

A Little Levity (#2)

Of mice and damnation:

“I’ll take good care of them—I promise!”

It was hard to turn down MH when he asked to be allowed to keep mice. A friend had given him a cage along with tips on maintenance. My son claimed the critters could be fed on kitchen scraps and insisted they wouldn’t smell. He agreed that the cage would stay in the garage and he would clean it regularly. The only expense would be for a bag of wood shavings and the mice themselves— no more than two. If any of the conditions were breached, the mice would immediately go to the SPCA.

With the cage prepared, we found an ad in the ‘*Buy and Sell*’. Over the phone, the seller said his usual customers were snake owners, but that mice make great pets, too. “They love to be cuddled,” he said.

We arranged to pick up the mice at his address in Surrey. On Saturday afternoon, we drove to a low-rise apartment building in the neighbourhood of the wrecked car graveyards at the seamy north end of King George Highway.



“You must be the fella wants a coupla pet mice!”

The door was opened by a grinning Herman Munster holding a spoon.

“Com’on in fellas— I was just feedin’ our kitty. Don’t worry about the shoes.”

MH gave me a nervous glance as we followed the tall man with a large forehead into his kitchen. A sharpening reek preceded the glimpse of a living room crammed with cages. The apartment was apparently not only a breeding site of mice— but of hamsters, cats, fish, birds and snakes.

A fat woman mashing up something orange in a plastic bowl greeted us with a toothy smile. A toddler, whose unusually high forehead indicated his paternity, was in a highchair apparently waiting a turn to be fed.

“I’m just getting your mice,” said the father calling from the living room.

“They’re fun pets,” the presumed mother said, “They’ll get to know you by your smell.”

MH glanced curiously round at the half empty feeding dishes and cages on the kitchen counter. At a corner desk, a computer displayed a pooing dog screensaver.

The husband returned with pink tails wiggling from cupped hands.

“We just want a pair,” I looked at MH. “But not a breeding pair. We only have a small cage.”

“No problem at all,” the tall man replied. “I checked the sexes. I’ll check again.” He held each greyish mouse up, parting in turn the tiny hind legs. “Yup, both females.”

“Just put them in there.” The wife pointed her spoon at a yogurt tub among the kitchen detritus. “Lucky little guys,” she murmured, “saved from a snake’s dinner!” Making open mouth motions she began feeding the strapped in babe.

I dug out the agreed upon \$7 after which the seller slipped the mice inside the covered tub. He handed it over to Mike.

“Just hold on. They gotta breathe.” He fished a jack knife out of his pocket. While MH held the tub, the man poked air-holes in the lid.

“Now remember,” he said at the door, “if for any reason you change your mind—you can bring them back. I’ll give you your money back—no questions, asked.”

“We appreciate that.”

We scurried out to the parked van and drove back across the Port Mann Bridge towards the denizens of cleaner rodents.



(a month later)

“Dad, the mice had babies!”

“What?”

I jolted from my desk and followed MH to the garage.

He pulled up the old sheet that covered the cage which was itself on top of the discarded fish tank. Leaning down, I confirmed the wiggling pink newborns clinging caterpillar-like beneath one of the grey adults...

“They were both supposed to be females!” I turned away, slightly nauseous. “Do you know how fast mice breed? Now there are six. In a few months there could be sixty.”

MH tsked. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m not going back to that creepy guy in Surrey. We could try the SPCA. I don’t know. Could you find anyone at your school who might want to keep mice for a while?”

“I’ll ask around. I don’t think anyone will want all six.”

I held my nose and winced. “In the meantime, this stink is going to go right through the house. When’s the last time you changed the shavings? Didn’t you make a promise?”

“I do change the shavings,” my son protested, “Once a week.”

I moved towards the door. ‘No, we don’t need this. I want them out of the house by the weekend. One way or another.’

It should have occurred that I left my 10-year-old with an insinuating demand: *‘Will someone rid me of these troublesome mice?’*



“Do you know what MH did with those baby mice?”

It was TE who gave the breathless report when I came back from work in the evening.

“What?”

“He flushed them down the toilet.” My daughter looked into my eyes, gauging the reaction.

I shook my head. “Don’t give him a rough time over it. He probably thought he had no choice.”

The 15-year-old blinked in surprise at her father’s apparent callousness.



MH was in bed but the light in his room was still on.

I heard what happened,” I said, crouching by the bed.

Cover to chin, he stared at the ceiling. “Mom said I should be ashamed of myself,” he croaked.

I looked back towards the closed bedroom door. “You tell your mother it was my fault. I told you there was no room in that cage for six mice. It wasn’t the most humane way to solve the problem— but something had to be done.”

His eyes glinted with fear of damnation.

I tousled his hair. “I don’t believe you caused the mice any suffering.”

He sighed and turned his head.

“Look honey— just think of how mice are usually treated by human beings. When we find them in our houses, we trap or poison them. I think they suffer a lot more from poisoning than drowning. Think of the terror they must feel when they’re thrown into a cage with snakes. Remember, that’s what those creepy people were breeding them for...”

With damnation still in his eyes, I tried to fib. “Did you know that sometimes mice will eat their own babies? They could have just disappeared that way.”

“I just so feel bad about doing it.” he whispered. “They looked so helpless.”

“Well, what’s done is done. If we’d taken them to the SPCA they would have got rid of them, too. Who knows how?” I kissed his forehead “Forget about it— but just find some kid at school to take the cage and the two adults— before they breed again.”

When I turned off the light he was staring again at the ceiling.

I closed his door in a welling of pride. What moral maturity in a 10-year-old! When I was his age, I would have not only dispatched the mice without conscience but relished every opportunity afterwards to give a rich description of the “execution.”... How merciful, that MH’s paternal inheritance is offset by a maternal infusion of Catholic guilt!

2002, Coquitlam, BC

FWT

Awaiting the tribunal of frogs:

Up to the age of 11 or so, my maternal cousin, LS, was also my best friend. On some of our sprees we stole candy, comics, cigarettes and even beer— brazen acts that neither of us would dare on our own. We loved to play with matches and gunpowder. My cousin and I had a dangerous chemistry...

One of our favourite seasonal pastimes was “executing” frogs. Many August afternoons would find LS and I swooping through the tall grass by the village lakeside armed with BB guns or clubs. Imagining ourselves avengers of the barbarities of ‘Krauts’ and ‘Japs’, we paid no heed to the Geneva Convention.

Some called us little hellions but I have no doubt that we were a two-headed monster in the making. The fact that in subsequent decades, the leopard frog has become an endangered species in Eastern Canada makes their torture by my cousin and I four decades ago all the more disgusting. Before some imaginary tribunal of amphibians, I could only throw myself on their mercy. Karmic justice would only be served by innumerable reincarnations of my cousin and I as frogs leaping in terror before earth-shuddering clubs.

Shuddering in recollection of that budding Himmler and Heydrich duo, I grope for a bit of consolation. Although not a defence, I can recall instances wherein my cousin and I fed one another’s imagination in not quite so sadistic a manner.

In such regard, I think of the Saturday mornings in which I accompanied LS on his paper route. We often talked ourselves hoarse while trudging through the icy streets delivering the ‘*Telegraph Journal*’. A favourite topic was gory scenes from movies. Admittedly, the relishing of Roman catapults or Viking spears tended to inspire further frog atrocities. Yet sometimes we would seize upon the day’s frontpage stories. We would typically pose to one another questions such as the following:

“If you were alone with Khrushchev would you try to kill him?”

“If a dope pusher gave you a free pill— would you take it?”

“What would you do if you were jumped from behind by a homosexual?”

“In an atomic war, would it be better to die in the blast or later from radiation sickness?”

After the short answers (e.g.: *“if I could escape”, “no way”, “kick him in the nuts”, “atomic blast”*...) we would expect the other to provide reasons (e.g.: *“Well, the only death more painful than by radiation sickness is by rabies...”*)

Sometimes the questions would be vaguely philosophical. One favourite was: *“Is it better to be a dead hero or a live coward?”* That was typically followed by a lapse of ruminating silence...



In the approach of adolescence, the interests of LS and I began to diverge. Despite being cousins and attending the same school, through our teens we kept a social distance. It was not merely because LS hewed to rod and gun and kept his hair short while I became more of a creature of

the counter-culture 1960s. Our distancing was much more based on an unspoken but mutual understanding that nitric acid and glycerol had to be kept separate...

Having been more 'serious' in high school than I was, LS made it to college a year before me. Yet without his father's boot up his ass, he could not resist the temptations of temporary freedom. After skipping classes and blowing his student loan on boozing, he withdrew at the end of his first semester. He remained a reader but never gave himself a second chance at academia.

In latter teens, we became a little friendlier. A few times, we drank beer together sitting on the hoods of cars along with other locals parked on wood roads. We were of different loyalties, but seemed to enjoy one another's wit in small doses...



The most memorable encounter with LS in those years occurred in 1969 when I was back in the village for Christmas. On Boxing Day, cousin LS stopped by my parent's house to deliver a gift of mincemeat from his mother.

While we were chatting by the kitchen door, a strange car pulled into the driveway. It was an unexpected visit of my friend from Saint John, JD, who was giving his family visitor from Virginia a brief tour of the province.

In their pitstop and greeting, JD asked if there was a nearby restaurant where we might have a bite and a chat. With the village's greasy spoon shuttered for the holidays, the only option was a tiny café attached to a shabby motel a few miles away on the Canadian side of the U.S. border. With cousin SL standing by the door, I felt obliged to ask him along.

The café was open but nearly empty apart from a few coffee drinkers. The grey-headed waitress doubling as motel manager looked annoyed when we entered. We sat at a wobbly table and looked up at the tiny menu board below a Pepsi clock.

"We weren't even pose ta be open today," she scowled from behind the counter. "We got hotdogs and hamburgers— that's purdy much it."

We ordered the hamburgers then stared awkwardly at one another. Cousin LS and I were on one side of the table and JD and his increasingly quiet American visitor on the other... It was only when the gruff waitress plonked the hamburgers on the table that we had something to talk about.

"Jesus," whispered JD, flicking away a curly grey hair from his plate.

After a single bite, the American set his burger down and crossed his arms. "I think that meat's been in a freezer for about a year," he mumbled.

I lifted my bun to check for other undesirable protein. "The bun's hard as a rock," I said, concerned that the Virginian might feel this was typical fare of the frozen north.

Yet it was LS's reaction that made this otherwise mundane episode unforgettable. He caught my eye in the '*Let's do something wild!*' look I hadn't seen since boyhood. Perhaps I dropped my eyes a millisecond too late.

My cousin jolted up, holding the hamburger like a bean bag. "This tastes like *shit!*" He yelled.

He then savagely hurled his burger at the wall.

The coffee drinkers turned, eyes darting from the inner door to the scattergram of ketchup on the faux wood panelling. The waitress had fortunately gone inside the door a few moments before.

"We'd better get to fuck outa here," said JD. Leaving exact change on the counter, we scrambled out the icy path to the car.

Scuffing along in his work boots, LS looked triumphant. He had shown the city boys that he was one village lad—roughhewn though he might appear—who brooks no horseshit... As for me, the thought that JD would take a tittering report of the episode back to his friends was mortifying...



Several times in the years afterwards, my friend JD and I had a belly laugh in recollection of this episode. In no retelling of the anecdote did I offer a defence of the guy referred to as "your hillbilly cousin". For that, I always felt a little guilty...

From the early 1970s onward, I rarely visited my natal village and scarcely saw LS again. I heard that he married, struggled with drink, divorced, went to AA and was several times on and off the wagon. He is apparently still clearing brush for tree harvesters— a grueling job seldom endured by men over fifty. It seems sadly in character that he would sentence himself to a lifetime of hard labour like a self-condemning Thomas Hardy character...

Perhaps I have avoided the worst of my cousin's native fatalism. Of course, that is for others to reckon. Still, even in middle age, I am appropriately haunted by the thought of that waiting tribunal of frogs...

2005, Coquitlam, BC

A quantifiable lightening of conscience:

I had stopped the shopping cart in the parking lot the Bellingham Costco in order to stuff the change from an American \$100 bill into my wallet. I had purchased a bottle of California champagne and a jumbo jar of smoked almonds but had about \$90 in change. I rechecked the receipt. Yes, the cashier had made a mistake. He gave me an extra \$20 bill.

Stopping up, I reviewed the moment before the checkout. The gangly young man operating the till had been talking over his shoulder to the girl at the adjacent checkout. When he reached forward with the \$100 bill, he looked unsure as to whether to check it for a counterfeit. I glared when he handed me the change. He fumbled a little—maybe it was his first day on the job. When the till count comes up short—maybe he will be in trouble...

Should I go back? I turned around, hesitating...

I began to think of how often I had been shortchanged—or had suspected so. Then there was the \$60 lost in a bank machine a few months ago. I had taken the receipt but absentmindedly left the cash in the slot. Might it not be fair enough to consider the \$20 as a small compensation for such dumb losses?

I then reasoned that Costco will not miss that \$20 such as a corner store certainly would. In that regard, I remembered C. once mentioning that in her supermarket chain, a small margin of error between cash and receipts—plus or minus—was always expected at end of day tallies...

With a tsk, I slipped the money into wallet and headed for the car...



While I was waiting behind the wheel for C. to return from the fabrics store, conscience stuck again. The moral issue was clear. Whether the money is unrightfully taken from a corner store or from a big corporation—the same categorical imperative is violated.

I reminded myself that my lost wallet was once returned—with cash still inside. That kind fellow who went to the trouble to track down my phone number from my driver's licence, garnered good karma. As if I hadn't enough bad karma already racked up—I was preparing to add \$20 American worth...

I then thought of the \$10 bill once seen on the floor of a washroom in the Royal Columbian hospital. The instant I saw it, I remembered a superstition from Nigeria. It was commonly believed there that sickness can be transferred to an unsuspecting finder of money deliberately left for such a purpose. From Filipino students, I had also heard of how the greedy are baited by soggy bills left in urinals. That morning in the Royal Columbian waiting for a needle biopsy, I would not have picked up a \$1000 bill!

Yet in Washington State just nine months after wrecking C.'s Ford Probe in Port Townsend, was I ready to tempt fate again?

I unbuckled and walked back towards the Costco entrance. But then from across the strip mall came the tinkle of bells. To one side of the busy entrance was a Sally Ann collection kettle. I veered toward it and opened my wallet.

Yet before the smiling Salvation Army lady, I hesitated again. Instead of plucking out the \$20, I settled on a \$10 bill. Dropping it into the kettle I scurried back to the Prius. The conscience was lightened only by 50%— but I felt nearly 75% better about it.

2009, Port Moody, BC

FWT

A tale of redemption:



Idly flipping through TV channels yesterday morning, I stopped momentarily on the Jesus infomercial, *100 Huntley St.* It was not the spectacle of slobbering glossolalia or twitching bodies floored by healing hands that drew my ungodly attention. With sound muted, it could have been any talk show. In a living room setting, a host in a dark business suit was interviewing a slick haired mid-sixties fellow and his younger wife. What struck me was the names in the chyron at the bottom of the screen: *‘My Story: BB and DB’...*

I knew the guy! When the camera switched to a close up, the family resemblance was unmistakable. He was definitely the same BB— older brother of CB, the Roy Orbison lookalike of my natal village.

I knew that older brother only as one of the duck-tailed James Deans who set out for Ontario after “good money.” BB was reputed to be musical, but I never heard him play guitar. Since I left New Brunswick before the mid-1970s (not after “good money”), my only memory of him is from a decade or so earlier: seeing him drunk and clowning in the village café...

Of all characters to be born again! Intrigued I turned up the volume. Looking slightly studious in hornrims, the middle-aged man told his tale of redemption:

“I had a wicked tongue,” he said in a familiar nasal twang, “I was a foul-mouthed blasphemer and a shameless alcoholic... For thirty years, I couldn’t keep a job. I can’t tell you how many times I was fired for showin’ up drunk. I remember bein’ broke and desperate, goin’ through cupboards lookin’ for vanilla extract!”

BB went on to shamelessly describe a “nine-month bender” which landed him in a Toronto detox center:

“I expected the Lord to take me,” he said. Pausing, he smiled at his wife. “Then I met D.”

Patting his hand, the wife revealed that she had met BB while volunteering in the same rehab center... She had herself been through a bad marriage and had had “issues with addictions,” unnamed. But she had been born again and was spreading the good news of salvation:

“At first B. scorned the word of God,” she squeezed his hand. “But I knew deep down he was thirsting for the gospel.”

BB eagerly nodded. “One night, I got the DTs bad. I woulda drunk rubbing alcohol if I coulda laid my hands on it. But then out of the darkness, Jesus came into my heart.” He closed his eyes. “I wept like a baby.”

“The Lord made him whole,” said the wife.

“All my friends from my hometown thought it was a miracle,” said BB.

The couple raised their joined hands.

After a time-alert from the silver-haired host, the couple rushed through the rest of the story of their journey from recovery to preaching— to mission work in Haiti. They said they made several trips to the Caribbean, most recently to help the victims of devastating hurricanes.

At the point, a short video clip was shown of the couple in tropical whites with a Haitian guide walking down a red dirt road past palm trees blown eschew. BB nods gravely as the guide points out damaged buildings.



Watching in fascination, I tried to square the image of BB the missionary with the jean jacketed greaser in pointed toe boots.

Although known to be a mean drunk, on the particular night of recollection BB was in a genial mood. In a booth at the back of the village greasy spoon, he was singing through multiple verses of a bawdy sea shanty:

*“Columbo had a cabin boy—a dirty little nipper
filled his ass with ground up glass and circumcised the skipper!”*

In wrapping up the ‘My Story’ segment, the host of *100 Huntley St.* joined hands and prayed together with his guests... BB made a final pitch for his mission work in Haiti and the segment ended with his charity’s website address displayed...

It was heartening to hear of an old fellow villager so dramatically turning his life around. BB and his wife were certainly not of the usual ilk of evangelist grifters. Still, remembering the shrewdness of his clan, it seemed that BB was now a hustler for a worthy cause. He was certainly still a performer. Although not persuaded to open my wallet, I wished his mission well...

Flipping the channel forward to CNN, I faintly heard the voice of the greaser across the booth from a trio of 15-year-old boys. It was croaking out the refrain of ‘Columbo’:

*“He knew the world was round-o.
His balls did touch the ground-o.
That syphilitic, hypocritic, son-of-a-bitch Columbo!”*

Yes, it was a miracle...

2006, Coquitlam, BC

A hitch-hiker's tale of salvation:



At the end *'The Hitchhiker'* (1953), another *film noir* watched on the Turner Classic Movies channel, I stared at the dark screen thinking about its credibility. The drama proceeds from the blunder of a couple of buddies going on a fishing trip to Baja California. The hitcher they innocently pick up (first shown in silhouette) turns out to be a sadistic killer on the lam....

Before the movie's opening credits was a 'public service' message: *'What you are about to see could have happened to you... When was the last time you invited death into your car?'*

In my early years, I would have taken that warning as insult. The risks in hitch-hiking seemed far greater to the hitchhiker than to the driver picking one up. Like most of my friends who relied on hitching to get around, I had the evidence of a few close calls:

Immediately to mind came an incident from July 1968. I was hitching back to my natal village from St. Andrews, New Brunswick, on a day off from a summer job washing dishes at the Algonquin resort hotel. The shortcut was a tertiary road north through the hamlets of rural Charlotte County—rumoured territory of inbred yokels.

In hitcher's bane, I was stuck in late afternoon on a deserted stretch of gravel road. I was desperate for a ride in either direction when slowly around the curve came an old round-topped sedan. Its sole occupant was silhouetted at the wheel. Slightly bouncing on bad springs, the two-tone rust-bucket first passed but then stopped before the curve ahead. As I ran eagerly toward it, the car jolted a few yards in reverse.

"I'm only goin' a few miles up the road," said the scrawny grey-haired driver leaning towards the open passenger's window. "Just up past Honeydale."

I hesitated. His lift would not get me entirely out of hillbilly country—but would put me back on a paved road. Glancing back at the empty road, I hopped in. Only when he jerked the car into gear did I see the neck of a bottle sticking up from his lap. In the whiff of sherry mingling with gas from a bad muffler, I turned towards the window...

He drove very slowly in silence for about a mile. But then he bumped over to the opposite shoulder.

"Gonna stop for a while," he said.

When he turned the wheel into a wood road, I reached towards the door handle.

"I can get out here," I said.

"No, no," he waved his hand. "We won't be long."

At first, I was merely impatient— assuming he had only a drink on his mind.

We bumped back a hundred yards into darkening woods then stopped. He jerked on the emergency brake then pulled up the brown-paper wrapped bottle. His skinny throat quivered in a long swill. Belching, he screwed the cap back on and then slid the bottle under the seat. He squinted and sighed.

“Can we just go?” I suddenly felt like a deer catching too late the crackle of footsteps.

“O, sweet Jesus!” he moaned. He began tapping and squeezing on the steering wheel.

"I gotta get goin,' OK?" I tried not to betray fear.

He dropped his head to the steering wheel. "O, the things I want to do," he blubbered. "So wicked—so dirty minded!"

I darted eyes to the door handle. "I've gotta go. Please, I'm in a hurry." In alder swamp there was nowhere to run.

He scratched his head and turned red eyed, slowly shaking his head.

“Nobody likes me— but I'm not surprised.”

I looked away, gauging the risk of thrashing away through the alders. When I glanced back, he was clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Jesus save me!" he whispered.

After a heart-in-mouth interval, he spread out his hands. He seemed to be staring at his yellowish nails... But then he groped down to turn the key. When the engine sputtered up, he roughly threw the gear shift into reverse.

Without looking at me or saying another word, he stopped at the wood road entrance allowing me to hop out. The last sight of him was through the back window as the old car on its sagging suspension, disappeared over the hill.



That was a sobering lesson but it did not stop me from hitchhiking. Indeed, about seven years later I found myself eyeing another door handle, gauging whether to jump out. That was in the cab of the pickup truck of a Hispanic farm-labour contractor who picked me up when I was stranded amidst empty fields outside Salinas, California.

“Three girls were raped and killed along this road in the last few months,” he said with a laugh. “Aren’t you scared to be hitchhiking?”

"Well," I tried to bluff, "Drivers have to be careful about who they pick up, too!"

I felt lucky after that ride, that a couple of tractor drivers had witnessed me getting into the truck. The driver reminded me of Juan Corona, the serial killer who buried the bodies of upwards of 50 migrant workers, in the same area a decade earlier...

In recalling that incident, I have shuddered in wondering if there had been no witness—how long my bones would have lain under a field of artichokes in the Central Valley of California...



But it is with a deeper shudder that I imagine a murder in the backwoods of Charlotte County, New Brunswick, in July 1968. Maybe some hunter would eventually stumble upon skeletal remains in an alder swamp beside a grown over wood road. Or maybe the vanishing of a 16-year-old lad would still be in the RCMP's unsolved cases files ...

But in reality, that hillbilly did *not* act upon his worst impulses in that alder swamp, 40 years ago... If he were not too drunk to have remembered the incident afterwards, he could well have believed that he wrestled down Satan himself... In the event that he was born again soon afterwards, his tale of salvation in that moment in the swamp, would be far richer than mine:

“I picked up some hitch-hiker boy and pulled off into the woods. I was drunk and burnin’ with shameful lust. But when I was at my weakest—just when I was just about to do somethin’ horrible—I cried out for Jesus and suddenly—”

2008, Port Moody BC

Never having to shovel shit:

Halfway along the trail to Jug Island in Belcarra park, I reflected on the National Film Board documentary seen on Utube earlier in the morning: *'In Love and Anger: Milton Acorn— Poet.'*

The film was made in 1984, two years before the death of the “people’s poet” from Prince Edward Island. The interview snippets, filmed in settings from bucolic PEI to seamy Spadina Ave. in Toronto, reveal a remarkable artist. Quite in contrast to the usual Canadian ‘professor-poet’, Acorn never had the security or fallback of a career. He was proud to have trained as a carpenter but much prouder in the claim that onward from his mid-30s, he was wholly dedicated to his writing.

He was a character and a drinker but was diligent at his craft. It was not only for his socialist affinities that his peers called him “the people’s poet”. He was celebrated in literary circles from Montreal to Vancouver. His work was initially snubbed by Canlit academia, but he eventually received his due— winning numerous literary honours, including a Governor General’s Award. Having made his mark in a wider world, he returned in his final years to his beloved little province...

Puffing uphill along slippery rocks, I thought of how few have such guts as to live only for— and only by— the writing of poetry... Of course, a poet needs to eat like everyone else— and cannot be faulted for desiring modest comfort... Yet no other literary form affords less remunerative opportunity. It seems common sense that a would-be poet should try to combine writing with a safe career. But is that not typically where the unholy compromise begins? At the end of days, the safe career may seem like decades spent shovelling shit— however soft-handedly...



Stopping at the viewpoint above the yachts on Bedwell Bay, I thought of how peasants in a medieval setting often came to the city to avoid shoveling shit. Of course, a country lad arriving in the city soon finds himself hungry in the marketplace. If he swipes a loaf from a stall—he might be beaten bloody...

But he may take note of the jugglers, the magicians or story tellers at the marketplace performing for thrown pennies. Perhaps the lad will conclude that he, too, needs some *sh*tick*.

If he is emboldened enough by desperation, he might find a corner of the marketplace and try his luck with some little performance. If he believes he has a pleasing voice, perhaps he will try singing. He might attract a small audience and a few pennies— or he might be jeered. If the latter, he will realize that in order to avoid starving in the city, he will need to come up with new tricks. Failing that, he still has the option of crawling back to shovel shit for the elder brother who inherited the family plot...



Headed downhill towards the rocky shore of Indian Arm, I thought again of the Milton Acorn documentary. In one sequence, he is shown reading before a small audience. He stands behind a mock-up of a ship's wheel with drink in hand and a live fiddler off to his side... It seemed a hokey 'performance' staged by the film director.

Perhaps Acorn could have garnered greater renown had he, like Leonard Cohen, learned to turn his poetry into song. Still, Acorn got by—presumably through honoraria and government grants. He seemed to manage without compromising his art...

Most memorable from the documentary was the scene in which Acorn is sitting in his bedroom at his elderly mother's house in Charlottetown, PEI, surrounded by a dishevelment of books. He says:

"What's to regret? I got 3 squares a day for most of my life. I've never done real hard work since the age of 35... I wished I'd fucked more— but who doesn't?"

His poems may not be among one's favourites, but who cannot admire Milton Acorn? Most impressively, he never had to shovel shit—nor presumably ever had to take it.

That could be a tombstone epitaph that leaves many of us deeply envious...

2012, Port Moody BC

Among bold hearts at the Craft Fair:

In accompanying C. to the craft fair at the Poirier Recreation Center, I should have known it would be awkward. One would have supposed that a Sunday morning in mid-December would be busy with Christmas shoppers. But this morning the handful of browsers (including C. and I) outnumbered the crafters.

While C. paused at each table, I passed through the gauntlet, careful not to give false encouragement with second glances... Of course, I supported C.'s plan to augment the Christmas gift list with locally made products. But I felt as queasy before handmade wool animals with button eyes as I did before their mass-manufactured counterparts at dollar stores...

It was not so difficult to understand the craft fair etiquette. Just a few smiles or nods if not a few words of appreciation ("*that's really cute— how did you do that?*") was enough for most of the crafters. Yet in passing a particularly ugly display of embroidered aprons, I wondered whether the toothy lady behind the table might pause for reflection in loading her car this afternoon without having made a single sale...

At the same time, I acknowledged that it takes some guts to take one's 'precious' creations to the marketplace. Possibly for every table rented at the Coquitlam craft sales there are five hobbyists who dare not expose their work to the public for fear of rejection... Yet when does one run out of excuses and simply give up?



"You should read our stories!"

I was in the midst of these gloomy thoughts when hailed by an old gal (grey bangs and purple dress) at a table piled with booklets. On the wall behind her was a computer printed banner proclaiming: '*Dogwood Seniors' Centre Life Writing Project.*' Smiling, she held up one the booklets.

"It's seniors writing about their life experiences. Interesting stories! Only \$4."

The old gent in a Christmas sweater beside her scratched his neck and looked away.

Obligingly, I opened the blue cover and flipped through. Under the list of contributors at the front was the acknowledgement: '*Sponsored by a grant from the government of British Columbia*'.

"You ought to tell your granddad about our group," said the woman, "He might like to join."

"Granddad?" I chuckled. "I'm almost a senior myself."

She caught my eye. "You only have to be 50 you know, to join the group."

"I'm over 55."

“I don’t believe it,” her eyes twinkled. ‘You don’t look over forty-five.’”

I tipped up my hat to reveal a bald pate. The old lady laughed.

“Do you have a story in here?” I asked.

“Mine’s coming up in the next edition,” she said, “stay tuned.”

Smiling, I continued flipping through. I sensed that our tiny interchange was probably more appreciated than a patronizing plunked down \$4. I put the booklet neatly back on the pile.

“See ya later,” she waved.

As I ambled away from her table, it occurred that that I’d probably just brushed off the only chance to ever see my name in print...

2007, Coquitlam, BC

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