

Chapter 11

Eighty-seven Year Obstacle Course

I have a mind to live in Yorkshire for a year, in order to put myself out of memory and debt. The fashion of this world passeth away: however, I am angry at those who disperse

us sooner there is need. - Jonathan Swift, portion of letter, written June 16, 1714, to John Arbuthnot

A woman retired for the night, woke up screaming, "What a horrible nightmare! I dreamt old age was creeping up on me." Anon.

Introduction

"at-teN-----SHUN! OK YOUSE GUYS, drop yer cocks, put on your socks."shouts Sarge, "Formation ten minutes, rifles, field packs. Freezing? Well I got somepin'll warm you up. But, ferget wot I larned you, it'll shore as hell cool you."

"Ain't thet purty, boys? Whole field civered wit snow, mershine guns aimed to keep yer noses, asses, at half mast. All you gotta do is crawl here to yonder, wit live ammo and tracers wizzing overhead. DON'T git yer weapons plugged wit mud and snow. Nothin' to it, 'less them gunners git absent minded. moVE OUT!"

Not so bad. Youthful confidence in the system. Army's just fooling, wouldn't waste valuable G. I.'s on such nonsense. But as days dragged by, the terrain and obstacles became rougher. tougher, larger, more dangerous. Casualties reached ten percent.

The man harkens back to these heady happenings of the 40's, a leveling experience where unschooled farm boys proved more adaptable to physical hardship in unfriendly terrain, to the operation of all kinds of vehicles and heavy equipment, and in their ability to make right or wrong decisions without a surfeit of second guesses.

Ed suddenly appears in the man's peripheral vision, and says, "Old soldiers never die, but they sure can reminisce their listeners to death! Come now, Olde Farte, what are you driving at, or are you off the road as usual?"

"Cool it, Chum," snarls the man, "My point is that it was only then that I learned to look for and respect the innate abilities of the untutored as well as the educated, and frequently found that the former outstripped the latter in kindness, generosity, native intelligence, and inventiveness."

"No wonder I am increasingly dependant on complete strangers to be patient enough to hear me practice English - no offence, Ed, since I communicate with you by thinking, and with Theodore by sign language, love and affection." continues the man, "Can't help it, Ed and Theodore, this is a real downer, hibernating in North Carolina, scarcely a person who honestly wants to come for more than a flyby visit. Count the number of days since we arrived from the north, that someone came for a real visit, or stayed overnight in our guestroom. Go ahead, Ed, count the number of times, with the fingers of one hand."

"Let me remind you, old man," replies Ed, "You're far out, far out into the eighties that is. That's a dark of winter time when people have you pegged for departure with nary a fare-thee-well. The milk of human kindness sours at the prospect of death. It's normal people-nature, to subconsciously wish you would board an iceberg and go sailing on that tropically warmed Gulf Stream."

"Looke here yerself, Edward," growls the man, "Here under yer noses is me driver license, given me by the sovereign state of North Carolina. It expires November 3, 2003. It sez nothing about icebergs, only motor vehicles. Thankee for the suggestion, Ed, all I gotta do is drive me van out of th' doldrums, and escape to the boondocks, like we done before."

Part 1 - Jonathan Swift offers Sage and Saffron Advice

"What have we here?" shrieks Ed, "Lutescent, citreous, ochreous ectoplasmic stuff swirling around the room! Oh, it's just Jonathan's ghostly self, dressed fit to kill. What's the occasion, Jon, and why the fancy topaz-yellow-rufescence?"



"Do not Thou sweet-talk me, Buffoon," whisps Jonathan Swift's ghost, "As any dolt knows, 'Ectoplasmic stuff' must be space-cleaned every century to renew its splendid aura, especially after exposure to the atmospheric insalubrity of the twentieth century. Now, I hath a score to settle with that profligate knave you call 'the man', and thence from the goodness of my long-dead heart, will offer salubrious advice about olde age."

"Oooh my!" gasps Ed, "Jon's gone from yellow to red, what an outlandish orange, what awful taste!"

"That shows my rage, now avast thee, Sycophant, my score is with thy master, about a letter the beggarly scofflaw wrote to his poor, innocent, bamboozlable grandchildren. It

was dated September 9, 1982, pasted inside the cover of my book, Gulliver's Travels, and says,

‘The really reasoning I writ to you is to send you my tru'lyin' adventure wich occurred in the year 1767 wen I wuz ship-rocked on the sunny shores of lily-putt, a golf course somewhere off the ocean-blues. A guy named Swift witnessed what occurred, took full credit for my trials and travails, and called me, ‘Gulliver.’”

"What bumptiousness! What abominable English! But what can I expect from a Yahoo?" exclaims Jonathan Swift's ghostly self.

"Now hold on, Jonathan," remonstrates the man, "I wrote the letter in jest, but it does reflect how much I empathized with your writings while telling my own tru'lyin' stories to my children and grandchildren. These days, as the rich get richer, and the poor more numerous, I am unpleasantly reminded of your satire, "Modest Proposal" which suggested that babes of the poor be fed to the rich.

"Somehow, our modern high-tech society that is so efficient in using up the world's natural resources," continues the man, "has overlooked the potential applying your proposal to everyone who is poor. This renewable, inexhaustible human biomass is of sufficient size to convince the prime movers of our society, the ECONOMISTS, that it would be a sound investment to temporarily provide them with housing, nutrition and health care, at the same carefully monitored level allotted domestic animals. Then, they could be converted into protein, thereby freeing them from the pain and suffering that they endure as an unwanted, despised part of our population."

"My ghostly spectrum of reactions does not include social maladjustment, so I must ignore thy Immodest Proposal," replies Jonathan, "Also, unlike living humans, I cannot store grudges. So I forgive thee, Bumpkin, and now must lighten thy burden by sharing with thee my own Resolutions when I come to be Old :

Not to marry a young woman; Not to be peevish, or morose, or suspicious; Not to scorn present Ways, or Wits, or Fashions, or Men, or War, etc.; Not to be fond of children; Not to tell the same Story over and over again to the same People; Not to be covetous; Not to neglect decency, or cleanliness, for fear of falling into Nastiness; Not to be over-severe with young People, but give allowances for their youthful follies and weaknesses; Not to be influenced by, or give ear to knavish tattling servants or others; Not to be too free of advice, nor trouble any but those who desire it.

To desire some good Friends to inform me which of these Resolutions I break, or neglect, & wherein, and reform accordingly; Not to talk much, nor of myself; Not to boast of my former beauty, or strength, or favour with ladies, etc.; Not o harken to Flatteries, nor conceive I can be loved by a young woman; Not to be positive, or opiniative; Not to set up for observing all these Rules, for fear I should observe none."

Part 2 - A Home for away from Home

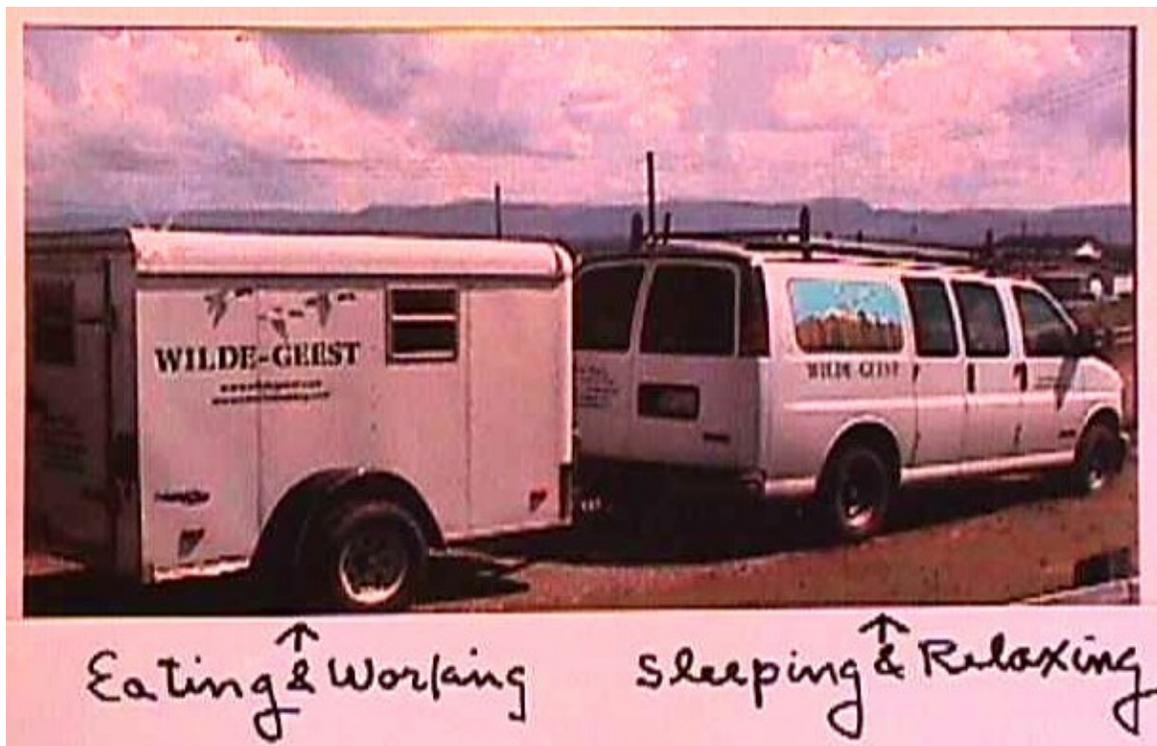
(Under construction - Proceed at Half Speed)

"Oh my, oh my!" says the man, "I've worn out three vehicles in ten years. This van is approaching the 100,000 mile mark, roughly equivalent to my age. No longer can I depend upon it, where I intend to go, on those frequently pot-holed shale or gravel roads."

"What to do? Well, I'll buy a new commercial van, half-ton instead of three quarter, smaller engine, body the same size. I've been tempted to buy one of those gussied-up R/V-travel trailers, which cost more than a new van. FORGET IT! Them things ain't up to what I'm gonna dish out."

April 1 to May 15 was completely taken up with an endless list of purchases and installations. It was necessary to insulate the van body and install two overhead screened ventilators. Todd and Irene visited Ocean, NC from Cow Head, Newfoundland. He volunteered to install bunks for Ted and Theodore, build storage cabinets for clothes and other possessions, and fabricate other amenities.

A tough little cargo trailer was purchased and converted into a combined mobile kitchen, and office area for computer, printer and accessories. . This involved installation of windows, insulation, cabinets, counters, sink, gas range, counters, bottled gas, and an electrical system.



This converted commercial van and trailer combination provided comfortable living conditions, was easily handled on busy highways, managed well on rough unpaved roads, and provided rest and relaxation in gravel pits, open fields and truck stops. . People constantly inquired about the Wildegeist markings, and many promised to check the man's and Theodore's 'Wildegeist' and 'bestfrienddog' domains."

"Must not settle for second best, when improvements are possible," said the man, two months later when they arrived in Newfoundland, "Fifteen thousand miles, which included many bad roads, proved the trailer was able to perform without serious structural failures. However, the door seals were inadequate, and allowed much dust and dirt to enter the van along the way. Also, the foodstuff containers, including canned goods, suffered greatly from the springy ride. Labels wore off, cans were dented, bottles broken. Must now get busy, and correct these problems, before our next long journey."

Part 3 - Bear West-Bear North, Destination Canada

"Here we go, Theodore, Edward, and Jonathan Swift (if your ghost is lurking hereabouts). Westward and Northward HO! Steady as she goes. I hope youse guys will settle down in this here nice new van, since we gonna spend our days and nights herein for a couple of months.." shouts the man over his shoulder, "Now Please! DO NOT DISTURB THE DRIVER as he skillfully highballs down this here highway."

"May I timidly ask your Royal Behindness, our Beloved Driver, a question?" whispers Ed, from inside the man's right inner-ear. "We've held our tongues for a mere four hours, and you're already entering a campground at Jordan Lake, what gives?"

"Surprise, surprise," shouts the man, "Jenny, Bob and Cece will meet us here, and Jayne and Bryan, and Laura, Cecil and Thea may also come. Hey Theodore, do you remember meeting Cecil and Laura in Newfoundland, and then along came Thea, a beautiful baby girl. It's party time!"

Later that evening : "My Goodness, Jenny," says the man, "A wonderful party. Seems a fool's age since I've been so personally involved in one. Theodore! You made a pig of yourself, stealing from everyone's plate and from the pots as well."

"West Virginia offers wonderful scenery," says Ed, the following night, "but that overgrown fur bag, that scavenger who woofed down twice what he can hold, is now making you pay for it."

"I know, I know," sighs the man, "This is the fourth time I've had to crawl out of my bunk, follow him 'round th' field, and watch him barf. Lucky it's bright moonlight - might as well get started, I'll stop for coffee, check maps, and decide the best route to follow from here."

As if on cue, two truck drivers approach the van while the man is wearily examining road maps. "What th' hell's Wildegeest, and where you and thet big red dawg headin'? No, you got it all wrong. One hundred miles out of your way. Take a left, next exit, and this here is a secondary road will take you to Jamestown, Ohio where you turn north onto the Interstate. "

"All this driving on a narrow road, and hoping to find a vet for Theodore," worries the man, " well at last here's Jamestown. It's getting late. I think I'll concentrate on finding a vet and a place to pull over and sleep. Buy gas and inquire."

"What's a Wildegeest?" asks a bearded truck driver, lounging in the service station. He directs the man to a veterinary hospital, one block away.

The man pulls up in front of the hospital, closely followed by Dr. Brown, all muddy from working with cattle in the field. He phones to tell his wife he will be late for dinner, then devotes full attention to Theodore. "This is a very healthy dog who has grossly overindulged. I'll put him on sulfa as a precaution against infection."

End of a perfect day, a beautiful state park turns up nearby, a friendly camp host, an unemployed man and wife, and two sick children. They welcome modest financial assistance, a penance the unbelieving man thinks, for the attention he has this day received from the gods.

"Indiana and Illinois, what a drag, but at least I'm avoiding big cities," thinks the man, "the air, the fields, the frequent industrial buildings, all so grim, the atmosphere laden with smog. Getting on towards evening and I don't see a place to stop. Well, at least I can listen to Public Radio news."

Karl Shapiro is dead! A fifteen minute commentary. Karl was never cut out to fit a mold. Apparently didn't change. He's labeled an "iconoclast". Does this mean he's forever pegged as a destroyer, or simply irreligious? After all, this is the conservative Midwest, so they've tarred him with ancient history. Karl, as part of a nominating panel, voted against their beloved Ezra Pound.

"Good for you, Karl!", muses the man, "He taught in California, lectured at Johns Hopkins. Early 30's, he was a drop-out at Hopkins in his sophomore year. He wrote poetry which his wife publicized while he was in the Army, serving in the South Pacific during WWII. Not long after his return from overseas, and the last time I saw him, was in Washington, D.C. He laughed and told me he was holding down a revolving chair in poetry at the Congressional Library. He didn't mention that this honor was awarded the best poet in the nation."

"Oh I'm so sad," sighs the man, "Karl was my best friend in high school, a strong influence who permanently turned me into as much of an iconoclast as my cowardly soul would allow. We played hookie while seniors at Forest Park High School, and when we graduated, he persuaded me not to attend graduation. Oh Karl, Oh Annie Silver, his aunt, my mother's best friend. News of Karl's death matches this depressing Illinois scene. "

Human Nature

*For months and years in a forgotten war
I rode the battle-gray diesel-stinking ships
Among the brilliantly advertised Pacific Islands
Coasting the sinister New Guinea Coasts,
All during the killing and hating of a forgotten war.*

*Now when I drive behind a diesel-stinking bus
On the way to the university to teach*

Stevens and Pound and Mallarme
I am homesick for war.

Footnote : "Human Nature" P. 320, *Selected Poems Karl Shapiro, (1968) Random House, NY. Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary (1996) Gramercy Books, New York.* Shapiro, Karl Jay, born 1913, US, poet and editor. Pound, Ezra Loomis, 1872 - 1958, US, poet.

"Iowa looks as depressing as Illinois." complains the man, " Will the sun never again restore these fields? Yes, it was wonderfully bright and colorful when Frances and I visited her parents at Ames, or was it my young eyes and true love? I suffered greatly when we were separated by war and she found another man."

"Hark Fellow Travelers!" cries the man, " At last we've cleared the Midwest. We're now in southern South Dakota on a highway with so many signs you wouldn't see trees if there were any. I'm gonna blow this crappy tourist route to Mount Rushmore, with its clutter of hokey western villages. TURN RIGHT, follow the Missouri River north on secondary roads until I reach the most northern east-west route across North Dakota."

"Stop squirming, Theodore!" says the man, "As far as you can see, these are plainly plains to infinity.

"An occasional homestead makes me wonder about the kinds of lives these people live. I'm attracted to it, I must admit." muses the man, "Well, this N-S passage has taken two days, but tonight we'll sleep in the Badlands, where Teddy Roosevelt proved his manhood by shooting and decapitating every animal that strayed within his sights."

"Sho' nuff!", exclaims the man, "This faithful Missouri River has led us to Williston, and the entrance to Theodore Roosevelt National Park."

At the gate they meet a gussied up wench, decked out in cowboy clothes and heavy pancake makeup. She refuses to smile when the man voices objections to paying for a camp site - because his dog is named after Teddy Roosevelt.

She wearily replies, "Jest hand me the money, Bub, and make sure that overgrown prairie-dog stays on a leash."

That afternoon the man marvels at the badlands scenery, and finds trails where Theodore can run as free as the wind. Next morning as they are leaving, a herd of buffalo surrounds the van, presses heavily against it, and begs them to stay.



"Montana!" cries the man, "The comfortable, sensible route is southwest on the superhighway to Billings, but that's the way I went in 1992. Repetition is a no no, the northern tack a go go."

"Talk about bad bad badlands, wastelands! This all day drive has it all." exclaims the man, "At Wolf Point, Theodore requests a rest stop, begs to stay the night. A truck driver stops, pisses, warns, "Rattlesnakes are about."

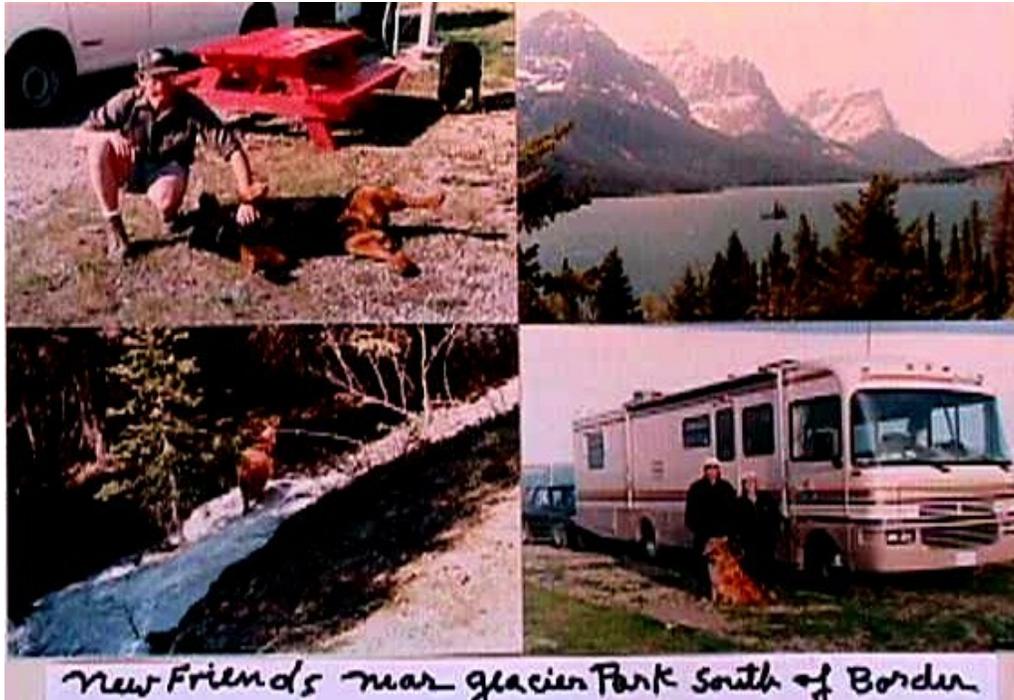
"THEEE-ODORE" shouts the man, "Get yer ass back here pronto, WE'RE GONE!"

"My Gawd, Theodore," says the man, "Last two nights, this 'Big Sky' Montana hasn't offered much comfort by way of campgrounds. The R/V place in Lewistown that we reached after crossing the badlands, was loaded cheek by jowl with monster rigs. Great Falls had little to offer, so we were relieved to camp at Flying J Truck Stop, which was hospitable at least. Now, at long last, here's Browning which looks interesting, with its mostly Indian population."

"Well, well, Theodore," continues the man, few minutes later, "we've finally lucked in. A right turn a few miles from town, and we're in 'Sleeping Wolf Campground and R/VPark' - no one around except free-roaming friendly dogs - a good sign - plenty of time to pick a choice spot, settle down, and turn Theodore loose to meet the canine society and explore without interference."

"We stayed almost a week, within easy driving distance to Glacier Park, south," says the man, "But the best part was the camp ground itself, watching the Indian children at play,

enjoying the friendliness of Mike's dogs, "Jaeger", "Chainsaw" and "Jesse", and in making friends with the children's father, Mike Wikstrom, owner of the campground, and manager of the IGA store in town. One day I had the pleasure of cooking a meal for the children when they were sick, and there was also time to set up and use the computer and printer in my trailer."



" One evening, Jake and Sue from Ohio, accompanied by their golden retriever, Joe, parked their motor home close to the van. Jake, an ex-truck driver, examined ed my trailer and pronounced it gravel-road worthy." recalls the man,"They left the next morning, bound for Alaska."

Part 4 - North to the Barrier-Border

Most Canadians tolerate Americans if not offered a better choice, and they usually let them cross into Canada unimpeded and fancy free. Not so with the man and bestfrienddog.

What is there about this shaggy man- ruddy dog combination that arouses the suspicion of Customs officials? Just ask them - at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia; St. Stephen and Woodstock, New Brunswick; and that outpost north of Babb, Montana. Thorough searches of truck and trailer have occurred six times at St. Stephen, and once at each of the other locations.

The Customs inspection near Babb was time consuming, and there was further delay in making sure the inspectors hadn't damaged carefully stowed camera and computer equipment, and putting everything back in place. It was dark and chilly when our heroes finally located a campground near Waterton after traversing narrow roads deep in the mountains, as daylight faded. The well tended park and beautiful scenery more than made up for the effort in getting there, and they stayed an extra day while exploring the park.

Disturbing information was provided at the information center at Waterton. "Let me guess," said an attractive woman at the counter, "Alaska bound, who isn't? It's still early in the season, I've never seen anything like it."

The man reported some of his initial impressions of southern Alberta, that people seemed distant and cold. She confided that this part of Alberta was indeed insular, and distrustful of outsiders, but not to worry, there would be great scenery and friendly people up ahead, and this would be the year the tourist invasion of Alaska would peak out amongst the peaks."

"Shit," thinks the man, as he digests this information, "Gotta rethink some of my plans, but meanwhile it's Sunday morning, and this road to Calgary is mostly straight, smooth, and across beautiful country."

However, the wind and skies were fretful, reminiscent of Newfoundland in the spring. Surely, Calgary would have plenty of places to rest overnight. But, not even a parking place was evident, under black skies, drenching rain and heavy traffic. Nothing to do, but turn back, look for a stopping place overlooked before.

Lucky! Turner's Corner, Alberta, city park had R/V parking facilities and self registration. Not a soul in sight, so Theodore roamed the area and hurried back just ahead of a barrage of hail and rain. While washing dinner dishes, there were voices outside. Four students from a missionary school called, "Youth with a Mission".

"Since it was wet and cold, I invited them to come inside the van, where everyone managed to find a seat," recalls the man, "They were nice friendly young people who had undoubtedly been selected for their social graces. They were curious about my travel plans, about the back roads we would travel, and the destinations. Finally, Robert Lumkes, from Australia, asked if I would allow them to pray for me. I told them about my dear, deceased friend, Georgina Payne, and how I sorely missed her friendship, and the comforting effect of her prayers upon this disbeliever."

Robert then prayed as follows :

God bless you in your travels, may He guide you and keep you safe.

Remember, when Theo doesn't listen, Jesus is always a best friend.

He will always listen and be there if you call him.

John 3:16 "He loves you no matter what"

HALT - This is the end of Chapter 11

March, 2001