

The Seven Ages of Man

By Robert MacManus

One

On the night 6 October, I happened to be wandering down the waterfront. I had had a rather bad day, choked full of misunderstandings and absurd apprehensions. In fact my boss, his name is Tim Swarzhund, had the nerve to accuse me of paperclip hoarding. Can you imagine? Well, at any rate, I was due for a good walk.

Wouldn't you know it, on the waterfront I happened to be preoccupied with the local knitting convention. Every week those gray-haired men muscle their way through the ranks of drug dealers and cheerleaders alike, just to get down to the waterfront to knit moistly. I asked the Knit Matron if he might have anything in a royal blue that evening, and he replied that you have to special order that sort of thing. Too bad for my Volvo.

Now, about this time I found myself deeply immersed in thought. I wondered if this is all that I am—a middle-aged, significantly overweight, male secretary with a deep-seated fear of intimacy and a profound lack of ambition? Then I thought: "Hey, at least my bills are due." If we were to consider this current condition as an implication of things to come, how can we but not consider this to be a remarkable commentary on the nature of ourselves.

At least that's what I thought at the time.

Why, it was only yesterday I remarked to my wife: "Why have you forsaken me?" She said "did you pick up that sack of potatoes I wanted?" I said no. "Well," she said, "That's why. You always disappoint me. You always let me down. You suck."

I went back to my room.

Two

I'm not exactly sure why anyone would be afraid of me, but some people are. Take my neighbor, John Oxford. About every other day he comes over and mutters something to the effect: "Why are you always driving in and out of your driveway? Can't you see I'm trying to watch the Simpsons?"

I never did like him.

Sometimes I wonder why my wife and my two darling children might be afraid of me. Perhaps they're afraid of the love I might force upon them. Perhaps they're afraid of my dominating wardrobe. Perhaps, just maybe, they're really not afraid of anything and it's just my own inability to make eye contact with anyone but total strangers which negates any human understanding I may be capable of. But then again, I am a big fan of Danny DeVito.

Three

Have you ever noticed how, just when things are beginning to go your way, you discover that that was not what you meant at all? Why, take this morning, for example. I was gridlocked in traffic, listening to my favorite concerto critique all that is material, when a man in the car next to me yelled to me: "watch out, for the rest of your life has already happened." It was at that moment that I noticed the bottom of my trousers were rolled.

I found this situation completely intolerable, so I picked up my cell phone and dialed 911. The woman on the phone was very nice, and she explained that the emergency service was not in the business of rescuing you from your dreams, only your nightmares. Our tax dollars at work.

Speaking of work—did you know that federal law prohibits you from psychoanalyzing yourself if you happen to make over \$80,000 a year? You're supposed to hire professionals for that sort of thing. Good for the economy.

Four

When I was young, the world was my push-up bra. I was a man of action, and “the cheerleaders flipped when I wiggled my hip.” Oh, the wet swimsuits. Oh, the boozy flesh. Oh, the illusion of grand actions to come. That war in space sure seemed like a good idea at the time.

But all my heroes died when the peace broke out. And now I have absolutely no interest in seeing my wife wear swimsuits. Oh sure, I can wear the finest ties in town. But now when I walk down the street, with my wingtips and my sure stride, the only thing you’re likely to hear a cheerleader say is: “there goes a rich, old man.” Oh the humanity.

Five

If you ever find yourself on the ground, being strangled by someone native to that part of the world, and you happen to look up and notice that he’s wearing a Rolex, just remember: if you kill that guy, that Rolex is yours.

Six

In the old days, sure you couldn’t have sex with her until you at least appeared serious to marry. But when you did, the matter was as good as settled. And sure now you can have sex with the ladies from other lands and other ways of life—with no mention of marriage at all. But the thing is, nowadays, you have to ask nicely. Which means, nowadays, she can say no. Which means, nowadays, she has to be in the mood, so you have to stay on your toes, say the right things, and always pay attention. I think sex must have been better when it was an entitlement, rather than a privilege.

Of course, that’s just probably me. I mean, it’s just probably because of the type of guy I am that I have to ask nicely. Some guys don’t have to ask nicely. Some guys

just have to be who they are and the women ask THEM nicely. So it is they who can say no if they're not in the mood.

Of course, they're never not in the mood, but that's hardly the point.

When my neighbor who wears the bonnets and the stockings saunters my way and says the door is open to her place, who am I to resist the Siren's cry? Yes, it's the cry I'm speaking of. For in that cry is the promise of heroism and a glorious death. But I don't want to die. I want my house in the country, and my poker night, and my standing ovation. But I also want explosions. No, I'm not being figurative—I mean, real, actual explosions—caused by me—with the bad guys dying underneath them, and my mother inviting me to bed after I grease the landing and taxi back to the hanger. I want to smoke a cigar and drink one with the boys, and laugh at the locker room joke.

I want to know all her secrets, every last one.

But I also want stimulating conversation, and interesting opinions, and challenging questions, and the smile of one who could do for herself if she really wanted to. Indeed, it comes down to this: what I want is a woman who is brilliant, and beautiful, and charming, and independent, and loved by everyone, and who is also completely devoted to me mind, body, and soul.

I want to know all her secrets, every last one.

I want to be both the winner and the savior. Is that too much to ask?

"I just want things to matter again, like the old days" she said to me. "I wish I were a man."

"Oh things still matter," I replied. "The mattering is just a bit more subtle."

But that didn't do it, and I drove home sad. Very, very sad.

Six, Six, Six, Six

I grow old, I grow old. The robot no longer does as I command. The robot never really did do exactly as I commanded, but at least in the beginning the tremendous work

and cleverness required to get the robot do anything at all was satisfying enough. In those days, if we could even get the robot to rock back and forth and make a clicking sound, we felt masters of our self-created universe. And it was a better universe than the one we were living in. It was a universe of atomic space robots, and it was our job to build and maintain those robots.

"I am number six, so who is number one?" he asked. But he wasn't, in fact, number six. He was number three-thousand, one-hundred, and forty-two. As it turned out, number one was a robot, and number six remains a captive in the Siren's studio apartment. We should have known better.

We thought that we could get the robots to fight for us, thereby sparing our own miserable selves from the terrible and numerous dangers of war in space, while losing none of the ecstasies. That way, we could be the heroes without having to die heroically. For the robots would die heroically, and we would march heroically back into the lab and build more heroic robots. And the cheerleaders would flip. Hurray.

And you know, eventually we did manage to get those robots to fight. They didn't want to fight, not at first. At first they just sat there, staring at each other. Then we built robots that could blink, and taught them that to blink was shameful. So we put them in together, hoping they would go at it like frenzied cocks. But they just floated there and stared at each other, blinking from time to time. When we brought them back out, we discovered that they were indeed ashamed of themselves, and their eyes were very dry, but they still didn't want to fight.

Stupid robots.

So then we built robots that could get angry, and we threw them at each other. But all they did was turn around and beat up the guys who threw them.

The cheerleaders did not flip. In fact, the cheerleaders laughed. Then they took away our robots.

Seven

The Sea is angry, and it rages and storms. But nobody travels by boat anymore, so the Sea's not impressing anyone.

Once the Earth gave of her bounty, and we took it out of a sense of birthright. Once we ate breads and fattened calves. Once we scorched the Earth and killed each other in pointless and endless wars (none of them in space, by the by). But then the Earth started ordering from catalogues, and we grew fat and undignified on potato chips and hamburgers, getting really irritated when special news bulletins interrupted our regularly scheduled broadcasts. Of course, this didn't bother the Earth that much, since it distracted us from figuring out new ways to defile her. At least, that's what SHE thought. So she went on reading the glossy article about how to discover the Sea's secret sex spots.

In my mind's eye, I stormed up the stair, took her by the back of her head, and pressed inward as she melted into my will. In my mind's eye, I stood tall and consumed her, and she gave of herself. Indeed, she was grateful for the opportunity to become our martyr.

In reality, I paused by the door, then turned around and descended the stair.