



HE MAIL

SHE MAIL

The meaning of life in

E-mail

**ELLIOT GRANT &
CHRISTINE WHITERAVEN OLINGER**



HE MAIL/SHE MAIL
The Meaning of Life in Email

by
Elliot Grant & Christine WhiteRaven Olinger

Ladybug Press
San Carlos, California

Beverly -

My worthy online
opponent + new-found "kola"

- hope you enjoy the book.

Enjoy each moment of

your life, walk in

beauty + stay well!

el

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced or transmitted, in whole or in part, through any means electronic or mechanical including photo copying or electronic transmission without prior written permission from the editor, except short excerpts considered normal for review.

Copyright © 1997 Elliot Grant & Christine WhiteRaven Olinger
Cover and graphic design Copyright ©1997 Georgia Jones
First printing 1997
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Grant, Elliot & Olinger, Christine WhiteRaven
 He Mail/She Mail: The Meaning of Life in E-mail
illustrated and edited by Georgia Jones cover design by Georgia Jones
Letters

ISBN 1-889409-17-0(pbk)

97-69895
CIP

All royalties are being donated to the Thief River Falls Education Foundation

EMAIL IS A FUNNY LANGUAGE

Those who use email to communicate find themselves in a world without physical cues. A picto-language called emoticons (emotional icons) has developed to fill the gap. This short list of emoticons and commonly used acronyms is included here to help you understand this language:

Typical smiles:

:-) :-} :-} :-] :-D wearing glasses 8-)

different nose:

:<) :=) boxer's nose :+0

smiles with winks:

;-) "-) '-) *-)

shock: :-0

sticking out tongue: :-P (Use Alt numeric keyboard 0222 for the tongue sticking out - To do this, enable the numeric keyboard by pushing the "Num Lock" key, hold down the "alt" key and on the numeric key section type 022)

Typical frowns:

:(:-/ :-{ :-[

Anything you can make a picture of using the keyboard is fair game for emoticons *-)

Other symbols are the asterisk, used on either side of a word or phrase for emphasis:

yes

Or capital letters, which mean a shout: ARGH!

There is a class of emoticon which is based on letters instead of pictures and these are placed between <> brackets:

<s> = smile

<bs> = big smile

(the smile classification had many modifiers)

<g> = grin

<eg> = evil grin

(grins too come in numerous flavors)

Sometimes a whole emotional expression, including body language is enclosed in brackets as an emoticon:

<hanging head and stubbing toe in dirt with embarrassment>

Acronyms are much more complicated because they are shorthand for so many words and a certain amount of shared context is needed if you are to understand the most personalized of these. Still, there are some which are commonly used:

LOL = laughing out loud

ROFL = rolling on the floor laughing

ROFLOL = rolling on the floor laughing out loud

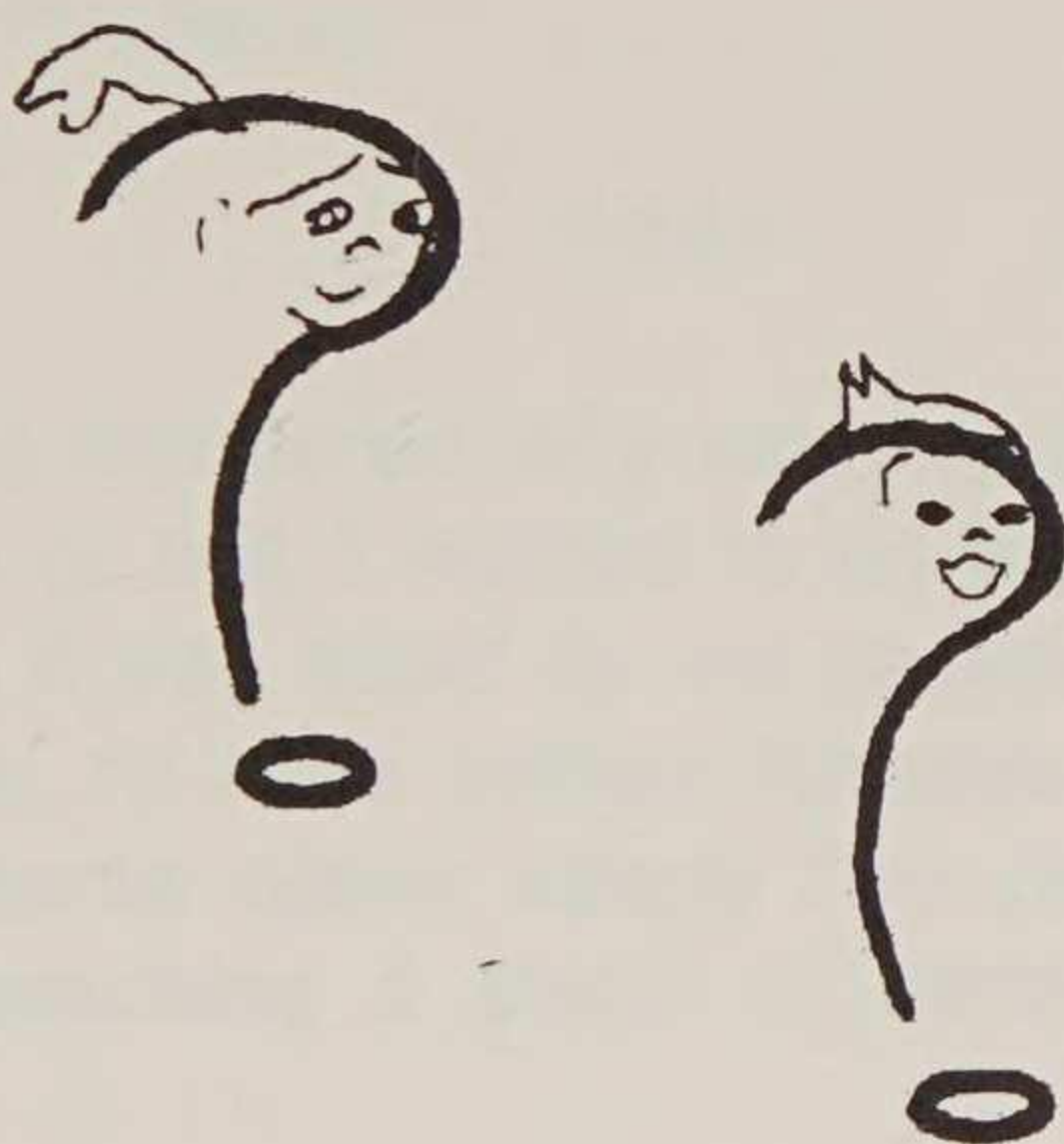
(there are many variations of this laughing)

btw = by the way

imo = in my opinion or in my humble opinion = imho

You will find several sites on the internet which provide lengthy acronym and emoticon dictionaries - type "emoticons" into any search.

A THOUGHT





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023

Obviously God is female. If a man had created the world, the colors would have clashed... Elliot



...we probably agree on most global issues. I wonder if we could pick an outrageous topic...But I'm not sure where we should begin... or what we should begin with. Any ideas??.. Raven



...I've also wondered why women don't play chess. Believe it or not, I wanted to do my dissertation on that. But it was nixed by my chairperson. (A male. Otherwise, I'd have written "chairwomanperson." Of course, some prefer simply "my chair." But I feel uneasy watching a piece of furniture correct my statistics....)

It seems e-mail is notorious for playful put-downs and wisecracks. But what I enjoy most is sharing true stories. I once had a friend named Sara. Some day, perhaps, I'll tell you about her. Back in the sixties (I begin many sentences with those words), she got involved with a guy named Norman. (My roommate Orange Duggy and I called this "The Norman Conquest.") Norman was involved with a man named John, who was involved with Eastern art and religion.

Then Sara got involved with John too, and she started spouting Zen to the point where it was hard to communicate with her about everyday realities, like where I'd put my sweater or who's gonna wash the dishes. If I asked "what time is it?" she'd respond, "what is time?" If I said, "I think it's time for bed," she'd say, "you think too much. Let your mind be clear." And when I'd ask, "what do you want to do?" she told me, "This is the Kali Age, and we must tell stories until the Kali age is over." I was so incorrigibly Western, that I thought "The Kali Age" had something to do with Lassie. But I liked her advice.

Those anecdotes, these are the myths upon which we build our lives, no?.. Elliot



I have an affinity for all things Cosmic. (You do, of course, know that one of my ferrets is called the Cosmic Chicken??)... that's what is so seductive about these online relationships. They are VERY similar to my offline ones, they are intellectual in nature, and deeply debate-and-discussion oriented. Cybersex FASCINATES me, but I've never heard a good come on... Harmless smut, but smut. (Shrug...)...

I'd like to submit a topic to start: The Garden (was it a set up, a gift, a myth, or what?)... Raven

ENTER THE GARDEN



How Do You Like Them Apples?
From Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Raven,

Here's what I remember about the Garden of Eden.
Tell me if I've got it right:

Adam and Eve grew up in a crummy neighborhood. Good for rabbits and squirrels maybe, but crummy for people. No sex, no rap music, no video games even. No toilets, which is a problem when you eat nothing but fruit. Nothing to read, except some old copies of "The Watchtower."

Worst of all, no change or growth. Except that Adam grew fatter and stupider every day.

Eve knew they had to blow this joint. So, when the Serpent made his proposition, she jumped at the chance. Using the forbidden fruit, she baked a pie, with melted cheese and a dollop of ice cream. Before Adam could ask for a second helping, the Big Bouncer had chucked them out.

As a reward, the Serpent was allowed to crawl around on his belly. That way he'd never again have to look humans in the eye, smell the beer on their breath and listen to their inane chatter. (Besides, he'd felt ridiculous trying to balance on his tail.) And from that

day forth, women have always been a stimulus for change and growth.

This brings me to mind of another garden. We used to live in the Village of West Hempstead, Long Island. We had a little Tudor house with a little plot of land and a big mortgage. The soil was so sandy, you could barely grow a decent lawn. Adjacent to the house was a pile of concrete chunks, left over from the former owner's efforts at home improvement. We had no idea how to get rid of this eyesore. The sanitation department showed no interest in carting it away. So finally, my wife covered it over with a thin layer of soil.

A few weeks later Joy, our three year old daughter, was playing on the mound with her friend. They were pretending to be farmers. Joy came inside and asked me for some seeds. I told her we had none. She said she didn't need real seeds for a "pretend" farm. So, I got out a jar of popcorn and a jar of elbow macaroni, and poured some of each into a bag.

Sure enough, we soon had West Hempstead's only cornfield. The stalks grew six feet high. Corn growing in concrete: this was truly a miracle. Had I given Joy a little fertilizer and a watering can, we'd now be lounging in the shade of macaroni trees.

el

How do you like them apples?

Fm: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Hmmmm...

I don't think the Garden scene went quite like that. A lot of folks defend Eve— I don't think there was anything to defend. But that's because the men who did the editing conveniently buried Lilith. Remember Lilith? Adam's first mate— an equal— who refused to lie **beneath** him. She transformed into an owl and flew away. Adam had **already** known about sex— and how he liked his— when Eve showed up. So first he quibbles over positions, then he has to blame Eve for "tempting" him. I think maybe Adam had a little problem.

Performance anxiety?? Failure to perform?? If the only other things in the Garden were animals and a big tree, maybe Eve was the first woman to tell the cosmic lie: size doesn't matter. Can't you picture it?? Adam glaring at the Snake and saying to Eve "you only talk to him because he's huge... is that what you want? I see the way you look at my fig leaf!" ANYHOW...

What **is** the obsession we have with planting crop? It's an urge as old as man, I think. I watch my father grunting and wincing as he bends over his rows, hear my Granny's voice tremble as she admits that she can't keep a garden anymore. And I wonder if we aren't trying to prove to ourselves that we're still capable of giving life. If our purpose is to "go forth and multiply"

and our children negate this purpose in a strictly evolutionary sense, perhaps that urge to grow things is denial. It hits the elderly hard, this gardening obsession. I wonder if they aren't trying, on some deep level, to legitimize their lives by continuing to give birth.

So maybe my strawberries are my reason for remaining. A little green and red billboard facing heaven that says: don't take me yet, Chief, I haven't weeded and there's a bumper crop on the way.

Which really brings us right back to Eve, the mother of humanity. That whole Original Sin rap sheet was nothing more than backlash. Eve was following the urges her Creator gave her: to sow (or be sown) in the interest of the future. Meanwhile, the original First Wife, Lilith, was watching from the trees...and whispering explicit instructions to the snake.

You go girl.

Just cuz I made it up don't mean it ain't true.

Raven

Pinball Wizard

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Hi Raven,

Thanks for the info on Lilith. Never knew who she was, though I'd heard the name before. Always sounded like someone lisping. Indeed, it inspired me to write a little poem:

Roseth are red
Lilith are white...

But I didn't know where to go from there. Perhaps you can suggest a suitable ending.

After reading your message, I did a little research. Is it not true that Lilith was a demon who kidnaped and murdered children? And that parents hung amulets to keep her away? These sound like serious character flaws. On the whole, I'd rather take Eve home to meet my Mom, though Lilith is the more interesting sexual partner. And would you prefer the Serpent to Adam?

By the way, I learned that I was wrong about the Serpent. He walked on his belly from The Beginning. And though the Lord "cursed" the Serpent and Adam, he did not specifically curse Eve. You wouldn't like the reason given by the "commentators" though. Well,

never mind. They were probably male.

Like you, I feel no need to defend Eve. Did Adam feel insecure? Sure, he'd have to. His first sexual partner flies away, and Eve flirts with an oversized phallic symbol. I feel sorry for the guy. He'd have been a challenge for a psychoanalyst. Born at age 20, so he skipped the Oedipal conflict. And he's only man ever to marry a woman who didn't remind him of his mother.

Geez, you have a grim view about gardening. If our purpose were simply to "go forth and multiply," I'd pack it in, and maybe move to New Jersey. Whether raising crops, or children, or even ferrets, the point is not just spreading seed, but nurturing and stimulating growth.

In my youth I loved to play pinball machines. Back then it was a nickel for five balls. (This space reserved for Freudian interpretations.) My Austrian grandpa would wag his head. "Why do you waste your money?" he'd ask. "You put in five cents, and get nothing back?"

"If I win, I get a free game."

"So? Then you play again, and still you get nothing!"

Grandpa was using the wrong paradigm. He mistook

pinball for a glorified slot machine. It would be foolish indeed to patronize a casino that returned nothing but another chance to pull the lever. But this was no one-armed bandit. It was a dazzling light and sound show, with shiny orbs pinging and ponging. And flippers. (This space reserved for more Freudian interpretations.) Nothing beat the thrill of rescuing a ball from the abyss, and keeping it in play.

You see what I mean, don't you Raven? We grow things to experience life, not to deny death. Life, at its best, is a game of pinball. And if we sometimes win a free game, so much the better.

And now I shall proceed to recite a poem of my own creation:

Lilith the owl-maid
Mythical visionary
Gave not a hoot for the
Typical missionary

(Tilt.)

Your co-conspirator and friend,

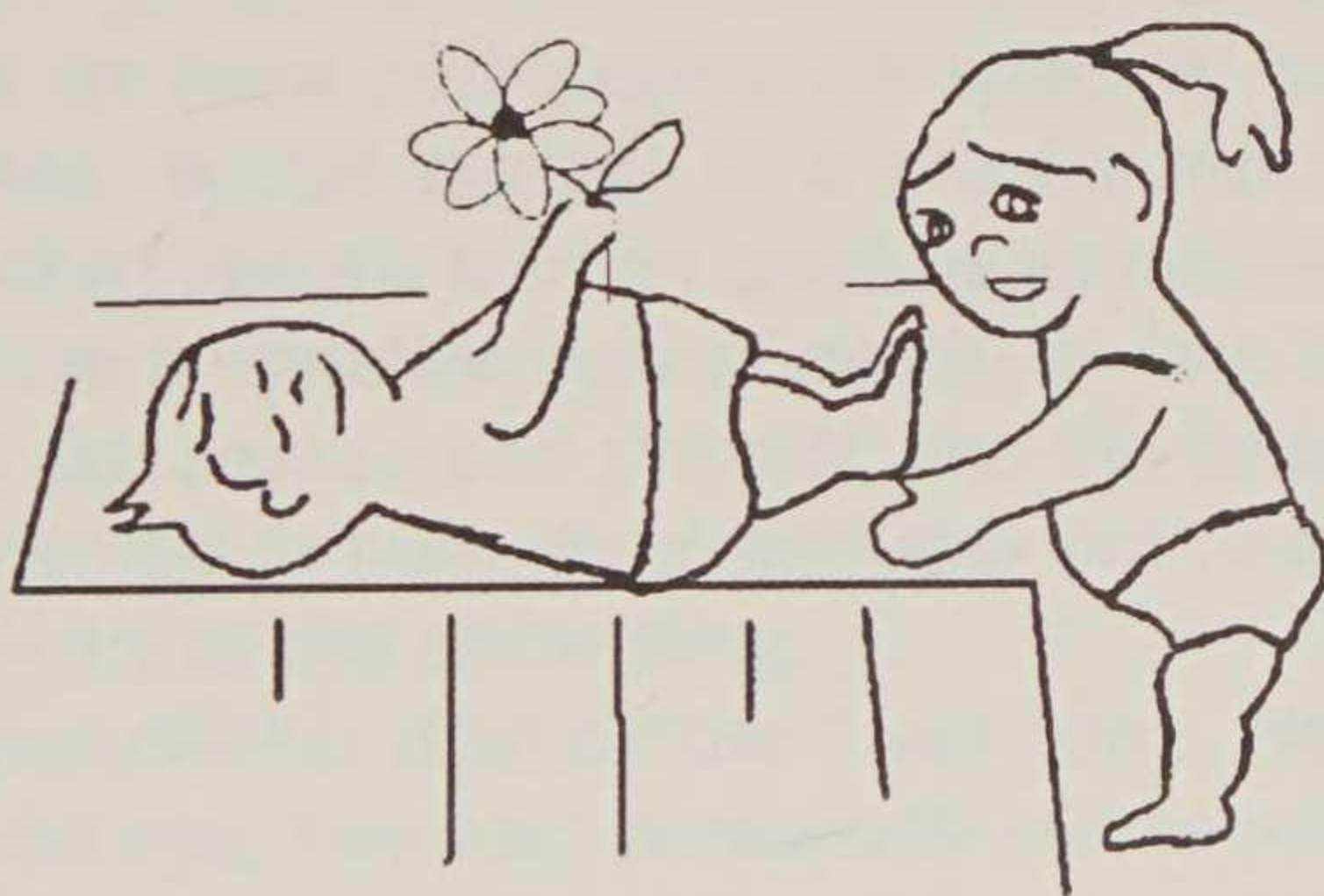
el

P.S. I didn't understand two parts of your message.

Could you help me out?

1. "...and our children negate this purpose in a strictly evolutionary sense,"
2. "You go girl."

**WHAT ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH
ANYWAY?**



Among the Flagstones

From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Pinball-boy-

Lilith got LOTS of bad press, along with Eve, and many other women. The demonic legends were post-Kabbalistic teachings and propaganda. What else is new?? As to your two questions: "You go girl" was directed at Lilith- she is a personal hero. The bit about our children negating- well, lots of folks (including Wilson***, not that I endorse him) theorize that biologically we are here to procreate. Once we have produced offspring, the body begins to decline. Because we have perpetuated the species, hopefully (wink wink, nudge nudge) in a greater incarnation. Funny, I don't see my take on gardens as negative, but I don't have a negative view of death. In fact, there is a reason that snakes and shrouds, and the color black are connected to both death and sex- not to mention creation- it's all the same thing.

My grandfather died before I was born. He was a farmer who was, I am told, particularly in-tune with both the land and animals. He died when his heart exploded, suddenly. For years- forty anyway- no grass would grow on his grave. I had theorized about why for many years. I've often wondered if, in some cosmic sense, the ground mourned him. Or if so great a loss touched other things around it, and left them stunned by the emptiness. But last spring I visited his grave on

top of the mountain in Virginia and found grass growing there. It began the most prolific period of my life as a writer. I'm still wrestling with why.

So, yeah— I guess I agree with what you said about sewing seeds not being all the gardener has to do. But the things that grow contain the seeds of gardens to come. I see my job as finished when something born of my nurturing grows enough to carry on without me. And I don't see this as a bad or sad or negative thing. I see it as a guarantee that the garden will continue. It will never bloom the same, but some color or turn of leaf will always remain as a sign that I was there. And my children will know how to till the soil, how to plant the seeds, where to place the rows. Luckily for us, we time-greedy creatures, it takes many seasons to accomplish such a task. Elton John (can't stand him, but he did one song I love) warned us about what happens to gardens when we leave no gardeners behind us to tend them. In his song *EMPTY GARDEN* he talks about the death of John Lennon and uses the garden as metaphor— "empty and ravaged in the absence of the one who cared for it."

As to pinball, I've always found it sexual. But I find A lot sexual. And I shudder to think what one of your profession will think of me after such an admission.

shuddering, blushing, and awaiting your response,

Raven

On Death and Malted

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Hi Raven,

Of course pinball is sexual. But I find sex just about everywhere too. Having read some of your bawdier work, it's hard to imagine that you really blushed.

Didn't realize Lilith was your personal hero. Sorry if my attempts at humor offended. I've had a number of personal heroes, but they were all human, and eventually fell from their pedestals. Perhaps there's an advantage to choosing one's role models from myth... Come to think of it, the same could be said for other relationships. Maybe I'd have saved myself some disappointment if I'd dated mythical women.

Your grandfather story was touching. I'm sure there was an important reason that the grass didn't grow.

I've never cared for Elton John either. Haven't heard the song you quoted. I did like "Philadelphia Freedom." I always thought it was about Billy Jean King. But maybe I just associated it with her, because she once had a tennis team called "The Philadelphia Freedoms." And "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road." That was Elton's, no?

I wish I could think of death the way you do. But the idea frightens me. When I was very young, I'd ask my mother about death. She would tell me there's no such thing. I suppose this sounded fake, because I kept asking. Then, when I was five years old, I confronted her once more. "Mom, what does it mean to be dead?" She stiffened her body, rolled her eyes back, made a guttural sound, stuck her tongue out to the side and went limp. I cried so hard that I nearly threw up.

Realizing that her explanation had been a tad too blunt, she tried to console me. "Don't worry," she said. "After you die, you go to a wonderful place. It's called 'heaven.'"

"Is it as nice as Valley Stream?" I snuffled (that was where we lived).

"Some say it's even nicer," she replied.

That made me feel a lot better. Until I requested a second opinion from my dad. "What does it feel like to be dead?" I asked.

"The same way it felt before you were born."

Whew! What a concept.

Since then I've read "The Holy Bible" and "The Tibetan

Book of the Dead." I've listened to the rabbi speak at funerals. I've even written a humorous essay about chicken salad, for a Mennonite quarterly. But with all that religious experience, my father's explanation still seems correct.

He had found comfort in his view of death. After all, he had handled nonexistence pretty well in the past, so why not in the future? For me, it caused profound anxiety. I guess it's not the great void that I fear, but the fact that it goes on forever. This stretches my little mind to the breaking point. Maybe that's why we have to die. Death is an anesthetic, to ease the pain of eternity.

I still think about heaven, though more as a longing than a conviction. Heaven is a little suburban village, where my stick ball bat propels the pink hi-bouncer way past Ori Friedman's house, and the drug store serves up malteds with two squirts of syrup. It's a lot like Valley Stream - only nicer.

el

Answer: 42

FROM: CWR Olinger TO: Elliot Grant

EI-

You do too know that song. "Empty Garden?" He wrote it for John Lennon. The refrain goes:

Your story about heaven reminds me of the line in *FIELD OF DREAMS* (one of my favorite movies) when Shoeless Joe asks Ray "is this heaven?" and he says "no, it's Iowa." Who is to say that heaven isn't Iowa for a guy like Shoeless Joe Jackson? Maybe my heaven will be a pond at the foot of a mountain. What I really think is that these "safe" places are probably the preparing place. All the tales one hears about being in a beautiful meadow with a bright light and relatives who've passed on... that's God's comfort zone. We are fleshy, fleshy creatures. We are so attached to our perceptions and our petty little visions of "it." Transcendence may well be a void. The idea is, after all, to rise above the struggle. Without the bad of the struggle the good is sort of moot. Ying, yang, what-have-you.

If it sounds dark, I guess it is on some level. I tend to go on spiritual swamptrips A lot. Perhaps because I am very Kabbalistic as I grow older. I believe in that spiral that keeps spiraling: the One Tree. I think maybe we just keep growing, changing, and recycling until it's over. (And I have a sneaking suspicion that it all starts

over again after that... all things indicate and create their opposite... out of endless nothing comes a big old mother of a something.)

So perhaps the birth/death analogy is apt. Perhaps that's the point. Old age and infancy are sooooo close to one another. Perhaps age and death prepare us for birth again. Who knows??

Then again perhaps Doug Adams*** had it all figured out. The answer to the BIG question of life, the universe, and everything?? 42. Go figger.

Riding the spiral,
Raven

Talking to Myself

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Hi Raven,

Nope. The song sounds pretty, but I don't know it. Maybe I'd recognize the melody. Can you hum a few bars?

To summarize: we started at Genesis, the beginning, then skipped to death, the end. Then we decided that it's all the same thing anyhow.

Similarly, I'm you, and you're me. You agree with that, don't you? You have to, because you're me. Then again, if you don't agree, then you can't be me. Hence, the statement isn't true. Which puts the matter entirely in your hands, Raven.

In the sixties, this kind of discussion would call for getting stoned. But them days are past. So, excuse me a moment while I get high on life....

There, that's better. Wow, heavy! Look at that screen-saver, man. Think I'll go get some munchies...

I'm back.

The other night, Joy was watching a video tape of Disney's Alice in Wonderland. I saw the part with the

hookah-smoking caterpillar, who keeps repeating: "WHO are YOU?" Hell of a question, no? The film was a favorite back in the sixties. People would line up at the Waverly, usually under the influence. They'd go "oo" and "ah" at the parts with hookahs and mushrooms, or at the colors on the screen, or at cracks in the plaster.

Watching that caterpillar reminded me of another sixties scene. A quiet moment, when I held a young woman in my arms, a woman who had given me a string of beads she'd made herself. Pulling me closer, she whispered, "who are you, person?"

Well Raven, it's my turn to suggest the next topic. So here it is:

Who are you?

el

WHO ARE YOU, PERSON?



Talking to myself

Fm: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Duality, Grant, it's all about dualism. Of **course** you're me and I'm you. We're all one big unit. And within each of us is our opposite. Which is what makes us cool critters, yes? 8-)

To the question at hand: who am I?

I'm rather fond of the idea that we are the sum of our experiences. Which is why it is **so** important to be cautious of children. (To quote another song, "careful of what you say, children will listen.")

I've had a life of dualisms. I am an only sister among brothers. I am Irish. I am Cherokee. But I bear an Austrian surname that is as old as Virginia. I was born and reared in a small colonial harbor town. But I am southern by genetic default. I like biscuits and gravy. I like scones. I like lace curtains. I like cast iron skillets. I am known for my sense of humor but write serious, dark poetry. I'm a feminist. I'm conservative. I'm an intellectual. I reject elitism.

All of what I am is the direct result of where I've been, who I've known, and what I've done. And my childhood was the biggest stamp on my personality.

The first thing that pops into my mind when I think of my childhood is a dirt road. I think 70% of my early years were spent on dirt roads. Barefoot. Accompanied by a large, black, Labrador Retriever. Her name was Charcoal and there were two of her. But not really. There was also a Becky- a chestnut

mare with a blaze shaped like a candle. And later there was another Lab named Becky, too. And a goat named Monopoly, a rabbit named Kalluchio, cats, other dogs, ducks, chickens, turtles— one named Mr. Williby that would play a significant role one Christmas, a mole named Lint, a white pigeon, a parakeet named Sandy Kofax, many fish, and— at last, my final love— ferrets, one named The Cosmic Chicken who sleeps with me and is the joy of my life.

WHAT— you ask— does any of THAT have to do with who I am?? It is the core of who I am. Because I grew up around a heavily wooded area, near the ocean, and close to animals, I had a tremendous sense of some very adult things. I was responsible. My critters got fed. If there was a storm the horse had water, lots of grain, and anything that could harm her legs was put away. When one of them was sick, I stayed up and worried. I didn't just learn how to nurture by watching my parents; I had something alive and real to nurture. It taught me to put someone else first. There were puppies. There were turtles hatched in a bathtub. There were deaths, too: tears, and misery, and burials.

Life and death are unavoidable in rural New England. The seasons don't just pass, they wave and shout as they go by. We learn to cherish the dark times. People come from all over the country to pack our beaches in the summer and our mountains in the winter. We locals hike Loon and Manadnock in the summer and bundle up to watch the ice break on the harbor in January or the swells against the sea-walls

during a storm, when the snow turns the ocean slate gray. There are no New England postcards with winter beaches or summer slopes. It's a place of secret majesty. We hide our grace behind tourist stereotypes. Let the invaders have the quaint. We cherish the elegance of fall **after** the leaves have fallen— the delirious crunch of leaves. I don't know a New Englander who can resist a stomp through neatly raked leaves. They smell of maple and oak and time. They smell something like books, something like warm linens.

That's who I am. A woman who knows how to read the seasons and love wild things. Celtic/Native. Northern/Southern. Secretive; I admit it. I grew up knowing that the good stuff was not for everyone. But I also, somehow, knew how special the sharing of those intimacies would be. Isn't that what we all are?? A pattern of paths or side-streets, be we city or country, that are known only to us.

My closest friend has often said how much she wants to take me to Cooperstown, New York, where she grew up. She talks about General Stores and meadows and little shops and stuff-you-can't-get-anymore. She talks about what a wonderful little town it is. And I know. Because I grew up in the same little town in Massachusetts. And I know why she wants to share it with me. Because it's who she is. And I can't think of a higher compliment to our friendship.

Okay— so who the hell are YOU??

[Faint, illegible text covering the majority of the page, likely bleed-through from the reverse side.]

Who Am I?

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Beautiful Raven, just beautiful. I love the sound of crunching leaves. And New England is one of my favorite places. When I lived back east, I spent most of my vacations there.

Cousin Connie would like what you wrote. She was once my kissin' cousin. Now we smooch via e-mail. Connie graduated in the top of her class in engineering school, then got a masters in mathematics. She married an art student named Jeff, and they decided to seek a better life. In the tiny rural village of Ashby, Massachusetts, they found a very inexpensive home: a large, stately house that showed its age, framed by a sprawling lawn and 17 acres of forest. For the past 25 years or so, Connie has been commuting 90 minutes each way to Boston, where she teaches high school science. She loves her job. Jeff stays home where he cooks, cleans, watches the kids, and tries to clear a path through the woods. He also attempts to restore the old house, but I hear this project is still far from completion. At night they sip tea together, while reading stories aloud. And each summer Connie travels alone to Ireland, where she plays traditional fiddle music in the pubs. You'd like Connie.

But who am I? This question brings to mind the

classic "One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish," by Dr. Seuss. Of all the anomalous critters depicted in this book, my favorite is cranky old Ned, who launches his monologue with those three words: "who am I?" Ned complains because his bed is too small. No matter what he does, either his head or his feet stick out. This not only describes his predicament, but defines his very existence. And it gets worse. In Ned's second appearance a myriad of uninvited guests have taken the liberty of jumping into the sack with him.

There's a lot of wisdom in Dr. Seuss, if one reads between the lines. So often we find ourselves stuck in the wrong bed, with the wrong company. Well, that's Connie, and that's Ned, but who am I? Do I seem to be dodging the issue? Maybe it's because your act is tough to follow.

I'm a blue fish out of water. From earliest childhood, I felt that my ideas, my thoughts, my values separated me from others. As a child I tried to play "cowboy's and Indians" with would-be friends. The game made no sense to me. I didn't care for violence, but there was a more vexing problem. One kid would say "bang bang, I got you, you're dead," expecting the other to obediently lie down. The other would respond "no you didn't, you missed." And then they would argue. I tried to explain that this was entirely pointless: since the bullets were imaginary, there was no way to judge

the accuracy of one's shot. Besides, why would anyone willingly fall over and play dead for the rest of the game? What sort of fun is that?

My father was an Austrian holocaust survivor. He was a warm and gentle man, a self-educated intellectual giant, but not good with money. Our family lived a nomadic existence, with creditors always on the phone and sheriffs at the door.

My dad's original name was Gert Gruenbaum, with an umlaut over the "u." ("Gert" became "Gerry," and he chose the name Grant at random from the New York telephone directory.) A rare form of cancer ended his life at the age of 53. My mom, now 75, had many suitors but never remarried.

I'm the sum of my experiences, plus or minus seven. Part of me I believe is entirely my own. The sense of humor, for example. I was an absurdist long before I'd read Ionesco. Certainly, it was a defense against anxiety and sadness. But why this defense? Why did I not become alcoholic, or psychotic, or a lawyer? That's the "plus or minus seven."

I've always been a performer. When I got my first record player, I lip-synched the songs before an imaginary audience. At two years old, I attended a show with my mom and my sister. There was a band playing music I didn't care for, so I sat dozing, sucking

my thumb. Then came the talent contest: children were invited to sing with the band. Before I knew what was happening, my mom and sister were pushing me toward the stage. The audience laughed as the MC pushed the microphone down to where I could reach it. I sang my favorite number: "Hey Good Lookin', What You Got Cookin'," complete with finger snapping and gestures. Finding the musical accompaniment a useless distraction, I scowled at the band leader, who immediately waved a signal to silence the musicians. The audience laughed throughout, and applauded at the end. Reaching into a large sack, the MC produced my prize – a dart gun. I used it to shoot random pedestrians on the way home. Many years later I learned that the poor band leader had been Count Basie. Eat your heart out, Ella.

Later I got involved in puppet shows, then community theatre and a few professional gigs. My otherwise miserable adolescence was salvaged by the tutelage of a marvelous acting teacher who became my personal guru. He taught me more about life, and about myself, than he ever realized.

Being a bright child, and the only son in a Jewish family, I was urged to become a physician, or at least a nuclear physicist. I wanted to be an actor, but realized that the chances of making a living at that profession were dim. In college, I switched majors weekly.

At age 19, I was diagnosed with cancer: an advanced non-Hodgkins lymphoma. I was expected to live no more than a few months. (Needless to say, I survived, but that's another story, for another time.) I was not told the whole truth: I was led to believe I could live 10 or 15 years. Oddly, the next few years were a happy time for me. I stopped worrying about what was expected, and instead thought about what I wanted. It was the late sixties, and I took full advantage of that giddy era. I moved to Greenwich Village where I had my own apartment, and studied English Education at NYU. I had decided on the teaching profession, partly because it did not require graduate study. I loved kids, and teaching would let me work with them for a few years, before I kicked the bucket.

In the New York City School System, I lasted 5 weeks. Then I worked in a bank for 5 years, before deciding to become a psychologist. I earned one and a half masters degrees, then another masters degree, a doctorate, and after 4 years of post-doctoral education, a psychoanalytic certificate. I absorbed far too much knowledge for any one person, so I'm trying to forget as much as I can.

Chemotherapy had rendered me unable to father a child biologically. But I dearly wanted to raise children. My first wife Tanny and I planned to use donor insemination. We hired a carpenter to overhaul the second bedroom, and turn it into a nursery. But

there was an unanticipated glitch: Tanny fell in love with the carpenter, and left me. During the divorce proceedings, she was pregnant with his child. To which I said, "oh heck," or words to that effect. Sometimes it helps to have an absurdist sense of humor.

Things work out. I'm now happily married. Martha and I adopted an uncommonly marvelous Korean child, aptly named "Joy." As I write, I await news about our new son, Vitaliy, who will one day journey here from Russia. No matter how many fish I have to fry, raising children is the number one priority.

Four years ago we moved from Long Island to a small rural town in the icy north of Minnesota. It's not for everyone, but that's okay. If it were, the place would be much too crowded. Local bumper stickers say: "Twenty below keeps the riff-raff out." If only the winters were that warm!

Who am I? I am a psychologist, working mostly with children. It's a wonderful profession. Yet like the irate insomniac of "One Fish Two Fish," I no longer feel comfortable in my little bed. It's time to splurge on a posture-pedic or sleep in the hay loft. I dabble in everything: the barn is filled with unfinished projects. And I write funny little stories. Of course, earning a living as an author is as likely as making it big in show business. Still, I did sing with Count Basie. Maybe

this little book we're doing, you and I, will be a best seller. And then there are the movie rights. I could play myself, if DeNiro's not available.

Your serve.

el

Milestones, Mountains, and Gentile Musings
From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Shit... Count Basie?? Get outta town!! (VBG) A lad after my own heart. Music is special to me, but writing has always been my passion. And teaching appeals, too. The brief taste I had of teaching left me begging for more, and it's where I want to spend my life. I'm hoping that the MFA I want to go back and get will make me a rare find. (gg) Everybody's getting so technical in academia- I like to zig when everyone zags. I wonder- do you, as a Jew, have the kind of attachment to holidays that Christians do?

*I come from a Catholic background. I'm also Cherokee, and hold those beliefs and practices very dear. But I *like* Jesus so much that I can't just say "to hell with it, I'm a Cherokee pagan." I'm Christian. Most would say just barely. My Trinity is Christ, Mary, and The Creator... and Mary is only one mask of Unelanuhi (the Cherokee Sun Goddess), Lillith, Eve, all women. Don't tell the Pope, okay?? He's health is bad enough already.*

*The reason I ask is that I've noted a theme in reviewing one's life. Tennyson*** may have started it with IN MEMORIAM, but maybe it's an archetype of some sort. I know I tend to divide my life up into Christmases. Not the Dickensian past-present-future thing, I tend to look back on my life as a ribbon extending behind me. There are bumps and valleys. The Christmases are like mountains. Which is weird, in*

a way, because they probably shouldn't be.

We didn't have it easy. My father was in the military and later worked at A lot of different things. He's talented, is my Papa. Most things that require work with hands, he can do. He ended up with Enterprise Equipment, a general contracting company, and stayed with them because it's a small, family-type of company. But I remember him being a carpenter, welder, pipe-fitter, what-have-you. And right now I'm working at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant in Plymouth— my old man welded the reactor when they put it up.

My mom was young when she married him. She came from a well-to-do town, Milton, outside of Boston. Lace-curtain Irish, most would have called them. My grandfather was a big-shot for Boston Edison (which owns the power plant where I work... which means something... I just don't know what). Nobody gave them anything. It was hard. Like your parents, they struggled. So Christmas should have been a hard time, but it never was. It was a pocket of joy that came once a year.

I remember one year when my brothers and I all got bicycles— bikes!!— every one of us. I thought we'd hit the mother load or dad's number had come in (didn't know what one's number coming in meant, only that it was good). My older brothers knew, and explained to me later, that the bikes were assembled from spare parts and painted. It was probably the leanest Christmas of our lives, but it was one of the best. My parents always went slightly over the edge like that.

Not that they were perfect— my mom and I nearly killed each other during my teen years. But there aren't too many parents who do as much as they did to make Christmas magic. Papa stood in the cold and threw rocks on the roof (reindeer's hooves). Mom made sure each of us got Pez and cordial cherries in our stockings. One year my old man walked around the family Christmas party with a turtle in his shirt pocket. (It was all I'd asked for, so he had to snip out and get it at the last minute before the store closed and hide it till morning.) My brother Tommy wanted a green fire engine. Most moms and dads would have given him a red one and explained about fire engines. My grandfather bought him one and painted it green. Why the hell not? When you're a kid you should be able to redesign your world. The Christmas after my grandfather died— I was twelve or thirteen— sticks out in my memory. Years ago, before the children had children of their own, we used to gather at my grandparents' on Christmas day. But Dada (stop laughing, that's what we called him) often snuck out early that morning to stop by our house. Not to bring anything or really do anything— just to watch the carnage and laugh. It was a huge source of joy for him to know kids never changed and it was somebody else's mess to clean up. Later, we started gathering at my aunt's house on Christmas eve. Dada always sat in the corner of the room in a big chair and watched us quietly, saying little. Typical patriarch, really. The year he died— around Thanksgiving time— that chair

stayed empty all Christmas eve. And for years afterward I noticed that no matter how the houses were arranged and no matter where we were gathered there was always an empty chair in a corner that drew my gaze. He was there, still getting a kick out of kids and piles of wrapping paper and somebody else's mess to clean up.

Is Hannuka like that? (Damned if I know how to spell it). Or maybe another holiday? I've often wondered. I have a few Jewish friends who sort of "join in" the Christmas festivities, but I always feel as though that's kind of a rip off. These days it seems like that's the one time of year A lot of people write. We don't mark a child's growth in birthdays anymore— we watch him or her change in those Picture-cards with "Season's Greetings from the Smiths" printed on the back. I know I feel a bit disjointed on Columbus Day (or, as my people call it "Lost Italian Day").

I get the day off. But it's not my holiday. I used to protest in some small way— when I was an undergrad we showed up to class and studied quietly on the quad. I used to always write something for the paper. After a while I passed the torch. Now I treat it as an extra Sunday. But I think about it: what do non-Christians feel when we're rapt in the throes of Christmas? Do you ever wanna just slug Santa? I can't say that I'd blame you. I think if I had to battle armies of Benji the Kwanzaa Pig (he doesn't exist, but for instance) on every street corner at that time of year, I'd get cranky. Besides, you have issues with carpenters,

clearly, and who wouldn't? I'm lighting a candle for you and little Vitaliy. Every kid should have a dad with an artist's soul and the cahoonies to glare at Count Basie for drowning him out. My dad can do one hell of a "Strawberry Roan." Flat as hell, but lots of heart.

*So, el- tell me about the mountains in your life. Look back on the ribbon and tell me where it piles up into a delightful rise. Sure, life is cyclic, not linear. But it's also big. So it *looks* linear for the same reason that Earth looks flat from Green Harbor.*

*Waiting breathlessly-
Raven*

THE MEANING OF SO MUCH



Hesse's Volkswagon

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Ravee Baby!

Benji the Kwanzaa Pig? Okay, he's imaginary, but you lobbed that allusion (illusion?) way over the head of this poor Minnesota boy. What ya talkin 'bout, woman?

That was a touching tale, about your dad and the fire engine. What an act of love. I like the way you put it - that kids should be able to redesign their world. Maybe that's what we try to do, when we write.

During my training, one of my first patients was a ten year old boy. We did "play therapy." He took a toy giraffe, pulled its legs to the sides, and called it an airplane. My supervisor said he was seriously disturbed: "pre-borderline," she said. She was wrong. He was an artist. But he was preoccupied with one theme: the Brooklyn Bridge. At school he would create perfect, detailed drawings of the bridge, while others were doing their work. He made many such drawings for me. He called it "the grandfather of all suspension bridges." And then he would tell me a story. I don't think it was exactly true, but it was *his* truth. He said the bridge's original architect had fallen into the concrete before it had dried. The architect's son had taken over, completing the bridge

upon a foundation which literally contained his father's body.

What did this mean? Well, the boy's parents had divorced. His father never came to see him; his mom was self-involved and withholding. He fondly remembered the warmth of his grandfather, who lived in Manhattan - on the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge. In his drawings, he was trying to bridge a gap in his life. I hope he succeeded.

You mentioned your job. What do you do for a living? I was under the delusion (confusion?) that you were a full-time writer. Also, where do you call home? (Literally now, not literarily. I already know your spirit pervades the universe and sparkles with the morning star.) And is there a "significant other"? I know, I hate that expression too.

I share your love for music. I wish I could write musically. In college, Professor Berlin lectured on "Death in Venice." He said, "were I a pianist, I would play it for you." Then he read the story aloud, pausing after each sentence to savor its rich harmony and rhythm.

Christmas. Like many other Jewish families, we celebrated a secular Christmas. It was a happy time. No tree in the house, no festive bulbs. Nobody dressed as Santa, but we believed in him. For the

children there were piles of colorfully wrapped toys and plenty of excitement.

I'll tell you a secret. As I got older, the spiritual side of the holiday became important as well. I never was able to worship Jesus. But I developed a respect for him as a teacher, an innovator and a model of love.

Where is it written that we must decide either-or? Oh yeah, I suppose it is. But don't believe all you read! It probably lost something in the translation. Go ahead Raven, be a Christian Cherokee. Join the Worldwide Church of Hybrids!

Yes, holidays are very important in Judaism. But our holiest days are in spring and fall. Many say that Chanukah calls for only a small celebration - it's been pumped up so the our kids won't feel left out during the Christmas season. To which I reply "yeah," and "so what?"

But let me tell you of my favorite Christmas. Perhaps this was one of the "hills" you inquired about. I have two sisters: Karin is 5 years older than I, Shari is 7 years younger. One winter, when I was a teenager, Shari and I spent the holiday season at the home of Karin and her husband Rob in Billerica, Massachusetts. As Christmas approached, we realized we couldn't do much shopping. The little community was covered with snow, and Karin's car

wasn't fit for long travel. Besides, we were nearly broke. So we came upon a plan. We drew names from a hat. Each of us filled a large stocking for one of the others. We made our purchases in a single afternoon, at a nearby shopping strip. The gifts could be as silly and impractical as we wished. The one rule was: we had to fill the stocking for three dollars or less.

It was a challenge. Among my gifts for Robbie were a wax banana and a huge rubber thumb. We laughed so hard when we opened the stockings together, and felt so close.

Another Christmas story took place in Billerica. A week or so before the holiday, we piled into the car - the four of us and Karin's little daughter, Toni. We went to a drive-in hamburger joint for lunch. As we ate, a pimply-faced Santa approached our car. Poking his head through the window, he spoke to Toni.

"Ho ho ho. I'm Santa Claus. Have you been a good girl?"

"Yes."

"Do you eat all your food?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you say your prayers?"

"Yes."

"Well, have a very merry Christmas. Ho ho ho."

As Mr. Kringle waddled away, Toni looked at her mother guiltily. "I lied to him," she said. "I don't really say my prayers."

"That's Okay," said Karin. "He lied to you. He's not really Santa Claus."

Hills. There have been many. And a half dozen mountains. The latter are always quiet moments, when a word or a wink elicits an unexpected rush of cosmic joy.

Summer of 1968. I have been diagnosed with cancer. Lyndon Johnson has resigned. I have campaigned for Robert Kennedy in Muncie, Indiana and attended his funeral at Arlington. Now I wander through Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. To the north is a concrete arch, with anti-war graffiti on its base. To the south, New York University. In the park's center a fountain, stone dry as usual, and a volleyball net. An ad-hoc tournament is in progress. Squinting against the sun, I sit to watch. Six to a side, each team a mishmash of colors and sizes: a shirtless Asian, a frumpy student, an unwashed freak. To the side, a

radical politico in wire-rimmed specs is recruiting a team of challengers. No visible leader coordinates, no umpire arbitrates. To some it is a grand farce, while others are out to win. Yet all adhere to the rules, nobody argues and everyone gets a chance at the ball. I have never seen such a blissfully harmonious gathering.

"Care for some reading material? Fifty cents to find out what's happening." The chipper voice belonged to a slim, twenty-something woman with a stack of tabloids under her arm.

"What kind of reading material?"

"It's Vassar's underground newspaper. Yes! Vassar has published an underground paper.

"Is it good?"

"You'll have to buy one to find out."

"Sounds intriguing."

She jams my two quarters into her jeans pocket. Thrusting a paper into my hands, she lifts her chin and cries, "all power to the people!" Then leaning close, whispers, "that's you."

Raven, did you ever see a movie or hear a song that

made perfect sense, though you had no idea what it was about?

Magic was in the air. It was as though life and death, yin and yang, I and thou had all piled into a Chevy convertible, and rammed it into Herman Hesse's VW. Well, a little like that. And suddenly I knew what I wanted in life: i.e., to spend my remaining days playing volleyball with a Vassar woman.

Well, I couldn't do that. So I did the next best thing. I double-timed it across the park, over to the university, and requested an application form. I transferred from Ohio State to NYU. I rented an apartment in the Village and found a roommate. When he moved out I found another. Then a third, who was later to be my wife. One thing led to another: career changes, divorce, remarriage, a new home, a new child. Would my life have taken the same course if a wide-eyed woman had not whispered those two words?

By the way, I never read that newspaper.

el

Chance Meetings and Other Stuff
Fm: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Ell-baby!

LOVED the story about the chick with the propaganda. (I'm a huge fan of propaganda, have written my share, and support it enthusiastically). I think all of us who teach, have taught, or aspire to teach like to think about changing someone's life with a word, a touch, a phrase spoken at the right moment. I miss teaching. But I also know that what I'm doing now is making me a stronger teacher— returning for more education, getting more world experience, re-evaluating my goals.

You asked me some questions. I'll answer them as directly as I dare under the circumstances. So— to the point— significant others and what-have-you.

Okay:

You were under the impression that I was a professional writer, and this is true. But, like most professional writers, I make precious little doing it. So I have to have a job. And I've bounced from working for KAO Infosystems to Boston Edison. I'm attempting to keep myself busy, fed, and to expand my horizons while preparing to go back for an MFA. Green Harbor Massachusetts is home— and, in an odd sense, I have some secondary homes: The Broadford, Virginia area (where my father grew up) is a family-cradle of some

kind and very important to me. And Boston is important to all of us from New England— it is, perhaps, my urban stomping grounds. And the West Coast of Ireland is in my blood. And Oxford. Which brings us to the subject of love. I was at Oxford for a while— Worcester— and fell in love briefly. His name was Ryan.

I'd not been there long at all when a tall, dark-haired gentleman with a ludicrous tweed bow-tie crept up behind me at a News-stand counter and tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned around the sun was in my eyes, so I stood there for a moment before moving into his shadow so I could see who he was. There was a moment that now seems terribly long in which he said nothing.

Then I saw his face clearly: thin, pale, serious, somewhat dreamy, with a longish shock of hair falling into his very dark eyes. He looked tired and very alert at the same time. His accent, when he spoke, was not quite British.

"I'm sorry— this is very forward of me— you're American, aren't you?"

I can't remember what else transpired. I know that he attempted to have a conversation with me, even commented that the color of my hair (a rather muddy auburn) was extraordinary, and I blew him off. I was alone and far from home and **very** wrapped up in my studies— Literature and the Unconscious, at the moment. Yet I'd been oddly attracted to him and it tickled the back of my mind for the rest of the afternoon. Two days later a don (professor) who I'd

grown very close to, Sally, insisted she introduce me to a colleague who she was sure I would like. He was also an instructor at Oxford and worked for the Tate Gallery part time. I remember reluctantly dragging myself across the quad to the dining hall that evening.

And there he was: the man from the news-stand. She said my name; he turned; his eyes went wide.

And I swear I fell in love the second he repeated my name. It was as though he were saying "Shangri-la" or "Paradise." In the same instant I realized that the dreamy quality about him was illness. I'd been reading Keats. I recognized, in this man, the fevered, ethereal quality that young people get when they are dying.

He said something to Sally about me being "the very same woman" he'd met at the news-stand with "the impossible green eyes." Impossible? My heart turned over.

Ryan had cancer. He'd been treated in every way possible at the Marie Curie Institute but there was little hope. What he had was time.

I realize now, after a good deal of therapy and an even greater deal of self-examination, that Ryan was my ideal love. He had an expiration date. I have always feared intimacy, and have feared others analyzing my intimacy even more. So a lover in a far away place who would only live a short time was ideal. That's the psychoanalytic explanation.

But the human explanation had a bit more to do with it. He was a lovely man. He was brilliant, kind, funny, gentle, and we admired the same things. We spent

many evenings at The Oxford Playhouse. We saw a Hungarian production of *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* that was hysterical. I'm still not sure if it was hysterical because it was awful or because it was fabulous on some cosmic level. But we laughed till tears streamed down our cheeks.

He drove me north, through the Lake District (breathtaking country) and into Scotland. We spent a day at the Tartan Festival. We ate warm scones with clotted cream and walked around all day. He bought me a sterling silver pin— a thistle with a huge, deep purple amethyst. I still have it. He got me positively hammered on Pimms— a fruity drink like a wine cooler with more kick— at the Nag's Head one night and had to steer me up the stairs to my room. We giggled the entire hall awake.

At the end of that wonderful summer I spent with him I went home. We had agreed to end it when I left Oxford and returned to the States. (I seriously considered taking a job offered me there, but wasn't ready to break ties with my family). I left him a letter that had my address in it, even though we'd promised to end it. For a long time I didn't know what happened to him.

About two years ago I heard from a friend who contacted me through Bridgewater State College that he had spoken often and fondly of me, but had died the following spring. I never said anything to anyone about the news. I'd known, really. I'm not sure how.

What does this have to do with your story? I think

Ryan was, for me, A lot like that woman with the paper. He changed my perspective of myself. He made me feel cultured, smart, and worth loving. And I loved him recklessly, freely, and without any fear because I knew that he would die soon. It makes me think of how liberated you seemed to feel when you were given that time limit. (What a blessing that you beat the odds! What a narrow place the world would be without Elliot Grant!!) It spirals me back to Keats, who died so young and *knew* his time was short. He lived so well, accomplished so much, created so much beauty.

I guess we should all live the trite aphorism: "treat every day as if it's your last." Nothing wrong with trite aphorisms. They were original when our grandparents' grandparents came up with them.

A note about the Bridge: I believe I read that the Brooklyn Bridge was begun by a man who did die (heart-attack, I think) during its construction. His wife finished it. Maybe your young friend heard the story on television and reinvented it to suit him. Reinventing old stories better is a time-honored tradition. Shakespeare got famous doing it. I admire you for seeing the Shakespeare in the kid. And I wonder how many great artists therapy would have ruined. Kiss the Cubists goodbye, at any rate.

Enough about love!! It bums me out. I like Christmas better. But, like the mountains, there are no peaks without valleys. Love has to suck to be love. If it didn't feel like your heart was going through the

garbage disposal when it ends it wouldn't feel like somersaulting through cotton candy when it starts. And it's worth it.

By the way: my brother Jon and I— both adults now (or reasonable facsimiles) stuff stockings for each other every year. It's not Christmas without stockings. Pez candy, little chocolate Santas, wind-up toys. Grown ups need more of these things to remind them of the important things like fun, and candy, and finding your happy place.

Do you really think I sparkle? (Blushing!)

Raven

Love, Vandalism, and Golf

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Hey Raven!

I came up with a new "emoticon."

Ra U ven That means, "Raven about you!"

But seriously...

That was a beautiful love story you told. You certainly are into dualism. It comes up again and again. I'm guessing that Ryan was a warm, gentle soul, who listened well and understood you. In other words, sick or healthy, he was worthy of your affections. It was not his illness that made you love him. But the "expiration date" freed you to feel and share that love. Or am I wrong?

I wonder if, similarly, you feel safer with e-mail relationships? No time limit, but the security of knowing you'll never meet face to face.

Me, I'm the opposite. I get attached to people too easily. And I'm a bull in a china shop when it comes to intimacy. I'm so ready to talk about "personal" matters that it makes people uneasy, especially here in Minnesota. As a relationship deepens, my foot is on the accelerator while the object of my attention is

jamming on the brakes. This was a constant source of conflict when I was courting my wife, Martha. And I'm terrible at small talk. Perhaps you've already perceived this quirk in my nature.

Funny thing about romantic tales. When they're fictitious, as in the movies, they bore me to tears. E.g., the film version of "Love Story": I'd give anything not to see that again. But I go ape over real love stories, like the one about you and Ryan.

Which brings me to the subject of humor. ("Objection! Irrelevant and immaterial." "Your honor, if you will allow me to precede, the relevance will soon become apparent." "Overruled, but be advised that you are trying the Court's patience.") At least for me, real-life anecdotes are usually funnier than comic "material."

A brief example. One of my wife's friends was visiting our house. She told us her father had passed away several years before. He and her mom had been virtually separated. They'd continued to live together merely for appearances. Truth was, her father had died in the arms of a prostitute.

To avoid embarrassment, Mom crafted a cover story. The deceased had been an avid golfer, so she told everyone (except immediate family) that her husband had expired on the greens.

Even the minister hadn't a clue. At the funeral he cleared his throat, rolled his eyes heavenward and declared: "Thank you Lord. It was a blessing that this man died while doing what he loved best."

This cracked me up. But only because it really happened. Had it come from a gag writer, I'd have groaned.

I don't know how old you are. (How old are you? Or am I getting too personal again?) Do you remember comics like Jack Benny, Groucho Marx and Bob Hope? Their stand-up routines were written for them - they never pretended otherwise. Now almost all comedians write their own material, or make us believe they do. And usually they tell "true" stories about themselves. I'm guessing that's because most people find such tales funnier. (Off the top of my head, the only exceptions I can think of are talk-show hosts, who can't be expected to concoct a new monologue every night.) But why has the standard changed since the days of Jack Benny? Does it reflect a change in the public's sense of humor? Why did we prefer canned shticks then, and self-revelation now?

While you're thinking about it, here's my favorite "New York" anecdote. I heard it nearly thirty years ago from Sandy, a college chum.

Apartments were hard to find in New York, particularly if you weren't rich. But Sandy lucked out. Her friend Jean was sick of being harassed by an ex-lover. Each day the fellow entered her dwelling while she was at work. She had no idea how he broke in. But he always left evidence - some petty bit of vandalism. At last, Jean could take it no longer. She decided she would move to Mexico. To avoid breaking her lease, she sub-let her rental to Sandy.

The apartment was nifty, except for one problem. Though Jean was far away, the vandal kept returning. Each evening Sandy found evidence of another practical joke: her underwear hanging from the lamp, for example, or the toilet seat upside down.

One day while playing hooky from her job, she caught the culprit red-handed. She sat him down and addressed him thusly: "Listen, I know you're pissed off at your girlfriend. But I'm not she. Jean has left the country. "

The man looked puzzled. "You mean Jean doesn't live here? Isn't this her apartment?"

"No," replied Sandy. "She sublet the place to me. Surely you can see, I am not the original tenant. Therefore, you have no cause to bother me."

The fellow just shook his head. "Sorry lady, but I can't

help you," he said. "You are not the original tenant. But also, I am not the original vandal. That guy left the country too. I'm just following his instructions."

Every word is true. At least, Sandy said it was.

She also said she'd traveled the world on a tramp steamer and met the king of Libya. I was gullible in those days. A good thing too. Otherwise the story wouldn't have been so funny.

el

PS: Re your "sparkle" question. I was going to write, "You sparkle so powerfully, that your e-mail has fried two of my surge protectors." Then I considered how computer-illiterate readers might interpret the comment. I mean, doesn't "surge protector" sound like apparatus for the treatment for premature ejaculation? So, at the risk of reactivating your blush, I'll simply say:

Yes, Raven. You sparkle very brightly indeed.

Miracles and Other Accidents

From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Elliot-

You have ruined my image of surge protectors. Really!

I think you're correct about the "true story" thing. I am in my thirties... but I have intimate knowledge of Benny, Hope, Gleason, Ceaser, and the rest. And the idea of "true story" has always intrigued me, anyhow. Irish folks know that the truth can slide about a bit when one is telling a story. I am fond of saying "I don't know if this really happened, but I do know that it's true."

One of my favorite things to do, when I was a kid, was to sit at my father's feet and listen to him talk about his childhood. He lived in a magic kingdom called Virginia. There was a King (John Henry Olinger), a Queen (Carrie Virginia Olinger) and many subjects (Betty-Ruth, Ruby-Jean, John, Bobby, Charles, Buggy, Shirley, Polly-Sue, Dorothy, Brenda, Mary-Emma). (You didn't miss-count. There were 12 of them including my father.) The Kingdom was a mountainous region with rivers and streams, lush valleys, what-have-you. Magic. The real stuff. So when my friends watched "The Waltons" and scoffed at how "unreal" it was, I knew better. My Papa grew up near there- I'd seen it. I'd even heard names just as hyphenated and old-fashioned. I can repeat every story my father ever told about his childhood.

My mother grew up in Milton, Massachusetts. I know her stories, too, but they seem, because it's so close to my own experience, almost too real. So real, in fact, that they didn't feel as true. And I have a sneaking suspicion that my father is more prone to creative embellishment. Which, to some, would mean that his stories were less-true. But for me the embellishments make his stories more-true.

I suppose becoming a poet was inevitable. I have, from earliest memory, been able to "tell all the truth but tell it slant," as Dickinson said. That doesn't mean I lie. It doesn't mean I exaggerate. It means I remember prettier. And it means I see things as they are but not necessarily as others see them.

For instance: I remember a friend of mine arguing with another friend of mine. Pete is a determined Atheist. (I, personally, think he dost protest too much, but never mind.) Myran is a convert to Catholicism. They were discussing the miracle of the loaves. I don't think either of them was "getting it" and said so. Pete insisted that it was absolutely stupid that anyone thought that Jesus fed 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish. Pete insisted that he knew what might have actually happened, and said something like:

"Here's what happened: people started to feel bad that they were saying they had nothing, so they took out what little they had and added it as the baskets came around. Some of the people had more, some had only a little, and only a handful of them had nothing. The story was exaggerated. Let's say it was

100 people, five loaves, and two fish— if everyone kicked a little bit in, it would have covered everyone."

Myran began to rail and spit that he had no faith and that "the Lord can do anything." I had been quiet up to this point (a miracle in an of itself) but spoke up, words something to this effect:

"You don't get it— either of you. Which one of the stories is more of a miracle? That God can create food or that people can overcome their fear? The kind of people who were following him had little or nothing and rarely knew where the next loaf was coming from. So if this man inspired them to share what might have been their last meal for a week— is that less a miracle? Maybe that IS the miracle."

The Lord **does** work in mysterious ways. The Lord uses her/his best resources: us. When we pray for a cure for cancer we shouldn't be looking for a slip of paper in God's handwriting that says "take 4 cups of tea tree oil and blend well with three teaspoons of chemical 2x7p3... set aside." We should be looking for a kid who shows a particular talent for science. That kid is the answer to the prayer. If he gets shot in a drive-by we start from scratch. And the cynics mumble about God's failure to produce results.

So maybe the story of the loaves is an Irish-story. Or a story my Virginian Papa would tell. Maybe it really went like this:

Jesus gets off the boat by the lake shore and there is the usual crush there. He sighs. The poor are

always with us. And the greedy. And the paparazzi. And the guy in the back is a member of the Sanhedrin, he isn't fooling anybody.

"Jesus," says Peter, "what a crowd."

"You're telling me" says Jesus, "the usual suspects. Okay. The poor are going to be hungry, and the spies are going to be hiding stuff."

"What do we do?" asks John.

"Go see what they have."

They mill around in the crowd and come back with five stale loaves of bread and two highly pungent fish.

"This is gross, big J," says Thomas "we can't feed them. This just isn't going to work out. Great. More bad publicity."

Jesus raises a sardonic brow.

"Watch this."

Jesus was a Jew. People forget that. He knew all about guilt. He also knew about acoustics, which is why he preached by sea-shores and from mountains. He says, in a loud and pleasant voice that Clinton would kill for:

"Father, these people are poor, but they are your children. If any of them had more to offer, they would give it. For they know that you read their hearts. And they know that you would be really ticked off if, say, Barnabas of the Sanhedrin were hiding some fresh, yummy rolls in his robe. But he's not here. So that's out of the question. They also know that you would particularly frown upon anyone trying to smuggle the fresh fish under their water jars while this slightly old,

but very appreciated fish, was growing warm and smelly in the sun. Knowing this, I ask that you bless this teeny-tiny meal and that it be plentiful, being about what we, who are all sinners, deserve. Bless the sick and the children who are hungry particularly, Lord. We will feed them first."

At this point Jesus gives the crowd a meaningful look and passes the basket to the front row. Miracles ensue. A guy named Barnabas empties his robe into a basket murmuring something about "forgetting he had those back pockets" and slips off quietly. Everybody eats well, and the baskets even have some stuff left over.

"We will probably all have ptomaine poisoning in the morning" says Thomas.

"Hasn't been discovered yet" says Peter "stop being a stick in the mud."

Not the same story. But no less a miracle, really. And just as meaningful.

And a bit more fun.

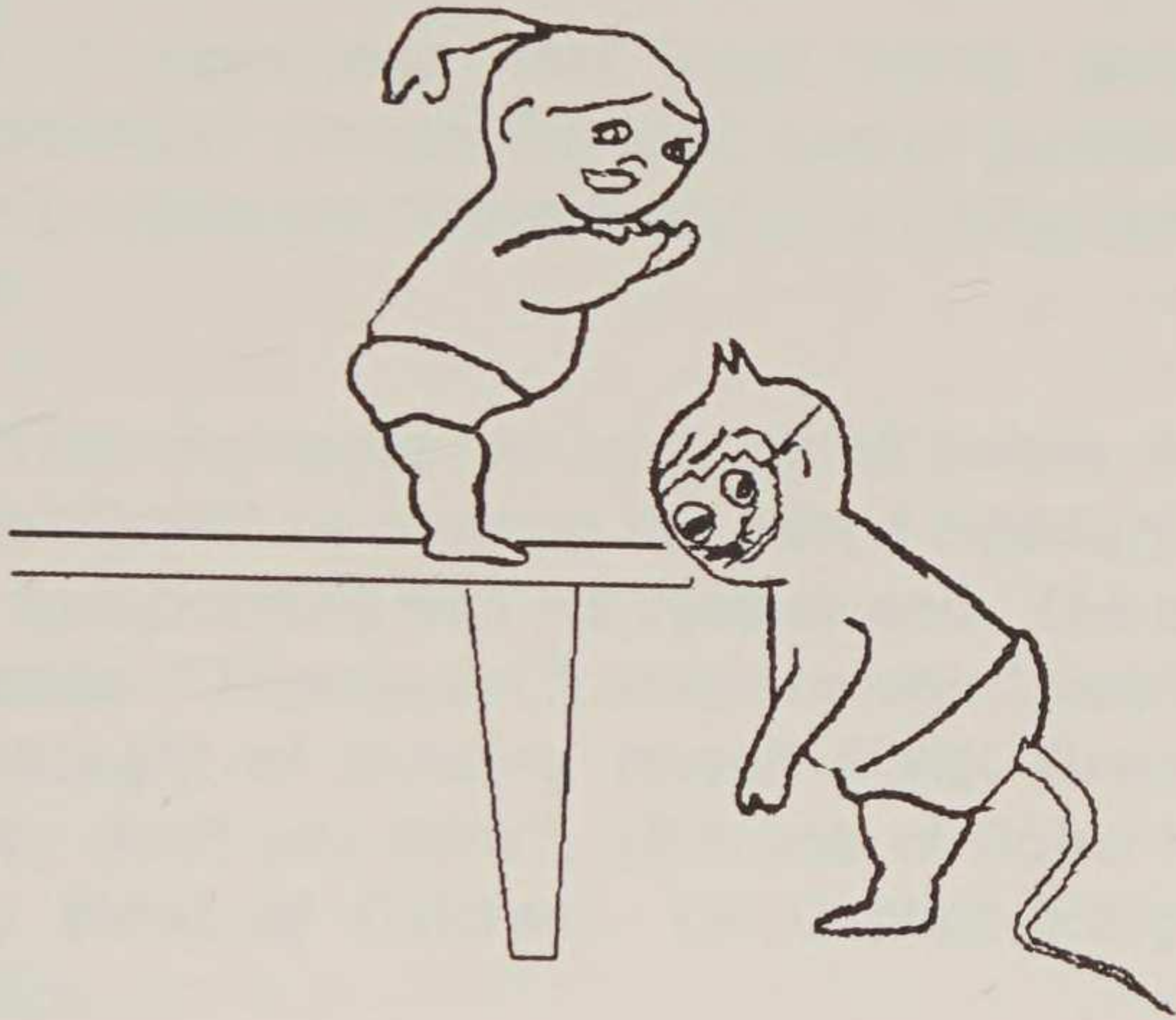
Does that mean that the story in Mark 6 isn't true? No. Maybe it's more true, maybe it's less true, maybe it's the truth told slant. It's just a story. It's there to teach us something. When we stop trying to make the story about what we want it to be about and let it speak to us it becomes as true as it can possibly be. And, after all, some of the truest stuff is only barely true. And some of the best miracles are only barely miracles— or maybe they're even more miraculous.

Santa, we find out at some point, doesn't fly around the world in a magic sleigh delivering toys. But legions of parents manage to brave the malls and the crowds and the bank balances to get the stuff under the tree. I like the second miracle better.

Hugs across cyberspace, El!

Raven

OF MICE AND MYTH



Of Mice and Myth

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Dear Christina Whiteraven Olinger,

Have I mentioned that your name gives me goosebumps? I mean, the good kind of goosebumps. Did you create the "Whiteraven," or is it Cherokee? Or both?

I don't like my name. As I mentioned before, my Dad chose "Grant" by opening the phone directory to the "G's" and pointing with his eyes closed. The original had been "Gruenbaum," which means "green tree." I've thought of dubbing myself "Elliot Greentree." Jaunty, don't you think? Like one of Robin Hood's Merry Band of Outlaws. Or Captain Kangaroo's sidekick.

My parents named me "Elliot" after FDR's son. Many other's had the same idea. (Would that they had settled on a common spelling. I tire of saying "two l's and one t.") The name was popular for only a short time. So, when I learn of another Elliot, I'm pretty sure he's about my age, and that his parents were Democrats. Mr. Kirshenbaum, that old cherry tree of a chemistry teacher, called me "el Yut." He said it's Spanish for "The Yut."

I longed for a wholesome American nickname, like "Bob" or "Pete." Figured it would make me one of the guys - you know, the gang that lights fire crackers in the driveway, the fellas who catch fly balls hit to shallow left. (I'd played 4178 games in the outfield, and never caught anything but poison ivy. My world was capricious: once the ball went up, there was no telling where it would come down.) Since "Richard," is my middle name, I told people to call me "Richie." After a year of corrections and reminders, the new name took hold. But before I had time to enjoy it, some joker introduced me as "Dick." I reinstated "Elliot" pronto.

In summer camp I was known to all as "Fieldmouse." Yes, I looked like one. Probably still do. It started as a put-down, but eventually I accepted the label with something that resembled pride. Maybe I should dredge up the old moniker. Picture the bronze plate on my office door: "Fieldmouse, Ph.D."

Do you resemble a Raven, Raven?

Your Loaves and Fishes story sounds true enough to me. And I like it because everyone was part of the miracle. Jesus is not just the embodiment of God, but the embodiment of God within each of us. Is it not also miraculous that you and I have met, and can now share these thoughts and feelings across the miles?

Back in Maspeth, Queens I had a landlady named Jane. Actually, she was more than a landlady. I shared a "mother-daughter" house with her. I guess we took turns being the mother. Jane was a religion student at Hunter College. Both insomniacs, we'd sit up all night discussing issues of cosmic importance. We never agreed on anything, but it was better than talking about when she'd get around to fixing the refrigerator.

Anyhow, she'd say my little anecdotes were "myths," which gave shape to my life experience. I didn't understand. What if the events had actually happened? "That's irrelevant," she'd respond impatiently. "They're still myths." Wha? I felt like I'd just missed another fly ball.

Well, I'm still as ignorant about mythology as I am about trajectory. But now I understand what Jane meant. Whether it "really" happened is irrelevant, because a myth is truer than true. Like your fishy Jesus story, or your father's tales of Virginia.

Which reminds me of Mrs. Walden, my third grade teacher in Harrisburg. She was a young, smartly dressed woman, and a stickler for manners. We could not start lunch until Deborah had her elbows off the table, and Elliot stopped slouching. But there was something special about Mrs. Walden.

Shortly before Christmas break, the playground whirred with chatter about new bikes and electric trains. We hadn't been born yesterday. We'd long since rejected that old folktale about elves tinkering away in an Arctic sweatshop. Toys came from the third floor of Pomoroy's Department Store, and nowhere else. But then there was poor little Spencer. He told us with a straight face that he'd written a letter to Santa. We teased him ruthlessly, but his conviction was unshakable. After recess, we rushed to our teacher for a verdict.

Mrs. Walden stood erect, arms folded and foot tapping. When we'd settled down, she said, "Firstly, it's rude to criticize people for their beliefs." She paused to let her disapproval sink in.

"As for the matter of Santa Claus, there are many opinions. Some say he exists, and some say he does not. There is no point arguing, since the matter cannot be proven either way. And that is all I have to say." She stepped behind her polished oak desk to prepare for the spelling test. Then glancing up at us, she added, "Personally, I believe in Santa Claus."

I do too, by the way. Here's a guy who's been celebrated all over the world for countless years. Everyone knows Santa. On the other hand, Yours Truly - hey, sometimes even my dog doesn't recognize me.

I've had the privilege of meeting our local Santa. He's a chubby fellow who works for the railroad. Repairs old toys in his spare time. Long ago he was recruited to play St. Nick for a charity event, because the costume fit him without padding. From the first "Ho ho ho," he had found his calling. Since then he has always taken his vacation time in December. During that month, he is seen only in his red suit and beard. He appears at the cub scouts and the American Legion. He visits each patient in the hospital and every nursing facility resident. He sees invalids at their homes. He never accepts a cent.

He told me of his visit to a woman with advanced Alzheimer's. She held his hand tightly, saying she'd always wanted to meet the real Santa Claus. Then she leaned over and whispered, "I know you're just a man in a fake beard. But you make me feel so much better."

"I'll see you again," he assured her, with tears in his eyes.

"Yes," she answered dreamily. "On Christmas Eve."

The woman died that very day. Her family said she had a smile on her face, for the first time in years.

Our Santa's getting old, and he has some health problems. Soon he'll retire from the railroad. He

plans to spend most of his time repairing toys. Except, of course, in December.

I suppose it's my turn to propose a topic. Our forays into death and truth have taxed my feeble brain. So let's detour to the "little" questions that keep me awake at night:

Judaism

1. Grün=green; Roth=red; Blau=blue; Weiss=white; Schwartz=black... not to mention Gold and Silver. Talk about a Rainbow Coalition! Why are so many German Jews named after colors?

2. When a gentile asks me, "are you Jewish?" I get nervous. When he asks, "are you a Jew?" I duck. That's because "Jewish" describes me, while "Jew" defines me. But wait. A person can be "Catholic" or "a Catholic," "Protestant" or "a Protestant," "Buddhist" or "a Buddhist." There's no such word as "Christianish." How come only the Chosen People were chosen to carry an adjective that differs from the noun?

Words

1. Your child asks you what the "f-word" means. How can you explain that (a) it's a beautiful act of love between a man and a woman, yet (b) it's a nasty expletive, never to be voiced in polite company?

2. To express condescending boredom, people used to say, "I couldn't care less." Suddenly they began saying, "I could care less." Why take a perfectly clear statement and stand it on it's head?

2. The all-purpose put-down is "jerk." It can be used to describe an unfair boss, a long-winded politician or a nerdy boyfriend. But what does the word mean, anyway?

Fairy Tales

1. The Seven Dwarfs: You've got Happy, Sleepy, Grumpy, Dopey, Bashful, Sneezy and Doc. Six adjectives and a noun. Six character traits and one overpaid profession. What's that last guy doing there? A Ph.D. conducting anthropological research on communal living? Sneezy's allergist?

2. Dr. Seuss: He wrote "Green Eggs and Ham," "Horton Hatches the Egg" and "Scrambled Eggs Super." What responsibility, if any, does the beloved author bear for our obscene cholesterol level?

3. Peter Pan: In my obscure but brilliant theatrical career, I've played dwarfs and I've played rabbits. But I never got to "crow" on stage. Nary a caw. How come Peter is always played by a woman?

Hoping you could care less,
Fieldmouse

Cross Dressing and Jewianity

From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

El-

I never received the last entry in our batch, so I suppose I'll backtrack. You had proposed a rather intimidating group of "little" questions.

But, you know— those "little" questions provide the fodder for some of the most outstanding discussions, don't you think??

Judaism:

*1. Colors: Do you think the colors are a reference to the sefirot*** of the Kabalistic*** Tree? Points to ponder.*

2. Jewish, the adjective: Interesting, this terminology you point out between Jew and Jewish. I wonder, though, if it is partly because Judaism is considered as much a nationality as it is a religion. It seems— bigger,

for lack of a better word. You hear "Irish Catholic" and "Catholic Italian." You don't hear so much "Russian Jew" and "German Jew" outside the Jewish community.

Plus, as I've earlier stated, I think Jews get ripped off in America. EVERYTHING is geared toward Christians and Christianity (there's a word for you—where'd "anity" come from?). Jews have AWESOME holidays— my friend Lee was talking about her father and mother having friends who were rich enough that they had a separate KITCHEN— not just a separate set of dishes— for Yom Kippur. She also talked about the tashlich— going to the ocean to throw away everything in her pockets, and how her father would always make SURE there was no change in his pockets when they left. 8-)

I think that pretty much kicks butt. ONE day of atonement, and you're clear. We go through Lent, confession, the big nine yards. Even in penance we pay retail.

Words

1. The "f-word..." I had a professor, when I was an undergrad, who would allow her children to use it because she didn't believe in censoring them. But they weren't allowed to use it when their grandmother over. Kind of a mixed message.

Personally, I think that may be a really good opportunity to delineate between the sacred act of love and a cheap expression of lust. But if one of my

nieces or nephews ever asked me I might also pass out. I can admit that.

2. Standing them on their heads: Because we are lazy. And yet, we are also willing to add words for no apparent reason. "Where's it at?" kills me. You DO NOT want to get me started on language.

3. But what does the word mean, anyway?: I believe the actual origins of "jerk" are archaic. Epilepsy and other diseases and disorders that caused seizures were common and untreatable as far back as Greece, when Claudius used to stammer horribly and foam at the mouth. These folks were thought to be idiots (not always fairly so) and the term "jerk" evolved from their physical movements when having a seizure. I have not looked this up, and am totally guessing. Sounds good, though, doesn't it?

Fairy Tales

1. Six traits and a Doc: Everyone knows that the seven dwarfs were allegorical for the unconscious, for crying out loud!! Doc is the conscious intellect. Dopey is ignorance, Sneezy is involuntary brain function, Grumpy is the anger reflex, Bashful is the denial/shame/guilt mechanism, Happy is the inner child and Sleepy is the dream-self. By gawd, I really AM good at making this stuff up!!

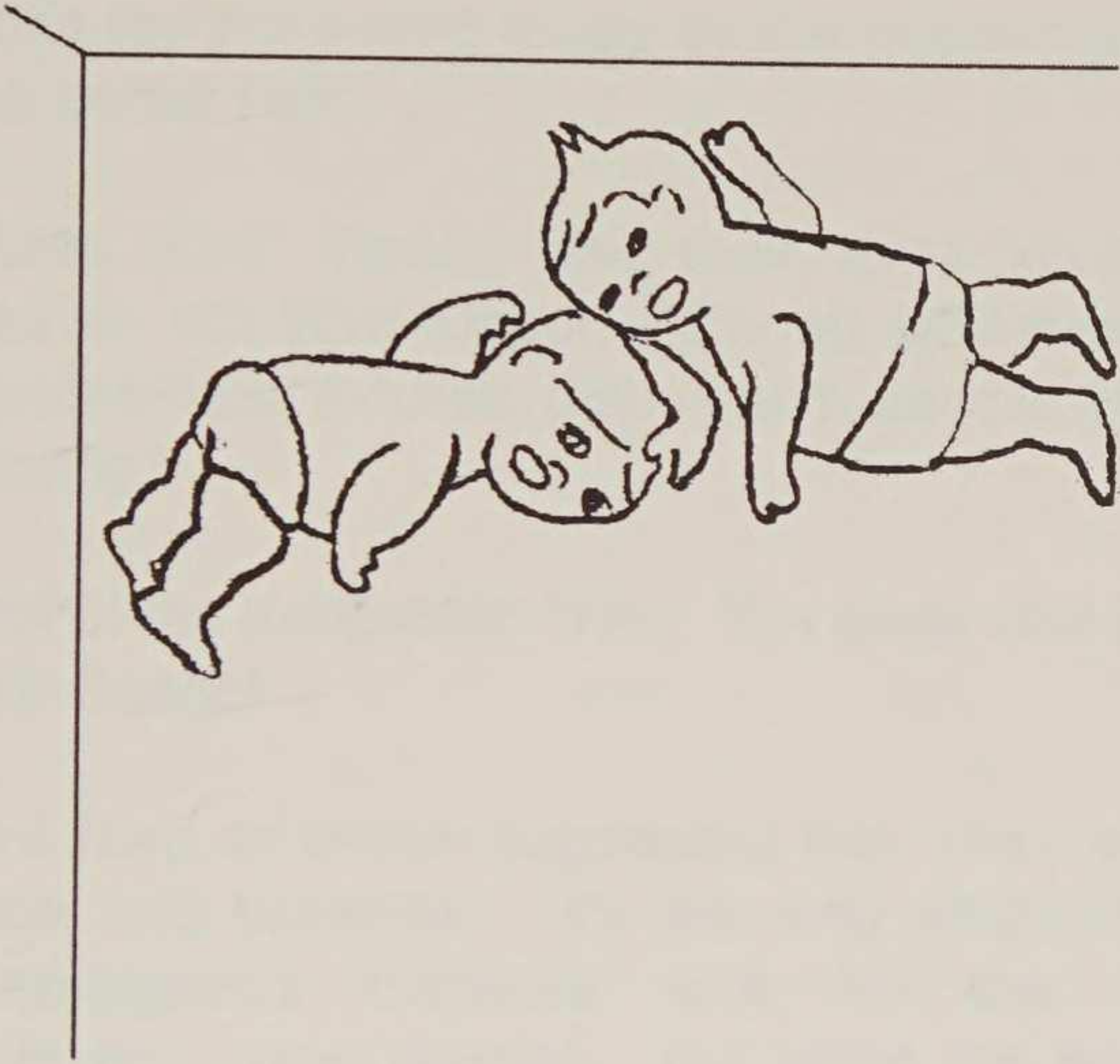
2. What responsibility does the beloved author bear for cholesterol levels: Dr. Suess was a genius. HUGE FAN. But I have oft wondered about the green eggs, my own self. I will also take this opportunity to add that the TV version of HORTON HEARS A WHO left me with an irrepressible urge, at any given moment, that persists into my adult life, to shout "BOIL THAT DUST SPEC, BOIL IT, BOIL IT, BOIL IT!!" unprovoked and in full voice.

3. Why was Peter always a woman: Can we make this our next topic? My fascination with cross-dressing, particularly in cartoons and fairy tales (makes the name even more ironic, don't it?) is waaaaay to big to get into here.

Raven

rubbing her hands together gleefully

HIDDEN WIRES



Petered Out

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Hi Raven,

Thanks for answering those thorny questions. I can sleep better now.

Perhaps your friends use their extra kitchen for Passover, not Yom Kippur. After all, why invest in all those cabinets, fixtures, dishes and utensils for a day of fasting?

Sefirot of the Kabbalistic Tree? You never told me you spoke Gaelic!

I once read an article suggesting that "the F word" is unique and essential: it's the only single-syllable, non-ambiguous transitive verb for the act of copulation. True enough. But since the word has such a bad rep, maybe we should make up another single-syllable, non-ambiguous transitive verb for the act of copulation. Worth a try, don't you think?

Ya wanna talk about Peter Pan? I used to know a whole lot about the guy. In grad school I lectured on the application of Otto Rank's psychoanalytic theories to "Peter Pan," and to Erica Jong's "Fear of Flying." It was a big hit. Unfortunately I've lost all my notes and forgot everything I said. Well, maybe not so

unfortunately.

I'd always assumed James Barrie had based the play on an old folk tale. (The story had that timeless, mythic quality.) In fact, Barrie dreamed up the whole yarn. But he claimed that he never remembered setting it to paper. It just kinda was "there." His first manuscript was a book, not a play. It was called something like "Peter and Wendy of Covent Garden." The title characters were infants. He aged them for the theatrical version, making the roles a bit easier to cast.

I saw the Mary Martin version on TV when I was a young child. The script was almost identical to Barrie's - they just added songs. But its television premiere was a major broadcasting event. Can you guess why? Color! Only NBC offered it, and they used the new technology for only a few "special" programs. This was before the famous "peacock" logo had been hatched. Color shows were preceded by five minutes of test patterns. Meanwhile, a silver-throated announcer explained how to adjust your picture controls. Of course this was merely a tease, since nobody actually owned a color set.

We had a 1948 RCA "black and white" with a hundred knobs surrounding an 11-inch screen. Nevertheless I waited eagerly, cross-legged on the living room floor. Did I fret about monochromatic hues? Did I squeal over pirates and Indians? Did I contemplate the

psychoanalytic theories of Otto Rank? Naw, that's kid stuff. For me - indeed, for all six year olds - the crucial issue was: "I wanna see the old lady dressed up like a boy."

"Peter Pan..." Did you ever notice how *long* the play is? How slooowly it starts? "Starring Mary Martin, Cyril Richard.. blah blah.. music by Richard Rodgers, Leonard Bernstein, Cole Porter... blah blah... book by James Barrie, George S. Kaufman, Anton Chekhov" who the hell cares?

"The Darling Residence." "Hrumph. Where are my cufflinks? Yak yak. Nanna Nanna! Grumble grumble and humph. Open the window. Close the window. What shadow? What fairy? Nonsense! Yak yak yak." Music. Slooow music.

"Tend the schlepper tend the schlepper La la la la blah blah blah..."

Here comes Tinkerbell, but she must've missed her cue: all I see is a little spotlight. Tinkle tinkle. Tinkle tinkle. (Millions of Americans glued to their television screens, watching a circle of light move back and forth. For this we need color?) Finally, enter Mary Martin! Applause, applause and some more applause, even though she hasn't done anything yet. Silence.

Peter: "Tink! Tink?"

Bummer!

Notes from "The Essence of Masculinity," by Mary Martin

1. Pixie-cut your hair.
2. Wear green leotards, a feathered hat and ballet slippers.
3. Apply rouge and lipstick sparingly.
4. Talk like Tweety Bird with a head cold.
5. Arching your back, place hands firmly on hips.
6. Crow.

Ya wanna talk about Peter Pan? Sure. Where should we start?

el

Do YOU Believe in Fairies?

From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Oh but el- EL!!

It's so much MORE than Peter Pan and an old lady in tights. It's an undercurrent of our society: crossdressing. Men and women just LOVE to get into one another's clothing and pretend. And it's something that we are weaned on, from Peter Pan to- yessiree, bob- the holiest of holy-America-emperors of childhood herodom: BUGS BUNNY!

But I digress. Allow me to circle back to young Pan.

What's really going on there? The spirit of youth, rebellion, and reckless courage captured in an image of homo-erotic energy. Pan is not only the leading "man," but a leading man who never ages, remaining ever-young and ever-strong. He is sought after, admired, and pursued by both male and female alike. He is the object of Hook's obsession. Hook is the only adult in the drama with any real meat to his role, and he is "castrated," the hand being an archetypical symbol for sexuality, by the boy-girl-nymph-human Pan. Pan crows when he triumphs- the rooster representing both dawn (youth and eternity) and sex (cocks being another old, archetypical symbol of obvious nature). His legion of "lost boys" are extensions of himself. His struggle with Hook transcends mere animosity. They are more lustfully obsessed with one another than

either of them is for Wendy. Wendy is a mere fixture. She darns socks, reminds the boys of childhood, represents motherhood (which requires the maturity they so vehemently refuse) to the motherless. But it is PETER who is both hero and damsel. It is PETER whom Hook seeks, lusts after, and is "cuckolded" by. What do we DO with such a creature as Pan? And is he (she) all that unusual?

Not really. Shakespeare is terribly fond of cross-dressing females and males. Perhaps more significant for my generation is the most beloved transvestite of all: Bugs Bunny and his gay lover, Elmer Fudd.

Oh, the symbolism!! Oh, the homoerotic glee with which they pursue and are pursued through forest and beyond. How many times have each of these cultural icons donned drag before millions of American children? How many times did Bugs kiss Elmer almost violently on the lips, brow, cheek? In the parody of Wagner's Sigfreid and Brunhilde, Bugs plays the female to Elmer's male, but in The Barber of Seville, the ending switches Elmer to bride and Bugs to groom. What about that great big gun and those deep, dark holes?? Hmmm?? What's THAT all about??

It's about sex and the duality of our gender. It's about how simply, easily, and effortlessly we can slide from masculine to feminine and back again without truly losing our innate identities. It's about gender, but not necessarily sex. And then again, it IS about sex: about the freedom of it, the pervasiveness of it, the

ease with which it worms its way into our subconscious and finds its way onto page, canvas, screen... Is that a pen in your inkwell, or are you just happy to see me?

Personally, I think Bugs Bunny is one of the greatest Americans to ever have lived. And he HAS lived, perhaps even more so than those of us who were born and died while Elmer chased him across the screens of Saturday morning television.

And the Pan? What really kept Pan young? Wendy was not enough of a pull for him to give up his boyhood, but Hook was enough of a pull to keep him frozen in it. Which is why, in conclusion, I think he was (and is) always played by a woman. Because we know on a deep level— really deep, in the cockles of our cockles, that Peter is the object d'amour of Hook. They lust after one another. So we make Peter a woman, as improbable as that seems. He's young, and, therefore, should be powerless to some extent. He is the object of Hook's most driving passion, and should be female— at least out where we can *see* what he/she is.

Which makes Robin Williams a lesbian. I'd suspected as much

Fondly,

Raven— who does not crow, but caws now and again.

;-)

Do YOU Believe in Fairies

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Hi Raven,

Of course I believe in fairies. I believe in everything, except maybe the Balanced Budget Amendment.

And the Law of Gravity - that's definitely a hoax. Objects are attached to the earth by wires. We plug things into wall sockets so they won't float away. For example, I've never lost my TV set, because that's secured by wires. But the darned "remote control" - who knows where it's flown off to?

Another example: Here in Minnesota we plug in our cars (they're equipped with block heaters to keep them warm at night). Not so in the Big Apple, where I used to live. Is it any surprise New York vehicles are more likely to "disappear"? Wires, it's all wires.

Some folks think Peter used wires to fly. In fact, the other cast members used them to stay grounded. We're all buoyant by nature.

And don't get me wrong about Peter Pan. I love it to pieces. By conventional standards the play is slow-moving and poorly constructed (kids do get impatient, particularly in the first act). But that makes

it appropriately dreamy.

I agree with every word of your analysis, though I hadn't thought about the love relationship between Hook and Pan. The whole play drips with eroticism: if the implicit sexuality were made explicit, "Peter Pan" would surely receive an X rating.

It is a shame that Wendy's personality is so bland, since her actions are truly bold. She's an adventuress exploring the unknown, like Alice in Wonderland and Dorothy in Oz. But Alice fell asleep and Dorothy got conked on the head. Among the three heroines, only Wendy *chooses* to try her wings.

The play has so many overlapping themes: it's about sex, it's about violence, it's about three hours long. And it's certainly about time (the aging Hook is haunted by a crocodile who swallowed a clock. So are we all).

It's about birth and death: that's where Otto Rank comes in. He wrote about the trauma of birth, which is not all that different from the trauma of death. "Fear of flying" is universal. We're afraid to cut the umbilical cord that keeps us grounded. (Wires, it's all wires.) Birth anxiety cautions us that we can float endlessly, beyond what we know, what we think and what we think we know. Death anxiety warns us that we can crash. But they're the same: either way, we dissolve

into the universe.

And Wendy, she's the Mother. By opening her window, by sewing on the shadow, she gives birth to Peter. Through him she is "born again." Then, like the Virgin Mary, she smiles contentedly while her offspring performs the showier miracles...

Gee, you're right about our obsession over cross dressing. After reading your message, I thought of some examples from TV, movies and the theater. Here's my list, so far:

Aladdin

All in the Family

Benny Hill

Bob and Ray

Bugs Bunny

Cabaret

La Cage Aux Folles

Charlie's Aunt

The Crying Game

Hair

Hansel and Gretel (Humperdinck's opera: the witch is
a baritone)

I Love Lucy

Knock on Wood (an old Danny Kaye film)

The Life of Brian

M Butterfly

MASH

Midnight Cowboy
The Milton Berle Show
Monty Python's Flying Circus
The Mouse That Roared
The Muppet Show (Frank Oz plays Ms. Piggy)
Mrs. Doubtfire
Peter Pan
Psycho
Serpico
Sleeper
Some Like it Hot
South Pacific
Tootsie
The Twelfth Night (and lots of other Shakespeare comedies)
Victor Victoria
West Side Story
The Year of Living Dangerously
Yentl
Zorro

Not to mention Lassie, who cross-dressed without benefit of clothes.

Seems to me, there are more female impersonators than male impersonators. And the former strive harder to be convincing. For men, it's "either-or," while women are comfortable in "Neverland." Which brings us back to Peter Pan. And wires.

As for me, I never wear skirts. The idea is appealing, though. Pants are great for warding off wood ticks and poison ivy. But have you ever noticed that they come to an acute angle between the legs? Ouch. Whoever modeled for the first pair of pants was not an anatomically-correct male. What a perverse society, where only women wear garments which accommodate an appendage that only men possess.

el

In Your Heart You Know It's Flat
From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

Hey, Grant-

You don't know if you have any Cherokee branches in your family tree, do you? We have very definite opinions with regard to such matters as wires.

The world is a four-cornered canvas, held down by ropes. In the center dwell the chosen people: the Tsalagi (Cherokee).

*Yes, Elliot Grant, it ***IS*** all wires. You see the archetype repeating itself throughout nature: apples wired to trees, tomatoes wired to vines, babies wired to mothers through the umbilical cord. We begin life on a wire.*

Ever meditate? In the moment of transcendence there is a silver "thread" (read: wire) connecting the soul to the body.

Ever been separated from someone you called your soul-mate? Do you feel that "tug" in the center of your spinal column? Wires. We're all wired together. Even the spinal column, itself.

Which brings me to the Kabbalah. The sacred Tree. The Sefirot: ten figures arranged in a curious shape.
Note:

Keter (Nothing)

Binah (Understanding)

Hokhmah (Wisdom)

Gevurah (Power)

Hesed (Love)

Tif'eret (Beauty)

Hod (Splendor)

Netsah (Eternity)

Yesod (Foundation)

Shekinah (Presence)

Between each of the spheres in the figure, there are lines drawn. Tif'eret spikes outward like a sun to each; each is connected to the other, directly or indirectly. You see? DNA, a fibonnacci sequence, a curling time spiral, a universe, Wires. It is most definitely, indeed, all WIRES.

Interesting, BTW, that BEAUTY should be at the center. Perhaps the Navajo are correct in their prayer, asking to "Walk in Beauty." I like the idea, but don't claim to understand it. Beauty as transcendence? Transcendence as Beauty, yes, but the other way around? That will take some thinking. I acknowledge freely that I don't grasp that yet, but I also note that Beauty is, most assuredly, power.

Which reminds me— Wendy as Madonna? I agree, though I wonder where her dark self is— where is Lillith?? Tinkerbell? Perhaps. Where there is light there is shadow. Hook? A cross-dressed Lillith in pirate-motif?

*And, of course, cross-dressing *IS* one of my*

favorite topics, so spiraling back to it momentarily is always a pleasure. Hair, too— what about all that long, curling hair on Captain Hook?? Hair is power. It's sexuality, magic, dominance, mystery. Wendy is always shown with restrained hair— bunned or bobbed or some-such. Veiled, like a Madonna. But Hook lets it all hang down, the filthy harlot!

I've also always found the darkness/lightness, day/night images in PAN curious. Wendy quite often appears at night, frequently at bed time. Hook, if I remember correctly, appears in both day and night. Is this, perhaps, because he is the bridge between the eternal child and the adult-who-kills-childhood? Tick toc, Tick toc— he is aware of time, despises the youth of Pan. But he still exists in Neverland... still longs to possess the youth of Peter. Whuzzup?? So much of what happens with Peter is at night. Is he still in the womb?? Is Hook the price for birth— for daylight? Isn't death the price of birth?

Peter hides from the Sun— cheats time. But he only cheats himself. Wendy goes back, grows, changes, ages. She integrates. Hook exists in Neverland as the part of Peter that he must continually face: the Sun he can never truly escape. We all battle our greatest fears. Hook is the embodiment of Peter's. But, if Hook is age, adulthood, and time, what else is he? Prepubescent Peter fears sex, too. Sex is part of that time-spiral; it takes us forward, creates the next generation. Peter can not procreate because to do so would be to acknowledge and initiate his immortality.

Hook is death, responsibility, sex. Hook is long, flowing hair and creative energy and SUN. He walks (floats) on water, looses part of himself to the dragon, defies time, and yet remains. If Peter is Christ and Wendy is Mary, Hook is Godlike, too. He is the OLD God, threatened by the new. And with all that hair and lace, maybe he's the GODDESS.

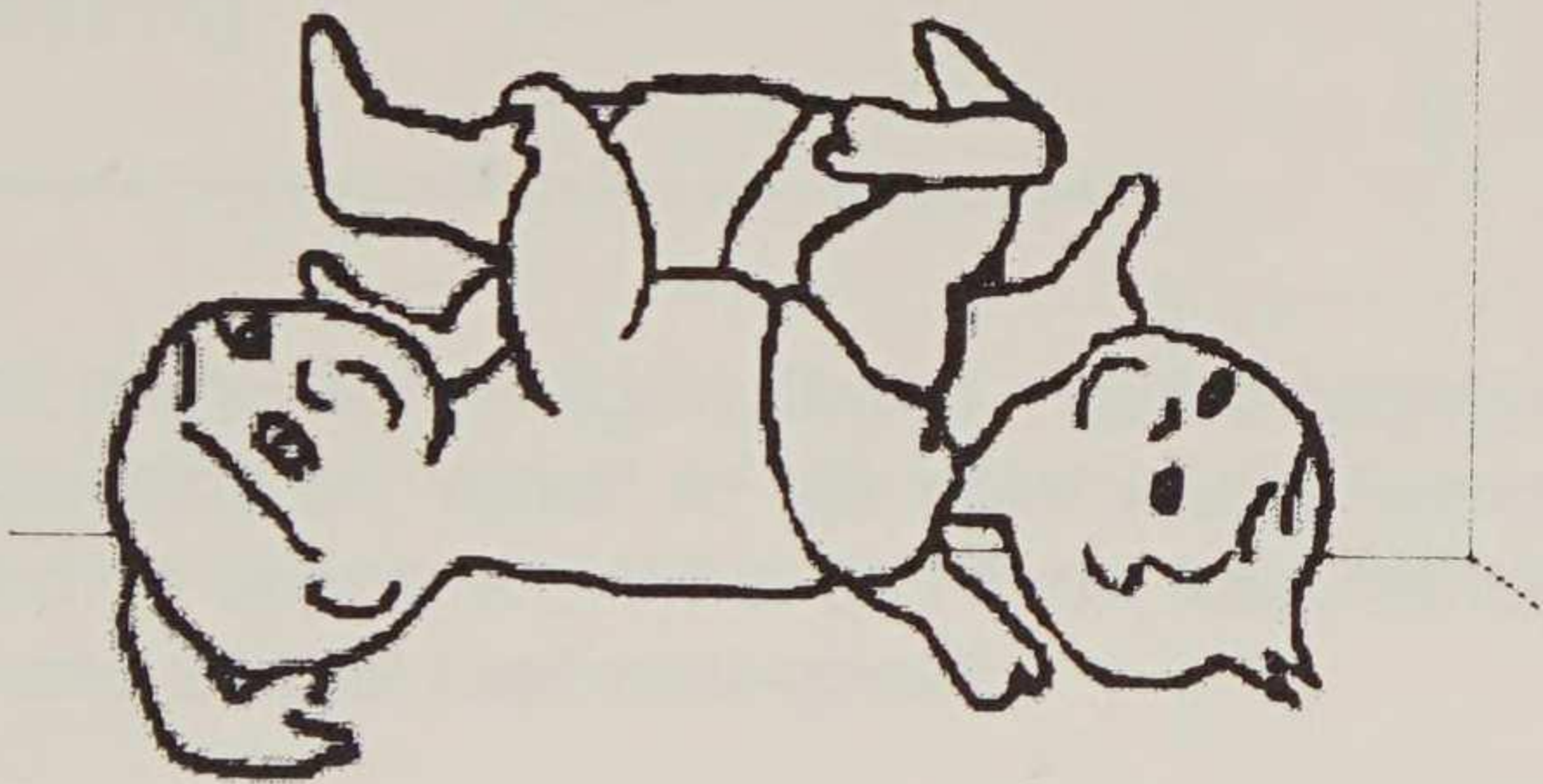
Because I truly believe that the GODDESS has been trying to get her foot back in the door for centuries—chasing Osiris, Ra, Mithra, Jesus, Buddha, all of them—through time. She's back there, hidden in the branches of that tree. She's got many names and many faces: Lillith, Mary, Eve, Isis, Diana, Artemis, Unelanuhi...

Which brings me back to things tribal. I've always identified with Unelanuhi— our Cherokee Sun Goddess. NOTE: not a Sun God, a Sun GODDESS. She takes no prisoners, my Unelanuhi. Her brother, the Moon, is a nameless, weak, wimpy little chap. It was she, El, who raised the world and anchored it with wires for the chosen people. That's us, of course, but I'm perfectly willing to share my spot with you and yours.

You're welcome. 8-)

Raven— Bird on a Wire

WISDOM COMETH WHEN...



Raven Beauty

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Raven,

When I was a child there was a certain room. At the far end was a cube shaped box, black with metallic trim, about half the size of an army trunk. My sister and I would sit cross-legged on the floor, spinning yarns about the contents of that box. We made a pact to never open the lid. That would have spoiled everything.

Well, you've done it again, Raven. You've elevated the discussion of "wires" to the point where I've got to stand on tippy-toes. What do I know from the tree of life and all that kabbal-de-gook?

Contrary to popular opinion (and I do get a kick out of being contrary), a little knowledge is a wonderful thing. But too much knowledge can stop a good conversation in its tracks. Here in the North Country, we spend many happy hours discussing the weather. But if we really knew...

"Can't say I like the looks of them clouds comin' in. 'Specially with all the rain we been havin."

"Actually, the rainfall has been 1.24 inches below average. And tomorrow it'll be sunny and dry, with a high of 57 degrees."

"Ya sure?"

"Yep."

"OK then." End of discussion.

Or, upon arrival at a gathering of friends:

"How long did it take ya to drive here?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes from Rice Lake? But that's only 'bout fifteen miles."

"Ain't no fifteen miles. East Rice Lake mebbe. Rice Lake's at least 25."

"C'mon. Eighteen miles at most, on the highway. Fifteen if you take the cut-across."

"You're thinkin of East Rice Lake. Can't take no cut-across from Rice Lake..."

This debate is good for at least another hour. Hour and a half, if there's plenty of beer. But suppose

Rufus comes up with...

"Hey, I've got a map in the pick-up. Let's just take a look."

End of discussion. And the cut-across will be covered over with weeds before Rufus is invited to another party.

Of course, too little knowledge is also a problem. I've proven that by raising topics like Wagnerian opera, or pastrami. Folks just grunt and stare at the floor for a long time. Then somebody rescues the evening by inquiring, "So, you got that septic tank fixed yet?"

Ergo, scintillating conversation requires the proper amount of knowledge. And the proper amount is just slightly more than zero.

Regarding Kaballah... um ... er ... so how about that septic tank?

Regarding "beauty," I know just a little more than zero. So allow me to expound:

What is beauty? It's subjective, sure. I can speak of a beautiful chess move, though the whole subject of chess leaves most people cold. Similarly, you can speak of a beautiful poem, which to others is sheer gibberish. But regardless of the object of one's

admiration, the appreciation of beauty is a universal experience. And that experience, I submit, involves harmony and "flow." It's a perfect blend, which forms a whole greater than the sum of its parts. And Raven, it's that harmony, that perfect blend, which puts us in touch with the oneness of it all. Yes, the wires. It's all wires. So of course, beauty is right there in the center, just where it belongs.

el

P.S. Regarding those "Cherokee Branches" of my family tree: I believe my Bubba descended from a band of Ashkenazy Cherokees near Minsk.

Skin, Scales, Fur, Feathers, and a Minor Epiphany
From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

El,

Now, El- don't get all flustered.

I **do** have a tendency to take conversations to a place others may not have been. But it gets **really, really interesting** when those hesitant others follow me. :-)

One night my closest friend and I had a four hour argument on the phone about which musical heroine was the greater feminist construct: Delta Dawn or Brandy (what a fine girl!)- the argument got very heated and I still come up with new points when listening to the radio. This same friend also battled with me for about an hour and a half on the phone over whether strippers were or were not empowered by the removal of their clothing in front of men- which ended up being a long discussion of power and what power really is.

As to beauty- I've long been fascinated by it and what it means to various people. Did you ever read Toni Morrison's *THE BLUEST EYE*? Interesting novel with respect to beauty, among other things. I, personally, have found that if one removes HUMANS from the discussion, one is able to- dare I suggest it- elevate the level of analysis.

FOR INSTANCE:

I find all animals beautiful. Even the ones that

frighten me a little, I find just lovely. And I have, since childhood, had an uncanny ability with all critters wild and woolly. My mother used to make me empty my pockets at the end of the day so that everything could be set free before bed time. I brought home everything from baby bunnies and chipmunks to a little blue-grey mole with a sharp, pointy nose. Turtles hatched in my bathtub—snappers. I grew up with a horse, a goat, a long parade of labrador retrievers, and countless cats, ducks, chicks, what-have-you. These days I share my life with two ferrets. The Cosmic Chicken is a lovely little female sable—Egyptian stock of elegant line and symmetry. Loki is a sterling silver male—rare for his deep, deep burgundy eyes and his white coat with sprays of silver along his back. I think they are the most beautiful things in the world. I can NOT look at them without feeling a tremendous need to bury my face in their fur and kiss the soft spots on the sides of their little saturnine heads. Just *seeing* their triangular little faces—Cosmo's with her dark mask, Loki's with it's pink nose and ears in a snowy white splotch—makes me want to smile. But there are people who don't feel that way. My older brother, in fact, would sell his right arm to have a place big enough for a labrador retriever; he would walk naked over cut glass to pat a puppy; he shares his home with a kitty. But he has never touched either of my fuzzies and won't. Just the other day he dropped by for a visit and Cosmo sat prettily between his feet—looking up at him beseechingly. He ignored her and pretended it wasn't

bothering him. I suspect that she gives him the creeps. He refers to her as "the rat."

I would hold my hand out to any creature. I've been terrified of people on many occasions, but never of an animal. Well, okay— I **used** to be horrified by snakes. But I touched one in a pet shop and was immediately charmed (no pun intended) by the feel of the thing: smooth and cool like paper but with a delightful pattern moving under your fingers. Sort of a mirror of what one feels when one touches a warm-blooded thing: a sense of life because it is **cold and moist** rather than because it is warm and dry.

You see, the thing about beauty is that so often we are afraid of what we fear— so often a scar or a disfigurement frightens us— that we don't step away from the fear long enough to see what's intriguing. I remember a man who played softball with my brothers and father who had been in a terrible accident; an area of his face was caved in on one side. I was a pre-teen when I met him, still young enough to see past conventional perceptions. The unusual contour of his face was fascinating— rare, an anomaly. Once I saw him standing with his back to a setting sun and his profile was amazing— carved in shapes that could be anything, like a mountain or those clouds you mentioned. It was beautiful. You are the first person I have ever mentioned it to— I never particularly felt like trying to explain what I meant. But he was beautiful. I suppose the **other** way I think beauty is being tangled in our society (in many, actually) is covetousness.

Beauty is only true beauty if it is admired and respected without needing to possess. Fur coats are an example. It's okay to admire the pelt of a sweet and fluffy animal. It is not true appreciation of beauty to slaughter, skin, and wear the pelt of that same sweet and fluffy animal. That is covetousness, greed, selfish and self-centered indulgence. It's okay to admire a beautiful woman and want to look at her, know her, perhaps even love her. It's not okay to chop her up and keep her in the freezer so nobody else can have her.

This jealousy of form is part of what has created the standard of beauty, I suppose. Way back when the king and queen got to decide what was beautiful. Inevitably, of course, it was *them. Look like us and be beautiful, powerful, special, they said. So everybody tried to look like them. And looks became power. And power is a collectible commodity. And those who did *not* have the correct hair/eye/skin color were ugly. And ugliness was weakness, poverty, disgrace. I was selling my beadwork at a church craft fair last fall and had Cosmo with me at my little table. She'd had a cough and I wanted to keep an eye on her. She is also outstanding for business. My work is small and needs to be seen— she draws people in close enough to look. This snotty woman with a fur collar comes walking up, smiles stiffly, draws back enough so as not to touch the creature, and says "may I touch her?"

I didn't want her to, but didn't want to be rude. She put one finger— an index finger, well manicured— on

Cosmo's head and gave a little half-stroke. She smiled. "Oh, she's so soft! She feels just like my collar!"

"Yes," I said coldly, "but she's not DEAD." Needless to say, there were no sales from her. But she did look completely shocked. Not that I said it, but that it was true. It was as though she was being told for the first time that fur coats do not come from the fur mines of Madison Avenue. They come from dead animals with cute faces, animals that might well have wrinkled a pink nose in just the same adorable way that **this one does, except that the head of those animals is no longer attached to the soft, furry body.* Is this not the very psychology that drives the violent male to objectify the female form?

Serial killer Bob is a great admirer of things lovely and supple. So he takes them, owns them, stores them in ziplocks for his personal enjoyment. Me, I'd rather commune with my fuzzy darlings than slaughter and wear them. I can think of nothing more joyous than the feel of that soft, soft fur beneath my hand and the warmth of the heart beating under the fur. If fur wearers think that softness is nice to own, they are just as clueless as a rapist who thinks he knows sexual fulfillment. The furs in **my closet have pulses.* My fur collar is draped across my shoulders because she loves me and likes to burrow in my hair. The fur trim around my wrist licks my hand and snuggles around my feet at night. Cosmo and Loki offer me much more warmth than their carcasses ever could.

So maybe beauty **is** at the center because

understanding what beauty truly is is the cosmic key. We are only liberated from our dreadfully human lust for possession and covetousness when we understand that beauty can not be possessed or created– it just is. And it teaches us, shows us how to perceive all things in the light of the divine.

Well, Elliot– thanks for the epiphany! See why I like those lofty levels of discussion? They take me to the COOLEST places.

*Walk in beauty,
Raven*

You and me, kid

From: Elliot Grant To: CWR Olinger

Raven,

Yes! No! And emphatically, yes! I agree, beauty can't be owned, though many lovely things can be. You say beauty can't be created? Sure it can. Otherwise, what the heck are we doing here? And yes, I like these conversations too.

You know what I hate? I'll tell you what I hate. I'm shmoozing with my co-workers, see. Nobody wants to do any work, since it's Friday afternoon or Monday morning and it's too nice a day, or else the weather's crummy. So there we stand at the water cooler, just watching the water get cooler. Somebody starts up a conversation, which soon becomes a debate. Well sir, being a sharp and perceptive dude, I utter a pithy remark, calculated to raise the level of discourse by two or three notches at least. Naturally, my colleagues are struck dumb. And then old Sam Wingtip, he of the congenital sneer, socks me with that old verbal spitball: "Well, now you're just arguing semantics."

Holy Toledo, is that what I was doing? A thousand pardons for suggesting that we consider the meaning of what we're talking about.

Now that my righteous indignation is fired up, what about "word processors"? There's a fine misnomer. Does my computer know from words? Look at that metallic moron, that rusty old chest of bugbytes and chip-dips. We're not talking Walt Whitman here. You and I, Raven, *we* process the words. Computers just schlep electrons.

Well, I'd love to hang out with you forever, but we've both got other places to be. So this will be my last letter.

We did it, kid. Working our way from "truth" to "beauty," we made the wires hum. Chapter one was Genesis, so we ought to close with Revelation, no? But I'll toss that ball to you, since I'm basically an Old Testament guy.

Ah, so many stories yet to tell. Lord willing, they'll find a place in the sequel (I'll meet you here in 2007). But please, one more for the road. A bittersweet tale of truth and beauty:

I was an oversensitive, underachieving suburban teenager. Shari, my little sister, was performing in the elementary school concert. My parents and I arrived early, so Mom and Dad saved me a seat up front, while I ducked out to do some exploring.

I stopped outside a second grade classroom. Next to

the door, a large bulletin board displayed the youngsters' creations. Twenty-odd papers were tacked to that board, under a banner that read, "My Dream House." Each paper contained a crayon drawing accompanied by a paragraph of descriptive prose.

The first drawing depicted a square white house with a triangular roof, one door, two curtained windows and a garage. The grass was golf-course green, as were the shrubs framing the entrance. To the right, in flawless penmanship: "My dream house will have three bedrooms, a den, a foyer..." And on the upper right corner: "A+ ... Very Nice Work!" I moved on to the second picture, the fifteenth, the twenty-fourth. There were ranches and split levels. Some contained three bedrooms, some four. A few had carports instead of garages. Each of these chain-linked "dreams" had received a grade of "A" or "B."

Stepping back to view the drawings collectively, I beheld an eery caricature of the cookie-cut housing development in which we all lived. These kids had been given a chance to create Utopia; instead, they had re-created suburbia.

Sadly I returned to the auditorium. At the front entrance, leaning against the door frame was the school principal, a stone-faced woman of considerable bulk. As I tried to pass, she stiffened her

arm and plunged it down like a parkway toll gate. Recognizing that a severed nose would do nothing to improve my mood, I dodged.

"Excuse me," I said politely.

"Mrmph," she replied unbudgingly.

"I'd like to see the concert please."

"No room. You can stand in the back."

"But my parents have saved me a seat."

"The seats are for adults. Teenagers stand in the back."

"Yeah, okay."

Thus rebuffed, I resumed my hallway wanderings. I paused once again at the "Dream House" display. Looking at each dreary picture in turn, I wondered what insidious childhood disease had caused such constriction of mind and spirit. But then I noticed one which I had previously overlooked. Sweeping curves, elegant spirals. An impossible house, architecturally unsound, defying conventional wisdom while scoffing at the laws of physics. And scribbled wildly across the purple sky: "My dream house will have a zillion rooms filled with puppies and kitties and hamsters and lots of

kids. It'll have a swimming pool inside, and the world's biggest playground out back... In bold block letters the artist signed her name – "KARLA!" But on the top: "C- ... very sloppy." Yes, how could it be otherwise? Surely this teacher would have referred little Pablo Picasso to special ed.

From behind, a hand gripped my shoulder. It was my old nemesis, Principal Tollgate.

"What are you doing here?" she barked.

"Um, I guess I'm looking at the pictures."

"You're not supposed to be looking at the pictures."

"Then why are they on display?"

"Young man, I don't like your attitude. You're not supposed to be here. I want you to leave the building at once."

Cautiously pulling away, I replied, "Sure, but my sister's in the concert. I'll just go and hear her sing, okay? And then you'll never see me again. I promise!"

I had backed up so far that the round-head pins on the bulletin board were digging into my shoulder blades.

"Are you refusing to leave? I'll go find a man who can help escort you to the door."

With that she marched back to the auditorium in search of a volunteer. Moments later she returned with a stoop-shouldered, smooth-faced pussycat of a man. Unwittingly, she had recruited the world's most unlikely bouncer: my dad.

"Sir," she said crisply, "this boy is causing a disturbance. Kindly help me eject him from the premises."

"What did he do?"

"Sir, I am asking for your cooperation in a matter of building security."

"But what did he do?" my father asked again.

"I caught him in a restricted area..."

Eyebrows slightly raised, my dad turned to me.

"Where were you?"

"In the corridor, looking at the pictures."

"You're not supposed to be looking at the pictures," snarled the principal.

"Then why are they on display?" asked my dad. Then, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder, "C'mon, lets go hear the concert. We saved you a seat up front."

Shari's class was waiting in the wings. On stage stood two dozen pink-faced children. Some looked rigidly intense, others fidgeted. One boy at the end was trying to scratch his crotch through the cumbersome layers of his choir robe. But they sang in perfect unison, their voices hauntingly sweet.

I'll tell you what they were singing. It was a simple verse, a chant really, composed by Frank Loesser for the film, "Hans Christian Andersen." I had learned it when I was in kindergarten, and I still sing it today. Honest to God, Raven, this was their song:

Two and two are four,
Four and four are eight,
Eight and eight are sixteen,
Sixteen and sixteen are thirty-two.

Inchworm, inchworm,
Measuring the marigolds,
Stick to your arithmetic,
You'll probably go far.

Inchworm, inchworm,
Measuring the marigolds,
Seems to me you'd stop and see

How beautiful they are.

If you run into Karla, blow her a kiss. Come to think of it, maybe you are Karla. I daresay, maybe we both are.

Raven, working with you has been a rare opportunity and a great joy. Live a long, glorious life, keep beauty at the center...

...and hey, don't forget to write.

el

Revelations: The Parable of Why
From: CWR Olinger To: Elliot Grant

el, el, my freelance philosopher and mystic,

Where do you get off being so profound? I have to FOLLOW that, man!

*I have too many tales of bad teachers to even *begin to weed them apart. I was lucky enough to attend an excellent elementary school but had horrid junior high and high school experiences. I am amazed, sometimes, that these experiences did not completely destroy my drive to learn. They didn't. In fact, the utter lack of decent learning created a void in my life that I filled in my own way. I may well be the only kid in history who used to skip school in order to visit exhibits at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. While barely passing History and Social Studies due to absences, I was ditching classes to see The Book of Kells, Tutenkammen, and Matisse when they were in town. While my peers showed an overwhelming tendency toward apathy, I became passionately curious about everything the world seemed (to an angry and paranoid kid) to be denying me. I refused to study crap at a mediocre high school when the world had better to offer me. When they assigned us Steinbeck, who I immediately recognized as a moderate novelist chosen for palatability, I was reading Faulkner. When they had the gall to expect me to read watered down garbage I picked up Alice Walker. I may*

have been a darkly brooding little bitch, but I wasn't stupid. Not because anyone was teaching me anything worth knowing, but because I wanted to know and looked it up. I used to spend hours in libraries. I used to argue with my teachers. When they started sending me to the administrator's offices, I stopped, but my curiosity never waned, and I still looked into any niggling little question that popped into my head.

Which brings me to revelations. If you question enough you have little epiphanies, little explosions of understanding that make segments of the big picture fall into place like puzzle pieces. And I think that's part of the plan. Which is why I'm going to share with you what I think may be my greatest revelation.

I had a dream a few years back. This dream stayed with me and drove me completely buggy for a long time, until I recognized it for what it was: not a routine dumping of excess cerebral baggage, not a manifestation of suppressed anxiety or desire, not a sexual desire cloaked in symbol. It was a parable. It was as old as my genetic code. It was a catharsis, and I think it was a gift. It went like this:

At the dawn of time there was a mist over the void in which no "world" yet existed. The Creator had made many living things, but had not determined what purpose each would serve. The Divine, a being of generosity and freedom, decided to allow each living thing to chose its purpose in eternity. One by one all the living things were called forward. The Creator said:

**YOU MAY EACH SELECT ONE GIFT TO DEFINE THE ESSENCE OF YOUR BEING AND THE*

*JOURNEY YOU WILL MAKE IN ETERNITY. IT WILL BE YOUR NATURE, YOUR PURPOSE, YOUR JOY AND YOUR LIFE. THINK CAREFULLY, FOR YOU MAY ONLY CHOOSE ONE. **

Bear came forward and thought about how much he loved to sleep. It would be wonderful, he decided, to sleep long nights away and dream. And so it is Bear's gift to hibernate, reflecting and dreaming the winter away.

Eagle came forward and knew that nothing could bring her greater joy than to use her wings. She longed to circle on the wind and see everything below her. She is blessed with soaring higher than all others of her kind.

Otter wanted nothing in the world so much as to play, and so he is the fun-loving acrobat. His gift is child-like playfulness.

Turtle stepped on Porcupine as they were waiting in the long line. Porcupine chose to make self-defense his gift; Turtle chose to have a body of the safest armor to protect her; self-preservation is her life-lesson.

The last of the living things to approach The Creator was the human. This gangly, dreamy creature had watched all the other animals make their choices and was somewhat bewildered by the ease with which each chose. Eternity was such a long time to practice one discipline over and over. True, learning to excel at any *one thing was certainly wonderful, but there were so many things to explore, so many gifts to discover. How would the human-child choose only one? The Creator cleared its throat with a sound like a thousand rock slides.

**YOU ARE THE LAST OF MY CHILDREN. YOU HAVE SEEN HOW WISELY YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS HAVE CHOSEN THEIR GIFTS. THINK CAREFULLY BEFORE YOU SPEAK. REMEMBER, YOU MAY ONLY CHOOSE ONE. **

The human said "why?"

I suppose you and I have, in these past few months, hammered away at a pretty big chunk of the why, el. But it was a great joy to do so, because it is, after all, what we are made for. We were created to question. We are beings of wonder and vision, laughter and longing, and psychedelic curiosity. I think that The Divine has smiled on you and I in our humble little effort, delighting in all the why and how we have wrestled through the modem, across the miles. I say that my dream was a gift because it felt like a myth remembered, a legend or story someone had told me. But it wasn't. Or, at least, it wasn't from my memory in this body and this life. Perhaps some chunk of my cosmic self— that part of my genetic coding that knows the primordial muck from whence we all crawled— whispered it from the deep self that can only creep out when we sleep. Whatever. Shrug. I take it as a gift, and share it with you, my partner in "why," and all the reckless readers who were curious enough to "why" themselves through this book.

Keep asking.

*Fondly, fondly, and ever-so-bittersweetly, I leave you,
this last time,*

Raven

APPENDIX

**THIEF RIVER FALLS EDUCATIONAL
FOUNDATION**

Like many people on the internet, Elliot Grant is both a citizen of the world who can talk philosophy with a friend thousands of miles away and a person who lives on a spot on a map, in a small, geographically defined world.

With that in mind Elliot and Raven discussed the contribution the royalties from their book might make and came to the conclusion that the small town that Elliot calls home best expressed the center of who he is and what he values. They are values with which Raven agreed and a community with which she was happy to identify and to which she was pleased to contribute. Thief River Falls, Minnesota is Elliot's geographic home and children and their future are the focus of his life's work.

The royalties from the sale of this book are being donated to the organization:

THIEF RIVER FALLS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Their mission is:

"...to help improve the quality of education by raising and allocating money for projects and equipment in the Thief River Falls Public Schools. Objectives of the Foundation include improving student achievement, motivating students to learn and improving instructional techniques."

In a 1995 letter about Tippi Benson, the woman whose memory and work this Foundation celebrates, Elliot wrote:

Tippi Benson is a gutsy, outspoken woman with a heart of pure gold. She's an expert at her job, and can tell me a thing or three about mine as well. She sometimes

does.

"...Let's see how we can help this family," she says simply. And we do.

Tippi is a full-time social worker: which is to say, 24 hours a day. Because our town is small, I run into her often at the supermarket or bank. "How ya doin, Doctor?" she asks with a broad grin. After we exchange pleasantries, she pulls me aside for an update on two or three of her kids. (They're all "her" kids, and don't tell her otherwise.) One could accuse her of being a "workaholic." But this isn't work for her. She loves her job, and would probably curl up and die if she had to stop.

No slave to fashion, Tippi wears the Challenger Elementary sweatshirt everywhere. Making her rounds in the school building, she's the Pied Piper of hope...

She can be heroic. One day a staff member and I are trying to calm an agitated, hyperactive eight year old boy. Our efforts are in vain: the child suddenly bolts, and soon is out of the building. "You go left, I'll go right," we hastily decide. Both of us terribly out of shape, we resemble the Keystone Kops on a bad day. Barely avoiding a head-on collision outside the front door, we see the boy far away and gaining ground. Then Tippi pulls up in her car. Screeching to a halt, springing open the door, she hits the ground at a dead run. Just as the child darts into traffic, she grabs his arm. "Hey, what's the hurry?" she hollers. And then, coolly, "Let's go back and talk."

Sometimes I worry about the world. The family is disintegrating, education is failing and people seek solace in fast gratification. I fear we are losing our capacity for warmth and basic decency. But then I picture a woman in a sweatshirt, her hand on the shoulder of another lonely,

confused child, taking him back to school, where he belongs. And I feel a little better, because Tippi's on the case.

Elliot Grant Ph.D., L.P.

With a city population of only 8,043 estimated by the Minnesota Department of Trade and Economic Development in 1994, Thief River Falls is truly a small town. But, it is a small world thanks to the internet and Thief River Falls, Minnesota can also be found in the wider world by going to: <http://www.rrv.nte/trf>

This is a town of churches, parks, moderate incomes. It sits on historic land where an Ojibwe Village and white settlers both found advantages in proximity to the two rivers. As might be expected, outdoor activities from fishing and hunting to snowmobiling and ice skating are popular and the area history is celebrated in museums and festivals. This is an area of rural roots and dairy farming.

A Chamber of Commerce motto proclaims Thief River Falls the city "Where Everybody is Somebody." But it is not lost in its quaintness. Thief River Falls is an area which prides itself on its shopping, nearby casinos, and restaurants.

There are three public schools in Thief River Falls. One each of Senior High, Middle, and Elementary. Like people everywhere, those in Thief River Falls are concerned about their children and their education. It is to that concern that the Thief River Falls Educational Foundation addresses itself. This is very much a community effort.

Thief River Falls could be anyone's community. It's children any of yours or mine. That's what makes Thief

River Falls Educational Foundation of interest to us all. And perhaps this reminder of the community effort it takes to provide good education and care for all of our children will encourage you and others to look into your local educational foundation or other programs helping your schools turn out better educated children to be the leaders of tomorrow.

To make donations directly to THIEF RIVER FALLS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION contact the:

Thief River Falls Education Foundation Office
230 South LaBree
Thief River Falls, MN 56701



Call toll-free to order
1-888-892-6000

other
Books From

Ladybug Press



Women on a Wire, ISBN 1-89409-16-2
a collection of poems from 29 cyber-poets
around the country. Royalties donated to
the National Coalition Against Domestic
Violence. \$11.95

A Garden of Weeds, ISBN 1-89409-19-7
poetry, essays, and garden lore for the
green-thumb philosopher. Royalties
donated to the Seva Foundation, an
international aid organization. \$16.95

Visit our web site at: <http://www.ladybugbooks.com>

Ladybug Press * 751 Laurel Street #223 * San Carlos, CA 94070 * (650)591-6212

"A delightful book..."

HE MAIL



**"A mindsprint...
demonstrates that e-mail
isn't about technology but
communication."**

SHE MAIL



**"An entertaining
slice of life"**

**Royalties from the sale of this
book are being donated to the
Thief River Falls Educational
Fund, Thief River Falls, MN.**

ISBN 1-889409-1



9 781889 409177

895