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My First Englishman

Abstract

'Abe Lincoln was an honest man.' O'Rourke, our history teacher, slammed Golden Horizons shut and gazed at us conspiratorially. 'Or so it says here.' He paused to scratch his stubble reflectively, a dry rasp we listened to with open mouths. 'Not only was Lincoln a saint but Washington was taller than Napoleon.'
'Abe Lincoln was an honest man.'

O'Rourke, our history teacher, slammed *Golden Horizons* shut and gazed at us conspiratorially. 'Or so it says here.' He paused to scratch his stubble reflectively, a dry rasp we listened to with open mouths. 'Not only was Lincoln a saint but Washington was taller than Napoleon.'

We waited for the truth. O'Rourke perched himself on Emily LaPlante's desk. He grinned. O'Rourke, third generation Irish-Canadian single male, age 26, was about to shape a generation. We sighed collectively.

There wasn't a ten-year-old girl in the class who hadn't signed her name Mrs O'Rourke at one time or another when his back was turned. And there wasn't a boy who didn't see himself in crumpled cords and battered Adidas trainers someday. O'Rourke had it all, wavy hair, a snarly smile, he even had dimples. We're counting on you, our eyes said, give us the low-down.

'The truth is, Lincoln was a penny-pinching slave-driver and, as for Washington, what do you think his men called him behind his back? Anyone? Barry?'

'Clacker?'

'Clacker?'

'Because of his false teeth, sir?'

'Good try but wrong. Next? One of the girls for a change? Mary?'

'Duck-wiggle?'

'Almost... Duck, starts with an a, a-s...'

'Duck-ass?'

'Correct. Why? Because he was short and fat and everytime he wore his general's jacket to lead the troops, he looked like a short fat waddling duck. End of story. But enough about the Americans. Tell me something about our first Prime Minister, MacDonald.'

'He was a drunk.'

'Good lad. What else?'

'He used to sneak down the back stairs of his office to avoid his enemy.'

'Why?'

'His enemy led a different party that didn't like drink. They were all out to get him.'

O'Rourke leaned back with a slow satisfied smile. 'You see, that's the difference between America and Canada. The Americans have to make a
hero out of everybody. We don’t need heroes. We have MacKenzie King, the third Prime Minister who had a dog named...

‘King.’

‘And what did MacKenzie used to talk to his dog about?’

‘Foreign policy.’

‘Exactly.’

It was 1972 and the national fever we had been plunged into by Trudeau-mania was not about to let up. All over Canada, history teachers gleefully dished out the dirt on America, heaping it up until it spilled over. O’Rourke went further. Look, he’d tell us, they have dirt but we have even more dirt. It seemed we were the only nation in the world that was willing to face up to facts.

As for our then leader, the fearless gappy-toothed Pierre Trudeau – now there was buckets of style and scandal. ‘Joie de vivre,’ our mothers murmured. The red carnation in Trudeau’s lapel was world famous, a symbol of his devil-may-care approach to the international arena. It smelled of Gallic gall, nouvelle cuisine and it smelled of his manhood. ‘I’m here,’ said the carnation on tour in China, in Russia and in America, ‘I’m here to have fun on behalf of the Canadian people and I’m not going home until I’ve seen absolutely everything.’

Did it matter that the carnation was pumped full of dye and turned into a pulpy spam-coloured ball by the end of the day? No. Because none of the other leaders had dared to put so much as a Red Cross pin in their lapel. None of the other leaders had such a young wife. Margaret Trudeau had gone through a hippie stage. The evidence was there at the wedding. Didn’t she suppress a giggle as she knelt at the altar? Wasn’t that a hippie wedding dress, no nips, no tucks, just pure flow? We knew what was really going on. The Trudeaus were a hot couple and Canada was on fire.

It wasn’t until Margaret’s 1980s autobiography that it slipped Trudeau was a teetotalling tightwad that never so much as sipped a Spritzer. Or paid for one. ‘Divorce,’ said Mother, ‘brings out the worst. That Margaret was a spendthrift on drugs. She was sick.’

But in spite of our belief that Americans as well as everyone else were dying to emigrate to Canada in the 1970s, there was still one nation left to conquer, one nation left to impress. Mother England, or simply, Mother.

‘Canada,’ proclaimed O’Rourke, ‘is not a melting pot like America, a place of forgetfulness, step off the boat and that’s it, finito, say good-bye to the motherland forever. No, Canada has never been America.’ Eyes gleaming, cheeks flushed, O’Rourke marched up and down the aisle, pounding fist into palm. ‘What,’ he shouted, ‘is Canada?’

‘Um, a, umm, mosaic, sir?’

‘Louder.’

‘A mosaic... sir?’

‘Everyone together... A...? Together... now, I can’t hear you.’

‘A mosaic, SIR.’
‘Correct, Canada is a place of remembrance, we remember where we came from. Example, Maude, where are you from?’
‘Well, there’s a bit of everything really, there’s even some Jew,’ I said.
‘You can’t be Jewish,’ Cicily whispered. ‘This is a Catholic school, you’ll have to leave.’
‘But it’s true...’
‘Fine, fine,’ said O’Rourke soothingly. ‘She’s a Heinz 57.’
‘Isn’t that an Americanism, sir?’
‘That’s enough, lads. Fair play, there’s nothing worse than thirty against one. Now my point is maybe it’s time to stop saying we’re Irish-Canadians and Italian-Canadians and Yugoslavians and start saying we’re Canadians.’

Flummoxed, we stared at O’Rourke. Give up our heritage? What would our parents say? Turn our back on our relics? All that china-ware carted across continents in leaky, rat-ridden, scurvy-soaked ships? Those gorgeous shepherdess figurines posing coyly in genuine mahogany what-nots from the Old Country? What about all those special holidays and feast-days? Those terrific presents, real gold necklaces, watches with compass hands, five-dollar bills in onion-skin envelopes? Give up all that? Couldn’t it wait?

O’Rourke never mentioned the concept of the stand-alone Canadian after that day. It was a dead end and he knew it. There was a feeling that he had gotten us halfway and it would be a few more generations before we renounced Mother. It would take time and maybe a revolution. He only hoped the Americans wouldn’t invade first. Canadians, he reasoned, were like cows in the field. You couldn’t go in there waving your arms about wildly. They’d just stare at you and go on chewing. That’s if they didn’t get nervous and stampede. Let them decide for themselves, he concluded. Besides, he had found a girlfriend.

After O’Rourke was seen at Sunday Mass with a long-haired brunette in calf-high brown vinyl boots and a denim maxi-skirt open to the knees and embroidered with daisies, the girls in class lost their passion for wars and Prime Ministers. The ‘lady acquaintance’ looked a lot like Margaret Trudeau. ‘I think it’s serious or he wouldn’t have taken her to Mass,’ Mother said. ‘She’s going to be The One.’ As for myself, after O’Rourke looked to marriage, I looked to England. One day, I decided, I don’t know where, I don’t know when, we’re going to meet.

That summer our family went fruit picking for ‘pin-money’. In fact, my father was on strike from the assembly-line and we were strapped for cash. So every morning, at five o’clock, we’d pile into the 1957 Chrysler. ‘Handmade, a good year,’ said Mother. In paper bags from Potter and Shaw Drugs were lettuce sandwiches on Wonder bread, a twinkie each and a root beer. The three of us squished into the back seat and tried to go
back to sleep.

In the front, Mother painted her lips fire-engine red. 'You never know who you’re going to meet,' she said. 'But always remember too much make-up and you look like a ship about to sink.' She wore lilac capri trousers, a sleeveless white top and white espadrilles. In her wide-brimmed straw hat, she was a dead ringer for Audrey Hepburn. Mother rubbed cream into her hands and sighed. As tiny as a Chinese courtesan and with hips like a matador, Mother looked out the window as she added and re-added the weekly expenses. The scent of her cream surrounded us like a sweet fog as we fell asleep.

By the time we reached the strawberry fields, our thighs were stuck to the leather and we were bursting for a pee. 'Behind the car, hurry,' Mother hissed.

In the fields the Italians had already filled their fourth quart. 'Look, they always get the nice fat red ones. I wonder if they stuff the bottom of the basket with leaves,' Mother railed. 'It's our own fault, we're never going to get anywhere if we can't even fill up our baskets on time. Next thing you know, they'll own the farm. And it's all your fault for sleeping in. Now, remember, no fooling around today in the patch, work, work, work, that's what I want to see.'

The Italians were not really from Italy, except for the old black-garbed women with hairy underarms and the bushy-browed grandfathers who, with a grimace, lowered themselves onto giant handkerchiefs carefully spread over dry bumpy ground. The children, mainly third generation, were raised like kids in Italy thirty years ago. I recognized Luigi the Tiger who was going to be a football star and Maria who already had a hope chest at the age of 11. But there was someone new in the field. Someone vastly more interesting than the Italians.

There he stood underneath the blaring sun like a mushroom, white and sort of soggy looking. He wore purple flares with yellow stars on the pockets and a skintight green undershirt. Rust coloured hair tickled his bony shoulders as he squinted at us. Everything about him roared, 'I'm not from here, I'm different, I'm new.' He was as exotic a creature as I had ever seen and he was sixteen.

The stranger spoke. 'Alright?'

Was it a question or was he telling us he was alright? Then it hit us. He was speaking English. He was English. We drew nearer to this visiting marvel, this cultural colossus we had heard of but never... touched. As he came towards us, we shivered, afraid to show our ignorance by talking. Instead we looked at each other, and giggled nervously.

'Geez,' we said, 'are you really English?'

'Absolutely,' he grinned, revealing chipped grey teeth. 'London, England, I'm here on a working holiday.'

'A holiday?' my sister tittered. 'Here?'

'Why not?'
‘Well...’, we stalled, torn between telling him St Catharines was a waste of time and wanting him to think it was worth visiting.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ my sister asked.

He laughed. ‘No, but if you know of any gorgeous birds who need a date, let me know. Especially if they’re blonde.’

‘Are birds special girls?’
‘I should think so.’

‘A working holiday, you say,’ Mother interrupted. ‘Well, you better start working and stop holidaying.’

‘I am working, I’m teaching them English.’

‘If the Queen’s English is good enough for the Queen then it’s good enough for us... But that’s not what you’re speaking, is it?’ Mother smiled menacingly. ‘Where exactly are you from in London?’

‘The best part, Dagenham,’ he flushed.

‘Digham,’ Mother paused. ‘I’ll have to ask my next-door neighbour about that. He’s from London too. He’s a University Professor. He’ll know where Dig... ham is.’ She grabbed my hand.

‘Say something,’ I asked him.

‘What?’

‘Anything, you know, just say something,’ I pleaded.

‘Okay. The forecast for today is extremely hot with a violent gust coming in from the right...’

‘Come on, we’re not here to listen to the weatherboy.’ Mother pulled us along the dusty rows.

‘Wow,’ I shouted, ‘that was amazing.’

‘There’s no need to hero-worship him, you know,’ Mother berated us.

‘He’s just a boy.’

‘He’s from England.’

‘Who says it’s the good part of England, eh? He’s probably from the slums. You can’t own your own house over there, that’s why they’re all crying to get into Canada. You think he’s a big shot but I’ll bet my bottom dollar his family is as broke as Kingdom Come.’

‘Who cares?’

‘Yeah, who cares?’

Mother turned in despair to the Italian grandmother behind her. ‘Were your children like this?’

‘Worse, you wouldn’t believe the agony...’

‘Just because he’s English, you’re ready to lick his feet,’ she fumed. ‘The English wouldn’t even rent to your uncles during the war, there were signs all over the place saying No Irish and there they were, good Canadian soldiers doing dirty work for the English. The English, ha, what about the Irish?’

‘Ha,’ said the Italian, spitting out a strawberry, ‘the English, they know nothing about food, they eat grease like the pig...’

‘You see,’ said Mother triumphantly, ‘that’s why he’s so pale, a diet of
grease. He’s got a funny smell too, sour like old pee-stained sheets.’

‘We Italians show the English the way to bath,’ the Italian interjected, ‘but… like animals, they hate water.’ She threw up her hands in disgust.

The days were glorious and the strawberry patch, a foreign land. It didn’t matter what the adults told us about Jack. That summer we couldn’t get enough of him. We followed him everywhere, apeing his pigeon-toed walk, repeating slang, vying for a crooked smile. ‘Alright’, ‘she’s tasty’, ‘nice bird’, ‘give us a fag’, ‘do us a favour’. We called him ‘Guv’. He called us ‘mate’. We were ‘well in with him’, he said, ‘as thick as thieves’. Mother continued to mutter darkly and harangue us about half-empty baskets but none of it mattered. We were in love.

It was time, we thought, to show him how much. It was time we got him married. To a Canadian. That way he’d stay in Canada… forever.

Herlinda, who was seventeen, worked at the open-air fruit market up the road from the farm. After preparing ornamental flower seedlings in early spring, the market was pretty dead. There were occasional truckers and weekend gardeners but most of the time Herlinda sat behind the counter with an Evangeline cream soda and read. When we came in to tell her about the interesting Englishman who wanted to meet her, she was in the middle of Bram Stoker’s Dracula. ‘Oh,’ she said, startled, pushing her glasses back up her nose, ‘that’s funny, I don’t remember any Englishman coming in, I would’ve remembered the accent.’

‘He’s shy, he said he was too shy to speak to you so we thought you could come and see him, like maybe this week…’

‘Well, I really think he should come here…’

‘Okay, when?’

‘Good heavens, I don’t know, whenever…’

‘Okay,’ we said, running out.

My brother thought that Herlinda should get rid of her glasses and my sister thought she should brush her hair.

‘She’s fine,’ I said. ‘She’s blonde, he likes blondes and she’s not fat or anything…’

‘Yeah, but maybe she reads too much…’

‘She’s fine,’ I said crossly, ‘and she’ll give him free pop.’

Back in the field my brother sidled up to Jack. ‘Hey, I got to tell you something, there’s this girl…’

‘You like someone, do you? Where is she? Here?’

‘No, for you I mean, a blonde…’

‘Spit it out, mate.’

‘There’s this girl who asked about you. I think she likes you… She’s blonde and everything…’

‘You’re taking the piss.’

‘What? Taking the what?’

‘Never mind, go on.’

‘No, what was that, I’m taking a piss?’
'The, the piss.'
'Oh.'
'Don't let it eat you up, mate. What about this girl?'

It took a week of build-up but we finally got him in the right frame of mind for walking up the road. We told him Herlinda liked skinny-dipping. Next Friday, he said, after I get paid, I'll pop in.

Then we had a brainstorm. A makeover for Herlinda. I went to Mother when she was between washing up and fixing the screen door.

'This could be marriage,' I said. 'Otherwise Herlinda might never meet anyone.'

'Marriage, without an education? And what happens when he gets sick or laid off? Absolutely not. She's too young.'

'Okay, maybe not marriage but still a real important date.'

'She should wait for someone who owns real trousers.'

'But he looks like a rock star. They all do in England. He's funny too and he'll make her laugh. I bet they get married and everything, especially if you help her get dressed.'

Mother looked horrified. 'I can't do that. Style is a very intimate thing. Her mother would never forgive me.'

'Just tell her to brush her hair.'

'Absolutely not.'

'Well then, it will be a big failure, all because of you.'

'She'll be fine, she has good child-bearing hips, a lot of men like that. Style's not everything, I once knew a woman with three chins and she was so much fun to be with she got a doctor.'

'How many chins did he have?'

'One and don't be snippy.'

'She'd need a doctor if she had three chins...'

'You know something? You're going to end up in a ditch with no-one if you don't learn to shut up.'

The next time Mother went into the market she was carrying a special edition Chateline Summer Beauty magazine that she left behind accidentally. The following day she returned and said, 'You wouldn't happen to have found a magazine on all sorts of things, skin-care and posture...'

'I have it right here, Mrs. Fitzpatrick.'

'Oh good, you know there's a very interesting article on hair-care, funnily enough there's this swoopy thing you can do with long, curly hair like yours, where is it now... the things you pick up, have you ever thought about posture, it's fascinating how it changes your appearance...'

When we dropped by to tell Herlinda what day to expect Jack, she still had the magazine. 'Remember Jack?' I said, and she blushed scarlet from the face to the neck.

'I forgot all about him, where did you say he was from?'

'London, and yellow's his favourite colour,' I replied. 'He's coming in
on Friday. Did you know he hasn’t seen the lopsided lama at Fawn Hill Nature Farm?’

‘Well, it is his first time in Canada. He can’t be expected to know where everything is. But it’d be a shame if he went without seeing the canal.’

‘That lama’s something else, so bad-tempered and a hump just hanging off the side like it’s going to fall off.’

‘I suppose there’s always the quarry...’

On Friday, Jack wore blue bell-bottoms with paisley inserts and a green satin shirt. He walked into the market and past Herlinda who sat behind the cash register with some of her hair swooped up and the rest bursting out of a butterfly clip. Her yellow sun-dress had an elasticized waist and big pockets with pink piping. Herlinda had painted her finger and toenails and was wearing rouge. She looked like a thirty-year-old divorcee.

Jack wandered among the seed trays and bug sprays and stopped at the fertilizer. We sucked grape popsicles and stared from our standpoint underneath the dwarf Maple tree. He looked away and began circling the lawn ornaments.

‘It sure was hot today, wasn’t it?’ I said.

‘Quite,’ he replied.

I nodded to Herlinda. ‘Jack’s from England, it’s not as hot there.’

‘Oh?’ said Herlinda.

‘Yes,’ Jack smiled briefly at her.

‘Well...’ Herlinda waited. Jack twirled the seed packet rack around and around.

Licking her lips nervously, Herlinda rubbed the back of her neck. ‘That’s very far, isn’t it, England?’

‘Somewhat.’ Jack stopped the rack with one finger.

‘Jack lives in London, right next door to Big Ben,’ said my sister.

‘Really? That must be awfully loud when you’re trying to sleep,’ said Herlinda.

Jack and Herlinda skirted around the burger issue for a while, whether you could taste the difference between an American burger and a Canadian one and then it was set, the big date.

We didn’t see Jack for three days. Then he turned up late for work looking as if he would rather be left alone.

I sat next to him without saying a word because I didn’t know if he wanted me to talk. When he finally opened his mouth his words came out as hard and chipped as bits of gravel. All he talked about was a rock band he wanted to form, called The Electric Druids, and how he needed to get
back to where things were really happening, Dagenham, London. He would sort out something with his mates, he said. We asked him about Herlinda. Did he like her?

‘She likes her books, doesn’t she?’ he replied, scornfully.

‘Don’t you think she’s pretty?’

‘She’s not my style.’ He went quiet again as if he had said something too close to the bone then added apologetically, ‘She likes Burt Bacharach and Nana Mouskouri. Know what I mean? Easy listening.’

‘But Nana’s wonderful,’ I said.

‘Of course, if you like that sort of thing...’ He looked over his shoulder then poured half his basket into mine, because that’s what friends were for, he said.

Herlinda was starting a new book, Far from the Madding Crowd, when we went in to ask her about Jack. She put it down reluctantly, only long enough to say, ‘He hasn’t even read Dickens. Not to mention Thomas Hardy. He may be English but I don’t think much of his education.’

She told Mother later that he had a peculiar smell like something badly fermented and that he was pushy with his hands. ‘Perhaps he doesn’t know any better,’ said Mother, ‘perhaps his parents...’

‘That’s another thing, he thinks he knows everything, he thinks he’s superior to us.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mother. ‘I’ve heard this before about the English. He’s going to have to learn the Hard Way.’

We stopped following Jack around so much and days went by when we hardly spoke to him at all. My sister and I sniffed surreptitiously if he was beside us. We started a Rank Days chart with a scale of one to ten. Only my brother remained steadfastly loyal.

‘He just smells like a guy, that’s all,’ he’d say, ‘it’s no big deal.’

Jack, used to our company, sought out obscure slang to lure us back. For a while it worked. But then, towards the end of summer, underneath a cold milky blue sky, Jack’s last attempt to reclaim our affections ended in a puff of strawberry field dust as we wheeled away on barefoot heels. There Jack stood, grinning crookedly and saying, ‘Have you seen my imitation of a Canadian?’

Enchanted, we drew closer. He planted his feet a shoulder width apart and reached with both hands for an invisible holster. In his pockets were two card punchers which he grabbed, spun round, blew into like two pistols and shoved back in his pockets. ‘Heeeey pardner, I’m gonna shoot you up,’ he said.

We looked at him in disgust. ‘That’s American,’ we retorted. ‘You’ve done an American, that’s horrible. Canadians are completely different.’

We stopped speaking to him altogether. Mother noticed and berated us behind the monolithic Chrysler. ‘He was only trying to make you laugh. How can you be so awful?’

‘You told us not to hero-worship him. Besides he stinks.’
'I said don’t hero-worship him. I didn’t say drag him through the dirt and spit on his grave. Now be nice to him, he’s all alone over here. How would you feel?'

'He thinks we’re Americans.'

'So what, what’s wrong with that? At least they’re friendly. You don’t mind Disney films and oranges from Florida at Christmas. This is the last time I say it, stop bullying him. On top of everything else he has to go back to England. They don’t even have proper plumbing over there.'

Mother was Jack’s protector the last three weeks, threatening us with ‘a good kick up the backside’ if so much as one nostril dilated in his presence.

'Your mother,’ she told him, ‘must be very proud of you. You’re as quick as the Italians at picking. I’ll bet she really misses you.’

They chatted about England like adults, comparing taxes and house repairs. ‘A little snow can destroy a house,’ she’d say. ‘I know, I’ve been there.’ One afternoon, Jack, in a shy halting way, showed her a photograph of his family, a tired-looking mother in her late fifties with four sons. ‘I admire her,’ said Mother, ‘bringing you up by herself and so well too. She deserves a medal. But I’m sure you tell her that all the time.’

The summer dragged to an end fretfully like a child sent to bed prematurely. Underneath an unpredictable sun, we sweated and shivered in turns as we hunted for the last strawberries. As Jack’s leaving day approached, we rejoined him with a sullen affection and a clearer eye, resenting him slightly for not being a hero but wanting to put a blanket around his frail English shoulders to keep him safe from cold wet shores. On his last day in Canada he came to the fields to say goodbye before the bus took him to Toronto.

We stood and ate picnic snacks off the hood of the Chrysler. ‘We got you something,’ we said, handing him a giant card with teddy bears picnicking on a soft green hill. ‘To Our English Guv’, it read, ‘I hope you enjoyed our beautiful country, with warm regards, Mrs Fitzpatrick’, and ‘It was very fun knowing you, you told lots of good jokes and made us laugh, Yours til Niagara Falls, Your Canadian pals’. In a small box was a key chain with The Maid of the Mist Honeymoon Ferry at Niagara Falls in a plastic case filled with water. Tilted slightly, the boat magically disappeared behind the Falls. ‘That’s so you don’t forget us,’ we explained. ‘You can carry it around in your pocket and use it for your English keys. Every time you open the door we’ll be with you.’