

THE BATTLE OF PRINCESS AND KING

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Susan and I volunteered to help out with the K-Town Triathlon. Let me re-phrase that : Susan volunteered; I was voluntold.

Our jobs were going to be traffic control. (Should be a snap, I thought: I'd done Yard Duty as a teacher for 35 years.) Susan was stationed at Ontario and Princess, kitty-corner from the S&R. This was near the beginning of the biking section of the event. She would get to see the action and cheer on the riders. From time to time she might have to ask a spectator to wait for a minute before crossing the street, or to redirect a Holiday Inn patron to an alternate exit.

Of course, I was assigned the intersection from hell, the Khyber Pass of Kingston, the OK Corral, the Alamo, the last gasp of the Light Brigade : Princess and King. I girded my loins with a British "Mustn't complain", and took up my position. I had two barricades and my lawn chair. The organizers had given me a spiffy blue T-Shirt and one of those fluorescent vests that highway construction workers wear. Give me a uniform and a barricade and I soon had "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from *Les Misérables* going through my head. My task was to direct people to alternate routes to the Holiday Inn, the Wolfe Island Ferry and the Causeway.

Seeing as it was 7:30 in the morning when I began my duty, traffic was very light. So, during that quiet spell I practised adopting authoritative postures, finally settling on an Alabama State Trooper pose. With my paunch and aviator sunglasses it seemed only natural. Ain't nobody gonna mess with Bubba.

I guess my natural air of authority and my I-don't-suffer-fools demeanor carried me through my four hour stint. Most drivers were cooperative and flexible as they had to make detours towards their planned destinations. Some were confused and needed the gentle touch. Two or three were peeved, and as they drove away, I knew they were no longer my problem. Only one driver was out and out unpleasant. I coped with his nautical language by imagining that he was a chronic grouch in any situation and by muttering under my breath something rude.

My favourite were the pedestrians who waited at the curb thinking they had to have my permission to cross. With an air of magnanimity I would wave them through, making lame jokes about “Mother, may I?” or “Simon Says”, such *bonhomie* retorts earning a charitable grin and mutterings about being out in the sun too long.

I reserved special affection for the little old lady in her Corolla, who, in spite of two barricades, my lawn chair and me in my spiffy blue T-Shirt, fluorescent orange vest, State Trooper paunch and Aviator sunglasses, waving authoritatively and then hysterically, was focused on getting through to point “B”.

Being professional, I would not directly ridicule the oblivious-to-their-environment drivers who would stop in the geometric centre of the Princess/King intersection to inquire directions to Tim Horton’s, all the while, hundreds of other cars are brought to a grinding halt during the consultation. Being patriotic, I always suggested “Canadian Maple”.

Several times, out-of-towners would ask for directions or recommendations regarding Kingston’s tourist attractions. A very nice European family asked if I could recommend a near-by restaurant for breakfast. My jocularity and subtlety of humour was perhaps, I admit, not helpful to our German visitors when I recommended a nearby establishment with the warning that their wine list was a little pedestrian, but since they were, wink-wink, pedestrians, that should be no problem. My new German friend suggested they were thinking more along the lines of Egg McMuffin.

Glowing with civic pride at doing my bit for Kingston tourism, I fantasized a scenario:

An English family would approach me with, “I say, could you possibly direct us to the big lobster sculpture in Shediac?”

“Well, hang a left at Queen; right on Division, and all the way out to the 401. Head east. When you hit New Brunswick, turn right. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks awfully. You Canadians, I must say, are terribly friendly.”

My other fantasy involved a green, \$135,000 (after taxes) Jaguar XKR, (420 horsepower ; zero to sixty in four point five; walnut dashboard and four

cup holders). It came by my “Checkpoint Charlie” at least three times, probably searching for Wolfe Island. I fantasized that I would jump out beside it on its next pass, force the driver, a retired tax accountant, to stop; I’d flash my badge, yell “Police business! I need your car!” Haul the bewildered taxman out on to the street, jump in and speed off, smoking the tires. Oddly, Kingston would immediately resemble San Francisco, as I launched into pursuit of two swarthy drug dealers in a Dodge Viper (no cup holders, would you believe it!) And whereas the Dodge could probably lose me in a straight-away, we who saw *Bullit* in 1968, know that the bad guys’ car would ground out on the hills and corners...

Meanwhile, back on duty, I became aware of my evolving technique at traffic control. Hour #1, I was polite, cheerful, helpful and ever so sympathetic. Hour #2, I became more business-like with modified cheerfulness. My directions were briefer, more to the point, with rare mentions of “What a beautiful day!” Hour #3 I became a little giddy, and, I must confess, giving creative directions to Pittsburgh Township. During the last hour, fatigue, heat, and the vagaries of befuddled drivers having got me, I slipped into my crabby teacher mode. Suddenly, this model of Kingstonian hospitality was holding forth with “You can’t find the Causeway? Cry me a river, buddy!” or “If I told you once, I told you a hundred times, you can’t get there from here!” or “Drive it or park it, Lady!”

I’m not proud of my loss of professionalism; and I hesitate to reveal that, during that last hour, I could hear Susan, a block away, down on Ontario Street, changing her “Have a nice day.” to “MOVE IT!”. Mind you, she was not on duty alone, like me, the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike holding back the North Sea. She had Carolyn the Cop with her. She had the long arm of the law, and a gun if needs be, to back her up. (When comparing notes later, Susan said she was very impressed with Carolyn : infinite patience with dolts, consistently polite with the wayward,... all displayed with an I’m-not-to-be-trifled-with air of authority. So, while Susan, in her fourth hour of asking people to not stop to scratch their itches in the middle of Ontario street, in the middle of a bike race, is beginning to adapt her language; her compatriot from the Police Department remained in control throughout.

We’ll volunteer again next year for the K-Town Triathlon. But not for traffic control. I want to hand out paper cups of water to the runners – even though I don’t really like most of them. Particularly the skinny, size 28 hipped,

high cheek boned, super fit, super cool, not-a-fat-cell-in-sight guys with their wrap-around sunglasses and having the nerve to look good in spandex.

There'll I be at my water station, with some super-cool spandex dude reaching for a proffered cup of water. At the last second, I'll snatch it away saying, "Not for you, pal. This one's for me. Handing out cups of water is exhausting, you know!"