

A Little Levity (#1)

Egyptian Dr. Benway:

The licorice Allsorts from Bhojan's supermarket in Kano was a costly treat—but devouring the whole bag at one sitting had been piggish. The fractured molar may have been rough justice, but I could not leave for long an exposed nerve. When my colleague, C. mentioned the name of the dentist who was working in the clinic at the local hospital, I was apprehensive.

“You know Mr. Hussain,” C. assured, “from Mr. Kotoyi's party. He will remember you.”

Only faintly amid a boozy blur, did I recall the Egyptian with bottle-thick glasses who said he'd been transferred from Kano. It was well-known that apart from a posting for volunteers, a government transfer away from the capital to this remote corner of the state was a punishment. I gulped at the prospect of Mr. Hussain (why did C. not call him ‘*doctor*’?) fiddling inside my mouth. Still, the tooth had to be plugged...

C. helped me make an appointment through Chidera, a friend from his Igbo homeland who was a nurse in training at the Hadejia Hospital. A half hour before the appointed time, I walked to the hospital compound in the middle of the dusty town.

An old Fulani *magardi* [watchman] in red fez led me through the courtyard where several patients propped themselves up on their blankets, surprised to see a *bature* not wearing medical whites. At the far end of the compound the *magardi* pointed to an open door over which was a sign ‘*dental surgery*’ with the Hausa translation in smaller print. The half dozen seats against the outside wall were all taken. Glancing at the other waiting patients wincing or holding jaws, I entered the room.

A man wearing a surgical mask yet attired in regular *kufi* [hat] and *riga* [gown] was holding up a metal instrument. He appeared to be ready to hand it over to the figure in green smock. The latter was bending over an old Hausa woman who was sprawled in what looked like a barber's chair. She was open mouthed and squinting.

“*Sannu*, Dr. Hussein,” I greeted the figure in green.

Mr. F.!” Hussein half turned, saucer-eyed behind the thick lenses. Holding the pliers at arm's length, he wiped his forehead. “Yes, I am expecting you. One of the nursing girls— what's her name— told me about your tooth pain.”

“Chidera.”

He waved away the importance of that detail. “So how can I help you?”

“Well, I broke a back tooth. I need a filling— even a temporary filling.”

“Pity. But I can treat it. Please sit. I'm almost finished here.” He nodded to the folding chair pushed into the corner. “Garba!”

Without instructions Garba, the Hausa assistant, ducked over and removed a box of tissues from the chair.

With a nod of thanks, I took the seat— shifting forward to further avoid rattling the brown bottles on the shelf behind. I immediately noted the absence of an electric drill or dentist's lamp. The tray of instruments behind the assistant appeared to be designed more for veterinary practice than for dentistry.

Meanwhile, Hussain returned to the job at hand. As the poor old woman gasped, he spread his feet for better torque.

"So how is life at the secondary school?" he grunted.

"Fine, fine. Just a week until the end of term."

"Very nice. So you travel? Home to Canada?"

"No, no. I'll just relax around here."

"Abnormalities here every day," he murmured still heaving with the pliers. "Relax, yes, very good plan..."

The women yelped as something suddenly tore loose from her mouth.

"My god, look here, Mr. F.", Hussein held up a bloody lump gripped in the pliers. As he twirled it under the makeshift lamp, it looked like a piece of pink coral. "It's a tumour," he said.

The old woman held her mouth with henna-stained hands. Her chest heaved.

"Here." Hussain pulled out a wad from the tissue box on the shelf and pushed them into her hand. "She'll be fine," he said to the assistant. "Not much bleeding. Tell her that the hospital dispensary can give her a packet of aspirin."

Eyeing the bloody lump that Hussain now pinched between thumb and forefinger, the old woman asked a question to the Hausa assistant.

"She wants to take it home," Garba translated. "She wants to show it to her sister."

"It's my property!" the Egyptian said sharply.

Rinsing the pliers under the tap, the assistant translated the refusal.

The old woman muttered and sighed. Then with clinking bracelets, she gathered up the folds of her red *abaya* and rose unsteadily from the chair. With hand on her elbow, the assistant walked her to the doorway.

"She'd pay 75 pounds for that operation in Egypt—100 pounds!" Hussain's mustache twitched as he watched her hobbling away.



“I can only do a temporary filling, Mr. F. But I have very strong glue. Very stable.”

Bracing myself in the sagging seat, I thought of ‘Old Smoky’, the ghoulisn nickname given to a certain chair in Texas prisons. At least this one had no electrodes or leather straps. I looked up helplessly into the enormously magnified eyes.

“Good for 6 months. Be careful— maybe a year. No hard chewing. In Canada you can get proper filling. Gold is the best. Good for your whole life.”

“But I won’t be back in Canada for a year. Can’t I get a permanent filling in Kano?”

Ruefully, he laughed. “Where? The Fagge dental clinic? Don’t bother trying. Only 3 dentists there. 3 dentists for all Kano City—3 dentists for 3 million people... Open wide, now, Mr. F.”

For the following minutes, I tried to focus on the Nido powered milk poster on the opposite wall. Meanwhile, as Dr. Hussain rammed and jammed, he whinged in expat-to-expat mode.

“You know I can’t understand what you Canadians are doing here in this country. These people, my God, there’re 3 things they’re interested in—3 things only.” Withdrawing the plugger from my mouth, he slapped it against his palm, counting the 3 things off: “Money, alcohol and harlots. *Shi ke nan!*” [that’s it]. He waved the dental tool and winked with his use of Hausa.

Nodding helplessly, I was reminded of the surrealistic scene in the W.S. Burroughs novel ‘*Naked Lunch*’. Therein, a demented ‘Dr. Benway’ performs heart massage with a toilet plunger...



Later back under my mosquito net, I ran my tongue over the newly packed tooth. It mildly throbbed yet the sharp-edged hole was covered. Relieved, I still wondered how many fellow Canucks would have opened their mouths to Hussain... I thought of a conversation with fellow *batures* in Kaduna a few months ago:

On the school break, I had stopped over at the house of GF, the Field Staff Officer, with whom I chatted along with 2 other Canucks also crashing on his living room floor for the night. Amid the customary expat confab over drinks, the touchy issue of “neo-colonial mentality” briefly came up... The question was posed as to whether expats in Nigeria can completely avoid “using their white”.

Nearly every *bature* expat has at one time been guided to the front of a sweaty line up in the bank. How many *batures* would refuse that privilege on moral grounds? The agronomist from Saskatchewan who gave that example also observed:

“When you take a Nigeria Airways flight— don’t you glance into the cockpit before taking your seat? Can you deny feeling a little more assured if the pilot is European?”

FG, an Acadian with more 10 years in the development bureaucracy, was even more pointed:

“You can fall over yourself to demonstrate that you don’t expect special treatment. But in an emergency, you’re still going to want modern medical care— and you’ll probably expect to get it a lot faster than most Nigerians... Then if you have to go under anaesthesia, would you be colour-blind as to not notice whether the doctor standing over you is black or white? We’ve got a long, long way to go!”

I thought of my anxieties about Dr. Hussain— was that not marginally racist? In the end he did a competent job—especially given the very limited resources he had... Then while I braced in his chair, what concern had I for the locals waiting in distress in the hot sun outside the door?

If otherwise inconsequential, those twinges of conscience at least distracted from the twinges in the jaw...

1978 (Hadejia, Nigeria)



Of technical devilry:

When the back wheel of my bike began to squeak, it was plain that the bearings were grinding down. If not replaced, at last they needed to be cleaned and greased. Having neither the tools nor the skill of such an operation, I decided to approach Simplicio, who was apprenticing in old Brother Emil's carpentry shop. He never failed to give a cheery greeting in every passing on the mission. I had never actually seen Simplicio working on a bike but knew him to be handy in all manner of repairs. He was the worker whom the principal usually sent around to the teachers' houses to fix leaky taps or frozen hinges. He was always grateful for an extra buck or two.

When I walked my bike up to the mission carpentry shop, Simplicio was squatting outside taking a smoke break.

"Mhoro, Simplicio," I greeted.

"How are you, Mr. F.? Very hot today." He glanced up at the cloudless sky. "We're waiting for the rains."

"Yes, let's hope..." rolled the bike back and forth in the sand. "Can you hear this squeak? I think the bearings need to be taken out and greased."

He knelt down and spun the wheel. "Yes, Mr. F. It needs grease. Very bad."

Can you fix it for me after work?"

He brushed whitish wood dust from his hair and glanced behind him. "Not so busy today—I can do it now."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, sure. Brother Emil is in town picking supplies."

"You want me to leave it?"

"It's not a big job." He pinched out the end of his ciggie and gently spat on the dust. "You can wait, sir."

A few moments later, he had the back wheel off and between his knees. "Very sticky," he muttered, working the oversized wrench.

Worried that the nuts would strip, I leaned closer. "Brother Hugo has some good tools. I can ask him."

"No no, Mr. F.," he squinted in effort. "It's coming now." In a few more jerks, the nut popped loose— instantly scattering the bearings. Simplicio grabbed wildly as they jumped and rolled in the dust.

"Jes-us!" I muttered. I was angry for not waiting to find better tools.

"Don't worry!" Simplicio pinched up a bearing which had fallen into his tattered sleeve. "Don't worry—I get them all." He pointed to his eyes. "Don't you know I have owl eyes?"

His nervous laugh made it plain that he could do his job better without the cat eyes of a *mrungu* glaring at him... I turned around, looking out towards the *kopje* behind the school.



In the squeaks behind my back, I thought of my chequered history of getting small repairs in Africa. I remembered the watch repairer in Dar es Salaam, to whom I'd handed my Casio with a request to clean the dust from the inside. When I turned my head, he removed screws for his own stash of cannibalized parts. The watch was effectively bugged...

Then there was the camera repairer at a workbench the Sabon Gari market in Kano city, Nigeria. I asked him to fix the sticky film winder on my Kodak 110 camera. He struggled to pry it open (just like Simplicio with the wheel hub) with an off-size screwdriver. When the mechanism sprang loose, metal bits flew into the dirt.

"*Shege, bature!*" he cursed.

That epithet, literally translated from Hausa as: '*bastard white man*', was not aimed at me. It was directed at the exasperating machinery itself. That curse was used throughout Nigeria for frustration in the midst of a myriad of technical bedevillments. I had heard "*Shege, bature,*" used even in the impatience of changing a tire and untangling a tape cassette... The gawking presence of a *bature* himself, probably lent a little more vehemence to the curse...

When I turned back around, Simplicio had the bearings crammed back in the hub. He was smearing into it a dollop of grease from the Shell can.

"You got *all* the bearings?" I asked.

He grinned. "I told you Mr. F.— I have owl eyes." Moments later he had the wheel back on and the nuts tightened. "No squeak," He said giving the restored wheel a turn.

"I can ride to class again. You have really helped me, Simplicio. *Ndatenda!*"

"You are very welcome, sir, he smiled.

When I slipped him a \$2 note, he softly clapped hands in Shona thanks.

I rolled away, relieved and chastened. How could I have doubted for an instant Simplicio's owl eyes? Like so many repairers throughout Africa working without proper tools, he has to be a wizard of improvisation. A *mrungu* inept in the repair of the simplest of gadgetry, ought to be especially humbled by such skill...

1984, Gokomere, Zimbabwe

A handful of beans:

“Let me explain, my good sir— the advantages of taking a cash-deal.”

On the passenger’s side of our Eddie Bauer Ford Explorer parked in the apartment stall was a Pakistani businessman. I was sitting glumly in the driver’s seat. On the console between us was a thick wad of elastic banded banknotes...

Even if the wad of money were larger, the sale would be depressing. Our apple-red Explorer seemed so central to the few family ‘adventures’ in the UAE: overnight camping in the desert with the kids; road trips to Dibba, El Ain and Muscat... T. will miss it most—no longer able to tool around Dubai at nights in style... Of course, buying a luxury SUV to use for only 18 months in Dubai was a risky extravagance. Yet there was reasonable hope that we could come close to breaking even in the resale.

In the first few hours after posting the *for-sale* ads on the bulletin board at Spinney’s supermarket, we had several calls. In heavy Arabic accents, the callers made ridiculously low offers. In the silence of the next few days, I grew nervous. Given the processing of our departure paperwork, we had just over 2 weeks to sell the car. So, when the call came from a polite Mr. Khan, I was glad to invite him to check over the Explorer.

Only when we met at the apartment elevator did the mid-50ish Pakistani with the honey-voice reveal that he was a manager of a used-car dealership. A gold watch and a large stomach under his *kameez* suggested that his business was prospering.

Once down in our parking stall, he wasted no time in determining the lowest possible offer he could make. Within 10 minutes he tested the vehicle’s electrical system, listened to the engine and wiped fingers in the exhaust pipe. He needed no test drive to confirm that the car was in as fine a shape as I had assured it was...

He also knew how to belittle its value. Feeling behind the right rear panel, Khan found a seam of welding from a repair job that the sweet old Greek lady had not told us about when we bought the car from her in Sharjah.

“You said there were no accidents.” A little breathless from bending over, Khan pulled out a calculator from his attaché and adjusted his glasses. “Most definitely, this lowers the resale value. Give me a moment, sir.”

There was little doubt that the number punching was tactical. Having already sized me up, Khan was then making me sweat.



“Mr. Khan, I really can’t—I really won’t go lower. You can see that this Explorer had low mileage and it is fully loaded. It is already priced below market value.”

“Listen, sir,” he chuckled, “At 4X4 Motors we are professionals. I am a businessman. I do straight deals. I have no time to fool around. You don’t know what kind of people are out there. People will make all kinds of promises, give you a down payment and then you get a bad cheque.

Here, I give you cash. Large bills.” He rubbed fingers, as if tempting a medieval Christian with filthy lucre.

“Honestly, Mr. Khan, I can’t go down much.”

“OK, tell me—tell me—what is your last price?”

Khan might have found me less hungry than many others for the wad of bills flopped in their faces. Yet probably few of his victims quite so easily folded.



“Why were in such a hurry? You start shaking when someone pulls out money!”

Back up in the apartment afterwards, I sat sheepishly at the kitchen table while my wife raged. There was no denying that I had fallen for an offer that was more than 2,000 Dirham below market value.

“Where’s your brain? You are a bloody *fool*!” She pointed at the pile of cash on the table, nostrils flaring. “After this don’t ask my opinion about anything. You make your decisions for yourself. I’ve had enough!”

In the backdraft of the slamming bedroom door the edge of the blue 500 Dirham bill on top of the pile gently lifted...

I slept on the sofa. Waking at dawn, I shuffled to the kitchen. I stared at the wad of bills untouched in the middle of the table.

I was reminded of ‘*Jack and the Bean Stock*’, a favourite bedtime story of 7-year-old MH. So, I sold the cow for a handful of beans and got from a sharp-tongued wife the upbraiding deserved... Yet there will be no treasure to spirit away in the collapse of my bean stock...

I was tempted to snatch up the bills and throw them off the balcony. Watching them flutter down 7 stories into the traffic of Mankool Road would have been weirdly— yet deeply— gratifying...

1999, Dubai, UAE

Making someone's day:

On the bus to the NDP riding office in Port Moody, I recalled the advice of my old friend MC, in his phone call last week.

“Volunteering for the election will get you out of your apartment for a while— that’s good if you’re depressed. But if you think some politician will help you get a job—you’re wastin’ your time...”

I assured myself that I had no illusions. Still, after 6 years out of the country— every straw had to be grabbed.

In the 2 previous volunteer sessions I manned the phone bank. In those evenings, I missed meeting the candidate himself when he dropped in to rally the troops. From behind a partition with a gabby voter on the line, I only glimpsed his finely tailored suit. That glimpse was enough for me to conclude that my candidate was certainly not one who would be aware of the 20% discount every Tuesday at Value Village...

Despite my growing limpness to the cause, I signed up for a third volunteer stint on a Saturday morning, delivering lawn signs. By late morning I was bouncing along in a pickup truck loaded with lawn signs.

The driver and fellow volunteer was a silver-bearded gent called Tom. I navigated with a map of Coquitlam on my lap, while old Tom talked. He began by listing jobs he had quit (from tissue paper factory worker to primary school teacher) before retirement. While he claimed to be a life-long social democrat, he proudly identified as a maverick and gadfly:

"I was on the provincial NDP Executive Committee," he said, tapping the wheel. "But I got tired of the mutual backslapping. I got tired of the so called ‘experts’: young guys with degrees in political science. The party needs more of the counsel of gray hairs... If we need more PhDs in government— let’s have a few doctorates from the school of hard knocks! He glanced at my empty sleeve. "You know, I’m always been for guys like you— the um, unemployed."

I nodded but declined the invitation to reveal my own supposed hard luck credentials. After a moment of awkward silence, Tom resumed chattering:

"I have a great scheme which would ensure that B.C. would remain productive. Not just for our children, but for our children's children..."

Nodding, I fumbled through the pink slips with the names and addresses for our deliveries. I checked each against the map. Suddenly, I recognized one name: "FS" followed by the instructions: *‘Do not leave sign on doorstep – please ring bell.’*

FS!

I flashed on the memory of fumbling with a tape recorder in front of a group of bored Japanese girls with Hello Kitty backpacks. At the back of the same classroom FS, the program coordinator, furiously took notes. I was soon to depart for Zimbabwe and had no interest in renewing any contract with international students. Still, as taskmaster and inquisitor, FS loomed large in the darker memories of the late fall of 1981...

In a few moments, FS would open her door and see, awkwardly holding her NDP lawn sign, a guy she only remembers as one of the unprepared temps she'd once had to supervise. I imagined her reaction: "*What are you doing here? I thought you had emigrated to South Africa!*"

While I agonized, old Tom ranted on:

"We can build roads into the mountain valleys," He made circles with his veiny hand, "We can parcel off the land and farm it rationally like they do on the prairies."

"Is that possible?" I squeezed the slip with the address of FS.

The pitch of Tom's voice went higher. "Look at the map, man, we have hundreds— maybe thousands of untouched mountain valleys in this province! All we need are access roads... Why, when I was on the executive committee, I spoke about this to Pauline, who was then our member of Parliament. She's now the president of Simon Fraser University, you know. I said: 'Pauline, let's not sit about here scratching each other's backs while the corporations are running roughshod over us all. It's time to stop acting like we are their serfs and peasants...' That's what I told her!"

"You said that straight up to the MP?" Behind my back, I was crumbling up the pink paper with the request for the delivery to the house of FS.

"You bet I did. Right to her face! That's why they didn't want me to stay on the executive committee. I always spoke my mind. They hated to be criticized, you know."

"Yeah, the status quo always hates to be challenged," I said. With a little cough, I dropped the pink ball on the floor and kicked it under the seat.

Relieved, I turned towards Tom. "Have you ever thought about going after the NDP nomination in this riding? You'd be a *real* man of the people."

"Well, it's kind of late," he said. "10 or 15 years ago, you bet I could have made a difference!" He gulped and smiled. "We're just comin' up to Canterbury Street. Left or right?"



With signs delivered (except to the house of FS) Tom dropped me off on North Road, a block from our apartment.

"Good luck with your job search." He leaned over to shake my hand. "It was great talking to ya, buddy!"

When he turned at the light, I could see from the sidewalk that he was smiling to himself. When was the last time anyone had listened to his yawp? With scarcely any effort, I had made someone's day. Meanwhile, I had dodged an encounter with a former nemesis... So even without the slightest advancement of the job search— volunteering was not a total waste of time!

1988, Coquitlam, BC

Bumping into a dreamtime:

I was waiting my turn at the photocopier when the fresh-faced woman half turned from pressing the buttons. "Hey," she said, "I had a dream about you last night."

I was startled. Early 30ish, AC was one of the younger members of the community-based English department. She knew me only as a guy from another department who had "bumped into" her home department for the fall term. If there were to be divisional layoffs in the coming weeks, being of lower seniority made her particularly vulnerable. Even the fact that she was the author of a collection of award-winning short stories could not save her from the iron law of seniority.

"Really?" I asked, affecting nonchalance in the awkwardness of the moment.

"Yeah", she continued, adjusting the feeder tray. "It was in a Latin American setting. In a jungle. You are way up in a tree on a strange platform. I asked: 'How did he get up there? How is he going to get down?' Meanwhile, you were just shrugging."

"That's strange." Jarred by the image, I managed to feign a smile.

She glanced up, half-smiling. "I often tell people I hardly know: 'O, you were in this exotic dream I had.' They're surprised. Sometimes they even think it's a come on."

"Funny how any random person can pop up in a dream," I said, looking out the window. Yet during the half-minute while her class set churned out onto the receiving tray, I ticked off a half dozen extending rejoinders:

I could ask her opinion about the dream theories: from dreams as psychic junk to the supremacy of 'dreamtime' for Australian Aboriginals... I could even surprise her by offering an 'interpretation' of her dream: that the figure (me) up in the tree (above her in seniority) had to have been lifted up— seemingly being unable to climb up by himself (beneficiary of affirmative action?) ... That would certainly have lent some ambiguity to her image of a David Lynch nightmare figure in a treetop...

Yet what I most wanted to ask her was: *'How often do 'exotic' dream images end up in your stories?'* That question was on the tip of my tongue when the short-listed candidate for a Governor General's Award swooped up her class set and hurried away.



"I heard they like to tell one another about their dreams," said ML. "They seem to be in a bit of a cult mind-set in that department."

Over a beer at the Rose and Thorn pub on the following Friday afternoon, I mentioned the brief encounter at the photocopier to the only colleague with whom I occasionally engage in off-campus off-the-record shop talk. The snippet was presented in describing the travails of bumping into a department seemingly dominated by bicycle-calved middle-aged women...

"Well at least she talked to ya," my colleague continued. "You couldn't expect to be welcomed over there with open arms."

We then joked about the reversal in our workplace of the conventional domination of males.

“In some ways we’ve got it made in our job,” ML said. “I’m glad I worked in a brewery before starting university—I know what a tough job is.” He chuckled. “Yeah, we’re lucky—although there are little things that remind you that we’re not really doing a regular guy’s job.”

He went on to tell about buying plastic fruits and vegetables for his literacy class: “The saleslady at Toys R Us to looked at me like I was some kind of pervert. A woman wouldn’t get that look!”

“Well, you have to balance that against the luxury of a good salary and benefits,” I said. “And a strong union.”

“We had a pretty strong local at Molson’s brewery too,” he said, “but nothing like the dockworkers in Australia.” He went on to claim that a certain local of Aussie stevedores qualify for ‘embarrassment pay’.

“Embarrassment pay? What to hell is that?”

“Apparently, it’s a supplement the dockworkers get for unloading cargos that might cause embarrassment to blue collar guys. They got it after protesting about handling a cargo of feminine hygiene products.”

“You got to be kidding!”

“That was in the report— really.”

After the laugh, I slapped the table. “Hey, they’re asking for input on bargaining for our new contract. Maybe we could bring forward the case for embarrassment pay. Having to buy work-related items from Toys R Us would be a good example.”

He gave a conspiratorial wink. “Yeah, or maybe having to listen every day to conversations that start with: *‘that colour really looks good on you!’*”

In the lull of hilarity, ML offered a bit of consolation for the awkwardness he has avoided by being a few steps higher than me in seniority: “Nobody ought to feel guilty about bumping. Everyone knows the rules. AC wouldn’t think twice about bumping you, if she had the chance.”

“You’re right— she probably wouldn’t.”

In a bottoms up swig, I remembered seeing the blurb on AC’s book, on display in the window of the college library. Notable among the effusive endorsements was: *‘the intensity of her deeply imagined stories is stunning...’*

Would a one-armed character trapped in a treetop make a cameo appearance in her next book? In the sourness of the dregs, it occurred that AC’s college fanbase would be quick to identify the inspiration for such intense imagining...

1996, Vancouver, BC

Pre-mortgage cold feet:

It was a revealing moment: T. and I were in the back of the minivan of the blonde female real estate agent coming back from an afternoon of depressing house viewings. In a newly completed housing development along the Loughheed highway—amid a wasteland of freeway spaghetti, high tension wires, cement mixers and mud—a moustached man was furiously raking his tiny treeless frontage. In watching him, I wondered whether his apparent ire was in being reminded that he had signed on to be a mortgage slave for the next quarter century...

Never in hell! I thought. Yet as we slowly passed, the man caught my eye in a look of defiance. I flinched in the imagining of his rake—poked through the back window of the van— and jabbed right into my sneering face...



Back in our coop townhouse, T. fumed. “You just don’t want to buy a house with me—you don’t respect me.”

However tired of the routine, I trotted out the usual tepid response. “Com’on, be reasonable. We just have to keep looking until we find something that’s not too far from my work and within our budget. You wouldn’t be any happier being house poor.”

“Well, I’m not going to rent for the rest of my life, mister. “Giving money to a landlord. It’s bullshit.”

Scowling, she looked out the window toward out coop neighbour’s unit. “Go pick up the kids from B.’s place. If you want supper, you’d better pick up some McDonalds’. Your servant is taking the night off.”

Before I had to time to lash back— as customary— my wife was already up the stairs and slamming the bedroom door.

Jiggling the car keys, I stared out the balcony window into the grey afternoon... It seemed there were no choice but to see if I could raise the pre-approved loan by another 20 K... That would probably mean increasing amortization from 25 to 30 years. If only T. knew just what vile connotations the very word ‘*mortgage*’ has for me!



I well remember seeing the word long before I knew its meaning. Its first appearance was on TV in a black and white cartoon:

A rickety old cabin was shown with a giant scroll lying across its roof. The walls of the cabin were buckling under the load. At the broken door, an old mouse with a long white beard was leaning on a cane. Outside in the dilapidated yard, a family of mice looked up dolefully at the giant scroll splintering the roof. Across the scroll was labelled ‘*mortgage*’...

But then to the rescue flies Mighty Mouse! With billowing cape, he lifts up the giant ‘*mortgage*’ scroll from the rooftop. Holding one gloved hand over his nose, the super mouse flies the scroll to a top of a smoking mountain and drops it into a bubbling lava pit. It disappears in a sizzle... Still

Back around the cabin, the bent trees straighten up and spout leaves. With the weight of the ‘*mortgage*’ lifted, the cabin itself transforms into a gleaming white house under a smiling-face sun. In the broad doorway, the old mouse tosses away his cane and yells “*Yippee!*”

So it seems that a cartoon seen by a boy of six— still gives a middle-aged man cold feet about buying a house... Does that mean I can blame Mighty Mouse for failing to make my wife happy?

1997, Burnaby, BC

fwl

Discovering a doppelganger:



MH and I had stopped our bikes along Lion's Park in downtown Port Coquitlam to ask for directions. We intended to ride to the Colony Farm Road after which we could loop north along the Pitt River dike and then west again towards the Coquitlam River.

Assured by a roller blader that we were headed in the right direction, we were about to hop back on our steeds when I noticed two scruffy fellows, gawking from the bench behind. Between them was an open carton of beer. Both were about my age. The one wearing a purplish hat bearing the Copenhagen snuff logo began whispering to his droopy-mustached buddy. The droopy moustache then bobbed in assent. I glared, expecting them to look away. Instead, they gawked—eyes widening.

“Kevin?” The droopy moustache guy suddenly called out, “Is that you?”

I twisted around, at first thinking he was addressing someone behind us. Yet both were staring straight at me in amused surprise.

“Kevin, what to fuck are you doin' here?”

“Are you talking to me?” I touched my chest.

The one with the Copenhagen snuff cap glanced back and forth between my face and my fake hand.

“Sorry bud. You look like someone we know.” With a guffaw, he poked his friend.

Only then did it occur that we were just a block away from a ‘transition’ residence for those struggling with substance abuse and mental illness. Among the residents were former inmates of the nearby Colony Farm forensic psychiatric facility.

As my son and I pushed off, we could hear cackling from behind.

Peddling along, I wondered what the real Kevin was up to at the moment. While my rubber hand was gripping a handlebar, perhaps his was steadying work on a metal lathe. I wondered what hope Kevin had for escorted day passes—let alone parole. So, what exactly was he doing time for?

With a shudder, I dismissed further speculation as to whether cosmic justice was being served by the roles arbitrarily assigned to my *doppelganger* and I...

2001, Coquitlam, BC
