

A “high” typically involves numerous phases. The initial effects are often somewhat stimulating and, in some individuals, may elicit mild tension or anxiety which is usually replaced by a pleasant feeling of well being. The later effects usually tend to make the user introspective and tranquil. Rapid mood changes often occur. A period of enormous hilarity may be followed by a contemplative silence. Many users report that they have some control over the degree to which they are involved in the subjective effects and that, when necessary, they can “come down” and perform normally. . . . The ability of subjects to “come down” at will has not been adequately explored experimentally.

—*LeDain Commission’s Report for the Canadian Government
Inquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs, 1972*

Royal Heights

JUNE, 2002

One quick conversation with his father. That is all it took to remind Jeremy Jacks why exactly he had abandoned the West Coast entirely almost two years before. Not quite ten hours prior to this telltale encounter, he had received a phone call from his father at his small studio apartment in Toronto, explaining how his brother Robert, an army reservist, had suffered a terrible parachuting accident while on a weekend training mission in Wainwright, Alberta. Apparently, according to their father anyway, Robert's parachute had become entangled with that of a Corporal Sidhu shortly after exiting the aircraft earlier that afternoon, and the tangled mass of chutes, cords, and confused yet dutiful soldiers had culminated their thousand-meter freefall by slamming as one into the hard, sun-baked earth. This was perhaps appropriate, or so at least Jeremy decided at the time, as he had spoken to his brother that very morning, and had himself characteristically refused to fall into line. Robert had called, not surprisingly, to inform him that their father was in trouble again.

"What'd he do now?" Jeremy asked, heaving what he believed to be the appropriate sigh, the same sort of sigh he always heaved when it came time to contemplate either member of his immediate family. In answer, Robert held his breath momentarily, the same sort of breath he always held before releasing something that was not quite truth, yet not quite false enough to be tagged an outright lie.

"Beat the shit out of the pay-parking machines at the hospital."

"The pay-*parking* machines? What the hell for?"

“What do you mean what for? Listen, loser, you know god-damned well—”

“But I thought he wasn’t, you know, drinking anymore.”

Again Robert held his breath, thereby gaining the crucial advantage, at which point he very calmly informed Jeremy that their father was in fact totally and completely sober—as if there were any other kind. “And hey, he’s been asking about you too,” he went on.

“And?”

“And he wants to know when you’re coming home.”

“Oh fuck, Robby, I don’t know. . . . I’m pretty settled in out here and—”

“He wants to see you though.”

Wincing, Jeremy asked what for.

“Again with the what for. Well I don’t know, Jer. Conceivably because you’re his son though.”

“Well can’t I just talk to him on the phone?”

“Sure you can, if you want to be an absolute prick about it. Thing is, he wants to *see* you though.”

“What’s he doing, dying? Christ, he is dying isn’t he. Oh that’s perfect. Just fucking perfect.”

“Easy, buddy. He just misses you, that’s all.”

“Avoiding him are you, Robby?”

“No, *you’re* avoiding him, Jeremy. *I* see him all the time.”

This was true, Jeremy knew, but he was not about to let the subsequent guilt get the best of him, or worse, back to Robert, the reigning paragon of Jacks family protocol.

“So what’s the problem then,” Jeremy said. “I mean, besides the obvious.”

“Well I haven’t been getting over much lately. . . . Linda, hey, she took off for a while.”

“She *left* you? *Why?*” For a moment Jeremy thought he would be unable to bear it should Robert, because he was Robert, tell him he had cheated on his wife again, an admission that would require Jeremy, because he was Jeremy, go out and get a belly full of booze for breakfast.

“No big deal, believe me. A little breather, that’s all. So anyway, with work and all—”

“Oh what the fuck ever,” said Jeremy. “School’s out for summer break.”

“You’re missing the point here, pal.”

“Yeah, well, tell him I’m busy. Tell him things are going pretty well out here in old Tor—”

“For crying out loud, Jer, your father’s in jail.”

Jeremy laughed. Such maudlin appeals always brought an abrupt chuckle, for their father had been incarcerated how many times before. “And hey, if you’re so all of a sudden concerned, why don’t you get him out?”

“Because, asshole, I’m in Alberta with the army right now. Remember Bob File though? Constable Bob? Yeah, well, Bob said he won’t release Dad until you come get him. You *explicitly*, he said.”

“I’m touched. Really.”

“Don’t be. Bob says one more stunt like this and Dad’ll have to do time. Contempt of court or something like that and—”

“He actually said that? *Time?* Christ Almighty, the old man’s nearly seventy god-damned years old.”

“Hey that’s what I said, but Bob said the judge is pissed. Told me to tell you that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m pissed too, Robby—tell him that.”

And that was how the conversation ended for Jeremy, placing familial thoughts and misgivings more or less out of mind until his father himself called with the unfortunate news of his brother’s incredibly unfortunate demise. Jeremy booked the first flight available out of Toronto, arriving in Vancouver just after two A.M. local time. It did not even occur to Jeremy to ask his father how he had gotten himself out of jail until he saw him standing there in the reception area, alone behind a barrier of awkward formality, a prisoner serving time. He looked tired, the deep vertical seams bisecting his cheeks threatening to draw deeper all the time. Hardly out of line for a seventy year-old standing alone in the middle of an airport in the middle of the night, mind you,

but still Jeremy could not get over it: Jon Jacks had become an old man.

Shaking Jon's large, scar-crossed hand, Jeremy immediately asked about the funeral arrangements, military or otherwise, as it was such an important part of the truncated family dynamic that neither father nor son display any symptoms of genuine affection much of the time.

Looking eligible to have taken the fall himself, Jon rubbed his weary red eyes and shook his tousled-haired head. He then started into a long tremulous sigh no doubt meant to offer some semblance of sad stability to the moment, but which caught up in his throat instead; therein it formed another grade of wretchedness, a cough this time, disturbing and painful, and he managed to say at length, "They're flying him home in a week's time."

"Why so long? An investigation or something?"

"No, no investigation. He won't be fit to fly till then."

"Jesus," said Jeremy, imagining, despite himself, the sorry state of his brother's corpse. Ever since he had first heard about the accident, he had been going over their final conversation, dissecting it, correcting it, continuing it, saying goodbye over and over again.

"Jesus," he repeated, breathing hard through his nostrils.

His father nodded grimly, no doubt compiling a laundry list of grievances against that particular deity. "Doctor so-and-so in Edmonton says slight compression of the spine. Estimates a four-to-six week recovery time."

"I—I don't understand."

"What's not to understand?" said his father, the whites of his eyes clouded to the waterline. "He'll be up and jumping again in no time."

Jeremy took one unsteady step back. "He's *alive*?"

"Well of course he's alive. Why wouldn't he be alive? That poor son of a bitch East Indian corporal broke his fall."

"You're joking."

"No I'm not joking. Why would I be joking? Of course the East Indian corporal didn't make it out so well."

POSTED BY LUCY @ 3:04:46 A.M. 4/1/2007

0 COMMENTS

Friday, June 30, 1972

Dear Mom & Dad:

Today has been somewhat stimulating, I guess, buzzing around buying long underwear, etc, trying to get organized and ready to sail into jail by 3 PM. Two unexpected bonuses: 1) The sky *isn't* falling, though your last phone call seemed to suggest as much; and 2) Gold's Luggage called on behalf of Air Canada (I filed a damage suit after my flight back from Vancouver; they didn't really do it much harm, but your old suitcase had just about bit the biscuit by that time), and I explained to the old codger that both shells had been crushed, and that the skin was ripped in countless places, so without further ado he invited me down to the Queen Street store to pick out a brand new bag—the fool. Despite his grumbling protestations, I decided to move up the line ever so slightly, to a soft-side jetliner in avocado green with black trim. It's a \$55 bag (he reluctantly allowed \$45 on the old one) so I paid the \$10 + tax difference and now have a beautiful new bag that holds *tons*. I won't have to worry about the sides crushing now either. I bought two pair men's socks (warm ones, as the hospital air conditioning is supposed to be quite chilly), one bra, four panties and the aforementioned long underwear—I'll worry about looking sexy and feminine again when I'm finally paroled in October.

Checked in at 3:30 PM (taxi was late picking me up, but we really had until 5 anyway) and met the nine other girls on our ward. Lorna, unfortunately, has been placed in the other group. Kind of strange, you know? I guess we just sort of assumed we'd be embarking on this adventure together, but that's okay. This girl from Spain, Maria, is in my group, as well as Anne, an old friend of Mike & Lorna's from Saskatoon. Actually they're all quite nice, and I'm looking forward to making some female friends, as all of mine, with the exception of Tracey, Ruth and Lorna, seem to be men. Should be interesting.

It has been gradually settling in that we are indeed in a hospital, in a ward, in, what, something of a fishbowl of sorts. We have our own little dining area from which the food trolley arrives and

departs, our own lounge w/TV and hi-fi, our own washer & dryer and iron & board in a large laundry room, and we buy our snacks and treats from the nursing station down the hall. We choose our day's menu the day before, just like you would in a hospital. It looks like there won't be much variety though: similar to the Y in taste and tedium—you know, bland, allegedly nourishing institutional food—but that's okay; I didn't come here looking for a gourmet chef anyway. Food will cost about \$2 per day, which is fair enough when you think about it, otherwise you'd have all sorts of folks just looking for a place to hit welfare for three months, and that is definitely *not* the idea here. For the first few days we'll be subsidized by the Foundation, until we've learned how to weave correctly. We use plastic coinage, just like money (all ten of us have been assigned different coloured chips, so Birdie Cormack's can be spent by Birdie Cormack only) and they advanced me \$5 today, plus supper free at 5 o'clock. Urine sample bottles were passed out for first thing in the morning—no liquids after 12 at night—a practice to be endured twice per week, as well as blood samples. The experiment will develop over a period of time, with new surprises to be introduced along the way. There are literally millions of tiny adjustments to make—have you any idea?

July 1, 1972

Happy Canada Day. God bless the Dominion. Awoke early this morning with throat, eyes and nose as dry as the Prairie Dustbowl. Actually, they call this a dust-free purity controlled air system—our clothes won't get dirty, and neither will our hair and hides, except from actual body perspiration, and the temperature remains constant(ly freezing) at all times. On the bright side, the air seems relatively dry, and therefore a nice change from all that rain out in Vancouver. But alas, where are you my sweet Toronto pollution?

Started to learn how to thread a loom today—très compliqué—but not really: you can't ride a bicycle the first time either. There apparently comes a time when you can do it quite naturally. I shall be weaving in my sleep by the end of the week, I'm sure.

The staff here (too many good looking guys!) are very quiet, pleasant and helpful, but *silent*. They all but blend into the woodwork. I'm not kidding; you hardly even notice them there. Every half-hour, around the clock, they patrol the ward, scribbling down little notes as to where you are, what you're doing, etc—doesn't bother me a bit—if you're in the can they just call your name and you answer, and that's it.

The girls are great fun—we'll all get along fine—and at least one aspect of our respective situations is identical: none of us will ever again be living in precisely the same set of circumstances as we are right now. Quite interesting, really. I can see how we're going to become quite the tight family unit in here.

I shall be having an EKG and EEG at some point in the next few days. In one of the tests (which one I'm not exactly sure) they'll stick twenty little pins into my head, all of which are hooked up to an enormous graph machine, and attempt to translate from the resulting scrawl how (if) in fact my head actually works. Don't you wish you could read EEG charts, Mom?

Had a lovely sauna tonight at 7 PM—it will be quite nice to have that to change the atmosphere now and again—and we also got out to the courtyard from 3:30–4:30 this afternoon. The whole idea of specific, regulated times is that we don't have any contact with people from the outside world. This is a hundred-bed hospital, and fairly large in staff and outpatient numbers, so these seemingly innocuous little escapades require quite the detailed arrangement, let me tell you.

July 2/1972

I'm finding that the famous five-hour sleeper is going to be sleeping a heck of a lot more in here. I guess the cool air does it, or something. It's so peaceful in here, and quiet, except when the hi-fi is going, which is most of the day in the big lounge—what a racket.

Dr. Miles (head of the study and a psychiatrist/scientist) and Dr. Congreves (same qualifications but Miles' assistant, collaborator and slave, or so it seems) met with us last night to answer any

questions we might have concerning the experiment. A strange pair, these two. Classic Crusoe-Friday dynamic, as it were. In another life I see them squatting on their haunches in the dark, there on the beach between them the scattered remains of a neglected and slowly dying fire, each man dressed in soiled loincloth, long stringy beard and thick cloak of distraction, one berating the other over a slight miscalculation concerning the influence of the winter solstice on the rapidly approaching tidal wave. Of course they would not and will not tell us anything that might precondition us, i.e. *when* and *if* anything green will be introduced into our barren little lives. Their main point was that the “evening walk” will not be permitted till early in the morning (5–7 AM), ostensibly because we’re girls, and because of the area of the city we’re in. I suppose that’s valid though. And anyway, it’s the nicest time of the morning, so I really don’t mind at all. We’re to be “escorted” of course, so no worries of our being in danger of any sort.

Would you please keep my letters intact and in order? I want to be able to read them again when I emerge again in October. Probably twice a week you can count on receiving daily notations and thoughts and the like, so don’t be surprised if they wander off the mark a little bit. Who knows, maybe someday someone else will want to read what I have wrought. Speaking of which, I didn’t call Winifred, so you can show them to her, but no one else.

All my love, Birdie

JULY, 2002

Robert returned home a few days later—walking with the aid of a cane, yes, but walking nonetheless—and indeed, contrary to initial reports, he was not at all dead. And although Jon of course had nothing to do with the accident, Jeremy would never put it past his father to at least contemplate such a scheme. He really was a wily old man, and as Constable Bob File had informed Jeremy by way of his brother, getting himself in too much trouble again. If nothing else, at least Bob had seen fit to have Jon released upon hearing of Robert’s near fatal accident. And so, for the time being

anyway, Jeremy decided to stay and see what could be done for them, expecting really nothing in return, salvage paid being of course proportional to the helplessness of the vessels being saved.

Together Jeremy and his father tried to get limping Robert into his now vacant, incessantly leaky condo—as mentioned, Robert’s wife had taken a recent leave of absence from their relationship, taking with her their three year-old daughter—but with his various minor injuries, together with everything else presently falling apart in his life, they thought better of it and decided to install him in his old room at his father’s house, the very house Robert and Jeremy had grown up in. This way no one, especially the press, would be able to bother Robert until he had more or less convalesced and felt ready to face the world again. His accident had captured a normally fractured national attention. What with the existing War on Terrorism humming along under its own impetus, and the so-called friendly-fire incident in Afghanistan of late, in which four Canadian soldiers had been thoroughly obliterated by the five-hundred pound bomb dropped from one of their American ally’s planes, Canadian military stories were eagerly sought after by Canadian news agencies these days—especially those stories featuring tragic accidents—and if there had to be a happy ending to the story, so be it, we would all just have to grin and bear it anyway. This way, though, no one could get to Robert. Not with father Jon dutifully entrenched at the front gate.

The Jacks house, an unremarkable split-level affair common to these and most other North American middleclass parts, stood halfway down a steeply sloping street ending in a brief cul-de-sac, the street itself situated near the bottom of a neighbourhood known vaguely, to some of us anyway, as Royal Heights. Royal Heights is part of the municipality of Delta, North Delta to be precise, which, as the name implies, stands atop the flood plain of the powerful Fraser River where it crashes headlong into the Pacific Ocean, bringing with it the broken mountain remains of the interior of the province and the attic of time. And while ‘South’ Delta lays claim to the nutrient-rich farmland of the lower elevations, the foundation of its population still white

milk-fed farmers and their whiter soymilk-fed families, with a few tribes of steadfast Native Indians and the stubborn and retired wealthy clinging to the waterfront fringes, 'North' Delta holds mostly to the higher elevations of ancient glacial moraine, a hodgepodge of aging, oddly homogeneous homes connected one to the others via the elevated arteries of power lines and the underground gossip and general malaise of their inhabitants. Dogs bark in faraway lots. Sirens scream nearby. A feeling of dread hangs suspended in the air; a seething desperation; a silent scream of cast-aside dreams and endless days of drudgery. As a measure of patriotism, people hang Canadian flags from their assorted roofs and garages. As a measure of economy, they shop at the not too distant Wal-Mart and, occasionally at least, at Zellers, the recently arrived Punjabi population devoting themselves largely to the latter along with their own assorted mysterious shops. In general, North Delta attracts the imminent mediocrity of the middleclass and any recently arrived Indo-Canadian immigrants. Actually, like much of the West Coast, North Delta is a relatively newly settled region, and the recent wave of immigration makes it that much newer all the time. Of course anxiety, as a rule, accompanies the risk of any rising tide, and the grumpy incumbents, those few white folks whose great-grandfathers colonized the area themselves all of a century before, decry these plagues of unwashed and their seeming unwillingness to better integrate themselves, while at the same time wanting for all the world to keep them as far away as possible, preferably back where they came from—on the other side of the world, if feasible. Every time a new family of Punjabis arrive, a vast nasal whine goes up from the steadily dwindling ratio of remaining Caucasians, a muttering of angry regret and hopeless despair. "Oh no, not again," they say, recalling realities that never were. North Delta is rife with racial tension. People literally hate each other there.

And yet I suppose it was nice enough. Three blocks and two streets up the hill from the Jacks residence stood the Royal Heights United Church, and four blocks beyond that, though no one liked to talk about it, the rapidly deteriorating Royal Heights

Shopping Centre. It was here that, after enduring several long difficult years of unemployment after inexplicably aborting a longer albeit far more difficult career as a salmon boat captain, Jon had poured his meagre lifesavings, any and all profits still lingering from the sale of his boat, and a sizeable loan into a largely unsuccessful stint as a video store owner-operator. Still, he managed to scratch almost six years out of that venture, and that mall, before the Punjabis moved in and took over it all, obliterating his already minimal income stream and sending him reeling back to the workforce once more, where he would settle in temporarily and irritably until at last forced into mandatory retirement from his part-time parking attendant post at Surrey Memorial Hospital. Truth be told, though, Royal Heights was not all that much of a mall. Not anymore. Since the Punjabi population had moved in to capture, over the previous decade or so, increasingly impressive stretches of the adjacent commercial and residential landscape, the mall, and its various tenants, had suffered immensely to be sure. Not that this suffering could be blamed solely on the Punjabis, as they had done, and continued to do, their very best to integrate themselves to the North American brand of capitalism via their own variety of local stores and restaurants, but simply that the Royal Heights Shopping Centre resided on Scott Road, that perpetually shifting mix of strip-mall monotony and miserable race relations, not to mention consensus dividing line between the arguably tolerable municipality of North Delta and the sinking city of Surrey. "The line between consent and rape" was a slur Scott Road was more often than not subjected to. Now I do not want to go into too much detail here, but suffice to say that Surrey, at least North Surrey, anywhere within a drive-by shooting of Scott Road, was not the place one wanted to raise one's children, not if one had any choice in the matter at all. Of course it was not the same back when the Jacks brothers were children, but then what suburban neighbourhoods were? And their father's house, despite the fact it stood rather effectively removed from this wholly inhospitable environment, nevertheless lay less than seven blocks away as the bullet flies, leaving their father with an

incessant soundtrack of wailing sirens and squealing tires to keep him awake and increasingly embittered throughout the night. And Robert's ill-fated condo, due exclusively to Robert's ill-fated foresight, stood smack on the corner of Scott Road and whatever, not three blocks from that tragic husk of failed entrepreneurialism and a father's sovereign dreams, that sad and shattered strip mall still known to some of us as Royal Heights.

POSTED BY LUCY @ 1:46:13 P.M. 4/2/2007

0 COMMENTS

July 3, 1972

Dear Mom & Dad:

All sorts of excitement around here today. Had my first belt accepted, and as they have us weaving on the most primitive of handlooms to such an extremely strict set of standards, that's quite the accomplishment, believe me. The loom requires a great deal of concentration and agility to handle at first, and your belt must meet their criteria exactly in order to be passed, no exceptions. Depending on how tight your tension is on the strings (the loom is restrung for each belt) you must over-weave by a certain amount to allow for shrinkage when you finally cut the belt off. It's all terribly complicated, but I won't bore you with the details just yet. One of the nurses just laughed and said we'd be whipping them off like nobody's business by next week. Yeah, right.

On a more, what, electrifying note, I was hooked up to the EKG today—nothing to it—but the EEG was something else entirely. First they measure your whole head off into twenty little sections marked with black wax pencil (Phrenology maybe? Or something like it anyway.) then stick electrodes into your head and ears, and turn the machine on and bingo! all sorts of waves come pouring out on the tickertape. I felt just like the stock exchange. They can apparently tell by the readings if you have any sort of brain damage or impending tumours or other such pleasantries, i.e. if you happened to fall out of a certain homemade highchair when you were a kid. Brain-eye responses are measured with the aid of a strobe light, as well as respiration

and deep breathing responses, bringing the total test time to approximately thirty minutes—a lovely little half-hour pit stop to be repeated six more times over the course of the experiment. All these little experiences I hope to be able to put into a book one day. (As I write this, it strikes me suddenly, if abstractly, that for writers and weavers vaguely similar rules apply. But then I'm not a writer, at least not yet, so you'll have to endure these yarns of wool for now.)

July 4, 1972

Slept in this morning till noon for no particular reason, except that we watched TV till about two last night. Still, I managed to weave five belts this afternoon, all of which passed, praise Allah, so I made a whopping \$12.⁵⁰. Had a shower and washed my hair—we'll all have slight dandruff from the dry air, but it'll disappear as soon as we're out again in October. What else . . . Oh yes, urine and blood samples were taken again this morning—minor sacrifices to the great god of bodily fluids lingering somewhere beyond these sterile, whitewashed walls. Have I mentioned that everyone here has aching muscles? Even mine are sore, a symptom that will disappear soon enough, we're told. Still, I've been conducting yoga exercises in the corridor, with special emphasis on sore back and arms. And thank the Lord my fingers are so strong from piano and guitar. I'm not suffering too much, but believe me, some of the girls sure are.

Can you imagine ten women locked up together on a Friday night in the middle of downtown Toronto? What a riot. I've never laughed so hard in my life. The girls are great fun, and of course we get very giddy at times. Watched a decent movie on TV tonight—"The Glass House" by Truman Capote, about a professor in prison. We could all relate already. Still I have to wonder how really close to the book they kept it, as it seemed a little overwrought in parts, but then maybe that's just Capote.

Thanking my lucky stars I'm not in Ottawa right now, what with that terrible thunderstorm and all. Lucky for us the weather really doesn't exist here in the fishbowl. Don't worry, we can

partake of it all via the windows, but it really doesn't register because the climate is always the same here in the hospital. I haven't felt any desire to go out yet, and I'm not going to until I really feel the need, you know? It's a most interesting situation, really . . . I'm surprised how easily we've fallen into the routine, and gotten used to each other (terrible catchphrase that: "used" to each other) and the staff. I feel almost as if I've always lived here—I never felt that way at the Y—whether with the ladies or the actual building, though, I'm not entirely sure. I think the comforts make all the difference though. Little things like no dust bunnies in the corners, no concern about theft, and no overly chlorinated matron or Y-type personage relentlessly hovering about, ready to pounce at the first sign of perceived misbehaviour (the staff here don't seem to care one way or the other)—even the fact that it's a small number of us, all one family at the dinner table, is somehow very cozy, very warm—I miss that. Although I suppose that hardly characterizes the spirit which has recently taken possession of the Cormack family firm, now does it?

July 5, 1972

Up at 7:30 this morning for breakfast, then off to work—had three belts polished off by noon or thereabouts. My timing's down to about 80 minutes per belt now, and when we really get into gear after another week or so, I'll be able to weave one every 20–25 minutes. That's about the limit apparently, this according to the nurses anyway, but the first belt took me all day, so I'm definitely improving. Yesterday, at my request, the resident shopper, a funny little camel named Stan (comes equipped with his very own hump and everything) bought me a plastic laundry pail, which I'm going to keep filled with water and standing in my room, so that should help moisturize the air a little.

Listened to the "Goon Show" on FM radio today with Peter Sellers and co. Very British, very funny—it's a rerun from the 50s but really outrageous, and of course we'll laugh at anything in here. I think I now know why all my friends are male—chicks are crazy—fun though, and an education in itself, even if further

evidence of the impending apocalypse perhaps already well underway.

July 6, 1972 year of Our Lord

Here we are, Thursday morning, up at 8 o'clock for a stretch, a yawn and, after pumping out the required blood and urine samples, a bowl of Red River cereal to start things off with a bang. Then it was off to the belt factory for the remainder of the day. How Dickensian my sorry existence has become, eh? My timing is now down to one belt per hour, including stringing, so I made an eye-popping \$25 today. Felt very satisfying, though, I must say. And to make things easier to keep track of, rather than having thousands of plastic chips rattling around in your sock at the end of the experiment, they let you cash in every \$50 worth to the nursing station, where they keep a little bank book. We've made great advances in our weaving ability since that first dreadful belt on Monday too. Needless to say, the time will now pass more swiftly, now that we can see a reasonable improvement in our earning power.

How to explain the experiment? Each day we learn a little bit more about what (and how) the medical staff is studying. Our group has seen nothing as yet, and truth be told we may not throughout the entire experiment. Perhaps we're the control group and Lorna's is the experimental—I really don't know. Anyway, they come around to monitor us every half-hour or so, but strangely enough it doesn't really bother me, perhaps because it's so impersonal, so objective—anything they observe is just that: an observation; a statistic; so much data to be collected. You see what I mean about the fishbowl though. It's like living behind a wall of glass with the entire world looking in on you, watching your particular reality unfold.

July 7, 1972

Good morning Mom & Dad—happy Friday. We've been here one whole week now. Got up at seven this morning, had a shower and washed my hair—felt great—then gobbled down some

cream of wheat cereal and grapefruit juice to start the day. I then proceeded, with comparative ease, to polish off ten *perfect* belts. Far out, eh? Tomorrow I'm going to go for twelve, with any luck. I'm sure glad I'm not allergic to wool though. If I were, I'd be sunk.

A completely different set of staff came in with the 7:30 shift change this morning, and here in the fishbowl these new arrivals are very much strangers in our midst—a somewhat awkward phenomenon, like having surprise houseguests, or a large family of noisy immigrants moving in down the street (wink, wink). What will they be like? Can you trust them? Will they like you, and more importantly, your belts? Remembering a host of new names (in three shifts, that's twelve new nurses, orderlies, psychiatrists, psychologists or whatever) presents an enormous new challenge in itself.

I'm beginning to realize just how much I'm going to learn from this experiment, about human beings, about their relationships, and how I'll maybe be able to use it as fodder later on. All good writing comes through experience, they say. . . . It's like holding a tiny segment of life under your microscope, Dad, and seeing many things you couldn't under ordinary circumstances.

The ladies are outrageous—we laugh a lot, and are even quite silly at times, but underneath we're beginning to let down our hair and really get to know one another. We're a very diverse group of course, with plenty in common, but with most interesting personal circumstances. I shall speak of them all from time to time, but I'll start with the one girl who has impressed me the most, Maria from Spain. Tall, slim, blond, about 21—looks like Ingrid Bergman in a way, less the willingness to weep all the time in order to get her way. I really like her. Last September she left for Europe, where she met an English friend in Greece, and together they travelled all throughout the Mediterranean, living in a kibbutz (state commune) in Israel for the better part of three months, and the rest of the time touring through various parts of Africa and the Middle East. Her friend has since returned to England, and will be coming over here in October; Maria having continued on to Canada (obviously) to enter into the experiment

with her friend Shirley—a cute wee girl very much like Aunt Zelda in appearance, only this kid's an absolute riot, believe me. She seems very quiet, and you barely know she's in the room—that is, until she drops one of her little “gems” and the whole group breaks up with gales of laughter. Maria and Shirley share the first bedroom, opposite mine, and we get together and chat from time to time.

Must get this off to the mailman.

Lots of love, Birdie

JULY, 2002

Putting off the effort of any sort of exercise, reclining in dull observation instead in one of two identical green deckchairs located at the far rear edge of his father's backyard, Jeremy gazed out over the ravine at the narrow tract of almost too-blue sky thereabouts. Being as it seemed an almost meteorological necessity that it rain profoundly each and every time he so much as glanced in the direction of his running shoes, Jeremy took the sky for what it was: a favourable omen of favourable conditions for one to shake off any extraneous poundage acquired in recent lethargic weeks and months. Not that his need for caloric restraint was in any way one of vanity; it was, in truth, of the economic variety. His financial situation being what it was in those days—having hit a low point, where it now seemed determined to remain—his various forms of credit all but depleted, he could scarcely afford the calories the ever-increasing obligation of obesity implied, let alone any new clothes to match an ever-expanding waistline. Therefore he ran, or tried to run, every second day, and in running kept the middling sins, those somehow fraternal twins, portliness and poverty at bay.

“Hey fag, how's the back?” he asked, following with interest his brother's limping journey around the shallow end of the peanut-shaped pool. Actually, a quick word on the pool seems only appropriate here. Their father had had it installed some five years before, some five years *after* both Robert and Jeremy had moved

out of the house seemingly for good. I suppose he thought a pool might entice his offspring to return, or in lieu of an out-and-out homecoming, at least give them reason to stop by here and there. As far I know, Jon himself never used the pool. He cleaned it, yes, and he maintained it, even upgrading it from time to time (for instance, installing an impressive and altogether expensive solar-panelled heating system on the roof of the house), but he never actually *swam* in it. No, it was more on an ornament of sorts. A totem. A peanut-shaped shrine to departed but not forgotten sons. Still, it was nice to look at. And it did offer their father something to work on in his spare time. That is, when not decking over what little yard remained green and wild to him here at the start of the new millennium. It was common knowledge amongst the Jacks boys that their father had no friends. Now in truth he had been, for most of his life, a friendly enough fellow—one might even say amiable—but then for years now he had not allowed this amiability to take root for anyone outside his immediate family. No, for strangers (and by broad definition that included both neighbours and relatives) he had managed to deck over the more agreeable aspects of his personality years ago, spending his many off-hours knee-deep in the ritual skimming of his pool, lost in abstractions of a semi-aquatic nature, hatching some new plot, Jeremy thought, against what would have to be considered human evolution in general.

Anyway, Jeremy was sitting in the backyard, putting off the effort of a run, calling his brother a fag and asking how his back was coming along.

“Sore, little brother, sore,” said Robert, lowering himself gingerly into the shaded chair alongside Jeremy’s out there in the sun. At twenty-nine, and approximately twenty minutes older than Jeremy, Robert was, less the accident, at the height of his formidable power. And as solid with muscle as he had become in recent years, especially through the chest, shoulders and arms, he was somehow resembling less and less his father, perhaps echoing some long lost relation on his mother’s side. Robert and Jeremy never really knew their mother. Or rather, they knew her, but

only in the way abandoned sons recognize a certain hoof print across the heart of an abandoned father. However, they certainly know *of* her, mostly by way of fragmentary eulogies delivered occasionally and reluctantly their way over the muted jingle of some annoying television commercial. Her name, they were told in just this way, was Virginia, and according to their father, she had died of complications stemming from a heart attack suffered exactly forty-six hours after wedding her second husband on a beach somewhere in the middle of the Mexican Riviera. The exact whereabouts of her grave, however, remained something of a mystery, as prior to Jon’s aversion to television in general, and commercials in particular, they received no real information on her at all. Then, suddenly, in their teens, when their father opened his doomed video store and subsequently refused to watch so much as one more second of television, they stopped talking about her altogether. And so it comes as no surprise that the demise of these two phenomena, Virginia Jacks and television, specifically commercials on television, are tied closely together in their memories now, a point that, however fascinating, has little or nothing to do with our actual narrative unfortunately.

And anyway, Jeremy looked nothing like his mother. No, he resembled his father in almost every conceivable manner. Still, as brothers, he and Robert looked well enough alike, which was really no surprise considering the circumstances of their earthly arrivals. One noticed immediately how in fact their faces shared the exact same features, even if Jeremy’s seemed to be arranged over a slightly larger playing field. And yet it was not as though his face were exceedingly lengthy. On the contrary, it was just that, in comparison, his brother’s seemed slightly abridged, as though all the necessary players, however prepared, had apparently deemed it necessary to prolong the huddle indefinitely before dispersing to their respective positions on the field.

Robert retrieved a can of root beer from the pocket of his robe, popped it open, and offered his brother a drink. Jeremy accepted, tilted the can back, and handed it back finished by half, as requested. Falling further into the comforts of routine, Robert asked his

brother how much he weighed—Jeremy told him, and returned the favour immediately. This was quite the right thing to do when sharing a root beer in your father's backyard, in my opinion.

"You know it's a miracle you're alive," Jeremy observed, bridging his hand across his brow to better shield his eyes from the sun. "Don't know if I've mentioned that."

"I know," Robert said. "And you have." He left it at that, and so Jeremy shifted his attention out over the ravine, following the erratic movements of squirrel tails and bird wings amid the short-cropped, chainsaw-topped trunks of the nearby cedar and spruce out towards the enormous leafy dome of the ancient maple tree beyond. Robert did not seem overly eager to discuss his accident, at least not yet, and as Jeremy did not want to push him on the subject—after all, a fellow soldier and friend had actually *died* breaking his fall—he changed the subject entirely, piloting the conversation in the direction of more hospitable waters, if recently estranged shores.

"Talked to Linda?"

"Just now actually," Robert said, aiming his root beer in the direction of the house and by extension, Jeremy supposed, the telephone thereabouts.

"So, what, she's given you some sort of open-ended sentence?"

"Seems so anyway."

"Strange . . ."

"What's *strange*," Robert said, in a complicated voice Jeremy did not recognize, at least not right away.

"Just that an accident of this magnitude, you'd think it would galvanize rather than destabilize, is all I'm saying."

"Yeah, well, you don't know what it was like before she left."

"That bad?"

"Pretty fucking bad," Robert said. "After Stephanie was born, Linda and I . . . well we weren't intimate for a long time, hey."

In a book, Jeremy thought, I would offer some sort of condolences here. Some sort of look suggesting a brotherly understanding—an understanding by association, as it were. Yet he could not bring himself to do it. And so he avoided looking at his brother

altogether, if for no other reason than Robert should feel he meant anything particular by the exposure.

"Where's she at?" he contrived to inquire of his hands instead.

"Ted and Lauren's."

"Ted and Lauren—Hansen?"

"They got an extra room," Robert explained, frowning down at his slippers. It was common knowledge, at least in this yard, that Robert's special slippers always made him feel less tired. But not today. And so he struggled to his feet to move awkwardly toward the railing of the deck overhanging the ravine. "Remember when we built this fucking thing?" he said, tapping the deck with his cane. "That was fun."

"Yeah it was," Jeremy agreed, standing up alongside so that they might lean out over the railing together. Some forty meters down the ravine's aggressively descending tree-studded slope, though hidden, ran the audibly attendant stream. "Listen, you can hear the river."

"Of course you can hear the river."

For some reason Robert and Jeremy had always referred to the stream as a river, perhaps because for them, in their childhood, large portions of which had been spent at play here in the ravine, a river it very much had been—relative to their size, I mean. Or perhaps because that was what they had always imagined it could be, given the appropriate opportunity. And anyway, all rivers start off as streams at some point, so in a way, I suppose, it was, if only partially and in theory.

"Look, you can still see our old fort down there. Or what's left of it anyway."

"You know, at one point I was going to build my daughter a fort," Robert observed after a short pause, holding his head at a strange angle. He moved it with difficulty, indicating that his back and neck were still causing him some measure of discomfort and pain. "Same place as ours was, hey, in the crook of the maple tree there."

"So why didn't you?"

"Don't know," he shrugged. "Maybe I will."

“Not for a while yet,” Jeremy said, indicating the cane.

Robert frowned down at his cane, then at the treacherous plaid slippers loitering about alongside. “Not for a while, no.”

Together they spat out over the railing, watching the two elasticizing globules plummet into the crowded green underbrush below.

“So how long?”

“Sorry?”

“How long you out for?” Robert wanted to know.

Jeremy shrugged. “No offence, but if I’d known the truth about what happened, I probably wouldn’t have come out here at all.”

“Writing?”

“Not right now, no.” He paused. “Anyway, I’m thinking of staying the summer. Maybe longer, I don’t know.”

“That’d be all right. Try not being such a dick to Dad though, all right?”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see how long each of us can stand the experiment. Check this out though.” Together they watched their father, in an outfit perfectly suited to the task, a bright yellow T-shirt and a pair of transcendently lime green Bermuda shorts to be exact, slowly engineer his descent of the sundeck stairs. Fortified by the proximity of his sons, and the conviction that he had raised two rather good ones, there had returned a relative spring to Jon’s step in recent days, and he sailed along at a kind of dignified slant until finally reaching the bottom of the stairs, whereupon he suddenly and somewhat surprisingly revved up the engines and all but sprinted the final few steps to the pond and his collection of hungry, colourful, impatiently waiting Koi. Almost all of Jon’s comings and goings of late, by movements as natural as the tides themselves—that is to say, grudging—took place in that space between the raised shore of sundeck door and the vast ocean of air extending out from the far rear edge of the artificially reclaimed backyard below. The effort by which these outings were undertaken, which may or may not be successful depending on the undertaker’s state of mind at the time, where the vast majority of problems went unseen and unchecked well

below the waterline, had eroded between Jon’s eyebrows a deep and serious trench. And yet there was always something strangely fluid suggested by his actual stride, even aquatic, as though he were separated only by air and a few billion years of evolution from a would-be amphibian’s primitive limbs and a splendid sea level view of some coveted beach environment. Still, most if not all of what this nautical manner of movement implied remained completely lost on his sons. This was due to the fact that, while they were at least tenuously aware their father had some sort of semi-dignified seafaring past, they tended to associate his character more with the periods that immediately followed—that is, those of a long shambling unemployment proceeding, by a series of unremarkable tacks, towards ill-fated video store ownership. Their collective attitude towards the truth had always been rather flexible, and therefore more like their father’s than Jeremy cared to admit, and so it came as no surprise that he had long ago capped his father’s dubious list of talents with the ability to do absolutely nothing for regular and extended periods of time.

And yet despite all this, and despite himself even, Jeremy smiled at his father, just managing to turn away in time before Jon could accuse one or more of his sons of making fun of him in some way, as he surely would and as they often did. And so he winced instead. At the thick foamy mattress of white bread his father was about to stuff into his mouth, and at the deep spread of margarine oozing out from between his freshly minted, preposterously white teeth. What inevitably followed was a horrific sneezing-coughing fit. Jon Jacks, it can with certainty be said, had become at some uncertain point entirely allergic to bread. And though it could be argued that real honest to goodness grain was nowhere to be found in that bleached slab’s long list of ingredients, sneeze and cough he most definitely did. Taken suddenly with an odd gasping roar of sorts, commencing with a long cascade of moist flushing coughs, he progressed steadily through a trembling choking fit that ended inevitably with his hawking into a balled up wad of tissue an oyster of truly inordinate size. They had at first frightened and then amused his sons as youngsters, these seemingly

random sneezing squalls, often announcing their wet and violent arrival before Jon could make the necessary, however inadequate, leap to the nearest Kleenex box.

“You think he’s all right?” Jeremy asked, recently returned from his tour of his father’s not-so-personal habits.

“He’s fine. You’re fine, aren’t you, Dad.”

“What’s that?” their father somewhat absently asked, despite the fact that, unbeknownst to all, even himself perhaps, he had for some reason been following the conversation with excruciating interest. Presumably he said these things automatically, as notwithstanding a still strong instinct for self-preservation, Jon Jacks felt he no longer understood, nor did he ever again expect to understand, exactly what was going on in any particular situation he happened to find himself in. Back in his younger, more energetic days, for purposes of pleasure there had been no substitute for heated debate, but now, nearing seventy years of age, Jon felt it was all he could do simply to keep pace with what was being said around, or in this case, about him. And yet the kinds of things he assumed he was hearing now, albeit in snatches only, were exactly the sort of persecution he expected and secretly hoped for from his sons. He smiled at them both, wagged an accusing finger intended to mean absolutely nothing and, having raised inactivity to something of a virtue, returned to postponing whatever it was he thought he had not been doing before this latest tidal wave of mucus had arisen from his lungs.

“Oh yeah,” Jeremy said at length, “just so you know, I’m having lunch with Bob File tomorrow.”

Robert surveyed his brother suspiciously. “What for? Dad?”

Jeremy nodded while watching their father putter about the pond. “Wants to have a little chat, I guess.”

“Bob fucking File,” Robert mused. “He and Jody, they’re married now, huh.”

“Well then it’s a good thing you got to her when you did,” Jeremy replied with a laugh.

Robert’s crowded features consolidated further, then corrected themselves to the expression of one who is, after all, in the right.

“What do you know about it?” he demanded.

Jeremy shrugged. “Just the really disappointing stuff.”

“So who else knows?”

“Who else knows what?” Jon asked, pivoting about in his curious and deliberate way. Neither of his sons answered, and so he stared at them, paused, even shook his head a little, but in the end did nothing, as though any display of actual interest here would be surplus to the question’s true nature.

POSTED BY LUCY @ 7:28:03 A.M. 4/3/2007

0 COMMENTS

Saturday, July 8, 1972

Dear Mom & Dad:

Got your wee note yesterday—sounds like that storm wave really hit your area too. There was a fair amount of rain down here, enough that the cars were spinning up and down Spadina Crescent on their summer tires. The address you used is just fine—

Birdie Cormack

West 4073, 33 Russell Street, Toronto

—so your letters will reach me directly, without exciting Lloyd Beatty et al of the Bobcaygeon Post Office, so keep them coming if you don’t mind.

A few aches and pains still cropping up from the weaving, especially around the nape of the neck and between the shoulder blades. You know how you feel after you climb the radio tower, Dad. Well try doing that every day—you’d be sore for the first while too, until the necessary muscles developed in time. Goal today is twelve belts—hope I get them done. This evening we’ll be writing psychological tests for a couple of hours at \$5 per test. . . . Makes for a nice break in the evening anyhow.

Love, Birdie

P.S. No, I haven’t heard anything yet from G. Not that I’m worried though; they’re busier than ever out there with D.M.A.W. and besides, she’s never been all that proficient at the art of

correspondence anyway. Just so you know, though, I started a letter to her this morning, which I hope to get into the mail in the next few days, so I should (hope to) hear back in a couple of weeks or so. In the meantime, please relax. If there's one thing we know about Ginny it's that your fretting about her won't do anyone any good.