



Hazel.

A short story by Ryan Zak.

Part 1: Idiot

I'm an idiot. But I think a lot. I'm a thoughtful idiot.

You might be wondering, what's the difference between a thoughtful idiot and a thoughtful genius? I'm not really sure. There seems to be a lot of overlap between the two.

Anyways, since I'm an idiot people generally leave me alone. This is good because it gives me more time to think.

I guess the first time I realized I was an idiot was when I was 8 years old. I had a great big shaggy golden retriever named Buddy, who everybody in the neighborhood loved because every time he saw you he'd get so overjoyed and excited that he'd run up to you and pee all over your shoes. Buddy could get away with peeing on people's shoes because he was so damn likeable and friendly. It was as impossible to get mad at Buddy for peeing on your shoes as it would be to get mad at Jesus for leaving the fridge door open or forgetting to take out the garbage. (This makes me wonder just how much Jesus could get away with around the house.)

One day I was playing fetch with Buddy on my front lawn. I guess I wasn't paying attention and I threw the ball out onto the street just as a car was driving by. Buddy, being a dog and all, naturally chased the ball and got hit by the car.

I remember screaming and running out to where my beloved Buddy's body lay motionless on the dirty concrete. I remember petting Buddy furiously and getting his warm, sticky blood all over my hands where it mixed in with my rapidly falling tears. I remember waiting for Buddy to lick my face or pee on my shoes, but all he did was just lay there dead and no fun to pet at all.

I remember my mom running down the front steps yelling, "Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!" over and over again. I remember Mrs. Arrinson finally getting out of her car and saying, "What happened?"

If anybody other than Mrs. Arrinson, the beloved 78-year-old town librarian, had been driving that car, they probably would've been blamed for Buddy's death. To be honest, there was plenty of time for Mrs. Arrinson to have stopped her car and avoided hitting Buddy, but I suspect that Mrs. Arrinson was half-blind at that point and shouldn't have been driving a car in the first place.

Anyways, the whole neighborhood was devastated by Buddy's death. Nobody blamed Mrs. Arrinson, and everybody blamed me. Some people even said that I killed Buddy on purpose, that I was sick in the head or something. That's just about the craziest thing I ever heard.

Most people, though, just called me an idiot. (I don't know what's worse- being called a murderer or an idiot.) It was as though the town

held a meeting where everybody agreed that the word “idiot” is what they would yell at me, or mutter under their breath just loud enough for me to hear, every time they passed me on the street.

My mother was terribly sympathetic and supportive, but I got the feeling that even *she* wanted to yell, “Hey idiot!” every time she saw me in the hallway or in the kitchen getting something out of the fridge.

That was the first time I’d ever been called an idiot- after Buddy’s death. I mean, I’d heard the word before, but I’d never thought to apply it to *myself*, just like I’d never thought to apply the words pinecone, jockstrap or airplane to myself either, though they’re all perfectly fine words.

From that point on, whenever I heard someone say the word “idiot” I would turn towards them, as if my name had been called. When someone used the word idiot in a sentence totally unrelated to me, I’d sometimes turn around and say, “Yes?”

The word just seemed to fit. It stuck like a good nickname. It just felt *right*.

Idiot.

Here’s the thing. Idiot or genius, I think we’re all capable of beautiful acts. Take the other day for instance: I was riding the train on my way downtown to visit a friend, and as we rolled past the lake, there were two people sitting down by the water, down where they’re hidden by the hills and bluffs, where nobody can see them. But *I* saw them. I caught a glimpse of them for just a second. The boy’s head was resting on the girl’s shoulder and the girl was gently running her fingers through the boy’s hair. I don’t want to sound cheesy or anything, but I think that kind of thing is so beautiful- two people hidden away from the world, gazing out over the water, with nothing to do but lean on each other and be happy.

Then a few minutes later I looked out the window again and I saw an old man and an old woman in a field. The old man was carrying a big white bucket with a lid on it, and the old woman was chasing butterflies with a giant butterfly net. She was running wonderfully with her long hair flowing in the wind, just like a little girl. And the old man was trotting dutifully behind her, raising his knees high and bouncing through the tall grass, just like a little boy.

That kind of stuff really gets to me. Those people sitting by the water and those people chasing butterflies. That kind of stuff makes me so happy I could cry.

You know that feeling you get when you see something beautiful, kind of like a suppressed yawn in your gut? That’s the feeling I’m talking about.

Anyways, it's like I said, we're all capable of beautiful acts. If you want to look at it nice and wide, life is one big beautiful act. And if you want to look at it nice and narrow, life is a zillion acts, some of them beautiful and some of them not.

I prefer to look at it nice and wide, because I find that a nice and narrow view of things makes it a lot easier to get worked up and angry and stressed out over meaningless stuff. To look at things nice and wide requires a bit more thought I guess, which is why I'm glad I'm an idiot, because I have more time to think about this kind of stuff.

Another good thing about being an idiot is that I'm not really scared of anything. I'm too slow or something, I guess. I'm just not mentally capable of being scared. I'd be more scared if a monster stayed inside my closet and rearranged my shelves than if it jumped out and yelled at me or tried to eat me or whatever. Can you imagine waking up in the morning to find that your shoes are where your shirts should be, and your pants are on the shelf where you usually keep your vinyl records? What a nightmare.

I can't tell you where I'm speaking to you from right now because that would ruin the end of the story. Just know that after I've told you everything, we'll end up right back here, right here in this same spot. I won't move an inch, I promise.

At this point, you might be thinking, "Get on with the story already!" Or you might be thinking, "I wonder if Jenny, (that cute girl you once had a class with) likes me." Or you might be thinking, "How large would a LEGO structure be if we used all the LEGO blocks in the world to build it?" These are all perfectly wonderful thoughts, and to be honest, I'm relieved to know that you're not some cave-dwelling Neanderthal only concerned with inventing new ways of cleaning your butt. And while I'm aware that it's not my place to carelessly cast auspicious character traits onto others, I can't help but think that you enjoy nothing more than to sit at home and carve sculptures out of leftover bars of soap. I imagine another favourite pastime of yours is building life-like replicas of celebrities using only toothpicks and pre-chewed bubble gum. I also heard a rumour that you prefer putting on your left pant leg before your right, because, "that's how Jesus put on *his* pants." There's one detail, though, that's rather puzzling to me. Why is it that you put cedar wood chips in your pet hamster's cage when he so clearly prefers aspen?

At this point you might be thinking, "I'm sick of this story. I can't take it any longer. I'll give this sorry excuse for an author no more than

five sentences to get his act together, and then I'm going to stop reading and go water my petunias."

I really *do* take it personally if a soap-carving, hamster-abusing, petunia-waterer chooses not to read my story. Because the truth is, I myself am an amateur soap-carver, frequent hamster-abuser and closet (well, not anymore) petunia-waterer. And to turn my back on my own people, on the only demographic that may be even remotely interested in my story, would be downright irresponsible.

I feel, at this point, that I'm veering slightly off track. To advise a budding young writer that they should never start a book on a tangent is like telling a painter to never paint unless they know exactly what they want to end up on the canvas.

I guess the best place to start is at my birth. It was fine, from what I'm told.

Moving on, I grew up a pretty normal child I guess. I never suspected that I was an idiot, and if anybody else ever suspected it they never said anything about it to me.

It can sometimes be difficult to tell whether or not a child is an idiot, because most children do a lot of pretty silly, unexplainable stuff. Like when you see a child making funny faces, or rolling around in the grass, or yelling made-up words. How are you supposed to know?

And it doesn't get much easier with age. Most *adults* don't know why they do half the stuff they do. Sure, they may be able to give you a few reasons, but if you keep asking "Why?" they will inevitably regress to the illogical final answer: "Just because."

And even though I'm an idiot, I can sometimes have a flash of brilliance. Not very often, but sometimes. Every so often I get lucky and my brain accidentally coughs up something that seems to make a good deal of sense. But I guess if you try really hard to be smart a million times, you're bound to spit out a decent idea or two every now and then.

I remember when I was a little kid I used to wake up in the morning and write on a piece of paper, "I have a strange feeling that I'm going to die today," so that if I did, in fact, die that day, people would find the piece of paper and say, "Oh my goodness. He wasn't an idiot after all! He was a genius who could predict the future!" And if I managed to escape death that day, I would toss the piece of paper into the garbage can and repeat the same routine the next day.

I still practice this habit to this very day, but usually in the form of sidenotes in my journal. Reading journal entries from my hypochondriac

years is like reading the diary of a dusty old man withering away on a god forsaken hospital bed:

“Pains in my chest when I woke up. I think today might be the day.”

“Blood in my poop today. It’s finally happened. Internal bleeding.”

“Had the hiccups non-stop for two days. My body is trying to self-destruct.”

“Feels like a worm is slowly eating away at my brain. I suspect I only have a few hours left.”

“Awoke with a feeling of unexplainable foreboding. I know today is my last day on earth. Good bye friends, family, cats.”

“Had a dream that I was repeatedly run over by a car. I’m done for.” Etc. etc.

I wouldn’t say I’m fascinated with death, but I always assumed that after I died, my legacy would live on for thousands of years, so there is a certain attraction.

What my legacy would be I have no idea. Perhaps they’d put my used toothbrush collection into a vacuum-sealed display case in the national museum. Perhaps I’d be remembered for the way I always pronounced the word “I” like a pirate, or would refuse to say the word “tree” any louder than a whisper. Perhaps I’d be immortalized for having trained a chipmunk to eat out of my hand, or for studying all the sounds a duck makes and teaching myself to replicate them on a trumpet.

It’s strange, because before I realized I was an idiot I used to be terrified of spiders. I used to kill spiders everywhere I saw them. Stomp on them, feed them to my cat Cathy, flush them down the toilet. But not anymore.

Now I find I’m happier when I *don’t* kill the spider in my bedroom. Sometimes I’ll leave a spider there on the ceiling and pretend that we’re roommates, that we’ve known each other since we were little kids running around the neighborhood causing mischief.

Sometimes I’ll leave a spider there on the ceiling and feed it breadcrumbs and little bits of bacon out of my hand, and I’ll make sure to make plenty of eye contact so that it knows I’m not scared or disgusted by it.

Sometimes I’ll talk to it and call it “Gregor.”

Sometimes I’ll coax it into my hand and let it run over my fingers. Then I’ll walk outside, make a wish and gently blow it into the garden. I usually wish that it would find its way back to its family, even if its family is in my bedroom.

This makes me happier than I can tell you.

Anyways, I don't have much left to say. (Are there rules to how long these things are allowed to be?) My life has been a slow stroll down a dirt path strewn with fallen kites and an occasional waterfall off to the side. There were a few big events, though, that caused me to end up here. One of those events was meeting a little girl named Hazel.

When I was 19 years old, I went to my mom's friend's birthday party. It seemed like an insignificant event at the time. But looking back on it now, I can see how significant it really was. The funny thing is that I almost ended up not going the party because there were two rabbits in my backyard that day and I wanted to stay home and watch them through the window until they ran away, or at least until it got too dark to see them.

Anyways, I ended up going to this party and I ended up meeting this 8-year old girl named Hazel. Hazel was a really special girl. I could tell right away. We locked eyes across the room and she smiled shyly at me. In her eyes I saw a reflection of myself, or at least a reflection of the person I always wanted to be. She sauntered over to me and shook my hand, and from that moment on, our imaginations became one.

We hung out for the rest of the night, just Hazel and me. There was a room full of other kids my age and a ton of adults talking about smart, important things, but I barely remember seeing them or even hearing them speak. I'm telling you, when you connect with a little kid like Hazel, nothing else seems to matter.

Hazel was a little ball of energy and she began doing tricks for me while I sat on the couch and watched her. Here's a list of some of the tricks she did: hand stands, swinging around poles and banisters, diving over couches, crawling under furniture, climbing up walls (don't ask how, but she did it), making funny animal noises (mainly ducks and chickens), hanging from the door frame, contorting her body into strange and difficult positions, throwing jellybeans into the air and catching them in her mouth, tricks with her fingers, eyes, mouth, ears, feet, arms, legs, head, front flips, back flips, acrobatic stunts, and the list goes on.

And always Hazel wanted to do more and more tricks. With wide eyes she would run up to me, and with her face no more than two feet from mine she'd say, "What do you want me to do now?"

And I'd say, "Scratch your head with your toes." And she'd do it. I swear she could do anything I asked her to. She was like some sort of 8-year old superhero. I'd watch her with great attentiveness and nod my head in approval or clap my hands joyously as she performed her latest stunt.

Then Hazel would run back to me and say, "What do you want me to do now?"

"Dance like a duck," I'd say.

And she'd do it, smiling and giggling and making duck noises as she danced. Maybe you know a girl like Hazel, with huge brown eyes you can't help staring at, a long messy ponytail, and the attitude of a grown lady. She was pure as purity itself. Untainted innocence and love. She had more intelligence and life in her than in any adult I've ever known.

After two hours or so of this incredible display of non-stop energy and talent, I finally ran out of tricks for Hazel to perform. "You've done at least a hundred tricks," I told her. "I can't think of any more."

"C'mon," she said. "What else do you want me to do?" She seemed disappointed in my lack of imagination.

"I'm all out of ideas." I shrugged helplessly, wishing I had an endless list of tricks for Hazel to perform.

"Just one more," she begged.

I admired her unquenchable hunger for imagination and adventure, but I was tired and my mind was slowing down. "You've done all the tricks I can imagine," I told her.

"I have a feeling there's one more trick we're missing..." She stared into my eyes, coaxing me with her invisible powers to put my mind to work just one more time. I closed my eyes and tried to think of a trick that she hadn't yet done.

"Okay..." I said slowly. "Why don't you... put a blanket over your head and walk across the room without bumping into anything."

Her eyes lit up. She grabbed a blanket, threw it over her head and began stumbling across the room, bumping into people and furniture, giggling all the way.

There's something else you should know about me. I've only ever known two people that I could call true "friends." The first was Rodriguez, an introverted type who lived mostly inside his own head. Rodriguez was extremely shy, but the funny thing was, he never seemed to be scared or uncomfortable. He just didn't say much, that's all.

Rodriguez was the kind of guy that squirts maple syrup on his ice cream and when you ask him about it he just laughs.

In grade seven Rodriguez ran for School President. We sat around at his parents' house and tried to think of some good campaign slogans that we could paint onto signs. We wound up narrowing it down to three slogans:

- 1) 3D goggles for all!
- 2) Chicken fingers, not human fingers!
- 3) I'll make the moon beautiful again.

Rodriguez lost the election. By a lot. He moved away the next summer

and I never saw him again.

It was getting late and Hazel had to go home with her parents. I pumped her hand up and down wildly and said, "Good night, Hazel. It was very nice to meet you."

She giggled and said, "It was nice to meet you too."

After she left, I felt empty and depressed. I couldn't force myself to talk to anyone else. No one else seemed interesting compared to her. I really missed her. I still do.

A couple months later I overheard my mom's friend saying that Hazel had started taking acting lessons.

After Rodriguez moved away I had to come up with some other way to spend my time. So I decided to start a business. Every weekday evening and weekend afternoon I'd load up my father's wheelbarrow with products and travel around the neighbourhood from door to door trying to make a few bucks. Since I didn't have much money to start with, I was forced to sell whatever I could get my hands on.

First, I tried selling empty peanut shells with tiny paintings on the inside. I'd carefully crack open the shells and eat the peanuts. Then I'd sit at my kitchen table, and with a fine-tipped brush I'd paint little animals and people on the insides of shells. Many people around the neighborhood seemed to like the idea, however I soon realized that the retail value of a peanut shell is very low, no matter what kind of animal you paint inside of it.

So I abandoned my peanut shell business and moved on to the healthcare industry. For almost three weeks I made a consistent profit by roaming the neighbourhood selling single band-aids and aspirin to anyone interested. Then I began targeting the playgrounds and fields where children frequently fell and skinned their knees and elbows. I tried selling my healthcare goods to bleeding children with tears in their eyes, but I soon found out that most children at the playground either don't carry around money, or aren't willing to spend their last quarter on a band-aid. I ended up giving away most of my band-aids and aspirin for free.

After my healthcare venture went under, I figure I'd better diversify. I went to the grocery store and bought 10 packs of popcorn. I dug through my mother's cupboards and found a few spools of assorted colours of sewing-thread. I went to the hardware store and bought a chunk of Styrofoam. I went to the barbershop and asked them for a bag of hair. I returned home and used a pair of scissors to construct tiny helmets out of the Styrofoam. Then, with a needle I began inserting

bunches of human hair into the tops of the helmets. Before long, I had a collection of shiny, sturdy little wigs just the right size to fit a hamster.

The very next evening I began marching around town on a quiet but steady route from door to door, my wheelbarrow full of popcorn, assorted colours of sewing-thread and hamster wigs.

This is how I met Victor, the only person other than Rodriguez that I've ever been able to call a true friend. One day while making my rounds, I knocked on the door of a small, rundown, box-shaped house with overgrown grass and a pile of old newspapers on the front porch. Victor answered the door wearing a purple housecoat hanging open to reveal a bare, hairy chest and red-and-white polka dot boxer shorts. I told him that I was selling hamster wigs, popcorn, and assorted colours of sewing-thread and I asked him if he'd like to buy anything. Victor frowned and stared at me, studying me for a few seconds. Suddenly his face brightened and he motioned for me to follow him inside. I grabbed a few of my products and stepped through the door.

Victor led me up a set of about 25 rickety, uneven stairs, and into a large white room. Sunlight streamed in through the dirty windows and illuminated hundreds of colourful paintings, all stacked in piles in the corners and forming rows along the walls. As I stared in wonder at all the paintings, Victor took out some money from his dresser drawer and offered me a handful of bills. He grabbed a piece of paper and a marker and wrote the words, "Twenty hamster wigs please." He jabbed his finger at the paper and smiled at me.

Suddenly it hit me. Victor couldn't talk.

"I.. I only have twelve hamster wigs," I told him.

Victor nodded his head and mouthed the word, "Okay."

He gave me a few bills and I handed him back twelve hamster wigs and the correct change. I don't know why he wanted twelve hamster wigs. He didn't have any hamsters.

Victor put the change back into his drawer and carefully placed the twelve hamster wigs in a pile on top of his dresser. He then turned to face a painting that was standing on an easel in the corner by the window. He sat down on a stool, picked up his paintbrush and began making small strokes on the canvas.

I wasn't sure if he wanted me to leave, so I just stood there for a while and watched him paint. I cleared my throat and shuffled my feet so that Victor knew I was still standing there behind him. He didn't turn around. After a few minutes I walked to a clear space in the middle of the room and sat down in a patch of sunlight. For the rest of the afternoon I forgot about selling popcorn and assorted colours of sewing-thread and I just sat there on the floor watching Victor paint.

For the next few months I'd visit Victor often and sit on his floor watching him paint. Every once in a while Victor would look back at me and smile. Sometimes the sun would be shining in through the window and I'd lay down on the floor and fall asleep, waking up periodically to check on Victor's progress. I sometimes wished that I could speak with Victor, that we could have a real, flowing conversation without the aid of markers and paper. But I also knew that the reason we were friends was because of some unspoken bond, because of *something*- a viewpoint, a belief, an understanding- that we silently shared about the world.

After spending more and more time with Victor, I noticed a change in the way I saw the world- I still felt like an idiot, but I felt like a *grateful* idiot; even though the world around me stayed the same, I felt that I somehow appreciated it all a little bit more.

I began to think of Victor as a kind of saint. "Victor the Mute" I called him. He never spoke, but he somehow shared his wisdom through his silence.

I remember one particular evening, after sitting on the floor for hours watching Victor paint, I rode my bike back home through a terrible rainstorm. It was late November and winter was right around the corner. The wind was devastatingly cold and the raindrops cut into my skin like knives. But for some reason- I think it had something to do with Victor- the only thought going through my head as I rode my bike through the storm was, "I am wet and cold but I am *alive*. I am wet and cold but I am *alive*. I am wet and cold but I am *alive*."

As I continued riding, my thoughts slowly evolved:

"I am wet and cold but I am *alive*.

I am wet and cold but I am *alive*.

I am wet and cold but I am *alive*.

I am wet and cold and I am *alive*.

I am wet and cold and *alive*.

I am wet, cold and *alive*.

I am cold and *alive*.

I am wet and *alive*.

I am *alive*.

I am *alive*.

I am *alive*.

I am *alive*.

I am *alive*.

I am *alive!*

I am *alive!*

I am **ALIVE!**

I am *ALIVE!*
I AM *ALIVE!*"

And as the thoughts evolved, so did the feelings. I was still wet and cold, but I no longer *felt* wet and cold. I could only *feel*, and I was what I felt and nothing more. I *was* that moment. I encompassed everything *in* and *about* that moment, and without that moment- the rain and the puddles and the wet and the cold- I would've been *nothing*, zip, zilch, exactly sum zero.

Yes, I was still wet and cold, but not in the same way that I was ten minutes before. I was wet, cold, and *alive*, riding my bike through a fall rainstorm that I wished would last for days.

I've never understood religion, because I'm an idiot. But loads of people tell me I'm really missing out. I believe them too. I sometimes wish I understood religion, so that I could stop being so confused and wondering about things all the time. I ask a lot of questions, but I don't find a whole lot of answers. I guess I kind of wish I didn't ask so many questions all the time, but I honestly can't help it. People tell me that if I understood religion I could stop asking so many questions.

That reminds me of a time I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Life is good. Eternal life is better." I asked one of my teachers what the bumper sticker meant and she said that after we die there's this thing called eternity, which is like a big beautiful city where everyone from all the different teams lives together, and they all get along. She also said that eternity is a difficult thing for most *normal* people to understand, and that since I'm an idiot and all, there's no way I could ever understand it. She told me to just forget about the whole thing. But I still like to think about eternity every once in a while. I even had a dream about it once, where everybody from all the different teams was sitting down at an endlessly long table and nobody from one team was sitting beside another person from the same team. I mean, you could still tell which teams some of the people were from, but it was like they'd forgotten about all that stuff and were now all on the same team. It's hard to explain.

Then two months later, Victor gave me some terrible news. I arrived in his room one day to find him waiting with a piece of paper in hand. He thrust the paper in my direction and stared at me imploringly. On the paper was a drawing of the Statue of Liberty. I looked up at Victor. He

pointed at himself, then at the picture. I nodded. I understood. Victor was moving away to New York. He was leaving me, just like Rodriguez.

Victor lunged forward and wrapped his arms around me. We stood there in my little patch of sunlight, surrounded by Victor's lifework, in the quiet room where I doubt more than fifty words had ever been spoken. I felt a dampness on my shoulder and I knew that Victor was crying.

Victor abruptly released me and bowed his head. He swiped at his eyes and, grabbing me by the sleeve, he ushered me out the door.

That was the last time I ever saw my friend Victor the Mute. Though I believe he's doing well in New York. I got an envelope in the mail from him last year. Inside the envelope was a single piece of paper. It was another picture of the Statue of Liberty, but this time he'd drawn a tiny man standing at the foot of the statue. The man was wearing a purple housecoat- obviously Victor- and had a wide smile on his face. That picture made me so happy. It's folded up in my pocket as I tell you this story. I take it out to look at it every once in a while- when I'm sitting on the bus, when I'm feeling down, when there's a rainstorm. I'll likely die with it still in my pocket.

Oh yea, on the back of the picture was a quote. In messy marker handwriting Victor had scrawled: "It is good to be a loving madman. It is good to be a stark-raving saint."

Flashback to an afternoon with Hazel:

"Here," I said. "I want to show you my favourite place."

I took her by the hand, this strange hand attached to this strange girl, and we walked over a grey metal bridge that spanned a dirty river.

"There." I pointed to a rooftop full of dozens of different-coloured pigeons, some bobbing around, some fighting and pecking at each other, some standing perfectly still.

Hazel's gaze followed the direction of my finger. She looked at my face and raised her eyebrows. "Where?"

Part 2: Lucid Idiot

They say I started losing my mind shortly after my mother died. When I think about it, the point when they say I started losing my mind was the point when I first became fully aware of myself, when I no longer felt like an idiot. Well, not exactly. I still felt like an idiot, but I was *aware*. I could control my thoughts. Zup zup zup.

My biggest concern in those days was my cat Cathy. My father wasn't home very often and if I forgot to feed Cathy she'd have to go without food until I remembered to fill her dish. I remember Cathy died once and I had to give her CPR to revive her. Her breath tasted like stale tuna. She meowed twice and jumped up onto the windowsill.

A couple of my school teachers testified in court that I'd been acting strangely ever since my mother went and died. They said I started talking to myself in class and not even *trying* to do any of the work they assigned. I'm not sure if that's true or not. To be honest, I don't remember going to class at all after my mother died.

And then there was the day I met Hazel at her acting class. People keep telling me that *that* was the *last straw*, whatever that means. Honestly, I don't understand what people are talking about half the time.

Anyways, you remember how I said that Hazel started taking acting lessons? Well I hadn't seen her for a long time, and I really missed her, so I decided to go visit her. I put on my nicest pair of blue jeans and I even combed my hair a little bit, if you can call messing up my hair with my fingers combing my hair.

I got to the acting class a few minutes before Hazel's lesson was finished. Her, and about ten other kids occupied a small room. A makeshift wooden stage was set up at the far end, and I remember that two of the walls were painted yellow and two were painted red. I'm not sure why I remember that. I guess it's just one of those details that somehow gets lodged in your memory, like a hair that gets caught in the shower drain. That one hair isn't any more special than the others, but for some reason, *it's* the one that gets stuck.

Hazel saw me right when I walked in and she gave me a little wave. She was wearing the same white frilly dress she'd been wearing at the party when I first met her. It was a really pretty dress, and I wouldn't have minded at all if she wore it every single day.

The class was in the middle of an exercise where each kid had to act out an everyday routine without speaking. When it was Hazel's turn she hopped up on stage and pretended to make breakfast. She spread butter on toast and poured herself some cereal and giggled uncontrollably when she spilled imaginary milk all over the kitchen table and floor. All the kids in the class laughed and I laughed too. She really was a cute kid.

When the class finally ended, Hazel ran over to me and grabbed my hand. Her eyes were sparkling.

“I have a new trick for you,” she said.

“Oh really?” I tried to stay calm and cool, but I couldn’t help smiling like an idiot, like myself.

“Lay down on your stomach,” she said, and pointed to the ground at her feet.

“What?”

“Get on your stomach.”

“But the ground is dirty.”

“Just *do it*,” she said, and she raised her eyebrows at me. Boy, when she wanted to, she could be really pushy.

I got down on my stomach and she jumped on my back.

“Now do pushups,” she said.

So I did pushups. I was happy to do pushups if Hazel wanted me to.

“Yeeeeee-haw,” she giggled and held onto my shirt collar. She was light as a feather on my back.

“Now stand up,” she commanded, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I stood up and she stuck her little feet into the back pockets of my jeans. I had to tighten my belt to keep my pants from falling down.

“Now neigh like a horse,” she said.

I neighed like a horse.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked her.

“That way!” She pointed toward the parking lot and we galloped off through the door, a cowgirl and her horse in the Wild Wild West.

I recently read the transcript from my trial, which my lawyer provided me upon my request. One section stood out in my mind:

JUDGE: *Animal Cruelty, Sexually Molesting a Minor, First Degree Murder. How does the defendant plead to these charges?*

ME: [standing up] *I’ll clean up my act. I’ll spend some time backwards.*

JUDGE: *Please be seated. [defendant sits down] I want to stress the seriousness of these crimes, and remind you that they may result in life imprisonment or even the death sentence.*

ME: [standing up] *I’ll take my chances and rub the mysterious madness. Zup, zup, zup.*

What’s wrong with being confused? The world is a confusing place if you let it be.

And then I had to stay in a mental hospital for 2 weeks. I would've had to stay longer but I escaped. I'm still not exactly sure why they sent me there. But I can tell you about the series of events that led up to it.

When Hazel's parents showed up, I was videotaping Hazel doing silly tricks in the parking lot. Her parents drove up just as Hazel was trying to do a handstand and her dress had fallen awkwardly down so that her underwear was showing. Now, I can see how this would look kind of bad, but it really wasn't. The truth is, I just like to videotape things that make me happy, or things that make me smile and laugh. And watching Hazel do stunts for me made me happier than just about anything else in the world. She made me laugh like crazy.

Anyways, Hazel's parents got pretty angry and took away my video camera. I guess they thought I was going to do something bad with the footage of Hazel. I tried to explain to them that I loved Hazel and I'd never do anything to hurt her. Hazel's mom yelled at me and told me never to come near Hazel again. Then they dragged Hazel to their car, and when they got home I guess they called the police or something, because the next thing I knew two police officers showed up at my door and took me to the police station. After a couple hours of sitting around on a hard bench, a nice lady with small round spectacles told me that they were going to take me to the mental hospital, where I would stay until I was all better.

The first thought that flashed through my mind as they dragged me out the door was, "Who's going to feed Cathy?"

I don't want to bore you with the mundane details of the inner workings of a mental hospital. If you really want to know what it's like, just take off all your clothes and sit in the middle of a busy intersection clipping your toenails with a pair of garden hedgers.

Besides joining in on the communal sponge baths with the elderly, the only exciting event that transpired in the mental hospital was meeting a man named Karl who believed he was the King of Europe.

Karl was the kind of guy that tells stories that always involve people getting hit in the face.

Karl was so special that he had his own caretaker, a big burly bearded man named Benson, to look after him wherever he went. Benson was the kind of guy that tells people to "watch their language" at a baseball game. You know, when someone in the crowd yells, "pitcher's

got a stinky butt” or “catcher’s got his pants on backwards,” Benson’s the guy that yells out, “Hey! Watch your language, buddy.”

I asked the King of Europe, or Karl, what he was doing all the way over here in Canada and why he wasn’t back in Europe doing his kingly duties, kissing babies and ordering servants around and such. He told me he was visiting the Archduke of Mexico, whose hand he sought in marriage. I was confused until the next day when I saw Karl down on one knee proposing in Spanish to the 70-year-old lunch lady.

Karl was a nice enough guy, but sometimes he could make me feel a bit uncomfortable. He kept calling me his son, patting me on the butt and muttering about the ducks that stole his breakfast.

During one of my daily walks in the garden, it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn’t fed Cathy in nearly two weeks. I pictured Cathy all alone, her skinny ribs showing, meowing sadly. A desperate panic set in and I knew that if I didn’t get home to feed Cathy right away, she would surely die. I knew what I had to do. I began to devise my escape plan.

I remember waking up, the morning of my escape, to the smell of pancakes. I walked into the dining room and Karl patted me on the butt. I laughed, quacked like a duck, and stole his breakfast when he wasn’t looking. The sun was shining, and even though I was in a mental hospital, I felt genuinely happy. I never suspected that in only a few short hours I’d be sitting in a high-security prison, accused of first-degree murder.

Two hours later, I was hiding behind a rose bush in a remote corner of the garden. I saw the King of Europe running across the yard holding a metal ladder. He reached the 10-foot fence, set up the ladder, and began motioning crazily in my direction, beckoning me to hurry up. I ran across the yard, and in mere seconds I was up and over the top of the fence, with my feet planted firmly on the other side. I gave the King of Europe a quick wave goodbye and bolted off in the direction of the parking lot. I heard the King yelling after me, but I couldn’t tell what he was saying.

The next few minutes passed by in a blur. I reached the parking lot and saw a lady getting into her car. I ran up to her, waving my arms wildly.

“Gimme’ your keys!” I yelled at her.

She screamed and threw her keys at me. They hit me in the face.

“Sorry!” I yelled after her as she ran away. “It’s an emergency!”

The tires squealed as I backed out of the parking lot, doing a wild 180 into the middle of traffic. I took off amid shrieking horns towards my home, towards Cathy.

As I turned into my suburb something jumped out in front of the car. I stomped on the brakes, but I couldn't stop in time. The bumper crashed into something with a loud bang.

I threw the car into park and ran out onto the road. I looked down to see who or what I had hit. At that moment the world stopped spinning and I felt my heart leap into my throat. I recognized the disfigured face of the person lying lifelessly beneath the front of the car.

It was the woman responsible for all my problems, the beloved old town-librarian, Mrs. Arrinson.

JUDGE: *We've heard from both sides, and the jury has been given their instructions. Due to the special circumstances of the trial, and the gravity of the charges, I'd like to give the defendant one last chance to address the jury before they begin their deliberations* [looks sternly, meaningfully at the defendant]. *Does the defendant have anything to say?*

ME: [stands up slowly, studies the jury thoughtfully] *Thank you, your honour. At this time I wish to say one thing: Oh lovely horse, fancy tail, sing louder, stand proudly and eat your hay. I don't know muchything. Zoop, zoop, zoop.* [sits down].

JUDGE: [bangs gavel] *This court is adjourned and will reconvene when the jury has reached its verdict.*

Since I was born, a bunch of things have happened to me. I told you about some of them.

A bunch of things have been thrown into my head. Sometimes they fit together, but usually they don't.

We don't grow crazy. It's just that more and more things get thrown into your head that don't fit together.

And here we are, back at the start. Or at the end, depending on how you look at it. I told you I wouldn't move an inch. I promised, remember?

"Anyways, those are my last words... and... I guess I have nothing more to say."

I feel a slight ticklish prick of something sharp in the soft flesh of my inner elbow. I look up into your eyes as you lean over me. Your eyes are dull and grey, but I think I catch a glimpse of something bright behind them.

I smile at you but you don't smile back.