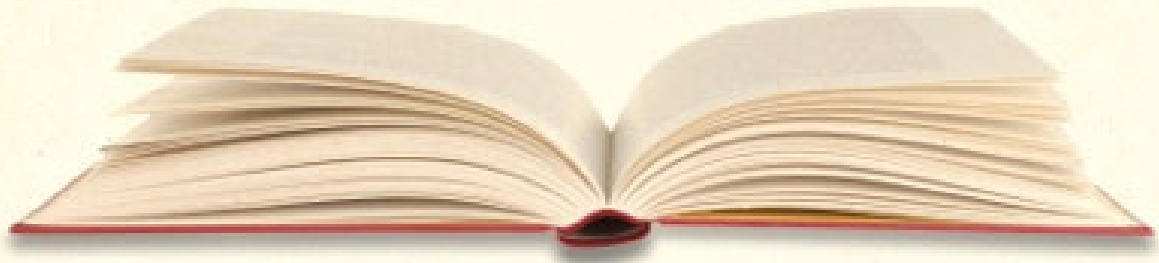


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OF



IMPROVISATIONS ON  
A CRAZY LITTLE THING

*Roger Rosenblatt*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
MAKING TOAST AND KAYAK MORNING

# *The Book of Love*

IMPROVISATIONS  
ON  
A CRAZY LITTLE THING

Roger Rosenblatt



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## Dedication

*For Ginny—  
Dedicated to the One I Love*

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THE CHINESE INVENTED THE CLOCK and gave it to the emperor, who stored it away in his palace. Eventually it was lost, and everyone who knew about the clock forgot about it. Four hundred years later, the French sailed into China, bearing a new invention of theirs, the clock. The Chinese, including the current emperor, were filled with amazement. They murmured and gaped, turning the machine this way and that. They said they never had seen anything as wonderful as a clock.

I THOUGHT OF YOU TONIGHT, as the moon was turning its knowing face, the way you turn away at one of my contrived displays of wit. Embarrassed for me, who lacks the wit to be embarrassed for myself. Why is that? Why are you prepared to bear my slightest burden? I, the tropical ceiling fan, wheeling in my faux aristocratic self-confidence. You, with the serene sense to look beyond the slats of the casa shutters to the mango trees, the bougainvillea, and beyond those, to the sea. So steady, your eyesight. But tonight was different. The past had changed, as it does sometimes, and instead of the self-regard I have worn like a white linen suit, I saw only you, and the strawberries, and the windfall of light on your hair.

The story I have to tell is of you. It was related to me by a priest who had read it in an Icelandic saga memorized by an Irishman who recited it on a road packed with flutists and soldiers, where he was overheard by a young girl from Florida who transcribed it in a language no one speaks anymore. So I need to tread carefully. Stories like yours tend to slip away, if one is not careful. And I have been known not to be careful. A dead language is like the ruins of a great civilization. It glows as it is excavated. I shall tell your story in that language, whose power derives from not saying everything, like a poem. Or a song. Maybe a song.

The story I have to tell is of you. Of others, too. Other people, other things. But mainly of you. It begins and ends with you. It always comes back to you.

SWONDERFUL, SBLUNDERFUL, SROMANTIC, frantic, logical, biological, whimsical, flimsical, writerly, golightly, puppy, yuppie, durable, curable, erratic, ecstatic, erotic, robotic, national, passionate, powerful, flowerful, ephemeral, dilemmal, musical, abusical, tragic, magic, mawkish, New Yawkish, ubiquitous, insickuous, loyal, cloyal, fleeting, cheating, parental, demented, beautiful, dutiful, diurnal, eternal, sawfullynice, sparadise.

THE PIANO BAR PLAYER is trying to express his fondness for the brunette standing near his bench. She has requested “Someone to Watch Over Me,” and has pointed out the song in the fake book that the piano player keeps propped up on his music stand. But the fake book is itself a prop. He cannot read music. He cannot tell her that. He wants so for her to like him, and she does. But “Just the Way You Are”? He was riffing on that tune when she entered the lounge. She seems above him, superior to him who never learned to do anything the right way. He is just a piano bar player. How he wants

to please and impress her. So he fidgets with the page of music, flutters it, and peers in, as if he were actually studying the chord progressions of “Someone to Watch Over Me.” She watches over his shoulder, then touches him on the arm. “Love songs are desire,” she says. “Why don’t you play it the way you feel it?” At once he relaxes and fails to exist, just as one fails to exist in water lights at the harbor, or in that first bite of a plum, in the summer, on a boat. “Why don’t we ride the song like a rainy road at night?” he says to her, courage mounting and the fingering flowing ahead of him, clairvoyant. He recalls the ecstasy of his years of failed instruction, and thinks, I never needed lessons, after all.

SOME ENCHANTED EVENING, you will meet a stranger and call it love at first sight, but it won’t be. We say that, love at first sight, when in fact we mean the opposite. In order to love someone you’ve never laid eyes on before, you need to have retained an impression of the person you would fall in love with once that person materialized. An amalgam, perhaps, of the best features of those you nearly loved. A composite image, like a police sketch. Finally, after many years, when that impression becomes a reality, and that person comes into view, across a crowded room or in a piano bar, or whatever, then somehow you know, because you always had known. Your imagination has preserved a picture of the love of your life. And look at *that*, she appears. So, when you think about it, the expression *love at first sight* really means “love at last.” Now that you know that, you can run to her side and make her your own. There you go.

THINGS I CAN TAKE, things I can’t.

I can take a punch. Maybe not two punches or three. But one, to the belly or the face. I can take a punch.

And a snub. I’ve been snubbed a lot, so I know that I can take a snub. Walk past me here. Don’t invite me there. I can take it.

I can take extreme heat and extreme cold. The heat was overwhelming in Lebanon and Israel. I climbed the Rock of Masada in a hundred degrees, which was no fun. But I could take it. And the cold, too, in Vermont and New Hampshire, those winters when the gas froze in the tank.

And a slur. I can take a slur. Call me kike, Hebe, Jew-boy. I can take that, too, though I’d probably want to find out if *you* can take a punch.

Gossips. I can take them, as well. I don’t like gossip, but I can live with it. And the company of fakes and tyrants and traitors and amiable accommodators—for brief periods. I can take it.

Disorder. It’s difficult for a Virgo. But I can take it. And shocks, I can take shocks. And I can take a joke.

And ingratitude; I kind of expect it. And cheapness and pettiness. Even rejection. I can take that. And an unlucky streak. Treachery, if you must. It gets me down, but I can take it.

Things I can’t take: your pain, the children’s pain, the verdict of your glance.

FROM TIME TO TIME on the *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, a character, perplexed as to how George could be with a scatterbrain like Gracie, would approach George and

begin, “I hope you won’t mind my asking—” At which point, George would cut him off and say, “I love her.”

Jack Benny reported that when Gracie died, hundreds of friends filled George and Gracie’s home. George greeted them with a smile, and told jokes to make them laugh. Every twenty minutes or so, Benny said, George would go off to a room by himself and weep. Then he’d return to his company, and make them laugh again.

“I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING to be there when I died,” says the husband in the movie *Take This Waltz*, just as his marriage is about to expire. A morose variant on the cliché “you’re the one I wanted to grow old with.” The remark is effective, as it comes from this particular husband, who is one of the world’s nicest guys. He cooks chicken, and writes cookbooks about cooking chicken. His first published success will be a book called *Tastes Like Chicken*. But that will come after his spritelike wife of five years runs off with another. She has loved her husband in a safe and solid way, because he is safe and solid. He views the future as death. “I thought you were going to be there when I died.” But she is neither safe nor solid. She dreams. And when the guy across the street (this is Toronto) catches her eye, she falls in love at first sight, which, as we know, means love at last. She is sort of a writer. He is sort of a painter, who transports citizens of Toronto in a rickshaw to earn a little money. He, too, is a nice guy. There are no villains in this piece.

If the movie is about anything, it is about gaps. Every life has at least one gap. And the choice every husband, wife, and lover makes is to live with one’s gap, or try to fill it. When the gap is filled, inevitably a different gap is revealed, just as gaping. “The Folks Who Live on the Hill,” that sweet, hopeful song about the safe and solid. How perfect would life be were we to love and wed and have some kids and see our children play and grow till we were old. And we would be called what we have always been called—the folks who live on the hill.

Take this scene in *Take This Waltz*: Before the lovers become lovers, physical lovers, body to body, they take an early morning swim together in a health club pool. They are the only ones in the pool. We watch them move toward and around each other, and away, and close again, but never touching. In an earlier scene he tells her how he would make love to her, up and down, if they were free to do what they wished. They do not touch in that scene, either. After their long aquatic ballet, the guy breaks the spell and grabs her ankle. Her expression changes, hardens. The swim dance is over. And, in fact, when they finally get together after she leaves her husband, they don’t last as a couple, because all they really had between them was their swim, a gap of their own, where nothing could go wrong. Only in the pool could their interplay be mistaken for life, the best life available to them, with no marriage vows broken, no taboos violated, and no disappointment. Forever would they be known as the folks who live in the water.

ON GAPS? First, a coffee cup is between you. Then a swimming pool. Then an ocean. Then everything. Keep your eye on gaps. They tend to grow when you’re not looking, like orchids, except they’re not as pretty as orchids.

ADVICE TO THOSE ABOUT TO ACQUIRE a Vermeer: Always look at it as it might appear in its average moments—not as it might glow in the light-dance of the fireplace, or burn from within on a fall Sunday morning when the amalgamation of the sun’s rays blasts red upon those fat Dutch cheeks, or as you would make it glow when you return home flushed with the one victory or another, or with wine. None of that.

Rather think: What will this masterpiece look like at 2:45 on a February afternoon when you have run out of toilet paper and the roof leaks and a horse has just kicked in your kitchen door for the fun of it. And a dead badger is wedged high in the chimney, stinking up the house. Consider moments such as these, when you are about to acquire your Vermeer. But yes. She is as lovely as a Vermeer.

THERE IS SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW. Uh-oh. I went and said it. There is something you should know. Your face stiffens. Your lips go dry. You seem certain that you are about to learn something painful, a terrible secret. Another woman? Another man? There is something you should know. One might as well say, I am about to ruin your life.

But think on it a moment. Just because the announcement usually is dire does not mean it has to be. Every time, I mean. There is something you should know. Say you are about to journey to an unknown place. And I, who have been to that place, would like to prepare you for certain contingencies and customs. At the dinner table, for instance, these people you are about to meet toss their food in the air and let it fall in their mouths. They all are quite good at this trick, and never spill a drop or a morsel. Do not be put off by this, much less horrified. It’s just their way. You might practice the trick yourself before you start out on your journey. Something you should know.

Or, the climate plummets below zero in the summers, and cornfields grow so red hot in the winters the corn rises just like that. Or polar bears run wild in the streets, and are deceptively affectionate, often appearing at your door and posing as houseguests. Or the women who live here insist on fornication as a gesture of welcome. Something you should know.

When it comes down to it, there is a lot that you should know if you do not already know it. Thus the announcement may be proffered at face value. If you are about to take a course in trigonometry, you should know algebra. If you are about to perform a quadruple bypass, it helps to know how to do it. Arcana you should know: You should know that the expression “the devil and the deep blue sea” has nothing to do with Satan, but rather refers to the line where a boat rests on the water, called the devil. You should know that “the lion’s share” derives from a fable even earlier than Aesop’s, in which the lion goes hunting with a cow, a goat, and a sheep, and claims all the spoils. So the phrase means not the largest portion, but rather the whole thing. You should know that the Chinese invented the clock.

And even this: The announcement may augur a delightful piece of news. People are speaking well of you. You should know that. You are about to inherit a fortune, or be awarded a prize. You should know that. You are beloved more than you ever can realize, in all the ways that someone can be loved, from every angle, from every way of looking at you or into you, for every quality of mind and heart that you possess. And for your frailties, too. And insecurities. And for your failings and stumbles. And



your sins, for those as well. You are beloved for being, and you need not lift a finger to earn it. Love is yours. My love is yours. Even this is something you should know.

JACK CALLS PAUL A NIGGER FAG, and Paul says the same thing of Jack. Whenever they fight, which is every fourth or fifth day, they will not speak to each other for one whole day afterward, and will fume and seethe and stomp around their railroad apartment on Bleecker Street, murmuring “nigger fag” as they pass each other in the hall. In bed they will roll to the outskirts, back to back with most of the bed in the gap between them. Yet all their friends know them to be “the happiest couple in New York.” And much of the time they are. Theirs was one of the first same-sex marriages in the state, and that makes them proud. And basically they are compatible, peas in a pod. They both like cooking and classical music. They like Vermeer. They like reruns of *Burns and Allen*. They like chess. They like baseball. They like pop, too—Blossom Dearie, Barbara Cooke, and Dean Martin, especially “Ain’t That a Kick in the Head.” And they both like fighting, which seems to come naturally to each of them, as Jack was reared in the South Central district of Los Angeles, and Paul in Bed-Stuy. You can take the boy out of the hood, says Jack, and Paul completes the axiom.

Which is why it was a near-fatal mistake for the six skinheads on Harrison Street one night, when they surrounded Paul and Jack, and called them nigger and called them fag. Both men were dressed in identical powder blue pullovers, and they were returning home from the ad agency that employs them. They must have looked like easy marks to the skinheads who, after a brawl that lasted no more than two minutes, limped away with fat lips and shiners (one with a crushed nose), while Jack and Paul bore hardly a scratch. On the walk home, they whistled “Ain’t That a Kick in the Head.” Tonight, they are side by side on the couch, watching *Mad Men* in peace and comfort, and holding hands, until Paul drives Jack up the wall by saying he’s got a man crush on Jon Hamm, and Jack calls him a nigger fag. Paul says the same thing of Jack.

SHOULD WE MIX IT UP this Valentine’s Day? I mean, a knock-down-drag-out, no-holds-barred, mano a mano donnybrook? Tell you what. Let’s make love instead. Let’s do both, and fight between the sheets. Does that make sense? Does anything about love make sense? Love is irrational, delirium, which is why neither of us would want to be one of those gods graced with eternal life, because if you have eternal life, why panic? Where’s the fire? But if you’re mortal, and are we ever, carpe diem, carpe whatever frantic impulse comes charging through your heart. So, what is it to be, baby? A shot to the kisser, or embraceable you? (I like a Gershwin tune. How about you?) Plant one on me.

The safest place to be in a tornado is a storm cellar. The safest place to be in a tornado is a railroad apartment on Bleecker Street or a Motel 6 or Williams-Sonoma or a bank vault or a North Korean prison. The safest place to be in a tornado is in your arms, you said, and you thought you meant it but you didn’t. Love is no safer than a bread knife. Take the storm cellar. Tea for two and two for tea and me for you in a cottage small by a waterfall? I don’t think so. Embrace the peril. If we’re going to pick our song, let’s make it “That Old Black Magic” and revel in the spin we’re in.

How do conservatives fall in love? Conservatively, I suppose, like porcupines. Love may be better suited to liberals, for whom disorder is a work of the imagination. Within the blink of a black eye, you can be enthralled by me, disgusted with me, appalled, enchanted, smitten, bored (*Bored? With me?*), forever mine, forever through with me. Analyze that. The trick is not to forget that we love each other, because couples do that. They forget to remember. As if love were keys to misplace or a purse to leave in an airport. What? Did I slip your mind? Did you slip mine? My irreplaceable you. My sweet erasable you, you'd be so nice to come home to. That is, you or Tracey the waitress with the boobs I glimpsed in Applebee's last Tuesday. Unforgettable, that's what you are not, unless I concentrate on you.

Pope Francis wants a church "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets" and not "clinging to its own security." Does that make sense? Is the pope Catholic? Francis embraces life as a holy mess. Love is a holy mess. You were not meant for me. I was not meant for you. Yet there we were in the snow, our first night together, the quiet luster of you, composed like a Gershwin tune, like "Embraceable You," while I, a whooping rhinoceros, stomped about in boots, a rhino in boots, until we stopped, stood thigh to thigh, looked up and caught the moon between the tangles of the clouds. My heart fell open like a knot.

Be my valentine in a blizzard, where the air is so thick, we cannot see two feet ahead of us, and we flail about snow-blind, without a GPS. Be my GPS to the tundra, the Klondike, and I'll be yours. The outer world of fanatics hates at the drop of a hat. Let us love as fanatically, unhinged. O promise me nothing. Is that you standing before me in the whiteout? Come to Papa. Do.

THESE DISTRACTED LOOKS OF MINE drive you up the wall, I know. I wish I could help it. No, I don't. Distracted is where I live. For weeks I have been turning a line over in my head—On first looking into Homer's Chapstick. Nothing good can come of such falderal, yet falderal is how I ral. How I roll. A Tootsie Tells How She Rolls. Did you know that Van Gogh's love song was "Call My Ear Responsible"? See? It is unthinkable that a noblewoman such as yourself should stoop to my level.

I talk to birds. Out loud. I talk to birds. In the early morning, when I am at the kitchen table writing, and a bird lands on top of the hedge outside the glass door to the deck, I talk to it, greet it, often with the single word "Bird." Stirred by a bird. I talk to squirrels, or to one particular squirrel (is it the same one every morning?), who skitters across the deck, sometimes from left to right, sometimes from right to left. In midskitter he will stop in his tracks, distractked, rear up, and turn to me, as if to say, annoyed, "What?" On the other side of the kitchen wall, you are watching Charlie Rose on *CBS This Morning* lead a discussion of whether or not we should invade Syria.

What would I do if I invaded Syria? Even if Syria deserves an invasion, I'm not familiar with the terrain. I wouldn't know where to go. Out of things. I'm too out of things. I wish I could be more with it, but then I might be conscripted to invade Syria, and how would that be? Who am I kidding? I don't wish I were more with it, neither does it, whatever it may be. You've known me since I was a fledgling distractee. Now I'm a pro. The distraction game can get out of hand, I hardly need to tell you. But on