

**TALES
FROM
PURGATORY**

S. Zachary Schumer

Dedicated to the memory of

Roland Rene Martin

He taught me how to think

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Welcome

Our doormat says, "welcome." It says so in big black letters. They stick out of the black rubber like little pins. We are very proud of our mat. It has been in the family as far back as anyone can remember.

When he knocked on the door we invited him in. As he entered the room he stepped on the doormat. The one that is almost a family heirloom. Everyone agreed, it is one old doormat.

We all greeted him with friendly smiles and shared small talk. Everyone was warm and sociable. Everyone except the doormat.

Drinks were served and we primed him with tasteless sandwiches. We kept the better cuts of meat and condiments in a special place.

After a while his eyes grew dark and his ears grew points. We had no choice. We locked him in the spare room and unscrewed the light bulb.

We could hear him stumbling around. He broke furniture and windows. We got out the shotgun and blew his fucking head off.

The rest was a matter of protocol.

We got out the hunting knives and dismembered his torso.

His body parts were scattered in the woods to feed the small creatures. Winter is harsh in these parts. Local folk do all they can for the animals.

We were glad we showed him traditional hospitality. We did the right thing.

Our doormat says, "welcome."

Surprise

It's been a great day. Things could not have worked out any better. I have been dreaming about this day for years. Maybe as long as I can remember.

For years I was alone. I never could find a relative. Nobody to share a common family history and joy. I remember the legend of old uncle Attila. Now, that was a man. Perhaps a man and a half. Could there ever be another person who's fat matched his stupid? There he was, a legend my mother told me about. Someone I never got to know. Just know about.

I think the trouble is my name. I spell Elliot different than anyone else. They spell the name Eliot. Perhaps along the way someone dropped a consonant. Non-scholars do things like that.

So, this morning I got up early and brushed my teeth twice. I do that when I want to make a good impression.

When you make a good impression you feel good about yourself and the ones you impress feel impressed.

Enough of this. My mind is racing and I can't seem to think clearly. Have I been drugged or I am just excited about the meeting of my relatives for the first time.

I heard about them from a friend. He told me about the name and told me to steer clear of that bunch. How could I do that? They may be blood.

That's why I came to this town and looked them up.

So, I showed up unannounced. I felt that family does not need an invitation.

There we were. A whole family of Attila clones. One is fatter than the next. If that isn't blood I don't know what is.

The refreshments they offered me lacked commitment. I didn't feel like an honored guest. However, they assured me that bologna and day old bread is a delicacy. When I asked for mustard they gave me a small bowl of crushed mustard seeds.

So, I sit here in this dark room where they sent me. I'm all excited and aglow waiting for my surprise.

Revenge

Revenge is a beautiful word. It rolls off the tongue like the brown soap your momma used to wash out your mouth, after you swore. You would gag for an hour, and then go back to swearing.

Revenge burns through me like a wooden steak burns through the heart of a vampire. Now, that's what revenge is all about. Not that crap that the weak-minded talk about. A twit would smack someone or put sugar in a gas tank for revenge. I laugh at those feeble attempts.

That's revenge with lower case letters. That's not for me. I use all capitals in bold print. Yah, that's what I want to do. Reach through the eye socket and tear out the brain. No twit business here. No sir!

I have spent a great deal of time contemplating revenge. In fact I wallow in it like a pig on an Alabama farm. Some times, I swim in it like a catfish waiting to become a sandwich at the golden arches.

Yes it's mine and mine alone.

I know that bunch. Oh, how I have studied them. Over and over again.

They live down the road. In every town in this country. Perhaps every town in the world. They are easier to find than a cold.

They have that holy grin on their faces. It doesn't matter. They are the ones to blame.

Time to focus. Set my sights and load my weapon. Shoot my blame like fire out of a hemorrhoidal rectum. I can, I will.

Their crime is the crime of self-righteousness. That whole bunch believes it is good and does good, that's righteousness. After a while they figure that what ever they do become good because they are good people. We all know who is on their side.

So, tonight I will paste on a smile and fill my flask. I'll go over there and hear about their holy beliefs and how they can save me. I'll eat their food and accept their hospitality. All I need is a minute by myself.

I'll pour out the gasoline all over the drapes and light it. We can all go to hell together.

FOG

The fog was a blanket of white uselessness that may have smothered the whole countryside. It could have been knee deep or as high as the peak of a large grey building at the end of the street. It stuck to everything and seemed to stretch and pull like taffy. It surrounded and confined me like a straight jacket, as I walked home from the bus stop.

The thought passed through my mind that something was wrong with the air. It sat in my lungs similar to a drug and forced me to breathe through my mouth (like a dog). I thought that maybe there was something wrong with my ears. The white poured in them and attacked my brain. My tongue was dry and I whistled through my nose as I walked down the street toward home.

Step after step, how many? Who cares! A service station is my only ally as I work my odyssey home. A hot cup of coffee and I have a new best friend. Seventy-nine cents is all my new best friend costs. I give the kid a buck and walk out the door. A buck is more than a fair price to pay for a hot cup of hope. My spirit is fortified for the trip home.

Only a couple more blocks of the fog before I get home. Perhaps if I walk slowly enough she will be asleep when I get home. That's the great part of the afternoon shift, if any shift can have a plus. Less people to see, less people to face. There is no one there to say, "leave me alone." I am already alone. The ones I have to see, I see in the dark tones, and they can't see me. All they see is a shadow and all they hear is mumbling and babbling from the dark. It goes on and on. Will there ever be closure? I once heard a guy at work call us "the walking dead." It matters not, we continue to do what we do every day as we lose our humanity to the machines.

What you see at work are not people. They are just part of the machines. The machines roll on and devour anyone fed to them. Nice guy, bad guy, it doesn't matter. Everyone winds up cannon fodder and the machines keep chewing.

As long as they are at work, the work will not let them be people. We all try at first, but after a while the war ends without a sound, not even a whimper. Why bother to struggle when you can't win?

You see the old timers who have worked their way up the food chain and are now management. Talking to them, talking to the machines, what is the difference? If the machine had eyes, it would have the same eyes as these men and women - huge, red and blank.

My toes are cold and I know it is time to go inside. I left my boots at work and wear my gym shoes home. I can't tell if my toes are wet from the moisture on the street or from my sweat. Perhaps I will wear my boots home when I get laid off. The machines at work take layoffs very personal. Their whole life is turned "ass over teakettle." You would think that some unknown force has singled them out and decided to tear their lives apart. Little do they appreciate the reality of not having to bow down to the other machines. For a while the human machines have broken the hierarchy of the factory, and they need it, like a junky needs a fix.

I love the lay off. I believe that it gives me a reprieve and a chance to connect with life or perhaps humanity. I stay as far as I can away from working people. They never change, not even when they are on their own time. They kill time until they go back to work. Back to their soulmate.

Nothing to do is a great relief and food takes on a taste. Any food is worth eating and any drink is worth drinking. Sometimes people I don't know are worth talking to. Most are not worth the effort. Maybe I am not worth the effort?

I see the light from the TV between the slats of the blinds. The blue light pours out the cracks between the shade and the window. My house is the only one on the north side of the block that is illuminated. I follow the light like a dog that has been let out at night to crap. I have done my business and there is nothing more to do but wipe my ass and go in the house.

All the neighbors must be in their bedrooms screwing or fighting at this time of night. If luck is on my side I won't have to do either. I can go to sleep.

Since the neighborhood is dead quiet I figure they are screwing. Why does screwing become quieter and quieter the more you do it? When I am old will my screwing be dead quiet? Is there a difference between screwing a quiet woman and a comatose woman? Will I have to find out?

I walk slower because she may be up. Sometimes I catch a break and she is sleeping on the couch. The door opens without a sound. I keep the hinges well oiled. I will slip into the hall as quietly as I can. I will turn the TV off and creep up the stairs as quietly as I can, holding my breath. At times like this I am glad I wear gym shoes. I can shower in the morning.

She is sitting on the easy chair watching a police show and eating ice cream. We exchange greetings and a mechanical kiss. She asks me about my day and the bus ride home. I answer "same old thing." I always answer same old thing. She presses me and asks about my meal at work.

I can't remember what I ate those many hours ago. I sat in the cafeteria and ate what everybody else ate. Did I sit by myself or eat with someone? I think I ate with someone who brown bagged it, and another one who had what I had. I wonder if they can remember what they ate? All that comes to mind is the two cups of coffee, just like every other cafeteria meal. I fueled up and went back to working for the machine.

Perhaps she wants sex tonight. When she wants sex she talks a lot. Then again she talks a lot all the time. It is hard to tell when she wants sex. It seems that she wants it around the clock. Maybe just a lot more than I want it. I can't remember the last time we screwed. The truth is I don't care. Maybe we are due. I need to fulfill my husbandly duties and she needs it like a bitch in heat. The only difference between screwing my wife and work is that if I call in sick to my wife it won't show up on my check. I'll have to pay in other ways. Somebody once told me there are no free lunches. I believe they were right.

I don't think I have a choice tonight. I do not have a cold and I have not worked any overtime. It is better to save up the excuses and perform tonight. It appears that we are due and I must stand and deliver. If she thinks that I am refusing her, she cries and life is rougher than normal for days. It is one thing to live with a woman. It is another thing to live with Mrs. Dracula.

When she cries I get red hot mad. I feel like a balloon about to explode. She wants to argue and I want to drink coffee. She pushes me until I want to ask her about her lost time at work. "Where did you go and what did you do?" I want to ask her about her other man. How much can she cry? How much can she pay? Things always get turned around, things are always my fault. How can everything be my fault? They always are. I never shacked up at a conference or at work!

The one time I confronted her she slapped me above my eye. The side of my head was swollen up for three days. At work some of the guys stared at me. The best thing is to say and do nothing at work. Maybe they thought I had been in a fistfight. They left me alone. I imagine that I earned some kind of macho respect from my fellow brawlers. That week I pulled a double shift so I

could show off my bruise. For a while they thought that I had become a dangerous person.

One of the guys at work, a stocky guy with long hair, smiled at me and said "nice shot." I looked him in the eye and said "bite me." I gave him the universal factory workers reply. He said "go for it." I call this kind of talk factory Ebonics for lack of any other title. After enough time on the job it becomes your first language. You have to change gears when you are talking to non-factory people.

I wonder what it would be like to jump out from behind a machine and hit him in the head with a wrench. Watch the blood run down his face and knock his safety glasses across the floor. Just stand there for a while and enjoy the fruits of my revenge. Then hide behind the machine and fade into the sounds like the fog.

These thoughts bring the anger up and I become the anger. Thoughts and violence are about to boil over. If I could just open the door and leave, go back to the gas station, and watch the attendant ring up sales. Walk until my feet get soaked. Embrace the night like a brother and rue the dawn like an enemy.

The next best relief is sleep. But I am in the house and the easy way out is to do what I must. She says she has missed me all evening and she is not sleepy. I answer "I have no plans," and I follow her up the stairs.

I assume that she is satisfied because she falls right to sleep. The victory is mine. I am free to stare out the window at the moon. Eventually I fall asleep without a fight or having to leave the house.

She is gone when I awake, the house is mine. I feel like I have been rewarded for a hard night's work. Then I realize that like the machine, she will be making demands of me soon enough. Later I will have to return to the plant and pay homage to the machine. The time is meaningless. I take the overtime because it keeps me away from her, and eight or twelve hours is the same as one hour when I am at work. It all blends into one grey nothingness. Time filled with sounds and danger but no substance or reason. It is there for itself, to feed itself, to gratify itself, and to perpetuate itself.

The machine does the work and I sort the parts. When I use up a case, another is brought in to take its place. Perhaps some day we can trade places. The machine can sort and I can work. Probably wouldn't make any difference if we get the work done. Seems sometimes the machine is an easier partner to live with than the wife. I wouldn't wish either on anybody.

I use the cases to mark time. When eight cases are used up, it's time for a meal. The cafeteria? A machine standing at attention against the wall? How nice. Most times I choose the machine. Like a soldier it says nothing and responds to commands. "A roast beef sandwich, now, you pitiful pile of scrap iron."

Taste is never an issue. Mustard and pepper supply the taste, so everything tastes the same. No taste, no texture, a few chomps, swallow then gulp down a mouth full of coffee. Nothing ever changes. Taste texture and mud, down the hatch.

When they fuel the bus is there a difference? Standard, Shell, it is all the same. Can there be a difference between ham salad and tuna salad? It gets shoved through the carburetor and burned up. The bus rolls down the concrete and asphalt. I get up take a leak and go back to work. Fuel is fuel and the machine has all the time in the world.

One of my happiest moments was when the machine broke down last fall. When I was a kid I was told never hit a man when he is down. I couldn't help myself. I walked over and kicked it. Not because it was down. Because it could be down. I never thought it would be down and there it was, dead as my old momma at the funeral home. Only difference was the machine fired up after a couple hours and momma stayed down.

While I stood around and did nothing, the geeks worked on the machine. What fun we would have burying the machine. We could use a backhoe to dig its grave and make stupid machine noises as they lowered it in the ground. All the guys could drop their pants and piss on it to help promote oxidation. We could even erect a stone. "Here lies the worst enemy of the working man." We would all get drunk and take half the next day to sleep it off.

What is the difference between the bus and the machine? Will the bus run if the heater breaks, will I work if I have a black eye? We carry on no matter how worn out our parts are, they are only replaced when broken. The machine gets a new part and my body heals. When the machine runs out of parts and my body will not heal, they just order a new one. Some boss calls the manufacturer or the union. A new component is ordered, arrives, and is paid for. Hook up the power and we are manufacturing parts for some assembly plant somewhere.

Robert Johnson sings to me over the speakers. I crank the volume up. This is the best part of the day, my pay back for cavorting with machines. Leftovers and cold beer make it all work and the microwave never fails. It rings

four times to tell me it has warmed my food. Who invented the microwave timer, Pavlov?

At times like this I think of Ella and my youth. I amaze myself that I can think of things that happened so far back. At times it seems that my daydreaming is clearer and more fulfilling than being awake. Some nights I dream about my daydreams. At times like that I question my grip on this dimension. Sometimes I wonder what is real and what are my dreams. Sometimes I cannot tell the difference. Most times I do not care. If the dreams do not care about me, why should I care about them?

She told me once that she loved me, then she left. Less than a year later she was married. I begged her to love me. I swore I would do anything she asked if only she would stay with me. I asked her a year later to leave her husband for me. I longed to share a life with her that was clear and light. Free from the emptiness in my stomach and the weight upon my back.

She cried and I would not. I knew the answer before I asked the question. The die was cast and all I could do now was follow the road that I found myself on. That night I listened to Dylan and drank Kentucky whiskey. I stay away from whiskey now. It only helps me remember the color of salvation. Black is the color I live. On a very good day I can find some grey.

I will never live in a large town. It is hard to get around, and I hate cars. Sometimes I am struck that every day I take part in a process that builds those four-wheeled monsters. That is all the guys at work talk about. I pick up pieces of their conversations over the roaring of the machines. Four-wheel drive, leather guts, and sixteen-inch wheels, is what I hear around the clock. It all blends together like brown sugar in oatmeal. I do not know what some of the auto parts are, that they are talking about. Perhaps the conversations are a type of Ebonics that I do not know. I have never taken a foreign language. Where does one go to learn the language of the factory? What degree do they issue?

This mindlessness is much better than the talk during hunting season. I refuse to eavesdrop during hunting season. A few years ago two guys got into a heated debate over the "points" on a deer that one of them shot. Since they could not settle their argument, the killer offered to bring the head of the deer to work in a shopping bag and settle the argument.

I can tell when September arrives because they start wearing their camouflage clothes to work. They appear to be camouflage macho peacocks.

Do they think the foreman will not see them in their new finery? Their next wardrobe change happens in October when bow season begins. Now they appear in bright orange so nobody will shoot them. Do they think that another hunter will shoot them on the factory floor? I wonder if someone will stick their heads in shopping bags and take them home for their friends to see?

If I had anything to say to these people and wanted to speak to all of them at the same time, I would place a salt lick on the cafeteria floor. They would all gather around and wait for a clean shot. I would shoot them all!

I sat at the lunch table and shared my ideas with the walls. One of the walls looked at me and said, "It's a mighty fine idea." He said "the only problem with my plan is that it would not get them away from their old ladies." I wanted to take a rifle by the barrel and club him over the head. Not because he likes to kill, rather because he took me seriously. He would know how the deer felt and I would know how he felt, a worthwhile experience for both of us. I said nothing, he kept at attention.

The physical size of the southwestern section of Saginaw allows me to get around easily by foot. The dusting of snow was not much of a problem. My gym shoes would not keep my feet dry, so I pulled on wool socks, dressed, and left the house. The air was clear and tasted like diesel exhaust fumes. I shoved my hands in my pockets. You cannot catch a finger in a machine with your hands in your pockets!

A mile or so later I saw her car. She always drives a new car. One more thing not to complain about, and it was a small price to pay for a degree of silence. I remember Ella's car. Her dad bought her a red Mercury convertible with bucket seats and a white interior for her sixteenth birthday. It was bigger than my old Ford. When we went out she would let me drive it. She said her dad wanted to buy her a Jaguar. It was a car she did not want. I still cannot conceive that the big Merc was a compromise. In those days a compromise for me would have been the guys throwing in some cash for gasoline.

Seems that for every mile I drove that car we traveled farther apart. When it was time for her first oil change, we were through. Stiff upper lip, nihilism, and stoicism, following the teachings of Mr. Spock: nothing worked. I was just slipping into the tar pit of the blues. The more I looked up, the more down I saw. The more down I saw, the more I saw her face and the dashboard of the Mercury convertible.

Was she selling a house or talking on the phone? Was she at a closing or just talking to a man? I found an empty seat in the fast food restaurant across the street from her office, drank hot coffee and watched the front of her building.

She left the building after a while with a man wearing a blue sales blazer. He held the car door open for her and they drove away in his car. They were smiling and she slid across the Cadillac seat next to him. He put on his directional indicator and turned right at the first light.

Maybe I made some of the parts for that car. Perhaps the machine and I joined together to ensure the quality of his car. I wonder if he ever thinks about the people who built that car? I wonder if she thinks about our marriage? Do I continue to spy on her because I care, or because I enjoy the blues? When I look down, I see Ella's face driving away in a Cadillac.

I put on my shades, stick my hands in my pockets and walk home. With my shades on, it feels more like night. My feet get wet and my legs are tired. I walk by a blue two door and look it over. I do not see any parts that look familiar. It is parked in a no parking zone. Could it be that the driver is an anarchist? Is he aware that he has broken the law? Am I the only one who cares?

I would like to see the police grab the driver. Find out where he is and drag him outside without his coat and shoes. Crack him across the shins with a nightstick. Shove him in an unmarked black sedan and drive away. The only testimony to his existence would be a blue two door rusting away in a no parking zone.

A big ugly guy could question him over and over. "Why do you flaunt your good fortune? Why do you shove it in the face of the working man? Who the hell do you think you are?"

I am glad I wore my wool socks. I have walked through many puddles. It is time to change my socks and get ready for this evening's work. Perhaps someone at work and I could discuss music or fine dining. Perhaps pigs could fly.

II

The workday was a contest between the machine and me. I fed the parts to the machine and the machine ate them. They were digested by the machine, and then shit flies out of the machine's rectum. Eat and shit, eat and shit, while I supplied the fodder. We work in harmony, like an entity with one soft part and a huge pile of steel parts. My mind wants to wander and think of Ella but the machine calls and I answer.

The thought occurs to me. Does the machine work for me or do I work for the machine? Given the noise level and speed, I think we both work for the boss. My problem is that I have no idea who the boss is. Maybe an alien sits behind a console somewhere and directs the ballet of noise and manufacturing. It could be a seven twenty-four creature with a giant head and no heart. Sometimes he turns the volume up. Sometimes he speeds the process up. He is paid with the skulls of people like me. Does he have a paneled trophy room with a pool table with twelve pockets because he has four arms?

I mumble to myself. "Who is in charge, screw you, you piece of greasy slave driving iron."

My watch says I have a few minutes, so I go to the toilet. This is the best part of the workday. The toilet is empty. I have the whole place to myself. I can pee, I can shit, and I can just hang around. It's all for me to decide what I do and in what order.

With all the time I have on the job the foreman would never write me up. I know what he looks like and what his name is. I forget sometimes and just ignore him. After he leaves, I remember who he is but it's too late. He shakes his head when he leaves. I know he hates me and he cares for the machine. I hate when he plays favorites.

If he calls in the union steward I will agree to anything as long as he leaves me alone. I do not work for him. "Go get the alien with the big head and we will work this out."

Maybe he does not hate me. Maybe it is me who hates him. It does not make a difference. He represents who he represents, and I stand for fresh air and butterflies. He has his turf and I have mine. My problem is that this factory is his turf and mine is frozen until spring. I would like to catch him sometime in the county park after work, and force-feed him some vanilla ice cream. He could kick and scream all he wants. I would keep on shoveling it into his mouth until he stopped breathing. Then I would drag his body into a stream and take a pee. "Go get your pal the alien, he is next!"

If I would have listened to people when I was young, I could have done better. They told me to get an education. They said I had a knack for the law. Ella's dad thought I could have been a businessman. I think I could have been an alien with the right training.

Four and one half years at the university, the easy way. Trying to meet women and pass tests. Dropping the tough classes and getting by on the easy ones. I was paying my college dues at the College of Education when I had nothing better to do. Bill always told me school beats the hell out of working. I cannot remember it being a good time. All I can remember is that it was the second best time I ever had.

Ella and I met in high school. She was easy and I was greedy. I stuffed myself like a beggar at a banquet. When I ate my fill, I then went back for more. My desperation showed like a silver dollar in the fog. She could read my needs and pain like a book report. We made love and listened to Leonard Cohen. She gave me her innocence and I gave her my heart. The loneliness was put on hold and the elevator music played while I happily held the receiver to my ear. One day she hung up, and I was alone.

The bus came to a stop and a burly man in a flannel shirt and vest sat down across from me. I imagined that he was a construction worker like my father. I rarely think of my father. Perhaps because when he was alive he never thought about me. He went through the motions of being a father. To me, he was a stranger that shared a house with the family. He shared the face of the foreman and the soul of the alien. I planned my time around his home time. When he was there, I was gone. I ate as many meals as I could at my friends' homes. Bill's mother would joke that I was her second son. If only I could have had such luck. I behaved myself and ate only as much as my hosts ate.

When my family did eat together I said as little as possible. I only answered questions. And given the few questions he ever asked, well, little was said. I wondered sometimes if it was because he did not care, or if he was not bright enough to ask any questions. It did not matter, because my life was mine and he had no claim on any of it. When I got a job and paid my own way we spoke even less. He lost the right to share any of my life when he refused to share a buck.

I vision Mr. Vest getting a report from his wife this evening. He would ignore the good and react to the bad. Maybe his son did not listen to his wife, or maybe the kid screwed up at school today. A report from the assistant principal or his teacher would be the kiss of death. If a conference was called, the kid might just as well take the hollow point.

The confrontation would start with screaming and threats, depending on Mr. Vest's mood. It would end in a solid crack across the side of the kid's head. The worst part of the battle would be that Mr. Vest would not let it go. It would be revisited tomorrow or the day after. Maybe another solid crack. Construction workers do not believe in "time outs."

If only Mrs. Vest could have dealt with the problems and not involve Mr. Vest. She would scream and shout, but never throw a real punch. Her punches would be easy and the kid could take them all day long. Unfortunately, usually it was no such luck. She would wait for her "torpedo" to take the contract. If Mr. Vest refused the job she would take her revenge on him. It was easier for Mr. Vest to follow the prescribed policy than not. He knew the wages of thinking.

Growing up for the kid is like taxes. You just keep on paying. Should somebody tell the kid, or is it better that he never finds out? Odds are that he will follow in his father's footsteps.

The bus has passed my stop and I have to walk an extra half-mile to get home. Good thing I wore my work boots. My feet are dry and warm. The walk is no problem. I feel better than I have felt in days. Finally I have caught a break. My gym shoes are at work, I am in a splendid mood.

The road is a mass of potholes. The water in them has turned to ice. All the way home, each one of them looks like a small-polluted lake reflecting the filthy light. At mid-block I scope out a large hole that could be the same size body of water that spawned life billions of years ago. If I hang around awhile I may see some primal life form crawl out of the hole.

The block is empty and all the shades are pulled. I walk up to the pothole and see my corrupt reflection in the ice. The thought occurs to me that I need to piss in the pothole. Then again, I do not need to go jail. Best just hold it and walk home.

Her car is not in the side drive. I can tell she has not been home for awhile because there are no tire tracks in the light snow. Did she tell me that she had plans for the evening? I do not remember. I must make it a point to write down what her schedule is. I could keep all the information I need on the big calendar in the kitchen. I bet it's probably my fault that I cannot remember if she gave me any information about this evening.

Is she hard to listen to, or don't I listen to her? She tells me she feels like she is talking to the wall. My pity goes out to the wall.

If she were my employee we could have a great relationship. She could send me E-mails or memos. I could put a limit on the number of words she could send. Twenty words would be more than enough. I could send ten words to her on a good day. Some days I would not communicate with her at all. If we would meet in person I would make guttural sounds and point with my finger. If I could only live in a perfect world.

The lights are on and her boots are in the hall. She must be wearing her gym shoes. I sure hope she is not wearing wool socks. This is a good time to enjoy my bad habits so I leave my coat on, put on my slippers, and go out the side door into the garage. I fill my clay pipe and light a match. Gas lighters are for amateurs. Us pro's always use strike anywhere kitchen matches in the winter.

A few heavy pulls, some powerful coughing and I hear a car pull up. It must be her, so I put my paraphernalia away before I get busted. She does not care if I smoke, she just does not want to know about it. I can feel the buzz begin as I go back into the house and head towards the easy chair.

I knew this was a good day. I knew big breaks were on the menu. I kiss her on the cheek, but my eyes I are on the pizza she is carrying. The fridge is full of beer and she has not unloaded on me. These are the signs of guilt. Does she feel guilty because she has not cooked for me in a week or has she spent some time with her "friend?" Who cares? The pizza has pepperoni, sausage, and bacon. I eat half the pizza and pound down four cold ones. She watches me eat and nibbles on two pieces.

She reminds me that today was Friday. The day of the week had slipped my mind completely. No work tomorrow. She picks up the changer and turns on the TV. The stage is set. She has fed me and has been quiet. The beer was cold and the pizza was warm. I eat in peace and watch the tube. I have no idea what I am watching, but it beats the alternative.

I drink three more beers and start to slur my words. "I need to get some sleep" I tell her. She answers that she too needs some sleep and the bed sounds inviting.

I quickly brush my teeth and get in bed before her. If I can fall asleep quickly it would be the frosting on an excellent day. I could send her a memo about my plan, but a snoring husband is a quicker message. Food, quiet, and sleep: all a workingman could ask for.

At 4:16, I am awake. My stomach aches with gas. Did she order onions on the pizza? Do I have to tell her again? I love onions but they beat the hell out of me. I take a crap and go into the living room to watch cartoons on the TV. Popeye has joined the army for the ten millionth time. There is nothing on the TV that interests me so I go the fridge and eat a slice of the pizza. An hour later, I crap again and go to sleep.

III

Saturday morning never seems to end. The wife is always in bed next to me when I wake up. She lays there with her eyes open and smiles at me. Her hair is a mess and I can smell her breath. After I pee, I give her what she wants. I also ease my own tension and ensure that she will leave me alone for the rest of the morning. Not a bad price to pay for some peace.

A hot shower, cup of coffee and an old movie on the TV are my wages. After the movie, I take her car to the quarter wash. I remember the days when the quarter car wash was indeed a quarter. Mom used to have me wash her car when I was a kid. She paid me two bucks to get the job done. The opportunity to have her car, along with a little free time, was a bonus. I would have paid for the car wash myself just to get the car and get away from my parents.

I went over to Ella's house to swear my love and faithfulness to an empty house. She was always out, her car was usually there, but she wasn't. She claimed to be out shopping or visiting her mother's grave. I believed her. I was young and, what else could I do? I got the idea that things were not right when

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