

Fall 2011

## Wolf Man, Part II

Ryan Flanagan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Flanagan, Ryan (2011) "Wolf Man, Part II," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 75 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss75/37>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

WOLF MAN, PART II

ARCHIMEDES' PRINCIPLE

*Some people not only lose faith in their talents and their dreams or values; some simply tire of them. Grow tired...of two rush hours a day, then the languor of weekends... I'm tired of weathermen and sportscasters on the screen. Of being patient and also of impatience. I'm tired of... sleeping badly, with forty-eight half-hours in the day—of breaking two eggs every morning and putting sugar on something...Man is different from animals in that he speculates, a high-risk activity.*

—Edward Hoagland

Breathing and swallowing use different tubes. Breathing expands the lungs, creates empty space that sucks air in through the windpipe. Swallowing opens this thing called the epiglottis, pushes food down the esophagus. The most efficient way to drown, I've heard, is to *breathe* the water. Tie on lead boots, put rocks in your pocket, and heave—suck it down through the windpipe into the lungs, pressurize the alveoli as they collapse. Close your eyes, exhale, densify your body, float on the sandy bottom, and vacuum. Flood the lungs with a flume of rusty cedar water.

It's different for dogs than it is for humans. Staying on the surface is programmed into their genes. When I was a kid my family had a mutt, and when I threw him into the lake he'd struggle to keep his head up, paddling back to the boat in despair, the expression on his mutt-face, *I can't do this much longer*. Yet he always lived.

Instinct always saved him. If you give a dog a first-time bath, throw him over the gunwale in the middle of a lake, as I used to do, he knows what to do without ever having done it before. There is no experimenting, no trial and error, only panic, only the elaborate, instant firing of neurons throughout his body that ends with life-saving behavior. The water on his skin tells his nerves to tell his brain that he can't breathe this wet substance—the dog, unaware that he breathes, what breathing is—and the result is that desperate, bobbing head, keeping itself alive.

I can't imagine my dog sucking water. Dogs seem to prefer instinct, unlike us, who rely more on reason, education. Where a dog knows by instinct to shake himself dry, we learn how to towel off. But still, we're liable to pass up what we've learned—might actually do the reverse—if we happen to grow tired. If man is tired, no reason can boost him, prevent him from throwing *himself* over the gunwale, rocks in pocket.

My father grew tired easily. He was never in great shape.

After he moved out, when he found himself alone on the weekends, in need of something to fill his time, he signed us up for SCUBA lessons on Sundays at a local indoor pool. This was when he had some money. He'd been wanting to try it, and I was curious about the idea of breathing underwater. It would be different from the snorkeling I'd done with flexible drinking straws—we'd be submerged for long periods of time, weaving through the water, insulated from the real world above.

The first couple Sundays were classroom instruction. We sat through lessons on air pressure, embolism, nitrogen, heat loss, dive tables. The first lesson was the law of buoyancy, Archimedes' Principle. An object submersed in fluid is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the object. Or—if I were to hollow out my body, fill it with water and reverse gravity so that it pushes my body toward the sky rather than pulling it down, this is the force with which Archimedes comes to my rescue if I were drowning in a lake. The diver's job is to balance himself between this buoyancy and earth's gravity.

A good diver makes his buoyancy just slightly negative so he can drift to his target depth, and when it's time to surface, the air he diverts from his tank into his vest will bring him up. But if he's too negative, even with a fully pressurized vest, he will sink to the ocean floor.

After a couple Sundays in the classroom we made our first plunge, sunk ourselves with lead weights, a leap of faith over what is reasonable. My father had more body fat than I did and required more weights. When we jumped in we sunk to the bottom and practiced the hand signals we learned in the classroom. Thumbs up meant, *Let's go to the surface*. Thumb and index finger in a circle with the other fingers straight meant, *I'm OK, are you?* After every descent we'd flash the signals to each other. He'd initiate, more from a father's instinct than a diver's:

"I'm OK, Ry, are you?"

"OK", my fingers said. And we'd stare at each other, no other means of communication than pointing, waving at half-speed.

When we surfaced, I'd get out first, reach out my hand down for him to take. Together we'd beach his body over the edge of the pool, and he'd emerge huffing, exhausted from lugging himself and all the rented equipment through the water for half an hour.

When the lessons were over we forgot about diving, and a year later he asked if I wanted to go to Florida. He bought all the equipment—the wetsuits, the flippers, the booties, the snorkels, the prescription mask, the anti-fog to spray on the lenses. For weeks he did research. Where to go, the maps, the diving books, the printouts from the Internet—the phone calls, the questions, the reservations.

His paranoia was choosing the best option—the careful analysis, speculation, which might've involved Consumer Reports, lists of pros and cons, a flowchart on a napkin. Sometimes he used the odometer to clock the mileage of various routes to the same place. On our way to the shore, he'd say this way was 2.4 miles longer than Rt. 168, but about 10 minutes quicker. He would say 2-point-4 rather than 2-and-a-half.

When we got to Florida he bought a disposable waterproof camera, and everything he'd orchestrated in the previous weeks had played out like some symphony. The reservation was waiting at the hotel and dive tour, each chosen for its fulfillment of certain criteria—*proximity to restaurants*, or a ratio, *number of stars:cost*. We took a dive boat into the Gulf with a bunch of other tourists, sunk to the bottom, and I fed squid to stingrays and he took pictures. He must have tired of this, though, too. We didn't go diving again. But more than the trip I remember the Sundays, those portions of our lives spent on that cement bottom. We waved to each other in slow motion—astronauts with no radio, unrecognizable in our masks, our breath bubbling past our ears, keeping time in our surreal atmosphere.

If you hold your breath long enough, your lungs will start contractions after a couple minutes, an involuntary reflex triggered by excess CO<sub>2</sub> in the bloodstream. It's called the breathing reflex—your lungs' attempt to short-circuit brain signals and get you to breathe. If you're determined though and still haven't given in at what they call the breath-hold breakpoint, you will blackout. Your lungs will contract, and because you're not conscious to thwart their efforts, they will revive you, pump oxygen into your dumb brain.

Though, they can't work miracles. If you blackout in a lake, your lungs will suck lake water instead of air.

But our bodies have tricks. A suicide who favors drowning but changes his mind halfway through won't yell for help for the same reason a dehydrated person won't be hungry: our physiology is smart. Yelling requires air, digestion requires water. Our systems know when to conserve. Take the mammalian diving reflex, too—a response triggered by cold water on the face, which lowers the heart rate, which lowers the need for oxygen in the bloodstream, lowering the need for a drowning person to breathe. Nor will a drowning person raise his arms into the air, which decreases his buoyancy, pushes him deeper underwater. These physiological decisions are made silently, without deliberation, without interference from any reason.

Even with this autonomic help, though, a panicked man flails his arms, keeps himself afloat, but spends gusts of air and energy. When panic sets in, adrenaline sets loose, dilating blood vessels, increasing oxygen delivery, but even with this *added* help his body will tire, his flailing, flag, his face, *I can't do this much longer*.

The US Army Survival Manual suggests relaxation. If one knows how to relax, it says, one is in little danger of drowning. "The body's natural buoyancy will keep at least the top of the head above water, but some movement is needed to keep the face above water. Floating on your back takes the least energy. Lie on your back in the water, spread your arms and legs, and arch your back. By controlling your breathing in and out, your face will always be out of the water and you may even sleep in this position for short periods. Your head will be partially submerged, but your face will be above water."

A panicked man won't know this technique instinctively, though, like my dog knew the doggy-paddle, and he'll be too fretful to figure it out. He will most likely flail around until he tires, or he might give up early to get it over with. In either case, reason is no help.

If I were narrating a program on the Discovery Channel about survival instincts, an animation would play on the screen, and in a British accent I'd say: *Eventually the man passes out, and the breathing reflex is triggered.* We see the cartoon-man's head go limp, and his arms fall dead. He slips under the surface of the computerized water. *As the reflex triggers,* I say, *the lungs expand, drawing water into the lungs, soaking them like wet sponges,* and we see the blue color enter his mouth with blinking arrows, down his windpipe, into the lungs, diagramed like an anatomy textbook. *Like two bricks inside his body, the waterlogged lungs pull the man's body down to the lake bottom.* And the faceless body sways like a leaf, falling.

He got tired a lot when he was sick, too. He had no energy on his hospital bed, not even to lift his head. A lot of times we'd cut our visits short because he wanted to go back to sleep. Just before he died he went on a ventilator, unconscious, a plastic breathing tube lodged down his throat. One lung was filled with fluid, which made the other tired, laboring with each breath, his body convulsing to the beeping air machine.

When his body couldn't do it anymore, we left the room and the nurses took away the breathing apparatus, and when I came back there were no more tubes or wires. His chest had stopped moving up and down, and there was no more laboring for air. No beeping from machines, and all the physiology, all the neurons and blood cells and hormones that had worked so hard and had been so innovative in those final years, keeping him afloat, probably scrambled under his skin in some final attempt to save him, even after his heart had stopped.

## WRECKING CREW AND KANGAROO

After the intervention we take him to the ER, and he stays at the hospital that night because we make him. The next day Kelly and I pick him up and drive him back to his place. When we walk inside he presses play on his answering machine and a robot voice says he has 37 new messages.

The first message is a young girl's voice, *Pat, it's Melissa, where are you? Pat! Pat!* He presses delete. The next message, *Pat—where are you! You have my biscuits. I'm throwing up.* Delete. *Pat!* And so on. After 5 or 6 he stops. One of the messages warns that if he doesn't pick up, she'll break down the door.

Kelly: *Who's that? What does she want? What are biscuits?*

Biscuits, he says, are methadone pills that look like miniature biscuits. Heroin addicts get them from the clinics. Biscuit was the first of more words to come.

*Eyeball poppers, or tornado. Or, How do you like me now? All doubling for crack. Wrecking crew, kangaroo. The great white hope, and hell, and Love, with a capital L. Groceries.*

A more interesting name: 24/7.



## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SCIENTISTS

*Whether you're trying to fight anxiety and depression, beat addiction, or simply lose weight, the key to success is learning how to think differently. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a practical, sensible, and effective approach to help you master your thoughts and think constructively.*  
—Personal Development for Dummies

After the funeral we cleaned out his place, and I found 5 Xeroxed pages from *Personal Development for Dummies* in his desk. They probably came from one of his outpatient sessions, the meetings at the hospital we made him go to when we found out. When I picked him up, he usually got into the car with worksheets, copies of pages from books on addiction, the kind I'd seen in the bookstore written by MDs, PhDs.

Page 221 begins Chapter 3, *Putting CBT into Action*. Cognitive behavioral therapy, it explains, is an attempt to reveal to a person his distorted, maladaptive thought patterns and to re-learn fundamental conceptions about who that person is. Then:

- ✓ **Getting Scientific.** CBT is scientific not only in the sense that it has been tested and developed through numerous scientific studies, but also in the sense that it encourages clients to become more like scientists. For example, during CBT, you may develop the ability to treat your thoughts as theories and hunches about reality to be tested (what scientists call *hypotheses*), rather than as facts.

The chapter begins, “Disturbing feelings, such as depression, anxiety, shame, guilt, anger, envy, and jealousy, are often rooted in low self-opinion.”

We bargain with him and he agreed to go Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. We take turns driving him there, Kelly and I—two parents working out carpool arrangements for their kids. We'd always been close, more than the typical brother and sister, but now our roles are beyond kindred.

“Are you taking Dad tonight or am I?” I'd ask.

“Well, I can take him if you can pick him up.”

Taking him meant picking him up at his condo, though both his car and license were still in good standing, driving him to the outpatient annex next to Kennedy Hospital.

*You really don't have to take me, he'd say. Look, pointing to his classmates getting out of their cars, all the other guys drive here by themselves like big boys.*

*Well, I don't mind. I'm not doing anything tonight.*

He was a different creature now, we hypothesized. He was no longer the scientist, the pragmatologist we'd known. He was *so* addicted, we reasoned, it didn't matter to him if his life were in danger. We taught ourselves that he was a different animal, one that wouldn't help himself unless we drove him to the sessions. The outpatient sessions would be just enough to clear the haze from his head so he could recover by himself. If he were attending these sessions, he couldn't possibly be using, and therefore he was safe. When we learned more about the culture, we'd realize most of his classmates had probably been there by court mandate, and that it was common to smoke up on the way to the meeting.

•

Wherever there is jargon in the book, such as *intrinsic worth*, or *unconditional self-acceptance*, or *fallible human being*, there is an icon in the margin, one of many that the book explains in its beginning. The jargon icon is of a cartoon kid with bulging eyes and Bart Simpson hair. He's pointing to a book, and his mouth is a squiggly line, which shows he's unsure about something. The text over his head reads *Jargon Alert*.

•

Not long after our intervention, my father and I ate dinner at Kelly's house. He had stopped on his way home from work, and somehow after dinner it was decided that he'd go to the outpatient session on his own that night, a first. He said, *I better get going if I'm going to be there on time.*

If we knew at the time that an *honest addict* invoked a fiction, like a *real-life Casper the Ghost*, that werewolves were more frequent, that addicts lie by definition, we would have still let him go. Because he wasn't an addict. We didn't label him *addict*, and even if we had, we wouldn't have known what it meant. At the NA meetings, he was the one who didn't belong, the exception to all the rules.

Weeks later we drove home from a meeting and he told me that he never went that night. One of the men at the meeting had said he regretted lying to his wife, his kids, and my father said he'd been lying about supposed clean time, that he was feeling guilty for a bunch of lies, that he *didn't want to be one of those addicts that lies.*





this understanding, one that took effect whenever we were alone together. I was there because I was the son, and he was there because he was the father of a son who wanted him to get better, and there were no pretensions to our previous selves. The air between us was empty, our history wiped out, just a generic father-son duo now, the son trying to fix something, the father playing along. Something from his old life told him that if he couldn't return to it he needed to at least pretend he was trying to.

When we talked, the exchange was factual. *No discussion of feelings* was part of the understanding. No discussion of concepts like labeling or self-esteem.

"So, your semester ends next week, huh?"

"Yeah. I have an exam on Thursday and then I'm done. So. Yeah."

"So, Kelly said she went to the Flyers game last night, is that right?"

"Umm, yeah, I think so," I'd say. "They lost."

My responses were bland, teased out to occupy more time. In any case, he never talked about the sessions' lessons, except one night when I asked him how the session went and he said pointless.

Now, I would have rather him spent his time a rollicking addict, free and unleashed. The doctors, the scientists don't want to say they have no answer, and so these sessions are their best try. And if I'd known this, that he wasn't about to re-learn anything, I would've labeled a sticky note and stuck it to his forehead. *Addict*, it would have said. *Go lie, go do what addicts do*, I would have said. I would have rather set him loose like a greyhound into a field of rabbits, watch him slowly circle back as he learned on his own.

*Pointless* echoed in my head. If I agreed with him he'd never go again. *Well, I guess they can't hurt*, I said, letting him know he still had to go, that he wasn't getting out of it, that the scientist he'd been all these years was going to keep using science.

He lied a lot in his final years. He lied about where he'd been when I called, about how many days of work he missed. About going to NA meetings, and about why his knee was shaking. Some lies he confessed, others I found out on my own. The NA meetings were abandoned, the sessions never took, and if I had a full stack of sticky notes after we found out, I could've written down each hypothesis about who he was, or who he *couldn't* be. I could've wallpapered my bedroom, and then stripped it note by note as my theories were disproved, plucked them lie by lie until the walls hung bare.

## JARGON ALERT

### Some Vernacular:

*Body-stuffer* - individual who ingests crack vials to avoid prosecution

*Buffer* - crack smoker; a woman who exchanges oral sex for crack

*Carpet patrol* - crack smokers searching the floor for crack

*Clocker* - entry level crack dealers who sell drugs 24 hours a day

*Crumb snatcher* - a junkie who steals tiny pieces of crack

*Devil's dick* - crack pipe

*Henpecking* - searching on hands and knees for crack

*Hubba pigeon* - crack user looking for rocks on a floor after a police raid

*Interplanetary mission* - travel from one crack house to another to search for crack

*Nontoucher* - crack user who doesn't want affection during or after smoking crack

*Pianoing* - using the fingers to find lost crack

*Pullers* - crack users who pull at parts of their bodies excessively

*Pusher* - metal hanger or umbrella rod used to scrape residue out of crack stems

*Res* - potent residue left as a result of smoking crack which is scraped and smoked

*Shot to the curb* - person who has lost it all to crack

*Uzi* - crack pipe

### NOTE ON SECONDARY USAGE OF *crack*:

Crackheads get so in tune with their fix, they say, any time the word comes up in conversation it snags their attention, like a dog named Rex during a special on dinosaurs, and he thinks the British guy is calling him every time he says *T-Rex*. You could say someone cracked, got tired, and one day just *cracked*, and the addict's ears will perk. You could say someone fell through the *cracks* and get the same response. You could say he took a *crack* at the high life. You could say the guy mixed cocaine with baking soda and water, that it *crackled* as he cooked it on the stove. You could say the person's life *cracked* like crystal on concrete, that the man *cracked* jokes about it, tried to make it less serious, though nobody *cracked* a smile. You could say his voice *cracked* every time he apologized.

THE MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW

*There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science & superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call The Twilight Zone.*

—Rod Serling

INT. OFFICE—MORNING

An office. Clean and clinical. A picture of wife and child on desk, with pens, ashtray, inbox. Camera zooms in on pictures of wife and child, then zooms out.

VOICE OVER

You're looking at a tableau of reality. Things of substance, of physical material—a desk, a window, a light. These things exist and have dimension.

Arthur Curtis, dressed in a suit, enters office with briefcase, opens blinds.

VOICE OVER

Now this is Arthur Curtis, age 36, who also is real. He has flesh and blood, muscle and mind. But in just a moment we will see how thin a line separates that which we *assume* to be real with that manufactured inside of a mind.

•

Curtis greets his secretary, makes small talk, goes through his mail. He asks if the Madison contracts are ready, and she says, *Oh, of course*, handing them over. *Well, to the grindstone*, he says, heading for his desk. Then he pauses, *Oh, I almost forgot. Would you mind calling and seeing if you could change the plane reservations to Saturday night?*

*Oh, of course*, she says. He explains that he and his wife want to get an early start on their vacation.

Once in his office, he sits down to make a phone call, but there is no dial tone. He gets up and starts for the door when he hears, *Cut!* He looks over in bewilderment to find a film crew in his office, and the camera pans out to reveal that his office is an office on a set. He's puzzled, frightened almost, and it's clear he thought he'd been living his real life, rather than acting.

Like some practical joke. Come home from work one night and find that all your furniture is gone. Or go to a family member's house and a stranger opens the door. A rupture in reality, a discrepancy between what you know is possible and what your senses tell you.

And the chaos plays out. He spends a moment looking at the director, who is suddenly a stranger. *Come on Jerry, is it so hard to make a phone call?* the director says. Jerry says his name is Arthur Curtis.

They think he's drunk again. The director warns he'll be fired if he doesn't sober up. Jerry—Curtis' real-life name—has a look of confusion that hemorrhages all over the director and crew—*What are you talking about? Where am I? What is this, some kind of a joke or something? I don't know you! I don't know any of you!*

It is May, and from the house where I grew up—shortly before my mother sold it, and long after my father had moved out—I walk outside to find that my father has dismantled our electrical supply box. The supply line enters the house through a box mounted on a slab of wood bolted to the side of the house, and the wood is rotting—one of the reasons the house failed inspection when my mother tried to sell it.

After weeks of saying he'd come to fix it, my father finally showed up, as my mother had been asking him to, though she wasn't used to doing this. During their marriage he fixed things as they broke, without being asked to, and never called a professional—not because of pride, but because there was no need. I grew up thinking every house had a garage with a tool bench, a pegboard with both mallet and claw hammer, steel bar clamps and angle clamps, metric and standard combination wrenches arranged by size, 7mm to 18mm, and ¼ inch to 1-¼ inch. That every father had bolted a vise to the bench, hung the crowbar next to the pry bar, and labeled the nut-bolt organizer's tiny drawers with descriptions like, *¼ x 1-¼ Machine Screws*.

That my father knew in any situation which tool to use and how to use it never surprised me, though I always assumed he'd undergone years of training, somehow, before I was born. Year after the funeral, his longtime friend Joe Bruckner told me the story of joy riding my grandfather's Carmengia through the Pine Barrens when they were 18 and slightly drunk. They didn't see the stump, he said, and when it clipped the tie rod, it snapped off. *Your dad got the tools out of the trunk, got under that car and somehow reattached the damn thing*, he said. *I don't know*

*what he did under there, but the car got us home.* He went on to tell me, that's just who your dad was—he knew how to make things work. The other story he told was one I'd heard before, the one everyone knew, from his high school days when he used an extension cord to rig up a desk lamp in a tree to light up the driveway basketball court.

As I walk over to him, I see he's got a screwdriver in the thick of it, in the maw of bare wires and connections, which carry 240 volts, I remember from high school tech class. He is unscrewing the back of the casing from the wood, the zinc connectors exposed, inches, half-inches from his fingertips.

I stand for a minute watching his bare hands fumble with the screwdriver. I tell myself he knows what he's doing, that I am overestimating the danger. Entranced, I watch the bareness of his hands working clumsy and close to the live connectors, like watching an amateur juggle torches. I fear for him but can't say anything. I tell myself he knows more than I do. I jog into the garage and bring back leather garden gloves, ask him if he wants them. He doesn't respond, and I toss them by his feet. His face is contorted as he works, sweating.

When he finishes, we go inside, and he lies on the couch, taking off his glasses, and he's asleep. I pour myself a drink, and my mother comes in a moment later.

"Where's Dad?" she says.

"Sleeping," I say. She walks over to him.

"Pat," she says. "Hello?"

"Huh?" he wakes.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh? Mmm. Mmmmmmmmmmm. Nothing," he says, "rubbing his eyes."

"Did you do anything yet?"

He stands up, takes off his shirt, shows us his hot flesh. His shirt is soaked with sweat in the armpits, the back, the chest, the stomach rolls. Beads come down his forehead, and he wipes them with his shirt.

"Did you look at the basement window yet?" she asks.

He doesn't respond at first, then leans his head against the wall. "Fucking Christ."

If I am directing the day, this is where I yell *Cut*. My mother and I look at each other. He goes down the basement stairs, I start to follow, and my mother's arm stops me. *What is he, on drugs?* she whispers.

I was surprised she didn't know him as well as she should have. I thought someone who'd lived with him for 15 years would know him better than that. He was in a bad mood, I told her. He left shortly after looking, and only looking, at the basement window, whose bars needed to be



removed for *egress*, as the inspector put it. There were still a handful of repairs to do, and he'd been there less than an hour. He pulled out of the driveway, and I watched, curious about the bad mood.

In two days my sister and I would find out. He had been acting odd in recent months—wasn't returning phone calls, wasn't showing up when he was supposed to. On his birthday, a few months earlier, my sister and I took him to dinner. We sat on his couch as he got ready to go. He came out of his bedroom and told us to go on out to the car, that he had to change his shirt, and he'd be out in a minute. We thought it strange, but he was OK during dinner, and we forgot it.

I lay in bed that night thinking how he'd only fixed one thing on the list. I told myself he was stressed out from work, and I believed it. He said he'd be back to fix the rest, but I ended up doing it all myself because settlement was coming fast. I put a railing on the front porch, installed new outlets in the bathrooms, re-wired the garage door opener, glued a brick back that had fallen from the chimney, and removed the bars from the basement window, for *egress*.

But Curtis wasn't drunk. He stumbles out of the studio, onto the street, and is almost run over by his ex-wife in a convertible. She steams at the sight of him, gets out of the car, *Are you out of your mind? Jerry, if you're drunk again... Look, I don't care if they bounce you. I don't care if you never work the rest of your miserable life.* She demands the alimony he's been dodging, he says he's never seen her before.

She takes him back to his house, which he claims to have never seen before, where his agent is waiting for him. He watches them bicker, watches her make him sign the alimony check. *If you lose this assignment, the agent says, we'll have to drop you. We can't cover up for you anymore,* says the agent. Later in the day, it's just him and his agent, alone, and the agent, thinking it's a ploy to escape his miserable life, says, *Jerry, sometimes I'd like to escape myself. Away from this turmoil. To some simpler existence.*

*You're telling me this is just a delusion? That I'm really Gerald Reagan...* And the agent finishes his sentence, *... Gerald Reagan, a sweet, unhappy man, burdened with that harpy.* Jerry insists, no, it's real, and the agent says he wishes it were.

Curtis returns to what he still thinks is his office, which is being dismantled by crew members. He doesn't understand what's going on, but he's starting to grasp something. He sits at his fake desk with his head in hands and the camera zooms in, a light shines on his despairing face and the camera zooms out to show his fictional wife arriving, the one he's going on vacation with. The secretary hands them the plane tickets, they walk out the door.

*The modus operandi for the departure from life, Serling's voiceover concludes, is usually a pine box of such and such dimensions, but there are other ways for a man to exit from life. Take the case*

of Arthur Curtis, age 36. His departure was along a highway, with an exit sign that reads, "This way to escape." Arthur Curtis, en route...[pause, cut to plane taking off runway]...to the Twilight Zone. And the score goes forte as he says it.

•

And somehow he makes it work. They can't find him at the end. They assume he's delusional, that's he's run off somewhere, but I like to think he was only being practical, resourceful. He took what he had and made it work, took his disfigured life and turned it into something. *Where's Jerry? Is he in his dressing room?...No, he's not in there.* And off takes the plane, the one he boarded with imaginary plane tickets and an imaginary wife.

But we aren't too surprised. In the beginning of the episode, Serling warns us: *But in just a moment we will see how thin a line separates that which we assume to be real with that manufactured inside of a mind.*

•

I also like to think my father might've one day pointed out the irony in *practical joke*, as he did with other terms. *How can a joke be practical?* he'd say. *Can somebody use a joke?* I like to think this not only because I know he loved to analyze the world, but because it involves practicality. During the same conversation, Joe Bruckner went on to tell me about a *WOT* and a *WOM*. Waste of time, waste of money, he said—*your dad's favorite expression*. I'd never heard my father say it—a *WOT* and a *WOM*—but it seems he invented it, and was quite known for it in his college days. Because my father liked baseball but not hockey, when Joe Bruckner would ask him to go to a Flyers game, my father would respond, *Eh, sounds like a WOT and a WOM*.

I remember walking across a suspension bridge with him once when I was young, and he told me of a joke his brother played on him and his friends when they were young. One of the friends was in on the joke and had dared my uncle to jump off into the water. After a lot of egging, my uncle crossed over the guardrail, climbed onto the railing, and looked back at the others, who were speechless with disbelief. Then he peers down into the water, hollers and leaps out. My father rushes to the railing and looks down, and my uncle is looking up, smiling from a ledge 10 feet below the railing.

I might've agreed with him about the practicality. You're put in a spot to believe something absurd, and then the lights come on, the joker jumps out, says, *No, just kidding, you're not delusional, but wasn't that fun?* You think the thing is real, and then you think it's not real. You could almost call it a *WOT* and a *WOM*.

But my father wasn't always so practical-minded. I think of the 6-year-old me, huddled in with a gaggle of my sister's friends in my parents' bedroom, each of us screeching a fresh scream with every crash of the Wolf Man's ax on the door. What stands out most from that night, and maybe the reason the scene is still vivid, is not the Wolf Man himself, but the confusion. Earlier in the day, my father had told me his plan, but in those desperate moments of teenage girls shrieking in my brain, I wondered who was out there. If it was possible it was the *real* Wolf Man. If maybe my father had been overtaken outside, bound and gagged by the real thing, and now it was *he* who was axing the door, rather than my father. And the contest flared inside of me, the child fraught with imagination, and reality telling him no, it has to be Dad.