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COVER
Dennis DeWinter
Tea spills and butter stains were all over the kitchen table. Edna swept these and some crumbs out of her way with a washcloth. The washcloth left water spots in its wake—not good. She got a paper towel from beside the sink to finish the job. Then she set out a sheet of stationery (not the flowery type, but some white letter bond) and slid it around with her fingers to make sure it wouldn’t pick up any marks. She sat down. How should she begin? she wondered, and put her pen to her lips while she thought. Sirs, Dear Sirs, Dear Editors: all of these greetings were used, she was sure, though none of them were printed. The Editors just printed what people had to say. They put the letters under headings that summarized the articles the people talked about. Some people wrote just one sentence. Edna imagined how they would begin their letters. In order to set up for the punchline, they would have to make it like a memo:

TO: ITEM Magazine  
FROM: John Smith  
RE: Death of Picasso  
Sirs: The greatest is gone.

These were clever people she was competing with, people who could say what they meant in a minute, who would get printed where she wouldn’t. She decided to be brief;

Sirs,

she wrote.

She looked at the word on the paper. It seemed nasty, short, defiant. She did not mean to be any of those things, but she didn’t want to write Dear in front of it, either. This wasn’t supposed to be a complimentary letter.

Still, she wanted to put in a personal note, let them know she was as human as they were. She added

Dear Sirs,

But what should she tell them? She couldn’t say. She wanted to look at the article again. She glanced around the kitchen. The magazine wasn’t on any of the counters. She went to the living room. It wasn’t on the sofa or in the piano bench or in the old coal bucket she had restored to use as a magazine rack. The boys’ room, she thought, and looked in their drawers. Nothing.

Finally she went into the bathroom and saw it on the sink. It had been set in a small pool of water and she had to wipe it off. The pages had lost their gloss and wrinkled up. She ticked her tongue. Now it wouldn’t lie flat.

She brought the magazine back to the table and opened it to the section called CURRENT LIFE. There he was—the doctor with the heavy eyebrows. In the article beside his picture, he said that middle-aged women were “nervous and indecisive.” He claimed that they were this way because they sat alone in the house all day while their husbands were out running the world. He backed his claim with some “recent studies.”

Edna frowned at the page. This man, she felt, was insulting her—and her friends as well. Besides, he was too hairy. His
eyebrows waved like unmowed grass. His moustache seemed to flow out of his nose. At his throat an arbitrary line divided whiskers from chest hair. "He gives me the creeps," said Edna.

The sound of her voice in the empty house startled her. She snapped her attention to the letter:

_Sir, I wish to tell you that Mr. Prowder is wrong. (she continued), I spent about the women in our town._

She stopped. She wasn't sure whether she could speak for the whole town. Some of the men might think she was a "pushy broad," as her husband often called other women. She decided to start a new letter and just talk about herself. She put down a new piece of paper.

_Sir, (she wrote), I wish to tell you that Mr. Prowder is wrong. (she wrote on). I am a man who is afraid of women, and I find myself

Is wrong? she thought. No, that didn't state the case, because he might be right about some women. Is in error? No, means the same as wrong. But he might be wrong. Yes, that was it.

might be wrong, at least according to my experience (she wrote on). I am a man who is afraid of women, and I find myself

able to take the bull by the horns, as my husband says, when I have to make a choice.

The quote from her husband was an inspiration. She liked its decisive tone. Now she was ready to finish. She dashed off the last lines:

_I have had absolutely no indecision in settling the matter. The Prowder study does not apply to me._

Edna lifted her pen in the air and waved it. Before signing her letter, however, she considered the phrase "indecision in settling the matter." A bit awkward, she thought, but it was better to toss Prowder's own word—indecisive—back at him. She signed the letter in the accepted form:

_Mrs. Edna Cameron_  
_Hunting, N. C._

The next week, she took ITEM from her mailbox and turned to the LETTERS section. It was there, in barely recognizable form, under the heading _Prowder's Bull:_

Dan Hawkins
Edna huffed and turned on her heel toward the house, already tapping out an angry protest in her mind. When she got inside, she wrenched her typewriter from the top shelf of the bedroom closet and marched it down to the kitchen table. She placed another sheet of bond into the roll and zipped it into position.

**Dear Sirs:** she typed, not stopping to fret over salutations, you have changed my letter. I hoped that you would print it as it was but expected that you wouldn’t print it at all. Imagine my surprise—here Edna briefly paused in her tirade to consider the beauty of these words—when I discovered YOUR version of my letter in this week’s ITEM magazine. I was shocked

Edna halted, dazzled by the force of her response. Quickly she left the table to grab a pencil from the desk drawer in her husband’s study. She went back and rubbed out the last word.

**I was SHOCKED** she resumed, smiling with satisfaction at the usefulness of the device she had discovered, and you may cancel my subscription That should make an impression, she thought as she signed herself

**Edna Cameron**
**Nutley, N.J.**

Edna returned to the study with her letter to get a stamp and envelope for it. She folded the paper in thirds and slipped it into the envelope, licked the flap smoothly, and stuck the stamp to the front. She had to pause, however, in the middle of addressing the letter because it suddenly occurred to her that she had forgotten the ITEM office’s street and number. Back to the kitchen she went, to look it up in the magazine.

But as she started to page through it, another piece of the day’s mail caught her eye. The return address in the upper corner of the envelope bore the ITEM logo. How convenient, she chuckled, and, putting both magazine and reply down on the drainboard of the sink, picked the letter up to study it further. She opened it carefully, in order not to spoil the information she needed, and began to read the message that appeared on the official ITEM stationery.

**ITEM magazine**

**Dear Mrs. Cameron,**
Sometimes the people who write to us have trouble expressing their opinions and confuse their readers by choosing unclear phrases. Our letters policy therefore states that we reserve the right to edit them for clarity. We hope that our revisions have helped you to communicate your idea better. Please call us toll-free at (800) 492-6294 if you wish us to retract any of our changes. And feel free to write us again on other matters. We appreciate your contribution to ITEM magazine.

Sincerely,

**Charles Murray**
Letters Dept.

Edna was charmed. She forgot all about cancelling her subscription. It was just as well. She had forgotten to wipe the drainboard.
Frank

We were past Rycroft, maybe fifteen miles from the border, when the motor started to smell like burnt grease. I looked at Frank, his right hand on the wheel, his left out the window hanging to the mirror support. He shrugged back at me, saying, "I don't know. The temperature gauge doesn't work."

"That's no surprise," I said. "It's just as incidental as everything else that doesn't work." Only two of the driving lights worked, the windows didn't roll up, the DP switch was strictly ornamental, and the only gauge that did work was the gas. The truck was a beat-up old Mac that carried our power plant—a huge diesel generator with a quarter mile of high-tension wire wrapped around its base. The rest of the box was full of tools and cans of diesel fuel. The truck was well beyond its Gross Vehicle Weight and hadn't seen a weigh station in years. That meant a lot of rough back roads, a lot of extra miles.

We kept moving, sniffing and listening for indications that the motor was reaching its limits. It was a hot afternoon and the countryside looked dusty—trees and grass were a thirsty-looking green. Little puffs of dust jumped up from the gravel shoulders as we moved down the blacktop to the sound of popping tar bubbles. Little winged animals with hard bodies, grasshoppers or crickets, splattered themselves against the pink bug deflector on the hood. Sometimes they crunched into my elbow hanging out the window, and left numbing sensations.

Far into the distance we could see the first low range of hills. They would be a relief. On the right we passed what looked like a store set back in a patch of gravel and surrounded by the slightly spindly aspen bush. It was an ugly building of rough-cut lumber painted with creosote. The place was overrun with junked cars and unrecognizable pieces of rusting metal. Close to the road stood a shiny aluminum-and-glass phone booth on a neat square of concrete. It looked to be straight out of the factory. A mile farther, Frank let up on the gas and sat forward sniffing.

"You smell boiling anti-freeze?"

"Yeah," I said, and I pulled out my pocket knife, opened the blade, and handed it to him. He shoved it into the ignition, switched it off, and we coasted to a stop on the gravel shoulder. The sunshine burning through the mottled windshield, the heat and dust coming in the open windows, the sudden silence and slight ringing in the ears from the recent movement were all oppressive, and left me feeling uncomfortably lethargic. I didn't make a move while Frank got out and walked around to the front of the truck. He reached into the grill to release the hood and jumped back, rubbing his hand. I pulled a rag out from under the seat and threw it to him. A hissing sound came from the motor and a cloud of steam rose when he lifted the radiator cap. I got out of the cab and had a look.

"Not groovy," I said, resting my foot up on the bumper.
"Decidedly not. We'll have to walk back for water."
"I hate walking for water on hot days."
"That store is at least a mile back."
"I know, and that's what I hate the most."
We took an empty fuel can out of the back and started walking. The tar stuck to my boots, my shirt stuck to my shoulders, and my jeans tugged at my knees—everything was glued together with sweat. Frank still had his leather hat pulled down over his long black hair, and there were no dark stains on his purple shirt. Frank is an Indian, and he had a feather stuck in his hatbrim to prove it.

"I guess no one told you it was hot, huh, Frank?"
He looked over at me thoughtfully, critically.
"Empirical evidence," he said finally, "would tell me that you, at least, are hot. Correct me if I'm wrong."
"Tell me, what does an Indian know about empirical evidence?"
"Enough to be cool."
We didn't say anything for a while, and I started hearing crickets or some kind of insect making lazy, boring, buzzing sounds. My legs had a rubbery feel to them and I was beginning to walk sloppily, so that my hip sockets jolted with every step. I was tired, thirsty, and overheated before we'd gone half a mile.

"What's with you Indians? Don't you feel the heat? Don't you guys ever sweat?"
"You ask me? You're white. It's your side that got the Word."
"Oh?"
"Sure. You fell into sin and ever since the fall the whole race labored under the curse."
"Oh, I see. That makes it all clear...."
"I'm glad we're of a mind."
"Except that Adam was the father of all races. That makes you a Jew."
"A Jew? How do you figure?"
"Sure—check out the nose sometime. You're probably one of them ten lost tribes that wandered around Europe, wound up in Siberia, and emigrated over to Alaska. That makes you a direct descendant—so where's the sweat on your brow?"
Frank thought for a while, then said, "But there's more to the curse: you've got to labor under the sweat of your brow. We all know them Injuns don't work—burgers don't know how."
"Maybe they haven't got a brow to sweat on."
"And maybe we camped out in Alaska too long and forgot what heat was all about."
"I don't know, Frank. I'm sort of partial to the brow theory myself."
I wished a car would come along, but tried not to count on it. We'd seen very few cars all day on this road. It was hardly a main highway—hardly a highway to begin with.
"I bet you're praying for a car to come along," said Frank. "You might say."
"I did, and there is. Your prayers have been answered—"
I spun my head to look "—but it's coming the wrong way. I guess you didn't make that clear. Try and be more specific next time."
I looked ahead, and sure enough, a car was coming toward us. It was far in the distance, and all I could see were flashes of sunlight on glass or chrome. As it drew nearer, it became a pickup truck, a blue one.
"Here, give me the can," I said, and, taking it from Frank, I walked over to the middle of the road and held it up so the driver would be sure to see it. The truck pulled over to the shoulder, and I ran up to the window, wondering why it is that they always pull off the highway even when there's nothing coming for miles.
"Hey," I said, "thanks for stopping. Could you take us to the store that's back a ways? Our rad boiled over... ."
He was an old guy with the red-leather face of a farmer or rancher. "It's not all that far," he said suspiciously.
"Yeah, I know. We're awful hot. How about it?"
He looked at me and at Frank standing quietly on the other side of the road. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.
"In the back."
"Thanks. Let's go, Running Bear!"
We climbed in and the old guy pulled a hard U-turn, the back tires spitting gravel and squeeling on the slick tar. It was only a short distance, but the relief was considerable. He pulled up beside the telephone booth, and, as soon as we touched ground, drove off again. He didn't wait to say you're welcome to our thanks; he didn't look back.
"I guess he knew what we were gonna ask next," said Frank.
We went into the store. It was dark and cool inside, and for all its uncompromising exterior, rather well set up. There was no one in the store, and we wandered around looking at things while we waited.
"No one run this place?" I asked.
"Someone must—I heard a bell ring when we opened the door."
"Must be them sharp Indian ears of yours."
"And my analytic mind."
"Yeah, that too. Sort of reminds me of Pavlov."
"Who?"
"Guy named Pavlov. He had this dog set up where every time he rang a bell, the dog's mouth would water."
"Sounds relevant. Dog owners the world over must be grateful."
"He figured he could apply it to people—learning techniques or something."
"Oh, said Frank, "so they went and put bells in all the schools."
"Right, so all the kids' mouths would water for the teacher."
"Seems to me he should have applied to to radiators."
"It would have been helpful."

A dumpy little woman in a housecoat and slippers shuffled in through a door behind the counter.
"Good morning," Frank said.
," Good afternoon, young man. What can I help you with?"
"We need some water. Our radiator boiled over."
She pointed to the door she'd just come through. "Through there and first door on your left," she said, and turned to me.
"You want anything?"
"Yeah." I watched Frank go through the door with the can.
"Two cokes and a pack of Player's filter."
She got them for me and rang them up. "Good day," she said, and shuffled out the way she had come.
"Good day," I said.

I sipped my coke and smoked a cigarette while waiting for Frank. He came out with the water and looked around for the woman.
"She go back already?"
"Yeah."
"No kidding? With you that's a reprobate and me that's an Indian and a whole storeful of useful stuff?"
"Like money and things."
"Right—she must be watching through a secret window."
"Tut-tut! Let's give her the benefit of the doubt."
"Quite right," said Frank. "You are most right. She's only standing behind the door with a shotgun."
"Right. And Frank..."
"Yes?"
"You are most right. Have a coke."
Frank doffed his hat.
"Running Rabbit, Running Bear salute-um you-um."
I picked up the can of water and we left the store.

I was exhausted when we got back to the truck, and Frank admitted that even he wouldn't want to do this as a matter of course. We filled the radiator and got back into the cab. The motor took awhile to start and when it finally caught, ran raggedly.
"Oil!" said Frank, shutting it off. "I forgot to check the oil."

The dipstick was completely dry, and it took three quarts from the back of the truck to bring it to the level. The truck still ran poorly, and when Frank let out the clutch, it stalled. He tried several more times until we started moving jerkily. There seemed to be no power left, no noticeable acceleration, and the engine was missing badly—popping off like a shotgun. We pulled off the road a quarter of a mile from where we'd first stopped.
"We'll have to wait for Carlos," said Frank. "I think we burned a valve."
"Great, and Carlos must be at least three hours behind us."

We got out of the truck. Frank opened a couple of beers he had tucked away in one of the toolboxes, and we sat against the tires in the shade. The beer was not a very good brand, nor was it cool or lively anymore after having bounced around in the truck for I don't know how long, but it was still good and wet.
"Frank," I said, "this is a very satisfying beer. Don't you agree?"
"It's pretty rotten beer, and warm."
"Sure. But you couldn't have picked a better time for a beer."
"Frankly, I could have."
"Well, of course, yours has been the studded career."
"One might say."

The night before, in High Level, before we'd torn down and packed up the show, Frank, me, and the rest of the crew had gone down to the beer gardens. It was the last night of the rodeo, and the fenced-in square at the west end of the grounds was packed with dusty cowboys and bright-shirted Indians. A five-piece country band played three sets of Hank Snow and Hank Williams songs. They played the same ten songs every set, and what they lacked in accomplishment, the crowd made up for in beer—three huge styrofoam cups for a dollar. By midnight one of the outhouses was on its side, the snow fence was down on two sides of the enclosure, the beer was free, and the band started making up their own songs with a lot of help from the crowd.

Half of the gardens was open space for dancing, the other half given up to picnic tables. Most everyone there danced at
least half the time, some pretty well all the time, and only Frank for none of the time. He sat the whole time. He sat at the end of his picnic table watching the activity and drinking beer. He drank one after another of those milkshake-sized containers and he didn’t get drunk. Maybe no one told him it was beer.

“What’s the matter, Frank?” I asked, coming back to our table after dancing with somebody’s grandmother. “Don’t you wanna dance?”

“Noppe,” he said.

“Well, why not? It’s a good time....”

“Don’t feel like it. Don’t know how.”

“Oh, g’wan. Watching me dance should be all the inspiration a cow needs, let alone a half-corked Injun.”

Frank tipped back and drained a full cup of beer. He didn’t even burp afterwards. I was getting a little concerned.

“You’re surely putting a lot of that stuff away, ol’ buddy.”

“Yes,” he said, “I am.” He wasn’t very talkative.

“How come you’re the only Indian I know that doesn’t like to dance?”

“Maybe I don’t want to be your run-of-the-mill Indian.”

“Yeah, but everyone’s dancing—not just Indians.”

Frank gave me a hard look and said, “Maybe I just don’t wanna be your typical idiot out there making a fool of himself. Maybe it embarrasses me to think about it, and maybe you can stop bugging me for a while.”

“Hey, now, take it easy. I didn’t know you were so touchy about it.”

“Well, I’m not.”

An old Indian woman swayed over to our table and leaned up against him. A powerful, odoriferous atmosphere came with her, following close behind, enveloping us. She had trouble speaking English, and did so with a thick Cree accent.

“Hey you,” she said, addressing Frank. “Hey you... you... sheen my hushband?” He didn’t answer. She tapped a finger against his shoulder and asked again. Frank was doing a strange thing: he was looking straight ahead of himself as if the old woman were not there. He wasn’t just ignoring her—he wasn’t even seeing her at all. She stood breathing heavily for a moment, little whimpering sounds coming from the back of her throat. The beer gardens, the
people and noise, the rinky-dink band all faded out as I
watched that old woman wander away and Frank just sitting
there, not saying a word, and staring off into the dark.
And at five this morning the sun filtered through the still
dusty atmosphere of the deserted rodeo grounds as I stood
dead on my feet drinking coffee and watching Frank ef­
tortlessly pick up the last piece of the ferris wheel. It was a
two-hundred-pound iron brace and he started spinning
around with it as if it were ·nothing. The rest of the crew stood
around cheering him on until he heaved it up onto the bed of
the trailer. He'd been working with a vengeance since he
stepped out of the beer gardens. He shut the door of the trailer
and walked toward me through the orange-yellow light.
“Frank, sometimes I figure you're more wh ite than red-and
a horse, too . Who ever heard of a guy drinking two gallons of
beer and working like that the rest of the night.”
“Yeah, well,” said Frank, pouring himself a cup of coffee ,
“sometimes you never can tell. ”
I looked over at Frank stretched out against the front tire of
the truck. He yawned and stared vacantly off towards the
bush, his beer virtually untouched.
“What are you thinking about, Frank?”
He didn't answer right off, but slowly scraped together a
small pile of gravel. He p icked up a handfu l and started
lobbing the stones one at a time into the ditch at the side of the
road. Little bits of dust rose from the weeds and grass as the
gravel hit. There was no wind anywhere, not a breath . The
insect noises became louder and louder to fill the gap while
Frank d idn 't answer .
“I'm not thinking about anything—specifically.”
I lifted my beer and finished it off in one long swallow, and
then, catching my breath, I sa id , “Well , then what are you
thinking about un-specifically?”
“Do you really want to know? I mean, is it that important for
you to know what I’m thinking, or is it just some words you’re
putting together for the occasion?”
Frank was serious, and he sat forward and stared at me.
“Yeah, well,” said Frank, pouring himself a cup of coffee,
“sometimes you never can tell.”

I looked over at Frank stretched out against the front tire of
the truck. He yawned and stared vacantly off towards the
bush, his beer virtually untouched.
“What are you thinking about, Frank?”
He didn't answer right off, but slowly scraped together a
small pile of gravel. He picked up a handful and started
lobbing the stones one at a time into the ditch at the side of the
road. Little bits of dust rose from the weeds and grass as the
gravel hit. There was no wind anywhere, not a breath . The
insect noises became louder and louder to fill the gap while
Frank didn’t answer.
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I lifted my beer and finished it off in one long swallow, and
then, catching my breath, I said, “Well, then what are you
thinking about un-specifically?”
“Do you really want to know? I mean, is it that important for
you to know what I’m thinking, or is it just some words you’re
putting together for the occasion?”
Frank was serious, and he sat forward and stared at me.
The gravel dropped from his hand.
“I guess it’s not all that important to me. It’s just a thing a
person says at a time like this. I don’t know, Frank. Maybe you
felt like talking or something . . . .”
“And maybe you wish you weren’t sitting here. Maybe
you’re wishing the truck hadn’t burned a valve or something.”
“Well, I guess! Don’t you?”
“Yeah. But I was driving. I’m supposed to check the oil.”

“Aw, come on,” I laughed. “It's no big deal, Frank. I don't
hold it against you. I wasn’t even thinking about that, for crying
out loud.”
“What were you thinking about, then?”
“You really want to know? I was thinking about that woman
last night in the gardens, and how you didn’t answer her when
she asked you a question—that's what I was really thinking.”
“That old lady? Man, she was so drunk she didn’t even
know she was talking to me.”
“Yeah, but you knew.”
“So what? What difference does that make? I could have
said anything at all—I could have told her that her husband
died in the outhouse—and it wouldn't have made any dif­
ference to her.”
“Well, at least then you would have said something—even
just to acknowledge her existence.”
“That's crazy,” said Frank, scooping up another handful of
gravel.
“Well, it’s crazy, then, so let's drop it. It just happened to be
on my mind, is all .”
I picked up a handful of gravel and started tossing it one
piece at a time at a particular weed in the ditch. After a while
Frank finished his beer and threw the bottle in the ditch. He
started pitching stones at that, and every now and then I
heard a clink. It was a very satisfactory sound, and I started
throwing at it, too, collecting a few clinks of my own. We were
taking turns now, and when Frank was two clinks ahead of me
I sat forward a little so I could aim better . I was winning twelve
clinks to ten when he threw a handful of gravel at the bottle
and said, “Do you ever wonder why Carlos had me be the
driver of this truck?”
“No, I can’t say that I’ve ever thought about it much.”
“It's because Indians are natural mechanics. We’re sup­
posed to have this feel for life , this brotherhood with the earth
and sky and all the little animals and other crap . We’re so
dumb, we thought that motors were alive , so we took them into
the brotherhood.”
“So? Is it true?”
“I don’t have any more feel for an engine than I have for a
bow and arrow. That’s why this is such a stupid situation.
Carlos should have put gauges in that truck.”
I didn’t know what to say to that, so I said nothing. After a
while, Frank stood up and yawned. He climbed into the cab
and stretched out on the seat, his legs hanging out the open
door.
"Hey, Frank?"
"Yeah, what?"
"Are you sure it's all that serious with the engine? I mean, maybe there's not all that much wrong with it." Nothing. "We could have a look..."
"Yeah, right," he mumbled. "Maybe it's only the rings that burned out."

I lit a cigarette and smoked it quietly while Frank fell asleep. When he started snoring I stood up and walked into the bush a little ways. It was somewhat cooler under the trees, and I lay down and went to sleep. When I woke up it was late in the evening and dark in the trees. I heard the horn blowing on the truck, and stumbled back out to the road. The engine was running and when Frank saw me he revved it up. It didn't miss and it didn't stutter—there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it.

"Let's go!" Frank yelled.

I jumped in and we were rolling before I'd slammed the door shut. Frank was whistling a song to himself and going through the gears, while I sat settled back in the seat not feeling fully awake yet. A cool breeze was coming in through the open windows, and we were moving quickly towards the hills where the sun had just set, throwing up a sheet of bright red afterglow. Frank had the headlights on, and the light flickered through the trees and bushes on both sides. A rabbit ran across the road, dodging from side to side like he was running an obstacle course. It all seemed unreal, dreamy, like we'd only stopped a minute for a break.

"Carlos come by yet?" I asked.
"Nope."

I waited, but he didn't offer anything, so I said, "How'd you get the truck running?"
"The, uh, the vacuum advance line was melted through, so I wrapped some tape around it."
"So there's nothing wrong with the engine?"
"Nope, nothing at all."

I looked straight ahead at the last streak of light above the hills and said, "Yeah, well, sometimes you never can tell."

Frank grinned, leaned an arm out the window, and went back to whistling. I sat back and enjoyed the ride.
MADELAINE: (hesitantly) Hazel, have you fed Tabby today? I haven’t seen her since this morning. She was mewing and prowling about the pantry, but I thought that it was Tuesday—your day to feed her.

HAZEL: You didn’t feed her? It’s Wednesday, not Tuesday. Really, must one remind you constantly of your duties? Yesterday you didn’t change the doilies on the server. The one with the violets is right there. (Points to sideboard.) I laid the one with the roses on the drying rack and you still forgot.

MADELAINE: I know I’m forgetful. (She shrugs a thin, white cardigan sweater over her shoulders.) It’s a bit chilly in here, isn’t it?

HAZEL: I was just thinking that it was rather warm. I feel a mite flushed. Do I look flushed?

MADELAINE: You didn’t feed her? It’s Wednesday, not Tuesday. Really, must one remind you constantly of your duties? Yesterday you didn’t change the doilies on the server. The one with the violets is right there. (Points to sideboard.) I laid the one with the roses on the drying rack and you still forgot.

HAZEL: Oh, I don’t know, dear. In this light you just look rosy, almost dewy. You know, when I was a girl, I had the most beautiful white skin—I used a cucumber-and-lemon solution. Most healthy for the pores.

HAZEL: I always swore by buttermilk. Buttermilk and egg whites. Of course, I didn’t have to worry much about the sun because mother would never let me out of the house without a hat.

MADELAINE: I think that a suntan makes a girl look rough and, well, a little mannish, if you know what I mean.

HAZEL: Oh, yes, definitely. Well, do you remember Anna Gibson? She always went about with short sleeves and no hat—looked like the tongue of my boot by the end of the summer. Seems I recall that she got married and had quite a large family.

MADELAINE: With a bookkeeper on the railroad. When she died, they only had her on view for one afternoon. I counted six floral arrangements—all from her family. Not one show from somebody who really mattered.

HAZEL: That’s right. Not even the Ladies’ Literary Club. Of course, she wasn’t a member, but still, you’d think.

MADELAINE: You’d think that any young woman would naturally belong to the Guild. But Anna never did have much cultivation. She used to play the piano quite prettily and read poetry too, but nothing of any substance.

HAZEL: Oh, yes, quite musical. She even tried to convince everyone that Prokofiev was as great as Mozart. I never. Have you ever?

MADELAINE: And she also tried to read D. H. Lawrence at the senior girls’ talent show. Simply gauche. I have never heard anything as disgusting since. I read a passage from The Old Curiosity Shop—the part where Little Nell dies. It always moves me so. I think that the true test of an artist is whether or not he can move his audience to tears. Why, when I read that passage, the whole audience was sighing and wiping tears from their eyes. Yes, I truly believe that I was the hit of the evening.

HAZEL: But what about my rendition of “I’m Only a Bird in a Guilded Cage”?

MADELAINE: That was par excellence. No one cried, but it was still a moving performance. Half of the audience went out for some fresh air.

HAZEL: Well, when your voice quavered like a goat I thought Harley Tibbet would swallow his beard. He laughed so hard that his nose started bleeding. Right about the time Little Nell passed on to her great reward. What a bunch of drivel.

MADELAINE: Drivel! I wouldn’t dare say that if I were you. You’re calling one of the masters of the English language a wordmonger?

HAZEL: Sentimental slop.

MADELAINE: As if singing that utterly revolting song qualifies as art. The only reason anyone clapped for you was either out of pity or relief. Your voice has all the resonance of a punctured bellows. Your vibrato wasn’t intentional; it was really a nervous quaver.

HAZEL: At least Harley Tibbet didn’t laugh at me. He told me that I could sing a duet with him any day of
the week.

MADELAINE: Didn't you wonder why he wasn't more specific? A man who sits on the roof of his house and watches the sun through a magnifying glass ought to have a clear head. Besides, he doesn't have any teeth.

HAZEL: He's dead.

MADELAINE: I don't think that would have worked out in any case.

HAZEL: You don't think what would have worked out? There never was anything between us that could be misconstrued as prurient.

MADELAINE: There never was anything that could be misconceived as prudent. A word to the wise is sufficient.

HAZEL: That word is jealousy. You've always been jealous of my superior accomplishments and you know it. I've always had a much smaller waist than you.

MADELAINE: At ninety pounds it's no surprise.

HAZEL: When I was in my prime I weighed more than ninety pounds!

MADELAINE: Litotes, litotes.

HAZEL: I know all about that unsightly wart that Dr. Smythe removed—I never heard of a seven pound wart before in all my life, and a boy wart at that.

MADELAINE: That's disgusting.

HAZEL: I know all about that unsightly wart that Dr. Smythe removed—I never heard of a seven pound wart before in all my life, and a boy wart at that.

MADELAINE: At least it proves that Harley had some gumption after all. For a man with no teeth, he certainly bit off more than he could chew.

MADELAINE: All ill-founded rumors.

HAZEL: I think foundling would be a better choice of words, don't you?

MADELAINE: Well, do you think I've forgotten about Elizabeth Cook?

HAZEL: The girl with the big heart and the big purse to match.

MADELAINE: Oh, that's right. I'd almost forgotten all about her.

HAZEL: You had her come over to my house on a Sunday afternoon and ask me in front of all of our company if I'd like to join her company. I'll never forgive or forget for that humiliation.

MADELAINE: How do you know that I'm behind that incident? It could have been one of your countless other supposed friends. In fact, I could swear that I used to see you and Elizabeth standing on the corner in front of the drugstore on Saturday nights. You always did look good in red.

HAZEL: Your best color has always been yellow—it matched the delicate, subtle undertones in your complexion.

MADELAINE: You've always tried to change the subject when I hit too close to the mark. I could always tell by your chin that you are a weak person. Your chin has no character. It could be anybody's chin.

HAZEL: Your chin reminds me of the Duchess in Alice in Wonderland. It really shows your stubborn determination to stick it into everybody else's affairs.

MADELAINE: Your vocabulary is spotted with such innuendo that I simply cannot continue this discussion any longer.

HAZEL: "Simply" was an appropriate choice of words, I must say.

MADELAINE: Your wit, ascerbic though it is, has always amused me. It's so refreshingly naive.

HAZEL: Who likes Little Nell? Did I hear someone say the word "NAIVE"?

MADELAINE: Well, that's very good for today. What do you say to a game of chess?

HAZEL: Sounds fine. I'm getting sick of this game. One last thing, though: would you say that I'm ahead or that your score still beats mine? I had some splendid notions tonight. Anna Gibson, Harley Tibbet, Elizabeth Cook, and Dr. Smythe. That's worth at least fifty points, wouldn't you say, dear?
Figure Study #1

Stan Myers
Route 30 into Iowa

Pass the Northwestern railyard
down by the muddy jungle.
Cross the toll bridge into Clinton.
Follow signs west into corn.

Father, from the farm,
rolls down the window
reaches for the air vent
rears back in his seat.

Elbow out the window,
head cocked to the side,
he inflates his lungs
and says, "Mmm, fresh air."

"Makes you feel so healthy.
Ahhh, good country in your nose.
Clear your sinuses
better than a prescription."

Us kids in the back seat
hands over our faces
heads between our knees
gagged at the stinking thought.

All those tiny particles up your nose.
That mud and slop by the trough.
Breakfast poured over their heads
running behind the ears slop slurp.

The road curves into bottom land.
Top soil erodes to another river.
A manure spreader works
contoured fields after supper.

Bob Boomsma
It took Dad and me from afternoon on one day
until sundown the next
to grease the windmill.

The first afternoon we went to town
for a six-pack of beer,
put the beers into a gunny sack,
and hung the sack in the well on clothesline.
The mill above the well looked shorter than forty feet.

The next morning after milking and breakfast
we walked into the pasture.
Dad had an empty bucket to drain the old oil into
and I new oil in a new tin can.

Dad sighed
and started up the ladder,
each foot on a step for five steps,
then both feet on one step for three steps,
and then stood on the eighth step
complaining of dizziness.
He came back down.

It was my turn.
I made it twelve steps up,
one foot on a step but breathing hard,
when Dad called up that I had the new oil.
I had to go back for the empty bucket.

It was harder my second time
and slower with the bucket. The whole mill
shivered in sympathy. I managed only to peek
onto the platform, to lift the empty bucket above
my head with my free hand, and tip the bucket
onto the platform. Then I too was dizzy.
I came down, the old oil
still undrained.

Getting the better of ourselves
proved time-consuming. By now it was
coffee time. In the kitchen we admitted
to Mother that all we had achieved
was an empty bucket
on the platform.

Mother reminded us that my brother Klaas,
now, alas, in service,
used to grease the mill on his way to catch
the school bus,
starting out a half-hour early. And he never
even had a drop
of grease on him at school that day.
Mother reminded us that Gerrit Henry, Klaas's friend around the corner, not in service and available, went up his dad's windmill with the full can and the empty can, drained the old oil, spread-eagled himself flat against the wheel, and had his dad put the mill in gear. Afterwards he said it had been better than a ferris wheel. Running the mill had got the last drop of oil out, and he had added new oil before coming down, all in one trip. Why couldn't we be like that? She might as well have said, "Napoleon: now there's a hero for you!"

In the pasture after coffee Dad said, "We'll never make it without the beer." He had hoped he could bring the sixpack back to Doc's Cafe, untouched. The trickle and then the drip from the gunny sack, the haul of the cold clothesline, and then the beer itself, all would have restored us if we had been thirsty and tired. We were afraid, not thirsty and tired, and the beer was our bitter anesthetic. We needed a bottle apiece for a full dose.

It was guilt and not the beer that got Dad to the top. He had to prove to himself that the beer had been necessary. How explain the beer to God come Judgment Day if he couldn't show that the beer had helped? I cheered when he made it: Oranje boven! And I cheered again when he opened the petcock and drained the old oil out into the bucket I had delivered earlier at such pain. But his eyes were bright as brimstone looking down, the guilt still there. How could he ever know for sure he hadn't faked the fear to justify the beer? He trembled all the way down, step by step, rung by rung, the full bucket tilting ominously as he changed it from one hand to the other. The wind whipped spatters over his bib-overall and cast-off Sunday tie. I remembered Klaas greasing the mill, clean.
We put the windmill in gear.
Three revolutions would have cleaned it
but we let it run longer to get it really clean.
Need I add that nobody was spread-eagled against the wheel?
We talked about the relativity of height, depth, space, and time,
postponing the minute when I would need to go up with new oil.
When we could think of no more to say, I started up.
On the twelfth step I glanced at my wristwatch.
We had talked for a half-hour: it was an hour
since our beers. "My beer's worn off,"
I called down, "I'm dizzy from the height.
I'm coming down for more beer.
But what would Mother say
if she smelled the beer
at dinner? We decided
to wait till afternoon.

At dinner Mother assumed
we were finished.
She greeted us like conquering heroes.
We had to admit only the old oil was drained out.
Had she known that, she muttered,
she would have made sandwiches
and not killed herself fixing pork chops
and apple pie, and
enough was enough,
we should get Gerrit Henry.

I waved her still
with bravado I didn't feel
and Dad prayed at table.
He might as well have prayed outright
for God's blessing on my perilous journey.
As it was, he prayed for God's blessing
in all difficult circumstances
and paused and swallowed.
No doubt from that moment legions
of angels hovered around me
but I was too frightened
to consider angels.
At prayer I considered
these fragile folded bones called
hands and at dinner I choked
on my pork chop and refused
my pie.
After dinner
the windmill had doubled in size
in the full glow of an Iowa afternoon.
Dad and I began with a beer apiece on the ground.
Who knows? If I failed again, he would need to be ready.
Actually, I surprised us both. I scrambled up, poured the oil in,
closed the petcock, and threw the empty tin down. It bounced higher than Dad's head! What a height, to make a can bounce higher than Dad's head.
Promptly I was paralyzed.
"You done real good," Dad called, "come down."
"Wait till I get a notion," I said, and didn't budge.
"I'll go home for tea without you."
I could do nothing.
"You got a piece of pie coming."
I could do nothing.
"There still are two beers in the well."
I still could do nothing.
"Must we get Gerrit Henry to fetch you down?"
Mention of Gerrit Henry
made me go prone on the platform,
clutch the edge, hunt for the spokes
and undertake my quavering descent.

Then it was tea-time.
Mother poured us tea
but gave us no hero's welcome.

After tea, we did chores,
after chores, we milked,
after milking, we ate supper,
and after supper, Dad remembered the beers.
You couldn't return two beers out of a six-pack to Doc's Cafe.

That beer—
  with Dad in twilight
  at the mill
  all fear gone,
  well, as gone as fear ever gets—
that beer is the only beer I have ever enjoyed.

But Mother's diary is too spare for June 11, 1944:
"Dad and Sietze greased the mill today."
If ever I did a day's work, I did it that day.
Getting into Leibniz

A brief critique
of the man A. Alexander Milne has called
“the moron of philosophy”

Baron Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz: just who was this controversial seventeenth-century philosopher, statesman, and man of science? Was he the brilliant, voluble, deeply religious universal genius that his publishers maintained he was, or was he the “grassy crackpot” whom his father disowned in print, and whom friends refused to invite to formal functions? Why does the Society of Leibniz celebrate the date of its mentor’s death rather than that of his birth? The answers to these and many other unasked and unimportant questions lie in this remarkable man’s rich life and inane writings.

Best known as a philosopher, especially with regard to his concepts of monadism, possible worlds, and his infinitesimal calculus, Leibniz was much more—truly a renaissance man. He was a diplomat, a theologian, a mathematician, an historian, a lawyer, a scientist, an inventor, a philologist, a poet, and a part-time aluminum siding salesman. Even his most caustic critics have had to admit that Leibniz changed the course of continental thought and politics. On the other hand, loyal supporters have never overcome the criticisms that he was a sloppy dresser and that he occasionally spat on floors in public. In any case, Leibniz’s reputation is unassailable, perhaps because no one is entirely certain where it is housed.

Leibniz was born in 1646, at the conclusion of the Thirty Years War in which he lost his grandfather, Hadrian, a military strategist who had risen to the rank of general in the Prussian army during the Moronic Wars of the late sixteenth century. Young Leibniz was not to become a career officer as his father and grandfather before him had, however; tales of the Thirty Years War deeply affected him, causing him to diligently pursue peace throughout his lifetime, and to scamper into closets whenever he heard loud noises. Ironically, the latter habit almost destroyed his effectiveness as privy concilor at Hanover in 1679, when noise from palace reconstruction had Leibniz spending more time in hiding than in the delicate negotiations to which he was called. T. Seuss Geisel, in his perceptive biography Laughable Leibniz (Knopf, 1970), suggests that Leibniz came perilously close to inviting an international altercation with his erratic behavior. The catastrophe was averted only after the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg issued Leibniz a stern warning to “quit the clowning and pacify these nyrds.” He was able to do so only after he had used a considerable portion of his father’s estate to bribe the parties concerned.

Another interesting historical footnote, about which Leib-
Leibniz’s biographers are unanimously agreed, is the near-disaster of his meeting with Spinoza in 1676. Leibniz was returning to his native Germany from France by way of England and Holland, and decided to visit the Dutch philosopher whose reputation at that time was rapidly growing. It is fortunate indeed that neither of the philosophers understood a word the other spoke, because Spinoza’s neopantheism is typical of the ideologies which regularly sent the pluralistic Leibniz into murderous rages. In addition, Leibniz was fiercely anti-Semitic, and had he discovered that Spinoza was a Jew, he might well have bitten his nose off, as he had those of three other Jews.

In addition to his humanitarian efforts, Leibniz busied himself with some formidable technological problems. In a letter to Herzog Johann Friedrich in October of 1671, Leibniz claims “...I have restored the lost invention of Drebel that enables one to go with a ship under the surface of the water (for it is tranquil enough under the water) or during an attack by sea-robbers...” and modern engineers have validated his apparent success in the endeavor. Unfortunately, neither Drebel nor Leibniz solved the problem of getting the ship or its passengers back above the water once it had been submerged. Leibniz lost three of his uncle’s merchant ships in experimentation before his uncle was notified and convinced him to discontinue the unauthorized work.

In 1672, Leibniz, then in hiding from family and relatives, invented a calculating machine capable of performing operations in multiplication, division, extraction of square roots, and income tax evasion. The machine met with great popular success and Leibniz returned to France to seek patents for it, and to fight extradition on charges of attempting to defraud the German government.

Despite Leibniz’s great work in diplomacy, science, and ecumenical reform, his lasting place in history ultimately depends upon his imbecilic philosophical writings, which have variously annoyed and infuriated thinking men ever since their publication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the basis of his writings alone, twentieth-century psychologists have deduced that Leibniz was either a hebephrenic schizoid, a manic-depressive, or was deliberately contriving a hoax. Twentieth-century philosophers are agreed that interpretation of Leibniz’s work is at best a bloody free-for-all.

One prominent philosopher who dirtied his reputation with a look at Leibniz was Bertrand Russell. In his Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz, Russell suggests that “Leibniz’s system follows correctly and necessarily from five premises,” which he enumerates as follows:

I. Every proposition has a subject and predicate, but often no

Russell finds the first premise to be in contradiction with the fourth and fifth premises, and the whole lot to be in contradiction with any sane man’s mental processes. Most contemporary scholars agree with him on this point.

Leibniz postulated that the universe was filled with an infinite number of self-aware entities which he called monads. As noted philosopher-theologian Allen Stewart Konigsberg suggests, “these [monads] were set in motion by some cause or underlying principle, or perhaps something fell somewhere.” In any case, the monads are self-contained and mutually exclusive—”windowless” in the idiom—and have no cause/effector relationship with one another. It is one of Leibniz’s typically opaque postulates that although each monad is absolutely distinct and disassociated from every other monad, nevertheless each monad “mirrors,” or is somehow aware of, every other monad in relationship to itself. As H. Leppenschild notes, this concept makes it nonsensical to phone anyone up.

Never one to leave well enough alone, Leibniz developed an intricate hierarchy of monads, ranging from the “naked monad,” synonymous with inanimate matter, to the supreme monad, synonymous with God. He had a very low opinion of the baser monads, and would seldom condescend to speak to them; for years he campaigned for the restriction of Nuremberg dinner clubs to all monads which didn’t reflect the highest metaphysical distinctions.

Leibniz’s famous concept of “possible worlds” evolves from his views of contingency and freedom with regard to his monads. He believed that all events in the real world are necessary; viz., any specific event is as necessary and predictable as the outcome of a mathematical equation. Thus, with sufficient knowledge of empirical data, logic should be able to predict any event in time with the same accuracy that it predicts four as the sum of two and two. Such knowledge implies logical determinism, however, and Leibniz’s mother had forbidden him ever to play with any kind of determinism. To preserve human freedom, Leibniz contended the theoretical existence of other possible worlds—worlds in which different choices implied different realities.
He made the rent so incredibly high in these alternate worlds, however, that humanity could not begin to afford them, and had to be content with its lot in this, the "best of all possible worlds." Voltaire satirized the idea of possible worlds in his novel Candide, but Leibniz remained hard-nosed about it and reportedly went to his grave a bitter man because he had not received a prize for the discovery.

Leibniz's philosophical meandering has likewise amused and enraged serious students for nearly three centuries now. Reactions ranging from those of the near-manic adulation of a small cultist community in Leibniz, Missouri, to the petulant refusal of the editors of the Encyclopedia Americana to acknowledge his historical existence, have done much to obscure the proper significance of the man's thought, if any. The controversy continues, if not to rage, at least to smolder. To date, Leibniz's supporters, such as Kurt Waldheim (who has characterized him as "just far-freakin'-out"), remain ardent but few; the general consensus of the philosophical community is perhaps most succinctly expressed by philosophical historian A. J. Foyt: "Whatever has been said of Leibniz by his disciples, I say this: Philosophy would not suffer one whit the loss of this epochal mongoloid. It is a mystery that anything this nitwit wrote has survived him—and it is an indictment of reason and taste that he is still studied from any but a comic pose."

1The quotation is taken from a letter Leibniz's father wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz in 1674 which later fell into the hands of a rotary club which published it much to Leibniz's political discredit.

2The Duke of Brunswick-Luneburg was notorious for his bombastic sarcasm, and it was rumored that he was not in his right mind (as witness his employ of Leibniz).


Edge of Around

Stan Myers