



From Tabusintac to Tokyo

True stories only slightly embellished

By Jeremiah Sutherland

Copyright (c) 2007 Jeremiah Sutherland

Dedication

To H.S. and D.W., who made me who I am today. Well, all the good parts in any case. Any failings are, of course, my responsibility.

Contents

Introduction

Tabusintac Hill

Dirty Snowballs for Breakfast

Catholic and French

A Shad in the Bed

Dining For Disaster 16

How Coffee Led To My Education 21

High Arctic Daze 28

Corporate Malfeasance 35

Mega Mess in Montana 39

In the Belly of the Beast 50

Keep Your Friends Close 53

Wilderness Man I 59

Wilderness Man II 63

You Can't Go Home Again - I (so don't even think about it) 67

You Can't Go Home Again - II 74

A Nice Place to Visit 77

Japanese Diet 81

Introduction

There is a fine line between being a storyteller and a bullshitter. There is an even finer line between being a bullshitter and a liar. I come from a long line of storytellers. However, it is wise to keep in mind that any storyteller may occasionally wander across the line to bullshitting from time to time. Only in the interests of a better story, you understand.

Anyone who writes a story strictly from his perspective, and swears it's the unvarnished truth, is a liar. We all have a version of reality that's coloured by our perceptions and thought processes. The farther back in time one goes in one's memory, the more likely it will be that the intervening years will have shaded the bright colours of what we thought we saw, heard and did. The painting of our lives is not an accurate version of events. And yet we firmly believe our version to be correct.

So the stories in this book are as true as anything viewed through the reverse end of a decades-long telescope.

Right out of the womb, our main goal is to just get by in a world we don't really understand. We have rules to learn at every stage and mistakes are to be expected. The more risks we take, the more mistakes we make and, perhaps, the more we learn. People who don't learn from their mistakes are ripe for a career in politics.

Someone once said that good stories come about when something goes wrong. Not every story in this book was birthed from a mistake, but enough has gone wrong in my life to make me a little leery of walking out the door on any particular day.

I've changed a lot of personal names (sometimes it's obvious, sometimes not) and one or two place names; I don't want people hunting me down, spouting their version of events and threatening lawsuits or broken legs. Let them write their own books.

I want to thank Roy Smyth and Inge Zegel for the last minute formatting rescue mission without which this book would not look nearly as good.

Tabusintac Hill

When she's in the mood to push my buttons, my significant other, the delightful and charming Ms. D, frequently alludes to the questionable timeline concerning my birth date. She derives much mirth from the fact that I was born something less than nine or ten months after my parents wed and hints that this indicates a certain amount of premarital hanky-panky.

Standing on my dignity ('cause it's higher than the coffee table), my reply is that I have it on good authority that I owe my early entry into the world to Tabusintac Hill. Said hill was once considered to be an abomination of the first water. The Tabusintac, like all hills, had an up and a down. In this case, the up and down were distinguished from each other by a sharp curve at the bottom. The main North/South New Brunswick highway slavishly followed the hill's contours.

If you were heading north, the road led you into a ravine and you were faced with a steep uphill incline that, in winter presented a challenge to at least half the vehicles trying to climb it. In true snow country fashion, steep, icy hills were conquered by getting a running start, building up a lot of speed and praying that Mr. Newton's rules concerning inertia would work in your favour. Headed south, the problem became keeping your car under control so that you didn't go shooting into the trees when the road curved to the left.

My parents were taking a trip to the Miramichi in December of '56 and were driving a Pontiac borrowed from one of my father's friends. My mother was pregnant with a bundle of bad attitude and misery that would turn out to be me.

I assume that my father was driving with that mix of panache and insouciance that my mother tended to describe as reckless behaviour. In any case, as he rounded the corner at the top of the hill, the road was apparently free of snow and ice and there was no reason to slowdown. Until the moose stepped out onto the road just ahead of themâ€

My father and mother disagree on what would have been the best course of action at this point. My mother feels that my father should just have kept on going straight through the moose. My father sensibly points out that this would have resulted in the moose sharing the front seat with them. In any case, the fact is that my father swerved to try and avoid the moose. It wasn't until my father tried evasive action that he discovered that the road was covered in black ice.

Let's freeze this tableau for a moment. Remember that no one wore seatbelts in those days. In case of an accident, you were left to carom around inside the car as freely as a politician's brains rattle around in a gnat's ass. Also recall that, this being the '50s, cars were built to be more like traveling living rooms and were really only good at going in straight lines. Braking and handling were definitely considered to be minor considerations. And forget all the modern innovations like dynamic vehicle control, force-limiting seatbelts, airbags and anti-lock brakes. Nope, once you exceeded the safe envelope of the straight and narrow, you were pretty much on your own, safety-wise.

Returning to my parents: Completely out of control, the car's nose swung to the left. The right rear clouted the moose. The rear bumper (bumpers weren't integrated into the body, air resistance being a tertiary design consideration) somehow snagged one of the moose's legs. Bouncing off the snow bank on the left side of the

road, the car and all its passengers proceeded down the hill backwards, gathering speed.

When they arrived at the bend at the bottom, the car went straight, leaving the road for the forest and snow and, underneath the snow, the frozen river. What really saved the day was the moose, acting as another bumper as the car ploughed through small saplings and snowdrifts for some 100 feet.

Once all the hoo-ha settled down and my parents realized they were still alive, my father leaned forward and turned off the ignition. They exited the car and were greeted by the smell of moose poop and freshly cut trees. The moose was exceptionally deceased, whether from blunt force injury or fright was never ascertained. They made their way through deep snow to the road and proceeded to wait for about an hour for someone else to come along and rescue them.

On the way into Bathurst, my mother went into labour so instead of going to a garage, the first stop was at the hospital. Husbands weren't encouraged to stick around for births in those days, so my father went off to see about getting the car hauled out of the bush.

I popped out about twelve hours later, four weeks early and pissed off as hell. I've been that way ever since. My folks didn't finish their trip. There was very little damage to the car, so they turned around and took their bundle of joy home.

And had roast rump of moose for Christmas dinner; they recall it was very tender.

Dirty Snowballs for Breakfast

Once, while grating potatoes to make potato pancakes, I had a Proustian moment. I can't lay claim to much in the way of literary knowledge, but I do know that Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" was prompted by his biting into a pastry and feeling a sense of overwhelming pleasure with no recognizable cause. In my case, I was instantly transported back to the grandmother's kitchen as she and my mother grated potatoes in order to make "poutine râpée", also known as "poutines".

People will immediately flash to the Quebecker ethnic food known by the same name. However, in spite of all the Franco-culinary posturing, this is really only French Fries with gravy and, oh yeah, can I have some cheese curds on that? One etymological source indicates that "poutine" really means "mess".

If you come from my part of the country, the Quebecker poutine is just another entry in the long list of dishes that will cause you to keel over from a myocardial infarction while shoveling a foot of snow out of the driveway shortly after you've retired—sometimes before.

Nope, poutines as I know them are a different creature entirely. They seem to be more of an Acadian thing and none of my friends had even heard of them, much less eaten a single one. Because of the work involved, my mother only made poutines for special times: Christmas, say or Easter.

My mother would borrow this grater that was about two feet long and she and my grandmother would set to work. Generally, they started off with an enormous paper sack of potatoes, about 25 pounds or so (We used to buy potatoes by the cartload and store them in a wooden bin in the basement. Because we were cheap labour, the kids would be sent down to retrieve a few for the family meal. It was creepy to descend into the dank cellar, feel our way through the dim obstacle course formed by my grandfather's thousands of tools and bits of wood and locate the bin. After a time in storage, the eyes on potatoes began to sprout pale tendrils and it didn't take much imagination to visualize all kinds of unpleasant creatures waiting to bite our hands as we groped around in the bin. I never worried about the monsters under my bed; just whatever was waiting for me in the potato bin.).

With my grandmother peeling and Mom grating, they would work their way through half the potatoes until there was a mess of rapidly blackening potato mush in the bucket. The water had to be drained out of the bucket and the mush squeezed to remove as much water as possible. The other half of the potatoes were boiled until mashable and then both portions of potatoes were mixed together. Consistency was important: too wet or too dry and everything would fall apart.

At some point, my mother would have procured a cheap cut of pork (in those days, there was no other kind). Something with equal parts fat and meat was considered good. The meat was diced up and left to cook for an hour or so.

Once the potatoes were mixed, Mom would start making generous-sized snowballs, hollow out the centres, fill them with pork, cover it up and gently lower the poutines into boiling water. Several large pots were required for this step.

At this point, all Mom's work might go for naught. For reasons we never understood (is there a food scientist in the house?), poutines might rupture or explode during this step and we would be left with bits of pork and potato floating in the water. In later years, my mother started covering each poutine in cheesecloth and this tended to stop the exploding behaviour while making the eating of a poutine an exercise in sorting cloth from potato.

After the cooking, the pots were left to sit outside for a couple of days. I assume this was to let everything set and for the (negligible) flavours to mingle.

Think of the massive amount of work this entailed! Try grating a couple of potatoes and see what happens. It takes a long time and you have to contend with grating a knuckle or a fingernail. Today's full time mother wouldn't have enough time to put this kind of thing together between trips to the soccer field and then the emergency room to set little Billy's finger. And why do it, anyway; you can pick up far more nutritionally rich foods at your supermarket? The foods take less time to prepare, are far more exotic (McCain's pizza), you can put the wrappings in the garbage and your children will learn how to cook from your example using a microwave.

We kids were pretty excited when it was finally time to get the poutines out of storage. They weren't considered to be a supper meal; in our house, we usually ate them for breakfast (let's see General Mills figure out how to put these in a toaster). The poutines were once again heated and each kid would get one. I've already mentioned that they were generally the size of a baseball. The colour would have changed to an unattractive gray-white (heavy on the gray). The surface texture would be similar to a meatball.

When you cut into the poutine, you could tell by the texture whether Mom had done the job right. If it was like cutting a piece of cold camembert cheese, you'd feel like you'd eaten a pound of lead. If it was soft, but not mushy, then the poutine would keep you going until lunch with no upset stomach.

This is homegrown, poor people, comfort food. There was nothing better than scoffing a couple of poutines and heading out into a snowy winter morning to play hockey, jump off the roof into a snow bank or shovel the driveway (on the way to my first heart attack). Compared to some of the other stuff we used to eat, poutines were probably fairly healthy. They were mostly potato with a little pork thrown in to provide flavour. And when you're a kid, who knows that this is poor people food?

There've been times when I wish I had a couple, made with love by Mom, to give me a little boost for the day. And I know that Mom loved me—it's the last thing she said before she and Dad ran away from home.

In this confessional age, TV, radio and print rely for much of their content on the sad stories of those "victims" of life. The story goes something like this: There is the future "victim" getting on with their quotidian activities and whoosh, they are whisked into a life of gambling, drugs, sex or junk food addiction. After years of struggle, they finally find redemption and become good people again.

As in any good tale of redemption, there has to be a "reason" for why our "victim" fell off the rails. Take your pick: they were molested, their parents ran away from home, they were denied desserts except on Sundays.

Just thinking about it brings a tear to my stony face. How can you not be moved by tales such as these?

What is the precipitating cause of the misery in my life? Well, my mother was French and my father was English. And to make things worse, I was brought up Catholic! Yes folks, in today's shorthand of grievance, I'm a half-breed straddling Canada's great language divide *and* a religious bigot.

My hometown was a mixture of French and English-speaking people and the results of their miscenagation. You could never tell by someone's last name who spoke your language (For instance, my good friend P. Arsenault spoke the Queen's English and my cousin Sean Doyle wouldn't have recognized an Oxford Dictionary if you shoved up his nose).

As children, we were segregated by language; all the French-speaking kids went to one side of the school where they spoke French all the time. I was fortunate enough to be sent to the English side of the school and got to speak my native tongue.

My parents decided my brother and sister wouldn't be quite so lucky. In an effort to bridge the great language divide, they both spent six years learning everything in French and mingling with the French people (My parents did this because it was the firm belief of all forward-thinking families that whatever road you took would be much smoother if you could speak both of Canada's official languages. As it turns out for my siblings and I, this was not to be the case. After I left my home for the big wide world, I never had the occasion to speak French unless I was swearing. As I understand it, only the government requires that you speak some version of French. This applies even to military officers, something I never really fathomed; after all, "Kill that motherfucker" is readily understandable in most languages).

In an effort to ensure both sides got a fair shake, signs were in either or both languages. We had "STOP/ARRET", "MEUBLES/FURNITURE". Some people would ask for a "hot dog", others a "'ot dawg", still others "un chien chaud". My mother would speak to us in English and yell at us in French when she got so mad she'd forget her English.

Even worse than living in the language chasm, we were also Catholic. In the first few years of school, we were taught by nuns. Women went into the convent presumably because they felt a vocation to spend their lives being close to God and serving Him in whatever capacity He deemed best. And the understanding was that they would be happy in the work He gave them.

We must have gotten the ones who didn't want to teach. You've never seen a more bitter group of people outside of the post office. Dressed in their black habits with stiff white bits around their heads, they stalked the aisles of the classroom armed only with a cloying piety and a yardstick (this being before the meter hit the schools).

Exuding a stench of disappointment mixed with the odour of starch, they instructed us in all manner of useful things like writing and reading and a few useless things like Catechism. Every week we'd get a dose of the superstitious drivel that made up the core of the religion we'd been born into. I'd sometimes feel overwhelmed by all the rules we had to learn about being Catholic. And the worst part was that, like the Mafia, the only way out was feet first.

This indoctrination put a harpoon deep into our psyches. We weren't incited to Holy War or anything, but it was abundantly clear that non-Catholics (These were Protestants; we'd never heard of Jews or Muslims or Zoroastrians or Hindus or Buddhists), not being a part of the true Christian religion were definitely not going to be taken, you know, up there. Not that they were bad people, you understand; they just didn't get born the right way and were unlikely to see the error of their ways.

If you weren't Catholic, you went to the Public School and we didn't understand a thing about those aliens. It was only after I got out of elementary school that I realized the Public School kids were as human as me.

When I got out of high school and went to university, I tried to put my past behind me. Some people fall away from the Church, I standing-broad-jumped-away from Catholicism. I spoke English all the time and put my French heritage into a locked box.

But my past does come to haunt me. I find myself breaking into French patois from time to time, befuddling my friends. Sometimes I eat tortiere.

I frequently worry what's going to happen to my soul when I dieâ€Iam I going to make it to Heaven or will I get stuck in Purgatory and spend a few millennia working off my sins. I obsess about getting my virginity back.

My history has cast a pall over my whole life: I've gotten professional, high paying jobs, earned the respect of my colleagues and friends, travelled to other countries, drunk fine wines and gambled hardly at all. I've even experimented with marijuana (but never inhaled).

Nothing seems to ease the pain of my birth and upbringing. Will no one have mercy on my tortured spirit?

A Shad in the Bed

Is not necessarily worth two of anything, anywhere else. But it can certainly be a heck of a lot of fun.

During my days as an inmate in Bridges House at the University of New Brunswick, I shared this space with about 99 other testosterone-addled "young adults" whose charming tendency to get completely out of hand was barely held in check by the rod of authority of the Don and Resident Fellow. This is not to say that these two worthies weren't good at their jobs; more accurately, their task was more akin to herding catsâ€fairly obtuse, barely socialized cats.

Given the state of controlled chaos that existed, it wasn't unusual for little conflicts to arise from time to time. Being rather physically small and odd, I came in for a certain amount of abuse from someone called Scut, a large and obnoxious Newfie (hmmm, that's like saying that water is wet). I can't remember what it was he did to me, but it was serious enough that I decided to get my own back.

It's been said that revenge is a dish best enjoyed cold. I think revenge is a dish best enjoyed in secret with no chance of counter-revenge to spoil the occasion. And so it was that I laid my plans against Scut.

The occasion and place were set. My means of entry was secured. Now I needed material. For me, the only good fish is a live one. Even though I hale from NB, I really don't like free-swimming seafood. Considering the unimaginative cuisine of my youth, it's surprising that I eat anything at all.

So with dead, smelly fish in mind, I persuaded my friend Shan to pick one up when he was down at the Saturday Farmer's Market. He returned with a four-pound shad, frozen solid. Shad has even more bones than other fish and you'll never see it featured on any cooking show (except maybe Iron Chef, where the disgusting and unusual seems to be standard). It took me all day to thaw out the fish in the lounge sinkâ€an activity

which elicited howls of complaint from the guys trying to watch TV.

That evening was our "Social". Socials were an occasion for us to invite people from other residences, preferably the women's residences. Thereupon, various debaucheries would take place, mostly related to drinking, dancing and falling over; sometimes on top of someone of another sex, more frequently into a snow bank.

It continues to amaze me that we drank as much as we did with impunity. We had our own bar in the Lower Lounge. We didn't even need to smuggle in booze, we just went to the liquor store, frequently in Locutus' car and bought our stock. A few years ago, I visited Bridges House again (it's a bisexual residence, now), and was astounded and heartbroken to discover that our bar had been turned into a computer room. Oh, the days of my youth are forever gone!

While the social was in full swing, I crept into Scut's room, pulled the covers back and gently laid the now fully defrosted shad in his bed. I was reasonably certain that Scut would get completely stocious at some point in the evening, stagger back and, with any luck, go to sleep hugging the fish. I had thought about gutting the fish in his bed, but hey, I'm a civilized trickster. Besides the carcass smelled bad enough just as it was and the aroma would permeate the bedding.

Having carried out this brief commando raid undetected, I retired to Shan's room (coincidentally just across from Scut's) to drink and await developments.

Some time later, Scut returned. And he brought a little girl buddy with him! Yep, our boy was gonna get screwed! Shortly after entering the room with his honey, Scut emerged in high dudgeon and with murder in his red-rimmed eyes. Since Shan and I were just across the hall, he demanded to know if we had seen who it was that put the fish in his bed. Not wanting to be kicked to death, both of us professed complete ignorance, something our professors would have agreed with.

We, of course, could only imagine the fun of getting down and hot, pulling the sheets back and perhaps even lying in the bed on top of or next to a dead fish. Talk about deflating one's expectations!

The show seemed to be over when Scut and his new best friend went off to her room to continue their interrupted tango. Scut made the mistake of leaving the fish in the overheated room so the smell, previously pungent, became decidedly overpowering. Some time later, Scut's roommate, Putter arrived (most of us lived in double rooms).

Putter was pretty drunk and was accompanied by an equally drunk friend, another guy from our residence. By this time, the smell in the small room would have knocked a buzzard off a gutwagon. Undeterred, the guys turned on all the lights and proceeded to get into a fight over who was going to get the fish. The fish became the rope in a tug of war between these two morons. Of course, the one with the tail had something better to hold on to and he ripped the fish out of his buddy's hands and smacked him in the head with it. Memory fails me at this point, possibly because I was laughing too hard.

Putter, having decided to go to bed, threw the fish out the window into the snow, following it with Scut's mattress, blankets and sheets. When Scut returned the next day, he had a hard time putting all this stuff back together; we only got one set of sheets a week. His mattress was particularly hard to locate as it had migrated to the roof our lounge for some reason.

I walked softly for a couple of weeks as I was certain someone would put that incident together with the thawing fish in the lounge and come up with my name. But nothing happened.

Scut did inadvertently get his own back years later as he called me collect late one night. He and another

residence boy named Roach were very drunk and decided to call me to conjure up the good ol' days. The only memorable image of Roach I can recall is him walking down a residence hallway wearing nothing except a sock and an erection. He was looking for a condom, or failing that, a balloon.

Thankfully, I never heard from either of them again.

Dining For Disaster

It's axiomatic that all cultures reserve a special place for food in their daily and social lives. For something as simple as a cuppa joe, we schedule and juggle our time to meet at predetermined locations to share conversation and libation.

Meals require even more effort and the social ramifications increase. One is expected to show up on time, sometimes dress to certain standards and bring one or many bottles of wine as a thoughtful gift to the hosts. And of course, the food is just an excuse to get together with friends to enjoy a meal, share stories, to discuss or seduce, to seal an agreement or act as a prelude to a severance of relations (frequently unintentionally).

I was first introduced to dining for pleasure as opposed to sustenance while at the University of New Brunswick. I lived in Bridges House, one of the men's residences. The young, eager, bright-eyed students in each residence were kept more or less in check by a Don.

Each residence had its share of maniacs and troublemakers who were at university to get some form of education, alcohol poisoning or a social disease—sometimes all three. The Don's job was to act as a mentor and prison warden. Imagine a building housing up to 100 young adult men. It doesn't take much to start a riot.

In our case, the Don was Locutus. When we met him, he must have been in his forties but looked to us adolescents to be older than Father Time. He was immediately dubbed "Grandpa Munster". With the tender sensitivity of males of our age, we didn't bother to hide this from him and he took it in good humour. In point of fact, Locutus was a great Don; firm when he needed to be and understanding and helpful as appropriate. You crossed this guy at your peril, but he was generally pretty tolerant.

Not that Bridges House was that hard to manage. The 100 or so inmates of the building were known as being kind of wimpy. We had a large number of serious engineers in the house. Engineering students don't typically have the time to go too crazy, as just getting a passing grade requires all of their efforts. To get a really good grade requires brains as well. Fortunately, I was prepared to work hard.

In addition to the Don, we had the Resident Fellow. His name was McFish, an enormous Scotsman Philosopher whose role was to provide a certain amount of extracurricular education and edification to the culture-starved denizens of Bridges. To give him his due, McFish worked away at this task with fortitude and humour.

McFish wasn't only big by birth. He was a man who enjoyed his meat and drink, either his or yours, should you decide to invite him over. Consequently, his frame had filled out over the years to the point where he was carrying a considerable amount of excess avoirdupois. The residence system also had a couple of Resident Fellows At Large. We had the Large Resident Fellow.

Previous to attending university, most of my experiences with food revolved around family. My father was also someone who enjoyed his food, but we weren't part of the class of people who experiment much when it comes to vittles. We certainly never had wine, and conversation was kept to a minimum unless you count the grunts of satisfaction emitted by my brother and I as we shoveled down helpings of meat and potatoes.

When I moved to residence, I ate in the dining hall. Institutional food wasn't all that great then, and there was frequent recourse to late night pizza runs to fill the yawning gulf in our bellies.

It was in the apartments of Locutus and McFish that I learned the delights of eating well and drinking to excess. Not all of our meals turned out as well as could be hoped.

It was McFish's habit, once he had got to know you well enough, to invite you to his place for dinner. This was an honour not granted to just any mortal. You had to pass certain criteria in order to be considered worthy to share his table. To this day, I have no idea how I made it into that rarefied company.

And so it was on a fine summer's evening, that Locutus, Bugs and I made our way to McFish's apartment in gleeful anticipation of a surfeit of food, booze and cigars. Bugs was a student like me and we were very good friends although he forsook engineering to become a physicist. You just never know about people.

This was not my first meal at the McFish table. I had partaken of some excellent repasts so what was to happen that evening was a shock.

To start with, glasses of Bass and Scotch to tune up the taste buds. Locutus smoked his obligatory four cigarettes and McFish toiled away in his kitchen. What's for dinner? Why Steak and Kidney Pudding!

Looking at the recipe for SKP on the web, I note that it calls for braising steak and ox kidney along with mushrooms and onion. The entire conglomeration looks like one of those old style bee hives and gives the impression of being hearty, tasty and, oh so comforting.

I am not, generally speaking a fan of organ meats, so I was somewhat suspicious of this offering to begin with. McFish, although known for the size of his portions, was not all that fussy about quality, being concerned primarily about price. So it was that the steak in the pudding could be described more accurately as gristle. The kidneys had never seen the inside of an ox having been harvested from chickens. McFish assured us that he had made two puddings so that there was more than enough to go around. He tucked in with gusto.

The wine accompanying the meal was an obscure Yugoslavian vintage that I'm convinced had originally been used as an emetic for livestock. It was this we were relying on to wash down the SKP.

Bugs swears that the kidneys had not been properly cooked before inclusion in the pudding. He said that every time he bit into one, he felt a hot blast of urine wash through his mouth. I can't vouch for that as there was no way that I was going to knowingly eat a kidney. Still, we managed to choke some a fair portion of the meal, accompanied by four bottles of the repulsive wine. I am convinced that McFish was cleaning out the fridge and wine cellar before heading off on one of his annual summer pilgrimages to wherever it is that expatriate Scotsmen go.

Shortly after dinner, Bugs begged leave to retire for the evening, leaving us three to drink and converse. I discovered him face down on the bed in his room. He told me that he had already vomited twice and was feeling like death. I don't think it was the food that was bothering him; he never had much of a head for alcohol.

I know it seems ungracious to complain about a free meal. But this is only in retrospect. At the time, I was as polite and grateful as my immature personality allowed me to be. I have dined out (so to speak) on this incident over excellent dinners many times in the past twenty years or so. It makes an excellent story. I have nothing to complain about.

And I should be grateful that it wasn't worse. My younger brother, who followed in my steps at Bridges, dined many times at McFish's. He had sheep hearts one night for dinner.

P.S. In spite of the picture I have painted of McFish's frugal way with a dollar, he was always a generous man with his time and vittles. I remember that he cracked open a bottle of 35-year old wine and shared it with undergrads whose age was half that of the wine. While the bottle was only big enough so that we each got about two ounces, it was certainly the best, smoothest vino that I had ever tasted.

Unlike many of his contemporaries and successors, McFish had a vision for how affairs in our residence and university should be arranged. While he might not have been right every time, and while he had a tendency to drive his colleagues mad, he made his case fearlessly and tirelessly.

He was an educator in the truest sense of the word; aside from his duties as a professor, he worked diligently to broaden the horizons of his charges even though we were too callow to see beyond the toes of our sneakers.

How Coffee Led To My Education

In one of Robertson Davies' books, a British paper's obituary for the main character reads in part, "I went to school in Canada, was educated in Britain". The implication is that you can get your basics in the Colonies, but by God, if you want a good education, you better come to the Mother Country.

That does bring up a good point. When I went to university to take engineering, I didn't really think about education; I was going to get a degree that was going to get me a job doing something cool and nifty. If you had asked me what an education was, I would have shrugged and told you that's what I was currently getting.

In the 25 or so years since being ejected from UNB, sheepskin in my hot little hand, I've had occasion to think about what an education looks like and what it was I actually took away with me.

I realized that universities are not really about getting jobs in the cold, cruel world. When I was working away at Electrical Engineering, I took math, field theory, properties of materials, electric machines and a whole bunch of other stuff that didn't stick in my head longer than it took to write the exam.

(A couple of insights into the engineering world: Civil Engineering students always seemed to have a lot of time on their hands as opposed to us Electrical types. Then it occurred to me that, in CE there are just two rules to remember: a) you can't push on a rope and b) if it moves, it's broken. The amazing thing is not that a whole field of endeavour can be summed up in two rules. No, the really amazing thing is that it takes a Civil Engineer four years to learn them.

My second insight: Mechanical Engineers build weapons. Civil Engineers build targets.)

When looking for my first job, I discovered that I was both over, and under, qualified for any job I might land. Engineering curricula, as developed by PhD's, many of whom have never had a job outside university, tend to focus on technical skill development.

My point is this: you can get trained as an engineer in the many fine universities here in Canada. You will not get any broader training in dealing with your fellow man or woman. And what's really important if you are going to work with a plethora of individuals both high and low, smart and stupid, is to work well with others.

In those days, my personality could charitably be described as "obnoxiously misanthropic". After many years of shock, psycho and drug therapy, I have improved to the point where my significant other, the charming Ms. D, will describe me as "misanthropic". But I digress.

At various times in my professional life, I have been asked to mentor someone. In my own contrary way, I have tried to make the case that mentoring is a two-way street. People will not necessarily accept your mentorship just because you think they need it. In my not-so-humble opinion, it's not just about giving advice

and telling someone how to do something; it's also about providing an example for someone to follow but they have to want to follow the example. (Something that's always bothered me: If you lose your mentor, does that mean you're demented?)

It turns out that I was looking for a mentor. And I was lucky enough to find one.

Locutus, when I met him, was definitely a different box of rocks. I realize now that he couldn't have been much more than 45. Looking at him now in his seventies, he really hasn't changed that much, although gravity has worked its evil magic on him.

As the Dean of the Biz Admin School, Locutus was no lightweight. He was smart, sarcastic and cynical. A grumpy exterior disguised a heart as big as all creation.

In his role as Don of the residence, Locutus had an open door policy. That is, the door to his apartment in our residence was literally open during the evenings. Anyone could waltz into his living room, pour themselves a cup of something approximating coffee and then plunk their butts into a chair and join the conversation.

Did I also mention that I'm a bit paranoid and resistant to change? I didn't pay very much attention to this new Don. I had liked the old Don just fine and had seen no reason for the change. But someone suggested that I go in to have coffee. And one night I did. For the next three years of my life at Bridges House, Locutus' place was pretty much my social centre.

Let me paint you a picture of Locutus' sanctum. A two-bedroom, not very spacious apartment on the second floor of Bridges. As Locutus was, at minimum, a two pack a day man, there was a certain atmosphere that can only be described as heavy. Antique tables of many descriptions and in a variety of repair held up lamps, coffee cups and books. Oil paintings covered the walls. Although I didn't like his art then, being a follower of the Playboy School of Photorealism, Locutus had excellent taste in the works he purchased.

Pieces of large and oddly shaped pottery took up space in the corners. Large, shapeless loveseats provided seating for guests. Metal cauldrons about the size of crock pots were situated here and there in the living room—Locutus' version of ashtrays.

There was a small bookcase for those in the room who did not wish to engage in conversation. In some cases, several conversations went on simultaneously.

Depending on the time of day, the event or holiday, food might be served. This could take the form of "Soupe À la Garbage", that is, whatever Locutus might have kicking around in the fridge. Anchovy pizza also sticks in my mind for some reason. Guest chefs were always welcome to whip up something in Locutus' tiny, not very tidy, kitchen.

Dinners would frequently continue long into the night with coffee being replaced by alcohol of many descriptions. Locutus was the first person I encountered who bought his booze by the case so that he had a selection of wine, liqueurs and spirits for all occasions. Most people I had known up to then bought one bottle, then drank it until they fell asleep or were arrested.

Every Saturday, Locutus would get up early, bundle a few brave, sometimes hung-over souls into his Datsun and drive down to the Farmer's Market to buy food for breakfast.

That's right, almost every weekend, a hearty breakfast was to be had for nothing except the willingness to be polite to everyone else in the room. As a starter, there was freshly made cider. If you were really hurting from the night before, you could add a dash of rum from the bottle right next to the cider. I recommend this even if you're not suffering.

Huge amounts of coffee would be consumed. Locutus would shuffle into the living room, announce what was on the griddle and take orders. At some point, the breakfast rush would peter out and Locutus would have his own breakfast, tidy the place up and go about his errands for the day, sometimes with several pimply students following in his wake like ducklings.

Just like Rick's place in "Casablanca", sooner or later, everyone came to Locutus': Students, professors, the occasional actor, artist or poet. Women, accompanied and not. Someone who knew him would drop in with three friends in tow. They'd have a drink and stay for dinner.

Discussions might include local politics, the university, trips to Italy, France and England, someone's latest book or painting or just plain gossip.

This sort of thing could become a blood sport. I met the "Pies"; two women too old to be tarts. They taught in the Biz Admin department and were ardently left wing Americans when it was still OK to be that way. One of them later became the Leader of the NDP in NB. I remember them stripping and dismembering some right-wing nut who dropped in one night.

From Locutus I learned why the Conservatives would always play second banana to the Liberals. He was mostly right. I learned about the politics of dealing with other departments in the university, why certain things happened and not others, that there was always a real story behind the one we all heard.

Gill McFish, in his role as Resident Fellow, organized the Bridges House Forum. The Forum, held in his apartment, would showcase whomever McFish could inveigle into attending. You might be listening to a theatrical director one week and the next week listening to a talk on the peculiar effects of removing the Corpus Callosum from the brains of people with severe epilepsy.

McFish introduced many of us to the strange pleasure of listening to Monty Python, engendering in many of us the defect of finding great humour in simple plays on words or on bizarre happenings. I discovered that there were other types of humour besides fart jokes. To this day, I can quote Python at the drop of a hat.

As a professor in Philosophy, McFish would talk at great length on paradoxes and logic. One of his colleagues had started the Flat Earth Society and had a very charming wife who I lusted after for about three months.

For a kid from a small town, these experiences opened up a plethora of possibilities and opportunities, new ways of looking at things and alternative understandings of how the world works. I realized that you could eat and drink well, meet interesting people, travel all over the world and have adventures without being rich or especially gifted or athletic; you just had to want to do it.

Of course, much of this had no immediate effect on my character. Most of us don't change overnight, nor should we want to. But as I look over the years since I left the uni, I can see definite patterns; some are big, some are small. I've added my own charming spin to some things.

So I paid a few thousand dollars, a lot of blood, sweat and tears and was trained to be an engineer. More importantly, I paid nothing and got an education.

Once you've seen the light, like all true believers, you want to show others the way. And you want to thank the people who put you on the right path.

But in the end, the only way to show your appreciation is to try and pass your version of an education on to someone else. But you have to choose carefully; not everyone is listening.

Right after I graduated from UNB, I traveled to Calgary to start my engineering career with Calgary Power. After about three years with CP, I got tired of trying to live on the pittance that the staid utility was paying its professional staff. Following in the footsteps of my good friend, Jim G., I applied for a job with HOPE(less) Petroleum.

This was the early '80s, during one of Calgary's boom periods ("Please Lord, give us another oil boom—we promise not to piss it away like the last one") and HOPE was going nuts with acquisitions and exploring for oil in the Beaufort Sea. There was a ton of money around and HOPE was spending like a drunken sailor.

The personnel people at HOPE were great believers in Industrial Psychology as a way of selecting high performers from the common herd of aspiring employees. Never thinking of myself as particularly special, it came as a surprise to me that, after filling in multiple-choice tests for several hours and undergoing an interview with a psychologist, I was considered to be a potential high performer. More importantly, the new job paid double my current salary.

When I started at the marine operations arm of HOPE, I took joined the ranks of mechanical, electrical, marine and drilling engineers, geologists, ice scientists, naval architects, ship's captains, hardcore oil guys (a completely different breed of human), visionaries and madmen (sometimes in the same body). It was the United Nations of Oil. We had Finns, Swedes, Dutch, Britons, Germans, Scots, and Newfies.

It was a very heady time. Aside from the ongoing oil exploration efforts taking place in the Arctic, people were sitting around thinking about things like ice-breaking oil tankers, massive static oil platforms operating year round and ways of safely transferring crude to ships.

HOPE's use of Industrial Psychologists and their methodologies meant that they were able to select a group of people who met the template for the type of person they felt they wanted (hard driving, goal oriented, take no prisoners). And they were pretty successful.

Looking back from a 25-year perspective, however, the Law of Unintended Consequences was working behind the scenes. This approach seemed selected for people who were egotistical, poor communicators, awful team players, bad managers, arrogant, hierarchical, narrow-minded and rude. Compound this with the usual quota of incompetents and Peter Principle candidates found anywhere and you have an organization that will do many interesting things—but it will do them slowly, badly and at great cost.

So how do you look for oil in the Arctic? You bring in one or many floating platforms equipped with a drill rig, pick your place and start making a hole.

But that's just the beginning. In order to support the drill operation you need supply ships, icebreakers, a floating dry dock, accommodation vessels, a land base, an airstrip, planes and helicopters. You need to manage the logistics of moving consumables, people and equipment from your land base to the area where your ships are assembled.

In HOPE's case, their land base was a large cluster of temporary accommodation close to Tuktoyaktuk in the NWT ("Not the edge of the world, but you can see it from here"). HOPE owned a 737 that could be used to haul freight or people and it landed on an airstrip close to Tuk Base. From there, everything had to be transhipped to McKinley Bay, where the ships were based.

When you're drilling on water, you have to anchor your ship so that it stays in the same place all the time. This being the Arctic, you can only operate for a few months of the year; ice, you know. In other words, the drilling season is very short and you can't afford to waste much time.

For a good portion of the year, McKinley Bay was populated with mothballed ships, frozen in the ice. Before

drilling season, when it was still dark 24 hours a day, McKinley Bay came alive with activity as an army of people arrived to begin the process of getting the fleet ready for the season.

The amount of work planned for this period always exceeded the time and ability of the crews to do it. Projects took longer to complete due to bad planning, delays in delivery of equipment and material, bad weather or competing priorities. HOPE had elected to purchase some used drill ships and at least two of the four dated back to WWII; hardly state of the art. The short answer to many problems was that only items that would affect your ability to drill would be dealt with. It was a hairy-assed way to do things, but this happens in any entity with more money than organizational skills.

Engineers (by this I mean the kind that went to university, not ship's engineers who sat on the right hand of God, the Captain) were considered to be, a) incompetent, b) unable to name their fathers, and c) lower than whale shit. They got short shrift from Captains and Chief Engineers, the rig managers and just about anyone else who had any authority. Mechanical engineers were treated slightly better than electrical engineers because most of the activity on ships and rigs is mechanical in nature.

By better treatment, I don't mean access to food or anything. The big thing in the Arctic was access to resources, cooperation and material. If the Chief Engineer didn't like what you wanted to do to his scruffy little tub, you might just as well go home.

The trick was to apply one's social skills (something most engineers have in minute amounts) to schmooze and sweet talk the chief engineers. At the very least, you had to make it look like it was in their best interests to let you do your work. At worst, you might have to crawl and grovel and make them think they were doing you a big favour by letting you do your thing.

Working at HOPE turned out to be pretty boring for me at first. At the time (and probably even today), ships and drill rigs were not that complicated electrically. Most seagoing folk figured that all you really needed was some guy who could keep the lights and pumps going. The drillers were only worried about keeping their drills turning. Otherwise, stay out of the way.

After a couple of months of relative idleness, I was tasked with going to McKinley Bay to help expedite a project on one of the supply ships. The steering system for the vessel was being converted from entirely mechanical to electro-mechanical and the whole thing was taking too long. My job: sort it out. This would be my first trip up to the Arctic.

In some ways, traveling to Tuk Base was about as exciting as flying from Edmonton to Calgary. You got aboard HOPE's own 737, put up with four or so hours of people chain-smoking (this was still allowed on planes in the '80s) and stepped off the jet in the endless daylight and limitless vistas ('cause it's flat all the way to the horizon) of the Arctic. Assuming, of course, that you weren't bumped for someone more vital to the day-to-day operations or that the weather precluded a landing.

In order to get from Tuk to McKinley, you waited in the hope, often vain, that a chopper was going to be available to take you to the ships. You might wait hours in the terminal building (more like a large ice-fishing shack) for a space and once again, people on crew change had priority. If you didn't get out that day, you would have to go into the camp itself and find yourself a place to stay for the night.

Once you got to McKinley, you had to scrounge around for a place to stay. In my case, I was able to get a bunk on the ship I was going to work on. I shared a room the size of a large closet with another crewmember. Fortunately, I didn't actually share the same bunk. He was on the night shift and, as I worked during the day, he would come in at the end of his shift and shake me awake. I don't recall ever seeing his face.

When I say "night shift", this is a meaningless term in the Arctic spring and summer. The sun essentially

travels around the horizon without ever going down. You start to feel that you really are the center of the universe because the light is always on. It played hell with my sleep patterns, but the advantage was that work could go on all the time. As long as you stayed in the sunlight, it was actually above zero and you didn't have to wear huge amounts of clothing.

The constant light played havoc with my sleep patterns. My body thought it was daytime all the time, so by the time I could convince myself to go to sleep, it was time to get up. As I was "supervising", I also had no real work to tire me out and exercise was limited to walking around the perimeter of ships on the ice. This was an activity not necessarily recommended as you could get lost or run afoul of a polar bear. In the early years of HOPE's work in the Arctic, each ship had a rifle. People traveling over the ice from ship to ship were encouraged to bring the gun with them. Given that most people are lousy shots, the joke was that if a group moving across the ice spotted a bear, someone would whack the weakest member across the knees with the rifle and everyone else would run. Eventually, someone decided that having guns around didn't seem like a good idea and, as the only purpose of the firearm was to disable someone, baseball bats were issued instead.

For entertainment, we had videotapes. This was still the early days of VCRs so there was very little in the way of content unless you really liked Andy Warhol's "Frankenstein". Personally, I've never seen it all the way through, but I don't think that this has adversely affected my life.

The only reliable entertainment was eating. And here, HOPE excelled. The theory was that a well-fed employee was, if not happy, at least not inclined to get into too much trouble. Food was available in abundance and was always of high quality and well prepared. You were also welcome to root around in the fridge for a snack.

No alcohol was allowed anywhere in HOPE's operations so we all drank one half percent alcohol beer. You could be fired on the spot for having alcohol or drugs in your possession, or so they said. In practice, there was a fair amount of drunks and stoners in the operation. Some of the ship's engineers set up stills and used fruit as a base for their concoctions. There were also stories of completely out-of-control behaviour by various ship's personnel. I don't believe all the stories I've heard, but there must be a basis of fact in a few of them.

It took me a couple of weeks to get my little project finished. Like most of the projects I've been involved with, the problems arose not so much from trying to get the technology to work (although this was not trivial); major issues arose with the people involved in the work. The welder working in the bowels of the ship thought the electronics technician I brought with me was an idiot. The tech felt much the same way about the welder and the rest of the crew. My job was to keep these guys from damaging each other and make sure that the work got done.

In theory, motivated professionals bring their skills to a job in an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and respect. In reality, especially when working in the field with tradesmen, you're dealing with a bunch of hardworking, exceptionally well paid people to whom the terms "professional" and "cooperate" are Greek for "faggot" and "spineless wimp". They have no respect for anyone not in their particular trade and believe that they're always right. In a situation like this, the guy with the biggest hammer is typically the one who's in charge. At 24, I was still young and green and lacked self-confidence, so the whole thing took a lot longer than it should have.

In many ways, HOPE was kind of a waste of my professional time. I didn't learn much and was never fully occupied. But it was all worth it for being able to be in the Arctic.

Corporate Malfeasance

I'm not good at sticking to the rules, not even the ones I set myself. I'm really terrible with the rules set by others, especially companies. Even as a child, I could never stay inside the lines in colouring books. Some of

you might put this down to poor hand-eye coordination, but I maintain that I was a rule-breaker right from the beginning.

One of my roles as an engineer with a multiplicity of companies was to set up projects, define the scope of the work, contract the work out and manage the project.

I was setting up a robot-based manufacturing cell for the company in the business of making early cellphones. The cell design required some equipment to be designed and built from scratch, so I got a local designer, Fergus, to give me a quote and got him started on the work.

Now, any project will run over budget and take longer than planned and the contractor may come back for more money. And so it was with this designer; he wasn't really vocal about it, but he indicated that the work did take a lot more time and expense than he's originally budgeted.

My usual reaction to these things is that this is not my problem. Most of the companies I've work for have lost money, so why should I give a rat's ass if some other company comes up a little short? In this case though, I liked Fergus and, as he was really a one-man operation, I decided to cut him some slack.

But first, I had to get permission from my boss to drop another few grand into Fergus's jeans. My boss refused. Having someone tell me I can't do something really brings out my dark side; especially around the time of the full moon.

Not long before, we had just waved a fond(-ish) farewell to our president as he was going on to greener fields. As a parting gift, the company bought him either a boat or a motor home, I forget which, and equipped it with three of their cell phones.

George Orwell wrote that we are all equal, but some are more equal than others. The golden handshakes that senior executives get is nothing new in any business and I was still naïve enough at this point to think that the guy deserved the going away present. Of course, we were all soon to find out that he was getting out while the getting was good and that the rest of us would soon be looking at severance packages somewhat less rich than the president's.

But that was all in the future. However, the memory of the rich sendoff outraged my sense of fairness and that always makes me a little (OK, a lot) irrational.

In my typical devious way, I walked across the street to another company I had contracted to do work for us and talked to the head guy, who also knew Fergus. Our conversation (suitably abridged) went like this:

Me: How much money is there left on the contract?

He: About \$ X.

Me: I want to get some money to Fergus for the work he's done, but my boss won't go for it. I need to perpetrate a fraud.

He: What did you have in mind?

Me: I want you to bill me \$ Y for some work. Fergus will bill you for work for the same amount. We pay you; you pay him.

He: OK.

And so it was. I had a few moments where my conscience was nagging away at me, but I quickly banished the faint voice with a couple of stiff Scotches. After the third scotch, I would bask in the satisfaction of having pulled a fast one on the rule enforcers

About a month later, a package appeared on my doorstep. Turned out it was from Fergus. Immediately, there was a large yellow puddle where I was standing.

Fergus had approached my life's companion, the charming and delightful Ms. D and asked her what I liked so that he could get something for me as a token of his appreciation. She mentioned that music by Frank Sinatra and coffee. Fergus, never one for moderation, opted to give me a cappuccino machine.

I've received gifts from people I've done business with; usually in the form of a token bottle of liquor at Christmas. But the value of the machine made it look like I was taking kickbacks. Not a good thing to have on your resume and definitely a firing offence if anyone was to find out.

I was really torn. I didn't want to seem ungrateful for the gift. At the same time, the fact that I actually got something out of the scam drove my conscience into overdrive and it took quite a few scotches to drive the little bugger back into one of the locked cupboards at the back of my mind.

Shortly afterwards, the company announced it was going to give us all the green weenie and put us on the street. Motorola was the 800-pound gorilla in the cell phone business and our technology sucked so the whole thing went into the toilet.

All of the top dogs, grossly overpaid and overcompensated, landed on their feet at other lucrative jobs in the communications field.

Given that we had just entered a periodic technology downturn, I was unemployed for about four months so I didn't feel so guilty about stiffing the company for a few bucks on someone else's behalf.

Then I ended up in Montana

Mega Mess in Montana

I had always wanted to live in Vancouver and, as I was unemployed, it seemed that now would be a good time to go there. The lovely and charming Ms. D agreed that this was a good idea and immediately set herself to find a job in Vancouver as well. Murphy's Law being in effect, she landed a position on her first interview and I couldn't find anything.

Never one to be deterred by bad news, I determined to head out to Vancouver in the confident, and misplaced, assumption that I would find something eventually. As luck would have it, as Ms. D and I were due to leave, I was offered a position in Montana, as the Manager of Engineering for a small robotic integrator.

For your information, an integrator is someone who buys discrete pieces of equipment and puts them together in a configuration tailored to meet the customer's needs.

At that time, I was under the mistaken impression that Robotics was the next big thing, so I jumped at the chance, leaving Ms. D safely ensconced in Vancouver. And so began a nine-month ordeal comprising shattered expectations, new bottoms of personal behaviour on the part of my colleagues and angst-filled days and nights.

It's not in my nature to ask very many questions. The important facts were that I had a job that paid pretty well, I was going to a new place and I was, I thought on the cutting edge of future manufacturing technology.

While the president of RPP was Ken, the actual owner was a guy named George and he was "da man" who called the shots. George had too much money for his own good. And he was the epitome of the old, rich, cheap, nasty guy who treated everyone like shit. George ran his various enterprises from a cheesy strip mall office (he owned the strip mall) in a slightly down-at-heel part of a city in Montana.

George had about \$30 million in cash so he was a bit flush. For everyday driving, he had a Mercedes. On Fridays and Saturdays, he drove a Ferrari Testarossa, which was especially finicky and required a great deal of care and attention (it's an insider's secret about owning exotic cars is purchasing one is not the hard part; the hard part is to foot the cost of keeping these wheeled prima donnas on the road).

Somehow Ken had talked George into spending money to start this company. The intention was to develop very high precision placement systems with special vision and robotic hands that would be used by the likes of TRW to put down large electronic components on circuit boards. The less I tell you about this the better. Like all goofy ideas, it made sense in theory. But as we all know, in theory, theory is better than practice. But in practice, it's not.

This company suffered from the same problems as many other high tech operations. That is, too much new technology that didn't work quite right, customers demanding timely delivery (on time delivery never happens) and not enough money. Frequent requests for further infusions of cash from investors were met with squawking and whining about the lack of progress in actually making money.

George's sole direct employee was a long-suffering secretary named Emma. Emma gave the lie to the claim that all people from New York are short tempered and rude. Emma was diplomatic, quiet-voiced, calm and if she was upset, always waited until she was alone before losing her cool.

Aside from Ken, we had a Chinese PhD called Phred, a mechanical engineer called Roger, John the drafting guy and Felix, the Marketing VP.

Phred handled the programming of the robot's vision system. As his English was limited, I never really could figure out what he was working on at any particular time. He sure did put in a lot of hours, but my experience with truly geeky technical people is that they can spend hundreds of hour accomplishing pretty much nothing; not having a social life, it's simply the way they get their jollies.

Ken probably wished he had never got into business with George. When things went wrong, George would invariably call Ken into his office and rip him a new asshole. With George, you could never be right. He was louder, and meaner and righter than you had ever been in your entire life.

On one occasion, George even reduced Ken's salary because Ken wasn't meeting whatever expectations George had of him. When I wasn't loathing Ken, I actually used to feel sorry for him. On the whole, he was a fairly decent guy and he took the brunt of George's abuse over missed deadlines and sales targets.

Now I need to clarify the difference between "Marketing" and "Sales".

Marketing people are annoying dweebs who sit in their offices thinking up ways to make customers buy stuff. These people put together the campaigns aimed at convincing people that they just can't get to the grocery store in style unless they're driving a 300 hp monster with four-foot tires.

Sales people are annoying glad-handers who travel around strong-arming customers into buying stuff. Continuing with the automobile analogy, salesmen are the pond scum who inveigle you into buying the aforementioned monster.

If these two subspecies of humanity share a common psychopathology, it is an obsessive optimism that

convinces them that even shit can be spun into gold. Felix, filling the two roles of marketing and sales, had an even bigger dose of this optimism than most people. He was also extremely hyper, frequently bouncing in to implore us to make design changes because he knew that he could sell a huge number of robots if we would only make a few adjustments.

In short, at RPP, the inmates were in charge of the asylum. This was the world I arrived in, toting my own set of odd behaviours and shortcomings which were guaranteed to stir things up.

For instance, I had no diplomatic skills at all. Nor was I aware that I needed any. As an engineer, things are always clear to me and I have no problem telling folks how the rubber hits the road. After a while I discovered that one trait that many people share is that they never say what they actually mean. A sentence like, "Bless your heart" translates to, "I'm going to cut your heart out during the next full moon".

My job as Manager of Engineering was to ensure that the project robots were built on a schedule that had been set in consultation with the customer. It is a truism that no project is ever finished on time or on budget. As adults, I think we all understand that. But it's important to pretend that the project will be completed on schedule, that the customer will love it and that the system will work entirely to spec as soon as it's turned on.

In reality, my job was to hurry along the engineers while trying to keep the customers in the dark as to, a) how badly we were behind schedule, and b) how crappy our technology was. In reality, our system probably needed another year of serious development before it was ready to be thrust into the cold, unforgiving world.

Our customers, being seasoned techies, knew without actually being told that we were having a tough time completing to commitment. However, as the game was played, this did not stop them from flogging away at us for missed deadlines. The theory behind this approach is that even a half-dead mule will keep hauling if you beat it enough.

Do you think we were especially incompetent? My experience has been that any organization, large or small, from Nortel to NASA, has problems with their technology and projects. It was after my experiences at RPP that I vowed to never, ever work with unproven tech again. Like most resolutions, I broke it.

Within a very short period of time, I managed to alienate Roger, the mechanical engineer. This wasn't very hard. Some people have a chip on their shoulder, but Roger had an entire tree. From his point of view, the world sucked—we treated him badly—no one liked his work—he was going to quit. And no amount of flattery or schmoozing or buttering up was going to change his mind. So Roger took his bad attitude and went off to inflict himself on another unsuspecting company. When he departed it was as though a big black cloud had moved off to rain on someone else's parade.

Thinking back on it, I'm surprised that Roger didn't end up in a tower with a high-powered rifle, shooting at pregnant women pushing baby carriages because "They" were after him. He had that kind of personality.

I replaced him with someone named Will. He was an outstanding engineer who had worked for years with a local aircraft company before being put out of work when it went out of business. At least, that was the story. As with so much about Will, this might or might not have been true.

Once certain people started to trust me, lots of interesting personal stories started to leak out. It turns out that George was on his second marriage, his first wife having died. George had two adult children from that marriage, a girl and a boy.

The boy was as useless as tits on a bull. Whether through birth or abuse of cocaine and other mind-expanding chemicals, he was several bricks short of a load. George was always trying to bully his friends into hiring him and he ended up doing very menial of jobs when he wasn't explaining his drug habit to the nice policemen

downtown.

I met George's daughter, Mary and her husband one day. Imagine one of those bagged-out women with teased hair, tits squeezing out of a too tight top, tight black pants and a face that has seen more than a few million UV rays. You've probably seen these women on the backs of Harleys. This was Mary.

Her husband surprised me more. It looked like one side of his body didn't work especially well and his face looked like a wax mask that had melted in the sun.

With these two was a sweet little girl that George doted on. In fact, any niceness he had in his mean, miserable, tiny, stone-like heart was reserved for this kid.

Naturally, I was curious as to what all this was about. I managed to unearth the following story: Mary's husband looked like he did because he was in a meeting where one of the participants pulled a gun and shot everyone in the room before killing himself. Mary's husband caught a slug in the head, accounting for his deficits.

Mary, at some point in the past had decided that George wasn't shuffling off his mortal coil quickly enough. So she engaged a cheap-ass hit man to take the old guy out. Once the would-be killer found out George had money, he called him up and asked him how much it would be worth to George if he wanted to keep breathing.

George was naturally a little incensed about having his daughter put a contract on him (I don't understand the problem, she actually struck me as a chip off the old block) so he cut her out of his will. Supposedly, in order to get back in his good graces, she got pregnant and produced this little blond angel; the apple of George's beady eye.

Imagine that the story of the next eight months or so contains a litany of failed mechanical equipment, exploding power supplies, defective computer software, demented management, disappointed customers and broken promises. This would be enough to make anyone a little nuts, let alone someone like me with a pretty tenuous grasp on sanity.

I was becoming more and more stressed. Two of our major customers were going completely apeshit over the delays. Whenever they came to visit to monitor progress and carry out tests, the equipment failed to work properly. Ken and George were on my case to make the other guys work harder, faster, whatever.

I burned up the phone lines talking to Ms. D and she listened to my screaming tantrums with a mixture of forbearance and sympathy. It wasn't just the job that was getting me down, it was the people I was working with—who were supposed to be on my side.

My first clue that everyone wasn't squeaky clean occurred early on in my tenure in Montana. I overheard Felix on the phone with a bail bondsman. He was trying to get bail for a friend of his who worked at the stable where Felix kept his racehorses. Turns out the friend had been apprehended coming out of a convenience store he had just robbed using the .357 Magnum Felix kept under the seat of his car. This was understandable as the friend was also using Felix's car as his getaway vehicle. Felix's friend did not get bail.

John, the drafting guy was sincere and hardworking but he had his own little kinks. He saw me working on my fencing foils in the workshop one day and ran out to his car to get his own special toy. He returned with a 9mm. Beretta loaded with hollow point bullets. For those of you gentle folk who don't know what this means, hollow points are intended to expand on contact, causing more damage to flesh, bone and organs than would a regular lead slug.

John said that he kept this howitzer in the trunk of his car. If anyone tried to rob him when he was sitting at a light, he could pull the gun out and defend himself. I never really understood how he planned to get from the driver's seat to the trunk, open it and brandish his weapon before the imagined assailant could shoot him.

It occurs to me that many Americans see guns as appliances. No one would dream of not owning a fridge or a stove. Why would you want to be without a gun for those special occasions? I notice that folks treat their guns like cell phones; guns get tossed into glove compartments, under seats and into desk drawers. No wonder there's so many shootings; it's almost easier to shoot someone than to call them.

Felix seemed to get more hyper all the time. He would come in to the workshop and practically bounce off the walls in his enthusiasm to help us do something. One day, he started to sweep out the building, it was 3000 square feet, with a small broom. I noticed that his dress shirt was stuck to his back with sweat even though the building was air-conditioned.

Then Will, the new engineer, started to act a little funny. We had been the best of buddies for some time and he had taught me a lot. Then he started coming in late or not at all. He told stories that became increasingly outlandish. I heard from Emma that he had started borrowing money from George.

Then one fine Friday, late in the day, Will stopped me in the hall and told me that I was totally useless as an engineer and the sooner I went back to Canada, the better. In case I had gone deaf since the last time we'd spoken, he stood about six inches from my face and screamed this diatribe at me.

I was a little surprised; our relationship had been slightly cooler of late, but this was like a declaration of war. Spineless Ken had gone home by that time so there was no one to talk to about it. My nerves were further rattled by the memory of Will talking about all the guns he had that his ex-wife hadn't taken with her. I'm sure the last thoughts of many people are, "What's he doing with that gun?" and it occurred to me that, given Will's state of mind at that point, I might shortly be one of those people. I bailed out and went home where I was finally able to contact Ken.

In order to calm me down, he suggested a trip to the mountains the next day. This was Ken's way. The world would be coming to an end and he would suggest a picnic. This was not because Ken was a calm, rational individual. He was as off-the-wall as the rest of us, but he just abhorred conflict.

So we had a nice little time in the country. We talked about the situation. He mentioned that Will had been trying for some time to get me fired so he could take over my job. The reason for Will's little explosion was that he had tried to get me fired once again and been told that it wasn't going to happen. It finally dawned on me that Will had a problem with alcohol and had fallen off the wagon some time ago.

Ken asked me if I thought Felix was on drugs and we had a long discussion about that. It was clear that Felix was doing something in the way of recreational pharmaceuticals and it was really starting to affect the way he saw the world

Looking back on Felix and Will, it amazes me that I didn't pick up on this early on. I've seen lots of impaired people over the years, some of them in the mirror. My defence is that I was still relatively young and clueless and I just took these guys at face value. The only sane person in the whole group was Emma and it turned out she was covering my back with George.

After long discussions with Ms. D over the weekend, I decided that it was time to get the hell out of Dodge. My mother was very sick and was going to need full time care, the job and company were going nowhere and I was stuck with a bunch of nut cases—some of whom were armed.

On Monday morning, Will tried to make amends. He had sobered up over the weekend and must have realized

that he had pushed the envelope too far. It would have been the easy path to continue on as before, but it seemed to me that once the decision had been made, I had to follow through.

So I gave my notice and headed back to Canada. I kept in touch with Emma from time to time. I received a letter from her one day, saying that Felix's mental state had deteriorated to the point where he saw enemies everywhere.

He spent a weekend at Ken's house because he'd been evicted from his place. Ken had reported that Felix spent the entire time walking around the house with his trusty .357, checking the street from behind drawn curtains.

Shortly after this episode of paranoia, Felix was found dead in bed. Seems he must have had a heart attack in his sleep. He couldn't have been much more than 42 and was a bit overweight but it's likely his cocaine abuse was the overwhelming contribution to his death.

As for Will, he continued in the job for a few months, but his drinking got worse. He arrived for a client meeting in Chicago drunk and a day late and Emma took it upon herself to get Will fired, which duly happened.

The last time I checked, the company was still running with a lot of the same bodies in the same jobs. There's only one loonie left and he's in charge.

In the Belly of the Beast

Yes, I have a shameful secret; well don't we all? Some secrets are the result of mistakes made through youthful exuberance. Others are passed on to us by our families, whispered in the darkness of a midnight car ride or muttered over one too many whiskies.

In my case, this serious mistake took place in the early nineties. When I graduated from engineering school way back in 1978, the myth of a job for life was just starting to show some wear and tear. I started off OK, working for Calgary Power and then moving on to working for HOPE Petroleum

This is where the dream went awry. HOPE didn't do so well which is pretty pathetic when you think about how easy it is to sell fossil fuels. After leaving this company, I ended up working on a Master of Engineering degree. This period of academic still water passed and I ended up in the rapids of iffy employment, working for one company after another. Some of them went bust and I was laid off or I quit on my own, looking for that employment El Dorado of high pay, interesting work and congenial coworkers.

I don't want to make myself sound the martyr here. I was always looking for that greener grass, wanting to climb faraway hills whose misty heights promised delightful surprises. And so it was that I came to rest in Vancouver after some months of personal trials that left me unemployed and unemployable.

I was living with the delightful Ms. D in a one-bedroom apartment. The job market was in one of its periodic slumps and I couldn't even sell myself by the pound. The few interviews I managed to snag went nowhere.

So I applied to work at Starbucks. Yes, sad as it is, I went to work for the Beast. I just wanted to make a few bucks and do something that got me out of the apartment for a few hours a day. Starbucks had not yet acquired a reputation of being the homogenizer of all things coffee, pandering to people who want everything but the kitchen sink in their coffee beverage.

Oh yeah, we had low fat lattes and decaf versions of espresso, all that nonsense. Even then, someone would come in and rip off a paragraph of drink description that we, the baristas, were expected to adhere to in every

respect. Never mind we had six equally complicated orders ahead of theirs. Our manager demanded that we keep all this in our heads. I was reprimanded on several occasions after asking my coworkers to write the orders on down on each cup. This was just not done.

On the whole, Starbucks wasn't a bad place to work. Company managers mouthed all the platitudes about treating employees right and making sure they got decent pay. They built a whole culture around coffee and how it should be served; I remember going to training sessions on how to make espresso, various types of coffees, where they came from and Starbucks' various products.

A lot of gay men seemed to work at Starbucks. In fact, it sometimes felt like a qualification for the job. It was one of the first questions I was asked by my coworkers when I started working there. Turns out I'm not, but I always thought that they didn't really believe meâ€”as though I was in denial about my gay-ness.

By training and experience, I am a "professional" and I still clung to the notion that I was just moonlighting for a while until something better came along. Somehow I was a cut above these people working in a dead end job. But aside from background and age, my coworkers weren't all that different from me. Some of them had degrees in the soft subjects, had traveled around a lot and were just using this as an interval while they got things going in their lives.

But it's easy to let the time slide by and find that you're stuck in this job and the only prospect of change is a similar job at another place. At some point, you wonder where the time went.

I lasted three months. For lots of reasons, I don't do well in retail. I got reprimanded for not being sufficiently obsequious to a customer (I can't even remember what it was I said). Then I started getting job interviews again and within a couple of months, I was back on the professional chain gang. For me, my time at Starbucks is a memory that causes me to laugh uneasily and quickly change the subject.

The purveyors of coffee experiences (Second Cup, whoever) want to make it seem that you can go to their place, have a cuppa java, relax with a paper or listen to piped in light jazz.

And that's what consumers want. But you better deliver their relaxation in a hurry 'cause they only have a half hour in which to enjoy it. And because you're on the bottom of the working totem pole, customers don't have any compunction about complaining to your boss.

So when you're standing in a lineup at your local coffee joint, steaming hotter than the espresso machine 'cause the teenager serving you seems a little dim and slow, remember what they taught us at Starbucks' schoolâ€”it's only coffee.

Keep Your Friends Close

And keep your enemies closer. I'm not really sure what that means. Does it mean stay in touch with your friends and keep an eagle eye on your enemies? The hard part, I think, is distinguishing your enemies and friends. What do you do if your friends don't have your best interests at heart?

Continuing efforts to the contrary, I have always been a fairly trusting soul. I recognize this as a fatal character flaw barring me from employment as a civil servant, policeman or Prime Minister. Initially a bit distant, if I like you, I will believe everything you tell me and move heaven and earth to follow through on any promise I make to you.

That was then. Like any life-changing lesson, the one I underwent some years ago was a hard one, but most illuminating.

It so happened that I was working in Calgary when a long time friend of mine, Max, approached me about working for him. He had an idea that the internet was going to be the next big thing and he had an idea for using developing new software to be used for getting around the Web. Of course, we have browsers now, but at the time, this was a pretty radical notion.

Ever the one to see really green grass on the other side of the fence, I agreed to come on board. Max explained that the salary was \$65,000, with \$50,000 in salary over the first year and the remaining \$15,000 paid at the end of the first year.

I was somewhat concerned about this, but Max assured me that he was good for it and that I would get my money even if it had to come out of his own pocket.

At this point, Max and I had been friends for many years. As managers, we often talked about how important it was to take care of the people who worked for us. I was still naïve enough in those days that I believed these fairy tales.

At that time, Max was like an older brother I never had. We shared many dinners, lunches and breakfasts. We spent scotch-soaked evenings plotting strategy against the very company we worked for. I was frequently a guest at Max's place and the best man when he got married.

The only downside of my new employment was that I had to move to Palookaville. I should have known this would be problematic. Upon hearing where I was going, people would invariably say, "Well, I hear it's nice in the summer time."

So off I went to P'ville to take up my job as Director of something or other at this company (let's call it Money Sink or MS for short). This little operation had about ten or twelve employees working for it. These were primarily computer science types with a couple of salespeople thrown in for good effect. The whole thing was funded by private money; a friend of Max's had thrown in the lion's share of the dough. As is often the case when you have cronies, associates and hangers-on involved, there was a certain amount of interference and useless, unsolicited advice fell on us like rain.

Truth to tell, the amount of bucks invested, about \$2M, was just enough to get us into the game. This paid for the development effort but wasn't nearly enough to provide the sort of marketing and sales effort that would have really pushed the company into positive cash flow.

There were a couple of high barriers that MS and its principals were struggling with: P'ville is not the centre of anywhere or anything. If they had been operating out of a larger centre, they would have instantly generated a lot more respect for what they were trying to do. But because the principals were all from P'ville, they were focused on the smaller picture.

In addition, the internet was still in its infancy. Accessibility outside of the large population locales was problematic and the majority of potential users had no idea what we were talking about. Our software should have been easier to use and much more user friendly.

All of these problems could have been overcome by more money, a different approach and time. At the time, no one really understood the potential of the Web.

Frankly, I was miserable in P'ville. My significant other, the light of my life, the charming and beautiful Ms. D had warned me about going into business with friends. As in so many other things, I ignored this sage advice. My relationship with Max became somewhat rocky in that he would come in occasionally and yell at me for one failing or another. In my own sensitive guy way, I would yell back.

Many people feel better after they get some things off their chest. Max is one of those people. In an argument, he has a hide like a rhinoceros so he doesn't realize that what he's saying is deeply offensive and at the same time, it's quite hard to actually offend him.

The same can't be said of me. I'm easily offended and I frequently just contain the explosion so that people think I've taken the criticism quite well or that there are no hard feelings. What I actually do is go find a corner somewhere so that I can nurse the minor grievance into a full-blown grudge. I hold a grudge like you wouldn't believe. God forgives, I don't.

To be fair to Max, he had taken a lot onto his plate. He had a family to raise as a single dad. He was running this company and he was working with us as kind of the Technology Officer. So really, there was a lot of pressure on him and Max isn't the kind of guy who willingly or easily dropped tasks or obligations.

I've been involved in a fair number of risky ventures, so my expectations of success tend to be low. At this point in my life, however, I still entertained the notion that hard work and smarts would guarantee success. And so it was, just about one year after I joined MS, the whole thing went tits up.

This very conveniently happened around about the time I would have been eligible to collect my deferred \$15,000. I don't attach any importance to the timing, but as the company no longer had any money, no one was prepared to pay me what I was owed. A guy with more balls, one with more respect for himself and more demanding of respect from others would have gotten up on his hind legs and barked until he got his money. At that time, I was not one of those happy few. I was the sort of person who didn't like to stand up for himself.

As it turned out, there was money to begin yet another venture (which was subsequently sold to another company), but no money to cover my nut.

After hanging around P'ville for a couple of months, cleaning things up, I put most of my effects in storage and headed to Calgary to look for a job.

I hit Cowtown in January in the midst of a deep cold snap that seemed set to last until August. After five months of unemployment and frantic job looking, I finally landed a job as a mid-level manufacturing management type. Throughout this period of time, I kept in sporadic touch with Max, but our relationship was still good.

In the summer of the year I got work again, Max came to town and I was invited to join him for dinner at the house of mutual friends. In the midst of an evening where we all jumped in the wine pool and swam around, Max mentioned having to pay a huge amount in customs duties to bring some jewelry back from Amsterdam. Nursing a headache the next day, this comment came floating out of short-term storage and provided the first pick at the scab over what turned out be a festering sore.

A month later, Max showed up for beers and I noted that he was wearing a diamond ring. Once again, being a bit of a slow burner, I said nothing and the evening continued in an atmosphere of good fellowship and mutual best wishes.

The thing that really gets on my tits about people who profess all sorts of principles and virtues is that they frequently toss the whole megillah into the toilet at the first bump in the road.

Max professed to buy into the management concept of looking after your own. He was also a pious Catholic who sang in Church and believed in all that nonsense about God and the Virgin Mary. But there didn't seem to be any contradiction between his "principles" and stiffing me out of my money.

I decided that he was not the sort of person that I wanted to be around. So I crossed him off my Christmas

card list. He has tried on a few occasions to renew our friendship. I have tried once or twice to forgive and forget.

My friend the Catholic priest says that God always forgives, no matter what. He points out, however, that being human, we like to see some amends for the transgression in question.

To date, no one has arrived on my doorstep bearing a cheque for the amount owed. I'm not even sure that it would make any difference...after all as many American celebrities know, you can barely pay for a decent shower curtain with fifteen grand.

How come I can't let this go, you ask? Not really sure. But we've all got to have standards (even if they're pretty low). As someone once said, "I have no friends who've let me down".

Wilderness Man I

I never felt much of an urge to go into the trees until I moved to Calgary. Calgary itself is a bit of a frontier town, with not much in the way of class or style and very much driven by money and the pursuit of oil. But it's close to the mountains, and it was in Banff that I began to spend my weekends traveling up hills and through mountain passes, first with my girlfriend at the time (who had a hell of a time prying me off the couch at first) and then on my own.

As time went by and I grew to like the solitude, I really disliked having people coming along with me in "my" mountains so I started hiking earlier in the season. In normal places, spring comes in April and May. In the mountains, spring may be under way, but it can hardly be said to be in full force. Passes are still filled with snow and it can snow or rain any time.

Sure, there was no one around to disturb the silence, but I can attest to the fact that it wasn't all that much fun either. There's nothing quite like going to sleep with the sound of raindrops hammering into your tent and the wind blowing so hard that you think it will blow your tent back to Calgary.

As the mountains filled up with more hikers, bikers and horses, I started to look for other ways to avoid the crowds. This meant either going farther into the backcountry or finding trails that no one would be stupid enough to try.

One of my last trips involved a long walk into Twin Falls. The trailhead for this trip is not that far from the Banff town site and it gets a lot of traffic because you can go in many directions from this particular point. Most of the trail switchbacks along the shoulder of a mountain, so on one side you have a steep drop and the other side presents a steep incline. Trees are mostly softwood and skinny and, Mother Nature not being much of a housekeeper, there's a lot of dead wood on the ground.

On this trip, I was dragging my ass back from Twin Falls, footsore and not paying attention. I was thinking about a couple of cold beers and maybe a hot shower, so I really wasn't paying attention to my surroundings.

That's when I ran into the bear and her cubs. I heard a *WOOF* and looked up to see three bear heads staring at me from the edge of the downhill side of the trail. In a moment that stretched out forever, everybody froze and tried to assess the situation. I've run into bears before and have therefore patented the stand-still-and-act-like-a-tree approach, but after that interminable moment, my nerve broke and I headed for the nearest upslope tree.

Which was actually a waste of time. First, never run; the bear thinks of you as prey and this sets off the hunting instinct (so I'm told). Second, there is no way you can climb a skinny little tree in time to save your sorry ass from a severe mauling. The bear, like the four-wheel drive killing machine it is, came around a stand

of trees at full gallop. There was a lot of noise: The sow was giving me a good view of her dentition, the cubs were squalling 'cause mom was roaring and I was bellowing because I was trying to get the bear to give up on me and possibly attract enough attention so that other people would come along and provide an alternate meal.

I was also in a ridiculous position. I was facing off a bear in the forest, standing on one leg while the other was cocked at a 90-degree angle, preparatory to climbing the tree. At some point the bear turned away and I decided to leg it out of there. Like a character in a bad adventure movie, I turned to run and immediately tripped over the aforementioned dead wood, falling to my knees. The bear then turned back towards me (never pass up easy prey), but I leapt to my feet and ran to another tree on the downhill side of the trail.

That's all it took. Satisfied that her cubs were out of danger and that I wasn't going in her direction, the sow turned and disappeared into the trees. I realized that, all through this 30 second encounter, I had fully expected to die and had come through without a mauling through sheer luck. I had scratches on my arms and legs and it turned out I was missing a big patch of skin on the back of one thigh. All this damage was self-inflicted as the bear never laid a paw on me.

Once I hot-footed it to my car, I stopped in Banff to buy some beer (Bear brand beer as it turns outâ€"horrible stuff) and report the bear incident. The wardens weren't all that interested. It turns out to have a true "bear attack", you actually have to have been mauled or preferably, killed by the bear in question. Performing an impromptu pas-de-deux with an enraged sow does not qualify.

I believed then (and continue to believe) that many wardens view bears as an endangered species and humans as nowhere near endangered enough. Hence the human tragedy of a serious or fatal attack is dwarfed by the tragedy of having to kill the bear responsible for the attack. I have to say that I see their point.

I come from a long (well, not that long) line of Sutherland men who have spent time making their living in wildernesses of one sort or another. This doesn't make us noble or anything like that; it just means that the urge to be somewhere underpopulated seems to be wired into us. Most of my work has been done in cushy offices, out of the rain and wind. But as I was driving out of Banff township, it occurred to me that I'd paid my dues. Being chased by *Ursus Arctos Horribilis* (this is a misnomer, it should be *Horribilis Horribilis Horribilis*, because it certainly scares the hell out of me.) and living to tell the tale lets me take an honourable place in the family "Book of Really Stupid Ancestors".

Wilderness Man II

My Grandpa Jeremiah spent some time in the Yukon during the Gold Rush. He'd gone out from NB to make his fortune moiling for that yellow stuff that, aside from women, is guaranteed to make men lose their minds. Finding that this was easier said than done, he eventually ended up working as a courier; each week, he would load up his dogsled and mush into town with the week's takings.

Eventually, he ended up with about \$10,000 (a lot of money in those days), thus providing a start in life for him and his family. He returned home and, keeping some money to set himself up, bought land and gave money to his close relatives. He spent the rest of his days in the Miramichi as a relatively well off country squire.

The male members of my family tend to be a little dismissive of detail and one of my Grandpa Jed's bigger mistakes came to light a few years ago when my siblings and I were asked to sign away our rights to some land adjoining the Miramachi River.

It turns out that another branch of the family had been logging it for years in the mistaken belief that they actually owned it. My grandfather had given the land to one of his brothers, but no one had ever done the paperwork. So legally, we owned the land through our deceased father in conjunction with an uncle (also a

Jeremiah) and an aunt.

For a brief, shining moment, I saw myself as a landowner fishing for salmon on my section of the river, but my uncle soon rained on my parade and I ended up signing away my claim to the land.

My father spent many years working on the logging operations of the local paper mill as a scaler. Part of his job was to keep track of the amount of wood that was logged before it was taken out of the woods and floated (later trucked) into town to the papermill. This job entailed his being away for a week at a time, sometimes returning on weekends. If there were forest fires to be fought, my father might stay away for weeks at a time.

My father told stories of surveying stands of trees and camping out at night. He recalled building lean-tos on one side of a fire and a short wall on the other side to reflect heat back into the lean-to. This was in the days when woodcraft was a skill that you needed to live in the forest.

Long before the days of lightweight, waterproof, breathable outdoor gear, my father wore the latest in outdoor performance clothing: wool shirts, pants and socks. He laced his feet into heavy gumboots. He carried his paperwork in a heavy canvas haversack that developed a unique smell after years of snow, sweat, rain and heat. He owned a heavy metal compass with a brass needle and a real glass cover over the compass card.

This was the '60s version of extreme outdoorsman-type stuff. If you fell into the creek, you got wet and you stayed wet. Your watch would corrode and you'd have to take it into a watchmaker's to get it fixed. You had to be able to navigate by using a map and compass instead of a GPS. The only way to call anybody was by using an old hand-cranked telephone in the cookhouse.

When I was about ten, my father decided to take me into the woods with him. So off we went in a real honest-to-goodness four-wheel-drive (not your average SUV or 4x4) that sat high off the road and looked like it had been dragged through a knothole backwards. The only thing I remember about the drive is sitting on my father's lap, driving over endlessly undulating forestry roads, and barfing all over his arm as I tried to stick my head out the window.

The camp was a collection of log cabins that acted as the base of operations for the loggers. It had its own cookhouse and stable as this was one of the last camps that used animal power. The cut logs were dragged out to the road by the huge (to me) horses, pulling big sledges. The logs were then stacked by the side of the road and were collected later by men with large steel hooks.

Earlier in my life, my father might be away for a few weeks on "The Drive". Logs were thrown into the river and driven downstream to be picked up later. To keep things moving the woodsmen would travel along with the logs, sometimes going out on the logs to clear up jams and frequently falling into the river.

The camp had no electricity or running water. Lighting was provided by kerosene lamps.

I remember that my father went out to fill the lamp one night and ran into an enormous bull moose just outside the cabin door. Moose aren't the world's prettiest beasts, but their size and the enormous rack of antlers they carry certainly makes them impressive. My father and the moose looked at each other and then went about their business.

Eventually, my dad stopped working in the forestry industry; he could see the writing on the wall as mechanization made large inroads in logging. I think too, that he decided he could do better financially and be home more often if he found some other employment. So he turned his back on that life and got a pretty good job in town.

As it turns out, my aforementioned bear encounter was pretty much my last trip into the mountains. My next

hiking trip turned out to be my last. Old age and flat feet caught up with me and it seemed like a good time to hang up the hiking boots and find other ways of being in the wilderness.

But on those lonely, dark nights when I sit in my log cabin on the third floor of Camosack Manor here in Victoria, I listen to the calls of the coyote and the wolf and imagine starlit nights, the moon turning the snow to silver and my grandfather and my father snuggled up next to me in our lean-to somewhere in the woods.

You Can't Go Home Again - I (so don't even think about it)

You can't ever go home again. It's been said so many times in so many ways by so many people that it's become a cliché. And, like all clichés, people intone these words without giving much thought to what they're saying.

I've thought about this a lot, trying to figure out why I've always felt uncomfortable when traveling back to my "roots". In going home, you can see the people you know, sleep in your own room (maintained, you assume, as a shrine to your youth by your doting mother), and you can be comforted by the thought that, if your wife throws you out, and you get fired, and the cops are after you (misfortune tending to knock on your door in groups of three, unlike Jehovah's Witnesses), you have a place to hide.

But wait a minute! Isn't that where the bowling alley used to be? And you've got three kids now? And what did Mom do with all the stuffed toys I had when I was small? Where's my bed?

Be prepared. If you leave home for a road trip with the basketball team, you're probably safe. If you've gone away to a new world with different demands, a new world that changes your perspective, new people nothing like the people you once knew—expect to be homeless in a very real way.

As you change, so does your place of birth and the people and things in it. Should you persist in your foolish attachment to your hometown but only visit occasionally, expect it to become like a foreign country to you.

Elephants, they say, never forget. They return to the same places time after time, even visiting what looks to be the graveyards of their ancestors. Using their trunks, they fondle sun-bleached bones and naked skulls, communing with those departed loved ones just as we pore over the pictures of departed family members.

I'm the same way in some respects. I keep coming back to New Brunswick, this graveyard of my younger years, looking for something, I-don't-know-what. I try to conjure up the ambiance and the people of 30 years-or-so ago so as to try to connect my current life to that old one.

This hopeless journey usually begins in Fredericton. Flying into the Maritimes is about as straightforward as getting to Somalia. The only place less well serviced than NB has to be PEI. It always costs more to fly in the Maritimes and there are fewer flights. Travel in winter is even more problematic as it can snow like a sonofabitch and sock the whole place in for a couple of days.

If the region is Somalia, getting to the North Shore is like traveling to Mogadishu. You can't conveniently fly there and the only other public transport is the bus. Taking the bus anywhere in the Maritimes is a Death-By-A-Thousand-Cuts experience in that you have to stop at every wide spot in the road to pick up or drop off something. By the time you get to your destination, your clothes will be out of style. So you have to rent a car.

Fredericton was my first step away from home. Being accepted at University of New Brunswick was like being given a pardon from a long slow decline in Dalhousie (the town, not the university). I've traveled the road between Fredericton and Dalhousie about a hundred times in all seasons, in sunshine and snowstorms (nothing stops the Sutherland Express), in cars, trucks and buses. I could probably travel this road with my

eyes closed. Certainly, my father could; he drove this route every weekend, back and forth, for years. He drove the shit out of Plymouth Reliants, wearing them out at the rate of about one a year.

Things on the highway have changed a bit: There are a lot fewer potholes and the lanes are slightly wider. On the other hand, a lot of dead man curves are still in evidence. The road continues to wander and saunter through towns and villages; no ring roads around here.

During my university years, my father would pick me up as he passed through on his way from Saint John. If I were really unlucky, he would make me drive. I can only ascribe this to the Catholic tendency for making oneself unhappy as ol' Frank hated my driving. He complained about how fast I drove (not fast enough), passing cars (not soon enough) and avoiding varmints on the road (don't slow down, don't even try to avoid them).

In movies and on TV, you frequently see the young sprout finally standing up to his old man and thereby confirming his own ascension to adulthood. This makes for good drama, but that wasn't me. Although my father had never hit me, preferring to leave corporal punishment to my mother, he scared the shit out of me. Loud, blunt, opinionated, short-tempered (sitting next to him when he was pissed off was like holding a grenade with the pin pulled, waiting for it to go off), dismissive of idiots and most other life forms, he was like a force of nature. My approach was to go along so as to get along so I suffered in silence; which I think pissed him off even more.

On these car trips, my captivity was exacerbated by my father's chain-smoking. Sitting in a car for four hours with him, I probably inhaled as much smoke as he did. He never did kick this particular vice. It killed him at 62.

For the first few years after he died, I would look for him in my rearview mirror, sailing up on me in a Reliant. His ghost doesn't make these trips anymore and I don't feel him riding just behind my shoulder. It's kind of a relief, actually.

So I'm flying solo on this trip, past Marysville and onto Taymouth on the River Tay. I've always liked that name although I can't tell you anything about the place.

The next milestones are Boiestown (the geographic centre of NB, you know), Blackville (whose feared constabulary would often lurk in the trees, waiting to hand out speeding tickets to augment the town's income. Blackville's fuzz is no longer in evidence, having been replaced by the jack-booted thugs of the RCMP.) and Doaktown.

The only landmark of note in Doaktown is W.W. Doak and Sons. They've been selling fishing tackle and clothes since 1946. This reminds me that one of the few ways of making money in NB is to take hopeless fisherman-from-away out on the Miramichi River so that they can murder the odd salmon.

After more seemingly endless driving, I arrive at Miramichi City, formerly the two towns of Chatham and Newcastle. On the way into town, I note that the papermill workers have been on strike for something over 200 days.

Paper mills seem to change owners more often than a '78 Volvo. Each owner will run the mill for a few years and then sell out. Faced with competition from other countries and the globalization trend, it seems tough to make money in this biz.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs, the town really can't afford to lose the employment this mill provides. NB still has lots of trees, but limited ways to make money from the forests.

Keep going, the next stop is Bathurst. If you were to colour the French and English-speaking areas of NB in white and red respectively, you would see areas of intense primary colours and a fair amount of pink tones. Bathurst is pinkish. Down the coast, through Buctouche and Caraquet, things are pretty white.

I know I'm in Acadian country; the red, white and blue flag with yellow star is painted on telephone poles and homeowners have the flags in their front yards.

There's a lot of Acadian Heritage stuff around this part of the country. Why? OK, quick history lesson. French (the real French) colonists appeared in the Bay of Fundy around 1604 (incidentally, the place was already inhabited by Indians, now called First Nations people, but there's room for everyone, right?).

Over the next 150 years, the French, British, Acadians and Americans (formerly British colonists) fought over Acadia (a place whose boundaries were never clearly defined). The British finally gained ascendancy in the New World and decided to deport the Acadians 'cause they just weren't fitting in. I'll skip over the stories of pillaging, burning and the many Acadians who perished on their way to wherever it was the British thought they should go.

With this act of dispersion, the British added a chapter to that book called, *Great Canadian Whines*. Every Canadian minority or subspecies thinks they have a reason to be unhappy with the way their ancestors were treated and a right to be compensated in some way and today's Acadian descendants are no different. There was talk at one point about demanding an apology from the Queen regarding the way the Eighteenth Century Acadians were treated.

I have no idea of what the politics of Acadian Heritage types are now and I don't care. There is some talk by younger Acadians about moving on from discovering their heritage and beating their chests about being displaced. Worrying about making the future more prosperous for NB would make a refreshing change from complaining about the past.

Going north of Bathurst, we come to Belledune and the lead smelter and power plant situated there. Not much lead in the ground means that the smelter will probably close, putting more people out of work. Given the fitful economy of the North Shore, this means that most of the workers will end up on EI.

I'm on the old coast road now, driving through Sea Side, Black Land, Jacquet River, New Mills, Charlo and Eel River Bar. The "Bar" is the world's second-largest sand bar. It's unusual in that it has fresh water on one side and salt water on the other. It's also a gathering place for many types of birds including bald eagles, peregrine falcons, harlequin ducks, and piping plovers.

My father, an early riser, would go down to the Bar and park on the gravel, looking at the wading birds as they hunted for breakfast. He would typically be among a group of car-bound birdwatchers, some of whom, no doubt had been there all night—not because they were avid birders, but because they'd fallen asleep after downing a pint of rum. At Inch Arran Beach, a steep slope to the water meant that the odd car would slip its brakes and take its sleeping occupant into the freezing water for an impromptu bath.

Back to the Bar: Used to be that the Bar was the beach where families came on weekends. For a mile on either side of the road, cars would park and disgorge children, dogs, inflatable whatever's, coolers, food and drink. No cell phones, boom boxes, knuckleheads playing Rap music. The worst you'd get was someone playing an underpowered transistor radio. We'd all have a grand time, swimming in the shallow, fairly warm water.

At night, budding young lovers would gather driftwood and light fires, huddling together on the cool sand in the dwindling light and anxiously awaiting full dark when the real fun would begin. Driving along at this time of day, you'd be enveloped in the memorable smell of salt-water marinated wood going up in smoke.

Now we head into Dalhousie.

You Can't Go Home Again - II

Driving along the piece of road called The Long Slant into town, you get an eyeful of the Bay of Chaleur (Jacques Cartier named the place "Bay of Heat", even though the water is pretty cold all the time) with the Bon Ami Rocks in sight close into shore and, across the water, the Gaspé Coast of Quebec. In the haze of the distance, the hills look like the backs of close-packed whales, sleeping on the surface.

On the other hand, looking up the steep and treed hillside, you can just make out the smokestacks of the local power plant, spewing out gray combustion byproducts. Thirty years ago, when the plant was first built, there was no NIMBY contingent doing their best to get in the way of construction; Dalhousie needed the jobs. Dalhousie still needs jobs and a nuclear disposal facility would be welcome even if the eerie green glow kept the good citizens awake at night.

On top of yet another hill is the Convent School. I went there from grades one to six, taught part of the time by scary nuns who lived in a different part of the building. Never mind people putting the Fear of God into you; I was taught early to fear the nuns. They were the black and white models, often referred to as Penguins by someone who'd just gotten the strap.

Fearsome, embittered and wizened, hobbled by bad knees caused by constant kneeling, Christ's Harpies would stalk the rows between school desks, instructing us in the rudiments of Catholicism, arithmetic and writing. Many would carry a yardstick (we didn't have meters then), ostensibly for pointing, but more often used to mete out the odd whack on the head to the pupils.

I remember that at one point, I hated a particular nun so much that I was giving myself over to boyhood fantasies of throwing her down the stairs. In my mind's eye, this provided a unique stroboscopic black and white effect as she tumbled head over heels, hitting each and every step.

Every first Friday of the month we'd be marched the short way to St. John the Baptist, the enormous stone parish church for confession and mass. That was a laugh and a half—sitting in the darkened confessional, telling the priest how many times you'd lied this month, whether you'd had impure thoughts, basically asking for forgiveness for being human. Do I sound bitter?

Let's go down the Convent Hill to see the paper mill that takes up one entire side of the town's commercial district. I remember, in the days before the mill cleaned up its act, my mother complaining about all the soot on the clothes left outside to dry.

However, if it weren't for the mill, my town would never have enjoyed any prosperity at all. As it is, the paper industry isn't very profitable any more and automation has ensured that fewer people are employed in making newsprint.

That low, extended groaning sound you hear may be due to the mill's processes or it may be the noise of Dalhousie circling the drain. On the other side of the main street, in what used to be the commercial heart of Dalhousie, buildings have disappeared, leaving empty spaces.

Businesses have closed and nothing has come in to take their place. The only new construction is a building to accommodate the growth of the local Tim Horton's. Any structures erected in the last ten years have been the aluminum-sided mass-produced utility buildings; hardly anything that contributes to the architectural heritage of the town.

You can tell that the town is dying and that the region doesn't necessarily have a big future. The hospital has been shut down. The movie theatre burned down and was never rebuilt. Most of the people you see on the streets are old enough to be retired. The place isn't quite a ghost town, but come back in a few more years.

On the other hand, what a beautiful location! You've got the Restigouche River, one of the best salmon rivers in the world. You've got a view of the baby-mountains on the Gaspé side of the river. No one wants to live here, so the civilized amenities aren't required.

No Starbucks, no overpriced hotels and spas, no retirement communities and vacation homes. The place is almost completely unspoiled. When I left I vowed never to come back because Dalhousie was never going anywhere. Now, I cherish it for that reason.

You can't go home again because it's changed and so have you.

A Nice Place to Visit

My life's companion, the charming and lovely Ms. D, and I have had a number of skirmishes over the last year about where to live. For reasons that are not important to this discussion, Ms. D lives in Vancouver and I have been living in my lonely log cabin on the third floor of Camosack Manor. But I'm restless and I think it's time to leave this little rock.

I like this apartment. It's roomy, the faucets don't leak and it's very quiet. It's close to a main street, but set back far enough that very little noise intrudes. The other reason it's quiet is that the place has a high proportion of really old people, some of whom may already be dead. I pay a fair amount of rent to the owners of this mausoleum, but on the whole, it's all upside. I even built bookcases; a sign of intended permanence.

But I really don't like Victoria. Or Vancouver Island, come to that. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that I loathe Victoria. I came here about eight years ago to work for a local company that was going gangbusters in the business of manufacturing Laser Pump Modules (What? Never mind, it doesn't matter.). Five years ago, this company was sunk along with a bunch of others in the Dotcom Crash and I became unemployed. No big deal, I've lost more jobs than most people have had hot meals. Since then, I've been trapped in this Green Gomorrah.

Unemployment hasn't soured my opinion of the locale. I disliked it here after the first month. I'm a high-energy kind of guy, always looking for something new and nifty to engage my short attention span (sort of like a toddler). I also don't do very well among the baffled, the shortsighted and the complacent. Victoria has those kinds of people in abundance.

Now why is this? Lessee, we've got an economy that is driven by tourism, retirees and government employees.

People come from all over Canada and the US to retire here or to buy a second home. Most of these people want the status quo. That means that there should be no change to the image of Victoria as a leafy, lush getaway where old people can slowly drive their Lincolns on sidewalks crowded with tourists. Apparently, a vision test is not required in order to get a driver's licence here. And there's no point in yelling at them, as the only sound these geriatrics can hear is that of their arteries hardening.

I know I'm a bit hard on old people when it comes to driving. Frankly, young guys smoking around town in their souped-up Japanese Rice Rockets are a menace too. Given that you can't go very far without driving into the water, there's hardly any point in having a powerful car.

Because so many people with a lot of money come here to live, there is a great demand for housing. This demand drives up the prices of broken-down hovels that wouldn't make it as doghouse anywhere else (well, maybe Vancouver).

Not only that, all this construction encroaches on the environment that people here say they cherish so much. That leafy lushness is rapidly giving way to concrete and cedar monoblocks with all the charm of Kingston Penitentiary.

And don't get me started on the weather. Yeah, it's nice here. It rarely goes down below five degrees. But let me tell you, five months of rain and cloud cover that sits at eyebrow level is enough to make me start eyeing my .45 Magnum with some pretty dark thoughts circling what passes for my mind. Ms. D has to padlock the knife drawer for the entire winter. Do you know what it's like trying to cut a steak with a plastic knife?

I've suffered through many cold Alberta winters, but at least in Calgary, the sun is shining as you slip into a hypothermic coma.

During the height of the cruise ship season, as many as 6000 tourists may be disgorged onto downtown Victoria to wander around aimlessly. Let's face it folks, Victoria is no mecca for shopping. Visitors can stop in at one of the many mediocre restaurants, eat overpriced food, then shop around for genuine plastic Mounties, Cuban cigars or a tartan Tam O'Shanter before being herded back onto their floating ghettos on their way to invade Alaska. A really big event is when an American aircraft carrier shows up and barfs 5000 pimply sailors into town.

And of course, we have the seat of government here. And when has government ever been in favour of change that won't get them votes?

With very little tax base, Victoria is desperately in need of revenue. That's why the Parking Barracudas descend on every expired meter with the same ferocity as shown by lawyers when they smell an accident victim.

There is an odd mix of people living here. We have the aforementioned ready-to-die who want nothing to change. There are also the people with very little in the way of skills and education. They form the backbone of the service workforce; driving trucks, waiting on tables, that sort low wage stuff. All this supports the tourist economy because how is your bar going to make any money if you can't underpay your staff? Anyone with any education or ambition has to wait in line for the very few jobs that pay decent salaries or leave the island.

And of course, we have the granola crowd. You know, the ones who believe in crystals, holistic medicine and chakra alignment. They're the fleece and Birkenstock people who shop at the local organic food stores because they would never put artificial chemicals in their bodies. You can see them trying to buy some natural vitamins so they can replenish the serotonin they've depleted in a three-day Ecstasy binge.

They are generally seen driving Hyundai Ponies with "Save the Whales (or Clayoquot, or Spirit Bears)" stickers decorating their bumpers. Those are frequently the same vehicles trailing blue smoke because their engines need a ring job.

The holistic types often join up with middle-aged former hippies at anti-power plant/tree cutting/farmed salmon protests. You can easily identify the old, successful hippies as they're the ones driving SUV's.

It isn't that I don't like people in Victoria. Many of the ones I know are warm-hearted and easy-going. People generally leave you alone to do whatever thing your thing is. We have a seven-foot tall transvestite wandering the streets and no one has ever gotten on his/her case.

But everywhere has a culture. And the culture, the overall *feel*, is one of a claustrophobic insularity and suspicion of change.

So the delightful Ms. D and I continue our discussions over where I should make my new home while I sit here in my Velvet Rut. I hear Inuvik is nice in the summer.

Japanese Diet

A few years ago, when I was working for a company that made obscene amounts of cash from the Dotcom boom, I had occasion to go to Japan on business. My colleagues and I were going to discuss various issues with the suppliers of our raw material.

The Japanese are very big on hospitality, among other things and we would be expected to join our hosts for meals and, in the case of one supplier, for the entire weekend at a resort close to Mount Fuji.

Well, therein lies the rub. You have to understand that I'm not really what you'd call an experimental gourmet. I am not one of those people who travel around looking to be thrilled and moved to tears by new ways of cooking monkey brains or crab eyes. When you switch from Fancy Feast to Tender Tongues, your cat may not just jump in and start chowing down. Like your feline, I will view the menu substitution with suspicion and will even refuse to eat. This is in contrast to dogs, the dumpster divers of the animal kingdom.

I refuse to even consider tasting: tongue, brains, liver, kidneys, pancreas, cats, rats, bats, gnats, the list is endless. But chief on my list of things I really don't want to sample is seafood; especially if it's raw.

Now I also seem to have a "sensitivity" to certain other foods, among them milk products (people ask me if I'm lactose intolerant and I tell them that I'm just plain intolerant), beef and soy. I don't turn blue as my throat closes off or anything like that. However, imagine Mount St. Helens going off in your stomach—that's what happens to me.

I really like Japan. I like the culture, the country and the people. The fact that I don't understand the language or what goes on in Japanese heads really only heightens the intrigue for me. But man, give me a pass on the munchies.

My intense dislike of all things seaborne (OK, I do eat the odd clam or mussel, but steam them please) goes right back to the womb. I came out standin' up and talkin' back and I made no bones about the fact that my New Brunswick confreres could take their piscine buddies and shove 'em. My father would on occasion bring home a salmon freshly caught in the Bay of Chaleur (hormone free but with just a teeny tiny bit of mercury), but, to his intense disapproval, I would turn up my nose at the offering.

What is it I don't like about seafood in general? The taste, smell, texture, appearance of the flesh and BONES! Nothing puts me off more than not being able to chew my food without having to steer my tongue around tiny needle-like bones. And heaven help me if one of these spiny structures makes it into my throat. It'll put me off eating for a week.

Not to say, that in my early days of innocence, I didn't experiment from time to time. Yep I remember those long winter nights in NB when we'd sit down to a "feed of smelt". Just split 'em, gut 'em, dredge 'em in flour and fry 'em up in a bit of lard. Yum, yum. Then at some point I realized that the crunchy texture I enjoyed so much was provided in part by the spines that were left in the fish when they were fried. Bye-bye smelts! Let's not even talk about herring and boiled potatoes.

My disinterest in the fruits de mer never seemed to me to be a handicap until the last ten or fifteen years when, along with Toyotas and Toshibas, North America became inundated with sushi. Raw fish combined with cold

rice and all wrapped up in seaweed sounds to me like a starvation diet that would have appealed to Robinson Crusoe only after he'd polished off Friday and every coconut in sight. I was dismayed that people wanted me to go out for lunch or dinner to these places so we could "enjoy" some Japanese cuisine. I'd rather drill my own teeth without anesthetic.

So you can imagine my trepidation when it was proposed that I head off for two weeks of traipsing around the backwaters of Japan, talking to people with a sketchy grasp of English and sampling the local cuisine with no Wendy's in sight. But, like those intrepid English explorers, I bought a Lonely Planet Guide, packed a healthy supply of meal replacement bars and caught the plane to Japan with one of my colleagues. We'll call him Flush.

As Flush has been dealing with the Japanese for almost twenty years, he has a pretty good grasp of the behaviour expected from Western guests and I got a lot of coaching. I fully expected to make lots of mistakes, but I wanted to avoid the obvious ones. Spewing snails onto your lap after discovering that they're still alive when you bite into them would be pretty rude.

One thing I have to say in favour of Japanese-style eating is that it is all beautifully presented. Attention to detail being paramount, everything is presented in pleasing arrangements and colours. A feast for the eyes, if not for the palate.

Breakfast: As we were spending every second or third day in Tokyo, there was an opportunity to stock up on Western-style food. Our hotel provided Japanese and Western type foods in a buffet-style breakfast. For the first meal of the day, you could have raw egg in hot rice with a side order of seaweed (the seaweed has been processed so that it looks like carbon paper). You could have sticky bean, which is sort of like Rice Krispie Squares except the colour is brown and the beans are only loosely glued to each other. And, of course, you could have fish.

The Western side of the buffet provided eggs, bacon, pancakes and coffee, coffee, coffee (ya can never have enough coffee).

The most memorable thing I didn't eat for breakfast was a fish complete with head and tail that had been formed into the shape of a capital "N". Its head, including a pair of accusatory eyes, was poking up in the air. One of my colleagues (this one joined us for the second leg of our trip) immediately dug in with chopsticksâ€”tough to do at the best of times.

In a rare show of mercy, our hosts had provided steak, eggs and toast as well. However, considering that I was in a backwater town called Akita (don't bother to look on a map, you won't find it), the chef's grasp of my kind of food was a little shaky.

Each slice of toast had enough butter on it to clog up the arteries of several people at once. The eggs and steak, well let's just say that the Japanese concept of cooking defines "medium-well" as "casually introduced to the frying pan". Nothing is ever overcooked because it's not part of the national mindset. It's either raw or slightly warmed.

Notwithstanding, I fell upon this stuff and wolfed it down. The only downside was that, in spite of my colleagues' professed enjoyment of breakfast fish, they wouldn't let me knock off their portions of steak and eggs.

At the time, we were staying in what was billed as a traditional Onsen (Hot Springs Resort). Japan sits on very geologically active land and the upside of this is that they get lots of hot water bubbling up through the ground. As Akita also gets about 30 feet of snow in a year (it snowed for the entire three days we were there), hot water is allowed to run into the streets, keeping them clear.

Wandering around the Onsen late at night, I noticed a signboard that gave directions for various facilities in English. For instance, there was an arrow pointing the way to the Puburic Baths. No, I didn't spell that wrong.

Lunch: As we were visiting a lot of factories, we ended up eating lunches from what are called Bento Boxes. Pickled plums, tofu, unidentifiable fish, all of it cold. I ate a lot of meal replacement bars. The less said about this the better.

Dinner: When it was just the three of us, we would frequently sneak off to have Western-type food—expensive and not well prepared, but what the heck, it's a little piece of home. When being entertained by our hosts, we were fed shark's fin balls wrapped in raw chicken skin (really expensive and the shark fin has all these golden threads in it), cow stomach (looks like Chicken McNuggets and has the consistency of car tires which is not improved by cooking it on the frying pan placed in the middle of the table), various raw shellfish and noodles. Thank heavens that all meals required lots of beer. Aside from the relaxing effect several beers have on me, it made a lot of the food easier to swallow.

In-between-meals: This is a big machine-dispensing culture. You can buy anything out of a machine. My favourite was the hot coffee in a can complete with cream and sugar. In my nutrition-deprived state I had to keep the metabolism going with sugar and caffeine.

A very popular drink seemed to be Pocari Sweat. No one was able to answer any of my questions about this product. Questions like, what is a Pocari? Why does it sweat so much? How do they get the sweat off the Pocari?

As in North America, Starbucks is everywhere you want to be. Really, that's not quite true. In the major cities such as Tokyo and Kyoto, the Coffee Mermaid has tapped her tail on many locations. But the countryside of Japan is surprisingly untouched by Western influences. The Japanese have never heard of fibre, so vegetables and fruit are scarcer than hen's teeth. And you certainly don't find them as part of a restaurant meal.

Remember I mentioned that I have trouble with milk products? And soy? Know what's in those meal replacement bars? Right. My stomach was in a constant uproar. Even the cast iron stomachs of my colleagues were showing signs of corrosion. As one of them said, "I haven't had a solid shit since I got here."

Now many of you might call me a Philistine and characterize this straightforward account of my trip as whining. I assure you that the trip was not an entire horror show. There were many bright spots.

The Japanese are exceptionally hospitable. When we were stuck at the wrong airport in Northern Japan, the airport manager bundled us into his car and drove us 100 km in a snowstorm so we could hook up with our contact at the right location. We arrived early and he insisted on buying us lunch. Granted that part of the manager's motivation was to practice his English on us, but nevertheless, this was extraordinary customer service.

Wakino-san, our host at Mt. Fuji took us to what he called a textile museum. Feeling like I was part of a pre-Glasnost Soviet delegation touring the tractor factories, I looked forward to this with all the anticipation I feel for a visit to the proctologist. I was astounded by what I saw. For once, Wakino-san's English had not been equal to the task. This place was only peripherally about textiles.

The museum contains kimonos made from silk using a special tie-dying method developed by and artist named Itchiku Kubota. It took him years of effort and poverty to perfect one of the most precious artistic effects I have ever seen. If I had gone to Japan just to see this museum, it would have been worth the trip.

One of the rides I was looking forward to taking was the Shinkansen (Bullet Train). Having traveled in a few Canadian trains, I was prepared for crashing and lurching as the train started up and all the cars fell into line

one by one. Not so on this train. I hardly knew I was moving. It wasn't until I noticed the speed display on the wall reach 200 km/hr that I realized that a sudden stop would result in my being shipped home in three family-size raspberry jam jars with a small thimble containing my brain tucked under the lid of one of the jars. Putting this vision aside, I decided to sit back and enjoy the ride.

After two weeks, we left for home. I've been thinking that I would like to go back to Japan again and check out the snow in the north. And meal replacement bars have gotten so much better since my last trip.

Jeremiah Sutherland is an engineer, musician and writer who (at the moment) lives in Victoria, BC. An avid sportsman, he enjoys shooting fish in a barrel.

A free ebook from <http://manybooks.net/>