

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Minimum List

The new-fallen cold-weather snow hardly compressed, then rebounded almost completely as Gordon's footsteps evenly ate up the forty-five yards from the bus stop to his new home. As always he noted his progress by silently counting the steps. To Gordon ordered thought was the prelude to inspiration. As he always said, "I'm tedious until I'm brilliant." Or as his companions said, "He's tedious until he's brilliant and then he's really tedious."

Today brilliance was problematic but solitude was certain. Gordon's new home was a one-bedroom/one all-purpose-other-room apartment on the main floor of an older two-storey walk-up on St. Mary's Road in the older lower middle class Winnipeg suburb of north St. Vital. The all-purpose room that failed to greet Gordon as he entered was half illuminated by the blue-grey mixture of moonlight, street lights, car lights and neon that oozed through the one and only window that looked out on the road. The window was everything in Gordon's world of nothing. The apartment – barely better than a room for rent – was nothing, though it contained everything Gordon owned and chose to own.

The possessions can be listed – because they were in fact listed by Gordon; to wit, the minimum set of stuff that a man (or a woman

as far as Gordon knew) needed to be happy or at least materially content in this world.

*A bedroom with a door that closed, to keep out the light and the dark*

*A single bed with spring and firm – but not too firm – mattress*

*Four sheets; two on the bed, two in the wash*

*Three pillows; two under the head, one between the legs for spine support*

*One comforter*

*One woolen blanket*

*One bedside table with reading lamp*

*One dresser*

*Blinds*

*Two bedtime t-shirts*

*Seven pairs of jockey briefs*

*Nine pairs of work/sport socks*

*Two pairs of jeans*

*Library card*

*Monthly transit pass*

*Writing paper*

*Pens and pencils – and so on.*

That was the Minimum List – still a work in progress. Less than seventy items. One year ago seventy pages would not have sufficed to list even Gordon's principal financial assets, let alone his family's personal possessions. But on January 1, 1996, exactly one week ago, the divorce became absolute, and, pursuant to Gordon's long standing instructions to his lawyer, the now ex-wife received everything that Gordon Strachan, Strachan Financial Inc., Strachan Merchant Bank,

Strachan Holdings Inc., Strachan Family Trusts 1-14, Elizabeth Strachan, Elizabeth Strachan Holdings Inc., and Manitoba 6345789 to 634810 Inc.'s possessed, expected to possess, hoped to possess, or might accidentally possess, control, or influence – except for, per Gordon, *enough money to drink myself to death*. Gordon did not want to or expect to drink himself to death. The point was poetic or something more or something less, depending on the mood of the moment.

Gordon climbed the four steps to the door to his apartment, opened it, pulled off his toque and parka, hung them on the hooks on the inside of the door, lobbed the newspaper he was carrying onto the comfortable chair closest to the window, closed the door behind him, pulled off his winter boots, shook off the cold and sank into the chair, first unfolding the paper and turning on the floor lamp.

Gordon felt for the cell phone that was not there in the lapel pocket of the suit jacket he was not wearing. He smiled ruefully, then pushed his glasses forward on his nose. The slim business section of the *Winnipeg Free Press* representing an easily resisted temptation, he resolutely turned to the sports pages. Gordon reviewed his new knowledge: the Moose are struggling; the Blue Bombers had (another) disappointing season; the Yankees are going through (another) thorough shake-up after their expensive roster failed to deliver even a pennant, never mind a World Series; the Vikings continue to flirt with success, and...basketball is completely impenetrable. Baby steps before big strides.

Gordon flipped open the phantom cell phone, mock dialed and addressed his imagination out loud. “Jerry, are you busy? Do you want to go down to Dave’s for a beer? Yes, you buy. I’m just a working guy. Oh? Okay, maybe next time.” Gordon’s chin touched his chest and he wept, almost – but not quite – inaudibly. For three

fat minutes. Gordon wiped his eyes on the right arm of his long-sleeve shirt, cleaned his glasses with his full-cut shirt tails, and pulled his one and only belt two pounds tighter. It felt good to feel bad deservedly. Then it felt bad to feel good gratuitously. Then Gordon had a laugh at himself, his condition and his story. He was perfectly conscious that his story was not history, not yet anyway.

His story, or the part of it that is *this* story started in Gordon's head long before it commenced its march through real-time. As the allure of acquisition faded, it occurred to Gordon that he wanted money much more than he wanted the things money can buy. Then it dawned on him that what he really craved was the independence money can buy. The deeper he pushed his reflections, the more focused became his insights. Gordon perceived that he wanted not independence from the necessity to work, but freedom from the power of others. Underneath that lay the simple but profound passion to be allowed to think as he would. You can't do that if you're working for the man, as he would never have put it. Over twenty-five years he had – only half-knowingly – sought wealth, equating financial independence with freedom. The freedom he found was the freedom to laugh at the irony of his condition. A businessman, however lofty, answers to his family, his shareholders, his customers, his competitors, his bankers, his employees, the media, the authorities and his own satiable or insatiable appetites called *ambition*. Gordon's appetites became plenty satiable. The buzz of biz had become comic, when it was not caustic.

*“For two cents I'd give it all up,” Jerry commented over the hissing silence of the steam room. “Those sonsabitches want an extra quarter percent for starters, then God knows what after that. Am I in this for the glory?”*

*“It’s curious that people offer to give up substantial material things for token monetary consideration; like trading a lot for a little is a good deal,” Gordon replied to the ceiling.*

*“It’s a figure of speech, Mr. Pedant,” Jerry smiled.*

*Gordon continued his conversation with the room. “I know, but it’s interesting. The real offer is to trade a burden for a token. But why do you need a token?”*

*“To get on the subway?” Jerry offered.*

*“No,” replied Gordon as he pulled on his lip. “The issue is, a token of what? Recognition of effort, success, permission to leave the contest?” Jerry’s face went from smiling to thoughtful.*

*“Never mind what I was saying,” Jerry needlessly commented. “You’re thinking of quitting again aren’t you?”*

*Gordon’s face went from thoughtful to smiling. “Sort of, but it’s revealing that you use the verb quitting.”*

*Jerry waved his two hands in front of his face. “Don’t go semantic, you know I support you getting out of business, as long as you’re getting into something else.”*

*“Why?” Gordon spoke softly and slowly.*

*“Why what?” Jerry as carefully responded.*

*Gordon shook his head as if coming out of a trance. “Why do I have to get into something else?”*

*Jerry stood up, tightened the towel around his waist, poured water over his head, shook his head, and answered cheerfully. “Lots of reasons; you would get bored otherwise, you ought to do something useful, your friends might fade away.”*

*Gordon was intrigued. “Why would my friends fade away, if they’re real friends?”*

*Jerry shot back, “How many real friends do people have? As opposed to business network acquaintances, for instance? None.*

*Your so-called business buddies would have no more use for you as a civilian. As opposed to social acquaintances? None. You don't get on the list unless you can give good dinners and winter in the sun."*

*Gordon chewed his lip. "What about guys from the old days, and girls?"*

*"Like me?" Jerry smiled. "We'd drop you like a hot potato!"*

The light in Gord's Great Room, as he had dubbed it, had dimmed to the colour of the dust particles that were no longer visible. Up, then down with second thoughts went the arm to turn on the floor lamp. Gordon could cook in artificial city twilight. Anyway, he sometimes experimented with living in the dark, in curiosity about and sympathy with the blind. The motions, as one goes through them: stand up, walk to and open fridge, remove and open box of *gourmet* soup. Gordon stopped, literally, to note that pre-made soup, however popular, was the food item where the gap between the quality of store-bought and home-made or good restaurant offerings was widest. He corrected himself. He had never actually, it dawned on him, taken much notice of home-cooking in his own home. He was surprised and a little ashamed to recall it. In quality restaurants or at friends' homes? Sure. But at *his* home? Not much. His mother had fed a family of six on Scottish industrial strength stew bought with a post-war welder's pay packet. His wife, the slim and cerebral Elizabeth nee Oldfield, could not compete, nor eventually care to compete with the twin filters between Gordon and food enjoyment – indifference and access to paid splendour.

Gordon unstopped his food preparation. Note to self – stop relating the new order to the old. Knorr soup is good soup. Made with the sweat of one's own brow. Gordon chuckled at the over-done expression, and then at the thought of literally making soup

from sweat. Not just any sweat, but brow sweat. The Knorr brand of sweat! Gordon mentally marked off (as he would literally do later) one item from his To Do list, *Make a New Friend*. The St. Vital Gordon seemed like a regular guy, maybe a bit weepy but with a sense of humour. And good soup.

Gordon methodically went through the rest of the mechanics of preparing his dinner of Butternut Squash soup, rye bread and instant coffee. He started a grace, but two baby tears told him to draw the line of normal a little tighter...for now. Dishes washed. A small tender pleasure. He always got satisfaction from cleaning up. Remember the first few years with Liz at the beach! It was just like now. He was determined that it be true. He was a workingman who came home to make his dinner and put his feet up before doing something-or-other normal for the rest of the evening. Then well earned rest and up at six-thirty to face the day again. Oh dear Lord, help me face friendly fire: bus riders, co-workers, straw bosses, union reps, lunchroom lads, mystified middle-aged ladies on the make, never take *no* for an answer ex-colleagues and the callous constables of the heart – cool co-conspirator cops on the beat of my imagination. He would have to beat them before they beat him to a paranormal pulp. He must get normal before inertia ran out the clock on his life.

And so to bed. At seven o'clock? All right, let's take a stroll down to the local. No drinks because no money. Luckily. The cold snap of a new night wind was wonderful on his face, the nostalgia of cold compensating for the discomfort. One hundred and fifty paces. Oh screw it, let's run. But remember that your heart is not so young as it was, Gordon laughed. Then he slowed down as he shouldered his way through the outer doors of Dave's Bar and Grill.

*Jerry motioned to the door. Gordon nodded and they left the*

*steam room, cold-footing it to the showers. They relaxed under the spiky flow from the big, shared, near antique shower head. Gordon began, “Do you remember, years ago, when we tried to figure out the smallest group of possessions that a man, a real philosopher man I mean, the smallest set of stuff you’d need to be happy, or should need to be happy?”*

*Jerry answered, “Yes, I sure do. I remember the talks we had with Jack and Lizzie – and Muriel! Good old Muriel! That’s cool! Years before the movie, and she was kinda like the Muriel from Muriel’s Wedding.”*

*Gord replied, “That’s not really fair. Our Muriel was a good girl – kinda deep, despite our teasing. The best part is that she actually put together a life like we talked about.”*

*Jerry turned off the showerhead. As they towelled dry Gordon reacquainted Jerry with the facts of Muriel’s life: how she had graduated from social work, and taken a government job with prospects. However, after only six months she had retreated, or so it seemed to her conventionally minded friends, to a dead-end job filling orders in Auto Parts at Canadian Tire. After two years of that Muriel had taken her surprisingly large savings and bought a hobby farm, or so it seemed to her conventionally minded rural neighbours, near Arnes, an hour and a half north of Winnipeg on the shores of that inland sea known as Lake Winnipeg. In the intervening years cottage and resort development had crept nearly to her heretofore remote property.*

*“Well,” Gordon continued, “it was no hobby for her. She ran some small specialty feed crops, for unavoidable cash outlays and walking around money. She cultivated a huge vegetable garden, and she kept chickens and the odd pig or cow or even goat or whatever. And she subsisted on the damn place! While you and me are pursuing*

*our high voltage schemes, she's out there doing it."*

*Jerry interjected, "How did you keep track of her? She disappeared to me. I just about forgot she existed. Why did you keep track of her? You went the precise opposite way."*

*Gord replied, "Liz sort of kept in touch with Muriel because she felt sorry for her, and maybe sort of admired her."*

*"Liz?" Jerry popped out. "No offence, but Liz is a Kingston Crescent girl, not a north St. V. scruff like us. Well-bred girls don't dig potatoes."*

*Gordon laughed, "Except for spuds like me. She's a thoroughbred. I love her, and I wouldn't trade her for the world, but she rarely hoes a garden. No, she saw something admirable in Muriel long ago, when we were still confused by Muriel's unorthodox looks and... straightforward way of looking at things."*

*"What about a man? Did that ever figure in Muriel's later life?" Jerry asked as he adjusted his tie and took one last mock fond look at himself in the mirror.*

*"Gordon will buy you a Corona and tell you that very interesting part of the Muriel saga."*

Gordon stuffed his toque and mitts in the pockets of his parka, wiped the frost off his glasses, and scouted for a seat. The twosie table nearest the right end of the six foot oval bar was vacant. "Hello Alexander, how's my young hero tonight?" Gordon croaked with a voice made raw by the wind and the rain.

"Hey, you're too old to be out of breath. Take it easy old timer!" Alexander snapped good-naturedly. "What'll you have, glass of red?"

"No – just a coffee please," Gordon answered with a sigh.

Gordon surveyed the faces of the seven-thirty shift; the burly,

quiet guy on the barstool, the woman of indeterminate years and a friendly but detached smile plopped in front of the VLTs, the stout couple seriously studying the already familiar menu, and the two young guys half-kibitzing and half-watching the hockey game on two of the three silent televisions. Dave's was half-sports bar, half-neighbourhood pub and half-serious portions restaurant – in the famous arithmetic and portion control of Dave.

Or so Alexander said, because no one had ever seen Dave at this outlet. Dave hung-out full time at his other place in Transcona, a working-class, railroad-based neighbourhood in the northeast quadrant of Winnipeg. St. Vital is in the southeast quadrant. Although there are better neighbourhoods here and there throughout the pie chart of Winnipeg circumferenced by the ring round around Winnipeg called the Perimeter Highway, the most noteworthy *swell* neighborhoods – Gordon's stomping grounds in recent years – were in the southwest quadrant.

Gordon sipped his pretty good coffee, tried to follow the game, and tried not to stare at the other occupants of this, the lounge half of the establishment. The restaurant half was empty. The VLT lady was of some interest, but not much. Her story, different in detail, no doubt, from that of other casual gamblers, was all too probably familiar in the main elements: earns a middling salary, owns a middling car, dates a moderate asshole, spends about all she can afford on gambling – but no more.

Gordon told himself, Stop that! You can't already know everything about ordinary people if you expect to get anywhere learning how to be normal. The pre-supposition of the project is that normal is better than whatever the hell you were...are. Yeah, his eternal internal interlocutor replied, but not everything normal. Normal is a big bouquet. Find the roses, not the dandelions.

How about the hockey guys? Yeah, how about the hockey guys? Gordon waited for a lull in the hockey action and the conversation, then forced out, “How’s the game with the new enforcement of the rules?” Gordon realized that this was, in the circumstances, an awkward way to pose his question.

Nevertheless Hockey Guy the First answered unaffectedly for himself and for his brother Hockey Guy the Second. “Not bad so far, but let’s see how far they get into the season before they just let the clutching and grabbing go.”

“A couple of suspensions of superstars and it’s all over,” Alexander piped in.

Second became animated. “No, Gretzky is behind it and he won’t let it go back.”

“Unless his offence sucks, then let’s see,” First put in. Alexander countered. Second counter-counter. First volleyed back, and then Gordon lost the thread, except to note that he was not a part of the conversation, and didn’t have the information or analysis to be so. Yet, he consoled himself; he had been a natural part of the exchange at the start. In fact, he had successfully started a conversation. Baby steps before big strides.

*As usual, Jerry elbowed in ahead of Gordon as if they were boys. “First one to the table pays the tab!” Gordon half shouted after Jerry, then coloured just a bit from embarrassment.*

*Alexander frowned in jest, then called over, “Hold it down punks.”*

*Now Jerry was abashed. But he got over it right away. “Two Coronas, barkeep, and keep behind your bar.”*

*“Right away gents.” Alexander brought the beers and the menus, then returned to loading new stock, his invariable Tuesday night*

*task. Gordon and Jerry studied the menus in silence, a silence that drifted towards the awkward after a few minutes.*

*Jerry cleared his throat. “Gordon, you were going to tell me about the men in Muriel’s life.”*

*Gordon looked up, then motioned Alexander over to take the order. This done, he answered Jerry: “Yeah, well, Muriel was no conventional looker as you remember. Although I kind of liked her looks. Anyway, she had those kind eyes. She went with Jack for a while in high school. She was a great friend to everybody. Most giving person. It sounds almost silly to describe somebody that nice, but she was, right?”*

*“Sure, Jerry replied, which is remarkable, because our crowd, the guys in our crowd, were such – ”*

*“Assholes?” Gordon offered.*

*“Oui.”*

*Gordon continued, “But the sad part was that Jack was embarrassed about going with her. He took her kindness for granted, but he couldn’t get over the fact that she was not a typical high school hottie. He probably really liked her style in and of itself, but he felt like she didn’t compare with the popular girls: Liz and Heather, and – you know who I mean – Bonnie.”*

*“Your Liz, my Heather and Jack’s Bonnie, or his Bonnie in his dreams.”*

*“That’s right!” Gordon picked it up. “Now you remember what happened. Jack dropped Muriel to go on what we thought would be a hopeless chase of Bonnie.”*

*Jerry said, “It’s so long ago it’s bittersweet to remember. Poor Muriel! But Jack finally tagged up with Bonnie didn’t he?”*

*“For awhile, Gordon replied, “but it didn’t work out. I don’t think Jack was ever the same, whether because of Bonnie or Muriel*

*or what – I can't say."*

*"Get out!" Jerry burst out, "That was twenty-five years ago."*

*Gordon slowly articulated his reply. "So what. You tell me if he's happy."*

*"Forget about Jack, What about Muriel? Jack dumped her a million years ago. What man or men did she hook up with after that?"*

*"We drifted apart, like I said, so I'm not sure. But about seven or eight years after high school it's reported that she's living with a biker."*

*"Stop." Jerry laughed. "Not a real biker!"*

*"No, not a real biker, just a guy with a motorcycle and a kind of a theatrical leather jacket, if you know what I mean."*

*"I do."*

*"He's a moody suffering intellectual goof, so the report went."*

*"A moocher?"*

*"Precisely. He puts her through for a few bucks and a few tears, neither of which she seemed to mind too much. But the best part is, he's the one who talked her into buying the farm and adopting the non-bourgeois lifestyle. The deadbeatnik was going to write a book, don't you know! Inside of nine months he's not there one bad morning. Muriel gets over it by throwing herself into the farm and her new... into the whole simplicity thing."*

*Jerry's eyes grew wide with surprise, wonder, and enjoyment. "The biker was Barry McAndrew – "*

*Gordon finished his sentence, "– who married Bonnie Kuntzler!" They both laughed and slapped the table.*

*"I thought I told you punks to hold it down!" Alexander interjected, hoping to be cut into the conversation.*

Gordon regretfully, or maybe demi-regretfully, listened to the conversations carry on quite satisfactorily without him. He sipped his second refill until his bladder told him it was nine-thirtyish and he couldn't, shouldn't drink any more coffee. He turned over then turfed the notion of ending the night with a red wine nightcap. Alexander waived off Gordon's asking for the bill. Gordon smiled and quite gratefully mouthed *thanks a million* as he re-parka-ed, re-toqued, and re-armoured for an even colder walk home. It was a walk not a jog this time, because of the strengthened wind and because of the even more contemplative than normal mood that had stolen over Gordon, as he sat alone, in every way, at Dave's. Good old Dave's. Gordon was armed against the empty allure of regret but had no defenses, never wanted any defenses against the cold cuddle of the blues. Any embrace is an embrace. Fifty steps to go. No, *strides* is more accurate, piped in Mr. Pedant. Forty steps, thirty steps, twenty steps, ten dirty strides, and home. No more pretend vision impairment; lamp on, outerwear off, shirt and pants off, bedtime t-shirt on, toilet made (Gordon loved that anachronism), pills taken, lamp off, reading-light on, clock radio alarm set to 6:45 a.m., *Sleep* set to twenty minutes, fit but succumbing to gravity body into bed (book in hand), said body back to the bathroom for tranche two of the coffee, then back into bed, read, yawn, reading light off, warm cuddle of the blues, empty allure of regret, dream crammed sleep.