

# Stories from the Old Attic

Robert A. Harris



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**Title:** Stories from the Old Attic

**Author:** Robert A. Harris

**Release date:** April 1, 1995 [eBook #240]

Most recently updated: July 13, 2008

**Language:** English

**Credits:** Produced by Robert Harris

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THE OLD ATTIC \*\*\*

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# **STORIES FROM THE OLD ATTIC**

Robert Harris

1992

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To Mom

## Contents:

The Second Greatest Commandment  
A Good Horse and a Better  
It's Not Valuable  
Stewardship  
The Man Who Believed in Miracles  
A Fish Story  
Man  
Love  
Indecision  
The Limit  
How Sir Reginald Helped the King  
How the Noble Percival Won the Fair Arissa  
Truth Carved in Stone  
How Sir Philo Married a Beautiful Princess Instead of the Woman He  
Loved  
Serendipity  
A Tale Revealing the Wisdom of Being a Cork on the River of Life  
The Art of Truth  
Matthew 18:3  
The Boy and the Vulture  
Three Flat Tires  
The History of Professor De Laix  
How the Humans Finally Learned to Like Themselves  
The Caterpillar and the Bee  
The Wise One  
On the Heroic Suffering of Mankind  
The Quest  
Life  
Discernment

It Depends on How You Look at It: Eight Vignettes on Perspective

The Strange Adventure

In Defeat There Is Victory

The Oppressed Girl

Two Conversations on Direction

Semiotics Strikes Out

Seeing is Believing

A Traditional Story

The Day Creativity Met the Linear Dragon

The Wall and the Bridge

The Wish

Several One Way Conversations

How the King Learned about Love

The Fly and the Elephant

The Man Who Talked Backwards

The Clue

An Analogy

## The Second Greatest Commandment

A man was out shoveling the excess gravel off his driveway and into the graveled road that ran by his house. A neighbor happened to be walking by just as the man tossed a shovel full down the road the opposite way the man used to drive in and out. "I see you aren't messing up the part of the road you use," sneered the neighbor.

A few minutes later another neighbor happened by and saw the man toss a shovel full of gravel down the other part of the road. "I see you are fixing

only the part of the road you use, and not the part others must use," sneered the second neighbor.

The shoveler stood still with a shovel full of gravel as the second man left. Now unsure of what to do with it that would be agreeable to his neighbors, he decided simply to dump it out onto his driveway on the very spot whence he had scooped it up. Just as he did so, a third neighbor happened to be walking by. "I see you are stealing gravel from the road for your driveway," sneered the third man. "People like you are what's wrong with this country."

At this point the homeowner put his shovel away and sat down with his pipe to contemplate these occurrences. Pretty soon a neighbor from further down the street drove by and saw the man sitting down enjoying his pipe. "If you weren't so lazy, you'd shovel some of that gravel off your driveway and back onto the road where it belongs," the driver sneered as he drove away, spinning his tires and scattering gravel in every direction.

### A Good Horse and a Better

A man once came upon a lad about midday skipping stones across a pond. "Hello, young man," he said, approaching. "What brings you here on a school day?"

"I wrote a poem yesterday which was the best in class, and the teacher said I could play today while the other children wrote more poems."

"Well, then, you are to be congratulated. Yours is certainly a deed of distinction. And as a reward," he added, settling himself on a tree stump, "let me tell you a story about two horses."

"Oh, yes, do," the youth said eagerly, sitting down at the man's feet.

"The first horse lived in Arabia, and he was beautiful and strong. He had never lost a race. And he was shrewd. He would run just hard enough to pull away from the other horses in the race, and then he would let up and trot, or even walk, across the finish line, to the great embarrassment and humiliation of all the other horses."

"He was clearly a superior animal," the young poet interjected.

"Yes, he was," agreed the man. "Now the other horse lived in Macedonia, and he, too, was strong and noble. He had, however, lost one race, the first race of his life; and some say he always remembered that when he ran."

"How grating to the heart it must be to lose so early and have a blight on one's reputation," mused the young man.

"But this horse always won every other race. And unlike our first horse, when this Macedonian horse ran and knew he had beaten the other horses, instead of letting up he redoubled his efforts and ran even harder—as hard as he could—for he now ran not against the fortuitous competitors with whom he began the race, but against his own heart: against all horses past and all horses future, against every horse in Macedonia and every one in Arabia, and also against the ideal horse with a pace so frighteningly fast that few can conceive its possibility. And even more than this, he ran toward the perfection of excellence itself. And when he crossed the finish line, as happy as he was to win, he secretly lamented that his opponents had not been fast enough to threaten him and push him onward."

"Even though he lost once," the lad remarked after a short silence, "perhaps this horse was as good as the Arabian."

"Perhaps so, my child," said the man, with a smile. "Perhaps so."

### It's Not Valuable

Once upon a time a wise and thoughtful craftsman made a new electric adding machine. It was very complex with many gears and levers and wheels, and it did amazing things, always adding up the numbers correctly. So the craftsman sold it to a businessman for many thousands of dollars. All the parts inside the new adding machine felt good about being so valuable. They worked hard and happily all day, and often talked about how useful they were to the businessman.

But one day a spring noticed a little nut just sitting on the end of a shaft. The spring pulled at the lever he was attached to and pointed. Soon the whole works knew. "You lazy little nut," said a spinning gear, "why don't you get to work?"

"But I am working," said the nut. "Holding on is my job."

"That's stupid," yelled a cam. "I don't believe our maker put you here. You just sneaked in to steal some of our glory. Why don't you get out?"

"Well," said the nut, "I'm sure our maker knew what he was doing, and that I do serve a purpose. I hold on as tightly as I can." But all the machinery began to squeal and abuse the nut so violently that he felt very sad and began to doubt himself. "Maybe I am useless," he thought. He appealed to the shaft he was threaded onto.

"Look, kid," the shaft told him, "I've got plenty of other parts holding on to me. I shouldn't have to support you, too."



So finally the little nut decided to unscrew himself and go away. He dropped off the shaft and fell through a hole in the bottom of the machine. "Good riddance," said the motor.

"Yeah, good riddance," all the other parts agreed.

Rather quickly the nut was forgotten and things went on as they had for awhile. But in a few hours, the shaft began to feel funny. At first he began to vibrate. Then he started sliding and slipping. He called for help to the other parts attached to him, but they could do nothing. Presently the shaft fell completely out of his mounting hole, causing many levers and gears and cams to slip out of alignment and crash against each other, and forcing the whole machine to grind to a halt with an awful noise. The motor tried his best to keep things going—he tried so hard that he bent many of the parts—and then as he tried even harder, he burned himself out. "This is all the fault of that little nut," the ruined parts all agreed.

"I'll give ya three bucks for it," said the junk man to the office manager.

### Stewardship

A wise man approached three young men standing around idly. "Here is a coin worth a hundred dollars," the wise man said to the first youth. "What should I do with it?"

"Give it to me," he said at once.

"Rather than reward such selfishness and greed," responded the wise man, "it would be better to throw the money into the sea." And with this,

the wise man threw the coin into the water. "Now," he said to the second youth, "here is another coin. What should I do with it?"

The second youth, feeling shrewd, answered, "Throw it into the sea."

But the wise man said, "That would be a careless waste. To follow a bad example only because it is an example is folly. Better than throwing this money away would be to give it to the poor." And he gave the money to a beggar sitting nearby. "I have one last coin," the wise man went on, talking to the third youth. "What shall I do with it?"

The third youth had been paying attention, and, thinking he would get the money if he avoided the greed and wastefulness implied in the answers of his friends, said, "Why, give it to the poor."

"That is a very wise and kind answer," said the wise man, smiling. And because you have answered so well" (at this the youth brightened with expectation), "I will indeed take your good advice and give the money to the poor."

"Don't I get anything for my wisdom?" demanded the youth.

"You have already received something much better than money," said the wise man.

### The Man Who Believed in Miracles

Once upon a time a traveler arrived in a land quite like our own, full of modern technology like cars and computers and whistling teapots, but with these two differences: there were no television sets and no airplanes. In fact,

nothing at all had ever been seen in the sky, not even a bird, and the only movies the people ever saw were in the theaters.

The traveler stayed for about a month on the eastern shore where he had arrived, and then decided to visit the western cities. He mentioned his decision one evening at a meeting of the principal scientists and educators of the region, who had gathered to hear of his travels. Someone mentioned that the west had much to offer, but that the journey between the two areas was unpleasant, consisting of crossing a hot, empty desert. "In that case," said the traveler, "I'll just fly."

"Is that like sleep?" one of the scientists asked.

"No, no," the traveler replied. "You know, fly through the air, like a bird."

"And what is a bird?" someone asked. And so the traveler began to explain about flight and what an airplane was and how it flew from one place to another. The room became very quiet, and the expressions on the faces of everyone present darkened.

"Does he expect us to believe this?" one man whispered to another.

"Well, you know what liars travelers are," someone else added. Finally the host spoke up, slightly embarrassed and slightly indignant.

"If this is your idea of a joke," he began, but was interrupted by the surprised traveler.

"Why, it's no joke at all. People fly all the time."

"I am sorry that you so much underestimate the intelligence and learning of your audience," said a professor across the table. "That a person could enter some metal device—like a car with fins—and rise into the air, and be

sustained there, and move forward, why that clearly violates everything we know about the law of gravity and the laws of physics. If we have learned anything from a thousand years of study of the natural world, it is that an object heavier than air must return immediately to earth when it is tossed into the sky."

"Hear, hear," two or three people muttered.

"Now, if you perhaps mean that these 'airplanes,' as you call them, are somehow flung into the air for a short distance and then fall to the ground, well, then perhaps that would be possible." The professor looked expectantly and a bit condescendingly at the traveler, hoping that the man would take this face-saving opportunity.

"No, no. You don't understand," said the traveler. "The airplanes have powerful motors and the craft rise into the air, and they stay up as long as they want, as long as the fuel holds out." There were several audible "hmmphs" around the room.

"Tell us then," said another scholar, in a saccharine voice, "how this device works. What makes it fly?"

"Well, I don't know exactly how it works. It has something to do with air flowing over the wings."

"You don't know—you cannot explain—how it works, this device that runs counter to everything we know about the natural world, yet you believe in it anyway."

"Believe in it?" asked the traveler, a bit confused by this turn of phrase. "Of course I 'believe in it.' I fly on one all the time at home."

"And how do you control its motions?" a man asked, without removing his pipe. The audience was clearly beginning to patronize the traveler, and he was growing a little irritated.

"Oh, I don't control it. There's a pilot for that."

"I see," the pipe smoker said. "So this airplane contains both you and the pilot. You're telling us that perhaps four or five hundred pounds of dead weight can travel through the air as long as it wants."

"As long as the fuel holds out," added one of the hmmphers, with amusement.

"And all the time sneering at the law of gravity and laughing science in the face," someone else noted.

"Well, actually, the planes are much larger than that," said the traveler. "Many of them hold two or three hundred people and weigh, my, I don't know—many thousands of pounds."

"I think we have heard enough," the now-fully-embarrassed and half-angered host said. "It was amusing for awhile, but it's time to put an end to this nonsense."

"It is not nonsense," the traveler protested. "It is the truth."

"Then you really believe this madman's drivel you've been feeding us?" the host asked, rather hotly.

"Of course. How can I not believe it? I see it and live it every day. And here," he added, remembering something, "I even have a photograph."

"Obviously faked," said the host, dismissing it after a glance.

"Who invited this charlatan?" someone asked of no one in particular.

"I thought science had put an end to all this miraculous event stuff long ago," said another man, rising from his chair and preparing to leave.

"Well, let's not pursue this pointless discussion," the host said. "Our guest apparently knows nothing of science, and is impervious to logic and to the considered opinion of the best minds of our nation. There's nothing left to do but adjourn." The meeting began to break up, and the traveler was putting on his coat when the man with the pipe made one last attempt to reason with him.

"We are all scientists here, all educated men. All of us agree that it is impossible for a heavier-than-air device to fly on its own through the air. Don't you see that? This is against the laws of nature—it violates the law of gravity."

"Well," said the traveler, "perhaps there is another law, or perhaps there is a higher law than the law of gravity, which, when it is understood, will explain how planes can fly."

"That's just what I'd expect a religious fanatic to say," said a man who had been listening in. "Science can jump into the trash as far as you religious types are concerned."

"Not at all," said the traveler. "But your science is not perfect. You do not yet know everything about everything, what is possible and what is not possible."

"Go take your religion to a church and keep it away from serious people," the man concluded, stomping out of the room.

In the weeks that followed, the traveler was ridiculed and denounced in the newspapers, being called everything from a con artist to a prospective mental patient. (The scientific journals said nothing about the man because they considered the whole matter as beneath serious thought.) As a result, the traveler was often left to himself, and so he pulled out his tiny portable television set and began to watch it. Just by chance, some visitors happened to come by and see the little box. They were very impressed and urged the traveler to market his invention for putting a movie inside such a small space.

In a few days, word had spread about this mini-movie and several scientists were convinced (after some debate) to come see it, together with some engineers representing the movie projector manufacturers of the nation.

They were sufficiently impressed as they watched a few scenes, but when the traveler changed channels, their enthusiasm turned to gaping astonishment. The traveler switched all around, showing them twenty channels in all. Such was the amazement and even incredulity of the engineers that they already began to suspect some kind of trick. The scientists looked confused.

"You certainly have a lot of films stored in that little box," one of the engineers said. "How do you get them all in there?"

"The pictures are not in the box," said the traveler. "They are all over in the air around us. This antenna brings them in and the set makes them visible." The engineers laughed while the scientists sneered, the latter now sorry they had allowed themselves to be talked into coming to hear this notorious nut.

"Come now," one of the scientists said. "Do you expect us to believe that there are pictures floating around us in the air—pictures we cannot see? And that twenty sets of these pictures are all present at once, scrambled together, just waiting for that little box to take them and sort them out? What do you take us for anyway—a bunch of gullible greenhorn fools?"

"And besides," continued an engineer, "how do these pictures get into the air in the first place? Where do they come from?"

"They're sent from a satellite in the sky," the traveler said, as all heads looked up. "You can't see it, of course. It's too high. But it's there."

"And of course you expect us to believe in something we can't see," said one of the scientists, with a touch of scorn.

"Believe it because of its effects—the results—the evidence of its existence," the traveler said. "If it weren't there, you would see no pictures."

"We know you're lying," another engineer said. "Even if there were a device in the sky, held up by a balloon or whatever, it couldn't send a signal down here without a wire. That would be against everything we know about electricity. And I don't see any wire."

"Well, it doesn't use a wire," said the traveler. "The signals are sent through the air. And the satellite isn't held up by a balloon; it stays up because it's high enough so that gravity doesn't pull it down."

"Now he's denying the law of gravity again," said one of the scientists. "Let's go. I've heard enough. Whatever he does to perform his little trick, he isn't telling us about it, so let's just leave."

"Yeah, let's get out of here," another scientist said. "Every time we catch him in an impossibility, he tells us the explanation is in the sky." Then



turning to the traveler to say goodbye, he added, "We cannot believe something when the weight of scientific evidence is against it."

"But when the physical evidence is clearly before you," said the traveler, "how can you not believe, even if your theories cannot explain it?"

"Because such an event would be a miracle, and science has nothing to do with miracles."

"Then perhaps science is the poorer for it," said the traveler, sitting down to watch his television, which just then happened to be showing a dove flying silently across the sky.

### A Fish Story

The bright sun and the gentle wind had made the little fish almost bold that summer day, enough so that they were swimming all over the pond, from their home in the reeds at one end to the rocky beach at the other. Or at least they swam very near to the rocky beach—as near as they dared—for all the older fish constantly warned them to stay away. Some of the dangers were clear enough, such as the wading birds who stepped into the shallow water, hoping to pluck out a little fish and swallow him right down, and the foxes, whose gigantic teeth were too awful even to think about. But there were other evils that were not so distinct. Hideous and unimaginable these were, with tales of fish swimming into the area and never to be heard from again, vague reports of sudden disappearances, and some hysterical tales, impossible to make sense of, of leaping shadows, wild splashings, worms flying through the water, and such like.

The dangers of the rocky beach could not quite be isolated in the minds of the little fish, so that they felt a general sense of impending doom whenever they swam more than a few feet from home. That is why, one day when three little fish met each other suddenly among the reeds, they were all momentarily startled. But soon they began talking and relaxed a little. "This is a wonderful pond," said one. "It's so big. But I've never been this far away from home before."

"Me either," said another. "I just hope we're safe here in these reeds."

"I do too," agreed the third. "You never know where an enemy may come from."

"And you can't be too careful," added the first.

"By the way," said one, "my name is Swimmy Fish. What's yours?"

"Finny Fish," said another.

"I'm Chirpy Bird," said the third.

Swimmy Fish and Finny Fish gave a start, looked at each other with surprise and terror, and then swam off in opposite directions as fast as they could. "Wait!" cried Chirpy Bird. "What's wrong? Come back!" He looked around anxiously, himself frightened by their fright, though he could see no sign of danger anywhere. But their fear hung over the area, so he decided to swim toward home, at more than his usual speed.

He had not gone very far when he saw several adult fish swimming toward him with serious and half-frightened expressions on their faces. When they saw him, they stopped at a distance. "Stop there," one of them demanded, so Chirpy Bird stopped. The big fish seemed to be engaged in a solemn discussion. Every once in awhile one of them waved a fin or

glanced in his direction. Finally, two of the largest fish approached a little nearer. "Don't make any sudden moves," the largest one, whose name was Glubber Fish, said with a mixture of command and pleading.

"I don't understand," the little fish said, bewildered.

"Are you Chirpy Bird?" asked Glubber Fish.

"Yes. I—"

"You must leave the pond." It was a tone of finality.

"But why?" asked Chirpy Bird.

"Because you'll soon be eating us and our children. Besides, birds don't live under water."

"But I'm not a bird," Chirpy Bird protested.

"What's your name?" demanded the other, who was called Spotted Fish.

"Chirpy Bird. But—"

"There you are," he said, with a tone of satisfaction.

"My name is Chirpy Bird," said the little one, "but I'm a fish."

"Nonsense," grumped Spotted Fish. "Whoever heard of a fish named Chirpy Bird?"

"Whether you've heard of me or not, here I am," said Chirpy Bird, not knowing what else to say.

"Totally illogical," interrupted Whisker Fish, who had just come near.

"As well as disrespectful and impudent," added Glubber fish.

"You must listen to reason," said Whisker Fish, self-importantly brushing himself in preparation. "And here it is: You are Chirpy Bird; granted. Birds eat fish; granted. Therefore, you eat fish."

"But—" Chirpy Bird tried to explain.

"There is no 'but.' It's a syllogism, and cannot be answered. The conclusion follows necessarily," said Whisker Fish. "It's pure logic."

"And it also follows," said Glubber fish, "that you must leave the pond."

"I'll die if I leave the pond," said Chirpy Bird.

"That's not our problem," said Glubber Fish.

"And it's an irrelevant objection," added Whisker Fish. The rest of the adult fish had gradually been easing forward during this conversation and now, at the direction of Glubber Fish, the whole group escorted Chirpy Bird down toward the rocky beach. In a few minutes they reached a low spot near a weeping willow, where several of the large fish grabbed Chirpy Bird and threw him onto the shore.

"Now fly away and leave us alone," one of them said. And leave them alone he did.

Man

Somewhere in a deep, tropical jungle lived a tribe of natives with extremely odd behavior. Generations ago the tribe had in some obscure

fashion contracted a parasite which induced a seemingly permanent delirium in each native, and which was passed on to subsequent generations. The delirium increased with age, and most of the adult natives showed it by eating dirt, sleeping on dunghills, pummeling anthills with rocks even as the ants bit them severely, and jumping out of trees onto their heads. This last maneuver caused the natives to stagger around senseless for days, or simply to lie unconscious and bleeding in the sun and rain. All these symptoms together prevented the natives from caring for their personal lives, and so they lived in deplorable squalor, with their huts falling apart, and their children and themselves half starved and wholly naked.

Another odd effect of the mental distraction was an unnatural craving for firewood. Unlike the other natives in the area, the members of this tribe collected—and stole, and cheated and betrayed for—log upon stick to pile next to their huts, even though in twenty very cold years they couldn't use half as much as they already possessed. A few natives had been crushed to death by collapsing woodpiles; many more had died from fighting over decidedly unimpressive old branches.

One day a doctor came from the East to the village, and he immediately recognized the symptoms of the disease (a common one) for which he carried the cure. He went gladly and confidently to the chief of the tribe and announced his ability to remedy the ills of the people, expecting to be praised and welcomed for his offer of help. To his surprise, however, the chief rebuffed him with contempt and asserted boldly that there was nothing at all wrong with his people, that they had always acted that way since he could remember, that it was the human condition, and that they were all perfectly happy. Then, after ordering the doctor to leave immediately, the chief jumped out of a tree into the tribal latrine and was unavailable for any further discussion.

Substantially taken aback but firm in his resolution, the doctor decided to take his offer directly to the natives. Most received him with laughter, contempt, or violence; many ignored him; a few beat him up; some said he just wanted to get at their firewood; most said they, like the chief, felt fine. But a dozen or so natives came to him privately where he had been tossed into the bushes after his most recent beating, and asked him for the medicine.

"We are somehow not really happy living like this," they said, "even though it is the way of the world." The doctor gladly gave them the medicine, and in a few days they began to show remarkable signs of recovery. No longer desiring to eat dirt or jump out of trees, these natives corrected their diet, improved in health, and began to apply themselves to such activities as making baskets, repairing their huts, caring for their children, and gathering food. Some even began to question the wisdom of collecting stacks of wood more than twenty feet high.

Such wild, unusual, and anti-social behavior did not go unnoticed by the other natives, who quickly ostracized the cured natives from the tribal camp, calling them enemies of the current system. And even though many of the delirious natives began to suspect that the cured natives were somehow better off than they, and that there might be more to living than sleeping on dunghills and finding new trees to jump out of, resistance to the cure was strong. First, almost all the educated and respectable people—the chief and his council—spoke against it, and the example of their sophistication and wealth (the chief's woodpile was ninety feet high) was very strong. Many others, from the gossips to the wise man, said that the old way was right, and that the tribe had always behaved that way. There were few real individuals in the tribe, so that even though scores would have been glad to try the cure, they were afraid to stand against the rest and did what everyone else was doing, which was nothing.

The witch doctor had a stronger argument against the new regimen. He pointed out that the cure was harder to take than the cures he dispensed. The Eastern doctor's cure was painful, and though many of the witch doctor's cures caused vomiting, hives, convulsions, and hallucinations, the natives were all familiar with these effects and attributed them to swallowing the medicine wrong, rather than to the medicine itself. But who knew what the fate of the cured natives would eventually be?

The cured natives said they felt fine, but they might have been lying. And who was fool enough to trust an outsider, a stranger, rather than the familiar witch doctor, who cursed those who took the cure because they rejected his medicines as false and pernicious? The cured natives said that a commitment must be made to trust the Eastern doctor; this was too difficult or uncertain a step for many, especially in the face of the social pressure around them. A decision accompanied by fear, decried by the important, and rejected by society could not be made by everyone.

After the time of his stay was over, the Eastern doctor showed the cured natives how to compound the medicine and then left. As generations passed, most of the natives remained loyal to the dunghill, but a few took the cure.

## Love

Otto and his girlfriend Brissa were driving merrily down the middle of the road one rainy night on their way to a party when they approached a little old lady trying vainly to change a flat tire.

"Gee, that's too bad," said Brissa.

"Yeah," agreed Otto.

"Maybe we should help her," added Brissa.

"We? You mean me. I'm not going to get wet. Besides, what good would it do me to help her? I don't even know who she is, and she probably doesn't have any money, or at least not enough to make getting wet worthwhile."

"But it would make you feel good to do a good deed," Brissa offered.

"Well, it makes me feel good to stay in here and keep dry," snapped Otto.

"It would make me happy, Otto," said Brissa, in her softest, most feminine voice.

"You? Boy, you're awfully selfish. Always thinking about yourself. You know, I wasn't put here just to cater to your stupid, idle whims." As his anger rose, Otto sped up a little, just in time to hit a large puddle near the little old lady, drenching her in a sheet of muddy water.

"Stop, Otto!" Brissa cried, exasperated. "I'll help her."

"Aw shut up," Otto snarled. "Do you think I'm going to walk into the party with a girl who's all wet and disheveled, looking like a drowned rat? You want people to laugh at me? Think of somebody besides yourself for a change. Now fix your makeup and keep your mouth shut."

## Indecision

Once upon a time a dozen or so curious travelers rented a boat for a cruise out to an enchanted island, where, it was said, Athena sat on her



throne dispensing rich gifts to all. The trip was smooth enough for awhile, with only a few rough seas to endure and an occasional shoal to avoid. But then one morning one of the passengers discovered that the boat was taking on water.

"We're sinking, we're sinking!" some of the people cried.

"No," said the captain, "the flow is not yet so fast. If we will get some buckets and bail the water out, everything will be all right." This solution seemed simple enough.

However, a dissension soon arose among the travelers about who would do the bailing, and what buckets would be used. "Allow me," said one. "It is my duty in this circumstance to bail, and I have here a very solid bucket suitable to the task."

"Beg pardon, sir," said another, "but I must be the bailer. It is written in the laws of the sea that a person of my parts must do this labor. Besides, I have a superior bucket."

"Wait," said a third. "This gentleman's bucket is all right, but I think I should be allowed to help bail, since I am a fellow passenger."

Everyone adduced many weighty, true, and worthy philosophical arguments for his position, and cited laws, ethics, and political and procedural rules, but no person succeeded in convincing any other. Soon, therefore, the discussion ceased to remain at this level, but grew rather heated, and shouts and aspersions began to fill the air, with perhaps even a trace of ill will.

"I refuse to allow anyone to bail this boat unless he uses this bucket, which, as any fool can see, is the only true bucket, clearly superior to all

others," screamed one.

"And I absolutely refuse to see this boat bailed unless I can take part in the work," yelled another.

Now these passengers all had some interest in seeing the boat bailed, and most hoped that this impasse could be overcome to the satisfaction of everyone. But since no one knew exactly what to do, nothing was done.

"Perhaps we will get to the enchanted island without bailing the boat," hoped one.

It was not to be so. While the travelers continued to debate, some suggesting unworkable alternatives and the others remaining unyielding, the boat continued to fill, until at one sudden and horrifying moment, the water rushed in over the gunwales and across the deck. The hold filled rapidly, and in spite of every man's frenzied efforts, the boat sank, carrying the stubborn but now too-late-repentant travelers, together with their screaming wives and virgin daughters, to the very bottom of the sea.

## The Limit

One day a man was walking through a forest and got lost. "Nothing could be worse than this," he said. Then it got dark. "Lost in the dark. What could be worse?" he asked. Then it got cold. "Now nothing could possibly be worse," he said as he shivered and stumbled around. But then it began to rain. "How could anything be worse than this?" he asked himself. But then the rain turned to snow and the wind came up. "This is absolutely the worst possible thing that could ever happen," he said. "There's nothing left." But then he fell and broke his arm. "Well, that's it," he thought. "This is the

worst of all." But as he lay in the snow, a tree branch broke off and fell on him, breaking both his legs. "This is worse than the worst," he thought. "But at least nothing else can happen." But then he heard the sound of wolves coming his way. The noise was so startling that the man awoke and discovered that he had been dreaming. "What a dream I had," he said, shaking himself. "Nothing could be worse."

### How Sir Reginald Helped the King

Once upon a time in the kingdom of Plebnia, the king was having a real problem with his letters to the outlying regions. His messages always seemed to arrive too late. No matter how early he mailed them, his Christmas cards arrived in July and his Valentines arrived on December 24, creating confusion and uncertainty among the people and giving the Problem Element an excuse to arouse the Rabble against him.

After some thought, the king had an idea: he would give ten million greedos (their monetary unit) and the hand of his totally gorgeous daughter to the person who could make his mail arrive the fastest. His loyal subjects immediately rushed to solve the problem, setting themselves to this task with an enthusiasm that an objective observer might well have described as manic. People ran back and forth, up and down, muttering, "Move the mail, shove the mail, fling it, sling it. Run. Hurry. Shoot the mail, toss it, heave it," and such like.

Included in the many and varied offered solutions were proposals to build a rocket sled, crisscross the countryside with pneumatic tubes, use fast horses stimulated by strong coffee, borrow a dragster from the sports arena, set up a reliable airline, make a jet-powered conveyor belt, or just use

ordinary mailmen under the threat of immediate, violent death if they delayed the mail.

However, Sir Reginald, the young, handsome hero of this tale, out of the goodness of his heart, his love for the king, and the excitement of the challenge (and scarcely considering the money or the girl more than four or five hours a day), decided to take a few minutes to examine the problem before he tried to solve it.

"Just what is it the king wants to do?" he asked himself. "He wants to send his mail quickly. And just what is mail? It's a message, information. Information, hmm. Information can be sent electronically, by wire or transmission. Yes. Hmm. Yes—A transmitter on one end and a printer on the other end would permit the king's mail to be sent at the speed of light. That should pretty much squash Sir Rodney's proposal to use battery-powered frisbees."

Well, what can we say? The brilliance of this proposal was so obvious that Sir Reginald was declared the winner and the plan was immediately instituted. The mail began to arrive on time, the king soon became popular again in the outlying regions, and Sir Reginald retired to spend the rest of his days in a spiffy castle on top of a hill, with his totally gorgeous wife and, later, seventeen children.

### How the Noble Percival Won the Fair Arissa

Once upon a time in a kingdom by the sea, two knights stood talking about the strategy of battle when their conversation was interrupted by the sight of the beautiful Arissa as she walked upon the green. "Forsooth, I

think I'll ask her for a date," said Sir Wishful, one of the knights. "Ditto," said Sir Percival, the other knight.

So Sir Wishful sauntered up to Arissa in his most elegant and refined manner, and, twirling his mustache genteelly, said, "Arissa, my dear, methinks I'd like to take you out to dinner."

Arissa sized up Sir Wishful a moment and then replied, "Sorry, Wishy, you're not my type."

Sir Percival, seeing his rival stumble off in a confused, embarrassed, humiliated, dazed—oh you get the idea. Anyway, Sir Percival saw his opportunity and approached Arissa. "Arissa," he said, "how about a date anon?" Only a moment was needed for the look of mild surprise to alter the beautiful maiden's features, after which she laughed loudly in Sir Percival's face for a good ten minutes.

Well, both Sir Wishful and Sir Percival retired to lick their wounds and lament the fate of men in this whole romantic con game, and Sir Wishful soon enough decided that he liked the taste of trout just about as well as the taste of women's lips, so he grabbed his bait and tackle and headed for the river. Sir Percival, on the other hand, really thought Arissa might be worth another attempt, and he rationalized with himself that perhaps she didn't quite understand the question. "Or belikes the maiden is just shy," he thought.

So Sir Percival, seeing on another day the fair, delicate Arissa using her footman's coat to clean the mud off her shoes, again approached and asked: "Arissa, sweet one, won't you go out with me sometime?"

Arissa generously gave Sir Percival a look that could have frozen several pounds of choice lobster, and replied, "You must be kidding."

Sir Percival thought about this answer for a couple of days, and still finding his inclination toward the gentle Arissa unchanged, he thought to make a clarificatory attempt, just in case the maiden did believe he had been kidding. Approaching her the next morning, Sir Percival said, "Kind Arissa, I wasn't kidding the other day. Ifay, I'd like to date you." Only the author's extreme commitment to complete truth forces him to admit that a tiny trace of irritation now flashed, but only for the briefest of moments, across the lovely Arissa's brow. "Get lost, creep," she said, clearly and distinctly.

Well, needless to say, by now most of the other knights in the realm were getting sufficient jollies out of Sir Percival's romantic endeavors. Even Sir Wishful had joined in the laughter, ridicule, and derision that seasoned Sir Percival's every meal with his friends. This hilarity touched the young knight and caused him to spend several days in contemplation of his past behavior. "Am I gaining or losing ground with Arissa?" he asked himself. "Rather had she said, 'Get lost' before she said, 'You must be kidding,' for as it stands, I can't say I'm making much progress."

But "Steadfast" was probably Sir Percival's middle name (or his uncle's middle name, anyway), so the knight decided to approach Arissa yet again. After all, Arissa seemed to be pretty okay, and Sir Percival wanted a date. In a few days, then, Arissa heard a familiar question in a familiar voice: "Arissa, sweetheart, let me ensconce you in my carriage and take you on a date." To which Arissa replied, "Sorry Perce, I'm busy. I've got to wash my hair."

To which the knight: "Well, when could you go then?"

To which Arissa: "Well, I'll be busy for the next ten years. I mean, I've got stuff to do, forsooth."

Well, our hero was getting a bit despondent about all this, and for sure his friends weren't helping much. Far from their giving him encouragement, their laughter rang so constantly in Sir Percival's head that he began to wonder if he was still quite sane. And not a few of his friends hinted here and there that psychiatric consultation might be useful to the knight, to get him over his ridiculous interest in the agreeable Arissa.

About this time it so happened that as Sir Percival was on his way to visit Sir Wishful for a nice dinner of trout and onions, he quite unexpectedly came upon Arissa, lovely as ever, sitting near the village waterfall and picking her teeth. Almost out of habit, Sir Percival spoke: "Arissa, sugar, would you like to go out with me sometime?"

To which Arissa: "Oh, Perce, didn't I tell you I was busy?"

To which Sir Percival: "Yeah, fair one, but I thought maybe you'd had a cancellation or something."

To which Arissa: "Well, if I did have a cancellation, I wouldn't fill it up with you. Besides, what would we do?"

To which Sir Percival: "We could go to dinner."

To which Arissa: "Like where, ifay?"

To which Sir Percival: "Andre's French Victuals."

To which Arissa: "And when would this be?"

To which Sir Percival: "I dunno. How about tomorrow night?"

To which—well, anyway, to her own surprise, to the astonishment of Sir Percival, and to the great confusion of the rest of the kingdom,

Arissa finally actually agreed to this scenario and the next evening the two young people went to Andre's.

Arissa, of course, ordered the eleven most expensive things on the menu, for she was still intending to discourage Sir Percival, but the knight was willing to put up with only a glass of water for his own dinner, because the success he had enjoyed so far with the desirable Arissa had quite taken away his appetite anyway.

In the course of the evening, Arissa happened to remark, "I wish they had apricots on the menu here. You know, I really love them. I could eat them by the ton."

To which Sir Percival: "Why, Arissa, my dove, I own an orchard of apricot trees."

To which Arissa: "Really? Oh, Perce." When she pronounced his name, the young maiden sighed and a glint appeared in one or both eyes.

Well, from here the story gets pretty mushy, so we'd better make it short. This delightful couple soon held hands; they discovered anon that their lips fit together pretty well, Arissa's ten years' worth of plans were miraculously cancelled, and Sir Percival finally asked the Big Question, to which Arissa replied, "Well, okay."

And so they were married and lived happily ever after, with Arissa often telling Sir Percival how she had secretly loved him from the first time she saw him, while Sir Percival, each time he kissed Arissa's apricot-flavored lips, congratulated himself for his skill in winning her.



## Truth Carved in Stone

A wise old philosopher was walking through the park with a young man and his true love when they came upon a beautiful statue of a Nereid. "Come here," he said to the youth, "and touch this statue." The young man put his hand on the statue's arm and felt of it closely, though he did not seem surprised at what he found. "Now the girl," the old man continued; so the lover also felt of his girlfriend's arm, in the same way. "And now," the man said, "tell me what you have learned."

"I'm not sure," the young man began. "The statue is hard and cold; the girl is warm and soft. Her flesh yields when I press; the marble does not."

"You have learned well," concluded the philosopher, "and if each of you remembers and lives by these truths, you will have a happy life together."

## How Sir Philo Married a Beautiful Princess Instead of the Woman He Loved

Once upon a time—and it had to be pretty long ago, as you will see—there lived a bunch of people in a little inland kingdom. The king, Cleon the Modest, was basically a good fellow, though he was not known for his brilliance in government. Instead, he was known chiefly for his glowing and nubile daughter, Jennifrella, a girl, though proud and a trifle petulant, so freighted with beauty and charms that pretty much every bachelor—and not a few married men—in the kingdom dreamed about her, whether awake or asleep. Truly, she maketh my pen tremble even as I write this.

Now Cleon was desirous of marrying off this legendary beauty as soon as possible so that he could be free of the constant entreaties for her hand, free

of the frequent bills for supplying her dressing table, and free to spend more time in his rose garden, which he truly loved. The king would have had little trouble choosing the richest suitor in the kingdom for his daughter, except that there were no exceptionally wealthy bachelors in the realm, and those of modest wealth all had castles and money boxes of essentially similar dimensions.

For her part, the Princess Jennifrella was repletely enamored of Sir Fassade, a handsome, dashing, suave, carefree young knight who most people, when they faced reality, agreed would almost certainly become her husband and therefore the next king.

King Cleon, however, was desirous of exercising his regal authority in having a say in who would follow him on the throne. And faced with what he clearly saw was an impossible number of choices, he therefore sought the opinion of his favorite advisor, the young Sir Philo. Now, persons of a cynical bent might begin to think that Sir Philo, an eligible bachelor himself and not at all impervious to feminine gorgeousness, would argue craftily that he himself was the most suitable and worthy candidate. This might have been so but for two equally powerful reasons. First, Sir Philo, brave, skilled, and thoughtful, was a man of integrity who would never abuse his position as the king's advisor to advance his own interests, even in a matter so emotionally and biologically compelling as that before us. The other reason is that Sir Philo was already in love with another. It was a gentle love, like a deep river, quiet and calm on the surface but fully substantial and powerful in its flow.

His happiness, the Lady Lucinda, though not of outward visage the equal of Jennifrella, was handsome enough for the young knight's daydreams. When asked what attracted him to Lucinda, he would answer ambiguously or mutter something about the light in her eyes. What joy he got sitting with

her under a tree in the bright spring, gazing upon her and dallying with her fingers or brushing a love-sick gnat from her collar. But what really twirled Sir Philo's cuff links was Lucinda's wit, her laugh, her playfulness. He relished taking the sprightly maid hand in hand on long walks, listening to the music of her voice and to the sentiments accompanying the music. How he loved to play with her tresses, or when her hair was up, to steal up behind her and kiss her unexpectedly on the back of the neck: for she would invariably produce a little shriek of surprise and delight and embarrassment, and then turning to him, her cheeks glowing irresistibly, attempt to glare and call him "monster," only to spoil her mock anger by bursting into giggles or even outright laughter. She would chide him and call him "rogue," and "impertinent," and he would say something like, "I'll put a stop to this abuse," and then their lips, who were old friends by now, would once again meet for fellowship. Of course, Lucinda would struggle just enough to enhance the enjoyment, until laughter or an unexpected visitor broke their embrace.

Well, enough mush. The point is that an unspoken understanding had developed between them so that only a few months after the rest of the kingdom knew it, they realized that they would one day wed and together laugh and cry through the years until death should wake them.

But to return to the weightier problem of King Cleon. Upon being asked for his advice, Sir Philo recommended that the king choose from among the following options. One, his majesty could choose the wisest and most just suitor for Jennifrella, for such a man would not only make a good king, but he would most likely be a decent husband, too. Or secondly, the king might seek a foreign alliance and marry his daughter to another king's son. This was an alternative which Sir Philo did not recommend, but mentioned only for the sake of completeness. And finally, the last possibility would be to let Jennifrella choose for herself—in which case, everyone knew that Sir

Fassade would be the next king, and he, opined Sir Philo, would be "acceptable," producing a government no worse than the current one. (Since I have already described the king's advisor as "thoughtful," I shall now add "tactful" and note that the final participial phrase of the previous sentence was thought but not uttered by the knight.) As for the kind of husband Sir Fassade would make, the princess would have no one to blame but herself.

King Cleon thought the matter over not quite long enough and decided to hold an archery contest, the winner of which would marry his daughter. The degree of Sir Philo's consternation is not recorded in the annals from which I am plagiarizing, but one may suppose that it was substantial, for reasons which will hereinafter appear. Needless to say (except to make the story longer and extend the reader's pleasure), Sir Philo made energetic protests, which eventually descended to rather pathetic entreaties, all in a futile attempt to change the king's mind. But King Cleon would not be dissuaded, and so the news was soon heralded throughout the kingdom, and, as you might suppose, arrow sales shot up immediately and remarkably.

As when a child pounds the ground near an anthill, causing a good many of the residents instantly to surface and run around in massed panic, so on the day of the contest the world arrived in a swarm at the castle of Cleon the Modest and prepared to be a witness, if not the victor, in the winning of Jennifrella.

There were several dozen contenders in the contest, some quite accomplished archers, some more or less dilettantish, and quite a few whose skills put the spectators at random hazard. Amid the noise and enthusiasm on this day stood a grim and silent Sir Philo, deeply troubled about the proceedings for three reasons. First, strictly from a philosophical standpoint, a shooting contest was a completely irrational method of

choosing either a spouse or a future king, and irrationality like this always troubled the young knight.

Second, though Sir Fassade was a very good shot, capable of satisfactorily humiliating most of the other contestants, he was no match for Sir Bargle. If they used the word then, I would have to exaggerate only slightly to say that Sir Bargle was, as they say in French, or maybe don't, a jerque. He punctuated nearly every sentence with an oath or a belch, constantly leered at the ladies in waiting (who knew all too well to keep a safe distance from him), and those who attended carefully to his speech noted that the word he used more than any other was "me." In a word (or fourteen, actually), Sir Bargle was a man unlikely to put his personal appetites in second place. The prospect of this knight nuzzling the hair or nibbling the earlobes of Jennifrella was in itself sufficiently repulsive to Sir Philo; the prospect of his becoming king was absolutely unthinkable.

The third reason that the king's advisor was grieved about the "score ahead and wed" method of selecting the princess' groom was that the only person in all the realm who could outshoot Sir Bargle was—Sir Philo.

Prithee, talk not to me about psychic conflict—nay, psychic trauma, for I have seen it here, and it is not gentle. Sir Philo traced and retraced many steps around the castle grounds, without thought of direction or destination, the movement of his feet and the tension on his face reflecting the turmoil in his soul. At length, in his anxiety, the brave knight turned to his lady love for succor and advice, and she, with a swiftness that surprised him and a nobility that made him love her more deeply than ever, told him that of course he must put the interest of the kingdom above his personal happiness. She then flew into his arms and burst into inconsolable sobbing for longer than we have time to look in on.

The contest began and proceeded remarkably well, with only the loss of a too-curious cow and a few luckless birds at the hands of the less accomplished suitors. Sir Fassade shot well that day, achieving a personal best. As each arrow hit, closer and closer toward the middle of the target, it made the princess clap a little louder and leap with joy a little higher. A smirk of self-congratulation soon decorated Sir Fassade's handsome face.

A loud belch and a louder laugh announced the commencement of Sir Bargle's shooting. As predicted by Sir Philo, Sir Bargle was an excellent shot. As each arrow landed a good handbreadth closer to the center of the target than any of those of Sir Fassade, the smiles on the faces of the princess and her favorite knight grew less and less until they had been completely replaced by somber looks on the knight and what might be described as silent hysteria on the face of the princess. The look on Sir Bargle's face at the conclusion of his shooting is a little too carnal for me to describe.

As he shot his set of arrows, Sir Philo was forced more than once, after he had fully drawn his bow, to pause, and to wait until a little tremble—attributed by the crowd to nervousness and eagerness to win Jennifrella—left his hands. As each arrow hit the target, remarkably near the middle, it also pierced the very center of Lucinda's heart. The young knight thought more than once about letting an arrow fly wide of the target, but he did his duty, though it brought grief to himself and devastation to the woman he treasured.

Sir Philo's smile as he took the hand of the princess was obviously forced, but no one noticed because Jennifrella was now bawling so spectacularly that the crowd, though not at all wishing to be unkind, found it, frankly, entertaining.

As it does for us all, time passed and life went on.

After a peculiar three years' delay, Lucinda finally made her choice from among several good offers and moved with her new husband to a remote part of the kingdom where it was reported that she was content, though some said that the cooler climate had somewhat subdued her well-known effervescence.

In the fullness of time, Sir Philo exchanged his sword for a crown and ascended the throne. He ruled wisely and justly, and the kingdom prospered. Hero that he was, he had mostly adjusted to the princess' personality, reminding himself as occasion required (and occasion did require), that not only had he acted for the good of the kingdom, but he had wed great beauty and, eventually, personal power. He further reminded himself that Jennifrella had made an adequate wife, even after her face wrinkled and her tummy pudged, and that she had proved to be a reasonable mother to his children. Whenever, in a moment of inattention, he discovered himself pining to enjoy a witty remark or some unguarded laughter, he quoted, hoping that it was true, the old proverb that "we grow most not when something is given but when something is taken away."

All in all, it was a reasonable life with much to be thankful for. Jennifrella's joy was that Sir Philo, now King Philo, remained a generous and loving husband even as her beauty faded; her only regret was that Sir Fassade had married her younger and more amiable sister, and both of them appeared to be altogether too happy. Lucinda's joy was in her two lovely children, whom she took, once or twice, to see the new king as he made a royal progress through their village. Her only regret was that she could reveal only half her heart as she told them what a good man he was. Sir Philo's joy was that he had acted virtuously and now enjoyed a mostly pleasant life, dispensing justice and mercy with care and humanity. His only regret was that he had learned to shoot arrows.

## Serendipity

A young man, in the confusion and embarrassment of youth, was walking across the campus of a great university on the way to his philosophy class. At the previous meeting, the professor had posed the question, "If we do not know the purpose of something, how can we know whether any aspect of it is good or bad?" This question, together with the problem for the day, "Does man have a purpose?" had taken complete occupation of the young man's mind, not because of any intrinsic interest, but because the professor was in the habit of calling on students and expecting a thoughtful response. So deeply meditative was the young man that he neglected to observe his path adequately, with the result that he soon bounced his head off an unhappily placed tree in the middle of the lawn.

Picking himself up and dusting himself off, the young man looked around to see if anyone had witnessed his inadvertent folly. The only people nearby were two men, who, although they were just a dozen feet away, were completely oblivious to the young man's accident, for the reason that they were engaged in a somewhat heated argument. Whether to obtain some sympathy for his bruised head, or to excuse his inattention, or perhaps simply because they were standing near a wheel barrow and looked for all the world like gardeners, the young man interrupted them with the slightly exasperated question, "Excuse me, but what is that tree doing there, anyway?"

Now it so happens that these two men were not gardeners at all. They were, in fact, tenured professors of philosophy, the very subject the young man was struggling to understand. They turned to him at once and condescended to admit him to their conversation.

"Well," said the first philosopher, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "see here. This is a tree." And pointing to the tree the young man was



already too-intimately familiar with, concluded with apparent satisfaction, "As Circumplexius has said in the fourth book of his *De Scientia*, 'An example is the best definition.'"

"I know that is a tree," replied the youth, rubbing his forehead.  
"What I want to know is, Why is it there in the first place?"

"You see," said the other philosopher to the first, "the dance of the blind with the senile." Then, momentarily stroking his beard, he turned to the young man and continued, "A tree means what it is. The concept of treedom does not subsist in some fortuitous, exogenous hyle—that is the doctrine of carpenters, not of philosophers. As Herman of Rimboa has aptly remarked, 'Inner eyes must perceive beyond what the outer eyes see.'"

"And as the Chinese say, 'The flies buzz in the wind, but men drink their tea,'" added the one with glasses. "Here, son," he went on, pointing again, "this is also a tree. Compare them and deduce treehood by subtracting the anomalous from the universal."

"Certainly you have read Dohesius *On the Nature of the Universe* in the last twenty-five years," the other philosopher said with some indignation. "Don't you recall his dictum that 'a second example is not an explanation'? How do you pretend to instruct the ignorance of youth when you have never instructed yourself? 'The canvas remains blank when the artist has no paint,' says Hugo de Brassus. Go back to your books."

"And as de Roquefort says, 'To sit on a cheese and eat whey is the destiny of fools.'"

"See here, young man," said the beard, ignoring his colleague, "treeness is a life process displaying the aspiration of matter toward hierarchy, order,

and structure. It finds analogues and even homologues in life systems everywhere."

"The frogs croak at night, but the sky remains dark," said the glasses, smirking slightly.

"Nonsense," replied the beard. "What I have said is self-evident. Sir Humphrey Boodle even noted it."

"But Boodle has been refuted these three hundred years."

"Well, Calesimon said so, too."

"Hah!" cried the glasses with a laugh of forced incredulity. "Calesimon! Calesimon was an idiot!"

"Argumentum ad hominem."

"Oh, come on. The man was institutionalized."

"And genetic fallacy, too. My, my."

"Ignore him, son," said the glasses to the youth. "He's not been very well since his wife laughed at his last paper. A tree—"

"She did not laugh," interrupted the beard.

"—is a woody plant containing specialized structures, larger overall than a bush and often, as you see here [pointing] having only one trunk rather than many."

"And is this the effect of dotage or of primordial ignorance?"

"False dilemma, Mr. Logician."

"Surely you were there that day in bonehead English when they distinguished between 'definition' and 'explanation.' You are familiar with the English language, aren't you? The young man has asked for an explanation."

"Well, as Frabonarde says, 'The whole is known by its parts.'"

"The doctrine of those who pull the wings from fruit flies."

"Yes, it would be too straightforward for someone who needs six hundred pages to discover that he doesn't know what he is talking about."

"A classic example of the projectionist error. Not everything you don't understand is a problem with the text," said the beard, tapping his finger to his temple.

"If I may be permitted one last allusion to Oriental wisdom, I would note only that the Chinese have said, 'Men hurt their eyes seeking a water lily in a rock garden—even in a large rock garden.'"

"I thought you knew that the Poems of Chen had been exposed as a product of nineteenth-century Europe. Don't make it a habit to go around quoting hoaxes. It gives philosophy a bad name."

"Excuse me, sirs," the youth interjected, "but I have to go now."

"Very well," said the beard. "Only remember, with the knowledge you attain, seek to achieve understanding."

"Oh, so now we are quoting the Bible!" cried the glasses with triumphant scorn. "The rest of the department will be interested in this."

"I was not quoting the Bible. I have never even read the Bible."

"Why don't you ask God to bless him while you're at it?"

"Listen, don't you think I know that your doctrine of cosmic mental states is just a front and that you're a closet monotheist?"

"And may I remind you that slander is an offense punishable by law?"

"And is this the state of a wise man?" asked the beard, looking at the sky, "to threaten his friend for speaking truth?"

"Now he's even praying! I can't believe this!"

"'We cannot see around corners,' says Germulphius, 'so what is left to the man who refuses to see in a straight line?'"

"Someone like your wife," answered the glasses. "No doubt by now she's found twelve more insupportably ridiculous assertions in your paper on aperceptual phenomenalism."

"Well, at least my wife reads my papers. At least my wife can read."

"My wife is an avid reader of literature."

"Since when did the television listings become 'literature'? That's the most transparent semantic ploy I have ever heard."

"Are you accusing me of owning a television?"

"He who can see the maggots need not ask if the dog is dead."

"'Ignore the shadow cast by a passing vapor,' says Phonetes."

"You've always been sloppy with bibliography, haven't you?" demanded the beard. "Phonetes would have been utterly embarrassed to have said that."

"No matter. Truth needs no ascription."

"That statement is obviously the product of extensive reading and protracted thought. With a little more effort, no doubt you'll be able to announce that the sun shines on a clear day."

"I suppose you have never read von Hoch: 'I had always known what he said, but I did not live it until I heard it spoken.'"

"I reject that statement together with its sordid implications. It smacks of the grimy hands of utilitarianism. In a minute you'll be insisting that philosophy have practical consequences for berry pickers and children. Perhaps you would be happier as some sort of mechanic where you could get your hands on things, rather than as one who pretends to instruct youth."

"You and Sir Peter Poole, who was proud that he couldn't tell a hoe from a rake."

"Well, what of that? My profession is philosophy, and I look for truth, not for mud."

"Even the sun cannot be seen through a silver coin."

"I have never accepted money for anything I've published," said the beard hotly.

"'Beware of those who look to the right and walk to the left,' says della Corta."

"How dare you accuse me—" At this point they were interrupted. A young man, deeply preoccupied with thinking about the purpose of mankind, had just bounced his head against a tree and—ah, but this is where you came in.

### A Tale Revealing the Wisdom Of Being a Cork on the River of Life

Once upon a time, not very far from a town pretty much like yours, an old, nearsighted man was wandering down a country road quite pleasantly, musing to himself thusly: "I wonder what I should seek today? Some new treasure of the Orient, or a lost clue to the secrets of nature? That would be nice, as I spit" (and here, had there been but a small brass spittoon by the wayside, a clear ring would have sounded across the nearby pastures), "but," continued the old man, "this is pretty barren ground hereabouts, so I'd best not set my hopes too high. I'll start by looking for a silver dollar."

With this thought, the man's eyes brightened and he continued now more alertly down the road, staring intently at the ground and knocking little pebbles around with his cane. After a little, he thought he saw something

ahead. Mending his pace somewhat, he hurried (as an old man with a cane hurries) up to the object, which he now believed to be a quarter. When he stooped down to pick it up, however, he found it to be merely a bottle cap, covered with red ants eating the remaining sugar. "Just what I was looking for!" exclaimed the old man with glee, even though the ants began to sting him on the thumb and forefinger. "Bottlecaps can be very useful." So he put the new possession into his pocket and once more began his stroll, still watching the ground.

He had hardly begun to wonder what he might find next, when, there, just a little way off, he saw a pearl lying in the roadbed. "Surely," he thought, "nothing is round or shiny exactly like a pearl, so I could not be mistaken this time." So he began to amble over without delay. As he came nearer, his joy increased. "Hee hee!" the old man laughed, before stifling his mirth lest he call attention to himself and bring competitors for his newfound treasure. He even paused a moment and looked around to see if anyone had noticed him or the pearl.

The way seemed clear so he closed the final distance, reached down, and picked it up. Instantly he was aware that this was no pearl, but just a partly dried up chicken brain, which must have fallen off some farmer's cart, or been left by some animal in haste. "Just what I was looking for!" the old man said very joyfully. "Chicken brains make real good soup." Into his pocket with the bottle cap went the brains, and down the road with his cane went the old man.

It was not long after this that he saw another, much larger item in the road before him, which looked, from where he now was, just exactly like a fat roll of paper money. Blessing his astrological reading promising riches for that day, he made his way up to the spot with a speed truly remarkable for a person of his age and infirmities, and anxiously bent over to retrieve

his treasure. A closer look, however, and a confirming touch revealed that the man had found a "road apple," or, as it is sometimes called, a "horse biscuit." "Just what I was looking for," the old man said, now more perfectly pleased than ever; "I can use this biscuit to cook my chicken soup. Seems dry enough to burn right well."

Now the old man, between his nearsightedness and his preoccupation with his great discoveries, wandered unknowingly over to the side of the road, and pretty soon he stepped off into a ditch and fell down with remarkable violence. A farmer not very far off saw this episode, and hurried over to help the old man up. As he got to his feet, the old man, wincing with pain and holding one arm, cried out with a tone of satisfaction, "A broken arm! Just what I was looking for! A broken arm can be very useful." The farmer blinked once or twice, recognizing that this sentiment did not conform with what his own would have been under the like circumstances, but he said nothing. Instead, he quite generously helped the old gentleman into his cart and took him to town.

When the two arrived, the farmer dutifully summoned a doctor and the constable and some others of note in the place and repeated how the old man had fallen and broken his arm, only to exclaim that such a result was apparently what he had intended. This narrative caused some strange looks and a little discussion among them, and no one could think what to do next (aside from fixing the man's arm), when the constable suddenly remembered that he did not know the man's name. "Sir," he asked, "have you any identification?"

"Why, I think so, sonny," replied the old man, beginning to fumble in his various pockets, and then, to the indescribable surprise of his audience, to remove what they did not know, and could not have imagined, were the souvenirs from his previous wanderings. When his pockets were finally



emptied, there was still no identification, but instead, on the table before them, his interrogators saw the following objects, namely, viz., and to wit: the bottle cap, the chicken brains, the horse manure, a piece of grimy string, a cigar butt, three pieces of chewed and flattened gum, a wing nut with stripped threads, a rusty nail (bent in two places), part of a candy wrapper, some rat pills (eleven of them), half a marble, and a common pebble.

After a moment or two of reflective silence, the mayor made bold to speak (seeing the constable in a reverie), and asked gently and softly, "Where did you get all these, uh, items?"

"Why, looking for gold and treasure, sonny," the old man answered, in a tone that implied that the mayor should have known the answer already. "But," he added as a second thought, and in the face of these gentlemen's now rather extravagantly and injudiciously raised eyebrows and opened mouths, "they were all just what I was looking for—like the broken arm here. Quite a find, eh?"

At this point, the farmer, who had been standing generally in the background holding his hat in both hands, came forward and begged an audience with the constable. "I didn't want to say this before," he began in a low tone, "but now I think I must, in case it should be important. All the way into town that old fellow kept saying something to me about wanting to cook his brains by burning a horse biscuit under his cap."

That was enough. And, needless to say, the Authorities from the Institution in the city were immediately summoned, and the old man was taken to a very pleasant place where he could rest among friends and nice people, have no worries, and be free to enjoy the "butterflies, blue skies, and happiness always." It is reported by reliable sources that shortly after arriving the old man was heard to exclaim cheerfully, "Just what I was looking for! Mattresses on the walls!"

## The Art of Truth

Once upon a time a famous art museum searched the world over for the best paintings it could find. After a long search, the museum found a beautiful Old Master painting depicting youths and maidens frolicking in a wood. The directors were only too glad to pay millions for this painting because they were captivated by its beauty and elegance. How delightfully the maidens' hair and mouths were drawn, how perfectly the hands and arms of the youths, how life-like the bare feet on the forest floor. But the curator of the museum was the happiest one of all, for he had now become guardian and protector of a famous work by a famous painter. "Every time I look at that painting," he would say, "I see new beauties and excellences. Just look at these leaves here, the sweep of the branches from this tree, capturing just the hint of a breeze and seeming to vibrate with the music from the dance of the youths and maidens in the clearing. My very soul resonates with the greatness of it all."

Needless to say, this wonderful painting was the most popular exhibit at the museum, providing instruction and delight for thousands of visitors. Everyone, from the young child who could barely walk to the old man who could barely walk, enjoyed its beauty frankly and openly or profited from studying its color and arrangement. Children loved to see the happy figures kicking up their feet with joy; the young people marveled at the freshness and beauty of the figures; those of mature years stood astonished at the excellent technique that could present such a convincing vision; the old remarked upon the feeling of cozy intimacy produced by the scene of innocent pleasure.

"This painting is almost too good to be true," remarked one visitor prophetically as he purchased a print of it.

One day a horrible discovery was made: the painting was not a genuine Old Master after all. It was a forgery. It had not been painted by the famous artist whose name was on it, and in fact it had been painted within the last ten years. The museum directors and the curator were horrified and consumed with shame. Immediately the painting was jerked from the walls of the museum and ignominiously relegated to a basement storeroom. "We regret such an unfortunate imposition," the curator told the museum's patrons. "This painting is not art; it is a tawdry fake. This painting is a lie."

At first the public was saddened to lose sight of such a popular painting, and a few mild protests were raised, but eventually concern for the painting was pushed aside by other more pressing concerns, and it was forgotten (as are all things no longer directly in front of us in this busy world) and life continued.

Only the museum curator and an occasional junior staff member ever saw the painting now, hanging in the dim light of the basement well away from public view. All that was heard of it was the curator's occasional disparaging comment. "Every day I see new defects and ugliness in this fraudulent outrage," he would say. "Just look how false the sun on the leaves looks, how phony is the wisp of that girl's hair, how ugly the clouds there, and how awkward that boy's position in the dance. How we were ever taken in by this obvious cheat is beyond me." And finally, shaking his head to show his regret, he concluded, "What we did was foolish and shameful."

Matthew 18:3

"The door to this classroom is farther down the hall, sir," said the student.

"How dare you try to tell me where the door is," huffed the professor, as he turned around and walked abruptly into the wall. While he held his bleeding nose, he was heard to mutter, "Now why did they move the door?"

\* A proud man never doubts, even when his nose bleeds.

### The Boy and the Vulture

A young boy was playing in the desert with a bow and arrow he had made, when a vulture, always looking for a tender meal, saw him from afar. The bird flew over and, seeing that the arrow was only a barren stick, swooped down and pecked at the boy. "Why don't you shoot me if you don't like my pecking?" it taunted. The boy shot his arrow repeatedly, but the bird was too quick, and the arrow always missed.

Finally, exhausted from chasing the arrow and deflecting the bird, the boy sat down in the sparse shade of a dead tree. The vulture, lighting on one of the dry branches above the boy, sat triumphantly preening and smirking, and even plucked a few old feathers to drop on the boy's head in contempt. "There's for your pains, feeble one," the bird said haughtily.

The boy, however, would not be defeated. Carefully he collected the feathers, fixed them to his stick, and with the resultantly accurate arrow, shot the surprised vulture through the heart.

\* In our pride we often unwittingly give our enemies the means to destroy us.

\* Perseverance and ingenuity, even in the face of humiliation and defeat, will at last succeed.

[Suggested by Aesop, "The Eagle and Arrow"]

### Three Flat Tires

Once in the fullness and complexity of human existence three cars left the same party one rainy night and took three different roads on the way home. Oddly enough, at approximately the same time, each car suffered a flat tire, and the young couples inside suddenly found their evening and their lives somewhat different from what they had been expecting.

The young lady riding in the first car became instantly upset. "Well, this is just great," she said to her escort with understandable disgust. "I knew I should have driven; then this never would have happened. How could you be so careless when we're all dressed up like this, anyway?"

"I'm sorry," the young man replied, getting out of the car. "I'll fix it as fast as I can." He quickly retrieved the jack and the spare tire and began to puzzle over the repair. In a minute the young lady was at his side.

"You don't even know what you're doing, do you?" she asked.

"Well, not really, but I think I can figure it out," he told her honestly.

"No you won't. I want this done right," the young lady answered, as she grabbed the jack handle with just enough suddenness that the young man lost his balance and fell over backward into a patiently waiting mud hole.

While these events came into being to form a permanent, though small, part of the history of the universe, the young driver of the second car was, not many miles away, even then climbing out of his vehicle into the rain and opening the trunk. His date, in a very ladylike manner, and with due

concern for her precious gown, stayed in the car with her hands folded in her lap. She generously took care to look away from the young man's labors in order not to cause him embarrassment, and, when he slipped down and bumped his head on the fender as he tried to loosen a particularly intransigent lug nut, she very kindly turned on the radio.

The third young man, though he encountered different raindrops on a different road on this night, realized similarly that he, too, was destined to be wet, and pushed open the door with resolve. However, as he climbed out of the car, the young lady he had been driving home got out also. "Get back in the car," he told her, "or you'll get wet."

"I'll help," the young lady said.

"There's nothing you can do," replied the young man as he reached for the spare in the trunk. "It's really a job for one person, and I've done it before."

"Then I'll watch," replied the young lady. And watch she did. Oh, she held the lug nuts to keep them from getting lost, but to speak truly, she was not really of any help and she did get drenched. As he changed the tire, the young man looked at the young lady once or twice, only to see her gown melting and her hair dripping down her face, and no doubt he thought, "What a sight she is."

Well, I've told you this story as evidence of the foolishness and irrationality of the human heart. For now observe the consequent:

The first young lady, naturally concerned for her safety and realizing that she possessed knowledge that her young man did not, quite reasonably chose to change the tire. However, the young man, fool that he was, was never seen escorting this capable and logical young lady again.

The second young lady, very sensibly concerned about preserving an expensive dress and realizing that she would be of little or no help to her young man, showed a similar wisdom in avoiding what she knew would be the consequences of leaving the car. But, even though her judgment was vindicated when she observed, in the form of the drenched, muddy, and bleeding young man, exactly those consequences she had predicted, the young man himself, blind and irrational as he was, was also never again seen escorting this thoughtful and discerning young lady.

Even stranger and more perverse as it must seem, however, the third young man, even after observing the silly and unreasonable behavior of his date, even after seeing her soaked to the skin, her gown ruined, her hair plastered against her neck, her mascara running down her cheeks in little inky rivulets—even after observing all this, not only was he seen escorting her frequently to other entertainments, but eventually he offered her a ring.

### The History of Professor De Laix

The world had long been promised a fifty-volume definitive analysis on the meaning of life by the brilliant and internationally respected Professor de Laix. Admirers from all across the surface of the earth produced unrelenting and enthusiastic requests—nay, demands—for the wise professor to bestow upon the world his penetrating insights into human nature. As the years passed, however, even though he had been begged repeatedly for the first part, or a first volume, or even a first chapter, he had always answered that he wanted to get the whole work clearly in his head before he put it down on paper.

"To rush precipitously forward without knowing precisely where one wants to go," he would tell them, "will not of necessity produce a happy outcome because it might lead to a complicative erroneity or put one on a train to a destination he would not ultimately wish to visit. After all, the most beautiful part of a given day is known only after dark, and the best path up the mountain—which I take to be the path of true wisdom—is seen only from the top."

Year after year, therefore, arrived with hope and left disappointed; new generations were born and millions of hopeful readers mingled their own dust with that of the earth without the benefit of even a phrase of Professor de Laix' wisdom.

Then one spring his colleagues and students noticed that he was gradually becoming more and more animated, and was heard occasionally to mutter, "Yes, yes, that's right, that's right." Finally one day while he was sitting in a coffee shop regaling a few favorite students with tales of fruitless thinking journeys upon which he had in the past embarked, he took a sip of coffee (or perhaps he had inadvertently been served espresso) and then suddenly opened his eyes widely, sprang to his feet, and announced excitedly, "That's it! I see it all now! Now it can be written! Everything is completely clear! So clear! Ha ha! Now I understand! Now, at last, I understand!"

After this brief speech, he burst out of the coffee shop (leaving his students with expressions of amazement and an unpaid bill) and began to run toward his office where he could finally sit down and produce his great work. Now at last he could pour forth his hitherto inexpressible wisdom to fertilize the orchards of culture and bring into being a new and wonderful fruit for civilization to munch upon.



Unfortunately, in his highly focused and externally oblivious rush toward his office, he neglected to watch for the traffic as he crossed the busy boulevard between the coffee shop and the university (for academia is often separated from the rest of life by just such a metaphor), and as a result he was tragically but thoroughly run down by a fully loaded manure truck, whose cargo had been produced after only one day's rumination, and whose owner also hoped that it would swell the fruit on the trees of a less figurative orchard.

Such was the life and death of the great Professor de Laix, a man for whom someday almost came.

### How the Humans Finally Learned to Like Themselves

It is man's peculiar distinction to love even those who err.

—Marcus Aurelius, VII.22

A sweet disorder in the dress. —Herrick

Once upon a time, many years from now, technology had continued its remarkable progress to the point that the construction of artificial people had finally become possible. These humakins, as they were called, were made so carefully and with such art that no one could tell the difference between a real human and an artificial one—except that the artificial ones were flawless. Physically the humakins were always young, always beautiful, always fresh; they never had a hair out of place, never a pimple, never a wrinkle, never a gray hair. Mentally they were always bright, alert, and smiling; they always got their facts right, and never took a wrong turn or got lost.

At first the appeal of the humakins was irresistible, and most humans chose them over other humans for spouses. What human female could compete with an always slim, beautiful, and lively imitation? And what human male could compete with an always confident, correct, and handsome construction? In fact, the word "humakin" quickly became a synonym for "perfect," as in, "That's a really humakin car," or "This pie tastes just humakin." At the same time the word "human" became a term of opprobrium, indicating something defective or of low quality, as in, "I never shop there because it's such a human store with human-quality merchandise."

To the consternation of many, however, while the humakins could construct more of themselves in a factory, the humans could produce more of themselves only by following the ancient method of their ancestors, so that the result of the marriages between flesh and plastic was the eventual decline of the human race.

When about nine tenths of the persons on the planet consisted of the precisely fabricated humakins and only one tenth of the really human, quite an odd and unexpected situation arose. It had become so unusual to see, for example, a woman wearing glasses or a man with wind-blown hair that such a detail now took on a natural appeal to some of the other humans.

One bright morning at breakfast in a fancy resort dining room, a human female, almost as lovely as a humakin, sat chatting with a humakin male who had condescended to sit with her. Suddenly she inadvertently spilled a glass of tomato juice onto her white tennis dress. While her humakin companion predictably stood up and stared at her with horror, across the room a human male who had just witnessed the event was so filled with ardor and longing that he almost broke the table in his rush to get over to her and make her acquaintance. His excitement to declare his affection left

him without the capacity for coherent speech, so that only tentative and confused phrases stumbled from his mouth. In the midst of his babbling, though, he could see, in the welling dew of the woman's eyes, the tenderness of regard he had inspired.

As other humans, too, began to grow weary of the expectation of constant perfection in their relationships, scenes similar to this one began to be repeated with increasing frequency. A loose shoe lace, a chipped fingernail, a shiny nose—all gradually became sources of romantic and emotional attraction, and those very characteristics that had before been viewed as defects soon came to be seen as emblems of the truly and desirably human, as guarantees of that unique inner fire that no amount of perfectly crafted plastic could equal.

The word "human" now began to be associated with the genuine, the natural—and the beautiful. It became not uncommon to hear a young lady remark to her admirer as he gently put a flower in her hair, "Oh, what a human thing of you to do." The word "humakin," on the other hand, began to imply something slickly unrealistic or laughably fake and was often pronounced with a sneer.

At length, having rediscovered the amorous appeal of their distinctives like freckles and missing buttons and the inability to refold road maps, the humans began to marry each other again. It wasn't many years before a young pledge of one of these new relationships was heard to ask in a tone of frustration, "But Mommy, why must I have a crooked tooth?" To which the mother replied, "That's so I'll always remember how truly beautiful you really are."

## The Caterpillar and the Bee

A bee, flying proudly around the garden, approached a caterpillar sitting on a shrub. "I don't know how you can stand to be alive," the bee said. "I'm valuable to the world with my honey and wax, I can fly anywhere I want, and I'm beautiful to behold. But you're just an ugly worm, not good for anything. While I soar from bloom to bloom feasting on nectar, all you can do is creep around and chew on a stem."

"What you say may be true," replied the caterpillar, "but my Maker must have put me here for some purpose, so I trust him for my future."

"You have no future," said the bee. "You'll be crawling through the dirt for the rest of your life. If you ask me, you'd be better off choking on a leaf."

Sometime later the flowers in the garden woke to find that the bee and the caterpillar had both disappeared. All that they could see now was a shriveled yellow body hanging from the edge of a spider web and a magnificent butterfly flexing its wings in the sun.

\* This story reminds us that we cannot predict the future, either for others or for ourselves.

\*This story teaches us to trust in God rather than in the opinion of men.

## The Wise One

High in the mountains of a distant land there once lived a man so incredibly old that his life no longer had any plot. He was so old that his very name had faded from the memories of all those around him, and he

was known only as "The Wise One." He spent his later days hearing and commenting on people's problems and sitting among a dozen or two disciples who waited patiently to hear all that was asked of him and all that he spoke. Sometimes an entire day would pass when not a syllable opened his lips; whether this was from a temporary lack of strength or simply because he had nothing to say, no one knew.

While his reputation among his disciples and a few others was that he possessed amazing wisdom and insight, many people thought him to be an idle and incoherent fool because, they said, he never provided a practical solution to the problem he was asked about. Instead he would ask a simplistic question or tell a story whose point was so obscure that many left his presence shaking their heads.

Some said that in his youth he had earned and spent large quantities of money, only to turn from what he saw as a life of vanity to the pursuit of wisdom. Others said that had that been true, he was proved all the more fool for giving up the good life for a life of hardship that was of little use to anyone. Thus, for every person who called him The Wise One with reverence, twenty pronounced his name with irony.

Of the stories still not erased by the hand of time, consider these and judge the man as you will:

\* \* \*

One day a man, clearly troubled by the cares of life, came to The Wise One and spoke thusly:

"My son, to whom I had entrusted my farm, last week stole my best cows, sold them in the market, and spent the money in wild and shameful living. Now he says he is sorry and will repay me. What should I do?"

"Tell me," replied the old man, "when you drop your bar of soap while bathing, what do you do?"

"I pick it up, of course," the man answered, with some irritation.

"And now tell me, which is of more value, a bar of soap or a human soul?"

While the questioner left not at all certain about what to do, one of The Wise One's disciples, who had been deeply affected by this exchange, rose and said, "Excuse me, O Wise One, but I must go and reconcile myself to a man I have wrongly ceased to love."

"Yes, my daughter," is all The Wise One said.

\* \* \*

Another time a young couple came to The Wise One to settle a great argument. The old man listened seemingly more politely than attentively as each gave a lengthy explanation of the dispute. Finally the two looked to The Wise One for his decision, both of them more confident than ever of being right. The Wise One reached over to a vase sitting nearby and pulled out a rose. "Shall I hit you with the bloom or with the stem?" he asked the couple.

"What are you talking about?" asked the young woman.

"It is written in the Book of Worn Out Sayings that 'in the rose garden of life he who plucks thorns for his partner's bed is a fool.'"

"I don't understand," said the young man.

"Those who sell flowers put them in a pan of colored water and the flowers take on the color of the water," concluded The Wise One. The couple left confused and without resolving their dispute, but they did seem to agree that their trip to The Wise One was worthless.

\* \* \*

On one occasion two men came to The Wise One on the same day. The first was a young man unsure about which road to take as he stepped out into the world. "I have considered my career choices," he said, "and I don't know whether to become a poet or a merchant."

The second man had just married a wife and was about to buy a house for them to live in. "I have investigated many houses carefully," he said, "and have found two that would be suitable. The first house is nearly new and well designed but damp inside, while the second is light and airy but older and not so well designed. I don't know which to choose."

"Your problems are one," said The Wise One, as he picked up a honey comb and squeezed it until the honey was drained out into a bowl. "You both must choose between the wax and the honey."

"My gosh," said one of The Wise One's disciples, leaping to his feet, "I'm about to marry the wrong girl." And with that, he ran off into the distance.

The two men looked at each other, searching each other's face for a glimmer of understanding, which neither found.

\* \* \*

One spring a richly dressed young man came to The Wise One and spoke these words:

"I have come from a far kingdom where I have just ascended the throne. My father ruled long and was old when he died, and now I am remodeling his castle. The many books of his great library are in the way of my new banquet hall, and I desire to rid myself of so much old paper. But I do not wish to throw out every book. I want to keep some for the sake of his precious memory. Thus, I have come to you for a principle of selection. Which books should I keep and which should I burn?"

"Go to the ancient source of rock in your kingdom, from which your cities have been built," answered The Wise One, "and build a pile of stones until you can stand on it and see over the edge of the quarry. Then remove the contemptible stones."

With a look of deep thoughtfulness on his brow, the young ruler left the presence of The Wise One and returned to his kingdom. It is not recorded whether this advice was put into effect or whether it helped the young ruler with his decision.

\* \* \*

There are many other stories about The Wise One, just as there are many other people with their own stories. But these shall suffice to show how one old man exhausted the meager remnant of his days on earth. Whether his life was spent well or ill perhaps even he himself did not know.

### On the Heroic Suffering of Mankind

A man stood philosophically on the prow of his ship, deeply inhaling the fresh sea air, feeling the warmth of the bright sunshine on his face, and ignoring or perhaps not hearing the burst of the whip as it lacerated the



backs of the struggling slaves in the galley. But in the midst of enjoying his view, he felt a particle of dust fly into his eye. By blinking and rubbing it a little, he removed the speck, but his eye was reddened.

"Well," he said stoically, "life has many pains and hardships and we must bear them as best we can." Then relaxing upon a couch and ordering two slaves to dab his brow with a moistened cloth, he called upon his friends to sympathize with his suffering, whereupon he found some satisfaction in complaining of his hurt.

## The Quest

All literature is but a variation on the quest motif. —  
Someone or Other

Too busy to look, too busy to be wise. —Someone Else or  
Someone Other

There once was a man who wandered from town to town constantly examining the ground. He carried a lantern in the daytime and a compass at night. When asked what he was doing, he would answer, "I'm looking for a place to stand, so that when the wind blows I may stand and not fall."

Most people thought he was insane until a man who had lived long and experienced much was overheard to say of him, "Only a few people are as wise as this man, for he is engaged in the only search that really matters."

## Life

One day a man called his friend and invited him to lunch at his office. "Just come on over and we'll have a great time," the man said.

"Where is your office?" the friend asked.

"I'm not sure of the address," answered the man, "but it's somewhere downtown, I think."

"Well," asked the friend, "what does the building look like?"

"It's tall, like an office building."

"What floor are you on?"

"I think it's one of the middle ones."

"How many doors down from the elevator?"

"Oh, it's several. But I've never really counted them."

"Don't wait for me," said the friend, as he hung up.

\* This is not a story about a man who could not give directions to his office. This is a story about the architecture of life. For many people inhabit their own lives in just this way, not knowing where they are or how to tell others how to reach them.

## Discernment

"But compared to the pearls, this piece of string is worthless," said the man, as he pulled it from the necklace and lost his whole treasure.

## It Depends on How You Look at It: Eight Vignettes on Perspective

A man's house burned to the ground. Upon hearing of it, the man said angrily, "This is the fault of oxygen!" For, as he explained, if there hadn't been any oxygen in the atmosphere, his house never would have burned.

\* \* \*

When the boss called Smervits and Jenkins into the office, Jenkins was very nervous because his plan to salvage the Freeble contract had not worked. Smervits wasn't worried because he had shrewdly stood by while Jenkins floundered with the contract.

"Jenkins, you failed," the boss said forcefully after the two men had entered. "That's good," he added, "because it shows that you tried something. Smervits, you didn't fail, but you didn't try anything, either. You're fired."

\* \* \*

One day the power went off in the mine, leaving the miners in absolute darkness. One miner found a match and lit it. "What a dinky little flame," said one of his companions, with contempt.

"What a great light in the darkness," said another, with awe.

\* \* \*

"Just think," said the man in the orange hard hat, "to us that's just a useless pile of rock. But to someone with greater vision it has value. It can be changed by his direction into something useful."

"How's that?" someone asked.

"First it has to be crushed, and then heated in a furnace, to give up its old properties and take on new ones. Then it can be mixed with water and molded into something beautiful."

"So that's how you make cement, huh?"

"No," someone said, "that's how you make a Christian."

\* \* \*

An officer came upon a young soldier so weighted down with weapons and ammunition that he couldn't move. "You know why you aren't attacking the enemy, don't you?" asked the officer.

"Yes," replied the soldier. "I'm waiting for more ammunition."

\* \* \*

Once in a pleasant garden there stood a tree, from which, legend said, God himself would one day reign. But instead, a group of wicked men broke in and chopped the tree down. They hacked the tree into a beam and nailed a holy man to it, leaving him to die upon a hill. So the tree of hope now had become a beam covered with blood and death. "See here," the wicked men said, laughing with scorn, "in what manner God's promises are fulfilled."

\* \* \*

The chairman of the department asked the young professor how his book was coming along. Said the professor, "Oh, the book is already written; I just haven't put it down on paper yet." The chairman patted the man on the back and told him to keep up the good work.

A construction worker, watching this scene transpire, decided that what was good enough for academe was good enough for him, so he sat back and opened a beer. Presently his foreman came along and wanted to know what was going on. Said the worker, "Oh, the hole is already dug; I just haven't taken out the dirt yet." The foreman, not having been enlightened by Higher Education, fired the worker, right in the middle of his beer.

\* \* \*

A man on foot approached an abandoned auto wrecking yard that still had many old pieces of assorted cars lying around. "What an enormous pile of worthless junk," he said to himself as he walked by. The next day another man on foot approached the same yard. "What a wonderful pile of worthy raw materials," he thought as he surveyed the area. A few days later the second man drove away in his own car.

### The Strange Adventure

Once upon a time, so long ago that it seems like yesterday, circumstances so occurred that two youths found themselves lost together in the desert and forced to spend the night without the services of modern technology.

"What a terrible thing," said the first one. "We're stuck out here all alone among who knows what frightening stuff."

"This is great," said the other. "What an adventure. I can't wait to see what happens."

As the light began to fade, the youths happened upon a snake, sitting on a rock to get the last warmth it could find before the cold night set in.

"Oh, no!" said the first youth. "Out here it's just one problem after another. Now we'll have to worry about that snake crawling all over us as we sleep."

"What a great opportunity," said the second youth. "Now we can have some dinner." Soon the snake was roasting on an impromptu fire, and in a little while, the two youths began to eat.

"This is horrible," said the first youth, spitting out the meat and nearly vomiting. "I can't imagine a worse thing."

"Actually, it tastes rather mild," said the second youth, eating with relish.

When the next day came and the youths were rescued, they were asked about their adventure.

"It was the most awful, horrible experience I've ever had," said the first youth, trembling from the memory. "I'll be mentally scarred by it for the rest of my life."

"It was great!" said the second youth. "I think it's the best thing that ever happened to me. What a fun time. I'm so glad I was there."

\* The events we experience are less important than the meaning we give to them, for life is about meaning, not experience.

### In Defeat There Is Victory

Once upon a time, among the infinite events which pass daily in this world, a man took his son and daughter to the racetrack to watch the horses

run. After several races, the man announced that he would place a bet. "We want to play, too!" his children cried excitedly.

"Very well," answered the man. "Here are the names of the horses in the coming race: 1. Dotty's Trotter; 2. Sure Win; 3. Also Ran; 4. High Risk; 5. Looking Good; 6. Outside Chance; 7. King Alphonso."

"I want to bet on Sure Win," the boy said eagerly. "There's nothing like the certainty of success."

"And I will bet on Looking Good; he sounds so handsome and strong," the daughter said, with a trace of a sigh.

"Good, children," their father replied, and he went off to place the bets for them.

"Whom did you bet on, daddy?" the daughter asked when he returned.

"I bet on Outside Chance," he answered.

Soon the race started. The horses bolted from the gate and took off at top speed. Looking Good looked good around the first turn. "Yay, yay, yay!" the girl yelled, jumping up and down as the desire of her heart moved forward. "I'm winning! I'm winning!"

"Patience, my child," said her father. "In horse racing, unlike in life, we look only at the finish, not at the progress."

"I sure hope that's true," the boy said, "because Sure Win is running fifth."

"Yes, my son," replied his father, trying to soften an inevitable blow, "although you know you cannot gamble and be sure at the same time."

At length the horses came into the final stretch, and, except for King Alphonso, who trailed rather substantially, there were only a few lengths between the leader and the trailing horse. But in that final, all-consuming, frenzied gallop, where mere wish and common effort give way to inner strength and spiritual power, the spaces increased, so that finally the children, with their feelings crushed by the surprise of unexpected failure and by the dismay of dashed hope, watched the horses run across the finish line in this order: 1. Outside Chance; 2. Also Ran; 3. Dotty's Trotter; 4. Sure Win; 5. High Risk; 6. Looking Good; 7. King Alphonso.

While the girl burst into unrestrained sobbing, the boy, feeling the full difficulty of the conflict between youth and manhood, choked his tears back, and knowing his father to be a philosophical type, tried to see the metaphorical application of this event. "This race is an allegory, isn't it, Father?" he asked, "where we learn that to succeed we must avoid what appears to be a 'Sure Win' and apply ourselves instead to the 'Outside Chance.'"

"No, my boy," the man answered. "The lesson is that we should not pay attention to names and appearances, but that we should penetrate beneath the surfaces of things; that we must consider real abilities, evaluate past records, and trust our judgment to bring us to a knowledge of the truth. Appearances and labels are often false and seldom accurately reflect inner realities. We must not let our casual perceptions influence our beliefs or rule our actions. I bet on Outside Chance because he previously has consistently outperformed the other horses in today's race, or horses that have beat the others. I care not about his name. Read where it says that God does not judge by external appearances, and imitate him."

"But I still like Looking Good and I wanted him to win," his daughter said perversely, wiping her tears and stamping her foot. "Outside Chance is



a creep."

"And now, my daughter," said the man, "you have first felt the conflict between reason and passion. May you learn to resolve it well."

### The Oppressed Girl

This may seem like a tall story, but there was once a teenage girl who didn't get along with her parents. "I'm sick and tired of all these oppressive rules," she would complain. "I feel just totally controlled. I want to be free!" So she ran away from home. "Now," she thought, "I can stay up all night and listen to loud music and watch awful movies."

When she told her friends of her new freedom, they said, "Great! Let's celebrate and get drunk."

"Yeah, why not?" she replied. "I can do anything I want." So she drank and laughed and vomited and passed out on the bathroom floor.

A little while later, she met an older girl who seemed to be experienced in the ways of freedom. "Hey," said the older girl, "to be free, just take these pills and free your mind from all your cares." So the teenage girl took the pills and felt strange and didn't sleep for three days and then closed her eyes and woke up in the middle of the following week.

Another time she met a young man who seemed to know about the free life. "Let me help to liberate you," he said, putting his arm around her. And so they went to his van and drove to a vacant lot where the young man kissed her and "liberated" her and told her to leave and drove away.

Many days later—days that passed without recognition or remembrance—the girl found herself sitting on a bench waiting for a bus in the middle of the desert. As she sat there gazing at the distant mountains, conscious of little more than the rising heat, she heard herself say, "I don't know what to do."

"Whatever you do will be foolish," said a voice from behind her.

"What?" the girl asked with some surprise, not sure whether she was listening to a person or a hallucination. The voice was that of an old woman with bony hands.

"Good decisions come from good values," continued the old woman, as she watched her knitting rather than the girl. "You have thrown your values away and so your decisions are poor."

"But I wanted to be free," the girl answered.

"There is no freedom without rules," the woman said. "Without rules there is only slavery."

"You know nothing about me," said the girl, her anger rising. "I'm not a slave to anyone. And I can do anything I want to. So just be quiet."

As she got on the bus to yet one more destination, the girl turned back to the old woman and said, "I'm sorry I got mad. The truth is, I'd do anything to be happy for one hour."

"That pretty well sums up your entire problem," the old woman said.

Two Conversations on Direction

"And then you turn here to the right."

"Really? No, I don't think so. The left path must be the way. It's more attractive, and it somehow just feels right."

"I'm sorry, but you have to take the fork to the right. See the little sign pointing the way?"

"Yes, but something just tells me the left fork is the one to take. The ground looks better, and that tree up ahead seems so persuasive."

"Well, I ought to know the way to my own house. There is only one way, along the right path."

"Uh uh. The right path looks bad. I just can't believe it leads to your house. You probably don't remember correctly."

"You'll get lost if you don't come this way. The other fork dead ends. The only thing there is a swamp, a pit, and a snake."

"It can't be. It looks so well traveled. And I have such a feeling that it will take me to your house; I've got to try it."

\* \* \*

"Hi. Hop in."

"Thanks, I appreciate the ride."

"No problem. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. That's what I want to find out. Where are you going?"

"To San Diego."

"Then where are you going?"

"Back home, why?"

"And then where are you going?"

"Well, oh, I get it. Then I'm going to rise in the firm and become president."

"And then where will you go?"

"I guess eventually I'll retire. Say, you feeling all right? You seem a little strange."

"But after you retire, where will you go?"

"Well, we all die eventually, so I guess I'll wind up at the cemetery."

"And then where will you go?"

"I get it. You're one of those religious fanatics, right? I think you'd better find another ride. You can get out here."

"Okay, I'm going. But I see you don't know where you're going, either."

"Yes, I do. I'm going to San Diego."

### Semiotics Strikes Out

It so happened in heaven one day that two souls who had been friends in their college years on earth met after long lives apart. After a few minutes of joyous reunion and recounting of their lives, one of the souls realized

that they were now in a place where all hearts can be revealed, and where they no longer needed to hide anything.

"You want to hear something funny, Lissa?" the soul said. "Back when we were young, I really loved you. Not having you for my wife is the one great regret of my earthly existence. Pretty silly, huh?"

"Not at all," said Lissa. "I always secretly loved you, too, and hoped against hope that someday you might notice me."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was too shy. But I sent you hints."

"Hints?"

"Yes, like the brownies I gave you that rainy day in the student union."

"Oh, or like the chocolate-chip cookies you gave me that one time?"

"Well, no, those were only cookies. I was just being friendly. But that Christmas when I gave you a coffee mug. That meant I loved you."

"Oh, I know. That thank-you note you wrote when I fixed your sink you signed, 'Love ya special.' That was a hint, huh?"

"Actually, I signed all my cards and notes that way, so I was just thanking you then. But remember that note I wrote where I called you a 'weird monster man'? Boy, how I loved you then. I wish you'd responded."

"I thought maybe that meant you didn't like me. I never was good at hints. I remember thinking a few times that some girl was hinting that she liked me but when I would ask her out or mention romance, she'd always look shocked and be dumbstruck with disbelief that I could ever have

thought she'd be interested in me." And here the soul sighed, as only souls can sigh.

"Well, why didn't you just say something to me, like, 'I love you'?" asked Lissa.

"I was afraid. And I didn't want to risk destroying our friendship by producing unwelcome romantic overtures. And besides, I sent you hints, too."

"Your overtures, as you call them, wouldn't have been unwelcome. But what do you mean you sent me hints?"

"I took you out to lunch."

"But you took lots of girls out to lunch."

"That was just for companionship or friendship. I just liked them, but I loved you. I thought about you day and night all through college, and for awhile after graduation, too."

"I wrote you a couple of love letters that I never sent."

"Gosh, I wish you'd said something."

"I wish you'd said something, too."

\* As we pass through earthly life so quickly and only once, how sad that our fear of rejection is so often stronger than our love.

Seeing is Believing

One day an idle young man was wandering through the woods not far from his town when he happened upon an old woman standing around a rather smoky fire and stirring a kettle. Being the modern young man that he was, he immediately blurted out his first impression:

"Gosh, you're ugly and whatever you're cooking stinks," he told her.

"Well, if you don't like my looks," answered the old woman, "I can fix that." She then spoke a few strange words, which were followed by a dramatic puff of smoke, and the young man discovered, not that the old woman had transformed herself into a beautiful young maiden, but that the young man could no longer see.

"Now I've protected you from all ugliness and every unpleasant sight," said the woman. "And you'll remain this way until you can find someone to marry you. And it will have to be someone who can look beyond externals better than you, because I'm also changing your looks a bit." Here the woman gave a little laugh and uttered a few more unintelligible words. Soon there was another puff of smoke.

"Ooh, bummer," said the young man, feeling of the new bump on his nose and the deep wrinkles now in his cheeks.

When the young man returned to town, he quickly discovered that his social life was now pretty much a historical artifact. Whenever he went to a party, the reaction was always the same.

"What's wrong with him?" some girl would ask.

"He's gotta look that way until someone marries him," would come the reply.

"Hasn't that plot already been done?" the girl would say, walking off in another direction.

But, hey, this is a fairy tale and I'm in a good mood so let's say that finally, after many rejections, the young man found a nice girl who actually loved him as he was.

As the young man got to know her, he kept trying to imagine what she looked like. After awhile, he constructed a picture of her in his mind, so that whenever he looked in her direction, his imagined vision of her came before his eyes so vividly that he felt he could almost see her. He thought that he could very nearly see the slight curve of her lips, the sunlight shining in her hair, the expressions of delight or concern on her brow.

Well, anyway, things worked out so well that pretty soon the girl's father was mortgaging his house to pay for the wedding.

When the bride and groom awoke on the first day of their honeymoon, the young man discovered that his eyes had been opened. However, he also discovered that the girl lying beside him did not have the deep blue eyes with long eyelashes, or the upturned nose with little freckles of the girl he had been seeing in his mind. The young man, still in the habit of blurting out his first impression, said, "Gosh, you've changed."

"No," said his new wife. "The only thing that's changed is that now you can see. Oh, and you no longer have a bump on your nose."

"But where's your blonde hair?" the young man asked.

"My hair has always been this color," the girl said, fingering her chestnut tresses.

"But you look so different," the young man said, still confused.



"When you looked at me before," the girl explained, "you saw only your imagination. This is what I'm really like."

"I see," said the young man, as he embraced her and began to give her a thousand kisses.

"I know," she said.

### A Traditional Story

Once upon a time, several time zones from your house, there lived a king who had tons of money, mansions and castles on too many lots, plenty of art and cultural treasures, dozens of wives (some of whom loved him), and so much power that the mere mention of his name caused cardiac arrest among a considerable number of his subjects. But—he was not happy. So he called his advisors to him to seek their advice.

"My soul troubles me," he told his court. "I have seemingly a full life, but I do not find happiness here. In the middle of an amusement, or when I wake at night, or as I take a bite of rare and delicious food, I feel an overcast sky in my heart. Help me to dispel this cloud."

"Perhaps your majesty would be happy if he had more wealth," suggested his treasurer. So the king increased the taxes on his people, hired traders to go to distant lands to buy and sell, told his workers to redouble their efforts in his precious metals mines and minted more coins than ever. It wasn't long before the king had so many storehouses full of treasure that he couldn't even count them.

On many an occasion his majesty would be riding through a city and see a huge building he didn't recognize, and upon inquiry, discover that it was yet one more warehouse full of his loot. And let me tell you, these warehouses were so glutted with gold and jewels and coins and rich carpets and Old Master paintings and antique vases that when the king wanted to look inside one, the jewels would flow out the door like gravel and the coins would spill out like water. His servants got so tired of replacing the excess that they finally just began to shovel it into the trash can after the king left. (Of course, they probably helped themselves to a little bit of it, too.)

In his palaces, the king had so much fancy stuff that ancient statues were used as door props in the stables, thousand-year-old urns were used as spittoons in the kitchen, and scraps of precious carpets were used to clean the servants' boots. The point is that after all this additional acquisition, the king's lifestyle was much fancier, but the king himself was still not happy.

"What his majesty needs is activity," said the king's culture minister. "Activity is the rubbing paper that scours the rust from the soul and burnishes her to a new shine. If the king would just engage in some hobbies, he would find contentment." So the king took up some hobbies: hunting, painting, dancing, building (more mansions and castles), eating, woodworking, stamp collecting, riding (in his golden carriage and on horseback), swimming (in his pool full of pearls), and even knitting. In all he tried thousands or perhaps hundreds of activities, each of them dozens of times.

He also held athletic contests, built amusement parks, and ransacked the world for jugglers and magicians and singers and players and storytellers (that's how I met him) and musicians. He ate too much, drank too much, and danced and played and watched and traveled and did too much and

basically engaged in a constant frenzy of activity from morning to night, from January to December, from the beginning of the decade to its end. And the result was that he was amused for awhile, but was mostly fat and tired and sometimes drunk and often disoriented, but still not happy.

"Perhaps your majesty would be happy if he ruled the surrounding lands and felt secure from attack," suggested the head of his army. "For the proverb says, 'In security lies happiness.'" So his majesty instructed his generals to go forth and conquer the territories around him. After a preposterous quantity of noise, smoke, blood, guts, and dying, the king found himself in possession of jillions of acres of farms and towns and houses and cottages and the souls of all those who lived therein. He now ruled over the land as far as he—or even someone with good eyesight—could see in every direction from the top of his highest tower. At any time of day or night the king could call for the relief of a distressed friend or the beheading of an enemy. He had absolute say over the life or death, the happiness or suffering, of millions of people of every rank and degree, from the most exalted noble in a seaside mansion to the most unfortunate street urchin in a grimy and stifling hovel. Such a thought sometimes gave the king half a smile, but he was still not happy.

"Perhaps what the king needs is love," said the eunuch in charge of the king's harem. "If he would marry a new variety of ever more beautiful wives, he would perchance find happiness among them." So the king decided to realize this scenario in three dimensions and searched throughout his kingdom for the most desirable women he could find. He found pretty ones and witty ones and laughing ones and moody ones and smart ones and elegant ones and plain ones and philosophical ones and decorated ones—women of every proportion, size, color, personality, and talent, and he married a hundred of them, some of whom loved him even more than those

among the first few dozen he was already married to. And the king found much pleasure in his wives, but he was still not truly happy.

"The king will find happiness only in wisdom," said one of the king's scholars. "For it is written that 'truth is a joy unto itself.'" So the king applied himself to books of wisdom, and to seeking the knowledge of all his many scholars and sending throughout all his realm to find the wise from every land. Dozens came and dozens pretended to instruct him in wisdom or in the way to happiness, but while he found some really good advice and some satisfying rules for life, happiness still eluded him.

Then one day came a woman from a land beyond the sunrise. Her words were few but they so affected those who listened that she was immediately granted an audience with the king, who explained the discontent of his condition.

"Here before me," he said, "it would seem that I have everything a man could want. I have three or four rings on every finger, I can caress a beautiful woman's hair in any color, I can ride a week in any direction and find my statue erected and feared, and I can hear any melody or see any play at my command. I possess or can do or enjoy everything I can imagine, and everything that the most creative of my servants can imagine. And yet I find that happiness is nowhere to be found. I am always rankled by a feeling of dissatisfaction and haunted by an awareness of emptiness."

"Truly, his majesty's desires seem to be infinite," said one of his courtiers, scarcely more able to hide his disgust than his envy.

"His majesty's desires are indeed infinite," said the woman. "For that is the nature of the human heart. The heart's deepest desires cannot be satisfied by any finite thing."

"Then what am I to do?" asked the king with dismay.

"You must seek the Infinite," the woman said.

"And where can I find it?" he asked. "What form does it take?"

"The Infinite is not a thing or in a particular place," said the woman. "But seek Him and you will find happiness."

When the people saw that the woman was returning to her land, they asked what she had said to the king.

"She reminded us of what we had forgotten," said one of the king's scholars, "that we are but travelers through an ephemeral landscape, and that on a journey through a desert, we should not expect to find happiness from fingering the grains of sand in the dunes. We find happiness by finding our way home."

## The Day Creativity Met the Linear Dragon

It was a winter's rainy day when the new Vice President for Design Concepts (who had just been promoted from Senior Accountant because he could calculate to the nearest nickel how much a new car would cost to build) noticed that two of his employees, a young man and a young woman, were not at their desks. Upon inquiring, he was told that they had "gone to the loft to be creative." The Vice President (who could remember the part number of every component he had ever touched) calmly adjusted his bow tie, cleared his throat, checked to see that his shoelaces were still tied, and then strode briskly down the long corridor of the half-remodeled

automobile factory. Soon he was walking up the stairs to the loft, only to arrive at a door marked, "Do Not Disturb."

Viewing the sign as an affront to his authority, he applied Chapter Two of the assertiveness training book he had just finished and quickly opened the door with determination and a scowl.

What he saw was not what he expected. Near the door was a boom box, playing very lively but not overly loud classical music. Directly in front of him across the room he saw the young woman, barefoot and wearing, instead of her business attire, purple sweatpants and a torn green sweatshirt. Worse than this, she was turning cartwheels and saying what sounded to him like, "Put it in the lake, dip it, water proof it, French dip it, soak it, drench it, pinch it, wrench it." When she stopped to attend to his interruption, he noticed that her hair was rubber banded into a vertical column on top of her head.

The young man was sitting off to one side, wearing jeans and a T-shirt printed with the words, "None of the Above." Nearby was an open ream of copier paper, many sheets of which he had evidently wrinkled up into a ball and tossed at a trash can a few feet away, with highly indifferent accuracy. A few of the sheets had been written on with multicolored felt-tip pens and placed carelessly in several piles.

"What's going on here?" demanded the Vice President.

"We work here," said the young man.

"Not any more you don't," said the Vice President sternly. "Just what do you think you're doing, anyway?"

"We're working on the new Blister DLX," said the young woman.

"I don't see any work being done here," the Vice President shot back.

"We're thinking," the young woman said.

"This doesn't look like thinking to me."

"Oh? And what does thinking look like to you?" asked the young man.

"Well, it certainly doesn't look like this. This is goofing off—and stop wasting that paper. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Scott and this is Tina," the young man said. "We're creative analysts. We're working on cost-cutting ideas."

"Cost cutting?" sneered the Vice President. "You don't even have a calculator. And besides, we've got engineers and accountants to cut costs, so even if you were doing that, you'd be either superfluous or redundant. I want you out of the plant by this afternoon."

That afternoon Scott and Tina went to the Vice President's office. As Scott stretched out on the floor and began to spread out a few papers, Tina pushed aside many feet of adding machine tape and sat in the Lotus position on one end of the Vice President's desk. The Vice President was not quite so upset that he did not notice that Tina was wearing earrings made from crumpled balls of paper hanging from bent paper clips. "We'd like to ask you to reconsider your firing us," said Tina. "We have some good ideas for the Blister."

"Get out," said the Vice President.

The next day all the executives met at a regularly scheduled administrative meeting, where there seemed to be some confusion and delay

in getting started. Finally, the President of the company spoke up. "I'm sorry for the delay," he said, "but we had scheduled a report on cost saving ideas by two of our top creative analysts and it now appears that some idiot fired them yesterday. However, we are in the process of getting everything straightened out, and they should be here soon."

"I hope it's Scott and Tina," one of the other executives said.  
"They're really brilliant."

"If unconventional," noted another.

"Unconventional or not," said the Chief Operating Officer, "I'll never forget how they saved us eighty-six million dollars on the Dazzle II by helping us reduce the number of parts. And when their expense account came through, all they'd bought were radio batteries and a couple of reams of paper."

"I remember that," said the first executive. "No fancy research, no costly experiments, just pure thought, just great ideas. They actually know how to think."

"What kind of a jerk would fire people like that?" someone asked.

And so it was that the new Vice President for Design Concepts was invited to take his skills to some other company, even though he could recite the exact cost of every part of every car the corporation made.

## The Wall and the Bridge

In the high country of a far away land there once stood a massive wall, blocking the pass between two mountains. Just below the wall was a path



leading around the mountains—a path made possible by a bridge connecting it across a deep chasm directly in front of the wall.

Now, the wall and the bridge were always bickering. One day when an old peddler leading an even older mule with a load of shabby wares crossed the bridge on the way to a distant fair, the wall said to the bridge, "You know, the trouble with you is that you have absolutely no discretion. You let just anyone walk over you. In fact, you're the slut of architectural forms, granting promiscuous entry to all and sundry."

"Is the greenness I see all over you moss or envy?" replied the bridge. "I enable people to fulfill their dreams; I provide opportunity for a better life. You're just an obstructionist, but I'm a facilitator—a metaphor for access, for hope, for possibility."

On another day a young maiden fleeing evil men ran across the rocks until she reached the wall where she could go no farther. She cried out and pounded her fists against the wall in despair until the men caught up with her and carried her away. The bridge then said to the wall in disgust, "You once accused me of having no discretion, but you are worse, for you are completely heartless. You're so cold and rigid that you cruelly prevent even the distressed and needy from passing by. Maybe that's why walls are known everywhere as symbols of 'No!' while we bridges are known as symbols of 'Yes!'"

"You, my loose and easy friend," said the wall, "indeed let the distressed pass, but you also let the criminals pass. I, on the other hand, provide the needed security to keep the land behind me safe from harm. I am a protector, and I defend this pass and the country well."

This dialogue continued for many years until one morning when suddenly the earth shook with great violence. So strong was the tremor that

both the wall and the bridge were reduced to rubble at the bottom of the chasm. Not many months later men came to repair the damage. In the process of reconstruction, however, the stones that were once part of the bridge were used to rebuild the wall and the stones that were once part of the wall were used to rebuild the bridge.

"Now I'll show you what a wall should really be like," said the new wall. "It shouldn't be cold and rejecting to everybody." And so at first, the new wall let many people climb up over it.

"And I'll show you what a bridge should do," said the new bridge. "It shouldn't let just anybody across." And so at first, the new bridge provided a difficult passage, causing many travelers to trip on the surface and a few even to fall over the edge.

But as spring and summer, harvest and winter came and went again and again, the rocks on the new wall grew more and more slippery and the little projections gradually broke away, so that climbing over or even getting a foothold became very difficult. And in the same passage of time, the rough spots on the new bridge wore down and the crevices filled up, so that passage across became much easier.

"You see," said the new bridge to the new wall, "you've learned something about being a wall."

"Well," the new wall replied, "I've known all along that I must guard the pass and fortify the defenses of the country. And of course I know it's my job to keep out all those who don't belong. But I see you've finally discovered how to be a bridge."

"You can say what you like," answered the new bridge. "But I've always understood that I provide a critical link in the path around the mountains,

and that my purpose is to help travelers across the gorge."

As the years collected, as years do, the new bridge and the new wall began to think less and less about what they had once been and more and more about the task they currently had to do, until eventually it became impossible for anyone to tell that the new wall had once been a bridge or that the new bridge had once been a wall.

"How indiscriminate and common you are," the new wall would often tell the new bridge.

"And how inflexible and repressive you are," the new bridge would reply.

### The Wish

While walking along the beach one day, a man spotted an old, barnacle-covered object which on closer examination he discovered to be an ancient bronze oil lamp. "Hah! Aladdin's lamp," he thought, jokingly. "I'll rub it." To his surprise, when he did rub it, a genie appeared.

"Okay, Bud," said the genie, in a remarkably bored tone. "You have one wish—anything you want. What is it?"

"Money," the man said instantly, his eyes widening. "Yes! Endless money. Riches! Wealth! Ha! Ha! Huge, massive, obscene wealth!"

"I thought so," said the genie in the same bored tone.

"No, wait," the man said, his eyes suddenly narrowing. "Power. Yeah, that's it. Complete and total power over everyone and everything in the world. With power I could get all the money I wanted."

"So you want power, huh?" asked the genie.

"Well, yes," said the man, now a bit hesitant because of the genie's less-than-enthusiastic tone. "Of course, with money I suppose I could buy power. Which do you think I should ask for, Genie?"

"How about world peace or personal humility or an end to famine or maybe an end to greed," suggested the genie, emphasizing the last phrase. "Or perhaps the gift of discernment or knowledge or spiritual enlightenment or even simple happiness."

"But with money or power I could buy or command all those," objected the man.

"Yeah, sure," said the genie.

"Well, just give me power and I'll show you that I can have everything else, too."

"You shall have what you ask," said the genie resignedly. "Whether you shall have what you imagine you must learn for yourself, and you will soon find out."

"Well, I certainly hope to have it all. Don't you ever hope, Genie?"

"Yes," said the genie. "I hope that someday my lamp will fall into the hands of a wise man."

And so the man was given power over everything on earth, over every government, every event, every activity of every soul. As a result, his name was soon pronounced with hatred and contempt by everyone, and in a few months he was assassinated by his most trusted followers.

## Several One Way Conversations

"Yes, they are shackles, but they are made of gold," said the man, as he asked for another pair on his wrists and two more on his ankles.

\* \* \*

"You can see how great I am by observing what I have done," said the chisel to the other tools, as they gazed upon the beautiful statue.

\* \* \*

"My word is as good as my check," said the forger, as he handed over partial payment and promised to pay the balance later.

\* \* \*

"May you get everything you want," said the philosopher to his enemy, knowing that his enemy would not recognize his words as a curse.

\* \* \*

"I'll teach this dirt not to muddy my shoes," said the man, shoveling madly, only soon to discover himself in a pit.

\* \* \*

"Now I see how essential material things are," said the man, as he looked at the ashes of his burned down house.

\* \* \*

"How dare you, who are nothing but a low worm, try to tell me what to do," said the man, as he stood there unmoving, just before the piano landed

on him.

### How the King Learned about Love

Back in the days of knights and chivalry and courtly love, a beautiful young woman fell in love with a man of noble birth, who, however, was already married. Their love continued to grow until the woman granted and the man took more than virtue could properly countenance and one morning the woman awakened with the right to use the pronoun "we" whenever she spoke.

She realized that she could not inform her lover because of his position, for he was not only married but also a very prominent member of the court. So she concealed the matter remarkably over many months, until, in the fullness of time, it could be concealed no longer. At that point she resolved to throw herself on the mercy of her mistress, the king's daughter, to whom she was a lady in waiting. She took her newborn son to the princess and begged quite pathetically for her help.

The king's daughter, knowing that he was a hard man who had never hesitated to crush, kill, or otherwise persecute anyone who offended him in the slightest, realized that she could not tell the truth or say simply that the child had been found during one of the princess' walks, because the king would then send it to a harsh life in an orphanage—and that would be if she found him in a good mood. She decided instead to declare to the king that the child was her own and take the guilt, together with any other consequences, upon herself, for she loved her lady in waiting very much.

When the king learned that his daughter had given birth (or so he believed), he was unutterably furious, and spent the better part of an hour

ranting and shouting execrations and breaking things. But when he demanded which of his knights had helped her into this situation, the princess, not willing to sacrifice any of the noble and completely innocent knights of the castle, invented the story of a secret lover from outside the castle walls.

The king suspected that his daughter was lying, or trying to lie—for the girl was so honest that she could not dissemble with conviction—so that he was now even more uncontrollably enraged than before; he now began screaming directly at his daughter and breaking larger and more expensive things. And because he could think of nothing but her duplicity and disobedience and his injured honor and her betrayal of his affection, he coldly (or rather hotly) determined to banish her from the kingdom. "For," he argued, "I will love not those who love not me." He therefore cruelly turned the girl and the child over to the traders of a passing caravan from a distant land who would take them past the borders of the kingdom.

Even as she saw her father's look of hatred as she was packed into the wagon at the rear of the caravan, the princess did not alter her resolve to keep her secret, for now she knew that if the king knew the truth, her lady in waiting would most certainly be executed. As for the lady in waiting, she was so stricken with grief over the king's actions that she very nearly took her own life. But the princess had commanded her never to reveal the secret, regardless of the consequences, and the lady in waiting feared that the princess would be exposed by such an action. So the woman, helpless to remedy the situation, instead fled the palace in tears.

As the traders proceeded out of the kingdom, the princess resolved that, whatever should happen to herself, she would not see the child grow up a slave. She therefore watched carefully for an opportunity and one night sneaked off from the traders as far as she could get in the cold and dark, and

put the child near a hut, hoping and praying that it would find safety and a free life, however humble. She then sneaked back to the traders, and pretended to be cuddling the baby in her arms.

The caravan traveled two full days before her deception was detected. When it was, the princess once again played audience to violent anger. The traders yelled and cursed the girl; then they beat her with fists and even with sticks, accompanied by more curses and threats; but nothing they could do could force her to tell what she had done with the baby. The traders, remembering the promises made to them by the king to encourage the secrecy of their charges, and fearing the consequences of a breach of that secrecy, sent riders back over the route they had traveled, to search everywhere.

Meanwhile an old woodcutter, who lived in the hut with his wife, found the baby and brought it inside. As they looked upon the beautiful, healthy child, their eyes shone with a sparkle that they thought had long ago disappeared forever. But even in their delight, they recognized immediately that the child was no ordinary foundling, for it had noble features and was wrapped in silks and wore a gold brooch with a white lily on it.

They soon recognized that the child would need better fare than the rough crusts and ordinary water the couple subsisted on—for they were extremely poor—so they began to wonder how they could take care of it.

"We could pick some of our neighbor's fruit at night," suggested the woman, "or perhaps sell the gold brooch."

"Or we could cheat the king the next time he buys wood," said the woodcutter sarcastically. "But we won't do any of those things. You know that it isn't right to do wrong, even to bring good. God has brought us this child; I pray that he will help us feed it."



Now, the old woodcutter had been saving a few coins from his meager earnings over the past three years in order to buy himself a new axe head in the spring. "But," he thought to himself, "I suppose I could sharpen this old head one more season, and with a little longer handle, it ought to be good enough to get my by." So he took the money he had saved and gave it to his wife, instructing her to buy the child proper food and raiment.

The old woman was so moved by this sacrifice that she took off her locket—other than her wedding ring the only piece of jewelry she owned, and an heirloom from her great grandmother, at that—and contributed it to the welfare of the child. "For," she said, "I was never so foolish as to believe that love had no price."

Just a few days later a rider from the traveling caravan arrived, and visited the woodcutter's neighbor. Because the woodcutter was not far away at the time, he overheard the conversation. "Have you seen anyone with a baby in the past week?" demanded the rider roughly.

"Who's asking?" asked the neighbor, without excessive politeness. As the woodcutter heard the angry, cursing, threatening reply of the rider, he ambled back to his hut to inform his wife of what was going on. The couple was quite shrewd enough not to reveal anything to a rude, angry, and ill-dressed man on horseback, because, they concluded that, however deficient their own hospitality to the child, it was likely to be better than whatever would be offered by such a ruffian. "And besides," the woodcutter's wife said, "I already love the child too much to give him up."

As the days passed, the old couple grew thoroughly attached to the baby. They both found themselves unexpectedly humming little tunes or smiling for no apparent reason, and they both found their chores suddenly lighter and easier. They worked faster, eager to finish and once again spend some time playing with the child.

However, it wasn't many weeks before the old woodcutter and his wife were forced to admit that they were simply too old and too poor to raise the child as it should be, and that they ought in all fairness to the babe to find a better home for it. "For," as the old woman explained, "I love the child too much to keep him."

So the woodcutter took the child to a house where several holy women lived and, after explaining the brief history of the child as he knew it, asked for their help. "The wife and I don't have the learning behind us, the money with us, or the years ahead of us to raise this child as it ought to be raised," said the woodcutter to the matron of the house, "so we'd appreciate it if you could find it a proper home."

"Our small endowment provides us with only a modest living," the matron said, "but we will care for the child until we can find out whom it belongs to, or until we can find it a good home." So the man left the child with them and went on with his wood cutting. The matron of the house assigned care of the child to one of the newest of the holy women, who could nurse it.

About this season in the kingdom, the queen gave birth to a son also. The child, however, was weak and sickly, and failed to flourish. In just a few weeks it developed a fever and died suddenly in the night. The queen, in addition to her grief, was frantic with anxiety, knowing that the king was such a hard man that if he knew his only son had died, he would hate the queen and perhaps divorce her. So she sent, with the utmost secrecy, a trusted servant to find another child to replace the one she had lost. "Bring me a child with no past," she told her servant, "and I will give it a future."

Finding such a child was a tiring and frustrating task for the servant, and he met with humiliation and rejection and insult and false leads and failure at every turn. But since this story is not about him, nor about the rewards of

perseverance, let us say simply that eventually he found himself at the door of the holy order of women we have mentioned above.

"Yes, we do have such a child as you seek," the matron told him. "We were keeping him until we could find his parents, or until we could find him a good home. Perhaps your mistress, whoever she is, will care for him well." The servant assured the matron that this would be so and gave her a large gift to maintain the house and its charitable work. As she handed him the child, she said, "The woman who has been nursing the child says that this parting is like a death to her, for she has become very attached to him. But she loves him too much to think of her feelings. I hope that what is a sadness for her will be a happiness for the child."

"Truly, good woman," replied the servant, "it is rightly said that the death of every fruit is the seed of new life. Every ending is also a beginning."

As the years passed, the baby grew up into a fine, strong young man. The king, who remained crusty and harsh toward everyone else, changed completely when his son (as he supposed) entered the room. The king became actually friendly and laughed some and often engaged in animated conversation with the young prince. The king was often heard to say that he would never let the prince part from him even for a day but that the prince should be his always. They often rode on horseback through the forest all day or sat together by the fire until the servants fell asleep, discussing the kingdom and enjoying each other's company.

When the prince reached his early manhood, the king not only took him into confidence on affairs of state, but began to share power with him, knowing that not many more years would pass before there would necessarily be a new king. Many of the king's decisions were now submitted to the prince before they were made, and the prince, to his credit, frequently moderated the king's stern and often cruel decrees.

By this time, the queen was in poor health, troubled by constant pain and a lingering cough. Everyone at the court eventually recognized that she was about to die. For several days the queen debated with herself whether or not to let the secret of the prince die with her, but at last, showing the heritage of her daughter's honesty, she decided that she must reveal it to the king.

By the time she reached this decision, the queen was truly on her deathbed, so she called the king to her and sat up weakly. "My king," she began, "I have a matter to disclose to you that has burdened my heart for many years. It concerns the prince." And here she hesitated for a few moments. The king waited in silence. "You," she continued, "are not his father."

The king, immediately concluding that the sanctity of his marriage bed had been violated, exploded into a rage that would likely have ended the queen's suffering prematurely had she not added as loudly as she could, "And I am not his mother." The king then, though still in shock, calmed himself enough to hear her explanation of the death of their natural son and her subterfuge in adopting the child who was now the prince. The king at first gave little credit to this tale, thinking that the queen was either delirious or scheming against him and his beloved son in some way. But he sent attendants to the holy order to discover the truth. They soon returned with the matron of the house and the woman who had nursed the prince as a baby.

"If what the queen tells me is true," said the king, "I have no happiness, no reason to live. For the only thing I love has been taken away."

The matron from the holy order solemnly attested to the truth of the queen's story. "The prince was indeed the baby given us by the woodcutter so many years ago," she said. As the king felt a wave of despair washing over him, the nurse from the holy order came forward and spoke.

"With all deference to my Lady and to her majesty," she said, "the queen is only half correct. For the child was indeed not hers, but he is the king's son." She then pulled back the cowl of her robes, took down her hair and showed the king her face. Even through the ravages of two decades, the king could still clearly see the face of his daughter's lady in waiting, his lover who had borne his child without his knowledge so many years ago. The lady briefly explained what had happened then and how she had immediately recognized the child when the woodcutter brought it to the holy house.

"You willingly gave me your son, even though I was evil?" the king asked in disbelief.

"I loved you," the lady in waiting said simply. "And I loved my son—our son—more."

When he realized how unjust and hypocritical he had been toward the lady, the princess, and the queen, the king was so overwhelmed with shame and humiliation that he fell to his knees and began pulling on his hair and sobbing loudly. His crying was the only sound in the room until the queen spoke.

"I forgive you, my husband and my king," she said. "And I love you."

"You love me?" the king asked, rising and turning to her with astonishment. "You love me after I have banished your daughter and proven unfaithful to you?" But there was no answer, for the queen had already closed her eyes for the last time.

The king stood as one who had been stunned. He could not speak or think. As he sat down in a stupor at the foot of the queen's bed, the prince

suddenly spoke. "I have found a mother today," he said. "I must now find a sister, too. I shall leave immediately in search of her."

"No!" the king yelled, standing up. But then, recollecting himself, he said, "No, you're right. You must go from me and find your sister."

In the days to come, as the king sat alone in his richly tapestried rooms, he had many hours to think over the events that had formed his life and to ask himself whether there was not in love some quality that can be shown only in sacrifice, not in advantage; only in surrender, and not in triumph.

### The Fly and the Elephant

A fly sat on an elephant's back. When the elephant shuffled down a dirt road, the fly said, "What a dust we are making!" When the elephant trudged knee-deep in the mud, the fly said, "How heavy we are!"

### The Man Who Talked Backwards

There was once a bizarre old philosopher who always seemed to say the opposite of what those who sought his advice expected. So contrary were his words that he was known as The Man Who Talked Backwards. His blessing on those he loved was, "May you have difficulty in this life," and his bitterest curse on his enemies was, "May your life pass without a single sorrow." Whenever someone asked him what course of learning to undertake in order to increase his knowledge, the philosopher would reply, "If you want to learn something, become a teacher." Whenever some grateful hearer would ask how he could repay the philosopher for his

advice, he would always answer, "The best way to repay a debt to me is to cancel a debt owed to you."

The Man Who Talked Backwards reversed even the most common of proverbs. Instead of repeating that "to love is to be patient," he would always quote, "To be patient is to love." Rather than noting that "seeing is believing," he would say, "Believing is seeing." For, he explained, what you believe controls what you see.

A young woman once asked him, "What can I do to make someone my friend? Shall I oil my skin or brush my hair?"

"Rather you should oil the skin and brush the hair of the one you like," answered the philosopher.

Another day a young scholar approached The Man Who Talked Backwards and asked him what books he should read, "For," the student said, "I realize that the more I read the more I will know."

"You will indeed learn something by reading," answered the philosopher, "but the more you read the less you will know. That is what makes reading of value."

"But how shall I know what beliefs I should hold in order to live the best life?" the young scholar asked.

"You think that your beliefs shape your actions," replied the philosopher, "but I tell you, it is your actions that shape your beliefs."

One day a woman came to the Man Who Talked Backwards for advice. "I know," she said, "that 'to live is to choose,' so I have come here to discover how I might fix my choices to live a fuller, more productive life."

"The better saying," said the philosopher, "is that 'to choose is to live.' But if you want to live life more fully, do less."

"Do less?" the woman asked with surprise. "But I'm an achiever. I thrive on accomplishment."

"Perhaps you have already diluted your life into meaninglessness," suggested the philosopher.

"But I'm easily bored," said the woman.

"I am truly sorry," said the philosopher. "Did you ever seek help for yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"For your infirmity of being bored."

"My infirmity?" asked the woman, again surprised.

"Ah," said the philosopher, "You attribute your boredom to others or to external circumstances."

"Well, of course," she said.

"In that case, I am sorry for your two infirmities."

"But I want to get as much out of life as I can," the woman protested. "You philosophers all say that one's life does not consist in material things because they disappear, but what then can I gain that I can keep?"

"The only thing that you can really keep—and keep forever—is what you give away," said the philosopher.



Late one afternoon a blunt young man came up to The Man Who Talked Backwards and asked him, "Now that you are old and about to drop dead, do you look forward to death or fear it—or perhaps I should ask, Did you live a good life or a bad one?"

"It is not one's life that determines his view of death," replied the philosopher, "but one's view of death that determines how he lives."

"So you are ready to end your life?" asked the blunt young man.

"Death is not an end to life, as you suppose," said the philosopher. "This world is but a mirror that reverses everything as it reflects it. Death therefore is merely the shattering of a mirror."

"Your mirror already has a large crack in it," said the blunt young man, with a laugh.

"Thank you," said the philosopher.

## The Clue

In every civilization, someone has to put up the signs that guide us on our way. —Proverb

Sometimes they had to drill the post holes up on Rocky Bluff—and it was a tough dig, what with the rocks and the hardness of the soil. They came home plenty tired and dirty on those days. Other times they drilled the holes down in Sandy Meadow, where the augur slipped in smoothly, quickly, and easily. They all praised the meadow and said how great it was to get an assignment to put up some signs there. And yet, when they told the

stories of their lives—the stories that animated their faces and brightened their eyes—they always seemed to be speaking of Rocky Bluff.

### An Analogy

As he clung to the sheer face of the rock, he could hear in his mind the voice of his climbing instructor: "If you make even a slight mistake, you will die instantly." He knew then that he need not debate whether to be attentive in his climb. And he was glad also that God is like a rock only in his steadfastness.

### About the Author

Robert Harris was born in Los Angeles, California in 1950. He is currently (1995) an English professor at Southern California College in Costa Mesa, California. He lives in Costa Mesa with his wife, Rita.

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