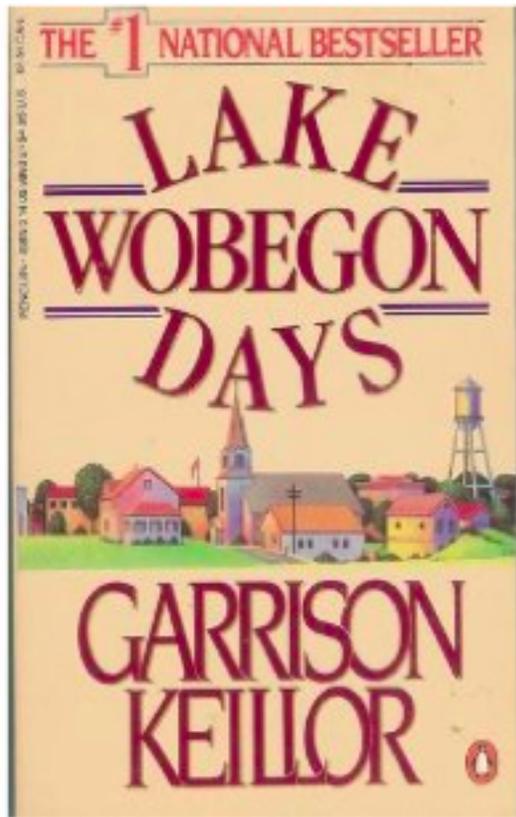


95 THESES 95

from *Lake Wobegon Days* (footnotes) by Garrison Keillor



* Terpsichore Terrace is the address of the former Wobegonian who wrote *95 Theses 95*, a neatly typed manifesto that he brought home in late October 1980, along with a fine woman from Boston whom his parents wanted to meet, since he had married her a few weeks before. His parents live in a little white house on the corner of Branch and Taft, where his old bedroom under the eaves has been lovingly preserved. He left his wife to look at it and snuck away to the Lutheran church, intending to nail the 95 to the door, a dramatic complaint against his upbringing, but then something in his upbringing made him afraid to pound holes in a good piece of wood, and he heard the Luther Leaguers inside at their Halloween pizza party and was afraid he would be seen--also, he was afraid the 95 would blow away since all he had were small carpet tacks. So he took it downtown and slipped it under Harold Starr's door with a note that said, "Probably you won't dare publish this."

Harold considered publication twice--first when his pipes froze and the office toilet burst, putting the Linotype out of commission and leaving him short of copy, and again when he had three wisdom teeth pulled and sprained his ankle, which he had hooked around the pedestal of the dentist's chair, and had to use crutches for three days during which he heard the same joke about those teeth having long roots more than thirty times--but he held off, and the 95 remains on his desk, in a lower stratum of stuff under council minutes and soil conservation reports.

In the same stack are some letters from the anonymous author asking for his manuscript back. Like so many writers of manifestos, he forgot to keep a copy, and over the years his letters have descended to a pitiful pleading tone quite unlike his original style.

I simply can't understand despite repeated requests. . . This is very important to me. . . The ms. is *mine* and I need it *now* for a longer work I'm writing. . . I know you are busy and please forgive me if I seem impatient but I beg you to *please* attend to this small matter. I enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Five such envelopes sit in the stack, with five addresses that show a general trend toward the east and south, with one brief long jump to California. Three are plain manila envelopes, two are Federal Express. The manuscript of 95 has sustained some coffee damage but is in good shape, except for three pages that are missing. "They are around here somewhere, I remember seeing them," says Harold, "and as soon as I get this desk straightened around and find the damn things, I'll send it all back to him. I'm just one person, you know, I'm not the U.S. Post Office."

Here, unabridged, is the document as Harold has it.

95 THESES 95

1. You have fed me wretched food, vegetables, boiled to extinction, fistfuls of white sugar, slabs of fat mucousy casseroles made with globs of cream of mushroom, until it's amazing my heart still beats. Food was not fuel but ballast; we ate and then we sank like rocks. Every Sunday, everyone got stoned on dinner except the women who cooked it and thereby lost their appetites--the rest of us did our duty and ate ourselves into a gaseous stupor and sat around in a trance and mumbled like a bunch of beefheads.

2. Every Advent, we entered the purgatory of *lutefisk*, a repulsive gelatinous fishlike dish that tasted of soap and gave off an odor that would gag a goat. We did this in honor of Norwegian ancestors, much as if the survivors of a famine might celebrate their deliverance by feasting on elm bark. I always felt the cold creeps as Advent approached, knowing that this dread delicacy would be put before me and I'd be told, "Just have a little." Eating "a little" was, like vomiting "a little," as bad as "a lot."

3. You have subjected me to endless boring talk about the weather, regularity, back problems, and whether something happened in 1938 or 1939, insisting that I sit quietly and listen to every word. "How's it going with you?" you said. "Oh, about the same," you replied. "Cold enough for you?" It was always cold, always about the same.

4. You taught me to worship a god who is like you, who shares your thinking exactly, who is going to slap me one if I don't straighten out fast. I am very uneasy every Sunday, which is cloudy and deathly still and filled with silent accusing whispers.

5. You have taught me to feel shame and disgust about my own body, so that I am afraid to clear my throat or blow my nose. Even now I run water in the sink when I go to the bathroom. "Go to the bathroom" is a term you taught me to use.

6. You have taught me the fear of becoming lost, which has killed the pleasure of curiosity and discovery. In strange cities, I memorize streets and always know exactly where I am. Amid scenes of great splendor, I review the route back to the hotel.

7. You have taught me to fear strangers and their illicit designs, robbing me of easy companionship, making me a very suspicious friend. Even among those I know well, I continue to worry: what do they *really* mean by liking me?

8. You have taught me to value a good night's sleep over all else including adventures of love and friendship, and even when the night is charged with magic, to be sure to get to bed. If God had not meant everyone to be in bed by ten-thirty, He would never have provided the ten o'clock newscast.

9. You taught me to be nice, so that now I am full of niceness, I have no sense of right and wrong, no passion. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," you said, so I am very quiet, which most people think is politeness. I call it repression.

10. You taught me to worry about my face. The fear of acne, which will follow me to my grave, began when I was fourteen, a time of life when a person has no skin but is all raw flesh (skin-colored), and grew a crop of zits around my nose and learned various positions, sitting and standing, in which I could keep a hand to my face. They were triggered by fear. You said, "I'd like you to have a nice complexion for Dorothy and Bob's wedding. They'll be taking pictures." So I wound up looking like a three-bean salad. I died inside to see myself in the mirror. Better that those blotches meant nose cancer; at least I could go to the hospital and get flowers. What I had, people don't send flowers for. When I was sixteen, I bought the first ski mask in town. "Why don't you smile more?" you said.

11. You taught me "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," teaching me to plod forward in the face of certain doom.

12. You taught me to be competitive even in matters of faith, to take pride in the great privilege of having been born Lutheran, even at moments of contrition. Religious intolerance was part of our faith. We believed Catholics were illiterate peasants, foreign-born, who worshiped idols. In Sunday School, we looked up to see a gory picture of "Christian Infants Martyred at the Hands of Papist Clergy." We believed there was a secret tunnel between rectory and nunnery. We believed they poisoned the pets of Protestants. Whatever they believed, it wasn't right.

13. In place of true contrition, you taught me to be apologetic. I apologize continually. I apologize for my own existence, a fact that I cannot change. For years, you told me I'd be sorry someday. I am.

14. You taught me to trust my own incompetence and even now won't let me mash potatoes without your direct supervision. "Don't run the mixer so fast that you get them all over," you say, as if in my home, the walls are covered with big white lumps. I can't mow a lawn or hang tinsel on a Christmas tree or paint a flat surface in your presence without you watching, worried, pointing out the unevenness.

15. You taught me an indecent fear of sexuality. I'm not sure I have any left underneath this baked-on crust of shame and disgust. For years I worried because my penis hangs slightly to the left, and finally read in a book that this is within the realm of the normal, but then wondered, What sort of person would read books like that?

16. You have provided me with poor male role models, including the Sons of Knute, the Boosters Club and others whose petulance, inertia, and ineptitude are legendary. I was taught to respect them: men who clung to tiny grudges for decades and were devoted to vanity, horsefeathers, small potatoes--not travel but the rites of trunk-loading and map-reading and gas mileage; not faith but the Building Committee; not love but supper.

17. Listening to them, I was taught to keep quite. Stupidity had the floor, always. Argument was impolite.

18. You instilled in me a paralyzing nostalgia for a time before I was born, a time when men were men and women were saintly, and children were obedient, industrious, asked no luxuries, entertained themselves, and knew right from wrong. I, on the other hand, was a symptom of everything going to hell in a handbasket. I was left to wonder why I bothered to be born.

19. You brought me up to respect fastidiousness as incarnate value, Christianity made evident. As a tiny child, I lined up my string beans in a row on the plate, taking exactly three per bite. I hesitated to eat the mashed potatoes, lest the little gravy lake spill. I kept useless collections of stamps, seashells, postcards, rocks, delighting in their deadly neatness. In our home, all surfaces were meant to be bare, emptiness was the ideal. The fear of dust (amathophobia) was endemic. One little book lying on the floor: "This house is a mess. Why can't you ever put things back when you're done with them?" We were passionate about snow-shoveling and made nice even banks. In summer, I edged the lawn, trimmed around trees, attacked dandelions. When Grandpa died, we tended his grave zealously, kneeling at the stone to landscape his resting place. "He was a good man," someone said once in the cemetery. "Ja," you said. "I've been thinking a little Turf-Builder. And maybe a fungicide."

20. In our theology, hard work was its own justification, a guard against corruption. Thus, we never bought an automatic dishwasher or a self-cleaning oven or a self-propelled mower with bag attachment, believing they would lead to degeneracy. We raked the grass clippings into a pile and later burned it. We did not use it for garden mulch because mulching kept weeds down and it was important that children weed the garden, slaving through the long hot afternoons. It was good for them. It kept them from moral turpitude.

21. Suffering was its own reward, to be preferred to pleasure. As Lutherans, we viewed pleasure with suspicion. Birth control was never an issue with us. Nor was renunciation of pleasures of the flesh. We never enjoyed them in the first place.

We were born to suffer. Pain was pooh-poohed. If you broke your leg, walk home and apply ice. Don't complain. Don't baby yourself. Our mothers ironed sheets, underwear, even in July. Our fathers wore out their backs at heavy, senseless labor, pulled their own teeth, lived with massive hemorrhoids. When Grandpa had his heart attack, he took one aspirin and went to bed early. We children suffered through dull repetitive schoolwork, under the lash of sadistic teachers. Punishment was good for you, deserved or not; if you hadn't done wrong, well, then it was for the last time.

22. A year ago, a friend offered to give me a backrub. I declined vociferously. You did this to me.

23. Two years ago I carried a box-spring mattress up four flights of stairs, declining offers of help, and did something to my back which still hurts. I didn't see a doctor but did buy a different mattress (orthopedic). Someone helped me carry it up and I felt guilty and kept saying, "No. Really. I got it now," all the way up as my back killed me and my eyes filled with tears.

24. Recently, I dropped my air conditioner on my foot. I think this is related.

25. Despite the bum foot, I kept running four miles per day. I love the misery of running. I love the misery of feeling I should run more, hundreds of miles, and do it on my knees.

26. You taught me to believe in quietness as a sign of good character, that a child who sat silently with hands folded was a child who had overcome temptation. In fact, I was only scared, but being a nice quiet boy, I was offered as an example to other children, many of whom despise me to this day. I did not have to be shushed on Sunday afternoon but went about my glum business of cutting out pictures from the rotogravure and pasting them into a scrapbook, being careful not to snip too loud. I learned that quietness could be used to personify not only goodness, but also intelligence and sensitivity, and so I silently earned a small reputation as a boy of superior intellect, a little scholar, a little sunbeam in this dark world, while in fact I was smug and lethargic and dull as a mud turtle.

27. Even now, I go to someone's house and think I am a good guest if I am very quiet, don't ask for anything, and refuse anything that's offered. This behavior makes other people think of me as a nincompoop.

28. I find it very hard to whoop it up, hail a pal, split a gut, cut a rug, have a ball, or make a joyful noise. I'm your boy, all right.

29. You taught me not to go overboard, lose my head, or make a big deal out of it, but to keep a happy medium, that the truth is in the middle. No extremes. Don't exaggerate. Hold your horses. Keep a lid on it. Save it for later. Be careful. Weigh the alternatives. Wear navy blue. Years later, I am constantly adjusting my feelings downward to achieve that fine balance of caution and melancholy.

30. You taught me not to be "unusual" for fear of what the neighbors would say. They were omniscient, able to see through walls. We knew they'd talk, because we always talked about them. We thought they were nuts, but still we shouldn't offend them.

31. Your theology wasn't happy about the idea of mercy and forgiveness, which only gave comfort to enemies, and so, although you recited the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, you remembered your debtors and managed not to speak to certain people--a major feat when you live in a town so small and attend the same church as they, an act of true dedication. In your behalf, I still dislike Bunsens. I have no idea why.

32. Your own mistakes you managed to explain to your own satisfaction. When you hurt people, you explained that you didn't mean to. When you gossiped malicious gossip, you explained that "everyone knows this and besides it's true." You had a good reason for every dumb thing you did which you said I would understand someday. I don't. I don't understand it at all.

33. *Oh, I think you can do without that.* Your words come back to me when I look at a new sportcoat. Good Scottish tweed, it costs \$130, and when I try it on, it makes me feel smart and lucky and substantial, but you're right, I can do without it, and so I will. *You can get a perfectly good one at Sears for half the price.* If I bought the \$130 one, pride would leak in and rot my heart. Who do I think I am?

34. For fear of what it might do to me, you never paid me a compliment, and when other people did, you beat it away from me with a stick. "He certainly is looking nice and grown up." *He'd look a lot nicer if he did something about his skin.* "That's wonderful that he got that job." *Yeah, well, we'll see how long it lasts.* You trained me so well, I now perform this service for myself. I deflect every kind word directed to me, and my denials are much more extravagant than the praise. "Good speech." *Oh, it was way too long, I didn't know what I was talking about, I was just blathering on and on, I was glad when it was over.* I do this under the impression that it is humility, a becoming quality in a person. Actually, I am starved for a good word, but after the long drought of my youth, no word is quite good enough. "Good" isn't enough. Under this thin veneer of modesty lies a monster of greed. I drive away every faint praise, beating my little chest, waiting to be named Sun-God, King of America, Idol of Millions, Bringer of Fire, the Great Haji, Thun-Dar The Boy Giant. I don't want to say, "Thanks, glad you liked it." I want to say, "Rise my people. Remove your faces from the carpet, stand, look me in the face."

35. The fear of poverty haunts me. You weren't poor but you anticipated the possibility by believing you were.

36. The fear of illness. You were seldom ill but you were always prepared to be.

37. Your illnesses were the result of exhaustion by good works, mine the result of having disobeyed you and not worn a scarf, not taking vitamins. I crawl into bed like a dog and feel not only unwell but unworthy. If someone came into shoot me, I'd turn on the light so he could take better aim.

38. The fear of poverty and illness, brought on by a sudden craving for cheap wine. A flaw in my character, a weak seam, and one day I bend down to tie my shoes and hear a rip in my head, and on the way to work I pick up a gallon of muscatel, and spend my lunch hour in the alley. A month later, I have no job, no house, no car, and my nose is dark purple and swollen to the size of an eggplant. My voice is like sandpaper, I cough up gobs of phlegm, my liver feels like a sandbag. My teeth are rotten stumps. I crap in my pants and lurch toward strangers, mumbling about spare change. The flaw was created by disobeying you. "Someday you'll find out," you said, and I probably will.

39. Damn.

40. Damn.

41. Damn.

42. Damn. [Three pages missing.]

56. In our house, work was a weapon, used as punishment, also to inspire guilt. You waited until I sat in a chair and read the funnies, then you charged in: "How can you *sit* with this mess all around you?" I looked down. One lonely sock on the floor, a Juicy Fruit wrapper on the table. You snatched them up, sighed as if your heart was broken, and stalked out. A great sigh, so loud it could be heard in the back of the balcony. You worked your fingers to the bone, and did anyone lift a finger to help? No, they didn't. When I lifted a finger, you told me it was the wrong finger and I was lifting it the wrong way. When I vacuumed, suddenly vacuuming became an exact science, a branch of physics, and I was doing it all wrong--you snatched the hose away and said, "Here, I might as well do it myself," which was what you intended all along.

57. You taught me that, no matter what I thought, it was probably wrong. The world is fundamentally deceptive. The better something looks, the more rotten it probably is down deep. Some people were fooled but not you. You could always see the underlying truth, and the truth was ugly. Roosevelt was a drunk and that was that. New Deal? What New Deal? A sham, from beginning to end. There was no Depression, a person could get work if they really tried. There was more to everything than anyone knew. This teaching has led me, against my better judgment, to suspect people of trying to put one over. At the checkout counter, I lean forward to catch the girl if she tries to finesse an extra ten cents on the peaches. That's how Higgledy-Piggledy makes a profit. That's why cashiers ring up the goods so fast, to confuse us.

58. Believing there is always more than meets the eye defeats the sense of sight. Always looking for hidden meanings, a person misses the lovely surface of the world, even in spring. Surely those green leaves are hiding bare branches. If you look hard enough, you will glimpse them: dark, malevolent, and a big trunk that if you ran into it hard enough, it would kill you.

59. Nonetheless you set store by a certain orderly look to things. Dinner was at noon, supper at five-thirty. This is so ingrained in me that I eat whether I'm hungry or not. I eat everything put before me. It is a sign that I am good.

60. Clean clothes made us respectable.

61. A clean house distinguished us from colored people.

62. Bigotry is never a pleasant subject so you didn't bring it up but you stuck by your guns anyway. Indians were drunks, Jews were thieves, and the colored were shiftless. Where you got this, I don't know, because there were none of them around, but you believed it more absolutely for the utter lack of evidence. *Everyone* knew about those people. It was common sense.

63.-67. [Obliterated by beverage stain.]

68. Everything was set in place in your universe, and you knew what everything and everybody was, whether you had ever seen them or not. You could glance at strangers and size them up instantly. An article of clothing, a phrase from their lips, a look in their eye--you knew who they were, and you were seldom generous in your assessments. "She certainly thinks a lot of *herself*." "I'll bet that's not *his* wife." "If that man's not a crook, then today's not Sunday," you said one Sunday. It was something about the shape of his head. You could tell. They couldn't fool you. And now I do this myself. I adopted the mirror-reverse of your prejudices and I apply them viciously. I detest neat-looking people like myself and people who look industrious and respectable. I sneer at them as middle-class. In elections, I vote automatically against Scandinavian names.

69. In fact, you imbued me with the sensitivity of a goat. I say vicious things about old friends to people I barely know. I say vicious things to people's faces and then explain that I was kidding. I am truly cavalier toward the suffering of innocent people, including that which I myself cause. The other day, I almost ran down an old man in a crosswalk. I hadn't seen him. My friend grabbed my arm and yelled and I slammed on the brakes. Rather than apologize to the man, I turned and explained to my friend that I hadn't seen him. And I hadn't. I didn't even see him after I stopped and he stood there dazed and terrified. I don't really see anybody.

70. When I hear about deprivation and injustice in the world, I get up and change the channel.

71. What can I do? It's not my fault. I didn't make them. God did. It's His world, let Him take care of it.

72. Anyway, I was brought up to believe that whatever happens to people is their own fault. There were few if any disasters that you couldn't explain by citing the mistakes made by the victims. "She never should have been there in the first place." Even if you had to go back thirty years, you could find where they took the wrong fork in the road that led directly to their house burning down, their car being hit by a truck, their hands being eaten by corn pickers.

73. If they had been more like you, they would have been all right. But they weren't paying attention. They lacked your strong sense of cruelty and hopelessness of the world.

74. You misdirected me as surely as if you had said the world is flat and north is west and two plus two is four; i.e., not utterly wrong, just wrong enough so that when I took the opposite position--the world is mountainous, north is east--I was wrong, too, and your being wrong about the world and north made me spend years trying to come up with the correct sum of two and two, other than four. *You gave me the wrong things to rebel against*. My little boat sailed bravely against the wind, straight into the rocks. Your mindless monogamy made me vacillate in love, your compulsive industry made me a prisoner of sloth, your tidiness made me sloppy, your materialism made me wasteful.

75. I wasted years in diametrical opposition, thinking you were completely mistaken, and wound up living a life *based more on yours* than if I'd stayed at home.

76. Because you always went to bed at ten, I stayed up half the night, chain-smoking (you were opposed to cigarettes), drinking straight gin (you didn't drink), and, given time, might have cut off my arm, it being yet another thing you would never have done.

77. I wasted some good years thinking proudly that I wasn't anything like you. Having grown up with ugly wallpaper, I painted all my walls off-white and thought I'd finally arrived. Bought a white couch, yours having been purple. My place looks like February.

78. I resist washing my dishes because it makes me feel obedient: the sink is disgusting.

79. I revolted by becoming a sensitive person, which I am not. I hate folk music. I don't care for most of the sensitive people I feel obligated to hang out with. Many of them play guitars and write songs about their feelings. I have to pack up my Percy Faith records when they come and put the box in the bedroom closet and pile winter coats on it, and despite the mothballs I'm afraid they'll take one sniff and say, "You like light classical, don't you." I pour a round of Lowenbrau, being careful not to pour along the side but straight down so the beer can express itself, and they say, "Did you ever try Dockendorf?" It's made by the Dockendorf family from hand-pumped water in their ancient original family brewery in an unspoiled Pennsylvania village where the barley is hauled in by Amish families who use wagons with oak beds. Those oak beds give Dockendorf its famous flavor. These beer bores, plus the renovators of Victorian houses, the singer-songwriters, the runners, the connoisseurs of northern Bengali cuisine, the collectors of everything Louis Armstrong recorded between August 1925 and June 1928, his seminal period--they are driving me inexorably toward life as a fat man in a bungalow swooning over sweet-and-sour pork. You drove me toward *them*.

80. This is one I can't say. It's true and it's important, having to do with sexual identity, but if I said it, I'd hear you saying, "How can you *say* that?" and I know I'd feel guilty. So I won't. *You* know what I mean.

81. Another thing of the same sort.

82. Another.

83. Guilt. Guilt as a child, then anger at you for filling me with guilt, then guilt at the anger. Then I tried to relieve *that* guilt by presenting you with a wonderful trip to Los Angeles to see your aunt. You protested that I didn't need to, then you went, and you conspired to make it awful. You cashed in the first-class plane tickets and flew tourist, you cancelled the reservation at the Beverly Wilshire and stayed at a cheap motel in Torrance by the freeway, then you came home miserable (but happy) and gave me a refund.

84. I took you to a famous steakhouse on your anniversary. You agonized over the menu and ordered the cheapest thing. I pleaded, I argued. I ordered the prime rib. I felt guilty as I ate it, just as you intended.

85. With the refund from the trip, I bought you a pearl necklace and a pair of gold earrings. You never wore them. "I'm afraid of losing them," you said. "Here? In the house?" I said. "You never can tell," you said.

86. A scene repeated thousands of times:

You (in the easy chair): Dear? As long as you're up, would you mind--

Me (in the doorway): What?

You (rising): Oh, never mind. I'll do it myself.

Me: *What?* I'll do it.

You (sighing): No, that's all right. You'd never find it.

(Or: "You might burn yourself." Or: "I'd just have to do it myself anyway." Or: "It's nothing.")

88. A scene from early childhood: our Sunday School class learned "Joy to the World" for the Christmas program. You asked me to sing it for the aunts and uncles when they came to dinner. I said no. You said yes. I said no. You said, "Someday when I'm dead and in my coffin, maybe you'll look down and remember the times I asked you do things and you wouldn't." So I sang, terrified of them and terrified about your death. You stopped me halfway through. You said, "Now, come on. You can sing it better than that."

89. A few years later, when I sang the part of Curly in *Oklahoma!* and everybody else said it was wonderful, you said, "I told him for years he could sing and we wouldn't listen to me."

90. I did listen to you, that's most of my problem. Everything you said went in one ear and right down my spine. Such as, "You're never going to make anything of yourself." When I was laid off from a job, you couldn't believe it wasn't for something I had done, something so awful that I wouldn't tell you.

91. Everything I said had hidden meaning for you, even. "I'm going to bed." "You can't even spend a *few minutes* talking to your parents?" you said.

92. Every tiny disagreement was an ultimate blow to you. "Is this the thanks we get after all we've done?"

93. My every act was a subject of study: "What are you doing?" you asked a million times. "Why didn't you do it before?" (Or "Can't it wait until later?") "Why do it *here*?" "Why are you so quiet?" *I'm thinking*. "About what?"

94. My posture, facial expression (if any), tone of voice, gait, all were of constant critical interest as you strove to achieve a perfect balance in me.

"Sit up. Don't slouch." Then, "Relax. You make me nervous just to look at you." "Why such a gloomy look?" Then, "Wipe that smirk off your face." "Pick up your feet." Then, "Can't you walk without sounding like a herd of elephants?" "Speak up. Don't mumble." "Keep your voice down."

95. Now you call me on the phone to ask, "Why don't you ever call us? Why do you shut us out of your life?" So I start to tell you about my life, but you don't want to hear it. You want to know why I didn't call.

I didn't call because I don't need to talk to you anymore. Your voice is in my head, talking constantly from morning till night. I keep the radio on, but I still hear you and will hear you until I die, when I will hear you say, "I told you," and then something else will happen.