

light reading series

featherproof 



Scott Stealey

LETTER
FROM THE
SEAWAY

Hello Stephen, congratulations on the new son. And your new fatherhood. I hope you and the wife are doing well. Did you pick up some pharmaceutical drugs from the hospital? I mention that cause I write to you from vacation in Montreal, Canada the home of affordable prescriptions. In those early morning moments when your son was being born, I was quite possibly walking along beside the gentle Flueve St. Laurent, drunk, cursing its mighty arrogant role as the only seaway to the Atlantic during the fur trades... I thought of how unnecessary animal pelts are to the current ruling class, to the steakheads, and to the youthful teenagers, who keep getting smaller. Also around this time when your son was born I was watching the sun rise over the river and looking at the tourist island to the NE, where there was the large black mesh of a biosphere dome that ballooned itself out of the skinny poplar trees. The sun rose and I drank more red wine and thought about the trees in the biosphere. Like, did those trees have it better in the biosphere, did they know how the trees on their own, outside, had it? There had been other people around me, I'm never really alone, especially when I'm traveling, there's always another old friend, person; but by the seaway I was awake while everyone else slept and allowed their thoughts and the ways they chose to express them the previous day to work themselves out in dreams. I had left the sleepy apartment on the Rue St. Denis with the bottle of red wine, given to me earlier in the night

1



Scott Stealey lives and works in Chicago. Here he is in a photobooth getting punched in the balls.



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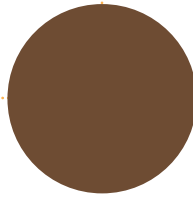
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by a French-Canadian woman who said she was refusing the bottle outright, that this wine more than any other stained her teeth a sickly purple and made her look like a flesh-eating monster. She had a fistful of pharmaceutical pills, though, and I guessed those made her feel pretty by her previous thoughts' logic. She wore a black dress and was all elbows most of the night. These pharmaceutical pills were pretty easy to get in Canada. I didn't want to know how she got them. These events and yours interlaced into thoughts of my own father, who did lab research for a pharmaceutical company for 35 years, growing indignant each day. I imagined that he began his work as a labor of deep concern, but watching the misuse of the drugs, from the disingenuous marketing to the lazy diagnostics, something turned over in his mind, and concern became pity, and pity as it often does in the suburbs became disgust, and disgust hardens you more than anything, especially if it's your labor, and he has yet to see the hope and trust a concerned person might come to recognize while staring blankly at a little round pill in their palm. There is a backlog of gray chemical reactions in his eyes as he chatters on about meds. I have a memory of my father, during one of our first trips to the Dairy Queen, explaining to the clerk how aspirin—the artificial sweetener available in one of the DC's new sugar-free ice creams—corrodes the cell walls of a lab rat's brain due to the drug being synthesized from alcohol byproducts. He was at the soft-serve window of the DC clucking on about this, and I turned and looked at the

other kids and dads, and I saw how a few of the dads were creasing new baseball mitts in half, then instructing their sons to sit on them, trying to break in the leather. At five in the morning, unable to untie this memory from the day's thoughts, I took the red wine into the night, riding a bicycle to the St. Lawrence Seaway. From the time difference Stephen, your son was to be born in an hour. But what's time difference? As I've found, this is all concurrent. I'll explain. The girl, the one who I was in Montreal to see, she had rented the apartment on the Rue St. Denis for us. She's an old friend and she got a good deal on the Internet. The apartment itself was an apartment, sure, but it was one room that snaked around walls that jutted out to divide an area for the kitchen, a sink and a little fridge with a countertop above it. It felt like a small old hotel. The apartment had a door next to the closet that went into the adjoining apartment, adding to the hotel feeling. The door had three locks on it, including one of those big sliding bolts like on a freight elevator. Yesterday, with nothing else to do, I shoved the bolt back and opened all the locks. The door popped back. I walked into the adjoining apartment to find two college-age guys sitting on the couch watching TV. They didn't even flinch. It was as if I was just another in a long line of strangers emerging into their room while they watched television. They both wore the same kind of sandals, and their jeans, both frayed dirty at the cuffs. "Bon soir," said the one holding the remote control. Stephen, here's where the night took a strange turn. After seeing these

this pocket pussy was. Most of what I've told you, Stephen, is because here you are now a father, and whatever it was I came upon by unlatching a bolt to an adjoining apartment on the Rue St. Denis, I can't find anything else to compare it to, and so, maybe soon you'll let me know. I've taken to believing that in writing you, it will trigger something, that whatever I'm doing now, and whatever you're reading now, it has no death, and life keeps ballooning itself out from those skinny poplar trees, a biosphere.



longer boys and we purposefully were meant to feel it. I remember Mr. Drehobel seeing us, saying a meek hello as his face fell, him holding a pocket pussy, then it dropping from his hand to the floor with a rubbery plop. On the Rue de Ste. Catherine, after walking into a sex shop with Ray and Mick, moving between the aisles, Mick saw his Behavioral Psychology professor shopping, where else, at the pocket pussies. And here was that same moment of reckoning for the boys that we had: the awkward hello, the falling face, the pocket pussy dropping to the ground, the rubbery plop, all in eerie succession, the moments almost slower as the memory made itself known. Also, no doubt, the shame, the mark of all this purposefully happening. I walked out. I knew how different it must have been for them. At first, it felt sad to know you were going to have to become a man. They came out right after me. Shortly after you and I had left the sex shop in Chicago so many years ago, you were so taken aback by seeing Mr. Drehobel that you had left your bag checked at the counter and had to go back inside to get it. See where this is going? Ray afterward did the same thing, and went back inside. Now you never told me what Mr. Drehobel did after you walked back in, but Ray told me the Behavioral Psychology professor had picked up the pocket pussy and was simply staring at it. I have no knowledge of what you saw of Mr. Drehobel, but I'm believing now the universe has this set-up, and so now you might believe me, for it's not every man who will simply stare like that, concede to the signs, if that is in fact what

two young guys in this adjoining apartment it occurred to me that they looked exactly like we did some twelve years ago, or at least as how I remember us. I don't mean they resembled us I mean they were us, right down to the sandals we ripped off from the health club locker room, right down to your busted nose you got from a fight in gym class floor hockey, lowering the tip a degree. I sat down to watch television with them and as I looked them over more closely, gradually I admitted that they seemed totally like us at that age, the sidburns in need of a trim, the hopelessly awkward movements, the arrogant smearing of people not present. I began to grow nervous. It felt as if I had accidentally stepped in on another run of the universe, one with a glitch in the mechanism, like a five-second delay during a live television broadcast. I felt like my life was spooling, overlapping like frames of film. I supposed that this could mean we all are immortal, that simultaneously everything is being played out, everyday your son is being born, everyday you are becoming a father, everyday my father is expounding on artificial sweeteners at Dairy Queen, and everyday I'm writing you this letter. Nobody is taking anybody's place because it's all happening at once, and it's designed to safely flow that way, so even though it seems everything runs side-by-side, it's all carefully running on top of itself. But I'm telling you, I got around the mystery of this by stepping into the adjoining room of this little apartment on the Rue St. Denis. I don't know how I did it but I did. The young guys introduced themselves to me as Ray (you), and Mick

(me), and I almost began to laugh upon hearing the low mumble of Mick's voice that used to be my own. Ray and Mick were Americans, from a town I hadn't heard of in Wisconsin. However the rules of this universe worked, there were bits that gushed inconclusive, but that word doesn't mean much when you're speaking to yourself from twelve years ago, telling him that you'll buy him some red wine for a party tonight, and him telling you some naïve thought about the difference between America and Canada, one that he probably learned from either history class or from talking to you, Stephen, from twelve years ago. I can't imagine what they thought of me, standing there nearly daydreaming, considering a timeline as a vertical, not a horizontal, gesturing my hands in a crossing of the axis, trying to get it. But they were kind, and asked me if I wanted to come with them to Vieux Montreal, where some of their other American friends were finishing the day sightseeing. Ray and Mick were in college at McGill. Mick told me that he was studying psychology, and that his student job was in the laboratory with the rats and Skinner boxes. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday Mick would arrive at 6:30 in the morning and begin to clean up after the rats. He removed each rat from its cage, placed it in a large pen on a table, removed the metal feces trays below each rack of cages, and overturned the trays into the garbage. He then sprayed down the cages and trays with disinfectant and water from a hose into some drains in the floor that led to the sewage pipes. Meanwhile the rats in the pen would wait for their

then the chain would be broken, and the vertical timeline of my life would be splintered, and I would be left without an eternal and simultaneous existence. I would live on as everybody thinks they do, but I would know that it would be the last run at the universe for me, that there would be an end to me, but unlike everyone else, it would be permanent. This began to occupy my thoughts. I didn't want to be too protective of Mick, but I knew how clumsy and stupid I was at his age. Still, our meeting had to have been pure accident, and I suppose if something was going to happen to Mick's and to my immortality, it could have at any time. Ray and Mick spread the word about the party to his friends then suggested we kill some time at one of the sex shops on the Rue Ste. Catherine before heading back for the party. Trying to understand the synchronicity of these events is difficult, for as I said, this all feels like I've felt it before... I know you're thinking that Ray and Mick's appearance can't be enough to go on, you can't hang immortality on a busted nose and some similar sayings, but it got more important and convincing after we got to the sex shop. Following this sequence of events is also very complicated for me now, for I'm remembering when we were that age, and we snuck off one summer day into one of Chicago's seedier adult shops. Walking among the sex toys and smut magazines, we saw our old English Literature teacher shopping in there, Mr. Drehobel, and when we did, it was a crossing of boundaries, it was a reckoning to us, we felt ashamed by our youth and he by his age, we were no

homes to be cleaned and get to know one another. If any of the rats were dead, Mick would call the Behavioral Psychology professor and let him know. He then would wrap the dead rat into a red plastic bag labeled "hazardous waste" and place it in one of the freezers. Rats can be pretty social creatures, and Mick liked these rats, they didn't bite him or claw him when he took them out of their cages, they didn't associate him with the others who poked and prodded at them all day, shocking them with electricity or injecting them with poison. Mick had even given many of the rats names since all they had were numbers stamped on their cages. Patrick, Kelsey, Christopher... I listened to Mick compassionately discuss the rats as we walked the narrow sidewalks around Vieux Montreal. I felt like I had heard all this before, not from my father so much but from myself, trying back then to understand him and his work. So it was here, then, I sensed that Mick might have understood his version of this memory better than I did, or at least in a different way, and here he was now, cleaning lab rats' cages. As you always seemed to have back then, Ray had a couple of pills, and he gave one to Mick, then apologized that he didn't have any for me. Stephen, he even said, "I don't have any change to spare," word for word the same odd comeback you would always impart to freeloaders. I suddenly became worried as I watched Mick swallow the pill, for I realized, if we are all in fact immortal, as me meeting myself as a teenager has to have proven, then I should keep an eye out for Mick, for if something should happen to him, surely