

John Harris / OTHER ART

Last year, Harvey decided to go into business. It was time, he announced, to put his money where his mouth was. Since Harvey never has any money, Barry and I naturally assumed that he meant Lilla's money, or someone else's money.

Lilla and Harvey have been living together for three years. This is a major change in Harvey's life. She is a colleague of ours at the college whose job it is to look after the "mentally disadvantaged" who are dropped off at the college every morning by the Peter Pan bus. Down the hall they come, an intimidating phalanx, shuffling, staggering, running, their toques pulled down over their eyes, gloves hanging by strings from the sleeves of their coats. Lilla is there to greet them, take their coats, ask after them. They gather around her, pat her on the back, hold her hand and say hello, a bunch of giant, distorted, affectionate children. They attend some special lectures that she arranges, take books out of the library, do aerobics in the gym, drop in on classes to ask unanswerably profound questions and sit by the entrance to the cafeteria saying things like "Hi, guy, what's happening?" to everyone who walks by.

Looking after them is a tough job and getting tougher as, due to budget cuts, the number of organized activities for them goes down and the amount of "free time" goes up. During this "free time," Lilla sits in her office and talks to the ones who want to talk and waits for the phone to ring about the others, viz,

"Lilla, we've got a student up here in the Bursar's office. He says his name is Danger Man."

"Oh yes. Bill. What's he doing?"

"Collecting paper. He says he needs paper. We've given him some memo pads, typing paper, graph paper, but none of it seems to be the right kind. He emptied out the waste paper baskets, but now he wants to look in the filing cabinets."

"I'll be right up."

Lilla also has to put up with faculty meetings where the appropriateness of having the disadvantaged at the college is sometimes (usually obliquely) discussed. While they have their uses, like bolstering

attendance at noon-hour lectures and the poetry readings that Barry organizes closer to figures likely to be respected by the Canada Council and other funding bodies, they are generally considered to be a "distraction," even more so (somehow) than the more flamboyant co-eds who are presently into majorette boots and very, very short mini-skirts. The college is, after all, some faculty argue, an institute of higher learning dedicated to providing opportunities in the professions to students of proven academic ability. Is it really a suitable place for people who need...special care? These discussions generally revolve around a number of specific complaints over the month — someone who wandered into the psychology lab and released the white rats, someone who popped up during a geology lecture with the assertion that the town still is under water, someone (it had, with his interest in office procedure and uncanny ability to penetrate the administration complex on the third floor, to be Bill) who stuffed the mailboxes with the contents of an in-out tray on the Principal's desk, creating a flurry of confusion, anxiety, false hope and anger.

Or Harvey could've meant putting our money where his mouth is and, to tell the truth, during the planning stages we avoided him or, whenever we ran into him, talked incessantly about our Chargex accounts and bills for sending kids to university. We reminded him of all the failures that had already taken place in town, everything from perogie bars to bookstores to chopstick factories. Only the franchises, we pointed out, appealing to the lowest common denominator of human taste, have ever survived, and some of those, it is suspected, exist only for tax purposes.

It was not so much that we minded putting in a few hundred, or even a thousand, on an even chance, but we knew that Harvey would fail.

The trouble is, Harvey gets bored very easily, and he cannot abide boredom. He refuses to accept it, as the rest of us do, as normal. During boring conversations he is apt to sigh loudly, announce that something interesting must be happening somewhere, and leave. He is famous for abruptly and forcefully changing the topic of a conversation, or insulting people by telling them straight to their faces that they are boring, or staring hard at them while they talk and then asking them questions like "are you happy?" As a result of this low boredom threshold Harvey has never been able to work at a regular job. He has been a mailman (eight months,) a tree planter

(three summers), a waiter (part-time for two months), a surveyor (one week) and a disk-jockey (six months). Of the eleven years of his working life, he has put in approximately two. Also, he has never been able to complete any schooling. He took college courses from Barry and me and got straight "A's" and went to university, but got bored and came home. He got within six months of certification as a journeyman printer, but he got kicked out of his work experience for refusing to typeset a boring textbook. For most of his adult life, and it is a matter of local speculation as to whether Harvey ever really was a child or, conversely, ever became an adult, Harvey has lived as a man about town, a man not of leisure but of taste, an artist, poet, philosopher. He writes poetry, practises the saxophone, serves as emcee for most local cultural events except of course those run by the Symphony Orchestra and Art Gallery group, and does graphic designs for anyone who needs them. Also, he is much sought after for personal advice; he finds it boring to be anything other than perfectly candid. No matter what happened to the rest of us in our lives and jobs, Harvey was out there, creative, intelligent, free. He was, of course, still bored most of the time, but at least it was not at our expense.

Harvey convinced us, however, that he was a changed man. He was finding it embarrassing, he said, to be thirty years old and kept by his parents or girlfriend, accepting an allowance, especially in Lilla's case where it was less than what her kids got and not nearly so well managed. And he had panic attacks about the future which would hold no financial security, no children, no place of his own, while the rest of us, it seemed, would be driving around in our electric Winnebagos eating creamed cheese and avocado sandwiches and wearing soft hats. He implied, too, that his feelings for Lilla and her kids were at the point where a serious commitment of some sort was called for. And he told us that Lilla was willing to remortgage her house, so financing would be no problem.

So we waited and watched. After an extensive period of study and thought, Harvey decided to start a cappucino bar and art gallery. This actually sounded feasible and, as Harvey explained it, we thirsted for his cappucino which, we understood, was some fancy kind of coffee traditionally consumed in a bohemian atmosphere of serious philosophical and artistic discussion. We were less sure about

the art, but Harvey was convinced there were enough local patrons willing to buy it if they only knew what and where it was, and plenty of local artists producing it. All he had to do was get these two groups together. Naturally most of us assumed we were members of the latter group, producers rather than consumers, and we would not actually have to buy any art. But there was some uncertainty about this.

Location was a real problem. The business had to go downtown because Harvey hates the suburbs and never goes there even for parties where the drinks are free. Anyway, he couldn't afford shopping centre rentals. But the downtown is tricky. It is in a natural bowl where two great rivers join, and it shares this bowl with 40 large lumber mills, three pulp mills and 200 acres of railway tracks. The mills and railways got here first and took almost all the river frontage and have seniority, which entitles them to dump into the river and shower the town with fly-ash and emissions that turn everything a dirty grey and contain totally reduced sulphur which on bad days (which is most of the time) burns your eyes and nose and gives you a headache. The government is still trying to figure out what else it does, but it is generally understood that this study could take a long time and will probably not be completed until the bush and the mills are gone and nobody is around to care.

The downtown core, as it is called, is made up of hotels with beer parlours with strippers and other businesses (cafés, junk stores, pawn shops and boarding houses) that serve the population of drunks, bums and drifters who make up the seasonal workforce of the logging industry and are the town's original class of inhabitants. Around this core are the bank buildings (with offices of lawyers and accountants) that went up in the sixties when the pulp mills came in and the town advertised itself as the world's fastest growing city next to Calcutta. Then there are the older suburbs where Joy and Barry and Lilla and Harvey live and then, on and over the hills around the bowl, the new suburbs and their shopping centres, dental clinics, neighborhood pubs and auto sales centres.

During the day, when the suburbanites commute to work, the downtown is busy and safe. At night it is dark, silent, and (except for the hotels) locked up. Lonely drunks wander up and down the streets shouting at ghosts and looking for open doors. The city has

put a library, swimming pool and ice rink in the downtown, and the provincial and federal governments have put the offices of their various departments there, but most of these facilities are closed at night creating large dark areas. In the downtown, the closure or removal of, say, one respectable business, or the shifting of a government office, can turn an entire block into a place where you are guaranteed to step into fresh barf or broken glass or come face-to-face with a panhandler or a drunk. If you are a business that gets isolated in one of these areas, you are done for.

Harvey found a place above an Italian café run by people with diversified interests who use the café more as a family kitchen and training centre for their kids so customers are a secondary consideration. There is a major government complex nearby, occupying most of a huge hotel that was mostly abandoned on completion after the coal mines up north went broke, and the bank buildings are within range for energetic secretaries or professionals on lunch hour who are looking for the bohemian touch. Harvey decorated the place tastefully, slashing the floor space dramatically, placing black and white checkerboard linoleum squares with glass-topped tables and wrought-iron chairs on one side, and on the other a gray rug with clothes racks, sculpture, jewelry and record bins and a book shelf. By the entrance was the capuccino machine and an appealing selection of muffins and cakes, and all around were pictures, paintings and sculptures by local artists, displayed on consignment.

The opening was a great success. Most local artists participated. My girlfriend Connie, for example, had two of her South American photos, enlarged and framed, on display. There was lots of pottery and painting. People came in from the suburbs and wandered around the statues, montages, clothes racks with hand-painted T-shirts, jewelry displays and pictures. They sipped café latté and chatted. I bought some earrings for Connie who couldn't make it due to a meeting of the canoe club. A doctor from out of town paid \$300 for one of Connie's pictures. Word went around the room like wildfire, and Barry and I slipped out and ran home and got some copies of our books and broadsides and put them in the bookcase. Nobody bought them. The newspaper called it "a bold new enterprise that heralds a new age of sophistication for the area."

As it turned out, Harvey's business paid the rent but did not provide him much of a salary. And, as was predicted, it was hard work for him. Harvey is not used to catering to people. For example, some of the artists became irate when their work didn't sell and Harvey insisted on returning it, in their opinion, prematurely. They pointed out that other stuff sat around a lot longer than their stuff did. The three-quarter-ton cast bronze cockroach with the human head in its mouth, for example, became a sore point. The main reason Harvey left it so long was that he threw his back out getting it there and did not look forward to spending another two weeks immobilized after he moved it out. But the other artists accused him of favoritism. Harvey told them to fuck off, and many did. Other customers, like Barry and me, wanted more food. "You have to have something on your stomach when you look at some of this stuff," we explained. "How about a crock pot with soup or beans?" I suggested frozen yogurt and even got Harvey a pamphlet explaining how to get the franchise and machine. But Harvey was firm. "If you want to eat," he said, "go to a café."

Mainly, however, Harvey got bored. There was no escape from the place. He became irate with customers. He would have trouble suppressing a snicker when they asked if he had the latest Elton John tape or described the colour scheme in their living or bed rooms. He was a sitting duck for the lonely, wounded and/or crazy. Phil, for example, an accountant whose wife had left him, made the place a kind of headquarters so it was unsafe to go there unless you liked looking at the photos of the house and kids that were in dispute, or the landrover that the wife simply drove away or the antique gun collection that she had, if you could believe it, hauled to the junk shop and sold for next to nothing. One day Harvey saw Phil, with a coffee in his hand and his photos in his breast pocket, making for a table of secretaries on their coffee break, and took him aside and told him that the subject of his divorce was, from that point on, banned, verboten, closed, taboo. Phil never came back, and neither did some others with stories to tell who heard about his fate. Then Harvey threw out a woman and her three kids who were running around and around the tables screaming at the top of their lungs. Other customers sympathized with the woman and thought Harvey was too heavy-handed, even if the kids had broken a

Guatemalan vase and were not inclined to say they were sorry, let alone pay for it. Of course, those of us who knew Harvey understood when, for example, he let it be known he was starting to get very tired of a couple of unnamed college instructors who spent most of their copious spare time complaining about their lucrative jobs, or a certain railway worker who regularly enumerated the worth of his pension plan and talked about the fishing he was going to do when he took retirement at fifty, or a certain local artist who had made so many mugs with cute faces on them that he was starting to look like a mug himself. But there were others who took it hard. The tree planters for example, who regularly sought out civilized comforts like cappucino, were hurt when they learned that, in Harvey's opinion, planters, while they usually looked interesting, were actually as boring as most urban professionals and sometimes a lot more boring. And then there were the bad days, when the mere request for a cappucino would get you nothing but an unflinching, incredulous stare, and you had to sit under that stare, coffeeless, trying to read the newspaper or look at the art.

Lilla stepped in. She hired Rob, a painter who used to be a bartender, to watch the tables. Rob was efficient and could stand polishing a cup or spoon for hours and even manipulated his eyebrows to look interested while customers told him their stories. He liked everything that people purchased even when they chose it off the wall from right beside one of his own things. Harvey is now more or less banned from the place, though he still uses the studio in back to arrange consignments, paint T-shirts and ties and do graphic designs for various businesses around town. He is allowed out, briefly, in the afternoon, for coffee, and if Rob knows you know Harvey and thinks it's o.k., he will let you go back into the studio for a visit.

Business is picking up now, and Harvey is earning some extra money for his graphics. Also, he has a new social presence, and more places in town where he can legitimately hang out. He is, for example, a member of the Downtown Business Association and the Chamber of Commerce. He goes to meetings and votes on such matters as parking meters and garbage pick-up. He has taken to wearing a sports coat that he bought at the Sally Ann and carrying around an empty attaché case. He is being courted by the Kinsmen.

When asked how things are going, he inevitably says that he is "in a new phase." He implies that there is lots of movement "under the surface." He says there are opportunities everywhere, "just waiting to be picked up." "Jesus," Barry will say, "you'd almost think he meant it. Maybe he's reading Lee Iaccoca or something. If you think about it, he's even starting to look like Lee Iaccoca."

None of this could've happened, however, without Lilla. Harvey is the first to admit it. "She's the muse," he says. "She inspires idiots." Presently, he's trying to talk her into quitting the college and devoting herself entirely to the business. He's also looking for a job.