

Stephen O'Connor

The Hipster's Hopper

"Every time I turn on a faucet, and a toilet... my thought goes into the river. It's a deep river you got here. There's a lot of water in Lowell. My thought does not have to be improved, because I got it from heaven, just like you got yours."

Jack Kerouac

OH BUT THEY CAST LONG SHADOWS over the city, those few who went away and conquered New York or Paris or Hollywood, and whose names came to be spoken wherever genius is honored—Lowell's own. An odd company—forever connected nowhere else but here, where we love them because as they burned across the world's stage, they shed a few sparks of glory over us, and the old mill town. Bette Davis—her house is right down on Chester Street off Westford, and my heart swells when I drive by. Not a supporting actress, pal. Bette Davis. There's a plaque on the house. Damn right, too. And there's James MacNeil Whistler. His birthplace is now The Whistler House Museum of Art; you can see the whole collection in an hour, but a more pleasant and impartial hour you won't spend outside of a monastic retreat. You can visit the museum and shoot right over to the Athenian Corner for lunch, and tell Stavros that Guy LaChance sent you. Yeah, Whistler was a Lowell boy, whether or not he wanted to admit it. Only produced the most famous painting in the whole world after the Mona Lisa. We'll take him. And did I mention that Ed McMahon is from Lowell? Throw a stick downtown and you'll probably hit a comedian, but a good straight man is hard to find. Try sitting in a chair for thirty years saying, "How cold was it, Johnny?"

But the big one—the one you can feel—not just as a shadow but as an encompassing awareness that pervades the city, and that follows Lowellians like a ghostly companion through travels

belongs not to Davis or Whistler, or Ed McMahon, but to Jack Kerouac, because Kerouac didn't just live here, he wrote about us and the town, and gave our soul an image projected on the stars that the whole world sees.

I realized that about twenty years ago when I was sitting at the Café du Carrefour in a little town called St. Pierre, lost in the mountains of Ardeche. I was chatting with a fellow I met there, over a glass of pastisse, and he asked me where I was from. "I'm from Lowell," I said, wondering what he would make of that.

"*Ah oui,*" he responded immediately, "*le ville de Kerouac.*"

There's South Lowell, the Grove, Belvidere, Pawtucketville, Centralville, the Acre...I live in the Highlands of Lowell, not very far from Jack Kerouac's last abode. When I walk the dog or go for a little run, I generally take a route that sends me by that house. It's just a thing I do, I don't even know why. And so it was that I contrived to possess an item of considerable literary significance; something unusual—and intimately connected with J.L.K. Not to put too fine a point on it, I acquired a toilet that belonged to The Lonesome Traveler himself. I don't have letters of provenance exactly, but I have witnesses. That is...witnesses, not people who saw Jack...well,—I mean people who saw me take it from the house, his house. And I have photos of the toilet in front of the aforementioned house.

It all began, as my daughter's storybooks say, one brisk day in January, when, laden with the guilt of an evening of excess, I determined that vigorous exercise was in order. Soon, in paint-stained sweat pants, and two faded sweatshirts, I began to chug and churn up the street. As I passed the house in which the King of the Beats once held court, I remarked that renovation was in progress. Hmmm. I spied a pile of rubble on the front porch, and amid it, a dated, pale pink porcelain toilet. Wheels rotated in my cerebellum. Could it be? It must have been—Kerouac's toilet! Immediately, my mind began to wander through paths of propitious augury. Hadn't Johnny Depp paid twenty thousand dollars to Tony Sampas for Jack's old beer-stained raincoat, that filthy one he's wearing in the sad photos George Poirier took? That

was the rumored price, anyway. I saw myself standing beside the toilet on *Antiques Roadshow*.

“Seventy thousand dollars, no less, I should think, at auction, Mr. LaChance. Does that surprise you?”

“Well, not really,” I say, cute liar that I am. “I knew it was worth at least that when I discovered that a good deal of *The Vanity of Duluo* was composed right here.”

“And of course the idea that the water that stood in this bowl was connected ultimately to the river, was a metaphor for Kerouac for the idea that his own thought was connected to heaven. So it’s a key piece of the Kerouac puzzle, a literary treasure, an extremely important...”

I had circled the block, still lost in these ruminations, when I came once again in view of the seat. Now it happens that Charlie Koukalakis, a co-worker and friend, lives across the street from Jack’s former domicile. I ran off of the road and up to his front door. I rang the doorbell, and wondered how I could broach the subject of the toilet without appearing to be—well, a person with an interest in toilets.

Charlie had company, but, convivial host that he is, he insisted that I come in and meet them. There was Theresa, his wife, and a football coach called Lenny from Endicott High School and his wife, whose name not only have I forgotten, but I never even heard in my excitement. He presented me all around, and offered me a coffee or a beer.

“Nah, I was just jogging by Charlie, and...” The guests regarded me with mild interest, probably wondering why I call on people during my exercises. I just couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I see they’re remodeling across the street.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, he’s putting in a new bathroom,” Charlie offered. Charlie is an awfully civil guy. He always makes you feel like what you said had some point, even when you walk in dripping sweat and talking about his neighbor’s new bathroom.

“Wasn’t that Kerouac’s house? Back in the 60’s?” I managed, casually.

“Yeah, yeah it was.” And Charlie had more pertinent information. “When this guy moved in, he found a box of notebooks

and threw them out.”

The football coach said, “They’d be worth a pretty penny today. He must be kicking himself.”

“Oh, yeah. Well people didn’t realize...”

“Charlie, has the bathroom been remodeled since Kerouac lived there?”

He looked puzzled. The women were raising their eyebrows at each other. “Ah, I don’t think so.” It was like a light went on in his eyes just as I asked, “So that was Jack Kerouac’s toilet?”

“Yes, yes, I imagine it was.”

“You’d better grab it,” said the coach, nodding sagely. “The toilet could be significant, because I know he used to write on toilet paper.”

“He wrote on toilet paper?” I asked, my heart picking up its pace. I had never heard that.

“Yeah, he wrote *On the Road* on long rolls of toilet paper, hundred foot rolls I seem to recall. So it makes sense he wrote on the toilet, probably that toilet.”

“I think that was teletype paper. That was teletype paper,” I said, disappointed.

“What’s teletype paper?”

“I don’t know. A long roll of paper. Like they use at *The Lowell Sun*.”

“He’d never fit that in his bathroom.”

“Well, it’s smaller of course, but I really don’t think he had it in his bathroom.”

“The toilet wasn’t in his bathroom?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know!” Imagine this guy trying to explain the blocking scheme on a bootleg run to the football team. No wonder I’d never heard of their team, or of the school for that matter.

I suddenly got nervous about those women. Their expressions had turned from one of amused sarcasm to one of rather too keen interest. I laughed loudly, attempting to deflate the whole notion that anyone would be interested in this useless artifact of the King of the Beats. “Well, anyway, how could you ever prove that it was Kerouac’s?”

“Well I would vouch for the fact that you got it from his house,” Charlie said.

I laughed even more loudly. “Yeah right. I got a letter right here from Charlie Kooks! Really! That’s rich! Ha ha!” I was starting to remind myself of that insane narrator in Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart.”

The women were peering through the front curtain at the coveted convenience; already convinced no doubt, that Jack Kerouac had sat there composing the work that defined a generation on hundreds of feet of Charmin. I made my excuses. “Getting cold! See ya later Chaaaalie! Nice meeting you—you people!”

I began my calculations, my campaign and my dreaming as soon as the door closed behind me. I trotted off, and mindful of Lott’s wife, I was careful not to cast a single glance back at the pale pink relic. Trash would go out on Wednesday night. I should wait. As twilight settled over the avenue I could probably pick it up. Would it fit in my trunk? Was this all folly? What proof could I get? That would be the second part of the problem. The first must be to secure Jack’s job.

The adventure I’ve begun to relate began on a Sunday. Ironically, or by cosmic synchronization, it was Super Bowl Sunday. I did not disturb my thoughts by driving by the house to check on the article in question on Monday or Tuesday, but I confess that I did ask Charlie if the toilet still sat in its wonted position. Each time, he told me that he hadn’t noticed. I found that difficult to imagine. On Wednesday morning, he gave me the same reply. I had maintained the strictest secrecy on the project up to this point. I decided to let Mr. Hogg in on the scheme, and yes, that’s his name, Arthur Hogg. He’s a teacher, like me, or rather “as am I.” (You have to watch the grammar, or people whine, “This guy’s a teacher and he don’t know the language! My children are ruined!”) Mr. Hogg appreciates literature, and he has a truck. He’s a good man; of course he’s a bit haggard after spending twenty years in front of high school kids with a name like Hogg. I used to hear him in the classroom next to mine on

the first day of school shouting, "My name...is Mister Hogg! Has anyone got a *problem* with that?"

Arthur was on board with the toilet mission immediately. He said that he would bring the pick-up truck by my house after school, and he arrived, true to the Hogg word, around 3:30. "Hi Athahogg," my eight year old daughter Cara said, because she has long been under the impression that, like that of a Brazilian soccer player, his name is one word. I explained to Cara and her older brother Brennan that Arthur and I had to go out for a few minutes. I sent the kids across the street to my sister's house. On the way out the door, my daughter said, "Athahogg! Your voice sounds like Eeyore's voice!" She and my son laughed merrily at this.

I directed Arthur to the scene of the—well, to the scene. I was feeling rather cheery, and along the way, I sang, "The hills are alive with the sound of muuuusic, with songs they have sung for a thousand yeeaaaaars..." I noted that Arthur didn't seem to share my frivolity. The truck gears grinded and he grimaced. I terminated my song of joy. "There's the house!" I said eagerly. He thought that Kerouac would have lived in some old baroque mansion, or a castle out of *Doctor Sax*. He was surprised to see a neat, upper middle class home. "It's still there!" I cried. For there it was, in all its pink splendor. And I candidly admit that it did my heart good to see it there, for my hopes had not been betrayed. It was then that I should have first suspected that I was falling under the spell of the toilet.

Rather awkward, though. The trash was not out; the grail of our quest was still on the front porch. "Wait here," I said, but Arthur bravely followed me as I approached the front door. I rang the doorbell. I heard chimes within—Winchester Cathedral? Big Ben? I don't know; I'm not very musical. When no one appeared after a few minutes, I drew out the digital camera, and photographed the toilet close up and long view, from angles that included the front door and number of the house. This was my documentation.

"It's obviously going to be thrown out. Here's the box for the new toilet. Do you think we can take it?" I asked Arthur, as if he were some sort of expert on Garbage Law.

“I think that as long as it’s on the property, and not out by the curb, you need the owner’s permission to take it.”

Of course I knew that he was correct. Ethical people can be such a nuisance when the enterprise is suspect. Arthur could never work for the C.I.A. I lifted the seat and tank a few inches, and was relieved to discover that it wasn’t really very heavy. The two of us stood there for a moment, looking at the toilet. “I know it sounds strange, Mr. Hogg, but standing next to this old crapper, I feel some kind of connection with Jack Kerouac. Like some part of him is here.”

“Yeah? Which part?” he asked, and by the look he gave me I could see he was losing his zeal for the project.

“Anyway, I’ll have to come back later. You don’t feel a little cheated, Arthur?”

“Guy, I’ve gone through forty-seven years of life with the name Hogg, as if “Arthur” wasn’t bad enough, and you’re asking me if I feel a little cheated? It’s a condition I live with.”

When we got back in the truck, he asked me, “Who is Eeyore, anyway?”

“Ah, beats me,” I said. I didn’t have the heart to tell him it was a chronically depressed donkey. I think he already had a hole in his aura.

At some point in my life I read that little story called “Araby,” by James Joyce. What the heck was that story about? Anyway, one line always stuck in my head—something like: *What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping hours...* I’d have to look it up, but something like that. Of course he was under the spell of a girl, so it’s a little different than a toilet. I don’t think I was exactly under the spell of the toilet, but I have to admit I was giving it a lot of thought. My wife Hannah asked me why I was so quiet during dinner. “Just thinking,” I said. She laughed as if to say, “Oh brother, there he goes thinking again.”

Wednesday night arrived. After dinner I put my own garbage out, and eased the Ford out of the driveway. The stars were twinkling in a frozen January sky, and my heart was filled with anticipation. Surely the Kerouac artifact would be out by now.

It wasn't, but there were lights on in the house. The moment of truth. I threw my car door open like a good honest man and walked directly to the front door. Those silly chimes again. I heard voices, and the door opened to reveal a young man and a little boy. Glancing at the toilet where it sat, I saw with horror that the lid of the tank had gone missing.

"Sorry to bother you. Are you discarding this toilet?"

"Yeah, take it if you want." He was an affable fellow. His little boy looked up at me, no doubt thinking, "The strange man wants the toilet." Who knows, I thought, maybe he'll remember me or wonder who the hell I was all his life, the way I remember and wonder about the rag man who used to pull his wagon down Marginal Street wearily yelling "Raaaags!"

"Are you throwing out the lid to the water tank, too? Is that around?"

"Some other guy just came by, like you, and asked me if he could have the cover. His was cracked or something."

It was as if I had a first hardbound edition of *On the Road* within my grasp, only to discover that some dunderhead had just torn off the dust jacket to line a drawer. Oh well; the lid was gone, but the toilet remained. I schlepped it into my trunk, watching the rear of the old Ford sink a few inches. I noticed the owner, the previous owner, standing in a window with a phone to his ear, watching me drive away. Stupid with embarrassment, I waved.

After stowing the toilet in the garage, I called Arthur. "I am not in right now," intoned the lugubrious voice, "but please leave a message and I will call you back."

"Hogg," I whispered, "*the Eagle has landed.*" I was about to hang up, but I was forced to add, "A few feathers are missing."

Upstairs my wife was watching some show about a crowd of prime-time whores who all wanted to marry this millionaire. I watched for a few minutes, then I decided I'd rather go back out to the garage and look at the toilet for a while. Mike, our Schnauzer, followed me out, and stood there blinking and looking from me to the toilet expectantly. I noticed a pile of books on an old desk in the corner of the garage, and from among

them I withdrew a battered copy of *Dubliners*. I sat down at the kitchen table and began to reread “Araby.”

The next evening my wife said to me, “Honey, there’s a toilet in the garage.”

“There is?”

“Hello? You mean you didn’t put it there?” She stopped slicing the cabbage and looked at me with, what would the King of the Beats call it? The timeless eyeballs of perplexed wifehood. Mike raised his head, sensing the tension with that special dog sense that lets them know if there’s going to be an earthquake, or if a UFO is making circles in your cornfield. I was tempted to tell her that the toilet was “a major award,” but I wasn’t sure she’d remember the reference, or find it funny.

“Oh, yeah, that toilet, the pink toilet? Yeah, that was, ah, what’s his name...the writer—Jack Kerouac’s toilet,” I said in an off-handed manner. I proceeded to tell her the story that I have told you, only in a slightly different tone, and with slightly different details, involving slightly different people. You know, the way married guys relate most of their stories to their wives. She soon lost interest, or grew weary, thank God. Sometimes it helps to just confuse the hell out of them.

On Saturday night my wife and I were invited to a neighborhood party at the home of the Eliots, artist friends of ours. Yes, we have artists in Lowell. Will is a retired illustrator, and his wife is actually a marriage therapist, but they both paint. They do “Life Drawing” classes at The Whistler House Museum. Ah, the rarified life of the artist. *Plein aire*, still life, and of course, naked people. *Ars gratia artista*. Nice work if you can get it. Philosophy Professor Meyer and his Polish wife Anna were there. Lovely people. They drink tea on their veranda. They are polyglots, and they read not just the cartoons in *The New Yorker*, but the actual articles and reviews. They keep their T.V. in the closet, and if there’s some really great opera on channel 2, they take it out and set it up. So I’ll put my neighbors up against anyone’s neighbors for class.

Once I had provided my wife with a glass of Pinot Grigio and myself with a Bass Ale, I left her in the kitchen chatting with Will's wife Elizabeth and a few other women. I winked at Will and the Professor, and nodded for them to follow me into the living room, where a fire in the grate, and a drink in the hand induced a cheerful camaraderie.

"Listen boys, I have Jack Kerouac's toilet in my garage." The professor adjusted his glasses, and for the first time since I've known him appeared at a loss for words, or perhaps he was waiting for a punch line. Will chuckled, and said, "What?"

I told them the story. Professor Meyer laughed offhandedly, and seemed inclined to find the artifact mildly amusing or curious, but essentially without real interest. Will, on the other hand, appeared to have been struck with a bolt from some literary Olympus. He wanted to know what I would do with it, and when I mentioned E-bay, he protested indignantly. "You can't do that!" he cried.

"It's not a manuscript, Will. It's a toilet"

"How much do you want for it?" Will asked.

Professor Meyer said, "Well, how could you put a price on such a thing?" I think he was being sarcastic.

Not to be flummoxed I said, "I'm loathe to part with it honestly, but if someone bids three hundred bucks, I'll let it go."

"Done," Will said, and thrust a hand out to seal the deal. He was serious.

"Wait a minute, Will. Are you sure? What are you going to do with it?"

"It's goin' *right there!*" he said, raising his index finger from his glass of wine to indicate the fireplace. "Right there. To the left of the fire."

"Of course," said the professor, "you can set your easel in front, sit on it and shout 'O for a muse of fire!'"

"Ah, you'd better check with Liz, Will. You think she wants a toilet next to her fireplace? I would venture to make a categorical statement that the woman who wants a toilet next to her fireplace has not been born."

Will looked truly perplexed. Professor Meyer said, "There's nothing so awful as a fact, Will."

I continued, "I'm afraid it might cause..."

"Alienation of the affections," supplied the professor.

"Are you kidding me?" Will asked, incredulous. "Are you kidding me? This isn't...this is *Jack Kerouac's* toilet! *Right there!*" He stretched a hand out toward the fireplace in noble determination, as if he were about to cry "Go west young man!" I admired his reckless bravado—not for nothing did he resemble General Custer.

"I gotta tell you Will, it's pink..."

"It may be an-aesthetic in any shade," commented the professor.

"Color," responded Will imperiously, "as well as the normal function of the object, is irrelevant! Absolutely!"

The wives wandered in from the kitchen, and at the same time the doorbell rang. Bob and Hildy and Bruce and Chris, more couples from the neighborhood, had arrived. As Elizabeth ushered them into the fire lit room, Will began to explain earnestly his proposed purchase, and its future place of prominence in the Eliot home. I cringed as the whole neighborhood listened to what appeared to be my attempt to fob off on a friend a used toilet of dubious renown at an exorbitant price.

Though a marriage counselor, I could see that Elizabeth was in no mood for a therapeutic dialogue. The image of her hearth transformed into a defecatory shrine, even to a local hero, was too much for her. Hannah appeared equally annoyed that I had managed to impose a toilet on the gathering. Will was restating his case, with the only argument in his possession. "This is *Jack Kerouac's* toilet! Doesn't anybody *get it?*"

There were pursed lips, furrowed brows, and raised eyebrows as people tried to get it. Elizabeth said, "No they don't get it. I don't get it, and you're not going to get it! Forget it!"

Will tried the clincher—*again*. "Think about it. Think of it as a piece of art. People come in your house, and you say, 'See that? See that right there? That was *Jack Kerouac's*...toilet!'"

"Are you crazy? I don't care if the toilet belonged to Jesus Christ!"

"Holy shit," muttered Professor Meyer.

Anna whispered a few words in Polish to the professor. I didn't

need to speak the language to know it was something like, "Shut up."

Bruce, with diplomatic aplomb, interjected that he had some good cigars, so Will, the professor, Bruce, and I threw on our coats and adjourned to the frozen patio, to blow foul fogs of smoke and bolster Will with our sullen sympathy over his wife's inability to make the creative leap from the mundane to the sublime. I left the beer inside and brought out a small glass of Glenfiddich.

"Am I crazy? Is it me?"

"Nah, Will, you're not crazy," I said reassuringly.

"No more than everyone else," commented the professor, "but I think Will that you may be one of those people who love suffering—a class, as Anatole France once said, that is more numerous than is generally supposed."

"Well, it would include every man who ever asked a woman to marry him," responded Will. As we chortled approvingly over our cigars, he continued. "It's the pearls before swine thing. She's just unappreciative, in the artistic sense." And he added with melancholy conviction, "Worse thing to be—unappreciative."

"She's probably unappreciative," I said, and to cheer him up I added, "and crazy."

"I mean come on! I mean that's a piece of literary history!"

"Yup," I concurred, stogie in one hand, and whiskey in the other like old General Grant, "had his dharma bum *right there*."

"Now I missed the beginning of the discussion," said Bruce, "Guy—could you tell me the story of why Kerouac's heirs wanted you to have this toilet?"

"It was his wish, Bruce," I said. He was puzzled, but put off further questions amid the palpable tension such inquiries were beginning to generate. We smoked in silence a little longer, watching the stars burn coldly at a distance so great it was in another age, and I couldn't help thinking that we would all be dead very shortly and no one would care what became of our toilets, either. To ease the tension, I told a joke about this guy who goes to the doctor because his johnson has turned orange. We all had a good chuckle, except the professor of course, who just sort of shook his head and said, "Oh, LaChance, LaChance..."

Let's face it, any guy who keeps his T.V. in the closet, and sits on the veranda sipping Darjeeling and reading something called *Corpus Inscriptionum Atticarum*—you're going to have to come up with something a little more clever than a guy with an orange johnson to get a giggle out of him. He'd be more inclined to laugh at Samuel Johnson than an orange johnson. Will cooled off and announced that he had decided to do the magnanimous thing and pardon his wife's philistine ignorance—and for the sake of domestic peace he would forgo the acquisition. We all nodded approvingly, knowing the crapper at the sacred hearth was a losing cause from the git-go, no matter how you dressed it up.

We tossed our cigars in a frozen flowerpot, and as we reentered the house, the professor whispered to me, "Well, that settles a long-standing philosophical controversy, Guy."

"What's that?" I asked.

"There is no free Will," he responded.

Hannah wasn't too mad at me. The wine helped. I explained softly to her that I had just been telling Will that I was going to try to get rid of the piece of junk for a few bucks, and all of a sudden he got possessed. Very close to the truth.

Emmet O'Byrne, a local plumber, found a matching lid for the water tank; it cost me twenty bucks, but what a transformation in the overall effect of the piece. Toward the end of January, a browser on eBay would have come across the following item under "Literary Memorabilia:" *Standard 2 Pink Toilet F 40-13 35 Dated Dec. 8, 1940, Belonging to Beat Legend Jack Kerouac from 1965-1969. 500 Dollar Reserve.* An accompanying photo depicted the toilet in front of the house, which any investigation would show to be the one in which Kerouac resided during the period in question. Mr. Hogg, Mr. Hallsey, the Media Center Director, who had lent me the digital camera, and I viewed the notice proudly. Now, we had only to wait.

At the end of the first day, there were no bids, so Hallsey sent one in for 550 dollars. He was already a registered member of eBay, where he had purchased Ben Butler's spittoon. Just kidding. He was interested in Roberto Benigni memorabilia.

Day Two: No bids, but I had an e-mail from a guy in France called Foquard. *LaChance: Vous me faites chier avec cette chiotte! Aux chiottes avec sa chiotte! Vous êtes typiquement Américain! Vive Kerouac! A bas LaChance!*

Of course with a name like Guy LaChance, you probably guessed that my background is French. “Is he interested buying it?” asked Mr. Hogg. “How would we ship it to France? What does he say?”

“Well it doesn’t make sense in English literally, but he says more or less, ‘You bore me with your toilet. To the toilets with your toilet! You are a typical American! Long live Kerouac! Down with LaChance.’”

“Wow. What do you make of that?”

“He doesn’t have 500 bucks and he’s jealous.” I was determined to remain optimistic until it was time to become pessimistic. In the interests of international communications and open expression, I replied to Foquard, “*Fofou: Va te faire mettre chez les Grecs. Venez ici à Lowell et je te battraï comme plâtre.*” For those of you whose French is rusty, well—rest assured that this Lowell Canuck didn’t take any crap from the snail-eating deedonc.

Day three: No bids, but I received a long e-mail from a fellow who went by the handle “Canman.” He wished to inform me that he had a large selection of water closets, commodes, chamber pots, bidets, and slop pails of historic interest.

Day Four: No bids, no e-mails. The thrill was fading. Hallsey didn’t seem to want to even talk about our prospects. I actually saw him hide once when he saw me come into the Media Center. I only wanted to tell him that I had written a letter to Johnny Depp! But he had toilet fatigue. I could understand that. I had hoped to share the money I made with my pals. “Easy come, easy go,” I thought. But it wasn’t coming easy after all. And it never did.

I lost twenty bucks on Kerouac’s toilet. When spring arrived I suggested to my wife that we plant geraniums in it and install it in the side yard, “Oh, great idea,” she said. “Did you see that in *Better Homes and Gardens?*”

“Well, it’s better than next to the freakin’ fireplace,” I retorted.

I heard a laugh from the kitchen. I do love her laugh.

It's still in my garage, and every now and then, on garbage night, I'm tempted to put it out, or to mysteriously leave it back on the porch where I got it, but I never do. It's useless. It's pink. It's a toilet. But it's worth just enough to me that I can't get rid of it. Miss Walker, my old seventh grade English teacher, once read us a poem by Robert Frost about a brook that concluded: *We love the things we love for what they are.* Some things are worth what you can get for them; other things are worth whatever they're worth to you.

Foquard and I exchanged angry e-mails for a while, but we finally became kind of friendly, and now he wants to come to Lowell to see Kerouac's grave, and I suspect, to get drunk in The Pawtucketville Social Club, or Nicky's, which is now Ricardo's. He even admits he wouldn't mind seeing the toilet. Crazy Frenchman. I told him I'd pick him up at Logan, and that will no doubt be another adventure. Stay tuned.

I don't know how James Joyce would have told the story, but I can imagine how he might have concluded it: "Gazing into the toilet bowl, he saw himself as a creature driven and derided by vanity, and his eyes burned with anguish and anger." The truth is it's not like that. I wasn't disillusioned, and I may make a few bucks yet, or so I tell myself. But the money doesn't matter. How can I explain it? I have an arrowhead on my desk that my grandfather ploughed up on his farm in Trois Riviers. I have thirteen Old Worthen St. Patrick's Day pins from different years in a black beret above the bar in my cellar. I have a Napoleon-handled bottle opener in the kitchen given to me by my dear late friend Jay Pendergast, the rogue scholar. And I have Jack Kerouac's toilet in the garage. *We love the things we love for what they are.*