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Sweating the small stuff

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The Guardian, Monday June 9 2008

"You're in a bad mood," said my wife. "I'm not in a bad mood," I said. "You are." "I'm not." I was.

I have been for about 30 years now. I can't help it.

I sweat the small stuff. There's a fly in the chicken soup for my soul. I don't lash out at strangers, or argue with my wife, but life gets to me. Cogito ergo I'm pissed off. To make matters worse, I live in a country, the US, that despises anger. Anger is to be conquered, suppressed, healed, usually with the self-help of hastily published books. And so, 15 years ago, I began to see a shrink. I still do. It hasn't helped. It makes me angry just thinking about it.

"If you don't want to go, just say so," said my wife. It was a Saturday morning, and we were heading into Manhattan for a comic book convention. I was hoping to find some angry writers, snarling graphic artists, people just as disillusioned with this miserable existence as I was.

"I do want to go," I said. "I do. Let's go."

The highway was jammed. The traffic was endless. The cops were everywhere. I tried my best to cheer up, tried to remember the things my shrink had told me. Have some perspective. Soon this will seem funny. Your mother didn't love you. It didn't help. Ninety minutes of aggressive driving later, we stopped at a diner for breakfast. The eggs were runny. The toast was burned. The coffee was cold.

"Check it out," said my wife, nodding towards the giant TV in the corner. It was April, and Pope Benedict was making his first ever visit to New York. That morning he was having Mass at Saint Patrick's Cathedral (doing Mass? Conducting Mass? Amassing?). It was quite a production. A teenage boy was singing. Long lines of people dressed in long white robes and tall white hats were milling about. There were cookies and wine for everyone. The Pope had the biggest chair of them all, and the tallest hat, and a golden staff of some kind, and what looked to me like some sort of a cape.

"I think it's a shawl," said my wife.

The waiter returned and filled my cup with more cold coffee. On the television, the Pope looked happy. His followers looked happy. The teenage boy seemed happy. "That'll be \$24," said the waiter.

An hour later, we arrived at the convention centre. The tickets cost a fortune. The parking was impossible. The lines were out the door.

"Check it out," said my wife, nodding towards the 30ft-tall image of Superman that greeted us at the front door.

It was not the orgy of creative fury I had hoped for. It was more like a gangbang of adolescent inanity.

It seemed this convention existed less as a gathering of like-minded writers and artists and more as an excuse for failures to dress up as superheroes. A man dressed as Superman hurried by. Batman waited for the restroom. Robin stood at the refreshment stand. Everyone seemed happy.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said to my wife.

The drive home took three hours, and for three hours, I sat behind the wheel and wondered, "Why?" Why was everyone else so happy? Why was I so unhappy? Did I need more therapy? Wasn't 15 years enough?

We got home and trudged wearily into the house. I sighed and dropped my bag on the floor. Just then my three-year-old son ran by, dressed as Darth Vader, his black cape flapping behind him as he shrieked with joy, the baby-sitter chasing behind him. And that's when it hit me. The Pope? Happy. Idiot dressed as Superman? Happy. Child in a Darth Vader costume? Happy. I don't need cognitive

behavioural therapy. I need a cape.

• It is Sunday morning, and, with my lawnmower before me, I am, unfortunately, God. THWACK! goes the head of a frog. SHPING! goes the skull of a snake. I am not a vegetarian. At restaurants, I order the steak. I like a side of bacon now and then. But I am a strict anthropomorphosiser, and it makes mowing a challenge. Toads. Caterpillars. And the newts. Oh dear God, the newts. I was raised to believe in a malicious God - a flooder, a plager, a kill-the-first-borner. Malice makes every death a murder, every misfortune a plot; there is no misery so deep that it can't be made worse with intent. I turn to my victims and apologise. "I'm sorry," I say to half a newt. "It's not your fault," I say to a third of a frog.

I wish I could explain. SHWACK. I wish I could tell them that it had nothing to do with them. KERUNK. And then it occurs to me: what if God isn't malicious? I'm certainly not; I'd rather the toads lived on. What if all the misery in the world - all the pain, all the suffering, all the disease - what if it's not about us? What if there is no malice? What if we're just newts in God's eternal backyard, and what if it needs a trim?

Just then, I noticed a bunch of weeds growing in a nearby bed. I stopped the mower, knelt down and reached in to remove the weeds. When I pulled my hand back out, it was covered with bees. They stung my hand, my shoulder, my face. And behold, I did grow angry. I ran to the garage, and returned with two cans of the strongest bee killer I could find.

Some of the bees died immediately. Some fell to the ground, where they writhed in agony. I picked my foot up to crush them, but didn't.

"Suffer," I said. "You little assholes." And dozens of them died there that day, on that place, as Auslander had decreed, for they had forsaken him.

• Charlie Brooker is away.

• Last week Shalom watched **The Wire**: "The following morning, as the dogs waited for their food, I asked my wife if she had 'fed these hairy motherfuckers yet or not'." This week Shalom didn't watch **The Wire**.

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