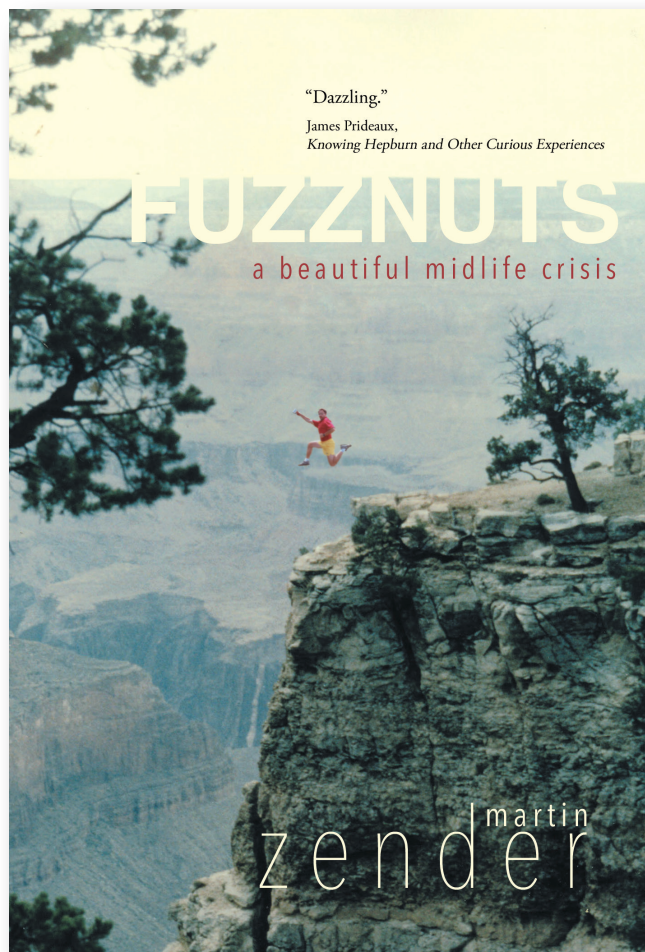




## “Accomplishments” & “Crutches.”

Two essays that I wrote around 1990.



I wrote the following two essays around 1990. They will be included in the upcoming book, “Fuzznuts.” Enjoy.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

What happens to the honeymoon when it goes into eclipse? What happens when you look and look at it but you can’t see the other side of it? I don’t know. I don’t know anything, really. When somebody milks my honeymoon of its value, there will be enough value left to put it on the far side of the moon and throw a boot at it.

There was a time when I thought the idea of bicycling down the east coast of Florida from Jacksonville to Miami for a honeymoon was a good idea. But then my bride Marcia and me took our bikes out of the trunk of our car at the Jacksonville airport on October 17, 1982, and left our car at the Jacksonville airport. This was the mistake—to leave the car.

I sit down to scribble a record of the honeymoon and I refuse to let anyone polish this. They all want me to polish it, believe me. Everyone wants to save me from myself but no editor will get near this, including myself, and I am the best editor I know. I want to capture the rawness of the honeymoon, even as boots are thrown at it. I think this will in turn capture the rawness of men and women. I am sorry that it went like this.

Marcia looked over from her bicycle into the red convertible that was driving slowly next to her down highway A1A in Hollywood, Florida. It was a convertible all right. Inside the convertible was a young man who was holding something in his right hand that was not his steering wheel, not his cigarette, not his Pepsi, not his pipe, but was definitely his penis. He was looking at Marcia and smiling.

At the next light, Marcia turned to me and said, “Did you see that guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy with the penis.”

“All guys have penises.”

"I want to get a room. *Now.*"

The motel lady said, "That will be forty-eight dollars, with tax. And you can take the bikes into the room, for all I care."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"My name is John."

"It is? Holy smokes." I turned to Marcia. "We're not in Kansas anymore, honey."

In the room, Marcia said, "Why have you brought me here?"

"You mean to this motel, or to Hollywood, Florida?"

"I mean on this so-called honeymoon."

"Why are you talking like this, honey? I thought you *wanted* to bicycle down the east coast of Florida."

"Swing and a miss. *You* wanted to bicycle down the east coast of Florida."

"I could have sworn it was you. You have been very understanding through all these penises."

"You have two minutes to order a pizza."

It had already been three years since we left Jack-

sonville—or so it seemed. It's supposed to be sunny in Florida in October—or so it seems. Seafood restaurant waitresses with poofy hair near Marineland are supposed to cheer northern bicycle visitors, not remind the bicycle visitors that the visitors' saddle bags have no electricity to power blow dryers—or so it seems. Sheepskin seat covers are supposed to keep the perinea of men and women from blistering; they are *not* supposed to remind men and women that they *have* perinea—or so it seems. Energy replacement drinks containing carbohydrates are supposed to stop muscle cramps—or so it seems. Custer was supposed to win at Little Big Horn with a man to spare—or so it seems. Miles are supposed to be only 5,280 feet long—or so it seems. Road maps should *not* be glanced at during sex—this I now know.

On the last day of our extravaganza, we rode to Miami in the rain. We took a train back to Jacksonville because that's where our very intelligent car had stayed. We got to Jacksonville at 10 p.m. and found a bad motel that had cockroaches in Room 19, but since Room 19 was the only room for rent in Jacksonville, we said, "Yes, we'll take it." The cockroaches were not very happy about this.

The next morning we rode the "short" distance to the Jacksonville Airport. It did not seem like a week since we had left that airport to camp on the beach near St. Augustine in a lightning storm. (I have not reported on that

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for a reason. In the tent that night, I heard all manner of stories about all the other men that Marcia had dated. This was during a severe thunderstorm. I had no idea that Marcia had dated so many men who were not bicyclists. Then Marcia told me stories of people who get murdered in Florida, especially in tents near the beach. Especially in thunderstorms.

For some terrible reason, I took a picture of Marcia right after she told me this story. Marcia, a gorgeous woman, is not really at her most beautiful in this picture. For some odd reason, I showed the picture to a friend at work when we got back from the honeymoon. I thought that there was something raw and beautiful about the picture. But my friend said, "Oh, my Christ." That was when I realized that I had made some serious misjudgments with the tent, the camera, the thunderstorm, and bicycling in general.







\* \* \*

If anybody nominates me for anything, I won't run. Who gives a crap where anybody but me was on the first Sunday of November in 1987? I was in Columbus, Ohio, where I had doomed myself to run the Columbus Marathon. In case you have never eaten six pounds of Aunt Jemima in one sitting, a marathon is a 26 mile, 385 yard race invented by an unknown man from Athens who ran from a Greek and Persian battleground in the plain of Marathon in 490 B.C. all the way to Athens where his first and only words were: "We conquer." These were his first and only words because immediately after speaking them, he died. The distance from the plain of Marathon to Athens was only 26 miles, but somebody had to barrow the dead messenger to the embalming shack, which took another 385 yards. This is how you start monumental traditions.

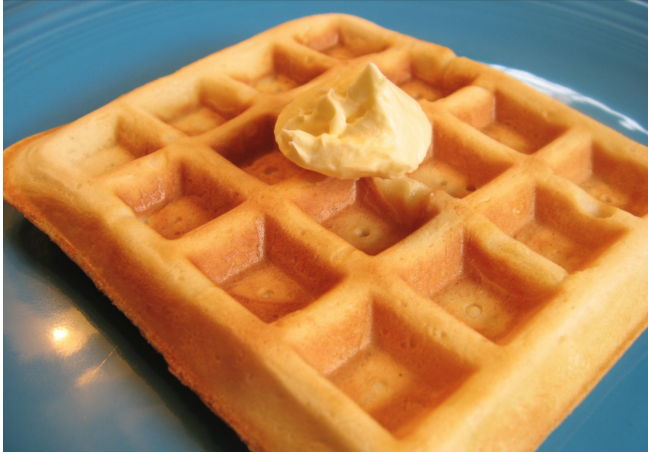
I had bigger plans. I wanted to crack the three-hour mark. This is a huge goal for a marathoner. If you run track it's the equivalent of running a four-minute mile. If you bowl it's the equivalent of rolling a 300 game. If you're a plumber it's the equivalent of bumping your head on a pipe.

Off went the gun. It was only a blank. This is a perfect beginning to a marathon.

The time passed as quickly as a turtle heading south for the winter between Marietta, Ohio and Columbia, South Carolina on Interstate 77. I had many opportunities in the first twelve miles to think about water, Aunt Jemima, Columbus drainage grates and my life.

Running had become my way of escaping responsibility for a short while. I still wanted to be a responsible person and I was one but I also wanted to escape it every now and then so that I could keep doing it. A wife is a good thing and children are a blessing. I had one child then, a son. It was Gabe. But I needed to get away from everything once in a while to make sure I was still the same self I had always been. So I started running. This seemed to work because there I was in Columbus putting everything to the test. But toward the end of the test something went wrong. Running experts call it "the wall." The wall is a figure-of-speech for real walls like the ones in either China or Berlin, or at my Catholic grade school. "The wall" is the time when your body says, "You've got to be kidding me." It is when you run out of energy and realize that entering the marathon was a mistake that you should never repeat.

It's hard to adjust to a new reality like this when your brain all of a sudden starts working. I tried to outrun



all the new sensations but they were all drinking Gatorade. At twenty-one miles I could tell that a blister was pushing against a rubber waffle on my left shoe. This is when I noticed that none of the people passing out drinks were either grunting or grabbing their waffles. At twenty-two miles my right calf started cramping and I noticed then that the people who were *not* running the race had relaxed calves. Some of the people were even going home. Some of the calves that I watched going home looked fine. At twenty-three miles my heart felt like an old possum taking its last crap in a garbage dump before it dies. My lungs felt like thousands of little air sacs, thank God. This was the only good news of the day. Then I noticed that the unknown dead runner from Athens should have been killed by a tiger on his way to Athens. As I looked through the window at his family (there was no glass in the window back then, of course), I noticed that the Athenian's parents had brown teeth and large noses. Athens itself (the city), including the Acropolis, the Neapolis, the Metropolis, the Octopus, small landowners and the bones of Hippias, appeared to occupy an area of Greece cursed by waffles and tiny imitation heat lakes. Experts say that marathoners get so crazy and tired of running at the twenty-three mile mark of a marathon that they want to stop themselves under a bush and involuntarily drain their bladders. This much is true, but there was not one bush along the marathon route in Columbus—if you can believe that.

Then it was as if a spotlight picked her out of the crowd. At the blessed side of the twenty-three mile mark Columbus marathon road stood a plain dark-haired woman. I really liked her dark hair. She was pregnant and I think the baby was about to come because of how the woman rubbed her hand on her belly. All I wanted to do was to run off the course and hold the woman's

hand. (This is the exact opposite of “break three hours.”) I wanted to ask her, “Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?” I wanted to find out if it was her first baby. I wanted to figure out things about her pregnancy. I would ask her questions. I would ask her what names she had picked out. I would ask her if she would breast-feed the baby. I did not even care about her baby-ready breasts. These had no interest to me whatsoever apart from motherhood. I would say, “You’re carrying low,” because that’s how it seemed to me. This would have proven my scrutiny to her. When I asked about her doctor, she would say to a girlfriend or to a spectator standing next to her, *The weeping possum cares for me.*

A Marine along the course saw what was happening and started fondling his rifle butt. “This is a *race!*” he screamed.

I was too tired to scream back, so I said, “Really? I thought it was the book of Revelation, chapter 19.”

What was happening to me? This race was supposed to be my big escape into self. It was turning on me. Thirty-nine drainage grates after thinking this, I crossed the finish line. I fell across it like Roger Bannister fell across the first four-minute mile in England, except that I was a failure. I toppled across the finish line and sank into the arms of another dark-haired woman, who was my wife.



Marcia hugged me. “Great race,” she said.

“But I didn’t break three hours,” I said. I withdrew from Marcia in a terrible moment of withdrawal. I sat down on the curb in a heap of failure.

Marcia stood with her hands on her hips and looked at me while I considered the importance of what I hadn’t done. ■



## CRUTCHES

The proof that Americans are a tolerant people is that the man who invented the jukebox died of natural causes. This makes me ask three questions about Pizza Hut: 1) Why does Pizza Hut have jukeboxes? 2) Why do people put money into these boxes? and 3) “Do you have a non-smoking booth near the jukebox plug?”

I like rock music but I wish I had never played it so that I could condemn people who create music that I don’t want to hear while eating pizza. I used to be the drummer in a band called “The Polytones.” Our gimmick was that we all wore white pants and each member had a different colored shirt. I couldn’t believe we wore pants. I thought our group should have been called, “Pants & Shirts.” Or, “The Gimmicks,” or “Colorfags.” But no. We were “The Polytones.”

I could really play the song, *Wipeout*. The drunks at our gigs and my sober parents used to shout, “Play *Wipeout*!” because they knew I was a “holy terror” (quite good), and that I could really “bang them cans” (play those drums) on that “baby” (song).

*Wipeout* is a rock song featuring the drummer. This is not to say that the lead guitarist can sit down and drink beer. Nope. *Wipeout* contains one lyric right at the beginning of the song. Guess what that lyric is? Yes that’s right, it’s “wipeout.” *Wipeout* must be played very loudly. The more decibels the better. If some rock group ever decided

to play this song under the water, then certain varieties of fish and some crustaceans would still be able to hear the song four days after the band surfaced. (Sound travels slower in water than in the air.) It would be a mess that not even Jacques Cousteau could helicopter out of.

I’m glad now for the sake of my children that “The Polytones” broke up. God is in control of this world and He broke up “The Polytones.” God did not want me to be a rock star. To ensure that I never became one, He put me in “The Polytones.” For double insurance, He broke up “The Polytones.” Talk about overkill. If our lead singer had been able to carry the simplest of notes with a song as simple as “Proud Mary” (you should have heard



“God did not want me to be a rock star. To ensure that I never became one, He put me in ‘The Polytones.’”

his attempt of “After the Loving”) then I would probably be a rock star now and my children would know how to dismantle a snare drum and smoke.

I have this to say about some rock stars: If Mick Jagger had led a normal life, he would be fishing with his grandson right now instead of helping Keith Richards tie his bandanna. I think that Madonna will get trapped in a washing machine with her delicates someday and be



accidentally strangled to death by a garter belt. She will not die, though. I'm glad. I don't *want* Madonna to die. I like it when she dresses like a dominatrix. It's just that Madonna needs a eunuch and a Jogbra. Or any bra.

I only turn up rock music hard when I'm living wrong. If I'm living right then I don't need Satanic levels of volume. It's nice to know that Satan is there when I need him though. I only need regular levels of volume when I don't need Satan. Life as it's supposed to be lived is satisfying as long as you're not trading guitar licks with Satan. One who is a) in tune with the talent-crushing God, b) exercising at least three days a week, c) eating fiber in the form of carrots and celery, d) remembering his wife's birthday, and e) reading books to his children, can probably get by without large doses of Satan.

To answer the questions from the beginning of this writing: a) Pizza Hut has jukeboxes because most people don't get enough fiber, b) People put money in the boxes because they have never heard "The Polytones," and c) "No, you can't have a booth near the jukebox plug."

\* \* \*

I was a high school sophomore and the whole of the sophomore French classes was traveling to Quebec City on a Greyhound bus.

This was a bus trip where my friend Paul Hoffer and I ganged up on other males as delicately as we could (with our elbows and fists) so that we and not they could be seated next to, or in front of, or behind, or catty-corner to, or in the laps of, Marti and Brigid. Marti and Brigid were the sexiest girls in our school who ever tried to speak French.

This was a dramatic moment because the rest of the



trip would either be dull and regretted (seated next to males such as Paul Huber and John Huth) or scented and giddy (sitting in the laps of females such as Brigid and Marti). The way it turned out was that Brigid sat one row ahead of me and Marti became unobtainable with some older girls. Nothing worked for Paul and me on the bus that day. The only thing that could save us was what happened next, as soon as we got *off* of the bus.

The smell of diesel fuel lifted off highway 40 like a pack of startled vultures when we jumped off our bus in Montreal, Ontario. This was Canada. I will attempt a complicated sentence now, so please take the trouble to follow it. If you do not follow it, then you will miss the wisdom that abides in it: On our way to Quebec City, wanting to be French, in the middle of this bus, heat buzzards wafting off the apron of petroleum, wanting to be in love, bandied together in a restaurant for lunch, sitting at a counter at a truck stop *so* near to perfume brands we had never smelled before, winning the lottery of a French-speaking waitress, so happy that the menus could not be understood by a single freshmen, I *personally* got the urge to try something new.

The beautiful teenage waitress said, "Un cafe?"

I said to her, "Oui."

I had never drank it before.

It came smoking and dead hot in a small cup on a saucer. Everything was white porcelain, except for the coffee.







My heartbeat quickened even before I took my first sip.

“Au lait?”

“Non, mademoiselle.”

If I was starting now, if this was it, then I would drink it black. I would come to know it unblemished. The coffee would respect me for that later. I would taste it and respect it for what it was and would forever be the simplest coffee drinker, without props or clinking things. Montreal had everything to do with me trying it black, and so did Brigid, and so did Spring, and so did the menus and the waitress’s hair color, which was espresso. I’ve always been glad about drinking it black because now I find myself in a circle of honor that includes my father and my brother-in-law Mike, even though each of these men came to black by a different route.

The coffee went down very, very well and that’s how, where, when and why I first drank it.

Coffee can assist a pent-up person hoping to mellow into manhood. This goes against the brain’s normal way of thinking. Something primitive fights against the caffeine and wins, but the primitive thing wouldn’t be there *without* the caffeine. I know. It slams against intuition. It’s the slowness and thinking that comes naturally with every sip, I think. My recommendation is to sip coffee like you’re climbing Mt. Everest. Every thought that I have while sipping coffee is a metaphoric camp between

“Every thought I have while sipping coffee is a metaphoric camp between Sherpa Town and the death plume on Everest.”

Sherpa Town and the white death plume on Everest’s summit. I’m still alive; I have not yet been killed in a blizzard, an ice-fall, a crevasse, or by stepping off a ledge into Tibet, so I enjoy the orange glow of a base camp tent. These are my thoughts as I drink morning coffee.

Part of it is in the tipping of the mug and the waiting to swallow the coffee. No one really knows how to do the waiting. I cannot quite swallow coffee straightaway. There must be a pause, no matter how brief. Let the bottom of the tongue savor things. No one climbs Mt. Everest in a day. Acclimatization must occur. There is the Khumbu Icefall, the Hornbein Couloir, Nuptse, Lhotse, Camp 5 and the Hillary Step. It’s in the holding of the top of the mug while resting the elbows on the knees and pausing to blow the smoke cool.

I’ve always believed that writers can profit from



“When the water becomes coffee you’ll forget all about that the water looked like factory runoff out the spigot.”

coffee. This can be overdone, which is why I’m half afraid of mentioning it.

I once saw a mug that said, “Writing is 10% inspiration, 90% caffeination.” What a mistake. It’s the other way around. Caffeine *cannot* and *should* not (and *shall* not) stimulate a writer to good sentences. Good sentences come from grapefruit, broccoli and sometimes spaghetti. But coffee *can* help a writer after he has written a good sentence, as long as the writer only takes a cup to his table when he knows that good sentences (as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, and possibly spaghetti) are on their way.

If the writer happens to write a good sentence, he can sip the coffee immediately after this and imagine that he is brilliant and/or sophisticated (see “mug; tipping,” and “cooling techniques; blowing”). Otherwise the writer reviews his work too soon, without affectation, and realizes (again, too soon) that he is ordinary.

Coffee is a fine thing if you work for the post office and have to be at work at 5:45 a.m.

There’s a single burner at the post office that makes eight cups very hot. The grounds smell so rich that you swear you could eat them. You really do want to eat the

grounds. It would be like a horse eating an apple. You want to hear the crunch of that. You don’t care what happens to your teeth, and neither do horses. You want everything that is offered by the dry ground beans in your system.

A yellow measuring cup that you keep in the can at the post office will cut into the soft grounds so that the grounds will fill in around the cut and make an exciting and very fresh “shooosh” sound. This also stirs up the delicious smell, which has lain dormant throughout the night. If the cut is deep enough, the grounds will become a heap on the measuring cup. If you’re angry at the mail, or at the person who wrote the “rain, snow, sleet and hail” thing, then you’ll let all of that ground coffee go into the brewing chamber. Otherwise you will shake some off. I will not recommend one thing over another because I don’t know your situation.

The water from the spigot in the mop closet is very evil. It’s yellow, like a New York taxi. It’s best not to look at it. It’s best to just hurry up and carry it to the burner before the cloudiness that comes straight from the spigot with the yellow gets worse. It really doesn’t matter what the water does (let it be yellow, let it cloud, let it race toward the Gulf of Mexico if that’s what it wants to do), because the grounds will transmute the water with heat, and when the water becomes coffee you’ll forget all about that the water looked like factory runoff out the spigot.

The whole brewing process may take longer than it took herniated Costa Ricans to pick the beans. The last part of it gurgles and smokes. The coffee is black as sin. This is a terrible cliché (and not even accurate) because coffee is nothing like sin. Some of it grows in Brazil, where there is good sun and way too many missionaries.



I would not introduce coffee to my young sons. I let them sip some on Sunday mornings but this is not introduction. Let them take foreign bus trips with young females. Let them write stories and go to work. In any of these circumstances, they may discover coffee for themselves. Although, to be honest, I would rather that they drink naturally decaffeinated tea. ■

Produced by Martin Zender/[www.martinzender.com](http://www.martinzender.com)  
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