Many thanks for that warm welcome. You know, when a guest speaker from out of town gets up on his hind legs to sing for his supper it is incumbent upon said speaker to say something pleasant about the location and company in which he finds himself. And with some towns and some audiences that can be a bit of a creative ... strain. I can remember once beginning a speech on a blustery winter’s eve saying how pleased I was to find myself in Hamilton, Ontario in a roomful of meat packers. And I remember thinking, “Hoo, I’m going to Hell for that one.”

No such problem here in Saskatoon. This is truly one of my favourite cities in Canada – make that the world. And to be in Saskatoon in a roomful of librarians .... Hey, Hugh Heifer can have his Big Hair bimbos and Scrooge McDuck can have his swimming pool full of silver dollars and Michael Jackson can have ... whatever Michael Jackson wants to have this week. Saskatoon and librarians is Paradise Enough for me.

Bit of an adjustment though ... to come from the undulating edge of the West Coast rain forest to the pool table flatlands of the Prairies. The island I live on is smaller than some Saskatchewan wheat farms, so it was with a little trepidation that I made this trip. Fortunately, I had a mentor. A neighbour a few houses down from me hails from Saskatoon. In fact you may have heard of him. Wally Stammbuck who used to do the morning show with his sidekick Den right here in Saskatoon. He’s retired and living on Salt Spring now. But I figured, who better to give me some Saskatchewan survival tips? So I said, “Well, Wally am I gonna fit in in Saskatchewan? I mean, how will I even know if I’m talking to someone from Saskatchewan?” “No problem,” said Wally. “If the fellow you’re talking to locks up his guns and ammo but leaves his truck and house open – he’s from Saskatchewan. If you’re in a farmhouse and there’s a foot high stack of Western Producers in the corner – you’re in Saskatchewan. If the folks you’re visiting talk right through the news and sports but fall deadly silent during the weather – that’s Saskatchewan. And if you see a welcome sign to a town coming up that is named after a pioneer homesteader, some dead European royal, or a human body part – you’re in Saskatchewan.”

Well, it’s easy for you folks to laugh, but you forget how mystifying your province can be to outsiders. I know an American fella came through Saskatchewan with his wife one time, by train.

Hour after hour the train crawled across the Prairie. The sun went down, the train crawled on. Finally sometime after midnight the train pulled into the station and the engine shut down. “Where are we, Harold?” said the wife. “I’ll find out,” said Harold, pulling on a dressing gown. He left their compartment, shuffled down the aisle, got out on to the platform and went up to a fellow who was sitting on the bench. “Say, Old Timer, I wonder if you could tell me where we are?” he asked. “Saskatoon,” said the fella on the bench. “Sas –wha?” said Harold. “Saskatoon,” said the stranger. “Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.” When the American got back to the compartment his wife said, “So where are we?” “Beats me,” said Harold. “All I know is they don’t speak English.”

I’m sure the Americans had a fine time here ... even if they couldn’t pronounce it. I know that I’m delighted to be here. If only because Saskatoon is such a long way from Vancouver. Whereas my island is only a few hours ferry ride from the city. Which means I fall squarely into the radioactive Smug Zone that surrounds Vancouver. Oh don’t get me wrong ... Vancouver has a beautiful location — with the mountains and the ocean and the trees ... And yes it is balmy. Vancouverites can literally cycle around the Seawall in the morning, then head for the mountains for some downhill skiing ... and cap it all with a leisurely sail around English Bay in the afternoon. And they can ply that recreational triple header in August ... or December. As they never tire of reminding you.

But don’t be fooled - life there is not perfect. There is one meteorological constant that Vancouverites seldom mention when they call up their mother-in-law in Prince Albert or North Battleford to chat about the harsh yellow of those blooming daffodils in February ... and those pesky rhododendron petals that stick to your windshield. They don’t talk about ... the rain. It rains in Vancouver, folks. It rains. A lot.

You’ve heard the story about the Canuck who dies and finds himself in a giant Post-Life waiting room in a long line-up of other recently deceased souls? Up ahead he can see two doors, marked Heaven and Hell, and one of Satan’s little helpers, standing in between the doors holding a pitchfork. The demon is selecting eternal destinies for the dead folks in the line-up. Every once in a while he directs a soul toward
the Heaven door. Mostly he just forks them straight through the Hell door. And there's no doubt that it's Hell, because the flames are licking right through the doorway.

However our newly departed notices another odd thing. He notices that every once in a while the demon pulls somebody out of the line-up and asks them to stand between the doorways. There's already a fair-sized group there. So when he reaches the demon he says, "Pardon me, Your Evilness, I notice you've got some people standing in a knot, between the doorways. What's the story there? Are they going to Heaven? Or Hell?" "Oh, they're going to Hell all right," says the Demon. "It's just that they're from Vancouver. We're waiting 'til they're dry enough to burn."

But hey... I don't want to spend the evening bad-mouthing Vancouver. Heck, there are lots of worse fates than finding yourself in a monsoon in Vancouver. I mean... you could be in Toronto.

Now don't get me wrong. This is not going to turn into a typical Western rant about Hogtown from a Westerner who doesn't know the Bloor viaduct from the Don Valley Parkway. I am intimately acquainted with the dubious charms of Toronto. As a matter of fact I am one of the few human beings you will ever meet who is willing to confess to having been BORN in Toronto. We don't get to vote on our place of birth.

But from the time I was old enough to pack a lunch I spent most of my spare time banging my forehead against the guardrail of Highway 401 trying to break out of the place. And I enjoyed some pretty impressive jailbreaks over the years. I managed to live for a time in Madrid and London and Paris and Nashville, Ontario. But no matter where I fled I could never snap that invisible umbilical cord... that Darth Vader-style tractor beam that kept locking on to my front bumper and paralysing my circuits to haul me inexorably back to that tight-sphinctered Little Switzerland on the Humber. For many years it was my emotional attachment to a regular paycheque that kept me shackled to Toronto. That's where the jobs were. And I would take them and grumble and plan my next getaway.

I thought I'd escaped for good when I wound up in Thunder Bay, Ontario early in my radio career. I landed a job as an announcer at a nice, sane little radio station... minding my own business... reading the occasional Moose Alert Bulletin, when suddenly... The Earth Moved. A telephone call from the head of CBC Radio Variety. How would I like to host a new national radio show? (Great!) Based in... oh dreaded double syllable: Traw na.

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Well, I hemmed and I hawed and I flip-flopped, but in the end I decided to subject myself to a Yonge Street massage, just one more time. Ah, but this time, I vowed to myself ... this time it was going to play differently. I was going back to Hogtown, okay. But this time I was gonna be calling the shots. No more Mister Nice Guy.

I remember it well. I landed at Pearson International Airport with major attitude. I quick-marched through the cavernous bowels of the Airport, straight to my luggage carousel. Found my two suitcases which miraculously had not been re-routed to Uzbekistan. Snatched those two suitcases up like a falcon nailing two field mice. Lugged those two suitcases up the escalator, out to the sidewalk. Set those two suitcases down – BAM! BAM! – on the sidewalk. Turned to face the CN Tower looming out of the smog ... Threw my fists over my head Rocky-style and roared: "This time Toronto ... this time you are not gonna get the best of me. This time I am gonna whip your ass!" You hear me? No answer. And when I looked down my two suitcases had vanished. Strange town, Toronto.

I'm not a theologian, so I don't care to speculate on the Second Coming of Christ. Aside from predicting that it does happen, it will not occur in Toronto. Who would notice in Toronto? Long-haired guy dressed in a bedsheet and flip-flops? Could be a city alderman in Toronto. Hard to imagine what Jesus could do to attract any media attention in Toronto – walk on the water? Huh. Have you seen Toronto harbour? I could walk on the water. I don't think the Lord would have much luck with the old water into wine, loaves and fishes routine either. Bo-ring. Double bo-ring. Gus Wickstrom, Tompkins, Saskatchewan.

Doesn't ring a bell? Okay, I'll explain. But before I do, I want to reassure everyone that this is NOT going to turn into a rant about Environment Canada weather forecasts. I am NOT going to dwell on the fact that, despite umpteen gazillion dollars worth of thermometers, barometers, anemometers, radar, Doppler, weather balloons and interstellar meteorological satellites, Environment Canada is almost always DEAD WRONG about predicting temperatures and conditions in the microclimate that surrounds my house. I will NOT point out that the Environment Canada spokesperson NEVER ADMITS his or her organization screwed up the day after it rains when it was supposed to have been sunny, or when a force ten gale shows up on what was forecast as a calm day.

I am just going to say that, when it comes to weather forecasting Gus Wickstrom of Tompkins, Saskatchewan, does it better. What's more, Gus doesn't have a hi-tech laboratory full of sophisticated instruments and gauges. He does his forecasting with pig spleens. You heard right. Gus takes the spleen from a slaughtered pig (older hogs are best), holds it out in front of him, palpates the organ, sometimes even takes a little chomp of it ("I like to bite into it a little ... I am trying to be more accurate") ... And then Gus Wickstrom predicts the weather for Tompkins, Saskatchewan and environs. Is he any good at it? The Farmer's Almanac thinks so. The magazine, which is mildly famous for the accuracy of its own weather forecasts, extolled Gus Wickstrom and his pig spleens in a feature article not long ago. He gets calls from radio stations and TV stations around the continent, asking him to tell the world what the weather's going to be. He's been interviewed by media outlets in New York and Los Angeles. COMO TV recently flew him in to Seattle to read his pig spleen prognostications for Washington. It's amazing what Gus can suss out from a simple pig spleen. "The last few years there's been a blue streak at the bottom of the spleens" says Gus. "That tells me we'll get some rain in May and June. (This year's) spleens have a good layer of fat compared to last year and that usually indicates more moisture." Is Gus on the money or is he just talking through his porkbellys? Well, a couple of years back he went toe to toe with the official Canadian weather office – and mopped the floor with them. "Environment Canada has thousands and thousands of dollars worth of equipment," says Gus,
“and that year they said it would be cold and wet (in the prairies). But the spleens showed exactly the opposite, and that’s what we got – a warm and mild winter with little precipitation.”

Environment Canada has a bit of an excuse in this contest – they’ve only been around for a few decades. Spleen-reading goes back for generations. “It came from my dad’s side of the family,” says Gus. “They came to Saskatchewan from Sweden back in the early 1900’s. But weather predictions with spleens were done in Stockholm long before that.” Gus has great respect for a body organ that doesn’t get a lot of positive press, generally speaking. He says the spleen is a powerful piece of meat that can do much more than tell you if it’s going to rain on your parade. He says slapping a chunk of raw spleen on your balding head promotes hair growth. “I often wear it under my hat when I go to check the mail,” he says. He’s a big fan of taking spleen internally too. Gus reckons a feed of spleen is good for folks with rheumatism, arthritis, bad hearing, failing eyesight. “It can put a little zip in your life,” he says. Speaking of which, Gus cautions against eating too much spleen. He says a little under four ounces a day is the absolute maximum. Why? Because spleen is … well, like Gus said – powerful. “It acts like Viagra. Anyone can eat it – men or women – but there is no use only one spouse eating it since that person will overpower the other.” Aha. That explains that famous old Prairie expression: “Is that a pig spleen in your pocket or are you happy to see me?”

Oh yeah, you can learn an awful lot from animals. The other animals, I mean. We humans have a bad habit of elevating ourselves above the other biological tenants of this planet. Which is kind of presumptuous when you think about it. I mean look at us. We can’t soar like eagles or swim like dolphins. We can’t climb like mountain goats, run like cheetahs or jump like kangaroos. Pound for pound, porpoises have bigger brains. Bears are stronger, rabbits are nimbler, and your average sewer rat is a helluva lot tougher. But we blithely assume ourselves to be the superior species. Why is that again?

My tenth grade biology teacher used to tell us that the human animal is superior because it’s the only animal that knows how to use tools. I wish I could’ve taken my tenth grade biology teacher with me on a canoe trip I took up the west coast last summer. Together we could have watched two otters bobbing in the surf. They were floating on their backs, balancing a couple of flat rocks on their tummies. They were using those rocks to break open clams, and they looked like they were at their own cocktail party, gossiping over the chip dip. Heck, I could just take my biology teacher
down to the parking lot of a seaside restaurant where I live. We could watch the seagulls pick up mussels on the beach, fly over the parking lot and drop them on the pavement to smash them open. I grant you that flat rocks and parking lots aren’t exactly Skil saws and electron microscopes—but they are tools, by any definition.

Not that my discovery was anything new. Chimpanzees have been videotaped using sticks to fish termites out of termite mounds. Egyptian vultures have been documented dropping rocks on ostrich eggs to make their own omelettes. Now from Down Under comes word of even more sophisticated tool use—by crows. Scientists on the island of New Caledonia, off the east coast of Australia, have been watching the island crows take tool use one step further. Unlike the chimps, the vultures, the otters and the seagulls, the crows don’t use whatever’s lying around—they actually adapt raw material to their own purposes. One thing they do is bite off tree twigs that have secondary branches growing out of them. This forms a ‘hook’ that the crows use to snag grubs and maggots out of holes. The other tool they fashion is even more lethal. The crows take leaves from a tree called the screw pine and nibble them lengthwise to create a tapered shaft about eight inches long. Screw leaves are naturally barbed. By the time the ‘craftsman’ is finished, he or she’s got a multi-fanged gaff that’s very efficient at rooting out worms, spiders, millipedes and all manner of creepy-crawlies hiding in the crevices of logs and tree trunks. And that’s just what the crows do. They grasp their ‘tools’ in their beaks and poke and prod until they catch their dinner. Doesn’t surprise me. Anybody who’s watched crows for any length of time knows that they’re smarter than your average government bureaucrat. Or Chihuahua, come to that.

When I was a kid, my dad brought home an orphan crow one day. We named him Sammy. My dad was obsessed with teaching him tricks, but Sammy didn’t seem all that keen. Not that Sammy was stupid. He just had better things to do with his time. One trick my dad tried to teach him was “fetch the quarter.” He’d pitch a quarter out in the grass, and since crows are attracted to shiny objects, Sammy would go after it. Sammy found the quarter every time. Getting it back from him was something else. My dad tried cherries. He would hold one up and say, “Here, Sammy! Nice cherry! Give me the quarter for a nice cherry.” Sammy would look at him like he was out of his mind. My dad was not a patient man. After twenty minutes or so of pleading, he’d pack up his bag of cherries and go back in the house. Not me. I wanted that quarter—enough to follow Sammy for hours if need be, waiting for him to get tired of lugging the quarter around. Besides, I knew that Sammy really liked cherries. All I had to do was get close enough to him with a strawberry or two, and he’d drop the quarter straight off. Of course, sometimes he’d fly half a mile or so over swamp and hills and burr patches. Other times he’d perch on the uppermost branch of a maple and make me climb about three stories high before he’d drop the quarter and gobble the strawberry. And I swear that sometimes I would see something close to a smirk cross his . . . beak. Sammy knew how to use a tool all right. I should know. I was it.

Ah, there are lessons to be learned everywhere had we but the eyes and ears to take them in. Take my local gas station. Wouldn’t you think you could learn anything getting gas, right? But there I am, sitting in my car at the pump while the gas jockey fills my tank with unleaded regular. The ignition is switched off, but I’ve got the key turned to “Accessories” so I can listen to the radio. The pump jockey leans in my window and says, “I’m afraid I have to ask you to turn your car radio off, sir.” “Why is that?” I ask. “Risk of a spark, sir. There was a gas station in Winnipeg that blew up because a customer had his radio on while he was getting gas.” Meekly, (I’m Canadian, eh?) I turn my ignition key to “Off.” I pay for the gas and drive away, making sure my wristwatch doesn’t accidentally brush against the window crank producing a spark that will turn the entire town into flaming Armageddon.

And then I think . . . wait a minute. I’ve been filling up at gas stations at least once a week for the last 40 years. Just about everybody I know has been doing the same thing. I can remember seeing guys pumping gas with cigarettes in their mouths. I have never, in four decades, heard of ANY fire caused at a gas pump ANYWHERE by a spark from a car ignition. On the other hand, maybe the kid was right. Perhaps I’m just an aging desperado who’s grown used to living dangerously. By rights, I shouldn’t even be here. I should have died from Extreme Carelessness years ago.

When I was growing up, my parents never strapped me into a kiddie’s car seat—mainly because there weren’t any. In those days, kids got to bounce around in the back seat along with the family must. We could even roll the windows down and fall out if we wanted to. The only air bag I knew was an American Airlines stewardess who lived down the street. Heck, I was lucky to live that long, really. I spent a lot of my infancy in a non-CSA-approved crib and I’m pretty sure my blankets weren’t treated with flame retardant. I know I spent a lot of lazy afternoons gnawing on the crib rails with my new teeth. Crib rails sporting a bright red coat of lead-based paint. Amazing I don’t glow in the dark.

And diet! Every nickel I could scrape up by cutting lawns (without safety glasses or noise reduction earmuffs) went for Hostess Twinkies, 12-ounce bottles of Kik Cola and all the bubble gum I could stuff between my jaws. And if we
were really good at home, Mom might make us our favourite between-meals snack: a slice of Christie’s white sliced, slathered with butter and then liberally sprinkled with brown sugar. Sometimes on hot days she’d even give us a pitcher of sugar-laced Freshie. Otherwise we’d just drink water from the garden hose. Medics! We got a dead man walking here!

As kids, we suffered from a dreadful lack of rules and supervision. We had pea-shooters and home-made bows and arrows. Bike helmets? Closest I got was a Davy Crockett coonskin cap. Dogs ran free. We cooked up our own pickup games of baseball and touch football without a single coach! We played hockey on outdoor rinks without dressing rooms or anyone to help us with our skates. Some of us even got hurt and had to get over it on our own. It was a brutal time.

We spent summer afternoons swinging on a rope tied to a branch of a huge maple tree. You took a mighty sprint, grabbed the rope, soared out over the river, let go of the rope and landed in the swimming hole if you timed it right. If you timed it wrong, you landed in a raspberry patch. There was no lifeguard, the rope was rotten and the branch could have come down at any time.

Mind you, by then we had already been coarsened by years of classroom barbarity. Kids nowadays won’t believe this, but in those Dark Ages, some of us actually FAILED OUR YEAR. That’s right—we were held back and forced to repeat a year’s worth of dreary classes until we got it right. It was all based on some primitive academic theory that certain kids were actually smarter and/or worked harder and therefore deserved preferential treatment. Thank heavens we’ve stamped out that kind of thinking. We live in much safer times now, but it can feel a little cramped. A smarter guy than me once said: “A ship is safe in a harbour, but that’s not what ships are for.” Applies to humans, too.

Ah, yes... taking chances. I wish that had been on the curriculum when I was at school. But we all played it pretty safe. Didn’t want to do anything that wasn’t “appropriate”. Speaking of which... Wanna know my least favourite cliché making the rounds these days? It’s a one-word expression: inappropriate. It’s a designation the Holier Than Thous amongst us can use to brand anything they don’t personally approve of. A Hollywood movie can be ‘inappropriate’. So can an attitude, the shortness of your skirt or the length of your hair. What a prissy, Pecksniffian declaration that is! Cowardly, too. Recently I watched as a high school basketball coach whistled a stoppage in practice and called a noisy,
foul-mouthed student off the court. Looking down his
nose (actually, up his nose — the kid was really tall) the
teacher grimmly announced “Walter, I find your language
inappropriate.” He could have just said, “Stop swearing.”
Ah well, all part of the Political Correctness Crusade that
continues to wash over us. I'd call it a return to the Victorian
Age, except that would be doing Victorians a disservice.
Recent tortured manifestations of Political Correctness
make Queen Victoria look like the proprietress of a bawdy
house.

In California, a painting of a nude was recently removed
from a public building at the University of Berkeley.
Detractors had complained that the portrait “exploits and
objectifies women.” It was a print of Goya's The Naked Maja
— a painting that has been considered a priceless classic
for the past two centuries. Oh well. At least they didn't try
to paint a bra and panties on her.

George Washington should be so lucky. You're familiar with
that famous painting of Washington by the artist Emanuel
Leutz — the one that shows the Father of The Nation
standing gallantly at the prow of a rowboat while his soldiers
ferry him to shore! The painting is called Washington Crossing
the Delaware and it's been a fixture in American mythology
almost as long as the US has been around. Alas, thanks to
the author's lubriciousness, the painting's days are numbered.
Last August, a School District in Columbus, Georgia recalled
2,300 fifth-grade textbooks. Reason? Well, the textbooks
contained a photograph of the illustrious painting and some
sharp-eyed reviewer on the school board noticed that if
you squint your eyes almost shut and use your imagination,
the pocket watch innocently dangling against Washington’s
left thigh might be misconstrued by a fifth-grader's eyes as
the Founding Father’s penis. So the books were recalled and
school district flunkies spent two weeks assiduously
airbrushing the suggestive timepiece out of the picture.

We had an example closer to home this month — in our
capital, as a matter of fact. The directors of the Federal
Agriculture Museum in Ottawa came down with an
interesting variation of Mad Cow disease. They announced
that the giving of feminine names to cows in the museum
had been deemed 'inappropriate' and would henceforth be
banned. The reasoning — if it can be called that — was that
if a cow named, say, Bessie, was being displayed to a
school class on a trip to the museum and there happened to be
a little girl in the class named Bessie, well, she might be . . .
embarrassed and humiliated. Particularly if the cow in
question happened to be, as a blushing spokesman for the
museum put it, “doing certain bodily functions.” Hell, you
know how depraved cows can be. Hence the banning of
feminine names for cows. Once the decision was made
public, the outcry was so loud the Museum officials hastily
changed their minds and rescinded the ban. Pity. I was
dying to know what names they would have deemed
appropriate. Lance the Cow perhaps? Spike? Theodore?

Even cartoons are not immune to the 'inappropriate' virus.
A recent Disney production featured Donald and Daisy
Duck doing a little white-water rafting. Half way through
the cartoon, their raft upset and Donald and Daisy are
thrown into the river. And that's where the standard's board
of Walt Disney Enterprises halted the production. They
called the animators before them and demanded to know
why the characters weren't wearing regulation life jackets.
One of the animators, Robert Gannoway, waited for several
seconds and replied in a meek and plaintive little voice,
“Because . . . they're ducks?”

Speaking of animals . . . Could we be serious about the beaver
for a moment? The business of choosing a national mascot
is important and most countries treat it with appropriate
solemnity. After all, a national mascot tells the rest of
the world which characteristics a nation holds dear. Hence,
most countries choose mascots that are brave, intelligent,
powerful or in some other way dominant and admirable.
The U.S. opted for a ferocious bald eagle, wings a-flare and
talons flashing. Britain reveres a doughty bulldog with a
spiked collar and a gobful of wicked-looking teeth. France
lines up behind an Amazonian, barricade-bestriding goddess
named Marianne. Russia has the burly bear; Costa Rica the
magnificent jaguar. And Canada? Canada has a rat. Castor
Canadensis, to be precise. A bottom-feeding pond dweller
with buck teeth, a furry spare tire and a tail that looks like it
was run over by a Winnebago.

Our national mascot is not noticeably heroic, muscular,
clever or oversupplied with sex appeal. That might lead
you to think that Canada placed last in the national mascot
sweepstakes. Don't kid yourself. Bucky Beaver may look
like a loser, but he is taking over the world as I write. Don't
believe me? Ask the Russians. Away back in the 1950s
somebody in Finland (a serious vodka enthusiast, I suspect)
got the bright idea of bringing in a brace of Canadian beavers
and turning them loose in the Finnish wilderness. The
Canuck imports settled right in, booting out the local
European beaver population (they really were kind of
wussy) and started to do the two things Canadian beavers
do best: making dams and making little beavers. They made
a lot of little beavers. Before long, offspring from those first
Canadian migrants were paddling inexorably toward
Sweden to the west and Russia to the east. Today, Russian
biologists grimly reckon there are at least 20,000 Canadian
beaver building unrequested water management projects
in northwest Russia. And they're expanding ever southward.
Think about it: the Canadian beaver stands poised to take Moscow—something even Napoleon couldn’t do.

You’d think Finns might have learned from the Argentine experience. Back in the 1940s Argentina imported 25 breeding pairs in an attempt to create a fur industry down there. The beaver liked the Argentine outback even more than the European backwoods—and responded in their characteristic beaverian way. Right now, Argentina is smothered in upwards of 50,000 industrious ex-Canadian dam-builders. And Britain? Don’t even mention Canadian beavers in Britain. Recently, some environmentalists in London suggested purchasing some Canadian beavers to reintroduce the animal into the English countryside, where they’ve been extinct for at least a millennium. The British press went nuts. “Keep the furry thugs in Canada,” one editorial huffed. Another called them “loutish interlopers” and “uncivilized brutes.” Scary. They don’t even talk about our hockey players that way.

So is there nothing that can stop a full-scale beaver invasion? Well . . . there is one antidote—but it’s even scarier. This Anti-Beaver Initiative was created here in Canada, fittingly enough. On a prairie farm belonging to 87-year-old Tom Harper. Tom had a Beaver Problem. They plugged his creek and flooded his fields. Looked like they might even flood him out of house and home if something wasn’t done. Tom tried everything. He called the authorities; they yawned. He set the dogs loose; the beavers swam away. He set live-traps; the beavers ignored them. He even tried shooting them. Big deal. There were plenty more where they came from. In desperation, Tom Harper set up loudspeakers near the principal beaver dam. He hooked the speakers up to his radio and (I’m not sure I can even repeat this in mixed company, but . . . ) he tuned the radio dial to CBC Radio One and cranked up the volume. CBC Radio One. News and interviews followed by more news and more interviews. Documentaries on Gay/Lesbian/Aboriginal/Transsexual/Dyslexic/Post Modern/Neo- Classical Symposia. Round table discussions on: The Kyoto Accord. Whither the NDP? Senate Reform. And (no connection) Greenhouse Gas. CBC Radio One. Twenty-four-seven. The beavers lasted 76 hours before they waddled into the Prairie wilderness, never to be seen or heard from again. So, yes the beaver can be bested. But there is such a thing as cruel and unusual punishment.

Okay, I’ve got a question for you: Have you ever awakened from a deep sleep to instant, saucer-eyed awareness that you were not . . . alone . . . in your bedroom? I mean, aside from whoever customarily shares your bedroom? We had that experience just last week—yours truly and my Heliomiet. Against Life’s Trails, Lynne. Spooky. We didn’t hear drawers sliding open or the chink of jewellery being pawed over. No stealthy footsteps or floorboard creakin’ . . . no. It was more like something . . . just over the threshold of sound . . . like ballooed Kleenexes being lobbed around the room. Then we’d hear a whispering thpppppp thpppp. At the bottom of the bed? Over by the dresser? But the sound vanished almost as soon as it registered. We sat up simultaneously, staring banjo-eyed into the dark, but saw nothing—or wait! Nnno. Probably just me blinkin’. But there it is again! Just a whirlash across the retina, faster than a politician’s smile.

And then I knew. It wasn’t a burglar we had in our bedroom. It was a bat. Now there’s a critic that sure got short-changed in English. Bat. What a pathetically inadequate name that is. The Aztec called them butterfly mice. To the French they’re chaubre souris—bald mice. The Germans have the best name of all—Fledermaus. That’s the one we Anglos could have stolen! We could have dubbed them Flittermice. But no . . .

. . . we stuck them with the mundane, monosyllabic ‘bat’. Turned out my bedroom intruder was just a little brown bat, but cute as he was and Harrowsmithian as I like to think I am, it’s tough to go back to sleep knowing that something looking like a miniature Crime Crusader is barrel-rolling through airspace not all that far from your pillow.

Which is why I got up, nude, at 2:30 last Thursday morning and put on my galoshes—well, so I could go out in the backyard shed and rummage through my fishing stuff and find my old landing net. And okay, I admit it, while I was out there I picked up my bicycle helmet too, because, well bats are skittish and they have teeth and tiny talons and I wouldn’t want him to mistake my head for an emergency landing strip or anything. It’s not easy to catch a flying bat in even a good-sized landing net like mine, but I did it. Well, truth to tell, the bat flew into my net while I was adjusting my chin strap. Point is, I got the bat in the landing net and took him out in my backyard about 2:37 AM in the nude. Except for the bicycle helmet. And the galoshes. And I was kind of holding the netted bat out in front of me with one hand and using a hockey stick with the other to remove the
mash from his wings, because I didn’t want to get to chummy with a ticked-off bat — even with my bicycle helmet on. And I just about had him free when . . . I heard the car doors slamming.

My next-door neighbours, returning home from a party. So close I could hear their car keys rattling. “No sweat,” I said to myself. “It’s a moonless night. I’ll just stand perfectly still with my landing net and hockey stick. They won’t see me.” Nor would they have . . . if my Boon Companion and Pillar of Strength Against Life’s Suffering Lynne . . . had not chosen that precise moment to throw on the backyard floodlights. “Need some light, dear?” I heard her call, cheerily. No . . . Not really. A Black Hole would be nice. Or perhaps a cyanide lozenge . . . The bat flew off. I wished that I could. And my neighbours? That’s the strangest thing. I don’t know what they made of it. Haven’t heard a peep out of them since Thursday morning.

Ah, it does my heart good to hear those Saskatoon belly laughs rolling through the room tonight. That’s not just a prairie trait. Canadians love to laugh. We laugh at politicians. We laugh at movie stars. We laugh at ourselves. But you know what has always struck me as curious? For a nation that loves to laugh so much . . . how come we don’t have our very own light bulb joke? You’re familiar with light bulb jokes — how many ’fillintheblanks’ does it take to change a light bulb — How many CIVIL SERVANTS, for example? The answer is SIX. One to change the bulb and five to form a committee to write the environmental impact statement.

How many LAWYERS does it take to change a light bulb?
How many can you afford?

How many fishermen?
Just one — but you shoulda seen that bulb! It was THIS BIG!

How many Californians/Sunshine Coasters does it take to screw in a light bulb?
Californians/Sunshine Coasters don’t screw in bulbs. They screw in hot tubs.

How many TEAMSTERS does it take to screw in a light bulb?
A hunnerd and forty-nine — you gotta problem wit dat?

How many REVENUE CANADA agents does it take to screw in a light bulb?
Just one . . . but the bulb really gets screwed.

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?
Just one . . . but the bulb has to REALLY WANT to change.

How many FEMINISTS does it take to change a light bulb?
Only one — and that’s NOT FUNNY!

We have of course GENERIC Canuck jokes — jokes made at our expense by other countries. Have you heard some of the Canuck jokes floating around in Washington lately? I don’t know if it was our cleaning their clocks at hockey or perhaps the thoughtful musings by our Liberal MP Carolyn Parrish about Americans being bastards, morons and a coalition of idiots . . . but we are the butt of a lot of jokes in Washington these days. Example of a joke you might here around a Washington DC water cooler:

You know why they never give Canuck workers a coffee break?
Takes too long to retrain them.

Have you seen what’s printed on every Pepsi Cola can that’s sold in Canada?
Open other end.

Did you hear about the Canadian race car driver who entered the Indianapolis 500?
Came in dead last. Made 14 pit stops. Four to gas up. Ten to ask directions.

Did you hear about the Canadian astronaut who volunteered to make the first landing on the sun?
American astronaut says, “Yore crazy boy, you’ll burn to a cinder.” Canuck astronaut says, “No problema — we’re landing at night, eh!”

Did you hear about the English earl who took his Canuck guest out for a spot of pheasant shooting?
Suddenly a beautiful blonde scamps by stark naked. The English Earl cries out “I say, Madame . . . are you game?” “Tee hee, I certainly am,” she says. So the Canuck shoots her.

I mentioned before that librarians are among my favourite people on the planet. I didn’t say that just because you’re charming and bright and bought me drinks this afternoon. No. I like you because . . . I need you and your libraries. Because I speak and write in English. And anyone who speaks and writes in English needs all the help they can get. Our
language, ladies and gentlemen, is insane. It makes no sense, constantly contradicts itself and has virtually no rules. Take pronunciation. Take the sentence: "Cough up the dough or I'll plough ya. Am I getting through, tough guy!" Five words in that sentence end in O-U-G-H. And in each word the O-U-G-H combination is pronounced differently - cough, dough, plough, through, tough. And that's just the beginning. Look at food. We have "egglant", which contains no egg; hamburger, which contains no ham. Pineapple — neither apple nor pine. English muffins were not invented in England but French fries were. We have boxers who fight in rings, which are square. We eat square meals on plates, which are round. I am a writer: I write. However fingers don't fing; grocers don't groce and hammers don't ham. The plural of tooth is teeth. How come in this crazy language of ours, my house can burn up as it burns down? After which I fill in the insurance forms by filling them out!

How come in this crazy language of ours, my house can burn up as it burns down? After which I fill in the insurance forms by filling them out? My alarm clock goes off ... by going on. When the stars are out ... they're visible, but when the lights are out, they're invisible. When I say I'm going to wind this up, the audience breathes a sigh of relief. But what if I'm only talking about winding up my watch?

English is such a mish mash and a hodge podge and a snare and a maze. I've been writing in English for more than 40 years and I still screw up on a regular basis. Which helps explain this letter that I received this week. It starts off: "Sir:" Believe me ... no 'good news' letter ever starts off 'Sir'. Anyway: "Sir: I have been surprised many times at your cavalier and lackadaisical mistreatment of the English language, but you have outdone yourself in your column this week when you ..." And then the letter goes on to fay me for some alleged linguistic misdemeanour. It is signed, of course, "Outraged Reader:" Well ... all I can say to Grumpy Reader is "For God's sake, sir, seek gainful employment. If you have nothing better to do than to pore over your poor prose, wrinkling out grammatical offences, then you are a man in serious need of a hobby ... have you considered tatting?"

Mind you to give Grumpy Reader his due ... he does have a point. English grammar and I have had little more than a nodding acquaintance since those dreary, dreadful days of grade seven English Composition, when a merciless Miss Thatcher lashed my class with volley after volley of English grammar rules and regs. Miss Thatcher took no prisoners. She ravaged me ... and left the pathetic, shuffling, unlettered wretch you see before you tonight. Even today, decades later, I still shamble around with my participle dangling obscenely, lurching over misplaced modifiers ... slapping ineffectively at insubordinate nouns ... averting my eyes shyly from those brazen copulative conjunctions that don't even have the common decency to wear a modest set of brackets ... It's a situation up with which no one should have to put. And sometimes I can't — put up with it, I mean. And when that happens I have a failsafe remedy. I just reach for my Fractured English file.

This is where I keep my collection of bits and pieces written by people who mangle the English language even more grievously than I do. Now to be fair ... more often than not these folks are labouring under a distinct disadvantage — namely that English is clearly not their first language. As in the case of whoever wrote this brochure for a Japanese car rental firm. Some advice that it offers its readers: "When a car heave in sight tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first... but if he still obstacles your passage ... then tootle him with vigour!" Or these assembly instructions that came with an Italian-made baby carriage: "Insert the blushing for blocking in the proper split. Push it deeply and wheel in anti-time sense till it arrests." Yes ... and buona fortuna ...

A polite reminder on the back of a hotel room door in Tokyo is, I think, appropriately Zen-like, given the locale. It reads: "Is forbidden to stealing the hotel towels please. If you are not person to do such thing is please not to read notice." In most Scandinavian countries, English is often spoken, but not always flawlessly. As in the cocktail lounge in Oslo where a sign tells clients: "Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar." Riding in elevators is unnerving in the most cosmopolitan of nations, but there is one lift in the city of Budapest that I intend to avoid for the rest of my natural life. It carries a sign that reads in (sort of) English: "To move the cabin, push button for wishing floor. If the cabin should enter more persons, each should press number of wishing floor. Driving is then going alphabetically by national order." Under which someone has written in ballpoint: "Or you could take the stairs.

Occasionally overseas English isn't merely mangled — it's
downright dangerous. As in the advertisement that sits in the window of a Hong Kong dentist. It says: “Teeth extracted by latest Methodists.” Or my overall favourite. The notice on the wall of an Acapulco Hotel dining room: “The management has personally passed all the water served here.” So now you know why they tell turistas not to drink the water.

As many of you know, I retired from my Basic Black show on CBC radio a couple of years ago, and people still ask me if I miss it. The answer — which is the answer to most questions — is yes and no. I don’t miss the commuting from home to work and back again. I don’t miss the big city noises and smells or the staff meetings. But I do miss the opportunity to meet great Canadians every week and to get paid for doing it. And by great I do not mean famous. Basic Black did not do celebrities or sports stars. We talked to people like . . . well, like Mavis Pickett, who I met on the last year of the show. Mavis Pickett’s story did not start out on a happy note. On the contrary.

In the early spring of 1996, tragedy fell on 64-year-old Mavis Pickett like a Mack truck full of boulders. It arrived in the form of a telephone call from a policeman in Whistler, B.C. Her 30-year-old daughter, also named Mavis, was dead. She had tumbled off a cliff while skiing at Blackcomb mountain. “She was my soulmate,” remembers Mavis senior. “We could finish each other’s sentences:” Poised on the cusp of senior citizenry, when life is supposed to smooth out and become pleasant, Mavis was instead plunged into a whirlpool of misery; faced with an unthinkable, inconsolable loss. So the grey-haired, bespectacled grandmother did the only thing she could. She became a stand-up comic.

Actually, it was an accident. Searching for some kind of relief from her pain, Mavis came across a night school brochure offering a course in grief management through humour. She signed up. At her first class, her heart fell when she discovered she’d enrolled not in a lecture series, but in a stand-up comedy workshop. “Not for me,” she thought firmly. She was no stand-up comedian. She was a retired elementary school teacher for heaven’s sake. She tried to withdraw from the course. The teacher, sensing something special in Mavis, begged her not to give up just yet — to at least attend a couple of classes and give it a shot. Turned out Mavis had superb natural timing and a great stage presence. She also had a personal comic mother lode of material all to herself. There’s a hoary old adage for writers that advises them to “Write about what you know.” Mavis decided she would take her humourous material from an area of life that she knew all about, that, curiously, no other stand-up comedian was tackling what it’s like to get older. It became an absolute gold mine. Other stand-up comics were screaming and yelling about sex and booze and Osama bin Laden in sulphurous X-rated rants. Mavis toddled out to the microphone and talked in a sweet voice about forgetfulness, decreased agility, fading eyesight and other hurdles of advancing age.

She never swears during her act, but she’s not exactly a goody-two-shoes out there on the stage. “Young people are really concerned about what old people think,” she purrs into the microphone. “Just the other day, my granddaughter asked me, ‘Did you and Grandpa have mutual orgasms?’ And I said, ‘Well, no dear. We had Metropolitan Life.’” It didn’t take the world of stand-up long to discover the fresh new voice coming out of Vancouver. Mavis is a smash. She’s appearing at nightclubs, cafes and conventions all over the city and the lower mainland. She could work just about every night if she wanted to, but she doesn’t. She’s got a real life. She also teaches osteo-fit classes to fellow seniors six days a week. “That’s where I pick up some of my best material,” she says.

The best thing about Mavis? Her exit line. Most stand-up comics invariably end their routines with lame and hapless bailout lines like “Hey, you’ve been a terrific audience. Thankyouverymuch.” Not Mavis. When she finishes her last joke, she pauses, beams out at the audience and says quietly, “Say goodnight, Mavis.” By this time, the audience is in love with the woman. The whole room roars “GOODNIGHT, MAVIS!” over their own applause. Except Mavis is not really talking to the audience. She’s talking to a specific person she can see sitting and laughing in the front row. It’s Mavis Anne, her daughter. Mavis Pickett is the only one who can see her, but that’s all right. Say goodnight, Mavis.

Well, you have been a wonderful audience tonight, warm and spontaneous, open-hearted and generous. Think of all the laughter that’s echoed through this room tonight. That’s the best therapy there is.

Think of all the laughter that's echoed through this room tonight. That's the best therapy there is.
It's been smouldering on my personal back burner for more than twenty years and I need to get it off my chest. My Guilty Moment involves a seven-year-old niece . . . and an instrument of torture. It happened sometime around the end of the '70s in the kitchen of my big sister's house not far from Fergus, Ontario. I was young and much cleverer than I am now — clever to the point of smart-assedness, actually. My big sister was both older AND more mature. She was also the mother of six. Following a delicious home-cooked meal, she announced that her third youngest, Patti, had an after-dinner surprise for us. Patti scooted away from the table into a back room, and eventually reappeared, harnessed and trussed to a piece of machinery that looked like a cross between a portable piano and a smithy's bellows, but made out of Formica.

It was, of course, an accordion. I'd seen them before — even heard them — but always at a manageable distance. This one was right in my face. Little Patti started to wheeze out Beer Barrel Polka. I felt a smile taking over the bottom half of my face. She plunged into I've Got A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts and my smile turned into a grin which morphed into a leer. By the time she was honking out Lady of Spain, I was cackling uncontrollably, the tears cascading down my cheeks. It was deeply embarrassing. Little Patti was playing her heart out; others at the dinner table were listening supportively. I was howling like a depraved loon. I can't help it. Accordions crack me up. I can tolerate bagpipes. I can keep a straight face through a Nose Flute Recital. But accordions just mess my mind. It's hard to say exactly why. Accordions are hardly the apex of earthly annoyance. Not in a world that includes chainsaws, jock rock DJs and Margaret Atwood reading her own poetry.

And the instrument is not without its champions. The accordion is the official musical instrument of San Francisco, not to mention Detroit, St. Paul and Skokie, Illinois. Gandhi played a version of the accordion, for heaven's sake. So does Laurie Anderson and k.d. lang. But on the other hand, so do Weird Al Yankovic and the Shmenge Brothers. I think the soaring accordion IQ (Irritability Quotient) is due to a combination of things. First, there is the music itself, which is invariably schmaltzy and cloying, and then there's the fact that it emanates from such a ludicrous looking contraption — one-third keyboard, one-third aircraft instrument panel, one-third mechanical lung — and all of it covered in a glittery Day-Glo veneer. I've got a hunch Elton John's coffin will look a lot like a top-of-the-line accordion.

And of course, it is loud. I am always amazed at the sheer gross volume of — well, noise — that an accordion can pump out. Sounds like a device that should be outlawed along with mustard gas and anthrax bombs, but the accordion, oddly, does not terrify people, it makes them smile, albeit uneasily. Or in my case, guffaw maniacally. I just hope my niece has kicked her accordion habit, once and for all. It's not easy. I know of one hard-core accordion player, heading home after playing at a wedding, who decided to stop for a coffee. He pulled in at a roadside diner and went inside. He was just sitting down at the counter when he realized — damn! — he had left his accordion in full view in his car! He rushed back to the parking lot, hoping against hope, but it was already too late. Someone had smashed in his car window and thrown in two more accordions. (Please note that after this point, Mr. Black adlibbed and the last bit of his speech is unavailable, except in the memories of those who attended.)