



THE
LAST
STRAW
a novel by
John Ginsburg

Cover Art by Paul Bergman

The Last Straw

This is the story of a man's peculiar descent into madness. Rayner Pazatsky is a typical prairie man, forty-six years of age, born and raised in Yorkton, Saskatchewan. He has lived in Winnipeg since his mid-twenties, making a modest living as an accountant, while chalking up a long record of jarring disappointment in his search for true love.

Beginning in the spring of 2005, three life-changing events follow in quick succession. Rayner's father dies. Then he inherits a junior hockey team from a neighbour. Then his wife Jennifer walks out on him, leaving a four-year-old son Flynn behind. For Rayner, this is the last straw. He begins to unravel. After a lifetime of failed relationships and love gone wrong, he's not getting up off the mat this time.

And then, amazingly, it happens to him. The perfect woman. The perfect relationship. Genuine peace and contentment. How? Why? Is it simply because he has given up, stopped striving? Because he has learned so much from his other relationships? Is it blind luck? Is it karma? Or has he really discovered the answer?

In a novel filled with humour and hockey stories, you'll meet a motley cast of characters who help bring Rayner to where he is in the winter of 2007-08. His first love Connie Lusiak, a savvy high school classmate. His new-age girlfriend Donna, who's into yoga and health-foods. Jennifer, the talented and beautiful accountant he marries. Harry Maitland, the stressed-out owner of a learning centre, who hires Rayner as a part-time tutor. Wes Melnyk, Rayner's neighbour, an old-timer who has spent his life in hockey, playing in the minors as a young man, owner of the Winnipeg Maroons in current times. Brian Lord, Rayner's best friend, a lawyer who looks like a cross between Lanny MacDonald and John Cleese. Michael Grove, the coach of Rayner's hockey team, a Newfie who tells the best hockey stories ever. Lenette Evers, the woman of Rayner's dreams; sexy, brilliant and funny. Eve Meyerman, his friend and kindred spirit, who owns a fleet of limousines. And Rayner himself, an everyman destined to discover the secret. How to find the perfect woman.



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Cover art by Paul Bergman
Sleeve image by Shimra Greenes

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This is a work of fiction. The people and
events depicted are purely fictional.

From Chapter 4:

How I came to inherit the hockey team, from the previous owner Wes Melnyk, is a pretty simple story. As I've already said, Wes was one of our neighbours when we moved into the house on Centennial Street, in the fall of 2001. Wes and I became good friends, and when he passed away, four years later, he left the hockey team to me in his will. So that's the bare bones of it. But I think it's important to fill in the story a bit. Especially in light of the events that followed.

After Flynn was born, Jennifer and I knew we couldn't stay in the apartment much longer; we just needed more room. We'd been talking about buying a house for a while, so we got busy and started looking. Jennifer wanted a house with a pool, mostly for Flynn when he got older. The place on Centennial was perfect. Three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, a back-yard deck and pool. Excellent condition; newly upgraded. It's one of those old character homes in North River Heights, with lots of oak trim and hardwood floors.

Moving is always traumatic, even when you can afford to pay movers to do most of the *shlepping*. And the baby was keeping us busy too, especially Jennifer. I think we managed it well enough, all things considered.

I wasn't surprised to come across a few odd things of Donna Finlay's when we emptied out the apartment; a copy of *The Bhagavad Gita*, a couple of bars of soap, a few yards of cloth at the bottom of a drawer, nothing much more than that. But I didn't expect to hear from Donna herself. And while the book and the soap and the material went unnoticed by Jennifer - either that, or she just chose not to comment - the phone call from Donna didn't go down all that well. I guess I only have myself to blame; I really didn't have to tell Jennifer anything about it. But what would *you* do? It was a few weeks before we moved when Donna called me at the apartment. Jennifer was in the living room with the baby; I was reading in bed. I could have said the call was from the man in the moon, or not said anything about it at all; Jennifer probably would have thought nothing of it. But *no*, not me. Gotta be honest.

Honesty is the best policy, right? Well, I'm not so sure. Before I tell you about the phone call from Donna, let me give you Brian Lord's take on honesty. His seminal learning experience happened during his university days down in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Brian's originally from Winnipeg and had applied to law school at the U of M, but he wasn't accepted. So he opted instead to study south of the border, close to home.

Anyway, back in his law school days, Brian was working at a restaurant in Grand Forks, on Saturdays. At the time, he was going out with a woman named Shirley, whom he'd met at U.N.D. They weren't living together or engaged or anything like that, but they were going out regularly, and they were 'ringing the bell' if you know what I mean. Also working at the same restaurant as Brian was a tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty named Marie. (There's always a beauty named Marie, at every restaurant...) She was one of the waitresses; Brian worked in the kitchen. According to Brian, Marie had fancied him from the day he started work at the restaurant. And she was always flirting with him. One Saturday night, at closing time, Marie made a move on him. She was cashing out and asked Brian if he'd wait a few minutes before leaving. Before he could even say his own name backwards (which is rather easy in his case), Brian found himself pressed against a wall in the kitchen, with Marie's hands and lips all over him. To quote Brian: 'All it was

was a blowjob. We didn't have sex.' It sounds like Bill Clinton, I know, but Brian was years ahead of Bubba on that score.

Well, maybe Bubba got away with it, but what about a normal guy like Brian? If you can call him normal... When Brian left the restaurant and returned to his apartment that night, he was smitten with guilt. He was joining his girlfriend Shirley later that same night and so he'd have to pretend that nothing had happened. Either that, or tell her about it. Brian felt terrible about his transgression, but he decided not to tell Shirley. In his mind, he vowed never to engage in any such behaviour again. He wanted to continue going out with Shirley and he thought that the only sensible thing to do was to say nothing.

Marie was also involved with someone at the time, a man she was living with. Her reaction to the incident in the restaurant was in no way like Brian's. Rather than forget about it or say nothing, she very much wanted to get involved with Brian. Fully and openly. Marie told her boyfriend about the incident with Brian, on the same night it happened. The boyfriend was crushed and very angry, but he thought he could forgive Marie and that they could still remain together. Marie had other ideas. She wanted Brian. So she immediately left the man and moved in with a girlfriend. At work, Marie told Brian she wanted to get together with him, that she knew there was something special between the two of them. Brian calmly and respectfully explained that he wanted to forget about the incident; that it shouldn't have happened. He was sorry about it but resolute. Marie pressed Brian about it at work, promising, urging, threatening, appealing to him in any way she could. These exchanges took place in tense, scattered intervals during their shifts at work, sometimes lasting for mere seconds, to be resumed half an hour later or at closing.

Things got so uncomfortable at work for Brian that he decided to quit the job, four weeks after the steamy incident in the kitchen. He kept the decision to himself, until his last night of work. After closing that night, Brian spoke to Marie on the street outside the restaurant. When he told Marie he was no longer working at the restaurant and that he intended to find another job, she freaked out; crying, accusing, screaming at him on the street, almost out of control. Brian managed to escape, slinking off into the night like the lowest of thieves.

After returning home, Brian's conscience wouldn't leave him alone. He felt it was fundamentally wrong of him not to tell his girlfriend about the incident. Marie had told her boyfriend, hadn't she? And besides, Marie might just lose it one day and confront Brian when he was with Shirley. Or, just as bad, she might contact Shirley directly and tell her about it. Brian came to a decision: honesty is the best policy. He told Shirley about Marie the next day. Shirley listened patiently to the account. When he'd finished, Shirley quietly uttered three words and walked out the door. 'You fucking asshole.' It was over between Brian and Shirley.

Brian was in his mid-twenties at the time and he laughs about it today, but I'm sure it was anything but funny at the time. In my case - the phone call with Donna - the situation was far reduced in emotional tension and potential fall-out. It wasn't a frenzied session of oral sex in a back room, it was just a harmless phone call. It had been more than three years since I'd spoken to Donna.

'Hi Rayner, it's Donna. I hope I haven't got you at a bad time.'

'Donna? Oh, Donna. Hi. Um, actually, I'm - '

'I know this is coming out of nowhere, but...do you want to meet for coffee some time?'

'Um, I don't think so. Sorry, I'm with someone else now. Actually, I'm - '

'That's okay, you don't have to explain. I get it. Anyway, I won't bother you. Oh, would it be too weird if I asked you about my dresser? The one I left, I mean. I'm -

'It's gone, Donna. Anything that was left. Sorry.'

'Everything? Those candle-holders, too?'

'Sorry.'

'Fuck, Rayner. I... forget about it. Sorry I called.'

She hung up before I could even say goodbye. In one minute on the phone, I'd gone from surprise to confusion to trepidation. Donna's emotions had travelled at the same speed, from nervous and friendly to annoyed and testy and then to angry.

That was it. She didn't call again and I haven't heard from her since. Which is a good thing. Anyway, I could have said nothing at all about that call to Jennifer and what harm would it have done? But honesty's the best policy, right? I decided to tell Jennifer immediately, right after Donna hung up. And I did, repeating the entire conversation verbatim.

Jennifer was immediately suspicious. 'That's odd, that she'd call you now' said Jennifer.

'I know.'

'Why do you look so agitated, Rayner? Has she called before?'

'No.'

'Why did you rush in here and tell me so fast? Did you think I might have overheard the conversation and that I was suspicious? So you had to explain?'

'No, Jennifer. I just wanted to be open about it. There's nothing to explain.'

'I don't know, Rayner. This sounds pretty strange. Are you trying to cover something up? Are you intending to get together with her? If you are, just tell me.'

'No. I'm not covering anything up, Jennifer. I just wanted to tell you about the call.

There's nothing going on. I'm not doing anything. I hope I never hear from her again.'

'What do you think she *really* wanted Rayner?'

'I told you everything she said, Jennifer. What else can I say?'

'Is she going to call you again?'

'No. She hung up. She has no reason to.'

Those kinds of questions continued for weeks after. And no matter how I answered them, they invariably led to other questions about Donna and me. Heavy questions. Why had we split up? What was she like? Why had I been attracted to her?

Dealing with Jennifer and her questioning was like fending off an attack. I'd listen to her questions and comments and try to let them glance off me, and then try to remain even-tempered in my response. It really didn't matter how I answered or what I answered; she was going to keep it up until either she tired of it or simply decided to quit. What was I guilty of, exactly? It was destructive, unnecessary and unfair. Did Jennifer really not trust me? Why did I have to dredge up my relationship with Donna all over again? What good was it going to do Jennifer and me? Hadn't I proved myself long ago? How could she not trust me after three years together? After all we'd been through... It made for a miserable few weeks with Jennifer. Added to the baby and moving and work, going through the fifth degree over Donna pushed Jennifer and I apart pretty badly. It took some time for us to get back

From Chapter 5:

...Over the next few years, as I got to know Wes better, rarely a week would go by without his telling me some kind of story involving hockey. One day he'd tell me about an incident involving his players or his staff. Another day it would be how a father had approached him to complain about the way the coaches were playing his son. I'd hear about the Winnipeg families who offered free billets to his out-of-town players, and about the people in the community who raised money to support the team.

But Wes's best hockey stories were about the games themselves, either from his own playing days or involving the Maroons. The one that made *him* laugh the most was the night two SMHL referees stayed in their dressing room for an entire night following a game. Because they were afraid to come out. It was a game between the Maroons and the Dauphin Kings, a few years back, late in the season, in Dauphin. The two teams were tied for first place at the time. Whoever finished first got a bye into the second round of the play-offs. With only a few minutes left to play in the third period, and the score tied 3-3, one of the two referees called a penalty shot against the Maroons. One of the Maroons defencemen had pulled a Dauphin player down from behind on a breakaway. The referee placed the puck at the centre dot and the fans started screaming and yelling, razzing the Maroons goalie. At the referee's whistle, the Dauphin player wound up from his own blue line and built up a little speed as he skated to centre ice to pick up the puck. But somehow, he completely over-skated the puck, his stick hardly even touching it. The puck wobbled a little but remained on the centre dot as he started down the ice. Realizing that he'd missed the puck, he stopped and turned around. When he came back to centre to pick up the puck, the referee blew his whistle and threw his arms out: the penalty shot was over. As the referee saw it, the player had contacted the puck in a forward direction, and failed to score before losing possession.

The Dauphin player was incredulous and immediately protested to the referee. The referee listened to him for a minute, shook his head resolutely and then turned away and skated to the opposite side of the ice. This only served to infuriate the player, so he pursued the referee across the ice. Meanwhile, the sell-out crowd was booing, yelling at the referee, throwing programs and cups onto the ice. The Dauphin coach was incensed too, standing up on the players' bench and yelling at the referee, calling him every name in the book.

Whatever the Dauphin player said to the referee, it was ripe enough to earn him a two-minute minor and a ten-minute misconduct. As soon as the Dauphin coach was made aware of those penalties, he lost it and ran onto the ice, heading straight for the referee. He was stopped and restrained by two of the Dauphin players. As a reward for the coach's little spectacle, the referee handed out another penalty to Dauphin - a two-minute bench penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct. And the coach was thrown out of the game.

It took a while to clear the ice and get the game back under control. When the game finally started again, Dauphin was two men short. Winnipeg scored twice with their man-advantage to go ahead 5-3. The fans were in a foul mood for the rest of the game, yelling threats at the referee, littering the ice, delaying the game after both Maroons goals. Dauphin scored the last goal of the game, with their goalie pulled and two seconds to play. Finally, the buzzer sounded to end the game. The final score was 5-4, Winnipeg, and the Maroons moved into first place.

After the game ended, a lot of the fans stayed behind, still angry and threatening. They were eventually cleared from the arena, but many of them decided to wait for the referee outside the rink, surrounding both the front and back entrances. The Maroons were yelled at and jeered as they left the building, but it was the referee the fans wanted a piece of. They were ready to tear the ref's arms off.

There was only one policeman on duty in the town that night. He was called to the scene and attempted to disperse the crowd, but to no avail. A second cop, who was off-duty, came to help, but the mob still refused to budge; they'd been had and they intended to confront the referee. A few hours later, the two policemen were reinforced by three RCMP officers who were stationed in Riding Mountain. That and the late hour were enough to send the angry fans on their way.

All the time that the crowd had been milling around ominously outside the rink, the two referees were cowering inside their dressing room, behind a locked door. Both the offending referee and his faithful colleague happened to be Winnipeggers, which of course multiplied their misdeed in the eyes of the fans. Arena staff kept the referees apprised of the menacing mob waiting for them outside. The two referees certainly had no inclination to walk out and face the angry crowd, and were quite rightly fearful for their well being. So they asked the arena officials to call up the league commissioner and to request that he send a car and bodyguards. On receiving the call however, the pragmatic commissioner urged calm and instead suggested the referees simply wait until the crowd died down.

All of the arena employees went home to bed, locking the building from the outside. The referees were left to let themselves out whenever they wanted to.

It wasn't until six in the morning that the two intrepid referees decided to poke their heads out of the arena. As one of them looked around, the other held the door open just in case they had to flee back inside. Once they were satisfied that all the fans were gone, they gingerly made their way down the street to their hotel, which was just a few blocks away.

Wes was laughing so hard when he told me that story that it sent him into a fit of coughing and doubled him over. It was hard to tell what he thought was funnier; the Dauphin player leaving the puck behind on the penalty shot or the one referee holding the door open while the other one looked around at six in the morning. I could listen to Wes tell stories like that for hours on end.

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From Chapter 9:

... Another example - she described having breakfast with Seymour and taking him to school. "We usually walk" she wrote. "The school is quite close. But his father, my ex, won't rest until Seymour is enrolled in a private boys' school for the financially obsessed. Because, after all, what would a boy's upbringing be like if he didn't have that glorious opportunity? The opportunity to get together regularly with a group of other boys and pee on one another, in the fine English tradition." Lenette added that she'd had toast with marmalade for breakfast, a favourite of hers. "Maybe Linus Pauling wouldn't approve, but I freely admit to a deep and desperate love of marmalade..."

On the heels of that second exchange, Lenette sent another email that same day, following up her reflections on life and career.

>>From Lenette Evers to Rayner Pazatsky; July 4, 2007

There's another thing I have to tell you. Right now! I'm sure you'll understand. It's that I have a secret ambition to be a writer one day - plays. Not so secret really. Actually, everyone I've ever known knows about it. Because I blab my little face off all the time, as you can see. When I retire, I'm definitely going to do it. That had better be soon - the jerks I have to deal with at work are just driving me mad. Early retirement, wouldn't that be lovely... You must think I'm friggin' batty. Here I am, forty-two with an eight-year-old son (and a seven or eight figure salary, if you count the numbers to the right of the decimal point), and I'm retiring already. I guess if I met a guy with a truckload of money... How well did you say you were doing, Rayner? Do you have a truck?

Anyway, back to my literary career. I'll get to my longer work later (or maybe I won't). Here's a sketch of my first play and the way I see things unfolding. It's a ninety-minute comedy-drama, called *Who Did It*, destined to become universally acclaimed and world-altering. It comes out of nowhere, of course, since I am totally unknown. First, it's staged in Vancouver, with a decent run scheduled, but it earns only faint praise from the critics. However, ordinary people love it and word gets around. The run is extended. Next, paying homage to my roots, I stage the play in Regina. And then, after fighting long and hard with the Saskatchewan actors' union, tooth and nail, I swing a deal to open for two nights in Yorkton. Eventually, theatres all over Canada want it. All major cities, except in Quebec. But I'm determined to play in Quebec too, thinking it unfair, and perhaps repressive, that Quebecers are expected to be entertained only by three-cheese poutine and memories of Rocket Richard. And so, a special version of the play is written, just for Quebec.

But negotiations with the Quebec arts community sadly fail. This is in spite of the intensive effort of my talented and devoted agent, Abe Milstein. Abe is a prominent Jewish lawyer and an occasional actor, from Vancouver. As it happens, Abe speaks French fluently, having flourished in the BC French-immersion school system from K through 12. Furthermore, Abe has a French stage-name, Jean-Claude Néot. And though he has used it only rarely in his professional career, Abe employs his stage-name in presenting himself to the theatre directors and to the theatre police in Quebec.

Sounding like a perfect imitation of Maurice Chevalier, Abe (Jean-Claude) makes our pitch to stage the play in Quebec. It is a somewhat complicated proposal, in four parts. Part one concerns the presentation and distribution of any text connected with the play. We offer to author all such text in such a way that the French version is exactly square-root-of-five times as big as the English version. (Jean-Claude points out that the square root of five is larger than two.) Secondly, we offer to present the play in Montreal, Quebec City and Lachute; two performances in each

venue. The play will be staged with extreme sensitivity to language issues. The cast will be double its usual size - an anglophone cast and a francophone cast. In each scene on the stage, two sets of actors will be present simultaneously, the anglophone actors who are performing the scene and their francophone counterparts. Each segment of dialogue will be performed first in one language and then the other, with one set of actors appearing from the background to replace the other. The French delivery of the dialogue will be spoken twice as loud as the English. Extensive rehearsals will have guaranteed that cast members are able to accurately and correctly project their volume. The third part of our proposal is financial. Jean-Claude promises to contribute a percentage of the profits to the labour unions and to appropriate municipal officials in gratitude. (Note Rayner: *profit*, not revenue. Of course, we'll show an operating loss everywhere we play.) The fourth and final clause in our proposal is one which Abe himself has conceived and which he is sure will win the day: we will endeavour to contract Celine Dion to sing in the intermissions at all performances.

With a four-pronged offer like this, you'd think that theatre-loving Quebecers would be jumping up and down with enthusiasm to stage the play, salivating all over one another as it were. But NO! Sadly, we have to pass on La Belle Province. Jean-Claude is politely turned down. He politely asks for an explanation. Is it because of the bilingual nature of the play, he wonders? Did he offend the wrong people by offering to make special contributions? Is it because the square root of five is an irrational number? No. None of the above. The Quebec theatre representative explains the matter quite simply to Abe. He speaks in English, since he suspects English is Abe's first language. This is blatantly false. Abe's first language is, in fact, Polish. Be that as it may, the theatre official has, by then, acquired certain information about Abe. The hotel manager where Abe is staying has informed on Abe. The manager has disclosed to the authorities that Abe communicated in English when checking in. 'Mr. Néot' the official says to Abe, his tone cold and direct. 'You must think we're a bunch of idiots here, ay? Madame Dion would never participate in a play like yours.'