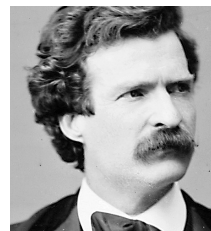
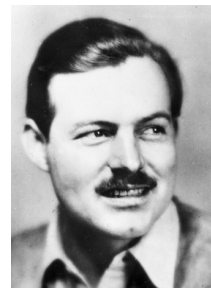


Between 1986 and 1992, I experienced a fertile period of writing. But it was more than that. This was when I developed my writing style. I believe it was around 1989 when I sent the first of my essays to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and—to my delight—the paper bought and published many of them. After that, I was published in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and many other newspapers around the country. I had my own column in the *Mansfield News Journal* and the *Massillon Independent*. In those days, I was writing about anything that came into my head. I wrote about how my wife Marcia arranged our family's shoes in the bathroom. I wrote about the possibility of flies taking

over the world. I wrote about why I hated lawn mowers. I wrote about how ridiculous Earth Day was. I wrote about the trials of working for the U.S. Postal Service.

It was astounding to me that people in Cleveland, Chicago or Atlanta cared about the shoes of my family, or where I worked. It was then that I realized that one of two kinds of writers/writing got published: a writer either had to write about extraordinary things, or write extraordinarily about ordinary things. Because my life was so ordinary, I figured that I had better be writing extraordinarily. But how to write extraordinarily while pretending not to? In other words, how to be brilliant while not coming across pretentious or over-produced? How to look like you're not really trying, while at the same time blinding the reader with science and blasting them with art?

My two writing heroes then were Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway. I admired Hemingway for his economy of style: "It was hot."



Great stuff. Not very funny, but groundbreaking. I admired Twain for his song and dance; Twain was the greatest humorist of all time. Hemingway was a workman, but Twain was a genius. Hemingway slogged through the mud; Twain flitted in the clouds. I thought then that if I could somehow combine the literal, deadpan pronouncements of Ernest Hemingway with the highwire word-flair of Mark Twain, then I would have really have something.

That's what I did and, since 1989, I've been trying to perfect it. If my writing doesn't read like it's falling effortlessly from a fairy-winged muse, then it's simply no good and I start over. As the saying goes: *The*

easier it is to read, the harder it was to write.

Around 1991 I collected about eighty of my essays for a book. The essays were weird in that I had somehow written both cynically and heartwarming on the same topics. Whether I was writing on work, dogs, childbirth, flies or photography studios, one essay was biting critical, and one dripped honey from the soul. I coupled the two viewpoints without so much as a seam. As I said, it was weird, but kind of wonderful at the same time.

The collection first caught the attention of James Prideaux, writer of two television films for Katherine Hepburn, who sent it to Dan Harvey of Putnam/Penguin. From there, it went to Nicholas Weinstock, then of Putnam (next, of Twentieth-Century Fox Television, and currently president of *Invention Films* and contributor to *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times*.) While trying to sell my collection to Putnam,



Katherine Hepburn and James Prideaux on the Vancouver set of *Mrs. Delafield Wants to Marry*.

Weinstock wrote, “Martin Zender’s attention to language and his earnestness in celebrating everyday life is captivating and original. Here is a unique voice that has not been heard before.” That and five bucks will get you a Café Latte at Starbucks. It was a near-miss in New York for yours truly. Weinstock took a lot of my stuff out of the book—he mismanaged the presentation, if you ask me. He later admitted to it. The result was a near-miss at mainstream relevance. This is the story of my literary life. But what it actually is, is a great rescue executed by God Himself, saving me *from* mainstream relevance and calling me



into His service and into the service of the body of Christ.

The “problem” is that all of this writing that I did in the late 80’s is still good. So I have decided to put it together myself this year and publish it in a book through good old Starke & Hartmann, Inc. Today, it is my pleasure to share a few excerpts from this book with you. Enjoy the journey back into what I consider to have been the golden years of my life, when I was married and raising a family.

(Author’s note: The name of the mother of my children is Marcia. Some of you know her as Melody. In this book, I call her “Eureka,” mainly because I was a freak of creativity back then and, in Eureka, I had “found something.” My two eldest sons are Gabe and Luke, but in this book I call them “Arty” and “Dibs.” Why? For the pure hell of it.)

PROVISIONS

People made fun of me last winter for burning fancy-pants fuel instead of cutting my own wood. I have been called, “Thermo-Priss,” “Eco-Baby,” and “Heat-tard.” In this way, if I can encourage even one other person on the planet to become as I am, I will do it.

No one should even consider cutting wood to heat his or her home. It is too dangerous. There is a reason that the word “chainsaw” appears next to the word “massacre” in so many popular horror movies. Should a fuel oil or natural gas person run out of money, wood *is* an option, I admit that. But there is no need for losing any blood. If you must give up your common sense and do the wood thing, then you must burn tables and chairs and wooden salad utensils. I don’t care how you do it. Throw the stuff against a wall and break it all into small pieces, if you have to. Anything is better than accidentally cutting your head in half, length-wise, in the woods.

I encourage you to become like me. But beware, because chainsaw people want you to be like *them*—or at least visit them in the hospital. Here is some advice for you: If a chainsaw person wants you to join him or her in the woods to make trees fall the wrong way, say “No!” Be prepared to provide at least three fancy-pants excuses why you can’t come, including fear of a) pain, b) dismemberment, and c) death.

If you ever become surrounded by at least two people talking about chainsaws and one is wearing a Stihl cap, do the following three things to keep them from calling you names: 1) put on safety glasses, 2) say, “Where are my lumber gloves?” 3) say, “Where are my Paul Bunyan



boots?” 4) tell the people that you are “just as rugged” and “just as mean” as they are, 5) listen carefully to the people and pretend to know what they are talking about, 6) say “you betcha, you betcha, you betcha” as many times as you can, and 7) try to grow a beard as fast as you can (this goes for women, too).

When you are relaxing in the sweltering homes of people who are more rugged than yourself, always be a Christian and try to admire their frontier spirit. Try not to talk about how easy your life is. Tell the people that they remind you of Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe. This will make the people feel better about their missing fingers. Do not mention your furnace. Try not to tell a person with half a face how easy it is to push your little thermostat knob up. Try to remember the sacrifices that pioneer people made back in the 1800’s. These people died in covered wagons and crumblebuggies somewhere between Nebraska and Oregon just so you could pick up the phone and call the propane guy.

When the chainsaw people have to interrupt their conversation with you for the fifth time to get up to throw more wood into their hellish receptacles, say “I know that you people are trying to kindle the pioneer spirit, and possibly even your own houses. I know that you (giggle) save a lot of (giggle) money (giggle).” (Giggle through your hands if you have to. At least you *have* hands. It is not rude to giggle. It is human nature.)

There is one sure way to buoy the spirits of your pioneering friends who think that they are saving so much money. Make Christian remarks about 1) the neatness of their woodpile, 2) the length of their woodpile, 3) the

height of their woodpile, 4) the big size of their woodpile 5) something else about their goddamn woodpile.

I am happy that you, who are my loyal reader, want to be like me. But beware of people who do not want to be like us. I did not tell you all of the bad names that chainsaw people have called me. I didn’t want to discourage you, but now it is time. These people have also called me “Wood Wuss” and “Tree Baby.” (My response is always: “You’re right! I am all these things, and more! I am ‘Ambulance Scaredy-Cat!’ as well; don’t forget *that* one.”) When chainsaw people say mean things like this to you, do the same thing I do. Say a mean thing back to them. It is still Christian as long as you are reading the New Testament in your spare time. Quote your mentor and mine, Abraham Lincoln. This man was possibly our greatest president with or without a beard, especially when he said: “I never did like work and I don’t deny it.” Abraham Lincoln always regretted those days when he split rails in Kentucky and his mother looked like a Quaker. In the White House, he burned fuel oil and

**“Tell the people that they
remind you of Paul Bunyan.
This will make them feel better
about their missing fingers.”**

sometimes spare chairs and salad utensils. He had his wife Mary throw the chairs against walls, which she was going to do anyway.

If you are true to our cause, then the time will come when you will be forced to defend your God-given right to sit down and drink hot chocolate while other people are dismembering themselves in the woods. Your best offense is a love of nature. I have written a dictum along this line that has served me well. A dictum is a prepared statement, I’m sure. If it’s not a prepared statement, then I have one anyway. I have printed up a dozen copies of this and I hand it out when trouble comes, which is all the time. I hand it to my chainsaw “friends.” The following dictum is copyrighted, but I don’t care if you use it. In fact, I want you to:

“I, _____, do solemnly swear to protect the hearing of our nation’s wildlife, to preserve the rustic beauty of our nation’s trees, to keep mud off the beautiful highways in a country where so many vehicles that aren’t pick-up trucks go, and to keep all emergency vehicle

people in garages washing their vehicles in the most boring manner possible.”

This dictum will anger chainsaw people, trust me. Even the women will stroke their beards and scowl at you. Do not be affected by this. None of them know even the opening lines of the Gettysburg Address. Do not stroke anything in return, not even your hot chocolate mug. Respond in a calm and peaceful way when a charred, wood-burning person uses your balled-up dictum to stoke his stove:

Turn up the thermostat.

Which is not to say that I don't work because I do. I work for the Postal Service. As far as recessions and other financial perils go, I thought my job was fool-proof. I'm not even sure what a recession is except I know that it has something to do with me not having money.

I'm what they call a “part-time flexible” in Willard, Ohio, working for the Postal Service. I've been that for about seven years now. I make pretty good money each and every hour that I work, and there are pretty good benefits with that. I have provided good things for my wife Eureka and my two sons on 30-35 hours a week of this kind of work. This bought new carpet, seven new storm windows, a plastic police motorcycle for the kids, and a subscription to *Bicycling* magazine for me. There were other luxuries like showers hot and long enough to make the wallpaper inside the shower curl. (Why do we have wallpaper *inside* the shower? Never mind that!)

But then something happened. They say the mail volume dropped. No one else probably noticed it but the men and women in my company with the calculators have fawned over it like Bambi. So from the offices off Pennsylvania Avenue to the hardwood work floor in Willard, the word went forth: Send the “flexies” (the “flexibles,” the people with no regular hours or guaranteed happiness) home.

I start work at 5:30 a.m. but on more than one day this Spring I got sent home in time to wave at kids in school buses—kids on their way *to* school. My supervisor is a pleasant woman named Barb and I know she's just doing her job. She comes at me with sad eyes (I think they are real eyes because she was once a “flexie” like me) and says: “I guess you can call it a day.”

This new way of living hit home only eight weeks ago when I saw someone at the high school baseball game digging with a reckless absence of care into a family-sized bag of cheese puffs. (The admission to that game was free.) It had been a hard week. This means that my paycheck the Friday before had made me laugh. It wasn't

the kind of laugh you do at a joke, but the kind you do at a dead battery in the rain having just dropped your Auto Club membership.

This person was digging hog-like into a family-sized bag of cheese puffs. I stared at the person not because they were digging like a hog, but because I wanted some of their cheese puffs.

This was the evening that Eureka made homemade bread and peanut butter cookies. The butter melted all over the top of the bread because the bread was still hot. The peanut butter cookies were heaped by Eureka with great extravagance and fanfare on top of one another. We ate leftover chili that evening that still had zing in it, far down in the beans. I knew that evening that my family was rich and blessed. I remember thanking God before supper for sending the boys and me a thrifty homemaker.



Strange things started happening to me after that. I started turning out lights and taking shorter showers. I started putting leftover dinner scraps into plastic boxes. I used to tease Eureka for doing that. “Throw it out,” I would always say. “Rid us of it.” But those days were over. Then I turned down the thermostat and wondered out loud whether I really needed *Bicycling* magazine.

It felt good to be doing these things. I became a man with a purpose. The money crunch had driven me to it because it's easy to avoid purposes and crunches. It was the first time I really felt like a provider. I would not only need to provide my family with money now, but with the wisdom needed to make the money *do* things. I started cracking my Bible more than ever. I found comfort there in the information that some rich people are really poor and some poor people are really rich.

If I pointed to a rich man and I said to you, “Look, there goes a rich man,” most people would turn to study

the man's clothes or his car. I don't know if you would do this, but you might. You don't have to. You might study the man's house, I'm not sure. Don't worry, most people would. Most people might study the man's kids' shoes. After all, I did say, "There goes a rich man." I used to turn that way, too. But now when somebody says, "Look, there goes a rich man," I study the hands instead of the dress of the man's wife. I study the character instead of the shoes of the man's children. I study the rule of peace in the voice and hands of the man himself.

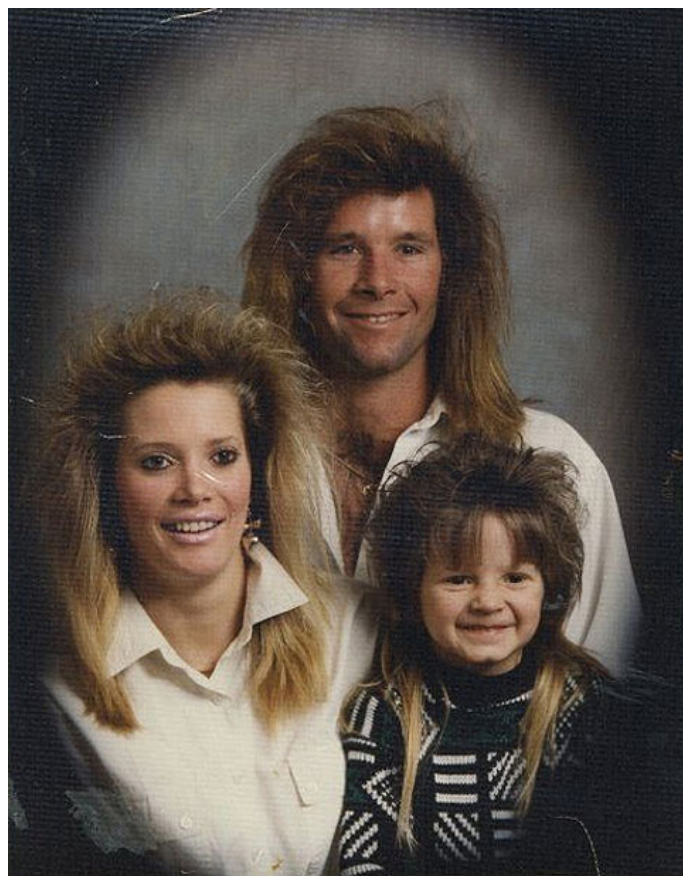
I heard a story once about a Depression family celebrating Christmas. Celebrating isn't the right word for it. It wasn't celebration in the same way Kool and the Gang makes you think of it today. It wasn't a gaggle of floral sugarness on a tinselpick, or a heap of presents in a party bag, or the self-conscious type of hugging that pat, pat, pat, pat, pats another person's back in the valley between the shoulder blades. It was a celebration of homemade wooden toys and the brains needed to make them. It was a celebration of hand-knit sweaters and the patience needed to craft them. It was a celebration of waterproof roofs and the strength needed to patch them, and of families promising themselves all over again to one another ("I'm going to be with you and love you no matter what, for the rest of my life") and the peace needed to keep them that way. I end this now with all these things. These things might sound corny in the day of wealth (this kind of writing will be laughed at in some conclaves) but they become warm pocketcoins in the day of want.

Hard times have done me a great favor. They have done this not on the days I read about them in the newspaper, but on the days I waved to the school children on my way home to the place of the flour-dusted wife, the children who call me "father," and the Book of the ill-shod millionaires. ■

STARING

It's good to take your family to a photo studio for a free 8X10 as long as you're willing to spend seventy dollars. The big time portrait studio shops are cahooting with Kodak, the people who make Instamatic cameras in Rochester, New York.

If anybody has ever tried to take a family portrait with an Instamatic camera, they know why I am so mad. There is a reason why Jesus never used an Instamatic. Ordinary



clods without tunics who own Instamatics but who also want good family pictures, are forced into professional studios. This is the reason why Jesus never used one. This is also Phase I of The Plan. This is not my plan, and it is not anyone's plan. It is an orphan plan. But it is a happy, unspanked orphan. Phase I of The Plan makes me need the studio. Phase II gets me there.

To get clods like me to the studio, the studio prints an offer with a coupon. Here is the offer: "DEAR CLOD: REDEEM THIS COUPON FOR A FREE 8X10. PICK UP THE PHONE AND CALL OUR NUMBER AS SOON AS YOU CAN. WHY HAVEN'T YOU DONE IT ALREADY?!"

There is one detail missing from this coupon. It's so long that it doesn't fit onto the coupon. Here it is:

"BRING IN THIS FREE COUPON AND YOU WILL BE GLAD TO GIVE US SEVENTY DOLLARS BEFORE YOU REALIZE WHAT HAPPENED. AND BY THE WAY, YOU MAY NEVER REALIZE WHAT HAPPENED. BUT EVEN IF YOU DO, IT WILL BE FAR TOO LATE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. BECAUSE LISTEN TO THIS: WE HAVE CONDUCTED EXPERIMENTS. BOY, YOU SHOULD SEE ALL THE PROGRESS WE HAVE MADE BECAUSE OF THESE EXPERIMENTS! WE DID A REALLY LONG EXPERIMENT ONE TIME SHOWING

US THAT ORDINARY CLOUDS WITH COWLICKS CAN'T FIGURE OUT HOW *EVERYPART* OF OUR PLAN WORKS FOR OUR GOOD AND FOR THE ILL OF THE CLOUD. ORDINARY, COWLICKED CLOUD PEOPLE TEND TO THINK THAT SOME NEW LAW WILL CAUSE ONE THING TO WORK FOR THEIR GOOD AND FOR *OUR* ILL. THIS IS RIDICULOUS! WHY DO YOU THINK WE CONDUCT THE EXPERIMENTS? BETWEEN YOU AND US, WE HAVE NOT SEEN MISGUIDED CONFIDENCE LIKE THIS IN ANY OTHER GENERATION, UP TO AND INCLUDING THE GEORGE EASTMAN GENERATION, WHO WAS RICH, SMART, AND ALWAYS IN CONTROL OF THE BACK OF HIS HEAD. WHO REALLY GIVES A RAT'S ASS IN HELL ANYWAY? THIS SUITS OUR OVERALL BUSINESS PLAN, AND IT HAS *EVERYTHING* TO DO WITH HOW MUCH MONEY WE MAKE IN ONE YEAR."

Go ahead and go to the studio. I did it.

The photographer sat my family down on a big furry box. While we were sitting on the box, the photographer took an ordinary picture of us. I was picking lint from Eureka's dress and slicking down my hair. Eureka was slicking down my hair, too. I don't know what the kids were doing. Probably slicking down my hair.

Flash and Jesus!

There went our free 8X10, probably.

Now the photographer got tricky. She said, "I'm just fooling around here, but let's try one with just the kids."

I warn you: This is as spontaneous as a garbage dump. I know this now and it's why I'm writing. This maneuver is the steak and potatoes of The Plan. This photo was a miracle. The boys were so happy-looking, and you should have seen how happy Eureka and I were just standing there appreciating how happy our boys were. And I mean this was rare, and the photographer had just captured it in (of course) the studio. We would see this picture, along with our free 8X10, in a week. This would launch Phase III of The Plan.

A week later, and there we were at the view table. (I'm the one who calls it a view table.) The studio people live for this piece of furniture. They carried heavy book bags into large classrooms in order to get them ready for it. They passed exams about it. Their moms and dads gave them cards, cakes and hardy back slaps (and handshakes) when they got their licenses to do it. Now all they needed was me and Eureka and the kids. And here we were!

The Viewing Expert yanked our family portrait from a brown envelope. I could tell she hated it. She slapped it on the counter and said, "Here is your free *picture*."

I looked at the picture. All I could say was: "No." My wife talks to other women all the time and said, "I don't think this will work." The kids didn't do or say anything. They were speechless. They had no speech.

I wanted to go away quickly with all my money still in my shoe, but then the Viewing Expert said, "But not to worry. We do have *this* photograph...", and she slipped *The Masterpiece* from another envelope—and she wore white gloves to do it. This was the Mona Lisa.



Good God. Who wouldn't like it? This photograph was a miracle, like the feast at Cana when Jesus upped the vintage and poured it into drums. How had this happened? I didn't care how it happened because all I knew was that it *had* happened, and that I must somehow obtain the beautiful thing. But I didn't ask how. I told myself I would not break. I said to myself, while standing in front

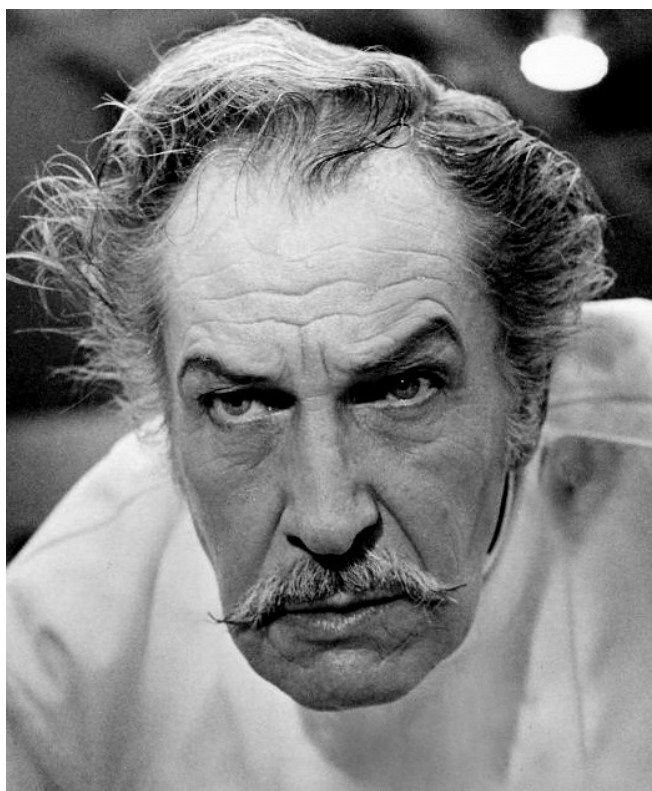
"The Viewing Expert slapped our family portrait onto the counter and said, 'Here is your free *picture*.'"

of the view table, that I would try hard to stay dry under tsunami sales water—*under* tsunami sales water, mind you. The sales pressure would not get to me, I told myself. But I am a man with a cowlick, just like the coupon had no room to say. The company was right about the back of my

head. I looked at the photograph again. *L'apparence de Fatima!* How many questions swam through my mind? Only one, but it was a good one.

"What will happen to this photograph...if we...if we...*don't* buy it?"

"If you...if you...*don't* buy it?" The Viewing Expert rubbed her hands together like Vincent Price in *The Pit and the Pendulum*. Sweat dampened my underarms as the Viewing Expert's fingernails sharpened themselves. She looked like a ghoulish witch as she said, "Why—if you *don't* buy it, *this* photograph will be—*destroyed*." The italics are real, and they are hers.



Did I like hearing the ghoulish witch say that about my children? No. That wasn't The Plan. Did I take the saying of the ghoulish witch into my heart? Oh yes indeed. That *was* The Plan. I pictured Arty and Dibs smiling for eternity into the darkness of a dark brown Dumpster, surrounded by coffee grounds and broken eggshells.

So I asked the ghoulish witch, "What will it take to keep this from happening?"

The ghoulish witch wrestled with this question at the final exam. It was not a hard wrestle for her. She got an "A" on the wrestle. In the hallway after the wrestle, an examiner asked the ghoulish witch to make a training video of her answer. (That's how good she was.) God destined

aforetime that the ghoulish witch would say to me later, "We have a *wonderful* package deal, and it's only seventy dollars."

Thank you, everyone involved. Ghoulish witch, I will give you seventy *thousand* of these dollars, stripped naked and wearing a kitty collar, if that's what it takes to keep the bad thing from happening to my children. I will do anything to protect my children from the dark brown Dumpster with the coffee grounds and the eggshells. Thank you for letting me pay you.

Parents who have not cracked under this offer live to regret it, if they live at all. They can't sleep at night because they lay awake wondering where their children are. Seventy dollars is nothing if it lets you sleep or walk with no ill feeling such as guilt past the brown-Dumpster hells of this world containing the yolk-stained likenesses of children whose parents even now lie wide-eyed in their beds.

Damn it, my bones crack and snap now like Rice Crispies. I used to pour from my bed ten years ago. That was ten years ago. Now my thumbs snap. I put weight on my left hand and my shoulder attacks the forts. Now I've learned to roll off my butt and swing my legs around. This has taken time. My knees will snap anyway, so I creep like a steamroller. *UhnMmmnnnnnow, UhnMmmnnnnnow, UhnMmmnnnnnow*. Why the thumbs crack, I don't know. These snaps and cracks infuriate me. I walk across the floor and my ankles wake up Eureka. I try to keep my ankles stiff. I try to control them. I try not to bend them. I do everything possible. What do they do? They snap and wake up Eureka; my *ankles* do this. But then Eureka goes back to sleep.

It's very dark.

I close the kids' door like my dad used to close my door. Before he went to work, my Dad would close door after door after door to protect Kelly and me from light, from the toilet flushing, and from his corn flakes pouring into a porcelain bowl. But really, the quiet guarded his solitude.

My house used to be a schoolhouse in the 1800's, so it tilts like Boxcar Willie. The door comes toward me on its own and I have to stop it before it clicks. It's all timing—*all* timing. I look at the boys first and then leave them to their silence with the sweeping of the door.

When I get downstairs, I let my legs go. But now all the snapping is snapped out. This is once again both frustrating and infuriating.

I'm alone in the kitchen like my dad used to be. I pour my corn flakes, only they're not corn flakes now



because something better now made of wheat kernels keeps your bowels organized and contains a surprising amount of trace minerals.

All I want to do is to sit in a chair in the living room and not move. I want to just sit Solomon-like in a chair and brace myself with one light on and stare at this beautiful living room. I won't care if I burn one calorie or ten, or whose diet I'm on. This room is an arrangement—bordering on a happening—of balance, plants, skill, sweat, good pictures and plenty of thinking from on top a ladder, holding a putty knife.

This living room is *so* blended that not one person would ever guess about the ladder and the putty knife and the sweat, or that the room is 131 years old. Eureka worked hard on this room. I have never been able to manage any kind of putty. But I did hold the ladder and the putty can while worshipping Eureka's long hair from my trench.

I compare enjoying the living room to reading a good book. No one knows how it happened. No one knows what writers or putty people must do in this world to make their projects rise from the dung hill. Above our sofa is a picture that Eureka took of me at the Grand

Canyon. I had walked far around and away from Eureka that day, then clambered down some rocks onto a dangerous and stupid ledge that split the canyon. Eureka exposed the film during a rare opportunity.

In the picture, I'm a very small speck—and alone. Canyon in the morning falls behind me, with a white sky climbing up the matting a foot over my head. A tall tree climbs up the picture just inside the left matting. The matting is dark blue and so is the gorging foreground rock offering me deathward. A scrubby tree invades the rock and leans toward the risk-taker. The trunk of this tree continues in a dark way. It cracks from this rock to make a beautiful arcing line that shouldn't be there.

The picture is eleven inches wide and fourteen inches tall. Something happened at the picture: there are perfect lines and arcs. The more one looks, the more lines and arcs appear. There are lines that meet other lines that meet other arcs, that meet the leaning tree, that meet the openings, that meet the leaves in the sky.

If morning were what I wanted it to be, dead objects would live. Chairs in the room would walk and their springs would talk. Foam would breathe. Furniture would clear its throat, while the clock would at last become the undominant sound.

People in books would come alive. My friends and comrades in the volumes would rustle alive. Stage hands would hammer scenes onto scaffolds, and everyone would cough. Then there would be boots and tiny slippers shuffling toward the next scene. Just before the raising of the curtain, all would be quiet.





I want to read books for myself, but I can't because I'm a husband and a father. Where would the spare time come from? The dehumidifier bucket needs dumped two times a day. Bills need to be paid, and the boys discovered the ocean in a brown seashell while I was at work. In addition to all this, *The Spooky Old Tree* came from the mailman. So I think that if I dump the bucket it will be done, if I tell the boys about the ocean they will want to go there with me, and if I read *The Spooky Old Tree* to them fourteen times they will love me forever.

In the morning, we are on the wall. I will stare and stare at the family portrait. Maybe I will talk to it. I will. We may not always be smiling like this. I know that's a terrible thought but I think it because I can't help myself. That's why family portraits are so good. Families in portraits smile even into the dark and void, when everyone is in bed. In this way is there hope in family portraits.

We blend in the picture so well because of Eureka and the way she chose our clothes. Eureka is beautiful. Her hair is full, thick and long. I remember the skirt she wore at the picture and so do hundreds of others. Arty makes me cry if I look too long. Luke is the little one here. His real name is Luke, but for the rest of the book I will call him "Dibs." He is two here, Arty is four. Dibs is at the bottom of the picture and is being brave for the yellow duck. He wants

to please the duck by being himself for it. He will get a toy after this and will make me laugh with it. He makes me laugh now.

The thing about night and the last parts of night is that the banks of the river fall back into mud. Shells return to the ocean, and some oceans even retreat to their faraway holes. The nighttime creatures of *The Spooky Old Tree* have just recently departed their pages for the scent of deep woods. There is a good deep river between these woods and caves, before the dawn, under the stars, protecting people of Earth from the banks and islands of life. ■

THE SUNRISE

Anybody can play notes on a piano. The trick lies in the rests between the notes.

If you've got to get out of bed before you want to (say, at 4:45 a.m.), you can always squint. Just pretend you're still asleep and move like a turtle until you stub your toe on a door jamb. Then cuss.

I used to take a super-hot shower those mornings when I didn't get enough sleep. I would get up and squint (I had to be at work at the post office at 5:45 a.m.), then make my shower hotter than at night when Eureka comes in waving through the steam and hears some jerk in the shower saying, "Who's there? Is that you?"

Then I'd fold my arms in the shower, face away from the water, and let the water redden my back. My arm and shoulder would be up against the wall at this time



and I'd cross my legs as though sitting in a vertical chair. Then I'd just stand with my eyes closed until my electric bill made the people at the billing company pass it around during their lunch break and laugh. My whole head would be up against the wall. If my head wasn't

against the wall and I wasn't in the shower, I would have looked like a naked man hanging out at a lamppost in Costa Rica at five o'clock in the morning.

These days, I kinda hate working at the Post Office.

The vestibule at the post office where I work is a small room between the back door and the work floor. This vestibule is probably a third the size of anyone's bedroom, smaller if they live at my house. This vestibule is separated

from the work floor by two swinging doors. It's separated on the dock side the same way, except the doors there have metal grating like in New York City at the drug stores in bad neighborhoods. Willard, Ohio, is so small that no one works at the post office at night. This makes the first man in, the first man in. If I have time, then I like and need and require myself to rest in this vestibule before going into the post office.

Whenever I'm the only person scheduled at 5:30 and I arrive at the post office five minutes early, I don't clock in. In the Postal Service, you can't clock in before your clock-in time. I've never understood that and neither have any of the supervisors or postmasters—but now I thank God for it. It's good to come into work five minutes early when you're the only one scheduled at 5:30. You can't clock in so you try to do something worthwhile, like find a buffer of rest between your time and company time. If you're creative, there are many of these buffers. The buffers live between the folds of life like lint on cloth napkins. This vestibule is one of these buffers.

The vestibule has a heater in it. It's the old-fashioned, metal kind of heater that looks like an accordion and has the thing at the bottom that hisses when the heater starts. These are the best heaters ever made because all they care about is heat. They bang and bang for their heat. If heaters

were female castaways on Gilligan's Island (excluding Mrs. Howell; I never include Mrs. Howell in anything) the new streamlined heaters would be Ginger, and these accordion, radiator-types would be Mary Ann.

I can't understand employees who come to work early and charge through this vestibule—through this quiet, dark and friendly vestibule—and turn on the workfloor lights. The lights reveal tables, machines, safety posters, mail cases, dirty windows, government gray garbage, a workfloor, mops, spooky closets and mail. And the employees don't even have to be here yet. Something is the matter with them.

Darkness is mercy to the inside of a post office.

There is a bag full of #3 mailbags in the vestibule now. I'm happy to see these. These are second-class mail bags, soft and brown, smaller than #2 bags, one-third the size of a garbage bag. They're made of canvas disguised as cotton. I grab this bag full of mailbags by the ropes at the mouth of the outside bag and pull it next to the heater. This will be my pillow.

“You can't clock in early so you try to do something worthwhile, like find a buffer of rest between your time and company time.”

I lay down on the hardwood floor of the vestibule and put the bags underneath my head.

There are no noises in Willard. Willard has only five traffic lights, and these flash off and on, yellow and red, during the night. There are no noises in the post office now because not one human being is in it. There are only noises on the dock if the wind is blowing. When the wind is blowing, the railing gate hits the dock rail and it sounds like a dinner bell. The wind isn't blowing now, so the dock is soundless.

It's still dark because I have purposely not turned on a single light.

The time clock grinds. Besides the hiss of the heater, this is the other most dominant vestibule sound. The time clock is old and has a mechanical flaw. The mechanical flaw is this: the clock grinds continuously until two seconds before the next minute clicks over, when it stops grinding completely. The click of the next minute turning over in the time clock is preceded by two seconds of silence, when the usually grinding time clock does not grind.

I fold my hands across my chest like I'm dead. Energy



The door to the Willard, Ohio, Post Office vestibule—30 years later.

conservation is an art and I am Salvador Dali. I won't even look at the time clock now. I have already memorized the minutes to company time before closing my eyes. I have counted the minutes and memorized the clicks, so what need now to open my eyes?

The hardwood floor wants everything and I'm a generous contributor. I give my feet to the floor and let them fall down into it. I give my elbows to it, letting them seep into the wood. My elbows are anesthetized, and so are my heels. My breathing is shallow as in sleep. I let my belly lift my chest. My chest, in turn, lifts my hands. Two seconds of silence now.

Click.

Three minutes to company time.

My hands sink down to the floor at my releasing them. There's more pressure on my butt now but the hardwood floor adjusts to it. They don't make floors like this anymore; they don't. The heater gains more confidence by letting steam up to the floor from some subterranean volcano. There are no sounds except the hiss of the heater and the silence of the...

Click.

Two minutes to company time.

I get rid of the mailbags and lay my head directly on the floor. This should not be attempted except on a hardwood floor. The floor conforms to the shape of my head at the same moment the silence of the vestibule breaks into two seconds of deeper silence.

Click.

One minute to company time.

Nothing exists now besides this minute. I've no guarantee of life beyond it. This may be my last minute on Earth. Good. Everything is fine. There is no work. Emma Jean will not come; Emma Jean drives the mail truck. She will not drop the metal restraining bar onto the truck bed. Jeff Adams will not come; Jeff drives the smaller mail van and takes the mail to four smaller towns. There will be no red van today. The postmaster will not tell me to raise the flag, and no one will come to the service window. No one will come because there will be no mail. There will be no stamps. Ounces and pounds will belong to another era before humanity.

Quickly now. Death is fine, and no problem to the dead.

I want so badly to hear the grinding clock. And it does grind. But then there is...

Silence.

Two *seconds* to company time.

My gut turns sick. But a good gut can milk rest even from this, if it is trained in it.

I grab at the fabric of the first second and pinch it. This second punches forward, but I pinch and pull it toward me. No one has ever done this to it—the second panics. I won't let go. The second stretches like a rubber band, pulling now with maniacal force. At last it snaps and disappears (no man can stop time), and I yank my finger back in pain.

One second to company time.

A potential world! One second *can* be a world to a master of time. I fought the last second and missed its joy. I will relax and let this one come. If it bears fruit, I will eat. But I will not force it to bear.

This second is a tree that begins with a seed. I watch its slim greenery break dirt, then pile cow dung around it. Then I water it and watch cats kill birds in it. I wait for the first good apple, pick and eat it, then throw the core end-over-end three inches past our burn barrel. I rake her leaves and burn them near the burn barrel. I feel sad as I watch her rot. The boys count her rings, then one boy sits on my lap on her wide, round stump—and we rest.

The morning is still red and yellow flashing. The floor is still hard. The heater is still Mary Ann and hissing, not one is yet in the mail to have taken the bags away They



don't make floors again Ginger this heater is Mary Jean wont-Jeff there will be no red...

Click.

I heard a bird at break of day. But first it was,
P.M.

I hope that the man who owns the barn down the road from us never tears it down. Some people say that the barn is old and dangerous. They may be looking in the mirror. The barn is red and stable and it alights when the sun goes down.



This effect is heightened if a storm has passed and the clouds send dark purple hues aloft. The dark purple clouds make a stage for the barn to the point that a person wants to get a camera and sit down in the grass for the final sizzling.

A.M.

When the weather is nice I sometimes come outside with a cup of coffee at 4:15 a.m. to sit in a redwood lawn chair that my dad might like. This chair is set under a giant pine tree that is taller than our two-story house. This pine was a Christmas tree many years before Burl Ives became a snowman. One Christmas, the people who lived in this house before us opened presents in their living room beneath this tree. Now the tree shades me from moonlight and houses bird families. Eureka makes crafts from the cones.

At 4:15 a.m., no birds are awake. Silence grips the world. No, I forgot. There is a bullfrog. He lives near a stream a few hundred yards from my chair, on the other side of Rome-Greenwich Road. I have named him Bishop. I would not try to spell the sound he makes because of how stupid I might look attempting it. Maybe the sound cannot be spelled. But then again, maybe it can.

"Mmwomp."

It can't.

The first bird is proud because his voice arrives from far off in the woods and bounces off tree trunks. This happens at twenty 'til five. He says the same thing three or four times, this bird, then something different, then repeats the sequence. This is wisdom. I wish I could understand him but I can't. Not now. Not yet.

I invited Eureka out here one morning. I set up an identical chair for her except that it was one that her mother might like. I brought out a crocheted comforter so that Eureka could cover her legs. It was chilly and Eureka was wearing shorts. I brought out the hassock from the house so that Eureka would have something to put her feet on. I wanted her to be comfortable.

I said, "Hear as much as you can, Eureka. And don't even use your eyes to see. Use them to hear."

The big tree didn't move. Nothing moved then except Bishop's throat. I'm feeling bold again and will try him one more time.

"Hmugg."

Forget it.



The stump where the tree used to be—30 sad years later.

The voice of the first bird rose from the woods and lured the others into musicianship. Soon, many birds came alive above our heads in the branches of the big tree. We never knew there were so many birds.

Eureka proved to be a good listener. “Did you hear the bird across the field answering the one in the tree?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t hear that one.”

But I wanted to hear it. And maybe someday, with Eureka’s help, I would. ■

(**Author’s note:** Nope!)

BONUS WRITING

From the Foreword to

Fuzznuts: A beautiful midlife crisis

by “Frito” Lacota

I went to school with Martin Zender, and would have bought a ticket to it, such was the quality of the entertainment. Martin brought a taste of hell and hilarity to St. Joan of Arc Catholic School in Canton, Ohio. (Then he turned seven.) His behavior was not so whacked as to warrant special education, but was quite sufficient to make several of the nuns there doubt their calling. They said the rosary for him. At the failure of prayer, they turned to science, breaking several good yardsticks against his frame. Martin would return to his seat grinning. I remember him telling me once, “It’s their butts against mine, and my butt is ten times harder than theirs.”

All throughout his scholastic career, Martin stuttered. In the fourth grade, however, Martin realized that he could

write. Imagine you or me finding a treasure-chest buried beneath our basement floor. This is what writing became to Martin, only more. In school, Martin’s stuttering frustrated him to literal tears, which probably contributed to some of his class clown behavioral issues. He had so much inside him that he wanted to say, but that wouldn’t come out. Writing became his



outlet. I do not think it exaggeration to say that writing brought Martin from communicative darkness to light. Descartes wrote, “I think, therefore I am.” Writing did that for Martin.

I credit Jim Strang, then deputy editorial director at the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, with the discovery of Martin Zender. Between 1989 and 1992, Strang published dozens of Martin’s essays on that paper’s Forum page. When asked for a letter of recommendation, Strang wrote: “Martin is the best unsung writer I’ve had the privilege to bring to public attention.”

Martin’s writing during this period was the record of a middle-aged man in conflict. Martin never talked about the conflict. Rather, the conflict appeared in the strange and almost nervous way he jumped from one point-of-view to another, sometimes in mid-thought, as if he were two people, each vying in the same piece to present his own mind-view.

Martin was writing about everyday things, but it was the switch of voice that made the writing weird, deeper than a mere sequence of essays. In one piece, for instance, Martin ripped the photo studio that had conned him into buying extra portraits of his kids. It was wickedly funny. But then he began talking about his bones cracking as he got out of bed. I thought—*what?* As I continued reading, however, the family photo came back, only this time Martin was admiring it in the quiet of his living room. Thus, Martin Zender snuck up on even me.

Zender’s writing serves on two levels: the surface entertainment, which is a trip in itself, and the sudden sidetrack. But the sidetrack turns out not to be a sidetrack after all, as it usually happily soliloquizes over some bridge he has just publicly burned. Which leads us to ask: Is Martin Zender mad at life or madly in love with it?

You figure it out.

I commend to you my favorite writer. Martin Zender brings a refreshing, even brilliant spontaneity to popular reading. He lives, thinks and talks like the rest of us wish we could live, think and talk. In Martin, we rise and fall, laugh and cry. In all, we refuse to feel guilty for the human condition. What a way to live. It’s the enviable life of Martin Zender.

—“Frito” Lacota

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