

### Chapter 3 – Maintenance

In this respect, my next job was an improvement of sorts. I worked on maintenance at a summer camp. It was a beautiful camp, on a lake in Muskoka, with swimming, canoeing, arts and crafts, theatre, waterskiing, tennis, golf, horseback riding, and etiquette for the ruling class. Maintenance was responsible for the buildings (dining halls, rec halls, cabins, washrooms/showers, offices, infirmary, sheds, and stables), the grounds, and the docks. For a while, I did okay. There was some concern, I admit, when, on the day the kids arrived, I started dancing around, weaving in and out of clusters of mostly wide-eyed and wary kids, taunting "I don't have to deal with you! I don't have to deal with you!" However, since the episode wasn't repeated, everyone pretended it didn't happen. And I went about my business, painting the cabins, cutting the grass, repairing the docks, and so on.

But then there was lunch. With the rest of the crew: Jimmy, the youngest member, summer help for three years while getting a forestry diploma, and now full-time; Clyde, a little slow – slow-thinking, slow-moving; Zeke, a wiry guy who would have reminded you of a World War I marine even if he didn't have that tattoo of an anchor on his arm; and Mac, our supervisor. Jackie, summer help like me, wasn't there. She didn't eat lunch. But the others did, and they were talking about going hunting on the weekend.

"I don't understand hunting," I joined in. The look Mac gave me indicated that women were to be seen and not heard. Hm. John's brother? He did have a ridiculously large and sturdy all-in-one wrench thing hooked onto his belt loop.

"I don't understand the desire to kill," I spoke again, loudly.

"It's not that," Zeke said. "It's the excitement, the thrill of stalking an animal that's big and wild and can tear you apart!"

"Yeah right. Like Bambi's cousin's going to tear you apart."

"And the challenge!" Clyde added. "Deer are smart, you know!"

I'd say the average deer has an IQ of what, three? So I had to ask, "Smart compared to who?" For example, I understand there were a lot of hunting injuries the year the M-10 Moose Call came onto the market. Well, what do you think's gonna happen when some moron stands in the middle of the forest during mating season and yells out in moose language 'COME FUCK ME NOW!'

"And 'the challenge'?" I continued. "Give me a break. You guys hunt in a group, so already it's what, six against one? And you use dogs, and ATVs, and even helicopters, to scare the animals out of the bush. And then you've got some geezer sittin' in a truck parked at the side of the road just waiting to pick off the first fear-frenzied creature that runs across. Oh, the challenge." 'Course then again, since said geezer has probably been chugging beer all afternoon, I guess that would be a challenge.

"It's not just all that," Jimmy pitched in. "We like the meat."

"Then why don't you go to a deer farm and just shoot one that's out grazing in the field? Or a cow farm. Hey, I know! Get a job in a slaughterhouse!"

"'Cuz it's gotta be wild," Zeke grinned at Clyde.

"Okay, why don't you just shoot a skunk?"

"Big and wild," he winked. Oh my god.

"Yeah, about this 'bigger is better' thing. It's completely illogical. I mean, anyone can shoot a moose that's just standing there. If you really wanna brag, hang a pair of chipmunk ears on your wall." They looked at me with such – What? Had I suggested castration again?

"And the wardrobe," I carried on. "Also highly illogical. I mean we have the – ," I adopted the bored and very gay voice of a pretentious British fashion designer, " – matching pants and shirt in camouflage 'I'm hiding' greens and browns. With perhaps a smudge of olive or taupe. While the accessories – vest and cap – are in fluorescent 'I can't help but be seen' orange. The ensemble fairly shouts 'I'm a man.'" By this point, they were ignoring me. Well, eating did require their full attention.

Another time, another lunch, I heard Jimmy and Mac mumbling to each other trying to figure out if Cathy, one of the new kitchen staff, was Chinese or Japanese. Or maybe Korean. Vietnamese even. They asked me what I thought.

"Isn't she Canadian?" I replied innocently.

They glared at me. Now what? Oh. I'd broken another rule. The 'Never ever expose our dim-witted prejudices, we take pride in being assholes, we take even greater pride in being ignorant assholes' rule. So I asked her when she next passed by our table.

And with only half the attitude she was entitled to, she answered simply, "Canadian."

Never one to pass up what was coming to me, I said, "See I told you so! Ya bunch of dim-witted prejudiced ignorant assholes." Well, lunch was clearly over.

They all got up, heavily, as if eating was a job well done.

"Tonight then?" Mac looked at Zeke.

"Yup – Clyde's place, right?"

"Right – "

"Who's bringing the beer?" Jimmy asked.

Ah yes, it was Friday. Friday night was poker night.

"Y'know why women can't play poker?" Mac asked, smiling nastily at me, rubbing in the exclusion. "They're no good at bluffing."

Hm. "Guess you've never had sex with a woman then, eh?"

So on my third day of 'firewood duty' – a supposedly punitive assignment that involved being dropped off at the chopping site first thing in the morning and not picked up until the end of the afternoon, leaving one all alone all day long to chop firewood – I figured as far as being on the maintenance crew goes, life doesn't get much better than that – on the third day of chopping wood, I developed my Theory of Man. Frankly, I think it rivals the Theory of Everything for explanatory value regarding life, the universe, and, well, everything.

My theory is this: men have a defective chromosome. The Y was supposed to be an X, but somehow it ended up missing something. Maybe it's a case of stunted growth or arrested development. Whatever, due to this defective chromosome, uniquely characteristic of the male, men are less evolved.

Consider their fascination with movement. They always have to be doing something. They can't sit still. This importance of movement is characteristic of many lower animals. Certainly it's required for flight and fight. (And no other options occur to lower animals.) And for many, movement is a form of posturing – which explains the

way men walk, and stand, and sit. On the other hand, such excessive physical activity may simply suggest that the organism's mental activity doesn't provide enough stimulation.

Not only must they be doing something, they must be doing it loudly. Men seem to be inordinately fond of engines, jackhammers, and chainsaws. This desire to make noise is suggestive of the lion's roar – the louder the noise, the greater the threat.

Because, usually, the larger the animal. And of course size is another male obsession. Girth which in a woman would be considered obese and disgusting is carried by men as if it increases their value, their authority: they thrust out their gut just as they thrust out their chest. It brings to mind the many animals that can inflate themselves – the blowfish can actually double its size. Men are concerned not only with physical size – in general and in particular – but also with the size of their paycheques, their houses, and their corporations. Simply put, the bigger, the better.

Closely related to the size thing is the territory thing. Men occupy a lot of space. Again, look at the way they stand and sit. They take up, they occupy, more space than they need – they lean on counters, sprawl on chairs, take over small countries.

Consider also men's obsession with speed. Cars, trains, planes. Sex. Speed is, of course, important for flight, one of the forementioned behaviours favoured by so many lower animals.

Like their sexual response, men's emotional response is, well, uncomplicated. They are easy to please. This lack of complexity is further indication that they are less evolved.

Some say that language is the mark of higher life forms. And, of course, any grade school teacher will tell you that boys lag behind girls in verbal development. They're just not very good at communicating. I believe the word I'm looking for is 'inarticulate.'

By way of summary, consider dick flicks. Also called 'action movies,' there is indeed lots of action. And lots of noise. The heroes are usually big. And they have big things – big guns, usually. The central conflict of a dick flick is almost always territorial. There is little in the way of plot or character development, but there's always at least one high-speed chase. And, understandably, the dialogue in a dick flick consists mostly of short and often incomplete sentences.

Alas, lunch wasn't the only problem. There was also that 'Merger Maniac' thing. Of course, maintenance staff was not supposed to interact with the kids – it goes without saying that we're unqualified to do so. Which is why one kid stopped in his tracks on hearing me, seeing me, the janitor, take a moment to play some Chopin on the piano in the rec hall I'd just swept. Janitors can't play Chopin. It totally rocked his world view. I'd probably sent him into years of therapy.

Anyway, one bright summer day while doing the washrooms, and pondering the cleaning products I was supposed to use – my rubber gloves were disintegrating – I heard what sounded like an awful lot of kids chanting "More! More! More! More!" Curious, I stepped outside, toilet brush in hand, to see four or five teams of kids on the playing field, each under a huge banner variously proclaiming Microsoft or Monsanto or something. After the chant, they'd huddle in their teams and apparently plan hostile takeovers, because then they'd all run around and, according to rules I still haven't figured out, some

won and some lost, and the kid in the corner with a huge stock market ticker tape thing changed some numbers.

At the next scrimmage, I ran onto the field with my pail of water – yes, dirty washroom clean-up water – and doused 'em all. I flicked my rag in the face of each of the camp leaders present, yelling like Pink Floyd, "Leave the kids alone!"

I tried explaining – to Security, ironically – that I was not threatening to throw bricks at anyone, nor did I even have any bricks, but the incident went on record nevertheless.

And then there were those little signs on the sanitary receptacles. One sign per receptacle, one receptacle per stall, ten stalls per washroom, five washrooms, that's fifty times a day I'd read "This sanitary receptacle is provided for your convenience. You are requested to co-operate and use it for the purpose intended."

'For our convenience?' I suppose the toilet paper is for our convenience too. No doubt some man came up with these signs.

'A sanitary receptacle'? That's just wrong. The receptacle may well be sanitary, thanks to yours truly, but I think what's meant is 'a sanitary napkin receptacle.' 'Course the napkins put into the receptacle aren't very sanitary at that point – 'menstrual napkin receptacle' would be more accurate. But men do have trouble with such words. (Though they seem to handle 'cunt' easily enough.)

'You are requested to co-operate.' Someone's been watching way too many late night movie interrogation scenes. Really, I think a 'please' would've sufficed. And actually, I don't even think we need a 'please'. I doubt we even need to be asked. I mean, why shouldn't we 'co-operate'? Women are generally inclined to keep things clean. And this was, after all, the girls' washroom, not the boys'. (Twice as much time was allotted for cleaning the boys' washrooms. At first, I thought that was because the men on the crew worked twice as slowly. But then one day I was assigned to the boy's washroom. Until then, I'd always thought 'a pissing contest' was just a metaphor.)

Lastly, 'for the purpose intended.' What else might we use a 'sanitary receptacle' for? A lunchbox? A weapon? ("And now for tonight's top story: as we speak, gangs of women are roaming the streets armed with sanitary receptacles...")

So I took all the little signs off the receptacles and bolted them to the walls in the boy's washrooms – one above each urinal. Alas, this too went on record.

And then there was that trip to the dump. Jimmy, Jackie, and I were to make a garbage run. Not knowing how long the trip would be, I asked Jackie, who'd gotten into the front seat of the pick-up beside Jimmy, who was already at the wheel, if I could ride up front instead. "I'm very prone to motion sickness." It's true. Ask any one of eight airline attendants. And five train attendants. I even get nauseous working the microfiche machines in the library.

"Oh no, me too," she replied. She had a crush on Jimmy.

Well, the solution was obvious. "Jimmy, how about you sit in the back then and one of us'll drive." He glared at me. Then angrily started the pick-up, jerked it into reverse, and headed out to the road, spinning gravel and bumping recklessly over all the ruts. I guess I was staying in the back. My stomach lurched. What'd I say? I couldn't figure it out. Surely he knew I could drive; in fact, I was driving my van clear across the

country 'bout the time Jimmy was just getting his license. Halfway to the dump, it dawned on me.

"Oh I get it!" I leaned forward into the front seat. "My truck is my penis!" And then I threw up.

Near the end of the summer, the kids put on a talent show. Curious, I joined the other members of the crew sitting at the back of the main rec hall. Suddenly, everyone stood. What's this, they stand for the Camp Director's grand entrance? I looked around in disbelief. Then everyone – kids, counsellors, staff – started singing the national anthem. They were standing for the anthem. Shit. If I'd known that, I would've shown up late. Mac glowered – down – at me. I'd never actually seen anyone glower before. Glare, yes. Glower, no. Then as soon as it was over and everyone sat back down, he jeered at me, "Too stiff to stand?" (I'd been chopping firewood again.)

"No, I don't stand for the anthem."

"Why not? You some kind of commie?"

"One question at a time," I kept my voice low, as someone had come onto the stage to introduce the evening's events. "I don't stand for the anthem because first of all, it's a bit arbitrary – why not play the town anthem instead, or the provincial anthem, or the planetary anthem? Second, why even encourage group bonding? I prefer to encourage individual identity: it's much less dangerous, not to mention healthier."

He gave me a blank look. You know that look of incomprehension, the look Sultan, Kohler's chimp in that famous experiment, the look Sultan probably had on his face before he understood he could pile the crates on top of each other to reach the banana?

"Whenever we divide ourselves into little groups," I continued to explain, against all odds of succeeding, but because the guy was taking a long time to introduce the first act, "there's a good chance we'll get into a hyperemotional, nonrational gang thing. And groups based on territory, such as nationalistic groups, are the worst. If you have a sense of self, you don't need the identity of a group, a gang. As Einstein said, 'Nationalism is an infantile disease.'"

"So you are a commie."

"What?" It took me a few seconds to figure out his mistake. "Communism is an economic system, not a political system. It's at odds with capitalism, not nationalism. And actually, my guess is that communists are quite nationalistic. They probably stand very proudly for their anthem." Was the first act ever going to begin?

"You should still show some respect." What a fine upstanding citizen he was. As self-righteous as they come.

"But I don't respect – "

"What's your problem?" He cut me off angrily. And a little loudly.

"I don't agree with what the anthem is saying, that's my problem. For example, the line 'I'll stand on guard for thee' – well, I won't – "

"You don't have to sing it, you just have to stand for it." He was getting very impatient with me.

"Well, when I stand for something, I stand for it – for what it means."

"Oh quit your nitpicking, it's not really supposed to mean anything!" He was shouting by now, and people were starting to turn around to look at us.

"Then why does my not standing for it upset you so much?"

Amazingly enough, I wasn't fired. I quit. Well I didn't actually quit, I just kind of left early. It was near the end of August, the kids were gone, and we had just begun the summer's-end clean-up. Apparently it would take the better part of a day just to drive around and empty the cabins of all the stuff left behind – clothes, food, you name it. A mere hour into that day, Mac whipped an unopened container of talcum powder into the pick-up from a cabin door. I happened to be standing between him and the pick-up. He looked first, I saw him. Turns out I ducked in time, the container sailed through the open back window, hit the windshield, and exploded. Pink talcum powder filled the interior. With the fresh scent of roses. I figured then was a good time to pick up my paycheque and not say goodbye.

But working with inanimates – the firewood, mops, and so forth, I mean – went so well, I got another maintenance job, this time at a rural recreation complex. And this time I was fired. You'd think little could go wrong when you're dealing with inanimates. Not so.

Apparently I wasn't happy enough. It was the second time I was being fired for not being happy enough. Still, it threw me. I mean, it's not enough that I do my job well?

"You don't have lunch with the rest of us," the assistant manager said. "Not even coffee breaks," she complained. "You'd rather play with your dog." Well yeah. (I had been taking Kessie with me on nice days. She amused herself in the bush while I did whatever it was I was supposed to be doing. But at five to ten, five to twelve, and five to two, she'd be sitting outside whatever building I was in, waiting patiently, confidently, with her ever-present bright fluorescent green tennis ball at her feet.)

I did spend one break watching the skating practice with the garbanzo guy. (It was a cold and rainy day – Kessie'd stayed at home.)

"Why aren't there any men's precision teams?" I asked him.

He looked at me, then back at the skaters.

"Sure, it requires attention to detail and a highly developed spatial sense. But men have those abilities, don't they? I mean, isn't that why, we're told, they dominate science and engineering?"

He looked at me again, but said nothing.

"Maybe it's the degree of cooperation required. Men are capable of cooperation – that's what team sports are all about – but in hockey, football, basketball, and the like, there's always room to be a star. Not so in a precision skating team. I betcha that's why there aren't any men's synchronized swimming teams either. There'd be way too many drownings.

"And sure, men are capable of the timing that cooperation entails. Quarterbacks and their receivers demonstrate this all the time. But the perfect synchrony of a precision team performance is achieved not by such discrete instances of cooperation, but by continuous cooperation. The sport requires ongoing adjustment to others, which requires awareness of and sensitivity to others, not to mention patience, and persistence, with the practice. It's not only about relationships – to the ice, to the music, to each other: it's

about maintaining those relationships."

He spoke then. "Drill."

Right. "Oh, well, give a man a gun – "

We continued to watch the guys skate around. Then another thought occurred to me. "I know what it is: members of a precision team have to put their arms around each other – that's it, isn't it?"

He exploded, shoving himself back from the boards. "I don't know why you're so hell-bent to get men into it! Let the girls have their synchronized skating. If they played hockey, they'd get hurt." True. They would. Because men have made beating someone senseless part of the game. And, in another case, the game.

"After all," he added, "you gals're more prone to injury, you gotta admit that." This from the sex that has its reproductive vitals hanging by a thread, at bull's-eye of the body, with nary half an inch of fat for protection. And competes on the pommel horse, voluntarily.

"You're quiet when the others are chatting on the job," the assistant manager had continued. I'm thinking, I thought.

"You hardly ever smile," she said. That's because of what I'm thinking, I thought.

"For minimum wage, the smile's not included," I said. Unsmiling.

"Well, perhaps some day you can go back to school, get a degree, and get a job that pays more than minimum wage. I think you can do it," she smiled, encouragingly. And I remembered then that, of course, I'd put only grade 12 on my resume – if I'd listed my degrees, I wouldn't've gotten the job. And it had been either that job or welfare.

"And truth be told," she said, "I wasn't pleased with your little informal pay equity inquiry." I had noticed that there seemed to be a clear division of labour, based on sex, and I had wondered if there was a difference in pay. Aloud. (And yes indeed, people get paid almost twice as much to stack chairs as to clean them.)

"Or your mention of black lung." This was after one of my coworkers had said her whole arm was numb the evening of the day we did the dining hall floor. Said dining hall was as large as a school cafeteria and we had to scrub each tile, on our hands and knees, with a steel wool soap pad thing.

"Numb?" I had asked. "Does that happen a lot? I mean, how often do we have to do that floor?"

"Yeah, why doesn't she just rent a couple of sanders or polishers or something," one of the other women asked.

"You guys ever hear of black lung?" I asked. "Occupational hazard of working in the mines. They eventually got compensation for it, I think. Employers have to provide a safe and healthy workplace. You should say something."

Right. Maybe something like, "When can I pick up my severance pay?"

(I figured the Labour Board would have fun with this one. But of course unless you've worked for three months at the same place, none of the labour laws regarding dismissal apply.) (You'd think I would've remembered that.)