

Q U A R T E R L Y
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Mind the Gap

by *Sophie Gilbert*

Imagine first making someone's acquaintance, perhaps in a classroom or an office, and having him immediately and unabashedly ask you for a rubber. Is he gleefully transgressing normal social boundaries? Is he drunk? Is he brandishing a pencil?

Such are the choppy and perilous waters that have long divided American and British English. (Rubber, by the way, is the British word for what Americans call an eraser.) Pre-Internet, collisions between the two were entertaining but isolated – a tourist from Oxford might visit the Carolinas and be perplexed when someone asked whether she knew how to shag (“shag” being a type of dance in those parts). In turn, she might innocently compliment a farmer on his fine ass (donkey). But in the 21st-century media environment, centuries-old news institutions and start-ups alike must try to placate stropky readers and unyielding copy editors on both sides of the Atlantic, at the same time. Is such a thing even possible?

For Guardian US, which launched in September 2011 as an online-only accompaniment to the almost-200-year-old British daily newspaper, the past few years have been fraught with decisions regarding which version of English to use – so much so that the publication debuted a blog, English to English, to help translate linguistic and cultural differences for confused readers. (The Guardian billed it as

“therapy for our special relationship.”) “The moment we realized we had to address this thing was when we started hiring all these American reporters,” Maraithe Thomas, Guardian US's deputy production editor, told me. “Our editor, Janine Gibson, was pretty adamant that we didn't hire all these D.C. and New York veterans just to change their copy” into British English.

The editors chose to let Guardian US's American writers write in American, and its British writers write in British – so the (American) national-security editor Spencer Ackerman might use spellings like organize and defense while the (English) writer Emma Brockes gets to keep slang like lairy and jollies. But when it came to proper nouns, The Guardian conceded the need for a more uniform policy, decreeing late last year that all Guardian publications, including Guardian US and Guardian Australia, would defer to local spellings. No more “Lincoln Centre” or “Labour Day.” “If we say ‘The attack on the World Trade Center put the Department of Defense at the centre of the country's defence,’ it makes perfect sense to me and, I hope, to you,” wrote the production editor David Marsh, explaining the policy.

Other British publications aiming to reach an American audience have refused to adapt to American conventions. U.S.-based readers now account for about 52 percent of The Economist's circulation, but the magazine continues to resolutely employ British spelling and usage. “It's part of our marketing,” says the Economist correspondent Lane Greene, who originally hails from Marietta, Georgia. “We're an outside view on America, and that's signaled all the time by the style. It feels British and it reads British, and that's by design.” Greene points out that American readers enjoy encountering quintessentially English terms like cock-a-hoop (“excessively triumphant”), while Brits tend to approach

American English with a mix of condescension and annoyance: “With formerly huge colonial powers, there can be a ‘Well, we lost the empire, but at least we still have the original language’ mentality to it.”

Other publications are counting on Anglophone readers around the world getting used to unfamiliar spellings and terms. Although about a third of The Atlantic’s online readers are overseas, the magazine generally uses American spellings for proper nouns; meanwhile, The Atlantic.com tends to use local spellings for places and organizations. Quartz, an online sister publication of The Atlantic, uses American English, while Quartz India uses Indian English (similar to British English), and the two sites frequently republish each other’s stories without too much ado. Which isn’t to say that readers won’t occasionally be perplexed by bewildering, sometimes risqué divergences among various forms of English. “It’s funny how many of them are slightly naughty, in the underwear region, like fanny pack and fag,” says Greene. “I don’t think I’ve ever had one of those ‘I’ll come and knock you up in the morning’ moments, but people who go back and forth a lot usually figure out a middle ground.” ♦

The Fall of Facebook

by *Alexis C. Madrigal*

Facebook has won this round of the Internet.

Steadily, grindingly, it continues to take an ever greater share of our time and attention online. More than 800 million people use the site on an average day. Individuals are dependent on it to keep up not just with their friends but with their families. When a research company looked at how people use their phones, it found that they spend more time on Facebook than they do browsing the entire rest of the Web.

Digital-media companies have grown reliant on Facebook’s powerful distribution capabilities. They are piglets at the sow, squealing amongst their siblings for sustenance, by which I mean readers.

Think about how this weakens the basic idea of a publication. The media bundles known as magazines and newspapers were built around letting advertisers reach an audience. But now virtually *all* of the audiences are in the same place, and media entities and advertisers alike know how to target them: they go to Facebook, select some options from a drop-down menu – 18-to-24-year-old men in Maryland who are college-football fans – and their ads materialize in the feeds of that demographic.

A decade after Facebook emerged from the Ivy League dorms in which it started, it is the most powerful information gatekeeper the world has ever known. It is only

slightly hyperbolic to say that Facebook is like all the broadcast-television networks put together. But instead of programming executives choosing what Americans see, programmers are. And while, once upon a time, everyone with a TV and an antenna could see “what was on,” Facebook news feeds are personalized, so no one outside the company actually knows what anyone else is seeing. This opacity would have been impossible to imagine in previous eras.

It is true that a slightly older technology company, Google, also plays a major role in what Americans read on the Internet. Google is an information utility, designed to get people to what they want to know. And when Google was the dominant distribution force on the Web, that fact was reflected in the kinds of content media companies produced – fact-filled, keyword-stuffed posts that Google’s software seemed to prefer.

Facebook is different, though. It measures what is “engaging” – what you (and people you resemble, according to its databases) like, comment on, and share. Then it shows you more things related to that. Like a joke about pizza? You’ll get an article about do-it-yourself brick ovens – and a Domino’s ad. Facebook is constantly showing you more of what it thinks you want to see and click on and read.

This has been the company’s greatest strength. Facebook has built a self-perpetuating optimization machine. It’s as if every time you turned on the TV, your cable box ranked every episode of every show just for you. Or when you went to a bar, only the people you’d been hanging out with regularly showed up.

Adding to the sense of Facebook’s inexorability, any time another company seems to threaten its position in a key domain, Facebook simply buys the business. Take

Instagram, which offered a mobile-optimized photo-sharing experience Facebook couldn’t match. So Facebook bought it, for \$715 million. Then it scooped up WhatsApp, which had garnered hundreds of millions of users with a simple, solid messaging application. That cost Facebook \$21.8 billion.

It’s all enough to make you wonder whether Facebook, unlike AOL or MySpace, really might be forever – or at least as forever as anything American capitalism is capable of producing.

And yet, significantly, people haven’t let go of their unease about Facebook’s core idea. “In three years of research and talking to hundreds of people and everyday users, I don’t think I heard anyone say once, ‘I love Facebook,’” says Clive Thompson, the author of *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*. Like a New Urbanist dream neighborhood where every lamppost and shrub seems unnervingly designed to please you, there’s a soullessness about the place. The software’s primary attributes – its omniscience, its solicitousness – all too easily provoke claustrophobia.

Given the collective unease with Facebook, could the Internet population launch a sort of immune response against the network? Understanding the threat represented by centralizing all of your online identity in one place doesn’t require sophisticated analysis or ethical contemplation. It’s simple stuff: What if Facebook changes something? What if the privacy settings shift (again)? What if you get locked out of your account?

And so, naturally enough, users are spreading themselves around, maintaining Facebook as their social spine, but investing in and loving a wide variety of other social apps. None of them seems likely to supplant Facebook on its own, but taken together, they form a pretty decent network of

networks, a dispersed alternative to Facebook life.

This is not a niche phenomenon. Snapchat has more than 100 million monthly users. Line boasts that more than half a billion people message their friends through its service. Pinterest has about 60 million monthly users. Vine has more than 40 million registered users. The list goes on and on.

Social networking is not, it turns out, winner take all. In the past, one might have imagined that switching between Facebook and “some other network” would be difficult, but the smartphone interface makes it easy to be on a dozen networks. All messages come to the same place – the phone’s notifications screen, so what matters is what your friends are doing, not which apps they’re using.

Take a look at the rise of apps that exploit the desire for anonymity, ephemerality, and the unknown – roughly the opposite of Facebook’s founding desire to connect real people (under their real names) on the Internet.

Or take Yik Yak, the most radical of them all. If you’re over the age of 22, you’ve probably never heard of the app, whose sole purpose is to act as a virtual bulletin board for local spaces. People post on anonymous timelines visible to others who are physically close by. The UC Berkeley students who are sitting near me as I write this evidently like posting about classes, drinking, and sex, but mostly they just crack jokes. It’s a zero-commitment app for bullshitting and – maybe – connecting with someone in the physical world. And it regularly ranks among the top free apps for iPhones – below Facebook Messenger but sometimes above even better-known apps like Snapchat and Instagram. Snapchat, which allows its users to send each other self-destructing messages, has grown because people like snapping pictures that won’t go on their permanent record. Anonymous apps like Secret and Whisper allow people to shout things into the

ether without worrying that someone will look in on that activity and socially punish them.

Right now, many mobile services merely replicate what people do on their computers. Yik Yak’s entire mechanism depends on where you are. It assumes that you already have ways to contact an extant social network – it takes Facebook for granted, even as it tries to undermine it. And if I were to put money on an area in which Facebook might be unable to dominate in the future, it would be apps that take advantage of physical proximity. Something radically new could arise on that front, whether it’s an evolution of Yik Yak or some service with an even dumber name.

A more direct challenge could come from a change in the media that people use to “talk” with one another. Judith Donath, who founded MIT’s Sociable Media Group and wrote *The Social Machine*, predicts that text will be a less and less important part of our asynchronous communications mix. Instead, she foresees a “very fluid interface” that would mix text with voice, video, sensor outputs (location, say, or vital signs), and who knows what else. Such an interface could be built by Facebook, but there’s no reason to think it has to be. Indeed, the forthcoming Apple Watch seems like a step toward the future Donath envisions. Users will be able to send animated smiley faces, drawings, voice snippets, and even their live heartbeats, which will be tapped out on the receiver’s wrist.

A simple but rich messaging platform – perhaps with specialized hardware – could replace the omnibus social network for most purposes. “I think we’re shifting in a weird way to one-on-one conversations on social networks and in messaging apps,” says Shani Hilton, the executive editor for news at BuzzFeed, the viral-media site. “People don’t want to perform their lives publicly in the same way that they

wanted to five years ago.”

Taken together, these trends pose a direct challenge to Facebook’s supremacy. After all, Facebook is built around a trade-off that it has asked users to make: *Give us all your personal information, post all your pictures, tag all your friends, and so on, forever. In return, we’ll optimize your social life.* But this output is only as good as the input. And it turns out that, when scaled up, creating this input – making yourself legible enough to the Facebook machine that your posts are deemed “relevant” and worthy of being displayed to your mom and your friends – is exhausting labor.

These new apps, then, are arguments that we can still have an Internet that is weird, and private. That we can still have social networks without *the social network*. And that we can still have friends on the Internet without “friending” them. ♦

A Brief History of Information Gatekeepers

1871: Western Union controls 90 percent of U.S. telegraph traffic.

1947: 97 percent of the country’s radio stations are affiliated with one of four national networks.

1969: Viewership for the three nightly network newscasts hits an all-time high, with 50 percent of all American homes tuning in.

1997: About half of all American homes with Internet access get it through America Online.

2002: Microsoft Internet Explorer captures 97 percent of the worldwide browser market.

2014: Amazon sells 63 percent of all books bought online – and 40 percent of books overall.

Going Digital

by Edward Lucie-Smith

Recently I’ve found myself involved with quite a few digital art books, as a provider of ideas as well as a provider of text. I’m not skilful enough to put them together myself. However I know roughly speaking how they work and I’m fortunate enough to have good collaborators. My efforts to date have been comparatively modest but are rapidly becoming more ambitious. The project I have in hand at the moment is a lot more ambitious than the kind of digital book you meet on a Kindle. A collaboration with my friend Zavier Ellis, of the gallery Charlie Smith London, it is an iBook for iPad (but soon for Apple laptops as well) – the first volume of a compendium called *100 London Artists*, designed to celebrate London as an art city.

London is now perhaps (and this assertion may surprise some people) the most important city in the world for contemporary art. It has great museums. The most important international dealers have opened branches here even if their businesses didn’t originate in London. It has the major auction rooms, which do more and more big sales of very new, or at least quite recent, art. It has frequent art fairs. It has a number of display spaces for private collections, among them the Saatchi Gallery, which, despite some stumbles, currently does a lot more for new artists, including British ones, than either of the Tates. It has major graduate art colleges. It has non-commercial organizations, such as

the Bow Arts Trust, which provide studio spaces. If one looks at what other major cities provide – New York, Paris, Berlin – London is visibly more complete. All of the others are weaker in one sector or another.

One point about doing this as an iBook, rather than as a more conventional cross-platform digital product, is that the format not only offers text and pictures – it also provides clickable links to the Web, which will enable users to find further information about both the artists and institutions featured. In other words it will be a hub, as well as a book. The volume to follow will offer video clips, and multiple views of sculptures and other three dimensional works, jumping from one viewpoint to another as required. Other iBooks I have authored, though more modest in scale and intention, have in some ways been even more radically innovative in what they offered. There have been filmed interviews with the artists featured, for example, and clips of studio activity.

There are excellent reasons why people who want to produce art books have begun to look at digital publication very seriously. Print art books, especially hardcovers, more expensive but probably more profitable than paperbacks, suffered a sales slump up to 20% in 2009 and 2010, the years immediately following the crash of 2008, though there has been a small recovery since then. Many of the art hardcover books now published are essentially ‘vanity’ publications, intended to boost the reputation and prices of a particular artist, but money losers in themselves. The ambitious synoptic books on contemporary art, some of which I was fortunate enough to be commissioned to do in the closing years of the last century, seem to be a particularly threatened species. Publishing houses who used to specialize in doing books of this kind are frantically diversifying – cook books,

interior decoration books, lifestyle books of all kinds now help to fill up their lists. The preference is for what looks good on a coffee table, for the book-as-object, like a nice bit of ornamental china, or a vase of flowers.

The economic structure that supported the kind of books I used to write was always a bit rickety. As I know from my own royalty statements over the years, ambitious wide-ranging books on contemporary art could at one time generate very substantial sales in multiple markets, but would generate surprisingly little cash for the person whose name was on the cover. A major reason for this was the payments for illustrations that publishers had to make to copyright holders. If you wrote books about Modern or contemporary art, pretty much all of the illustration material you needed was in copyright. Obviously these payments claimed priority in the budget – authors got the leftovers.

To choose an example from the ‘popular’ end of the market for art books – specifically from the long running bargain priced World of Art series published by Thames & Hudson – the advance for a book in this series, standard price if in paperback either £9.95 or £8.95, is currently £1000 for a text of 35,000 words, against a royalty of 2.6%. In other words, the author gets just short of thirty pence per copy, and around 3500 copies have to be sold to repay the advance. Some titles take off, and last for years in various versions, and also appear in a number of other languages, in addition to English. My own *Movements in Art Since 1945*, first published as a World of Art in 1969, has run through five different editions and is still in print. I heard about a new edition in German only the other day. Other titles in the series, quite a lot of them, struggle to return the advance – in that case £1000 is all you get for doing the job. Thames &

Hudson are honest enough to warn one about this when commissioning.

The paradox is – I am speaking here in the broadest terms – that the two incarnations of *Movements in Art I* received most benefit from were both pirated, though with my consent, and at least with the publisher's acquiescence. Not that either of us could have done much about it, had we objected. One such edition appeared in China in the 1980s, fairly soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution. China was not then a signatory to the international copyright convention, which the Chinese government did not join until 1992. The book introduced a whole generation of Chinese curators and artists to what had happened in contemporary art since the end of WWII. A rather similar thing happened when the book was published in Farsi (Persian) at the turn of the millennium. Iran only took its first steps to join the Convention in April 2012. Both publishing events led to invitations to visit, to lecture, to explore fascinating new art worlds. Never mind the royalties, feel the boarding pass.

Despite this, I do now wonder if the heyday of the heavily illustrated full colour art book isn't about over. We tend to forget that its life span has been comparatively brief. Such books only really took off after World War II, with advances in printing technology. If they are declining now, their reign may turn out to have lasted less than three-quarters of a century.

One feature of orthodox art book publishing in recent years has been the impulse to produce volumes that are ever larger and grander – folio sized, often with six-hundred or even a thousand pages. Often, too, with very ambitious price-tags. How about the celebrated photographer Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* from Taschen – two volumes, 18.4 x 27.6 in, 700 pages, £2500, complete with book stand? It

seems obvious that books of this kind are never really intended to be read, despite publishers' protestations to the contrary. They are art-objects in their own right. Their purpose is chiefly to enhance the prestige of some person, institution or cultural situation – gosh, they must be important to deserve a book as big as that! Tellingly, such books are often marketed as 'investments'. Pay up, keep them pristine, make a profit once they are out of print and you decide to get rid of them, because they are cluttering up your space. There will always be another handsome white elephant you might want to give houseroom to for a while, just for the pleasure of leafing through those pretty pictures. Not too often, for fear of blemishing the pages.

There's no comfortable way to tackle the text in one of these monsters, unless you have a portable lectern to put on your desk or your dining table. These books are too big for your lap, and certainly too gigantic to read in bed. You could make a fine comic video of someone trying to read one on the tube. The books are dinosaurs, too huge and unwieldy to survive the appearance of nimbler life forms.

This, of course, brings me back to my original point. Where an existing technology is perceived to be inefficient, it tends – human ingenuity being what it is – to be challenged, and perhaps replaced, by a newer one. Sometimes the replacement is comparatively easy. Photography triumphed over the camera obscura, because people had long been looking for a way of fixing images produced by a lens. There was, however, an initial battle between the daguerrotype and negative to positive photography of the kind embraced by Fox-Talbot. The gasoline powered automobile met with more resistance. Initial designs were an uneasy compromise, borrowing awkwardly from the traditional dogcart. The earliest known magazine advertisement for an automobile, pub-

lished in America in 1898, encouraged readers to ‘Dispense With A Horse’. The quoted price in the ad is \$1000 – ‘no agents’. Quite a big sum in those days. In 1898 \$1000 was the equivalent of nearly \$28,000 today, which is the current US list price of a new Ford Mustang V6 Convertible.

It took some time to win people over to this new means of transportation. They liked horses – beasts friendly to man for millennia – they didn’t at first like these noisy, smelly, unreliable and (they thought) rather ugly machines. They could never, then, have envisaged the modern cult of the automobile, propagated by people like Jeremy Clarkson. Cars are cutting edge technology. The grander models have also, for many enthusiasts, acquired the status of art.

Thanks to the growth of the Internet we have, in the last twenty or thirty years, witnessed a revolution in communication. In particular, we have witnessed a revolution in our power to disseminate visual images. This distribution can be instant and worldwide. At the same time, thanks to digital photography and video, we have witnessed a revolution in the means of making these images. It is not entirely surprising to see these related technologies being brought together to create what we still call books, though they no longer have any physical presence and exist only on screen. Quite apart from anything else digital books – among them eBooks, which are digital books in their currently most advanced form – offer advantages that I haven’t yet mentioned. They require much less time and effort to make, require many fewer people to take part in the manufacturing process, do not have any storage or transportation costs. Once you are in possession, you don’t have to look about for a shelf to put the thing on, where it will inevitably gather dust from day to day. And of course, if you want to read a digital book on the tube, you can, no matter how many virtual pages it has.

Our upcoming eBook 100 London Artists will be in tune with the times. Carry your iPad with you, and you can now get connected to the Internet while you are on the London Underground network. If the book open on your tablet happens to be ours, and you suddenly fancy visiting a gallery near your stop, just click on its name in the Resources section.

Of course even those who recognize the advantages offered by digital books often feel a twinge of nostalgia for paper and print. They hanker for something physically solid that they can hold in their hands. It’s also prudent to point to other possible disadvantages to the new formats. Readers normally scroll through text on screen much more rapidly than when they read and turn over pages. With eBooks, there is a mingling of images, text, movement and sound, plus the capacity to call up images at will, enlarge them with a flick of the fingers, then sweep them away. These multiple possibilities create a very different experience from that of reading a book in the traditional way. Some people would argue that it is also a much more superficial one.

For the humble art book author, there are, however, advantages to digital that are not perhaps so immediately apparent to non-professionals. This comment applies particularly to those, who like me, write about contemporary art. Large art book publishing houses, replete with opinionated editors, want you to do as you are told. It’s no longer a matter of helping you to say what you want to say as clearly and unambiguously as possible – it’s a matter of trying to cajole you, or even force you, to express the editor’s opinions, rather than your own.

I can recall a number of examples of this, some comic, some rather less so. For example, I was writing a book for the major American art book publisher Abrams, covering all

the visual arts of the 20th century. I submitted a first chapter, which was about the Fauves. Back, very late – by the time the reaction arrived I was already nearing the middle of the text in order to meet the contractual delivery date – came the demand: “Must have more women!” One thing is historically certain – there were no major, or even fairly minor, female artists among the Fauves. Politically correct had triumphed over good sense.

When the time came to do the most recent revision of *Movements in Art* since 1945, Thames & Hudson’s then chief commissioning editor, the late Nikos Stangos, confronted me with a list of ‘must do’s’. Some I thought were impossible, purely in narrative terms. Others were contrary to my own perception of things. We sat down and negotiated, and finally reached what I thought was an agreed agenda for what I was and wasn’t prepared to do. At this point Nikos retired into hospital, to have a back operation. Soon afterwards, the line editor of the book contacted me. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I have a note here of what Nikos said you would do. I’ll read it out to you.’ It was, unchanged in any respect, the list Nikos had originally come up with. ‘I won’t do that,’ I said. ‘It’s not what we agreed.’ – ‘What shall we do then?’ – My reply was fairly crisp. ‘We’re going to do what in fact I agreed to do, and don’t even think of altering the text without my permission, since it’s copyright to me.’ I knew the new version was already booked in to a printer in Hong Kong. Thames & Hudson needed to deliver text and illustrations on time, or miss their slot. An author beginning work on a newly commissioned text is obviously in a weaker position than I was then.

Why did this incident happen? Chiefly, I think, because the publishing house was looking towards the all-important American market. American audiences, particularly Ameri-

can academic audiences, like to have fed back to them opinions they have already formed. They don’t like to have these challenged by opinions (or even facts) that are not in sync with the prevailing orthodoxy. Paradoxically this orthodoxy is unstable, especially where contemporary art is concerned. What is accepted as gospel truth at one annual College Art Association meeting is no longer gospel by the following year. This fits rather badly with the conventional publishing cycle. A 35,000 word text, already partly researched, takes about three months to write. Getting the requisite illustration material, plus permissions, takes a bit longer, once the text is received by the publisher. Then the book has to be designed, though this is easier if it belongs to a series that uses a fairly standard format. Then it goes to a printer, perhaps in the Far East. The finished books are shipped back, to distributors in the United States and in Britain. Throw in a bit of bureaucracy and some wrangling between editor and author, and it can easily be a year between the signature of the contract and delivery of the finished article.

The importance of the rise of digital publishing lies not just in the new features that print cannot deliver, nor in the convenience of getting rid of clutter. If you really love a book in the traditional form, then cherish it – but how many books are most of us able to house? It also lies in the fact that digital offers the possibility of a new kind of non-structural, non-hierarchical publishing. Digital books can be produced with great rapidity, using a minuscule workforce. More and more people understand how to use the basic software made available by Apple for iBooks. Simpler cross-platform digital books are even easier to produce. A mass of non-copyright illustrations is available on the Web from Wiki-commons (though admittedly this doesn’t help with contemporary images, which remain in copyright). And

more and more people, especially the younger generation of those interested in the arts, are even more addicted to their tablets than they are to their mobile phones. What this makes possible is a kind of guerilla publishing, which reacts immediately to any shift in the current artistic climate. In other words, the hierarchical top down structure that has for the past sixty years or so dominated the way that art books are published, with relatively few major imprints as the primary players, seems likely to crumble fairly soon. The new way of publishing is particularly challenging in the illustrated book sector. It offers brutal competition to the established way of doing things, partly because of the emphasis on the visual, where digital is most at home, and still more so because of the increase in speed and the steep cut in costs. Good art books have tended to require major investment. Now they don't. And distribution through the Web is more efficient, as well as being much cheaper, than anything print can achieve. ♦

Live to 75

by *Ezekiel J. Emanuel*

Seventy-five. That's how long I want to live: 75 years.

This preference drives my daughters crazy. It drives my brothers crazy. My loving friends think I am crazy. They think that I can't mean what I say; that I haven't thought clearly about this, because there is so much in the world to see and do. To convince me of my errors, they enumerate the myriad people I know who are over 75 and doing quite well. They are certain that as I get closer to 75, I will push the desired age back to 80, then 85, maybe even 90.

I am sure of my position. Doubtless, death is a loss. It deprives us of experiences and milestones, of time spent with our spouse and children. In short, it deprives us of all the things we value.

But here is a simple truth that many of us seem to resist: living too long is also a loss. It renders many of us, if not disabled, then faltering and declining, a state that may not be worse than death but is nonetheless deprived. It robs us of our creativity and ability to contribute to work, society, the world. It transforms how people experience us, relate to us, and, most important, remember us. We are no longer remembered as vibrant and engaged but as feeble, ineffectual, even pathetic.

By the time I reach 75, I will have lived a complete life. I will have loved and been loved. My children will be grown

and in the midst of their own rich lives. I will have seen my grandchildren born and beginning their lives. I will have pursued my life's projects and made whatever contributions, important or not, I am going to make. And hopefully, I will not have too many mental and physical limitations. Dying at 75 will not be a tragedy. Indeed, I plan to have my memorial service before I die. And I don't want any crying or wailing, but a warm gathering filled with fun reminiscences, stories of my awkwardness, and celebrations of a good life. After I die, my survivors can have their own memorial service if they want – that is not my business.

Let me be clear about my wish. I'm neither asking for more time than is likely nor foreshortening my life. Today I am, as far as my physician and I know, very healthy, with no chronic illness. I just climbed Kilimanjaro with two of my nephews. So I am not talking about bargaining with God to live to 75 because I have a terminal illness. Nor am I talking about waking up one morning 18 years from now and ending my life through euthanasia or suicide. Since the 1990s, I have actively opposed legalizing euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. People who want to die in one of these ways tend to suffer not from unremitting pain but from depression, hopelessness, and fear of losing their dignity and control. The people they leave behind inevitably feel they have somehow failed. The answer to these symptoms is not ending a life but getting help. I have long argued that we should focus on giving all terminally ill people a good, compassionate death – not euthanasia or assisted suicide for a tiny minority.

I am talking about how long I *want* to live and the kind and amount of health care I will consent to after 75. Americans seem to be obsessed with exercising, doing mental puzzles, consuming various juice and protein

concoctions, sticking to strict diets, and popping vitamins and supplements, all in a valiant effort to cheat death and prolong life as long as possible. This has become so pervasive that it now defines a cultural type: what I call the American immortal.

I reject this aspiration. I think this manic desperation to endlessly extend life is misguided and potentially destructive. For many reasons, 75 is a pretty good age to aim to stop.

What are those reasons? Let's begin with demography. We are growing old, and our older years are not of high quality. Since the mid-19th century, Americans have been living longer. In 1900, the life expectancy of an average American at birth was approximately 47 years. By 1930, it was 59.7; by 1960, 69.7; by 1990, 75.4. Today, a newborn can expect to live about 79 years. (On average, women live longer than men. In the United States, the gap is about five years. According to the National Vital Statistics Report, life expectancy for American males born in 2011 is 76.3, and for females it is 81.1.)

In the early part of the 20th century, life expectancy increased as vaccines, antibiotics, and better medical care saved more children from premature death and effectively treated infections. Once cured, people who had been sick largely returned to their normal, healthy lives without residual disabilities. Since 1960, however, increases in longevity have been achieved mainly by extending the lives of people over 60. Rather than saving more young people, we are stretching out old age.

The American immortal desperately wants to believe in the "compression of morbidity." Developed in 1980 by James F. Fries, now a professor emeritus of medicine at Stanford, this theory postulates that as we extend our life

spans into the 80s and 90s, we will be living healthier lives – more time before we have disabilities, and fewer disabilities overall. The claim is that with longer life, an ever smaller proportion of our lives will be spent in a state of decline.

Compression of morbidity is a quintessentially American idea. It tells us exactly what we want to believe: that we will live longer lives and then abruptly die with hardly any aches, pains, or physical deterioration – the morbidity traditionally associated with growing old. It promises a kind of fountain of youth until the ever-receding time of death. It is this dream – or fantasy – that drives the American immortal and has fueled interest and investment in regenerative medicine and replacement organs.

But as life has gotten longer, has it gotten healthier? Is 70 the new 50?

Not quite. It is true that compared with their counterparts 50 years ago, seniors today are less disabled and more mobile. But over recent decades, increases in longevity seem to have been accompanied by increases in disability – not decreases. For instance, using data from the National Health Interview Survey, Eileen Crimmins, a researcher at the University of Southern California, and a colleague assessed physical functioning in adults, analyzing whether people could walk a quarter of a mile; climb 10 stairs; stand or sit for two hours; and stand up, bend, or kneel without using special equipment. The results show that as people age, there is a progressive erosion of physical functioning. More important, Crimmins found that between 1998 and 2006, the loss of functional mobility in the elderly increased. In 1998, about 28 percent of American men 80 and older had a functional limitation; by 2006, that figure was nearly 42 percent. And for women the result was even worse: more than half of women 80 and older had a functional limitation.

Crimmins’s conclusion: There was an “increase in the life expectancy with disease and a decrease in the years without disease. The same is true for functioning loss, an increase in expected years unable to function.”

This was confirmed by a recent worldwide assessment of “healthy life expectancy” conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. The researchers included not just physical but also mental disabilities such as depression and dementia. They found not a compression of morbidity but in fact an expansion – an “increase in the absolute number of years lost to disability as life expectancy rises.”

How can this be? My father illustrates the situation well. About a decade ago, just shy of his 77th birthday, he began having pain in his abdomen. Like every good doctor, he kept denying that it was anything important. But after three weeks with no improvement, he was persuaded to see his physician. He had in fact had a heart attack, which led to a cardiac catheterization and ultimately a bypass. Since then, he has not been the same. Once the prototype of a hyperactive Emanuel, suddenly his walking, his talking, his humor got slower. Today he can swim, read the newspaper, needle his kids on the phone, and still live with my mother in their own house. But everything seems sluggish. Although he didn’t die from the heart attack, no one would say he is living a vibrant life. When he discussed it with me, my father said, “I have slowed down tremendously. That is a fact. I no longer make rounds at the hospital or teach.” Despite this, he also said he was happy.

As Crimmins puts it, over the past 50 years, health care hasn’t slowed the aging process so much as it has slowed the dying process. And, as my father demonstrates, the

contemporary dying process has been elongated. Death usually results from the complications of chronic illness – heart disease, cancer, emphysema, stroke, Alzheimer’s, diabetes.

Take the example of stroke. The good news is that we have made major strides in reducing mortality from strokes. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of deaths from stroke declined by more than 20 percent. The bad news is that many of the roughly 6.8 million Americans who have survived a stroke suffer from paralysis or an inability to speak. And many of the estimated 13 million more Americans who have survived a “silent” stroke suffer from more subtle brain dysfunction such as aberrations in thought processes, mood regulation, and cognitive functioning. Worse, it is projected that over the next 15 years there will be a 50 percent increase in the number of Americans suffering from stroke-induced disabilities. Unfortunately, the same phenomenon is repeated with many other diseases.

So American immortals may live longer than their parents, but they are likely to be more incapacitated. Does that sound very desirable? Not to me.

The situation becomes of even greater concern when we confront the most dreadful of all possibilities: living with dementia and other acquired mental disabilities. Right now approximately 5 million Americans over 65 have Alzheimer’s; one in three Americans 85 and older has Alzheimer’s. And the prospect of that changing in the next few decades is not good. Numerous recent trials of drugs that were supposed to stall Alzheimer’s – much less reverse or prevent it – have failed so miserably that researchers are rethinking the whole disease paradigm that informed much of the research over the past few decades. Instead of

predicting a cure in the foreseeable future, many are warning of a tsunami of dementia – a nearly 300 percent increase in the number of older Americans with dementia by 2050.

Half of people 80 and older with functional limitations. A third of people 85 and older with Alzheimer’s. That still leaves many, many elderly people who have escaped physical and mental disability. If we are among the lucky ones, then why stop at 75? Why not live as long as possible?

Even if we aren’t demented, our mental functioning deteriorates as we grow older. Age-associated declines in mental-processing speed, working and long-term memory, and problem-solving are well established. Conversely, distractibility increases. We cannot focus and stay with a project as well as we could when we were young. As we move slower with age, we also think slower.

It is not just mental slowing. We literally lose our creativity. About a decade ago, I began working with a prominent health economist who was about to turn 80. Our collaboration was incredibly productive. We published numerous papers that influenced the evolving debates around health-care reform. My colleague is brilliant and continues to be a major contributor, and he celebrated his 90th birthday this year. But he is an outlier – a very rare individual.

American immortals operate on the assumption that they will be precisely such outliers. But the fact is that by 75, creativity, originality, and productivity are pretty much gone for the vast, vast majority of us. Einstein famously said, “A person who has not made his great contribution to science before the age of 30 will never do so.” He was extreme in his assessment. And wrong. Dean Keith Simonton, at the University of California at Davis, a luminary among

researchers on age and creativity, synthesized numerous studies to demonstrate a typical age-creativity curve: creativity rises rapidly as a career commences, peaks about 20 years into the career, at about age 40 or 45, and then enters a slow, age-related decline. There are some, but not huge, variations among disciplines. Currently, the average age at which Nobel Prize-winning physicists make their discovery – not get the prize – is 48. Theoretical chemists and physicists make their major contribution slightly earlier than empirical researchers do. Similarly, poets tend to peak earlier than novelists do. Simonton's own study of classical composers shows that the typical composer writes his first major work at age 26, peaks at about age 40 with both his best work and maximum output, and then declines, writing his last significant musical composition at 52. (All the composers studied were male.)

This age-creativity relationship is a statistical association, the product of averages; individuals vary from this trajectory. Indeed, everyone in a creative profession thinks they will be, like my collaborator, in the long tail of the curve. There are late bloomers. As my friends who enumerate them do, we hold on to them for hope. It is true, people can continue to be productive past 75 – to write and publish, to draw, carve, and sculpt, to compose. But there is no getting around the data. By definition, few of us can be exceptions. Moreover, we need to ask how much of what “Old Thinkers,” as Harvey C. Lehman called them in his 1953 *Age and Achievement*, produce is novel rather than reiterative and repetitive of previous ideas. The age-creativity curve – especially the decline – endures across cultures and throughout history, suggesting some deep underlying biological determinism probably related to brain plasticity.

We can only speculate about the biology. The connections between neurons are subject to an intense process of natural selection. The neural connections that are most heavily used are reinforced and retained, while those that are rarely, if ever, used atrophy and disappear over time. Although brain plasticity persists throughout life, we do not get totally rewired. As we age, we forge a very extensive network of connections established through a lifetime of experiences, thoughts, feelings, actions, and memories. We are subject to who we have been. It is difficult, if not impossible, to generate new, creative thoughts, because we don't develop a new set of neural connections that can supersede the existing network. It is much more difficult for older people to learn new languages. All of those mental puzzles are an effort to slow the erosion of the neural connections we have. Once you squeeze the creativity out of the neural networks established over your initial career, they are not likely to develop strong new brain connections to generate innovative ideas – except maybe in those Old Thinkers like my outlier colleague, who happen to be in the minority endowed with superior plasticity.

Maybe mental functions – processing, memory, problem-solving – slow at 75. Maybe creating something novel is very rare after that age. But isn't this a peculiar obsession? Isn't there more to life than being totally physically fit and continuing to add to one's creative legacy?

One university professor told me that as he has aged (he is 70) he has published less frequently, but he now contributes in other ways. He mentors students, helping them translate their passions into research projects and advising them on the balance of career and family. And people in other fields can do the same: mentor the next generation.

Mentorship is hugely important. It lets us transmit our collective memory and draw on the wisdom of elders. It is too often undervalued, dismissed as a way to occupy seniors who refuse to retire and who keep repeating the same stories. But it also illuminates a key issue with aging: the constricting of our ambitions and expectations.

We accommodate our physical and mental limitations. Our expectations shrink. Aware of our diminishing capacities, we choose ever more restricted activities and projects, to ensure we can fulfill them. Indeed, this constriction happens almost imperceptibly. Over time, and without our conscious choice, we transform our lives. We don't notice that we are aspiring to and doing less and less. And so we remain content, but the canvas is now tiny. The American immortal, once a vital figure in his or her profession and community, is happy to cultivate avocational interests, to take up bird watching, bicycle riding, pottery, and the like. And then, as walking becomes harder and the pain of arthritis limits the fingers' mobility, life comes to center around sitting in the den reading or listening to books on tape and doing crossword puzzles. And then ...

Maybe this is too dismissive. There is more to life than youthful passions focused on career and creating. There is posterity: children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

But here, too, living as long as possible has drawbacks we often won't admit to ourselves. I will leave aside the very real and oppressive financial and caregiving burdens that many, if not most, adults in the so-called sandwich generation are now experiencing, caught between the care of children and parents. Our living too long places real emotional weights on our progeny.

Unless there has been terrible abuse, no child wants his or

her parents to die. It is a huge loss at any age. It creates a tremendous, unfillable hole. But parents also cast a big shadow for most children. Whether estranged, disengaged, or deeply loving, they set expectations, render judgments, impose their opinions, interfere, and are generally a looming presence for even adult children. This can be wonderful. It can be annoying. It can be destructive. But it is inescapable as long as the parent is alive. Examples abound in life and literature: Lear, the quintessential Jewish mother, the Tiger Mom. And while children can never fully escape this weight even after a parent dies, there is much less pressure to conform to parental expectations and demands after they are gone.

Living parents also occupy the role of head of the family. They make it hard for grown children to become the patriarch or matriarch. When parents routinely live to 95, children must caretake into their own retirement. That doesn't leave them much time on their own – and it is all old age. When parents live to 75, children have had the joys of a rich relationship with their parents, but also have enough time for their own lives, out of their parents' shadows.

But there is something even more important than parental shadowing: memories. How do we want to be remembered by our children and grandchildren? We wish our children to remember us in our prime. Active, vigorous, engaged, animated, astute, enthusiastic, funny, warm, loving. Not stooped and sluggish, forgetful and repetitive, constantly asking "What did she say?" We want to be remembered as independent, not experienced as burdens.

At age 75 we reach that unique, albeit somewhat arbitrarily chosen, moment when we have lived a rich and complete life, and have hopefully imparted the right memories to our children. Living the American immortal's

dream dramatically increases the chances that we will not get our wish – that memories of vitality will be crowded out by the agonies of decline. Yes, with effort our children will be able to recall that great family vacation, that funny scene at Thanksgiving, that embarrassing faux pas at a wedding. But the most-recent years – the years with progressing disabilities and the need to make caregiving arrangements – will inevitably become the predominant and salient memories. The old joys have to be actively conjured up.

Of course, our children won't admit it. They love us and fear the loss that will be created by our death. And a loss it will be. A huge loss. They don't want to confront our mortality, and they certainly don't want to wish for our death. But even if we manage not to become burdens to them, our shadowing them until their old age is also a loss. And leaving them – and our grandchildren – with memories framed not by our vivacity but by our frailty is the ultimate tragedy.

Seventy-five. That is all I want to live. But if I am not going to engage in euthanasia or suicide, and I won't, is this all just idle chatter? Don't I lack the courage of my convictions?

No. My view does have important practical implications. One is personal and two involve policy.

Once I have lived to 75, my approach to my health care will completely change. I won't actively end my life. But I won't try to prolong it, either. Today, when the doctor recommends a test or treatment, especially one that will extend our lives, it becomes incumbent upon us to give a good reason why we don't want it. The momentum of medicine and family means we will almost invariably get it.

My attitude flips this default on its head. I take guidance from what Sir William Osler wrote in his classic turn-of-the-

century medical textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*: “Pneumonia may well be called the friend of the aged. Taken off by it in an acute, short, not often painful illness, the old man escapes those ‘cold gradations of decay’ so distressing to himself and to his friends.”

My Osler-inspired philosophy is this: At 75 and beyond, I will need a good reason to even visit the doctor and take any medical test or treatment, no matter how routine and painless. And that good reason is not “It will prolong your life.” I will stop getting any regular preventive tests, screenings, or interventions. I will accept only palliative – not curative – treatments if I am suffering pain or other disability.

This means colonoscopies and other cancer-screening tests are out – and before 75. If I were diagnosed with cancer now, at 57, I would probably be treated, unless the prognosis was very poor. But 65 will be my last colonoscopy. No screening for prostate cancer at any age. (When a urologist gave me a PSA test even after I said I wasn't interested and called me with the results, I hung up before he could tell me. He ordered the test for himself, I told him, not for me.) After 75, if I develop cancer, I will refuse treatment. Similarly, no cardiac stress test. No pacemaker and certainly no implantable defibrillator. No heart-valve replacement or bypass surgery. If I develop emphysema or some similar disease that involves frequent exacerbations that would, normally, land me in the hospital, I will accept treatment to ameliorate the discomfort caused by the feeling of suffocation, but will refuse to be hauled off.

What about simple stuff? Flu shots are out. Certainly if there were to be a flu pandemic, a younger person who has yet to live a complete life ought to get the vaccine or any antiviral drugs. A big challenge is antibiotics for pneumonia

or skin and urinary infections. Antibiotics are cheap and largely effective in curing infections. It is really hard for us to say no. Indeed, even people who are sure they don't want life-extending treatments find it hard to refuse antibiotics. But, as Osler reminds us, unlike the decays associated with chronic conditions, death from these infections is quick and relatively painless. So, no to antibiotics.

Obviously, a do-not-resuscitate order and a complete advance directive indicating no ventilators, dialysis, surgery, antibiotics, or any other medication – nothing except palliative care even if I am conscious but not mentally competent – have been written and recorded. In short, no life-sustaining interventions. I will die when whatever comes first takes me.

As for the two policy implications, one relates to using life expectancy as a measure of the quality of health care. Japan has the third-highest life expectancy, at 84.4 years (behind Monaco and Macau), while the United States is a disappointing No. 42, at 79.5 years. But we should not care about catching up with – or measure ourselves against – Japan. Once a country has a life expectancy past 75 for both men and women, this measure should be ignored. (The one exception is increasing the life expectancy of some subgroups, such as black males, who have a life expectancy of just 72.1 years. That is dreadful, and should be a major focus of attention.) Instead, we should look much more carefully at children's health measures, where the U.S. lags, and shamefully: in preterm deliveries before 37 weeks (currently one in eight U.S. births), which are correlated with poor outcomes in vision, with cerebral palsy, and with various problems related to brain development; in infant mortality (the U.S. is at 6.17 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, while Japan is at 2.13 and Norway is at 2.48); and in

adolescent mortality (where the U.S. has an appalling record – at the bottom among high-income countries).

A second policy implication relates to biomedical research. We need more research on Alzheimer's, the growing disabilities of old age, and chronic conditions – not on prolonging the dying process.

Many people, especially those sympathetic to the American immortal, will recoil and reject my view. They will think of every exception, as if these prove that the central theory is wrong. Like my friends, they will think me crazy, posturing – or worse. They might condemn me as being against the elderly.

Again, let me be clear: I am not saying that those who want to live as long as possible are unethical or wrong. I am certainly not scorning or dismissing people who want to live on despite their physical and mental limitations. I'm not even trying to convince anyone I'm right. Indeed, I often advise people in this age group on how to get the best medical care available in the United States for their ailments. That is their choice, and I want to support them.

And I am not advocating 75 as the official statistic of a complete, good life in order to save resources, ration health care, or address public-policy issues arising from the increases in life expectancy. What I am trying to do is delineate my views for a good life and make my friends and others think about how they want to live as they grow older. I want them to think of an alternative to succumbing to that slow constriction of activities and aspirations imperceptibly imposed by aging. Are we to embrace the "American immortal" or my "75 and no more" view?

I think the rejection of my view is literally natural. After all, evolution has inculcated in us a drive to live as long as possible. We are programmed to struggle to survive.

Consequently, most people feel there is something vaguely wrong with saying 75 and no more. We are eternally optimistic Americans who chafe at limits, especially limits imposed on our own lives. We are sure we are exceptional.

I also think my view conjures up spiritual and existential reasons for people to scorn and reject it. Many of us have suppressed, actively or passively, thinking about God, heaven and hell, and whether we return to the worms. We are agnostics or atheists, or just don't think about whether there is a God and why she should care at all about mere mortals. We also avoid constantly thinking about the purpose of our lives and the mark we will leave. Is making money, chasing the dream, all worth it? Indeed, most of us have found a way to live our lives comfortably without acknowledging, much less answering, these big questions on a regular basis. We have gotten into a productive routine that helps us ignore them. And I don't purport to have the answers.

But 75 defines a clear point in time: for me, 2032. It removes the fuzziness of trying to live as long as possible. Its specificity forces us to think about the end of our lives and engage with the deepest existential questions and ponder what we want to leave our children and grandchildren, our community, our fellow Americans, the world. The deadline also forces each of us to ask whether our consumption is worth our contribution. As most of us learned in college during late-night bull sessions, these questions foster deep anxiety and discomfort. The specificity of 75 means we can no longer just continue to ignore them and maintain our easy, socially acceptable agnosticism. For me, 18 more years with which to wade through these questions is preferable to years of trying to hang on to every additional day and forget the psychic pain they bring up, while enduring the physical

pain of an elongated dying process.

Seventy-five years is all I want to live. I want to celebrate my life while I am still in my prime. My daughters and dear friends will continue to try to convince me that I am wrong and can live a valuable life much longer. And I retain the right to change my mind and offer a vigorous and reasoned defense of living as long as possible. That, after all, would mean still being creative after 75. ♦

Side by...

Forgiveness in Families

by *Alice Munro*

I'VE OFTEN THOUGHT, suppose I had to go to a psychiatrist, and he would want to know about my family background, naturally, so I would have to start telling him about my brother, and he wouldn't even wait till I was finished, would he, the psychiatrist, he'd commit me.

I said that to Mother; she laughed. "You're hard on that boy, Val."

"Boy," I said. Man.

She laughed, she admitted it. "But remember," she said, "the Lord loves a lunatic."

"How do you know," I said, "seeing you're an atheist?"

Some things he couldn't help. Being born, for instance. He was born the week I started school, and how's that for timing? I was scared, it wasn't like now when the kids have been going to play-school and kindergarten for years. I was going to school for the first time and all the other kids had their mothers with them and where was mine? In the hospital having a baby. The embarrassment to me. There was a lot of shame about those things then.

It wasn't his fault getting born and it wasn't his fault throwing up at my wedding. Think of it. The floor, the table, he even managed to hit the cake. He was not drunk, as some people thought, he really did have some violent kind of flu, which Haro and I came down with, in fact, on our honey-

... by side

Családtagnak megbocsátjuk

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

GYAKRAN AZON GONDOLKODOM, ha felkeresnék egy pszichiátert, és ő a családomról faggatna, természetesen leg, kénytelen lennék az öcsémről is mesélni, és ő, a pszichiáter, anélkül, hogy bármi lényegeset mondanék, azonnal átlátna rajtam.

Ezt elmondtam anyámnak, de ő csak nevetett.

– Túl szigorú vagy a fiúhoz, Val.

– Fiú? – válaszoltam. – Meglett férfi.

Anyám elmosolyodott, de nem mondott ellent.

– Ám ne feledd – jegyezte meg –, az Úr kedveli a félnótásokat.

– Honnan tudod? – kérdeztem. – Ateista vagy.

Van, amiről valóban nem tehetett. Például, ahogy a világra jött. Azon a héten született, amikor először mentem iskolába. Jó kis időzítés! Be voltam ijedve; akkoriban nem volt divat, mint manapság, hogy a gyerekek bölcsődébe, óvodába járnak az iskolakezdés előtti években. Azon az első napon, amikor iskolába mentem, minden gyereket elkísért az anyukája, az anyém hol volt? Kórházban, éppen szült. Roppant kellemetlen. Akkoriban elég szégyellnivaló volt mindez.

Ahogy nem tehetett róla, mikor jött a világra, arról sem tehetett, hogy az esküvőmön elhányta magát. Gondolj bele: a földre, az asztalra, még a tortára is fröccsent. Nem ré-

moon. I never heard of anybody else with any kind of flu throwing up over a table with a lace cloth and silver candlesticks and wedding cake on it, but you could say it was bad luck; maybe everybody else when the need came on them was closer to a toilet. And everybody else might try a little harder, to hold back, they just might, because nobody else is quite so special, quite so center-of-the-universe, as my baby brother. Just call him a child of nature. That was what he called himself, later on.

I will skip over what he did between getting bony and throwing up at my wedding except to say that he had asthma and got to stay home from school weeks on end, listening to soap operas. Sometimes there was a truce between us, and I would get him to tell me what happened every day on "Big Sister" and "Road of Life" and the one with Gee-Gee and Papa David. He was very good at remembering all the characters and getting all the complications straight, I'll say that, and he did read a lot in Gateways to Bookland, that lovely set Mother bought for us and that he later sneaked out of the house and sold, for ten dollars, to a secondhand book dealer. Mother said he could have been brilliant at school if he wanted to be. That's a deep one, your brother, she used to say, he's got some surprises in store for us. She was right, he had.

He started staying home permanently in Grade Ten after a little problem of being caught in a cheating-ring that was getting math tests from some teacher's desk. One of the janitors was letting him back in the classroom after school because he said he was working on a special project. So he was, in his own way. Mother said he did it to make himself popular, because he had asthma and couldn't take part in sports.

Now. Jobs. The question comes up, what is such a person

szegségében, ahogy néhány vendég gondolta; valami erőszakos influenza kapta el, ami később Harót és engem is ágynak döntött a nászutunkon. Hallatlan, hogy valaki anynyira lebetegszik, hogy a csipketerítős asztalra okádjon, az ezüst gyertyatartó és az esküvői torta mellé. Talán csak az időzítés az oka. Esetleg mások közelebb ültek a mosdóhoz, amikor rájuk tört az inger. És talán mások megpróbálták visszatartani egy kicsit, mert senki sem olyan, mint ő, senki sem a világ közepe, mint a kisöcsém. Hívjuk a természet gyermekének. Legalábbis később így nevezete magát.

Nem részletezem, mi hogy volt a csecsemőkora és az esküvőm közötti években, legyen elég annyi, hogy az asztmája miatt sokszor hetekig nem ment iskolába, és amikor ottthon maradt, egész nap rádiójátékokat hallgatott. Néha szent volt köztünk a béke, ilyenkor elmesélte, mi történt a Big Sister vagy a Road of Life egy-egy epizódjában, Gigivel vagy Dávid papával. Űgyesen felismerte a szereplőket és megjegyezte a bonyodalom minden apró részletét, ezt el kell ismernem, és sokat forgatta a Könyvország kapui című sorozatot, amit Anya vett nekünk, de amit később elcsent otthonról, hogy eladja egy antikváriumnak, tíz dollárért. Anya azt mondta, kitűnő tanuló lehetne, ha érdekelné a tanulás. Van esze az öcsédnek, szokta mondogatni, meglátod, lesz még meglepetésben résziink. Ebben igaza lett.

Tizedikben már szinte egyfolytában otthon maradt, miután elkapták egy diákcsíny miatt: a matektanár asztaláról ellopták a teszteket. Az egyik takarítónak, aki visszaengedte az osztályba, azt hazudta, hogy szorgalmi feladatot véggez. Tulajdonképpen, sajátos módon csakugyan így volt. Anya mindezt azzal magyarázta, hogy az öcsém így törekszik népszerűvé válni, mivel az asztmája miatt nem sportolhat a többiekkel.

Aztán jöttek a munkahelyek. Felmerül a kérdés, mihez

as my brother – and I ought to give him a name at least, his name is Cam, for Cameron, Mother thought that would be a suitable name for a university president or honest tycoon (which was the sort of thing she planned for him to be) – what is he going to do, how is he going to make a living? Until recently the country did not pay you to sit on your uppers and announce that you had adopted a creative lifestyle. He got a job first as a movie usher. Mother got it for him, she knew the manager, it was the old International Theater over on Blake Street. He had to quit, though, because he got this darkness-phobia. All the people sitting in the dark he said gave him a crawly feeling, very peculiar. It only interfered with him working as an usher, it didn't interfere with him going to the movies on his own. He got very fond of movies. In fact, he spent whole days sitting in movie houses, sitting through every show twice then going to another theater and sitting through what was there. He had to do something with his time, because Mother and all of us believed he was working then in the office of the Greyhound Bus Depot. He went off to work at the right time every morning and came home at the right time every night, and he told all about the cranky old man in charge of the office and the woman with curvature of the spine who had been there since 1919 and how mad she got at the young girls chewing gum, oh, a lively story, it would have worked up to something as good as the soap operas if Mother hadn't phoned up to complain about the way they were withholding his pay check – due to a technical error in the spelling of his name, he said – and found out he'd quit in the middle of his second day.

Well. Sitting in movies was better than sitting in beer parlors, Mother said. At least he wasn't on the street getting in with criminal gangs. She asked him what his favorite

kezd az életben egy ilyen ember, mint az öcsém, de adjak neki nevet legalább: Cameron, röviden Cam. Anya úgy képzelte, ez a megfelelő név, ha egyetemi vezető vagy becsületes mágnás lesz, hisz ilyesmi karriert helyezett kilátásba az öcsém számára. Egészen az utóbbi időig az államnak nem volt szokása, hogy fizessen valakit, aki azt hirdeti magáról, hogy kreatív életformát folytat, de közben csak ül a babérajain. Először egy moziban dolgozott jegyszedőként. Anya szerezte neki az állást, ismerte a Blake Streeti régi Nemzetközi Filmszínház igazgatóját. De ezt az állást nemsokára ott kellett hagynia, mert fóbiái támadtak a sötétben. A teremben ülő közönség furcsa, hátborzongató érzéseket támasztott benne. Ám ezek az érzések csak jegyszedőként lepték meg; ha látogatóként ment moziba, nem zavarták. Nagyon megszerette a mozit. Egész napokat töltött az elsötétített teremben, végigült több előadást, aztán átment egy másik moziba. Valamit kellett kezdeni az idejével, mert Anya és mindenki azt hitte, hogy a Greyhound buszállomáson dolgozik. Rendes időben elment minden reggel, és este jött haza; még mesélt is a rozoga öregről, aki az irodát vezeti és a gerincferdüléssel asszonyról, aki már 1919 óta ott dolgozik, és hogy mennyire bosszantja a nőt, ha fiatal lányok rágógumiznak. Egész életteli történet, és idővel bizonyára a rádiójátékok szintjére fejlődik, csak hogy anyám egyszer odatelefonált, reklamálni akart, amiért visszatartják a fizetést – valami szimpla technikai hiba miatt, mondta az öcsém, elírták a nevét –, így tudtuk meg, hogy már a második napon felmondott.

Hát így. Még mindig jobb, ha moziban ül, mintha a sörözőket látogatná, mondta anyám. Legalább nem szúri össze a levet utcai bűnöző bandákkal. Anyám megkérdezte, melyik a kedvenc filmje. Azt mondta, a Hét testvér, hét mennyasszony. Látod, kommentálta anyám, a természet

movie was and he said Seven Brides for Seven Brothers. See, she said, he is interested in an outdoor life, he is not suited to office work. So she sent him to work for some cousins of hers who have a farm in the Fraser Valley. I should explain that my father, Cam's and mine, was dead by this time, he died away back when Cam was having asthma and listening to soap operas. It didn't make much difference, his dying because he worked as a conductor on the P.G.E. when it started at Squamish, and he lived part of the time in Lillooet. Nothing changed, Mother went on working at Eaton's as she always had, going across on the ferry and then on the bus; I got supper, she came trudging up the hill in the winter dark.

Cam took off from the farm, he complained that the cousins were religious and always after his soul. Mother could see his problem, she had after all brought him up to be a freethinker. He hitchhiked east. From time to time a letter came. A request for funds. He had been offered a job in northern Quebec if he could get the money together to get up there. Mother sent it. He sent word the job had folded, but he didn't send back the money. He and two friends were going to start a turkey farm. They sent us plans, estimates. They were supposed to be working on contract for the Purina Company, nothing could go wrong. The turkeys were drowned in a flood, after Mother had sent him money and we had too against our better judgment. Everywhere that boy hits turns into a disaster area, Mother said. If you read it in a book you wouldn't believe it, she said. It's so terrible it's funny.

She knew. I used to go over to see her on Wednesday afternoon – her day off – pushing the stroller with Karen in it, and later Tommy in it and Karen walking beside, up Lonsdale and down King's Road, and what would we always

érdekl. A hivatali munka nem neki való. Így aztán anyám megszervezte, hogy valamelyik unokatestvére farmján, a Fraser völgyben kaphasson munkát. Azt hiszem, ideje megemlítenem, hogy apánk ekkor már rég meghalt, még akkoriban, amikor Cam az asztmája miatt otthon maradt az iskolából és rádiójátékokat hallgatott. Halálát szinte alig érzékeltük, mert a squamishi vasútvonal megnyitása után kaulauzként dolgozott és Lillooetban lakott. A halála után semmi sem változott körülöttünk; Anya továbbra is az Eaton's áruházban dolgozott, komppal járt át az öböl túloldalára, aztán buszra ült. Én készítettem a vacsorát, anyám télen nehezen vánszorgott fel a hegyre a korán leszállt sötétben.

Cam a farmot is otthagya, panaszkodott, hogy hitbuzgó unokatestvérei állandóan az ő lelkét akarják megváltani. Anyánk megértette a problémát, végül is ő nevelt belőlünk szabadgondolkodót. Aztán az öcsém stoppal keletre ment. Időről időre levél jött tőle, általában pénzt kért. Valaki állást ajánlott neki Quebecben, északon. Bárcsak össze tudná szedni az útiköltség árát. Anyám megküldte neki. Aztán üzenet érkezett, hogy az állás terve kútba esett, de a pénzt nem küldte vissza. Két barátjával pulykafarmot akartak létesíteni. Elküldte a terveket, a becsült kiadások részleteit. A Purina állateledel-gyártó cégnek fognak bedolgozni, ez a siker biztosítéka. De miután anyám, sőt mi is – minden meggyőződésünk ellenére – megküldtük neki a kívánt összeget, kiderült, hogy a pulykák egy árvíz alkalmával elpusztultak. Ez a fiú bármihez nyúl, balul üt ki, mondta anyám. Ha egy regényben olvasnám, nem hinném el. Annyira borzasztó, hogy már mulatságos, tette hozzá.

Ő tudja. Szerda délutánonként, a szabadnapján látogattam meg mindig, babakocsiban feltoltam Karent a meredek Lonsdale Avenue-n, aztán leereszkedtünk a King's

end up talking about? That boy and I, we are getting a divorce, she said. I am definitely going to write him off. What good will he ever be until he stops relying on me, she asked. I kept my mouth shut, more or less. She knew my opinion. But she ended up every time saying, "He was a nice fellow to have around the house, though. Good company. That boy could always make me laugh."

Or, "He had a lot to contend with, his asthma and no dad. He never did intentionally hurt a soul."

"One good thing he did," she said, "you could really call it a good turn. That girl."

Referring to the girl who came and told us she had been engaged to him, in Hamilton, Ontario, until he told her he could never get married because he had just found out there was hereditary fatal kidney disease in his family. He wrote her a letter. And she came looking for him to tell him it didn't matter. Not at all a bad-looking girl. She worked for the Bell Telephone. Mother said it was a lie told out of kindness, to spare her feelings when he didn't want to marry her. I said it was a kindness, anyway, because she would have been supporting him for the rest of her life.

Though it might have eased things up a bit on the rest of us.

But that was then and now is now and as we all know times have changed. Cam is finding it easier. He lives at home, off and on, has for a year and a half. His hair is thin in front, not surprising in a man thirty-four years of age, but shoulder-length behind, straggly, graying. He wears a sort of rough brown robe that looks as if it might be made out of a sack (is that what sackcloth is supposed to be, I said to Haro, I wouldn't mind supplying the ashes), and hanging down on his chest he has all sorts of chains, medallions, crosses, elk's teeth or whatnot. Rope sandals on his feet.

Roadon, később Tommyval a babakocsiban, Karen pedig mellettünk totyogva, és kiről beszélünk állandóan? Az a fiú meg én: elválnak útjaink, mondta anyám. Mi lesz így belőle, ha folyton csak rám támaszkodik? Most már végérvényesen leírom. Befogtam a szám, többé-kevésbé. Anyám ügyis tudta, mit gondolok. De a végén mindig ugyanúgy zárta le a témát: – Azért míg itthon volt, örültem a társaságának. Betyár fiú, mindig megnevettetett.

Vagy: – Annyi mindennel meg kellett birkóznia. Az asztmája, aztán meg, hogy apa nélkül nőtt fel. Soha egy lelket meg nem bántott volna szándékosan.

– Egyvalamit nem lehet tőle elvitatni – jegyezte meg anyám. – Azzal a lánnyal legalább lovagiasan bánt.

Arra a lányra utalt, aki egy nap beállított hozzánk és kijelentette, hogy az öcsém eljegyezte Hamiltonban, Ontárióban, de bevallotta neki, hogy soha nem házasodhatnak össze, mert most tudta meg, hogy egy bizonyos öröklött és halálos kimenetelű vesebetegségben szenved. Az öcsém ezt levélben tudatta a lánnyal, aki rögtön elutazott hozzánk, hogy megnyugtassa az öcsémet, a betegsége nem akadály. A lány ráadásul elég csinos volt. A Bell telefontársaságnál dolgozott. Anyám úgy tartotta, az öcsém pusztán figyelmességéből hazudott, nem akarta megbántani a lányt azzal, hogy nem veszi feleségül. Az öcsém részéről ez csupán anynyiban figyelmesség, mondtam, hogy így megkímélte a lányt attól, hogy egész életében gondoskodnia kelljen róla.

Jóllehet a házasság kissé megkönnyítette volna mindannyiunk életét.

De a múltat nem lehet megváltoztatni, az idők változnak. Camnek már könnyebb, mindenesetre. Másfél éve újra otthon él, helyel-közzel. A homloka fölött megritkult a haja, egy harmincnégy éves férfinél ebben nincs semmi meglepő, de hátul a válláig ér, zilált és őszül. Durva barna

Some friend of his makes them. He collects welfare. Nobody asks him to work. Who could be so crude? If he has to write down his occupation he writes priest.

It's true. There is a whole school of them, calling themselves priests, and they have a house over in Kitsilano, Cam stays there too sometimes. They're in competition with the Hare Krishna bunch, only these ones don't chant, they just walk around smiling. He has developed this voice I can't stand, a very thin, sweet voice, all on one level. It makes me want to stand in front of him and say, "There's an earthquake in Chile, two hundred thousand people just died, they've burned up another village in Vietnam, famine as usual in India." Just to see if he'd keep saying, "Ve-ery nice, ve-ery ni-ice," that sweet way. He won't eat meat, of course, he eats whole-grain cereals and leafy vegetables. He came into the kitchen where I was slicing beets – beets being forbidden, a root vegetable – and, "I hope you understand that you're committing murder," he said.

"No," I said, "but I'll give you sixty seconds to get out of here or I may be."

So as I say he's home part of the time now and he was there on the Monday night when Mother got sick. She was vomiting. A couple of days before this he had started her on a vegetarian diet – she was always promising him she'd try it – and he told her she was vomiting up all the old poisons stored up in her body from eating meat and sugar and so on. He said it was a good sign, and when she had it all vomited out she'd feel better. She kept vomiting, and she didn't feel better, but he had to go out. Monday nights is when they have the weekly meeting at the priests' house, where they chant and burn incense or celebrate the black mass, for all I know. He stayed out most of the night, and when he got home he found Mother unconscious on the

köpenyt visel, ami úgy néz ki, mintha zsákvászonból lenne – ha ilyen a zsákruha, mondtam Harónak, szívesen hintenék hamut fejére –, a mellén meg mindenféle láncot, medált, keresztet, jávorszarvasfogat, miegymást. Lábbeliként egy barátja által készített fonott szandálban jár. Szociális segélyen él, senki nem kéri tőle számon, miért nem dolgozik. Ki lenne oly faragatlan? Ha egy úrlapra beírja a foglalkozását, azt írja: pap.

És csakugyan, egész népes tábor veszi körül, mindannyian papnak hívják magukat, a Kitsilano-öbölben van egy házuk, néha Cam is ott alszik. A krishnással konkurálnak, csak ők nem énekelnek: szüntelenül mosolyogva járnak-kelelnek. A hanghordozása, amit felvett, az a vékony, édeskés, monoton alaphang, egyenesen idegesítő. Néha kedvem lenne oda állni elé és azt mondani: – Chilében földrengés pusztított, kétszáz ezer ember meghalt, Vietnámban egymás falvait égeti fel a nép, Indiában éhínség dúl, mint mindig.

Csak hogy halljam, ahogy azon az édeskedő hangján reagál mindenre: – Nagy-szerű. Na-gyon ö-rülök.

Természetesen nem fogyaszt húst, teljes kiőrlésű müzliket és leveles zöldséget eszik csupán. Egyszer bejött a konyhába, épp céklát pucoltam, a cékla mint gumós növény, tiltott, és azt mondta: – Remélem felfogod, hogy gyilkosságot követsz el.

– Nem hinném – feleltem –, hacsak egy pillanat alatt el nem takarodsz a szemem előtt.

Tehát mint mondtam, az öcsém ideje egy részét otthon töltötte. Azon a hétfő délután is otthon volt, amikor Anya rosszul lett. Hányt. Néhány nappal korábban állt ő is át a vegetáriánus étkezésre; örökké ígérgette az öcsémnek, hogy egyszer megpróbálja. A rosszulletre az öcsém csak annyit mondott, hogy a hús- és cukorfogyasztás következ-

bathroom floor.

He got on the phone and phoned me.

“I think you better come over here and see if you can help Mom, Val.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

“She’s not feeling very well.”

“What’s the matter with her? Put her on the phone.”

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

I swear he tittered. “Well I’m afraid she’s passed out.”

I called the ambulance and sent them for her, that was how she got to the hospital, five o’clock in the morning. I called her family doctor, he got over there, and he got Dr. Ellis Bell, one of the best-known heart men in the city, because that was what they had decided it was, her heart. I got dressed and woke Haro and told him and then I drove myself over to the Lions Gate Hospital. They wouldn’t let me in till ten o’clock. They had her in Intensive Care. I sat outside Intensive Care in their slick little awful waiting room. They had red slipper chairs, cheap covering, and a stand full of pebbles with green plastic leaves growing up. I sat there hour after hour and read *The Reader’s Digest*. The jokes. Thinking this is how it is, this is it, really, she’s dying. Now, this moment, behind those doors, dying. Nothing stops or holds off for it the way you somehow and against all your sense believe it will. I thought about Mother’s life, the part of it I knew. Going to work every day, first on the ferry then on the bus. Shopping at the old Red-and-White then at the new Safeway – new, fifteen years old! Going down to the Library one night a week, taking me with her, and we would come home on the bus with our load of books and a bag of grapes we bought at the Chinese place, for a treat. Wednesday afternoon too when my kids were small and I went over

tében a gyomorban felhalmozódott mérgeket öklendezi ki. Azt mondta, ez jó jel, és ha megszabadul az összes méregtől, jobban fogja érezni magát. Anyám egyre csak okádott, nem lett jobban, de az öcsém kénytelen volt elmenni otthonról. Hétfő esténként rendszeres összejövetelet tartanak a papok házában, énekelnek, füstölőt égetnek, fekete misét mondanak, tudom is én. Az éjszaka nagy részét így nem otthon töltötte, és amikor hazaért, Anyát a fürdőszoba kövén kiterülve találta, öntudatlan állapotban.

Odament a telefonhoz és engem hívott.

– Val, azt hiszem, jobb, ha átjössz, és megnézed, mit lehet kezdeni Anyával.

– Mi van vele?

– Nem érzi magát túl jól.

– Mi a baja? Add a telefonhoz!

– Az nem fog menni.

– Hogy-hogy nem?

Esküszöm, úgy hallottam, mintha visszafojtottan kuncogna magában: – Nos, azt hiszem, elájult.

Sürgősen hívtam a mentőket, így került anyám kórházba, hajnali ötkor. Aztán telefonáltam a házi orvosának, ő értesítette Bell doktort, a város egyik legjobb szív-specialistáját, mert úgy döntöttek, anyámnak a szívével vannak problémái. Felöltöztem, felkeltettem Harót, elmondtam neki, mi történt, aztán kocsival én is a Lions Gate kórházba siettem. Tíz óra előtt be se engedtek hozzá. Az Intenzív osztályon feküdt, én a tip-top kis váróban ücsörögtem, a székről állandóan félrecsúszott az olcsó huzat, egy virágállványon zöld műanyag levelek bújtak elő a kavicsok közül. Órákig ültem várakozva, a *Reader’s Digest* egyik számát olvastam. Főleg a vicceket. Arra gondoltam, ez van, igazán nem tudok mit tenni, anyám haldoklik. Most, e pillanatban, csak egy ajtó választ el tőle. Semmi sem állíthatja meg vagy

there to drink coffee and she rolled us cigarettes on that contraption she had. And I thought, all these things don't seem that much like life, when you're doing them, they're just what you do, how you fill up your days, and you think all the time something is going to crack open, and you'll find yourself, then you'll find yourself, in life. It's not even that you particularly want this to happen, this cracking open, you're comfortable enough the way things are, but you do expect it. Then you're dying, Mother is dying, and it's just the same plastic chairs and plastic plants and ordinary day outside with people getting groceries and what you've had is all there is, and going to the Library, just a thing like that, coming back up the hill on the bus with books and a bag of grapes seems now worth wanting, O God doesn't it, you'd break your heart wanting back there.

When they let me in to see her she was bluish-gray in the face and her eyes were not all-the-way closed, but they had rolled up, the slit that was open showed the whites. She always looked terrible with her teeth out, anyway, wouldn't let us see her. Cam teased her vanity. They were out now. So all the time, I thought, all the time even when she was young it was in her that she was going to look like this.

They didn't hold out hope. Haro came and took a look at her and put his arm around my shoulders and said, "Val, you'll have to be prepared." He meant well but I couldn't talk to him. It wasn't his mother and he couldn't remember anything. That wasn't his fault but I didn't want to talk to him, I didn't want to listen to him telling me I better be prepared. We went and ate something in the hospital cafeteria.

"You better phone Cam," Haro said.

"Why?"

"He'll want to know."

"Why do you think he'll want to know? He left her alone

háríthatja el a bajt, ahogy az ember valahogy meggyőződése ellenére mindig reméli. Eltöprengtem anyám életén, legalábbis a számomra ismert részleteken. Ahogy munkába jár. Először komppal, aztán buszra ül. Ahogy a régi boltban, aztán az új Safewayben vásárol. Új!? Tizenöt éve megvan. Ahogy heti rendszerességgel leereszkedik velem a hegyről a könyvtárba, busszal jövünk haza, könyvekkel felpakolva és egy zacskó szőlővel, amit a kínainál vettünk, jutalomfalatnak. Szerda délutánonként, amíg a gyerekek kicsik voltak, gyakran átmentem hozzá. Kávétunk, ő meg azzal a fura szerkentyűjével cigarettát sodort. Arra gondoltam, mindez nem nagybetűs ÉLET. Amikor az ember épp a közepén tart, éli az életét, teszi a dolgát, kitölti a napokat, és abban reménykedik, hogy majd valami egyszer csak megnyílik előtte és minden a helyére kerül, az élete egyenesbe ér. Még csak nem is az, hogy vágyik rá, erre a megnyíló lehetőségre, minden kényelmes úgy, ahogy van, de számít rá. Aztán elközeleg a halál pillanata, Anya haldoklik, és mindenki ugyanabban a műanyag székekben ül, a műanyag virágok ugyanazok, hétköznapi van, az emberek vásárolni mennek, és csak ennyi jutott, mentek a könyvtárba, hazafelé buszon, könyvekkel, szőlővel, és hirtelen az ilyen apróságok nagyon hiányoznak, te jóisten, mennyire hiányoznak, bármit megadnál érte, csak hogy minden újra a régi legyen.

Amikor végre bemehettem hozzá, az arcát kékesszürkének láttam, a szemei félig nyitva, de a pupillája fennakadt, a szemhéj alatt csak a szeme fehérje látszott. És amúgy is, szörnyen nézett ki a műfogsora nélkül. Sosem engedte, hogy így lássuk. Cam ugratta, hogy hiú. Most, hogy a műfogsora nélkül láttam, az jutott eszembe, ez mindvégig benne rejlett, már fiatal korában is benne rejlett, hogy egyszer így fog kinézni.

last night and he didn't know enough to get an ambulance when he came in and found her this morning."

"Just the same. He has a right. Maybe you ought to tell him to get over here."

"He is probably busy this moment preparing to give her a hippie funeral."

But Haro persuaded me as he always can and I went and phoned. No answer. I felt better because I had phoned, and justified in what I had said because of Cam not being in. I went back and waited, by myself.

About seven o'clock that night Cam turned up. He was not alone. He had brought along a tribe of co-priests, I suppose they were, from that house. They all wore the same kind of outfit he did, the brown sacking nightgown and the chains and crosses and holy hardware, they all had long hair, they were all a good many years younger than Cam, except for one old man, really old, with a curly gray beard and bare feet – in March, bare feet – and no teeth. I swear this old man didn't have a clue what was going on. I think they picked him up down by the Salvation Army and put that outfit on him because they needed an old man for a kind of mascot, or extra holiness, or something.

Cam said, "This is my sister Valerie. This is Brother Michael. This is Brother John, this is Brother Louis." Etc., etc.

"They haven't said anything to give me hope, Cam. She is dying."

"We hope not," said Cam with his secret smile. "We spent the day working for her."

"Do you mean praying?" I said.

"Work is a better word to describe it than praying, if you don't understand what it is."

Well of course, I never understand.

"Real praying is work, believe me," says Cam and they all

Az orvosok nem sok jóval biztattak. Haro is bejött, egy pillantást vetett anyámra, majd a vállamra tette a kezét és azt mondta: – Val, készülj el a legrosszabbra!

Jót akart, de nem tudtam erre mit mondani. Nem az ő anyjáról volt szó, őt nem terhelték az emlékek. Nem róhatom ezt fel neki hibaként, de nem akartam vele beszélgetni. Nem akartam újra hallani tőle, hogy el kell készülnöm a legrosszabbra. A kórházi büfében ettünk valamit.

– Fel kéne hívnod Camet – mondta Haro.

– Minek?

– Lehet, hogy kíváncsi, mi történik.

– Honnan veszed, hogy kíváncsi? Este magára hagyta anyánkat, és még annyi esze sem volt, hogy hívja a mentőket, amikor hazajött és rátalált hajnalban.

– Akkor is. Joga van mindenről tudni. Talán szólhatsz neki, hogy jöjjön be meglátogatni.

– Jelenleg feltehetőleg éppen a hippie temetést készíti elő.

De Haro sikerült meggyőzzön, ahogy mindig, és megkerestem a telefont. Kicsöngött, nem vették fel. Ettől jobban éreztem magam, önigazolást nyújtott, hogy megpróbáltam telefonálni, de Cam nem volt otthon. Visszamentem az osztályra, és egymagamban várakoztam.

Este hét körül megjelent Cam. Nem egyedül jött. Néhány paptársa kísérte, gondolom, abból a törzsi házból. Mindannyian ugyanolyan ruházatot viseltek, mint Cam, barna zsákvászon köpenyt, láncokat, keresztek, szent vas- és fémárut, mindnek hosszú haja volt, és egyetlen kivétellel mindegyikük jóval fiatalabb volt mint Cam. Az egyetlen kivétel egy nagyon idős, bozontos ősz szakállú, fogatlan öreg volt, mezítláb – márciusban. Lefogadom, az öregnek sejtelve sem volt, mi történik körülötte. Gondolom, az Üdvhadsereg hajléktalanjai között szedték fel, és

smile at me, his way. They can't keep still, like children who have to go to the bathroom they're weaving and jiggling and doing little steps.

"Now where's her room?" says Cam in a practical tone of voice.

I thought of Mother dying and through that slit between her lids – who knows, maybe she can see from time to time – seeing this crowd of dervishes celebrating around her bed. Mother who lost her religion when she was thirteen and went to the Unitarian Church and quit when they had the split about crossing God out of the hymns (she was for it), Mother having to spend her last conscious minutes wondering what had happened, if she was transported back in history to where loonies cavorted around in their crazy ceremonies, trying to sort her last reasonable thoughts out in the middle of their business.

Thank God the nurse said no. The intern was brought and he said no. Cam didn't insist, he smiled and nodded at them as if they were granting permission and then he brought the troupe back into the waiting room and there, right before my eyes, they started. They put the old man in the center, sitting down with his head bowed and his eyes shut – they had to tap him and remind him how to do that – and they squatted in a rough sort of circle round him, facing in and out, in and out, alternately. Then, eyes closed, they started swaying back and forth moaning some words very softly, only not the same words, it sounded as if each one of them had got different words, and not in English of course but Swahili or Sanskrit or something. It got louder, gradually it got louder, a pounding singsong, and as it did they rose to their feet, all except the old man who stayed where he was and looked as if he might have gone to sleep, sitting, and they began a shuffling kind of dance where they stood,

ráadták a maguk viseletét, mert szükségük volt egy ilyen kabalafigurára a hatás vagy a szentség fokozása érdekében.

Cam mindenkit bemutatott: – Ez itt a nővérem, Valerie. Ez itt Mihály testvér, ő János testvér, Lajos testvér.

Satöbbi, satöbbi.

– Semmi jóval nem biztatnak, Cam. Anya haldoklik.

– Reméljük, nem – mondta Cam titokzatos mosollyal. – Egész nap rá koncentráltunk.

– Úgy érted, imádkoztatok? – kérdeztem.

– A koncentráció jobban kifejezi a lényegét, mint ha azt mondanánk, imádkoztunk. Ha valaki nem értené, mit csinálunk.

Persze. Én soha nem értettem.

– Az imádság valójában koncentráció, hidd el – mondta Cam, és a többiek mind úgy mosolyogtak rám, ahogy az öcsém szokott. Olyanok voltak, mint a gyerekek, akiknek vécére kell menni, nem tudnak megülni egy helyben, mocorognak, tekergőznek, sasszéznak.

– No, akkor melyik a szobája? – kérdezte Cam gyakorlatias hangon.

Arra gondoltam, anyám haldoklik, de ki tudja, résnyire nyitott szemével talán meglátja ezeket a derviseket az ágya körül, ahogy őt ünneplik. Tizenhárom éves korában kiábrándult a vallásból. Az unitárius templomba járt, de amikor két pártra szakadtak azon a kérdésen, hogy kihúzzák-e Isten nevét az énekekből, anyám ezt a nézetet képviselte, otthagya őket. És talán utolsó tudatos perceiben azon fog tűnődni, miképpen került vissza a múltba, és kik ezek a fél-nótások, akik szertartásosan ugrándoznak körülötte. Hogy utolsó racionális gondolataival ezt az örületet próbálja megfejteni?!

Az ápolónő, hála istennek, nemet mondott. Hívták az ügyeletes orvost, de ő sem engedélyezte. Cam nem erőltette

clapping, not very well in time. They did this for a long while, and the noise they were making, though it was not terribly loud, attracted the nurses from their station and nurses' aids and orderlies and a few people like me who were waiting, and nobody seemed to know what to do, because it was so unbelievable, so crazy in that ordinary little waiting room. Everybody just stared as if they were asleep and dreaming and expecting to wake up. Then a nurse came out of Intensive Care and said, "We can't have this disturbance. What do you think you're doing here?"

She took hold of one of the young ones and shook him by the shoulder, else she couldn't have got anybody to stop and pay attention.

"We're working to help a woman who's very sick," he told her.

"I don't know what you call working, but you're not helping anybody. Now I'm asking you to clear out of here. Excuse me. I'm not asking. I'm telling."

"You're very mistaken if you think the tones of our voices are hurting or disturbing any sick person. This whole ceremony is pitched at a level which will reach and comfort the unconscious mind and draw the demonic influences out of the body. It's a ceremony that goes back five thousand years."

"Good Lord," said the nurse, looking stupefied as well she might. "Who are these people?"

I had to go and enlighten her, telling her that it was my brother and what you might call his friends, and I was not in on their ceremony. I asked about Mother, was there any change.

"No change," she said. "What do we have to do to get them out of here?"

"Turn the hose on them," one of the orderlies said, and

a dolgot, mosolygott, és úgy tett, mintha ő tenne engedelményeket, aztán összeszedte az embereit és a várószobában, a szemem előtt, nekifogtak. Az öreg középre ült, és behunyt szemmel, amire apró vállveregetéssel kellett emlékeztetni, lehajtotta a fejét, a többiek pedig leguggoltak körülötte, felváltva, egyikük kifelé, minden második a kör közepe felé fordulva. Aztán lehunyt szemmel ringatózni kezdtek, előre-hátra. Halk, puha szavakat mormoltak, de mindenki mást, és persze nem angol szavakat, hanem szanszkrit, szuahéli vagy valami ilyesmi nyelven. A kántálás fokozatosan erősödött, és eközben mindenki felemelkedett, kivéve az öreget, aki ülve maradt, és úgy tűnt, elaludt. A többiek csoszogó táncba kezdtek és tapsoltak, elég ütemtelenül. Ezt viszonylag sokáig tehették, mert nem voltak túl hangosak, de végül valaki meghallotta a nővérpultnál, és ápolónők, segédápolók és egyéb hozzám hasonló várakozók kezdtek összeseregleni, de senki nem tudta, mi a teendő ilyen esetben, annyira hihetetlen és örült volt az egész, abban a hétköznapi kis várószobában. Mindenki csak maga elé meredt, mintha elaludt volna, és várná, hogy valaki ébressze fel. Aztán az egyik Intenzív osztályos ápolónő kifakadt: – Mégis, mit gondolnak, hol vannak? Ne csináljanak rendbontást.

Az egyik fiatalt megragadta a vállánál, megrázta, hogy a táncolók figyelmét magára hívja.

– Azon dolgozunk, hogy meggyógyítsunk egy nagyon beteg asszonyt – mondta az, akit megrázott.

– Nem tudom, mit hív ezen munkának, de ezzel senkin nem segít. Megkérem, hagyják el a helyiséget. Bocsánat, nem kérem. Utasítom.

– Téved, ha azt hiszi, hogy az énekünk zavarja a betegeket vagy fájdalmat okoz nekik. Az egész szertartás azon a hangmagasságon folyik, amely a tudatalattit szólítja meg,

all this time, the dance, or ceremony, never stopped, and the one who had stopped and done the explaining went back to dancing too, and I said to the nurse, "I'll phone in to see how she is, I'm going home for a little while." I walked out of the hospital and found to my surprise that it was dark. The whole day in there, dark to dark. In the parking lot I started to cry. Cam has turned this into a circus for his own benefit, I said to myself, and said it out loud when I got home.

Haro made me a drink.

"It'll probably get into the papers," I said. "Cam's chance for fame."

Haro phoned the hospital to see if there was any news and they said there wasn't. "Did they have – was there any difficulty with some young people in the waiting room this evening? Did they leave quietly?" Haro is ten years older than I am, a cautious man, too patient with everybody. I used to think he was sometimes giving Cam money I didn't know about.

"They left quietly," he said. "Don't worry about the papers. Get some sleep."

I didn't mean to but I fell asleep on the couch, after the drink and the long day. I woke up with the phone ringing and day lightening the room. I stumbled into the kitchen dragging the blanket Haro had put over me and saw by the clock on the wall it was a quarter to six. She's gone, I thought.

It was her own doctor.

He said he had encouraging news. He said she was much better this morning.

I dragged over a chair and collapsed in it, both arms and my head too down on the kitchen counter. I came back on the phone to hear him saying she was still in a critical phase

és kiúzi a démonikus erőket a testből. Ilyen szertartásokat már ötezer éve gyakorolnak.

– Te jó ég, kik ezek az emberek? – nézett körül a nővér megrökönyödve.

Fel kellett világosítanom. Kénytelen voltam elmondani, hogy egyikük az öcsém, a többiek, úgymond, a barátai, és hogy nekem semmi közöm a szertartáshoz. Megkérdeztem, változott-e anyám állapota.

– Semmi hírem – válaszolt az ápolónő –, de miképpen szabadulhatnánk meg ezektől?

– Hidegzuhany, az kell nekik – mondta az egyik beteg-hordozó.

Mindeközben a tánc folytatódott, még az a fiatalember is, aki a magyarázatot nyújtotta, és addig megállt, újra táncolt.

– Majd telefonálok. Egy kis időre hazamegyek – mondtam az ápolónőnek.

Amikor a kórházat elhagytam, meglepődve láttam, hogy kint már besötétedett. Az egész napot az épületben töltöttem, reggel még sötétben érkeztem, és most sötétben megyek haza. A parkolóban elfogott a sírás. Cam az egészről cirkuszi jelenetet rendezett, gondoltam magamban, aztán később hangosan is kimondtam, otthon. A saját hasznára.

Haro csinált egy italt.

– Biztos bekerül az újságokba – mondtam. – Cam így akar hírnévre szert tenni.

Haro felhívta a kórházat, van-e valami hír. Nem volt.

– Nem volt további probléma a fiatalokkal a váróban? Békésen távoztak?

Haro tíz évvel idősebb nálam, megfontolt, türelmes ember. Néha úgy képzeltem, a tudtom nélkül pénzeket ad Camnek.

– Csendben elvonultak – mondta aztán. – Ne aggódj az

and the next forty-eight hours would tell the story, but without raising my hopes too high he wanted me to know she was responding to treatment. He said that was especially surprising in view of the fact that she had been late getting to hospital and the things they did to her at first did not seem to have much effect, though of course the fact that she survived the first few hours at all was a good sign. Nobody had made much of this good sign to me yesterday, I thought.

I sat there for an hour at least after I had hung up the phone. I made a cup of instant coffee and my hands were shaking so I could hardly get the water into the cup, then couldn't get the cup to my mouth. I let it go cold. Haro came out in his pyjamas at last. He gave me one look and said, "Easy, Val. Has she gone?"

"She's some better. She's responding to treatment."

"The look of you I thought the other."

"I'm so amazed."

"I wouldn't've given five cents for her chances yesterday noon."

"I know. I can't believe it."

"It's the tension," Haro said. "I know. You build yourself up ready for something bad to happen and then when it doesn't, it's a queer feeling, you can't feel good right away, it's almost like a disappointment."

Disappointment. That was the word that stayed with me. I was so glad, really, grateful, but underneath I was thinking, so Cam didn't kill her after all, with his carelessness and craziness and going out and neglecting her he didn't kill her, and I was, yes, I was, sorry in some part of me to find out that was true. And I knew Haro knew this but wouldn't speak of it to me, ever. That was the real shock to me, why I kept shaking. Not whether Mother lived or died. It was what

újságok miatt. Próbálj meg aludni.

Egyáltalán nem akartam, de a hosszú nap és az ital után ruhástól elaludtam a kanapén. Telefoncsöngés ébresztett, nappali világosság járta be a szobát. Kibotorkáltam a konyhába, a takarót, amit Haro rám terített, magam után húzva. A falióra háromnegyed hatot mutatott. Anyám elment, gondoltam.

A családi orvos hívott.

Azt mondta, biztató hírei vannak. Anyám határozottan jobban lett ma reggelre.

Odahúztam egy széket, beleomoltam, a karjaim és a fejem a pultra hajtottam. Aztán újra a fülemhez vettem a kagylót, és hallottam, hogy azért a helyzet még mindig vészes. A következő negyvennyolc órában minden eldől, nem akar túl hiú reményeket kelteni bennem, de tudnom kell, hogy anyám reagál a kezelésre. Ez azért meglepő, mert későn vitték be a kórházba, és az első próbálkozások nem jártak sikerrel, bár az a tény, hogy egyáltalán átvészelte az első néhány órát, már jelentett valamit. Tegnap felém senki nem jelezte, hogy az első néhány óra fontos lehet, gondoltam.

Legalább egy órán át ültem ott, miután letettem a telefont. Csináltam egy gyorskávét, de a kezem remegett, ahogy a forró vizet a bögrébe öntöttem, aztán meg alig tudtam a számhoz emelni. Hagytam kihűlni. Végül Haro jelent meg, pizsamában. Rám nézett és így szólt: – Nyugalom, Val. Elment?

– Jobban van. Reagál a kezelésre.

– Úgy néztél rám, hogy az ellenkezőjét gondoltam.

– Annyira meglepett.

– Tegnap délben egy fillért sem tettem volna fel rá, hogy megmarad.

– Igen. Hihetetlen.

was so plain about myself.

Mother got well, she pulled through beautifully. After she rallied she never sank back. She was in the hospital three weeks and then she came home, and rested another three weeks, and after that went back to work, cutting down a bit and working ten to four instead of full days, what they call the housewives' shift. She told everybody about Cam and his friends coming to the hospital. She began to say things like, "Well, that boy of mine may not be much of a success at anything else but you have to admit he has a knack of saving lives," Or, "Maybe Cam should go into the miracle business, he certainly pulled it off with me." By this time Cam was saying, he is saying now, that he's not sure about that religion, he's getting tired of the other priests and all that not eating meat or root vegetables. It's a stage, he says now, he's glad he went through it, self-discovery. One day I went over there and found he was trying on an old suit and tie. He says he might take advantage of some of the adult education courses, he is thinking of becoming an accountant.

I was thinking myself about changing into a different sort of person from the one I am. I do think about that. I read a book called *The Art of Loving*. A lot of things seemed clear while I was reading it but afterwards I went back to being more or less the same. What has Cam ever done that actually hurt me, anyway, as Haro once said. And how am I better than he is after the way I felt the night Mother lived instead of died? I made a promise to myself I would try. I went over there one day taking them a bakery cake – which Cam eats now as happily as anybody else – and I heard their voices out in the yard – now it's summer, they love to sit in the sun. Mother saying to some visitor, "Oh yes I was, I was all set to take off into the wild blue yonder, and Cam here, this idiot, came and danced outside my door with a bunch

– A feszültség munkál benned, tudom – mondta Haro. – Felkészülsz a legrosszabbra, és amikor jóra fordulnak a dolgok, furcsán érzed magad. Nem tudsz azonnal felszabadulni. Szinte csalódást érzel.

Csalódás. Ez a szó maradt meg bennem. Igazán nagyon örültem, hálás voltam a sorsnak, de legbelül arra gondoltam, Cam végül nem okozta a halálát, a gondatlanságával, az örültségével; valahol mélyen sajnálatot éreztem, igen, sajnáltam, hogy így történt. És éreztem, hogy Haro is tudja ezt, de soha-soha nem fogja kimondani, hogy tudja. Ez sokkolt, remegtem. Nem azért, mert Anya él és nem halt meg. Hanem mert magamat ilyen tisztán láttam.

Anyám felgyógyult, gyönyörűen visszatért belé az élet. Legyűrte a betegséget, és a panaszok soha nem tértek vissza. Három hétig maradt a kórházban, majd három hetet otthon töltött, de azután visszament dolgozni. Tíz-től négyig, az egész napos munka helyett, háziasszonyoknak való műszak, így hívták. Mindenkinek mesélt Cam és a barátai kórházi látogatásáról. Ilyeneket mondott: – Hát, igen, az a fiú semmiben nem ért el különösebb sikert, de azt tudja, hogy mentse meg mások életét.

Vagy: – Camnek lenne keresnivalója a kuruzsló-iparban. Velem mindenestre csodát művelt.

De azóta Cam elbizonytalanodott a 'vallását' illetően. Elege van a többi papból, és hogy nem lehet húst vagy gumós zöldséget enni. Ez is csak egy állomás, azt mondja, az önfelfedezés útján. Egy nap, amikor átmentem hozzájuk, éppen egy régi öltönyét próbálgatta, nyakkendő is kötött. Esti iskolán gondolkodik, azt mondja, könyvelő szeretne lenni.

Én is szoktam arra gondolni, hogy jó lenne megváltozni, más lenni, mint aki vagyok. Sokat gondolkodom ezen. Olvastam egy könyvet, *A szeretet művészete*, ez a címe. Sok

of his hippie friends – ”

“My God, woman,” roared Cam, but you could tell he didn’t care now, “members of an ancient holy discipline.”

I had a strange feeling, like I was walking on coals and trying a spell so I wouldn’t get burnt.

Forgiveness in families is a mystery to me, how it comes or how it lasts. ♦



minden megvilágosodott előttem olvasás közben, de miután végeztem vele, visszatértem a régi kerékvágásba. Többé-kevésbé. Haro egyszer megkérdezte, mit tett Cam, amiből konkrétan károm származott. Igaza van. És mitől lennék különb Camnél, ha képes voltam azokra a furcsa érzésekre, amikor anyám életben maradt, ahelyett, hogy meghalt volna. Megfogadtam, hogy igyekszem különb lenni. Egy nap cukrászdai tortát vittem nekik, amit ma már Cam ugyanolyan étvággal fogyaszt, mint bármi más, és meghallottam, ahogy az udvaron beszélgetnek. Nyár van, szeretnek a napsütésben ücsörögni. Anya azt mondja egy vendégnek: – Ó, hogyne. Készen álltam, hogy elrepüljek a túlvilági vad kékségbe, de ez az idióta Cam itt, néhány hippie barátjával bejött a kórházba és táncra perdültek értem a váróhelyiségben.

– Az Istenre, asszony – dübörgött Cam, de hallatszott, hogy csak színészkedik –, ők egy ősi, szent magatartásforma képviselői voltak.

Olyan furcsa érzésem támadt, mint aki égő briketten lépked, és valami varázslatban bíz, hogy nem fog megégni.

Rejtély, hogy az érzés miből forrászik, de egy családtagnak mindent újra és újra megbocsátunk. ♦