



# **The Weekly Man**

## **Sleeping In Ditches**

*Near the close of the 21st Century, God commanded, "Hey Noah, I want you to build a canoe."*

*"But Lord," said Noah, "shouldn't that be an ark?"*

*"No," said God, "there's not that much worth saving."*

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By evening and day I'm the man of the hour, the life of the party, the wit, the insider, the compleat schmooz rider. I'm the water cooler sage, the lunchroom rage; everybody wants to hear me, everybody wants to be near me, everybody wants to absorb me through that huge umbrella of thought that surrounds me, bouncing away everything I don't want to know.

There's a lot of crap out there, and shit falls out of the sky, but not on me. I'm the source of my own crap and people respect me for that. I'm like the faucet I can't turn off. Wordsworth's spontaneous overflow without the meter. I'm a damn flood.

At night, I sleep in ditches.

Not the same ditch every night. I have favorites and sometimes I like to try something new. I've slept in ditches full of needles and condoms and barking spiders. I wear two wide swatches of red on my back from a slick of bubbling something-or-other at the bottom of a ditch by a chemical plant. I've seen small things flitter and flap in the darkness around rusted tin cans while they debated whether to leave me alone or eat me.

But, it's not all bad.

I woke once in a ditch with immaculate new suburban ranch-style houses with carved lawns on one side and a field of sprawling swamp and early morning animal sounds on the other. In a clearing by a stream banked with yellow and blue flowers, an army of bulldozers pointed right at the swamp and its animal noises. I felt like I was on the cusp of something wonderful and nascent. Soon, I thought, those bulldozers will turn God's land into something useful for his

children. Yes, I believe in God. His outline glowed in the aura surrounding those formidable machines—his tools built by man in his power's image.

The grass in that ditch was long and thick and made for comfortable sleeping. Right by my head, the biggest most beautiful dandelions opened with brilliant bursts of yellow and orange, their leaves vibrating with the deepest green I'd ever known. There was grandeur in those flowers. Their beauty was irresistible. I reached out...and I ate them.

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She took a long slow swallow from her champagne glass and it was erotic the way her throat undulated with the swallow, but she was well into her seventies and I'm not that liberal-minded. Besides, I think downing her glass of bubbly may have had something to do with her being impressed with what I had to say. I get this a lot at dinner parties.

Yes, I go to dinner parties. I love nothing more than a free meal in a friend's home, friend or not. I wear my best for these occasions because dinner parties are all about appearances, even in the things we say. And I have a lot to say.

She wore a red gown with back lace dangling over where her breasts may have been at one time. She wore black gloves. Her face was surprisingly wrinkle free and she had a youthful glint in her eyes. Then, her throat, though still erotic...suddenly lurched, and lurched again. She was choking. The woman beside her (her granddaughter, who was young and beautiful and had been eyeing me for most of the evening) slapped her grandmother on the back, hard. That seemed to do the trick and as the old woman reclaimed her composure, she glared at me and her youthful glint turned to fire, my cue to continue.

"Nature needs to be pushed," I said. "Without some sort of imbalance or conflict, nothing happens. Everything stays the same forever and then it all just disappears out of boredom. So we're doing Nature a favor when we pump her full of garbage."

The man beside me with the thick glasses and a paunch spilling over his chair told me that nobody was doing anybody a favor, least of all nature, by dumping garbage into the oceans ...

"...but," I corrected, "it's not just the oceans, it's the air and the soil. We need to maintain a balance, we need to fill them all with the things we took from them." I paused for effect and noticed the old woman was just about to ruin my train of thought by speaking. "Think of it, think of its simple cyclic beauty," I said. "We take raw materials from the land, air and seas, mix them into entirely new materials that might take Nature billions of years to create—things like all-season tires and chrome bumpers—and then we feed them back into nature in their new forms ..."

The man with the paunch coughed out a laugh.

"... and those new materials mix with the raw materials to create something even newer. And a stronger, more robust Nature evolves in the process."

The old woman, whose throat was obviously still irritated from the choking (and whose granddaughter had just winked at me), scratched out something about overloading the environment before it had a chance to adapt and then we all die, to which I replied wisely, "The happy gambler is the one who embraces the concept of losing with grace and dignity."

Around the gathering, heads nodded agreement. Somebody always nods agreement. It's what keeps the plastic corks in the champagne bottles cooling in ice-filled silver buckets the length of the table.

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Yes, I thought, hours after the party, she'll have that same glint in her eye when she's her grandmother's age. I watched the condom swirl in the toilet and disappear, my contribution to the environment.

Then I left her place to find a comfortable ditch.

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The company kitchenette is the 21st Century's answer to the Greek amphitheatre where philosophers met to stare at ideas. I would have made a great Greek.

I was sticking a meat pie, all wrapped in shiny plastic, into the microwave and thinking how the true worth of a man's life is not measured as much by his acts—all of which are subject to anybody and his dog's opinion—as it is by the amount of garbage he creates during his life. A man's pile of garbage is something you can measure, and the less biodegradable the better because we need to leave monuments so that aliens will know we were here.

But we weren't talking garbage on this particular day. We were talking Free Will. One of the junior managers said something about everything being pre-determined so what did it matter if we were good or bad because we were doomed to heaven or hell even before we were born.

"Hell is where everybody chews gum," I said. "And the saliva tastes like it came from somebody else's mouth."

The junior manager looked confused.

"I'm talking about God's hell," I explained. "He owns it all."

I had a feeling that I still wasn't getting through to him. "You see," I said, "God gave us Free Will. We do what we want and he just stands back and watches. Everything after that is just pure chance because there's nobody in charge."

He still wasn't getting it, and the administrative assistant with the low cut blouse and magnificent cleavage wasn't getting it either. "Life isn't a path," I said. "It's a maze, and we should all be happy to be lost."

Ah...I was sure I was getting through to them now. "That's what Free Will is all about, being happy to be lost."

They stood with their beautifully wrapped microwave dinners in their hands, saying nothing, just feeling the full force of my words.

I have that effect on people.

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*Hell has its eyes set on me  
An' it's takin' me away  
Hell has its eyes set on me  
An' there ain't no runnin' away*

*Hell's lips are kissin' my ass  
An' it's catchin' up to me  
It's comin' right outta my past  
Makin' this what I've done to me*

- from a 21st Century Ballad

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The young man with the orange spiked hair spoke with a slight lisp through lips pierced with a dozen silver rings. He said something about his rage and how he wanted to scream into every sewer in the city because there was no intelligent life above ground.

“You might awaken things you don’t want to meet,” I said. Sleeping in ditches gives you these insights. He said that he would gladly give his life just to be heard by a single human being. A young woman with bright green hair and rings dangling from her eyebrows and nose offered to die as well.

“It’s when people listen to you,” I said, “that your life is most in danger.”

The young lady pointed a finger wrapped in black mesh that seemed to be some sort of glove traveling the length of her arm and disappearing into her black sun dress. She accused me of having said the exact opposite last week. “The problem here,” I said, “is that you’ve obviously gotten today mixed up with last week.”

While she thought about that, I changed the subject. “Have you ever thought about why we’re here?” This got their attention. The young man forgot about his death wish and the young lady stopped thinking. “It’s something I think about a lot when I look up at the light bouncing off the bottoms of iron oxide clouds.”

The young man asked if I was talking about the ultimate purpose.

“There is no the ultimate purpose,” I said. “There’re lots of ultimate purposes, as many as you can count, and none of them more ultimate than the others. We waste so much of our lives looking for the ultimate purpose that the search itself mistakenly becomes our ultimate purpose.”

The young man said something about that being OK with him, but the young lady wondered how there could be more than one ultimate purpose.

“Because they all turn out to be ultimately wrong,” I said. The young lady picked her nose quickly and asked if I really believed that.

“Check back with me next week,” I told her.

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I was stung one day taking a piece of European chocolate away from a wasp with whom I was sharing a ditch. The pain was like a tiny pocket of steam trapped under my skin and looking for a way out. It was such an interesting feeling that I encouraged the wasp to sting me again. It didn’t feel the same the second time so I squashed the wasp and ate the chocolate.

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I went to an anti-abortion rally that had free home cooking. I shared a picnic table with a group of women who made a point of showing the hair in their armpits. Some had tattoos on their thighs and backs. They were talking about how much gas their SUVs ate. I, of course, knew the truth about this.

“God put oil in the earth for us to use,” I said. “The more gas we use, the closer we bring ourselves to God’s purpose.”

A spandex-coated woman with muscular arms twice the size of mine asked me what the hell I was talking about. Before I had a chance to answer, she leaned toward me—all testosterone and sweat— and asked if I was really an anti-abortionist, or was I a baby-killer.

“Overpopulation is the baby-killer,” I said. “But we need to populate the earth at an alarming rate so that we outnumber the insects before they finish eating our crops and then turn on us. This is why God lets women get pregnant.”

I slept in a hospital that night. It wasn't quite as elegant as sleeping in a ditch.

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*I just wanna punch you in the face  
Wanna smash and batter you all over the place  
Ain't no such thing as a savin' grace  
So hold on buddy while I punch your face*

- from a 21st Century Ballad

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I was eating burgers and fries in a fast food restaurant after waiting over an hour for a family of four to leave, praying the whole time they would leave their leftovers on the table.

They did...proof that God sometimes smiles through the odds.

The youngest, a girl with blonde bangs and a permanent pout, had eaten one fry and nothing else. Her soft drink was pristine, her burger still resplendently wrapped. Her parents had threatened repeatedly to cut her chat time, but she kept muttering something about mad cows.

I have thoughts about mad cows. I think I'd be mad too if somebody slaughtered me, stuffed me with food coloring and preservatives, pounded me into patties, fried the crap out of me, shoved me into a bun soaked with thick sauce and half-hearted vegetables, and served me up to some pouty little bitch who didn't even have the grace to eat me because she was afraid to join the army of zombies that mad cows are creating to get revenge on the human race for feeding cows to cows.

But...that's another story. On this particular day I was sitting in a fast food restaurant chewing on a cow and thinking that, if the company kitchenette is the 21st Century's amphitheatre for staring down ideas, then the fast food restaurant, besides offering designer food for the masses, is the mirror into ourselves. It's what we've become. A tribute to our ability to reconstruct reality and believe whatever we want. In fact, I like to think of modern civilization as a fast food restaurant.

They're like schools where we can get to the kids before they've had a chance to be corrupted by non-productive spending habits. For instance, if a child spends five dollars on a bag of bean sprouts at a farmers' market, who gains? The farmer. And maybe his family. Maybe even the guy who rents the stalls at the market. But that's it. Now, that same five bucks spent in a fast food restaurant supports entire industries: the beef industry (along with the regulatory government agencies), the trucking industry, the advertising and public relations industry, the fast food furniture industry, the building industry, not to mention all those high school kids working in fast food joints who need to be exploited so that they can afford to buy iPods for their pirated music.

And you might say that the bean sprouts are better for the kid than the burger, fries and pop, but what the hell, who wants to live past their ability to go deeper into debt? Which is one of the dangers we face when we eat foods that haven't been carefully screened by marketing managers and prime time television.

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*My burger's got E. coli and it's gonna take me down  
My girlfriend's got ebola and she's wearing a black frown  
My doggie's got the canine flu and his piss is turnin' brown  
There's a germ on my finger tip  
Doin' a flip  
He's really hip  
A sensational hit  
In a world where everyone's sick  
And I got the I'm-afraid-to-eat-touch-drink-smell-or-fuck-anything-cause-it's-all-out-to-kill-me  
blues*

- from a 21st Century Ballad

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In 1918, the worst pandemic in history cancelled attacks between allied and German forces because flu was killing so many men in the trenches that there weren't enough to properly feed into the machine guns. Anywhere from twenty million to a hundred million people died from flu that year, more than all the deaths in all the wars, plagues and train crashes in history.

Some people say the human race is no better than flu...that we're a virus threatening to spoil the universe and if aliens ever find out about us, they'll cure us right out of existence.

I have a theory about this.

Viruses never turn on themselves. They may be suicidal, but they're not homicidal. They kill their host by accident and excess and take themselves down in the process, but they never turn on themselves.

We do.

We kill our own kind. We kill our host. We kill ourselves. We kill everything that's killable. We kill our children and our mates. We kill for pleasure and recreation. We kill because it feels right and we kill when it feels wrong. We kill for our gods. We kill for nations and governments and ideals. We kill because voices in our heads tell us to kill. We kill for profit and prophets. We kill to even the score and then we kill because there's nothing else to do. We kill because it's in our nature and we're damn good at it.

Trust me. No aliens are going to mess with us. They'll wait till we're finished killing and then they'll explore our garbage.

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*I feel so useless I could die  
I'm drinking rubby 'stead of rye*

*I got no place to go  
An' I got no one no more  
But that's OK with me  
Cause buddy can't you see  
I just wanna punch you in the face*

- from a 21st Century Ballad

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Tonight I'm sleeping in a ditch that's almost a piece of Christmas. Yes, I believe in Christ. All of them. Especially tonight. When I entered this ditch, I found a red plastic bag just lying in here and it had a six-pack of beer and two cigars in glass tubes inside. One of the beers was smashed but, like I said, I believe in all of the Christs and I'm thankful for the other five beers.

The moon is full tonight, bright and clear and precise around the edges. I don't see a cloud anywhere and the grass in this ditch is long and packs down comfortably and dry because there's been no rain for a few days. I have a cardboard box for a pillow.

There's a new housing development growing from the woods a few blocks away and the air is scented with the rich aroma of machine oil and tree blood. There's a pinch of carbon monoxide in the air to remind me of the interconnectedness of all things human, if only in our fate.

Fireflies ignite the air with streaks of light. I grab one and use its ass to light my cigar. Then I eat the fly. The smoke from my cigar reminds me of my beginnings, whatever they were. I down a beer in one long non-stop guzzle that almost drowns me in the rapture of the moment and I belch mindlessly under a perfect chemical night sky.