

Spring 2002

Anecdotes

J. Robert Lennon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Lennon, J. Robert (2002) "Anecdotes," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 57 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss57/15>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

SHORTCUT

ONE NIGHT, WHEN I WAS young, I fell asleep while driving down a Midwestern two-lane county highway and woke instantly to find myself on a wide, empty interstate in a powerful thunderstorm. I pulled off the road and waited until the rain stopped, then drove to the next exit, where I found a motel and checked in for the night. I was met the next morning by bright sunlight and a feeling of disorientation, because, although the sleep had refreshed me, I had no idea where I was. A glance at the telephone book in my room reminded me that I was in Iowa. This mystery solved, I went out to the cafeteria adjoining the lobby of the hotel and sat down to eat breakfast.

Seats were scarce, so when a young woman asked if she could join me, I was happy to oblige her. I engaged her in conversation and soon realized we were headed in the same direction. Since she had been stranded here by a bout of engine trouble, I offered to drive her the rest of the way. She happily accepted.

By the end of our trip, the young woman and I had fallen in love, and within a year we were married. Now we live together in another part of the country, our children moved out, and nearing the age we were when we met. The story of our meeting in the Iowa motel is told often to guests, and occasionally we retell it to one another, for sentimental reasons.

That morning, as we climbed into the car together, I recalled the sudden change in the highway and the weather the previous night. When I'd gotten settled behind the wheel, I consulted my map to see where I'd gone wrong. I was at first puzzled, then horrified, to discover that the road I'd been driving on was practically parallel to the one I'd exited after the storm, with as many as sixty miles separating the two. In order to switch from one to the other, I would have had to make several connections on unfamiliar country roads, which might have taken more than ninety minutes. I had no memory of this drive, and could not have known how to accomplish it without careful study of the map. Nonetheless, I appeared to have done so while sleeping.

When, years later, I finally told my wife, she dismissed out of hand my version of events and insisted that I must simply have found a shortcut.

TWINS

In college I knew a young man and woman, twin brother and sister, remarkable for their affinity: they were both slight, blond-haired and handsome; spoke with the same emphatic rhythm; walked with a confident, long-legged stride and liked the same music, food, art, and film. They finished one another's sentences and were adept at games of pantomime, during which it sometimes seemed each could read the other's mind. The two were inseparable, and could occasionally be persuaded to tell the story of how their birth parents were killed in an auto accident, and how they came to be adopted by the dean of our college and his wife. They had been a campus fixture since their infancy, and were well known and loved by students, faculty and staff alike.

When they were about to graduate, the twins were gravely injured in their own auto accident. Though they survived, it was discovered in the hospital that not only were they not twins, they were not even related. Repeated blood tests confirmed this fact, and the story briefly became a national news item of the "strange but true" variety. After a few years, however, the story vanished, as did the twins.

Many years later I learned, from a mutual acquaintance, that the twins had married. They invited most of their closest friends to the wedding, but few came, or even responded to the invitation. According to my acquaintance, who did attend, the dean and his wife were not there either.

Though my acquaintance saw nothing morally wrong with the union, she did report that their first dance together after exchanging vows was a shocking sight, and one she would never forget. The twins danced face to face, holding each other with passionate intensity, the line between them like a mirror that reflected everything but their gender. No one joined them on the floor, for that dance or any other.

The twins send out a family newsletter every year, complete

with photographs and news. They have adopted a number of children of various races and nationalities, but have had none of their own. There is no consensus among their former friends about whether this is due to some fertility problem, or if it represents a final taboo that not even the twins themselves dared break.

HEIRLOOM

I remember deer hunting with my father when I was a young man. He always carried the same antiquated rifle, its stock and trigger worn from use. Once he pointed out the nearly obliterated remains of a carved set of initials, and he told me the rifle had belonged to his own father, who killed himself when my father was still a boy. In fact, he said, the suicide was committed with this very rifle.

It wasn't until I was much older that I realized how horrifying this revelation was, so horrifying that I later convinced myself I had made the whole story up.

When my father killed himself, I inherited the rifle. By then I had a son of my own, but I had given up hunting in the fall. I put the rifle, along with some other possessions of my father's I couldn't bear to sell, into a self-storage warehouse outside town.

At those times when my unhappiness becomes most difficult to bear, I drive out to the warehouse and stare at the gray corrugated steel door my father's things are stored behind. This never fails to improve my mood. I don't bring the key on these excursions, of course; I haven't seen the key in years and would be hard-pressed to tell you where it is.

THE MOTHERS

Local mothers banded together to exchange advice about and support for the difficult task, which they all shared, of balancing personal ambition and fulfillment with the demands of home and family. Their association was regarded as a great success, and a new sense of confidence and calm seemed to settle over our town, the likes of which had not previously been seen.

So fond of one another did area mothers become that they arranged to take a trip together, an ocean cruise. Area fathers rearranged their work schedules to accommodate the mothers, and prepared to emulate, while they were away, those qualities most commonly associated with the mothers.

While the mothers were gone, our town's business, both private and professional, stopped entirely, and the streets filled up with fathers and children acting in a manner that encompassed not only fatherliness and childishness, but motherliness as well. It was impossible to pin down exactly what behavior, speech, or patterns of thought constituted this motherliness, yet all agreed that there was a surrogate motherliness in the air, neither as full nor as satisfying as the real thing, yet a fair substitute nonetheless.

When the mothers returned, their own inherent qualities had intensified, or perhaps it only seemed that way, as we had grown used to their absence. Whatever the case, this motherliness, combined with that which we had developed without them, created an excess, and emotions ran high for several weeks while we regained our equilibrium.

Though no one wishes to deprive the mothers of further associations, we all found this experience unsettling, and have asked them to refrain in the future from departing all at once. To this, the mothers have agreed, though not without some reluctance.

THE FATHERS

The fathers in our town began to worry that they were paying their children insufficient attention, so a coalition of concerned fathers, headed by the mayor (a father of four), organized a picnic to be held at our lakeside park, which all the fathers and their children were expected to attend. Those games traditionally played between fathers and children—baseball and football, for example—were organized; foods, such as hot dogs and hamburgers, that children most commonly associated with their fathers, were cooked; and live entertainment determined to be fatherly in nature—specifically, a rock concert—was scheduled.

Few would argue that the fathers and children did not have a good time. Nevertheless, things did not go quite as planned. The children objected to the fathers' participation in games, as their large size and superior skills upset the balance of play. The foods, which the children especially savored, were refused by many fathers, who, concerned about their health, wished to avoid cholesterol and fat. And the rock concert, which addressed the generational gap by including both "oldies" and loud contemporary music, succeeded at neither, driving the children to the lakeside, where they threw rocks into the water and at one another, and pushing the fathers into little groups, where they discussed sports and drank beer.

When the picnic was over, some suggested that the very detachment from their children that the fathers displayed was a defining characteristic of fatherhood, and should be embraced, not discouraged. This suggestion was received with approval by fathers and children alike, and no further picnics are planned.

MONEY

At present, we have accumulated some debt, and though we often wish it were gone entirely, we recognize that there is some satisfaction in reducing it incrementally through our monthly payments. The payments, though small, imbue our bill-paying with a sense of greater purpose, as in making them we are working gradually toward the greater goal of debt elimination.

That said, we are not fully satisfied with our current income level, nor with the speed of our debt reduction. At the present rate, our debt would be erased some years after our planned retirement. Ideally, we would like to pay off our debt at exactly the time of our retirement. This would necessitate a twenty-percent increase in our earnings.

However, it would not necessarily be better to earn even more than that. Still greater earnings would fulfill our desires too quickly, leaving us with years of aimless living, during which we would miss our longtime goal of erasing debt.

Then again, paying off our debt at retirement might prove equally unsatisfying. Perhaps it is our longing for a twenty-per-

cent increase in earnings that pleases us, rather than the increase itself, insofar as the increase is a plausible, but unlikely, circumstance, and the longing is a sure thing. Perhaps what we really need is a *decrease* in earnings, so that we will pay off our debt approximately at the time of our deaths, or not at all, yet still enjoy imagining the possibility of debt elimination.

Still, if an earnings increase or unexpected windfall were to come our way, we would accept it instantly.

DAMNED IF YOU DO

I do not attend church as I did in my youth, as I have since learned things that convince me of the spuriousness of my religion. Yet I feel guilty for failing to attend. If I do go to church, I am lying, which is sinful; yet if I do not, I am sinning by my failure to worship. But if my religion is spurious, then there is no sin; but if my religion is not spurious, then I sin by believing in its spuriousness.

If I live a life of virtue unconnected to the law of God, then I mock the law of God, as virtue is a creation of His law. Yet, if I abandon God, I must abandon virtue, and thus act against my own convictions. But if I believe that virtue is an inherent property of man, then I must believe in an intelligence behind his existence. But if there is no intelligence behind his existence, there is no more value in virtue than in other forms of behavior. If I believe in Heaven, then I believe in God, so my reluctance to worship condemns me to Hell. Yet if I do not believe in Hell, then I do not believe in Heaven; so I must believe in the permanence of death, which is itself another hell.

If I am fully happy as a non-observant believer, then I am damned, as I presume to lead a full life without worship. But if I am fully happy as a non-believer, then I am a fool, because my death will be permanent. Therefore, I am never fully happy.

UNLIKELY

M., once our close friend, gradually became unbearable as her life's disappointments led to bitterness, finger-pointing, and

crude gossip. We took our time returning her letters and phone calls, finally refusing to answer them at all, and eventually the letters and calls stopped entirely.

Then, just when we thought we would never again hear from her, she contacted us with the terrible news that she had been diagnosed with cancer, and was beginning treatment immediately. Horrified, we apologized for our past inattentiveness to her problems, promising to stay in close touch during her time of need. It seemed now that our complaints about her personality had been petty and perhaps even inaccurate; indeed, it was hard to remember exactly what we had found so unappealing about this friend, whose bravery in the face of death revealed her as a woman of strong, even extraordinary, character.

After a battle of several years, M. succeeded in defeating the cancer, and her doctors reported with pleased surprise that the disease was unlikely to recur. We sent her a large fruit basket in congratulation, accompanied by a letter expressing our gratitude for her years of loyal friendship.

However, our friend's restored health did little to prevent further personal and professional failures, which amassed in much the way they had before she was sick, and she again resorted to monotonous grumbling, accusation, and slander. Once again she became difficult to bear, and again we cut her off, more confident than ever in the rightness of our reaction, even going so far as to surmise that her illness may have been the result, not of random misfortune or genetic error, but of her own bad habits, such as smoking, overeating, and indolence. When recently we learned through the grapevine that she had suffered a relapse and was not expected to survive, we were saddened, but remained convinced that such a thing was unlikely to happen to us.