

# Leaving Home

Blithering Genius

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## Contents

<b>1 At Parents' House</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 A Few Days Earlier</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3 First Evening After Leaving Parents' House</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>4 Spending A Day With Frank</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5 A Day In The Fraser Valley</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6 Talking With And Parting From Frank</b>	<b>9</b>

## 1 At Parents' House

Both of us sat at the table and neither of us said anything. Or at least not anything much. Today was the day. I was leaving home.

Grade 12 was finished. I had written the last final exam a few days ago. Now it was time to go and face the world. I had no idea where I was going, but I knew that I had to go.

The pizza came with a free bottle of Coke, so we had pizza and Coke. My two cats bounded in and out of the apartment over the balcony. They knew what the backpack meant. They knew I was going away. They didn't know forever.

"Here Smiley," I crooned, "Here Smingala."

They came to be petted and scratched. They purred as I rubbed noses with them.

"Have you got enough warm clothes?" my mother asked. It was her way of expressing love: to be concerned about my survival.

"Yes Mom, of course." I said, and brushed my hair out of my face.

There was nothing to be said.

My backpack was on the balcony. It was an old green Trapper Nelson. I had packed it with my sleeping bag, a sweater, rain gear, my pot, my tent, some food, and a few odds and ends.

I ate my pizza.

## **2 A Few Days Earlier**

A few days earlier, a strange thing had happened to me. I was in the library, killing time before my physics exam, looking through my textbook. Out of nowhere, a very cute girl came up to me and said “Hi”. I had never seen her before. I think she was in Grade 11. I was confused about why she was talking to me.

“Hi”. I said.

“I heard you are really smart! What university are you going to?” she asked in a bubbly voice.

“I’m not going to university” I said. I was still confused about why she was talking to me.

She stared at me and said “Why not? Aren’t you the smartest guy in the school?”

I paused for a moment. What could I say to that?

“I don’t want to” I said.

She kept staring at me with a puzzled smile on her face, as if she was waiting for an explanation, or for me to chat her up, or something. I turned back to my textbook. She went away.

I don’t know how to explain to a normal person the position I was in, at that point in my life. I had no attachment to humanity, no desire to be part of it. I had never had a real job, never gone on a date, never gone to a dance or a party. I had only one friend, Frank, and he was an exception to almost every rule.

I couldn’t relate to ordinary people at all. I didn’t fit in, and I wasn’t interested in trying. In Grade 11, I went a month without speaking to anyone, just as an experiment.

Actually, I did speak once to another student during that month. A girl in my art class asked me why I never talked. I said “I had my tongue removed for insolence by the high priest of Jandor.” She said “Oh, you’re a smart-ass.” I renewed my vow of silence instantly.

## **3 First Evening After Leaving Parents’ House**

Instead of dealing with people, I immersed myself in the beauty and honesty of nature. I spent my weekends in the mountains. I walked to school alone, and spent a lot of time at a lake near my school. I would go down there, stand on a little dock, and just be in the moment, experiencing my surroundings as fully as possible: the clouds, the waves, birds flying by, the sounds of wind and water blending with the sounds of the city. Then I would walk slowly home, thinking about philosophical problems.

I had arrived at a philosophical impasse almost two years ago. I had questioned and rejected everything. I did not believe that life had any purpose. I did not believe that there was an ultimate basis for truth or value. There was experience. There was thought. There was action. I existed. But I had no reason to exist.

That’s why I had no interest in pursuing little tokens of social appreciation, such as grades or money. How I go to university if life had no purpose? Or go anywhere?

But I had to go somewhere. I had to do something. We cannot just exist. We act, even if there is no ultimate reason to act.

School was over, and so now I had to do something, even though there was nothing to do. I had to act, even though I had no purpose.

I finished my pizza. Now was the time. I had to go. I didn't know where I was going. I had no reason to go. But I had to go. I got up from the table.

"Goodbye" I said to my Mom.

"Goodbye" she said, with some warmth in her normally flat voice.

I put my backpack on and walked to the balcony door. Smingala was outside and he looked at me from under a parked car. I climbed over the balcony rail. Our apartment was on the first floor so I usually entered and left by the balcony door. I walked across the lawn. Tears were welling up in my eyes.

"Take care!" my mother called after me. I couldn't answer. I was choking up.

Smingala darted from under the car and ran over to some bushes. He looked at me. I crossed the street and went up the alley. Tears started to stream down my face.

"Why does it have to be this way?" I thought.

After a little while I wiped my eyes and face on my sleeve, and I started to calm down. I breathed deeply, trying to relax. It was a warm June evening. Nighthawks and swallows were catching insects above the apartment buildings. Kids were playing in the street. Adults were sitting on balconies, talking and drinking beer.

I decided to walk down to the lake and spend the night in the tall grass there. In the morning I would go somewhere else. It was somewhere to go, and my feet were used to going in that direction.

I was walking down residential streets when an old friend of mine saw me and waved. "Hey!" he shouted, "Where are you going? Camping?"

We had been good friends back in Grades 7 and 8, before I became such a dedicated loner. He jogged over to me.

"I'm leaving," I said.

"Leaving? Where are you going?"

I shrugged. "Just leaving."

"You want a ride somewhere?" he asked.

"No, that's okay."

"Good luck," he said. His eyes showed real concern. We had been good friends long ago.

"Thanks" I said.

He walked back to where his friends were waiting.

I sighed and kept walking. I really didn't want to run into people I knew on that particular evening. I continued on my way to the lake. As I walked, I drank in the familiar sights of houses, trees, plants, etc. Even the sidewalk cracks were familiar. I had walked this way to school, day after day, for two years. That walk was part of the little world that I was leaving.

## 4 Spending A Day With Frank

As I was walking down a street close to the lake, a brown car pulled alongside me and some obnoxious jerk yelled out “Hey, what flavor is that backpack, fag?”.

It was Frank, my one weird friend. What a strange coincidence that he would be driving down that street on that particular day. He might have been looking for me, but he had no way of knowing that I would be there.

“Brown,” I replied, and got in the car. Frank kept looking over at me and grinning. He was obviously pleased at having found and insulted me.

“Take me across the Patullo bridge or else.” I said, pulling out my hunting knife.

“Okay. Ever gone ninety miles an hour in reverse before?”

“Only going around corners on Mt. Seymour.”

We both laughed.

Frank drove around the neighborhood for a while. I asked him what he was doing. He said he had taken his sister and brother swimming at the lake and was waiting to drive them home. He pulled into a church parking lot and stopped.

“About your value theory. . .” he started to say.

I sighed. I didn’t really feel like a philosophical debate. We had been having this discussion a few days ago. I was trying to explain my philosophical ideas to Frank, with limited success.

“It’s not that I don’t ever have goals or desires or plans,” I tried to explain. “It is that I don’t believe that there is any rational basis for value. My brain still makes me want to eat, or get up in the morning, etc., but I know that I have no rational reason for doing so.”

“But you always walked to school without a jacket in the rain. Weren’t you in that case purposefully trying not to attain pleasure?”

“Yeah, I was experimenting with my consciousness. I was accepting the cold, rather than rejecting it and trying to avoid it. And for a while I believed that I could transcend desire. But there was more to it than that. I thought I could eliminate consciousness itself, in a way — eliminate the separation between the self and the world. But I eventually understood that I could not transcend desire, or transcend the division between the self and the world.”

I paused for a minute.

“It’s hard to explain,” I said. “I was testing the limits of myself, or trying to find them, I guess.”

“Why are you leaving home now?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know.” I said. “I can’t justify it, obviously, and I’m not sure I can explain it either. I just am.”

He started up the engine and we drove out of the parking lot.

“Clarify, just for a minute,” he said, “exactly why there is no purpose to life. I know you’ve told me a million times before until I got sick of hearing it, but I wasn’t listening all those times. Just spell it out in simple terms, don’t explain it over and over. . . .”

“Okay, shut up. There is no purpose to life that can be derived rationally — that is to say, from a chain of logic without assumptions. We naturally believe certain things, such as that we are in a car and you are driving, but we can’t ultimately prove that those beliefs are correct. That’s the point of ‘I think, therefore I am’. Only your existence is beyond doubt. The same problem exists for values. There is no foundation for values. You naturally value this or that, but you can’t ultimately justify your values.”

He pulled into the beach parking lot. We sat in the car, looking at the bodies playing in the water with the low sunshine sparkling on it.

“Have you ever seen my sister before?” asked Frank after a minute or two.

“No, which one is she?”

“She’s that girl right over there, whose head is just out of the water.”

“Oh, I see her. She’s not as bad-looking as you said.”

She swam up to the shore, left the water and began toweling herself off.

“Well, she is kind of fat.”

I got out and sat in the back with my pack. Eventually Frank’s sister came to the car and got in, followed by his younger brother who sat in the back with me, still huffing and puffing after his swim. Frank’s sister looked back at me, then turned to Frank and said, “Is this the asshole you hang around with?”

Frank laughed. “Yeah. He gets really good marks in school.”

“Boy, the atmosphere in here is great.” I said, in response to the insult. “Get three fat people in a car and you can barely breathe.”

Frank threw back his head and laughed. His sister and brother seemed very insulted.

Once we were moving, I asked Frank if he was going to take me over the Patullo bridge. He didn’t answer but sped the car up so it took a little jump over the crest of a hill.

He dropped me off two blocks from his house. Before I got out of the car, he handed me the gum he was chewing. “Here, this is to remember me by.” he said. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, I took it and dropped it behind his sister’s back. He zoomed away and I walked down the road slowly, not so slow that I couldn’t deny waiting for him, but slow enough that he could catch up. I knew he was going to come with me, and that’s why he didn’t take me over the Patullo bridge.

Sure enough, a few minutes later I looked back and saw a figure dart behind a parked car and hide. I put on my best sneer and waited. Frank’s head popped up with a big grin on it, and he ran over to join me.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

He had gone home, parked the car, grabbed his jacket and fifty bucks, and ran to catch up.

“Hey,” he said, “Can I have that hat?”

I had brought this weird camouflage ‘ranger’ hat with me for some inexplicable reason. I say inexplicable because I was wearing my baseball cap. I had the other hat safety-pinned to the outside of my backpack. I handed it to him.

"You can wear it," I said

Frank put on the hat. He took my pack as well and carried it along, moaning and groaning about the weight.

We walked through a little park. Two cute teenage girls were sitting on the swings. We decided to stare at them. We stood there for a few minutes until they got annoyed.

"Weirdos!" they yelled at us.

Frank put a finger on one side of his nose, and blew a long stream of snot out of the other nostril. He solemnly rubbed some of the snot on his cheek while leering suggestively.

"Ewww, gross!" one of the girls shouted in horror.

We laughed and walked on.

When we got to a road that had a decent amount of traffic, we started hitch-hiking. We weren't going in any particular direction, so we hitched the cars going both ways. A man pulled over to give us a lift. He took us to Kits beach, a beach near downtown Vancouver.

We got out and thanked him. It was getting dark. The incessant numbers of beautiful people that always pour down beach sidewalks on summer evenings flowed around and past us in a never-ending stream of fashionable clothes and trendy aloofness. We wandered down onto the beach.

Our feet kicked sand. A bike rider came out of the dark and barely missed us. He vanished into the gloom behind us. We wandered back onto the path. A gaggle of cute teenage girls walked by, talking and laughing. When they saw us their chatter was replaced by an uneasy silence. We were out of place, like mad dogs in a shopping mall.

One girl walked by wearing a light blue top and white pants. "There sure are a lot of Smurfs around here!" Frank said loudly.

We left the beach path and walked through a park. The stars came out above. We decided to go downtown. We wandered around city streets for a couple of hours doing random things: screaming out gibberish at passing Smurfs, walking into fancy restaurants and asking for Eric, talking to hookers and arguing about philosophy. Eventually I got tired and suggested that we go to the pit to get some sleep.

We got on the Skytrain without paying and rode it to Edmonds station. Then we got off and walked into the pit. The stars sparkled above the Douglas fir trees. The lights were on at the honey farm, casting an orange glow. Our shadows wavered on the long grass and were swallowed up into it. I took Frank to a special place I knew of, a little hollow in a cedar grove.

"I might as well light a fire so I can see," I said, and gathered a bunch of dead sticks and leaf litter into a pile.

The red light of the fire illuminated the little hollow as I took my sleeping bag out of my pack. Frank made himself as comfortable as possible on the ground in his jacket.

"Do you ever fantasize about girls?" he asked.

"All the time."

"I mean, wouldn't you like to have sex just once?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know."

"It's over, it's really over."

"School?"

"Yeah, the whole thing."

"Yeah, it is kind of weird. It's gonna be different."

"You're not even going to Grad." Frank said, staring up at the sky.

"Well, fuck, yeah, I can really see me going to Grad in my blue Adidas shirt."

"You should go in a tux, just to see how people would react. It'd be funny."

"I don't know. I don't really care. Too late now."

"Yeah, it's in three days."

"I'll be long gone by then. I'll be in the Yucatan leading a string of pack-goats through the jungle with a one-eyed dwarf as a partner, I reckon. Either that, or in Chilliwack."

There was laughter accompanying this last statement, most of it from me. I paused. "Are you going to Grad?" I asked. I wondered if Frank was going to come with me all the way or if he was just coming along for a little while and then going back.

"I bought the ticket," he said.

"Who's your Grad date?"

"I forget her name. Some fat chick who hates me."

He lay there looking up at the roof of boughs.

"You really don't care, do you?" he said. "You are the weirdest motherfucker I have ever met. I tried to get them to put 'I don't care' under your picture in the annual, but they said they weren't putting you in at all because you didn't get a Grad photo taken."

"Really?" I laughed. "That's funny. I bet having a picture of me in a blue Adidas shirt would really ruin their annual." I was infamous for having only one shirt, but in fact I had two identical blue Adidas shirts and a green long-sleeved work shirt, which I was wearing that day. It had a yellow patch on one elbow.

We talked late into the night, and the cedar grove was perforated by laughter. A little red glow lay on the ground between us where the fire had been, until eventually it faded out.

## **5 A Day In The Fraser Valley**

In the morning, I woke up with sticky eyes and a sore throat. Frank was in much worse shape. "I was awake all night," he said, "I was too fucking cold to sleep."

I pulled my sweater out of my backpack in search of breakfast. He stared pop-eyed at the sweater. "You mean you had that in there all the time, while I've been lying here suffering, freezing with cold, nearly dying of hypothermia, and you never told me?"

I laughed. "Well you never said anything." I started eating a piece of bannock, a hard dry bread I made myself for backpacking trips. It was not tasty but it was filling.

"Do I get some?" Frank asked.

I handed him a piece. He chewed it and looked at me. "You eat this shit? My dog wouldn't piss on this." But he ate it anyway.

The sun was fairly high up when we staggered out of the hollow into its glare. It was getting close to the summer solstice, and the days were long. The image I remember most from that morning was looking back at the foxglove growing along the edge of the pit in tattered ranks of pink and white. This is the last time I'll ever see this, I thought. I had watched the sun set many times, sitting on a rock at the edge of the pit. The pit was another part of my little world that I was leaving behind.

We took the Skytrain to New West station. There we caught a bus to Langley. As we got on the bus everyone stared at us. But we were a team. As long as we could draw sustenance from each other's egos we could survive. Man is a social animal. Give him a group, even if it is only two people, and he is no longer a freak, an outcast, a loser. He is no longer simply a person who rejects society. He has his own society. He becomes something not to be taken so lightly. We swaggered to the back of the bus and sat down.

At one stop numerous retards got on the bus, burbling and gooing to the bus driver and passengers. "Seems that we've taken the wrong bus," said Frank. "We wanted the Langley bus. This is the Easter Seal bus." The retards cooed and nodded their heads. I burbled back and started rocking back and forth, gently banging my head against the window. One of the retards copied me, banging his head into the window and smiling at me.

The bus rolled to a stop on Langley's main street. No one else was left on the bus. "Last stop, boys!" the bus driver called. Frank went forward trying to get directions to the highway. I waited outside, looking around. The ground was firm, the sky was sunny, the air was nice.

"C'mon man, let's go." I called to Frank. I wasn't concerned about where we were going or how to get there. I just wanted to go.

We walked down the street and into the 7-11 on the corner. We bought a Big Gulp (a 32 oz soft drink) and I got some Halls for my sore throat. We took the drink to a vacant lot behind the 7-11 and divided it. Frank drank his half right away. I drank some of mine out of the cup and poured the rest into my canteen. Frank looked around him, kind of astonished, as if he were seeing things for the first time.

"The grass is green," he said in awe, "the sky is blue."

I smiled to myself but didn't say anything. This was something I had tried to explain to him many times before.

The distant volcano, Mt. Baker, beckoned to the southeast, its huge form towering over its neighbor mountains in the Cascades. The white of its snowfield was softened by the intervening miles of atmosphere. Hills of green rose in irregular shapes from the floodplain, like islands from the sea. There were no clouds in the sky that day. It was a perfect pastel-blue summer sky.

We left the lot behind the 7-11 and walked back onto Langley's main street. The sun was shining on the deserted store fronts. In front of a beauty salon a wizened old man handed us each a pamphlet.

"Give your souls to Jesus." he said. "You have sinned, everyone is a sinner!" he croaked hoarsely.

"Praise be unto Satan." I said with a solemn nod and took the pamphlet.



I looked in the door of the salon. The old bitch at the counter looked back at me suspiciously. “How much for a pedicure?” I asked.

There doesn’t seem enough time in a day to contain all the memories I have of that day. The memories come in no particular sequence. I think of us wandering across deserted back roads in the sun, with fields of grass and daisies on both sides and here and there a tall fir with a hawk in it. I think of us climbing a barbed wire fence and me ripping my sock, walking through a kid’s soccer game, hitching short rides with several different people, most of whom were smoking pot. I see us stealing strawberries from farmer’s fields. I remember us sharing a chocolate milk and I remember sitting on the bank of a ditch and Frank saying “If you really wanted to live without goals, you’d throw away that watch” and me saying “That’s ridiculous. Wanting to live without goals is a goal.”

But most of all I remember Mt. Baker ahead, shimmering in the early summer heat, drawing me on.

Wandering through the Fraser Valley, if only it could last forever. The berry fields, the scattering of suburban developments, farm land, deserted malls, vacant lots given over to flowers, ditches full of dandelions, the occasional corner-store or 7-11 from which to obtain the sugar-laden necessities of life. But in every direction this beautiful and open landscape gives way to environments that are bleaker and more constrained. To the east rise the Cascade mountains, where tall mountains and fir trees overshadow the road. To the west lies the sprawling, bustling city of Vancouver, and beyond it lies the Pacific Ocean, where freighters move slowly through the waves and dead crabs wash against the shoreline. To the south there is Washington state, across a border that does not easily admit wanderers. To the north there are more mountains, their sides cloaked in dark and mysterious forests, their rocky ridges capped with snow.

The Fraser Valley is not a destination. It is a cosmic cloverleaf that sends you off in one direction or another. You can’t wander endlessly on its backroads, forever lost, living on Big Gulps and 7-11 hamburgers and stolen strawberries, while debating the meaning of existence. Every road eventually carries you off to somewhere else.

## **6 Talking With And Parting From Frank**

Eventually the day drew to a close. Long purple shadows stretched across the land as the sun sank lower in the sky. Canada geese lifted off from the fields and flew away honking to water. Frank and I were walking across a bridge over the Trans-Canada Highway. On the other side was the town of Clearbrook. This was where Frank was going to turn around and start hitching back. But first he had to test my memory.

“Do you remember my Dad’s name?”

“Yes, of course. It’s Alex.” (It was actually Mike.)

“Alright, but do you remember my sister’s name?”

“Wendy.” (It was actually Mary.)

“Yeah! Wow, you’re good at this. Now for the million-dollar question. Can you tell me what my dog’s name is?”

“Igor? Hopscotch?”

"No," he laughed, "It's Rusty."

"Ah, I should have guessed. No doubt named on account of his color."

The cars passed below, whizzing by at 90 km an hour, going somewhere.

Frank looked over at my profile. He was carrying the pack.

"Hey!" he said, "I never noticed it before, but you've got a ski-slope nose!"

"Oh yeah?" I said, "Well you. . . ."

"Oh no!" he said in mock horror, "Don't retaliate!"

"What do you mean?" I said innocently. "I was just going to say that you have cauliflower eyeballs, that's all."

There was a convenience store on the other side of the bridge. We went there and bought their equivalent of Big Gulps, then we took them to an empty parking lot and sat down on the asphalt to drink.

"I should be able to get back tonight," Frank said, looking over at the highway. He was an experienced hitch-hiker. "Can I have this hat?" he asked.

"No way!" I said. "That hat is a priceless piece of dogshit!"

Frank laughed at the truth of that statement and handed it to me. He looked over at some buildings that were under construction. "You could sleep there tonight," he said. I nodded. We sat there in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Frank got up to leave.

"So long man," he said. "It's been real. I'll see you in San Francisco."

"Yeah," I said, "on the corner of Haight and Ashbury."

He walked down the street and onto the on-ramp and then was hidden from sight behind the store. The sunlight was yellow on the skeleton building frames. Soon the sun would dip below the horizon. Suddenly I felt lonely and afraid.

I won't sleep in those buildings, I thought. I need to find somewhere else.

I got to my feet and walked down the road, looking for a place to sleep.