



Albatross

(THE CURSE OF Honesty)

Robert Nichols



Definitions:

Bullshit 1. The exaggeration, distortion, or concoction of words, ideas, actions, or concepts for relatively innocuous purposes relating to social intercourse and self-deception—not to be confused with blatant dishonesty (used car salesmen and lovers are bullshitters; radio/TV evangelists and politicians are liars). 2. The half-truths that inflate the illusion of reality. 3. White lies, cow pies and alibis. 4. Sometimes, just about everything in the world except fear.

Mish Kia The little known and rarely practiced Japanese martial art of meat cleaving.

"It is an ancient mariner
and he stoppeth one..."

Hello.

I'll call you Newfriend.

This won't take very long, an hour or so and then you'll be free to leave. I'm sorry I don't have furniture, but the rug is thick—it might almost be comfortable.

I won't be needing you for long. Just a short time and you can go on to be an honored guest at your cousin's or niece's or whomever's wedding party you were heading for when I captured you.

Sit down, lie down, curl into a fetal ball—whatever, and, while we wait, I'll say what I need to say. Just stay here and wait with me.

And, please, listen.

It was way up in northern North Dakota where horizons are faint lines drawn between dirt fields and sky fields, and roads are scarce and wind-crossed. I was a hitchhiker, a fisherman with a thumb-line cast to an empty sea.

I was standing beside a two-lane highway and there were few cars and few people. A farmer had let me off late in the afternoon and then turned off on a dirt road reaching to the northern horizon. For a long time, I stood there watching the cloud of dust rising from behind his fast departing car until it finally disappeared beyond the edge of the world.

Sometimes twenty-five or thirty minutes would pass between cars, maybe longer, and then, when darkness came, much longer.

I didn't care.

I took out my harmonica and played "Oh, Shenandoah."

It was a ten-thousand-starred night, perfectly still save for an occasional small gust of wind and my slurring harmonica sounds.

Across the vast face of the planet, I was alone. I didn't care. I was nineteen.

As I played I thought, my song is filling the whole Universe and nobody can hear it. Nobody at all.

It didn't matter. It was fifteen years ago, and I thought it didn't matter.

I was wrong.

You see, I'm alone again and, even here in this lush land and living deeply within this amiable town of dear hearts and gentle people, the landscape is just as desolate, and still nobody is hearing my song, my story. And, yes, it really matters. In the distant vacancy of North Dakota, a naive boy had been a fool; and now, in the distant vacancy of this town full of friends and loved ones, a man is desperate.

That's the reason I stopped you down there on the sidewalk and lured you up here to this hollow apartment with my "glittering eye."

Do you know "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner?"

I know I'm nuts. Don't worry about it. I'm probably harmless anyway. Listen:

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"

The bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din."

He holds him with his glittering eye--
The Wedding-guest stood still,
And listens like a three-years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.

Do you get it? "Glittering eye..." It's me, I'm thirty-four years old and, already, I'm an "Ancient Mariner"—not quite so grey maybe, but it's true. Do you know the story he tells? What? A little hazy, you say? Jeez, you must have slept right thorough English literature class. Stay awake this time, Newfriend. Listen.

The ancient mariner was a sailor sailing away on a good ship, the wind was blowing the right direction, the weather was perfect, everything was just fine. And then, for no apparent reason, he took a little target practice with his handy crossbow and shot down a bird that had been flying along with the ship and bringing it all the good luck. An albatross. From that point on, everything went to hell—he had ruined all the good luck with that thoughtless bit of archery. The dead albatross hung around his neck, draped there as a reminder of the curse that brought about the torturous destruction of the ship and the crew. Eventually, he was the only survivor and by then he was so wild-eyed just looking at him could drive you crazy.

After many trials, the ancient mariner prayerfully blessed a water snake that was swirling through a scummy sea and freed himself from his lousy bird.

The selfsame moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

Well, my "albatross" is still wrapped around my throat—it has been rotting there for some time now. And, by its very nature, my curse precludes absolution by prayer.

It's very late on this Saturday morning and I'll have to hurry. That's the best way to tell it anyway. Just the main details with an occasional digression to give it the right perspective.

I don't want to lose you, Newfriend. I need you.

You'll just have to believe me when I say I'm not some religious fanatic who has captured you for the purpose of offering salvation, or a criminal after your money, or some deviant who lusts for your body.

I'm not going to hurt you. And beyond any rational arguments I could use to command your attention, I've got the "glittering eye" today—you can't leave until I'm finished anyway. You might as well trust me.

It's Saturday morning and I need to tell someone what has happened. She always said I didn't talk enough—Maureen, that is. Maureen is, well actually, was my wife. You'd like her. She's very pretty but she doesn't live here anymore.

I'm going to talk now. Congratulations, you're going to hear the whole story, Newfriend. The entirety no one near or dear to yours truly has bothered to grasp.

I'll spare you lengthy description of all the plots and subplots and get to the heart of who I am, or what I am and a portion of the world I have known. If you go too far into anyone's life, it becomes very dull and I don't want you to be bored into not understanding. Telling more than the basic truths could endanger my purpose. You've had enough of the tediousness of soap opera in your own life, haven't you? The plots of my life, like yours, have, for the most part, been somewhat bland. They are created from such drudgery as divorce, injury, hidden loves, terror—the stock flow of experiences which already nearly distract you to death with your own life.

Please, just wait here with me for a while as I tell you what my wife, friends, and colleagues never began to understand.

And I know what you are thinking. You're wondering why I'm foolish enough to believe a stranger will comprehend the needs and truths of my life that have eluded those who supposedly love me. That's the whole point of all of this. They—my wife, my friends, my colleagues—the people who love me, respect me, and, most of all, know me: I have never told them the story that has brought me to the solitude of this Saturday morning. It shouldn't have been necessary.

Are you ready now? Settled? Relatively comfortable?
I won't ramble too much.

Deep in meditation one day about a year ago, a strange man walked into my brain and said, "This won't hurt."

He was a small and his face was almost completely hidden by a white monk's cowl. What little I did see of his face was white, like the face of a mime.

He pulled back the cloth slightly so as to reveal his smiling mouth as it repeated, "This won't hurt," and added, "don't worry."

Pulling a crossbow from beneath his robe, he handed it to me and said, "Shoot, please."
"Certainly," I said.

So, I shot an arrow, piercing a minute part of my brain. It didn't hurt. And, soft in the mantra rhythm of meditation I asked, "What have I done to my brain?"

"It is nothing," he said with the motion of an old smile. "You have merely severed a minor and useless sub-circuit in your communication network. You've eliminated a flaw, so to speak, and in doing so have cleared the way to experiencing higher consciousness."

"Thank you, thank you," I said with an amazing amount of sincerity and then, almost as an afterthought, I asked, "What is it I have cut out?"

"The bullshit," he said.

"Oh," I said.

PART ONE

Maureen

Chapter One

"...and I'm..."

It was not long ago, just a matter of about three weeks. I walked into this very apartment (it had furniture then) after enduring the challenge of an annual spring English teacher's convention for four days. Maureen met me at the door with an intense and serious face which I kissed.

I love her.

Then she started sobbing tears all down her cheeks—her nose running, wiping her nose with the back of her delicate hand, her voice breaking, her words muffled by the back of her hand and damp with sorrow. She said, over and over, "You're so good, you're so good...." Over and over.

I'm a very patient man. From years of experience, I knew my wife would always eventually reveal what was troubling her. But, regardless of any prompting on my part to expedite the telling of her truths, they were never spoken until she felt ready to speak.

So, while we are waiting for her, I'll tell you about the convention. It was terrible. The speakers were depressing. (They wanted machines to replace human beings, which has already happened anyway). The food was grease-on-a-bun purchased at fast food restaurants. (I couldn't afford the first-class fare at the "five-star" hotel where the convention was held.) The aristocratic environment of the place was offensive to my proletariat soul. (They still had housekeepers running around in little French maid costumes, and the male bellhops and porters wore drab purple tuxes the color of some moribund great aunt's parlor couch.) And I had fallen in love (with someone who, but for the most wistful of my recollections, might not even exist).

Louder sobs. Open crying.

I smiled sympathy at her and led her into the kitchen where I made myself a wonderful ham sandwich with cheese, pickle, and tomato on wheat toast. As I chewed, I thought how I wished I could help her.

I drank a glass of milk and found I was weary from the long drive across huge, snowy mountains and through twisting canyons. Maureen was still weeping and not yet ready to tell me anything of her sorrow.

I love her, you know.

I left her whimpering in the kitchen and went to the bedroom. I was too sleepy for my evening meditation so I undressed and climbed into bed.

Oh, it felt good to lie down on that good old bed and stretch out. As I left the kitchen, Maureen had added two words to her wet chant, making it: "You're so good, you're so good... and I'm...."

I rested my head on my favorite pillow (a thin feather pillow—I have always maintained that sleeping on thick pillows makes your chest sink in) when, gradually, I realized something was wrong. I sensed the presence of something alien to the eight-year, hallowed bed of our marriage. Something was amiss in our nest of bliss. Something was existent in our bed that was definitely extra-connubial.

What was it, you wonder? This might be a soap opera after all. Organ Music!

This damn bed smells like Melvin's aftershave, I thought.

"This damn bed smells like Melvin's aftershave!" I said, with considerably greater indignation than I had intended.

Maureen, bless her, came rushing into the room with a sob-soaked handkerchief covering most of her face. "Oh, Greg, Greg (that's my name, Newfriend, Greg Watkins. Glad to meet you), I didn't want to hurt you and now I have...." Her "have" bent into a whine and then more crying. A few throat-caught sobs and she finally blurted out, "You're so good. You're so good, and I'm going to leave you and marry Melvin."

Chapter Two Hush

She stood there in the slant of light coming into the dark bedroom from the hallway. Upon her lovely face were tears and tear streaks. Her pretty eyes were squinted by the deep crease of her forehead. Her soft lips had become thin and inward in their tenseness.

"...Marry Melvin," she had said.

"Oh." I said, and for various reasons, both physical, and I'm sure, psychological, I went to sleep.

Isn't it funny, Newfriend, how the mind tries to protect us from levels of harshness we are unready to bear? It's like a dream of a school bell ringing. It's sounding the end of the day and you're a kid. It's ringing and ringing and you know it means you're about to be set free to rush through the school house door, hop on your bicycle, and ride the infinite reaches of the neighborhood world clear to dinner time. But, in fact, you're not a kid. You are a corporate drone or a rote-dull bureaucrat, the "school bell" is the old wind-up alarm clock your mother sent you off to college with, and it's clanging the hell out of the precious silence of dawn's early bedroom.

If the dream is persistent enough, the clock will eventually run down and slumber will have domain over obligation. But how rare it is indeed that we are blessed by such an obstinate dream.

Maureen was sobbing words I chose not to comprehend. So, I smiled at her, dropped lids, and drifted swiftly off into a deep sleep. And, just like with the imaginary school bell and the alarm clock, I sought flight in a dream.

It was a strange dream about being a miner, but I wasn't digging coal or gold. I was a lamp miner in the basement of a cavernous, old department store vibrating with the sounds of electric chimes and the voices of elevator operators saying things like, "Luggage, furniture, sporting goods, lamp shades ... watch your step." I was deep into the dark, dark recesses of a lamp shaft when the shift boss started shouting, "Get up, you bastard! Get up!" And I tried to get up, but it was too late. There was a terrible cave-in and I was trapped while one particularly familiar pole lamp with red shades and bright gold chain hangers kept bashing me in the head.

"Get up, you bastard. Get up!" she said.

Before I go on with my story, I think I'd better tell you something about Hush Meditation. It's an important part of this. Hush Meditation saved my life, for all it's worth.

"Ninety-one dollars and fifty cents for peace of mind." That's what my friend, Jim, the insurance man, had said to me. I thought about it for a few days and asked him, "Then why is your stomach bleeding and why are you chewing your fingers?"

"What?" he asked defensively.

"Your life is just as screwed up as anybody else's."

"Well, I might have forgotten to meditate this year."

But what he said is true. I read about it in the highly respected journal, *The Scientific Citizen*. When they hooked up wires to people and told them to meditate, instruments indicated that good things happened to metabolism and heartbeat. The body was given profound rest, producing brain wave patterns deeper than those of lowest levels of sleep. Two short sessions a day and you're on the way to better times. And you could take the entire weekend course for the low, low price of \$91.50.

It saved my life.

My friend Alice of the health food, Alice of the Earth, Alice of the Anti-Chemical Preservatives League, Alice of the "you are what you eat," best described my condition just prior

to availing myself of the curative wonders of Hush Meditation. It happened a year and a half ago as we hiked over autumnal hills through high mountain aspen groves, "Watkins, you might die right here because of all the grease and salt and chemicals and beer you've been dumping into your body. Watkins, you've got HBP, you hear, HBP!" I sat down on a rotting log and gripped my wrist, attempting to check my pulse. I imagined deep, throbbing, chest pains--perhaps a little dizziness, a pressure in my head.

"Dizziness? Pressure?" she asked with a wire-thin smile.

"Maybe," I said weakly.

"Watkins, with your HBP you'll have a stroke and be paralyzed and vegetate until you're lucky enough to have a heart attack and die."

Laboriously, I elevated my gaze from the ground and met her dancing eyes, "Thank you for your positive prognostication, Alice," I said darkly and cast my eyes back down to the earth. I could feel the stiffness setting in, no doubt, from my arteries turning to stone. My arms, dangled from slumping shoulders, ape-like, nearly brushing the dirt.

Then I realized that "HBP" was "high blood pressure." No wonder Alice was attacking me with such glee--she had it, too. (She always had that ruddy blush of arterial anguish about her.) I looked up and with eyes meeting hers and blending into a bond of mutual hostility, said, "You're glad I'm dying, aren't you?" She just laughed that female-liberation laugh of hers and jogged on over the hill to catch up with her boyfriend, Melvin, and my wife, Maureen.

It was right then, on an October afternoon a year and a half ago, sitting upon the rough bark of a fallen tree, that I accepted the fact that the course of my life was suicidal. I had known about my high blood pressure for over a year at the time. For a while I had taken little white pills every night until they quit being effective. The doctor (wizard in white) had prescribed new pills, which I took for about a week, and then Maureen and I had noticed they were making me impotent. This is to say, my old, faithful companion in delight would suddenly become extremely ineffective at the most critical of times. We weren't accustomed to such disappointment.

"Suicide," I said out loud as I kicked at the rubble of autumnal debris covering the forest floor at my feet. "If that's what this means, then that's what it is." Regardless of the dire consequences foretold by Alice, I was determined never to take another debilitating HBP pill in the, thank you, Alice, limited time remaining to my short life. I would willingly die a fully functioning man, rather than live long and limp as a medicated old codger.

Fortunately, at that time in my life there was another, less dire option available.

There was Hush Meditation.

"Why not?" I said. "Hell, I might even live."

Thus it was that Hush Meditation came to save my life.

It was the following Saturday when I started meditating under the tranquil guidance of my lovely little Guru-lady who said soft words like, "It is good. Yes?"

I would just nod from deep within the newly discovered, deep calm of my consciousness.

Two weeks without missing a morning or an evening meditation and I was changed.

At first, Maureen loved it. "Don't forget to meditate," she would say as she turned down the television.

The doctor loved it. "Your blood pressure is normal," he said.

And, most of all, I loved it. "I can be hard and hearty at the same time," I said.

But, you know, when I think about it now, Newfriend, "saved" is not really the right word to describe the effect meditation has had upon my life. A better word would probably be "prolonged." To "save" implies a kind of renewal, a salvation. To put it more accurately, meditation did not save my life it extended it. There's a difference.

And you must be wondering what it was about my life that brought about the hypertension in the first place. The "grease and salt and chemicals and beer" of Alice's analysis were only irritants to a pre-existent tendency. You see, long before the physical effects of

medicine and for reasons that to this very day I have yet to grasp fully, our bed was growing cold. I knew it. Maureen knew it. And, eventually, my body knew it.

Hush Meditation was a conscious means of protecting myself from an unbearable truth: my marriage was dying. Meditation was the obstinate dream.

And, speaking of dreams, when I awoke from my strange dream in the lamp mine, I found myself flat out in a bed in the Broken Head Ward of St. Ferd's Community Hospital.