

LIFE IS NOT ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL. LIFE, IN FACT, IS OFTEN QUITE CRAPPY. OR AT LEAST THAT'S HOW **SHALOM AUSLANDER** SEES IT. WHICH IS WHY HE TRAVELED TO IOWA TO MEET A MAN WHO SPENT CHRISTMAS EVE LITERALLY STUCK HEADFIRST IN A SEPTIC TANK. THE AUTHOR WAS LOOKING FOR CONFIRMATION, A PARTNER IN MISERY. WOULD HE FIND IT?

📷 | GEOFF KERN



# The Fecal Position



**I HAVE SOMETHING** of a negative view of the world. People suck, sure, but that's just the beginning; call it Fate, call it God, call it Chance—I call it life, with a capital Crappy. Of course my best friend's cancer has returned. Of course my incontinent dog pees on my couch. Of course my new car is lousy in the snow and of course it snows three feet the day I pick it up from the dealer and of course it gets stuck in a ditch and of course it's now making a weird engine noise and of course the dealer says it's not covered.

"That's life. And it's a festering pile of maggot-ridden shit." Somebody famous once said that, or should have, but they didn't, because famous people suck, too.

I'm not much fun at parties.

Therapy? Hasn't helped. Marijuana? Hasn't helped. Mitch Albom? Hasn't helped.

Mitch Albom is the author of a bestselling book called *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Morrie Schwartz was Albom's college professor, and the book follows Morrie as he faces his impending death with, supposedly, wisdom and positivity. Also, Morrie dances. Morrie quickly becomes Mitch's spiritual guide and partner. Morrie tells Mitch to live fully. He tells Mitch to live in the moment. He tells Mitch to seek joy. Mitch decides to live fully. Mitch decides to live in the moment. Mitch decides to seek joy. His time with Morrie shows Mitch that life is a wonderful gift, which he probably suspected anyway, but it's nice to have it confirmed by an old man, particularly one who dances.

Frankly, I thought Morrie was full of shit. I didn't buy his whole Deathbed-Obi-Won Kenobi thing, and I was pretty sure he was burying his own pessimism inside a shiny package of pseudowisdom he was selling so hard so he could buy it later himself. My shrink calls that "transferring." He also tells me that I focus on the negative, that I view life through the shit-coated prism of a lousy childhood, and that life is not a cosmic backed-up toilet nobody can figure out how to flush.

Which is why, despite my feelings for Morrie, I envied Mitch.

I needed a spiritual partner...a guru...an

••• Bob Schoff, at home in Iowa, a few months after the dunking.

anguished Master to my wretched Grasshopper...a dark someone who could confirm what I thought of life instead of telling me to cheer up.

"Smile!" says the waitress at the local coffee shop.

"Live with passion!" says Tony Robbins.

"Become a better you!" says the Joel Osteen 2008 Day-to-Day Calendar.

Misery loves company, and the fact is, in this world of "2002 Ways to Cheer Yourself Up," "14,000 Things to Be Happy About," and "14,000 Things to Be Happy About—Revised & Updated," a miserable guy can get to feeling pretty lonely.

What I need is confirmation.

What I need is support.

What I need is a partner in existential darkness.

That's where the Internet comes in, mankind's collective constant reminder that all the world's a stage, and that there's a gaping hole torn in the floor, and that it's probably from a suicide bomber or some sort of horrifying natural disaster. The Internet! Paranoid bloggers, delusional commenters, Drudge Report! Ah, Drudge Report. Of course the president lied! Of course a father dismembered his family! Of course someone shot up a kindergarten, and of course there's a video of it and of course it's the week's most downloaded! And so, a few days after Christmas—when the misery of life is temporarily buried beneath a blanket of tinsel and empty wishes for "good" and I'm feeling most alone—I went online.

••• On this very spot, 77-year-old Bob Schoff peered into the (fetid) void.

*Priests Brawl at Bethlehem Birthplace of Jesus?*

Good, but not great.

*Tiger Chews Off Zookeeper's Arm?*

Getting better.

*Iowa Man Spends Christmas Eve Stuck Upside Down in Septic Tank?*

Bingo.

*(AP) Des Moines—It was a stinky holiday for Bob Schoff. The 77-year-old man spent part of Christmas Eve stuck upside down in the opening of his septic tank, with his head inside and his feet kicking in the air above.*

It seemed almost too good to be true. Here was a man who experienced what I had only before thought of as a troublingly apt metaphor: He had literally been in a world of shit. He had physically lived through what I feel emotionally every day of my life.

"Is this Bob Schoff?" I said into the telephone later that afternoon.

Maybe it wasn't just me. Maybe I shouldn't just cheer up. Maybe the fabled bucket everyone doggedly insists is half full is half full of your own shit and you're going to die upside down inside of it. Perhaps if a Jew from New York City, as was I, and a non-Jew from Iowa, as was he, could come together on the whole life-is-crappy thing, it would be real progress for the world. Perhaps that meeting of miserable minds would help me more than a meeting with my shrink ever could.

Perhaps I had found my Morrie.

"Yes," said the man on the other end of the phone. His voice was soft, and it quivered in the way that old people's voices do because life is a futile run from death and disease, which will catch us all soon enough

in their ghastly, miserable grips. Nice.

I introduced myself, told Bob I had heard about his ordeal, and explained that I wanted to come out to Iowa to meet him.

"Come to Iowa?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Why's that?" asked Bob.

"I have something of a negative view of the world," I said.

"THAT'S ME," said the man with the oversize luggage and the damp patches beneath his arms. He had been fumbling his way down the narrow airplane aisle for some time, dragging his bag between the seats, crushing the knees and elbows of anyone unfortunate enough to get in his way, and he had stopped beside me, breathing heavily. He pointed to the empty seat beside me with one hand while mopping his damp brow with the forearm of the other. I smelled chili.

I'm going to propose something here that may seem a little novel, maybe even a little shocking, but it needs to be said and it needs to be said now: Wheels alone do not make something a carry-on. You can't just tack a couple of rusty metal wheels onto the back end of a fucking grand piano and bring it with you onboard. It's called a carry-on. Even after Joey Packs-A-Lot had wrestled his laptop, two hardcover books, and a three-inch-thick file folder out of his bag, it still took two flight attendants to help get the damn thing into the overhead compartment. He wiped his brow again, piled all his crap on top of his lap, squeezed into his seat, commandeered our shared armrest, reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a Taco Bell ½-Pound Cheesy Rice & Bean Burrito. Of course he did.

When we touched down at Des Moines International Airport, snow was falling heavily, the roads hadn't been plowed, and according to the car-rental agent, they were expecting eight inches overnight plus six more the next morning.

"You can't unscramble eggs," says Joel Osteen.

"Do you have anything with four-wheel drive?" I asked the rental agent.

"No."

"Snow tires?"

"No."

"Can you give me directions to the Marriott?"

"Out the airport and to the right," she said.

As it turned out, it was out the airport and to the left.

"Quit wasting your time," says Joel Osteen, "trying to figure out something that you can't change."

What should have been a ten-minute drive to the hotel became a forty-five-minute cuss-filled rear-wheel slide through the outskirts of Des Moines, and by the time I checked in, it was too late to get any dinner.



“God,” says Joel Osteen, “wants you to enjoy life to the fullest.”

Has anyone ever punched Joel Osteen in the face? I mean really just hauled off and clocked that fucker right in the face? The teeth look new, so maybe someone has.

I switched off the lights, climbed into bed, and closed my eyes.

Yes, *someone has*, I decided as the infant in the room next door began to scream. Of course it did.

**A SEPTIC TANK** is the key component of a septic system, a small-scale sewage-treatment system used to treat and dispose of various household wastes (sewage). Waste water (piss) and waste solids (shit) flow from the home to the septic tank, which is buried outside. From there, the liquefied sewage flows to a smaller tank, called a distribution box. The distribution box distributes the sewage from the septic tank to the leach field, also referred to as a drain field or seepage field, depending upon locality.

On December 23, 2007, Bob Schoff discovered a blockage in his distribution box. The following afternoon, he dug a three-and-a-half-foot-deep-by-two-foot-wide hole to the top of the box. He lay down on the ground, braced himself with his left hand, and reached down into the hole with his right. He removed the top of the distribution box, and after some poking around, dislodged a clump of toilet paper from the box’s main inlet hole. Suddenly, Bob’s supporting hand slipped, and he fell headfirst into the narrow hole, trapped upside down in a flying-superhero pose: one arm up beside his head, the other arm against his hip. He couldn’t move. His head was inside the distribution box, his lower lip resting on the box’s uppermost edge. Only his feet remained visible outside the hole. To make matters worse, because he had just cleared the blockage in the line, the sewage was now able to pass from the tank, through the distribution box, and out to the leach field, also referred to as a drain field or seepage field, depending upon locality.

He stayed there for some time.

It was just after five o’clock in the afternoon, December 24, 2007, Christmas Eve.

**THE GODDAMN** baby cried all night. I have a baby of my own, so don’t get all bent out of shape about this, but there are times when simple common courtesy demands a smothering. *Hello, Housekeeping? Can you bring an extra pillow up to room 1491? Yes, I realize I am calling from 1493.* Unless you smother a dozen of them, it won’t get on Drudge anyway, so don’t worry about it.

The parking lot hadn’t been plowed.

The roads hadn’t been plowed.

The traffic lights were out.

Bob shook my hand warmly, welcomed me into his home, and led me to the living room. He is a short, spry, silver-haired man

**HERE WAS A MAN WHOM GOD HAD PICKED UP BY HIS FEET AND DIPPED LIKE A FRENCH CRULLER INTO A GRANDE CRAPPUCCINO, AND THE BEST I COULD GET OUT OF HIM WAS A HANDFUL OF EMPTY PLATITUDES. NO RAGE. NO TORMENT.**

of 77. I’m short, too. Maybe misery is a short thing. Hitler? Short. Cartman? Short. Osteen? Five feet eleven inches. If I ever reach 77 (which I won’t), I hope to be as healthy as Bob (I won’t). He waited for me to take my seat upon the couch before sitting down in the loveseat across from me. He gazed out onto the large picture window that looked out onto the small front yard and watched as the squirrels and birds ran to and fro. Soon they would be dead.

“Beautiful day,” said Bob. “Beautiful day.”

I nodded. Was my Morrie testing me? Was this some sort of code?

“Streets are crap, though,” I said.

Bob smiled and shrugged.

I reminded him of why I had come: that I had something of a negative view of the world, that everyone insisted life was good, that I felt alone in my negativity, and that I hoped that if anyone could confirm the shittiness of life, a man who almost died in his own shit could. Was it as bad as I thought, Bob? Did everything suck? Was there a way through it? Was it worth even trying?

Bob smiled and shrugged. “Got m’good days and m’bad days,” he said.

I nodded. I wasn’t so sure I agreed with him on the m’good-days part, but I decided to meet him halfway: Yes, I said, we definitely have m’bad days.

“Many of them,” I added. “Many, many, many of them.”

Bob smiled and shrugged.

Across the way, I could see Bob’s elderly neighbor trying to make his way down his icy front stoop. He held on to the rail with both hands.

“Have you always lived in Des Moines?” I asked.

“M’whole life,” said Bob. “I’m not much for traveling.”

The neighbor slipped but managed to catch himself. He pulled himself up and went back inside. Would his few remaining crumbs of bread be enough to last him until morning? No. No, they wouldn’t.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “Planes go down.”

“I like fishin’,” said Bob.

“That’s got to be the worst way,” I said. “To die, I mean.”

“Like to garden, too,” said Bob.

I decided to use our airline-safety discussion to segue into a talk about his near-death incident. I asked him how he dealt with it; something like that, it has to make you angry.

“Nah, didn’t make me angry.”

“It didn’t?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Just easygoin’, I guess,” said Bob.

“Easygoin’?” I asked.

Bob looked back at the window. He smiled as a pair of starving birds landed on one of the many bird feeders hanging from the tree nearest the window.

“How’s that happen?” I asked.

“Don’t bother me none, really.”

“Were you hurt?”

“Not t’bad.”

“Did it smell down there?”

“Didn’t smell s’bad. Smelled like dirt, mostly.”

“That’s not what dirt smells like, Bob.”

“I was covered in it.”

“In what?”

“Dirt. And some other stuff.”

“People around town must tease you, though, right?”

“I’m a celebrity,” said Bob. “There goes the guy from TV.”

I gently pointed out that he was on TV for nearly dying in his own excrement.

“I was on the front page of the newspaper in Omaha.”

“That didn’t bother you?”

“Just another day in m’life,” said Bob.

What the fuck was going on here? Had I wasted my time? If this guy had bridge-work, he’d be Joel Osteen. If he had whiskers and a tail, he’d be Hello fucking Kitty. Here was a man whom God had picked up by his feet and dipped like a French cruller into a grande crappuccino, and the best I could get out of him was a handful of empty platitudes. No rage. No torment.

I searched desperately for an answer.

God? I wondered. Was it God? Did this chipper fucking lunatic believe in God?

Bob shook his head.

“Nah. Last time I went to church,” he said, “was probably thirty-five years ago.”

Maybe he was one of those freaks who had a happy childhood? Maybe Mommy loved him, the crazy bitch. Maybe that’s why he was so sunshiny and I was so black-holey?

Unfortunately for me, Bob Schoff has had a remarkably shitty life. He’s happily married now, but there’s a divorce in his past, and he has two adult children he doesn’t speak with. His parents divorced when he was a child, and one year later his father “up and left” for California, leaving Bob and his six siblings as wards of the state. He no longer speaks to any of his siblings, not even the sister who lives just a few miles away. She phoned the day after his story hit the press: “Boy what some people wouldn’t do

to get on TV," she said.

"Kind of a rough story," I said. "Do you see it that way?"

"I'm easygoin'."

Bob smiled again, shrugged again, and looked back out the window again. A squirrel had busted up the bird party and was trying to get at the feeder. *DEATH TO THE SPARROWS*, he wrote on the tree before setting the birdhouse on fire.

You know what Mitch Albom got off Morrie? "Money is not a substitute for tenderness." And "Invest in the human family." And "Love each other or die." Bullshit, sure, but *good* bullshit.

There is a New England-based clothing company called Life Is Good. They sell T-shirts that say *LIFE IS GOOD* and hats that say *LIFE IS GOOD*. They sell backpacks, too. Here's what the backpacks say: *LIFE IS GOOD*. They are extremely popular. You know why? Because life *isn't* good. Because \$25 is a pretty good deal for a 100 percent cotton bold-faced lie. I'd pay a hundred times that for someone to just tell me the truth. To fess up. For Joel Osteen to stand onstage, look into the camera God wants him to be on, and say, "Fuck it. Fuck it all. Life is a pile of shit, but I get my teeth whitened every month, and that's how I get through it. Find your own way, my children. For me, it's BrightSmile."

Where was my confirmation? Where was my support? Where was my partner in existential darkness?

I switched tactics. I thought if I pressed Bob a bit more, "brought him back to the moment," so to speak, I could get him to acknowledge the awfulness of his experience. I leaned forward in my chair, took a deep breath, and looked Bob straight in the eye.

"So you're 77 years old," I said.

"Yep."

"And you're down there, at the bottom of your septic tank, and you're thinking, *This is it. I'm 77 years old, and this is how it ends—upside down in a septic tank.*"

"Wasn't in m'septic tank," said Bob. "Was in m'distribution box."

"Jesus Christ, Bob," I said.

I acknowledged that he was in his distribution box but pointed out that nevertheless, this was an awful cap on a man's life: You spend nearly eight decades working on yourself, living a good and noble life, hoping for nothing more than to be able to finish this brutal, pointless journey with a thimbleful of respectability left over, only to end up on the national news for nearly drowning in your own shit, for getting stuck upside down in your septic tank?

"Wasn't in m'septic tank," said Bob.

Just to be clear to the nonplumbers out there, this is a distinction that essentially amounts to arguing that he wasn't upside down in the enormous primary shitbox, he was only upside down in the smaller, secondary shitbox. I tried again.

••• Bob and Toni Schoff have been happily married for thirty-four years.

"So when you're down there," I said, "are you feeling any kind of anger? Are you thinking, *This is it? This is what it comes to?*"

"I was thinking I was dead," said Bob. With a laugh.

I told Bob that I didn't understand—that if I live to 77 and pass away in my sleep, or I get sick—okay, fine, that's the thing you expect. You don't expect to make it that long just to die upside down in a sewage hole.

"So me," I said, "I would've been angry."

"No, I wasn't angry," said Bob. "I'm pretty active."

Two possibilities were beginning to form in my mind: (1) Bob's secret to happiness was finding the razor-thin silver linings on enormous pitch-black clouds, or (2) Bob was in denial.

"May I speak with your wife?" I asked.

Bob and Toni have been married thirty-four years. She came into the living room and sat beside him on the loveseat.

I ran my hand through my hair and frowned.

"Has he always been like this?" I asked.

"Always," she said. She seemed as annoyed as I. "He's just that way. I feel things a little bit differently. I get ticked."

And when she does, she told me, Bob leaves the room. He just walks away.

"He just walks out?"

"Yep."

"No consoling?"

"Nah."

"No commiserating?"

"Nope."

"Is that true?" I asked Bob.

Bob smiled, shrugged, and looked out the window. It was true. I put the cap back on my pen, closed my notebook, and turned to Toni. If his own wife couldn't figure him out, I sure as hell wasn't going to.

"I'll tell you," I said to her, "I'd give all the money in the world for a pill that would get me like that"—I nodded in Bob's direction—"for just five goddamn minutes."

"I know what you mean," said Toni.

"It's very annoying," I said.

"Sure is," said Toni.

I stood and looked out the window. The snow was falling again, and the roads were covered. I pulled on my coat and shook Toni's hand. "This has been really unhelpful," I said to her.

Bob had already gotten up and was standing by the window. I went and stood beside him.

"Looks bad," I said.

"It'll be okay."

"They still haven't plowed," I said.

"They should be out soon."

"I hope the flight's not cancelled."

"You'll be fine."

*Has anyone ever punched Bob Schoff*



*in the face?* I wondered. I shook his hand, thanked him for nothing, and left.

**OUTSIDE**, another inch had already fallen, and as I brushed the snow from my car my thoughts returned to Joel Osteen. I imagined Joel's car sliding down a long snow-covered road, colliding with a telephone pole, and bursting into flames. I imagined Joel running from the car, head ablaze; he's rolling on the ground and screaming and shouting about the Lord, and finally, flames extinguished, he takes out his cell phone and calls Bob Schoff.

"Got m'good days and m'bad days," says Bob.

"Thank you," says Joel. "Thank you."

I hadn't found my Morrie; I had found Joel Osteen's Morrie. If anyone was my Morrie, it was Toni.

I backed out of the Schoff's driveway, slid across the street, and got stuck in a snowbank. I had come to Iowa hoping for confirmation of my view of life as a trip down the River Shits and, if possible, some guidance on navigation. It occurred to me, as I stepped on the gas and spun my tires, that I had gotten both; denial implies at least a momentary acknowledgement, and maybe, at a certain point, acknowledgement becomes too painful. Maybe you shout your whole life ("Scream when you burn," urged Bukowski—and then, apparently, drink heavily) at pain, at suffering, at the fact that dogs die young while politicians grow old, and then you hit 70 and your friends die and your hips break and it's a good day if you can manage a strong, healthy piss...and so maybe denial (total, absolute, "got m'good and m'bad days" denial) is the 77-year-old's scream when they burn.

Bob seems happy. Happier than I am, at any rate. I'm 37 now. That's forty years before I get to the denial stage. Fourteen thousand six hundred days.

I'm looking forward to it already.

I gassed my way out of the snowbank, cursed at the rental-car company, slid sideways across the street, nearly took out Bob's mailbox, and started on my way to the airport. The snow began to fall more heavily.

Of course it did.

SHALOM AUSLANDER is the author of *Foreskin's Lament*. This is his first piece for GQ.