

A Fool's Rhapsody

By

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The game enforces smirks; but we have seen
The moon in lonely alleys make
A grail of laughter of an empty ash can,
And through it all sound of gaiety and quest
Have heard a kitten in the wilderness.

“*Chaplinesque*” (Hart Crane)

Is this the real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in a landslide
No escape from reality
Open your eyes
Look up to the skies and see
I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy
Because I'm easy come, easy go
A little high, little low
Anyway the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me, to me.

“*Bohemian Rhapsody*” (Freddie Mercury, *Queen*)

Can you hear what I'm saying?
Can you see the parts that I'm playing?
“Holy Man, Rocker Man, Come on Queenie,
Joker Man, Spider Man, Blue Eyed Meanie.”
So you found your solution
What will be your last contribution?
"Live it up, rip it up, why so lazy?
Give it out, dish it out, let's go crazy,
Yeah!"

“*A Fool's Overture*” (Rick Davies and Roger Hodgson, *Supertramp*)

PART I: Beginnings

CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings are apt to be shadowy.

~ Rachel Carson¹

Cue music.

Hey Pal, *Skoodle Um Skoo!*² (Can you hear it? I can.)

I see a little old woman not-in-a-shoe playing songs of love on a big accordion the size of a junior Saint Bernard. She's caught that aging disease. Older than time she is and yet, despite wrinkled, wrinkly-wrinkles, wispy white hair under a Gypsy blue bandanna, thick glasses and decrepitude, she's beautiful. There's a girl in there, visible like steam from a hot cup of tea; there's a faded Ruth Etting, 1920s singer with tears in her eyes,³ and a Rose Austin, aerial performing star.⁴ Are your eyes playing tricks or is this really happening? There she is and there she isn't as peek-a-boo spirits go in and out of this dimension and the great beyond.

And the old woman's music reaches warm hands into your chest and squeezes tight, so tight you see your life flash before your eyes like so many home movies, colours fading, black and white, numbers counting down... *3,2,1...pop*. You feel the essence of love flow like tears in a Paris gutter, like regret, like shame, like knowing now what you didn't know then and you soar high above this mortal plain on invisible strings in an azure sky and think, "How sad. My life is ebbing. Did I love enough? Am I ready to die? Should I have played more golf?"

And the little old woman sits not in a shoe, but in a formerly mobile home rooted in a derelict mobile home park strewn with old tires as all such trailer parks are strewn. She's wearing a faded floral dress with a cherry pattern and she sits perched on a yellow vinyl dinette chair with flowers on it that was perfect in 1961, part of a matching three-piece set that's been taped and re-taped in failing attempts to keep gray cotton batten stuffing from erupting like a carnival de Venice.⁵ The old woman is surrounded by knickknacks of this and that from days gone by. Figurines, broken toys, doodads, black velvet paintings of sad clowns, circus posters, and framed photographs of friends, family and children now gone echo off the walls like midnight, the stars and you.⁶ The scene is funny-sad and bitter-sweet. Funny because the woman - so minimized by her instrument - looks oddly hilarious and sad because she *is* oddly hilarious; bitter because she's poor (not even a pot for her peas) and sweet, sweeter than Cracker Jack⁷ with a surprisingly disappointing toy inside.

If her eyes were open, you'd see kindness there, but you don't because she keeps them closed as she breathes with the instrument's bellows, floating and bobbing on notes that go from fingers, to ears, to heart and back again. In her mind she pictures herself as a girl playing baseball in a dusty field with her brothers, and then, she plays a lullaby for a baby now grown and gone. The old woman spirals round and round like the earth, like the seasons, like the stars and when she plays, she is as she once was: fresh, young, beautiful, flying high on a trapeze as families below sit amazed and then, with a frenzy of fingers, it's all aboard a steam train for Berlin and a memory for Circus Renz.⁸

On a table at her side is a hand tinted photograph of herself as a girl charmed into life like a fairy tale mirror. Black and white people long dead live in a dimension where time once frozen in two-dimensionality lives on in a silent movie that's endlessly looping in a frame. Actual

moments that were here and gone don't go, not really. They live and breathe, and dance again and again and again... endlessly repeating through eternity for those attuned to the frequency and the magic accordion musical touch. It's a crystal ball⁹ window to a bygone world made manifest. Can you see the old woman as a girl kibitzing in the gilded picture frame? She's wearing trapeze tights and a bandanna. There she is as she was with her six brothers, one of whom is a smiling sad clown, the black sheep of a trapeze family with circus blood going back generations. In the distance a beautiful woman in feathers and a sequined body suit sits on a white horse holding what looks like a baby clown. The baby clown is my father. I've seen the picture before. The beautiful woman is my grandmother. The clown in the foreground is my grandfather. He's young and fit and silly, full of fun and heart. With a bright red nose and painted smile, he knew then what few know now. He knew that life shouldn't be awful. It goes awry when reason and power thwart love and care. In times when humans were cruel, not so long ago in Europe and around the world, millions of people suffered and died of starvation and murder¹⁰ as my circus ancestors strove to bring love and beauty into the world. They knew then that the tragedies happening shouldn't be happening. That's *not* the way it should be! Planet earth, although harsh at times, is nonetheless beautiful and humans should know better. My grandfather grew up in a family that knew that if you have your health and a bit of coin, you can kick the meanies in the bum and run! Run like the wind and do it again and again because they can't catch you! Cajole the cruel into kindness and nobody gets hurt. My paternal grandfather knew how to make the most of any given day on this glorious globe where everything is as one under the sun.

As for the old woman who is my Great-Aunt Polly with the big accordion, sunshine streams through dirty windows striking a crystal hanging there as dust particles float languidly in liquid air and dappled sunlight plays upon the room's walls like the mirrored balls of her youth.

Is she squinting, crying or smiling? Difficult to say. She plays *Eternally* (the *song*, that is). The melody composed by Charles Chaplin so long ago comes to life in this once mobile home. It's an appropriate tune for the old woman living a black and white dream, not because it's sad, but because it isn't. It's happy-sad. It's not one and it's not the other. It's both - like life, a bitter-sweet symphony, as they say. Then she plays *La Vie En Rose* and flies free as a bird in sensible old lady shoes and you ask, "How could she *possibly* be happy? Doesn't she know where she is? Is she unaware of her age and economic status? Doesn't she know she lives on instant potatoes and has no TV?" Pish posh! Of course she does! She should be dead, but none of that matters! It's June and the lilacs are in bloom! She plays *Smile* though her heart truly *is* breaking on this sunny afternoon in June as the fragrance from lilacs blows through a broken screened window by the sink. The old woman has found her peace. She's let go the hang ups that made her anxious. After a lifetime of trying to achieve, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not, she's given up and accepted her lot. There's nothing to achieve and there never *really* was. She did her bit like everyone should. Now she's old. She accepts who she was, where she went and what she did.

When she was younger, she thought her life a disaster, alternating between fits of suffering and starts of ecstasy (of the *non-chemical* variety). She compared her life to others' and thought, "What's the point?" She worried and remonstrated about the waste of time she thought her life to be and then... *it* happened. One day - an ordinary day, not dissimilar from any other day - she looked at herself in the mirror for the millionth time and saw herself as if for the first time. "Who's that?" she thought, but it wasn't dementia. She saw the person behind the eyes, without the wrinkles and baggage. She saw herself with clarity. She felt an overwhelming feeling of compassion for herself and everyone else too. Love engulfed her. She accepted the world and herself without reproof. She accepted the trees, the snakes and the birds, or the lack thereof. She

accepted plugged gutters and dirty windows. Like Sisyphus dirty windows were her stone to roll. Again and again she'd clean them and then: she saw the connection. Dirty windows were the ideas she had of herself. Good/bad, dirty/clean, two sides of the same coin. It's all the same to the clam.¹¹ Life is born again and again. Her home is as she is, perfectly imperfect. She breathes it in without discrimination. She's happy just to breathe! It's the little things. Summer will be here soon and she's glad. It's accordion time which is a bit like Hammer time,¹² but without the parachute pants. She never did like parachute pants. Too parachuty. Like most people unaware of the games we play, she had separated herself from the world until she came to the realization that none of it was real. Her ideas were just ideas. She's not separate. She never was. Her nose isn't separate from her face and her face isn't separate from the sky. She didn't come *into* the world. She came *out of* the world.¹³

There *is* a difference.

When I was a boy of about ten visiting the little old woman with the big accordion who was my Great-Aunt Polly, we sat at her table and she said, pointing her knobby fingers, "Look there." I looked there. I was an agreeable boy. She said, "See that huckleberry bush? It produces huckleberries." I looked at the huckleberry bush. I had to agree. It did indeed produce huckleberries. Not many, but some, most of which were snapped-up by birds. "Think of that huckleberry bush as the world." I looked at her blankly. "Don't you see *ma petite d'Airelle*? The world peoples like the huckleberry huckleberries!" I had no idea what she was on about. Crazy lady. She obviously didn't know anything about verbs. She was an exotic old bird who called me her *petite d'Airelle* which means "huckleberry" in English. I didn't know what she meant by the world peopling bit, but I didn't ask her to explain. I was a quiet child and she thought I was

smarter than I was. I nodded as if to say, “*Oui! Je comprend!*” but of course “*Je ne comprend pas!*”

I wanted another cookie.

“Don’t you see? I’m as much a part of the world as that crystal hanging there,” she said as she played *I’m forever blowing bubbles** - the song - on her accordion. “I’m as much a part of the world as that plastic flamingo, that huckleberry growing through the tire or...,” she paused for dramatic emphasis, “*you!*” She poked my chest with her knobbly finger, then, for emphasis, she said, “*J’aime ma petite d’Airelle!*”

I didn’t get it. I didn’t speak French and even if I had, I wasn’t really paying attention, and yet, I never forgot what she said. She was a fairy tale to me. If I had understood, I might have felt differently about myself and my world. Great-Aunt Polly knew that people live in their heads - a few in their hearts. People live like bubbles floating on the sea, halfway between their ears and a little behind their eyes;¹⁴ they’re like chauffeurs inside a car. Everything outside is perceived through windshield eyes. Their eyes are cameras in a movie they make on the fly. They are the labels they hear and tell, labels that become self-fulfilling.

“Look at your hand,” she said. I looked at my hand. My fingernails were terrible. “You move your hand and you feel that you decide how to move it. Is that not so?” I looked at my hand and agreed with a nod. ‘When does my hand get to hold a cookie?’ I thought. “Do you *decide* to move your hand before you move it?” I looked at my hand and moved it around, considering. I nodded in agreement. “When you decide to move your hand, do you first decide to decide to move your hand or do you just do it?” I nodded. This was confusing: *decide to decide?* “How do you *just do it* without *deciding* to do it first? Is deciding voluntary or involuntary?”

I looked at her dumbly and she took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Is your breathing voluntary or involuntary?” I guessed, “*Involuntary?*” I said. She took my hand, held it to my chest and said, “Is your heartbeat voluntary or involuntary? Do you decide to have heartbeats? Do you make your stomach digest?” I thought for a moment and said, “It’s automatic. I don’t think about it or tell my body to do it.” She nodded her head.

“Just so. Do these things that your body does do so *involuntarily?*” She had a funny way of saying *involuntarily* as if she had a mouthful of marbles. It came out as, “*involuntarily*”.

I giggled. *Involuntarily*.

“How is your heart beating and your stomach digesting – all of which happens *involuntarily* any different from the sun shining or the moon shining or the wind blowing in the trees?”

She lost me.

My body does its thing – I get that – but now she’s saying that my body performing its bodily functions is the same as the sun shining and the wind blowing in the trees. How could that possibly be the same?

“Don’t you see? The sun shining and the wind blowing in the trees happens *involuntarily* too.”

I looked into her starry eyes.

“You have a definition of yourself that you make up. Your definition doesn’t include the things *you do* without effort – like your heart and lungs. Your body is part of the energy system of the universe. It’s all *you* only you think you’re just this tiny little bit of it. You think you end at your skin. You don’t focus your attention on your heart or your lungs and in the same way you don’t focus your attention on how *you* shine the sun.”

Oh really? Give me a break. I looked out the window at a bird eating huckleberries in the sunlight. “I make the sun shine?” I said. I rolled my eyes incredulously. She’s nuts.

“Of course you do!” she said. “You’re part of nature.”

I could hear new age hippies singing somewhere. Their echoes wafted like the memory of pot smoke. It was a ridiculous stretch of the imagination. I have nothing to do with the sun. Yet, Great-Aunt Polly despite reality was convinced - poor thing. She didn’t stop.

“You are *one* with the universe and in harmony with your surroundings. Your body is in one continuous process with everything else in the same way that waves are continuous with the ocean.” I glazed over and she knew it. “Are you your hand?” she asked. “No,” I said. “My hand is part of me.” “And who is *me*? Where are you?” “*Hello? I’m right here,*” I thought. “Are you *in* your hand?” “In my hand? I suppose. My hand is part of my body,” I said. She looked at the sun. “Are you in the sun?” “No. Of course not,” I said. “I’d burn up.” She laughed. “I end where my body ends,” I said. “So you think that you are something *in* your body?” I nodded yes. “Are you your *brain*?” she asked tapping my forehead. “You think that’s you?” She poked my chest. “You think that *you* are your focused conscious attention in your brain.” I nodded. “I think so,” I said.

She tossed a ball and I caught it. “You are *in* your hand even if your hand moves without you *consciously deciding* to move it?” I examined the ball. There was a moment of silence. “Get up and walk around,” she said. I got up and walked around. “You walk but you don’t need to tell your feet how to do it. They just do it.” I looked at my legs and feet. I am my brain. I am in my hands and feet. My brain controls my feet. I pointed out to her that some people with brain injuries have to learn how to walk.

“Just so,” she said. “When you look around, you see a lot. Don’t you?” I nodded. There was a lot of junk to see. “You are conscious of what you notice.” I continued nodding. “And yet,

if you went home and someone asked what colour sweater I was wearing, you might not remember. Even though you may have noticed my sweater, you didn't attend to its colour. In the same way, you don't focus your attention on your blood circulating, but it circulates nonetheless. What if the same process goes on with the sun? What if, in the same way that you don't focus your attention on your body, you don't focus your attention on how you make the sun shine?"

Incredulity showed on my face. I didn't say anything. I sat down and fidgeted with the ball she'd thrown me. She was trying to tell me that I am more than I think I am, but I didn't buy it. She didn't know that I knew myself to be lesser than I was.

She finished by saying. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Wonder. That's the ticket. I think the expression of wonder in poetry and the arts is important. It distinguishes people from animals. To be intelligent and sensitive is better than being a moron, isn't it? To come out of the trance of yourself, the trick is to live in the present. You've got to sit down, forget all your plans for the future and say to yourself, 'Ah! There now. I've arrived.' You've got to sit quiet near a little stream and listen," she said quite seriously.

When I was a bit older, I again visited Great-Aunt Polly in her Gypsy trailer. I rode my bike all day to the outskirts of the city. She welcomed me into her house with open arms and a cookie. Despite what I perceived to be a sad existence, she was never sad; well, yes, that's not entirely true. I think she was sad, but not in the same way most people are sad. She was *nuclear* sad which, oddly enough, seemed to make her *nuclear* happy. She said that she embraced misery. I think her happiness came out of sadness. Her sadness made her appreciate things. She didn't try to be happy, she just was. She knew that all things are fleeting. It's all permanent change. She gave of herself like a tree gives oxygen. A tree doesn't give for reward. It just does its tree thing. Likewise, Great-Aunt Polly did her Great-Aunt Polly thing. She was an artist and

her greatest work was herself. She lived poetry. Sure she was strange, but I liked being with her. I once asked her if she was enlightened. She said that there was no such thing as an enlightened person. There's just the realization that there is no separation between one's self and everything else.

Whatever that means.

She told me how, as a child, she felt like she didn't quite understand the game everyone was playing. She spent a lot of time playing with her toy animals like I used to do and when she did that she would lose her sense of identity. She said that she had moments of feeling an expansion. That's what she called it, 'an *expansion*' and I don't think she meant an expansion of girth. She said that she had the sensation of being outside her body - not of *moving* outside her body but of *being* outside her body. She'd get a floating feeling of formlessness like there was no skin surrounding her. She said that there was nothing that she thought of as herself - as her *me*. She didn't end with her skin. After having a formless experience she would find herself feeling afraid, as if she didn't exist. She would rebuild her identity by telling herself who and what she was. Despite these efforts, she never felt herself to be a solid person. As a child, there was nothing in the adult world she could relate to.

When she shared these things with me, I didn't know what to think. I thought maybe she was on drugs or had lost her mind. People told me she was crazy. She lived as a recluse. At the time it seemed to me that her beliefs and mental illness weren't far removed. She loved to talk about dreams. She called messages from dreams *inner happenings*.¹⁵ Inner happenings were endlessly fascinating to her. She once asked me, "How do you use words to explain something beyond words?" I shrugged my usual '*duh, I don't know,*' and she said, "You explain words behind words with art and dance and music and poetry. This is where the significance of life

appears.” I didn’t get it until she played music that put me into a zone. I don’t know how else to describe it. I felt like I loved every one. It was a real trip. My shell melted and I almost cried. If the kids at school knew I loved them, they would have hated me.

I once asked Great-Aunt Polly what I should do with my life. I said that I hated high school. “So?” she said. I said that I didn’t know what to do. “So?” she said. I said that I worried about money. “So? Money?” and then she laughed. “That’s hilarious!” she said between laughs. I didn’t get it and then she asked me, “What would you like to do if money were not an object?” I said I didn’t know and she pressed, “Come on. You know. How would you enjoy spending your day?” I thought about it and I said that I liked to write. “Really? Great! There you go,” she said. “Writing is good. Be a poet. Do that. Forget about money.” I couldn’t believe it. Nobody had ever said that to me before. “Forget the money? How can I live?” I asked. “If you say that getting money is the most important thing in your life, you will spend your life wasting your time. You’ll do things you don’t like doing so you can go on doing things you don’t like doing.” She told me to do what I want to do and, if I do that, I’ll become a master. I asked her what I should write about and she said that the words will come. “Just write,” she said. I asked her what if no one reads what I write and she said, “Doesn’t matter. Who cares? Do it.”

And I did.

I told her how I didn’t like the way the earth was being treated and that I’d like to get off electricity. “Do it!” she said. “Electricity is over-rated. I have some candles you can have.” And then she said, “You speak for the earth! You be the eyes and ears! Write about that! *You are the earth!*” That’s when Great-Aunt Polly *really* went off. “You are the sun, the moon, the stars... you are... everything! You are the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea! You are the mountains and trees and prairies. You are clouds. You are rain. Everything is a dance. Nothing is hidden.

Look around! You are looking at the brilliant light right now! You just call it ordinary everyday consciousness. People think that nature doesn't give a damn. We put ourselves down and think we're small nothings, but that's the funny part! We're everything and everything is us! Teachers tell you to pay attention and you get stuck with the idea of paying attention and you think that you *are* the attention, but if you start paying attention to attention you realize that it's a trick! You don't need to do anything! The moment you think you are different from the universe, you cut yourself off. You don't know that you and the universe are one. You're not some kind of creature living in a world of trees and rocks. Trees and rocks are just as much you as your hands and feet! You don't end with your bag of skin. Look around!"

Certifiable.

And she continued after taking a drink of water. I had to wait and watch as she gulped it down. It took awhile. She continued. "People die and people are born. Suppose you close your eyes and don't wake up, but then, you open your eyes and you're still you and all you know is you. You could be another you entirely without any knowledge other than of being you. You say, *I'm me*, but what's that? You're me could be someone else except you don't know you're someone else – you just know you are you. You just know yourself as yourself. You're awareness is of *you* alone. You close your eyes and when you open them you're you – that's all you know. You can only be one person and that's true of everyone. We're all one at a time. We all call ourselves 'I' which makes everybody an *I*."

She was obviously stoned or on something. Maybe she was crazy. Even though I thought that none of what she said made any sense or mattered to me – I live in the real world! – but, for whatever reason, she inspired me. She made me laugh. When she said, "Show me the real you!"

I jumped up like a show-off and shouted, “Me! Me! Me!” And she looked at me and said, “That’s not you.”

Funny stuff.

In high school I lost my innocence. I got a really bad attitude. I thought I knew everything and I thought people were stupid. Great-Aunt Polly knew I didn’t believe in her new age nonsense, but it didn’t matter to her. She didn’t judge me. We’d sit and talk about the wildest stuff and then she’d play her music. With her I could be myself (whatever that was). It’s because of her that I continue to scribble ideas and spill my guts in notepads. I did as she suggested. I wrote. I write. I write this. What I write gets thrown away, blown away, thrown to the wind like a conversation that’s here and gone, but that’s OK. Really it is. Not people read and those who do wouldn’t read what I write. It’s too strange. But I don’t write for the attention. I write because I write. Does a goat butt because it has horns or does it have horns because it butts? Do I write because I have a pen in my hand or do I have a pen in my hand because I write? Is there a difference? Does it matter? Writing is like breathing to me. It’s a meditation. I write to get beyond words, to know the words beyond words. As for my being the Earth’s voice, forget about it. I try, but I make no progress. Nobody reads what I write. Nothing changes. We’re doomed. I’m barking at the moon. Nobody listens. Nobody cares. They don’t get it. When I tell people that I speak for the trees, they laugh at me and call me a tree-hugger, as if that’s a bad thing! Nature gets more and more trashed every day and they call that progress? Really? They say it’s just about economics. It’s about jobs and taxes. With this warped piece of logic, even a ruptured pipeline is a good thing. It creates jobs. And I wonder: “Where are we headed?” Sometimes I see a future that I can adapt to, I see glimmers of hope, and then, bulldozers come along and that is, as they say, that.

One time when I visited Great-Aunt Polly, I told her about how I'd been tramping around putting it all down in notepads as she'd suggested. I arrived at her place dirty and hungry. I was living an aimless life, traveling here, there and everywhere. "How wonderful!" she said clapping me on the back with her knobby old hands and looking deeply into my eyes as if she could read my mind which I think she could. She was very perceptive. "You're a poet!" she said. "Just as I hoped you would be. You're an adventurer looking for love! *Très belle!*" I told her about all the jobs I'd been fired from and she laughed. I told her that I was miserable and she laughed some more, as if it was the funniest thing she ever heard. "Misery is the flip-side of happiness," she said. "You can't have one without the other." She did not criticize me. She didn't find fault. She did not feel sorry for me. She was glad for me. "You are a free man!" she said. "That's important. Be free as a bird!" she said. I told her about how I'd work for a while and then I'd do something stupid and get fired. She said, "Magnifique! So funny! You are really living!"

On my last visit to Great-Aunt Polly my mother had been dead for many years and my father had started to drink full-time until one day, he just disappeared. I thought maybe he would stop to see Great-Aunt Polly, but he never did. Dad had been working as one of those guys who dance around at the side of the road holding up a sign advertising things like: "No money down!" and "Easy credit!" or "\$5 pizza!" People would honk and laugh at him. I guess, after a while, being a human sign lost its appeal. Not exactly show business. He had been a celebrated clown who performed for thousands of people. He performed before royalty so, being a human sign must have been a bit of a letdown. When kids threw eggs at him, he stopped dancing. He'd hold his signs half-way up. People in their cars couldn't read them. He'd stagger around with his sign. When he was fired from his last sign gig, someone said they saw him set his sign down at the side of the road and walk away. No one that I knew ever saw him again.

When I started tramping, people thought I was wasting my life. Like father like son, they said. They called me a loser, but I didn't care. What did they know? I consoled myself by thinking, "At least I'm not boring!" I looked for my father, but I couldn't find him. Sometimes I thought I should do something more with my life. When I told Great-Aunt Polly how I felt, I broke down and we both cried. She hugged me and said, "Do what you do. Be free *ma petite d'Airelle*. Your dad will do what he will do too. Things happen. Your grandfather did what he wanted to do and look at him! The happiest of men! A wise man! A wizard! There were dark times in his life, but he'd say, '*Never say die!*' He was the light at the end of any tunnel. Your Granddad told me that life isn't a journey with a beginning, middle and end. If you think of it that way, you'll miss the whole point. Life is a musical thing and a person is supposed to sing and dance as the music is being played. The meaning of life is so simple, so simple most people don't see it. It's too obvious. Everybody rushes around in a great panic to get where they're going as if there's something to achieve and there isn't. The meaning of life is to be alive. That's it. It's a musical thing."

Believers say there is a world beyond our perceptions. They say there are things I can't see, like spirits and ghosts and if I were sensitive, I too would see these things too. Sometimes I even think I do. I don't know. Sometimes I smell things, but that's another story. Scientists tell me there are amazing things at the quantum level that I can't see. If I had a particle accelerator, I could see these things. They say that everything at the quantum level is fuzzy. Even a brick is fuzzy. I don't know about that. A brick doesn't *feel* fuzzy, unless it's made of something like foam rubber, but then, who wants a foam rubber brick? What would you do with a foam rubber brick? Build a foam rubber building? When a brick hits my head, it doesn't feel fuzzy. It leaves a

mark. A brick might be occupied by space and atoms, but it doesn't matter to my head which is also fuzzy and filled with space and atoms at the quantum level.

But, I digress.

The music Great-Aunt Polly played was simple. She played with love. The music made her heart beat. Her heart might have continued to beat without the music, but *with* the music it was better. With the music her heart beat for reasons other than survival. If she died, squashed by her giant accordion, she would probably have laughed. Not that she wanted to die squished by a big accordion, but she was ready to take whatever life had to dish out. Such is how I remember my Great-Aunt Polly. She plays *Eternally* in the memory of her 1920 world.



CHAPTER TWO

*i will cultivate within
me scrupulously the Inimitable which
is loneliness...*

~ E.E. Cummings

I begin this story with my Great-Aunt Polly and her melancordion not because this is a melancholy story. It isn't. Not really, some bits are, but not totally. This is a rather peculiar story. You'll not see another like it. Great-Aunt Polly isn't part of my story, only her music is, only her love is. Yes, I said love. Believe it or not, that's what this is about. She sets the tone, as it were. I include a few observations about my great-aunt because I want you to feel the bitter-sweetness that she felt. Can you picture her? Can you hear her song? Can you feel a weight on your chest? Imagine a gentle panda bear sitting on your chest. Can you feel that weight? Despite the awkwardness of my prose I hope that you, dear reader (*if there is a dear reader*), will come to know the same inexplicably happy-sad and bitter-sweet feeling Great-Aunt Polly felt and I feel constantly. To be receptive to this happy-sad and bitter-sweet feeling you've got to be in the mood. You've got to be touched... in your heart - not your head. If you're angry, it won't happen. If you're in a hurry, forget it. You've got to slow down. You have to have the time to stop and stare like a sheep or a cow. If you're worried, it might happen; no – just kidding - it won't. If you're critical, forget it. You can't be prissy or think you're morally superior. It's about going with the flow for life is about pain and beauty. If you love life, you love the hurt that comes with it.¹⁶

The feeling I'm trying to get across can't be forced. If it comes, it comes of its own accord. The feeling will come to you like a little bird - like a Red-breasted Nuthatch. If a Red-breasted Nuthatch lands on your finger, you don't have anything to do with it. You can't make that little Red-breasted Nuthatch land on your finger. You can hold bird seed, but even with a handful of birdseed, it's still up to the bird. You have no control. The only thing you can do is be patient. Just like Great-Aunt Polly had no control over her deterioration, you too have no control either. You can do what you can, not what you can't.

Long ago I realized the futility of trying to make a bird land on my finger and the futility of *not* trying to try to get a bird to land on my finger. If it happens, it happens. It's like love. If it happens, it happens. All you can do is take off your shoes and feel the grass. I can't tell you to go love a brother or sister. I guess I could tell you, but you wouldn't. Being told to love someone doesn't work. It can't be done. If you love a brother or sister because someone tells you to that's artificial. It's like that little bird. If love happens, it happens and, if it happens, it happens because you cultivated it by loving the bird first. You earned the bird's love.

In high school I was sent to a psychologist. I think they thought I was a bit crazy. Teachers said I was too sad (too sad? I mean, don't they look around?). My teachers thought I was nuts, but I knew that wasn't the real reason that I was sent to a psychologist. They didn't care about my mental well-being. The real reason was that they wanted me out because I made too many waves. I criticized carbon-intensive resource extraction and in my part of the world, people lived off carbon-intensive resource extraction. Believe it or not, I think they thought I was a threat to their way of life and the status quo. When a guest politician was making a speech at our school about how wonderful everything is, about all the wonderful opportunities in the future, I stood behind him and held a balloon over his head. It took a while for people to realize

what I was doing. Something came over me and I just walked right up and I did it. I'd seen a picture of someone holding a balloon over Donald Trump's head and I thought that it said more than any protest sign could. It was a quietly mocking gesture. By the time I was wrestled to the ground I'd embarrassed the school and hurt my finger.

The school psychologist told me I was narcissistic. Aside from my not knowing what that is, she said that I think I know everything and that I'm superior to others. I told her that I've taken off the blinders. I see the world for what it is. I see what people do and she said that I have a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity in my fantasy behaviour." She said that I lacked empathy and I felt sorry for her. What does she know? She can't see beyond her vaulted ceiling in her big suburban house on a cul-de-sac. She doesn't see what I see. I see a mess. I see urban sprawl and brown skies above it all. I see a world in environmental crisis. I see humanity living like it has another planet to go to.

The psychologist gave me what she called the Zimbardo Time Perspective test.¹⁷ She said that we're all time travelers and we draw from our memories, from experiences in the present and we look forward to the future. How well we travel between the past, present and future makes a difference in how happy we are. She said that I was a *Present Hedonist* because I scored low on conscientiousness, emotional stability, impulse control and ego control. She said that's why I did the thing with the balloon. She said that if I was Future-Oriented, I could be more achievement-oriented then in situations I would do a cost-benefit analysis and if I did that, I would be more successful in life. I wouldn't get into trouble. I'd focus on getting an education so that I could get a high paying job and then I could buy a nice big house and Mercedes Benz and travel the world if I wanted. With goals like that, I'd work hard in school and get better marks. When she told me all this, I said, "*Look over there!*" and when she turned to look over there, I

ran out of the office and never looked back. I did what any self-respecting Present Hedonist would do: I quit school. I dropped out.

The story you're reading (assuming there is someone other than myself involved) is about a personal transformation: my transformation. It's a true story. It's about heart and, dare I say it, it's about love because, contrary to what the school psychologist said, I did and do have future goals but not the kind of goals my society favours. I wanted a future with forests, fresh water and animals. It depressed me to see that this wasn't to be. At some point I realized that most things are beyond my control. It's like what Great-Aunt Polly said about my heart beating involuntarily. For, aside from lifestyle choices and heredity, whether my heart continues to beat today and tomorrow isn't up to me. The same goes for my thinking brain. Think, don't think, it's not up to me. I can't say, "Don't think that! Don't think about monkeys!" because as soon as I'm told not to think about monkeys, guess what? (*I think about monkeys.*)

After I left school, I was a voice in the wind, pleading with people to care about nature and to do something about it. My life got so bad that I gave up and then... it hit me, that's it: *give up*. It sounds pathetic. I decided that I had to stop trying to save the world and just *be* the world. The world will be fine. I don't need to do anything. I decided to be as natural as Great-Aunt Polly except, in my case, I would shave. The pressure of trying to save a world populated by millions of people uninterested and oblivious of the natural environment was too much for me. When I tried to be natural, paradoxically, I became artificial. I was a phony. It wasn't until I gave up *trying* to become natural that I actually became natural. It's like, if I try to be original, I'm not. Directives like, "Do this!" or "Don't do that!" like they say in school don't work. It's infuriating until you get it: it – whatever it is - can't be got. People look for it in complexity, but it's not there. It is the opposite. It is found in simplicity. It is simplicity. You don't have to

do anything at all. It's right there all the time. I felt *it* one time when I was in a coffee shop beside a busy road. It was an ugly road surrounded by ugly buildings and ugly chain link fences harvesting garbage and yet, as I sat there, I saw its beauty. I felt total peace. All of a sudden I accepted the ugliness and felt natural. I wasn't angry. I wasn't disturbed. When I gave up and accepted the scene as it was, I accepted everything as the way things are, right now, in the moment, I felt fantastic. I forgot about the future. I found contentment. I sat there in the sun sipping a delicious caffeine concoction in an ecstasy of relaxation. The night I'd spent in a ditch made the coffee taste even better than it possibly could. I saw that the ugly road was beautiful. The sparrows hopping at my feet, beneath the crappy outdoor furniture, weren't judging the crappy outdoor furniture and neither was I. I found peace in the ugly scene. It was beautiful in its ugliness. I had one of my first euphoric experiences. The now was rapturous. I didn't want it to end. I could feel the eternity of time. It didn't matter if I had a love-hate on for cars and concrete. I accepted and, low and behold, the unpleasant became pleasant. I accepted life without hang-ups. I accepted guilt and worry for what it was: nothing, useless emotions. Life is beautiful even when it's mechanized, industrialized and polluted. For my own sanity I told myself to let it go and when I finally did that, I had an aesthetically spiritual feeling of absolute peace. It was my first taste of peace. Eventually it ended and I returned to my habitual way of thinking. Too bad. It's like what Jesus said when he said, "Let it be." Jesus was a Mexican friend I worked with at Walmart. Jesus would say, "Let it *beeeee*," and then he'd buzz like a bumble bee.

He was a funny guy. When I got fired for telling people to quit buying bottled water and disposable crap, as I was being escorted out of the store by security, Jesus said to me, "*Be an accepting being and go on an accepting going.*"

We waved good bye to each other. As far as I know, Jesus still works there.

CHAPTER THREE

One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.

~ Bob Marley

Things started to change when I took a job as the new janitor in a mall downtown. Up until that time I lived in a cocoon I'd mentally woven around myself. I lived in a world of abstractions. After I was fired from Walmart I was unemployed for a long time. I didn't fit in. I wandered around and when necessary, I survived on hand outs. After you do that for a while, you know what the blues are. You feel the blues in your veins. You become invisible. I didn't care about the economy, the environment, politics, religion, philosophy, my dad, Great-Aunt Polly... my only concerns were where would I sleep and what would I eat. I felt separate like Great-Aunt Polly felt separate. Truth be told, I became a lunatic.

A lunatic like me was the most isolated person in the world because the notions I had about reality separated me from what was real. The coffee-shop peace I felt that one day was an anomaly. At my lowest point, before my transformation (I don't know what else to call it) I became so jaded that even remembering Great-Aunt Polly and her big accordion left me feeling empty. I stopped loving. I lost my taste buds. Everything was sawdust. I was flat, indifferent. I couldn't understand how my ancient aunt could be happy in a junky old trailer. I thought mean thoughts like: "Why do some people automatically hate accordionists?"

It saves time."

You see, I'd separated myself from reality like a red balloon released into the sky. I wasn't easy like a Sunday morning.¹⁸ I was disappointed. My life wasn't turning out the way I

thought it should. It became easy for me to hate the rich, the middle-class and the poor. I hated everyone. I was an equal opportunity hater. The tiniest thing annoyed me because I wanted things to be other than they were. When I started as the new janitor, I was depressed. People were not individuals to me, they were types. People were insects swarming in a nest and I was one of them. I lived in an ant hill and I hated ants. I was free falling from a two hundred story building. I had no sympathy. I observed, analyzed, critiqued and judged. People were glorified stink machines. When I saw people eating in the food court, I thought of toilets, toilet paper and fecal matter. I saw people as sewage that I had to clean up after. I saw humanity as a cancer slowly destroying its host. I preferred plants and animals to people and yet, if I had to live in a forest (if there were any left), I wouldn't survive. I needed the city to live.

I labeled people according to types on a continuum with zombies on one end and jerks, pods and automatons on the other. I called people without hearts, *zombies*. Not zombies like in a cheesy movie (a zombie may or may not wear tattered clothing), by *zombie* I meant a person who's superficial, a person who engages in chatter without connection, a person unconcerned with the natural environment and impervious to the beauty of nature. The mall is full of zombies. Zombies come into the world like aliens. They don't feel themselves to be part of nature. I know of which I speak, for I too was a zombie. There may as well have had a sign on my forehead that said, "Vacancy. Inquire within." I was a shell of a person. A void. I had no compassion. I was a vacuum and for me, as with all zombie folk, love isn't so much resisted as it is inconsequential and non-existent. Zombies live in herds. They need distractions. They're easily bored. They think they think for themselves, but they don't. They're influenced by zombie advertising. In social media sites they like to tell everyone all the great stuff they're doing. They like to look like they have lots and lots of fun and that they have lots of friends and that life is just a big bowl

of cherries. They're overly optimistic. Life is great! They're glib and sarcastic. They like flashy hotels and cars. They attend costume parties on a regular basis. They like to imagine themselves living in beer and wine commercials. They don't just live; they live a lifestyle. It's all about appearances: white teeth, good skin, good hair, muscular bodies, designer clothes, gourmet food. They want all the luxuries money can buy. Life is a bucket list. They have goals that must be checked off one by one in order to feel fulfilled. They absolutely crave wealth. In this respect, they're like jerks.

For a jerk, life is a competition and everyone a competitor. Jerks are the shadow side of the warrior archetype in our competitive society. They're in it to win and the winner is best exemplified by the popular saying equating manhood with toys like luxury cars, speedboats, yachts and private jets as exemplified on the bumper from the 1980s which read: "*He who dies with the most toys wins.*" With an attitude like that, nobody wins. It's mentality unconcerned with the future. It's all about the present moment's pleasure quotient. People like this don't think about death. Death is not something worth thinking about, that is, unless it spurs a jerk to engage in more thrills and frantic living.

Jerks desire. Jerks crave.

Jerks are rewarded for their jerkiness. Jerks race ahead of the line and cut in front at the last minute. Jerks are self important. Jerks don't stop for pedestrians. In their jerky luxury vehicles they impatiently barrel their jerky way through intersections. Full speed ahead! Out of my way! Coming through! They're always busy and they're always in a hurry. When surrounded by jerks, it's hard not to become a jerk oneself. It's a contagion. Jerks take the last jug of milk without a thought for the person who must go without. "*Too bad, so sad,*" they snap. "*You snooze, you lose!*" they quip. It's survival of the jerkiest. Jerks take courses in leadership and

business management. Lots of jerks are millionaires. They're the investor class. It's all a façade, a front. They work in communications or the petroleum business or the financial sector. They're corporate people. To a jerk, life is a fight for survival and kindness goes out the window with such a mindset.

Pods are similar to both jerks and zombies, but then again, they are slightly different. A pod is devoid of emotion and individuality. Zombies and jerks may feel emotion, but only in as much as it pertains to themselves. In all forms on the continuum, be it zombies, jerks, jerky-zombies or pods, empathy is lacking or non-existent and the world of nature is as nothing. There are not poets. There are no Wordsworthians in their numbers. There are no romantics. Nature, as in plants and animals, water, air and soil – all of it – is for personal use, abuse and entertainment. Automatons are similar to pods except automatons are more machine-like. They follow instructions. They don't think for themselves. Keep in mind that there are hybrids. There are zombie-jerks and jerky-zombies. The common denominator in all forms is self-centredness. It may be funny in a raunchy TV show or movie comedy, but when it is pervasive on a global scale, then it's just plain scary. Where one fits on this continuum of types often depends upon one's stage in life, upon one's values and upon one's perceptions of goodness and beauty. I used to consider humans as gifted with reason and, as such, I considered humans as life aware of itself. Maybe other species feel the same way, I don't know; I only speak from my species' perspective. Humans are aware of the shortness of their lives and they know that each and every one of them will die before those they care about, or those they care about will die before them. They can't face their inner emptiness so they use technological magic to live as long and as comfortable a life as possible. This is how I thought until one day I had this incredible urge to escape. I found myself in a profound sense of panic. I knew myself to be totally isolated. I knew

I was going insane. I knew that I was totally alone. As I walked through the mall one day, I saw myself as if from above. I saw how pathetic I was. I saw myself as a lonely little janitor, dressed in blue wearing blue plastic gloves adrift in a world of strangers who feel nothing for me, and I feeling nothing for them. I was a disembodied head. I knew that the only way I could escape this feeling of isolation and loneliness was to withdraw.

I think humans of all ages and cultures are confronted with the solution to one and the same question I faced. How can I transcend my life and find peace? I thought, deep down, most people long to connect. I didn't know that I longed to connect, until I saw the dots and I did. Now that I've had this experience that I'm about to tell you about, I connect. That's my arc. I started out one way: anti-social, hate-filled, angry, bitter, and then... not. I'm the same person, but something exists inside me that wasn't there before (and no, I don't mean a tumor). Hate is no longer a habit of mine. I now know that the world is a funny place and that I'm a funny little creature in it. The self that I feel is me is basically the same self that you feel is you. I have gone to the ground of pure consciousness (whatever that means) and I have felt a self-delight, a self-unconsciousness that I wanted to last and last. I feel permanently like I did by that coffee shop on that ugly street corner. I'm content. I accept. I walk in funny ways that make me feel happy inside. When no one's looking, I twirl. I see things with creative eyes. I'm unrealistically realistic. I'm content to be me and, I laugh. I really laugh! I'm peaceful. TRANQUIL! (sorry, that didn't sound tranquil). I know all this sounds crazy, but please, dear reader (if there still is a dear reader after this perambulating preamble), bear with me. I need to set the stage for what is about to follow so that you'll understand what happened to me. I know at some point you'll think, "Where is he going with all this stuff?" but I beg of you. Please hang on. What I'm trying to express doesn't fit nicely into words and my vocabulary isn't extensive. I'm a janitor not a

writer! If I could act out my transformation, you'd see what I mean. I'm better at non-verbal communication. I amuse myself in this funny whacked-out world. I left my *me-ness* and found everything-ness. It's hard to explain. Where once I was permanently discouraged, frustrated, basterated (*made up word*), I'm now: *not*. I'm not discouraged. I'm not frustrated. I'm not even basterated (*whatever that means!*). I fly by the seat of my pants! If you saw me, you wouldn't know such a transformation had taken place. It's an internal thing. I took the neuroplasticity of my brain and altered it with my behaviour and experience. I had a jerk transplant. I still look pretty normal, that is, except for the strange walking three feet above the ground part and the internal giddiness. I'm giddy on the inside and extraordinarily ordinary on the outside. I know I'm not important. Life is an improvisation. My actions are not premeditated. When I see a tree, I don't think, "There's a tree!" I see treeness. I think, "Good morning your treeness." My blood is infused with bubbles, but instead of suffering a stroke and brain damage my brain is stroked by genius. I'm metaphorical. I have no purpose. Does a flower have a purpose other than to flower? Do I have a purpose other than to me? No. I'm like my Great-Aunt Polly. I don't have a mountain to climb. I have nothing to prove. I'm no one and everyone. I could be anywhere. Life is a series of gags threaded together and the joke is on us. Some is rich and some is poor¹⁹ and we think that matters. I've come to know that life is like the meandering path of a drunk staggering down the road. You can't predict the path he'll go. Anyone who ever crossed a bridge that suddenly collapsed didn't expect to be killed. Surprise! I'm not talking fatalism here. I'm talking the real world. I'm talking dewdrops on green shoots in street cracks. I'm talking love in the slums. The world is full of surprises. Things don't go the way we anticipate, so what? Who cares? Make the most of it. The pressure goes off when I play non-interference. I do what I can, not what I can't. When I sit, I sit and when I walk, I walk.²⁰ I don't think about it. I just do it. I

kick only when something needs kicking and the grass grows by itself,²¹ if you know what I mean. It (whatever *it* is) gets done. With every solution, there's a new problem. That's just the way it is. Problems and solutions are one. Why get worked up? When I gave up trying to try to get that bird to land on my finger, I left it up to the bird. It's like running up the down escalator.

What follows is my whacked out story about a person who changed. It happened. I feel compelled to tell it. It's like what that that philosopher Kierkegaard said, "We live forward and understand backward" or was it the other way around? Maybe I'm living backward and understanding forward. I don't know. Time is topsy-turvy. It actually doesn't exist, but try telling that to your boss when you're late for work. "Boss, time doesn't exist." She'd say, "Neither does your job, so take a hike little brother!" Why she calls you little brother, I don't know. Some people say, "The only time is now," but as much as I hate to argue with that observation, I don't think that's true. Time is now, yes, but time was then and time will be too. The trick is to let go, Let go of moments and let go who you think you are. You're not a stuffed shirt. I let go of the ideas I had about myself to realize that I'm not an idea. Whatever it was that happened or whatever it is that is happening, whatever this is, whatever it is that I do or did, I'm doing it.

I'm *diding* it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes then when you do criticize them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes. ~ Somebody somewhere

I never dreamed of becoming a janitor, but, there you are. Sometimes dreams *do* come true. I didn't know janitorial work would be good for me. I doubt anyone has ever actually dreamed of becoming a janitor. It just sort of happens, like the way one minute rolls into the next or the way the sun comes up in the morning. Life rolls along of its own accord. The way it works is one day you apply for a job – in my case, for a janitorial job - and then, if you're lucky (or not so lucky, depending on how you look at it), you either get the job or you don't. I got the job. It was a mixed blessing (if there are such things). At first I hated it. It's not the kind of job that as a kid I aspired to have. I never said, "*When I grow up, I want to be a janitor! I want to sweep floors, wear blue polyester, clean toilets and empty garbage! Good times!*" All sarcasm aside though, after my mental breakdown, I realized that working as a janitor isn't that bad. I rather like. Some of the smells of garbage I could live without and I hate being a polluter, but every job has its own garbage, metaphorical or otherwise. I'd rather live in a shire, but alas, I'm not a character in a fantasy.

People roll their eyes in pity when you tell them you work as a janitor. Job labels have a funny way of affecting peoples' perceptions of one another. I'm not my job any more than my dad or my granddad were their jobs. They were both clowns, but they weren't clowns twenty-four hours a day. Well, then again... bad example. All I'm saying is that, just because I'm a janitor doesn't mean I'm a lesser human being. Janitors are people just like clowns are people.

I'm not too proud to do an honest day's work cleaning up after strangers. Working here is part of my therapy. I won't get rich, but at least I won't starve. I contribute. There are more important things in life than money. Judy Garland said it all when she said that she could live without money, but not without love. Easy for her to say, she was rich, then again, maybe it *was* true for her. I'll never buy a Lamborghini, but I don't need a Lamborghini. If you have a Lamborghini, I say enjoy it. Have fun speeding. I just don't happen to have a need for speed. I'm more of a turtle than a hare. In slowness is wisdom, or so I think when I'm not in a hurry.

Until recently I went through the motions of living. I spent time in my bubble, reading and forgetting and watching movies and forgetting. Never giving too much thought to people other than in thinking poorly of them or in thinking there were too many. People were just sort of there, ubiquitous, like cars and bars.

My dad used to tell the story of how one day he found me, as a little kid wearing my suit, bowtie and trench coat, standing on a street corner with a toy briefcase. He asked me what I was doing. "Being a stranger," I said. "Why are you being a stranger?" he asked. "When I grow up, I want to be a stranger," I said. I have no recollection of the incident, but Dad swore it to be true. He thought it was funny. He didn't see it as a predictor of later life. I still look at pictures of myself and think, "*Is that me?*" But now, all that's changed. I'm no longer the stranger. I'm an artist, but not in the way you'd expect. I don't make anything. I don't do anything. The art to which I'm dedicated isn't painting or acting or making music or decorating with sandwich meat. I won't get rich or famous off my art. The art I practice is something completely different, but before I tell you what my art is, let me ask you, dear reader a question: *What do people want?* Would you say people want food and shelter, entertainment and luxuries? People want to live comfortably, right? Who doesn't want a comfortable existence? I know I do. Who among us

enjoys austerity? Nobody. People rally against it. We want the good life and the good life includes all the comforts and entertainments we can afford. Isn't that right? It's hard not to think that it's true and there's nothing wrong with wanting to live comfortably, but go beneath the surface. Imagine, what do people *really* want? Do people *really* want a new car, a new house, a new... *whatever* or, are these *things*, just things and what people *really* want isn't a thing at all. If you don't believe me, take a look at advertising. When a commercial comes on, the pitch isn't about the car or beer or whatever it is that's being advertised, it's the lifestyle. It's desire. Commercials are full of images of smiling beautiful people having fun. That's what people want. They want to be beautiful people having fun. They hope that the product will bring them *that*. I'm not talking about living a balanced life or living a life of moderation or living with gratitude, that's all good stuff, what I'm talking about is what I think people really *want*. Are you ready? Wait for it. People want... love.

That's it.

Forgive me for talking about love. It's like talking about raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens. Talking about love can make people uncomfortable, but I think it's important. Love makes the world go round, right? Or is it money? People take love for granted. It's like air or water. The only time people think about air or water is when it's gone or badly polluted. Love is like that. People crave it. They need it, but they don't know that they do. I assumed love would come to me until I read my handbook.²² My man Dr. Fromm told me that love isn't something that will come to me. I have to cultivate it like I would cultivate a garden. Love can be nurtured. Love is a capacity, not an object.

To a lot of people almost everything *else* is considered more important than love: prestige, money, power, drugs, cars, shoes, wine, bacon, success...cheese (did I say wine?).

People spend their lives climbing ladders to success only to realize when they're at the top, the ladders they climbed are against the wrong wall.²³ Me, I'm not climbing a ladder to success. The only ladder I climb is the one I use to change a light bulb.

I tell you all this because I think I know why the world's a mess, but if I tell you why I think the world's in a mess, you won't believe me. You'll think it's the result of economics or politics or public policies and so on and so forth and you'll ask what could a janitor in nowhere's-ville, an obscure nobody, a non-descript diminutive loser like me possibly know? If I tell you why the world's in a mess, you'll look at me as if I'm mad. Do I have a PhD? No. Am I an expert? No. You'll say my opinion means nothing. You'll say I'm naïve and I'll counter "*no I'm not!*" and you'll say, "Yes you are!" and I'll say, "*No I'm not*" and you'll say, "Yes you are," and I'll say, "*no I'm not.*" This scintillating banter will continue until each of us forgets our position and I say, "It's not complicated. It's simple. The problem is that people don't practice the art of loving."

"Give me a break!" you'll say and then after you've calmed down you'll ask, "So, what's the art of loving?" and I'll say, "*Precisely.*" Then you'll get mad and walk away because you have no time to waste with an idiot like me because there's something you need to pick up at a mega-store, so you jump in your car, fight gridlock traffic (it's not like the TV commercials), you'll breathe bad air, drink bad bottled water (unaware of leached chemicals), get mad at equally self-interested hurried people who get in your way and then you'll whip out your credit card after you've waited forever in a line with a thousand other idiots, and you'll swipe your credit card so a digital computer number can pay for whatever it was that you thought you wanted, feeling at the end of it all like you need a good stiff drink or a hit of something and then you'll drive back through a sprawling suburban nightmare on your equally sprawling buttocks

until you get home and flop onto a sofa to watch a brainless action-packed, escapist, super-hero save the world from a raving lunatic and then you'll say, "I'm fine. FINE! Hey janitor, clean up on aisle three! Isn't there some garbage you need to take out?" and I'll say, "You call this fine? Go ahead and put your head up Superman's cape! See if I care!"

I have the answer and it's simple. The answer is so obvious even the birds sing about it. Love. Humans have difficulties as individuals and as a species on a global scale for lack of it. People don't love their world. What I'm talking about is more than loving a few selected individuals or a nation, that's a start, but it's more. It's a reverence for the earth and everything on it. It's a realization that people aren't so different. People mistakenly believe that if they are lovable, that's all that matters. Someone will love him or her if a he or a she is lovable, it's reciprocation, but that's not the way it works.

I work in a shopping mall and I watch people. I don't begrudge them their consumer activities. It gives me a job. It's great when people can buy nice things and have fun doing it, but let's be reasonable. The dark side of the mall mentality is evident when people love their *stuff* more than each other. With this mentality, Nature (with a capital N) is doomed.

I don't mean to be too hard on Homo sapiens. There are some good ones and there are some who are capable of becoming good ones. There are those who experience brotherly love, perhaps during a war or playing football, and there are some who experience motherly love when self-sacrifice is engaged; some people experience self-love (not to be confused with selfishness) and some experience erotic love. These forms of love exist and they're beautiful and worthy of music, art, movies and books, but I'm sure I don't need to remind you that the actions of multitudes throughout history up until and including the present have been otherwise. Don't take my word for it. Look around: war, violence, cruelty, greed, social dysfunction, addiction, suicide,

destruction of nature on an unprecedented global scale. If you're a Homo sapien, don't take offense. It's probably not your fault. You're born into it. If you ask me (and I know you didn't), there are way better species out there. Look at yellow birds or blue birds.

I love blue birds. Blue birds take my breath away. They don't need drugs to get them through the day and, as far as I can tell, there are no deviant serial killing blue birds, no blue birds with dynamite to blow mountains tops off. Blue birds have nothing to prove, nothing to gain. They don't damage the environment except for maybe pooping on statues of people which is more of a political statement than anything else.

I like to think of myself as a kind of blue bird. I'm a flightless polyester blue bird and I do my polyester blue bird best to make the world a better place. I janitorize. I conserve. Sometimes I think, as far as humans go, I'm not that bad, but if I could choose, I'd rather be a blue bird than a human. I like to imagine myself as a blue bird, swooping and singing and going from tree to tree reveling in the sheer existence of my body and the trees and streams, flowers and rocks, but sadly I have to accept the fact that I am not a blue bird. If I were, some human would probably come along and poison me, shoot me or stick me in a cage. Unfortunately, I'm a human. I'm one of billions. Maybe I'm romanticizing the life of a blue bird and being too hard on humans. Humans can experience the delight found in the ground of pure being too. Besides, maybe being a blue bird isn't all it's cracked up to be. All that flying around must get tiring and it's impossible to pick up coins. Eating insects, well, that's not exactly appealing. If I were a blue bird, I'd stick to berries.

CHAPTER FIVE

Boredom: the desire for desires.

~ Leo Tolstoy

Beware the barrenness of a busy life.

~ Socrates

On most days I start work in the late afternoon by emptying garbage cans in the food court. It isn't as bad as it sounds. It gives me time to watch people. Fascinating creatures. I've stopped hating them. As a janitor, I'm invisible, cloaked in blue as it were. Most people don't even notice me watching them. They look right past me. I'm part of the manufactured landscape, a cog in a big consumer machine. I empty garbage cans and when the mall closes, I sweep and think and then I wash the floors and think and when all that's done, I'm free to wander aimlessly and think. Sometimes I think about thinking. Sometimes I feel. On most days I like to get my work done as quickly as possible so I have time to wander around the mall. After I wander, if I'm lucky, I catch the last bus and go home to eat noodles. If I miss the last bus, I walk home and on the way home I look up at the streetlights and then I eat noodles. I find that I like watching street lights almost as much as I like eating noodles.

It's a simple life. Nothing much changes day after day. The gravitational pull of the familiar makes it comfortable. I'm content. The world may be imploding like the buildings I once saw on TV, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm a drop in an ocean of avarice and inhumanity. Sure I don't have a wife and child or a car and a house. That's okay. It just wasn't

meant to be. So be it. It's my destiny. I expect the worst and accept the rest. I'm a pessimist. I do no harm. I think about Great-Aunt Polly. I think about my mom who died a slow and painful death from cancer when I was about fourteen and I think about my dad who's out there somewhere wallowing in poverty and about my grandfather who looks so sad in his nursing home. All this is what it is. I do the best I can, given my situation. I'm a *whatever-floats-your-boat-within-reason* kind of guy. I'm small potatoes. I'm tater tots.

When I think that my life is somehow lacking, I rationalize. I tell myself that the things that comprise a so-called normal life are prisons. All the things people take to be important like a partner, children, friends, sports, houses, canned peas, TVs, appliances, plumbing, cars, couches, end tables, insulated garages, weed free lawns, cutlery, barbeques, lawn mowers, caulking, flooring, computers, tools, and activities like going to the mall, buying gas... all the things one cares about and keeps busy doing on a day to day basis in a so-called *normal* life, are traps. I don't need to do or buy anything. I'm free because I don't have anything. I whisper the streets alone. I'm content with my spoon, my bowl, my noodles, my frozen peas. I'm a Zen kind of guy. I have some clothes and odds and ends, but that's it. I'm comfortable in my skin. I'm not burdened with stuff. I'm free to do anything that doesn't cost money. I don't owe anyone and no one owes me. I'm free as a bird and just as rich. I'm set. I can take off tramping wherever I want whenever I want. I can take care of myself. Unless the mall closes, the mall blows up for some inexplicable reason or I really screw up, I can ride out my years in obscurity and if the mall closes, I can take a menial job somewhere else and keep moving. I'm a total nobody going nowhere, slowly, irrevocably, towards an end that everybody will know eventually and "*that's alright Mama,*" said Elvis swiveling in wisdom.

I'll ride out this life until its expiration date and death won't be so bad. No big deal. Nothing to fear. How will I know what happens until it happens? I like the idea of heaven, but what do I know? The only thing I might miss when I'm dead is sleep, that is, unless I get to sleep after I'm dead. I sometimes imagine what it would be like to go to sleep and never wake up and when I do, something weird happens. I begin to wonder: what would it be like to wake up after having never gone to sleep? Great-Aunt Polly used to ask me that. I look around and I see that people die and people are born. What if, when I come to my end and my eyes close for the very last time someone new comes into being and that someone new opens his or her eyes and I think it's me? How would I know I'm the same me I've always been? It's one of those things that make me go hmmm.²⁴ My *me* could just as easily be someone else.

I only mention sleep because sleeping is one of my favourite activities, or rather, *in-*activities. I enjoy oblivion. I love dreaming. If I'm asked, "Did you have a good sleep?" I say, "Of course I had a good sleep. Sleeping isn't my problem. Waking up is the problem." As for my fellow janitors, I don't know what they think about sleep or anything else. Do they believe in life after death? I don't know. Do they ask the questions I do? I don't know. We don't talk. I've tried to talk to them, but they're not interested. I've pretty much given up. They look at me as if I'm strange and maybe I am. "Fine!" I say. "See if I care." I can amuse myself by myself. Where's my mop?

Like a lot of people, the guys at work are isolated from themselves and each other. Maybe it's better that way. I keep to myself and they keep to themselves. There's no confusion. There are no unmet expectations. We all know where we stand in this no-man's land of the modern industrial climate controlled artificial environment of the mall. We're all serving time (time-and-a-half on national holidays).

Most of the janitors at the mall don't work very hard. The hardest work they do is getting out of work. Come to think of it, I hate to say this, but most of my janitorial colleagues are zombies. There's nothing behind the eyes but biology. Their pupils are dilated and non-responsive. They don't know what I know about the art of loving. If I brought up the subject of love, they'd report me to the manager. I'd get thrown into the loony bin. Only crazy people love till it hurts.

By looking at my fellow janitors you'd assume they don't love anything. They look dead, except for Ajay. He's lively. He's not a zombie, pod, jerk or automaton. He's nothing like that. Nothing I've said applies to Mr. Ajay Singh. You could even say that I love him, but I wouldn't. I don't think he'd like that. Ajay is my friend. He's a Sikh. He wears a turban. I think it's cool. I asked him if I could wear a turban too and he said, "No."

Ajay's a tough cookie. Around here I've heard others call him derogatory names, but never to his face. No one wants to mess with him. Ajay thinks of himself as a saint-soldier. He told me that he's invincible and unconquerable, just like his name. He said that Ajay means *victory* or *conqueror* and Singh means *lion*. He said that one must control one's internal vices and be able to be constantly immersed in virtues as clarified in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Ajay is the hardest worker here. I'm lazy and I don't have a turban, but he doesn't hold that against me. When he talks, I listen. I think he appreciates the fact that I don't interrupt. He says I'm pale and weak. I think he feels sorry for me. One time when I'd annoyed him by letting someone insult me in the food court he said that I was like Piglet in the Winnie the Pooh stories. He says that I should stick up for myself and the injustices in the world and that I should eat more than noodles. I'm inclined to agree, but that's as far as I go. He's a caring person. I learn

from him. We mop the food court together and chit chat as we do so. He tells me all about India. It sounds nice.

Ajay helped me get a job at a discount store where I wash the floors and he helped me find a place to live, except, he doesn't know that he found me a place to live. I didn't tell him. He found me work cleaning a warehouse after hours and because no one is in the warehouse after hours, I moved in. I sleep on a bed in an antique trailer that's on display. The warehouse is full of interesting vehicles and antiques like the trailer I sleep in. All night I can I wander around and look at interesting stuff. It makes bathing in a sink almost bearable.

I spend most of my time in solitary pursuits. As part of my apprenticeship, I contemplate love and its various manifestations. I don't talk to many people. I don't mind being alone. It gives me time to think and to study my art. To be comfortable alone is a prerequisite to being loving, or so I've read. I concentrate on being a loving person. That's really all there is to it. I cultivate compassion like I cultivate carrots in a flower pot. I listen to music to help me feel. As a rule the love I cultivate isn't reciprocated, but that's OK. I tell myself that it enhances the feeling, like an anonymous gift.

Sometimes my life gets lonely, but I have found a rhythm to loneliness. I swim in it. I make the most of what life has to offer, given the situation I'm in, my proclivities and limitations, my appearance and status – you know, like a good little existentialist. I keep my life simple. I'm practically Amish. Give me a good hot beverage, a nice piece of pie, beautiful music like Edith Piaf's *Je Ne Regrette Rien*, a good friend like Ajay, the absence of pain and I say, *Who could want anything more? I have it all.*

One day, as I was mopping in the Dollar Store, which is one of those discount stores permeated by the smells of plastic, I had this weirdly profound experience. I was lost in the

experience of mopping – really getting into the Zen of it, you know. I was making each swipe of the mop better than the last when out of my peripheral vision I happened to notice a wall of fake flowers beside me. It loomed there out of the corner of my eye. (Did I mention that I look at the world from the periphery? Well... I do.) So striking was the vision of a wall of fake flowers that I stopped to take it all in. It was breathtakingly artificial. My mind went blank. I felt absolute peace. I stood totally still, utterly and completely still. The stillness was beyond still. Atoms stopped moving. Time stopped. All was silent save the sound of a distant fan whirring recycled plastic air and Hawaiian guitars playing *Sweet Leilani* music through little round speakers perforated by tiny holes in the ceiling. I thought deeply about this Technicolor feast of falseness - this pseudo-nature so removed from Hawaiian beaches. And I thought, people try so hard – bless their little hearts – to replace nature with manufactured facsimiles. Why is that? What do we do with fake flowers? We put them on simulated granite headstones or on wood-grained laminate tables in veneer houses and I asked myself: “Who are we fooling? Do we fool anyone?” Maybe we do. I’ve heard people say, “Look at those flowers, they’re so real, they almost look fake.”

I stopped mopping and I stood by that wall of real fake flowers. I don’t know how long I stood there. I could have stood there all night. I looked up and down the aisle with just my eyes. I didn’t move my head. I become one with everything. The world of things dissolved. I froze in an odd position like my friends the manikins. I became a transcendental transparent eyeball. I could feel my respiration. My nasal passages opened. The scene was super real. After a while of blank delight I returned to myself and wondered: Are people metaphorically similar to fake flowers? Consider: People have a persona they present to the world.²⁵ I’m a white flower. Some people are red. Each person has a place in his or her scheme of things. It’s hierarchical. The expensive fake flowers – the rich people, the oligarchies, the orchids – they’re at the top of the wall, and the

cheap ones – the poor people, daisies like me – are crowded at the bottom and falling on the floor. It's unnaturally natural. The flowers reminded me of the time, as a boy, my family and I had a picnic in a field. We munched on cucumber sandwiches, lazed on blankets on the grass and clowned around as we gazed at green verdant hills and flowers. I loved it. Time froze then too. The green verdant hills where we picnicked are gone now. They were annexed by the bloated city and replaced by trendy houses with slate facades, three- and four-car garages and double wide concrete driveways. Nature is inexorably reduced by the ever expanding swirls of suburbia where everyone wants to live the cul-de-sac dream...

But, I digress.

I looked from the wall of fake flowers on one side of me to a display of greeting cards on the other side of me. I selected a card with a picture of the earth as taken from space. Inside the card it read: *"Remember: If the world didn't suck, we'd all fall off."* Charming. I selected another card. This one had a drawing of hearts on the outside. I opened the card and inside it read: *"Love is in the air... so I might as well stay inside."* What's happening? I must be in the insincere greeting card section. The sentiments of these cards weren't warming me. I moved down the aisle and picked up another card. This one had a photograph of a red rose. Surely this one would be of a loving nature. On the front of the card it read, *"I looked at a flower..."* and inside it read *"...and thought of you... it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen... till I met you."* That's more like it! At last, here is love! Sick, obsessive, unrealistic, romantic, short-lived... but then, why doesn't it make me happy? It should shouldn't it? But it didn't. The sentiment felt insipid. Maybe the cards don't make me feel happy because they're mass produced. Maybe I'm saddened because people have to buy a card to express their feelings. Why does it make me feel sad to

think of happy people? Maybe Aldous Huxley was right when he said, “*There is something curiously boring about somebody else’s happiness.*”

On the floor I noticed that a greeting card had fallen. I picked it up and brushed off the dust. On the card there was a picture of a lovely vegetable garden with a clown in the distance towards the back of the garden. The clown had a white face, red nose, little red cheeks, and brightly coloured clothes – the whole bit. He looked like a nice clown, smiling there in the garden. I almost didn’t see him amidst the gladiolus. He was camouflaged, like a white rabbit in snow; how beautiful the garden looked and how extraordinary to see a clown in it. The neat rows of vegetables were appealing. I thought of my granddad. He would like this card. The card was not too damaged to give as a gift. I put it in my pocket. I could give it to Granddad for his birthday. If I had a garden like the one pictured on the card, I could live off the vegetables. There would be no need for profit. I’d love to garden. It would sustain me. I was born to labour for my sustenance. I wondered if I should plant a garden outside the warehouse. I could see the garden in my mind. Beside the warehouse, by the abandoned railway tracks, there’s land that no one uses. There’s just weeds and derelicts. I could plant a few seeds and water them with a big watering can. I could use a wagon to haul the big watering can to the garden. I could see it in my mind’s eye. I imagined myself growing vegetables wearing a big sun hat pulling a wagon with a big watering can. I imagined it all in every detail. Granddad could come and sit in the garden too. I could get him a chair. He could be the clown in the garden. As I stood there staring and thinking – imagining myself working in the garden – I caught sight of a lady bug walking along the fake leaf of a fake flower. Surely the ladybug knew something wasn’t quite right. Poor thing, it won’t find any aphids here. Even the bunnies are made of dust.

I put my hand out and the ladybug walked onto it. I looked at him closely. Maybe it was a she ladybug. I don't know. How can you tell? I began to wonder: Why has there never been a ladybug superhero? You know, there are all kinds of superheroes, like Spiderman and Batman and Ironman, but there's no Ladybugman. Why is that? There should be a Ladybugman! I think it would be great. There could be Ladybugman movies. I can see them now. Spiderman has special spider powers and Batman has special bat powered technologies, why couldn't there be a Ladybugman with his own special powers? Ladybugman could, of course, fly, and he'd have a hard shell so he'd be impervious to insults and bullets, but he wouldn't be violent. His amazing power would be that he'd be un-insultable! He could be a funny superhero. What a novelty! Unlike Ironman or other justice driven super heroes – who are great in their own way – Ladybugman would be something completely different. He wouldn't get mad. He would be the bringer of peace! I like that. He'd be a super hero without violent tendencies, but he'd be more effective than a Quaker. A Quaker superhero would get pulverized. Ladybugman wouldn't be out to get revenge. He'd help people who did bad things to know that their doing bad things wasn't a good thing to do. He'd show them how to love. Instead of punishing criminals, he'd rescue them from themselves and put them to work in his garden so that they'd learn how to give up on selfishness. His power would be in his disarmingly nice niceness. He'd be super nice, but not in a prissy fake way. In his eyes you'd see that he's enlightened like Great-Aunt Polly is enlightened. He'd be reasonable *and* poetic. Inside his hard shell he'd carry a tea service. To comfort people under duress he'd say, "*Care for a cup of tea?*" That would be his catch phrase. He'd have a British accent. I don't know why. I just like the idea. Sounds civilized. (I think they call ladybugs ladybirds in Britain, but I could be wrong.)

Ladybugman's special power would be the power of love. He'd enter a room and all anger would dissipate like magic. People would become like big innocent babies except with the ability to control their bowels.

"Would you like a blueberry scone?" Ladybug man would ask. *"One moment, please. I'm terribly sorry. I'm getting a signal from Ladybug headquarters... Yes, of course, do come by. We can talk about what to do after you've given up a life of crime. No. Ha ha ha. I don't want money. What an abstraction! I have no need of fiat currency. Ha ha ha!"* Ladybugman would have a wonderful laugh like Douglas Fairbanks did.

Ladybug man would, of course, be a gardener. His secret hideout would be a rooftop garden on an old warehouse - like my warehouse! He would facilitate group therapy and anger management sessions in his garden, but not in an annoyingly patronizing and frustrating way. He'd be a garden philosopher. He would be on the side of plants and animals. He would talk about Mother Nature as if she were his real Mom. *"Yes of course Mom. I'll pick the weeds and reform them."*

Ladybugman would say in his English accent, *"Gardening is a verb. Gardening is what you do; and, gardening as a noun describes not what you did, but what you got when you gardened."* He'd see the entire planet as a garden. He would talk about how the garden is an opening of a personal space to admit a few, a great many, or thousands of plants that exude charm, pleasure, beauty, oxygen, conversation, friendship, confidence amongst other rewards. He wouldn't like shoes. The philosophical message conveyed by Ladybugman in his movies would be one of optimism balanced with a healthy dose of pessimism. He'd convey the ultimate conviction that individuals can live in serene happiness, fortified by the continual experience of modest pleasures. You'd never really know if Ladybugman was a male or a female, but that

would be completely fine. It would be part of his/her charm. Ladybugman, despite the name, would be gender neutral. Gender would be something Ladybugman would laugh about. It would be a running gag. Ladybugman would never be in a hurry. He'd talk slow and move slow. He'd say, "*No great thing is created suddenly, any more than a bunch of grapes or a fig. If you tell me that you want a fig, I answer that there must be time. Let it first blossom, then bear fruit, then ripen.*" Ladybugman movies would be slow. That would be their charm. They'd win slowness awards.

As I watched the ladybug walk on my hand and thought these thoughts, I resolved to write about this in my notepad (*did I mention that I write everything down? Well, I do. My life is narrated in notepads*). The ladybug's little feet tickled my hand. As much as I enjoyed my little friend, I knew he should be outside. In here, it is sad. He would surely die. He should be free. I walked to the door, opened it and carefully put him outside. It was a cool night in the alley, but I felt sure that a ladybug would be better off out of doors than in here. There are no *real* aphids here. There are only pictures of aphids rendered cute by graphic artists.

I knelt down and the little fellow walked off my hand. So beautiful he was! I loved him. I wished him well. *Good bye my little ladybug friend. Bye-bye little Ladybugman. Farewell!* It won't be easy out there, but maybe you'll find a cozy corner. I watched his little orange and black form bumble along into the distance when a giant size thirteen foot descended upon him like an asteroid from outer space.

"Hold the door!" Alfred Eric, the burly Security Guard, called as he brushed past me, oblivious to the life he'd just now so inadvertently snuffed. He smelled of a manly cologne. I looked up at the guard as he pushed by and then, I looked down at my flattened friend. I saw his

yellow guts. I should have left the ladybug alone. Why is it that whenever I touch something beautiful, a big human foot comes down and crushes the life out of it?

Alfred Eric was indeed a big guy. Huge in fact. He towered over me like a... a tower. He had gargantuan feet, the size of small countries really. The only consolation to Ladybugman's demise was that he didn't suffer. It was quick. I looked at Alfred Eric. He was innocent. I didn't blame him. How could he know? One time, I called Alfred Eric *Al*. He didn't like it. He insisted that I call him Alfred Eric in full and he enunciated each letter of his name very precisely. He'd say, "I am not Alfred, or Al. I am not Alfie, not Fred, not Freddy; I'm not Eric or E; I'm not Big Boy, Alfie E or any derivative thereof. I'm *Alfred Eric*. If I'm not addressed as such, I will not respond or, if I do, I will respond in kind with a fist."

Quite a guy, that Alfred Eric.

I call him Al.

PART II: middles

CHAPTER SIX

If nothing is done, then all will be well.

~ Lao Tzu

Soda spilled on the floor is sticky.

~ M.E. Binks

Every night all four janitors sit at a table in the food court in the mall. We wait until everyone goes home and then Ajay and I sweep and wash the floors. I don't know where the other two janitors go. By the looks of them I think they go somewhere to sleep. They look tired. As we work, Ajay tells me about India. In India there are quite a few people. It's nature's way.

I like to watch the girl who works in the food court at Danny's Hamburgers. She's lovely. I'm totally in love. I would marry her if she'd have me. I'd jump into red hot lava for her, but then, if I did that, it would be difficult to get married: "*Do you take this blackened crisp to be your husband?*" I think not. The way the Danny's Hamburgers girl's hair falls around her face as she scrubs hamburger grease off the counter is most appealing. The orange and brown of her uniform is my favourite colour. Sometimes she comes to our table and gives Ajay and I left over French fries. I don't mind that they're extra crunchy and only somewhat rancid. At least they won't go to waste. I eat them for the sake of the planet. I recycle them with my guts. When she comes to our table, Ajay has an easy banter with her. I don't say anything. I can't. She terrifies

me. I feel impossibly shy around her. I don't have the nerve to speak. I can barely look at her when she's looking at me. It's like looking into the sun. I try not to sneeze. She said that her name is Brittani and that her name is spelt with an i. On one occasion Ajay and Brittani with an i were talking about their favourite things to eat and I sat there listening to them talk. She said that she liked apple pie and Ajay said that he liked apple pie too. I didn't contribute to the conversation until I had worked up the nerve. They were done talking about pie and had moved on in their conversation to other things, but that didn't stop me. I blurted out, "I like flapper pie." Brittani with an i looked at me as if I was an enchanted toaster. She had never heard me speak. My voice came out squeaky and high pitched.

"You like what?" she asked.

I wiped my nose with a hanky. I should mention that I have a perpetual cold. My nose is forever running. It's a real bummer. Thinking of flapper pie and the word bummer reminded me of my mother. She used to say the word *bummer* all the time. On her death bed, she said, "You know, this is a real bummer."

"Dapper pie," I said. "I mean flapper pie - not dapper pie," I laughed nervously. "I don't know what that is. My mom used to make it."

"Make what?" she asked into my eyes.

"Flapper pie," I repeated. I heard violins. They were coming from the mall's speakers.

My heart raced and my mouth went dry. I noticed how her eyes were as brown as the root beer she served. When she gazed down at me, I had the feeling she could see into my heart. I was about to explain what *flapper* pie was - it's custard topped by meringue in a Graham cracker crust - when we were joined by Alfred Eric, the burly security guard. He stood towering beside me like a... a tower.

Alfred Eric: Ladybug killer.

“What’s up?” he said taking a handful of extra-brown crunchy fries and jamming them down his fry-hole. My two colleagues got up to leave. “Don’t leave on my account boys,” Alfred Eric said. “Oh, I forgot. You’ve got some *sleeping* to do.” He laughed. His laugh sounded like a car backfiring or a constipated seal. It wasn’t quite a “Ha” or a “Heh.” It was more of a “Haep!” Hard to describe, really. Whatever it was, his laugh was abrupt and loud and we all jumped in our seats when we heard it. Every time he laughed we’d jerk spasmodically in unison, making a sort of a janitorial physical echo to his piercing laugh. It should be noted that the *boys* he was referring to, were, in fact, two men in their sixties. At least, I think they were in their sixties. One could hardly call them boys. In my mind I called them Grumpy and Sleepy. I know, it isn’t fair, but that’s what I did. Sometimes life isn’t fair. Grumpy and Sleepy might *not* have been in their sixties. Chronologically speaking, they might not have been in their sixties. For all I knew, they could have been in their thirties or forties or even their fifties. It’s hard to tell, but physically, they certainly looked like they men in their sixties. Come to think of it, they didn’t really look like happy little dwarves. I don’t know why I called them that. Maybe it was their hair. They looked sort of sad. Life had beaten them down. They were hunched over like they’d been rowing a slave ship for years and years. When Alfred Eric spoke to Grumpy and Sleepy, looked at one another with uncertainty. One of them – the one I called Sleepy - got up without speaking. He gave a sleepy glare at his partner and floated away. Sleepy had an amazing way of carrying his head level, as if he were carrying a tray of fine crystal goblets or a pile of books on his head. His partner, Grumpy, was apparently impervious (or is it oblivious?) to sleepy glares for he remained seated and feigned interest in our conversation.

“See you in the furniture department,” Alfred Eric called out to Sleepy. We all winced and angled our ears away from Alfred Eric. “They got a new shipment of beds. *Haep!*” We jerked convulsively. “Haep!” we jerked again. I felt *haep*-shocked.

With a vacant seat now beside me, Alfred Eric plopped heavily down into it like the proverbial poop that he was. He did everything heavily. I don’t imagine he can help it. His ample weight shook the table. The chairs were attached to the table with metal bars so when Alfred Eric sat down, Ajay and I bounced up. Ajay had to hang onto his turban and readjust it on his head.

“Honey, when you going to go out with me?” simpered Alfred Eric as he chewed stale fries. I hated his simpering and the movement of his mandibles was freaking me out.

The young woman in the orange and brown uniform whom I adored didn’t respond to his question directly. She looked at him blankly as if she were blind and muttered, “I’ve got to get my things.” She trotted back to her counter to get her *things*. We watched her trot away. When I looked at Al, I didn’t appreciate the lascivious look in his eyes. I felt a rush of jealousy. “No hurry. I’ll talk to the cleaning staff,” Alfred Eric said as he looked at Ajay and me. “I’ll walk you out!” he shouted. Ajay and I jerked our bodies spasmodically when he said this. We looked at one another and then we looked at Alfred Eric who continued to stuff his face with fried potatoes. I practiced my art (the art of loving) without success. I had to remind myself that Alfred Eric had once been a cute little innocent baby.

“These fries are disgusting!” chuffed Alfred Eric as he stuffed yet another fist of fries into the black hole of his mouth. I turned my head to watch the black hole in his face. He could swallow light with that thing. I tried to look away, but I couldn’t. I looked at the muscles in his jaw. Alfred Eric had amazingly powerful jaws. He was a human pit bull. I could just imagine the serious pounds of pressure that he had between his clenched teeth. He could probably crush

bones with his jaws. ‘He’s like a human hyena,’ I thought to myself. He even laughed like a hyena. “Ha hee hya hya. Haep!” (I’m not sure how to write how a hyena sounds laughing; hopefully you get the idea). Long story short, I hated hating Alfred Eric. It wasn’t good for me. He was a classic jerk, but I tried not to label him as such. “He’s just a big snowman,” I muttered to myself. “What?” he said. (Did I say that out loud?) Ajay glared at me.

I told myself not to judge Alfred Eric, but unfortunately. I wouldn’t listen. Alfred Eric made me feel unhinged and weak. I wiped my dripping nose with a tissue yet again and readied myself for a big sneeze that didn’t materialize. Alfred Eric and Ajay recoiled in anticipation. When the big sneeze didn’t come, they relaxed their tensed muscles and looked at one another. They’d been sneeze-shocked.

We sat in silence.

The only sound was of Alfred Eric’s breathing and chewing. He asked me in his raspy Batman impersonation voice, “*What’s your name little man?*” We were all well aware of Alfred Eric’s obsession with the Batman movies. He could recite dialogue from entire scenes in his Batman voice.

“Me?” I said with my hands gesticulating. I’m a gesticulator. I’ve been known to injure passersby when in conversation.

“Yeah *you*. What’s your name?” he repeated. “Can’t you talk?”

“Me,” I said.

“Yeah, you,” said Alfred Eric. “So you *can* talk.”

“No, no. I mean, yes, yes. I mean that’s not a question. I am *Me*.”

Alfred Eric glared. “What?”

“I’m Me,” I said again. “My name is *Me*. The letter M and the letter E., that’s me.”

Alfred Eric looked at Ajay and Ajay nodded his head in affirmation. The third janitor, the one I call Grumpy, seated at the next table wasn't paying attention. He was there, but, not. I imagined him to be someone I might have known if I had lived in the Middle Ages. Maybe it was the hair.

"Your name is *Me*?" said Alfred Eric incredulously. I nodded.

"Of course his name is *Me!*" Ajay confirmed.

"*Of course his name is Me? Why, of course?*" said Alfred Eric. "Let me get this straight: You're *Me*?"

"No. You're you. I'm me," I said.

Alfred Eric gave me a blank stare as he chewed more sad fries with renewed vigour. His malice was palpable. "Sorry. Just kidding," I said. "My name is M.E. You know... as in the acronym. Some people are A.J. for Anthony Junior or B.J. for Bruce Johnny or E.M. for Eliot Michael..."

"Oh-Kay," interrupted Alfred Eric. "I get it."

"It's actually M-dot-E-dot-E-dot with two ee's, but it's somewhat strange to say 'ee' so it's been shortened to just *M.E.* with one 'e'. That's how I sign my name. I sign it M.E. Eventually people stopped calling me M.E and started calling me me and then it became Emmy which is actually a pronunciation of M and E and E made into a word." We sat in silence for a moment as Alfred Eric processed the information I provided. I strove for clarification, "You know... Emmyyyy?"

"What the *h* kind of name is *Me*?" glared Alfred Eric. He preferred to say 'h,' as in, 'what the *h*' instead of actually saying the word *hell*. In a previous conversation he said that he found the word *hell* to be offensive and low-class. He considered the word *hell* an obscenity. I think he

felt the word *hell* wasn't the kind of word a law-man like him would use. He liked to imagine himself as having style. You see, Alfred Eric dreamed of one day becoming a police constable. People who bandied the word *hell* irritated him. When someone said, "What the *hell*?" or "To *hell* with it!" or "*Hell's* bells!" he would become annoyed and furrow his ample bushy eyebrows. Even when he was speaking in his Batman voice, he replaced the word *hell* with an *h*. Why he did that, beat the *hell* out of me, but, what the *hell* do I know? *Hell*, it's a free country... *Hell*.

"Me, it's just a name I call myself," I spoke-sang. Alfred Eric again frowned and paused his chewing. I guess he's not a fan of speak-singing. "Call me M.E. or Emmy." I could tell that he wanted to box my ears.

"I repeat: What the '*h*' kind of name is *Emmy*?"

"Emmy? It's M and E as in Meyer which is German for farmer and bringer of light, E as in Eberhard which is also German meaning strong wild boar or strong as a boar and another E as in Erasmus which is Greek for amiable or worthy of love. I guess that makes me an amiable wild boar farmer or a farmer, boar strong and worthy of love."

I looked at Alfred Eric and Ajay to see if they were as amused as I was. I was trying to be funny, but they didn't appreciate the humour. This was fun. "Isn't that funny?" I asked. "My dad's name was, or is? I'm not sure. Anyway, his name is *Meyer Eberhard Eliot* and people were confused between *Meyer Eberhard Eliot*, my dad, and *Meyer Eberhard Erasmus*, me. My family was in the habit of using all of our middle names. If someone said, "*Hey, Meyer Eberhard!*" both Dad and I would look up and be confused, so people started to say our full names as in, "*Meyer Eberhard Erasmus*, could you pass the salt!" or "canned peas" or whatever the case might be and, after a while, saying *Meyer Eberhard Erasmus* or *Meyer Eberhard Eliot* became a bit of a

mouthful - especially if you need the salt or canned peas in a hurry or if you actually had a mouthful of food - so my name was shortened to the acronym, M.E.E. and people would say the letters like they say AJ or KFC or whatever, but that was too cumbersome too. M-E-E, M-E-E, M-E-E - see what I mean?" I demonstrated how cumbersome it was, and continued. "And because I didn't really want to be called Junior, I became *Me* like the personal pronoun, but that was confusing too. It would be like having the name You for you. I could say, "Hey You, and you would look up but what if I really didn't mean you, I wanted to talk to my friend *named* You, not you so people started to pronounce M.E.E. as if it was the word Emmy, you know, like the television awards, the Emmies – and not the acronym M.E.E." I let them absorb what I'd just explained. It was quiet for a moment. "So... that's me: *Emmy* Binks...Mr. Emmy Binks, at your service." It was a lot to take in. We sat in silence and sipped our drinks through plastic straws. My hands are small so I had to hold my large drink with two hands. I've had trouble with Big Gulps²⁶ my entire life.

"I'm Ajay," offered Ajay.

"What's that stand for? Anthony Junior?" Alfred Eric said sarcastically.

"No, no, no," said Ajay quickly. He had a habit of saying the word *no* repeatedly very fast. "Nononono. It's not an acronym. It's A-j-a-y," Ajay spelled. "It's not A.J. It's *Ajay*. It's a Sikh name meaning *victory* or *conqueror*." The way Ajay said *victory* and *conqueror* was quite thespian. I admired his delivery. I nodded my head in agreement. Ajay inspired me.

"*Really?* That's *fascinating!*" said Alfred Eric with mock seriousness and false sincerity.

"Oh, yes!" said Ajay oblivious to the mock seriousness and false sincerity.

"You do know that I didn't actually ask what Ajay means, don't you?" said Alfred Eric in a prickly tone.

“Listen! I do not appreciate your prickly tone,” said Ajay. “I thought you’d be interested!” He was much annoyed. Ajay could be testy sometimes. Alfred Eric was obviously not interested. He didn’t care about anyone but the *Danny’s Hamburgers’* woman. Ajay was water to Alfred Eric’s oil. They did not mix. Alfred Eric once mistakenly said to Ajay, “Don’t get your hat in a knot!” and Ajay went berserk. “What!” he shouted. His brown face turned crimson. “This is not a *hat!*”

Fun.

The third janitor, or Grumpy as I called him - but not in a mean way - sat there staring straight ahead. Perhaps he was watching dust motes in the air. Much as I wanted him to, he didn’t offer to tell us his name. I was afraid to ask. He sort of had a perpetual frown. I think it was Kim or Tim or Bim. I don’t know. I wasn’t sure. People called him Kim the Korean or Tim the Korean, in an appallingly racist sort of way, but they didn’t call him that to his face. Most racists don’t say something racist to the face of a race that they’re racist towards. I find it fascinating that people feel the need to identify Kim or Tim as a Korean. To me he was just a human. He’s a man first and a then a Korean or Chinese man or whatever he is, but then again, I am ignorant of such things. He might be from the Hong Kong or Beijing for all I know. I don’t perceive the intricacies and nationalities. He’s a biped omnivore who happens to like eating rice. The exchange between Alfred Eric and Ajay put a damper on our conversation. We sat in silence for a long time. We were all waiting for the *Danny’s Hamburger’s* girl, or more accurately, the *Danny’s Hamburger’s* woman to show up because she wasn’t’ really a *girl* anymore— well yes, she was a girl – but not in a girlish way. She’d matured but we didn’t call her a woman because the word *woman* is intimidating to guys like us. We’re not really men. There is no honour or integrity amongst janitors and security guards such as us. We’re immature. We’re more or less

just simpletons muddling our way through life – except for Ajay - again, he’s the exception. He’s a man. He has a wife and children. He takes care of his parents. He does manly stuff. Alfred Eric collects comic books and I’m an expert in muzak, so there you go.

As I sat at our table having a so-called conversation, I thought of Brittani with an i and I pictured her walking towards me in my mind. I saw her as a princess moving in slow motion and I saw myself as a simple mall slave. I thought of her beauty and suddenly became aware of the symphonic music that was playing on the mall’s cleverly concealed speakers. It was Montavoni’s version of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*. It had to be the brightest tune in this segment. To break the silence I said, “I love this song!” and I did. I truly did and I still do. It’s one of my theme songs. Hearing it makes me feel the weight of my heart. I leave my brain and enter my chest. I can actually feel love as a pulsing emotion that lives in me very being.

Ajay and Alfred Eric looked at me with no small measure of hostility. Ajay was still fuming from Alfred Eric having said, ‘don’t get your hat in a knot’ and Alfred Eric didn’t understand. He had not attended the cultural sensitivity classes offered by human resources. Rule number one in cultural sensitivity is to respect headgear like Ajay’s turban. Al didn’t get it. So here we had Ajay who was ready to pull out a sword and slay Alfred Eric where he stood and there we had Alfred Eric who was an angry mess of a man. He retained a low-grade seething rage for most everything. He didn’t like hats. He’s like a big angry boy. He tries to hide his rage, but one knows it’s there, beneath the surface, like a great white shark. You can sense it. One day he’ll be the guy going around the mall showing people his shot gun and screaming that there’s a sale on bullets. “Come and get yours today! Bang.”

I closed my eyes and found my plastic drinking straw with my tongue like a cow putting its tongue in its nose. I sipped my drink from a massive paper cup that I held onto with two

hands. I listened and floated, oblivious to Grumpy (aka Kim, Tim or Bim - whatever), Ajay and Alfred Eric. They watched me listening to music. They couldn't know that I was beaming inside. Alfred Eric rolled his eyes and said, "Great! That's just great!"

"I know!" I said.

"What?" shouted Alfred Eric.

"Isn't it magnificent? Can't you just picture Judy Garland and the Scarecrow and the..."

I paused, picturing Judy and the Scarecrow and.... I searched for the words "... and the..."

"Tin man and Lion!" said Ajay. The suspense had infuriated him.

"That's right," I said dreamily. "The Tin Man and the lion and don't forget the lion." I wished they could picture what I was picturing but I was pretty sure they wouldn't or couldn't see what I saw. They were in the mall. I was somewhere else. I was on another planet. My planet was Technicolor. It was Oz.

"You said lion twice," said Ajay.

"Pardon me?" I said.

"You said lion twice," Ajay repeated.

"Oh, sorry – Dorothy, the scarecrow and the –"

"No! Not great!" said Alfred Eric waiving his arms excitedly.

"Who's this Judy person?" asked Ajay.

"Judy Garland," I said.

"Garlend?" said Ajay.

"No, *Garland*. Like the plastic boas you put around a Christmas tree," I said.

"Plastic boas? What are you talking about?" said Ajay.

"You mean Dorothy," said Grumpy.

“*Muzak!*” interrupted Alfred Eric. “I finally put that -” he winced an unspoken obscenity, “that - ...out of my mind and then you just had to remind me that it’s there. It took me months to forget the music was there and then you went and ruined it by reminding me that it’s there. You ...” words escaped him. “You... *clown!*”

“Clown?” I asked feeling secretly flattered. He couldn’t know my history, could he? I thought of my dad and my granddad and I thought of our proud artistic heritage that had been so maligned by time. I suddenly had a strange moment. It was like I was in a weird non-circus that wasn’t like a circus at all and yet, it was. “Why wouldn’t you want to hear the music?” I said. “I hear it all the time. It’s always there, in the background. It’s like an unseen clock that ticks. It’s one of the perks of the job, don’t you think? It’s part of my therapy. ”

“Perks?” said Alfred Eric.

“Therapy?” said Ajay.

I didn’t want to get into it. I hadn’t told Ajay that I’d self-prescribed music therapy to deal with my anxiety and depression about future environmental collapse. I didn’t want him to know that I was sad. I wanted him to think that I was a happy guy. I think that musical therapy was beginning to work because I felt much less hostile and hopeless than I usually felt. I am much more willing to talk to people than I was when I lived in a ditch at the side of the road. Humour was returning to my life. Ajay didn’t know it, but his friendship had helped me to reconnect with humanity. Once, when we were by the mall fountain, I almost told him about the art of loving, but then Alfred Eric showed up and I didn’t say anything. I was afraid that Alfred Eric would think that I was a homosexual. Alfred Eric thinks love is gay.

“Al,” I said looking into his eyes beneath his bushy eyebrows, because, of course, where else would they be? “Muzak is one of the reasons I love this place!” I returned to slurping the

last of my root beer with both hands. Al or Alfred Eric as he insisted upon being called was getting mad. He flailed his arms dramatically. “Are you nuts!” he exclaimed. ‘Yes,’ I thought but I didn’t say anything because he had not said it as if it were a question. He lowered his head and glowered at me like an angry bull. “I’ve told you before. If you know what’s good for you, you do not call me *Al*! It’s *Alfred Eric*. Got it? I’m warning you for the last time.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “My apologies. Alfred Eric, I knew that.” I said Eric with a well articulated and distinct ‘k’ sound. “I stand corrected,” I said, again emphasizing the ‘k’ sound. I really shouldn’t taunt this guy but he brought out the worst in me. I changed the subject. “Do you think dreams come true?”

“What?” asked Al, I mean, Alfred Eric!

“Like the song, you know. This is the part where she sings ‘*and the dreams that you dare to dream, really do come true*’. Do you think dreams come true?”

“Who’s that?” said Ajay.

“Judy Garland,” I said.

“Who is this Judy person? Is she a singer?”

“Dorothy,” said Grumpy who was actually Kim or Tim, but nobody was listening to him.

“Yes, she was a...” I started to give Ajay a lesson in Judy Garland lore when Alfred Eric interrupted me again.

“What the *h* are you talking about? I hate this music! I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to know about it!” Alfred Eric shouted and glared into the distance. He winced as if he were enduring an unpleasant proctology exam as the strains of *Somewhere over the Rainbow* continued unabated. We sank into a void in the conversation as the omnipresent music or *Muzak* as it is more commonly known in elevators and buildings around the world, echoed off the walls

in the empty mall. Only myself and the fashionably dressed manikins, some without heads and some with heads (but without faces) listened attentively. I could picture the mall in a post apocalyptic world like the one portrayed in the movie *Twelve Monkeys*. Everything is quiet except for the Muzak which plays incessantly even when there is no one left to hear it because of a pandemic and everyone is dead.²⁷

The strains of violins playing love songs were a bone of contention with my fellow mall workers. It seemed like I was the only employee who genuinely enjoyed the ubiquitous music. Most people in the mall either put up with it - as Ajay had done - did his or her best to ignore it - as Alfred Eric had done - or hadn't noticed there was music at all - as Grumpy or rather Kim (or Tim? Bim?) and Sleepy had done. To me, Al's lack of appreciation for fine music was further evidence of his total lack of soul. Al was as ugly as the city that had spawned him. To help prevent my growing feelings of hatred, I tried to picture him as a baby. He would have been a big baby. Picturing people as babies helped me to consider their innocence. It's hard to be mad at a baby. It's all part of my apprenticeship in the art of loving. "Did you know that Muzak is scientifically engineered sound?" I asked.

"Do tell," said Alfred Eric facetiously. At least I think he was being facetious. He may have been sarcastic. Sometimes I can't discriminate between facetiousness and sarcasm. Sort of a birth defect, really. I ignored Al and I continued for the benefit of Ajay and Grumpy or Kim (or Tim). They listened without comment. "It's true," I continued. "They say that Muzak affects those who hear it, but it doesn't require conscious effort to listen. The Muzak Corporation specializes in physiological and psychological effects and applications of music and they draw on the use of frequency and the research of the founder. I think his name was Jim. But I might be wrong. Maybe it was James. I'm not sure. Anyway, they use a system that provides people with

a psychological *lift* on a subconscious level through programming sound in fifteen minute blocks or segments as they call them.”

“A *lift*? I don’t feel a lift,” said Ajay.

“Are you a *Moo-sack* expert?” said Alfred Eric sardonically or was it sarcastically? He pronounced Muzak, “*moo-sack*” as if the term were somehow bovine related. He was trying to irritate me, but it didn’t work. I’m not feeling irritable. “Poor baby,” I quietly said to him in my head.

“What?” said Alfred Eric. Ajay looked at me.

“No. I’m not an expert. I read about it somewhere,” I said. “Do you feel a lift?” I asked Grumpy or Kim (or Tim), but Grumpy or Kim (or Tim), didn’t respond. I’m not sure he knew I was addressing him and I didn’t want to say his name because I wasn’t completely sure what his name was. Grumpy was my nickname for him. I knew I shouldn’t call him that in my head. His name might be Tim or Kim or some other mono-syllable. Maybe it was Jeff? Clark? ...Anyway, “Muzak is science. It’s supposed to make you feel happier,” I said.

“Music isn’t science. It sucks. I hate it,” said Alfred Eric.

“Really? Music sucks? Are you kidding? Science says you should feel better and have less fatigue when you hear it. You should feel a lift because they order tunes from least to most stimulating and the stimulus value of each segment is determined by factors such as tempo, rhythm, instrumentation and orchestra size. I think they have *Easy Instrumentals* here in the mall. *Easy Instrumentals* target adults aged 35 to 89. When it’s pumped in here the key words that should come to your mind are: *familiar*, *nostalgic*, and *elegant*. If I’m right, this is the final tune because it’s the brightest. I’ll hazard to guess this tune will be followed by fifteen minutes of silence.”

After I said that, surprisingly, we sat listening to the sound of silence. Literally. An instrumental version of Simon and Garfunkel's "*The Sound of Silence*" echoed off the empty mall's walls. The fashionable manikins with and without heads or faces stood alert, their plastic hearts breaking in silence.

"Or not," I said. "Sorry. I'm wrong."

As we sat listened to the *Sound of Silence*, Ajay and Alfred Eric watched me intently. My eyes glazed over like a blind man's donut. Ajay tried to see what I was looking at. He waved his hand in front of my face, but I didn't move or blink. I wasn't looking at anything. I'd gone inside my heart. It was safer in there. They looked at each other and then back at me. I did this some times. When a piece of music triggered an emotional response, I went into my mind and then into my heart. A montage of images from my childhood and my current existence flooded me as the music played. I could hear the words, "Hello darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again. Because the vision softly creeping left its seeds while I was sleeping and the vision that was planted in my brain, still remains, within the sound of silence. In restless dreams I walked alone..."

"Hey!" said Alfred Eric snapping his fingers and slapping his hands in front of my face. Ajay jumped. "What's with this guy?" said Alfred Eric.

"What?" I said.

"You're doing it again," said Ajay. "I told you he does that."

"What?"

"You get this weird far away look in your eyes. It's like you're blind," said Ajay. "I told you not to do that. It freaks me out. I keep thinking you're having a stroke or something."

"Sorry, the music casts a spell over me and I feel..." I said to Ajay with my eyes averted.

“Don’t do that,” said Ajay.

“Interesting,” said Alfred Eric. “We’d all love to know what you feel but, shhhh!” he shushed. “Be quiet. Go back to your never-never land.” Honey, otherwise known as Brittani with an i, according to her Danny’s Hamburgers name tag, returned to our table. She looked resplendent in her brown and orange uniform. She smelled great too. I found myself salivating from her fragrance which was a heady brew of French fries, onion rings, root beer and flowers.

“Sorry for what?” she said tonelessly.

Nobody said anything. My tongue was tied. “I’m ready,” she said, somewhat out of breath, the result of hurrying. My heart beat for her. I felt my soul linking with hers as she delicately chewed her gum and blew a large pink bubble which popped in her face and had to be peeled off - the chewing gum, that is, not her face.

I wished I was gum.

“Good! Not a moment too soon,” said Alfred Eric standing. “I can’t take any more of this,” he said, as if this *‘this’* was something he had to scrape off his shoe.

Given his ample girth and because the chair was attached to the table, he had some difficulty extricating himself from the table-chairs unit. Ajay, Kim (or Tim – let’s forget I ever called him Grumpy, that wasn’t nice) and I watched as the giant security guard grunted to get out of his seat. The three of us were jostled by his movements. He couldn’t push his chair back so he had to squeeze himself out. He grunted with a couple of failed attempts, but then with one great push he squeezed himself out. Just as he did so there was an audible, “Pop!” as if he was a huge cork in a bottle of fat champagne. No one was quite sure where the pop sound came from, but Alfred Eric glared at me anyway. Kim (or Tim, formerly known as Grumpy) silently walked in the opposite direction without a word.

Ajay and I watched as Brittani with an i and Alfred Eric walked to the escalator. They proceeded to float down the escalator like statues. I noted the smell of men's aftershave in the air, probably the result of Alfred Eric's exertions. Ajay looked at me. I was lovingly looking at Brittani with an i. To me she moved in slow motion. To Ajay she was in regular motion. To me, her gum chewing was angelic. To Ajay, it was unpleasant. I stood up and went to the railing so as to get a better look. After the large man and small woman had been gone for an indeterminate amount of time, and, in the midst of Montavoni's *Barcoralle* - which was a perfect accompaniment to the vision of Brittani with an i floating down the escalator - Ajay broke my silent reverie and said, "Stop it. Why don't you ask her out?"

"Who?" I asked.

"You know who. Brittani! That's who!" said Ajay.

"Who? Me?" I asked.

Ajay shrugged and gesticulated with his arms to indicate that I was the only other human present. He was easily annoyed. "Of course *Me!*" he said.

"You love her?" I asked.

"No, no. *You* love her! *You* love her! Why would you think I love her?"

"Because you said, *of course me,*" I said.

"I meant *you*. When I said *Me*, I meant *you!* What a ridiculous name you have! Who ever heard of someone named after a pronoun?"

"Who's on first?" I said.

"What?" said Ajay.

"Exactly," I said.

"Who's on first?" asked Ajay.

“Precisely,” I said.

Ajay looked at me confused. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s Abbott and Costello?” I said.

“Who?” asked Ajay.

“Never mind,” I said.

“Forget all that. It’s obvious that you love her.”

“Oh,” I said mildly. I stood looking down at Ajay seated at the table reading his magazine. After a couple of minutes, I asked for clarification, “It is?” I asked.

“It is *what*?” said Ajay who was intent on reading his Sikh magazine. “Leave me alone. I’m reading my Sikh magazine.” Ajay scratched his head through his turban which moved like an ill-fitting wig.

Ajay loved his Sikh magazine, *The Sikh Times*. He also loved his turban. I envied him. I wished it were appropriate for me to wear such a head covering. I looked over Ajay’s shoulder. On the cover of the magazine there was a cartoon of a Sikh sporting a blue turban and a caption bubble which read, “*My head covering is downright Sikh.*” I noted that there was also a picture of Sponge Bob wearing a turban. Ajay chuckled to himself. Despite his surly demeanor, he did have a sense of humour. The magazine fascinated me. Ajay did not appreciate me leaning into his personal space. He pulled his magazine away and glared.

“Space,” muttered Ajay. “You’re crowding me again. Stop hovering. Go. Sit over there!”

I shifted somewhat and watched Ajay read. Ajay, aware my eyes were upon him said, as he turned another page of his magazine without looking up, “What?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“What nothing?” said Ajay.

“Nothing. It’s just that you said it’s obvious that I love her and I said “*It is?*” because I didn’t know it was obvious.”

“Are you still talking about that? That conversation ended ages ago.”

“It did?” I said.

“Yes. I moved on,” said Ajay. “You’re too slow.”

“I was thinking about what you said. You think it’s obvious that it looks obvious that I love her?”

“Of course it’s obvious that it looks obvious that you love her,” Ajay repeated.

“Of course? How’s it ‘of course’ obvious?” I asked.

“Little things, like the way you turn bright red whenever she’s near,” he said.

“I do?” I said.

“You do,” Ajay confirmed.

“Maybe I have a mild case of rosacea,” I said.

“Rosacea?” Ajay interrupted. “It’s not rosacea. It’s attraction. It’s love. You get a constipated look on your face whenever she’s near.” Ajay put a constipated look on his face to illustrate. “Listen my friend, between you and me, it’s not a good look.”

I paused to consider as he continued to flip through the glossy pages of his Sikh magazine. “She’s pretty, don’t you think?” I said leaning on my broom.

Ajay turned another page and answered without looking away from his magazine, “Very pretty. Not my type. Too much gum chewing for my taste, but for you, she’s perfect. You should get married. Have little noodle children. A man needs children. Don’t be such a coward. Leave me alone.”

“She wouldn’t go out with me let alone marry me,” I said. “Would she?”

“Of course,” said Ajay. “Why not? Why wouldn’t she marry you? What do I care? Leave me alone. I’m trying to read this interesting article about how to deal with irritating people.”

“But I’m a janitor,” I said.

Ajay put his magazine down. “So? What does that mean? You’re a janitor. So what? You work, don’t you? It’s a good job. You don’t sit around complaining,” he said picking up his magazine and reading. “You work – not hard - but you work. You buy food,” he mumbled. “You know about Muzak. You can tell her all about it. I’m sure she’d be interested.”

“I guess so,” I said absently twirling my broom much to the secret consternation of Ajay. I was balancing my broom on my finger until it fell. “I don’t think she sees me in that way.”

Ajay sighed and continued reading. “Must you do that? Without looking up he said with annoyance, “What way? How does she not see you? I look at you. I see you. In what way does she not see you? What’s not to see? You are there. There you are.” He had an amazing way of speaking quickly without taking a breath.

“I don’t know. Not *that* way. You know, not romantically. We’re friends,” I said. “That’s all. Friends.”

“Friends? That’s a good thing. Very good. A good start, don’t you think? Some couples get married and they don’t even have that. At least there’s no hate. I know married people who hate each other. Friendship is a perfectly good way to begin a marriage,” said Ajay.

“You think so?”

“Of course,” said Ajay. “Didn’t I just say that? I don’t say things I don’t mean. Ask her to marry you. Maybe in time she will see you in *that* way. You never know. Stranger things have happened.”

“Think so? What about Al?”

Ajay looked at me. He knew I liked to say Al because of a hostility I felt towards Alfred Eric. He also knew that it wasn't a good idea for me to make fun of Al. "She's not interested in Alfred Eric. I can tell."

"Really? You think so? Why not?" I asked.

"Not her type," Ajay said.

"What's her type?" I asked.

"I don't know. Someone who doesn't stink," Ajay said. "You don't stink. You're clean. You have good hygiene. You have clean teeth. That's important."

"Really? Thanks!" I said sincerely. "I do my best. I wash myself regularly. Do you think she'd go out with me?" I asked.

He looked at me appraisingly. He let out a sigh, rose to his feet and put his magazine in his back pocket. "It's that time," he said. "She's pretty, but I don't think she's out of your league. You're not that repulsive."

"You think so?"

"Of course. You're not that ugly," he said.

"Really? You think so?" I said again. Note to self: I really should not say *really* all the time. It really gets really annoying.

"You're not too disgusting. Ask her out. Start by telling her a joke. She'll like that."

"A joke? Like what kind of joke should I tell?" I asked.

"I don't know. Something clean. I don't know from jokes. Do I look like a joke man to you?" said Ajay testily.

"OK," I said.

“A *dyslexic man walks into a bra*,” said Kim (or Tim). Neither Ajay or I had noticed that Tim (or Kim) had sidled up beside us. It was those red and white sneakers he wore. You never knew when he’d pop up beside you. I jumped. “What?” I asked startled.

“It’s a joke. I heard it on TV. *A dyslexic man walks into a bra*,” Kim (or Tim) repeated. I just looked at him. I was sure that he cut his hair with a bowl on his head.

Ajay laughed. “Don’t you get it?” said Ajay. “A dyslexic man mixes his letters. Instead of a bar, he walked into a bra.”

“Oh. I get it,” I said lying and then I took the plunge. “Thanks... Tim.”

“Harold,” Tim said. “You’re welcome.”

“Sorry. Harold? Your name is Harold as in Harold Lloyd?” I said. “You know: Glasses?”

“Who?” asked Harold who wasn’t at all Harold Lloyd-like.²⁸

“Silent movie comedian,” I said. “Oh,” said Harold (formerly known as Kim, Tim, Bim and Grumpy). I looked at Ajay. When I looked back, Harold was gone. He had slipped away as silently as he’d arrived. Harold reminded me of a Cheshire cat in sneakers, but I don’t know why. He didn’t smile like a Cheshire cat. Maybe it was his hair.

“That’s a good one. Tell her funny jokes like that,” Ajay said in all seriousness.

“OK,” I said.

“Learn more jokes. Get funny,” he said.

“OK,” I said.

“Quit saying, *OK, OK?*”

“OK,” I said. “Sorry.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Criminals usually prey on weakness. They can smell it.

~ Stephen Seagal

Later, after work, I sat at the back of a city bus staring wistfully out the window. I watched street lights file by. I sneezed against the window, wiped the smudge and blew my nose on a hanky. Once again, I found myself with the sniffles. It must be a northern thing. Having a perpetual cold isn't fun. Maybe I had a perpetual cold from living in a drafty warehouse. Oh, well. Whatever. Despite the affliction, I was feeling lucky. I'd caught the last bus. If I had missed it, I would have had to walk. Walking home wouldn't have been the end of the world, but I felt tired so I was glad to have caught the bus. It had been a long day. Pushing a broom is a bummer. (I thought of my mother dieing. Bummer.) I was glad to be sitting. There's nothing like a good sit.²⁹

Out of the corner of my eye I watched a quartet of hoodlums harass a young woman sitting alone. The woman did her best to ignore the hoodlums. I felt sorry for her. They were abrasive, crude and really ugly. Hoodlums, as I defined them, were young men involved in criminal and/or anti-social behaviour. Hoodlums act and think with a mob mentality. They are driven by animal desires. They're filled with hate, greed and envy – not necessarily in that order. They're incapable of feeling empathy and they get their kicks from torturing anyone or anything associated with weakness. They want money. For the moment, they were leaving me alone.

Someone should tell these hoodlums to leave that poor woman alone too, someone, but, not me. The bus driver eyed the hoodlums in his rearview mirror. The driver should do

something. If I were a real man and, if I didn't have this perpetual cold, I would step forward and protect the dignity of that poor innocent woman. She just wanted to be left alone. Despite their invitations for lascivious activity, she made it clear that she had no desire to be romantically involved with any one of them. If I wasn't so tired and if I didn't have this runny nose, I'd teach those hoodlums a lesson they'd not soon forget! I'd do something, but of course I didn't. I was too afraid. I just sat there like the coward that I am. I avoided eye contact and hoped the hoodlums wouldn't see me. The woman looked like she could hold her own. Sometimes I feel myself to be like the proverbial ostrich with his head in the sand. Obviously they were zombie people with some jerkiness in the mix. I did my best to ignore them. It was for the best. I felt like a pod. Then, without warning, I let out a great big wet sneeze.³⁰ I left sneeze residue everywhere - on the window, on my clothes, on my hands. I didn't have time to bring out my hanky. It was a surprise attack. I looked at my wet hands. Gross. The sneeze sounded exactly like an elephant's trumpet, that is, if an elephant had a trumpet and could blow it.

Everyone on the bus, including the hoodlums, the woman and the driver... which was everyone - jumped. They looked back at me. They (everyone) was annoyed. I continued wiping sneeze stuff off myself and looked back without expression. It was a long bus. I felt small and alone at the back. "Sorry," I whispered. There were scowls upon the scowls of the already scowling faces of the hoodlums and the bus driver. The woman didn't exactly scowl, but the erectness of her neck told me of her displeasure. They were irritated. I'd startled them. Nobody likes to be startled, especially hoodlums. They're funny that way. Maybe the hoodlums thought it was a gunshot. If you're a hoodlum, you can't look cool and indifferent when your body is spasmodically reacting to a nerd's sneeze.

I looked down and busied myself. Maybe they won't notice me. I had such a tickle in my throat that it wasn't funny any more. From out of a paper bag which looked like a bag used by rummies to conceal liquor, I produced a bottle of cough syrup and, taking out a spoon I had in my shirt pocket, I slowly and carefully unscrewed the top of the bottle and measured a serving. Given the rocking motion of the bus, pouring syrup into a spoon proved none too easy. It was like being on board a ship and yet, the rocking to and fro of the bus complimented the Hawaiian music I was listening to. I love Tiki Bar music.³¹ Hawaiian music is very therapeutic.

I should have just taken a drink out of the cough medicine bottle like a regular person, but 'noooo,' that's not how my mother taught me how to do it. One must use a spoon and measure medicine carefully. I concentrated upon the task at hand, but pouring cough syrup into a spoon on a bus rolling down a bumpy road requires nerves of steel and grim determination. I was so engaged when the hoodlums, alerted by my elephantine 'trumpet' sneeze, snaked towards the back of the bus and surrounded me like proverbial ooze from a sore. I sat motionless holding a spoonful of cough syrup in mid-air as they leaned into my space. I could smell them. I could also hear yodeling Hawaiians, but they couldn't. They smelled like a heavily perfumed men's room. Not pleasant.

I sat completely motionless except for the tiny coughs that escaped from me involuntarily. Without moving my head, I looked at each hoodlum with my eyes. They appeared to be interested in what I was doing. To be hospitable and to show them that I wasn't a snob, I smiled just a little. I coughed feebly to show them I was harmless. They didn't care. They looked at each other and then at me. Thus, we remained. Motionless. On a bus. Only the jostling and rolling disturbed our stillness until, without warning, I let out yet another explosive sneeze, or should I say, I let out a sneeze-shot for that's how the hoodlums took it. I not only startled them,

I flicked cough syrup on the nearest of them – the little angry looking one. I laughed a little to myself. I couldn't help it. He looked funny. The sneeze sounded Donald Duck-like, if you know what I mean. The expressions on the hoodlums' faces was priceless.

Fun.

I shouldn't have chuckled.

The little angry hoodlum literally exploded with vitriolic rage. The vein in his forehead looked like it would surely burst. I could see his mouth moving, but of course I couldn't hear anything he said because I had my ear buds in my ears (where else?). I was listening to my therapy music at full volume. The Hawaiian music had ended so his exaggerated silent ravings were now being set to an interesting juxtaposition to Offenbach's *Barcarole, Les Contes d'Hoffman*. After hearing it in the mall, I'd been listening to it over and over again on my playlist. It had entered my psyche. I couldn't get enough of it. It made me think of Britanni with an i and her gum. Sweet bubbles of pink.

I tried to wipe cough syrup off the little angry hoodlum's skull sweater. Some syrup had landed in the picture of an eye socket on his shirt. My attempts to clean the syrup off his sweater inflamed him even more. He kept slapping my hand away. I read his lips. He looked like he was saying, "*Get your funning hands off my funning shirt. Fun! Fun! Don't fluff with me!*" At least, that's what I think he was saying. I might be wrong. The screaming hoodlum alerted the bus driver who glared at me in his rearview mirror. No matter how many times I tried to wipe cough syrup off my belligerent hoodlum friend, he'd slap my hand away. As I tried to clean his sleeve, I noticed the little hoodlum's tattoos and piercings. His tattoos were of skeletons, devils and monsters. To calm myself, I tried to picture him as a baby. He must have been a baby at one time. Did I mention that picturing people as babies helps me to see their innocence?

I felt badly for the little hoodlum. He'd decorated himself with images of death and decay and I'd mocked them with cough syrup. I was transfixed by the skull on his sweater and then, when I looked into his face, I noticed the multiple metal objects projecting out of it. That must have hurt. I wondered if he'd mind if I asked him why he adorned himself in such a manner and I wondered what the drawings on his body meant. Was it self-mutilation or personal expression? Perhaps it was a combination of both? Maybe he was crying for attention. Maybe he just wanted to be loved. Is that so wrong? The silver and black piercings stood out against the red of his face and the serpent tattoo on his neck seemed to come alive as he raved. His face was bent into contortions of unpleasantness. Poor fellow. Perhaps, with my sneeze and efforts to wipe the cough syrup off, I'd exacerbated his already sensitive anti-social condition. He slapped my hand away again and again. Seeing the commotion that I was causing, the driver stopped the bus, got up, and walked towards the back. He appeared to be yelling as well, but I couldn't hear him. In all the excitement it hadn't occurred to me to take the ear buds out of my ears (where else?). I found myself preferring steel guitars and violins to the current unpleasantness. The woman sitting at the front looked back at me over her shoulder. She had a delicate neck. Like a dancer. I liked that. The concerned expression on her face showed that she cared for me. I fell in love yet again. My heart reached out to her. Her fear made me love her even more. I felt the need to protect and comfort her. "There, there, my lady. Don't let that bad little hoodlum scare you." The woman surely must have been a beautiful baby. She had kind eyes and brown hair. If Brittani with and i won't marry me, maybe this woman would.

The hoodlum and the driver were now getting into it. *At last*, I thought, something would be done. The driver would finally kick the hoodlums off the bus so decent folk like myself and the woman I love can be jostled by the motion of the bus in our respective seats in peace. We can

be free to fall in love on this bus and then, after we're married, on our anniversary we can reenact our meeting on the bus. I'd wear my scarf and we could hold hands and look into one another's eyes with love. We could be as one.

The driver got a strange look on his face. He got a look on his face that was even stranger than his already strange looking face. Was it fear? Contempt? Constipation? I wasn't sure. Whatever it was, he grabbed my bag, slammed it into my chest and pointed at the door. "*Out,*" the driver shouted, or rather, mouthed at me.

I looked up at him in disbelief. "Me?" I motioned to myself. I couldn't hear my own voice over the violins in my ears. It was like a real life silent movie. I felt disembodied. Montovani was playing a tango in my ears as the driver roughly grabbed me by the arm and yanked me to my feet. I popped up like a rag doll. 'Maybe he wants to dance,' I thought. But no, it wasn't to dance. He had other plans. The driver yanked shoved me towards the door as the hoodlums waved their arms and bared their teeth like triumphant chimpanzees. 'You've got to be kidding?' I thought. Then the driver waved me away shouting, "Get off! Get off!" At least, that's what I think he was saying. He may have been saying, "Get Orff! Get Orff!" in reference to Orff percussion instruments for children, but, that was unlikely given the context of this situation. This wasn't an elementary school music class.

This was transportation.

When he pushed me to the door, it was pretty clear that he didn't mean "Get Orff! Orff!" I hesitated in the stairwell by the door and the driver stepped forward threateningly and gave my shoulder another shove. I clutched my bag and with a dramatic fumble and staggered down the stairs like a pinball going down the centre after the pinball machine has been tilted. The flippers of the rear doors of the bus couldn't touch me. Before I knew what had happened, I was outside

on a cold November sidewalk watching the bus roar away in a cloud of diesel exhaust and street dirt. The hoodlums stood waving and exulting in their victory in the windows at the back of the bus. They were laughing and pointing and making faces at me. The last thing I saw was the back of the woman's head as if she were sitting in a pew at church. I loved her still anyway. Maybe we'd meet again some day. The bus's taillights receded into the wet and foggy autumn night. I felt romantically alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*When lonely days turn to lonely nights,
you take a trip to the city lights
and take the long way home.*

~ Roger Hodgson, *Supertramp*

On the sidewalk, the air hit me like a slap in the face. I gathered my scarf against the cold and stood on the sidewalk getting my bearings. I grabbed a hanky and sneezed again. I went over what had just happened. One minute I'm on the bus having a good sit where' it's nice and warm and the next, I'm on the street taking the long way home. It happened so fast. Go figure. At least I was in the warehouse district and my building wasn't too far away. I began to walk as Montovani's orchestra played *Clair de Lune* or was it *Moonlight Serenade*? I wasn't quite sure. I get those two songs mixed up.

I looked at the moon. I thought about the woman on the bus and I thought about Brittani with an 'i'. It would be a difficult task to choose between the two women. Better to let them choose who gets me. I'd be satisfied with either one. I'm not picky. They were both beautiful in their own way. On the one hand there was Brittani. She looked adorable in her orange and brown uniform blowing pink bubbles and making hamburgers. If I married her, I could probably get at a discount on hamburgers. And then, on the other hand, there was the woman on the bus with the sad brown eyes and the delicate neck. Tough decision.

I walked.

After a while, my feet began to hurt. I developed blisters. To alleviate the discomfort, I found myself hobbling. I came to a street with a row of nightclubs. It was a cool night so no one was sitting at the outdoor tables. I looked in the window of one of the restaurants. The warm glow inside was most appealing. It looked delightful. Everyone looked so happy. People were laughing and talking as they ate and drank. I smiled to myself and mouthed the words I saw people saying. I found myself mimicking them to myself. I pantomimed people having a good time and imagined myself as one of them. I thought of going inside, but after looking in my pockets, I realized I didn't have any money. I took my ear buds out of my ears so they dangled down my shoulders (that is, my ear buds dangled, not my ears). I stood at the window watching people inside with empty pockets protruding. Thus I was standing and peering in the windows when a young couple came out the door and looked at me. I felt silly to be alone. I surely must have looked pathetic to them. I pretended to be talking on a cell phone and mumbled quiet incoherent words to nobody on a non-existent mobile phone. The couple stopped beside me. They appeared to want to talk so I held my pretend phone to my side - concealing it from them - and said, "Yes?"

"Can we borrow your phone to call a cab?" the woman asked, "When you're finished, of course."

"Oh," I said smiling vaguely.

"It'll just take a second," the man said. "Neither one of us should drive." The couple looked at one another and smiled. How beautiful they were. "Oh," I said again. I could feel the nothingness in my hand. "That's impossible," I said.

"Why?" said the man stepping forward. The woman looked puzzled. She appeared to be the kind of woman unused to not getting her way.

“Because,” I lied. “My phone just went dead.”

“Your phone just went dead?” said the man.

“That’s right,” I said.

“But you were just talking on it,” said the woman.

“Yes. But now. It’s dead,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Let me see it,” said the man.

“I don’t think so,” I said shaking my head. “That’s impossible.”

“Let’s go Tom,” said the woman with growing concern.

“Come on. Let me see it,” the man named Tom insisted. “See? This is what I’m talking about! Nobody’s willing to help each other out. Let me see your phone!”

I shook my head again and twisted my arms out of reach. I noticed that the angry man named Tom was well dressed. He smelled of pine-sol. Perhaps he was a lumberjack. The woman wore a red coat. She looked clean, like a well swept floor.

“I’m going to see that phone!” the man named Tom said grabbing my arm.

I resisted by pulling my arm away, but he was strong. He wrestled me for my non-existent phone. “We’re living in a society here!” shouted the man.³² I remembered hearing that on TV. All three of us noticed there was movement by the windows inside the restaurant. People inside were looking out the window.

“Tom! Stop it! Stop it!” the woman shouted as she grabbed Tom’s arms. “He’s not worth it. *People are looking,*” she hissed.

The man named Tom wrestled my arm so that it extended straight out in front of me. I held my hand closed. He slowly pried my fingers open. I was reminded of the scene in *Remains of the Day* where Anthony Hopkins clutches a book to his chest as Emma Thomson pries his

fingers open. I felt Anthony Hopkinsish. It was no use. I quit resisting and opened my fingers to reveal the nothingness of my imaginary phone.

“What?” said Tom.

“There’s nothing there?” said the woman pointing out the obvious.

“Where’s your phone?” asked Tom.

“He doesn’t have one. I can’t believe this,” said the woman as another man who appeared to be the manager stepped outside. “Let’s go,” she whispered. “Here comes the manager.” She was correct. You can always tell when someone is a manager. There’s something about the pinched face and desperate eyes.

“Don’t you have one?” asked Tom.

“One what?” I asked.

“Phone. Don’t you have a phone?”

“No,” I said. “I used to have one,” I lied, “but I lost it.”

“But I saw you talking on a phone,” said Tom.

“I was pretending,” I said.

“He was faking,” said the woman. “Don’t you get it? Can we go now?” She smiled at the manager.

“Is there a problem?” said the manager with an insipid intonation.

Tom looked intently at me as if he’d known me his whole life. “Why did you lie?” he asked. He looked at my ear buds hanging over my shoulders. Things got very quiet for some reason. Everyone present could hear the music from my ear buds. Bonnie Tyler was singing *A Total Eclipse of the Heart*.³³ It was humiliating. When Tom heard that I was listening to a break up song, that’s when I think he really started to feel sorry for me.

“I was embarrassed,” I said pushing the ear buds into my shirt pocket inside my jacket.

The manager looked at me. His face was less pinched than other managers’ faces I’d seen. “Is there a problem?” asked the manager, again with that same insipid intonation.

“No problem,” said the woman smiling without any intonation. “Just having a good time.”

“Why were you embarrassed?” asked Tom ignoring the manager and the woman.

“Tom? Can I speak with you?” said the woman. She put her mouth to Tom’s ear and whispered, “Let’s go.”

“I saw you two and you looked so happy and then you looked at me and I felt... embarrassed,” I said.

“Why’d you feel embarrassed?” asked Tom.

“Because I’m out here looking through the window and I don’t have a mobile phone,” I said.

“Looking through the window?” said the manager insipidly. Maybe he was born insipid. “Why don’t you come in?”

“Yeah, why don’t you go in?” echoed Tom.

“It’s pretty obvious. Isn’t it?” said the woman. Tom looked dumbfounded. It obviously wasn’t obvious to him. The manager and the woman regarded my empty pockets which were protruding from my pants like ineffective waterwings. They shared a look which seemed to say, “He’s one of those.”

“Let’s go. I’ll call a cab inside,” said the woman.

“I can call you a cab,” said the manager.

“What’s obvious? Why don’t you go in?” asked Tom. I think he was a drunk.

The woman looked exasperated. In a hushed tone she said in Tom's ear, "He doesn't have any *money*." The woman looked at me with an insincere smile. I was pretty sure she found me repulsive. Poverty has that effect on some women.

"No money?" the manager said surprised as if he'd never heard such a thing.

"Is that true?" asked Tom.

"No money," I confirmed with a nod of my head. "I have money. Just not on me."

"Don't you have a credit card?" asked Tom.

"No," I said. The manager looked more insipid than ever.

"See?" Tom said to the woman. "Look at this guy! You work hard don't you? I can tell." Without giving me a chance to reply, he continued. "Here's a guy, who you can tell works, but he doesn't have enough money to go in a nice little restaurant like this after a hard day. This is what the working poor looks like."

I blinked like a frightened doe.

"Am I right?"

"It's OK," I said. "I don't mind. I'll just go home, alone and ..."

"It's not OK!" Tom raised his voice and slapped me on the back. "Come! Come with us little buddy. Let me buy you a drink!" He sounded like a Viking or a Russian. I was ready for him to call me comrade.

"As lovely as that sounds, Tom, let me remind you that we've got to go. Tomorrow's a big day, don't you think?" she said wheedling Tom away. "Remember? The club? A wedding? Your parents?"

“One drink. Then we go! It’ll be quick. One drink won’t matter. It’ll take a while for a cab to get here anyway. Right? I like this guy. I feel bad for bending his arm. I didn’t hurt you did I?” he asked.

I rubbed my arm, wincing a little.

“See! I hurt his arm! It’s the least I can do. It’s settled. Come on buddy, what’s your pleasure?” he said pulling me by my arm into the bar. “Let’s get you a drink. Beer? A pint of dark, medium or pale? What’s your pleasure buddy?”

I nodded. I liked the way he called me buddy. I wasn’t anyone’s buddy. “Well... if it’s not too much trouble?” I said. “Anything is good.”

“Great! Come on! You join us. It’ll be fun. You look like a guy who could use some fun. There’s live music tonight.” He led me into the restaurant which was loud and packed. Every table was occupied. People looked up as Tom pulled me along by the hand. I looked over at a man on a small stage playing a guitar, singing in a high pitched voice, “*I’ll give a little bit. I’ll give a little bit of my life for you. So give a little bit...*”³⁴ Tom and I were followed by the woman who was reluctantly following with the manager. The singer on the stage continued, “*Give a little bit of your time to me. See the man with the lonely eyes. Take his hand, you’ll be surprised.*”

“My friends are over here,” Tom said tugging me through the throng. The woman and the manager followed. The woman rolled her eyes and said something to the manager who also rolled his eyes. He smiled a sneering little smile before slipping behind the bar. Tom sat me down in an empty chair at a table with his friends, one of whom I quickly noticed, was Brittani with an i. She didn’t have on her *Danny’s Hamburgers*’ uniform, but I recognized her right away. She looked at me and pretended not to see me. I sat across from her. She must have

realized that I knew that she knew who I was. She acknowledge my presence by saying loudly to no one in particular, “Look it’s M.E.”

“What?” said Tom sitting down beside me. “You know each other?”

“Sure. M.E. is his name,” said Brittani with an ‘i’.

“M.E.? What?” Tom leaned forward to hear over the loud music.

“His name,” said Brittani with an ‘i’.

“His name?”

“His name is Emmeeee!” said Brittani with an ‘i’. “He works at the mall.”

“Emmy? What’s he do?” asked Tom as if I wasn’t there.

“He works at the mall,” Brittani repeated.

“As a what?” asked Tom. He signaled a waitress and ordered two drinks. Tom’s girlfriend pulled up a chair she took from another table. Tom asked her with his eyes if she wanted a drink too. She shook her head and pointed at her watch. Tom touched her hand and said into her ear, “I know. I know. It’ll just take a minute.” She was appeared annoyed.

Brittani asked, “What are you doing here?” at the same time as Tom asked, “What do you do at the mall?”

“We found him lurking outside,” Tom answered with a wink as Brittani answered Tom, saying, “He’s a custodian.” Tom asked, “A custodian?” asked Tom at the same time as Brittani said, “Lurking?”

“A janitor,” I said to Tom who had turned towards Brittani. Communication was difficult. “I was just looking in the window,” I said to Brittani who had turned the other away. It was hard to hear one another over the loud music. A waitress came and placed a tall pint in front of me as Tom turned to his girlfriend who was impatient to leave. I could tell that she didn’t like me. Tom

was busy trying to make amends with his girlfriend as I looked at Brittani. I didn't know what to say. Brittani smiled at me expectantly. I stalled by feigning interest in the musician on stage. I bobbed my head to the music like a total idiot. I wasn't really grooving. I was twitching involuntarily. I gulped down a big drink of dark beer and started choking.

"How do you know Tom?" asked Brittani as I continued to cough and wipe tears from my eyes. I totally lost my composure. It's hard to try and look sophisticated when you're coughing and strings of spit are coming out of your nose and mouth. Brittani, to her credit, did her best to ignore the mess I'd become. I couldn't get my breath. I was creating quite a scene. "He's a lawyer you know," she said.

"Really? A lawyer? We just met," I said looking at Tom and wiping tears from my eyes and spittle from my cheeks. My mind frantically raced for something to say. After a couple of awkward moments I said, "Did you try flapper pie?" Brittani wasn't looking at me as the singer finished his set. When she turned back to face me, I repeated what I'd said, but I did so in a louder voice so she'd hear me. "I said: did you try flapper pie?" The music had stopped and the room fell silent. My words echoed off the walls. People looked at me and Brittani looked at the people looking at me. I looked at Brittani looking at the people looking at me. Our eyes met and she turned away as if my gaze were too much. Despite not getting an answer to my question or being shown any interest in a flapper pie conversation, undaunted, I started to explain the particulars of flapper pie. Don't ask me why. I just did. I couldn't think of anything else to say. "It's custard, meringue and a graham cracker crust. To make it you first..." I stopped. She wasn't listening. I could tell. Maybe it was the way she shifted in her seat and looked the other way. I don't know - I'm sensitive to these sorts of things. Brittani looked at other people as I, like a moron, continued to explain the ins and outs of flapper pie making. Although I spoke of pie,

what I was really doing was showing her how much I loved her. She had to know that I had fallen in love with her the moment I saw her when she first served me a hamburger. I hated burgers, but I kept going back. I loved the way she looked in her uniform. I loved the way hamburgers smelled even if I hated how they tasted. I loved root beer because of her. Brittani turned her head as I spoke and she touched my arm as if to excuse herself and then she said something to a tall handsome man who was rising from his chair to leave. She leaned towards me and said something in my ear. I could feel her breath puffing life and perhaps some spittle into my ear. "See that guy over there?" She pointed at a gallant looking man sitting across from us. "His name is Mike." I nodded my head without comprehension. "He's a millionaire!" she said. I looked at her as she continued. "He lives in a mansion! He's asked me to go out with him! He's taking me to a party!" she said excitedly. "*Coming!*" she called to Mike the millionaire who was yachting away through the parting crowd. "See you," she said. I smiled dumbly. Just as she started to get up, I took one last shot, "*What did the green grape say to the purple grape?*" She looked at me. "*Breathe, idiot! BREATHE!*"

"What?" she said.

She looked at me and showed no signs of either understanding or caring to hear why the grapes had spoken as such. She was elsewhere, I could tell. Before turning to go, she grabbed my arm, "Wish me luck!" she said just before she walked away. I watched her walk go. "Luck," I said to no one.

"That's a good one," said Tom. I looked at him confused. "*Breathe!*" he said. "Good one." Tom watched me watching her walking away. "Don't mind her. All she cares about is money. She wants a rich man." Leaning forward so his girlfriend wouldn't hear him, he said, "I don't have enough."

“Enough?” I said.

“Money,” Tom said. “Oh,” I said. I reached forward to pick up my beer glass and accidentally knocked it over spilling the remains on the table. I pulled out my hanky to wipe up the spill. Tom looked somewhat askance at my hanky. “Sorry,” I said. “That’s okay,” said Tom brushing beer off his sleeve. “It’s nothing. We’ll get you another one. Tell me about being a janitor, I mean, custodian. Is it interesting?” My nose suddenly began to run again. I wiped my nose with the rag I’d just been using to soak up beer. From that point on, everything smelled like a brewery. Tom’s girlfriend tapped him on the shoulder, “I’m going,” she said with finality. “You’re welcome to stay with your new friend.” She gave me a disparaging look. There was no escaping her meaning. When she said the part about staying with ‘*your new friend*,’ she clearly meant: ‘you’re welcome to stay with your new *disease*.’ I think I was the disease.

Tom looked at me apologetically and then he looked back at his girlfriend who was leaving. I didn’t blame him. If our situations were reversed, I too would have left with his girlfriend. He tried to bridge the gap between us, but the gap was too wide. We were worlds apart. His girlfriend would have none of it. Before leaving he tossed money on the table and said, “Have another one on me. Nice meeting you. Maybe I’ll see you at the mall.” He left before I could decline his gift or reciprocate with my own.

I watched Tom and his girlfriend leave the restaurant. They were arguing. The other people at my table looked at me in my janitor blues and then they looked at one another.

“Well, we should go,” said a man at my table in a pinstriped suit to another pinstriper.

“Yeah?” said the pinstriper confused. And then he saw me, “Oh, yeah. Look at the time! We should go.” In a flurry of movement everyone at the table vanished leaving me as sole occupant. I sat alone at a big island of a table. It was as if a big stink bomb had gone off and I

was the stink bomb. Ajay was wrong. I did stink. I felt self-conscious sitting at a big table by myself. I'd gone from feeling happy to feeling as blue as the blue in my uniform. The manager gave me what I took to be a dirty look. It was difficult to tell, given the pinched nature of his face.

I looked at my empty glass as if it was the most interesting thing in the world, as if all the answers to life's riddles were to be found somewhere in the depths of the glass. Many people I'd known had thought as much. A waitress returned and started clearing empties from my table. "Want another one?" she asked wiping the table and taking my glass. "Sure," I said picking up the money before she could clear it away with the empties. I handed her the money, saying, "One more please. And then, that's it." Except I didn't actually say, "that's it." I waved my hands to show, "that's it." I speak with my hands. She hurried away without speaking and I fell in love with her. She returned shortly with another full glass. On the small stage the *Supertramp* tribute band continued to play. They were quite good imitators. As I drank a beer at my newly cleared table, I watched people listening to the music. I took a big gulp and spilled beer on my shirt and left beer foam under my nose. I don't get out much. In fact, I don't get out at all. A woman at another table watched me and then looked away. I caught her glance. She knew what I was about. I giggled to myself which was something I don't normally do. Me, giggle? I giggled at my giggle. I knew that the woman at the next table who had glanced at me saw me as someone other than I was. The way I appeared to her and the way I appeared to myself were two different things. I wanted to tell her that I really didn't have a drinking problem. Having a drink in a restaurant was a rare occasion. 'Oh, well,' I thought. She doesn't know me. And then, it happened.

Again.

Maybe it was the music, maybe it was the beer, maybe it was the woman, the waitress, Brittani with an i, Tom, Tom's girlfriend, the men in pinstripe suits - I don't know. Whatever it was, when I put my mug down after a second big swig – which I did in slow motion, gulp, gulp, gulp - I disembodied myself. In that instant, as my beer mug hit the table like a gavel – *bang* - I understood the world in its entirety. I felt total awareness. I understood the people surrounding me. If this were a movie (which it was, albeit, a movie inside my head), this would be the part where everything would go in slow motion. In an instant I stepped outside what was going on around me and entered another dimension, a dimension where the world proceeded as it normally appeared to proceed, but from which I'd stepped out. I had stepped between the minute and second-hand. The clock had stopped for me. I had somehow entered the speed of light. It was a Great-Aunt Polly experience. I was outside my body and outside time.

The people drinking and talking and listening to the music didn't know that I knew what they were all about. I saw through their game. I saw behind their personas. I knew what was *really* going on. All of it was phony. That's right, people were a façade to each other. They're all fake. No one actually knows anyone, least of all themselves. In slow motion, as if from above, I saw people talking like they were barking dogs, seals or screeching monkeys. People were creatures speaking their creature language. They were speaking German. They were aliens and I was alienated. In an instant I felt the profound feeling of loneliness and isolation that I'd felt before. Tom had briefly rekindled my belief in humanity, but now that he was gone, all feeling for people went with him. I felt alone. I grimaced as if I were smelling blue cheese.

When the manager looked at me, I matched his expression and then I disappeared. Before leaving I watched the keyboard player sing Supertramp's *Dreamer*. It was a song I had heard before. Maybe *Dreamer* was my theme song? "*Dreamer, your nothing but a dreamer. Well can*

you put your hands in your head, oh no.” As quickly as I’d disembodied from myself, I snapped back like a rubber band. I came back to myself and watched beautiful people standing in the doorway waiting for my table. They kept looking and pointing at me. I knew they wanted my table. I was in the way. I gulped the remainder of my drink and slipped out of time again. Music followed me as I rose from my seat and made my way across the floor between crowded tables. People didn’t seem to know that I was dancing because my dancing was at a speed they couldn’t comprehend. They didn’t see me dancing circles around their tables. I moved beyond the comprehension of their dimension. Only dogs could see me dance. I nodded my head to the manager as I met his cheesy expression. He did not smile. He wasn’t as bad as I thought, though. I kind of liked him. I knew that he knew that I knew that I didn’t belong here. As I passed the beautiful people I said, “Yeh ken half me tableaux.” Then I laughed to myself. I must have appeared crazy to the beautiful people. The thought that I appeared crazy to them made me laugh even more. Then zing, I didn’t feel animosity for them. I loved them all. They didn’t know what I knew. I felt both glad and sad to leave the bar. Outside I could hear my song. I paused and listened to the music coming from inside.

I said, “Far out, what a day, a year, a laugh it is.”

You know, well you know, you had it comin’ to you

Now there’s not a lot you can do.

Outside, I looked at the moon and listened to the night. I listened to the muffled sound of the music coming from inside the restaurant. It was a clear night. I put on my moon gazing glasses which are really just my glasses. I call them moon gazing glasses because I can see things far away. It occurred to me that my glasses were rather Harold Lloyd-like. I wondered how I’d not noticed that before. When the song was over, I heard people inside the restaurant cheer. I

took their cheers to be for me. I took a bow, left my imaginary stage and began to walk home.

After awhile, I settled down and put in my ear buds. The soundtrack in my mind played that old Bee Gee's song I'd heard when I was young. It always brought a lump to my throat.

*I started a joke,
which started the whole world crying,
but I didn't see, oh no,
that the joke was on me, oh no.*

I felt sorry for myself. In my mind I knew my life had been a joke. I was a punch line. I was alone. Even though it was November I felt like it was the first of May when Christmas trees were tall.³⁵ I had flashbacks of the slow song at a school dance where couples took to the floor leaving the wallflower that I was standing alone on the periphery where I would watch longingly from the side. Alone again. *Naturally*. From Robin Gibb to Gilbert O'Sullivan I walked the deserted streets of the warehouse district and heard the words to a song.

*In a little while from now
If I'm not feeling any less sour
I promise myself to treat myself
And visit a nearby tower
And climbing to the top
Will throw myself off
In an effort to
Make it clear to who ever
Wants to know what it's like
When you're shattered*

Shattered. That's how I felt. I walked to the rhythm of the empty streets. Visions of my life played in my mind. Where was this coming from? At work with Ajay, everything had been fine, but now... What was happening to me? I was lapsing into sadness again. I'd made such progress. I thought I'd left depression behind. What were these melancholy lyrics doing inside my head? I understood the words as if I'd written them. And then I thought, 'This isn't so bad. This is a good thing. It's all part of my apprenticeship.' I realized that love isn't well understood unless it hurts (at least some times). Such is life for those prepared to feel. As I walked, I moved in and out of the street lights' glow. The night was liquid. I was disintegrating.

CHAPTER NINE

A girl phoned me the other day and said...

"Come on over, there's nobody home." I went over.

Nobody was home.

~ Rodney Dangerfield

Here we are, trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why.

~ Kurt Vonnegut

When I arrived at my building, my feet were killing me. I stood at the base of my building and looked up. Clouds racing in the sky lent to the illusion that the building was moving. It stood like a big, old and dark ship. It was a five story, brick warehouse that was built in 1907. It was currently being used to store an eclectic assortment of stuff including antique furniture, taxidermy, old signs, a Model T, a vintage trailer, toys, art, statues – you name it. If it was rare, it was in there. The owner of the building was an eccentric fellow who was obsessed with collecting strange and wonderful things. He bought and sold these rare things and sometimes, he rented even them out for use in movies. I was hired as the janitor for the building. It was my job to sweep and dust. Nothing more. The owner of the building did not know that I had secretly move in. I'd been living in the warehouse for about a year and in all that time, I never tired of looking at the assortment of objects the owner had rescued from vandals and the garbage dump. I often wandered the building at night looking at things until I went to bed in an old camper trailer that was parked inside the warehouse on the main floor. The trailer was a fully restored turquoise green 1947 Westwood Tahoe. The owner thought there would be a rich person

willing to pay \$45,000 for the trailer, but so far and to my good fortune, no one was interested in buying it. The trailer was roped off in a retrospective camping display, complete with stuffed animals – a black bear and a bobcat - trees, vintage lawn furniture, a manikin I'd named Jimmy and an electric bonfire that I liked to sit beside. When I sat on a lawn chair in the display, I couldn't help but feel myself to be living in the past. Few people, aside from the owner of the building, ever went into the trailer. It was the perfect hideout for someone needing a hideout. I didn't need a hide out. I just needed a place to live for free. I camped in the warehouse all year round, hiding evidence of my presence and living in stealth mode. I kept the few things that I owned carefully hidden from sight and cleaned up any mess that I happened to make as quickly as I made it.

Back on the sidewalk, in front of the warehouse, I stood there feeling tired. I searched my pockets for the key to get into the building, but finding the key was proving difficult. I searched every pocket, but I couldn't find it. After a few moments of searching I forgot what I was looking for and then I remembered, '*Oh, yes. The key!*' How could I get into the building without a key? I thought of sleeping on the ground in the alley. It would have been so easy. I was so tired, but then a car came and I felt suddenly paranoid. I ran or rather, hobbled, to the back of the building. My feet were killing me. In the alley behind the warehouse I looked up at the fire escape. If I could get up there, I might find an unlocked window and get in that way. I jumped up to reach the ladder that was suspended on a track by the fire escape, but, try as I might, I couldn't reach the bottom rung. I needed some height. I looked for something to stand on. There were metal garbage cans at the side. I dragged one into position beneath the ladder and clumsily climbed on top. Once on top of a garbage can, I stretched as high as I could, but still couldn't reach the ladder so I dragged a second garbage can, lifted it on top of the first, and climbed on

top. It wasn't as easy as it sounds. Still not high enough! I dragged a third can into position. Maybe it was the moonlight; maybe it was the old back alley or maybe it was the silliness of having to climb a tower of garbage cans behind an ancient brick warehouse, whatever the reason, I had an overwhelming feeling that I was back in time. In my head it was 1914. I could hear Scott Joplin playing the *Weeping Willow Rag* and *Easy Winners* in my head. I knew these songs because Great-Aunt Polly used to play them for me when I was a boy. She played them so many times – over and over and over again - they became part of me. I lived and breathed Scott Joplin's ragtime music. I'd lie on the floor and play with my toy cars as she hammered away on her old upright piano. With this musical accompaniment playing in my brain and the ridiculousness of the situation – namely, climbing on top of a tower of garbage cans in a moonlit back alley - my low spirits began to rise. I rose by increments to the top of my precarious tower of tin garbage cans and felt ludicrous. Strange as it sounds, it was just what the doctor ordered. A little wackiness on this sad night was what I needed to get over myself.

At the top of the tower of cans, I was tipsy and the cans were wobbly. Safety at last!³⁶ If I had been in the mood to be funny, this would have been funny, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to be funny, which of course, made it, strangely enough, even funnier. This was serious. I had to be careful. In this seriousness there is comedy. Because no one was there to appreciate the spectacle of my climbing a tower of garbage cans, I felt funny which, again, made it funnier to no one but myself. There's nothing more funny than someone *not* trying to be funny doing funny things for no one to see.

I was suddenly reminded of the things my dad used to do. He did crazy stuff like this all the time. He didn't think rationally. He lived creatively. Maybe it was from a lifetime of falling on his head - nothing ever went right for him, which helped him to work on ways to do things

differently. It was as if the universe was out to get him and he had to figure out ways to circumnavigate the universe. Inanimate objects were problematic. If he had an umbrella, it wouldn't open.³⁷ For anyone else the umbrella would open no problem, but for him, it refused. If Dad tried to open a cutlery drawer in the kitchen, it would stick. He'd pull harder and the drawer until it would shoot out spilling cutlery everywhere. He was intentionally trying to be a slapstick artist, it just sort of happened. Slapstick was the world he inhabited. Objects toyed with him. In his hands everything came to life, often becoming something other than what the object was intended to be. It didn't help that he had a convoluted sense of logic. For example, if he needed sugar for his coffee, he'd carry one teaspoon at a time across the room instead of moving the sugar bowl closer to his cup. In so doing he'd spill sugar all over the floor and then he would slip and fall on the floor. Mom was always having to clean up after him. Dad was a walking tornado. He put the bumble in the word clumsy. He tripped and fell all the time and yet, never seemed to get hurt. When I think of Dad, the song that immediately comes to my mind is Huey 'Piano' Smith and his clowns'³⁸ hit *Don't You Just know It*. I can hear the song and see a montage of images recording Dad falling down, Dad doing one crazy thing after another, Dad knocking things over and stumbling everywhere he went. He was hilarious without trying. It was his seriousness which made him even funnier.

On the tower of garbage cans I had a Dad moment. I felt like he must have felt. When I finally got to the top of the garbage cans that were precariously standing one upon another, I ever so slowly reached my hand up and grabbed hold of the fire escape ladder, but the moment I put my weight on it, the ladder shot down its track knocking the garbage cans asunder and spilling their contents everywhere and then when I climbed off the ladder to clean up the mess I made, the spring loaded ladder shot back up its track, "*Shhhhting!*" said the ladder.

I did my best to pick up the garbage strewn about the alley. Not to be outdone, I reassembled the tower of cans and climbed back up top. I guess there would be a tower tonight.³⁹ I balanced on the cans again, slowly straightened up and reached for the ladder. I took a leap of faith and again the ladder rocketed down its track knocking the cans and their contents into the alley with a crash. This time, however, I made no effort to clean up the mess. As Alfred Eric would say, "To 'h' with it." I just looked at the mess without expression and thought of Buster Keaton. I then turned my head to look up the ladder and proceeded to climb to the spirit in the sky.⁴⁰ I climbed up the stairs on the old metal fire escape and tried to open a door on the second floor. It was locked. I tried to open windows on either side of the door. Nothing would budge. The place was locked tight. I clambered to the third floor, tried the same thing and then moved on to the fourth floor. I still couldn't get in. I climbed to the top floor which was the fifth. The door and windows didn't open there either so without really thinking about what I was doing, I crawled onto the wide ledge and tried to open another couple of windows without success. It was then that I stopped to take a rest. All this climbing and crawling on hands and knees was hard work. I pulled out my hanky and wiped my brow and my nose. The hanky smelled like beer. I held it out and accidently dropped it. I watched the hanky slowly fall then I sat on the ledge with my feet dangling and looked out at the city under a starry sky. It was quite a remarkable. Again my heart lifted. I didn't feel afraid, but then again, heights have never bothered me. This was nothing. When I was a little kid, I would stand on top of a little platform on a long pole that Dad would hoist up and balance on his thumb. It was a great bit. My mother didn't like it. She said it was too dangerous. My dad didn't agree. When I got too big to hold up with his thumb, Dad used the top of his head. Eventually I got too big for that too. Dad said I was fearless as a kid. I'm not sure what happened to me as I grew up. As I got older, I became more and more afraid, but not

tonight. For whatever reason, I didn't feel any fear whatsoever. From my perch on the ledge I looked out at rows of old brick buildings. Over time they had all fallen into disrepair and would probably get torn down in the next few years to make room for yet another freeway. The idea of another freeway struck me as ironic. Freeways were anything but free. Looking around, I found myself surrounded by abandoned factories, warehouses, apartment houses and storefronts. It was like an economic bomb had gone off. At one time this area had been an industrial hub of activity, but nobody made things here anymore. This neighbourhood which had been busy at the turn of the twentieth century now stood empty. Back when there were trains and street cars, when people lived and died here, this was a bustling area filled with life. Now, it was quiet. Except for a few pigeons and eccentrics, the place was deserted.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the stars and at the clouds in the sky that were slowly floating by. There was a full moon. I thought about my dad and wondered where he might be. I wondered if he was still alive. Could he be looking up at the same sky I was? I thought about my grandfather who would be asleep by now on his cot in the nursing home. I felt sorry for him. For such a happy guy, he had become a sad old man. Too bad it had come to this. He never used to be sad. He was as his sister Great-Aunt Polly had described him: the happiest man alive. He had been extraordinary. He knew things that others didn't seem capable of knowing. He had always been filled with fun. But now, his demeanor had changed. Life had beaten him to a pulp. He couldn't wait to die and it was just a matter of time before he did. The end was near. I could feel it. It was just too bad that he wouldn't get the chance to do anything fun before he left this world.

I swiveled myself and stood up on the ledge. I walked towards another window and pushed the frame up. To my surprise, the window opened. I reached my leg through the now

open window and felt around in the darkness with my foot, but instead of touching the floor as I had expected, I lost my balance and tumbled inside knocking whatever it was I bumped onto the floor with a loud crash. “*Oops*,” I thought. I might have said, “*Oops*” out loud. I don’t know. I can’t remember. I inched my way through the blackness of the room I was in. With a sigh of relief and only minor bruising, I made it to the stairs and then down to the main floor. That’s when I thought to check my breast pocket. There, of course, was my key. Note to self: *Check breast pockets for keys first.*

On the main floor there was a bare light bulb above the front door. Dim as it was, it was bright enough for me to see my way to the trailer. I don’t normally turn on lights because I don’t want anyone to know I’m here - especially this late at night - but there was one light that I simply had to turn on. It was my favourite light. It was a large fake moon with a light inside. It was probably from a theatrical performance or an amusement park. Against the wall there was one of the first Coca-Cola vending machines. The owner kept it stocked with soda pop. I opened the lid, selected a pop and opened it with the bottle opener at the front of the machine. I took a sip of the pop. It tasted fantastic. It was grape. Beneath the artificial moonlight, outside the trailer that was roped-off in a retrospective camping display, I stepped over the velvet rope and sat on an old folding deck chair that was already set up. To my left there was a bear who I gently patted on the snout. He didn’t look too happy. I took another sip of my soda pop and kicked off my shoes. It was heaven. I thought I heard a cricket. It was cool in the warehouse so I switched on the fake electric bonfire to warm my hands and as I gazed at the red glow of the heater’s coils and looked up at the fake moon, I imagined myself to be out in a great boreal forest. As there aren’t any boreal forests left, this would be as close as I would ever get. Beside me sat an antique gramophone with a large brass horn. I leaned over, switched on the gramophone and carefully

lowered the needle onto a record. There was a crackling sound and then Charles Harrison began singing, *I'm always chasing rainbows*. It was one of my favourite songs. It could be Ladybug man's theme song. Come to think of it, it could be a theme song for my soundtrack. It took me back to 1918. With a gentle contented sigh, I made myself comfortable. The scratching of the needle on the record added to its charm. Charles' voice singing from the great beyond echoed in the empty warehouse...

At the end of the rainbow there's happiness

and to find it how often I've tried

But my life is a race, just a wild goose chase

and my dreams have all been denied!

Why have I always been a failure? What can the reason be?

I wonder if the world's to blame? I wonder if it could be me?

I'm always chasing rainbows, watching clouds drifting by

My schemes are just like all my dreams

Ending in the sky

Some fellows look and find the sunshine,

I always look and find the rain.

Some fellows make a winning sometime,

I never even make a gain, believe me,

I'm always chasing rainbows,

waiting to find a little blue bird in vain.

After I listened to the record again and again, I pushed the music into my subconscious, I remembered the greeting card with the picture of a garden and the clown on it that I'd put in my

pocket. I pulled out the card and examined the picture illuminated as it was by my artificial moonlight. The picture reminded me of my granddad who had had a garden just like the one in the picture. The picture and the nostalgic music brought tears to my eyes. I wiped them on the bear's fur. He didn't seem to mind. I thought about my granddad. When I was a boy, my granddad and I would sit on lawn chairs as he sprayed water from a hose onto vegetables he'd planted in neat little rows. He loved his little garden. Sometimes he'd shoot me with the hose and we'd laugh. Like my dad, granddad had also worked in the circus as a clown. He had retired before small circuses with animals fell into disrepute. He had been a really funny guy. His sense of humour was understated and quiet which was pretty much the opposite of my dad's more wild sense of bazaar comedy. Granddad didn't show much in the way of facial expressions when he performed. It was part of his appeal. He made the surreal things he did look completely effortless. If he juggled, he would look bored. I examined the picture of the garden on the card. The scene took me back to a time when I was a boy. Granddad and I would sit in his small urban garden watching white cabbage butterflies. It was a nice time. Long after Granddad had retired, he'd put on shows at parties. He'd pretend to be Sir Harry Lauder⁴¹ and sing *It's in the Book*. I can still see him in his Harry Lauder outfit complete with makeshift kilt, tam, pipe and walking stick. Maybe it was the music. Maybe it was because I was exhausted or maybe it was the beer I'd consumed, whatever it was, I fell asleep and, in so doing, I had the most wonderful dream.

In my dream I could hear Charles Harrison singing *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*. I knew the year to be 1918. I was in a large garden patch - just like in the one in the picture on the greeting card I'd so intently examined. Charles Harrison was singing to me in person as a piano player accompanied him. We were all outside in the garden. Charles Harrison and the piano player were in black and white. Everything else was in colour. Just beyond the garden which was

plowed into neat rows, there were rolling hills and trees and birds. It was beautiful. I inhaled deeply and smiled. I watched a blue bird that appeared in the style of a pre-war Disney cartoon. The bluebird was using a bucket and mop to wash a tree branch. He winked at me and a ladybug flew by giving me a thumbs up. I could see flowers and bees buzzing in the flowers. It was paradise. I could smell fresh country air. It didn't smell like a warehouse or a mall. I was wearing a wide brimmed hat and dark clothing from long ago. I crouched on my knees and planted a seed one seed at a time.⁴² With one hand I pushed a finger into the soil up to the knuckle and then, with the other hand, I dropped in a seed. I heard someone calling. I jumped up smiling and ran into a small cottage. In the cottage I found Brittani with an i. She was wearing her *Danny's Hamburgers* uniform. She was smiling too. She imitated my walk and we both laughed. How happy I felt. She told me to get ready for supper. I set my rake on the table and looked at puppies in a bassinet. I picked up a puppy and cradled it. The scene was oddly familiar, as if I'd dreamed it before.

CHAPTER TEN

Dream as if you'll live forever. Live as if you'll die today.

~ James Dean

In the morning I heard a strange sound that woke me up. The sound had entered my dreams. It was a spooky *wooooo-wooooo* sound. I found myself slouched on a folding deck chair in the weirdest campground I'd ever seen. A bobcat and a bear looked upon my countenance in wonderment yet I didn't find their presence in the least alarming. I scratched my head and yawned. When I yawned, I heard the *wooooo-wooooo* sound again. For a moment I thought the sound had emanated from me. I tested this theory by opening my mouth again. Nothing happened. The sound was *not* coming from me. It was the kind of sound that you'd hear in an old sci-fi movie. After pondering my situation for a while, I realized that the sound wasn't random. It had regularity. It was actually a ghostly rendition of *Somewhere over the Rainbow* and it was coming, not from over the rainbow, but from all around me. I couldn't localize it. I seriously wondered if I was still asleep. What kind of lucid dream was this? My brain wasn't helping. It was unresponsive. I found myself in some kind of weird forest. It was like the music was coming from the trees. On my right, I looked at the black bear who continued to bare his teeth and look back at me in surprise and on my left sat a bobcat who met my gaze with a similarly surprised expression, "*What're you looking at?*" the bobcat seemed to be saying. I started to enjoy the music. It was strangely soothing. On a little camp table at my side there were the remnants of a bottle of pop. I took a drink. As I drank, I heard another noise, a clattering sound which broke the

spell cast by the *woooo-woooing*. My brain finally started to engage. The spell was broken. I recognized the sound as that of a garage door opening. It sounded like a warehouse door. Then it hit me: I'd slept in and the owner had come into the warehouse early. If I was found in my current state, I would not only lose my job as janitor of the warehouse, I would lose my home.

I jumped up, or, at least I tried to jump up. It was more of a *fall out* than a *jump up*. My back was fused into a curved position and my feet were killing me from last night's walk. My back wouldn't straighten. I crawled to the trailer where the door remained open and I slipped inside the trailer closing the door quietly behind me. No sooner had I done so when a shadow fell on my chair in front of the trailer. I peeked out the trailer's window and saw the warehouse owner step over the velvet rope and into the camping display. On the camping table was the greeting card I'd left out the night before. The owner examined the greeting card then he looked at the fire place and the phonograph. I assumed that the jig was up, but I wasn't exactly ready to reveal myself. From the trailer window I followed the warehouse owner with my eyes. He picked up the greeting card and went around looking to see if anything else had been disturbed. He went around the back of the trailer and out of my line of sight. I tucked my shirt in as best I could and quietly followed him. With only minor pain, I managed to straighten my back and stagger along behind. I hoped the owner wouldn't hear the cracking of my bones and the shuffling of my feet.

The owner, Mr. Milton, could best be described as idiosyncratic. Physically, he was tallish, pinkish and on the heavy side of pudgy with longish brown hair and curving bangs. His hair reminded me of Bobby Goldsboro and I wondered if he was, in fact, wearing a wig. He had on a 1970s double knit plaid disco leisure suit with a safari jacket that was blue gray, off white and medium pinkish-beige in colour. To complete the ensemble, he had on a contrasting multi-coloured blue-green nylon shirt in a Tiki bar design with a big flat collar that he wore over top of

the suit's collar. He had on orange tear-drop shaped aviator glasses and white shoes. He looked like he was going to a leisure suit convention. It took courage to wear an outfit like that. I admired Mr. Milton for his panache. He was a man out of time.

As I watched unobserved, Mr. Milton slowly went around the warehouse looking for an intruder. The intruder was, of course, me, but he didn't know that. I crept along behind him, keeping out of sight. When he walked, I walked. When he stopped, I stopped. I tried hard not to breathe which, after a while, made me feel breathless. Mr. Milton stopped in front of a box that was about the size of a bread bin. The box was wooden and looked like an old radio. It had a two foot tall antenna sticking out the top, a circular antenna jutting out the side and a couple of knobs protruding from the front. Mr. Milton approached the box with reverence. He cracked his fingers, put an earphone into his ear and flicked a switch. He then positioned himself in front of the box with his hands raised in the air. He put his left hand just above the side antenna and he held his right hand a few inches from the vertical antenna. He closed his eyes and gently vibrated his right hand up and down in mid air. When he raised his left hand the *woooo* sound I'd heard earlier grew louder. The more he raised his left hand, the louder the sound became. He waved his right hand delicately, somehow controlling the pitch of the sound without actually touching anything at all. What I heard was a cross between a ghost woman humming to herself and a violin made of jelly. He played *Clair de Lune* by Claude Debussy. With eyes closed he conducted music that came out of thin air. I felt absorbed in the sound. It was like I was a spill and the music was an absorbent paper towel soaking me into itself. My eyes glistened with tears. The music hit a nerve and I went into a trance. At some point, I must have shifted my weight which made a creaking sound in the wooden floorboards. Mr. Milton heard the creak and froze. I backed out of sight and, in so doing, made more creaks. Mr. Milton walked towards where he

thought the creaking sound was coming from. He didn't take out the ear phone. When the wire reached its end, his head jerked back and the earpiece popped out.

Fortunately for me, Mr. Milton went in the opposite direction to where I was. Once he was out of sight, I made my way to the back door, but I was too slow. Mr. Milton rounded a corner and bumped right into me. I've never seen a man in a leisure-suit jump so high. He let out a yell and went into leisure-suit orbit. He yelled, "HOO-O-OAA-OOP!" It sounded strangley Hawaiian. I thought he was going to have a heart attack and yet, oddly enough, not a hair on his head went out of place.

"Geez you scared me!" he said breathlessly. "What are you doing here?" As he spoke, he held his chest with both hands and hobbled in a circle. "I almost had a heart attack!"

"I forgot my sweater," I blurted. "I came to get it." When I lie, I tend to blurt.

"Geez!" he repeated. "Geez! Man! Wooh! O-oaaa-oop! Let me catch my breath. You scared the *be-Jesus* out of me! Binks, right? Emmy? You're the..." He bumped a pen out of his pocket.

"Janitor," I finished. "It's M.E.E."

"Emmy? Right. Woo!" he said picking up his pen. "Emmy... man!"

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't know anyone was here."

"Neither did I. Geez!" he said again laughing. "Good one!"

"Sorry," I said.

"No, no... Not at all!" said Mr. Milton. "I should thank you. I enjoyed that! It's fun to be scared, don't you think? Vincent Price said, 'It's as much fun to scare as to be scared.' But then, that's not really applicable here, is it? Because that would mean you purposely tried to scare me like Vincent Price would have done, but I don't think you did, did you?" Mr. Milton didn't give

me a chance to reply before he continued, "Of course you didn't. You just happened to come in to get your sweater and I have an over active imagination." Mr. Milton spoke without punctuation. In a lower voice, verging on a whisper he said, "I get spooked when I play the Theremin. It reminds me of...clowns."

I didn't know how to respond. '*Clowns?*' I thought.

Mr. Milton continued, "It's pronounced 'There-e-min.' It's an early electronic musical instrument whereby a tone is generated by two high-frequency oscillators and the pitch is controlled by the... here, let me show you," he said leading me. He walked in front of me, turned suddenly and I bumped into him a second time. "You don't touch anything around here, do you? I mean you dust. You don't move anything do you?" I shook my head. "No? Good. If you do, that's okay. I know I told you not to move anything, but if you do - I don't mind if you move things as you clean them, but I just want you to be careful, that's all."

"I'm very careful not to..." I stopped without completing the sentence. Mr. Milton waited for me to finish. When I didn't finish my sentence, he continued.

"Because a lot of the things in here are priceless. I don't want anything broken," he said.

"I'm..." I said. Again he waited for me to finish my thought, but when I didn't he did it for me.

"Careful? Good! That's good." He put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm glad we got that out of the way. It's OK." Then he paused and looked me square in the eye. "In your travels around here, have you ever noticed anything *strange?*"

"Strange?" I repeated. "No."

"Strange, you know... I don't know. Things moving... white shapes, orbs of light... voices?" he said.

“You mean ghosts?”

“Ghosts. Ha!” he paused. “Well... yeah. I’m pretty sure this place is haunted,” he spoke quietly so as not to disturb the entities he imagined were listening. “Do you hear strange noises?”

“I heard a weird a *woooo-woooing* sound,” I said.

“You did? Really? Wait. When? Look at me,” Mr. Milton held out his arm for me to see. “I’ve got goose bumps.”

“Just now. When I just came into the building,” I lied again.

“What? Wait. You heard a *wooo-oooo* just now? No. That was me. It’s the Theremin! See, look over here,” he said. “Come.” He led me past objects stacked on tall shelving units. “When I come in here, I hear strange inexplicable noises and I feel a... a... a presence. Don’t you? Look at this,” he said stopping suddenly. I bumped into his back. He smelled like my dad’s Old Spice aftershave. Mr. Milton pulled out my greeting card with the picture of the garden and clown on it. “I found this card sitting over there on the stool in the camping display. Weird. Isn’t that weird? Is this yours?”

“No,” I lied again.

“See that?” Mr. Milton held the card for me to see. “It’s a little difficult. See this? You have a perfectly normal looking vegetable garden in the country with flowers, nice sunny day and then, see in the back by the flowers - you almost don’t see him camouflaged in the gladiolas— there’s a... *clown*.” He dragged out the word ‘*cllllooowwnnn*.’

I looked at the card and shrugged. “Oh. Yeah. I see him. By the gladiolus. Cute.”

“Cute? That’s right. Gladiolus! Yeah! You’re right!” he said excitedly. I looked at him as he stared at the card.

“He looks like a nice clown,” I said.

“A nice clown? You’re kidding, right? See that?” He pointed at the card. “How terrifying is that? He’s *lurking* in the flowers.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s lurking,” I said.

“Not lurking? Clowns lurk, believe you me. Then why is he over there? What’s he doing in there?” asked Mr. Milton.

“It’s just a clown in a garden,” I said. “He looks harmless. He’s cute.”

“Harmless? Cute? Just a clown in a garden? Remember John Wayne Gacy? Clowns ...” Mr. Milton’s voice trailed off as he got a faraway look in his eye. “Clowns freak me out, man.” I thought that it was interesting to hear Mr. Milton say ‘*man*’, as in, “*Clowns freak me out, man.*”

“Remember the movie *Poltergeist*?” Mr. Milton said as my mind went elsewhere. “There was an evil clown doll in the movie that came to life and did evil clown-doll things....” Mr. Milton paused, as if remembering evil clown-doll things. “When I was about ten, I had a clown doll that looked just like the one in *Poltergeist*. After I saw the movie, I had nightmares and my mom threw my clown doll in the garbage. I remember crying about it. I felt guilty. Flash forward to group therapy: *Hello. My name is Allen Milton, I’m afraid of clowns.* See this card, it’s like a spirit is sending me a message. See here.” Mr. Milton held the card up for me to see. “It says, *Thinking about you and all the beautiful memories we’ve made.*”

There was a pregnant pause as he gazed at the card. “Get it?”

I shrugged, not getting it. I didn’t know his name was Allen.

“You sure this isn’t your card?” he said.

I should have said that it was. It would have been safer than lying, but I looked at the card and said, “No. It’s not mine. Maybe it’s someone else’s? Someone who was in here.”

“But who? Who’s card is it?” Mr. Milton paused. “No one’s been in here except me and you. Wait, I did have movers in here the other day.”

“I haven’t seen anything,” I said.

“It’s old, see that? Look at the date on the back. It says, *made in 1923!* Don’t you get it? A spirit put it there for me to find!” I looked at him. “An object can have a spirit in it you know,” he said. Mr. Milton continued as if I’d said, *‘Really?’* In a questioning fashion, but I didn’t say *really* at all. Kind of strange... *really*.

“Of course, *really!* Look at all this stuff,” he waved his hands to indicate the room full of objects. “Any *one* of these things could have a spirit attached to it.” He paused to hear what I had to say about that. I had nothing to say so he continued, “Do you think I’m in this for the money?”

“Yes?” I offered.

“No! Not. No way! I love every single thing in here. I’d keep them all if I could. They give me a vibe. You know? A vibration. I *feel* the past as if it still exists today. These things from the past put me in contact with another dimension. I feel death. Check this out,” Mr. Milton ran towards the back of a row and shelves and returned with an antique clown doll wrapped in clear plastic. He handed me the doll to examine. I looked at the doll and pulled away the plastic to reveal the doll’s head. The doll had on a cone shaped hat. It had a white face and simple clown makeup. It didn’t look scary to me. Mr. Milton pointed at the doll wide-eyed and said, “This antique clown was bought from an antique store and about a week after buying it, the buyer experienced bizarre dreams about the clown so she sold it to me on eBay. I hired a psychic who held the clown in an attempt to use her ability of psychometry.” I must have looked questioningly at him, because he clarified his meaning. “Psychometry is reading the energy of objects by holding them.” He looked into my eyes and I nodded my head. There was an awkward

pause before he continued, “Anyway, my Psychic used her psychometry to gain insight into the spiritual energy attached to the doll and seconds after picking up the clown, the psychic put it back down on a chair almost immediately. She described the unsettling feeling that it gave her as *too intense.*”

I looked at the doll who smiled benignly up at me. “I don’t feel anything,” I said.

“*Too intense!*” Mr. Milton repeated. “You don’t you feel it?”

“No,” I said.

“You don’t you feel anything?” he asked surprised.

“No,” I said. “It’s just a harmless kid’s toy.”

I handed the doll back to Mr. Milton. He examined it before carefully wrapping it again and setting it with reverence on top of a box. “Look at this,” he said turning. “Here’s a vintage picture of a little girl holding an armful of antique clown dolls. See that? Look there. That’s the same doll! See? She’s holding it!” I examined the old photograph. From the looks of the photograph - the little girl’s dress, her hair and the other clown dolls – it looked like the photo had been taken some time in the 1880s. I handed the picture back to Mr. Milton who looked at it sadly. “She’s dead now,” said Mr. Milton sadly. “She was a sweet little girl. Now she’s dead...” he mumbled. *"There are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of a Hell... Alas! The grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful... they must sleep, or they will devour us--they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish."*

I didn’t know what to say. We stood for a moment in silence. I looked at Mr. Milton.

“Poe,” he said. “Poe?” I said. “Edgar Allan,” he said. “Oh,” I said.

“What’s that?” I asked pointing at box that looked like a radio.

“That?” Mr. Milton said pointing at an antique toilet.

“No. Not that. That,” I said pointing at the wooden box with the antennas sticking up and out. “Oh, that!” he said stepping towards the box. “That is a 1929 RCA Theremin. Very rare. The only mass produced Theremin ever made. It’s the ultimate nerd instrument. Let me show you.” He flicked switches and I heard a slight buzz. I couldn’t wait to try it. “It takes a moment to warm up.” He waved his hands and sounds started to come from it. At first it sounded like a giant groaning with stomach troubles. Mr. Milton smiled self-consciously.

“Neat,” I said. I wondered if people still said, ‘*neat*.’

Mr. Milton started to play *We Are the Champions* by Queen. It was totally flat. It sounded like someone was in a box with his mouth stuffed with a sock. He’s yelling for help even though he knows help isn’t coming. “Isn’t it great?” asked Mr. Milton enthusiastically.

I nodded my head.

“Wait,” said Mr. Milton. He then played all of *When You Wish upon a Star*. It sounded like Walt Disney was having a nightmare. As Mr. Milton played with his eyes closed, I thought about how, when you wish upon a falling star your dreams might indeed come true, unless it’s really a meteorite hurtling to the earth to destroy all life, then you’re pretty much hooped no matter what you wished for, that is, unless you wished for death by meteor, then wishes do come true. In my experience the wishing star exists, you’ll find it in a theme park for about ninety-three dollars a person.

If that wasn’t enough, Mr. Milton then played *Honey* by Bobby Goldsboro. I stood with a plastered smile on my absurd face. I wasn’t sure of how to react. I had many visions. I shifted my weight from one leg to another. When he stopped, I said, “That’s great. Well, I have to -” Without acknowledging that I’d spoken, Mr. Milton clicked off the Theremin, set down the ear

phone and said, "If you liked that, check this out." He said pointed at a large object with a blanket thrown over it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a roulette table," he said pulling the cover off. "Go ahead. Touch it," he said. I did as instructed even though I didn't particularly want to. "Can you feel it? Touch it again."

"Feel what?" I said shrugging my shoulders.

"Let me tell you about this roulette wheel. This is a 1906 roulette wheel. It has double zeroes. See that?" he said pointing. He got right down so his face was a nose-length away from the surface of the wheel. "It was made by the Rocky Mountain Sporting Goods Company of Denver, Colorado. It features a bird's eye maple hub with nickel-finish finial and rosewood surround. It has the original green hand painted padded linen table top bearing a hand-painted board. See here! See this hole? These holes and tears indicate wear consistent with age and use. Don't you see? This shows that it was used! There could be a host of spirits around it ..." he paused to consider, "... right now. You know? They could be gambling right in front of us, right now, but we don't see them. They could be in another dimension! I can feel them! Can't you? There are spirits sitting here, gambling, right now!" he said reverently.

I looked around. I didn't know what to say.

"Spirit, if you are here. Give me a sign," Mr. Milton said. He gave the wheel a spin, then placed a ball down and spun it in the opposite direction. "Show me a sign! Give me a double zero!" he said. We stood watching the ball go round and round on the roulette wheel. "Stephen Hawking, you know the famous Physicist?" I nodded. "He said that all evidence shows God was actually quite a gambler, and the universe is a great casino, where dice are thrown, and roulette wheels spin on every occasion."

I nodded again as the ball went round and round.

“Sometimes you’re lucky and you don’t get sick, but anything can happen at any time. It’s roulette. Life is roulette.” The ball began to bounce. We waited with baited breath for it to land on double zeroes. It landed on a seven. We stood in silence for a minute.

“Did you get your sweater?” Mr. Milton said in a subdued voice. He was disappointed by the lack of spirit engagement.

I stood dazed until I realized Mr. Milton was waiting for an answer. Unfortunately, I’d missed the question. “Pardon me?” I said.

“Sweater. You said you left your sweater.”

“Oh, right. Got it,” I said holding up a sweater for him to see.

He covered the roulette wheel. “When you come in tonight, clean up the back alley. Looks like some raccoons got into the garbage.”

Before I left, I looked back at the warehouse owner. He was looking at the gramophone player in the camping display. He saw me looking at him. “Hey,” he called back. “Do you have a minute? Do you have to go somewhere?”

“Well. Yes...” I said. “I’m going to -” I said.

“It’ll just take a second,” Mr. Milton interrupted. “There’s something you’ve got to see. Follow me.” Mr. Milton led me to the second floor and in a corner he pointed at what looked like movie props. “I pick these things up on...” his voice trailed away as he started to uncover things. “It’s amazing what you can find on the Internet! Check it out!” There were old movie posters, old light fixtures, exit signs, drinking fountains - all manner of artifacts from theatres. He pulled off a blanket to expose an adult size statue. It was a beautiful woman wearing a Native American headdress holding what looked like a head on a platter.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s a... a...”

“A woman?” I offered.

“A woman, yes...” he picked up a packing slip and read aloud what was written on the slip. “*This Indian maiden statue graced the side of a balcony in the United Artists Theatre, Detroit.*” He lowered the packing slip and gazed at the statue. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

I had to agree. She was beautiful. “She’s beautiful,” I said.

He bent down, picked up a large brown manila envelope and from inside the envelope pulled out a stack of photographs. “Look at these pictures,” he said. I leaned forward. “See this? This theatre was destroyed by vandals. Look at these!” Mr. Milton flipped through a set of eight by ten photographs as he said, “This used to be a beautiful old theatre built in 1928. It was gorgeous. It was better than anything we have today.”

“What a mess,” I said. “That’s terrible.” And it was terrible. It looked like the set of a horror movie or the aftermath of an apocalypse.

“People don’t care about the past. See that?” he said pointing at what looked like a wall with scraps of concrete, bricks and plaster. “That used to be my Indian maiden – am I okay to say that? Indian maiden? Maybe I should say this aboriginal maiden?”

“I don’t know,” I said. There was a silence as we looked at the maiden.

“This one was rescued. See, she’s still intact. I saved her. Isn’t she beautiful?”

“She sure is,” I said. “Why is she holding a head on a platter?”

“You know, I don’t know - a comment on colonization perhaps? Neat, eh?”

I nodded “Very neat,” I confirmed. I guess some people do say, ‘neat.’

“Would you buy it?”

“I couldn’t afford it,” I said.

“No, no. But if you could afford it - if you had money - would you buy it?” he asked.

“Oh, most definitely,” I said. It was something I really needed.

We stood looking at photographs of the United Artists Theatre in Detroit as it was in the old days and as it was today. Today it was in ruins. It was like looking at a dead body.

“What a shame,” he said. I could see tears in Mr. Milton’s eyes. He really did feel this stuff. “These things are gone forever. You and I will never experience what it was like during the silent movie era.” He sniffled. “Look at this! This is a picture of one of the Indian maidens that didn’t make it. She’s gone... smashed to bits by vandals. I’m so glad...”

“I’m glad she’s here,” I said.

“Me too. I’m glad I could save her. Why do people do these things?” Mr. Milton asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. I worried that my breath was bad so I didn’t want to speak. I tested my breath by turning and breathing into my hand. Mr. Milton didn’t seem to notice. He continued to stare at his Indian maiden statue.

“It’s crazy. People are crazy! Look at how beautiful she is!” You could tell that he loved the maiden. She was real to him. I put my hand on his shoulder and we shared a silent vigil.

“Yeah,” I said after a minute or two. “Well... ah, I’ve got my sweater. I better go. My granddad’s waiting for me,” I said edging away.

“Sure. Go,” he said casually. I started walking away as he continued to talk, ostensibly to me, but more to himself. “In the old days, going to a movie was a big event, a shared experience. Now... people don’t know how to behave. They shoot each other. Is it me or has our culture become depersonalized and cold? Movies are not for big screens but for iPhones. Want to eat in a restaurant? Well, you can go to the fast food giant and they can pump you full of calories for

pennies, and you can do it all from the privacy of your car, never seeing anyone, never talking to anyone else, never sharing the experience.” He spoke quickly, becoming more and more animated as I continued to move backwards towards the stairs.

“Don’t take the bus, take your car! Kids don’t even play outside any more. They stay inside and play video games. It seems like we can live our entire lives without sharing anything with another living person. Is it any wonder Facebook has become so popular? As the whole world becomes so depersonalized, Facebook *is* personal. You can pick your friends, build communities, and share things.”

“Yeah,” I said from across the room at the top of the stairs. “Too bad, well... see you. I’ll be back to clean up tonight.”

He was on a roll. “It’s to the point that theatres are actually unpleasant to attend. Fifty years ago, attending a movie was a spectacular event. Today we have movies based on comic books, with no plots and too many explosions. Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “See you.”

I looked back at Mr. Milton just before I went down the stairs. He stood looking at the statue and at the pictures. I couldn’t help but feel badly for him. I was glad that he could rescue these things from destruction, but for what purpose? To what end? He couldn’t sell them. Nobody wanted them. Mr. Milton sold some things to collectors, but few people saw the value in such things as the Indian maiden statue. Passion and sentiment filled his voice as he continued to talk. I could hear him talking to himself as I tip toed down the stairs.

“It’s like music. People don’t care about music like they used to. Thousands of songs are stored on little computers and set to play on random.” I stopped on the landing when he started talking about silent movies. I could hear him as he said, “In a movie with sound, the viewer gets

his bearings from what the characters say and what tone they use. Watching movies is a kind of eavesdropping. Silent movies are different. They're pre-linguistic. A peculiar kind of attentiveness results that's akin to the intensity of meditation, a wordless and intimate absorption in which the flow goes both ways: the spectator completes the people on the screen, inwardly speaks their words for them rather than listening in. It is always a surprising experience. The sense of loss when a silent picture ends, the sudden awareness of how intently one has been staring at the people who have now vanished into air..." I felt myself to be eavesdropping on Mr. Milton's thoughts. As I carefully walked down the stairs and out the back door, his words continued to follow me, "...the irreversibility of the past...however wonderful the 1920's may or may not have been... there is no going back." *There's no going back.*

PART II

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Because of indifference, one dies before one actually dies.

~ Elie Wiesel

I arrived at my granddad's room in the nursing home by mid-afternoon. I felt rather other worldly. I wasn't me. My reality hung by a thread. I guess it was from too much dreaming. Everything felt profound as if frozen snapshots of time were getting caught. What the warehouse owner had said about the past was disheartening. It resonated with me. I could see his Indian maiden statue from the old Detroit movie palace in my mind. The look on her sad face said, "All things pass away and are gone. Forever." I felt that it was my head on her platter. The pleasant dream I'd had about the garden looped in my brain like a fever. Why was life so sad?

I didn't feel angry any more. I felt like I never would again. I had turned a corner. The significance of existence made getting angry unfathomable. It would be like getting angry because it's raining. I don't live in a world that is without rain. It rains. Simple as that. There is traffic. Keys get lost. Animals die. Why get angry about it? It, the world, can't be other than what it is. There were no jerks or zombies or pods. There were just people. People are people. They have always been the way they are. People are the same as me. Maybe I was going through the steps of grieving. I'd passed through anger and now I was into resignation. My life was passing before my eyes like everybody else's lives were passing before their eyes. So be it. It

would be over soon. I felt like crying. The song *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows* played on the gramophone in my mind. I could just imagine how Granddad felt about his life. More had changed in his lifetime than had changed in mine. His life was almost over.

Granddad was sitting in a chair by the window when I entered his room at the nursing home. He was watching squirrels. We greeted one another as we customarily did. We gave each other the barest of nods and then I gave him an awkward hug. He felt small and bony in my arms. I didn't know which side of his face to put my own and in our clunky embrace I squished his nose against my collar bone. He didn't complain. After that, we sat in silence, each lost in our own private oblivions. On his nightstand there was an old picture of me and my mom and dad. It was an image from happier times. Dad was holding me in his arms and Mom had her arm draped over my dad's shoulder. He had a band aid across his forehead. I had on what looked like a miniature tuxedo complete with bow tie and carnation in the lapel. All three of us were smiling. In later years Dad and I became awkward together. As I got older, I couldn't figure him out and I'm sure he felt the same about me. He was unpredictable and complicated. His stumbling around and clumsiness got old. I was embarrassed by him. He had what you might call a complex personality. One minute he could make you laugh with his funny antics and the next, he'd be sad and you'd feel badly for him and think it was your fault. It was as if he were far away on an island all by himself. He was alone even when he was with people. The real world and his world were always at loggerheads. I think he lived in a world of fun and the real world wasn't so fun. The real world is serious business. It isn't a place for silliness. Doing something stupid for fun could result in death. There's nothing funny about that. His world of fun clashed against a real world that was out to kill and cause him pain. The real world is built on responsibility, accountability and survival of the fittest. Dad wasn't built for such a place. He

was built for lightness. If we were in a store he would act as if he had a head injury, which he probably did, come to think of it. He was always hitting his head on things. He had a big head. It got in the way. It wasn't politically correct to pretend to be a person with a head injury, but that's what he sometimes did. To me, it was funny. He knew his audience. I bet people with head injuries would even laugh. It wasn't like he made fun of anybody. If anything, he made fun of himself and his own incompetence. He never did anything malicious or hurtful. He'd say bazaar things and laugh with this loud goofy laugh of his. It was hilarious. When I was a kid, we laughed a lot. He could always make me and my mom laugh. All she had to do was look at him and she'd laugh. He was just all around funny. Life was a lark. One time when I was ten years old I peed myself laughing so hard. Mom peed herself sometimes too. That was Dad's idea of successful comedy. If the audience laughed so hard that it peed itself, that was a success bit. The more Mom and I laughed, the funnier he'd get and if we lost biological functioning, so much the better. He was nuclear funny. These comedians today don't know what funny is. If I described what he did, you probably wouldn't think it was funny. That's because you had to be there. He made any situation funny. Everything he did was spontaneous and improvised. It's hard to describe. I think he was funny because he had been brought up in the circus. He saw things from a slightly different angle than most people. For my Dad nothing in the circus was ever very serious. The circus was built for fun and he was built for it. He studied it. He was an artist of comedy and the gods of comedy smiled upon him. People said that he'd been a child prodigy, a regular Mozart of the clown world - a clown prince and Granddad. He was the clown king. My mom and I, we were the straight men to their antics. Dad came by his funniness naturally because Granddad was the same way and so was I - at least - I was when I was young. I grew out of it. I'd seen one too many tree die. I hated the world because I loved endangered species

more than I loved people, but, in my family, if we could get people to laugh and have a good time, it was like a drug for us. We were professionals. From a very early age Dad was dressed as a clown and he was included in his dad's act and I was included in my dad's act. Granddad was even known to toss Dad into the audience like Buster Keaton's dad did to him. It was a rough and tumble world and my dad was a tough little beggar. I followed in that tradition – at least for a while. Somewhere along the way I lost my heart. I was part of my dad's act when I was small, but after Mom died when I was fourteen, things weren't funny to me anymore. I decided that I didn't want to be an entertainer. It was too nerve wracking for me. The death of love had dampened my spirit. As far back as I can remember, Dad lived in a clown world where everything was something other than what it was. In Dad's hands things like keys became quick-draw guns, towels became capes and dinette chairs and bananas became props in a WWI flying ace dogfight. Wherever we were, music would spur Dad into a dance. He didn't care what people thought and yet, he wasn't a show off. His humour was subtle. He wasn't a Jerry Lewis. He wasn't an in your face comedian. He was a comedian with real class. He loved being silly and surprising people with his silliness. Happy surprises were everything to him. He loved it. Life was all about having fun. Period. Like Charles Chaplin said (or was it Groucho Marx?): A day without laughter is a day wasted. He lived by that motto. If you met him, you'd probably be impressed by his wit and his charm, but after a while you might get tired of his zaniness. I don't know. Some people did. People without a sense of humour did. As I got older, I certainly did and when I didn't laugh, I broke his heart. I never quite knew what was going on in his head. He was a conceptual artist before there were such things. He was a court jester. He was rarely serious so, as a kid, I had a lot of fun with him, but then, when I entered my teens, I took myself serious and the things he did irritated me. I became closer to my granddad than my dad. Dad would try to get

my attention, but the more he tried, the more removed I became. I remember thinking that at least Granddad wasn't totally strange. In high school it got worse. Without Mom around, I pulled further and further away. I became depressed. I was too serious. He tried to be a good dad, but I wouldn't let him. I wouldn't listen to him. He tried to get me to do things with him, but I didn't want to be seen with him. If we were in a store, he would use things to entertain me. If there were one piece snuggles – you know, like the type little kids' wear – he would hang onto the hanger and make them look like they were dancing. In restaurants, he would dance or do something foolish for my amusement. You'd probably think he was fun, but not me. I was a tough cookie. If we were in a hardware store, he'd stick a plunger on his head and walk around like an idiot. I wouldn't crack a smile. A clock would be a living thing in his hands. He'd examine like a doctor. He would eat flowers. If we were near stuffed toys, he would put on a whole puppet show with voices and actions and plots he'd make up on the spot. Other people thought he was brilliant, hilarious, but not me. I'd try and get away from him. It was like the more embarrassed he could make me, the funnier it was to him. He liked to laugh but I didn't. I was too cool to see the funniness around me. My friends had fathers with respectable jobs - doctors, lawyers, carpenters, managers. Not my dad. No. He was a clown. How stupid is that? I hated the idea of it. I'd see his act and never laugh. He said that I was the perfect straight man, but I didn't want to be his straight man. His energy sucked me dry. The older I got the more critical I became and the more frantically he tried to make me laugh. It was sad really. Sometimes I said harsh things. I criticized everything he did and treated him with total disrespect, even when my friends were around. I didn't love him. I called him by his clown name which was Pop: Pop the clown. Can you believe it? He called it his professional name. Yeah, right! Real professional. Give me a break. It could have been worse. He could have been Bozo.

But to me, he was a Bozo. Sometimes I even called him Bozo to his face. Even though I knew I was being mean, Dad never got mad. He took it in stride. I'd get into a bad mood, say something mean to Dad and Mom would get mad at me. He would defend me, saying, "Give the boy a break, it isn't easy being human. I embarrass the boy."

Dad said that he knew deep down that I didn't *really* hate him. He knew I just sort of hated him - occasionally. He tried to make light of my poor treatment of him. He tried to make me laugh and smile, but as I got older, I smiled and laughed less and less. My mother told me that I hurt him sometimes, but he never complained or demanded that I be more respectful. He told my mother that he thought it was the price he had to pay for being a clown. He saw it as his challenge. He said that I was *his* serious side. He said that the world isn't an easy place to live. Just watch the news any day of the week. Bad stuff happens every day and contrary to what positive thinkers might believe, that's the way it's always been. A person can't help but get angry and depressed. And yet, Dad maintained that even in Auschwitz, a sense of humour was a good thing to have. Humour helped people to laugh through their hardships and making fun of those with power and who did bad things, gave people with a sense of humour a common enemy. It was fun to make fun of people who think they're superior. Humour can bring oppressed people together. At least, that's what my dad said. One time Mom told me that Dad was plagued by dreams in which he was possessed by an entity. The entity was a trickster. It would speak through him. Mom would have conversations with the entity long into the night and the next day she'd tell Dad about all the amazing things he'd said. He wouldn't believe her. He didn't remember saying anything that she said he'd said and he'd even get a little mad about it. Personally, I think my dad was a bit touched. He was probably mentally ill or maybe he really was possessed – if there is such a thing. He lived in his own little world. People said that my dad

was a creative genius, but to me he was a pain. He took things too far. I went along with it when I was small because I didn't know any better but as I got older I realized that my dad was, quite frankly, peculiar. He enjoyed the theatre of the absurd. The more bazaar, so much the better. He liked the Dadaists. Granddad was more of a traditional clown. He had a bit that he perfected and did over and over again, whereas with my dad never did the same thing twice. Dad thrived on newness and spontaneity and Granddad liked the predictable. Granddad's clown name was Sir Richard. He loved being a clown too, but to him, it was just a job – a fun job. He taught my dad how to be a clown but Granddad said that my dad took clowning to a whole new level. Granddad never deviated from his routine, but with my dad, everything was improvisation. He called his performances "happenings." He said that sometimes, when he was performing, he had out of body experiences. Dad often used satire to criticize politicians. That's something Granddad never did. Dad would even get arrested. The circus would have to bail him out. You'd think he'd get fired, but the circus liked it because he'd get them free publicity. One time, I saw Dad on TV. Cameras were rolling as he climbed a tall ladder he'd straddled over a chain link and barbed wire fence. The fence restricted people from entering a petroleum refinery. Dad put on his clown garb under a wedding dress and climbed down a ladder head first. It was totally ridiculous. It didn't make any sense. Here he was in a restricted area of a refinery wearing a wedding dress and a gas mask having a picnic with stuffed animals who were also wearing gas masks. He filmed himself and he took self-timed pictures that were framed and displayed in a community centre. A picture of his bizzaro picnic was on the front page of the newspaper. The reporter asked him why he was wearing a wedding dress and Dad said, "I don't know." That's the way he was. Nothing made sense. His favourite comedians were people like Andy Kaufman, Jonathon Winters and Peter Sellers. Dad would become one of his characters and he wouldn't know when to stop. Dad

wanted me to be a clown too, but I wasn't interested. For both my dad and my granddad there was nothing they'd rather do than to entertain. They loved it. They lived to do it. They lived off laughter. It was a drug to them. Granddad was proud of his son, but he knew there was something not quite right about him. He said that my dad couldn't relax. Dad was a clumsy visionary. My friends thought Pop the clown (my dad) and Sir Richard (my granddad) were very funny. They laughed at them and wished they had fathers and grandfathers like them. Not me. I said they could have them. I'd say cruel things like, "Hey Pop, can I borrow the car or is it full of clowns? Oh, that's right. You don't have a car," or "Hey Pop, can I ask you some advice about what classes I should take? Oh, that's right. You never got past grade six." When I was a teenager, I treated my dad like he was an idiot, which he wasn't – at least, not exactly. His heart was in the right place, even if his brains weren't. It's one of those things I guess, call it youthful ignorance. It's like that line from the Joni Mitchell song, "*You never know what you've got 'til it's gone.*" Dad was only an idiot when it came to day to day reality. Everything he did, he did for love. It's only now that I realize what a good and funny man he was. His comedy was ahead of its time. When I think about the crazy stuff he used to do, I now catch myself laughing out loud – something I rarely do. Maybe I finally lightened up. Dad's comedy was like that. He called it the delayed reaction or the comic time-bomb. I'll have a flashback about something he did that, at the time, I didn't get, but then years later something would tweak my memory and I'd finally get it and laugh my head off. If Dad were around, he'd get a kick out of my delayed reactions. He said that it was his mission in life to help people to feel happy. And he said that satire was a great way to show people what was really going on in the world without actually having to get into an argument about it. He said that people take themselves too seriously. They just need a bit of prompting to see the humour in things. He said that people need to lighten up

and to have fun with life. Life isn't serious. It's funny. He got that from my granddad. One of Dad's favourite expressions was, "No worries." He said it all the time and he actually did live without any worries. He was worry free. Now that I'm older, I realize what an amazing thing that is. Even when he should have been worried, he never was. Can you imagine what it would feel like to have no worries? What a relief that would be! Dad said that whatever happens is going to happen anyway with or without his worrying about it so it's better not to worry about it. It saves energy and it's much more relaxing.

Dad was more of an artist than my granddad and my granddad was a comedian's comedian. They were the same but different. When I was fourteen years old, my mom died. It was my granddad who stepped up to take care of me, not that I needed taking care of. I was pretty self-sufficient. Dad tried to take care of me, but I didn't need or want his help. As far as I was concerned, he couldn't do anything right. All I needed were my books and my records. After a while, Dad became more and more unreliable. He'd disappear and then come back and then disappear again. I'm not sure where he went. Granddad said that Dad was like a shark. He had to keep moving. If he sat still, he'd die. He said that Dad needed to feel needed. He knew I didn't need him. Granddad said that life was hard on my dad and that my dad's heart had been broken when my mom died. I should have been gentler, but I wasn't. Granddad said that Dad was a romantic. He liked to ride freight trains like a hobo. Every time I see a freight train, I look to see if my dad is on it.

When Dad vanished, Granddad was philosophical about it all. He said that it took comedic skills to get through the hard times and that if he didn't have his sense of humour, he would not have been able to get through the hardships he experienced. He said that laughter was one of the greatest gifts in life. He strove to share that gift with everyone. It's ironic that now,

after a lifetime of making people laugh it looks like Granddad has at last lost his sense of humour. He doesn't laugh any more. Seeing him like this, I realize how wonderful both my dad and granddad had been. I was too hard on them both. I see that now. We really should have been a team. If I could, I'd apologize to my dad, but I can't. He's disappeared and I can't find him. I try to apologize for my childish behavior to my granddad, but he says to forget it. "Water under the bridge," he says. He says that I should let the past go and learn from it. I ask him to forgive me, but he says there's nothing to forgive. He says what my dad would say, "No worries."

Now that I live in the same city, I visit my granddad at least once a week. I know he doesn't have much longer to live. He's old and he doesn't want to live. He's given up. He's lost his sense of humour which is kind of funny, because, I think I'm finally getting mine back.

These thoughts were going through my mind as I sat there in silence on Granddad's bed. I shifted and the bed made a gaseous noise like a whoopee cushion. Neither Granddad nor I commented. We didn't even snicker. Granddad looked at me without saying a word. I felt self-conscious about my sloppy appearance. I had on sloppy clothes and a sloppy black cardigan sweater. He pointed at squirrels out the window. I smiled at the antics of the squirrels as they chased one another around a tree, but he didn't. "Tree rats," he said in his deadpan way. Sometimes he reminded me of George Burns. He actually kind of looked like George Burns. I once watched that movie "Oh God" at a friend's house and I remember thinking, "Hey, that's my granddad! Granddad looks like God!"

Granddad thought he had heart disease. Because of this belief, he barely moved. He just sat there. I don't think his heart problems were physical though. The doctors said he was fine. This whole thing with heart problems began after Granddad started getting harassed during his performances. He'd gotten over my father's disappearance and my mother's death and my

grandmother's death and the death of all his friends and he was working again doing children's birthday parties. He seemed to be happy, but then something changed. Something broke his spirit. He said that the love went out of peoples' eyes. People became afraid of clowns. They became a joke. He wore less and less makeup until he barely wore any at all. The old ways of making people laugh didn't work any more. He said that people were more interested in computers and whatnot than in going to see a lame old clown like him. People lost their innocence and became to sophisticated for foolishness. He convinced himself that if he moved too much, he would have a heart attack. With this decision not to move came an overall decline in his health. He never went outside and he looked as white as he did when he wore white grease paint makeup. He became depressed and rarely spoke. He sat in his chair waiting to die, but death wouldn't come.

A pretty nurse wearing a smock made with a Betty Boop pattern came into the room carrying a cardboard box and an old fashioned leather suitcase. "Hi Emmy," she said. "Hi," I said. She paused, looked at us and said, "Don't you two talk?" *Was that a rhetorical question?* I wondered. *Should I answer?* Granddad looked at her without speaking. There's your answer he seemed to say.

"Rough night?" the nurse said to me. I looked down at my un-tucked shirt and made another attempt to tuck it in and brushed my hand over my messy mop of hair. My janitor uniform was too big. "Look what I found Mr. Binks," she said loudly, as if Granddad were hearing impaired. He wasn't. Granddad winced. 'Not all old people are deaf,' his face seemed to say.

"I found a box of things and this charming little suitcase. I think it's yours!" said the nurse as she sat the box and suitcase on the bed. "They were going to get rid of these things so I

thought you should go through them and keep what you want.” She began to rummage in the box. “Look at all this stuff. Look at this!” she said pulling out a framed eight by ten photograph. She took down a calendar with pictures of kittens on it and hung the photograph on a nail. “Why isn’t this hanging up?” she said. “I didn’t know you were a Charlie Chaplin fan?”

I looked at the picture and then at Granddad. It was a picture of Charlie Chaplin as the tramp and the words, “A day without laughter is a day wasted.”

Granddad shrugged. “Long time ago,” he grumbled. “No one cares. No one remembers.”

I looked at Granddad. He was right. It was what the warehouse owner had said earlier. *No one cares*. No one cares about Charlie Chaplin’s little fellow. Ancient history. People have forgotten the silent picture era. Everything has its time. I casually looked inside the box. There were old pictures of other silent era comedians including Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, Albert Austin, Eric Campbell and some that I didn’t know.

“What is this? Is this a projector?” she asked rummaging around. I nodded my head as she tried to lift it out of the box. I grabbed the projector to help and put it on the bed table. “There are films in here. Look!” she said handed me a round metal container. “What is it?” she asked trying to read a title written on the container. “Why don’t you watch them? I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She took the cord that was wrapped around the projector and plugged it in. “Watch a film. Maybe it’ll put a smile on those faces. And you,” she said pointing at me and poking her finger into my chest. “Eat something. Eat this toast before it goes to waste.” Then she said quietly into my ear, “I’ve got a surprise for you.” I didn’t know what to say. In a lower tone so Granddad couldn’t hear she said, “There’s something I want you to do for me.”

I felt her nearness. I meant to say, “*Really?*” to show my enthusiasm, but it didn’t come out quite right. My tongue had trouble with the ‘*r*’ so it came out, “*eally?*” She had that affect on

me. She was pretty. I would do almost anything to get her to like me. She turned and her polyester hosiery swished as she walked quickly out of the room repeating as she went away, “Eat something!”

Fortunately my gaff – missing the ‘r’ in *really* - wasn’t noticed by her or if it was, she didn’t say anything. Granddad continued to look out the window. He ignored the box. I sat on the bed and picked up a piece of toast that was still there from Granddad’s breakfast. I looked inside the box as I munched on toast. Some of what was in the box I recognized as my own toys from when I was a kid. I was surprised to see that Granddad had saved these things. I looked at him and at the films in their metal cans. With the toast dangling from my mouth I flipped up the arms to the projector, put an empty reel on the projector and began threading a film. I had done this a million times when I was a kid. We didn’t have a TV.

I looked at the photograph of Charlie Chaplin hanging on the wall. It was Charlie wearing the little tramp costume in about the year 1915. When I was a kid, I was a Charlie Chaplin fan. I watched his films all the time. That same picture of Charlie Chaplin used to hang on my bedroom wall. He was like a brother to me. When the kids at school were watching Batman or Superman on TV, I was watching Charlie Chaplin on these old 16 mm films. I don’t know where Granddad got them, but we’ve always had them in the family. Granddad said that he liked Charlie alright, but I loved him. I remember wanting to actually be Charlie. That was my dream. I watched all of Charlie Chaplin’s films over and over again. I watched them in slow motion and I watched them backwards and forwards, again and again. I studied Chaplin’s every move and I secretly imitated him. There was something about these old silent movies that I loved. Charlie was funny to me. I’d forgotten all about that. I thought about what Mr. Milton had said about the silent movies of long ago. I still loved them. When I had the film loaded I turned it on and

projected the image onto the wall. At first all that could be seen was white but then the numbers counted down and the opening credits began. I watched Granddad watching the image on the wall. It occurred to me that the viewer of a silent film is like the reader of a poem. In a poem you read into it what you will. It's the same with a silent film. In a silent film so much is accomplished with suggestion, imagery and music. You bring your own interpretations to bear. Silent films are more interactive than "talkies." I loved that about them, but there's more to my appreciation than that. Besides the films themselves, I have always been drawn to the romance of the silent film era. People in the movie industry in the old days were called *movies*. There was a great sense of excitement and possibility in the air. The movie industry didn't have the self-consciousness and self-importance that it has today. Charlie Chaplin and the other clown princes I loved were free to improvise. They didn't need a script. Charlie just needed a situation and he could make it up as he went along. He could make his early films in just a few minutes. Making a film was like life. The only difference was that, in later films, Charlie could re-shoot a scene over and over again if he didn't like it. He could re-do a scene over and over until he got it just right. In real life, that's harder to do.

When I watch a silent movie, it's like I'm watching ghosts. Everyone who had anything to do with the making of a film is dead yet they live on in film and in my mind. Soon I'll be gone and the world I know will vanish like the world of the silent film era. The world of cars and clothes and food and the way people talked and acted from that era is gone. Watching a silent film is like looking into the past. I love the scenery of old Hollywood. If only we could bring back the orange groves and the simplicity of the period. Nowadays, things are complicated. Things are coming to a head. It's not going to end well. Soon we'll run out of water and then...

Granddad scrunched up a ball of paper and threw it at me. The paper ball bounced off my head. He has always been a good shot. We used to spend a lot of time throwing things like stones at cans or whatever. I used to be good at that too. I came back from my thoughts to see Granddad sitting there staring at me. The film we'd watched was over and the wall was white from the projector's light. The finished film went around and around, the tail hitting the edges of the projector making a clattering sound. I loaded another reel and turned on the projector. The title, *The Circus* appeared on the wall. I watched Granddad to see what his reaction would be. His expression did not change as he stared at the film being projected. This was nothing new. He never showed emotion. He hadn't for years. Granddad and I watched the whole movie without speaking or moving except for when I self-consciously crunched on toast. I snuffled, that is to say, I sort of laughed, especially at the part with the barking dog and the lion, but I didn't have any real big belly laughs. It's not the fault of the film. It was funny enough, but I never really learned how to laugh out loud which is funny because I grew up in such a funny household. Laughing out loud was something alien to me. I envied people with a great laugh. After *The Circus* we watched films from Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton and Chaplin. Granddad and I went back in time. It was as if I were seeing these comedians for the very first time. I'd forgotten how good they were. The films hadn't changed. I had. I felt myself to be a different person. I was especially ready to see Chaplin films again. I felt more open to the vagrant with the baggy trousers, bowler hat, big shoes, and cane. I couldn't help but admire and appreciate his acrobatic skills in falling, skidding and delivering swift well-aimed kicks. It looked fun. There was precision in his tricks and postures and a great store of invention in the fun he brought. He was a creature of comedy, but there was more to it than that. In the deepening sadness of my life Chaplin expressed its tragedy. Maybe that's why I loved the tramp. I saw myself in him. I saw

how the tramp's comedy was true to life in a bazaar world. With his cane he made this sad old world, for a moment at least, a funny place. Charlie was the Trickster. He was the mischief-maker, the fool with a note of rebellion and nonconformity, sometimes gullible, sometimes cunning. He had a certain attitude that saw the funniness all around.

As Granddad and I watched old silent movies that afternoon, the two of us dozed in and out of consciousness. I pondered Charlie Chaplin. I thought about how there were two personalities. There was the man, Chaplin, and there was the character, Charlie. Charlie is the one who loses. He is the one whose hopes go down in defeat and when he does occasionally win, it's often only in dreams. I saw Charlie as myself. Charlie entered my dreams. I fell asleep on Granddad's bed in the nursing home and I entered Charlie's land where I lived in comic desperation as a tramp. I didn't know I was funny. I was serious. Like Charlie, I kept an air of sophistication in my poverty. In my dream Charlie was my teacher. He showed me around his world. He showed me park benches where I could sleep in the summertime. He showed me lakes that I could fall in. He showed me beaches and boardwalks that were populated by pretty girls, boyfriends and jealous husbands. He showed me saloons, dance halls and streets that looked like old London. He showed me flophouses and cops, hotdog stands and lonesome roads. He taught me how to have an attitude which said, "This is life. I'm not changing anything. I'm just going to do my best to get along in it. I will have fun in this world." I dreamed about Charlie's land. I felt myself to be in it until the nurse bustled into Granddad's room and woke me up as another film was just finishing. "Good timing," she said turning the projector off. She shook Granddad's shoulder. "I've got a surprise for you!" she said. Granddad's eyes opened, but only slightly. "The children's choir is here!" the nurse sang happily. Neither Granddad nor I shared her enthusiasm. "They're going to sing!" she said. She looked at the two of us and frowned. We didn't make a

move. “Come on,” she said pulling Granddad to his feet and to me she said, “Walk your grandfather to the recreation room. I’ll take this box. You take the suitcase.”

I had no idea what she had in mind. I looked at her and the battered old suitcase. I wondered what was going on. The look on her face said, “*Don’t argue. Just do it!*”

So I did.

“No ‘*oblem*,” I said. Granddad began to walk in his slow methodical way. On one side I held Granddad up and on the other I carried the little battered leather suitcase. It felt light. Since moving into the nursing home Granddad had become more and more incapable of walking and he rarely talked. He became weaker and weaker with every passing day. What a shame considering how active he’d been up to relatively recently. Today, he took the smallest steps imaginable. It was like he was acting. He was pretending to be an old man. It was sad, but at the same time, strangely comical. I imagined that he was secretly having fun with the role. He could speak volumes with his eyes and face.

We took shaky baby steps and inched our way down the hallway. Like him, I found myself staring at my feet. My feet hurt. They’d been aching since last night. To be funny, I turned my feet outwards in an imitation of the tramp. Granddad stopped and slowly panned his face to look at mine. If I had been capable of laughing, I would have. He was funny. Granddad’s eyes said, “*That’s not funny.*” His stone-faced demeanor hid from the world a bubbling joy that I thought was just beneath the surface belying the nursing home’s pervasive feeling of death. Granddad’s stoic expression suited the nursing home’s antiseptic white walls, and yet, despite the whiteness, I knew that this was definitely not Granddad’s idea of heaven.

We stopped in front of an old man and an old woman who sat with their feet flat on the floor in front of them. They each sat stiffly erect with their respective hands on their respective

knees. The woman's make up was severe. She had on bright red lipstick, extreme blue eye shadow and red blush formed in circles on her cheeks. The man had a pencil-thin mustache and slicked-back thinning gray hair. He made me think of Douglas Fairbanks if he'd lived to be a hundred and two. Granddad and I paused to watch the old man and woman talk. The old woman said to the old man, "*How was your day?*" and the old man replied, "*I don't know.*" Then he paused and said, "*How was your day?*" and after a pause the old woman said, "*I don't know,*" to which the old man said, "*Did you have a good day or a bad day?*" The old woman replied after considering the question, "*I don't know. Did you have a good day or a bad day?*" and the old man thought about it for a while and said, "*I don't know.*" Granddad and I watched this scintillating verbal exchange that was funny-sad. We took a synchronized deep breath, turned back to staring at our sore feet and returned to shuffling forward as one.

We were about half-way down the hallway when the nurse saw us from a distance. She was carrying the box of Granddad's stuff. She looked annoyed. She grabbed a wheel chair and pushed it towards us. "Come on! You're moving too slow. The children are about start!" She whipped the wheelchair in front of Granddad, pushed him into it and set the box on his lap. He looked at the box without comment. She stepped behind the wheelchair and pushed it forward. Granddad's head jerked back as if he'd boarded a rocket and I trotted along beside the nurse. I was still carrying the suitcase. She looked at it and said in conspiratorial hushed voice, "Now, when we get him in there you follow my lead." I looked at her bewildered.

"This is when you're supposed to say OK," she said.

"O -," I said. The K didn't materialize.

"Goot!" she said. I noticed that she had a German accent or was it Russian? I followed her as she rocketed Granddad into the recreation room. She parked him in a corner facing a

display of children's art. "Now then Mr. Binks, I mean, Sir Richard, you sit here and enjoy the lovely children's art. It'll cheer you up," she said. She took me by my elbow and led me into a storage room off to the side at the front of the room. I had to raise the suitcase to keep it from banging into the elderly residents already gathered.

Over my shoulder I caught sight of Granddad sitting stone-faced in a corner. He sat mere inches from the display. In front of his nose were children's drawings of Armageddon on paper, replete with violent, gritty images of human figures impaled on spikes with x's for eyes, a person hung by the neck with a stick coming out of its eye and gore around the mouth and amputated appendages. The images were of a desolate wasteland. There were crayon coloured drawings of cars smashed together surrounded by dead people and carnage. People were catapulted onto giant cacti.

In the small storage room I found myself, the nurse closed the door, turned to me and said, "I found these things in your grandfather's box. Here's the makeup," she handed me an old cigar box. I opened the box to see greasepaint and various tubes. "And here's the clothes," she said plopping a pile of clothes on top of the cigar box which snapped closed. I looked at the clothes and I looked at her. I was glad to see that they weren't brightly coloured.

"Look at me," she said. I stood gazing at the clothes trying to ascertain their nature and why I was being encouraged to put them on. "Look at me," the nurse repeated. She put her finger to my chin and tilted my face up. "I'm not asking. I'm telling." We were inches from one another. I could smell astringent. "You're going to get made up and put these old clothes on like the good boy that you are, and then, after the children have sung their last song, I'm going to knock on this door," she rapped the pattern *shave-and-a-haircut* on the door to demonstrate,

“you’ll come out wearing these clothes, with that makeup on, and then, you and I will put on a show.”

“Makeup?” I asked.

“Of course. You know the makeup I’m talking about and yes, a show,” she confirmed.

I fussed through the clothes. “What kind of show?” I asked.

“I don’t know. You’ll think of something,” she said.

“I’ll think of something?” I said. The nurse nodded. “I can’t put on a show,” I said handing her the clothes.

“Sure you can. You’ll be great!” she said pushing the clothes back into my arms.

“What? Are you crazy?” I said pushing the clothes back at her.

“Just do it. Pleeaaase?” A shoe fell to the floor.

When I was about to protest again, she put her hand to my mouth. Her hand felt warm on my face. “It’ll be easy,” she said. “Don’t think about it. Just do it. I’ll help. Do what I say and follow my lead. We’ll make people laugh - including your grandfather. It’ll be fun. He *needs* to laugh and we’ll have a great time,” she said. “How hard can it be?”

“But...” I said.

“It’ll be good for him,” she said.

“- but...” I said again.

“I’m worried,” she said.

“What?” I said. *Me too*, I thought. “But...”

“He never laughs or smiles,” she said looking at the door with concern. “He looks so sad. As long as I’ve known him, I haven’t seen him smile,” she said. “Not once. And it breaks my heart. Everyone should smile and laugh. Don’t you think? Didn’t he laugh before coming here?”

“No, not really, I mean... sometimes...”

“Didn’t he laugh when you were a kid?” she asked.

“You know. Come to think of it, yes. He did laugh,” I said.

“When did he stop laughing?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It was a gradual thing. As he aged and people died – Grandma, my mom... then Dad ran away, he retired, friends died... he put his nose away.” The nurse just looked at me. “His clown nose,” I clarified.

“He was a clown? In a circus? I heard about that.”

“He was a clown in circuses, on the street... whenever, wherever...,” I said.

“And did he laugh then?” she asked.

“Not exactly. He was a sad clown,” I said.

“A sad clown?”

“A serious clown,” I said. “But he did smile and sometimes he’d laugh. He has a *hick-up* kind of laugh, but then he came here.”

“Not the funniest place in the world.”

“No,” I said.

“See what I mean? We’ve got to try!” she said enthusiastically. I looked at the clothes and frowned.

“Ah, come on. It’ll be fun,” she said again.

“It’ll be the opposite of fun. Everyone will stare at me like I’m a freak,” I said.

“No, no - you’ll do great. You can do it,” she said. “Do it for your grandfather,” she said pulling away to crack open the door and peek out. “The children will love it. They’ll sing, I’ll get them settled, then I’ll knock and that’s your cue,” she said opening the door.

“Then what?” I asked reaching to hold her from going out.

“Then you come out,” she said.

“I come out. Then what?”

“You do some funny business – silly stuff,” she whispered.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Don’t worry about it. Go with it. You’ll think of something,” she said. “I know you will!”

“I will?”

“Sure you will. You’re a funny guy.” I looked at her in disbelief. “Of course you are! You don’t know that?” she said. I looked at her incredulously. “Don’t look so surprised. Of course you are!” she said.

“What do I do that’s funny?” I asked.

“I don’t know... everything,” she giggled. I stared. “You’re doing it now.”

“I am?”

“You’re funny,” she said.

“I am?” I repeated.

“Maybe it’s your face,” she said turning my face from side to side with her hand on my chin. “It’s the way you move.”

“My face?”

“Not exactly. It’s your eyes. I don’t know. You never noticed that people laugh at you?”

“And that’s a good thing?”

“You make people happy,” she said.

“I do?”

She opened the door wider. "I'm going. It's time. Everyone is waiting. Just come out in those old clothes, dance around; do silly stuff. I've got that box of props you can use. How tough can it be? They're kids and seniors. Easy crowd," she closed the door, but before doing so, she gave me a look. It was kind of an intimate look. She leaned forward, kissed my cheek and left the room. I stood frozen to the spot. Reflexively, I put my hand to my cheek. What just happened? Maybe I should forget Brittani with an 'i' and the woman on the bus to focus on the nurse. I could love her, couldn't I? Of course I could. And then: absolute panic. I couldn't believe it. This was ridiculous. Crazy! "*I'm not putting these clothes on!*" I thought. "*Grease paint?*" You've got to be kidding! I opened the door to tell the nurse that I couldn't do it. She stood blocking the door. When I opened it, the door bumped her in the back. I held up the pants and said, "I can't put these on."

"Why not?" she spoke softly. "Whisper!"

"They're wool," I said.

"So?" she said.

"Wool makes me itchy," I whispered.

"Don't be ridiculous. Who cares? Put them on!"

"Ridiculous? I can't do it," I said.

"Sure you can!" She pushed me back as an old woman looked at me. The nurse spoke very fast. "Get dressed. If you won't do it for me, do it for your grandfather. Wouldn't it be fun to see him laugh? He needs to laugh. Don't you think? Make him laugh! Go!"

"No," I said as she closed the door in my face. "He won't laugh," I said to myself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Be careful what you pretend to be because you are what you pretend to be.

~ Kurt Vonnegut

Once I was dressed, I stuck on a little moustache and opened the door slightly to peek at what was going on in the recreation room. I felt really, really, *really* stupid. I felt profoundly stupid. This was crazy. There was no way I could go out there looking like this. The children had lined up in front of the residents who had been wheeled in and sat crumpled in their chairs for the performance. The children stared at the residents and the residents stared at the children. They were as mysterious as aliens to each other. Beginnings met endings. All was quiet – you could hear the proverbial wind blow. Except for the occasional cough or wheeze as each sized up the other, all was quiet. One child picked his nose as an elder chewed her gums.

Granddad remained staring at a picture in the corner. He may have been sleeping. I don't know. From my vantage point I couldn't tell. A stout male nurse wearing a nursing uniform that was too tight for him noticed Granddad in the corner. The nurse walked up to him saying in a sing song voice, "Hey, David (not his name)! What are you doing over here? You'll miss the show!" Everything was an exclamation point with this guy. The enthusiastic male nurse spun Granddad around making his head spin. "Let me wheel Mr. Wheeler!" said the nurse laughing ingenuously as he whisked Granddad forward. "Get it?" Granddad probably got it, but chose not to show it. The joke was on the nurse. Granddad's name wasn't Wheeler. "He's a wheeler-dealer that Mr. Wheeler!" exclaimed the nurse. He wheeled Granddad forward, and parallel parked him

like a car between two residents who regarded him with little interest. Granddad sat expressionless. He looked slightly nauseated. He looked like he was waiting for death, but death wouldn't arrive. He looked disappointed. The nurse in the Betty Boop smock sat down at the piano and adjusted her sheet music as the male choir director with a pony tail raised his hands to gain the attention of the children who were kibitzing amongst themselves. After a few glares, Ponytail settled the children down and then, giving a nod, he signaled the children to sing. They started slowly without accompaniment. Ponytail crouched before the choir and exaggerated the words silently for the children who copied his expressions animatedly and mistaking words like potato for tomato thereby making the song basically unintelligible. After the first verse, the nurse began to play the piano. The children sang a song I didn't recognize. It seemed a bit weird to me. The song involved a lost potato looking for his salad. The residents in this level-four care nursing home looked more confused than they normally looked. They perceived the world as if through a soda straw and they didn't know what was going on.

At the end of the song, the children just stood there. Again the proverbial wind blew. An uncomfortable silence ensued. Pony tail stood up and motioned the children to take a bow, which they did. The room fell silent again except for a smattering of applause which sounded like bacon frying. I looked to see what Granddad's reaction would be. He looked like a statue. I could have spray painted him gold, put him on the street with a cup in front of him and made money off him as a human statue. He looked *almost* real. I quietly closed the door and waited anxiously for my cue. Alarm grew in the pit of my stomach. I was ready, but I didn't know for what. The toast I'd eaten churned inside my stomach. I felt the walls of the narrow storage room closing in on me and caught a glimpse of myself reflected in a small silver ornamental Christmas tree ball that was poking out of a box. The scene reflected on the silver ball struck me as surreal. I had on

white makeup and mascara. I looked like a ghost. I didn't feel like myself. I felt naked. I felt silly. This is not the kind of thing I do or have ever done. I thrive on obscurity and live in anonymity. I'm an audience, not a performer. I'd much rather watch than be watched. I don't want to make a fool of myself. What was I thinking?

The things I do for love.

Contrary to what the pretty nurse may have believed, I had no idea what I was going to do when I got out there. My mind was a total blank. I had nothing. Absolutely nothing. I felt as imaginative as the Sierra desert. A flood of total and utter panic engulfed me and my heart raced uncontrollably. I broke into a cold sweat. I thought I was going to be sick. What was going on? Why was I here? One minute I'm minding my own business and the next I'm dressed like an oddball in a closet. Was this my destiny? Why me? How can I get out of this?

Through the door I heard the nurse call out, "OK, boys and girls. Settle down. We've got a surprise for you. A very special guest is here. Does anyone like to laugh?" she asked. "Yeah!" shouted the children. She repeated the question and the children shouted even louder. "Yeah!" they shouted. And the nurse continued, "Great! Today's guest will make you laugh! I'll knock on the door to get him to come out!"

Talk about pressure. I thought my head was going to explode. I concluded that there was no way I was going to go out there. I looked around the storage room for a place to hide. There was nowhere to go.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The nurse didn't do the 'shave-and-a-haircut' knock I'd expected. I froze. I then turned around like a caged animal and in so doing bumped a box of Christmas decorations which tumbled to the floor spilling decorations and smashing ornamental silver balls all over the floor.

The children looked at one another when they heard the crash. “Oh my,” said the nurse with mock surprise. “Something’s going on in there!” The children looked at the elderly audience some of whom were quietly dozing. “Maybe if we call him together - nice and loud - he’ll come out.” They all shouted, “*Come out, come out, wherever you are!*”

I did not come out.

“Again!” said the nurse. “This time: *louder!* Boys and girls, say it with me. One, two three: *Come out, come out wherever you are!*” All eyes were on the storage room door. I didn’t move. They called again. Again I didn’t move. The suspense was killing me. The residents and nurses were now getting into the game. I heard one of the residents say in a loud voice, “What’s going on? Who’s in the closet?”

Through the door I heard the nurse say, “Sometimes he’s shy. I’ll go see what’s keeping him.” I grasped the doorknob and held it fast to prevent her entry. There was no way I was going out there. I could feel the nurse trying to pull the door open. My hands were so sweaty that the doorknob started to turn. My feet began to slide forward as she pulled the door open. I quickly let go so the people outside wouldn’t see me. She was stronger than me. Her strength must have come from hoisting seniors around or perhaps it was her Russian genetics. I jumped back as she rushed into the storage room closing the door behind her.

“What’s going on? Why aren’t you out there?” she whispered.

“I can’t go out there like this!” I said without equivocation. I stood motionless in the centre of the room clutching my hat and cane. “This is stupid!” I whispered.

“What? You look adorable! Sure you can,” she said.

“No. I can’t!”

“They’re waiting for you,” she whispered. She swiveled me by my shoulders and started to push from behind. I leaned backwards. My feet started to slide. I spun around and tore off the fake mustache. “I can’t wear this!” She grabbed my hand, took the mustache and jammed it squarely under my nose again. It kind of hurt. I wiggled my nose and adjusted my upper lip. I checked for blood under my nose with my finger. She slapped my hand aside, yanked my glasses off and jammed them in a breast pocket. “You don’t need those,” she said. The world descended into blurriness. I was about to protest yet again when she cupped my face with her hands and put her nose to mine. “Listen,” she said softly. I could feel her breath. “You *will* do this thing. Rest assured.” I wanted to kiss the sweet blurry orb with black holes in front of me, but before I could, I heard the words, “Let’s go! They’re waiting!” I felt her hands pushing on my shoulders as I began to slide backwards.

“Tell them I disappeared. Tell them I flew away,” I said in desperation slowly sliding away my resolve.

“No. Way. You’ll do this!” She pushed harder. I twisted my shoulders and she came forward and I slid behind her. It was quite a move but quick as a flash she grabbed my wrist before I could get away and she pulled me towards the door. I resisted by pulling in the opposite direction but I couldn’t get any traction and there was nothing but bedpans to hang onto. My big feet were spinning and sliding on the linoleum floor. She reached and twisted the doorknob, pushed the door open and started to peek outside. I pulled on my arm frantically as she clutched my wrist like iron and poked her head out saying brightly despite her exertions. “I found him!”

“Yay!” cheered the children trying to see inside the closet.

The elderly people looked at one another unsure.

“Ready?” asked the nurse quickly turning to me before one last Herculean pull. “Here we go. Get out there! Do whatever feels natural.” *Natural?* I thought. I pulled back and looked down at my feet. I got a serious look on my face. “Wait a second,” I said. “Something’s happening.”

“Good,” said the nurse. “What’s happening?”

And then I said, “*I feel funny.*”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“No really. I feel funny,” I said. And I did. I did feel funny.

She looked at me as if I was stalling and then yanked me like she was the engine of a locomotive and I was the caboose. Her sensible white shoes gave her all the traction she needed. There was nothing I could do. She pushed the door open with one hand and hung onto me with the other. The door flew open. I grabbed a water pipe that was against the wall as she continued to pull.

“No. Wait,” I said. “I’m not ready.”

“Could use a little help here,” she said out the door as she tried to wrestle me out the door. I was now being pulled horizontal by my leg. I dangled sideways from the doorknob - one foot was on the floor and the other was in the nurse’s hands. I saw sweat on her brow. She snorted, “He’s a little shy.”

The children in the front row rushed forward to help the nurse pull my leg. Slowly I began to lose my grip. I couldn’t believe this was happening. When I couldn’t hold onto the pipe any longer, we tumbled out the doorway and onto the floor. The nurse jumped up to reclaim her dignity. “Ta da!” she said.

I quickly got up and turned to leave but she latched onto the seat of my pants with that iron grip of hers. “Sit. Sit,” she said to the children and they quickly returned to their seats.

“Get down! Get down!” said the children to each other.

I stood up beside the nurse and straightened myself. I gave up trying to get away. I knew that I couldn't win. A child at the front picked up my hat and handed it to me. My eyes met those of the child and all of a sudden, I felt a connection to the child in a way that I wouldn't in my normal clothes. I wasn't Me any more. I nodded my head as if to say, 'thank you' and proceeded to adjust my disheveled clothing with a false sense of decorum. Everyone in the room watched me as my mind went entirely blank and character within me took over my actions.

The nurse picked up my cane and handed it to me. I stood staring at the crowd. The room was silent. The nurse took the cane and whopped me on the head with it and a few people laughed lightly. My hat tumbled to the floor. Another child picked it up, stepped forward and placed it in my hand. The nurse left my side and sat down in the audience. I stood alone and forlorn. I'd entered a surreal experience. There were about fifteen residents, three nurses and twenty or so children in the choir. They all waited for me to do something.

“Who's that?” said an elderly lady with a loud voice.

“I don't know,” whispered the male nurse to the elderly lady.

“What?” said the elderly lady in her loud voice.

“I don't know,” repeated the male nurse.

“What?” said the elderly lady.

Another elderly lady pointed her finger at me and called out, “That's Charlie!”

“Who?” asked the male nurse. The children stared at me and looked at one another in wonderment. “Who?” asked a boy to his friend. I stood there motionless hoping that if I closed my eyes this nightmare would end.

“I had a brother named Charlie,” said the elderly lady with the loud voice. “He blew his brains out with a hunting rifle.” I opened my eyes. I smiled at the lady and tipped my hat.

The nurse came up beside me and said quietly into my ear, “Go ahead. Do something! Be funny.” I looked at her blankly. The nurse turned to go and I reached for her arm, but she eluded my grasp. I started to follow her. She turned and pointed me back as if I were a dog. “Stay!” she commanded before moving towards her seat. Sensing that I was following her again she turned and approached me with a frown on her face. She cupped my face in her hands. “Do something,” she said quietly, only inches from my face. Maybe it was her closeness, maybe it was the intense feeling of terror or the feeling of love that I felt for her - whatever it was - at that moment I heard a love song in my head. The song began to play softly. If this were a movie, everyone would hear it, but as it was, I was the only one listening. An emotion swept over me as I stood there feeling ridiculous. Time stood still. What had been a blurry world slowly came into focus. I looked at the nurse, my grandfather and all the people sitting quietly. Everyone waited patiently for me to entertain them and, for a second, I thought I saw my dad in the audience. The scene before my eyes went into slow motion as the slow love song played within my head continued. The music was incongruous to the scene, but... there you are. It wasn't planned. Love's like that. The words to the song playing in my mind had nothing to do with what was happening.

Go and do what you want.

I know that you have the need,

but you know that I'll wait,

as long as it takes.

You'll never make me,

you'll never make me,

you'll never make me cry.

I looked out at the universe unfolding before me as soft guitars quietly strummed. I felt my mortality slipping away as the song continued, *“Now I may not mean everything, but I'm happy to have your love, so don't worry baby, I'll be alright, and I'll never make you, I'll never make you, I'll never make you cry.”* Sensing the strangeness of my mental disappearance and not hearing the music in my head, a few people chuckled uncomfortably. It was a peculiar scene. People expected something to happen, but nothing did. The nurse looked around the room, hoping I'd snap out of it. She didn't know that time had once again stopped for me. She didn't know that the earth had stopped rotating. I was becoming weightless. The children waited patiently for the show to begin. They didn't know what was going on in my head. They saw a man in a disheveled suit standing before them listening to something they couldn't hear. *“So go and do what you want. I know that you have the need, and don't worry baby, I'll be alright, you'll never make me, you'll never make me, you'll never make me-”* BONK!

The music stopped.

A rubber ball flew from somewhere and hit me square on the forehead. I was back in reality. The time shift was over. I came back to my senses full throttle. Where was I? I backed up into a flag display. Two flags on short poles were crisscrossed framing a picture of Queen Elizabeth II. I looked at the two flags on their poles and felt a compulsion to wave them. Without knowing why or what I was doing, I picked up a flag and proceeded to wave it around as if I were a parade master. I beamed like a lunatic and crazily marched around. The audience sat in silence. This was a poor excuse for entertainment.

I selected a second flag and began waving it around with the other one but in my incompetent marching and waving, I almost hit the seated children in the front row. They ducked

their heads. I then fell backwards over the piano bench hitting my head hard on the floor. That's when the lights went out.

I zipped down a worm hole towards a light at the end of a long tunnel. It was beautiful until I burst into the light when the nurse threw water on my face. SLAM. I was back in my body. I found myself on my back surrounded by a sea of faces looking down at me. I don't know how long I'd been unconscious – maybe just a few seconds, maybe an eternity. The world I awoke to was black and white. Everyone, including myself, wore clothing from 1915. Apparently I had woken up in a dream.

I looked up at the nurse who looked resplendent in her 1915 nurse's uniform and white wings on her back. The lights in the ceiling haloed her. I closed my eyes and reached my lips towards hers. When her lips brushed against mine, she pushed my face down and used it as leverage to help herself up.

“He's back,” she said casually. The children laughed. “Help him up.” I felt small cherub hands lifting me. I rubbed my head where a bump had started to form. I felt dizzy. I shook my head to rid myself of this black and white vision, but it didn't go away.

“Are you all right?” asked the nurse.

I nodded my head and staggered backwards sitting down hard on the knee of an elderly lady in a wheelchair. I reached behind and nonchalantly pulled an oxygen tube from her nose and put it to mine, inhaling deeply. The senior resident gasped surprised. She put her head to the side to peer at the alien who had invaded her lap. In the real world (not my black and white world of 1915), the male nurse slapped me on the shoulder and the choir director turned to the nurse and complained about my behaviour. I grabbed hold of his pony tail and used it as a rope to pull myself up. He shouted his disapproval. The nurse (who was in reality wearing the Betty Boop

smock) jumped up and grabbed the oxygen hose from me and put it back into the resident's nose. She was angry with me as I scratched my head and yawned.

I felt as if I'd been sleeping forever. I thumped my chest invigorated by the oxygen. I smiled at the nurse, batted my eyes flirtatiously and picked up the piano bench. I snatched a piece of sheet of music from the box on the floor and handed it to her. The sheet music had a picture of Scott Joplin on the front and the title, "*The Entertainer*." I pushed her towards the piano and towards playing the music printed on the sheet music that I thrust towards her. I anticipated the music and slapped my hands together in anticipation. I pulled the nurse by the hand and pushed her to sit at the piano. "I'm not very good," she said as she settled herself on the bench and began to examine the music.

I positioned myself in readiness. I waited and then I waited some more. We all waited. The nurse took forever to get started. She carefully studied the notes with her nose close to the page. I scratched my head. With one hand she moved her finger along the printed notes and with the other she moved just above the keys as if she were playing. After doing this for a while she positioned her hands and the me that wasn't Me thought, 'OK! Here we go!' but then she played more air piano, cracked her fingers and studied the music some more. It was very suspenseful.

I stood there like a statue watching her with my eyes. The suspense was killing me. I saw the children out of the corner of my eye. They were getting restless. They started putting up their hands to ask to go to the bathroom. This started the residents asking for the same thing. A veritable flood of a bathroom parade commenced. Finally, after much deliberation, the nurse began to play.

She got off to a rocky start with the opening bar and it went downhill from there. Half the notes she hit were wrong and the other half were incorrect. It was total discord. It was Scott

Joplin's worst nightmare. I looked at the nurse with surprised disbelief. The nurse hunched over the piano in all seriousness and shredded Joplin's best work. In response I began to move to the sour notes. The people on their way to the bathroom stopped in their tracks. Her playing and my stiff dancing were an unbelievably bad combination. It was so incredibly bad. It was so bad that they laughed at its ridiculousness.

An old man who had been sitting off to the side in a wheelchair trying to get some sleep couldn't take it anymore. He woke up from the infernal piano playing, put his hands over his ears and displayed a facial expression of absolute pain and total dissatisfaction. With no little effort, he got out of his chair and made his way to the piano. He put his gnarled tree branch hand onto the nurse's shoulder as she continued to massacre *The Entertainer*. She looked up. When he touched her. "Abe?" she said. Abe nodded and motioned with his thumb for her to vacate the piano bench. "What? You want to play?" said the nurse. Abe nodded. The nurse stopped playing (at last) and the audience clapped their enthusiastic approval. I froze on the spot. The nurse got up and Abe slid onto the bench replacing her. He handed her the sheet music. I guess he didn't need it.

"Boys and girls, have we got a surprise for you!" the nurse said to the audience. "Mr. Lass is going to play!" The boys and girls looked bored and unimpressed. I leaned against the wall.

Abe had on a little bow tie and a pale blue shirt. He looked very old. He began to play the piano quietly and turned in his seat to look at the children seated on the floor. His fingers moved effortlessly across the keys as he played a lovely tune. I think it was the Burr and Campbell tune, "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles"⁴³ It had been a popular song in 1919. Mr. Lass spoke with a thick New York accent. "My full name is Abraham H. Lass," he said. "Nobody ever calls me

Abraham. It's Abe. My mother used to call me 'Abey.' The boys in the street call me Abe and everybody else I know at present calls me Abe. It's Abe Lass, the one, the only," he laughed heartily, "silent movie piano player."

Abe looked at me. I remained leaning against the wall off to the side. I was glad that no one seemed to be paying attention to me. "You do what you do and I'll play accompaniment," he said with a wink. I stepped forward and looked at Abe feeling increasingly dizzy and lightheaded. So much so, that the scene transformed itself right before my unbelieving eyes. It was as if Abe's wink had magically triggered something inexplicable. Abe slowly faded away until he vanished completely. I looked at the audience of children and residents and they too faded away and vanished. I was obviously having a stroke. How else could I explain what was happening? No longer was I standing in a present day nursing home and no longer was I me. I can't explain it. Maybe it was from the hit on the head. Maybe Abe had magical powers, I don't know. Right before my very eyes the nursing home recreation centre turned into a 1915 street scene in silent film speed with black and white colours. I recognized the street from a film I'd watched with my granddad.

I could smell 1915 air -it had a whiff of horse manure in it - and I could hear the clip clop of horses' hooves and the distant barking of a dog. I could still hear Abe on the piano as I began to walk down the street towards the entrance of a bank I knew to be there. Rounding a corner I tripped on something tiny on the sidewalk. I turned and picked up the tiny object. I examined it and put it in my vest pocket. I then made my way through a rotating door and past a man bent at the waist cleaning the inside of a table. I used the bent over man as a door, pulling him in and out of the table that he was cleaning. I then made my way down a flight of stairs to the vault. I walked with machine-like precision. I did not round corners. I turned abruptly on the square. I

turned at straight angles as if I were walking on a line marked off on the floor. I approached a huge vault door, used combinations on dials and spun a wheel to open a big vault door.

People in the real world watched my performance in wonderment. They weren't seeing what I was seeing. Abe continued to play the piano. I pushed a huge vault door open (the door is invisible to the audience in the nursing home) and I went inside the bank vault to retrieve, not gold, but a mop and bucket. I am a janitor not the bank manager as one would have expected based on my performance. I took off my tattered jacket and donned a janitorial uniform jacket and hat that I pulled out of the bucket. From there I proceeded to walk around with the mop banging people in the face whenever I turned. The people in my mind were occupants of a bank, but, in reality, they were people in the audience of a nursing home. I didn't have a thought in my head as all this transpired. I saw a different world than the audience saw. I was following a script that was in my psyche. It was instinctual, spiritual. It was as if all of this had been programmed into me. I was a man possessed. I had a fleeting thought of the recreation room audience who was there (but not). It was as if the audience were in the dream and the world of the bank in 1915 was the real world. The two worlds were mixed together in my mind. The people in the nursing home audience had no idea what I was doing. I looked like a crazy person, but they assumed I was putting on a show that was strangely funny. They couldn't see the bank or any of the people who were kicking me in the butt. I later learned that nobody had a clue what was going on. They didn't know they were in a bank in 1915. They didn't see the world I saw. They watched me carry a wastebasket upside down and spill contents onto the floor and then sweep them aside. They watched me as I paid particular attention to one little piece of something on the floor that I could not sweep away. They didn't see the other janitor who was sweeping back at me the garbage that I was sweeping towards him!

The nursing home manager had been called into the recreation room because a crazy person was in there. The manager must have been surprised when I whacked him in the face with a mop when I turned around. In my world he was the bank manager wearing a top hat. It was an accident. The real world and my world were mixing together. The manager of the nursing home didn't see the tussles I was getting into with various people in my world, two of whom were security guards dressed appropriately for 1915. In my world the bank guards who grabbed onto me and lifted me up were actually nursing home security guards who had been called because I had hit the manager in the face with a mop. This is when things began to change. They didn't know it, but the security guards from the nursing home were actually bank guards were in my world. When they picked me up, the 1915 bank began to fade away. They lost their 1915 appearance and became what they were - nursing home security guards. With a shake of my head, I found myself back in the nursing home without a clue as to what had actually happened. I thought I was dreaming reality.

Abe remained sitting at the piano. He looked at me as if he understood that I had been in another dimension. Gradually the black and white silent movie world of 1915 returned to the present world of colour. The audience was still seated as they had been all along. Nothing had changed for them, but to me, I'd entered an illusion. They had watched me without knowing I had entered another time. Needless to say, as I came out of my delusional world, I was confused. I wondered if the nursing home and the audience in the recreation centre was the dream or if the bank of 1915 was the dream. I didn't know what was real. Was all of it a dream? Was I real? I wasn't sure. Who am I? What's going on? I felt reality slipping away.

I looked from one security guard to the other. These were now the nursing home security guards and not bank guards from 1915. They remained holding me in mid-air between them as the

manager and the nurse talked about what to do with me. Abe turned to his piano and said with a wink, “And now, some *Pickles and Peppers*.” With the first note of the music which was suitable for a Mack Sennet Keystone Cops chase scene, my sensibility changed. Rather than feeling resigned to my immobilized position in mid-air, I instantly knew how to get out of it without actually knowing what I was going to do. The music spurred me into action. I became as a puppet to the music Abe played. My body parts moved on autopilot to Abe’s piano music.

First I began by swinging my legs out and back, out and back, as if I were in a hammock and then, with growing momentum from the pendulum swinging action I’d initiated, I flipped my legs over my head causing the security guards to let go and bang their heads together. Now free, I stood and looked at the guards with their tangled arms. They quickly reached for me to begin our cat and mouse chase. One guard lunged at me as I hopped straight up landing on his hunched back. When he stood up, I was sent into the other guard knocking him over. It was chaotic and yet, to me, it was as if the entire thing was choreographed. All was fluid. I intuitively understood the physics of every action and reaction. I knew what each move would do and I moved completely naturally and without effort.

The guards tried harder and harder to catch me, but I eluded their grasp smacking them as I went. At one point I stood hunched over with my leg between a guard’s legs. When I stood up, he flipped over my back landing flat on his back. It wasn’t me. I was no longer in control. A body part would move of its own volition. I’d try to stop it knowing this is not how civilized men behave, but my hands had minds of their own and my feet, well, they were out of control.

The music took hold of me. I was in a Keystone chase with the guards. Laughter from the children, residents and nurses poured down like a waterfall as I tussled with the guards repeatedly kicking them in the bum. It was the laughter that roused me from the other dimension

I found myself in. When I came out of the 1915 world, the guards were sitting exhausted on the floor. I stood between them looking at the happy faces of the nursing home audience. I saw them as if for the first time. As they clapped, I took an elaborate bow. Abe stopped playing the piano with a flourish and I leaned against the piano completely relaxed and content as if the entire performance had been planned. Abe and I looked at one another. Something between us passed. He understood my world. The guards stood up confused. They didn't know what had happened. They felt as if they'd just been through the ringer. The nurse and the manager ran towards me. It was all the nurse could do to persuade the manager not to have the guards haul me away to the police. The guards looked at me. They had no desire to tangle with me again. They started towards me. I pretended to lunge at them and they bid a hasty retreat.

The nurse was just as surprised by what I had done as anyone else. She thanked the guards for participating. They left the recreation room confused. The nurse then looked at me sternly. She knew something strange had happened to me. She thanked Abe and everyone clapped their approval and the performance was over except my body didn't seem to know that it was over. I was still going in and out of some supersonic comedic dimension. As I leaned against the piano catching my breath, I felt in my pocket for the small metal box that I knew to be there. I took it out and looked through the collection of cigar and cigarette butts pulling out the best of the bunch. I then pulled off the pathetic excuse for gloves I was wearing, put a cigarette butt into my mouth, found a match and lit it off the side of a senior's head. I then did a backwards drop kick of the match sending it into a garbage can.

The manager glared at me. I was feeling pretty proud of myself when he came and took my cigarette away saying, "You can't smoke in here." It was as if I saw the words printed in

front of me, “You can’t smoke in here!” The manager left the recreation hall carrying my cigarette with an extended arm as if it were a diaper.

I looked at a senior resident who looked up at me. Ponytail, the choir director, directed the children to get ready to go. The children stood up and were lined up in a single file military style. They would soon be boarding their bus. As I stood there smiling and waving goodbye to the children, I smelled smoke. Looking down, I realized that there was a fire burning in the garbage can. I tried to shout fire, but could only mouth the words. Nobody could hear me. I looked around for water and finding none I put my foot into the can to stomp the fire out, but when I did that, I accidentally kicked paper out of the can and sparks flew around the room. That’s when the children began to scream and the sprinklers sprang into action shooting water everywhere. The woman in the wheelchair sat stoically as water rained down on her head. She looked up at me with an expression which said, “You idiot. Now look what you’ve done.” I smiled sheepishly down at her. “Sorry,” I mouthed.

The fire alarm sounded. People tried to shield themselves from the water as they quickly exited the recreation room. The nurse pushed me to follow. Everyone was herded outside where I found myself on the street feeling ridiculous dressed in the Little Tramp clothes. Reality struck me hard when the fire trucks came and firemen ran into the building with fire extinguishers in their hands. The nurse went with the firemen, security guards and the manager. She was trying to explain what had happened. “It was just a show for the kids,” she repeated. As she explained what had happened, I saw her pointing at me. The implication made me nervous. I had no idea what had just happened. Something wasn’t right. Outside on the sidewalk, the children’s choir was lined up in a single file. They filed past me shaking my hand as they walked past before boarding a school bus that was parked by the curb. They seemed to like me. In the meantime, the

fire had been extinguished and everyone was waved back in. When the school bus pulled away, I waved to the children and quickly went back into the nursing home to get my clothes from the storage room. I desperately wanted to end this fiasco. I had to get out of these clothes. When I entered the storage room I found that my clothes were not there. I ran to the nurse who stood by the nursing station a short distance from a huddle of security, firemen and police. The nurse said that she didn't know where my clothes had gone. She suggested that they may have been taken to the laundry.

"I can't wear these," I said pointing at myself. "I feel ridiculous. I have a headache and I have to go to work."

"Come back tomorrow," she said. "I'll find your clothes and put them in your grandfather's room." The manager called to her and she looked at him. "Coming," she said. Then she turned to me saying, "Come with me. You've got some explaining to do. The police are looking for the person who lit the fire," she said.

"What fire?" I said.

"The fire that you lit with your match?" she said.

"I did? I didn't mean to. If I did, it was an accident," I said. "They know that, don't they?"

"They don't know what happened. None of us really know what happened. You were like a wild man out there. You should talk to the police," she said. I looked at her incredulously. "It's not a big deal. You tell them what happened. I'm sure it'll be fine," she said.

"Really?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, but something in her facial expression said otherwise. I was worried. "I'm sure it'll be fine. It's just... There's some paperwork to do. Mrs. Richardson died."

“What? Someone died?”

“Happens all the time. It was too much excitement. She probably a heart attack, but don’t worry about it. You can’t help it if people have heart attacks,” she said. “Did your grandfather laugh?:

“What? I don’t know. I didn’t see him,” I said.

“You were amazing by the way. What were you doing?”

“Doing? I don’t know. It wasn’t me.”

“Wait,” said the nurse interrupting when someone called her name. “Just a minute. Come and talk to the police. They’re waiting.” She pulled my arm towards the huddle of police officers, security guards, firemen and the manager who stood in the corridor by the nursing station. As the nurse pulled me towards them, the big huddle of people looked at me. I became incredibly agitated. I pulled away from the nurse and dashed into a room off to the side. In the room an elderly woman lying in bed said, “Finally! I can’t get the bed to go down! Who are you? Is it Halloween?” I smiled at her then turned to look at the door. “Can you adjust the bed?” the woman said. I continued to look at the door distractedly and absently stepped towards the bed and tried to adjust a knob on the side. The woman looked at me strangely. “No, no. The controls are over there,” she said pointing. I looked at her dumbly. “Just forget it.” I fiddled with this and that control on the bed. “Do you know what you’re doing?” she said.

I pushed a button and the bed began to fold. “The other way!” said the lady. I tried to get the bed to go the other way, but it wouldn’t. This wasn’t going well. I jumped onto the bed and tried to push it open but it wouldn’t cooperate.

“Help!” cried the lady except I couldn’t hear her. I saw a black and white title card, “HELP!” I held my finger to her lips and said, “Shhh.” At that moment the nurse and a police officer stepped into the room.

“Hey!” said the officer reaching for me. At least I think he said ‘Hey!’ it may have been ‘Ray.’ I don’t know. It all happened so fast. Either way, I wasn’t sticking around. I fell backwards off the bed and landed on my feet. I had that old black and white feeling again! I could hear Abe at the piano again! The officer, surprised by the athletic move I had made, ran around the side of the bed to grab me, but I slipped underneath, quick as a flash and scrambled out the door and into the hallway where I bumped into the back of another officer. This officer turned and our eyes met. I tipped my hat. I don’t know why, but I gave her a great big kiss right on the lips. She didn’t like it. I was on autopilot again.

I didn’t have a thought in my head as my hat fell and rolled onto the floor. I bent over to pick it up as the officer reached for me. When I stood up suddenly with my hat in hand, I bumped her sending her off balance. She staggered backward and I did a quick about face and raced for the exit. When I hit the exit door handle, the fire alarm sounded yet again. Outside, I ran as quickly as I could in my too big shoes past the firemen who watched me go. I jumped over a hedge into a parking lot where I hurdled dividers and ran into a back alley.

I didn’t look back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

From there to here, and here to there, funny things are everywhere.

~ Dr. Suess

Once in the back alley and realizing that no one had followed me I slowed my pace. I felt totally self-conscious in the crazy outfit that was better suited for 1915 than it was for 2015. I had no idea what had just happened. Time travel wasn't something I was used to. I took off the tight jacket and bowler hat. I wanted to appear less conspicuous, but it was cold, so I put them back on again. Not that the hat gave me much warmth, but it was better than nothing. I felt like I was wearing a giant chicken outfit. I couldn't have felt more stupid. Words cannot express how embarrassed I felt. I felt like I'd lost control of myself and reality. The pants were too big. The crotch was practically to my knees. The jacket was too tight and the shoes were so big it made it difficult to walk. I found myself walking with my toes splayed outward. It was easier to walk that way than to endlessly trip on the long toes of the big shoes.

My plan was to avoid people as much as possible. I would change clothes at work as soon as I got there. Down one alley I came upon a man with his head in a large red garbage receptacle. I was about to hide when he poked his head up like a raccoon. He was holding an aluminum pop can in his hand and looked surprised to see me. The unshaven man stared at me as I smiled and tipped my hat. What else could I do? It's not like I had a choice. The character came out of the costume and into me as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I was the little fellow, the little tramp, the vagabond, and I breathed as the little tramp would have breathed. I felt

effervescent, bubbly. I felt a happiness verging on euphoria. The costume infused me with a bright and happy-go-lucky energy. As a boy, I'd imitated Charles Chaplin's little tramp, but this was different. This wasn't about imitation. This was about me *being* the tramp – mind, body and spirit. I literally felt like I was the little fellow! The little tramp and I were one. My body felt a new liveliness. My every motion was that of the tramp I'd seen in those old silent movies of long, long ago. I felt loose as a goose and ready to honk. I was casual and care free. I stopped beside the man who stared at me dumbfounded and I looked inside the garbage receptacle. I spied another pop can. Without thinking, I deftly hooked it with my bamboo cane and flipped it to the man who caught it in midair. I tipped my hat again, as if to say, "You're welcome!" Then I turned on the spot with flair and continued on my way with a devil may care, but I don't attitude. The feeling of self-consciousness had abated by increments as I came to fully inhabit my new found personality. I became more and more possessed by the character of the tramp with each step that I took. The big shoes were heavy, and yet, despite their oversized scuffed proportions, I felt light on my feet. I felt quicker. I felt Charlie Chaplin's presence in my being. This was my destiny! At long last I had discovered who I really was. I was someone else. The world continued to go in and out of colour. One minute the world would be in full colour and high definition and the next, it would be grainy and black and white. One minute it's the present and the next its 1915. I moved my big shoes in and out of two time dimensions.

A woman walking a small dog came towards me from the opposite direction. When she saw me, she smiled and her dog barked its head off. I tipped my hat to the woman who alternated between wearing a modern red track outfit and a 1915 dress complete with hat and feathers. I tipped my hat to the dog and I tipped my hat to the rock which I tripped on when I gave the barking dog a wide berth.

I strolled along looking up at the late afternoon sky. I felt myself drawn to dreamy music coming from a shoe store. Speakers outside the store were playing electronic music that crept into my brain. I listened to the music transfixed and looked at a display of mirrors in the store window. I saw myself in multiple dimensions. The street scene reflected before my eyes faded and became what it had been in 1915. My heart swelled with love to the point of bursting. I loved the people as worlds from a present entered a past. A line from the song resonated with me, "*Life is timeless.*" Customers who were going in and out of the store in their 1915 finery regarded me suspiciously. I realized that at the same time there is a present day reality in which we move on a daily basis - a world we take to be *real* – there are past realities proceeding like echoes beyond our awareness in parallel dimensions. I had somehow tapped into a past dimension. I was moving in and out of the present and the world as it was in 1915. Somehow I was able to enter this past reality. I was a short circuit between dimensions.

I hooked the shoe store door handle with my cane and opened it for people entering. They smiled at me. They thought I was part of a store promotion. A man gave me a coin as a tip. I looked at the coin and pocketed it in my vest. A manager inside looked at me. I didn't like the way he looked at me so I walked away in a puff of smoke from my cigar.

I became increasingly aware of the feeling I'd had when I first put on the Charlie Chaplin tramp outfit in the storage room. I felt tingly. I can't think of a better word to describe what I felt. I felt silly and yet, exhilarated. For the first time in my life I felt a spirit of funniness. I felt a gentle bliss. Both my dad and granddad had tried to explain this feeling to me, but I wouldn't listen. Dad had said that he got the feeling while entertaining and Granddad said that after years of being funny, funniness became a way of life for him. Funniness infuses you with a lighthearted attitude. The world becomes your movie. Dad said that funniness is like jazz music.

When you're in front of an audience, you get into a groove. You hear laughter and get into a zone. No longer are you an entertainer for others. You become an entertainer for yourself. The world becomes beautiful and wonderful just the way it is. He said that when you feel this way, nothing can get you down. Humour can defuse suffering. You might drop your eggs and walk into a door, hurt your nose, crack up the car, but if you can laugh about it, you'll feel no pain. If you can laugh at yourself, you're the freest person there is. Where some people would get angry or cry, you don't. Not that you smile in the face of all adversity. It's just that you know that when something bad happens, it'll pass. You know that this is how the world is. You don't take it personal. You can be the brunt of the world's joke, but that's okay. With the right comedic attitude, disaster isn't the end of the world (unless of course, it's a massive asteroid hitting the Earth and then it is the end of the world). Disaster isn't so bad.

I'd obviously gone insane. I suffered a mental breakdown brought on by a head injury.

Oh, well.

I saw a cigarette butt on the sidewalk. I picked up the butt and put it in the small metal box I knew was in my pocket. What was happening to me? I hated smoking. Surely what I was wearing wasn't magic. How could it be? There is no such thing as magic. But, then again, how could I explain how the outfit was making me feel? How could I explain going into the world of 1915? What if the clothes really were magic? I certainly felt magic. I felt a heightened sense of awareness. I felt invincible. I felt good, no - great! Fantastic! I had a good feeling inside me. A dark cloud had been lifted. My stomach felt light. It was a secret feeling. People looked at me strangely, but I didn't care. They didn't know. I still felt self-conscious and shy but I also felt alive and happy. I saw the ultimate humour in the comedy that was life. Life isn't as serious as I

had thought it to be. People think it is, but it isn't. There is nothing to fear. When I looked at people, I didn't feel that old feeling of animosity. I felt something else. What was it?

In an alley I came upon some boys drawing graffiti on a wall. When they saw me, they walked away. They left a spray can behind. I picked up the can and thought of running after them to return it, but they had rounded a corner and were gone. I examined what they had left unfinished on the wall as if it were fine art displayed in a gallery. Instead of feeling annoyed as I usually do with punks spraying graffiti on the street, I felt compassion for the boys who'd done this. I'd interrupted them. I shook the spray can. They'd written the words *FIGHT APATHY* on the wall. They were apathetic warriors. I finished the sentiment by spray painting *OR DON'T* and stepped back to admire my work. At the same time as I was doing this, a man resembling a rock star came into the alley from a gate beside me. He glared at me, pushed his long hair out of his eyes, adjusted his bandana and yelled obscenities at me. Without hesitation, I dropped the spray can, jumped up and with remarkable agility placed both my feet squarely on his chest and gave a swift push. I drop kicked him with both feet. He flew backward into a pile of garbage bags. It happened in slow motion really fast. It's hard to explain. I would never normally do anything like this. It wasn't me and yet it was. I had to be possessed. I stood there dumbfounded looking at the Stephen Tyler look alike and the Stephen Tyler look alike looked up at me with eyes wide. I imagined that to him I was a computer animated graphic in a video game. He had disbelief in his eyes. He didn't know what had happened to him. One minute he knows what he's about, the next, he's on the ground looking up at a cartoon man. I ran away turning the corner on one foot as the ne'er-do-well rock star sat dazed and confused.

After a time I came to a sign by a crosswalk. The sign read, *STOP FOR ME. IT'S THE LAW*. With a felt marker that I knew to be in my pocket, I drew a claw where the stick man's

hand should have been and added a “C” in front of the “L” making it, *STOP FOR ME. IT’S THE CLAW.*

I was on a roll.

On a stop sign, beneath the word *STOP* I printed *VANDALISM!* This was fun. There was a sign behind a house that read, *BEWARE OF THE DOG.* Beneath these words I wrote *HE IS VERY SARCASTIC.* Some enterprising vandals had spray painted a sentiment I agreed with on a brick wall. They’d printed the words, *LOVE STILL EXIST.* Beneath it I wrote, *GRAMMAR NOT.*

Dressed as a bum like I was and as ridiculous and conspicuous as I felt myself to be, nothing could bring me down. I felt energetic music play in the movie that was running in mind. At the side of the road there was a dead cat. In a ditch I found a cardboard garage sale sign. I turned the sign over and on the back I drew an arrow and wrote *FREE CAT* in bold letters. I stuck the sign in the ground beside the body and the cat and continued on my way. I came upon a sign that had a picture of politician’s face on it. The politician had a reputation for being self-interested and pompous. I searched my pockets and found that I had another marker. It was red. With the red marker, I drew clown features on the politician’s face. On a realty sign, under the words *FOR LEASE* I wrote *NAVIDAD.* I was just finished doing this when a police officer driving by saw me and pulled up in a police cruiser. When he got out and approached me, I pretended that he was beating me up. I propelled myself into garbage cans making a real racket and threw myself from him to the wall and back again. A group of bystanders pulled out cameras and began documenting the scene. The surprised officer tried to grab me. I made it look like he’d taken another swing at me, then I ran into an alley leaving him to face the offended bystanders.

I don't know what had come over me. I would never normally do these sorts of things. It was the spirit of mirth that was doing it. I saw humour in everything! This is the divine comedy! This is what Granddad had tried to tell me about so many years ago before he'd given up on life.

When I was a kid, I was ashamed of my dad and my granddad. They were embarrassing to me. Who has father figures who dress like clowns? It was humiliating. We traveled around a lot. Whenever I would come into a new school, the kids would whisper to one another, "There's that new kid. His dad's a clown." And then someone would make fun of my clothes. Clowns like my dad didn't make much money, so it didn't help that my clothes were second hand. "Hey purple pants! Where'd you get the purple pants?" Because we could only afford used clothes I was always dressed decades behind everyone else and it didn't help that my mom dressed me like a nerd. She came from a Quaker family. Quakers aren't known for their fashion sense. How I wished that my dad was a plumber or something else. As I got older I started to hate the circus. I hated everything about it. I felt badly for the animals and did my best to comfort them or free them. When elephants went on rampages, I cheered for the elephants. When Mom died and my dad left us, it was just Granddad and me. He did the best he could to take care of me, but he didn't know anything about raising a kid. I lived on snow cones, popcorn and candy floss. I asked Granddad to settle down and get a regular job, but he said that show business was in his blood. He said it was in my blood too.

My mother had been beautiful. She came from a religious family. She was a secretary to a booking agent. That's how she met my father. The story goes that one day my father came to see his agent and met my mother in the office. My dad was an incorrigible flirt. On their first date he bought her one of those arrows that look like you've been shot through the head. Of course he took her to the circus to meet his family. He swept her off her feet. As I say, she came

from a Quaker family, so when my mother's father heard that his daughter was in love with a clown, you can imagine what happened. He forbade her from seeing Dad. Dad was lucky that Quaker's don't hit. My mother ran away with the circus. I don't think she knew what she was in for. The wife of a clown isn't easy. There's a lot of seltzer involved.

Both my father and my grandfather told me that I should be proud of my heritage. I wasn't proud. Maybe that's why Pop, my dad's clown name, and I never clicked. My dad was like a boy. He never grew up. My mom found it charming, but I found it annoying. I could never understand clowns or people who thought clowns were funny. I never thought of clowns as funny. My dad's friends freaked me out. It was a sideshow when we had a barbeque. The clowns were always breaking things. It was ridiculous. I never laughed at any of their antics. My father and mother tried to make life as normal as possible for me, but when most kids had a dog, I had a spider monkey. When most kids played cops and robbers, I sat in the wings at the circus organizing Pop's collection of rubber chickens. When my mother died, my dad just disappeared. I had nowhere to go but the circus. I stayed with my granddad. It wasn't all that bad though. I did get to travel. I listened to records and made the most of it but when Granddad was an old man and still on the road with the circus, something happened that took the life out of him. He quit the circus. We stayed for awhile in a little old house that had a garden. He found comfort there. I grew up, moved out and went from job to job trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. One day I got a phone call from my Great-Aunt Polly. She said that Granddad needed help. I found him at home sitting in a lawn chair waiting to die. His friends were all dead by this time and his beloved clowns were maligned on TV. I guess the despair he felt was too much. Scary movies about clowns started to become the norm. It made Granddad feel sad. He's say, "Why do people hate clowns?" He lost his zest for life. He got heart pains, and, that was it. He gave up.

Now he's in a nursing home. He just sits and frowns. One day he said to me, "Things always end badly." I said, "No they don't." Then, as if to prove my granddad correct, I accidentally bumped his red Jell-O onto the floor. I remember the look on his face. "See," he seemed to say. "I told you so."

As I strolled along as the tramp, all these thoughts flooded through me. My life was flashing before my eyes. I thought about my childhood. Back then, kids would ask me, "What does your dad do?" Sometimes I'd lie and say, "Oh, he's a plumber." Other times, when pressed to tell them where my dad was, I told the truth. "He's a clown," I'd say. "He travels with the circus." There would be the inevitable pause. "He's a what?"

"A clown."

"Your dad is a clown?"

"Yes. My dad is a clown. Can we talk about something else?"

"You mean you're dad is like a real live circus clown?"

"Yes. A real live circus clown," I'd say.

"What's his name?"

"Pop."

"You're dad is Pop? Pop the clown? I saw him once! Really? He's amazingly funny. Wow! Would he make me a balloon animal?"

God forbid if Dad should hear someone say something like that. He'd go on a tirade about how there's a difference between a balloon sculptor and a clown. I remember one time he came home early from whatever it was he did on a day off. The circus he'd worked for had closed so he had to find another line of work, at least, for a while. He'd been working at a clothing store. When they hired him in the men's department, the store people heard his accent

and thought he'd have a sense of style, but Dad put on accents according to his mood. They didn't know my dad. He started wearing a red nose to work.

On one particular day, during summer holidays, some kids from the apartment building where we were living came over. We were listening to records in my bedroom. We got to talking about clowns. Dad must have heard the guys talking about how unfunny clowns were. He came into my room and tried to explain what a real clown was. I remember the whole scene. When he came in, he said with his fake English accent, "Most people don't understand clowning. People in North America haven't seen good clowning."

Before I could stop him, one of the kids (I think it was Percy) asked, "What's good clowning?" At the time, I thought, "*Here we go. Percy is an idiot.*"

As I remember it, Dad became thoughtful. He pulled up a desk chair and sat on it with his forearms folded. He said in his rapid fire Cockney style, "The criterion of comedy is one that many clowns fail. To be truly funny is not easy. Comedy is not a science with formulas to follow. It's an art. It's an interaction between a performer and an audience. It's a matter of taste. The only way to test a gag is to try it before an audience to see how people react. To make things more difficult, a gag that works extremely well for one performer will fall flat for another. The reason for this is... (dramatic pause) character."

"Character?" asked Percy naively.

"Dad's got to g..." I wanted to say *go*, but I was interrupted by Dad continued with what later came to be known as: *The clown lecture*.

"The humour of any situation," he began, "is dependent upon the character to whom it happens." He looked at the my friends for a reaction, seeing none, he continued. "Did you get that? Let me repeat: The humour of *any* situation is dependent upon the character to whom it

happens. A fall that deflates a rich pompous society matron can be funny – yes indeed - but if it happens to a poor frail elderly lady, it is tragic. You can't trip a mother. That's never funny. Each individual clown should be a distinct character. There is no such thing as being: *simply a clown*. A clown can be flirtatious and shy," Dad lowered his head and fluttered his eyelashes at Percy in a most unappealing lascivious way. "A clown can be arrogant." He put his nose in the air, thrust his chin out and closed his eyes. "A clown can be stupid, clever, or any number of attributes, but a clown has to be something." He abruptly stood up and looked around my bedroom. I sensed trouble was afoot.

"Dad!" I said apprehensively.

He grabbed a handful of toys, readied himself and started to juggle, but he never could juggle so everything fell to the floor. I rushed to pick up my fallen toys. The room was silent as Dad looked for signs of amusement. "Nothing," he said. "I'm getting to know my audience."

"Dad! You broke it!" I said picking up a valued action figure.

"Sorry. That didn't work. Now we're getting somewhere. Juggling is a boring skill that's difficult to make entertaining." Dad sat still. Only his eyes moved. He got up, but as he did so, he let out a flatulent. Timmy and one of the other boys laughed.

"That's gross!" I said opening a window.

"Sorry," he said smirking. "You see, the great clowns are those with depth of character involving many aspects," he let another one go. "Great clown characters are carefully delineated personalities."

"Can anyone be a clown?" asked Percy waving his hands in front of his face to dissipate the methane permeating my small bedroom.

"Don't encourage him," I mumbled.

“Good question. I’m glad you asked that Pepe,” Dad said.

“Percy. It’s Percy,” said Percy eagerly.

“Right. Sorry. Percy-it’s-Percy,” Dad said. Each of us boy looked at one another. Dad spoke as quickly as possible. He knew my patience was wearing thin. I knew he was speaking to me more than to my friends. For my entire life he’d wanted me to join him and be a clown.

“You’ve got to find the clown within you,” he said. “You’ve got to find your inner clown. In a real sense, this is what happens. For some people a clown character provides a façade they can hide behind, thus freeing inhibitions. This freedom is one of the lures of clowning. The character can contain exaggerated traits in the performer’s personality, ones he wishes he had, and ones he has observed in others. He can hide behind the makeup and costume of a clown and be free to be himself. There must be an honesty to the traits he or she has chosen. It will not work for a quiet person to try to force himself to be a boisterous clown. It will not work for one person to tell another what traits their character should have. The specific traits chosen for the character will be determined by the performer’s personal sense of humour and by audience interaction. As the performer interacts with audiences, he discovers what they respond to, and as his skills develop, his character will evolve and change. This is one of the big differences between an actor and a clown. While they use many of the same techniques, an actor portrays many characters during their career, and a clown concentrates on perfecting *one* character. A clown must be concerned with showmanship. He must understand and use movement, blocking, focus, timing, and pacing. A clown must not only give careful consideration to the idea behind the gags, but also to how they are framed and presented. A good clown uses every possible tool to entertain the audience. He can improvise with anything. He can take an everyday object and see it as something completely different. A clown can’t just be someone who goofs around and does

practical jokes for personal enjoyment. A clown performs for the enjoyment of others. He's serious, but he can't appear to be trying to be funny. No. Never! A clown must have self-discipline and interest in others. That's it." Dad looked around at the boys, some of whom were in rapt attention.

"Why do clowns dress like they do?" Percy asked.

"Pop has things to do. Don't you Pop?" I looked at my dad sternly. I'd had enough.

Dad didn't catch my drift or, if he did, he chose to ignore it. "I'm glad you asked that Percy. Personally, I don't like the one-piece costume with ruffles. Too Halloweeny. Too *every clown*, if you know what I mean. Just like the enormous painted-on grin, it's amateur. Too many clowns mask their expressions. A good make-up design enhances the expressive qualities of the performer's face. You actually don't even need make-up to be a good clown."

"So, what's the secret to being a good clown?" I asked slumping onto my bed.

Dad looked me squarely in the eye. Standing, he made a fist and pounded his chest. He then made a face to show that he'd hurt himself.

We smiled. I found the action predictable. Trite. Not funny, but the others, found it personable.

"A clown must love people in order to be successful. In order to establish a rapport with an audience, the performer must like them, and this is an attitude that can not be faked. Collectively, an audience is very sensitive to this. Clowning serves as a channel for the performer's love. It's not an ego trip. They try to make others happy. They try to make others feel good about themselves. This love is something that can not be taught. There's an instinctive element to clowning. You either got it, or you don't. Every clown can learn to be a better clown, but not everybody can learn to be a clown."

‘Why did Dad say all that?’ I wondered. Back walking in my newfound old costume, his words echoed in my mind. I walked along feeling silly and as I did so, I finally understood what he meant. For the first time in my life, I felt *it*. I didn’t feel mean or silly. I felt funny. For the first time in my life I understood why Dad loved the circus and why he loved those old silent movies. Dad loved Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, Mabel Normand, Edna Purviance, Mack Sennett – all those guys and more that he told me about but I can’t remember. We both knew how we felt about Chaplin’s tramp. I wouldn’t admit it, but I loved the tramp – for awhile, until I grew tired of all that stuff, but father never stopped loving Chaplin. Even when the rest of America turned its back on him, Dad and Granddad never did. Father said that Chaplin was one of the greatest clowns ever. Wearing the tramp outfit brought back a flood of memories to me. I was a child again. Just before he disappeared, my Dad had said that he’d stopped laughing at Charlie. When he said it, I was shocked. It showed me how he’d stopped loving life. It showed me how he’d lost his sense of humour. When that happened, Dad lost his zest for living and he took off. Now the same thing had happened to Granddad. Maybe the nurse was right. Granddad needed to laugh. Maybe laughter is as important as air and Granddad was suffocating. Maybe I could make him laugh. Could I? I needed to try again. I realized that my granddad and I weren’t so different after all. I too needed to laugh. I didn’t realize it until I laughed too. I had laughed at the nursing home. It felt fantastic to have a big belly laugh. Here I was walking down a back alley dressed like one of the greatest screen legends in the history of movies who had basically been completely forgotten by generation after generation. Chaplin was a legend who was forgotten in today’s world of computers and high tech gadgetry. And yet, the spirit of the tramp was reborn in my heart. I was the tramp reborn. I could feel Charlie’s essence in my bones. I imagined myself to be in a movie and the camera was rolling. Sure, people

thought me crazy, but, so what? I didn't care! I behaved in the funniest way because I knew people liked it and I wasn't trying to be funny. I was just... Me. I tripped and fell without getting hurt. I was the penultimate gymnast. Every gesture I made was fluid. I felt positively giddy! Hilarity filled me. What a trip! I could do anything. I was Superman except instead of being able to fly and bend steel; I could fall head over heels without hurting myself. I could scale a wall and fall and jump up unhurt. I was a cartoon man. I was impervious to injury and absolutely, totally and unequivocally fearless. I could do anything! Nobody scared me. Nobody could hurt me. I said to myself, "I *am* the tramp!" This is how Charlie must have felt when he made the Sennett, Mutual and Essanay comedies. I felt silly and happy. I felt a silly happiness and a happy silliness.

Everything I saw had gag potential. Nothing was what it really was. I was starring in a movie just for me. But it wasn't a movie. This was real life. I felt invincible. I felt myself to be a new kind of superhero, except instead of strength and power I had wit, dexterity, and invulnerable funniness. I was Ladybug man! I felt a balance between tragic and comic. I felt the pathos of life. I was possessed by the character of the tramp. Sure I preferred 1915, but 1915 was in me. It was how I saw. It was the silent movie era again.

Mr. Milton was wrong. You can go back!

In the park I came upon a group of tough looking young people sitting in a circle. One of them said, "Hey, Dude!" His colourful public park friends looked at me and laughed. I smiled and tipped my hat.

"Hey, Dude, come here," the colourful young man yelled. I motioned to make sure it was me to whom he was talking. "Yeah, you, Little Dude! Come here!"

I approached. "Who are you supposed to be?" one of them asked.

I shrugged as if to say, “I don’t know.” They were listening to a guy play his guitar. He was singing and playing Bob Marley’s *No Woman No Cry*. The one with the long hair who called me Little Dude gave me an elaborate handshake and invited me to join them sitting cross legged on the grass. The grass was a damp so I brought out my hanky and carefully lay it down on the ground to sit upon. I guess this looked pretty funny given the ragged nature of my pants. I had trouble twisting my legs into a cross-legged position without falling backward or forward onto my face. They laughed at my struggles and I laughed too. As we sang, a big white dog kept putting his head between my legs in a most embarrassing fashion. It was distracting. I repeatedly pushed the dog away with my cane. This also amused the group. Finally, I put my hat in my lap to protect myself from the dog. Again they laughed.

They passed me a cigarette and I took it gratefully saying “thanks.” I tipped my hat to them. I got up and started walking away with the cigarette in my hand when my friend with the long hair jumped up and pulled me back. “Little Dude, where ya goin’?” he said. He brought me back insisting we share the cigarette as a group. Poor people, I thought. They must be homeless. They had to share a cigarette. The song they kept playing over and over again struck me as funny. We started to sing it together but instead of singing, “No woman, no cry,” I thought it was “No woman, no pie.”

“Did you just say *pie*?” asked my new friend.

“When?” I asked.

“Just now,” my long-haired friend said.

“Yes?” I said.

“That’s good!” he said laughing. Next thing I knew we were all dancing and singing, *“No woman, no pie. No woman, no pie. No woman, no pie. Oh my little sister, don’t shed no tears. No woman, no pie.”*

As I shared cigarettes, drank beer, danced and laughed on the grass in the park on this beautiful day with my new colourful friends. It felt wonderful. I wasn’t me anymore. Who cares about environmental disaster? Not me. I was living for the moment and letting go the things I couldn’t control. My new friends held up cardboard signs begging money from passersby. They laughingly called their signs “Bumvertising.” One sign read, “Lost Job, Need Food.” Another said, “Ninjas Killed My Family, Need Money for Revenge!” and yet another read, “Need Money for Beer and Pot.” A police officer saw the park people pestering passersby in the park. He approached my new group of bum friends. My friends saw him coming, but I didn’t. I had my eyes closed. They dropped their begging signs and beer bottles beside me. They excused themselves from my vicinity without my knowledge. I was too busy listening to music in my happy place to hear, or see, the cop who stood over me trying to get me to respond. If I had, I too would have high tailed it. When the cop poked me with his baton, I passed the cigarette him. I thought he was one of my new friends getting demanding, but when I felt a steel grip on my arm yanking me to my feet, I knew otherwise. As the cop stood there, I kept my eyes closed and felt his arm and chest. He smacked me in the chest when I got too close. That’s when I opened one eye. I looked around to see where my long-haired friends had gone. He asked me for identification so I emptied my pockets to show him that I didn’t have anything of importance. The things I pulled out were quite remarkable, really. I had no idea that I had all this stuff on me. It was like I was Jesus pulling out loaves and fishes out of baskets to feed the multitudes except, in my case, instead of loaves and fishes I pulled out weird objects that I handed to the officer to

hold onto for me. I pulled out a rubber chickens, bags of marbles, a sandwich, a Frisbee, a pillow, a notebook, pens – all kinds of things. The officer threw these things down and demanded to know what I was doing. He picked up one of the Bumvertising signs that was on the ground beside me. I did a quick about face, but he caught me by the scruff of the neck and tossed me like a doll. He put my hands behind my back, handcuffed me and led me towards his cruiser. A group of kids watched as I was hauled away. By a statue of the queen the officer stopped to talk to another officer. As he chatted, he held onto me with his body turned to his companion. I became bored. I could see my new friends watching me from a distance. I tried to wave but the officer yanked my hands down.

A fly started to pester my face. I couldn't shoo it away. My arms were behind my back so I scrunched my back up and in no time, surprisingly, I stepped backward and pulled myself through the cuffs. It was so easy. I couldn't believe it. I didn't know I could pull a Houdini like that. I tried to show the officer my amazing achievement, but the officer paid no attention to me. His back was towards me. He ignored my attempts to talk to him. I tugged his leave, but he didn't pay attention. Now, with my arms in front of me, it was much easier to shoo the fly away. And then, I looked at the handcuffs and at the officer engaged in his conversation with another officer. Neither of them paid any attention to me. Noticing a key hanging off the officer's belt, I carefully snagged it and undid my cuffs. The officer continued to hang on to the chain of the handcuffs. He didn't know I wasn't wearing them any more. I started to walk away. I saw my friends in the distance waving at me to follow them. I signaled for them to wait and walked back to the officer. I carefully hooked one side of the hand cuff to the officer's belt and the other side to a metal sign. I couldn't believe that neither officer noticed. I was invisible. I started to walk away again. My new friends laughed as they looked at me. The sign I'd cuffed the officer to was

a no smoking sign. It had a cigarette with a red circle and a line through a drawing of a cigarette. I pulled out my marker and drew a line on the sign. The line went from the end of the cigarette – the end where you put your mouth - to the plume of the smoke rising. The line I'd added changed it from looking like a burning cigarette to a piece of pie. I wrote the word "PIE" on the sign so instead of a no smoking sign it was now a no pie sign.

I tapped the officer's shoulder a couple of times. Each time I did, he pushed me away. When the other officer walked away, he finally looked at me. He could see my new friends laughing at him. I held out my hands which were handcuff free. He tried to grab me, but I stayed just out of his reach. He was surprised to find himself handcuffed to a pole. I tipped my hat and walked away like a gentleman. I left him struggling with the cuffs. I laughed to myself. He didn't.

For some reason I felt quite dreamy. I had a nice conversation with a tree and floated through the park in a gentle euphoria. In the centre of the park I watched as a band set up musical equipment for a performance in the bandstand. When two big guys wearing black tee-shirts struggled with a giant black box, they motioned for me to help. I wiped the brow of one of them and put his hair out of his eyes with a ribbon that I pulled out of my pocket. The big black box started to roll backwards. I joined them in pushing it up the ramp. We managed to get the big black box onto the stage. They thanked me.

Some wild looking people walked past me onto the stage. They must be the musicians because they looked prehistoric. One of them looked at me. She motioned for the other musicians to stop and look at me as well. They nodded at one another, patted me on the back and the one in a fur loin cloth handed me a red tambourine. I thanked him for the tambourine and started to walk away. He stopped me and the group led me onto a stage. A huge audience

cheered. I saw the flash of a 1915 audience. Quite strange. The musicians readied themselves with their instruments. I followed suit and readied my tambourine. The lead musician motioned for me to start banging a rhythm with my tambourine. I tapped a nice rhythm, smiled benignly at the audience, feeling proud of myself, and then, all of a sudden, with the first strum of his guitar, the volume was so loud it knocked me over. I fell into the drummer knocking drums and percussion paraphernalia everywhere. I helped the drummer up and together we picked up his drums. I signaled to the lead guitar player to wait for one moment and then I took facial tissues from a facial tissue box that was on stage, balled up the tissue and stuck the balls of tissue into each of my ears. The audience had to wait. When I was ready, I nodded to the guitar player. We were just about to start again when three big guys in black t-shirts stepped heavily onto stage. By the looks of them, they did everything heavily. The men in black t-shirts said something to me, but I couldn't hear. They then surrounded me and tried to take my tambourine away. It was relatively easy to elude the big guys. It was like a choreographed wrestling dance with black bears. The drummer and keyboardist played a little tune as I hopped in and out of the bears' grasp. At one point I clambered onto a tower speaker and jumped onto the shoulders of one of the bears – I mean men.. He tried to pull me off, but his thick muscular arms prohibited him. The audience laughed. I turned to look at them. That's when a bear caught me and carried me off the stage. The audience laughed some more. This of course was my secret fuel. I'd made them happy.

My gift.

I left the park when the bears chased me away like I was a goat that had gotten into their garden. I continued to walk and found myself in Chinatown. I rounded a corner and was faced by dancers inside a Chinese dragon. Fireworks were lit and I jumped around terrified. The dragon

appeared to be chasing me. Each and every way I went the dragon was sure to follow. I fell and covered my head. When I looked up, it was gone. It had walked over me. Such was Chinatown.

Around the next corner I found myself in a parade. There were scantily clad men who handed me a flag. I enjoyed dancing and prancing in the parade.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Oh frabjous day. Callooh! Callay!

~ Lewis Carroll

A little nonsense now and then is cherished by the wisest man.

~ Roald Dahl

By the time I got to the mall where I worked I was tired, but it was a good kind of tired – if there is such a thing. Tired is tired and yet, I felt exhilarated. I had become so totally immersed in the character of the tramp, vagabond or little fellow – whatever you want to call him - that I had completely forgotten myself. I was a Me that I didn't know was there. I didn't think of the old tramp clothes that I was wearing as a costume. It was a second skin. I was possessed by the spirit of the Little Tramp. I was the *Little Dude!* I arrived in the mall clad as the tramp, but I didn't feel self-conscious. I owned the clothes. Dressed as the tramp I felt completely comfortable with myself. The clothes were me. I sat and watched people and the people watched me. Slowly, as people started to notice me, I found myself clowning around with passersby. People were entertaining me. I waved my cane and fooled around with it as I imitated the way people walked. I'd walk behind a person who demonstrated a character trait, like an exaggerated arm swing like a marching soldier or a hunched walk of determination and I would imitate them. I'd walk behind a woman with a feminine saunter and I'd imitate her. I'd match my steps with those of a determined business man with blinders on, then, when the man turned around to look

at me, aware of my presence; I'd turn and look in another direction. I walked like a zombie staring down at a mobile device until I ran into a pole. I walked beside someone talking loudly into a headset, making a racket with kazoo as I walked along. When the person would try to chase me away, I would tease them and come back. I would take the arm of a man pushing a baby stroller and pretend to be a woman hanging onto his arm. In a vest pocket I found a small device that looked like a squeaker from a dog's toy. I put it in my mouth and blew it to make all kinds of funny sounds in keeping with my actions. For a bald man I pretended to shine his head, for a red headed woman I pretended to warm my hands. I had fun with the people and they didn't seem to mind. I didn't do anything in a spiteful way. I was a character of lightheartedness in a much too overly serious world. There was no animosity, crudeness or cruelty in my actions. I liked the people and I felt like they liked me. Maybe that's why no one got mad. People were good natured about my teasing. In time, people stopped to watch my improvisations and pantomimes. When I heard the ever growing audience's laughter, it added fuel to the fire in my heart and people joined me in the act. My clowning around became freer. I had a small suitcase. I put the case down and opened it. Inside were amusing props I pulled out for laughs and people threw coins into my suitcase. I was surprised at first, but then, I was elated and grateful. Such a crowd surrounded me that security became concerned. When security guards arrived on the scene, it looked like a riot was going on. They didn't know what the attraction was. The guards found me in the middle of a crowd pretending to be a chicken. They tried to escort me away and I made them part of the show I was making up as I went along. I imitated them until they got too serious for my liking. I should have known that people like this take themselves rather seriously. They're self-important. When they got rough with me, I became defensive. I resisted their efforts to restrain me and escort me out of the mall. They did not find my antics funny at all, especially

Alfred Eric. He didn't have a sense of humour. I recognized him right away but he didn't know it was me. When they couldn't get a handle on me, more security guards arrived. Next thing I knew I was surrounded by six guards decked out in security uniforms ready to wrestle me to the ground and cuff me. They shot pepper spray at me but missed and hit one another. They tried to catch me and wrestle me down, but the floors were smooth and slippery. We slipped around and fell in a jumble, stood up, and fell again. Try as they could, they couldn't catch me. I was tricky. The audience laughed and thought this was part of the show. The guards and I wound up running on the spot. I was in some kind of super comedic slapstick zone. When the guards were on the ground and I could get away, I ran stepped on their stomachs to retrieve my suitcase. The people threw coins in the old battered leather case and I thanked them with a bow. I tried to shoo them away, but they stayed. A guard managed to get up and lunge at me. I leapfrogged over him and headed for the stairs, then looked back to see all six security guards in hot pursuit. They were my personal Keystone cops. Just before I dashed away, I doubled back and gave Alfred Eric a big kiss. He was struck dumb. It was a total riot and the tramp was a smash. I couldn't believe how easy it was to elude the guards. As they became increasingly tired, I found myself toying with them. It was a game. I played with them. I ran into a department store and put a lampshade on my head. A guard ran right past me without seeing me. I was surprised to see that this antic actually worked. When I got tired, I ran into a back corridor and into the janitor's room where I threw on some janitorial clothes over top of the tramp outfit. I didn't have time to change clothes. I put my glasses on, tore off the fake mustache, put it in my pocket and threw the bowler hat, bamboo cane and little suitcase into a garbage cart that I covered it with a garbage bag. When the security guards burst into the janitor's closet, they saw Emmy - the odd little janitor. I turned and looked innocently up at them. They were out of breath and sweating profusely.

“He must have gone this way!” Alfred Eric shouted. The guards turned and ran to catch the little tramp. I watched them go. Now that I was dressed in my janitor blues, there was nothing more to do. I went to work. I rolled my garbage cart into the mall and as I took out the garbage bags from mall receptacles, I wondered what had possessed me. Why did I do what I had done? If my granddad would have seen me, he wouldn’t have believed it. It wasn’t me. I’d found my inner clown. It was the Little Dude. I could feel the tramp outfit underneath my janitor clothes. I felt puffy. It was a secret that lightened my heart. Aside from feeling somewhat uncomfortable, the clothes underneath my clothes made me feel totally alive.

So, that’s it. It’s official. I’ve lost my mind. How else could I explain what had happened? I acted like a crazy person. Wearing what I wore was ridiculous. Insane. Foolish. But, if I was insane, I wondered, why did I not *feel* insane? Is it not insane to not feel insane? I felt sane. I felt more sane than I’d ever felt before. I felt free. I felt absolutely happy. I was possessed by a spirit of happiness. I was and wasn’t in the present any more. I was in a past that had stopped. I was in a dream. I didn’t feel crazy. Then again, isn’t that the definition of insanity? in·san·i·ty (noun): 1. *The state of being seriously mentally ill; madness.* 2. *Extreme foolishness or irrationality.* You don’t get more foolish than prancing around dressed like Charlie Chaplin’s Little tramp, now do you? That’s nuts. Even thinking about what I had done was embarrassing. What was I thinking? Truth be told, I had not been thinking at all. The Me that people think they know wasn’t me any more. The me that’s *Me* isn’t me: it’s Charlie! That’s the real Me! As soon as I put on those clothes in that storage room at the nursing home, the character became me in its entirety. When I put the bowler on, I felt stupid. I resisted, but then, as the nurse and I put on our *show*, I let go of inhibitions. I hit my head and left time behind. Even now, when I should be normal, as I walk in the mall, I find myself twirling a small broom like a baton. My hands did

things on their own. I twirled the broom and whisked crud I found on the floor into my dustpan with a comedic flourish. I did quick turns and funny walks like a virtuoso. Like a tango. Tango music played in my head. No. Wait, it was coming from the mall's Muzak system. As I went around sweeping this and that, dusting and doing my janitorial work, a new vitality came over me. I felt complete and total relaxation. When I was fiddling with stuff on a shelf in a store, some people looked askance at my antics. A security guard gave me a dirty look. He didn't know that I was the tramp inside. I couldn't help but be funny. I felt the fun inside me. I'd realized how fun, fun could be. In the food court, I pulled out a garbage bag and snapped it like it was a red blanket from a bull fight. I saw myself as a bull fighter. Someone finishing their meal looked at me and I smiled sheepishly. I took out a bag full of garbage and I dragged it behind me on the floor. I didn't notice that there was a hole in the bag. Alfred Eric and the smaller security guard who had chased me earlier when I was dressed as the tramp came towards me. I felt for sure they'd know that I was, in fact, the tramp. I thought for sure that they could see through my janitor disguise. Al and the other guard yelled and pointed at me.

“Who me?” I motioned. I didn't feel the need to speak.

They pointed at the floor and I looked down between my legs and saw that I'd left a long trail of brown liquid on the floor. I think it was Coca-Cola. That's why they were angry and yelling. Ajay stood nearby watching. He was waiting for the mall to be completely empty before going to work. I walked over to him and asked to borrow his mop. He gave me his mop and I dipped it in a bucket and slowly walked to the trail of Coca-Cola. On my way to the spill I inadvertently dragged the mop over the smaller guard's foot. He glared at me and muttered, “Watch what you're doing!” he yelled. I apologized, picked up the bucket and in my haste slopped water on Alfred Eric's feet. He stepped back from me and yelled his displeasure. The

floor was slippery and he almost fell. Alfred Eric grabbed for me. I pulled back and we did a little slippery dance. Then he yanked the mop handle out of my grasp and threw it on the floor. When the broom handle hit the floor, it clattered. The sound echoed throughout the mall. A few people who were finishing their meals in the food court looked up when they heard the clatter. Ajay watched in disbelief as the guards stormed angrily off in a huff and I watched the guards go too. I noticed a wealthy woman who was looking at me. She'd seen the whole thing. I met her gaze. She looked slightly miffed or maybe she was vexed, I wasn't sure. She had to step carefully over the spill I'd made as she walked by me. I put my arms out to help her over the spill, but she pushed my hands away. I winked at her and said something I thought she'd like. I kissed the air. She didn't like me and wasted no time in lambasting me. I would normally not have had the nerve to do something cheeky, but knowing I was the tramp inside made me courageous and happy-go-lucky. I was open to possibilities, even if she wasn't. Ajay walked over to me as I stood leaning on the mop watching the woman walk away.

“Are you crazy?” said Ajay. “What's the matter with you?”

I shrugged my shoulders and then ballet danced away through the mall slopping water as I went. I imagined the mop was a beautiful woman and we were figure skating. When I attempted to spin while holding my mop partner above my head I ran into two police officers who were rounding the corner with two security guards and the manager tagging along behind. I almost smacked one of the officers in the face with the mop. The officer had to duck. The manager went berserk when this happened. He yelled at me and threw my mop to the floor. Again there was a clatter. The manager really let loose until he realized that there were a few patrons in the mall watching him.

Later, after the mall was closed, the janitors including Ajay, myself, Harold and Demetri sat at tables in the food court. Ajay and I had our brooms and mops ready to begin work. Ajay wasn't sure what was going on with me, but he knew something was up. Demetri and Harold were getting ready to go off to wherever it was they went off to when Alfred Eric came sauntering by. His big belly hung over his belt. He plopped down in the chair beside me making Ajay and I bounce up. "Did you guys see that bum who caused the commotion?" said Alfred Eric. I felt a secret thrill. I felt like Bruce Wayne listening to people talk about the Batman.

"I saw him," said Ajay. "The way he mimicked people was hilarious."

"Are you kidding? He was rude and inappropriate. He wasn't funny," said Alfred Eric.

"I thought he was funny," said Harold.

"Tim, you too?"

"It's Harold," said Harold.

"Whatever. How can you say that? He made fun of people! He created a safety hazard," said Alfred Eric.

"The people didn't seem to mind," said Harold.

"People threw money in his suitcase, said Demetri.

"Safety hazard? Come on," chided Ajay. "Really?"

"People could have got hurt!" said Alfred Eric.

"Hurt? How?" asked Ajay.

"What if there was a fire? There would have been panic. People would have been trampled."

"Fire?" Harold said.

"If I catch that bum, he'll be sorry," said Alfred Eric. "I'll kill him."

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Didn’t you see the clown?” asked Ajay. “He was a Charlie Chaplin little tramp.”

“No,” I said.

“You missed the best street performer I’ve ever seen!” said Harold the Korean janitor who rarely spoke. “Did you see him when he pretended to be a woman?”

“Offensive and sexist,” said Alfred Eric.

“But in a good way,” said Demetri.

“He was obnoxious,” said Alfred Eric. “Would you want him to make fun of your turban? I doubt it.”

“Why not? Sikhs have a sense of humour too you know. You’re just mad because he made fun of you and you don’t have a sense of humour,” said Ajay.

“I’ve got a sense of humour,” said Alfred Eric. “I know what’s funny!”

“What’s funny to you?” I asked.

“What?” asked Alfred Eric.

“What do you think is funny,” I said.

“I don’t know. Not that bum!” he said.

“I know what’s funny,” said Harold.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“That man at the comedy club. Very funny! Hilarious! My friend is the janitor and he leaves the back door open just a bit so you can go in for free,” said Harold.

“Is that ethical?” Alfred Eric said haughtily.

We looked at one another and laughed as Harold continued, “Last night, I went and it was funny! Me and my friends, we laughed our heads off.”

“What did he do that was funny?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It’s the situations he describes,” Harold said.

“Does he tell jokes?” asked Ajay.

Brittani with an ‘i’ came to our table with a small box of French fries.

“Not jokes. He tells funny stories,” said Harold. “It’s the way he tells them.”

“I love comedians,” said Brittani. “I love anyone who’s funny!”

Ajay tilted his head and looked me as if to say, See! *I told you so*. Emmy has a joke,” said Ajay. “Don’t you Emmy?” I looked at Ajay. He raised his eyebrows to encourage me. “Tell Brittani that joke you told me! You should hear this. Emmy is funny,” said Ajay.

Brittani looked at me quizzically. “He is?”

“Oh yes. Very funny. So funny. Aren’t you Emmy? He makes me laugh all the time. Ha, ha, ha.” Ajay demonstrated. Harold, Demetri and Alfred Eric looked at one another confused.

“Well,” I said. “I’m not *that* funny.”

“Oh, so modest. Don’t be so modest,” said Ajay. “He’s very modest. You’re very funny. Come on, tell us that joke,” said Ajay.

“Emmy is not funny,” announced Alfred Eric. “I know funny and he is not funny. You think he’s funny?” asked Alfred Eric to Demetri.

“Funny looking,” said Demetri.

Everyone laughed.

“Now that’s funny. Demetri is funny,” said Alfred Eric.

“Do you think Emmy is funny?” Ajay asked Harold.

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Harold. He caught something from Ajay’s eye but he wasn’t sure what it was. Ajay wanted everyone to think that I was funny. “I guess so,” said Harold.

“See!” said Ajay. “He’s funny. Women love Emmy’s jokes. Don’t they Emmy? He has to fight women off with a stick,” said Ajay.

“An ugly stick,” said Demetri. Alfred Eric and Demetri laughed.

“I don’t even know what that means,” said Harold.

“Demetri, you are so funny,” said Alfred Eric.

Ajay ignored them all. “Emmy, tell that joke,” he said.

“Ummm,” I said. “Let’s see.”

Ajay was pouring it on. “He’s very modest,” said Ajay. “Go ahead. Brittani’s listening.”

“Well,” I said.

“Tell a joke so that all of us can laugh,” said Ajay. “Brittani likes jokes. Don’t you Brittani?”

Brittani casually chewed her bubble gum. “Sure,” she said.

“OK,” I said. My heart began to race. “Ok. I got one. It’s a good one, actually.” My mouth went dry. There’s nothing that makes me more nervous than telling a joke. I felt Charlie’s tramp outfit underneath my janitor blues. I hoped that it would give me some super-comic powers, but it didn’t. I looked at each of them and said, “*A dyslexic man walks into a bra.*”

“What?” said Harold.

“I don’t get it,” said Brittani.

“That’s not funny,” said Alfred Eric. “Dyslexia is nothing to laugh about.”

“What’s dyslexia?” asked Brittani.

“It’s when you mix up your letters. It’s funny. See, instead of walking into a bar he walks into a bra. Isn’t that funny?” said Ajay.

“Sure,” said Brittani popping a bubble.

I looked at Brittani and she looked back. It was like she was seeing me for the very first time.

“That’s not funny,” said Harold. “I’d say: *“A dyslexic man walks into a bar. His own feelings of inadequacy over learning he has a disability have driven him to drink and is driving a wedge between him and his family.”*”

We all looked at Harold.

“That’s not funny,” said Alfred Eric.

“I know. It’s an anti-joke,” said Harold.

“Don’t listen to them. Tell another one,” said Ajay.

I looked at the expectant faces around the table.

“OK, here’s one: A woman gets on a bus with her baby. The bus driver says, ‘Ugh, that’s the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen!’ The woman walks to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming. She says to a man next to her: ‘The driver just insulted me!’ The man says: ‘You go up there and tell him off. Go on, I’ll hold your monkey for you.’”

No one laughed.

“I don’t get it,” said Brittani. “The woman has a monkey?”

“No, no,” said Ajay. “No monkey. It’s the baby.”

“The man has insulted her by calling her baby a monkey,” I explained.

“So, there isn’t a monkey?” said Brittani.

“No. The man thinks her *baby* is a monkey,” I said.

“Oh,” said Brittani. She put her hand on my shoulder. “Sorry Emmy. Don’t take this personally, but, you’re not funny. Some people got it and some people don’t and you don’t.” She saw the disappointed look on my face. “But that’s ok you have other qualities, like...” Brittani didn’t finish her sentence. There was a lapse in the conversation.

“He’s punctual,” offered Ajay.

“See, everyone has their good qualities,” said Brittani.

“That little guy with the tuxedo and funny hat was funny,” said Harold.

“Yes. I saw him. Now *he* was funny!” said Brittani looking at me.

“Not funny,” said Alfred Eric. “Crazy. A mall hazard.”

“Not a hazard. He made people laugh. Even the old people laughed. I liked seeing a street performer in here. We need something like that. This mall is dieing,” said Ajay. “Street performers have a long tradition in my country. It should be a regular thing.”

“He had on a little patched tuxedo. He was so cute. Now he’s funny,” said Brittani looking at me.

“What makes him funnier than me?” I asked.

“He was physical; none of this intellectual stuff. He didn’t *try* to be funny. You try to be funny with your jokes but that’s not funny. You try too hard. You’re not naturally funny,” said Brittani.

“Sorry Brittani, but your so-called cute street performer is a bum!” said Alfred Eric.

“Of course he’s a bum, that’s his shtick,” said Harold.

“He’s not a bum. He’s a hobo,” said Ajay.

“Isn’t a bum a hobo?” asked Harold. “I thought he was a tramp?”

“Bum, hobo, tramp - same difference. I hate the guy. I’m gonna kill him if I see him again,” said Alfred Eric.

“You’re mad because he made you look stupid,” said Ajay.

“It was funny how you guys couldn’t catch him. He ran circles around you,” said Brittani laughing. “I saw him kick you in the bum.”

“He had the advantage. We had to be careful not to hurt bystanders,” said Alfred Eric.

“I was working back here when I saw people walking by. I took my break to see what was going on and I saw all these people around, you know, standing around, so I went to see what was going on and I saw him in his little patched tuxedo with the funny hat and cane,” she said.

“Charlie Chaplin,” said Ajay.

“Charlie Chaplin? Who?” said Brittani.

“You’ve never heard of Charlie Chaplin?” said Ajay.

“Who’s Charlie Chaplin?” asked Brittani.

“You never heard of Charlie Chaplin?” said Ajay again.

“No,” said Brittani.

“Haven’t we already gone through this? Who the ‘h’ is Charlie Chaplin!” demanded Alfred Eric.

Ajay clicked his tongue. “So sad. Such genius. Forgotten.”

Demetri, the Russian janitor, said, “Back in Russia, as a boy, we watched Charlie Chaplin movies in school. We loved the Little Tramp. He was very popular with the communists. My friends and I always laughed – especially when he kicked police.”

“Really?” said Brittani.

“Of course,” said Ajay.

“Why you say *of course* all the time? Why *of course*? How do you know what we did in USSR?” said Demetri testily.

“I don’t know. I’m just saying,” said Ajay.

“What are you saying?” said Demetri glaring at Ajay. “Anyway! Where was I? Damn it Ajay now my train is off the track.” Brittani looked confused. Demetri continued, “The Little Tramp did what we all wanted to do. He hit back. We loved that. His movies were perfect for Russian children. They were silent so we didn’t need English. They put in Russian words. He’s comedian of people!”

“In India we watched his movies too,” said Ajay. “I liked him because he was a little guy.”

“Me too,” said Demetri.

“Security chased him all over the place. It was hilarious. He make fools of them,” said Demetri. “You guys chase him all over the mall, didn’t you?”

Alfred Eric was not happy. “He didn’t have permission to pan handle in the mall.”

“He wasn’t pan handling,” said Demetri. “He’s entertainer.”

“He’s a bum!” said Alfred Eric.

“Did you catch him?” asked Brittani.

“No, of course not,” said Ajay. “There’s no way.”

“We would have caught him if -” Alfred Eric stopped short.

“If what?” asked Brittani.

“He’s going to say, *if we had guns*,” said Ajay.

“Guns?” Brittani said.

“Again with the guns?” said Ajay. “God help us all if you security guards get guns. Nobody would be safe.”

“Why? We should have guns! It’s very dangerous. You don’t know the half of it,” said Alfred Eric.

“Dangerous? Come on. Some shoplifting, some drunks and Charlie Chaplin – ooh, that’s dangerous.”

“Whatever. If they let us have guns, we would have caught him.”

“You’d shoot him?” asked Brittani horrified.

“Of course,” said Ajay.

“Why of course? All the time of course,” said Demitri.

“He wasn’t hurting anyone! He got away. That’s fair,” said Ajay. “He’s too smart and fast.”

“You guards are too fat,” said Demtri.

Alfred Eric frowned.

“He shows his face again, that bum, he’ll live to regret it. I’ll kill him,” said Alfred Eric. “Believe me you.”

“It’s believe you me,” I said.

“What?” said Alfred Eric. I didn’t repeat myself. Al looked none too pleased, believe you me. There was a lull in the conversation. The tension was palpable. I hadn’t heard the janitors have such a conversation in... well never. It was our first conversation of any real length. We all stood up.

“Charlie ran circles around you guys!” laughed Ajay. “I hope he comes back. He’s so funny! I’ve never seen people so happy. You’ll never catch him!”

“This must be very stressful for you,” I said to Alfred Eric as he glared at me.

“Ready?” Alfred Eric asked Brittani. “Let’s go!” he said without waiting for a reply.

Brittani and Alfred Eric walked to the escalator and started down. Ajay, Demetri, Harold and I followed them to the railing and watched them go down without speaking. Silence fell over the mall. It was silent except for the muzak which was playing Montovani, *La Paloma* followed by *The Blue Tango*. I was excited to share this information, but thought better of it. They didn’t appreciate this fine musical score. I felt myself dancing inside. Happiness ensued.

I had two bananas; one I had started to peel and eat and the other I made a big show of balancing on the railing - much to the amusement of my fellow boys in blue. Ajay, Harold, and Demetri watched intently. Knowing I had the outfit on under the janitor clothes made me feel funny. It was like I knew I had on Superman’s tights. I had special powers. I couldn’t jump buildings, but so what? That’s nothing. I could be funny! Alfred Eric and Brittani got off the escalator and stood directly beneath us as I continued to munch on my banana.

The janitors and I, in synchronized motion, leaned over the railing to get a better look at Brittani from above. She was popular with the janitors. In leaning forward I accidentally bumped my balanced banana. It fell in slow motion, cart wheeling down and making a direct hit on top of Alfred Eric’s head. The banana bounced to the floor as he put his hand up and yelled, “Hey!” Brittani looked up at us. She giggled. Alfred Eric looked decidedly ape like. I giggled too. I don’t think I’ve ever giggled.

“Oops,” I said as I waved a little wave at Brittani. To the boys I pointed out the obvious, “I dropped my banana.” They looked at me without speaking, and then all three of us looked over the railing at Alfred Eric as he picked up the banana and angrily flung it back at me. I caught the upcoming banana and smiled. I was pleased with myself, but in catching the

upcoming banana, I let go the peel of the second banana. My banana peel fell straight down into Alfred Eric's upturned face. Bull's eye! I couldn't have done better if I tried.

Alfred Eric was furious. My fellow janitors knew that I was in trouble. "Hey! Get down here!" Alfred Eric shouted.

I walked to the escalator to do as requested and Ajay grabbed my sleeve saying, "Are you crazy?" Demetri and Harold just watched. "Go the other way!" said Ajay.

Alfred Eric raced to the escalator yelling unintelligibly. His face was bright red. The poor fellow was about to have a heart attack. Brittani tried to stop him as Ajay had tried to stop me. Both failed miserably. Some things were meant to be. Once on the escalator going down, I saw Alfred Eric coming up and quickly realized the error of my ways. Charlie Chaplin outfit or no Charlie Chaplin outfit, I had to get away. Al was out for blood.

I started to walk backwards up the escalator, but Ajay, who had followed me, was in my way. I bumped into him. I turned around and pushed him up the down escalator. Ajay tried to back up. We stumbled up the down escalator as Alfred Eric, followed by Brittani, marched towards us on the up the escalator. Alfred Eric had murder in his eyes. When I started to run up the down escalator to get away from Alfred Eric, Alfred Eric had to run down the up escalator to catch me. Both Ajay and Brittani found themselves in the way. They had to run up the down and down to up so as to not get trampled. Somewhere in the middle Alfred Eric and I grappled with each other. He swung his hands wildly at me as I ducked and weaved my way out of being hit. Ajay and Brittani continued running ahead in opposite directions on stairs also going in opposite directions. With each miss, Alfred Eric got more and more angry. Harold and Demetri stood open-mouthed watching the chaos unfold on the escalator as mall music played an incongruous *Blue Tango*. Gradually all four of us – Ajay and me and Alfred Eric and Brittani - began to tire. I

tripped and fell which left Ajay open to getting hit by Alfred Eric. When Ajay was hit, he got mad and started swinging at Alfred Eric. The tables were turned. This reversal from the chaser to chased left Alfred Eric fearing for his life and running away from Ajay who may or may not have been brandishing a sword. It all happened so fast.

Alfred Eric tried to avoid getting hit as he pushed Brittani ahead. Having fallen down, I arrived at the bottom and watched from below. Brittani tripped and Alfred Eric stepped over her. She went to the top. Alfred Eric saw me relaxing at the bottom and in a burst of steam ran hard straight at me. I pushed the red stop button on the escalator. When I did that, both Ajay and Alfred Eric fell hard. Alfred Eric jumped back up with alacrity. It was surprising how such a large man could move so fast. He was a bull coming down. I put my arms up onto either side of the escalator and swung my legs up hitting Alfred Eric square in the chest. He fell backward and I was pushed off the escalator by the force of the blow. I looked at Alfred Eric and wasted no time in getting away.

I ran through the mall and around the corner, doing the famous Chaplin turn on one foot. I didn't mean to. It just happened. I dashed into a red English phone booth that stood outside the British pub near the doors of the mall. Inside the phone booth I took off my glasses, put them in my pocket and stripped off the janitor outfit. I saw Alfred Eric and ducked down. Alfred Eric raced by. I peeked my head up. When he was gone I came out dressed as the Little Tramp and headed in the opposite direction. Alfred Eric, realizing that I must have doubled back, turned around. When he rounded the corner, I jumped into a display of manikins before he could see me. He stopped directly in front of me huffing and puffing.

He looked directly at me and I stood as still as I could. He didn't see me. When he turned his head away from me, I grabbed a hammer from the display and bopped him on the head. He

turned to see what had just hit him. I realized that it was a plastic hammer. He saw me as the Little Tramp holding a hammer and grabbed for my jacket. I jumped onto his shoulder and pushed him as he tried to pull me off. I bumped into signs hanging from the ceiling and covered his eyes then I jumped off of his shoulders and landed behind him. The push I gave to launch myself from his shoulders propelled him forward into a display of lingerie. He knocked into a manikin which he grabbed by the bosom to steady. Tired from the exertion of the chase, he took deep breaths and watched me run away and around a corner. Ajay came around the corner from the other direction and found Alfred Eric holding the naked manikin's bosom. Alfred Eric saw Ajay at the same time he realized the inappropriateness of his hand placement. Alfred Eric snatched his hands away and continued to run after me.

I rounded a corner and slowed down when I looked back and saw no one coming. I went into the janitor's room to retrieve my hat and cane which I playfully began to twirl. I entered an empty mall and, like a real gentleman, I sauntered. I began to window shop not realizing that Alfred Eric was right behind me. He slowly and quietly came up from behind. When he grabbed for me, at that moment I caught sight of his reflection in the window. I did a quick turn on the spot and kicked him in the behind which sent him headlong into the window. He spun around to grab me, but he missed and I'd dashed away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Life would be tragic if it weren't funny.

~ Stephen Hawking

I ran through the mall at full tilt, raced up the stairs and into a glass walk-over leading from the mall into a hotel across the street. In front of the doors to the hotel's largest banquet hall I saw Alfred Eric coming fast. To avoid him, I took off my hat and ran into the banquet hall where I grabbed a tray of drinks that was on a side table and assumed the role of a waiter. My outfit, blended in relatively well. I concealed my hat under my tray. Alfred Eric entered the hall and scanned the room. He was out of breath. I turned my back towards him and started serving drinks. I snatched glances at Alfred Eric as I did. A waiter came to the side table looking for his tray but found it gone.

There were hundreds of people dressed in their finery sitting at tables being served food and drinks. A hotel manager, seeing Alfred Eric scanning the crowd, approached to find out what was the matter. From a distance I saw Alfred Eric describe me and indicate my height by holding his hand out. I selected one of the drinks on my tray, drained it and set the empty glass before a patron who reached for it and was surprised to find it empty. I surreptitiously watched Alfred Eric talk to the manager who used a mobile phone to make a call. I took another drink from the tray and drained it. A woman looked up at me as I did so. I smiled at her without speaking. The woman turned to face the people at her table and I peeked at her over my shoulder as she told the people at her table about the waiter who she saw sneaking drinks. When more security guards

appeared and two police officers approached the manager and Alfred Eric, I made for the nearest exit. Alfred Eric turned towards me, but before he could see me, I set my now empty tray vertically beside a chair, tossed my hat under a chair and sat at a table. I smiled in greeting at the people sitting at my table. A young woman set a bowl of soup before me and I smiled up at her as she did so. I then looked at the people at my table and smiled again. I snatched another drink from a waiter passing by without his knowledge and drank that too. Another waitress approached our table with a wine bottle that she poured for the guests. She poured me a glass of wine and I nodded my acceptance. I drank that too. The large woman beside me regarded me with suspicion and a hint of condemnation. I had literally gulped my wine down as she watched. I smiled and tipped my glass to her. The woman did not react. Now sufficiently imbibed, I felt much more relaxed. I set my elbow on the table but missed and jerked my head an undignified manner. The people at the table weren't sure what to make of me, but I continued to smile and tried hard to look normal. When a guard neared me, I tried to make myself appear as natural as possible by pretending to talk to the man sitting beside me. Police officers and guards milled throughout the large hall looking for me. I tilted my face down and turned my attention to the soup that had been ladled into my bowl. The man beside me took a spoonful. When the soup touched his lips, he jerked his head. The jerk of his head startled me and I jumped. Again he leaned forward, carefully took a spoonful of soup, touched the soup to his lips and again made a quick jerk which again made me jump. The third time he leaned forward putting a spoonful of soup to his lips, I jerked and made him jump. Then I laughed.

On the stage a master of ceremonies began the evening's proceedings. When people clapped, I set my spoon down too late and clapped after everyone had stopped clapping. This drew the attention of others around me. I picked up my spoon and took another spoonful of soup.

Again the people clapped and again I put my spoon down and clapped too late. We sat at tables eating as the awards for environmental stewardship were presented to people at corporate tables. My table had a sign in the centre. The sign had a *Sinner* energy company logo and the words, “*Tailings ponds made better!*”

The master of ceremonies cleared his throat and reading from a cue card said in a loud excited voice, “For preservation of wetlands and the natural habitat of ducks, I’m proud to present this year’s award for environmental excellence to the Sinner Energy company!” The crowd hooted and clapped and the people at my table beamed as the master of ceremonies continued reading aloud, “After the oil from the sands has been extracted, large reservoirs of water—called tailings ponds—pose a threat to the environment. Sinner is currently implementing a multi-pronged approach to managing its tailings ponds to comply with government regulations.” Then in a laughing voice he said, “Come on up you *Sinners!*” People laughed and clapped, enjoying the pun. Leaning into the microphone which he bumped with his chin, the master of ceremonies said, “Just a joke.” Everyone clapped enthusiastically as the people at my table smiled, rose to their feet and approached the stage to receive their award. Not to be left alone at the table, I joined the group. When the woman in front of me stopped short, I bumped into her back causing a domino effect with the people in front of her.

“Excuse me,” I said. I staggered forward and tripped as I stepped onto the stage. A plaque with an embossed duck on top was thrust into my hands. I said smiling towards people gathered around. The woman in front of me said in a very dramatic fashion, “Thank you. Thank you all!” Someone shook my hand and I was pushed towards the microphone. The room fell silent as people waited to hear what I was going say. Of course, I didn’t know what I was about to say until I said it. I looked at the duck on the trophy. I smiled and clearing my throat I looked out at

the smiling faces in the audience and I said, "This is truly incredible" The crowd clapped again. Someone hooted again. "Who would believe an oil sands company would get an environmental award? How crazy is that?"

No one laughed. The room fell silent.

The master of ceremonies stepped in front of me and pushed me away from the microphone. "You're giving Sinner an award for helping ducks?" I said surprised. "What do the ducks have to say? Oh, that's right. They're dead." I laughed. No one else did. There was an audible gasp in the room. "What? Is it something I said?" I asked the Master of Ceremonies.

A tall man who looked remarkably like the devil tried to grab the plaque away from me. "*Oh, no. It's the devil,*" I thought as he tossed me from side to side yanking at the plaque that I held onto tightly. Then he and a muscular woman tried to push me off the stage, but I didn't like being pushed. "Get off the stage!" said the muscular woman.

"I'm going! I'm going. You don't need to push," I said trying to be dignified.

Police and security guards advanced upon me like a pack of wolves. I looked out at the crowd and blinked. "What? Did I say something wrong? I should have kept silent."

A cop waved for me to come towards him. He looked angry. I shook my head '*No*' and backed up stepping on the devil-man's toes. The cop stepped onto the stage and, just as he was about to grab me, I took a running leap from the stage onto a table in front. "Sorry. Excuse me. Pardon me," I said as I landed on the table and proceeded to walk across it, stepping on buns and knocking drinks and food onto the people as I went.

I stepped onto the shoulder of man and launched myself across to another table. In this way I made my way stepping on people as I went from table to table in a straight line as the crowd flies. The police did everything they could to catch me, and so did the people at the tables, but I

moved like a doped-up, performance-enhanced gymnast. I moved with total alacrity using my cane when I needed it. When I saw that the side exits were blocked by guards, I retraced my steps back across more tables to the main doors, jumping and dodging anyone who tried to catch me as I went. Along the way I noticed someone had a camera aimed at me so I stopped and posed momentarily before continuing on my merry way.

“Excuse me. Pardon me. Excuse me...” I said as I went. No one could accuse me of not being polite. Total chaos ensued. I left a mess of food, drinks and people in my wake. By the doors I eluded a couple of rough and tumble cops and somehow I managed to get past more cops and into the lobby outside the banquet hall. Like a running back with the ball, I ran clutching my plaque through the wall of police. I literally leaped over them. By the grand stairs leading to the main floor, I paused and debated what to do. Behind me a phalanx of cops splattered by food were advancing fast and down below, on the first floor, there were more police entering the hotel and standing in the main lobby. I measured my chances of getting out as being better down below so I hopped onto the railing and slid down the banister hitting police at the bottom and knocking them down. With a spin and a twist, I ran down a side hall dodging cops and turning corners in the classic bouncing on one foot turn of Charlie.

I didn't even try. It just happened.

It felt elated. I can't describe how I felt. What a rush! The chase was on!

Cops were in hot pursuit as I rounded a corner and donned a lampshade by an elevator. I'd seen it work before. Two cops came around the corner and stopped to look at me. They looked at one another surprised. They weren't fooled for a second. They slowly moved towards me as if I were a raccoon they were about to catch. One of the officers slowly unholstered her

taser and aimed. When she fired at me I did a spin, a twist and a jump. She missed. I stopped to watch the second cop fall flat on his face.

I doubled back and ran towards the main lobby where I slammed into more police and the rotating front door. Officers stood on either side of the door as I continued to spin around and around. When an officer stuck his baton in the door to stop it spinning, I slammed face-first into the door. With the help of another officer, they pushed the revolving door open and reached in to grab me. They yanked me out of the revolving door by the seat of my pants and I fell to the floor. I did a quick crayon role to evade their grasp and bounced to my feet. Police now surrounded me in a circle. I did a running jump breaking through the circle as I'd remembered doing when playing British Bulldog as a boy. I ran out the glass front doors of the hotel, but on the street there were more police so I ran back inside hitting another poor officer in the face as he ran out.

Once in the lobby I evaded capture and, like a rocket, I ran back up the stairs, through the banquet lobby, through the walk-over, back into the mall, down the stairs and towards the front doors of the mall. There were more police there. I was about to jump into the red British phone booth that I'd used earlier to take off my janitor clothes when another security guard came out of a side door from a back corridor. Before I was seen, I did an about face and dashed into an English style bar which was next to the phone booth.

When I scurried into the pub out of fear from police, a group of old men were standing at the bar. It was an old English style pub complete with dark wood and the smell of stale beer. At first the atmosphere was quiet and brooding, but when the old men turned their collective faces towards me, their frowns turned to smiles and their eyes twinkled as if they were about to cry. At least, that's what I thought.

The good cheer they exhibited when they saw me did my heart well. They bade me welcome most exuberantly. It was as if I'd stepped back in time into a post WWI London pub. The motley crew of men was indeed old. For all I knew these were the last living survivors of the Great War. Each of the men had to be in least in their eighties, maybe nineties. I imagined their collective age to be in the 500 year range.

“Why, it’s Charlie!” one of the men exclaimed in a slurred Cockney accent. Whether or not the accent was genuine or not, wasn’t clear, but I liked it. “Buy yeh a drink gov’ner?” the man said.

The four old men stepped forward from the bar and surrounded me. Some were wearing military uniforms and had medals pinned to their chests. Each man slapped my back so exuberantly that I staggered from their friendly blows. They laughed heartily as I lost my balance. My hat almost fell to the floor but I caught it, popped it on my head and tipped my hat to each of the men. The bartender wasted no time in pouring me a pint which he thrust towards me.

“Come on Charlie! ‘ave a drink with us!” The men did not question my attire. To them I was Charlie Chaplin, the Little Tramp. One of the men with a handlebar mustache and long beard handed me a dripping pint of ale. I hung my cane on my arm and took the drink gratefully. Some of the beer spilled on my hand. I set the glass down on the bar and wiped my hands on the man’s beard. The men roared with laughter and I smiled crazily at this. The four men surrounded me. I peeked from between them to see a cop come into the bar and walk out again. The four men and I stood talking animatedly. I’m not sure how many glasses of beer I had with them, or how many hours passed, but the next thing I knew we were singing like the world’s oldest drunken choir. In time, one by one, we staggered out of the pub. It was adjacent to the mall’s

entrance. Outside of the pub and near the mall's entrance, we swayed in the non-existent breeze and each of the men said farewell before staggering away.

A heavy man standing behind me put one arm into his coat's sleeve and fumbled in search of the other sleeve as I put my arm through the other sleeve. When he couldn't find the other sleeve and I turned around, we found ourselves wearing the same coat. We laughed most heartily when the man yanked his coat and spun me around. This turn of comic events proved beneficial when a police officer standing outside the pub came to my attention. Fortunately the officer couldn't see me standing behind the heavy man. I ducked down and crawled into the red British phone booth standing outside the pub. When the heavy man uncovered his eyes which were tearing from laughing so hard, he was surprised to see that I'd vanished. He looked all around for me, but I was gone. He scratched his head in wonderment. Inside the phone booth I slunk to the bottom and with some difficulty put on the janitor's pants and shirt overtop of the tramp clothes. I put the hat and cane into the small old fashioned leather suitcase that I'd left in there.

By the doors to the mall my drunken friends staggered past a gauntlet of police officers. I crouched in the phone booth and watched them go. Now clad in my janitor's outfit, I tossed my suitcase into the garbage bag on the janitor's cart which stood beside the phone booth and I selected a wash cloth and spray cleanser from the cart. I casually wiped the booth and everything around it. I was embarrassed when I wiped the bosom of a wooden carving of a woman. As I was wiping the window of the pub and looking back at the police, I noticed that I still had the mustache on so I tore that off before they could see. This brought tears to my eyes as I pulled out my eyeglasses from an inner pocket and put them on. I was now a sad looking Clark Kent.

I continued wiping everything in sight. Banquet people walked past. I knew they were banquet people because they staggered and were covered in dried food which they tried to clean food off. They were dressed up and disheveled. They reminded me of soldiers returning from battle. Out of the corner of my eye I watched as police officers held the mall doors open for the people to leave. I wondered if I could get through. I was so absorbed in pretending to clean that I hadn't noticed that an officer had approached and stood beside me. Without looking at what I was doing, I sprayed cleanser on him and proceeded to wipe him with a wash cloth. I soon realized that something wasn't quite right. I felt his chest and looked up to see the stern expression on his face then I polished his badge while smiling innocently up at him. He frowned at me as I stepped backwards to admire my handy work, then I put the rag and cleanser back into the cart and walked quickly away without looking back. I dashed through the exit doors leading into a back corridor and broke into a run when out of sight, all the while remaining in character. The police officer followed but by the time he entered the corridor I'd already rounded a corner.

I raced down back corridors pushing the janitor's cart. I ran into the Dollar Store and past the wall of fake flowers, snatched up the small old fashioned leather suitcase from the cart and slammed through the exit doors leading into the alley leaving the janitor's cart still rolling. Once in the back alley I looked left and right then raced past an officer who stood guard at the end. I then jumped onto a bus that stood waiting on the street and waved good bye to the officer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I have a dream, a fantasy, to help me through reality.

~ Abba

On the bus the driver gave me the traditional scowl, which was surprising given he was listening to Abba's, *I Have a Dream* on a little music player. No evening was complete without the driver's angry face. I welcomed the familiar sight. I felt safe. His hostility was strangely comforting. At least he was consistent. You knew where you stood with him. As I walked past the driver, I could see the baby that he had once been. I could see him in his mother's arms. He had been the light in someone's eyes. Despite bitter years of disappointment, I could see innocence in his face. He still had baby fat. He had been his mother's baby after all, and now, here he was, driving a bus listening to Abba with yahoos like me boarding his bus. I smiled, tipped my imaginary hat and showed him my pass. "No trouble. Or you're out," he grumbled.

"No trouble," I said crossing my heart.

I walked past the woman with the graceful neck. She stared out the window as usual without looking at me. I tipped my imaginary hat to her as well. I still loved her. She too had been a baby. I could see smiling a baby's toothless grin. Such innocence. We all start off that way, don't we? Then something happens. Life happens. We all experience disappointment, sadness, loss, frustration, hate, death... Some of us are able to deal with these things and some of us become silent movie comedians in our minds. I was glad to see that there were no hoodlums aboard the bus. I found my seat at the back of the bus, tossed my little brown suitcase onto the

seat and sat down heavily. I breathed a sigh of relief. I could relax. The Little Tramp outfit was a little uncomfortable under the janitor's outfit, but not too bad. I liked wearing it. The bus started to move forward, but then stopped with a jerk. I grabbed the seat in front of me to keep myself from falling onto the floor. The driver opened the front door and the quartet of hoodlums stepped aboard. The woman looked at them then looked away.

"I don't want any trouble," said the driver.

"No trouble Mr. *Bus Man*. We'll be as sweet as pie," said the angry hoodlum tossing coins into the receptacle. The driver closed the front door and the hoodlums wasted no time in sitting near the young woman. Her head did not move. She didn't even look at them. She sat looking out the window doing her best to ignore them. I watched as the hoodlums harassed her. The babies they may have been were long gone. No innocence remained. I did not feel empathy for them. Their remarks to the woman made my blood boil. How rude!

The driver eyed me in his rear view mirror and did nothing. I felt myself getting angrier and angrier at the hoodlums, but, as I'd had enough trouble for one night, I put my ear buds into my ears and turned on some soothing music to try and relax myself. I restricted myself to looking out the window and minding my own business. When one of the hoodlums touched the shoulder of the woman and she slapped his hand away, I couldn't help but see them. *That's it!* I thought. I'd had enough. These guys got away with murder because people were afraid of them. I did not feel afraid. I could not sit by and watch such an effrontery. I got a serious look in my eye and slowly took off my glasses. I carefully put my glasses in an inner pocket, and unbuttoned my janitor shirt to reveal the little tramp outfit underneath. I pulled off the janitor pants with no small measure of difficulty in the tight quarters. At one point I found myself rolling around on the floor. I put on my moustache, and, with a steely look in my eye, I pulled out my hat and cane

from the suitcase and abruptly stood up. I sprouted wings, metaphorically speaking. I stepped into the aisle, secured my little hat firmly on my head and steadied myself. No longer did I feel myself to be a coward. I had superhero blood in my veins. I was a real Supertramp!

I walked up to the hoodlums and tapped the nearest one on the shoulder with my cane. The hoodlum turned his head to look at me. I saw a look of surprise on his face. He could not believe his eyes. I imagined myself to be a fantastic vision for him. All four hoodlums rose to their feet. I was surrounded. The woman looked at me without speaking. I stood sizing up the situation. I examined each of the hoodlums. All was quiet except for the music I heard in my ear buds. I was in a silent movie. Time stood still as we rocked side to side from the motion of the bus driving down the road, then, without warning, and with lightning speed, I hit the angry man with the goatee full in the face with the palm of my hand. He tumbled backward. I spun around, grabbed onto the back of the bus seats on either side of the aisle and rocked my feet up and planted a two-legged kick squarely into the chest of the man behind me. He flew backwards like a projectile as the man beside me swung and missed when I ducked. He accidentally hit the man beside me who also fell. In a flash all four hoodlums were knocked down and I stood unharmed in the eye of a slapstick super storm. It all happened so unexpectedly and so fast that no one present, including myself, could believe what had just happened. As if on cue they all scrambled to their feet and proceeded to chase me around the bus. I jumped from seat to seat hitting them as I went. They couldn't catch me or stop me from hitting them. Up, down and all around that bus I battered them into a fit of uncontrollable rage. The driver, seeing the chaos going on behind him in the rearview mirror slammed on the brakes. The hoodlums fell into a pile with me on top. The driver opened the front door and stood up grabbing a club as he did so. He brandished the club, grabbed me by the collar and yanked me up like a rag doll. He then carried me a couple of steps

to the back door and threw me out. The hoodlums regained their senses and ran out the door to catch me. “*Get him!*” one shouted.

Once outside, quick as a flash, I ran to the front of the bus and jumped in. I dashed up the aisle and from behind the driver I grabbed his club and kicked him in the behind. He bounced off the backdoor frame and landed on the sidewalk outside. He now found himself outside in the cold air encircled by the hoodlums. I ran to the front of the bus, jumped into the driver’s seat and, in a single motion, closed the front door. I put the bus in gear and pulled away feeling very proud of myself. Without his club the driver was left defenseless. He pulled out a mobile phone but the hoodlums wasted no time in pouncing on him. They hit his phone out of his hand, knocked him to the ground and rained blows and kicks upon him. A woman in an apartment watched the hoodlums attack the driver and phoned the police.

“Stop!” the woman on the bus screamed. “Don’t leave him there!”

I looked at the woman in the mirror and jammed on the brakes and without looking back threw the bus into reverse. The hoodlums jumped to the side when I almost hit them. I opened the front door and ran outside brandishing the club. I swung the club and chased the hoodlums down the street. I was reminded of the scene in *The Kid* where the tramp chased the social worker away. The woman inside her apartment couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The woman with the graceful neck stepped outside and handed me her mobile phone as she knelt down to examine the prostate driver. “Call 911,” she said. I looked at the device, but I had no idea how to operate it. The woman, seeing this, grabbed the phone and tried to use it. “It’s dead,” she said. “Help! Help!” she called, but the street was empty. “Help him in,” she said. “We’ll have to take him to the hospital.”

I helped the dazed driver to his feet and with the help of the woman we walked the driver up the stairs and onto the bus. He looked at me confused. The woman comforted the driver, “We’ll get you help,” she said. “Go, go!” she said to me. I jumped into the driver’s seat and we roared away before the hoodlums could return. “Close the door!” yelled the woman.

I rounded a corner and headed for the hospital. In no time at all, I steered the bus onto the sidewalk by the hospital’s Emergency Room. People smoking outside the Emergency Room door had to jump out of the way. I jumped out of the bus, and grabbed a wheelchair by the door and rolled it to the bus. The woman and I helped the driver to his feet. With our assistance he was able to make it down the stairs of the bus and into the wheelchair. We rolled the driver into the Emergency Room.

“He was just attacked,” said the woman to a nurse behind the counter. The nurse looked at the driver. The woman and I watched as nurses came out and rolled the wheelchair through the inner emergency room doors.

A man sitting to the side looked me up and down. “Halloween party?” he said. I looked through the glass doors at the bus parked outside. The woman and I looked at one another and walked outside. An ambulance pulled up. Two paramedics opened the back and unloaded a stretcher with an elderly woman on it. As they hurried past, one paramedic muttered to the other, “Who’s the idiot who parked that bus?” The woman and I watched as the paramedic’s rolled the old woman into the hospital.

I turned to the woman and said, “Would you like a ride home?”

“In that?” she said pointing. I nodded. “Are you driving?” she asked. Again I nodded. “But isn’t that stealing?” I just looked from her to the bus and back again. She shook her head. “No. I don’t think so. You should just leave it there. I’m sure they’re looking for it,” she said as

she started to walk away, then she stopped, turned and stepped towards me. “I want to thank you,” she said. I turned my cheek towards her, closed my eyes and pointed. She smiled, leaned forward and when she planted her lips on my cheek I quickly turned my face and caught her lips with mine. She smiled and backed up. “Thanks,” she said amused. Our eyes lingered on one another for a moment before she turned and walked back into the hospital. I watched the woman go through the glass doors.

“*Well, that’s that,*” I thought. I started to walk away. After I’d gone some distance and stood by the nearest bus stop, I realized I’d forgotten my suitcase. I ran back and climbed into the bus to retrieve it. I picked up the little old suitcase and was making my way to the exit when I looked at the steering wheel of the bus. It looked inviting. Before I could change my mind, I jumped behind the giant steering wheel and settled myself into the driver’s seat. An elderly woman approached and started to get onto the bus through the open door. I stopped her before she could take another step. I put my hand up and said, “Sorry. I’m out of service.” The woman looked taken aback as she backed down the steps. As soon as she was off the bus, I closed the door in her face. I shrugged my shoulders and put the bus in gear. I took the turn too sharp and again I drove over the sidewalk, just missing a woman who had to jump out of the way. The old woman watched as the bus drove away hitting various things – signs, newspaper boxes, planters.

Once on a main street I found myself rather enjoying the experience. At a street light a police car edged up along the side. I could see the police officer looking at me out of the corner of my eye. She looked familiar. When the light turned green, I quickly turned a corner. The police car saw the back of the bus and continued going straight ahead. I was a nervous wreck. Driving a hot bus was not as much fun as I thought it would be. I pulled into the parking lot of a fast food restaurant and drove up to the order window bumping signs as I went. I perused the

menu and a bored voice came over the intercom. “Welcome to *Danny’s*. What can I get you?” I placed my order and the voice said how much it would cost and I pulled forward to the pick-up window which was no easy task. Given the size of the bus I bumped the side of the menu sign and scraped the nose off of a fiberglass Danny.

The girl at the drive-through window looked surprised when a city bus pulled up. She handed me a bag and I paid with coins taken from the coin box. I smiled and maneuvered the bus into the parking lot. The bus was so large that I continued to have difficulty. The way I was positioned blocked traffic and people began to honk their horns. I wanted to relax for a moment but that was not to be. With much backing up and going forward, inch by inch, I finally managed to pull the bus out of the parking lot and back onto the street. I drove over more curbs and knocked over a few more newspaper boxes along the way. It was a big bus.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When I say, "Get it," everybody mess around...

Hold yourself now, "Stop! Mess around!"

That's what I'm talkin' about.

~ Clarence "Pine Top" Smith

As I drove along in that big old bus I heard Clarence "Pine Top" Smith. I thought it was in my head but it was actually from a tiny radio beside me. I drove the bus to the nursing home and parked out front. As quiet as possible, I stealthily went through the darkened hallways to my granddad's room where I found him sleeping in bed. I shook him. He roused himself. Through bleary eyes he looked up at me, "Charlie?" he said. I nodded. He said, "Am I dead?" and I nodded again. Granddad looked at me real close. He touched my face, pulled off the mustache, put it back on then touched my shoulders. He picked a bit of something off of my lapel and held it out for me to examine. I took it from him, smelt it and put it in my mouth. "Banana," I said smiling. "Let's go," I whispered.

"Where?" asked Granddad.

"I'm the ghost of clowning past," I said. Granddad's face went ashen. "Come on. It's time for you to have some fun." I helped him out of his bed and into his wheelchair. He motioned for me to pick up his cardboard box. I set the box which was about the size of a small microwave oven onto his lap and rolled him down the quiet and darkened hallways, past sleeping residents and up to the nurse's station. We stopped to watch the staff. I measured how I was

going to get Granddad past them unnoticed. Some nurses were watching the news on TV. The report they were watching was about a chaotic incident at a hotel where an environmental activist had disrupted a petroleum industry awards dinner. Video from security cameras showed someone looking like Charlie Chaplin's tramp making mayhem at the banquet.

"It is believed that Charlie Chaplin is now at large," said the anchorman sarcastically. "At large," he said smirking. "An unidentified male dressed like Charlie Chaplin's little tramp staged a protest at the awards dinner tonight. The awards dinner gives oil companies the opportunity to pat themselves on the back for the good work they do for the environment. Authorities aren't sure how the man managed to infiltrate the high security event. Amateur video shows what happened." Security camera video showed the tramp on stage receiving the award, saying, "*You're kidding? What do the ducks have to say about this? Oh, that's right, they're dead.*" More video showed Charlie jumping from table to table as police and security guards tried to catch him. Back in the studio, the anchors made light of the story. Granddad's nurse stood up slowly and walked towards the TV. "Look at this!" she said excitedly to her sleepy colleagues.

The anchor man continued, "The so-called man in the Chaplin costume trashed the event leaving many people injured. Police describe the little man as five feet four inches tall, wielding a cane and wearing an ill fitting tattered grayish-black tuxedo, oversized shoes and bowler hat. When last seen the tramp protestor hit a corporate executive in the head."

"*Chaplin rides again!*" said the female anchor.

"I guess you could say that," said the male anchor smirking. "There's more to this story, however. Police report that someone resembling the tramp drove a stolen city bus to a drive through window at *Danny's Drive-In.*"

“*Well*. Isn’t that something?” said the female anchor smiling a swarthy self-satisfied smile as she tapped the pages of her script onto the anchor desk.

“*Well*. It is something,” said the male anchor. “Thanks for watching everybody. Good night,” Before the closing music came on, the anchorman was heard to say, “Isn’t Charlie supposed to be silent?”

“He’ll never learn,” said the female anchor. “*He’ll never learn.*” The symmetrically perfect anchor couple laughed and the show ended with a loud commercial advertising monster sized trucks. Granddad’s nurse turned to look at her colleagues who had gone about their business unimpressed by the news story. The light of recognition was in her eyes. Because she had her back towards Granddad and I, she didn’t see us watch the news story before sneaking by. I pushed Granddad past the nurse’s station when no one was looking and hurried him out the main door. Security cameras recorded us leaving the building, but no one was paying attention to the monitors. Someone had given the nurses a box of chocolates and they were more intent in making selections than in watching a senior resident breakout with Charlie Chaplin. Once outside, I rolled Granddad to the bus. He looked at me and at the bus with incredulity.

I smiled. “It’s a charter,” I said. Granddad did not speak. I used the wheelchair lift to get him on board. “Guess where we’re going?” I said. Granddad did not respond. He looked like he was going somewhere unpleasant. “Go ahead! Guess! You won’t be able to guess in a million years,” I said. “Guess where we’re going?” Granddad looked pained. “*This is not a good sign,*” I thought. Granddad wasn’t guessing.

Back in the nursing home, the nurse in the Betty Boop smock tip-toed into Granddad’s room and quietly peered at Granddad’s bed. In the subdued light she could see that the blankets had been tossed back. When she turned on a light, she realized that Granddad was gone. She

hurried back to the nurse's station and with a worried look on her face ran out the front door. Once outside she watched as a city bus in the distance drove over the corner of sidewalk, over a patch of grass and through a bush before bonking a *No Parking* sign with its outside mirror. The bus then roared away and the nurse watched it go.

Inside the bus I had difficulty steering straight and turning corners. It was a very long bus. Truth be told, I didn't really know how to drive. I looked in the rearview mirror to see Granddad sitting content looking out the window at the passing scenery.

"There's something I want you to see," I said as I adjusted myself behind the huge steering wheel. "It won't take long."

I noticed the little radio sitting on the side consul. I pushed a button and more old boogie woogie music began to play. First we heard "*Bass Goin' crazy*" with Albert Ammons, Henry Brown's *Deep Morgan Boogie* and Pinetop's *Boogie Woogie*. I closed my eyes and danced in my seat which probably wasn't a good idea when driving a large city bus down a busy city street. I weaved between two lanes almost hitting a car full of teenagers driving along side.

"There's a bag of food there on the seat beside you, if you want something to eat. Oh and there's root beer there too," I said. Granddad looked inside the paper bag beside him and pulled out a hamburger and a root beer. He slowly and carefully un-wrapped the burger, took a big satisfying bite and sipped root beer from a straw as we jostled along listening to boogie-woogie music. I could just imagine what the teenagers thought when they saw me driving a bus beside them. They've probably never heard of Charlie Chaplin. I tipped my bowler hat to the teens who laughed. The teens pulled up beside the bus when I stopped at a traffic signal. They were waving and cheering so I smiled and gave them a wave. The driver of the car revved his engine so I did the same.

“Wanna’ race?” a kid shouted out the window. I looked back at Granddad who sat quietly munching a burger and grooved to the music without moving. I was reminded of Buster Keaton. I nodded my head. When the light turned green, the driver of the car and I slammed our feet down on our respective accelerator peddles. The car roared ahead and the bus lurched forward. Granddad’s chair moved slightly. He put his hand out and hung on. The hamburger he was eating smeared Ketchup around his mouth. He didn’t seem to mind though. He took it all in stride as if nightly bus racing with Charlie Chaplin was a normal turn of events. The car and the bus raced down the street. When I gained on the car, the passengers hooted their approval. I pretended to be a race car driver being pushed back in my chair by a powerful g-force and the teens laughed as the bus went faster and faster. To them it was slow. They kept pace along side. I didn’t slow down as we crested a hill and the bus almost went airborne. It was thrilling and Granddad didn’t seem to mind.

As we bounced along at top speed, Granddad pulled his white hair backwards so that he looked like he was going so fast that his hair had gone horizontal. The teens thought this was hilarious. Granddad spotted a police car coming towards us and with some effort because of the bouncing of the bus reached up and pulled the cord to make the “Ding” sound. At the same instant I too saw the police. I pushed the brake and took a sharp turn as Granddad hung on. At one point it felt like we were going to tip. When I looked back, the police car was turning around, its police lights were on and it was in pursuit of the teens’ car.

Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot.

~ Charlie Chaplin

I saw the comedy club sign. It read, “Welcome Pie Man!” I took a wide turn and just barely managed to squeeze the bus into the back alley behind the club. I could see that the back door was slightly ajar, just as Harold had said it would be. I parked beside the back door, turned on the four-way flashers and helped Granddad off the bus using the wheelchair lift. I pushed Granddad up to the back door and, just before going in, I looked down at him. I hadn’t noticed how pathetic he looked in his baggy pajamas.

Here was my plan: I thought that if I could get Granddad to laugh like he used to laugh, before life chipped away at his good cheer, the dam of sadness would burst and he’d die a happy man or, better yet, live longer and feel better about life. This was a mercenary trip. After all, he’d spent his entire life helping other people, including me, to laugh. It was my turn to entertain him. I had been a dud of a grandson. Since the nurse and I had failed to make Granddad laugh, I thought maybe a professional comedian could succeed where we had failed.

“You’re probably wondering why we’re here,” I said. Granddad’s eyes did indeed look curious. “This is a comedy club,” I said. “Inside is the funniest man in town.” Granddad looked up at me. He was shivering in the cold night air. I continued, “We’re here because you haven’t laughed in...what...years? Tonight you will laugh! Even if it kills you.” From inside the comedy club we could hear ominous heavy metal music. Both Granddad and I looked at the door, alarmed by the sound. Granddad scanned the tramp outfit with a questioning eye. “This?” I asked

pointing at myself. “It was in your box. Fits perfect.” I pulled out the seat of the pants to exaggerate how big they were. I did some tricks with the hat, kicked up the oversized shoes, twirled the cane, did some ballet moves and spun myself around as if I were a woman modeling clothes. Granddad didn’t laugh. He only watched. “Where’d you get this?” I muttered as I looked down at the clothes. “It feels authentic.” I leaned on the cane, the tip of which went into a hole in a manhole cover and I fell on my side hitting my elbow. I had trouble extricating the cane from the hole. When I yanked out the cane after much tugging, it hit Granddad squarely in the head. He remained expressionless. “Sorry,” I said smoothing his hair. “That’ll leave a mark.” I crouched down to his level and spoke in all seriousness. “How can I put this? Let’s see. There’s happiness in...” I started, and then stopped, *“too mushy,”* I thought. “There’s happiness in...”

A deep voice coming from under a large piece of cardboard beside us said, *“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony. Mahatma Gandhi.”* Granddad and I looked towards the talking cardboard which was now moving to reveal a man underneath. *“Happiness depends on ourselves. Aristotle,”* said the man under the cardboard. *“Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know. Ernest Hemingway.”* Granddad and I looked at one another. *“Some cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go. Oscar Wilde,”* said the man clearing his throat. “Now, shut up and let me sleep!”

Granddad and I looked at the cardboard man. I stepped behind Granddad’s wheelchair and wheeled him closer to the comedy club door and away from the strange man. Kneeling down, I tried another approach, saying quietly, “Let’s just say... you’re not dead...” The man under the cardboard grunted. He then said, *“I have never killed a man, but I have read many obituaries with great pleasure. Clarence Darrow.”*

“Tonight: We laugh,” I said.

The man sat up and looked squarely at Granddad and I. "*A day without laughter is a day wasted.* Charles Chaplin," said the man. "Hey! You said that. Charlie? Is that you? Am I dead? I love you." He wiped his eyes and took a drink from a bottle before saying, "To the King of the Bums!" he said raising his bottle.

Suddenly the whole situation struck me as strange. It was as if I was meant to be here. Here I was in a back alley late at night with my granddad out in the cold with a homeless person. I began to have doubts about everything. What did I hope to accomplish? I looked at Granddad. He looked small and old and cold in his baggy pajamas. He looked even smaller and older and colder than he normally looked. Getting him to laugh wouldn't be easy. I wasn't seventeen. Maybe the wild bus ride had been too much. What made me think he'd have fun? Maybe it was the tramp outfit. It was making me crazy. Mr. Milton had said things can have spirits attached to them. Maybe the outfit had Charlie Chaplin attached to it. Could I have become him? Maybe I wasn't Me at all? I held up my finger, indicating that he should wait. Granddad's expression said, "*Where am I going to go?*"

I ran back to the bus. Before I returned, the man in the cardboard box looked at Granddad and Granddad looked at the man in the box. Their eyes examined one another silently and intently. There was a glimmer of recognition between them. Neither man spoke as the moonlight shone down upon them and the trash cans. The homeless man smiled at Granddad and he winked at the homeless man. Granddad turned even whiter. Something was passing between them. Maybe they knew each other.

In the bus I found Granddad's box and pulled out his jacket. It was grey and drab (*no accounting for taste*) with impossibly long sleeves. I ran back to Granddad carrying the jacket. I think Granddad and the homeless man had been talking during my absence. When I approached I

heard their voices. They stopped talking as I approached. Beneath all that hair, I thought maybe I knew the homeless man. “Hey Charlie! Do something funny. We’ve been waiting ages for you to come back,” the man said drinking from his bottle. He winked again. It was a strangely familiar wink. He did it again. It was a two-eyed wink. Who had I seen do that before? I couldn’t recall. “Hey Charles, let me ask you a question. Am I dead?” I looked at him, paused then wacked him on the head with my cane. “Ow!” he said and I laughed. “That’s funny,” he said. I turned and helped Granddad put on his jacket.

“I must be dead. Charlie, you’re an angel, a silent angel with a cane. I love you,” the dirty homeless said man crying. Funny, I didn’t think I hit him that hard. He tried to stand up and muttered unintelligibly to himself as he took another big swig from his bottle in the paper bag. He then lay back down and pulled his cardboard covers back over himself. Granddad looked down at the jacket I was helping him to put on. He slowly examined the buttons. “It’ll have to do,” I said as I helped him. Stepping back, I looked at the result.

“You look...” I was going to say ‘great!’ or ‘spiffy,’ or ‘you look okay’ but the truth was, sadly, otherwise. He looked pathetic. I didn’t finish my sentence. Wearing his old clowning jacket as he was, I couldn’t help but think how times had changed for Granddad. Both clowning and Granddad had seen better days. There was a time when people loved clowns, now they were detested. Granddad’s happy-go-lucky had got-up-and-went.

Even though I had found Granddad’s brand of light comedy highly irritating (how I hated squirting flowers and white rubber balls), I now found myself missing his simple humour. He had always been so light and effervescent. I would never have imagined in a million years that, as a clown, people would find him scary. There was never anything mean spirited about what he did. He never went in for extreme makeup or garish costumes. He and my Dad’s humour had

never been complicated. They had been a clown team. Dad had been the smart one and Granddad was the dumb one playing the accordion. At one time they had a universal appeal and all ages found them funny. The kids used to love him and my Dad. Their simple comedy made people feel happy. Their strategy wasn't to tell jokes. They were about accepting limitations and finding humour in it. Their clown comedy accepted the world as it was – limitations and all. Now that I had discovered the gift of comedy in my heart I felt that I knew my Dad and Granddad better than ever before, which was too bad because it was too late. I'd probably never see my dad again and granddad was a shell of the man he once had been. He and all the old clowns like him just weren't funny anymore. In his prime, Granddad took pride in clowning. Both he and my dad considered it an art. Being a clown had been an honourable profession.

I had a friend who was a clown.

When he died, all his friends went to the funeral in one car.

~ Steven Wright

Growing up, Dad told me all about the great clowns in history and how they came to be presented as they were. He told me how the art of clowning existed for thousands of years and that most cultures throughout history have had clowns. He told me about a pygmy clown who performed as a jester in the court of a Pharaoh in 2500 B.C. and he said that there were court jesters in China in 1818 B.C. Clowns performing as court jesters were often the only ones who could speak out against a ruler's ideas. For example, there was a Chinese emperor who in 300

B.C. oversaw the building of the Great Wall of China where thousands of labourers died in its construction. The emperor planned to paint the Great Wall which would have resulted in thousands more people dying but his jester criticized the plan and jokingly convinced the emperor to abandon the idea. Clowns were historically perceived as good and fun but in more recent years, the media cast clowns in a horrific light. People today think of clowns as more scary than funny. There are horror movies featuring clowns and people who say they have a fear of clowns. These developments discouraged my father and grandfather. Granddad always said, “All the world loves a clown!” When that was no longer true and the world stopped loving clowns, both dad and granddad stopped feeling loved.

There are now movies and novels that portray clowns as ghastly. Sometimes people have a bad experience with a clown. Maybe a clown scared them when they were children, or maybe they were just frightened by the face makeup. You know, the big red lips, the giant red nose, the unnaturally white skin. Clown makeup can obscure or even conceal real facial expressions. Not being able to see the clown’s true face could inspire some instinctual distrust. Some children are afraid of costumed people in general; even Santa Claus is scary to some children. There have always been bed-wetting children here and there who were put-off by clowns, but I wonder, at what point did clowns transform, in the minds of vast swaths of people en-masse, from absurd and funny *haha* to *yikes* frightening? Today the scary or evil clown probably finds more representation in our pop-culture than the funny clown. Think *Poltergeist*, Stephen King’s *IT*, *The Joker*, and yes, John Wayne Gasy. Since about the 1980s, clowns have become increasingly portrayed as scary and there is even a clown phobia. Dad once said that people started to turn on clowns when Lon Chaney Sr. said, “There is nothing funny about a clown in the moonlight.” The same could be said about Granddad. Sitting there in the darkened alley outside the exit of a

comedy club, there was nothing funny about him and yet, in his ridiculousness, there was something about him that, although not exactly hilarious - more pathetic really - in that ridiculously pathetic-ness he did look kind of funny. He looked so funny that I just had to laugh. And when I did laugh, I wondered why because he was both funny and un-funny at the same time. It depended upon how I looked at him. He was a living example of the wave-particle duality. To explain some aspects of light behavior, you treat light as a wave, and to explain other aspects you treat light as being made up of particles. Light exhibits wave-particle duality, because it exhibits properties of both waves and particles depending upon how it is observed. Granddad exhibited this duality by being both funny and un-funny at the same time. It's the like the *observer effect* in physics. The *observer effect* refers to changes that the act of observation will make on the phenomenon being observed. In the case of Granddad, the act of observing him changed whether or not he was funny. His comedic form was dependent upon the observer. Without an observer, I wondered if Granddad even existed.

What was it about Granddad that made him that way? How could he be so funny and so unfunny at the same time? According to Granddad's clown colleagues and circus aficionados (*yes, there are such people*), both Dad and Granddad were, at one time, the funniest clowns ever. It's hard to believe that they had fans. One aficionado said that Granddad's comedy had been all about unrequited love. In his act he would always try to win the affection of a friend or the heart of a girl, but he'd always fail. In the end, he'd either be ignored or rejected and that would make people laugh because they felt sorry for him and superior to him. Yet, deep down, people still identified with Granddad. People sympathized with him. He was the ultimate underdog. He brought that feeling of unrequited love out into the open, you know the part I mean, that part of you that is rooted in the fear that you are not loved, the fear that you never will be loved, the fear

that there is some part of you that's grotesque, that the world will turn away from. That was my Granddad. He used a feeling we all know to make us laugh. At that moment, I could see that he was the stray cat nobody wanted, yet, there was something endearing about him too.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Clocks slay time... time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels;
only when the clock stops does time come to life.*

~ William Faulkner

Only connect (the dots).⁴⁴

~ E.M. Forster (adapted by M.E.)

I opened the solid black exit door with one hand and spun Granddad around with the other. He slopped forward in his chair as I backed him roughly into the building, banging him against the door's handle as I went. I tried to be quiet without success.

"*Shhhh,*" I said as the door banged against Granddad's arm.

He reached out a shaky hand in an effort to brace the door before it slammed with a resounding "Bang!" that I'm sure everyone heard. I looked at the sleeve of Granddad's jacket as I pushed his chair forward. It was funny. The entire situation struck me as funny. What a pair we made! Here I was, a tramp, noisily sneaking an elaborate old man sporting baggy pajamas and a ridiculous jacket into a comedy club. It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. But that was OK. I was tired of making sense. I wanted to have fun.

Inside the black painted corridor of the club I could hear what I assumed to be the amplified voice of a comedian on stage. The comedian sounded a bit like Satan or at least, he sounded like how I imagined Satan would sound if I met Satan in a comedy club. Perhaps we'd

entered some kind of evil underworld. The comedian's incomprehensible voice was loud and angry. It bounced off the walls in the back corridor. Following each uttering by the *voice*, there was lascivious laughter in response. This was to be the funniest comedian ever? What was so funny? Why were people laughing? Granddad remained as stone-faced as ever. Maybe he understood. It felt like we were entering a carnival fun house. It was scary in the dark tunnel lit solely by a small red exit sign. The sign cast an ominous red glow on everything. I pushed Granddad in his wheelchair up the corridor and into a black curtain at the end. I parted the curtain so I could see inside. My eyes adjusted to the light as I scanned the room looking for a place to sit. I spotted a suitable table in the back. Looking down, however, I noticed that Granddad's face was plastered tight against the heavy black curtain.

"Sorry," I said pushing him forward, inadvertently dragging his nose the length of the rough curtain. Once through, he winced slightly and rubbed his reddened nose without complaint.

The perfect straight man.

The main room was both smaller and larger than I had expected. I'd never been in a comedy club before so I didn't know what to anticipate. I looked at the stage which was a small affair. It was a raised platform jutting into a room surrounded by tables. A banner across the back wall behind the stage read, "The Pie Man!" I guessed that the man talking into the microphone on the stage was, indeed, the Pie Man.

It was dark so I had trouble seeing where I was going. I pushed Granddad's wheelchair into tables and chairs and ran over peoples' feet as we bumbled along disrupting the show. People complained, but Granddad didn't. He just sat hunched over, pale, white face, red nosed, expressionless; as if he thought this were all a dream. I too felt like this was a dream. Ever since

I'd put on the tramp costume, I'd felt like I'd become unhinged from reality. Normally I can distinguish between *dreaming* and *waking* life. Life is real, but dreams are not. There are contrasts. Time is disjointed in dreams, but can be mapped using clock time in real life. I wake to a continuing life, but each dream is complete in itself. Dreams normally appear illusory in comparison with normal waking life, but today the contrasts were less apparent. Time rolled along so quickly that one instant rolled into the next. One minute I'm at work, the next, DING, I'm running around like I'm in a silent movie comedian from the 1920's (is it the 1920's? I don't know) then, DING, I'm fighting hoodlums and driving a stolen city bus, then, DING, I'm in a comedy club with my granddad in tow. The reality of a few minutes ago feels as illusory as any dream, and I'm left wondering: Did that really happen? Is this really happening? Am I dreaming or is this real?

I bumped into a table spilling a drink on a man who quickly stood up in front of me. "Sorry," I said, fearing the worst. The man looked down at the spill on his clothes to assess the damage. He dabbed at the spill with a napkin. "It's all right," he said. "No harm done."

I looked at the man and recognized him instantly. It was Tom, the nice fellow who had bought me a drink back when I was the old me before I put on the tramp outfit and became the new me. I looked at the woman with him. Sure enough, it was the woman who had disliked me so intensely. She was continuing her dislike. I could tell she hated me even though she didn't know I was a new and improved me. Neither Tom nor the woman recognized who I was.

I stepped close to Tom and put my face to his. He smelled like a cinnamon candle. I reached out and held onto his arm and he backed up ever so slightly, surprised by this sudden closeness, uncertain of my intentions.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you real?"

Tom laughed nervously and looked down at his girlfriend who looked up at us frowning.

“Am I what?” Tom said. Granddad sat in his chair watching. Interested.

“Are you real?” I repeated, feeling Tom’s arm and inspecting his face.

“Am I real?” Tom asked.

“Yes. Are *you* real?” I repeated.

“I think so,” Tom said laughing uncomfortably. Around us the comedian’s show continued. Some people were laughing but not at Tom and I. “So this is real? I’m not dreaming, am I?”

Tom laughed again. I liked his laugh. His girlfriend watched the comedian. She didn’t pay attention to our conversation. She wasn’t interested in my existential angst. Tom appeared to be at a loss for words. He looked into my eyes and I thought I saw a glimmer of recognition in them. I saw my reflection. Time was, once again, playing tricks on me. It felt like it was standing still. I felt like what was happening right now had already happened and that I was remembering it all from some time in the future. I was living a memory that I would be looking at later, tomorrow, next week, a year from now. “No. This is real,” he said smiling.

“Oh,” I said. “Thank you.” I tipped my hat and continued pushing Granddad’s wheelchair away. Granddad looked back at Tom. Tom sat down and continued to watch us as his girlfriend leaned forward to ask if he knew who we were.

“Sorry... Sorry... Pardon me...” I said as we troubled more audience members on our way across the room towards an unoccupied table. As I pushed Granddad along, my mind went back to thinking about time. Maybe, only the present is real. The birth of a person always comes before their death even as these events become part of the distant past. The past, the present, and the future aspect of time is constantly changing, future events are moving to the present and then

into the past and then further back into the past. Time felt unreal to me because the distinction of past, present and future, which is a changing relationship, is more essential to time than to the fixed relationship of earlier and later. The past is but a memory of an event and the present is confined to an infinitesimally narrow point on the time line which is being encroached upon by what we think of as the past and the future. In this respect, the present resembles the sharp point of a recording laser or needle. The present is but the mental awareness of the recording of memory into our brain. Unless we are consciously aware of an event, it does not enter into our past memory. It's as if it never existed. The only time there is, it seemed to me at that moment, was right this minute.

It was late and there were many unoccupied tables so finding an empty one wasn't too difficult. I pushed Granddad's wheelchair up to a table towards the back of the room and lightly sat down beside him.

"Isn't this nice?" I said smiling. I picked up my sleeve which had become wet from something on the table. Granddad was not convinced that this was nice. I think he thought that he was in some kind of purgatory. I wasn't even sure that he knew I was me.

The comedian continued to swear and talk about bodily fluids. Comedy at its finest. He glared at us out of the corner of his eye. Granddad didn't appear to be amused by what the comedian had to say. Granddad stared up at the comedian dumb-faced.

The comedian's voice reminded me of a trombone from a Charlie Brown cartoon, "Wooaa, wa, wa, wa." It was as if the comedian spoke another language that Granddad and I couldn't comprehend. A waitress, who saw us come in, came to our table to take our drink order. To Granddad I said, "What would you like? A piña colada? Strawberry Margarita? Scotch on the rocks?" Anything you'd like."

Granddad looked up at the waitress. She said, matter-of-factly, “We have beer, vodka, rum or whiskey. That’s it. Take your pick.”

“Oh,” I said smiling. “We’ll have two rum and cokes please.” The waitress started to walk away. I jumped up and ran in front of her. “Can we have cherries on top?” I asked smiling sheepishly. She frowned and walked away without comment. The comedian on stage looked at me as he finished what I took to be another crude joke. I wasn’t sure. If it was, I didn’t get it.

“...Yup,” said the comedian, “so I answered: *I missed the kick!*”

There was a splattering of applause and insincere laughter. “Come on you ignorant clods! That wasn’t complicated. Calling you people stupid would insult stupid people. Do you have a terrible empty feeling – in your skull? Have you considered suing your brains for non-support? How’d you people get in here? Did someone leave a cage open?” The room went silent, but the comedian recovered quickly. “I’m pitchin’ but you’re not catchin’! ... Did somebody say: PIES!” The audience gaped. A man at the back yelled out, “Woo-hoo! Yeah! Pies! Right on!”

The comedian took a drink from a beer bottle sitting on a wooden stool beside him. It wasn’t going well. Maybe it was his timing. He was wearing blue jeans and a black T-shirt with the words SHUT UP emblazed with large white letters on the front. For a man of mirth, he didn’t look very happy. Maybe he needed some encouragement. I jumped up and clapped enthusiastically. It didn’t work. My applause did not alleviate his sadness. It only seemed to increase the comedian’s ire. He put his hand above his eyes to cut the glare from the stage lights and looked directly at me while saying with a sneer, “Did I say: ‘Send in the clowns?’”

A few people laughed. I looked around self-consciously and sat down. “This doesn’t look good,” I thought.

“Did I say: ‘*Send in the clowns?*’” the comedian repeated loudly. I think he was going for shock value because he said it so loudly into the microphone that I wanted to run away. I smiled wanly and looked at Granddad who sat expressionless. Granddad wasn’t smiling which of course, was nothing new. He hadn’t smiled in years. If it was possible, he was smiling even less than not smiling at all.

“He’s the *Pie Man!*” I said to Granddad, as if that made a difference. “Harold said this guy is the funniest comedian ever!”

Granddad looked at me. There was no question uttered so I responded as if there was.

“Harold’s a guy at work,” I said, as if that too made a difference.

The waitress returned and put two drinks on our table, but not before putting two paper coasters down with question marks printed on them. The two rum and cokes she set down had small red straws and stale lemon slices. No cherries. The waitress caught my look of disappointment.

“We don’t have no cherries,” she said. “Sixteen dollars.”

I looked at the dried up lemon slice. Granddad took his slice off and examined it. I think his was a lime. It was green.

“Sixteen dollars,” repeated the waitress.

“Sixteen dollars?” I said seeking clarification.

“Sixteen dollars,” she confirmed.

I must have looked surprised, as if I somehow doubted what the waitress had said. She frowned deeply and said again, “Sixteen dollars.”

“*Where is the love?*” I wondered. “*Not here and not now,*” I thought.

I dug my hands into my pockets but I couldn't grasp the money inside so I stood up to gain better access. The comedian watched Granddad and I as he told a story about a truck. At least that's what I thought he was talking about. I'm not sure. To me he said, "Waa waa waa, truck!" He talked a lot about trucks; everything was truck this and truck that. I wasn't really paying him any attention and people at the tables around me weren't either. They were looking at me.

I pulled out a handful of change that clattered onto the table and bounced onto the floor. Both the waitress and the comedian looked annoyed. People sitting nearby watched with interest and the comedian noticed.

"Hey!" he shouted into the microphone. "I'm up here! Look up here!"

I crouched down to pick coins up from the floor. The waitress put her hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. I started to count fourteen dollars from my pile of quarters, nickels and dimes. The money had come from people who gave me loose change when I was clowning in the mall. When I realized that there might not be fourteen dollars, I went back under the table to look for more change that might have fallen. I had difficulty seeing under the table so I stood up suddenly, pulled out a wooden match from a box and struck it off Granddad's shoulder. He looked at the spot where I'd struck the match.

Someone somewhere laughed.

Back under the table I could see much better. I stood up again after I'd found more coins. The match burned to my fingertips and I flicked it away. The spent match landed in a woman's drink without her knowledge. When she took a sip, she felt the match in her mouth and took it out.

I lit another match off Granddad and put my face close to the table to discern the difference between nickels and quarters. I glanced up at Granddad and smiled as I continued to count coins. He sat quietly sipping his drink.

“Don’t you have any bills?” asked the waitress. “We take credit cards, you know.”

Granddad set his drink down and felt in his pockets, ostensibly to find some money. He pulled out a hanky which was attached to another hanky which was attached to another hanky and so on and so on. The waitress became impatient as Granddad pulled out an endless string of hanky after hanky from his pocket. A young woman at the next table watched, leaned forward and pointed at us so her friend could see us too.

When I had enough money, I handed a pile of coins to the waitress who looked none too pleased before she walked away.

The comedian interrupted his talk about trucks to draw attention to us. “*Hey! Freaks,*” he shouted into the microphone. “I’m working up here. Show some consideration.” The comedian pointed his finger in our direction and everyone in the club turned to look at us. I looked behind me to ensure that the comedian was indeed referring to me and Granddad.

“Yeah you! You idiot. I’m talking to you!” said the comedian. I touched my chest with my hands as if to say, “*Who me? Are you talking to me?*” A few more people laughed which encouraged the comedian to continue his tirade.

“Goofball! Yeah, you in the stupid hat. What is that, a tuxedo? Get a load of this guy. Can someone hit the house lights?” the comedian asked.

No lights came on.

“I said: Can someone please turn on the house lights on? *Please.*”

Still no lights came on.

“I’m surrounded by idiots. Lights! *Lights!*” shouted the comedian. “For those of you who cannot see – LIGHTS! -we’ve got, what: a pre-historic clown, and a... what? What are you supposed to be, some kind of grubby waiter? I hate to tell you this, but... some people really shouldn’t wear hats,” the comedian said sarcastically

I took off my bowler, looked at it, and then put it back on.

“Mr. Peanut. That’s what I’ll call you. Are you from the world’s worst symphony?”
Again there was a smattering of laughter. “Did I say *send in the clowns?* What a lunatic!”

My smile waned. He wasn’t being very nice. I looked at Granddad who looked back at me.

“Dig the old Dude. Now that’s just plain scary,” said the comedian. “Hey old man Dude. Yeah, you in the ridiculous jacket, shouldn’t you be dead?”

The audience laughed uncomfortably. I stood bolt upright with anger. Granddad tugged me down and pushed my drink towards me. I picked it up and took a sip through the tiny red straw. It required a great deal of suction. My cheeks compressed with the effort. The comedian continued to trash Granddad and me.

“Old man, you’re so old, the candles on your birthday cake raised the temperature by three degrees.” Again I stood up angrily, ready for a fight, and Granddad tugged me down. There was a splattering of applause and lascivious laughter. I ran towards the comedian but Granddad hooked my pants with the cane. His wheelchair jerked forward as I pulled and the people at the next table laughed. The comedian watched as his laughs were being usurped.

“*What is going on here?*” he yelled. “Ha!” snorted the comedian into the microphone.
“You’re so old. When you were a kid, rainbows were in black and white.”

Granddad pulled me back and I pushed his wheelchair back to our table.

The comedian continued with his rapid fire attack, getting more and more shrill, much to my dismay. "I hate clowns. You know the difference between a comedian and a clown? One's funny. Guess what's funny? A comedian. Clowns are the opposite of funny. They're dumb. A comedian makes people laugh, *sensibly* and that's because a comedian has intelligence. Comedians use their brains and people who laugh at comedians have brains too. But with clowns, it's all stupidity. Clowns have no intelligence. Zero. Nothing. They're freaks. Loony. A comedian like me gives people a gift they can take home. Clowns only give indigestion because... you know what? Clowns taste funny. I spit out clowns. Get it? Clowns stink. Ever noticed how clowns make the funniest faces when you taser them?"

Once again I jumped towards the comedian. He needed a smack! How dare he insult Granddad and me and all clowns like that! Granddad hooked my cane onto the waist of my pants and tried to hold me back but I was too strong. He popped out of his chair water skiind behind me as I made my way to the stage. A few people noticed and laughed. The comedian didn't like that.

"Don't encourage them! People who laugh at clowns are just as stupid as stupid clowns!" he shouted. Someone said, "Ooooo" as audience members looked at one another. They watched me advance upon the stage with Granddad in tow.

"How do you make a dead clown float?" asked the comedian. "You take your foot off its head." Some people laughed and hooted. "Wooo!" Encouraged by the laughter, the comedian shot another jab. "What's funnier than a dead baby? A dead baby wearing a clown suit."

Nobody laughed.

It became quiet. I thought I actually heard crickets.

More people said, "Ooooh."

“What?” said the comedian. “What? Did I insult you clowns?” He knew he was losing the crowd. I tumbled forward when Granddad let go of my cane. “Come on people! Don’t tell me you actually *like* clowns! Hating clowns is like..., loving bacon. Everybody does it!”

I tumbled to the floor when I felt myself released. Granddad had let go of me. I got up from the floor and looked back to see what happened. Granddad wasn’t there. He was now the one advancing upon the comedian. From the floor I looked over to see Granddad, ever so slowly, walking towards the stage. I jumped up and stepped in front of him. Granddad kept going. I tapped Granddad on the shoulder. He didn’t stop. He just stared at his feet and took his usual baby steps. He reminded me of Tim Conway doing the old man routine. Some people laughed at Granddad, much to the comedian’s dismay. I shrugged my shoulders and did my best to persuade Granddad to sit down again.

“Are you Tim Conway?” asked the comedian. He noticed the similarity too. “I thought you were dead? Oh, that’s right. You are dead. Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to: Mr. Dead Tim Conway!” A few people chuckled. Whether or not it was because of Granddad or the comedian’s comments, it was difficult to say.

“Call the police. Call the National Guard,” said the comedian in mock fear looking closely at his fingernails. “Now I’m scared,” he said facetiously. To the side he said with exasperation he called for help, “Could somebody *please* turn on the house lights?”

Still the lights did not come on.

“Arghh!” roared the comedian sounding rather pirate-like.

He looked at Granddad slowly approaching like a glacier. He then looked at his watch. This action elicited a chuckle from the crowd. No one was quite sure what was happening. It was quite suspenseful, really. I pulled at Granddad’s arm and tried to persuade him to sit down, but

he just kept going. Coming from the kitchen a man wearing an apron who looked like a baker pushed a serving cart laden with pies past me and up to the stage. The comedian waved at the baker to put the pies onto a table set up at the back of the stage.

I didn't know there would be a dessert.

The comedian looked at me, "Did you just roll that fossil in here through the exit?" To the side he mumbled, "I thought we sprayed for clowns? Didn't we just spray for them?"

Some more people laughed. Granddad was very near the stage now.

"Hey, old geezer!" shouted the comedian. "What are you going to do, beat me with a wet noodle? ...this is just sad. Hey, goofball! All right, that's it. Waiter, take the old man and get him out of here. The jokes over. We've had our fun but there's paying customers in here and I got a show to do. If you'll just roll on outta here... we won't need to get rough."

Granddad continued to edge his way slowly forward, head down, determined. I continued to try to persuade him that we should leave, but he was oblivious.

"No?" said the comedian. "Alright then, kick the bums out. Let's call in the big guns." The comedian motioned towards a bouncer who stood at the back of the room with his arms crossed. I saw the bouncer coming towards us, feeling rising panic in my throat, but, much to my surprise, the audience came to our defense. Someone in the audience yelled, "Let them stay!" This started a chant, as more audience members joined in the call.

"Let them stay! Let them stay! Let them stay!!" chanted the audience as Granddad continued his advance, now marching to the rhythm of the chant.

That's when the lights finally came on.

"Finally!" said the comedian. "Get a look at these guys," he mumbled into the microphone.

The bouncer, a big man wearing a black t-shirt, stepped directly in front of Granddad blocking his way. Granddad kept his head down and continued to walk, that is, he continued to walk until he bumped into the bouncer. Instead of stopping, however, Granddad continued. His legs moved on the spot like a toy. He butted against the bouncer's ample stomach and continued walking like a wind-up toy soldier that's hit a wall. The toy walks but it doesn't get anywhere.

People began to laugh. The show was now in front of the stage. This was the turning point. The waitress touched my shoulder and when I turned to face her, she asked me to show her my ticket. I stalled as best I could while trying to persuade Granddad that we had to go. I looked for non-existent tickets in my many pockets and started pulling things out and handing them to the waitress who had no other choice but to hold onto them. As I was doing this, Granddad continued to walk on the spot like a very old and slightly disturbing toy. I handed the waitress a whisk, a ribbon and a sculpture of a naked woman. Embarrassed by the nakedness of the statue, I used the ribbon to cover the sculpture. With each new thing I pulled out, I was as surprised as everyone else. While this was going on, Granddad had stopped walking on the spot and did a slow tilt of his head to look up at the bouncer who stood in front of him with his arms crossed like a giant. The bouncer looked down at Granddad and smirked. Granddad felt the bouncer's huge arms and made a face as if to say, "*Those are big arms.*" A heavy set woman sitting to the side of Granddad laughed loudly. Alerted by the sound, Granddad slowly turned his head to look at the heavyset woman. He made a look as if to say, "*Hi there. I think I love you.*"

The heavyset woman looked at Granddad and laughed again. He looked ridiculous in his oversized jacket with the long arms hanging down at his sides. Granddad made a flirtatious look and magically handed the woman a gargantuan bouquet of flowers which she happily accepted into her arms. Ever so slowly - so slowly that you could barely tell he was moving - Granddad

turned his body and aimed his bottom at the woman's lap. The comedian feeling ignored up on stage watched Granddad and I on the floor in front of the stage. He took a drink from his bottle of beer and sat on his stool as the baker continued to load pies onto the stage. You could hear a faint "beep, beep, beep" sound as Granddad backed up. He had become a truck. No one was quite sure where the sound was coming from, but then I noticed that the comedian was holding the microphone up to his mouth and was making the sound.

Granddad slowly started to sit on the woman's lap. "Creeeeaaak," sounded the comedian into the microphone. When it was taking too long for the woman's liking, she tugged Granddad and he plopped onto her lap.

"Kaploosh!"

An odd explosive sound was heard and the woman laughed louder than before. This made everyone in the audience laugh too. Granddad pretended to wipe his brow and fan himself with a Chinese fan that I had pulled from my pocket and handed to the waitress who, in turn, handed it to Granddad. Both the waitress and the bouncer were now part of the act. The large woman in the audience who Granddad was now sitting on gave Granddad a tight embrace and a white rubber ball about the size of a tennis ball popped out of him from somewhere and bounced onto the stage. The comedian watched it bounce. To me, it looked like the ball had come out of Granddad's mouth but I don't know how that could have happened. At that instant, I gave up trying to make sense of anything.

Granddad looked at the heavy set woman and then at the audience. He smiled and the audience laughed. It was then that I realized what was really going on.

Granddad was clowning!

He was back! But there was more to it than just that. Granddad and I were a team!

When I couldn't produce our show tickets for the waitress, the bouncer waved his arm indicating that Granddad and I had to leave immediately. I motioned to Granddad that we should go and he looked at me frowning, then he looked adoringly at the woman, shook his head and smiled. The bouncer yanked Granddad by the arm off of the woman's lap but Granddad was like a rag doll. The bouncer was left trying to hold Granddad up. He kept falling like a wet noodle. I tried to yank Granddad away from the bouncer's grasp and now there was a tug of war struggle. I put my foot on the bouncer's chest and tried to pry Granddad away from the bouncer. Granddad continued to flop around as the bouncer tried to push me away. The woman leapt to her feet and faced the bouncer.

"Hey!" shouted the woman. "Leave him alone!"

The bouncer became concerned. All he was trying to do was throw Granddad and I out of the club but it wasn't going to well. He had no desire to hurt anyone. He pushed the woman aside and dragged Granddad by the arm towards the exit as I pulled on Granddad's other arm in the opposite direction. Granddad made a face that was... funny. The bouncer then tried to grab me, but I jumped out of the way and ran around a table.

"Let's hear it for the clowns!" said the comedian into the microphone. There was clapping. "Good riddance!" he said.

I reached into my pants and pulled out a rubber brick. I tossed the brick as hard as I could and it bounced right off the comedian's head and onto the floor. The comedian fell off his stool. The bartender, seeing this, called 911 and the bouncer let go of Granddad's arm and now lunged at me with both hands. I eluded his grasp. He tried to grab me and I slapped him in the face as he took a swing at me. I ducked. His hand hit another man who had stood up during the melee.

The fight was on.

Granddad was now free of the bouncer. He headed straight for the comedian who remained sitting on the stage dazed. As the bouncer was trying to grab me, Granddad was helped onto the stage by his new lady friend who gave him a kiss on the cheek before returning to her seat. All the while the audience laughed and cheered. This was exciting. On the stage the comedian saw Granddad, their eyes met and the comedian started to back away.

“Hey, old man, you know I was only kidding, right?” he said. “I love clowns. I’m a comedian. Remember?”

The bouncer, seeing Granddad on the stage, gave up chasing me and ran for the stage. I whipped alongside and tripped him. He fell hard. I stepped on his back and ran onto the stage from the opposite side.

Now Granddad was on one side of the stage, I was on the other side and the comedian was in the middle. “Hey look! Goofball bookends,” said the comedian. Granddad and I edged closer.

“Wait. I give up. Go ahead. Beat me with your rubber chickens,” said the comedian. “That’s it. I’m done.”

The audience clapped. “Woo! Woo!”

“What? You like these clowns?” asked the comedian incredulously.

There were more cheers and clapping.

Granddad and I turned towards the audience. It was as if we had just noticed them. “You think you can do a better job?” he asked. The audience cheered again. “Let’s see what you’ve got,” he said handing me the microphone which I pushed it away. He then tried to hand the microphone to Granddad who looked at it as if it were dynAjaye.

The comedian said, “Whatever,” into the microphone before setting it on the floor and stepping off the stage leaving Granddad and I alone.

The audience clapped and then it became very quiet.

The White Rubber Ball

Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom.

~ George S. Patton

Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious.

~ Peter Ustinov

Granddad and I stood dumbfounded on the stage. What now? This was an unexpected turn of events. We hung our arms straight down and stood stiffly, shyly blinking our eyes as the audience looked at us unsure and we looked at the audience, equally unsure. I looked down and saw the white ball that had somehow popped out of Granddad and bounced onto the stage. I picked up the white rubber ball and held it under Granddad’s nose motioning with it rather aggressively as if asking, “*Is this your ball? Bad boy!*”

Granddad remained sheepish standing there very still with his arms loosely hanging down at his sides. His big gray cloth jacket, with the impossibly long sleeves that hung below his hands, seemed to envelop him like a dear old friend. As a clown, he’d used the jacket for years and years. It was old and tattered. Who knew what surprises the jacket held? Unlike his colleagues who did the traditional clown thing, Granddad had been an anomaly. What set

Granddad apart was his sheer ordinariness. He didn't wear elaborate makeup. He was not colourful. He wore baggy old clothes in grays and browns with flood pants, just a little too short exposing his ankles, and he wore ordinary brown oxford shoes. Now in his pajamas, Granddad was as he was. Long ago, in the circus; natural, like father earth, a humble boy-man, without pretension.

Granddad made no expression as he stood there in a scary comedy club now made less scary by his presence on stage. Somehow he conveyed guilt to me and I picked up on it without a thought. Our roles were pre-determined. I would be the assertive one and he would be the passive. We had somehow become magically syncopated, like jazz masters.

I opened his jacket and roughly pulled out two more white rubber balls from an inner lining. He looked at me as if I'd found his prized possessions and I was his granddad taking away his toys, but when I walked away with the balls to put them in a small wooden box I found at the side of the stage, Granddad smiled, ever so slightly and adjusted his jacket as if he'd gotten away with something. The audience was *in* on the joke.

"What's this? He's up to something," I thought. The audience chuckled conspiratorially. I stopped what I was doing when I heard the laughs and noticed Granddad's rather smug expression. I backed up behind him and set a box on the stage.

"Oh, oh," his face seemed to say. All communication was non-verbal. Granddad squirmed his feet, nervously twisting his shoes together, aware of my approach from behind without actually looking at me.

I came towards Granddad from the back and lifted his right arm. A white ball, just like the other white balls, fell from his armpit. I snatched it up. I put the ball in the box then picked Granddad up bodily by the shoulders from behind. I bounced Granddad up and down. He seemed

no longer weak. Another white ball came out the bottom of a left sleeve. I quickly picked that ball up and put it in the box with the others. Now, from this slow start, I adjusted my collar as if I meant business and was readying myself for a complete and thorough white rubber ball confiscation.

I pulled Granddad's right up arm horizontally and looked down his sleeve. Another white ball bounced out from inside his jacket. The ball bounced on the floor and I grabbed it and put it in the box. Granddad kept his arm up. I turned and took a deep breath and blew into his right sleeve. A ball dangled just below the cuff of his left sleeve as I blew, going up again when I ran out of breath, going down and dangling again as I blew into his sleeve. I put my face into his sleeve and came out with a ball in my mouth. I blew that ball into his sleeve and it appeared to come out of his left sleeve which was hanging down towards the floor, snatched that ball up and returned to Granddad's side. I slapped him on the shoulder and another white ball came out his sleeve. I picked that ball up too. Again I slapped his shoulder and another ball came out his sleeve. I did this a couple more times. Now I held a bunch of white balls in my hand. I slapped his shoulder expecting yet another ball to come out his sleeve, but this time a ball came down and went back up. Granddad started to back away from me and I slapped his shoulder again. A ball came out and I took it. When I took the armful of balls I'd now collected and dropped them in the box, I noticed Granddad adjusting his sleeves. I suspected something was up and the audience did too.

I came towards Granddad and began to dig inside his jacket as more and more balls fell out and bounced on the floor. I grabbed a ball that was attached to an invisible elastic. I pulled it out a ways and it snapped back into his jacket. Now things were going crazy. More and more balls were appearing. Dad held his arm behind his back as if hiding something and I tussled with

him pulling balls out from under the back of his jacket. He held out his right sleeve again and dug around inside. The audience could see balls go past his stomach from one side of his open jacket to the other side. I pulled balls from here and there and everywhere then we kibitzed with more and more white rubber balls much to the audience's amazement. One ball shot up vertically, high into the air. I caught it when it finally came down. How Granddad managed to shoot a ball up like that, I'm not sure. It was his own particular kind of magic. I was but a pawn in the show he was putting on. I followed where he led. At last I took Granddad's jacket off and upon shaking it dozens and dozens of balls fell to the floor and bounced all around. The audience laughed and clapped. This was the finale. Granddad and I humbly took our bow. I'm not sure how we did what we did. I doubt that we could replicate it. I don't know.

The comedian came onto the stage unimpressed. He picked up the microphone, "Thanks. That was great," he said without enthusiasm in a monotone voice. "Let's hear it for the freaks."

"Noooo," said the audience.

"What?" said the comedian.

Audience members called out, "*More! More! More!*"

"More?" said the comedian in disbelief. "I can't believe you people. Didn't you come to see me? I am the Pie Man!"

Nothing.

There was no reaction from the audience. After a moment of silence someone said, "Yay," real quiet like.

Granddad and I continued to stand like two guilty students before the principal. Someone shouted, "They're better!" followed by a few hoots and sporadic clapping. The comedian was stunned. "That hurt," he said pretending to take an arrow out of his heart. He started to walk

down the two steps it took to get off the small stage as I stepped forward and patted him on the back compassionately which the audience took as a there-there sort of pat. “Ahhh,” said the audience. “Don’t patronize me!” snapped the comedian, I shook my head and the audience chuckled as one person. I spoke quietly into the comedian’s ear. “You want music? I’ll give you music!” he said wickedly, raising an eyebrow to show exaggerated evil intent. Both Granddad and I looked at one another frightened by the prospect. I pulled out my small music player and showed Granddad. He looked at the device as if he couldn’t see it and pointed at a song at random. I looked at the song’s title, made a face as if to say, “*You sure?*” and Granddad nodded enthusiastically. I handed the device to the comedian and pointed at our musical selection on the small electronic screen.

“This one?” he said pointing. I nodded. “Are you sure?” I looked at Granddad who nodded again.

“Let’s get this over with? Pies are a-waiting!” said the comedian with enthusiasm. Clearing his throat for dramatic effect he said into the microphone, “Ahem. Ladies and Gentlemen, *Introducing...*” then aside, with a feigned whisper he asked me, “Who are you?” I looked at Granddad and Granddad looked at me. “What do you guys call yourselves?”

I looked at Granddad. He only showed fear. We both shrugged our shoulders. The comedian saw us shrug our shoulders and turned to the audience and shrugged his own. The comedian made a dead pan look at the audience and muttered, “Again, I say, let’s get this over with before I have to kill myself. What are you going to do?” He looked at us and we raised our shoulders again as if to say, “*We don’t know.*” Then Granddad said, “*A dance with balls*” without speaking. He held up a white ball and moved it slightly as if he were dancing with it. The comedian rolled his eyes. Granddad and I shared a soft conspiratorial look.

“They’re going to do. *Something*,” said the comedian. “Something equally weird, I’m sure,” he muttered into the microphone as he stepped off of the stage.

An awkward silence fell over the room. The audience looked at Granddad and me as we stood on the stage nervously staring at the audience. Granddad fidgeted with his feet and I stood completely frozen. The sound of silence was broken suddenly by an alarmingly loud electrical guitar chord from some heavy metal music. I jumped into Granddad’s arms and he managed to hang onto me. The audience laughed.

“Sorry,” said the comedian. “Wrong one,” he laughed. “That’s mine. Just a minute, just a minute ...”

I jumped down and adjusted Granddad. Another piece of music popped on for just a second, but that wasn’t right either. “Sorry. Here it is. Ready?” said the comedian’s voice from off stage. Granddad motioned for the comedian to wait a second as he used his foot to gently kick a couple of the white balls that littered the stage out of the way. As Granddad was doing that, I picked up two white balls and held them in one hand. Granddad also picked up two balls, holding one in each hand then we looked at one another. And began.

“Ready?” the voice of the comedian asked.

I nodded.

A sense of quiet anticipation fell over the room. What happened after that is difficult to describe. If there truly are moments of sublime magic in life, this was one of those moments. The comedian had said that clowns only give what is stupid. That may well be true. On one level what Granddad and I did was stupid, or at least ridiculous and certainly silly, but on another level what we did was oddly beautiful. The audience was mesmerized. Enchanted. It was a Cirque de Soliel moment. I don’t know exactly what we did. It was a kind of cat and mouse dance with the

white rubber balls. I was not thinking as Granddad and I worked together. I did what I did without a notion in my head. It just happened. The zone. I did whatever came naturally to my mind. It's all a blank to me. I guess I was so totally in the moment that nothing about our dance remained in my mind afterwards. Without a memory, it's difficult to say that it even happened. The only way I know it happened was when we finished the dance and the audience cheered happily at the end.

Granddad and I were in total harmony. Moving this way and that in what appeared to be a carefully choreographed routine, we improvised. We let the music dictate our movements. I imagined what I was actually doing. From the experience I now know what it means to perform. We let the music take us and the audience sitting, out there in the darkness could see it all. They were a part of it. The musical selection so randomly selected was Tchaikovsky's *German Song* from a collection of children's songs I learned to play on the piano as a child. I played the *German Song* at a piano recital. I remembered my Mom and Granddad proudly sitting in the audience. The memory flooded me with long forgotten feelings of love that I'd somehow blocked as I aged. It all came back to me. I felt love. If you don't know the piece, it's a shame. I can't describe it. It's as all music is, terribly difficult to describe. It's light. Suffice it to say that it is disarmingly charming and simple. For a total of one minute and eleven seconds time stood still as Dad and I did a dance with white rubber balls.

Our dance began when Granddad looked at me with uncertainty out of the corner of his eye. I approached to stand beside him. When the music began, I reached my empty hand to grab a ball from him. He moved his ball up and I continued my movement arcing downward as he went upward then we froze into place with the beat of the music. I was ostensibly trying to get his ball. When he moved down, I moved up and again and we froze into dramatic positions for

an instant again and again. Each time he moved a ball I reached for it then we'd freeze. We moved our hands and bodies in a stop motion fashion to the music, improvising and playing cat and mouse with the balls and having a mock fight. I've never juggled a day in my life, but with Granddad's help, I juggled without actually juggling. We held the balls in our hands and occasionally tossed them into the air and bounced them on the floor. We moved to the music, letting the creative flow of movement flow through us. It sounds cliché, but what we did was poetry. I was in the zone or, to put it more aptly, it wasn't me that was in the zone. It was Charlie. I was Charlie and Charlie was me.

I got out of my way.

At the end of our odd little dance with the odd little white balls, the audience laughed and clapped. They gave us a standing ovation much to the chagrin of the comedian. I'm embarrassed to say that I felt tears welling in my eyes. After a few moments of clapping (I'm going hate myself for saying this), I could... I could literally feel the love of the people. Granddad and I, for however brief, less than five minutes I'd imagine, had helped a room full of individual human beings to feel happy. And the individual human beings wanted us to know that they appreciated our efforts. The room was happy.

Granddad and I took one bow after another until it was ridiculous. I would motion to Granddad for him to take a bow, he would do a silly over confident bow and then he would signal to me to do likewise. We each clicked our heels like overconfident and arrogant orchestra performers. The comedian eventually interrupted this love-in by walking onto the stage and saying insincerely, "Yes. Yes. Very nice. Sit down. You can sit down now. That's enough. It's time for the professional. Amateur hour is over. That was..." he paused as the audience sat down, "that was... interesting? No. What's the right word..., yes: Pathetic. Pathetic. Terrible.

Horrible, really, really bad. There's two minutes I'll never get back." Some audience members laughed, but others voiced their disapproval by saying, "Oooo!"

Unfortunately for the comedian, however, the music did not stop. The next track from my little player happened to be Jerry Shard's "*Can-can*" from an Ultra-Lounge album called "A Bachelor in Paris." It too was a silly little trifle of a song, but once the music started, there was no stopping Granddad and I.

The comedian continued to talk as the music played. "Turn off the music," he snapped. "I can't take any more. It's time for the pies!"

"Pies?" I thought. "Why are there pies?"

I looked at the table set so nicely by the baker with dozens and dozens of pies and glanced over at Granddad. Granddad looked blankly back at me as the *can-can* continued to inspire. "Turn that music off!" demanded the comedian again. "Idiots! I'm surrounded by idiots!"

I stepped towards the table of pies and looked out at the audience who could see me moving behind the comedian. With his back to me, the comedian continued to complain saying, "They act as though their stupidity is a virtue. They have delusions of adequacy. Don't encourage them."

When the comedian turned around, he saw me standing behind the table of pies. Granddad just watched. "What are you doing? Get away from my pies! Get off the stage!" As he shouted, I picked up a custard pie and measured its weight in my hand. It looked quite lovely.

"Put the pie down! Step away from the pies! STEP AWAY FROM THE PIES!" I knew as soon as I heard the *can-can* that I *could-could*.

What happened after that is anyone's guess.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The best things in life are silly.

~ Scott Adams' *Dilbert*

“*Ding, ding!*” the bell on the bus stirred me from my torpor. What a night. I was exhausted. I pulled the bus over, stopped, and opened the door nodding to the couple who hopped off saying, “Thanks.” I tipped my hat as if I were the regular driver. Upon shoulder checking as I pulled the bus back out into traffic, I noticed custard pie splattered on my shoulder. I picked it off and ate it. I looked back at Granddad who sat with his eyes closed in the front seat. He too was splattered with pie, remnants from the comic battle we had fought so valiantly against unimaginable odds. Granddad had made no effort to clean the pie off his face and clothes. He looked even whiter than his normal white pallor. He almost looked dead.

Behind Granddad sat the last of the patrons from the comedy club. They too were pie splattered and tired. When the pies started flying as the *can-can* played, these people became our allies in what was later known at the comedy club as the “*Pie War.*” The couple had fought alongside Granddad and I, escaping with us onto the bus when the police arrived.

“*Ding, ding!*” the bell sounded again. I pulled over. The last of the pie warriors hopped out the back door of the bus shouting, “A Pie for All Ages!” and “Good Pie! Good Pie!” I watched them walk away in the rearview mirror before pulling into traffic. I looked down at my knee and noticed more pie splattered on my trousers. In picking it off, I swerved the bus erratically. Good thing there wasn’t much traffic. I turned to see if Granddad had fallen off his

seat. He was still sleeping. I had to get him back to the nursing home before his absence was noticed. I looked at him. What a mess. I couldn't take him back to the nursing home looking like that.

"We should get cleaned up," I said. Granddad didn't move. I ate some more pie off my clothing. "We're not far from my place," I said. "Why don't we go there? We could have coffee and get cleaned up."

Granddad didn't stir. I parked the bus at the back of the warehouse.

"Granddad!" I said. Granddad's eyes fluttered open. I stepped beside him and shook him by the shoulder. He didn't move. I shook him and shook him. He was like a rag doll. "*Granddad!* Wake up. Let's get cleaned up. This is where I live," I said. "You want to ride in your chair?" I asked pointing at his wheelchair. Granddad gave me a dazed look. He stood up as if to walk, but I thought better of it and helped him into his chair and off the bus. I rolled him into the warehouse as he sat looking around at the antiques.

"You live in a museum?" he said.

"No," I said. I told him about the warehouse and how I happened to live here. I parked his chair in the camping display. He quietly looked at the bear and the lynx as I turned on the moonlight sign. Granddad looked up at it. I went into the bathroom and returned with a wet towel which we used to wipe pie off ourselves. It wasn't going too well. I sat down and looked at Granddad.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"Sure. Sounds good," he grumbled.

“It’s good to hear you talk. Wait,” I said racing to one of the shelves where I found the clown doll and a box of circus things. I returned and set the doll in Granddad’s hands and the box beside him on the camping table. Granddad examined the doll.

“I’ll make coffee,” I said going into the trailer.

Granddad sat alone in the camping display. He looked at his surroundings and he looked at the doll. He set the doll beside him on a camping stool and looked inside the box. He pulled out a circus book and looked at a few of the pictures. He set the book aside and found a cone shaped hat. He looked at the doll, then he looked at the hat and then he put the hat on. Inside the box he found a small vintage case filled with Stein’s grease paint sticks and tricks. He looked at himself in a hand-held mirror. When I returned, I set the tea tray on the camping table and turned around to see that Granddad had painted himself to look like the doll.

I sort of jumped back surprised. “You two match!” I said smiling.

He smiled too. “I haven’t seen a case like this in years,” he said. “See this? It’s full of makeup.” I nodded and poured coffee into old teacups. “Want some music?” I asked. Granddad nodded.

I put the Charles Harrison record on the Gramophone. We had a resplendent moment sipping coffee, looking at the moonlight sign and listening to “*I’m Always Chasing Rainbows*.” So intent were we on listening to the music that we didn’t hear Mr. Milton enter the building. Mr. Milton had installed motion detectors and a silent alarm in the warehouse to alert him if there were ghosts or burglars moving about. Upon hearing the music when he entered the warehouse, Mr. Milton tip-toed towards the source of the music. I can only imagine what he thought when he saw us. Granddad and I looked up to see him gaping in disbelief.

Here I was looking like Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp and Granddad, well, he looked exactly like the clown doll who sat on a stool beside him. We sat in tableau. Mr. Milton froze on the spot in absolute shock and then he fainted. I raced to Mr. Milton's side and checked his pulse.

"He's still alive," I said. "We'd better go."

Granddad nodded. I pushed Granddad's wheelchair around a corner and we stayed out of sight. After a moment Mr. Milton returned to his senses. We watched him slowly rise to his feet. The clown doll remained sitting on the stool. Granddad and I peeked around the corner and watched as Mr. Milton stood there dumbfounded. Granddad smiled and I started to giggle. I held my finger to my lips and whispered, "Shhhhh."

This did not have the effect that I had hoped. Granddad smiled and tried to suppress a giggle. I tried to suppress my laughter too. It was like we'd done something funny in church and the effort to *not* laugh made it even funnier and impossible to stop. It was irresistible. We had to laugh, but we couldn't. We would be caught and that would not be good. We could see Mr. Milton's face. It was priceless. He was totally amazed. He believed that what he had seen were ghosts. I'm positive that he thought I was the real Charlie Chaplin returned from the spirit world and Granddad, as the clown doll, had miraculously been animated into life! The small giggle grew and grew in us until Granddad completely lost it and let out in an uproariously huge belly laugh and I along with him.

The dam had burst!

It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. I don't know exactly why. I guess it was a combination of the tension and excitement from the entire evening being released in combination with the look on Mr. Milton's face which was hilarious. The laughs just poured out "Whoosh!"

It had been a crazy day. It was driving in a stolen city bus, doing an improvised show with white balls and having a great pie fight and the silliness of Mr. Milton's seriousness was unbelievable. The expression on Mr. Milton's face was priceless. It struck Granddad and me as so absolutely hilarious that we just couldn't contain ourselves. We had to laugh. The fact that we had been trying so hard *not* to laugh had made it even more uncontrollable.

It was years of self-imposed gloom totally obliterated.

Mr. Milton jumped when he heard us laugh and that made us laugh even more. You could tell that Mr. Milton thought we were invisible. He thought he was hearing disembodied laughter. He thought we were still in our chairs laughing. We laughed and we laughed. I had forgotten how funny Granddad's laugh had been. It was kind of a, "*a-hick, a-hick, a-hick.*" I remembered hearing it as a kid. As a teenager, my Granddad's laugh had embarrassed me, but my friends liked it. They would go out of their way to be funny so they could hear it. The more Granddad laughed, the more I laughed and the more I laughed, the more Granddad laughed. The more we laughed together, the funnier it became. It was contagious, a virtual nuclear reaction of laughs. We laughed like the sun. Years of sadness vanished. We laughed about the entire evening. We laughed about everything. The whole world struck us as funny. Years of pent up laughter flowed out of Granddad and me.

Mr. Milton remained motionless, frozen to the spot listening to our laughter and totally spooked by it. He looked at our tea cups and the clown doll. He picked up a tea cup and put it in front of the clown doll and backed up reverently. He bowed to our empty chairs and backed away. We stopped laughing long enough to hear Mr. Milton walk away and close the door behind him on his way out of the building. That too struck us as funny. I imagined the story Mr.

Milton would tell about the night he was visited by the ghost of Charlie Chaplin and a clown doll come to life as a man.

Granddad was laughing so hard that I became concerned. I thought he was having some sort of convulsion. Tears were pouring down his face. I patted him on the back and rolled his chair back by the fake bonfire as he laughed. He was still laughing, “*a-hick, a-hick, a-hick*” when I parked him by the bear and lynx. He patted the bear on the head. He started coughing as I handed him his teacup. I encouraged him to take a drink and his laughter slowly subsided. The “*a-hick, a-hick, a-hick,*” slowed down like the dripping of water from a leaky faucet. I sat down and we chuckled together, wiping tears and sipping coffee.

I picked up a record and held it for Granddad to see, “How about some Baroque music?” I asked.

“Great. I always enjoy something new,” Granddad said. At least, I think that’s what he said. He was hard to understand because he’d started laughing again.

“That was Mr. Milton. He’s the owner,” I said as if Granddad had asked. Granddad took a sip of coffee. “I think he thought we were ghosts.”

“Poor guy. I haven’t laughed so hard in...,” he stopped, looked me in the eye as he wiped clown make-up from his face laughing. “Thanks,” he said. “Thanks for...”

“You’re welcome,” I said.

“We’re quite a team,” he said. “We knocked ‘em dead tonight, didn’t we?” I nodded and we sat for a moment in silence as Mozart quietly played. Granddad glanced at the wall and caught sight of a large picture of the Titanic. I followed his gaze. “I’ve always been fascinated by the Titanic,” Granddad said. “I have a theory.”

“Really,” I said. Again, it was nice to hear Granddad talk.

“The way I think about it is we’re all Titanic,” he said.

“How so?” I asked. “More coffee?”

“Yes, please,” said Granddad. “This is delicious.” We clinked teacups.

“How are we all Titanic?” I asked.

“The people didn’t know she was going to sink. They were busy doing their everyday things, the workers worked, the rich loitered and it was full-speed ahead then: *Bang!* Just goes to show, you never know when your time’s up,” said Granddad. “It’s just dumb luck.”

“Luck? But don’t you make your own luck?” I asked.

“In some ways we do. We make choices, but...” Granddad’s eyes narrowed and he stood up and pretended to be drunk. I grew concerned that he’d fall or break something. “Imagine that I’m life. Life is like a drunk walking. I try to walk a straight line, but I can’t. The meandering, unpredictable path of a drunken person is a metaphor for our lives. Few things turn out the way we plan them. Random events we cannot foresee or predict can determine the course of our lives.”

“I can see that,” I said.

“We tend to overstate the degree to which we actually control things,” he said plopping down again. I nodded and looked at the picture of the ship. We sat in silence for a moment.

“I think about the lifeboats,” I said.

“How so?” Granddad said slurping his coffee noisily. He had loosened up significantly.

“There isn’t anything to say about the wisdom of building a ship to carry 3,300 people, but only supplying lifeboats for about 1,100... It’s not that it was technologically impossible.

“And they didn’t use what little they had as well as they could,” offered Granddad.

“Exactly!” I said. “You know what I think? I think the planet is like Titanic.”

“How so?” asked Granddad. He peered into my face catching the note of gloom as I spoke quickly, “Only when the planet is toast will people realize that they could have done better!” I stood up and approached the picture. “They’ll realize when the worst that could happen happens that their measures were never adequate. They’ll act like they did with the Titanic. They didn’t think they needed lifeboats because they thought her unsinkable. People think there is no disaster they can’t handle. It plays out over and over again in human history. There is something in humans that wants to believe that all threats can be prepared for, that authority has the answers and that Mommy and Daddy are still out there to take care of us when bad things happen.” I sat down beside Granddad with resignation. He handed me a cookie and munched on one himself. He patted me on the back. My thoughts had been stirred, “Nobody wants to admit they don't know everything, that they could be wrong, that they're engaging in risky behavior. Silencing dissenting voices, refusing to address uncertainty, and refusing to learn from history are what make hubris possible. It's a lesson we seem to have to relearn over and over. If there's one thing about the sinking of the Titanic that bothers me, it's the reaction by the passengers and crew. The people on the Titanic had two and a half hours to act. How many could have been saved if they had turned all their resources to survival mode by making sure lifeboats were all used and filled, by improvising rafts, by organizing the departure from the ship as quickly as possible and by having calm and order? *What else could they have done with it?*” The last question hung in the air. I was bringing Granddad down, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Forget about it,” said Granddad as a pall of sadness fell over me. “Let’s not let thoughts like that ruin things. Keep it in perspective.” Granddad stood up again and rolled his wheelchair out of the way. He picked up a deck chair and tried to set it up mumbling, “I haven’t sat in one of these in years.” I continued to talk, waving my arms animatedly as Granddad fiddled with his

chair. “As a planet, as individuals, as a species, we're facing a lot of slow-motion disasters that can prove fatal: economic inequality on steroids; incompetent elites doubling down on failed policies; corruption of democratic institutions and the war on the public good; energy-resource-population issues; global climate change. The list goes on and on with more and more,” I said standing to help Granddad with his chair. He moved the folding chair this way and that until it snapped together folded on the floor. I too tried to set up the chair. “We have no shortage of icebergs, and we're about as able to change course as quickly as the Titanic. There's a Titanic metaphor that keeps coming up with every foreseeable disaster: *rearranging the deck chairs.*”

I realized that it was hopeless. I let the chair fall. Granddad returned to his wheelchair. We sat in silence, finishing our coffee and listening to Pachelbel's canon. Seeing the look on my face, Granddad slapped my knee lightly. “Hear that? That's Pachelbel. Forget about all that. You'll drive yourself crazy. Keep it in perspective,” said Granddad as if he'd read my mind. “It'll make you sad like it makes me sad. There's nothing we can do. You'll get bitter like me. You just got to live your life and find happiness where you can. There's only one way to find happiness and that's to stop worrying about things which are beyond your power. It makes me happy to see you worry free,” he said. I nodded. Granddad continued his pep talk. “You've got the Little Tramp spirit in you, right?” I nodded. “Do you feel it inside?” Another nod. “Well then, enjoy it. Be light as a feather! OK? Do it for me,” said Granddad. “Keep a happy feeling in your heart. *Never say die!*” I nodded as he gave me a rough hug around the neck. “OK,” I said. I could see the subtitle in my mind. “That makes me happy. Even if you're not wearing the outfit, have the Little Tramp spirit inside you,” he said leaning forward and pointing at my chest. “You made me happy tonight. Happier than I thought I could ever be again. You woke me up! I'm ready to die now,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

We sat in silence a moment longer and then Granddad said, “All this talk makes me want to go outside. You know what I’d like to do?”

“What?” I asked.

“I’d love to watch the sun come up in the country,” he said. “I haven’t seen a sunrise in... forever.”

I nodded. “Let’s go,” I said standing up quickly and running outside. Granddad watched me go. I went out the door and jumped onto the bus then I ran back into the warehouse and grabbed my hat and cane and ran out again. Granddad pushed the wheels of his chair to catch up with me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Let me drink from the waters where the mountain streams flood.

Let the smell of wildflowers flow free through my blood.

~ Bob Dylan

Granddad sat watching out the window. He was dozing in and out of consciousness as we drove out towards the edge of the city and onto a country road. He did not speak. We hadn't spoken for a long time. I put on some '50s music that I thought he'd like. At one point, I looked back to see him bobbing his head to the Ink Spots singing "If I Didn't Care," but it might have been the motion of the bus. There may have been no bobbing involved. I steered the bus onto a dirt road leading into a valley by a lake, stopped, opened the door and helped Granddad outside. When we were outside, he said, "Look up."

I looked up.

The sun was just below the horizon and the sky was filled with fluffy clouds of pink, blue and orange. A few stars remained visible directly above us. Our ears were met by the sound of crickets and the lapping of water on the shore. It was warm and pleasant and absolutely still. I lay on the ground flat on my back beside Granddad's wheelchair and closed my eyes. In no time at all, I fell asleep and had a dream.

In the dream I was in a world of white. After my eyes became adjusted, I realized the white was ice and snow. I had on a parka and I was saying good bye to my granddad who stood on an iceberg slowly floating away. Granddad was smiling. He tossed a small suitcase at me and it hit me in the head. I looked down at the suitcase and then at Granddad. He had turned around. I

watched as his lone figure receded into the distance of a winter wonderland. Northern lights filled the sky with music. I watched him float away to it. He turned around, gave me one final wave and I woke up.

I don't know how long I'd been sleeping, but by the looks of the sun which was above me, I could tell that it had been a while. The wheelchair sat empty beside me. I got up and looked around for Granddad. The bus was where I'd parked it with its door open. I ran into it and found it empty. Granddad was nowhere to be seen. I looked at the ground and saw footprints in the sand. I ran to the water's edge and found Granddad sitting on a dock with his feet in the water. He looked up at me when I approached. I took off my shoes and joined him. I put my feet in the cold water. It felt good. He turned his head and smiled at me.

"Nice," he said simply.

We sat in silence a moment and then he reached out, took my hand and kissed it. The years of sadness that seemed to have imprisoned him were gone. He was smiling brightly. I put my arm on his shoulder and we watched the sun rise higher and higher. Birds flitted in the trees. We heard the same music.

We spent the whole day just lazing around in the country. It was beautiful. We even went swimming. We munched on sandwiches I found on the bus in a lunch pail. It was great to see Granddad smile and laugh and it felt great to laugh and smile myself. We both felt free and happy. Later, back on the bus, I drove and looked in the rear view mirror at Granddad. He sat looking out the window and clutching a small bouquet of wild flowers he'd picked. When we entered the city his demeanor changed. He did not turn his head to see me looking in the rear view mirror. He sat looking at the city which had sprawled into the country, big and ugly, killing everything in its path like an environmental cancer. Granddad sat expressionless as I continued

to drive. When I stopped at a street light, I looked back to see that he'd closed his eyes and slumped in his seat. It had been a long night. He must be tired. And then, in the rearview mirror I saw a police car. Its red flashing lights came on to pull me over. I pulled to the side of the road, stopped the bus and hopped out of the driver's seat. I went to wake Granddad up. I shook his shoulder, but he didn't stir. I shook him again. Then it hit me. I knew he was gone. I sat down and looked at him. He looked peaceful. This had been a good day to die. I don't know. I felt sad, but I also felt glad. No one lives forever.

I could see the red lights of the police car coursing through the interior of the bus. I picked up the box and little suitcase and with one last look at Granddad, I stepped down the stairs and peeked out the door. I could see the police car behind the bus. I hopped out and hid behind a garbage can. I waited for a police officer to come and arrest me, but no police officer came. From out of the suitcase I pulled out my janitorial clothes. I put them on over top of the tramp outfit. I could hear more police cars coming. A small white poodle came along sniffing at the garbage can. He started to bark. I tried to shoo him away. A lady who was tethered to the poodle looked at me and picked her poodle up. I tipped my hat to her as she walked away then I put my hat and cane into the suitcase. I stood up and slowly walked down the alley as more police cars came. I imagined the police storming the bus and finding Granddad sitting there clutching wild flowers to his chest. The thought made me smile. Granddad's last joke. They could deal with the removal of Granddad's body better than I could. Granddad was gone. It was as simple as that.

It began to rain.

I walked and walked then I walked some more. I carried the box and suitcase into the mall where I worked. People with umbrellas looked at me as I struggled. I could tell that they

were mildly amused. When at last I entered the mall, I could feel peoples' eyes on me. On the door I stopped to look at a wanted poster. Printed on the poster was a picture of the Little Tramp. The picture had been taken from a security camera.

I put the cardboard box and suitcase into the janitor's room and entertained the notion of going into the mall and having fun with the people. This thought made me realize that I do, in fact, like people. When the people are laughing and enjoying themselves as I entertain them, I feel great. I love their laughter. It makes me feel that I'm not alone. I have kindred spirits. I thought that maybe I should go out there and entertain. Wouldn't that be something? Here the authorities are looking for the tramp and I'm right under their noses. What would they do? They'd try to arrest me. Upon second thought, I decided to lay low. I didn't feel funny. I wasn't in the mood. I felt sad. I was tired. I felt lazy so I did what I was supposed to do: I went to work.

It was a typical evening. The nice thing about this job is that there are no expectations. Nobody expects me to talk. I have nothing to sell and no one to impress. Everyone is respectful of everyone else's prerogative to be quiet. When we sat in the food court Brittani didn't come out to give the janitors French fries. I saw her clean up and go. She was in a hurry. She looked at me for a second, but that was it. I'm nothing to her.

Ajay and I worked without talking. Later, Ajay went to work cleaning somewhere and I mopped the floor in the dollar store. I looked at the fake flowers. I looked at greeting cards. There was a card with a picture of a clown on it that caught my eye. It proved to be crude and not very funny. I looked at the *With Deepest Sympathy* cards. It's funny how condolences cards are pretty much all the same. There would be no need for condolences cards for Granddad. There wasn't any family left. All his friends were dead. He once told me that he didn't want a funeral.

He would be put him into a pauper's grave or wherever it is they put dead paupers found on city busses. Pop wouldn't care.

I strolled through the mall feeling even more melancholy than I normally do. I began to think about life, you know, the big picture. I thought about Charles Chaplin, the real living, breathing person who was born in 1889, rose to popularity in about 1914, and experienced incredible fame and then, incredible rejection; a man who married young women, fathered lots of kids and died at a ripe old age surrounded by family in a fancy villa in Switzerland. Not a bad way to go for a Cockney kid from the streets of London. He did all right. I wish I could have met him. In popular culture he's pretty much forgotten now. If I told people I loved Charlie Chaplin, they would I'm crazy. Maybe I am. Charlie is dead and long gone. His time is passed, just as my granddad's time has passed and my time will pass too. In a blink of time everyone I see will be dead and forgotten too. Family photographs will be thrown away. I felt sad. I noticed how the mall had fallen on hard times. There were fewer and fewer stores. For Lease signs were everywhere. I walked in a section of the mall that felt like a ghost town.

In the deserted section of the mall Alfred Eric walked right past me without speaking. He was still mad about the banana incident. He didn't know I was the Little Tramp that he hated like the plague. He didn't know I was the clown he hated more than anything. I said I was sorry for the banana incident, but he ignored me. Oh well. I can appreciate Alfred Eric as a human being even if he does hate me. I felt bad that he hated me, but there was nothing I could do about it. It's his prerogative. I realized that my love for Chaplin was not just that of one human for another. There was more to it. Chaplin's character of the Little Tramp was a dream-world made manifest in me. The tramp's spirit was in me. I know it sounds crazy. I'd been rational my entire life and where had it gotten me? Rational thoughts had destroyed my soul. I was all left brain – logical,

compartmentalized, self-absorbed. I didn't see the whole picture. I had no perspective about deeper meanings and metaphors. I'd lost my sense of imagination and emotion. Rational thought had killed my enthusiasm for living. It made me feel depressed about the state of the world. I felt completely useless. Could this experience of becoming the Little Tramp be the triumph over irrationality that I needed? I'd spent my entire life trying to organize my world, abiding by the clock, adhering to ridiculous and stifling rules I despised, letting people mistreat me without recrimination and seeing unfairness rule the day; crossing each day off my calendar with an 'X' and, one by one, getting closer and closer to death with each 'X' I made.

What if I lived as the Little Tramp in my mind and used my cane to poke and jab the people who needed a poke and a jab? I could torment the arrogant rich and toss some humble pie in their eyes. What if I used my foot to place some well placed kicks? And, what if, in being free to have fun - in being free to see one thing as another, in seeing the humour in any situation - I could lift myself out of mundane existence and have fun? I've been living a dull life. It's time for me to experience the ethereal, to see what can't be seen! What if I chose to exist in a reality of my own making? Does that render me insane and, if it does, isn't that better than a life of despair?

Despite feeling sad, I could feel the spirit of the Little Tramp bubbling in me, keeping me buoyant. I knew deep down that there isn't anything or anyone to fear. I'll be all right even when I'm not. I walked in the darkened mall hallway as the Little Tramp. I moved in out of the spotlights on the floor. I splayed my feet and walked silly to that happy 1920s silly cartoon music playing in my head. I did a little dance. I felt happiness inside me despite, or, maybe even, because of, the sadness all around me. Happiness and sadness go together like black and white, one is realized with the other. You can't see without black – without shadow – otherwise

everything would be just white and you can't make out shapes without shadows and you can't see without shades of gray made by mixing black and white. You need the light. Black and white, happiness and sadness, you need them both. We fool ourselves into believing that all we need is steady happiness. That's crazy. One can't live on ice cream. People are foolish not to appreciate sadness. If you don't love the sadness, you can't experience the euphoria of happiness.

I thought about these things and I wished the real Chaplin were with me. I even wished I would have been alive in the 1920's instead of now, but then, if I would have lived back in the 1920's, I'd be dead now. I will keep the 1920's in me. I will keep Charlie's Little Tramp in my heart. I will dedicate myself to making a movie that only I can see. It is the movie of my life. I now see through Charlie's eyes. I am Charlie reincarnated in a new form. I'm not exactly him of course. I know I'm not gifted or brilliant or flawed in the ways he was flawed. I have my own kind of brilliance and my own kind of flaws; nevertheless, I am the Little Tramp just the same! I am the same, but different! The gags I live and string together will not be shown in a Nickelodeon. They will only be realized by me and appreciated by me. When I walk down the street dressed as the Little Tramp either outwardly or inwardly, I see the world as the Little Tramp would see the world. My imagination transports me from fantasy to personal reality. People may or may not see the Little Tramp when they look at me. It doesn't matter. I am what I am. I'm not pretending to be something I'm not. And when the Tramp outfit is not visible, when it is hidden, it is in my mind, always, because the Little Tramp is not a costume, it is not just wacky old clothes that don't fit. The Little Tramp was - and is - a way of thinking; it is how I choose to live in the world. The Little Tramp is how I am to myself. The thought gives me comfort. The thought gives me happiness and fulfillment. Even if the thought is insane, I'm

content to be in this insanity. I embrace it! It is no more insane to be happy - to live in a delusion - as to not.

As I sat pondering, Ajay came through the mall and found me sitting on a bench staring into space. I had the cardboard box containing my granddad's things sitting on my lap. This is the box I'd carried almost all day. This was the box I'd seen in the nursing home and later in the bus when Granddad gave it to me. The box was my granddad's life, and now it was my life. It was a box that contained Charlie Chaplin. My granddad loved Chaplin as the artist he was. I believe Chaplin lived in my granddad and my father as they all live in me now. Through Chaplin's Little Tramp the legacy continues. The box on my lap remained closed. I didn't look at the things inside. Ajay stopped and sat beside me. "What's in the box?" he said.

"Things from my grandfather," I said.

"Oh," he said.

We sat in silence.

"Granddad died today," I said. "He died on the city bus I took. I took him into the country in a bus I stole."

"Oh," said Ajay.

"Did I ever tell you that if Granddad had not joined the Circus, he wanted to be a farmer? Not a rich farmer, just a farmer who could afford to eat and live in peace in the country, with a rocking chair, wine now and then, laughs with good friends and good food." I paused.

"Granddad loved nature like William Wordsworth loved nature. For Granddad, nature was pure poetry."

Ajay looked at me as I stared straight ahead in a trance. The beauty of Ajay was that he accepted this. He did not think me odd. He let me be me.

“Granddad used to call himself Pop. He and I watched the sun rise. It was his last one. I think he knew it would be,” I paused and then continued. “It was a beautiful day. We loved it. I knew it would end. He knew it would end. And now, I find myself reliving it. Pop died on the bus as police were getting ready to take me in, but I got a way. I got off the bus and left him all alone and the police found his body. Just sitting there. Do you think I should have stayed?”

“What for?” said Ajay.

“I shouldn’t have left Granddad like that,” I said. “It’s disrespectful. I abandoned him.”

“O.K. So you left your grandfather dead on a bus, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“In a bus you had stolen?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I see. Well, the way I see it is that your grandfather was gone, right? You said it yourself that he was dead and gone, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well then. What good would it be for you to go to jail? He wouldn’t have liked that, would he? You didn’t destroy the bus or anything did you?”

“No,” I said.

“Then I say that it’s okay,” said Ajay.

“You’re a good friend Ajay. Did I ever tell you that I…” I started then he interrupted.

“Let’s get to work. We’ve got work to do,” said Ajay.

We sat in silence. “Thanks Ajay,” I said.

“Your grandfather was a good man. I can tell.”

“Think so?”

“Of course! He was a clown wasn't he?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Very noble. He gave the gift of laughter,” said Ajay.

“Think so?”

“Of course! Very noble. He lived a good life, didn't he? No one lives forever, right?”

I nodded in the affirmative.

“Why don't you go home? I'll finish up.”

I nodded again. He patted me on the back. He felt the lumps under my clothes.

“What do you have on?” he asked.

I smiled at him. “Hobo clothes,” I said. I stood up and walked away. He watched me go.

In the janitor's room I took off the little tramp outfit and added it to the box. I sadly walked out of the mall. Once outside on the street I carried the box and suitcase. I stopped to look at a bus, but I didn't get in. A drizzle began to fall. The night was black and white. I was alone.

Pawn Shop

I walked down the street feeling sad. I came to a pawn shop and stood outside debating what to do. I sat on the curb and looked at the box. I had to get rid of the past. Maybe the outfit was making me crazy. Why cling to my granddad's things? He was gone. It only made me melancholy. Inside the box were the Charlie Chaplin clothes and odds and ends from my granddad's life. Clown stuff. There were old signed letters and pictures that didn't mean

anything to me. The pawnbroker looked bored. He reluctantly looked at the things in the box. I didn't notice that his eyes almost popped out of his head.

“What is this junk?” he said looking casually through the box, keeping his enthusiasm hidden. “What? Clown stuff? People hate clowns. They're scary. Pictures? No. A collector might like this (it was a figurine)... I'll give you ten dollars for the lot.”

“That's it?” I said.

“Not much here,” he said. “What can I say? Look at these clothes. Garbage,” he handed me a ten dollar bill. I took the bill and he tossed the clothes, hat, shoes and cane into a garbage can as if it were diseased. He put the alarm clock to his ear and tossed it in the garbage as well. I started to walk away, but then caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. I looked pathetic. The spark had gone. I looked back at the clothes in the garbage. They were alive and I'd abandoned them. Something pulled me back. I don't know what it was. With sudden intensity I lay across the counter and retrieved the clothes. “Hey!” said the pawn broker as he tried to stop me. He grabbed at the clothes. “Hey!” he shouted again. “A deal's a deal!”

“Keep your ten dollars!” I said as we wrestled. I managed to yank the clothes from his fingers. The pawnbroker grabbed at the hat and cane and ran away from me. I chased after him. We ran around the store. I hopped the counter and grabbed the cane from him then I used it to snag the hat. I jammed the hat on my head, hit him with a big shoe then threw everything in the box.

“I've changed my mind,” I said. “It's not garbage.”

“Put it back!” he said. “I paid you!”

“You said it’s garbage. Why would you mind if I keep it?” I said. I took the box and slammed the ten back on the counter and headed towards the door. I looked back at the pawnbroker who called out, “Okay. I’ll give you twenty.”

“Forget it,” I said.

“Thirty,” he said.

“Not for sale. I changed my mind,” I shouted.

I stepped outside fumbling with the box. I wandered the streets carrying the box and the suitcase. In an alley I stopped and looked at the suitcase and the box. I took off the janitor’s uniform and put it in the suitcase. I then took the things I wanted to keep out of the box and put them in the suitcase. I put on the bowler hat and took out the cane. It was a foggy and drizzly night. I tossed the box beside a disposal bin where it landed on a man hidden beneath cardboard.

“What the?” he said. “Watch what your doin’!”

“Sorry,” I said tipping my hat.

“Charlie?” the man said. “Is that you again?”

I didn’t answer. He looked at the box. “You throwin’ this away?”

I nodded.

“He looked at a few of the things in the box and pulled out the alarm clock. “What am I going to do with an alarm clock?” he said. “Do I look like a man who need’s a clock?”

I didn’t know.

“Alarm clock!” the man laughed. “I gave up on time long time ago.”

I tipped my hat and started to walk away.

“Wait,” he said putting the clock to his ear, listening. He looked me in the eye. I tipped my hat again, did a little kick turn and happily shuffled away. I felt as light as a feather.

The man laughed. "By Charlie!" said the man.

I turned around and smiled, tipped my hat and walked down the sidewalk. I peeked around a building to look back at the man. I watched him shake the clock and hold it to his ear. He tossed the clock into the garbage, picked up the box and walked down the alley in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Remember me and smile, for it's better to forget than to remember me and cry.

~ Dr. Seuss

Once back in the warehouse, I sat on the folding deck chair by the trailer where I'd sat with Granddad. I looked at his chair which was folded on the floor. I plugged in the electric fireplace. From inside the suitcase I pulled out a black and white publicity photograph of Pop in his clown costume. I heard the music of the circus in my mind. I remembered how as a boy he used to balance me and toss me around as part of his act. When I got too big for that, he tried to include me in the show, but my Mom didn't want me to be in that life. He taught be the ball routine. He tried to make me funny but I wasn't. I was too much the straight man. I read my books and worried while he did his act.

From the suitcase I pulled out the Charlie Chaplin movies. I went into the trailer and came out with a small TV with a built in DVD player. I sat and watched the videos. After I'd watched them all I stood in a mirror and put on the hat and took out the cane. I looked at myself. I turned to a side table. To anyone watching from behind I appeared to be sobbing, however, when I turned around, the shaking I was doing wasn't from crying. I shook because I was shaking a cocktail shaker. I turned around and shook the cocktail shaker with a bored, placid face. I poured myself a martini and dropped in an olive skewer. I sipped the martini with sophistication until I poked my eye with the skewer and jerked my head.

I wandered around the warehouse looking at this and that. The things I examined really were quite fascinating. Mr. Milton was certainly an eclectic and eccentric collector. I pulled back a sheet to find a stuffed mountain lion which made me jump into the arms of a manikin to whom I made romantic advances.

I came to a box with a selection of records inside. I selected a record and put it on the gramophone. When the music started, I did a bit of a dance. I found the folding deck chair which I had tried to set up for Granddad. I proceeded to try to set up yet again. I imagined myself in a Chaplin film. With much struggle and no success, I finally opened a window and tossed the chair out the window. I watched it fall and then I continued to look out the window. Not far away I saw a row of restaurants with people sitting at outside tables. I grabbed a huge pair of binoculars and watched the people enjoying themselves. I emptied my pockets in search of money. My pockets were empty. I didn't have any money. I wandered around some more before pulling back a large sheet concealing a Model T. I jumped in the back seat and pretended a chauffer was driving me.

That's when I got an amazing idea.

I ran to the trailer where I found my little leather suitcase. I looked inside and snapped it shut then went back to the car, tossed the suitcase in the front seat and climbed behind the steering wheel. I fumbled with this and that trying to start the car. Nothing happened. I jumped out, scratched my head, noticed the crank at the front and gave it a turn. To my surprise, the motor started. I jumped in and the engine promptly stalled. I came out of the car again, gave the crank another turn. Once again the engine fired up, and again, when I jumped behind the steering wheel the engine stopped.

I once again stepped out of the car. I scratched my head and gave the crank yet another turn, the engine started again! This time, it continued to run. I ran to the big door and pulled the chain to open it. I jumped behind the wheel, released the brake, put the car in gear and the car jumped forward. The thrill I felt was unimaginable. I drove the car out into the back alley and then pulled out onto the street.

It was a warm summer evening. I rolled down the window and stopped at a street light. A police car pulled up beside me. The officer inside looked at me carefully. I could be wrong, but I was fairly certain the officer was the same one I had seen when I was driving the bus. I smiled and tipped my hat. When the light turned green I pulled away as the police car remained stationary. I drove to the nearby restaurant area and stopped just outside a café crowded with people dining at outdoor tables behind a low fence. I parked the car and hopped out holding the little suitcase.

I put my hat upside down on the sidewalk and pulled out a toy accordion from the suitcase and started to play. People looked at me and smiled. I began playing the beer barrel polka and I danced around as I did so. Children got up from their tables and began to dance along with me on their side of the fence. A wealthy couple was obviously not amused. They sneered at me, signaled for a waiter, and complained. A manager was summoned. I could tell that the wealthy couple didn't appreciate my rendition of the polka so I switched to playing Edith Piaf's *La Foule*. Perhaps they'd appreciate something a little more refined.

A manager approached me on his side of the fence as the children started throwing coins into my hat. I closed my eyes and was right into playing the accordion as I paced back and forth on the sidewalk. The manager followed me. I didn't see him. He kept tapping me on the shoulder, but I was so absorbed that I didn't notice. I was oblivious to his presence. He leaned

over the fence farther and farther. Just as he was about to touch me, I would spin and turn. He didn't know I was only pretending not to see him, or maybe he did. I used the opportunity to generate some physical comedy at the manager's expense. The outfit, the music and the festive atmosphere were having a positive effect on me. Giddiness returned. No longer did I feel melancholy. I walked around with my eyes closed as the manager followed. He kept tapping me on the shoulder. After we did a weird sort of courtship dance I finally opened my eyes. By this time the manager was flustered, red-faced and embarrassed. Our dance had elicited laughter from people sitting at tables.

I looked up and smiled at the manager. The manager frowned. He asked me to leave. I argued with him then I made a big show of starting the Model T which again proved temperamental. When it finally started, I drove in a wide circling u-turn to park directly in front of the restaurant next door. The manager stood watching with his hands on his hips. A table of gangsters watched me too. They sat stone-faced, not amused. I got out of the car with a flourish as the manager glared. I asked a pretty young woman if I could look at her hand. She gave me her hand and I turned it palm up. I examined her hand affectionately as her boyfriend glared. I asked her to hold up her fingers outspread and up. I then positioned myself so my nose touched her thumb. I asked her to wiggle her fingers. In this way I sent a message of disdain to the manager. People at their tables laughed, including the gangsters.

I took off my hat and put it upside down on the sidewalk and again began to play the toy accordion. This time I played *Eternally* from *Limelight*. It had been my granddad's favourite. The group of gangsters sipped their beers and listened. The large angry looking one started to weep. He summoned his friend and said something into his friend's ear. I watched. The friend then came over to me. He was a mean looking character so I started to run away but before I

could do so, he grabbed me. The man assured me that he meant me no harm. He handed me some money and invited me to follow him. I hopped the little fence.

When I approached their table, one of the gangsters said, "Who's the freak?"

The solemn looking angry man with a scar on his face, did not appreciate the freak remark for he said, "Don't you know who that is? That's Charlie Chaplin."

"Charlie who?"

"Charlie Chaplin!" said the man with the facial scar.

The man who'd made the freak remark obviously did not know who Charlie Chaplin was.

"He's an artist," said the man with the scar.

When I came up beside the solemn man, he stood up and shook my hand. He told his associate to move and bade me to sit next to him. He showed me a newspaper with a picture of a man who had been killed and explained that his friend had just died and this was his wake. The man asked me to play the song again, so I did. I played the song as the intimidating gangsters self-consciously wiped tears from their eyes. A lady at the next table also began to cry. Soon it seemed that everyone was crying. When the manager who was leading a couple of women to a table saw what was going on, he couldn't believe his eyes. His clientele was crying!

The big fellow then slammed his hands on the table making everyone jump, including me. I fell off my chair. Someone spilled wine on themselves. I dropped the accordion and quickly picked it up.

The manager seated a couple of well-dressed women at a nearby table. The women looked at me playing the accordion. It was the Filipino nurse. She was as surprised to see as I was to see her.

"Play something happy," the gangster said.

I started to play some bouncy Italian folk music and the gangsters began to smile and raise their glasses. I felt like I controlled the emotions of everyone there. It was quite remarkable. With a signal from the leader, the gang leaned forward into a huddle. They spoke conspiratorially. Every now and then one of the gang would poke his head to see if anyone was listening. I leaned in to hear what was being said, but every time I leaned in, I was pushed away. I was playing Bohemian Rhapsody with my eyes closed when the manager came and tapped me on the shoulder and told me to leave. I shook my head frantically to say no. The manager pushed me to leave. Again I shook my head frantically. I jerked my head to get the manager to look behind him. When the manager finally did, he saw that a large intimidating gangster stood glaring behind him. The leader of the gang held the intimidating gangster back and said, "He stays!"

He then told the manger to get me something. "What do you want to eat?" the gang leader said. I saw a plate of spaghetti being carried on a tray.

"Spaghetti?" I said.

"Get our little friend a plate of spaghetti and a glass of red wine!" The manager whipped away and the big fellow gave me a hug. My hat fell off.

A plate of spaghetti and a glass of wine was promptly placed in front of me. I swirled noodles onto a fork. Just as I was about to put the noodles in my mouth, I looked up to see the Filipino nurse standing beside me. I lowered my fork. The gang members looked at the woman as well. She looked like she felt conspicuous.

"I heard you playing and I thought: is that, could it be? You? Is it you? Then I realized it was... it is you," she stumbled.

I didn't say anything, but stood up slowly. "Don't get up," she said. "I don't want to disturb your dinner with your... friends." She looked at the gangsters beside me with a wary smile. "I just wanted to say how sorry I was to hear about your Granddad. We're going to miss him," she said. "They found him on a bus."

I looked down at my plate then back up at her. "I see you've kept the clothes. They suit you! Maybe you'll come and we can put on another show."

I was about to say, I'd like that and thank you, when again the leader slammed his hands onto the table and again I jumped and fell out of my chair. The nurse helped me up and our eyes met.

"Let's go!" said the gang leader standing. "You too!" he said grabbing me.

I looked pleadingly at the woman as I was yanked away. The gang got up. "You'll play for us!" I was pushed and pulled into a car as the nurse watched us go. Inside the car I was squashed between two tough guys. "Play something," demanded the leader in the front seat as the rest of the gang took out guns and readied themselves, for what, I didn't know.

"Requests?" I asked.

"Anything," said the gang leader sharply amidst the clicks and clacks of the loading of guns.

I started to play *Auld Lange Syne*. The passengers looked pensively out the windows. "Not that," shouted the leader. I quickly switched to playing *Iron Man* by Black Sabbath and the men in the car nodded appreciatively as they held their guns. The car proceeded to drive through town and stop outside a big house. Everyone piled out of the car leaving me in the backseat alone. I breathed a sigh of relief. From outside the car I watched as the gang assemble, check

their guns and go towards the house. The leader turned towards me, “Where’s Charlie?” he said. “Bring him.”

An arm reached into the car, grabbed me and dragged me out. I was pushed along with them. The gang separated on either side of a door of the house. The men hid behind trees at the sides. I was pushed out in front of the door.

“Play,” the gang leader hissed.

I looked around uncertain. “Play!” hissed the gang leader again.

I shrugged my shoulders. “*What should I play?*” I mouthed. The guys looked at one another uncertain.

“Doesn’t matter!” whispered the gang leader. “Anything! Just play!”

I nodded and mouthed, “*I know.*”

After a dramatic pause in which I readied myself, I launched into playing the *Chicken Dance*. It seemed appropriate given the knocking together of my knees. Upon hearing the selection, the gang members in hiding looked at one another.

“*Is this guy for real?*” their faces seemed to say.

From inside the house, I saw the lights go on. I saw movement behind the curtains and someone inside the house peeped at me through the peep hole. I smiled nervously as I stood wide-eyed playing the accordion. I could just imagine what the man who peeped out thought. I heard a series of clicks from multiple door looks being disengaged on the other side of the door. I switched from playing the *Chicken Dance* to playing *Tico-Tico no Fubá*. I don’t know why I changed songs. I just did. It wouldn’t matter to any of the gang members bent on mayhem, but “fubá” is a type of cornmeal and “tico-tico” is the name of a sparrow. I saw myself as the sparrow.

I only wished there was cornmeal around me instead of guns.

I tried to warn the person in the house that this was a trap by jerking my head spasmodically, but a spasmodically jerking head from a Charlie Chaplin lookalike playing *Tico-Tico no Fubá* on an accordion is not easily deciphered. The gang members in hiding around me cocked their guns and readied themselves for the ambush. From inside the house, the door slowly creaked open. The bald head of man poked out and looked at me. The head then looked this way and that. Not seeing any danger, the bald head turned to someone inside and the call went to other heads to come check out what's going on outside.

The gang members in hiding smiled to themselves. The ruse was working! My accordion was drawing out the people from inside the house. A head concealed by a juniper bush smiled and signaled at other heads to get ready. The next thing I knew I was surrounded by another entire gang. There were no two gangs, one of which was ready to ambush the other. The gang from the house had come out to see what was going on. They stood watching me play. From out of the bushes, the leader stepped out and shouted, "Surprise! Get 'em boys!" Multiple shots from multiple guns rang out in the cool night air.

I closed my eyes, continued to play and hoped for the best. Men fell where they stood as gun smoke wafted the air around me. It was a regular gunfight at O.K. corral and I was caught in the middle. When the smoke cleared, I couldn't believe that I hadn't been hit. I felt my chest, torso, head, arms and legs - no holes! The tramp suit must be magic! It was a miracle.

I put the accordion in my suitcase – it's funny how the suitcase was always with me - and I wasted no time walking away. When I heard sirens, I started to run, but then I heard a weak voice call, "*Charlie? Charlie?*"

I stopped and turned around. “*Charlie*,” the voice croaked again. I walked towards the source of the voice and found the gang leader with the scar lying in a heap beside an angel fountain by the house. I propped him against the fountain. He started to whisper something.

“You’re standing...” he whispered.

“What?” I said.

“You’re standing...”

“What?” I said again putting my ear to his mouth.

“You’re standing on my hand,” he said quietly.

I looked down to see his hand beneath my foot.

“Sorry,” I said, stepping off.

“Take me to the car,” he said.

I helped him up and walked him to the car. I opened the car door and helped him get in. Once inside the car he groaned, “Drive.”

I started the car and pulled around a corner when police cars started arriving. The scarred gang leader muttered continuously about his life and the end that he felt was near.

“I don’t know why I got into this life,” he said. “I should have sold lawn furniture off route 15. You know?” he looked at me. I was intent on driving so I wasn’t really listening. “All I ever really wanted to do was fish.”

I nodded.

“Do you like fishing?”

I nodded again. I’d never fished in my life, but he didn’t need to know that. Fishing was popular with humans, but not so popular with fish.

“I love fishing,” he continued. “It’s relaxing. No guns, ah, ah...”

I wondered why men like my dying companion felt the need to join gangs. Look where they get you. Good thing I'd never joined a gang, not that any gang had ever asked me to join them. I would have liked to have had a serious conversation on the subject of gang affiliation but, at that particular moment, I was more concerned with not crashing the car into anything. I didn't want to draw any attention to our whereabouts. This was more difficult than one might assume, given the flashy nature of the car itself. The car was difficult to control. I found that if I ever so slightly just touched the accelerator it lurched forward and in resting my arm I had inadvertently hit a switch which made the front of the car shoot straight up like it was a rocket aimed at the moon. At an intersection a police car sidled up beside us.

"Act normal," said the gang leader bleeding.

I looked over at the officer with what I hoped was straight face. I think it was my friend - the same officer who saw me in the hospital after the sprinkler incident, who saw me driving the bus and then the Model T and now in this low riding gangster car.

I tipped my hat. The officer's face remained dumbfounded as he surveyed our conveyance. The car I was driving was a bright purple with small shining wheels. There was a mural of a naked woman on the side. I put my arm out the window to cover her bosom. I tried to lower the front end of the car by flicking a switch, but the car wouldn't cooperate. Instead of just going down it went down and then back up. We bounced along beside the police car. With each bounce the gang leader let out a yell of pain and a grown of agony. The light turned green and I pulled away with the front end aimed high and the back scraping the ground. The police car didn't move.

"Take me to Joe's," the gang leader said. He directed me around one corner after another then he said, "I'm a gonner." The expression surprised me. I didn't think people actually said

things like that except for maybe in old western movies. I guess it went with his, “Get ‘em boys.” The gang leader then said, “I want to give you this aaagh...”

“What?” I said. “Give me what?” Great, I thought. I’ve lost another passenger. The leader had been reaching inside his pocket when he expired. I pulled over and looked at the gang leader. I was reaching into his pocket when I saw a police car come around the corner. Without hesitation I jumped out of the car and grabbed my suitcase. Once outside I slipped behind a tree just as the police car’s flashing lights came on. The officer aimed a floodlight on the gang leader who sat slumped in the front seat.

From behind the tree, I dashed into an adjacent hall. Inside the hall there were people milling about in costumes. I tried my best to blend in. When I heard music, I knew there was a dance being held. I heard Duke Ellington’s *Mood Indigo*. Strange, I thought. I didn’t know time travel was possible.

I helped myself to a cup of some weak flavoured orange liquid which I spit back into the cup and poured into a plant. I stood off to the side and smiled as necessary. That’s when I saw her. I saw the A&W girl standing at the side of the hall. She was dressed in a Little Red Riding Hood outfit. “*How cute,*” I thought. I watched her and debated whether or not I should go over and speak to her. I felt nervous as I surreptitiously inched forward.

A man stood with his back to me and I reached under his arm, secretly took his drink, drained it and returned the glass empty. The man picked up his glass and started to drink. He was puzzled when he discovered that it was empty. I walked up to the *Danny’s Hamburgers’* girl and waited for her to notice me. When she did, she seemed genuinely excited to see me. “Charlie!” she said and I smiled. She didn’t know that I was Me, the janitor. To her, I was the funny entertainer from the mall. She asked me to join her and her friends.

Alfred Eric, the security guard, stood with his back to me. I didn't know he was there. He was dressed as a wolf. When he turned around and saw me, he flipped out. He immediately tried to grab me, I jumped out of the way. He made a rude comment out of frustration and took a swing at me. He missed. The *Danny's Hamburgers'* girl whom I adore stepped in front of me and reprimanded Alfred Eric. She made it clear to him that he was not to hit me. Alfred Eric was furious. He wanted to kill me. The *Danny's Hamburgers'* girl didn't notice when I kicked him in the bum behind his back as she lectured him. He glowered at me with unrestrained hatred. As she lectured him, I heard an exciting song that I loved. I wasted no time in grabbing Little Red Riding hood and whisking her away from the Big Bad Wolf.

I led the *Danny's Hamburgers'* girl whom I adore onto the dance floor where we danced all over the floor with abandon. It wasn't me. It was Charlie. And Charlie could dance. Alfred Eric tried to follow us but I kept dancing her away from him. When he couldn't catch us, he approached two of his burly friends. He said something to them in their ears. The burly friends nodded and got me in their sights. They came up to me from all sides. I was surrounded. One grabbed me and picked me and carried me out. When I looked back, the wolf was dancing with the *Danny's Hamburgers'* girl. My adoration peaked and then ebbed.

I was thrown out the door and I fell down the stairs. Out on the street I tried to get back in but my way was blocked by the burly friends of Alfred Eric's. I voiced my objection but I was barred from reentry. Without an alternative or a magic ring, I walked away disheartened.

Eventually I came to a park. I was exhausted so I sat down on a park bench. I looked up at the night sky and tried to get comfortable using my suitcase as a pillow. As I started to dose off, I was awakened by hoots and howls. As there are not many owls or coyotes in the city, I became concerned. Another kind of animal was in my midst. I became afraid. I didn't realize that

a mob of wild teenagers who had been drinking in the park were making the noise. When one of them let out a screeching howl, I jumped to my feet. I tried to see into the dark to no avail. It was no use. It was pitch black. I noticed beside me a poll. I struck a match and on the poll I saw that there was a red power button. I pushed the red power button and flood lights came on behind me casting a huge shadow on the teenagers. The light scared the teenagers. They scattered in all directions like cockroaches. When I stepped forward to see what was going on, my shadow became less menacing. The fleeing teens turned to see me, the Little Tramp, lie down on the park bench. They realized that I was harmless. The tables were now turned. I could hear them coming before I saw them. I didn't like the looks on their faces.

It was time to go. I quickly made my getaway. The chase was on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet.

~ Plato

In the end, everything is a gag.

~ Charlie Chaplin

A loving heart is the truest wisdom.

~ Charles Dickens

I ran and ran until I felt sure there were no more teenagers chasing me. And then I walked. I don't know how long I walked. It felt like forever. What a night. My feet really hurt. I realized the characteristic walk of Chaplin's tramp was the result of sore feet, bad shoes and an inner liveliness and lightness of spirit. I had another one of my strangely profound experiences. As the sun rose over the city, I considered my situation. I found myself strangely enough loving myself. Sorry. It sounds strange but there's no other way to say it. I don't mean it in an egotistical way. I mean it in a nice way. I felt in tune with my body and my surroundings. I felt like I was in a movie starring myself. I felt free. I felt myself to be a super tramp. How else could I explain what had happened? It's hard to believe I had not as of yet been killed or arrested. If it hadn't have happened to me, I wouldn't have believed it.

I walked and walked as music played in my mind. I was in an alley when I heard a pop sound. At first I thought that I'd somehow made the sound myself. I looked around. The city was asleep at this hour of the morning. I stopped and lit a cigarette and put my nose in the air. I

watched a pigeon. Looking to my side, I realized I was outside the dining area of the restaurant I'd visited earlier. I was beside the restaurant where the manager had so adamantly insisted I leave.

I was surprised to hear the pop sound again. This time it was louder. It seemed to be coming from the interior of the restaurant. I cupped my hands around my face to peer through the window. There, inside, I saw the manager gagged and tied to a chair. The manager's eyes were wide. I followed where the manager was looking and I saw the same hoodlums I'd bested on the bus. In the instant I realized it was the hoodlums from the bus, one of them saw me because the manager looked directly at me. The angry hoodlum approached the window and put his nose to mine. I realized his proximity and jumped back. The hoodlum signaled his colleagues. They stopped breaking things to see me. They all put their faces to the window. Through the window I heard one of the hoodlums yell, "Get 'im!"

"It never ends," I thought. "Why don't these people use 'h's? What the 'h'?"

I ran into the back alley to discover that the back door was wide open. It had been left that way by the hoodlums who had run out the door in pursuit of me. I dashed inside the restaurant through the open door. The hoodlums, thinking I was in the front, ran towards the front up the side as I was coming around the other side and in the back. Inside the restaurant I went to the manager and untied him. He couldn't believe his eyes. The hoodlums were now out front. They looked through the front window to see me inside untying the manager. They ran towards the front door which I slammed open right into the leader's face. The leader tumbled back bumping into the gang of hoodlums who fell like so many Keystone cops. The gang then jumped up and ran to the back from the outside. I ran to the back from the inside. I slammed the backdoor into their faces. Again they tumbled and again they jumped up. In the window I made a

face and said, “Nah nah!” In hindsight, this probably wasn’t a good idea. One of the hoodlums picked up a rock and threw it through the window, just missing my head. I grabbed the rock that had been thrown in and tossed it back at a hoodlum bonking one of them on the head. I was an incredible shot with a rock. The manager was behind me calling the police. Seeing this, the hoodlums grabbed their fallen comrade and beat a hasty retreat.

“I’ve called the police!” said the manager. This too scared me so I ran out onto the street. I stood on the sidewalk wondering what to do. Police were on their way. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the Model T. *Of course!* I thought. I started the old car as hastily as I could then pulled away. The manager was surprised to see me go. He wanted to thank me. The hoodlums had reached their car and were starting away when they saw me drive by.

“Follow that... car!” one of the hoodlums said.

They followed behind me. In the other direction I saw police cars go tearing by. One of the officers looked me in the eye. There was something strangely familiar about him. When I reached the warehouse, I opened the big door and parked the car inside just as the Mr. Milton, the owner, came into the building. He looked tired. I don’t think he got any sleep. Luckily he did not see the car come in and assumed that it had been there all along. I lay down on the front seat when I saw the owner come towards the car. He was followed by two other men in coveralls. The men went into the office.

I quietly got out of the car and ran to the trailer. Inside the trailer I grabbed a few things that I’d hidden under the bed. I looked at what had been my home. I wasn’t sure if I’d be back. I put in my ear buds. Montovani’s *Summertime in Venice* filled my senses. This was my movie’s soundtrack. I peeked out of the trailer door to make sure the coast was clear and I headed for the door.

I was about to leave the building when I saw the hoodlums approaching from outside. From inside the owner and the two men in coveralls had left the office and were coming towards me. I needed somewhere to hide. I was beside the Model T, so I jumped into the back seat. The owner touched the car and found that it was warm. He looked puzzled. He opened the front door and got in as the two men positioned themselves at the back in readiness for pushing. Mr. Milton put the car in neutral and yelled out the window, "Push!"

The two men at the back pushed the car as Mr. Milton steered it into position behind a flatbed tow truck. As he steered the car, he hummed *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. When the car was in position, he stopped it and got out. The men in coveralls attached chains to the car and I could feel it being slowly loaded onto the flatbed. When the car was secured, the two men got into the driver's seat of the tow truck and we pulled away. I peeked out the rear window. Mr. Milton was watching. I finally realized who he looked like. He looked like Nicholas Cage. I saw Mr. Milton's mouth fall open when he saw Charlie Chaplin looking at him. Mr. Milton dropped what he was holding and fainted flat on the ground. The hoodlums watched the tow truck drive away with the Model T.

The hoodlums stood on the sidewalk wondering what to do. I watched them go around to the side where they were met by the owner who was on the ground by the big door. The hoodlums looked at one another and at the owner. A building obscured my vision. That was the last time I saw of any of them.

From the back seat of the Model T which was loaded on a flatbed tow truck I watched scenery go by. We drove past the restaurant where I'd encountered the gangsters. I saw the manager talking to police on the patio. I thought he looked up and saw me, but I wasn't sure. In no time, we were headed out of the city and down the highway. I looked out at the landscape and

eventually fell asleep. When I woke up, the truck was pulling over. The driver got out of the cab of the truck and came to the back. He hopped up and opened the door of the Model T. He found me lying on the front seat. I smiled and gave a little wave.

He grabbed me and tossed me out.

I landed on the ground in a heap but I popped right up. The magic of the outfit kept me from being hurt. I could not be hurt. The driver didn't know what to make of me. He just stood there on the back of the flatbed beside the Model T looking at me. To him, I was clearly delusional. He'd found a real nut job. He didn't know that what I'd found was a good delusion. I preferred the delusion.

I called up to the man for my suitcase which he grabbed from inside the car and threw down. The old leather suitcase knocked me over. Now, from the ground, I watched as the man in coveralls jumped down from the back of flatbed and climbed back into the cab. I watched as the tow truck loaded with the Model T roared away, then I got up.

I looked inside my suitcase and found a real brick inside. I examined the brick and put it back inside. I don't know why there was a brick in there.

I turned my body looking in each of the four directions. I pondered which way to go. I could either head down the busy divided highway and back to the city, I could head for a new city to the East or I could take the gravel country road into the sunset. I chose the gravel country road. After brushing myself off with the whisk I walked away as I'd remembered the tramp walking away in many of his movies. I turned, did a little hop and walked briskly away.

New adventures await. I felt the aperture of a camera swallow me in black, ending this three realer. A new film would begin with me walking down a country road.

Cue music.

¹ *Rachel Carson*: Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was a marine biologist who advanced the global environmental movement.

² *Hey Pal, Skoodle Um Skoo*: Papa Charlie Jackson's July 1927 hit song.

³ *Ruth Etting - 1920s singer with tears in her eyes*: Ruth Etting (1867-1978) was known as "America's sweetheart of song". Her signature song was 'Shine On Silver Moon' and her version of 'Dancing with Tears in My Eyes' was charted at #10 in 1930.

⁴ *Rose Austin, aerial performing star*: Rose and Aimee Austin (1870-1907) – the Austin Sisters - were trapeze artists. Aimee was known as the "Human Fly" for her talent of "ceiling walking". In 1892 a New York Times article entitled "Cannot Find Rose Austin," it was reported that Rose Austin had disappeared from her home in Bath Beach, Long Island, New York.

⁵ *carnival de Venice*: reference to a folk tune for solo trumpet with a fast tempo and the words "My hat, it has three corners."

⁶ *midnight, the stars and you*: Albert Allick Bowlly (1898-1941) crooned this haunting melody with Ray Noble and his Orchestra for Victor Records in 1934.

⁷ *Cracker Jack*: candy coated popcorn and peanuts. In 1896, the first lot of Cracker Jack was produced. It was named by someone who said, "That's crackerjack!" In 1908 the snack food got free publicity in the song "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." Sailor Jack and his dog Bingo were registered as trademarks for Cracker Jack in 1918. Sailor Jack was modeled after a nephew who died of pneumonia shortly after the image appeared at the age of eight.

⁸ *memory of Circus Renz*: Circus Renz was a German circus company established in 1842 in Berlin. It existed until 1897. *Souvenir de Cirque Renz* (Memory of Circus Renz) is the title of a quick and technically demanding song written around 1894 by Gustav Perter (1833-1919).

⁹ *crystal ball*: The image of a Gypsy huddled over a crystal ball, is a familiar one.

¹⁰ *died of starvation and murder*: in the 1930s the state under Stalin starved and murdered millions of people and the atrocities committed by Hitler's National Socialists are well documented.

¹¹ *it's all the same to the clam*: Shell Silverstein, *A Light in the Attic*.

¹² *Hammer time*: M.C. Hammer was a musical entertainer from the 1980s best known for his parachute pants and hit single, "Can't Touch This."

¹³ *she came out of the world*: Alan Watts identified the phenomena whereby language usage most notably in reference to the self contributes to human beings separating themselves from the world.

¹⁴ *between their ears and a little behind their eyes*: ideas presented here are from Alan Watts (1915-1973) who wrote *The Way of Zen* (1957) and *The Nature of Consciousness* (1960).

¹⁵ *inner happenings*: Carl Jung spoke of "inner happenings" in his autobiography Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1963).

¹⁶ *love the hurt that comes with it*: Walter Mosley, *The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey*.

¹⁷ *Zimbardo Time Perspective test*: named after Stanford University psychology professor Philip Zimbardo.

¹⁸ *easy like a Sunday morning*: reference to the Commodores 1977 hit single written by Lionel Richie.

¹⁹ *some is rich and some is poor*: This is a reference to the Clash song, *Bankrobber*. The lyric that follows is, “And I don’t believe in lying back and saying how bad your life is.”

²⁰ *when I sit I sit and when I walk, I walk*: this reference is reminiscent of the Zen saying ‘before enlightenment chop wood, carry water...after enlightenment chop wood carry water’ or ‘when hungry eat, when tired sleep’ whereby the essence of living a spiritual life is contained – at least according to Zen.

²¹ *the grass grows by itself*: this is another reference to a Zen saying, namely, ‘Sit quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.’ It points out the futility of worrying about something we have no control over. It is similar to the stoic philosophy of Epictetus (AD 55-135) whereby all external events are determined by fate and beyond our control or the serenity prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) – adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous - “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

²² *handbook*: The book being referred to is *The Art of Loving* which is a 1956 book by psychologist Erich Fromm. Fromm argues that love is a skill that can be developed.

²³ *ladders they climbed are against the wrong wall*: Joseph Campbell used to warn people about climbing ladder to success. Thomas Merton has been attributed to saying that as well.

²⁴ *make me go hmmm*: this reference is to the song *Things that Make You Go Hmmm...* by C + C Music Factory presenting Freedom Williams in 1990.

²⁵ *persona*: according to Carl Jung the persona was the social face individuals present to the world. The persona is designed to make an impression upon others and to conceal the true nature of an individual.

²⁶ *Big Gulps*: a reference to 7/11 which is a convenience store that sells soda in large cups.

²⁷ *humans are dead from a pandemic or radiation poisoning*: such a scene appeared in the film *Twelve Monkeys*, written and directed by Terry Gilliam of Monty Python fame.

²⁸ *Harold Lloyd-like*: Harold Lloyd (1893-1971) was one of the most popular comedians of the silent film era. The “Glasses” character was somewhat of a disguise to mask the handsomeness of Harold Lloyd.

²⁹ *There’s nothing like a good sit*: this is a line adopted from the TV show *Seinfeld*.

³⁰ *a great big wet sneeze*: comedian Harry Langdon coughed and sneezed in a similar fashion in the back of an airplane in the 1933 film, *The Hitchhiker* and in the back of bus in the 1926 film in *The Strong Man*.

³¹ *Tiki Bar music*: during the sneeze sequence at the back of the bus, the author was listening to Dennis Pavao sing, “My Yellow Ginger Lei” followed by a medley of Gabby Pahinui singing “Hi’ilawhe” and “He Punawai I

Weheia'e" and Sol Hoopii's Quartet, "Hula Girl" and Martin Denny's "Hawaiian War Chant". There's something about tiki music that's amazingly relaxing.

³² "We're living in a society here!" shouted the man: another reference to a *Seinfeld* TV episode.

³³ *A Total Eclipse of the Heart*: written by Jim Steinman, recorded by Bonnie Tyler and released in 1983.

³⁴ *give a little bit*: written by Rick Davies and Roger Hodgson and released in 1977 on Supertramp's album *Even in the Quietest Moments*.

³⁵ *the first of May when Christmas trees were tall*: reference to a Bee Gees song entitled the "First of May" released in 1969.

³⁶ *safety at last*: reference to Harold Lloyd's 1923 romantic comedy *Safety Last*. This was the film that saw Harold dangling from the hands of a large clock outside of a skyscraper.

³⁷ *it wouldn't open*: the same thing happened to Buster Keaton in the 1927 film, *College*.

³⁸ *Huey 'Piano' Smith and his clowns*: released in 1958 *Don't You Just Know It* was their biggest hit.

³⁹ *a tower tonight*: reference to a lyric about a tower in Gilbert O'Sullivan's song *Alone Again, Naturally* released in 1972.

⁴⁰ *spirit in the sky*: reference to the song by Norman Greenbaum.

⁴¹ *Harry Lauder*: Scottish music hall singer and comedian (1870-1950).

⁴² *one seed at a time*: the dream scene is reminiscent of a scene in Charlie Chaplin's 1918 film *A Dog's Life*.

⁴³ *I'm forever blowing bubbles*: reference to popular song from 1918.

⁴⁴ *connect*: the author is reminded of E.M. Forster's dictum "Only connect!" presented in the 1910 novel *Howard's End*.