



Being Human Is A Full Time Job **(Without the Benefits)** by Robert Bradley Fuchs **FLYMF March 2005, The One Year In The Shit Issue, Volume 2 Issue 3**

I've been trying to make a list of things that irritate me for some days now. I think—and by I, I mean my analyst. He thinks that this will help with some of my neuroses. I don't mind. I like making lists, compulsively so. It beats doing work. It gives me the satisfaction of accomplishing something without actually doing a damn thing. It doesn't matter what it is, how trivial a task. If I can cross something off, the day has been a success. Wake up. (Check.) Make coffee. (Check.) Twenty minutes and I've already accomplished so much. Breathe. (Check.) I did it again. (Check.) It's tiring being this busy.

I've been sitting in my apartment working on the list. Thinking it over. Mulling it over. Meditating on it, ruminating, stewing, languishing. In short, procrastinating. Anything to keep me from doing my work. Not purposefully, mind you. The T.V. is off. No SportsCenter for me. No Celebrity Poker on this tube. Although my God that show is addictive. (Bonnie Hunt, you are one shrewd lady.) The internet is shut down. I haven't checked my e-mail in a good five minutes. Scratch that, I'm not checking my e-mail again. At least not for another five minutes.

So what irritates me? I'm drawing a blank, which I know is impossible. I'm irritating. I irritate friends and loved ones, distancing myself from those around me. I irritate myself. I would be distanced from myself if that was physically possible. I am easily annoyed. I am insecure and neurotic. I make snap decisions. I judge people. Even when I say I don't, I do. I judge Californians for driving on the wrong side of the street, for speaking with those affected accents, for calling an elevator a lift, a bathroom a loo. No, wait... wrong country. That's Canada, right? So what bothers me? Birds, for damn sure. They bother the hell out of me. But they're not worthy of this opus. Although they will get their due... But anyway, I'm a New Yorker by nature, even if not by location, so I'm supposed to be irritable. It comes with the job description and the manual.

Nothing's right. Even when things are right, they're not. Take the weather. I wake up (Check) and look out the window. Even when the weather is good, it's bad. If it's sunny, it's probably too sunny. If I need to reach for my Ray Bans or even squint my eyes, it's too much. Pull down the sun visor in my car? I might as well pull over. Sunlight good; sunshine, not so much. It's a subtle distinction, but a distinction nevertheless. If it's cloudy or God forbid it rains, who needs that? I might as well be back in New York with the humidity and the dew point and Sam Champion with his Doppler radar with the rest of civilized society.

Clouds? Rain? That's not what I signed up for. That green mass hovering on the map precipitously over the Valley? I think not. High pressure systems? Not in my equation. And the temperature. It should be between seventy and seventy-five degrees all day long. All day, every day. Just like USC said on the brochure. Even at night. Seventy degrees at night, maybe drop down to sixty five so I can sleep better but that's it.

And sunny. And why not? We have solar powered panels in sky scrapers, solar powered cars, so why not a solar powered sun? Keep that baby running twenty-four hours a day. If I want to read a book on the roof at midnight, it damn well better be sunny.

But staying inside is never an option. Thank you for that, neighbors. The people next door are vacuuming what must be loose change or a small animal—a cat?—for the third time today. Morning, evening, it doesn't matter. A bout of insomnia? No problem. They vacuum. The (euphemism alert) heavy-set couple above me is enjoying some afternoon delight—I mean really enjoying. Hardcore. Seven times, no breaks, no coming up for air or stopping for water. That kind of enjoying. I look up at the heaving ceiling and question the structure of the building; I calculate the odds of the roof caving in on me.

I consider banging up there with a broom, to check the beams for support and to of course show them who's boss, but don't for two reasons. One, my building is pre-war and there might or might not be asbestos dust in the ceilings. (Seriously, there is a sign at the entrance of my building: This building may or may not contain chemicals that may cause cancer and possible birth defects. Have a nice day! J) Comforting stuff. That sure made a good impression when I showed the place to the folks. Convinced them that I made the right decisions on my own, to leave New York, to leave THEM. Instilled them with faith, made them proud. Our son did good. But at least it's rent stabilized.

So I don't bang upstairs. Because I don't really want granulated cancer raining down on me. But even more important, I don't have a broom. Dust buster yes, real broom, no. Why, you ask? Because I don't sweep. I'm a stickler for keeping things neat. Things have to be in a certain place, just so, but clean, that is optional. I have a dust pail, and a dust buster, but no broom. So I could tidy up the crumbs on their sofa from their Entenmans powdered donuts, but I can't bang and tell them to shut the hell up.

Oh, and I know he's not a “neighbor,” but the custodian, or maintenance worker, as they like to be known, who is on lunch

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break, is sitting in the courtyard right outside my patio— *right* outside my patio—blasting *El Gordo Y La Flaca* on his portable black and white T.V. set.

And the birds. Lest we forget the birds. Birds irritate me to no end. Not in theory, but in practice. They seem nice enough. Birds. The thought of them is comforting. Birds. With their wings and beaks, and their flying south for the winter, and spreading pollen and Christmas cheer. All good things. And chicken tastes good, so does turkey. I've even taken to eating turkey pastrami and turkey ham—all of the flavor but none of the guilt. I'm not a fan of duck—too tough, but I've heard ostrich is nice.

So they have some use, but they're evil. Pigeons that litter up the streets, they've been useless since the advent of the telephone or the pony express. Seagulls ruining your time at the beach, making you duck and cover. Birds leaving streaks on your windshield, which never comes off despite liberal amounts of wiper fluid. And the noise. The incessant chirping. There must be a nest of I don't even know what, thousands of tiny devil birds burrowed into the side of my building. All I hear are these chirps. These high pitched, shrill chirps boring into my head, waking me from my slumber, my fantasy Jenny Garner dreams (Ben Affleck??? I mean, please), keeping me from doing my work, keeping me from writing my lists, from feeling like I accomplished a damn thing, making the vein on the side of my head pop to three times the legal limit.

This is killing me, this noise. I try to drown it out, to get some peace. There's the ceiling fan to drown out the noise, but it doesn't do much. It causes its own incessant rattling. I'd try the air conditioner, but the thermostat has been set at seventy-two degrees and I'm comfortable so I'm not about to mess that up. Not over birds. I won't let them win that easily. Crafty bastards. I plug in an ocean machine that I bought at Sharper Image—okay, on sale at Target, who am I kidding—one of those machines to drown out the noise, all the craziness of the world around me—keeping me alone with the craziness in my head. I try it out, I put it on, but the constant barrage of waves crashing into the breakers or of thunderstorms pounding against my windows, the constant pitter-patter of rain drops on leaves in a tropical rain forest, the sound of water, slowly, constantly, steadily petering, dripping, streaming, doesn't drown out noise. It doesn't give me peace. It just makes me want to run to the closest fire hydrant. There is also a setting called white noise. I suppose I could try that, but wouldn't I just be better off listening to myself speak?

So I have no choice in the matter. I have to get out. And I drive. I hate driving but that's a necessity here. Heaven forbid you walk anywhere in L.A. I tried once, crossing Wilshire Blvd to mail a letter, and got a ticket for jaywalking.

“But officer,” I replied, “don't pedestrians have the right of way?” He said yes, but only in the crosswalk. I tell him that I was in the crosswalk. He yells at me for giving him “lip.” He said that, “Giving him lip.” I told him he was lucky I didn't give him tongue.

Next thing I know, he cuffs me and thrusts me against the hood of my car, strutting like a cock as he calls me “Son.” “Listen here, Son,” he said—no, I'm kidding, I'm kidding. You knew that. I'm white. He hasn't been taught by his superiors to hate me.

But here's what I don't get: L.A. is the fitness capital of the world. Everyone cares about their appearance. I read somewhere, maybe in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, that Angelinos are shallow (This isn't me saying that. I read it in a periodical so God knows it's true). That the city is comprised of hipster wanna-be actors with scripts in their back pockets, guys who wore derbies and took up swing dancing for a week after seeing Swingers, couples who nine years later frequent the Dresden to see Marty and Elaine, people who still quote the flick, telling each other they are “so money and they don't even know it.” All the while they starve themselves, become emaciated so they can look lighter on camera.

I talked with an uber-thin waitress/actress named Piper at one of those oh-so-trendy Hollywood restaurants, the ones that are too cool for tourists but just cool enough for posers, for people who want to be seen, but pretend they don't, people who feel they need to live L.A. to live in L.A.: In short, me.

Here is a sample, a small transcript of our actual interaction: (names have been changed to protect the innocent)

Me : (after eating a twelve dollar veggie delight sandwich, which ostensibly was avocado and sprouts on wet bread, and engaging in some light flirty banter) What are you doing after this? Want to join me for pie?

PIPER : Gee, thanks, I can't. I need to lose weight. (She smiles, pacing on from foot to foot. I can see her fourth rib protruding through her shirt.) But how's this? You can buy me a slice and then you can eat it.

Me : No. Wait, what do you mean lose weight? You look great. A little on the thin side, slightly anemic, maybe iron deficient, but doable. There's the crush factor, so you might have to be on top, or from behind, but you're doable.

PIPER : (blushing) Thanks. That means a lot. (She then shakes her head, the way a parent does to a small child when asked why you don't put ice cream in the DVD player.) It doesn't matter how I look in real life. When I'm on camera, it adds ten pounds, I don't want to be a hippo.

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What? What does that even mean? Piper weighed as much as a breadstick. I get that no one eats here. Everyone is on the lookout for the big break, and heaven forbid they ate a calzone last week. That would ruin everything. So everyone exercises, everyone is styling, everyone looks fabulous. At least the important, pretty people do. It has been scientifically proven that monkeys in California look in the mirror two to three times more than their primate brethren in other parts of the country. So fitness, having the sexy tight body is the rage here, so naturally people would use their legs, go for walks, run their errands. But no, everyone drives. (It is also the pro-environment capitol of the world but everyone here drives an Expedition or a tricked out Escalade—gold rims optional—so go figure)

But nobody here walks. No one here can walk. L.A. is so spread out the corner grocery is two miles away. Public transportation is nonexistent—the subway, or as I call it, the urban myth, runs for three blocks downtown, and the bus goes from the corner of Blood to the corner of Crip. When the bus is headed to a place you only know from old NWA albums (*Straight Outta Compton*, anyone?), it's best to find another mode of transit. And since the movie *Collateral* came out, cabbies don't stop for white guys any more. So you have no choice but to drive.

So the car becomes the fortress of solitude. My own private nirvana. Until I pull out of the garage, that is. I could go on about L.A. drivers, but I've already accomplished so much. And it's about time I checked off “nap” from my list.