



FABLES FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

# BESOP'S FABLES

*Fables for the Third Millennium*

by Barry Daniels

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## AN ORDINARY DAY

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

Benny looked into his own eyes as he shaved, and counted his troubles. They buzzed around inside his head like a swarm of angry bees. His youngest son, Michael, needed expensive orthodontistry, and the dentist had warned that ‘right away’ would not be too soon. Benny didn’t even want to think about next year, when his oldest boy headed for college, or the fact that the last decent winter coat his wife Diane had bought was approaching its ninth birthday. And he still could not see how he was ever going to find the money. A raise was out of the question, and so was an advance on his salary. Given the rumours which were circulating at work lately he’d be lucky to keep his job. He could sell his old Chevvy, as

Diane constantly urged him to do, and take the bus to work, but then how would they cope with all the after-school activities for the kids? With hockey games, Soccer practice, Riding lessons, Judo classes, the old car spent little time parked on the driveway. And then even if he sold the car he would be lucky to get half of what the Orthodontist had estimated. A sharp pain in his lower abdomen reminded him that he should have seen the doctor about these recurrent attacks long ago! He could no longer pretend that the pains were getting easier to bear, or that the attacks were coming less frequently. But what if he needed surgery, how was he going to find the money for that? What if it was something which could keep him off work for a long time, or even? ... well, let's not even *think* about *that* possibility. He'd opted out of his company's health insurance plan, needing every penny of his take-home pay just to cover the day-to-day household expenses. In hindsight, that looked like an

exceptionally bad choice on his part, as Diane frequently pointed out to him.

He dressed quickly and walked through the kitchen to the driveway, skipping breakfast once again and trying to ignore the hard glare which his wife directed at his back. The Chevy turned over sluggishly but fired before the battery gave up trying (his neighbour had told him that the last boost he'd supplied was definitely the end of the road) and limped along the freeway into the city.

Arriving late for work he found the office empty, and followed the sounds of activity into the boardroom. This at least was not unexpected. The threat of layoffs had been hanging over his small company for months now, but the faces of his colleagues told him, even before he read the message on the flip chart, that the news was even worse than expected. The company was on the verge of bankruptcy, holding out only until the employees cashed

their final paycheques before filing the papers. Benny picked up the small envelope from the desk by the side of the chart and left the room. There was nothing to stay for, nothing left to discuss. And nowhere to go but home, to try to explain to Diane that even the small paycheque which she so despised was no longer available to sustain them.

Crossing the bridge out of the city his engine gave several long groans and quit. Benny prayed that the car had enough momentum to carry it over the top of the hill and then let gravity take over. He knew that the bridge was constantly monitored, and that a tow-truck would be dispatched as soon as his stalled car was spotted, but he knew also that the bill would need to be paid at once, or his car would be impounded. His prayers were, as usual, unanswered. The Impala rolled to a stop twenty feet from the summit. He considered trying to push the car over the last few feet, but knew that as soon as he released the

brake, well before he could jump out of the driver door, his heavy automobile would have rolled backwards into the car behind. Horns were honking, drivers were climbing out of their cars, smoke was now pouring from the Impala's ruined motor, and Benny gave up. He crossed in front of the dying car and leaned out over the metal railings. He looked down to the fast flowing river, hundreds of feet below, and saw his only available option. He climbed the fence.

\* \* \*

When Benny opened his eyes he hovered for a few seconds in the fuzzy space between dream and waking, unsure of anything, waiting for the world to come into focus. He shook his head to clear the dream and the world came into focus with a bang. Literally. That last one had been far too close to home. Dust drifted down from the concrete ceiling of the bunker, and he lifted his

hand to shield his eyes. Other, more distant bombs could be heard and felt as the morning barrage of the city continued. Next to him on the makeshift mattress Diane stirred and came awake. On the upturned crate which functioned as a bedside table he saw the small envelope which had arrived yesterday by military mail, informing him that young Mikey had now been taken from them. All of his boys were dead now, died fighting a senseless war which would never end. Benny got up from the blankets and limped to the far corner of the bunker, relieved to see that there was enough water for a cup of coffee, at least. Later he or Diane would have to make the terrifying trip above ground in search of provisions. Diane would probably insist on going again, as Benny's range of movement was very limited since the shrapnel had taken off half of his left foot.

Diane stirred and got up from the bed. She looked fondly at her husband. They had gone through so much together



in the years since the war had started. “You’re up early, Benny,” she said, coming up behind him to slip her arms around his waist. “Did you have bad dreams again, darling?” “Bad dreams?” Benny replied, “Not this time; quite the opposite, in fact. I dreamed of the old days, before the war, when the only things we had to worry about were dental bills and that old Chevy clunker I used to run. I dreamed of that time I got stuck at the top of the MacDonald Bridge, and the cops thought I was going to jump, and brought me home in their cruiser.”

“I’m still not convinced that you weren’t going to jump, you know,” Diane said. “I remember how upset you were about Mikey’s dental bills, and then losing your job. And wasn’t that about the time you had the emergency appendectomy? Well, I’m just glad that you came home safe that day, Benny. Think of what you’d have lost if you’d jumped! You would never have opened your own company and made all that money!”

“Yes, you’re right,” Benny said, thoughtfully. “Our troubles seem so trivial when we look back on them. Still, it was wonderful to be able to spend some time back there, back then, even in my dreams.”

Another explosion close to the shelter shook more dust and debris from the ceiling. “Yes, I wish I could have been with you, darling, if only in a dream.” Diane said. “Those were good days, with the family all around us. Good days.”

\* \* \*

*‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ are never absolutes. ‘Good Days’ and ‘Bad Days’ are meaningless terms unless there is a yardstick against which they can be measured. Before*

*determining which kind of days you are living in, be sure to set a point of reference.*

\* \* \*

## CHIT-CHAT

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

Mrs. Noble didn't notice Mrs. Thomas until the two bumped into each other on their way out of the train station. As they walked the last quarter mile to their homes in Hawthorne Avenue the two women fell into step.

"It's been ages since we had a little chat," said Mrs. Noble. "I don't know if I've seen you since our Michael got the Nobel prize. Did I tell you about that? He got it for his work on the new AIDS vaccine."

"Well that's nice," Mrs. Thomas replied with a smile. "You won't have heard, then, that my Sam is out on parole. He's glad to be back on the street, but he's very

bitter about the way the coppers framed him with that cocaine they slipped into his pocket.”

“Michael is back home now,” Mrs. Noble continued. “He quit his job with the Research group when they denied him patent rights, but the day after he left he got three new job offers. One of them is in New York, at five times the pay, but the others are for very good money, and nearer to home, so he’s taking a few days to think about it.”

“Of course our home life is a little more hectic with Sam back at home and his Dad still on night shift. I suppose you’ve heard the fighting that goes on. Still, it’s nice for me that the old man has another target at home now, if you see what I mean. Sam does like his music loud, though, and when his Dad is trying to get some sleep... Well, that’s why the police car was round at the house yesterday, I expect you noticed.”

“The local lab, it’s quite small but they pay their people very well, and the perks are very good. They told Michael that he could have use of the company jet any time he wanted. That would be nice for the three of us, swanning off for a holiday in our own jet. Well, you know what I mean.”

“The old man is recovering from the knife wounds, though he did need a lot of stitches. Sam is a bit too fast to pull out that big knife of his, I think. Mind you, our Sam is probably the way he is as a result of the beatings he got from his Dad growing up. I mean, you can’t keep clubbing a kid on the side of his head without doing some damage, can you?”

“Oh, here we are on Hawthorne Avenue. My, your lilac hedge looks lovely this year, have you been feeding it

something special?”

“What? Oh, the lilac. We cut it way back last autumn, and it seems to have benefitted from that. We just put the usual fertilizer on it, but it does seem to have done a lot better than usual this spring.”

“Well, bye now, Mrs. Thomas. Nice chatting to you.”

“You too, Mrs. Noble. I enjoyed our little conversation.”

\* \* \*

Mr. Thomas put down the newspaper as his wife came into the room. “Was that Mrs. Noble you were talking to in the street. What’s she been up to then.”

“What? Oh, nothing much. Her son’s out of a job, apparently. He’s back living with his parents. I thing she said he’s got AIDS.”

“Always knew he’d never amount to anything, that one.”

\* \* \*

Mr. Noble turned off the television as his wife came into the room. “Was that Mrs. Thomas you were talking to in the street? Did you find out what that business with the police cars the other day?”

“What? Oh, no, she never mentioned that. She was just telling me about her lilac bushes, that’s all.”

“Yes, they do look good this year.”



\* \* \*

*Taking turns talking is not necessarily a conversation.  
For a true information exchange it is necessary that two  
pairs of ears are also brought into the equation, and that  
'input' and 'output' systems on both sides are connected  
to functioning brains, which are attuned and receptive.*

\* \* \*

## MOMMA SAID.....

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

Management Training? Who needs it! Just remember what your Momma told you, all those years ago.

*The Company's Employee Handbook says:* Our objectives can only be achieved by the application of effective intercommunication and teamwork; by setting aside individual priorities in favour of working together towards corporate goals;

*Momma Said:* “Now, you children play nicely together, d’you hear me!”

*The Handbook says:* Remuneration is determined using a graduated scale which takes into consideration such

factors as education, length of service, annual performance reviews, and objectives achievement.

Consistently high performance ratings will in most cases result in positive salary reviews.

*Momma said: “ Do your chores, and then we’ll talk about increasing your allowance.”*

*The Handbook says:* The office copying machine is to be used for no more than ten copies per original document.

Longer runs are uneconomical and can result in employees waiting in line for significant periods of time.

Be considerate of the needs of your fellow workers.

*Momma said: “Share your toys, and take turns on the Playstation.”*

*The Handbook says:* Do not expect that you will always be given the ‘plum’ assignments. Your Division Chief will assign projects to staff who are best qualified to handle them. By the nature of the company’s operations

you will occasionally be asked to handle a difficult or onerous task; performing such tasks with enthusiasm and dedication will bring you the approbation of company management.

*Momma said: “ I’m not asking you to like it, just eat your broccoli.”*

*The Handbook says:* In most cases retirement age is sixty five years. Occasionally (e.g. due to health or compassionate grounds) an employee may become eligible for retirement at an earlier age, with an appropriately reduced pension.

*Momma said: “I know it’s not your bedtime, but you’re falling asleep where you sit. Come on, let’s get you up to bed, young man.”*

*The Handbook says:* It is to be expected that you will occasionally feel that the instructions you receive from your superior are in some way flawed. For example you

may think that you know a more efficient method of achieving the company's objective. You are encouraged to share your view with your Division Chief. Mature discussion of the alternative with your superior can benefit both parties, and your point of view will receive all due consideration. However, always remember that your superior has the last word in such situations, and his/her decision is final.

*Momma said: "Because I said so, that's why!"*

\* \* \*

*When searching for new methods, new procedures, new ways of doing old tasks, don't immediately discard conventional wisdom.*

*(Momma said: "Momma knows best.")*

\* \* \*

## NATURAL INSTINCTS

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

By the start of the twenty second century the Agency For Worldwide Political Correctness had reached and passed all of its major milestones. Children were dressed in head to toe bubble wrap at birth and remained so clad until the morning of their eighteenth birthday, which was also the date at which they were first allowed to go outside.

Movies of children using ancient playground equipment were shown to first graders as a reminder of the black old days when scraped knees, bruised elbows and even broken bones were commonplace. Counselors were always on hand at these showings to ensure that fragile childhood natures did not become traumatized by the frightening depictions of young children wearing bandaids. Screaming classes were held for young

children to ensure that they could reach a level of 180 decibels in the event that an adult not known to them should try to engage them in conversation. They were also trained in the correct use of Mace and Pepper spray.

No dictionary in any language anywhere in the world contained any word in which the letters M, A, and N occurred in sequence. Any institution in which the male/female ratio varied more than 0.5% from the standard 50:50 was subject to severe penalties, including imprisonment of the governing board for up to twenty years.

The Directors of the A.F.W.P.C. declared themselves moderately well pleased and began to seek other outlets for their creative energies. Their eyes fell on Nature, which even at a casual glance seemed to be in dire need of their attention. Field Agents were dispatched to the fields.

The situation at the Beehive was atrocious. The Male/Female/Neuter ratio was so far removed from standard that the Agent first thought someone was playing a joke on her/him. The utterly male dominated workforce was reminiscent of the bad old days of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the Queen Bee stood adamantly in favour of the status quo, and even sent a swarm of soldier bees in pursuit of the Field Agent when his/her persuasive efforts became excessive. Although several worker bees expressed an interest in the AFWPC's efforts, none of them could be induced to lay eggs, and the Agent was eventually forced to withdraw.

At the stables the mares overwhelmingly refused the Agency's overtures, explaining as patiently as possible that stallions were interested in only two things: Grazing and mating. Furthermore, the mares' dominance had been established as a result of extensive efforts on the part of



their ancestors, and was not something they would now give up lightly. When the stallions were asked for their viewpoint they refused to comment until they'd had an opportunity to discuss the issue with their wives.

Zebras gave much the same response to the PC advocates, pointing out that their close cousin, the Unicorn, would not now be extinct if it had not been for the intervention of an early PC advocate who insisted that Noah had no right to refuse entry to the Ark of Horace and Arthur, who constituted a legal pairing and had even been married at a ceremony in Canada.

The Praying M\*\*tis advised the Field Agent that she would get back to him/her as soon as she had finished devouring her mate. When the M\*\*tis added "Stick around, dearie; you look quite tasty," the Agent withdrew with as much grace as he/she could m\*\*age while running as fast as possible backwards.

The Cats were insulted by the very idea that those howling, brawling, night crawling, one-track-minded Toms could in any way be considered equal to the females. They suggested that the Agent should take up the issue with the lionesses, or any other of the big cats, and advised the wearing of all-encompassing steel plated body armour for the interview.

The Vixen barked out loud at the suggestion that instead of staying in her warm, comfortable den with her adorable chubby children, she should join her mate, out hunting in the cold, dark, rain-drenched forest where predators and/or traps waited behind every second tree. At that point in the interview the mate arrived, dripping wet, shivering with cold, dropped his catch into the middle of the hungry pack of cubs, turned and went back to his search for food. The vixen merely raised an eyebrow, and the Agent, seeing the futility of further argument, left.

In the end the AFWPC abandoned these efforts and decided instead to focus on the development of a Time Machine, which would allow them to mount a vigorous Campaign For Political Correctness in the Dark Ages. Early results were promising, and a dozen PC Field Agents were dispatched to feudal England. At the time of writing none have yet returned.

\* \* \*

*Nature Is Not Politically Correct.*

\* \* \*

*Join the Campaign Against Political Correctness today,  
before it's too late: <http://www.capc.co.uk/>*

\* \* \*

# THE PERFECTIONIST

## *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

Six young students, accompanied by their Science Master, were touring a building site. They watched huge trucks unload stone, brick, wood and other building materials and listened in awe to the site engineer and the architect, who patiently explained the basic purpose and function of their jobs. Now left to their own devices the youngsters adjusted their hard hats and followed their teacher into the working area of the site.

The first workman they met was an electrician, who explained why it was important to have all of the wiring in place before the interior walls were installed, as there would be no access for the wiring when the drywall was in place. The second man was a bricklayer, but when

politely asked what he was doing he said only “I’m laying bricks; what does it look like I’m doing?” Despite the surly reply, the students watched in awe as the man speedily spread mortar, tapped the brick into place, removed excess mortar and moved without pause to the next brick. Where a partial brick was needed the man chopped off a suitably sized portion and set it in place without breaking stride. The students and their master were impressed with the fluid grace of the craftsman.

Moving on, the group spoke with a carpenter and a plasterer, a plumber and a general labourer, discovering how each of these men blended their particular skills into the creation of a new building.

Just before leaving the site the group came upon a second bricklayer, but the contrast between this man and the first was substantial. The man selected each brick from the pile beside him as though he were choosing the ripest fruit

from a greengrocer's stall. After he had selected a brick he carefully applied a layer of mortar and set the brick in place like a jeweler placing a diamond in its golden setting. Then the man stepped back, examined his work, made a small adjustment and reached for the next brick. While the students looked on the bricklayer removed several bricks from the top level of the wall on which he was working. He turned to the group and said: "Not good enough," and set about rebuilding the defective section. "What are you doing?" one of the students asked. "I am building a great palace," the bricklayer replied. "A building that will last a thousand years; a place where people will come to marvel at the quality and craftsmanship; a standard which lesser builders will equal only in their dreams. *That* is what I am doing young man."

"You see," the science master addressed his students enthusiastically, "That is the difference between a

common craftsman and a master of the trade. *Attitude*. That is what determines quality. One man is ‘laying bricks’ while another is ‘building a palace’. Remember this lesson well.”

The following week the science master brought a second group of students on the same tour. They interviewed various craftsmen, including the surly bricklayer, and made their way out of the site. Looking for the ‘builder of palaces’ the group found a different man working in the area, laying bricks in the same fashion as the first man, with practiced efficiency. The site foreman was passing by, so the master called to him and asked what had happened to the palace builder. “That moron!” the foreman growled. “I gave the fool his cards last week. We have standards on the site and your palace builder had completed less than ten percent of the daily requirement for his trade.”

“But surely, with his attitude to work, his walls were of the highest quality! After all, the man worked as though he were building the walls of a palace.”

“A palace, yes,” the foreman laughed. “I have no use for a builder of palaces. We’re putting up an apartment block. I need a man who thinks he’s building garage walls.”

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*What a terrible waste of time and effort it is to do with great attention to detail something that does not need to be done at all.*

\* \* \*



## PROJECTILES

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

“So you see, Henderson, you’ve nothing to worry about.”

Despite the assurance, Myles Henderson still looked worried. He had spent the previous four months in a fruitless attempt to track down the few surviving members of the lost tribe of the Oobijumbi, thought by many to be extinct. Henderson and his small band had followed rumour and myth, tales of possible sightings and old wives tales deep into the Amazon jungle – all without success. In pursuit of yet another slim possibility the party had built a makeshift raft and braved the rapids of this section of the river, only to lose the raft, all of their provisions and each other in the process. Lost and semi-delirious, Henderson had stumbled along a barely visible trail into a Oobunti village – and found Sir John Farquar. The famed explorer, long since given up for dead, had set

up house in the village and gone native. After food and sleep, feeling more or less human again, Myles met up with the Village Chief only to find that Sir John and the Chief were one and the same. When Myles explained the nature of his quest Sir John had amazing news: “The Oobijumbi? Of course I know where they are, old boy. They’re neighbours of ours. You’ll find an Oobijumbi village about five kilometers upriver, if you’re still interested. I should warn you, though, they’re a very warlike tribe, and are as likely to greet you with poisoned arrows as open arms. One word of advice, go alone for a better chance of survival. Go in force and you’ll all be dead before you see an Oobi.”

“My God, Farquar! Are you telling me that I’ve spent all of this time and effort to locate the Oobijumbi and I’m likely to end up as a poison arrow pincushion?”

“Now, now!” Sir John said. “Calm down old chap! It’s not nearly as bad as it sounds. You see, the Oobijumbi are an extremely logical tribe. They prize reason above all else, and since I convinced them some years back that it is impossible to shoot an arrow into a man who is running away, all you need do is turn and run, and return later when the tribe is in a better mood. After a big feast, say.” Henderson frowned. “Sorry, old chap, but you’ve lost me there. You say that if I turn and run the tribesmen will not fire at me because,, I didn’t quite catch your drift in that last part.”

Sir John spoke slowly, as though to someone of limited hearing or mental competence. “It’s simple, Henderson. I merely explained to the Oobijumbi warriors that firing off an arrow after a running man is a waste of time since the arrow can never catch him. Let’s suppose there are two chaps facing the hunters, and the Oobijumbi fire their arrows. Say for the sake of argument that one of the

chaps stands firm and the other turns and runs off. Now follow carefully what happens. When the arrows reach the spot where the chaps were standing, the one who is still there gets skewered. but the one who turned and ran, well he's not there any more so the arrow can't touch him."

"Yes, but....."

"Stay with me here, Henderson. The arrow, of course continues to fly towards the running man, who is now, let's say twenty feet further away and still running.

Right? So the arrow must travel those extra twenty feet to catch him. But, lo and behold, when the arrow crosses that twenty feet, the chappie's moved on again. Let's say he's now covered an additional five feet. So, on goes the arrow, five more feet, but the chap has moved yet again, let's say two feet this time. Then, same old story. He's

never there when the arrow arrives, you see, so he's perfectly safe."

"But this time he's only moved a few inches, and next time....."

"A few inches is still a few inches, and don't you see, Henderson, *it never comes down to zero!!* Even when you're measuring in nanometers it never gets to zero. There is always a tiny, tiny fraction of an inch between the arrow and the running chappie's hide. Now, the Oobijumbi, *knowing* this, won't waste their arrows on a futile shot, so the running fellow is safe as houses."

Myles frowned. "But I've seen antelope brought down by a skilled bowman. How can....."

"So you refute my logic, do you Myles?"

“Well, not exactly, Sir John. But are you certain it’s safe?”

“Absolutely, old boy. I’ve done it many times myself. Never fails.”

“Very well, if you can lend me a canoe I’ll set out tomorrow morning.”

\* \* \*

By the time Henderson had paddled the few kilometers upriver the sun was high in a cloudless sky. The Oobijumbi village appeared exactly where Sir John had said it would, and Myles beached the canoe within sight of the huts. Before the explorer was half way towards the village, twenty armed tribesmen appeared from the huts, bows drawn and arrows notched. Obviously he had arrived at a bad time. Remembering his colleague’s

advice, he turned quickly and began to run back towards the beach, waiting with trepidation for the arrows to find his back. The arrows never came. Risking a look back over his shoulder Myles found to his amazement and relief that the Oobijumbi had lowered their bows.

All except Jerome. The Oobijumbi considered Jerome to be a strange boy, always questioning, never satisfied with a pat answer, always pushing his boundaries. Rather than sit down and analyse a problem Jerome tended to jump right in with a process he called 'Trial and Error'. The boy was a disappointment to his parents and a cause of frustration to the village elders, who had come to the conclusion that it was simply a waste of time trying to educate Jerome in the ways of reason and logic. Jerome took aim at the retreating white man and loosed his arrow.

\* \* \*

*When the arguments against you seem compelling, when you're pretty much convinced that what you're trying to do is flatly impossible – remember Jerome. Damn it all, give it a shot anyway, just to see what happens!*

\* \* \*



## RIGHTS OF PASSAGE

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

By the time Archie cut the motor the breeze had stiffened nicely and now blew at a steady ten knots, with gusts perhaps to twelve. His brand new twenty five foot sloop-rigged sailboat gleamed in the bright spring sunshine, sparkling chrome, polished mahogany and the bright white of new canvas creating poetry in light. Archie was well pleased. He had lived this moment in his mind a thousand times over the long winter. If his lottery win had been just a few thousand more dollars he would have trailered 'Blue Bonnet' south to warmer water, but it was not to be. He had waited impatiently for the sun's return to these northern lands, and finally his patience had run out. The water temperature was barely out of the forties on this fine May morning, and the old pros at the Yacht Club had warned Archie against sailing, but he was not to

be denied. Right or wrong, this was the day he would realise his dream.

At least he had used the winter months well, reading everything he could find on the ancient art of harnessing the wind, and, academically speaking, Archie was as knowledgeable a sailor as could be found along Nova Scotia's southern shore. He had rigged the sloop for single handed sailing, with automatic furling and reefing sails, and all of the necessary controls within easy reach of the helm.

As the motor cut out Archie breathed in the tranquility. Out towards the centre of the bay the sounds of the land could not reach, so only the lap of the waves and an occasional seabird's cry disturbed the silence. He set the jib and pushed the button to raise the mainsail, loving the snap-snap of the canvas as it rose up the mast. The sail caught the breeze and the sloop turned, dancing over the

white-tops. Archie's firm hand on the tiller brought her round onto a close reach and held her – exactly as he had learned to do in his study during the long February nights.

Archie settled into his course, the boat heeling with the wind, knowing that the heavy leaded keel would keep him safely upright even if the wind should pick up or gust.

A shrill siren broke the silence and the mood. Directly in the path of the sailboat the local Island Ferry was approaching on a collision course. But Archie knew the rules of the sea. Power gives way to sail. Always. He held his course.

On board the ferry the captain used all of his strength to turn the ship's wheel but to no avail. The rudder was jammed hard. This was certainly a result of the accident earlier that day, when an inattentive Cape Island skipper had forced the ferry into an emergency maneuver that had

ended in impact with the dock. More important at the moment was the matter of warning the oncoming sailboat that he was heading towards disaster unless he changed course very soon. Rights of way notwithstanding, the captain had run out of options. He had cut back the power as soon as he had realised that the helm was unresponsive, but could not stop the ship's engines completely as that would turn his vessel into a free floating hazard. He sounded the horn again. On deck the mate was trying to hail the sailboat with a megaphone but he was shouting against the wind.

Archie listened to the horn blast with annoyance. He heard odd sounds coming from an electronic megaphone in the hands of a dancing fool on the boat's foredeck.

“To hell with you!” Archie thought. “I will not be intimidated. I have the right of way. Power gives way to

sail. Always!!! So just move over. I HAVE THE RIGHT OF WAY, DAMMIT!!”

The collision didn't last long. The beautiful mahogany woodwork splintered and cracked; chrome fittings buckled and broke; lines snapped and canvas tore. The sailboat sank in seconds. The ferry, now having no other option, stopped. The captain and two of the passengers dove into the frigid waters but could not stay under for long, and could find no sign of the hapless skipper of the small, broken sailboat. Archie and his dreams now rested on the seabed.

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*When an urgent decision must be made the question of who is right and who is wrong can be far less important than consideration of the consequences of the chosen option.*

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## VITAL STATISTICS

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

“Troopers, Halt!”

The well trained cavalry troop stopped as a man. The unit’s three lieutenants trotted forward to meet with their captain.

“It’s pointless going on,” the captain told them. “The enemy have obviously crossed the river, and we’re never going to catch up with them while we stay on this side of it. Trouble is, the river is getting wider with every mile we travel along it, and it’s turning south while the enemy are obviously heading north towards their home base. If they reach the mountains we’re beaten. We’d end up as target practice for their archers firing from the high cliffs.”

“Then we cross, sir!” volunteered the youngest of the lieutenants. The captain, an old grey-bearded campaigner, had lately learned to deal with his younger officers with a deal of patience. “Well reasoned, Jameson!” he said. Missing the sarcasm, the lieutenant took this as a compliment and smiled broadly. “Now, do you think we should just start across, or do you think that armed men sitting on armoured mounts might be wise to first consider what would happen if the water just turned out to be deeper than four or five feet.”

“We would sink to the bottom, sir” the young officer replied, his smile fading.

“We would indeed, lad. And do you think that the men would have time to throw off their swords and armour before they drowned? Or, if one or two of us managed to struggle back to shore, have you considered what a

splendid tramp we would have to get back home, unarmed, unhorsed and through a hundred miles of hostile territory?”

“I... er.. ah.. No, sir.”

“Then perhaps it would be wise to pause for a while and give some thought to how deep the river might be?”

“I.. er, Yes, sir.”

“Then have the men dismount and find me a strong swimmer, someone who might be prepared to wade across for us and find out how deep the damn thing is.”

While the junior departed to follow orders one of the more seasoned officers approached the captain.

“If I may suggest, sir, we have the Royal Geographer and



his staff travelling with the supply train, making maps of this region. If the man has half-decent maps of this area we may be able to save the time it would take to check out the river.”

“Good thinking, Lewis. Go get the man.”

The Royal Geographer arrived with his own wagon and a retinue of assistants. When the Captain told him what he wanted to know the Geographer and two of his assistants hunted around inside the wagon and emerged holding a large, multicolored map.

“This river is called the Abenamus, and it flows from the northern mountains to Port Haber, where it joins the Great Western Ocean. At this point it is just under a mile wide, and the average depth is three feet.”

“Three feet?” the Captain said, in pleased surprise. “It is

only three feet deep?”

“On average, yes,” the Geographer replied, looking at the notes on his map. “Three feet.”

“Mount up!” cried the captain, “To horse, and quickly. We may yet catch up to the Barbarian Hordes. Do not fear the river, it will barely reach the horses underbellies. With me, then; Cavalry, forward.”

The troop rode into the river, and with a mighty splashing urged their horses onward towards the distant shore. With joyful shouts they charged to the centre of the river, at which point they promptly disappeared, leaving only an impressive froth of bubbles to show the point at which they were last seen. A half dozen troopers gained control of their horses in time to turn and head back to shore. The Royal Geographer, having witnessed this event, had turned his wagon and was throwing up the dust as he

retraced his steps. His retinue was running hard to keep up.

At the point where the Abenamus river reaches the coast at Port Haber, it is just under a mile wide. Over the years the river has grown to this width from an original stream, which, in its early days – perhaps a thousand years ago -- could have been crossed by a good horse in a single leap. The passing years have caused the river to broaden, but at the centre the original flow has carved out its bed to a depth of between twelve and fifteen feet. This deep trough is less than two hundred feet wide. The rest of the river is much shallower.

Statistically, with a depth of two and a half feet over 5000 feet of its width, and a fifteen foot depth for the remaining 200, the average depth of the river could rightly be claimed to be less than three feet. Two point nine eight feet, to be specific. This piece of information may have

been of some interest to the departing Royal Geographer, but was no longer of any concern whatever to the Captain of Cavalry and most of his men.

\* \* \*

*Beware of any statement which follows or contains the words “On average.....” It is possible to drown in a river which is, on average, only a few inches deep.*

\* \* \*

## TRICKSTER

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

On his eighteenth birthday Prince Patrick received from his father, the King of Paradoxia, a small silk purse, a parchment scroll and a new pair of shoes. The purse contained ten silver florins, the average annual wage of a typical Paradoxian tradesman, and the scroll turned out to be a detailed map of the country. The footwear was in fact a pair of stout leather hiking shoes, hand made to the exact dimensions of the prince's feet, which had been measured by a palace servant while the young man slept. The King also gave the prince a short lecture.

“You have had an excellent education, young Patrick; the finest tutors in the land have taught you well. But though you are a well educated young man I have observed that

you have not yet learned wisdom. You have had a sheltered upbringing, and you are unfamiliar with the day to day lives of the subjects who you will one day rule. I have come to the conclusion that in order for you to gain the ‘street-smarts’ you will need in order to govern, you must spend time in the streets. That is where I am sending you. You have been given enough money to see you comfortably through the first few months, but after that you must earn your own way. You may return to the castle on the morning of your nineteenth birthday. If you choose to return before that date, I will know that you do not have the necessary strength of character to rule Paradoxia, and I will begin to groom your younger brother for the position. Do you feel up to the challenge, young prince?”

“I welcome the challenge, father!” the prince replied with spirit. “If you had not prepared this test for me I would have embarked on something similar in any case. I could

not truly hope to govern this country without a more thorough knowledge of its people, and the best way to do so is to become one of them. At least for a year. I will leave at first light.”

“Well spoken,” replied the king. “Your attitude speaks strongly of your chances for success. Though you will not see them, my men will follow your progress and bring back to me the tales of your successes and failures. Enjoy your successes, and learn from your failures, boy. I will give you only this small piece of advice. Paradoxians are by their nature tricksters, and will delight in playing their jokes on you, and lightening your purse in the process, if they can. Trust your instincts and guard your florins. Fare thee well, prince Patrick.

\* \* \*

The next morning at daybreak the prince left the castle and passed unremarked through the city gates. He had traded his tailored court clothes for the working garb of a palace gardener, and had by design neglected to shave. At the city gate he gave a cheery ‘good morning’ to the guard, who returned a “Good morning, lad. Where are you off to so early on this fine morning?” “I’m away to seek my fortune,” he told the soldier, grinning. “Then I wish you well of it,” the guard called after him.

Though he looked more like a gardener than a prince, he still looked like a young man who might have a florin or two in his purse, or at least a few copper pennies, and it was not long before an elderly man coming towards the city called out to Patrick.

“Ho, boy. Take the weight off your feet for a while and let us sit in the shade of that tree, and I will show you how



you may learn to live well by way of a short lesson in mathematics which I will give you.”

Intrigued, the prince sat with the man at the side of the dry roadbed beneath the shade of an old bay tree. “Show me this trick, I am eager to learn how to live well with the minimum amount of work.”

“Well, let me ask, do you know the practice of algebra?”

“I know a little of the art,” said the prince, who had studied under the finest mathematicians in the country. “It is a way of dealing with numbers, is it not?”

“Indeed it is,” the man replied, “And your knowledge of it will make the teaching easier. Now, if you will give me two florins, I will give you back ten, which is a fine and easy profit, is it not?” Despite his reservations the prince was intrigued, and drew two coins from his purse. He passed them to the man, who slipped one into his pocket

and returned the other to the prince. “And here is your ten,” he said.

The prince took the coin and caught hold of the man’s arm before he could rise. “And the other nine?” he growled.

“But young master, you told me that you were familiar with algebra, which proves, as you know, that one is equal to two, and so two is equal to four and four is the equal to ten and thus one is also equal to ten and you are therefore paid in full.”

“Your ability to prove what you say will determine whether you leave this spot with or without a hole in your palm the width of my dagger blade.”

“But certainly, I will refresh the memory of that which you have surely been taught. Regard.”

Taking a stick from under the tree the man smoothed a space on the dusty roadbed and wrote:

$$(X^2 - X^2) = (X^2 - X^2)$$

“You see,” he told the prince, “I have written a self evident truth. X squared minus X squared equals itself. This must be so, as when the same thing appears on each side of the equals sign, there can be no gainsaying of the truth of it.”

“So far so good” said Patrick. “Continue, please.”

“Very well. Now I shall factorise the left hand side of the equation as the difference of two squares, which is  $(X-X)(X+X)$ . Do you follow me?”

“I do. Go on.”

“And from the right hand side I will remove a common factor, ‘X’, yielding  $X(X-X)$ . Yes?”

“That is permitted. And?”

“And thus we are left with:

$$(X-X)(X+X) = X(X-X)$$

“I will now cancel the common factor  $(X-X)$  and I am left with:

$$(X+X) = X \quad \text{or} \quad 2X = 1X, \quad \text{or} \quad 2 = 1$$

“And so, if  $1 = 2$ , then  $2 = 4$  and indeed, from this we must conclude that any number equals any other number, and I have therefore returned to you the ten which I promised. In fact I could say with equal conviction that I have returned to you a hundred florins, and in fairness you should return ninety of them to me.”

Smiling, the man got to his feet, bowed to the prince, and walked slowly away, leaving the younger man laughing out loud as he retraced the scratchings in the dust looking for the mathematical fallacy which he knew must be there.

\* \* \*

To conserve his dwindling supply of florins the prince slept that night in the stable adjoining a small Inn, and earned his breakfast by cleaning out that same stable the following morning. As he finished the meal of fresh baked bread and delicious home made cheese he chatted with other guests of the Inn, who ate communally at the same large table. He explained to one of the men how he had been cheated out of a silver coin by way of a mathematical puzzle which he still did not fully understand, and the man sympathised.

“Do not put your trust in numbers, young wanderer,” the man warned sternly. “Look rather to reason and logic for your proofs, for they cannot lie to you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Patrick asked, intrigued but wary.

“Well, I will ask you one question. A wise man, so they say, can tell by reading another man’s eyes whether he is lying or not. Can you do this, do you think?”

“I believe that I can,” said the prince.

“And I say that you cannot. Would you wager a florin to put your belief to the test?”

Despite serious misgivings, the prince could not resist. He took a coin from his purse and put it onto the table. The stranger did not move to take the coin, however.

“Let’s leave it there until you are convinced enough to give it to me,” he said, and turned to call over two young men who had been eating at the far end of the table. The two came over and stood next to the prince, each man drawing a small purse from his pocket.

“These are my sons,” the stranger said. “In one of their purses there are five florins. The other is empty. You may choose one purse and take the contents for your own. Now to aid you in making your choice I will tell you that one of my sons is totally honest. He has never told a lie and he never will. Sadly I must confess that the other son is the exact opposite. A scurrilous youngster, who does not know the meaning of honesty. He will tell you a lie. In fact he tells nothing but lies. If you are a good judge of a man’s honesty, as you claim, you may ask one question, of either son, before making your choice – but I will not reveal to you which is which. Are you still game to wager your coin, my young friend?”

The prince laughed. “Not wager, for there is no chance involved. I know this game! I have played it with my father. I will take your florins.” Turning to the first youngster the prince asked: “If I ask your brother which purse I should choose, which would he advise?”

“He would advise you to take my purse, sir,” the boy answered.

“You see,” the prince laughed, “Whether the boy lies or tells the truth, his answer will be the same. He will tell me the lie,” and the prince reached to the other boy and took the purse, Which was empty.

“How can this be?” the prince asked. “My logic was flawless. But you may take my coin, sir, for it is yours now by right.”



“I hate to see you so upset,” the man said, returning the empty purse to his son. “Let me make it up to you. Will you wager another florin for a second choice of purse?”

‘The man is clearly a simpleton,’ the prince thought. ‘If the one purse does not hold the coins, then the other must; but I cannot take advantage of a man in such a condition.’

“I will not,” said the prince.

“Wisely said, youngster. For the second purse is also empty.”

“But you said.....”

“I asked you if you would wager a florin that you could tell when a man was lying, and you said you could. But you could not. *I* was the liar. My story of one full purse and one empty was the lie. And if you had known that,

you would have reclaimed your coin. Thank you, young sir. And now we must be leaving.”

Once more the prince fell about with laughter – at the ease with which he had been tricked out of the second coin. Shouldering his pack the young prince left the Inn, silently vowing to keep a better hold on his dwindling funds.

\* \* \*

In the next village the prince was accosted by a well dressed elderly man who offered to prove, for the price of a glass of wine at a nearby tavern, that a fired arrow could never harm a running man. The prince, a little wiser than he had been a few days previously, agreed to the wager on the condition that the theory would be considered proven or not by the practical expediency of Patrick borrowing a crossbow and giving the old man a ten-count start. Under

these conditions the man withdrew his wager, but the prince offered him a glass of wine anyway. In the tavern the two were disturbed in their drinking by a shabby young boy who offered, for a few copper coins, to prove that it was possible to drown in a river which was only, on average, a few inches deep. Patrick refused to believe in anything so ridiculous, and knew therefore that here was another ruse, or mathematical deception, to prove something that could not possibly be true. "Aye," he told the boy, "Indeed a man could drown in such a river if he were no more than a few inches tall! You have some foolish babble of that sort, so I will keep my copper and you will take your leave rapidly before I lose the good temper in which you fortunately find me."

Claiming that it was no trick but provable by the application of statistics, the youngster saw the benefit of discretion here, and left the two to begin working on their second draught,

\* \* \*

As spring turned to summer and summer cooled to autumn the prince found work in manual labour at farms which he passed, and in Inns and Taverns along his path, For a while he served as tutor to the daughter of a local merchant, and came to autumn with his purse full of copper and the odd remaining silver florin. With his new wealth he was able to sleep through the colder, lengthening, nights inside an Inn, or at least in the comparative comfort of an attached stable. At one such stop, sharing a loft with a young man of an age with the prince, he was sternly warned by the stranger to stick to the footpaths of Paradoxia, and shun the high speed coaches which carried more time-conscious citizens about the land.

“And why do you so advise me,” the prince asked, his senses sounding an alarm. “For a few copper pennies I will explain,” the man answered, not in any way surprising Patrick. “Tell me anyway,” the prince replied, “And if I like your logic I will give you the coins.”

“Agreed,” the young man said eagerly, “But tell me first, do you have any grounding at all in the science of Physics, for if you do it will make for an easier explanation.” “You may assume that I am familiar with the basic tenets of the science of Physics,” said the prince. “Proceed with your explanation of why I should not travel by stage.”

“Imagine, if you will,” the man began, “That a stage coach is heading east at full gallop, while heading west on a direct collision course, is a small fly.”

“A fly,” said Patrick, “A fly is about to crash into the coach, I have it.”

“The collision is inevitable,” the stranger continued. “Let us now consider the collision from the point of view of this poor insect. Immediately prior to impact, the fly was heading due west, while after the impact the squished remains of the fly are heading due east.”

“Granted,” agreed the prince.

“Now,” the man continued, “Knowing a little of the science of physics, you must grant me that, however quickly this happened, the progress of the fly was slowed, stopped and reversed.”

“All in the blink of an eye,” said the prince, “But I will concede that any physical object cannot instantaneously change direction.”

“Therefore, at some point during the collision, the fly, or the remains thereof, were stationary with respect to the ground.”

“For an infinitesimal amount of time this must have happened,” said Patrick.

“You must surely also concede that from the moment of impact the unfortunate fly was at rest relative to the front of the coach with which it came into contact.”

“Stationary on the front of the coach and bound to remain so until scraped off,” said Patrick.

“Then follow me closely here,” said the man, warming to his topic. “For the most infinitesimal amount of time, the fly, or remains thereof, was stationary with respect to both the stage coach and the ground, and therefore, at that

point in time, the coach must also have been stationary with respect to the ground. Which is to say, the coach had stopped. And given the great amount of flying insects during the spring and summer months, the stage must reach this condition a hundred, a thousand times for each mile of road travel. And the effect of so many sudden stops and starts on the passengers of the said coach can only be described as horrendous.”

The prince, who had studiously followed each step in the argument, felt himself lucky that he had offered only pennies for this ardent piece of trickery. He took five copper coins from his purse and handed them over.

“Here,” he said. “Now go to sleep.”

\* \* \*

As the year progressed the prince came to love the quirky people of Paradoxia, although he learned to guard against



their proclivity for removing florins from his purse. His original silver coins were now long gone, but he kept body and soul together most effectively by taking up occasional work as he travelled through the country. For a while he took service as a security guard at a city Inn. The prince was an expert swordsman, having received professional instruction from an early age, but preferred to keep the peace by soft words and persuasive logic. His reputation as a wise young man spread through the city, and he was one day sought out by a young girl.

“Please sir, would you help my father? He is a man of science, and he was conducting an experiment which went wrong, and now all he does is sit in his chair in the laboratory flickering at me.”

“Flickering, is he?” asked the prince, his intuition warning him that there was something odd about this small girl’s request. “You wouldn’t be about to wager florins with

me, would you?” Misunderstanding, the girl whispered “I could not afford silver coin, sir, but I could pay you some copper if your services require it.” The prince softened. “Lead and I will follow you,” he said.

The man was flickering. He sat in a wooden chair in the middle of his small laboratory, surrounded by equipment such as the prince had never seen. The poor man spoke in a soft, jittery voice, and his speech was most obviously causing him great discomfort.

“I always hated my father,” the man hissed, “So I invented a time machine, and went back to a period just after my birth. There I confronted my father and killed him with a club. Unfortunately, the calibration of my machine was faulty, and I actually killed my father a year before I was born. As soon as I did this, I ceased to be, since I had never been born, and because I had not been born, I could not have gone back to kill my father,

therefore my father survived, therefore I was born,  
therefore I did go back and kill my father and therefore  
,,,,,”

“And that is why you are flickering,” said Patrick. “Well let us end this.” The prince drew his sword and hacked away at the humming equipment until one particular cut severed the power line to the time machine and shut down the machine. The flickering scientist became solid once more.

“Thank you, young man,” he said, shaking Patrick’s hand. “But tell me, how did you know exactly where and when to strike the machine so that I would solidify here and not back before my birth?”

“If you had died in that previous time your daughter would not have been born and thus would not have been

able to seek my help. Since she did so, she had obviously been born and therefore I had obviously been successful.”

“Would you run that past me once more slowly,” asked the scientist.

“Sorry, I have to get back to work,” said the prince, thinking: ‘My God, I am becoming more the Paradoxian every day!’

\* \* \*

A few days before his nineteenth birthday, as the prince was making his way home, he passed through a village square where an elderly woman sat, quietly sobbing.

“What’s wrong?” asked the prince.

“How kind of you to ask,” the woman replied. “It’s my son, you see. He’s about to marry a woman he doesn’t

love, and not the girl he really loves, and who loves him back.”

“Easily solved,” said the prince. “Tell him to marry the girl he loves. But since that answer is obvious, and yet he elects not to act on it, there is plainly more involved here.”

“You are correct,” the woman said. “My son and I believe strongly in a God who cares deeply for his earthly children, and guides our actions by way of signs. My son was torn between the two women, one who is penniless but loves him truly, and one from a rich family, which would be a profitable match. Asking a sign from God, my son decided that he would go to the stage depot at random times and catch the first stage to come through. You see, one goes north and one south, and both coaches pass through the village once each hour. So he did this for a month, and out of twelve trips, one was to the north

and the other eleven to the south. He has therefore determined to marry the woman who lives to the south, even though his heart lies north. It is the sign we asked from God, and we cannot go against it.”

The prince thought over the woman’s problem and visited the stage depot. He studied the timetable pinned to the wall, and realised at once that what was taking place was not the will of God nor was it random chance that had sent the young man southwards.

“You see,” he told the mother, “Although the coaches pass through the village once per hour in each direction, the chances of heading north or south are not equal. The southbound coach passes through the village on the stroke of the hour, the northbound at five minutes after the hour. Therefore if your son enters the coach stop at random intervals, he will only catch the northbound if he enters between the hour and five minutes past. At any other

time he must wait for the stroke of the following hour, and then take the southbound coach. So there is only one chance in twelve of his heading north, and eleven chances of heading south. Tell your son that this message does not come from God, but is due to the laws of statistics.”

“May the good Lord bless your travels,” said the woman, as the prince, smiling, walked away.

\* \* \*

As the prince entered the palace grounds a great cheer went up, as his father has arranged for a grand feast in honour of Patrick’s homecoming. “I have followed your progress with great joy,” the king said, hugging his son. “You have come to be known as a man of good sense, and one who both gives and lives by sound advice. You will make a great king in your time, and I am very proud of you.”

“Thank you, father,” Patrick replied. “I have learned many things in my year of travel, but the principal amongst them is this:

\* \* \*

*When all things point towards one answer, and when all the rules of logic and reason give that same indication, and when men of good reputation and great wisdom say it is so, and yet your heart cries out that it is not, then listen well to your heart, and look for the flaw in the logic, because your heart will not cry out in this way without good reason. A man would be a fool not to listen and take heed.*

\* \* \*



## TURNABOUT

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

Roland Harrison the fourth was on the upper landing, staring at the large oil painting of his great-grandfather, Roland Harrison the first, when the hamster ran over his foot. He leaned over the railing and screamed. “Sheila!”. Sheila Harrison (who often referred to herself as Sheila Harrison the first and last), came out of the kitchen, where she had been discussing the week’s dinner menus with the cook, and looked up towards the top of the staircase.

“What is it, Henry? And please stop that silly shrieking; it’s so undignified.”

“One of those damned vermin is loose.”

“Not Leo’s hamsters again,” his wife interrupted. “They are *not vermin*, Henry. And if you’ve harmed it, and upset Leo.....”

“I never touched it!” Henry answered, somewhat peeved. “I just don’t see why the boy has to have so many of the blasted things. And not just here! At the cottage, at the townhouse, for God’s sake Sheila we have four residences, and they’re all overrun with our grandson’s pet vermin.”

His wife was no longer listening. She walked through the large, impressive foyer of the Harrison mansion, across a spacious living room into the sunroom, where she found Leo Harrison sprawled on the floor playing with his baseball card collection.

Leo was twenty six years old. He had been fifteen when his father’s light aircraft had crashed on landing at the Harrison summer house outside Miami, killing the parents on impact and putting Leo into a six month coma. The

boy had awakened from the coma unable to hear or speak. Competent surgeons had restored his hearing and some speech, but were unable to do anything about the damage to Leo's brain, and had told the grandparents not to expect any intellectual development much above that of an average ten year old. Nevertheless, Leo appeared to be a happy, well adjusted ten year old, and the joy of his grandmother's life – but the bane of his grandfather's.

“Never mind the vermin, Sheila, we're late as it is. Is the boy ready?”

Roland had never been able to accept the fact that his grandson was now developmentally challenged, and he seemed to take the boy's mental limitations as some sort of personal insult. The limit of his involvement with the 'boy' was to take Leo to his weekly 'soccer practice', at which a dozen similarly afflicted adult ten-year-olds

kicked a brightly painted ball around a field for a couple of hours.

Roland floored the accelerator of his sports car and headed down the driveway at speed. The sudden surge jolted the ‘boy’, who had not properly fastened his seat belt. Leo’s baseball cards flew into the air obscuring Roland’s vision, and Leo, hot in pursuit, landed in his grandfather’s lap – all two hundred and twelve pounds of him.

Roland opened his eyes to find himself walking down a long, white corridor which apparently had no end.

Looking back over his shoulder he noted that the corridor also lacked a beginning. To the right and left were plain, white painted doors. There were no signs, no directions of any kind.

“I think we’re dead, Roland.”

Roland turned to his right and noticed for the first time that a plump young man was walking alongside him.

“Leo?” he questioned, “Is that you?”

“Yes, it is,” the man replied. “I think you barreled out of the driveway straight into the path of a sixteen wheeler. The poor guy didn’t even have a chance to touch his brakes.”

“Poor guy? *He’s* not dead! *We* are the poor guys .....  
Leo? You’re talking like.... I mean you’re not.....”

“Not gaga any more? That’s right, Grandpa. That’s what you used to tell your friends isn’t it? ‘The poor boy’s gaga. Totally gaga. A complete waste of space. Damn shame he didn’t die with his parents and save us all the cost of his keep.’ That’s pretty close, I think.”

“How did you... I mean, that’s not.... I didn’t really..  
But how come you can now....?”

“I guess the defect was in my physical brain, which is  
now lying next to yours on the road outside your  
driveway. We’re road kill, Grandpa. I think we go in  
here.”

“How do you know that?” Roland asked, but getting no  
answer he followed his grandson towards a plain white  
door which had opened at their approach.

“Ah, good,” The voice came from inside the room.

“Roland and Leopold. I can take you both together, if  
you’d like to take a seat.”

“If you’re Saint Peter and these are the pearly gates,  
you’re a bit less regal than I expected,” Roland told the

elderly, grey haired civil servant, who gestured to two plain wooden chairs in front of his desk.

“Oh, My! I’ve never heard that one before!” the clerk replied sarcastically. “Would you walk into the computer store looking for a new laptop and expect Bill Gates to come out and show you the merchandise?”

“Sorry,” Roland began. “No offence intended. But I take it that we’re both.....”

“Dead. Oh yes.” The elderly gentleman replied. “Very dead, At least your physical bodies are.”

Roland lifted his hands to his eyes, then looked down at his bulging stomach. “No, no,” the clerk shook his head. “Your earthly bodies are still on the ground outside your mansion. ‘Road-kill’ as young Leo puts it. Very droll. What you are wearing now are the etheric doubles,

spiritual copies of your physical bodies which will begin to fade shortly. Anyway, you'll be on your way before then. This is the high speed checkout line for people with little or no emotional baggage. Now, let's start with you, Leo. What would you like to tell me about your earthly life, and what you accomplished there?"

"I was very good to my hamsters," Leo said, straight faced. "Indeed you were," the clerk replied and made an entry into a large ledger which was spread out on his desktop. "Now you, Roland, what fine achievements can you tell me about your long stay on earth. Let me hear what you have to brag about."

"Well," said Roland, puffing out his etheric chest, "I expanded the family business tenfold, and made my grandfather's fortune seem like a child's piggy bank in comparison. I opened factories in five cities, employed a workforce of three thousand souls..."



“No, Roland, you misunderstand me. And you did not employ the souls of your employees, even if you think you did. Your wealth, your business empire, your five palatial residences, they were all given to you. They were all part of your life plan. We were expecting you to do great things with the wealth and power you were given in your last incarnation. Now let’s talk about what you actually accomplished. How effectively did you use all of this for the good of your fellow man.”

Roland sat, stunned. “Was I supposed to do that?” he asked after a long pause. “Well, I put a health insurance plan into effect for my employees....”

“No, no, that won’t do,” the clerk told him, shaking his head for added emphasis. “You only started that program as a result of legislation which forced you to do so, and even then you made money by buying the insurance

company and bribing government officials to send the contract there. For every penny you paid out you collected two in premiums. Very clever, but not what I'm looking for."

"Well, I gave a million to the local hospital for..."

"I should explain, Roland, that lying is a waste of time here, since every time you lie, the astral energy in your etheric body flashes red. It was your wife Sheila who paid for the new scanners and the money came from her own family funds. Let me see if I can help you. Oh dear. There's very little positive in your record. I've seen some poor report cards in my time but this one! Good God! (Sorry, Lord) it says here that three young people froze to death outside one of your factories because the security officers would not let them in even when the outside temperature fell to....."

“I can’t be responsible for the actions of my subordinates.”

“Oh, the security officers will certainly pay for the bad karma they earned that day, Roland, but they *were* following your orders to.... let me see, ah yes, to ‘clear away the debris and not bother you with trivia of this sort.’ You did contribute to charity I see, but then a few hundred thousand to you would be like pocket change to most people, and even then you got tax relief for it. Oh, my, Henry, I can find no redemption in your life at all. None. Well, as I said, you’re in the high speed checkout lane, and your record makes my decision very clear and simple; so let’s cut through the red tape and get on with reassignments.

“Leo, you did a wonderful job with your hamsters. You were kind to your grandmother, too, and to your Grandpa, though he did nothing to deserve your kindness. You

were given little but you used it well. You carried some bad karma into your life, but you balanced that nicely and added good karma to it. You can go down this time, if you so choose, into a position much like the one your grandfather just vacated. Lots of power, money, worldly wealth, and an opportunity to use it all for the benefit of humanity. I am sure that you will do a splendid job. Please leave by the right hand door.”

“Thank you, sir. I will do my best.” His etheric outline blurring rapidly the young spirit left to take up his next incarnation.

“And now you, Roland. I’m afraid you have an appalling great load of bad karma to deal with before we can even *think* about spiritual progress.”

‘Well, turnabout is fair play, so I guess that means I’m going back for a life like Leo just completed.

‘Developmentally Challenged’. Kicking an orange coloured football around and squealing like a five year old?”

“Oh, we may work up to such a life after a couple of incarnations, but I’m afraid you’re not ready to start there. You’re going back as a hamster, Roland. Let’s see what you can make of that. Please leave by the left hand door. Hop to it, now! ”

\* \* \*

*Any spiritual progress you may have made as a result of your current physical incarnation will not be a result of any wealth or power you have amassed during your lifetime, but by the use to which you have put that which was given to you. From those to whom much is given, much will be expected.*

? ? ?

*What's that you say? You find the moral a little trite? A bit overworked? You've heard it, read about it, often. 'Rich Men, Camels, Needle's eyes'? That kind of thing? You're right, of course. Everyone knows that the truly important things in life can't be bought, or even valued in monetary terms.*

*Now here is a strange thing, though: if this is so well known, and accepted as truth by so many people, than why are so many of us still pouring so much of our time, energy and effort into acquiring earthly possessions that we don't really need and rarely get the chance to use?*

*Take this challenge: Go to the nearest mirror, look deeply into your own eyes, remember that your spirit body will flash with a red light if you lie, even to yourself, and then*

*answer this question: If you were to be judged today by such a yardstick, would your next life be lived as a man or as a hamster?*

\* \* \*

## YESTERDAY'S MAGIC

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

If you'd gone down to the Tudbury marketplace on a Saturday morning in the year 1671 or thereabouts, and asked a randomly selected sample of people "Who is the most powerful man in the kingdom?" the great majority of your respondents would have said "The King, of course." They would have been wrong. True, the King could raise an army and send it into battle, but Wizard Taggart could send a fire spell or two at that same army and turn the entire host into one colossal outdoor barbecue. Or, if the wizard were too busy to cast such a complex spell, he could simply turn the King into a small rodent and call for the Royal Rat catcher. The King knew this very well, and realised that the only reason he continued to occupy the throne himself was that Taggart



had no interest in it. The wizard had said one more than occasion that he found the whole reigning business to be a great crashing bore, and that he would far rather spend his time in the Wizard's Turret, which occupied the upper floor of the tallest tower of Tudbury Castle.

So it was that on one particularly dark and nasty evening the wizard was to be found in his workshop trying out a spell which he had discovered in a dusty old tome from the castle library. As luck would have it, Taggart was not assisted in these efforts by his apprentice, who was suffering from second degree burns after a fumbled attempt to light the shop's candles by means of a badly memorised and poorly executed flame spell. A young groom, sent up from the stables at Taggart's request, was doing his best to fill the gap. The poor fellow was absolutely terrified, which was probably the main reason why, when Taggart called for his wand, the young man handed over the lighted taper which he had been holding,

hot end in. The wizard cursed, howled, jumped and cursed some more. Grabbing his wand from the nearby bench he pointed it at the hapless youngster and cast a Go-away spell. And at that exact moment, lightning hit the tower, setting fire to anything even remotely flammable within it. Fortunately, that did not include the furious wizard nor his hapless assistant, for they were no longer there.

To be more precise, they were still 'there', but were no longer 'then'. The lightning strike had reacted in a very interesting way with the spell Taggart had been casting at the moment of impact, and instead of sending the young groom back to the stables as intended, the mutated spell hurled Wizard and Assistant far into the future. The two men found themselves in the middle of a meadow surrounded by a crumbling pile of rock in the place where the castle had once stood.

Leaving the field by a convenient gate the two men set off along a well used track in the direction of a distant steeple. A sturdy young man in worn overalls approached from the opposite direction.

“Ho, Peasant,” Taggart cried “What time is this?”

The man glanced at his wrist for reasons which the wizard could not fathom, and replied: “It’s half past three, Granddad. And you just watch who you’re calling names!” The man walked on. “Wait,” Taggart called after him. “I have not dismissed you. What year is this?” Without breaking his stride the farm worker called back: “It’s Two thousand nine you silly old goat!”

Without knowing how, exactly, he had been insulted, the wizard was becoming very annoyed with the attitude of this local vassal, and drew his wand from his belt.

Waving an intricate pattern in the air he mumbled a

powerful incantation and hurled a lighting bolt at the man's back. Or at least that was his intention. When nothing at all happened the wizard picked up a rock from the side of the road and hurled it after the man, missing the target, but causing the man to turn and scowl at the pair. Taggart drew himself up to his full five and a half feet and prepared to defend himself, but the farmer merely pulled a small metallic object from the pocket of his overalls ..... and started talking to it. *And the object talked back.*

In a flash the wizard's attitude changed. "Forgive me, I beg you, Master. I did not realise that I was in the presence of a fellow Mage. Let me explain my predicament."

"Tell you what, Granddad. You just turn around and walk towards that church back there, and you'll meet two more great Mages coming towards you in a magic chariot with

a blue light on top. You go and explain your predicament to them.”

\* \* \*

Taggart looked around his cell with pleasure. The two uniformed guards had escorted him gently but firmly into this place, and had obviously recognised his importance, for they had placed him in the royal suite. The bed was the softest the wizard had ever known, despite the thinness of the mattress. Music appeared to come from the walls though there was no sign of an orchestra. Food of the finest quality appeared regularly, and, best of all, at the touch of a magical talisman water ran from a pipe into a bowl below. Water without limit, fine tasting water, and by a twist of the talisman, *the water could be made to run hot or cold!* Taggart tried a few simple spells, but their failure only confirmed what he had suspected after the lightning spell had misfired. His magic would not

work here. This fact caused him little concern, since it was quite obvious that he now moved in an entire society of top-grade warlocks, one of whom would surely help Taggart to reclaim his lost powers once the wizard's credentials had been established.

The duty officer approached his sergeant. "The old fellow seems happy as a clam, but the young lad is complaining about his accommodation," the officer grinned. "What's the matter with the accommodation?" the sergeant asked, "And why are you grinning?" "The young lad says the cell is far too fine for the likes of him, and we must have mistaken him for royalty just because he was in the company of the Royal Wizard. He wants us to move him to somewhere less luxurious."

"Best put a call in to the city," the sergeant advised.

"Let's get the police psychologist out here to have a little chat with these birds."

\* \* \*

The police psychologist arrived to interview the two ‘vagrants’. She spoke first with the boy. “He says he’s from this area,” she later told the sergeant, “Claims he worked in the King’s stables.” “Well, William King and his family farm down by old castle ruins, and Bill is always on the lookout for strong and willing young lads. I’ll give him a call, see if he has any use for this one.”

Her next interview was with Wizard Taggart, who started out on the wrong foot by reprimanding the officer for sitting down in his presence without first obtaining permission. He then proceeded to list his accomplishments and (temporarily suspended) magical powers. “I speak with my peers from all regions of the country,” he boasted, “without the necessity of travelling to meet them. I observe distant events in far off lands. I

have much experience in healing the sick, and in the treatment of grievous wounds. I can read the skies and forecast the coming storm. I can foretell the sex of a pregnant woman's child while it is still in the womb. I fly through the air, and am able to journey many miles in the course of a single day. I can manufacture explosive powders, and treat steel so that it will hold a superior edge." Taggart paused, surprised. Visiting dignitaries were usually open mouthed by this stage, while this female merely continued to make scratches on the paper in front of her. Taggart played his trump card. "I can read and write!" he boasted "In four languages!"

Still unimpressed, the woman stood. "That will be enough to be going on with," she smiled at him. "I'll try to find time to come and see you again later in the week."

"YOU, will find time for ME!" the wizard spluttered.

Enraged he strode around the table and grabbed the doctor



by the throat. As casually as though she were swatting a pesky insect, the lady caught hold of the wizard's pinky finger and bent it backwards close to the breaking point. Even before Taggart could cry out the police constable who had been watching through the one way mirror had him pinned and cuffed.

Back at her office the psychologist reported to her Director. "The young man poses no problem. He's been taken on at the King farm outside Tudbury, by the old castle ruins. Mr. King seems well pleased with the boy. The old man is a different story. He seems to have little or no formal education, but claims some minor language skills and a little medical background. Not enough of either to be useful. From what I can gather he seems to spend most of his time on the phone with his friends or watching Television. But the crux of the matter is that he is mentally unstable, and with a superiority complex bigger than any I've ever seen; and he can be violent even

when unprovoked. I've remanded him to the psychiatric wing of Leadville Penitentiary for observation, but I believe that it will be a long time before anyone will consider him fit to be released."

\* \* \*

*Magic and Miracles are sometimes no more than the early manifestation of a new technology. When the technology overtakes the magic, what is the wizard's trade worth then? Competent craftsmanship and a willingness to work, on the other hand, will probably continue to be in demand in any age.*

\* \* \*

## WINNERS AND LOSERS

### *A Table for the Third Millennium*

- \* A Loser says: “I just want to do my best”  
A Winner says: “I am going to win.”
  
- \* A loser says: “I’d like to improve on my fastest time.”  
A Winner says: “I am going to win,”
  
- \* A Loser says: “I’m shooting for a top ten finish.”  
A Winner says: “I am going to win.”
  
- \* A Loser sees Gold, Silver and Bronze medals.  
A Winner sees a Gold Medal and two losers.
  
- \* A Loser says: “If I can’t win I want to be a Good Loser.”

A Winner says: “Show me a Good Loser and I’ll show you a loser.”

- \* A Loser says: “I want a well rounded life in which my sport plays an important part.”

A Winner says: “I live for my sport.”

- \* A Loser says: “I will not sacrifice my family life for my sport.”

A Winner says: “I live for my sport.”

- \* A Loser says: “It’s not important whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game.”

A Winner says: “Try telling that to the crowd at a World Cup Soccer match.”

A Winner says: “If winning isn’t important, why do we bother to keep score?”

A Winner says: “If you really believe that winning is not important, you’re setting yourself up to lose.”

\* A Winner says: “See my trophies; see my medals; see my cups; see my press clippings; see my glory. See my life.”

A Loser says: “See my family, my wife and my children. This is my life.”

\* A winner says: “I gave up much for my sport, but the sacrifice was worth while.”

A Loser says: “I gave up much to spend time with my family, but what I gained made the sacrifice worthwhile.

\* \* \*

*Who won, and what did they win? Who lost, and what did they lose? Perhaps one should think twice and then think again before setting one's sights on the top level of the podium.*

\* \* \*

## WHAT YOU WISH FOR

### *A Fable for the Third Millennium*

- The baby thinks: “I wish I was just a little older, so that I could stand up and explore my world.”
- The toddler says: “I wish I was just a little older so that I could go to school and start to learn about my world.”
- The first grader says: “I wish I was older, so that the big boys would stop picking on me.”
- The tenth grader says: “I wish I was just a little older and could go off to college; what fun that will be.”

- The college student says: “I wish I was just a little older so that I could graduate, get a full time job and finally have some money in my pocket.”
- The young man says: “I wish I was just a little older so that I would have some seniority and a more important job.”
- The adult says: “I wish I was just a little older so that the kids would be off on their own and the mortgage would be paid and I’d finally have some decent disposable income.”
- The middle aged man says: “I wish I was just a little older and could retire on a nice pension and have all the free time I want to travel and see the world.

- The retiree says: “How did I get so old so quickly?  
Where did my life go?”

\* \* \*

*Life is all about the journey, never the destination. Life is in the view passing by outside the train window. Pause often. Get to know your fellow passengers. Think not about where you're going but about where you are. Never wish away your time. Look out of the window. Enjoy the scenery.*

\* \* \*