away.

We sit there, both of us smiling, nodding our heads, as we look each other over. It has been a few years since we saw each other. He was a little older than I so we weren’t in the same crowd. He and his brother used to work for my Dad at times mainly to get enough money to buy beer for the weekend.

About this time my eyes adjust to the halo of the open bar door surrounding his silhouette and I notice a couple butterfly bandages on his head. The smell of beer hangs in the air along with stale smoke and you can hear the clink of bottles echoing behind as Wilbur the bartender stocks his shelves. I motion to Wilbur with my fingers spread like a V to bring us two beers. Communication without words. You learn sign language fast in a bar especially when you get loaded and words don’t come

easy.

“What happened to your head?” I ask as I point with my lips. Most Indians here will point with anything but their fingers because it was deemed rude, unless they’re politicians. It’s a cultural thing.

“Oh . . . got shot in the head,” he says matter-of-factly.

“You got shot?” I whisper loudly as I squint to see, the light behind still blinding me. “Jesus Christ! Shouldn’t you be in the hospital, man?”

“I was. Then I got thirsty, so I checked myself out. Besides I wasn’t in too much pain or anything . . . and I could see all my fingers . . . and my toes too!” He laughs. I don’t.

“What the hell happened?”

When the beer arrives, he takes the dripping wet Pilsner and after a long swig he places it down gently. He caresses the bottleneck as beads stream down and over his fingers. A far-away look settles into his eyes.

“Well . . . me and David, my brother?” He kind of asks, nodding with his chin pointing and puckered lips to make sure I know who he is talking about. I nod in return. “We were drinking all night. We had hired Moses to take us to Mont Nebo for a couple cases of Pilsner earlier that day. Get ready for hunting, eh?”

Moses used to work for us too, and he would frequent the bar of a small village called Mont Nebo close to our reserve. Population there was probably 60 but they had a bar. We, the younger crowd, would often remark on Moses going to Mont Nebo for a few beer, relating in jest to the biblical stories. The coincidence of name and place was too good to pass up.

Sol continues. “By early morning we were out of beer but feeling pretty good as the sun came up. We start talking ‘bout what a nice day to go hunting, of how many elk we could get. “You know,” he turns to me remembering, “The season had just opened for elk?” He looks at me to make this point as if it’s logical for what they do next.

“So we decided to clean our rifles, get them ready. We’re sitting there and David’s just finishing oiling his gun. He’s got it on his lap, pulls back the lever, cocks it, and I was just gonna ask him if he checked the barrel when BANG . . . and everything goes white. Not black like they say,” he looks at me as if he’s the expert now, “but white, real white.”

He’s looking up at the bar ceiling now gesturing, with his hand in a half-circle, eyes half-closed. I look at his glazed eyes and wonder if he’s OK ‘cause he’s silent for a bit. Maybe he’s got some internal bleeding or something I’m thinking, but he starts up again in low gear. Slow at first then escalating, he comes out of the temporary trance as he relives the moment.

“Next thing I know I’m on the floor looking at the ceiling. I hear David screaming, see a flash or blur as he runs to me. I feel something running down the side of my head, around the temple,” he raises hand to his temple, “and I touch it and there’s blood! It comes to me, I’ve been shot in the head!”

He stares at me with bug-eyes, kind of scaring me. “Well now I start to go crazy thinking I’m gonna die and I start

“What! What the hell is going on? I’m talking to myself, trying to make sense of this,” he explains to me, “cause I was sure angels were coming.”

screaming. My bro flips out too and we both run out the door and about 20 yards away there stands Uncle John. He's not moving or anything, just standing looking at us. Guess he was wondering what the hell's going on here, one guy goes this way and the next guy coming out goes the other way - both screaming. But now I'm losing it and run off into the bushes. All that beer didn't help either, I guess,” he says profoundly as he thinks about it. “Anyway I take off, just run, gotta get outa there. Don't know how long I ran but I end up in some willows, sat down and you know, just waited for the end to come.”

He says this stoically as if he was some great warrior. I'm smiling to myself.

He goes on. “I was sitting there, blood all over me when I remembered I had toilet paper in my pockets so I reach in my pockets, take out a whole bunch and start packing it in my head to stop the bleeding. I keep a lot on me in case I have to go to the bathroom when I'm away from home, eh?” He nods at me to acknowledge this wisdom, which I do, I've been there.

“I could feel where the wound was with my fingers and it ran down the middle of my head so that's where I put the toilet paper.” He motions with his hand down from the top of his

head to his hairline. “Finally,” he says, “I begin to hear voices a long ways away. I'm kinda dizzy, just like I'm gonna pass out. I'm thinking, those must be the angels coming. The voices get louder in my head. All at once, like through a fog, a nurse, dog, RCMP, and my Chief come galloping through the bush.”

“What! What the hell is going on? I'm talking to myself, trying to make sense of this,” he explains to me, “cause I was sure angels were coming.”

“I guess Uncle John had called the Chief who called the community nurse then the RCMP. That's why they were there real quick and together.”

“I look up, I see their mouths moving slowly but I can't make sense of what they're saying.” He takes his Pilsner at this point and half-empties it. He catches his breath, repeats, “They weren't making sense ... so I said nothing, besides I didn't know what to say so I just smile at them. The RCMP is holding this huge dog who wouldn't stop yapping, the nurse is holding up three fingers and your Dad (Chief) is shouting at me. I'm mixed up, can't say anything, can't think, so I figure I'll show them how I stopped the bleeding. So I pull the toilet paper that is soaked with blood from my head, hold it out and



ELM TREE BY ARNOLD ISBISTER



show them. Well, all Hell breaks loose! The nurse screams, the RCMP faints, landing on top of his stupid barking dog that takes off dragging the cop along cause he's still hanging on to the leash . . . and my Chief's eyes are popping out!"

"Plop!" he says as he describes with his arm how the poor officer fell, then waves it like a snake to imitate the dog's actions as he pulls his master along. A devious smile comes to him as he reminisces fondly on this picture in his mind. Getting buggy-eyed again, he looks at me.

"They thought I was pulling out my brains!" he hollers in a gleeful wonder, smacking his knee. His smile gets bigger as he studies me then erupts in maniacal laughter. It is like an artist putting the final touches to a masterpiece. I laugh till I cry as he finished the story. He signals the bartender with a V for another round, pointing to me for the cash. I would buy quite a few that night.

"So they put me in the ambulance when it gets there. One of the guys asks me how many fingers he's holding up. I tell him I never went to school, eh? He looks to me with the question. But he's asking me again. Then I ask him, Don't you know? Why you asking me?"

I'm just about falling off the chair at this point.

"Your Dad yells at me now to smarten up or he will kick my ass, but I'm not joking, eh? Never went to school or learned to count, always depended on my smarter brother for that. So anyway he tells them to take me to the hospital. 'Bout this time I can hear some crying in the bush, and I'm thinking maybe it's the angels again. I was still in shock, they said but I misunderstood this."

"Well you know, my hearing was not too good after that gun going off beside my ears, so I thought they said I was going to pot, eh? You know, going to die but in a slow way?"

I was getting weak from laughing. "Yeah, yeah . . ." I said urging him with my hand to go on.

He's smiling from ear to ear as he knows he has me. "Well this cry continues and I'm looking to the sky. The Chief says, He's over here. Wow, I thought, the Chief is talking with the angels."

My knees are almost on the floor now as I try to contain myself, my stomach muscles getting weaker.

"Then this big noise like thunder comes and I get kinda scared again. I look to the noise and here comes David flying through the bush. Ugliest angel I ever saw with his broken nose and five teeth," he says to himself in disappointment. He adds from memory, "Two molars on one side and three front teeth. Anyway he's a bawling, tears all over his face. He reaches out, grabs my hand thinks I'm dying too, eh? Well, we were hugging each other, blubbering away when that stretcher I was on breaks. David lands on me and he's big, eh?" I knowingly nod.

"He almost crushes me and knocks the wind out of me.

I'm gasping for breath and David is just wailing away like ole Waylon and Willie. He thinks he has really done me in. Finally I get my wind and tell him I am back."

My ribs are cracking, I am laughing so hard.

"So I tell him, 'David, it's alright. It wasn't your fault,' but I was lying, eh? I tell him, 'You can have all I got when it's all over.'"

"Really?" he says. "Even the black velvet Elvis painting?" He stops crying at this point which kinda pissed me off. You know, he wants that painting that bad . . . just a second ago he's bawling? David just loved that painting. He would imitate Elvis with a wig whenever we drank and sang. Quite the sight with David in a wig singing Love Me Tender and he's got no teeth." He smiles fondly at the scene in his mind.

"Then he asks me," Solomon shouts, "with tears still in his eyes, What about that moose rack for the guns? I coulda killed him then. I'm on my deathbed or death stretcher and he's asking for material things, my things? So I reach up, grab him

"They thought I was pulling out my brains!" he hollers in a gleeful wonder, smacking his knee. His smile gets bigger as he studies me then erupts in maniacal laughter.

around the neck and start choking. He's making these weird sounds when your Dad grabbed me. The Chief shakes me hard, yelling, Stop it! Both of you! You're not dying, you idiot! And you, pointing to David he says, Get out of here, I'll talk to you later."

David persists asking about the head wound but is assured there was no permanent damage. Sol quotes my Dad, imitating his actions with a shaking of his head, waving his hand, "Buncha idiots! Drinking, fooling around with guns. . . Geez!" My Dad never swore.

"Then you know what he did, what David did?" Solomon tells me, "Just as he's leaving he asks, Say Chief, can you loan me a 20? Your Dad lost it then. David sees his eyes starting to bulge out and starts running, I think he's still running."

I am in hysterics.

The next day I asked my Dad and he said, "Yeah, it's all true, I was there." He shook his head in dismay and disgust as he told the story in his words. It wasn't humorous the way he told it. It's funny how the same picture looks different when it's in another frame . . . but I still laugh remembering Solomon's version.

Ten years later I would meet Sol again. It was on a midnight shift, where the troubled seemed most prone to breaking down. Maybe it's the thought of going to sleep alone or the dark walls that close in on you . . . or the lifelessness a cell bares. There is something about cement and steel that is so cold.

Doing the required count before locking up, we were called to the basement unit called the Dungeon.' This unit held those for assessment waiting for parole or for court reports. A nurse motioned us over to the station while the unit security locked up the inmates.

“We’re locking up before I take you into the West Wing. I didn’t want the others to see this and get all agitated before lock-up.”

She stood there emotionless staring at the dark orange door #131. After the count was done she ushered us into the wing and to the door. We looked in as she whispered past us and stood there. Under the dim glow of the cell light she removed the sheet, sterile and crisp with starch. A dark face made darker by the whiteness of the sheet came into focus. There below me lay Solomon. This was a shock, an old friend now dead before me, his clouded eyes staring vacantly back at me.

Apparently he never did get over his addictions, his problems. His life was surrounded by alcohol, the only thing that gave him pleasure. It came to own him though, as he later stole for it and suffered the change in himself as he became more destitute, hopeless in his attitude. That cheerful demeanor, devil-may-care outlook was lost in his later years. What

Tharn!

BY CHUCK LOVATT

“What do you want from this?” she asked, ever so innocently – like, in the same tone a spider might use when inviting a fly to its web. “I mean, it’s time to speak honestly, don’t you think?”

If there’s one thing that gives me the heartburn (as W.O. Mitchell used to say) it’s when a woman steers you toward the correct answer. Not that I don’t appreciate the guidance, mind, but they’re so darned inconsistent with it. Now, if she’d given me the same sort of hint for her first question, I’d be miles ahead of where I was now.

“Well, don’t you?”

Sometimes we higher life forms are just kidding ourselves, thinking we have freedom of choice.

“Sure!” I try to sound like I just love where she’s going with this. “Absolutely!” But if ever there was a time to equivocate, or to lie, or to pretend you have been suddenly rendered mute, or to just plain fall into a swoon that will last until she changes the subject, now was that time.

She had it dangling over me like Damocles’ sword, just itching to split my head in two. Except of course, the blade wasn’t poised over my head - with women it never is. You see, the thing was this had a 50-50 chance of going either way, and in my experience, those odds fall well short of being anywhere near satisfactory.

If I told her I was only in this for shits and giggles, and it turned out she had her heart set on something altogether more serious, she’d have my balls for breakfast, and we’d be finito. But if, on the other hand, it was I who wanted to see where this might take us, and she who was simply looking for something uncomplicated, that sword would still slice off my cajones, and

remained was a man old before his time with a cynical sarcasm replacing the humour he once had.

I took this home to my heart, never telling anybody about it. I relished the laughter he had shared, that ‘feel-good’ atmosphere he created out of negativity and that smile that said, “Everything is going to be alright.”

Now he lay there cold as the cement floor, no smile, with a self-made noose that hung around his neck like a beggar’s necktie. He had used the cheap felt throw-over that each Pen issues to inmates. He had cut it apart with a borrowed dull-edge scissors from a nurse, fashioned it into a hangman’s noose, then hung himself from an embedded steel coat hanger. His considerable weight did the rest by tightening the knots, locking them together like they are supposed to. Once tightened there is no release without being cut.

We carried him out, quietly, then finger-printed him, took photos, and that was it.

so much for scenario number two. In fact, the only way of avoiding disaster was for our terms to be compatible, but I didn’t have a clue as to what they were.

I felt helpless, frozen in the headlights, like there’s nothing I can do but sit there, allowing the forces of Doom to descend and utterly destroy me.

There’s a word for this state. In *Watership Down*, Richard Adams called it Tharn.

I don’t mean for it to sound the way it does. I mean, I’m falling for this girl, or at least I think I could be falling for her, or I think I might be reaching the point to where I could visualize myself falling for her, but I wasn’t ready to say so just yet – not even to myself.

“I mean, we keep skirting around it, don’t we?”

“Yeah,” I said, still none the wiser, “we do.”

Of course the main attraction for me, or at least the main attraction thus far was that she coupled like a stoat of Gomorrah must have coupled, but it was no use telling her that. Women don’t take such compliments the same as men.

‘I want to be with you,’ I might say, ‘because you couple like a Gomorrah stoat.’

‘Really?’ she would reply, ‘How lovely of you to say so.’ I don’t think.

Hearken and tremble all ye men and know: regardless of what they may tell you, women are different.

“I think it’s time to stop pussyfooting around.”

It’s a wonder more women aren’t into small engine repair. I mean, they just love to tinker with the mechanics of things. There we were, purring along famously, then she has to go and see what’ll happen if the spark is advanced just the teensiest bit.

“Stop pussyfooting!” I repeat with false enthusiasm. “By



all means, couldn't agree more." Then I start doing so for all I am worth.

"Four weeks," I give my head an appreciative but neutral shake...which is not easy to do. Four weeks is the amount of time we've been together. My neutrality could mean either I thought that was very long, or hardly any time at all.

"Yes," she was watching me closely, "and how do you feel about that?"

How do I feel, forsooth! Christ, we were striking into the very heart of femininity!

To buy time, I laugh a hoarse laugh. "How do I feel?!" and again, with emphasis "How do I feel?!" I give an admiring chuckle, as though she's really gotten a good one in - like she's just made a really good joke or something. But the fact is I'm praying like hell she'll think I consider the question too incredibly ludicrous to answer.

"Yes, how do you feel?"

Damn! Damn and blast! She had me backed into a corner and (at the risk of mixing metaphors) I'd have to come down on one side or other pretty soon. One mistake and, at the very least, a really fun time would go up in smoke. At the very worst, my life would be ruined!

But wait! She'd mentioned 'pussyfooting,' hadn't she? Now, that was a serious word which only a serious person would use! No one who was just interested in a little slap-and-

tickle would say anything even remotely resembling 'pussy-footing' in that context!

So I gave her my most frank stare and opened my mouth to tell her that I wanted us to go further ... then closed it again, and glanced away.

Maybe it was a trap. Maybe she had some insecurities, and she was setting this trap for me to blunder into. Then she could give me the old heave-ho and avoid having to deal with her baggage, all at the same time.

Yeah, that made sense. All women have hang-ups, absolutely all of them, and with that total inclusion comes the fact that not a single one is willing to face any of them head-on. Like I said, they're not like men - not like me, for instance. 'Level-headed' was my byword, and 'baggage,' for me, meant an extra pair of socks and a change of underwear. Matter of fact, if you were to get to know me, you'd probably think I was Beaver Cleaver's dad. But in contrast, there's a reason why women wear heels: it's their way of telling you they don't have two feet on the ground - only 10 toes, which is not quite the same any way you care to look at it.

So, with that in mind, it would be best to tell her I was gung-ho for the status quo. That way the pressure would be off and her hang-ups could go whistle. Except, of course, if that wasn't the case, it would be the worst possible thing to tell her.

Cursing silently, I lied, "Well, that's a very good question." I sat back, steepling my fingers sagaciously against my chest and looked to heaven for guidance. "Yes, certainly an excellent question."

"And?"

But now I was stymied - totally Tharn. A long uncomfortable pause was inevitable, and the only thing worse than saying the wrong thing was to say nothing at all. When that happened it would be over, tout finis, kaput. Anything I said afterward would be too late.

I sat there, staring at her in a state of mute panic, almost hearing the engine roar as that murderous machine bore down on me, thirsting to rend limb from limb, like a ravenous wolf would an innocent lamb. But then, in the nick of time, Blessed Inspiration came to me like it comes to people maybe once in their lives, if that!

"It's complicated," I said, avoiding her eyes.

The complexities of the feminine mind are forever attracted to a kindred spirit...unless, of course, she just wanted to keep things simple!

"Oh? How so?"

I almost fainted with relief (God, I wish I had!) But she'd swallowed the bait, and that was a good thing.

"I mean you're so fascinating." I glanced up to see how she's taking this. Her head was tilted quizzically to one side (excellent!). I left it hanging.

"Go on," she prompted.

"What I mean is you're not like other girls. You're so" My hand slowly stirred the air while my eyes continued to gaze skyward. "You're so" I ceased stirring for a moment,



ART BY JAMES SKELTON

*The point of this exercise,
of course, was to turn the object
of our discussion from myself to her . . .*

squinted thoughtfully – considered – then gave my head an impatient shake as though discarding a word found wanting. “You’re so...”

The point of this exercise, of course, was to turn the object of our discussion from myself to her, and it would seem that had been successfully carried out – admirably carried out, if I do say so myself. Now that she realized I found her fascinating, she just wouldn’t be human if she didn’t want to hear more.

“You’re so ...” Finally, I let my hands fall into my lap, and give my wrists a weak flip: failure personified. “Complex,” I finished lamely, with just a hint of self-annoyance to suggest I found this totally inadequate.

Well, obviously that wasn’t the case at all; it was the perfect word! I defy anyone who has been described as fascinating and complex not to be intrigued by it. I mean, I’d be intrigued if someone referred to me that way.

“Really?” she leaned forward, “I’m intrigued.”

See?

“I mean, you’re so beautiful,” her brow twitched with annoyance so I hurried on, “but that’s the very least of it.” It became serene again. “It’s just that I don’t understand what you see in a guy like me.” A little self-effacement never hurt anyone, especially if you put it in such a way as to elicit a reply. And it was true too, of course. I’ll admit honesty has its uses sometimes.

“You’re interesting,” she offered, which was good for starters, but it would be bad form to let her go on – especially if she wasn’t willing to.

“I’m glad you think so,” I cut in with polite impatience, as though considering this was a given (which was far from the truth), “but the thing is there’s so much more about you that makes your physical self seem almost common by comparison.”

I’ll admit that was going out on a limb; no woman ever wants her looks to be brought into question. But it was plain as day she’d been told she was beautiful so many times by so many guys (all of who would’ve had an ulterior motive, of course) that she regarded such comments with suspicion, almost as an occupational hazard. So, to be confronted by someone who found her appearance lacking in relation to her mind, and with the gumption to say so, well, odds were I’d go up a notch or two in her estimation.

Sure enough, her face clouded over like it was getting ready to storm for a week, but it cleared up again as soon as she caught my meaning. Then I saw something new in the way she looked at me, and wondered if it wasn’t gratitude.

The beauty of it is I wasn’t lying, not about that part anyway. For one thing her mind was like a treasure chest filled with rare jewels. It drew me to her like a fly to fly-paper, and did almost as much for me on the physical side as did her body. Then there was her sense of humour that kept rocking me back on my heels, because it was so original and not cruel the way most humour is. But even all that paled when compared

to...well, just the good old common sense way there was about her. Most beautiful women like to talk about themselves and not much else - it’s groomed into them. But she wasn’t like that. Oh, she wasn’t immune to a compliment every now and then (like what I was doing now, for instance) but it would have to be carefully tempered and not overdone, otherwise I would end up doing my cause far more harm than good.

But for all that, what it all came down to was that she was a woman, and being a woman, she just had to ask bloody awkward questions, like the one that started all this in the first place. Still, when it came to brass tacks, say what you like, life hasn’t been boring since I met her.

So I summed up with, “You’re like no one else I’ve ever known, man or woman.”

Gender-neutral statements go over big with women, but I found myself perplexed to be speaking more from the heart than I’d originally intended. I also discovered a curious lack of being unsettled by that. She gave me a hard look that lasted an eternity. Then, thank God, it slowly broke into a smile to let me know the inquisition was over and I was off the hook.

“So are you,” she said, and I think she meant it, too.

We sat in silence, feeling closer than ever, like somewhere along the line we’d taken a step toward something. Then I caught her smiling secretly to herself.

“What?”

“Oh, I was just curious how you were going to wriggle out of that, is all.”

Aghast, I stared at her, feeling the blood turning cold in my veins.

“You mean you did that on purpose?!”

“Of course,” she giggled. “How else am I supposed to test your mettle?”

I took a long sober moment to consider the improbability of women, thinking I might have to reassess her sense of humour after all.

By God, I’d been had! She’d led me on a wild goose chase, and had me jumping through one flaming hoop after another, like a toothless old lion in a one-ring circus, just so she could satisfy an idle curiosity! With that knowledge came a flash of anger, a grim determination that I would continue to be my own man – my own level-headed self - and that nothing, or no one, would ever lead me around by the nose again! I felt used, degraded, my sensibilities ruthlessly invaded for the sole purpose of being mocked. It wasn’t good enough, not by a damn sight! This was war! I’d see her in hell! I’d rather drink hemlock than spend one more minute with such an unfeeling creature! Why, I....!

But then, in spite of everything, I suddenly found myself laughing too - a kind of vive la différence sort of chuckle. What the hell, we only go around once, right?

“Well for starters,” I said, taking her hand before kissing her gently on the mouth, “let’s talk about the stoats of ancient Gomorrah.”

That’s probably what she had in mind all along.



Crazy Hazy

BY GLADYS MACDONALD

Little Hazel had wandered away from her safe spot in the back yard. She was six years old but had not started school with other children her age because she had a learning problem. Her mother had taken her to the playground, two blocks away, on several occasions to play on the slide or merry-go-round. Today, Hazel decided to wander there by herself.

She saw several children playing, some with their parents and others in little groups without a mother or a father. She stood back and watched for a while. Then she got up courage to go down the slide, her favourite plaything. When she got in the line, a bigger child, a boy, said, “Who are you?”

“My mommy calls me Hazel, and my daddy calls me Hazy,” she replied.

“My name is Perry,” he said, as he slid down the slide ahead of her.

Hazy had some difficulty climbing the ladder up the slide. Her mother was usually there to help her. Another boy got in line and told her to “hurry up.” He didn’t sound very friendly. Hazy climbed another step. She looked down at the

ground. “What’s the hold up?” said the boy. Hazy didn’t like his voice.

Perry looked up and said, “I’ll catch you, Hazy, and don’t be in such a hurry, Jake.”

“Don’t be afraid,” he said to Hazy. “Jake is always in a hurry.” Hazy was able to swing her legs around in front. Jake nudged her from behind and sent her flying down the slide. Perry picked her up off the ground. He told Jake that he shouldn’t play so rough.

Jake said, “What did you say her name is?”

“It’s Hazy,” replied Perry, “and she’s just a little girl. Be nice to her.”

“Hazy?” said Jake. “I think it should be ‘Crazy.’ Yes, ‘Crazy Hazy!’”

Hazy laughed. “That’s a funny name. Crazy Hazy,” she said again and again. “Crazy Hazy, I like it. It sounds silly.”

Just then, Hazy saw her father coming. He was happy to see that she was safe and had made some friends. Hazy said, “Daddy, I have some new friends.” She pointed as she said, “That’s Perry and this funny boy is Jake. He makes me laugh. He calls me a funny name. He calls me ‘Crazy Hazy.’”



SAM WAS A HAPPY CAT BUT SHE DID HAVE PROBLEMS . a fabric piece by ELIZABETH GLIXMAN

My purse

BY JENNY VASILESCU

Sometimes, life is really, really funny ...

My husband and I have been blessed with two perfect children. They have been cute and healthy, good at school and good to us. Now they are grownups, having their jobs and their own families, bringing to life our six precious grandchildren. So, our life has been a good one.

Except lately ... To tell you the truth, my husband and I are not young any longer, in our eighties. We are still living in our old home, proud to say we are doing everything by ourselves. But, there is trouble in our little paradise. For some years I've been forgetting this or that from time to time. Lately, I'm forgetting more and more, which means a lot of stress, to say the least. Still, we manage ... But our children tell us quite often about that new Health Centre in our town. They say that there are many kinds of doctors like psychiatrists, neurologists, and so on, specialized in elderly-related conditions. These specialists could do an assessment on every senior, then make an appropriate plan for everybody to improve their abilities. They also have special helpful programs for us, very good, even to prevent problems from happening, or at least to delay their development. That's very good, I'm glad people have help, but my common sense tells me that if there is no problem, there is no need to look to solve it. Everybody forgets from time to time, just like I do ... Right? We managed just O.K. for so long, I thought ... So, we politely refused our children's repeated invitations ...

However, today, I'm not so sure about that and I'm going to tell you why.

Some of my embarrassing forgetfulness comes from my own purse. All my life I've admired, and I've been very grateful to the women who invented the purse, which I've used plentifully. In my youthful years, I used to have little fancy purses, of different colours, to match my outfits and my shoes. Then I didn't have to carry too much around.

I really don't know how it happened, but, in time, I've gathered more and more little things in my purse, all of them very important. For instance, at the beginning, I had in my purse my parents' picture. Then, I added my siblings' pictures, then my husband's, then my children's, lately my grandchildren's, a true photo album. Then, I started to carry make-up, and skin cream, then my medicines, in case I'd be late away from home, and a little, just a little bottle with some instant coffee, just in case, to kick my mind. I also carry more and more Kleenex, hand wipes, toothpaste, toothbrush, cough drops, asthma puffs, reading glasses, sunglasses and other essential little things for personal use, which names I'd prefer not to mention ...

So, it's just understandable that those little fancy purses from my youthful years have no use now, not a tenth of my

stuff would fit in them altogether. As a result, my actual purse looks like a travelling bag, or even like "Noah's Ark," as my husband used to tease me. Yet, the fact that I have with me all I needed away from home, even for a few hours, makes me happy and gives me confidence.

Not long ago, I purchased a new purse, long, large, with strong handles, with many, many compartments, big pockets and small pockets. It's made of little pieces of leather of different colours, so it's just good for me. It fits with any of my outfits and shoes and I could crowd inside whatever I wanted, winter or summer. The best purse of my life! And I felt so comfortable and proud of myself! I couldn't understand, though, why my husband was looking at me with terror. He made me promise him to make sure not to open my purse in front of other people. You never know if they could understand my special reasons, he said ... So, reluctantly, I did ...

Yet, as nothing good in this world comes without some kinds of problems, just as many of our medicines don't come without any side effects, a big problem developed: how could I possibly find the right thing at the right time?!

Take my word, the worst that can happen is not to find the house keys when coming home. It's like a curse.

If I leave home in a hurry and I just throw the keys in the purse, although I

have a special pocket for them, when I come back, I have to search forever for the keys. It's a nightmare, especially if I'm hungry, thirsty, or I have other urgent problems.

Otherwise, all was going just fine, until the other day, early morning, when I had to have some special tests done at the Hospital. I needed my health card. I knew I'd put it in a very special place when I left from home, just to find it easier, but where? I started to rummage in my purse. I searched a few minutes, nothing! I rummaged again, nothing!

"You could empty your purse here, on the desk," the receptionist smiled cutely.

"I'd rather try again," I murmured, terrified, and kept searching with great zeal for another few minutes. Some people were waiting their turn, looking reproachfully at me.

"Somebody else could take my turn," I said generously, and kept searching.

"Well, the doctor is ready for your tests," she said. "Let's empty your purse here," and she helped me turn it upside down on her desk.

There was all my stuff spread on the desk, a real pile, ready to flood over the floor. By her face, the receptionist had already regretted her decision. People looked at me, then at the desk, startled, speechless ... I searched and searched, nothing! What now?

"It could be home," I mumbled, and started to put the things back into my purse, one by one. Surprise!!! What did I find there?!! Two plastic bags with used Kleenex, two bags with make-up, I thought I've lost the first one, yet, there it was!

All my life I've admired, and I've been very grateful to the women who invented the purse . . .



Then, two tubes with toothpaste, three toothbrushes, some old reading eyeglasses, just beside the new ones, some pantyhose, in an unopened bag, although it was winter, cold, and I was wearing slacks... Then, sunglasses, although it was snowing outside, and many, many other things still on the desk. People were more and more surprised. To their bigger surprise, I quickly grabbed some personal objects and threw them in my purse. Was my face red!.. But it wasn't just that. A little paper bag fell off the desk, it opened, its contents spreading all over the floor. People burst into laughter. What in the world?! I asked myself, in dismay. There they were, some little innocent packages, fallen from the bag my husband had given to me long time ago. He had specifically asked me to give them as soon as possible to our grandson, who is a handsome 17-year-old, in love with all the young ladies in the world. I didn't even know what was in them, but now I found out ! The problem was that I've totally forgotten, innocently carrying them around ... And there I was, bending with great effort, picking them up, one by one, throwing them in my purse. With my last drop of dignity, I gathered all the other things, not even looking at them, and pushed them all into my purse. When I had the

power to look again at people around, everybody turned their look in a different direction, their faces showing amusement and amazement. And all of a sudden, another thought struck me: what if my grandson ends up with a baby? Fortunately, I didn't have time to think enough about it, because I had another problem. Not having my health card, I couldn't have my tests done. The receptionist made me another appointment, for a few months later .

I returned home, sad, tired, hungry, let aside I'd totally lost my dignity. Angrily, I emptied the contents of my purse on the table. I threw away the garbage, I put to the side what I didn't need. Then, I organized all things by compartments and pockets. Surprise, surprise, I found the damn health card in the pocket dedicated to the house keys! Happy to find it, I sat down a moment, thinking hard. Then the sadness flooded my soul. How in the world had it ended there?! Who in the whole world put it there?! Now this was still a mystery! Why in the world I didn't look there at the Hospital?! Oh! I know, because I had my house keys in the pocket of my jacket, to find them easier. I was very, very disappointed in myself. Though, after awhile, I thought: why in the world didn't the receptionist look in the pockets of the purse, since she humiliated me that badly?! She looked so smart then! The receptionist! Definitely, it's her fault! Yet, the faces of those people kept coming back to my mind, again and again, staring at me, in amusement. And since then, this is my nightmare, chasing me day and night. And it makes me really mad, why can't I forget this awful thing but I forget too many other good things.

However, when I came to my senses, I decided that once a month, I should check my purse. As a good reminder, I marked on the calendar, at the end of each month, the capital letter "P," with great satisfaction. A little while later, I thought: what if I forget what this letter stands for? So, I completed the word: "PURSE," on the little square of that day. And I felt good about myself. After a good, long, hard thinking, I asked myself: what if I forget what I meant by this word? So, I crowded beside it, in the same square, the word "CHECK." So, "PURSE CHECK." It makes sense, doesn't it? I think the problem is solved, isn't it?

Now, after a few weeks, I've regained some of my dignity, although those faces of people keep haunting me from time to time, like a humiliating, frightening dream. I wish I could forget them. I will, I'm sure, sometime ... And also, I wish the receptionist would forget my name and my face, until the next appointment ... I might be lucky next time, at least ...

Now there is something else my common sense tells me. I'd better go with my children to that new Health Centre and go through all the necessary tests... Although I hate doing those humiliating tests ... And I hate this whole situation ... Still, I hate more the situation I've just been through ... However, those specialists might help me not to forget that much ... I'd rather try ... Maybe, just maybe, hopefully, all those happenings I've just told you, won't happen again ... At least, I have to try ... Wish me luck, please ...



BIOSTRING BY HENRY PETERS



Feisty and funny

BY IRENE GROBOWSKY

Capponi, Pat. *Last Stop Sunnyside*.
HarperCollins Publishing Ltd, 2008.
Paperback. 326 pp. \$8.99

Following the publication of five non-fiction books dealing with poverty and clinical depression, Pat Capponi has used "what she knows" to advantage and written two mystery novels, the first of which is *Last Stop Sunnyside*.

Set in the neighbourhood of Parkdale, a once-wealthy area of Toronto, the story is told by Dana Leoni, who, much like Capponi herself, is a feisty "never give up" heroine. Leoni cares enough about her fellow residents in the rundown Delta Court rooming house to get involved in their lives. This little community is composed of a cross-section of area residents, with six in particular forming a tight core of friendship. When one of their own is found dead and declared a suicide, the group decides to investigate because they are absolutely convinced their friend had to have been murdered.

Determined to discover the truth behind the death of Maryanne, their friend and fellow resident, the group organize themselves on a quest. Leoni is designated to provide leadership for Gerry, a mental hospital survivor, Diamond, a street tough, Michael, a self-proclaimed failure, and Miss Semple, an indigent widow with a burden of guilt. These crime solvers of Sunnyside prove themselves as conversant with street ways and every bit as original in creating diversions as Sherlock Holmes's Baker Street Irregulars, despite having no cellphone, no means of transportation, and only one watch.

Leoni is the bridge between the worlds of poverty and

mental illness and the middle class; she has connections with both. She is able to borrow a car from a theatrical friend to trail the man believed to be responsible in some way for the death of Maryanne. But an ensuing stake-out hardly proves to be simple: as her street acquaintances surround the car to congratulate her and comment on it, her quarry drives away unnoticed.

The connections among the several worlds of the novel thus provide a parallel plot of the detective work for which Leoni is recruited by her theatrical friends. The successful resolution of the theatre mystery comes about in a truly hilarious scene when the culprit is finally caught.

Throughout the book, Capponi treats her characters - the damaged, the eccentric, and the "normal" - with respect, providing the humour by the juxtaposition of circumstances that evoke responses ranging from chuckles to outright belly laughs. This is a fast-paced good read which would make an excellent film, as scenes are vivid and visual and characters are memorable but not caricatured. Capponi has given us an honest depiction of a neighbourhood which is a community, one where individuals can and do help each other.

A resident of Toronto, Pat Capponi is a respected advocate for the poor and has received the Order of Ontario and the C. M. Hincks Award from the Canadian Mental Health Association.

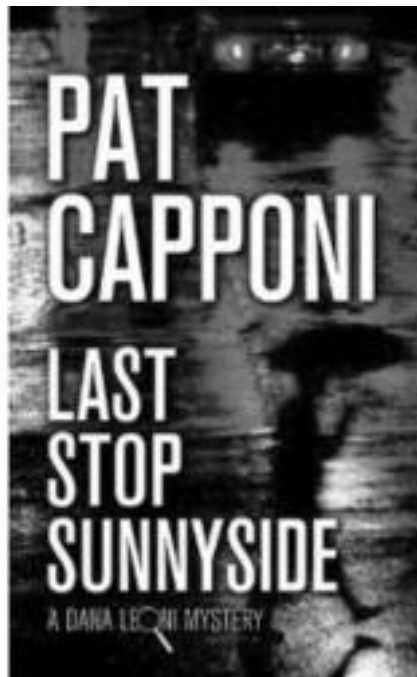
Also of interest:

Upstairs in the Crazy House Toronto:
Viking, 1992

Dispatches from the Poverty Line Toronto:
Penguin, 1997

Beyond the Crazy House: changing the future of madness
Toronto: Penguin 2003

The Corpse Will Keep (another Dana Leoni mystery) Toronto:
HarperCollins, 2008



Flower Child: An R & R Review

BY LAURIE RASMUSSEN & CAROL REMPEL

Trudeau, Margaret, *Changing My Mind*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2010
Hardcover. 382 pp. \$34.99

A former prime minister's wife now in her senior years, Margaret Trudeau offers up her well-documented public history and her less-known private story to begin a public dialogue about mental illness, challenge the status quo, and "encourage others to seek professional diagnosis and treatment" (inside cover). The author contends that if you have language, you have hope, and weaves a language through which hope can be reclaimed. Her theme that mental illness is recognizable and treatable includes a challenge to get help early so life can be enjoyed.

High profile but surprisingly relatable, Margaret as narrator brings Canadian and international history to life. If undiagnosed bipolar disorder is the antagonist and source of major conflict, it also is the human defect that makes the character Margaret sympathetic. Even as a child, she was described by her grandmother, an avid gardener, as "one of the more delicate flowers in the garden . . . [b]ut . . . also a perennial" that is "fragile . . . yet . . . durable. . ." (p.5). Complicated and misunderstood, Margaret eventually begins an overdue dialogue about health and social issues with the other characters.

Foreshadowed with simple phrases like "For a while, we were very happy" (p. 61), the plot of this memoir of Margaret's life involves the loss and recovery of structure, meaningful work, significant relationships, and financial well-being. For example, Margaret cites how her harried life as a public figure becomes more focused on simple, manageable responsibilities such as restoring self-care through healthy sleep and nutrition patterns (p. 294); her fast-paced life becomes more balanced with the roles of mother, homemaker (p. 300), gardener (p. 332), photographer (p. 333), and social/mental health advocate (pp. 315-381; 321-329). She recognizes the importance of healthy family relationships by referring to a network of strong women in her family as her "underpinnings" (p. 13); she also identifies the importance of a healthy relationship with a doctor one can trust (p. 274). Margaret confirms that such positive life patterns contribute to her self-respect, giving her as well as other mental health sufferers and those close to them hope as she lives in recovery and, as every perennial does, endures.

Frequently the narrator's steady tone – contrived, con-

strained, and heavily edited – belies the extremity of the character's experiences. Moreover, the 104 photos included throughout the book capture only happy times, leaving Margaret's words alone to capture what is missing. Nevertheless, the content of her words speaks credibly of one who knows firsthand about being so "severely depressed [she] can hardly speak" (p. 4). The highs and lows of her life are objectively recounted, and an acquired honesty punctuates the pages periodically with bitter twinges, deep sorrow, and remorse. Margaret's voice is most authentic when she speaks of what is dear to her heart.

The emotional subtext of her language identifies clearly the people and places that contributed positively and negatively to the health Margaret values. From the "secluded convent" of the Prime Minister's residence (p. 105), through her "attractive, unpretentious, and superbly . . . renovated" first "real home" (pp. 185-186), and eventually to the "grey, dark and extremely gloomy" hospital where she was committed against her will (pp. 272-273), place impacts her story. Equally honest but even stronger is Margaret's stirring description of people. No holding back, Margaret admits rage as she "began to hate [the press], their power, their intrusiveness" (p. 311). Kind words are offered to many, but fondest affirmations are reserved for family, especially her children. "I owe my recovery, my mental health, to [my daughter] Alicia . . . Whenever I speak about my children . . . I feel a great pride. I find myself smiling and talking a little faster. . ." (pp. 302-303).

Thus the enduring Flower translates her complex history into a message of hope in a clear, straightforward, tell-it-like-it-is style that speaks health.

Despite awkward jumps at times as the author switches from storytelling to driving home her message, the reader is left with a memorable story that does align with the thesis. This story educates, removing the mystery from words like "manic depression" and "bi-polar," making mental illness seem ordinary, recognizable, understandable, manageable, and treatable. The book may be seen as an educational guide for medical professionals, the press, the public, and family and friends of people with mental illness. Although the book may be too long for a severely depressed person to read, and the occasional name-dropping comes across as pretentious and disruptive to the story, the sincerity and power of Margaret's voice lets mental health sufferers know they are not alone. Readers will find hope in her benediction, "May you find the courage to face your own realities and find the words to call for help." (p. 345).





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A poet, writer and artist living in New England, USA

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Winnipeg artist and long-time contributor to TRANSITION.

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SKELTON, JAMES

See Authors

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From rural South Dakota family of artists, writers and musicians. Lives in Benicia, CA. Creates art and writes poetry in the Historic Arsenal. Published in California and Tennessee.

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Regular contributor to TRANSITION, now living in Germany.

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Regina writer and previous contributor. Winner 2010 SWG Short manuscript Non-Fiction prize.

BRAUN, GORD

Yorkton writer and regular contributor.

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Winnipeg MB poet, reviewer, and arts administrator. Winner 2011 Wallace Stegner Grant for the Arts .

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Longtime writer and regular contributor from Weyburn. Pleased to contribute to "more laughter in [all] our lives."

FERGUSON, CAROL

Moose Jaw matriarch, writer, and member of Prairie Pens, the Hillcrest Church writers group, and Inscribe. Has lived with Bulbar ALS for six years. Author of one biography, two novels.

GROBOWSKY, IRENE

Omnivorous reader, bibliophile, and lover of language. Thirteen year association with the Saskatchewan Festival of Words in Moose Jaw

FLAATEN, NORVALD

Weyburn writer and retiree still active as volunteer in mental health field.

HARDING-RUSSELL, GILLIAN

Frequent contributor and widely published Regina writer: three poetry collections published; two books and several magazine publications forthcoming.

HURDLE, CRYSTAL

Teaches English and Creative Writing at Capilano University, Vancouver. Widely published and previous contributor.

ISBISTER, ARNOLD

Saskatoon based and widely exhibited artist <<http://fineartamerica.com/profiles/arnold-imbister.html>>. Teaches visual arts to troubled youth/adults. First contribution to TRANSITION.

JOHNSON, BRAD

Member of Weyburn (CMHA) writers group. Grew up in Estevan SK. Travelled and worked, various places and jobs. "I have learned how to be happy along the way."

JOHNSON, NORMA

Elbow SK writer and supporter of mental health initiatives.

KIMBER, ELAINE

See the introduction to her play, "Conglomeration," by her daughter, Jennifer Howie.

LOEHR, BRENT

Teacher, coach and writer from Muenster, SK. Completed manuscript of stories about global travels with baseball. Published in Prairies North, Swedish Press, and The Society. First time in TRANSITION.

LOVATT, CHUCK

An 'old hippie' from southwestern Manitoba with two cats, a guitar with a broken 'G' string, and a deranged laptop. Stories have been recognized and/or published both nationally and internationally.

MACDONALD, GLADYS

Experienced writer and performer from MJ. Founding member of Prairie Quills writing group.

MCGILL, ELIZABETH

Full time employment a pleasant memory and retirement a reality in Brandon MB. Exploring and charting paths of self-discovery, including writing fanciful tales. First time in TRANSITION.

MOOSE JAW MUSE

Moose Jaw (CMHA)-based model of the writing-for-therapy group. Begins most sessions with a freewriting exercise. Organizes retreats.

MORRISON, ALEC

Haileybury ON standup comic (in CMHA Program), musician, performer, and poetry instructor. Relatively stable sufferer from bipolar schizoaffective disorder.

MORRISON, IAN

Teaches standup comedy for CMHA(SK). Fuller bio in his "Healing Through Humour" article.

MUIRHEAD, LAURIE LYNNE

Established and well-published SK writer, performer, teacher, and all-round literary person.

PARLEY, KAY

Widely published and frequent contributor to TRANSITION. Author of Lady with a Lantern (Benchmark, 2007).

RASMUSSEN, LAURIE AND CAROL REMPLE

Members of Moose Jaw Muse and regular joint reviewers for TRANSITION.

SKELTON, JAMES

Saskatoon artist and poet very frequently published (both poetry and art) in TRANSITION.

SNOW, JEFFREY P.

An American biologist who uses genomics technologies to study cancer.

VASILESCUE, JENNY

First-time contributor out of Kitchener ON.





Tiffany Harder (left), CMHA, Multicultural Transition Coordinator, Rob Carnie, CHAB, Darrell Downton, President of CMHA (Saskatchewan Division) Inc's Board of Directors, and Donna Bowyer, program director of CMHA Moose Jaw Branch, and Director of the Friends for Life program.

Moose Jaw radio host receives award

Rob Carnie of Golden West Radio in Moose Jaw, was recognized by the Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc. at their Provincial Conference.

Rob received the Media Award, recognizing his years of work highlighting mental health issues and promoting local mental health events and projects.

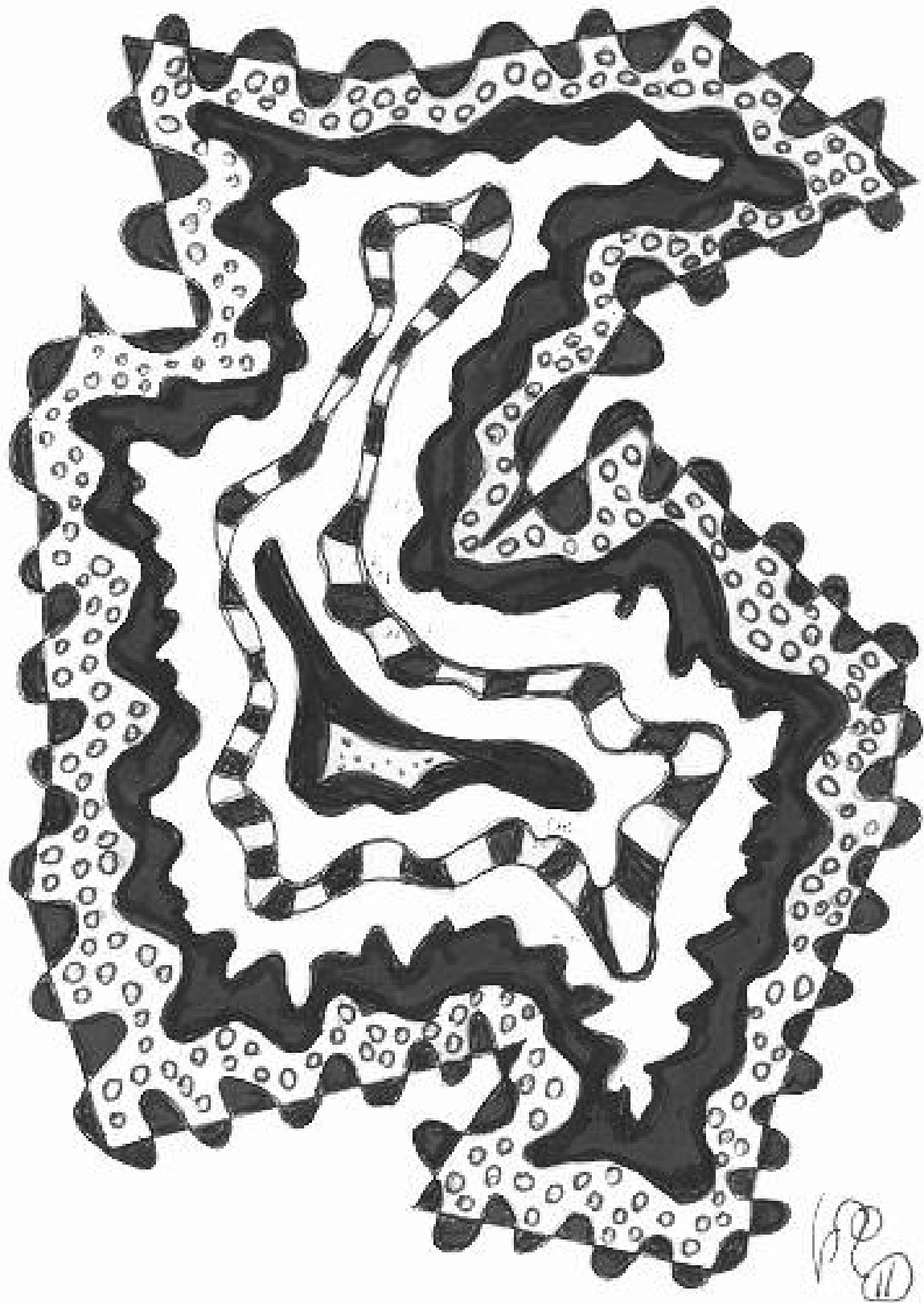
"I haven't had any serious mental health problems in my life, but that doesn't matter and that is actually the point. The folks at the CMHA work hard to remove the stigma surrounding mental health issues and the people who have the challenges," says Carnie. "They're not crazy, they're ill, they're sick and as a society, we're still only beginning to recognize that."

The CMHA's Healthy Living - Healthy Minds Provincial Conference was held June 23 and 24 in Swift Current.

"I'd like to thank the CMHA-Saskatchewan Division for this award and accept it on behalf of Golden West Radio - Moose Jaw, which includes my station 800 CHAB along with our sister stations Country 100 and MIX 103 and our website, DiscoverMooseJaw.com," said Carnie in his acceptance speech.

"It is through those avenues that I have been able to assist the CMHA with publicity, education and the continued effort to dispel the stigma surrounding mental illness.

"Through continued cooperation and communication with the local Moose Jaw Branch of the CMHA, (which has been very good for many years . . . thanks to Donna Bowyer!) I promise to continue with the effort to keep mental health issues in the public eye!"



ART BY HENRY PETERS

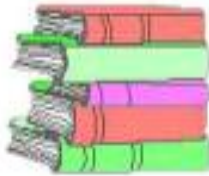


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