

# The Spowl Ribbon

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*The spowl ribbon*

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*To my loving parents,  
who always knew I would do something like this.*

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## Preface

A spowl ribbon is an imaginary strip of brightly colored material, tied into a pretty bow, used to join fact with fiction. It's also the engine belt of literary time-traveling devices such as this book. Flip these pages and my spowl ribbon will take you to stories and observations written between 1996 and 2009.

If you can't find the word "spowl" in a dictionary, it's because I made it up. I did find two usages of "spowl" on the Internet before completing this book, though. One was a shortening of "spotted owl." The other was a reference to a tiny figure that looks like a cross between a spider and an owl, which can be found on one-dollar bills.

The phrase "the spowl ribbon" actually came to me in a dream. It seemed like it was an important dream and a clever phrase, even though both were really quite meaningless. So I decided to assign some meaning and see if it catches on. People did that kind of thing a lot back in 2009. They probably still do.

Assigning meaning to meaninglessness helps make sense of life's coincidental patterns. It's an important thing to do, because if you can't make any sense out of your life you're probably not go-

ing to enjoy it. Contriving a purpose for yourself and the things around you helps get things accomplished.

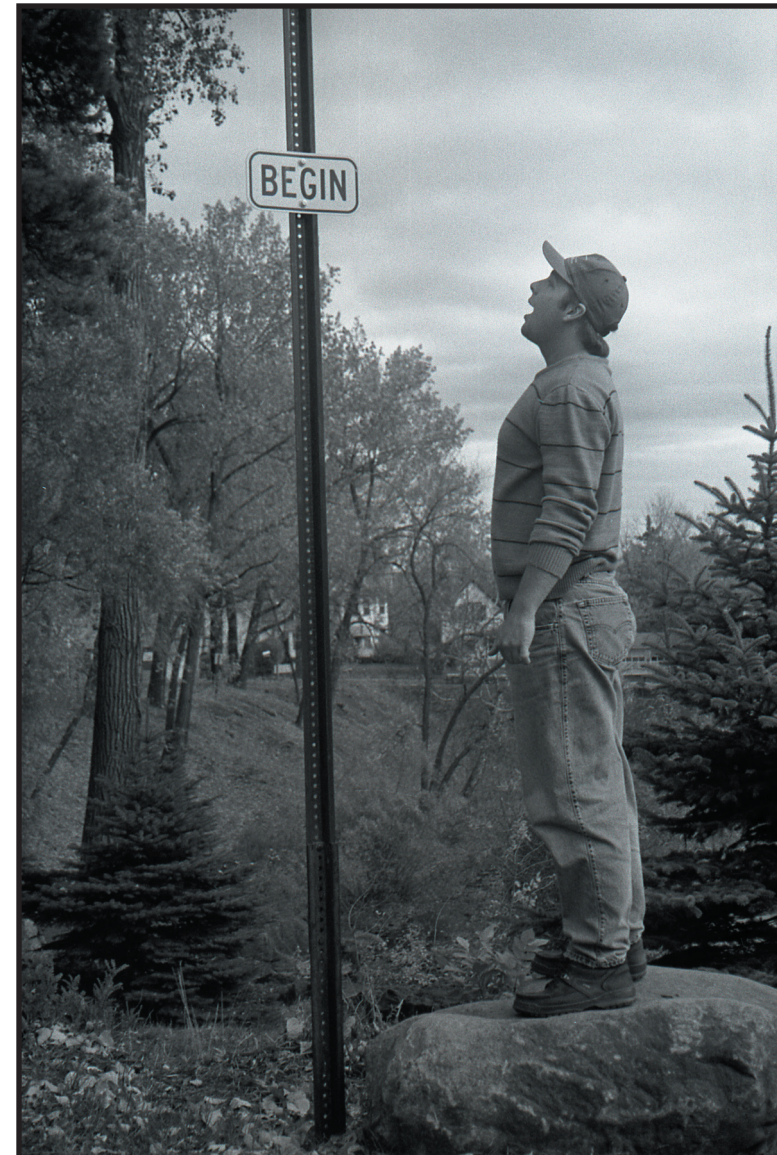
I began working on *The Spowl Ribbon* when I was 23 years old and finished this edition at age 37. Whether my literary devices were ready for time travel or not, I was getting restless. I knew that with each passing year, my spowl ribbon would become more difficult for readers to use.

Traveling from your world to my world isn't simple. Your world is in the present, and even while you travel to the past, you are still moving toward the future. My world is in the past. It keeps going further into the past every day. Isn't time travel fascinating?

Back in 2009, I had no way of knowing how old or wise I might become. At any moment, swine flu or terrorists could sabotage my time-travel plans. So I compiled this collection of stories as a record of my work, and bound it with a spowl ribbon.

If conceit was my only motivation, so be it. Examining one's own desires slows the pursuit. Perhaps the only justifying remark I can make without reservation and despite the complications of time travel is that goofing off transcends all forces in nature. The best thing I can do today is surround myself with elf juice and cheese fog and silver-toothed dingbat leaves.

Paul Lundgren  
December 30, 2009  
Duluth, Minnesota



## The Unexpected Highlight

When we walk through the woods, we expect to see certain things. There will be rabbits and trees and wild berries. There will be broken beer bottles and rusty appliances and rotting deer carcasses.

Sometimes we leave the trail and try to get lost. We fantasize about finding an undiscovered cave that leads to another universe. We plan our defense against rampaging moose.

We could walk in the woods every day, discussing what might happen, and never guess correctly. Will we find a briefcase full of money? Bigfoot? A UFO crash site?

No, not this time. Today's unexpected highlight is an old man wearing bikini shorts with a pack of cigarettes tucked in the crotch, pushing his bicycle up from the river.



## A Spider's Panic

When the bathroom light came on, the black spider crouched a little, then stayed perfectly still. His only hope was to blend in with the white toilet.

The same thing happened to you once. The door opened unexpectedly, and you wanted to run and hide, but the only thing you could do was sit there, hoping no one would smoosh you.



## Contemplation Creek

There are a lot of steep ridges along Contemplation Creek. The trees are thick and the picker bushes are plentiful. It can be difficult to get down close to the water without sliding right in.

The water flows rapidly here, but the stream is too narrow and shallow to achieve river status. There are two pools along the creek where it's just deep enough for swimming. On hot summer days, thick clouds of insects hover over those spots.

The water in Contemplation Creek is clear and uncontaminated, but there are no fish here. If you roll up your pants and walk up and down the stream, you can see your feet clearly on the rocky bottom. The urban forest surrounding the creek is too hilly to be developed into housing and too unremarkable to be preserved as parkland. The Contemplation Creek area is seemingly useless to everyone and everything but the water that flows through it.

If you spend some time here, you'll start watching the water more closely. You'll see it carelessly bouncing off of rocks and tree branches, sometimes stalling in pools and sometimes flowing around each obstruction with ease.

In winter, Contemplation Creek freezes over and all of its water is perfectly still. You can walk right on top of it with little danger, though some spots are slippery. In spring and fall, you can hear the water flow under the snow.

If you toss a big boulder through the ice in the middle of the half-frozen stream, you can dramatically alter the flow of water. If you wanted, you could build a dam in the summer and completely reroute Contemplation Creek.

The water doesn't care where it's going anyway, and neither do you. You're both going to dry up eventually and stop running. You might as well stomp through that ice and get your boots wet.

Your ancestors built a small wooden bridge across Contemplation Creek many years ago. It eventually rotted away and fell into the water. You can still cross the creek any time you want, but it takes longer now.

Maybe you should build your own bridge. You could, if you wanted to. It's something to think about as you balance on a jagged, slippery rock, wondering why you keep coming back to this place, and how it got its name.





## Fortune Cookie

I like the word “fortune.” It’s a very optimistic word. Though it refers to the chance happening of both fortunate and unfortunate events, when someone tells me my fortune is about to be predicted, I anticipate it will be positive. The word suggests that I will be “fortunate” and perhaps even win a “fortune” in cash and prizes.

I also like the word “cookie.” It is the word most frequently used to refer to delicious sugary snacks, after all.

So it’s no wonder that I like the idea of fortune cookies. In reality, of course, fortune cookies are flavorless and stale, but the promise of their magical powers to predict the future preserves their integrity as a delightful treat.

One fortune, however, confused me a bit. It read: “Your luck has been completely changed today.”

The reason I was confused is I wasn’t sure if my luck had been good or bad leading up to this fortune cookie. I hadn’t won any sweepstakes or crashed my car in recent months, so it was difficult to tell if things were changing for the better or worse.

Adding to my confusion was the past tense of the statement. It proclaimed that my luck “has been” completely changed, which

meant it had already changed. According to this fortune, my luck had changed “completely,” and I didn’t even notice.

That got me to thinking. Just because my luck had changed didn’t necessarily mean there would be immediate effects. For example, my luck could have changed for the worse at noon, but it might take a few hours for me to come across a slippery staircase. It might even take days or weeks.

That got me to thinking even more. What if my luck had been good, but now it had changed for the worse, but nothing bad had happened yet? It’s conceivable, then, that my luck could change again before anything bad happens. Then I’d have to look back on my period of bad luck as having been pretty lucky. What should I expect if my luck has completely changed after a lucky week of bad luck?

After thinking about this for a while, something occurred to me that brought great clarity to the whole issue. I remembered that I was reading a piece of paper that was inside a cookie.





## Real Men are Dead

At a convention in Fort Lauderdale, George ate the second-most cornbread. “It was delicious,” he recalls. “I like cornbread a lot more than I like conventions.”

You might see George wandering around in the park, a skinny old man dressed in mohair, deeply immersed in thoughts that make no sense to you. “Someday we will all be X,” he says, “Are you looking forward to it?”

George is often making comparisons that no one else understands. Here he comes now with two rotten bananas in his pockets. “I suppose the world is like these bananas,” he says. “I know I’m bananas.”

He shares some of the qualities of Emerson and Thoreau, but George recognizes that he lives in a different world. “Emerson said Thoreau was the prince of the huckleberry picnics,” he says. “I have stinkbugs on my huckleberries.”

Sometimes George appears to be distracted. That’s because he sees things the rest of us can’t. “Is that a little girl’s hatred over there?” he asks.

It often seems like George’s mind is in a whole other world. “I spend a lot of time having fantasies,” he says. “I spend even more time trying to figure out why I enjoy them so much.”

George’s navy stories are a little different than the ones the other veterans tell. “When I heard that Admiral Halsey was coming to inspect us, I ran away into the woods to hide,” he explains. “No one was going to inspect me.”

Ask George if the rumor that he killed a man is true. He’ll just laugh and tell you, “I’m killing people all the time.”

It’s difficult to determine whether George is crazy or whether he’s a genius. Either way, he’s not a very popular fellow. “I went to the Mariner Mall and there were all these fifteen-year-old kids there,” he says. “They think I’m really weird.”

Popularity is a subjective thing anyway. “It doesn’t matter how insane you are,” according to George. “There will always be someone who likes you.”



## Take Off Your Pants

When Zoilo was a teenager, he would go down by the shore to skip rocks off the water or maybe have a swim. Sometimes, he would just sit there by himself and stare out across the lake. It was a good place to be alone and think.

There were no mountains or trees on the water, so Zoilo could see for miles and miles. His thoughts seemed to stretch further there, because they had more space to fill.

Sometimes a cruise ship would go by, and the passengers would wave at Zoilo. They were mostly older, white, wealthy people. They always looked really bored, leaning against the railings and looking in all directions for something to wave at. Zoilo felt that way too, sitting on the shore watching the clouds turn pink as the sun went down.

One night, the cruise ship was full of college students dancing to a reggae band. Zoilo noticed no one on the ship was wearing pants. The security guard was standing in his normal position at the back of the ship, near the flag pole, but tonight he had taken Old Glory down and raised his navy blue polyester slacks up the

pole. Zoilo watched him take a giant swig of beer from a huge glass shaped like an anchor.

When the security guard noticed Zoilo on the shore, he grabbed a pirate hat off a half-naked woman and put it on his head. Then, he shouted to Zoilo, “Arrr! Take off yer pants, matey!” Zoilo sat perfectly still, as if he didn’t notice the ship was there. When it floated out of sight, he stood up and went home. His parents were out, and the house was very quiet. The telephone refused to ring.

Zoilo decided the next time someone shouted at him to take off his pants, he would take them off immediately. He would swing them wildly over his head like a weapon.

He also decided he would start to drink alcohol at the first available opportunity. He went down to the shore the next night and imagined what it would be like to take off his pants and get drunk. His life would never be the same.



## False Alarm

The fire alarm in my building goes off at all hours, for some unknown reason. It happens two or three times a month, so I don't bother evacuating my apartment. I just turn the volume way up on my stereo or bury my head between two pillows.

It takes about five minutes for the fire department to arrive, and then another minute or two for someone to turn the alarm off. I never pay attention to how many firefighters show up or how they determine it's a false alarm so quickly.

Sometimes I look out the window to see if any of my neighbors are outside. It's not that I think there might be a real fire; I just want to laugh at any new tenants or sticklers for the rules who might be pacing around out there, alone and cold.

I always hear the hallway door close right after the alarm goes off. When I first moved in, I thought it was some hooligan escaping the building after pulling the alarm, so I'd run to the window to see if I could catch him running away.

After a while I figured out that the hallway doors, which are normally propped open, will automatically close whenever the fire alarm goes off. I've also been told that there is a problem with the

smoke detection system, and there is not a merry prankster pulling the alarm for laughs.

When I was in elementary school, I was warned not to pull the fire alarm as a prank because ink would shoot out at me and everyone would know I did it. To this day I don't know if that's true, but it sure is a great deterrent.

I really do want to pull that fire alarm. It's hard to tell just by looking at it how it works or what it will feel like. I don't want to bother anyone or hear the sound of that annoying alarm; I just want the alarm-pulling experience.

Sometimes, when the alarm is going off, I wonder if it would matter if I went out into the hallway and pulled that tempting little lever. After all, if the alarm is already going off, what harm could I cause? Except maybe an ink stain on my hand.



## Small World

How many of you wanted to be an astronaut when you were a kid?” the speaker asked. Everyone raised a hand, except for an old man in the back.

“When I was a kid,” the old man said, “there was no such thing as an astronaut.”



## Linda's Surprise

Linda had a bad stomachache after eating a bowl of chili. She put off going to the doctor for a day, but it kept feeling worse.

It turned out the stomachache had nothing to do with chili. Linda was miscarrying a ruptured ectopic pregnancy.

After the emergency surgery, we all had a good laugh about that one.



## Standing Alone, Doing Nothing

It takes a lot of effort to keep people from pointing and laughing at you. Even if you're attractive, highly educated and gainfully employed, there are still those who will consider you a target for ridicule if you're not careful.

The list of things people will make fun of you for is endless. They'll make fun of you for being rich, and for being poor. They'll make fun of you for being a virgin, and for being promiscuous. They'll make fun of you for being different in any way at all, and for being like everyone else. They'll even make fun of you for doing nothing.

In fact, doing nothing almost guarantees that you will be laughed at. Try standing on a street corner and staring off into space. It won't be long before people start pointing at you and whispering to each other. Someone may even shout out, "Hey look! It's a homeless moron!"

This offends me deeply because I believe there is nothing nobler than standing alone, doing nothing. I should be inclined to

shout at other people, "Hey! Look at the busy person driving somewhere to do something! What a loser!"

Don't get me wrong, I earn my keep on this planet and work hard like everyone else. I scrub my bathtub and vote in every election. But when it comes time to relax at the end of the day, sometimes I prefer to avoid actively relaxing—things like reading, hiking and drinking—and instead choose to stand alone and do nothing.

I'm not meditating and I'm not practicing yoga. Those activities are *something*. I'm focused on good, old-fashioned nothing. I'm not trying to have a poetic moment, connect with my creator or discover some useful knowledge about myself. I'm not doing any thinking at all. I'm just standing alone, doing nothing.

It's amazing how few people do nothing when it's so easy to do. All it requires is that you stop doing what you're doing. Stand still as long as you want and walk away when you're done.

Standing still and doing nothing is the most beautiful and freeing thing in the world. It's also the first step toward becoming the homeless moron you've always wanted to be. I highly recommend it.



## Auditions for Reality

The Dream Me does things the Real Me can only dream about. He rides buffalo in the rodeo. He grows his hair down to the floor. He flies over mountains and perches on the tops of radio towers.

The Real Me doesn't always find out what the Dream Me has been up to. When he does, it's usually an immediate recollection of a single adventure, and a feeling like maybe he was there, too.

Every now and then, the Real Me discovers a buried memory of an incident that the Dream Me has been keeping a secret. It's usually some strange, repeated behavior, like driving a school bus full of burritos to the Hebrew Cemetery. It doesn't seem to make any sense.

One night the Dream Me was in a long, empty room with the Dream Girl. They were sitting on office chairs, gliding around on the hardwood floor in slow motion. They were giddy, like little kids sliding on a patch of ice. Their chairs started bouncing against each other like carnival bumper-cars. The Dream Girl was laughing and blushing. The Dream Me was sexually excited.

When one of the collisions threw the Dream Me out of his chair, he landed awkwardly on the Dream Girl's lap. His nose touched her cheek. She stopped laughing. The chairs stopped moving. The Dream World stopped dreaming.

The Dream Me closed his eyes and brought his face slowly toward the Dream Girl's. His mouth fell awkwardly on her nose, and stayed paralyzed there until her hand touched his cheek and guided their lips together. It was real.

I stood there for a moment, in between the Dream Me and the Real Me, wondering why this was happening. Why was this so exciting and so disappointing? Why did the Dream Girl disappear and leave all three of us here alone?

When the Real Me thinks about the Dream Girl now, he feels guilty. The Dream Me has already had an affair with Lisa Bonet. He also accidentally shattered the Dream Girl's hip by dropping a bowling ball on her lap.

The Real Me is a lot like the Dream Me. The Real Me could kiss the Dream Girl and take hold of the moment, but he couldn't love her into the Real World.

The Dream Me is always a step ahead. In passion, love, disaster and worry, the Dream Me is always holding auditions for reality. I wish the Dream Girl had been cast in a better role.



## Calling Out

I have a habit of getting drunk and calling myself on the telephone. It happens about every other Tuesday or Wednesday. The middle of a busy workweek is when I'm the most desperate for my own attention.

I like to give myself plenty of encouragement and advice. "Just keep doing what you're doing," I say. "That's how I got my start."

It's fun to make these calls, but I don't like receiving them. When I'm busy working on a project with a looming deadline, or I'm having a quiet dinner, the last thing I need is my future self calling and blabbering a bunch of drunken nonsense.

You might think it's useful to get advice from the future, but it's really not very helpful at all. It's always too vague or obvious. "Be careful out on the lake," I'll say. "And tell mom you love her."

I never give myself any good advice, like a smart investment strategy or how to avoid regrettable behavior. It would be really nice if, just once, I would explain to myself exactly when clowning around will be funny and when it will get me into trouble.

Sometimes I get caught in a vortex of phone calls. I'll call myself in 1999, and he'll put me on hold because he has me from 2012

on the other line. Then I'll get a call while I'm on hold, and it's me from next month telling me to hang up if I know what's good for me.

I received a sad call about four years ago. It was me calling to ask myself if I remembered when I told myself to just follow my heart. "Not really," I said, "But that's a pretty common piece of advice, so I've definitely heard it a lot."

"Well," I told myself, "It turns out I didn't really know what I was talking about back then. I've come to find out that you should only follow your heart about half the time. The rest of the time you should be practical."

That was when I decided not to listen to my own advice anymore. I treat myself like a prank caller or a telemarketer now. "Why do you bother calling me?" I sometimes ask. "Because I love you," I always answer.





## House of Widows

Before the freeway came through, there was a duplex here. Four bold women lived in it together after their husbands died. Ellen and Jennie were downstairs; Belle and Beverly were upstairs.

Death was just around the corner for the downstairs widows. When the city used eminent domain to seize the property and demolish the house, Ellen and Jennie moved into a nursing home together.

What I remember about them the most was how happy they were when they had guests. It was fun to visit them because everything in their house was so old. They didn't have a couch, for example, they had a "davenport."

Ellen and Jennie both wore wool coats in winter that had to weigh no less than 40 pounds. Though they needed canes and walkers to get around, they were somehow strong enough to wear jackets that were one-third their bodyweights.

The upstairs widows, Belle and Beverly, moved into a different house. After Belle died, I went to visit Beverly, who lived alone and was over 90 years old. She told me stories about her late husband.

"Roy snored every night," she told me. "He snored seven different ways. It's been 30 years now, but I still remember all the sounds he made in his sleep. After he died, it was so quiet in the bedroom at night that I couldn't stand to be in there."

So she started falling asleep on the davenport, watching the *Tonight Show*. "When I moved in with Belle and told her why I didn't need a bed, she said I should try to meet another man. I told her that she should try to shut up."

To this day, Beverly still has dreams about Roy. "He's always walking away, smiling and waving," she says. "Our marriage license is on the refrigerator if you want to see it. We tied the knot in 1931."

Below the marriage license is a small note Beverly has written to indicate that she wants to be cremated. The last sentence is in bold letters and underlined. It reads: "Bury my ashes next to Royal."

Changing the subject, Beverly reaches into a drawer and pulls out a form that her insurance company sent to her. "They want to know what year my house was built and what kind of roof it has? How am I supposed to know that?"



## Relationship Advice

**Y**ou can always decorate your car, paint “Just Married” on the back, and drive around by yourself.



## Another Disappointment

**W**hen I made it home, I kicked off my shoes and went straight to the kitchen. There was a familiar shape under the oven light.

“Mmmm. Someone’s baking banana bread.”

I opened the oven door, inhaled deeply, and leaned in for a closer look.

“Oh. Someone’s baking a meatloaf.”



## Scars

I have a lot of scars. There's a big one on my forehead from when I fell down the stairs at a shopping mall. This happened when I was three years old, but I will carry the evidence on my forehead for the rest of my life.

When I was four I lost control of my tricycle while riding down a hill and crashed face-first into a trailer hitch. It was a very bloody affair, but somehow left no scar. Sometimes really big accidents turn out to be less significant than the tiny cuts we don't think much of at the time.

There is a little scar on my shoulder from the day I carelessly walked into a sharp tree branch while mowing the lawn. It didn't hurt much, but that scar is still there to remind me to be more careful when I do yard work.

When I played youth baseball there was an old wooden bat we would swing to loosen up. Someone hollowed out the barrel and drove a railroad spike into it to weigh it down. It was an accident waiting to happen.

I can't easily hide these scars, so people often ask me about them. They want to know what happened and if it hurt. I can hide my psychological scars, so people don't ask about them.

Some people have physical scars and psychological scars that go together, like burned flesh after an attempted arson murder or big stretch marks from having two fatherless children.

Our scars are like a stack of bills for things we bought many years ago. We don't want those things anymore, but we have to keep making payments. We try to learn from these wounds, but we always end up getting more.

I like to imagine our psychological scars could be visible after we die, like the rings inside a tree. Someone could stand over my corpse some day and say, "See here? That must be from when his wife left him for the third time. And look at this one...seems to be from about 1986. Isn't that when his father was hit by a car?"



## Climb a Tree

It's easy for most adults to resist the urge to climb a tree. There just doesn't seem to be anything up there that's worth reaching. The potential for looking foolish or being injured tends to outweigh any conceivable reward.

It does make sense for children, who have three months of summer vacation, to climb a tree. Kids must explore every conceivable form of free entertainment with no concern for any potential return on their investment. Adults have too many obligations to risk wasting any time.

The fear of being injured climbing a tree is legitimate, but a bit exaggerated. Falling could indeed result in paralysis or death, but if the right tree is chosen, it shouldn't be too hard to find solid limbs to grab on to. Anyone who takes it slow should be just fine.

It's not really the fear of injury that keeps adults from climbing a tree; it's the fear of having to explain an injury to others. Anyone who shows up at work with a separated shoulder from falling out of a tree will have a difficult time being taken seriously by colleagues in the future.

There are also political fears about climbing trees. What if someone sees you up there? Republicans will note that climbing a tree often requires literally hugging it. Democrats will be concerned about damaging the bark and destroying the entire ecology of the American landscape.

Most of the time, climbing a tree doesn't even enter an adult's mind. But every now and then, on a walk in the woods, a tree is spotted that seems to have just the right footholds. It looks like an easy climb, but what for?

If you succeed, no one will be impressed. It wouldn't be like you climbed Mount Everest. On the other hand, if the president were spotted halfway up a silver maple, the media would be there in no time. The event would be analyzed on talk shows for weeks to come.

Although there seems to be no good reason to climb a tree, once you get past the apprehensions and reach the top, you won't regret it. It could be the highlight of your week, but you'll never understand why.



## The Escape Artist

Loneliness is a fleeting thing. It surprises you when it strikes, because you spend so much time wishing you were alone. All those conversations you have during the day are so exhausting. The last thing you should want when you get home is to be with another person.

When you're alone, you have control. You can sit still and think, and no one will disagree with you. You can turn on the television, and if it disagrees with you, you can turn the channel until it agrees with you.

Human interaction is more stressful. You have to talk about the same things over and over again—the weather, the war, the school board—repeating your narrow opinion. Each time you talk about a specific subject, you say basically the same things, and the people who talk to you say the same things too, repeating all the facts and quotes they have memorized. Sometimes you catch people telling you the same anecdote two and three times, and you fear that you probably do the same thing.

You can feel the most alone when you're in a large crowd, surrounded by people that you don't want to talk to. You feel awkward and indecisive because you know you could make conversation—

you just don't have anything new to say. Even if you talk to someone you've never met before, you can't bear to listen to yourself make the same remarks you've already rehearsed on your friends. Why would you want to meet a new person anyway? You already know so many people that you can't even remember their names when you see them.

Still, it's exciting when you meet that occasional rare and interesting person who is just different enough to be intriguing, but just familiar enough to be tolerable. There are billions of people in the world, and you are one in a million. That means there are thousands of you out there, but the odds of meeting one of you are one in a million. That's why you can feel lonely sometimes.

Advertisements try to convince you to narrow the field by buying products that will prove alluring to people with mindsets similar to yours. This is like taking out a personal ad; it only draws more unwanted attention.

Suddenly you find yourself interacting with all sorts of people who have one thing in common with you, and nothing else. By trying to selectively attract people, you only succeed in creating more interactions with the very general public. So you've learned that in most cases it's best to walk with your head down and avoid starting conversations. Still, there are times when you just can't stop yourself.

There you are, in line at the grocery store with nothing to do but stand and stare at the person in front of you. There's something about her; she just looks like someone who thinks like you. So you make a remark about the stupid headline on the magazine in the rack next to her. She laughs and starts talking about how she wished she worked for a stupid magazine.

"The first story I'd write would an exposé," she tells you. "It would be called 'How People Eat Spaghetti When No One is Watching.' There would be a lot of pictures."

This person could be one in a million, you think to yourself. Then the cashier jumps in on your conversation, talking about celebrity murders and other scandals from the magazine headlines. Before you know it, the object of your interest is gone, and you're stuck listening to an apron-wearing teenager talk about paparazzi photos and sex caught on videotape. Your big mouth has led you into a trap, and now you must become an escape artist.

You could just tip your shopping cart over and run away. You could abandon this deadly conversation without even saying a word and chase after that one-in-a-million woman. That would be taking an even greater risk than striking up this conversation in the first place, which has already backfired. So you smile and nod and pretend to listen, until an opportunity comes for you to grab your groceries and say goodbye.

Out in the parking lot, no one seems to be around. It's a summer night, but very cold and gray. You get into your car and place your bag of groceries securely on the passenger seat, you turn the ignition, fasten your seatbelt, and adjust the volume on the radio. Suddenly, there's a knock on the passenger-side window, and another new woman enters your life without warning. She's speaking to you through the window, but you can't hear her over the sound of the radio. The look on her face, however, tells you what she's saying is important.

You turn down the radio and lean across the front seat to crank down the window, but the seatbelt stops you from reaching. You unbuckle it and make the move again. As the window goes down, she immediately begs you to take her with you. She doesn't say where she wants to go, and doesn't seem to care. She just desperately needs to get away.

You have to act fast, but you want more information before you help this woman. Has she just committed a robbery? Is she fleeing an attack and in need of your help? There's no way to tell if she's on

the side of good or evil, but you are convinced someone is in pursuit of her, and there is no time to find out the details.

You know this could all be a trick. She could have a gun in her purse. Someone could be videotaping this for a hidden-camera television program about the funny ways people react to surprise drama. You also know she could be an innocent woman being chased by a lunatic.

No matter what's going on, you are opening your door to an adventure. If you drive away alone, you will feel guilty and full of regret for having left this helpless woman to fend for herself. You'll also have to look back regrettably if the mystery is never solved. If you let her in, you are doing the right thing, though you are also accepting the potential consequences of kindness.

You unlock the door and she gets in. The grocery bag you carefully positioned in the passenger seat is now haphazardly squeezed between the two of you. She adjusts her purse, and pulls the door closed behind her. The adventure begins.

"Where are we going?" you ask.

"Just drive," she answers, pointing straight ahead. "That way."

You shift the car into drive and look up into the rearview mirror as you pull out into the empty street. No one is pursuing you, and you wonder if that is a good sign or a bad sign. You turn to look at your passenger and notice that she's kind of trashy looking.

"I live at the church," she says. "I'm a healer."

Well, there you have it. You've picked up a drunk.

"Where can I take you?" you ask, hoping it's somewhere nearby. Once again, you've found yourself in the unenviable position of having to become an escape artist.

"R. T. Quinlan's Saloon," she says. "Is that OK?"

"That's fine," you tell her. You know you shouldn't bring this woman to another bar, but her welfare is no longer a concern. Now

you are out for yourself. The mission is to get safely to R.T. Quinlan's, and get her out of the car in the most expedient manner possible.

"Are you married?" she asks.

This is a dangerous question, you think. She probably wants to turn a trick to raise some drug money. You don't want to insult her by refusing the offer, so you will try any lie to keep her from coming on to you.

"Yes, I've been married for three years now," you answer.

"Do you have any children?" she asks.

There seems no reason to lie in this instance, but, now that the precedent has been set, you can't resist.

"Yes, I have twenty-four children," you answer.

"Wow!" she laughs, "you and your wife must really...never mind."

She continues to laugh, and you don't know for sure whether she believes your story or not. You keep wondering if she is up to something. Her right hand is curiously near her purse, as if she could pull something out to surprise you with at any moment. Her left hand keeps reaching around the grocery bag to touch you. When she laughs, she softly clutches your elbow.

"You are a very nice man," she says. "Your family must really love you."

"Yes, I suppose they do," you answer, feeling a bit guilty now for your sober deviousness in the face of her kind, yet drunken words. You're not really a bad guy, you just want to get her to the bar and out of your life, so you can get home in time to have the laundry done before the nightly news comes on.

"I tell fortunes," she says. "Do you want me to tell you yours?"

You say yes, at first thinking it will be a safe enough way to pass the time. Then, you re-evaluate the situation. The way this woman fell into your life so quickly and easily, ready to tell you your fortune—it seems like it might be a sign from the gods.

Of course, you don't really believe that, but you want to. You have to be open to the possibility, because if the gods are going to communicate to you, this is probably how they would go about it. What harm could it do to be receptive to her fortune telling?

"You aren't very happy," she says.

Your mouth falls open a bit as it occurs to you that she's right. You're not very happy. With or without that lovely wife and twenty-four healthy children, something is missing. The fortuneteller has your attention now.

"You should adopt a child," she says. "You should adopt a child from Romania."

The dim lights of R.T. Quinlan's Saloon signal the end of the ride. You announce loudly and clearly that the destination has been reached, using a phony sort of tone that insinuates you'd love to keep talking with her, but hey, "We're here."

She opens the door without saying anything more. Stepping onto the curb, however, she turns around and leans back into the car.

"Adopt a child from Romania," she repeats. "Please do it."

She closes the door, and you start driving away immediately. When you get home, you are alone again. You put away your groceries, turn on the TV and relax. Adopting a child from Romania is the furthest thing from your mind.

You're quite happy to be alone, but as you turn the channel, you think about the woman in line at the store—the one that got away. You decide that next week you'll go to the same store for groceries at the same time, just in case she might be in line again, standing next to an even stupider magazine.





## Camping

When some people go camping, they plunge deep into the wilderness, by foot or canoe, and carry only the most essential baggage. Others park their loaded-up camper outside a Wal-Mart department store. There are a lot of options in between.

Some people go on solo adventures, while others bring friends or family. There are also festivals in which hundreds of supposedly like-minded people sleep together in a field of tents, creating a miniature neighborhood of canvas homes.

If a quest is a part of the camping trip, it seldom results in a pot of gold or other tangible reward. The goal is usually to conquer some distance and see the sights. The reward is how good a shower or plunge in open water will feel at the end.

Some people like to get up at sunrise and start the day; others like to stay up late, drink alcohol and listen to loud music. At a campground, these cultures always clash, but usually without confrontation.

Campers tend to get along well with each other because they have common enemies: mosquitoes, flies, ticks, grizzly bears.

Having the proper gear is essential, but something is always forgotten. The kindness of a stranger can be lifesaving.

Starting a campfire is sometimes necessary for warmth or for cooking, but often it's just there to create a conversational centerpiece. There's usually a controversy over what can be thrown into the fire. Some people think nothing of burning bottles and cans; others get upset about anything but wood and paper going up in flames.

Combining a chocolate bar with a marshmallow on a graham cracker is indeed a tasty treat, but it's not really any better than a chocolate bar by itself. Finding seemingly practical ways to utilize the fire, however, is always fun, and the experience of hiking to the shore to wash off sticky marshmallow goo is what makes a s'more extra delicious.

The worst parts of a camping trip are inevitably the most legendary. A favorite topic around campfires is always the time someone broke an ankle or flipped a kayak. It seems there is no adventure without misadventure.

But eventually the stories die out and the night is quiet for a few moments. Someone looks up at the stars, or maybe pokes the fire with a stick. The awkward silence is prolonged by the perception that the next remark should be profound. Someone inevitably steps up to the challenge.

"Fire is awesome."



## Desecration

Cemetery groundskeeping is strange work. When Lars started, he thought “doing yard maintenance for the dead” was absurd. He needed money, though, and this was the best job he could find. After nine years, his perspective changed.

“This is an important job,” he says. “Not everyone can do it, but it needs to get done. The people with friends and family buried here want the place to look nice. It gives them ... comfort, I guess.”

Lars is still single and has trouble meeting women. When he talks about his job, people think he’s creepy. Sometimes he says he works at the “Corpse Garden” to show he still has a sense of humor about it.

The southeast portion of the cemetery has a large section of soldier’s graves. Lars’ great uncle Walter is buried there. He died during World War II, long before Lars was born. Though Lars never knew his great uncle, he considers the gravesite to be sacred ground.

When flags were missing from some of the soldier’s graves, Lars notified the media. “It must have been a bunch of kids with

no respect,” he told a newspaper reporter. “Probably a bunch of hippies stole them to protest the war.”

The crime was particularly offensive because the flags were torn right off the poles. Shards of Old Glory were left dangling on the line, which Lars said was evidence the crime was meant to send a message.

“I don’t see how anyone could rip down flags like that and ever look a veteran in the eye,” he told a TV reporter. “I mean, people have a right to their opinions, but this is just sickening and sad.”

It was a full week later when Lars solved the crime. Taking a break from mowing the grass, he stood straight up on his riding mower and stretched his back. Noticing something peculiar in the urban forest that bordered the cemetery, he walked out to have a look.

The missing flags were at the top of an arborvitae tree, stolen by a squirrel to insulate her nest. Lars stood there for about five minutes, wondering if he should try to retrieve the flags or just leave them. He didn’t know if he should tell anyone what he saw.



## The Projects

There are six identical structures occupying the whole block. Twelve low-income families live inside. About twenty kids can be found running around the yards yelling and playing at any given time. The buildings are called “projects”—subsidized housing for the poor.

Across the street are five normal homes. Two are owned by young couples, two are owned by elderly widows, and one is owned by a divorced man who yells at his dog a lot. There are no children on that side of the street.

The adults in the projects are all thin black men and obese white women. Some of them must be couples, but it’s difficult to tell. The women don’t come outside very often. The men talk loudly to each other in the front yards.

The people in normal homes are often outside doing yard work. They stop occasionally to talk to each other in hushed tones about how the people in the projects are ruining the neighborhood. Denigrating the lower class is a bonding ritual they cherish.

The kids in the projects are always causing problems. Most of them are undeniable brats; a few are well behaved, but obviously

dim witted. One might say they’re a lot like rich kids. They pretty much run rampant and do what they want.

The two widows are the most annoyed by the kids, and are most often the targets of vandalism. The widows don’t know which kids belong to which “project,” and have never met any of the parents. They call the police when they have a complaint.

The people from the projects seem to produce more waste than other people in the neighborhood. It’s common for several plastic bags of trash to pile up around their garbage cans, which overflow. The wind blows frozen pizza boxes up and down the block.

The two young couples across the street plan to move when they save up enough money. “We can’t invest in this house and fix it up. It’ll never be worth more than we paid for it. Not with the projects across the street.”

The divorced man thinks the people in the projects are con artists. “Is that an ATV in their yard?” he says in disbelief. “How can they afford that? Talk about scamming the system. That’s my tax dollars right there.”



## Weirdo

Here comes a weirdo. He's walking down Second Avenue East with his arms straight out from his sides. He's dressed like a normal person, and he's not screaming, drooling or having a conversation with a streetlight. He's just walking along with his arms out. And that's all it takes to be a weirdo.

If he were preparing to take off like an airplane, using his arms as wings, we'd classify him as crazy. But he's not running around and groaning out engine noises, he's just holding out his arms for no reason. That's the difference between being crazy and being a weirdo.

When he crosses other people on the sidewalk, he looks right at them, probably watching for a reaction. No one asks what he's doing or shows a confused expression, but after walking past him they turn for a second look and then shake their heads.

The weirdo seems to be telling the world he's had enough. He can no longer behave like a normal person. This is just the first in a series of progressively stranger behaviors that will distinguish him from those who apply logic to their daily lives.

Last night, the weirdo had his breakthrough. He was walking by himself down an empty street at night when the urge to hold out his arms overwhelmed him. No one was watching, so he could do it without the threat of being considered a weirdo. It felt wonderful.

Now that he's convinced himself to do it again in the daylight, in front of other people, he knows he'll be a weirdo from this moment on. He's already planning new weirdo things to try. When he gets home, he'll paint a sign to put on his front lawn for his birthday. It will read, "Lordy lordy, look who's 37."

When the fog rolls in, he'll walk over to the railroad tracks and surprise a herd of deer. They'll scamper off under the big orange lights, their long shadows dancing in the distance. The inspiration to spin his arms like a windmill under those lights will be irresistible.

At midnight, on the railroad tracks, at the edge of the woods, he'll act like he's the only person alive. He'll launch into a wild dance that no one will see. But if he hears someone coming, he'll stop acting crazy and go back to being a weirdo. He has a reputation to uphold.



## Unidentified Man

He's mentioned in the newspaper for the strangest things: using suction cups to climb up the side of an office building, bicycling against traffic on the freeway, making strange threats in front of the library.

He has an unidentified wife and two unidentified children. They all seem to find trouble wherever they go, whether they instigate it or not. The man, however, seems to get the most attention.

His antics can be so reckless, it seems like he's trying to get caught. There are often hundreds of witnesses, and he's frequently caught on video, but he's proven elusive to those who would apprehend him.

It's difficult to imagine what motivates his actions. There's just no reason to dump mercury on a women's underwear display at K-mart or perform a high-wire act on the ski-lift cables at Giants Ridge.

The unidentified man is not always looking for trouble, though. He can be a victim of circumstance as easily as anyone else. One day he thought he was acting perfectly normal and suddenly found himself handcuffed in the back of a squad car. It wasn't easy to ex-

plain why he walked past the Minnehaha Elementary School playground during recess carrying an axe and tossing toys to the children.

"I was just in town to do some laundry," he told the police detective. "I went into the mercantile and saw they only wanted three dollars for this used axe. So I bought it. Then the guy told me he had a whole bunch of Frisbees he was just going to throw away."

The unidentified man really thought he was going to be a hero for once—a springtime Santa Claus tossing plastic Hamm's beer promotional flying discs to the children from his gift bag. Instead, he became the subject of an incident report.

"The police were called and the children were brought in from the playground," the school principal wrote to parents. "The police quickly apprehended the man. A lockdown was not needed."

The unidentified man was questioned for two hours about every unsolved crime in the region. He denied everything. No charges were filed. His name was kept out of the press, again.

One time, a dozen witnesses saw him jump off the Blatnik Bridge. The unidentified man was presumed dead until someone spotted him the next day running naked through a graveyard, jumping tombstones like hurdles.



## Undressing the Snowman

There she goes again, outside to undress the snowman. This happens every winter night, before they turn off the lights and go to sleep. The snowman's hat and scarf have to be taken inside the house, or the neighborhood kids might steal them.

There is some resentment over this ritual. Bernice thinks it would be nice if her husband would get up and do the undressing. After all, he's the one who made the snowman. He's the one who doesn't mind the cold weather. He's the one who insists they live in this bitter climate.

Earl would rather leave the snowman's hat and scarf outside overnight. They're not worth much anyway, and if a few wild youngsters keep him from having a snowman on his terms, then it's not worth having a snowman at all. He knows as well as she does that the hat and scarf will probably be stolen, but he would rather take that risk than live in fear.

After Bernice undresses the snowman, she can't help but bring up the subject of moving south. She would rather live in California or Arizona, where snowmen only exist a few days a year, if at all.

In Minnesota, a good snowman can survive for several months,

if you can keep those hoodlum kids from practicing professional wrestling moves on him. Usually they knock him over with a jumping shoulder tackle or running clothesline maneuver. The most daring of adolescent maniacs will actually climb up on the porch railing to "jump off the top rope" and decapitate the snowman.

Putting the snowman back together again is a job Earl performs early in the morning, before Bernice wakes up. He doesn't want her to find out about the debilitating injuries inflicted on his handy work.

He loves that snowman like he loves her, in spite of certain obvious complications. He knows that everything melts away eventually, and you have to make the best out of what you have before it's gone.

He built this snowman for her as she watched through the living room window. She made him put on a hat and scarf before he went out. She believes you have to protect what you love—even old snowmen.



## Beat

James Goggleye is the best wheelchair-bound American Indian pool player alive. He plays every night, drinking whiskey sours the whole time. He gets better with every game, every drink.

"I'm undefeated today," he says at Curly's Bar. "No one can beat me. I beat everybody at Roby's and everybody at Mitch's. I'm 17-0 tonight. I had to come over here to find some competition."

At Curly's, there's no competition either. James wins with ease. He wheels around the table, shakes his opponent's hand graciously, and smiles as if he knows some cosmic secret.

"Go pick some songs on the jukebox," he says, handing over a dollar. "It's too quiet in here. We need music. We need a beat."

All the bar regulars know James, but no one else in town has ever heard of him, unless they read the crime report in the daily newspaper. His one claim to fame: "James E. Goggleye, 52, no current address available. Public consumption, fined \$100."

He was caught trying to take his cocktail from Curly's back to Roby's. He would have gotten away with it, but it was snowing out and his wheelchair wasn't handling as smoothly as usual. The cop told him he should get hauled in for driving while intoxicated.

Some people wonder what makes James smile the way he does. His people have had their land and way of life taken away. He has no ability to stand or to walk. He has no freedom to take a drink from one bar to the next. Still, he's almost always smiling, showing off the few decayed teeth he has left.

Behind that wide smile and those twinkling, bloodshot eyes is the knowledge that no one in town can beat him at pool. Maybe they can get good jobs and good dental work, and run and dance and pick up girls, but they'll always lose at pool to a handicapped alcoholic.

James could slide a buck into that juke and push the selection buttons as easily as anyone else in the bar. He's too busy smiling, waiting for his next opponent, ready to make another chump play his music for him.

He doesn't care what songs get picked, or that the sound system is lousy. He doesn't want to hear the words anyway, just the beat. Bang the drums and chalk that stick. Another whiskey sour, please.





## Tour of Dirty Dishes

We begin the “Tour of Dirty Dishes” with this set of hand-me-down plates. They were too ugly for my parents to use 30 years ago, but somehow these flowery plastic relics of the 1970s have made it into the daily rotation in my kitchen. The curry stain on this one looks like a diaper stain.

Taking up most of the space in the sink are these ceramic bowls made by aspiring potters. There is no use in washing these bowls and putting them away in the cupboards. That would only be practical if they were stackable. This collection of uniquely crooked gems can only be safely piled below waist level, and is therefore left on constant display in my sink gallery.

The Minnesota State Historical Society has expressed interest in my long-running plastic cup installation, which I’ve proudly maintained for two decades. This set of commemorative 24-ounce cups from the Minneapolis Metrodome is surely sought after by collectors. There’s Mickey Hatcher, Tom Brunansky, Gary Gaetti, Kent Hrbek and Kirby Puckett. The “Enjoy Coke” logo is prominently positioned on all sides of the cups, proof that they are pre-New Coke/Classic Coke era.

Even though Rollie Fingers played for the rival Milwaukee Brewers, Minnesota baseball fans still sip with reverence from my “Rollie Fingers Day” Hall of Fame cup. It features a list of Rollie’s major career achievements, such as, “Four-time Roloids Relief Pitcher of the Year.” The list neglects to point out one achievement that the artist’s rendering of Rollie makes quite clear: “Greatest handlebar moustache in baseball history.”

This cup from Saints Roller Skating Center will surely take you back to Teen Beat Sunday Nights when everyone had combs in their back pockets, Foosball was the hot game in town, and the Foreigner and Loverboy songs were on a seemingly endless loop.

When it comes to plastic cups, nothing beats the Mega Buddy. This 60-ounce monster from a Kwik Trip store puts all Big Gulps and Hardee’s Moose cups to shame.

Sadly, only two Smurf glasses remain from a once extensive collection. The artwork on them has faded considerably over the years. As a preservation effort, these glasses are reserved for special occasions only. You may drink Kool-Aid from them, nothing else.



## Parade

I love a good parade. At least, I think I do. I mean, I've been to about fifty parades, but I can't say I've ever been to a really *good* one. The parades on TV look like they might be fun, but it's hard to tell what it's like to be there in person.

I'm used to going to community parades that never, ever have an inflated, 500-foot-tall cartoon character. And, let's face it, that's the only reason to have a parade. Lining up every youth dance group and high school band in town and marching them down Main Street is just not very interesting.

Saying you don't like parades, however, is like saying you don't like Christmas. Some people are bold enough to admit it, but those people are quickly thrown into a class of party-pooing naysayers who want to ruin everything and are incapable of having fun. So, I say I like parades even though I really don't.

The problem, quite simply, is that parades are supposed to have things called "floats" in them. But community parades seldom have anything that floats. They have things called "units" instead.

"This year's parade has 110 units," the parade organizer tells the media. "It's the most units we've ever had." Well, why would anyone

want to see a "unit"? Why is a parade considered better because it's longer than ever before?

"Ladies and gentleman, here comes our next unit," I imagine I might say if I were the parade announcer. "It's a truck towing a six-foot-tall pot of Arco coffee. Just look at it, people! Is that a big pot of coffee or what?"

"And now, walking down the street with giant smiles and handfuls of pamphlets, it's every single candidate for public office on this fall's ballot! They're followed closely by a radio station mascot! Crowd around him kids, he's got candy!"

It seems like the formula for these community parades is to simply line up half the people in town so the other half can watch them go for a walk. For variety, throw a notable figure in the backseat of a car and watch him wave.

Thankfully, there is at least one interesting thing in community parades. The Shriners who ride through on their tiny cars are indisputably awesome. Everything else pales in comparison. Only a 500-foot-tall Elmer Fudd could compete.



# Joanne’s Humiliation

When Joanne was eight years old, she fainted while milking a cow. The cow was startled by this and stomped on her, breaking her arm and bruising her ribs.

“The worst part was afterward,” Joanne confided to her friends. “They brought me into the house and took off my shirt in front of my uncle.”



# Why We Love Halloween

In the middle of November, she finds a crumpled receipt buried deep in her jacket pocket.

Fake ears..... \$2.99



## Has Anybody Seen My Underwear?

When I'm out walking I sometimes find lost clothing. I see a glove propped up against a fire hydrant or a hat half-buried in a pile of snow, and I don't think much of it.

When I find an undergarment, however, I always try to piece its story together. How did that brassiere end up hanging from barbwire at the top of a fence? How did that jockstrap end up clogging a sewer grate? How did those panties get frozen into a layer of ice on Chester Creek?

The reason these sightings fill me with wonder is that I always know the whereabouts of my own undergarments, so it seems odd to me that other people are able to lose them. For me, it's simple. I wear one pair of undershorts, and the rest are either in the hamper, the washer or dryer, or neatly folded in my dresser drawer. Even if I cast a pair aside in a moment of passion, I eventually return to find them. So, in general, it's really easy to know the location of my underwear.

That's why I'm so distressed about not being able to find my navy blue boxer shorts. I know I had them with me on my trip to Colorado, but when I got home they weren't in my suitcase. After a round of laundry they have now been classified as Missing in Action. I fear I may never see them again.

It's a small loss, really. I probably spent somewhere between \$2 and \$6 for those boxer shorts. I have no emotional attachment to them. There should be no noticeable effect on my life at all.

The only thing that troubles me is that I want to know where they are! Did airport security confiscate my underwear? Did I get a little more intoxicated than I remember on my vacation?

My best guess is that, back in Colorado, I went into my friend's guest bedroom, dropped my boxer shorts to the floor before showering, thinking I would pick them up upon returning, and then accidentally kicked them under a piece of furniture. Or maybe I set them on the unmade bed and then didn't notice them when I straightened up, blindly tucking them into the sheets. Perhaps I took them off and hung them on a hook in the bathroom before showering.

One thing is certain: if my underwear were left anywhere in my friend's home, he is going to find them and have to deal with them. No matter where they are discovered, I will be considered a pig for having left them there. Also, my friend will be put in the situation of having to call me and say, "Ah, Paul? I found some underwear that look cheap enough to belong to a writer from Duluth. What should I do with them?"

And I will have to answer that question. If we were talking about another clothing item, like a shirt, I could just say, "Keep it, wear it if you want, return it the next time you visit Duluth." But underwear is different. There is a psychological barrier. No matter what kind of heavy-duty detergents exist in the world, my friend

still will not wear my underwear after a thousand wash cycles. And I certainly don't want him to.

I'd like to tell my friend to throw my boxer shorts away, but I just bought them about two months ago. They're as good as new. The garbage hauler would have to wonder why someone decided to throw away a new pair of perfectly good underwear. All the way to the town dump, people would piece together sordid tales of the wild party that led to whatever deed prompted the conclusion that I just couldn't ever wear those tainted drawers again.

So there will be only one solution. My friend will have to put my underwear into an envelope, take the package to the post office to be weighed, and mail it to me. I can already see myself opening the package; an envelope full of underwear, a friendship changed forever.



## Advice for Women

If you're trying to convince a man to drink a lot of whisky, try sitting on his lap.



## Job Opportunities

It's amazing how many people have jobs. Even students and elderly people are often engaged in at least part-time employment. This is surprising to me because it seems like there shouldn't be that much to do.

With all the work that's already occurred in human history, we should be finished by now. There are plenty of houses and parks and roads and gardens and books and theaters all around us. Can't we just enjoy them?

Even with all the work currently going on, many people want more to do. Apparently there are still not enough jobs to go around, so politicians are working to develop incentives for companies to "create jobs."

Politicians often disagree about the best ways to create jobs, but they all agree that more jobs are needed. I keep hoping a politician will come along with a plan to eliminate the need for people to work so much.

There are always a lot of jobs advertised in the classified section of the daily newspaper. Most of the openings are in the education-

al, medical and sales fields. My favorite ad is for plasma donors, as if that's a career option.

Of course, many job opportunities aren't necessarily considered career options. There are always openings available in the fields of telemarketing, newspaper delivery and caring for vulnerable adults, because no one wants those jobs for more than six months.

The employment ads that confuse me the most do not disclose who the employer is. Instead of sending a résumé directly to a business, the job seeker is supposed to send it to the newspaper, where it will apparently be forwarded. This seems like a scam.

I've always wanted to make my own arrangement with the newspaper, and then send nameless résumés out. "If these skills sound like a good match for your company, please mail a job-offer letter to Box 147," my cover letter would note. "No phone calls, please."

I am also amused by the jobs that promise, in bold print, often followed by an exclamation point, that the compensation is tragically lousy. "Pays \$8 per hour!" the ads proudly proclaim. Well gosh, that's almost half of an honest wage! Where do I apply?



Our departed ancestors have become the butt of jokes in a basement vaudeville show. We don't think about how Aunt Ellen used that cane as a serious tool to increase her mobility. It's a prop now, clutched in the hand of her great nephew's friend. "Look at me. I'm old!" the teenager says, as we laugh at the absurdity of it all.



## Rec Room

The basement is where the fun happens. There's a recreation room down there with hideous carpeting and completely expendable furniture. Dogs play cards there. The Minnesota Twins are world champions forever. The magic eight ball has all the answers.

Who bought that latch-hook kit and made a U.S. flag out of yarn? Where did that big ceramic monkey come from? Why are we keeping an old Fitger's beer can that looks like someone tied it to the back of a truck and dragged it home in 1964?

In the back room, near the half-empty paint cans and dusty whipped topping containers filled with screws, nails and unidentifiable appliance parts, there are boxes of old clothing. It's like a miniature Goodwill store back there, open every Halloween or whenever the urge to play dress up takes hold.

Nothing brings out the laughs like grandma's wig and Uncle Otto's checkerboard slacks. There was a time when these things were worn by people who expected others to take them seriously. Now, it is the stuff of ridicule.



## Mr. Smarty Pants

When the circus came to town, my sixth-grade teacher announced a contest. “The newspaper is offering a prize to the student who draws the best poster,” she told us. “I want you all to be creative and draw a fun circus scene.”

My drawing skills were poor, so I knew there was only one way my poster could compete. I would have to develop a unique and clever concept. While the other kids immediately started drawing clowns and lions, I brainstormed.

Soon, the idea hit me. I drew an elephant with an enormous trunk. The elephant was on stage, but its trunk stretched off stage, behind a curtain, out of the audience’s sight. The drawing also showed the backstage area, where the elephant’s trunk finally ended, revealing my funny, funny joke. The elephant was drinking out of the toilet.

“This isn’t funny,” Mrs. Holden told me. “It’s crude. I want you to draw something else.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “Maybe you should explain to me what things are funny and what things are not. See, when the other kids

all laughed at it, I was left with the impression that it must be funny, but apparently laughter isn’t a good gauge of what is humorous.”

My sarcastic remarks were greeted with that patented over-the-reading-glasses stern look—the most powerful tool in any teacher’s arsenal. It’s a look that always signaled big trouble for me, because it meant “back down now, or else.” I very rarely backed down, because I always felt my arguments were legitimate. I wanted to show that I wasn’t an idiot or a troublemaker, but in fact a misunderstood genius.

A whole classroom full of unimaginative sheep drew their stupid clown poster and were graded with a smiley face and allowed to move on with their lives. I drew something different and had to start all over again.

Mrs. Holden’s expectation was that I would accept her decision, and go draw something similar to what my classmates did. My need to be exceptional in spite of my lack of drawing skills, however, forced me to stand up for my artistic integrity by making my next drawing even more outrageous.

Realistically, Mrs. Holden couldn’t stop teaching math and science and focus the rest of the school year on making me keep repeating the same art assignment. I knew that I would eventually win an endurance test.

“Well, there’s more than one brilliant idea in this brain of mine,” I told her. “I’ll bet I can come up with an even funnier idea.”

“Why don’t you draw something that’s not funny for a change?” she asked, mistakenly thinking she could successfully debate a twelve year old.

“So, now you’re saying what I drew is funny?”

“No, I’m saying that you tried to be funny, but failed. I’m suggesting that you should take something seriously for a change.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said, “You want me to draw a serious poster for the circus.”

I had all the right answers, but she had all the glare and all the authority. I shrugged my shoulders and went back to my desk to start working on the next masterpiece.

This time, I drew a really fat tightrope artist. The rope, however, was not very tight underneath her tremendous weight. In fact, it stretched all the way to the floor.

“So, you think making fun of other people is funny?”

These debates always got me into bigger and bigger trouble.

“Am I missing something here?” I asked. “‘Fun’ is a root of ‘funny,’ isn’t it? Making fun of someone pretty much has to be funny.”

Nothing aggravates teachers more than a know-it-all kid who thinks he can get away with sarcastically “teaching” them something.

“Well, there’s nothing funny about hurting other people’s feelings,” the rant began. “What does that sign on the wall say?”

“Nothing. It’s an inanimate object with no vocal capabilities.”

“Well, I’m sure you can read it, and you know that this is a put-down-free area. That means no putdowns.”

“You’re right. You’re right. Clearly I owe this poorly drawn fictitious character an apology.”

In retrospect, it was at this point that I should have retreated. I think I really could have wore her down in the long run, but I just couldn’t stop myself from pushing the issue.

“Whoops,” I continued. “Was that a putdown to say my character is ‘poorly drawn’? I’m really going to give her a complex.”

At first, the other kids in the class hadn’t been paying close attention to my somewhat private conversation at the teacher’s desk. Slowly they began to recognize the wisecracking tone in my voice and realized that there was a performance going on that they

shouldn’t miss. This, of course, would work to my disadvantage. It’s one thing to be bested in a verbal sparring match by a sixth grader, but when, on top of that, the rest of the kids whose respect you demand are suddenly snickering at you, it’s time to flip out.

“Listen Mr. Smarty Pants ...”

I couldn’t resist interrupting. “Smarty pants?” I said, reaching down and clutching my pants, “What? These old things?”

The room exploded in laughter, and my teacher exploded with one word: “Out!” She pointed at the door, and I finally retreated, one remark too late.

What made my reference to my pants so funny to my classmates, and so obnoxious to my teacher, was that I had a long-running routine of pants humor that began on the first day of the school year.

Before the sixth grade, I had been kind of a square peg. I stood politely in the single-file lines, stayed out of fights, and seldom argued with my teachers. My occasional obnoxious remarks were usually tolerated because they were not terribly malicious. On the first day of sixth grade, however, a sort of mini human-rights issue developed, and I immediately enlisted in the fight for the cause.

One of the rituals many families share at the start of each school year is shopping for new clothes. For the most part, I didn’t share in that ritual. My family was on sort of a tight budget. We could afford new clothes, but the fashionable jeans of the day seemed pretty spendy compared to the stiff, bright blue K-mart jeans my mother would recommend. I preferred wearing hand-me-down corduroy pants from my brothers to the cheap, testicle-crushing department store jeans, which my friends referred to as “stiffys,” because you could practically stand them upright on their own.

To illustrate how silly I thought the “school shopping” obsession was, I decided that on the first day of school, when all the oth-

er kids were dressed up to look their best, I would wear sweatpants. It was the early 1980s, and sweatpants were a relatively new thing. Athletes had been wearing polyester running pants for years, but now a new style of half cotton, half polyester pants, with elastic around the waist and the ankles, was taking off across the nation. They were supposed to be reserved for athletic activities or for relaxing around the house, but by the late '80s people were wearing them everywhere. They disappeared in the '90s, replaced first by pants with wild animal prints called Zubaz, and then by swooshy warm-up pants.

It wasn't unique of me to wear sweatpants to school, but to do it on the first day of school was indeed a statement. I was telling everyone that I was a slacker and a punk. Period.

It just so happened that on the first day of class Mrs. Holden told us that kids shouldn't wear sweatpants to school. She said that she thought they looked awful.

The other kids started to look at me and smile, wondering how I was going to take this putdown. Inspired perhaps by the popular Twisted Sister song of the times, "We're Not Gonna Take It," I stood up and announced in my own special way how I felt about this attack on my pants.

"I guess you can mark me down for an F in fashion," I said, doing a quick runway turn like a sweatpants model.

The teacher laughed along with the class, but casually noted again that she would "appreciate it" if we didn't wear sweatpants. I decided right then and there that I was going to wear sweatpants to school every day. Mrs. Holden had just given me the perfect excuse to dress cheaply and comfortably, while maintaining the respect of my peers.

So, with my sweatpants on, I became the only class clown with a running gag. All I had to do was sit back with my arms folded be-

hind my head and bark out, "Boy, these sweatpants sure are comfortable!" The teacher would roll her eyes and my classmates would giggle with delight.

The gags got more sophisticated as the school year went on. I began working my sweatpants comments into essays, mathematical story problems, and vocabulary quizzes.

"Paul, your word is jovial. Spell it, define it, and use it in a sentence."

"Jovial: j-o-v-i-a-l. Very happy. I am jovial when I wear sweatpants."

Not only did the other kids think I was clever in my role as Mr. Smarty Pants, but they also saw me as a sort of martyr. I was the kind of guy who wouldn't sit still while his generations' pants were being insulted.

In the battle over my crude art, it was the reference to my pants that got me kicked out of class. I sat out in the hall for a long time before I was finally told that my mother was going to have to come in for a special conference. Things cooled down for a while after that, but I kept wearing sweatpants (pun completely intended).

When the next drawing contest came up, it was to promote skiing at Spirit Mountain. I drew a ski jump with a bunch of people in line at the top, a skier halfway down, another in mid air, and about a dozen more in a pile of broken limbs at the bottom of the jump. For this I was sent to a psychiatrist.

After about five minutes, the school's shrink told me there was nothing wrong with having an imagination. He said he had some paperwork to do, and that I should just hang out for about a half an hour and then go back to class.

That episode was a victory for Mrs. Holden. It didn't matter that she couldn't get a second opinion confirming that I was nuts. All the kids knew I was sent to the MacArthur Elementary

Boobyhatch, and that was punishment enough for me. Nothing I could say about the experience could be verified, and would only affirm the rumor that I was demented. I had to shut up and let it blow over.

When the end of the school year neared, Mrs. Holden announced that our class would soon be taking its much anticipated sixth-grade trip. It was an exciting prospect. Where would we be going? Disneyworld? Valleyfair? Kiss concert?

“We will be going to the Calumet Mine next week,” Mrs. Holden announced. “It’s going to be a wonderful educational experience.”

Now, a taconite mine was not exactly the sixth-grade dream vacation, but it was a day out of the classroom, so my fellow students and I looked forward to it. I was sitting in the front row of class when the announcement was made, and Mrs. Holden looked right at me when she began her closing remarks.

“One more thing, class. Because we will be out in public, we want to represent our school as best we can. So anyone who wears sweatpants next Tuesday will have to stay here at school and do a special assignment with the principal.”

My normally loose lips were tightened by this unexpected counterattack. If I wore sweatpants, I faced an *entire day* doing a *special assignment* with the principal while my classmates were off having a road-trip adventure. What could be worse than that? I had been issued a direct challenge to stand up for my rights and suffer the consequences.

I spent the next few days thinking it over, and when Tuesday morning came around, I put on corduroy pants. Right away, I saw disappointment in the eyes of my classmates. They had come to expect different pants from Paul Lundgren, and I let them all down.

Another student, who had been sick during the days leading up to the field trip, never heard about Mrs. Holden’s special one-

day ban on sweatpants. Knowing there would be a long bus ride that day, he figured he would dress comfortably and wear sweatpants. He ended up spending the day with the principal. I got to go on the trip, but I didn’t enjoy it for one moment. All I could think about was what a coward I was.

It was a great lesson Mrs. Holden taught me that day. I learned that enduring punishment is often a very slight obstacle compared with enduring a legacy of cowardice. I’ll never forget how easily I gave in after a whole school year of wearing sweatpants, just to avoid a single day of light torture.

There is instant victory in standing up against oppression, even when its authority seems undaunted and threatens to stomp you out. When it does so it makes a statement against itself. The boy who wore sweatpants that day was an A-student. I don’t know if he learned anything from his punishment, but I did.



## About the Author

Paul Lundgren began his career as a newspaper columnist and journalist in 1996. Since then, his writing has been featured in numerous periodicals and Web sites; of note are *Transistor*, *Ripsaw*, *North Coast Review*, *The Pretentious Metaphor*, [perfectduluthday.com](http://perfectduluthday.com), and [mnartists.org](http://mnartists.org), in which versions of the stories in this book have previously appeared.

He is a proud graduate of the prestigious Robert E. Denfeld High School and the University of Wisconsin-Superior.