

## Thirty years and forty feet

Paul Snyders – July 2010

*Note - there may be other businesses called Mango Spot - this describes one that no longer exists, not them.*

--- - o - ---

How could I best describe the corner of Yonge and Elm in nineteen eighty-one?

Times-Square Toronto-style, is the easiest thumbnail clue – but that's cliché and much too simplistic. Back then, Toronto only had one downtown – and that corner was right in the middle of it. It was also a very different time – when information was still precious – and most people expressed some of their tastes and interests by shopping for oddities, building unique collections of things that were hard to find.

I'm not saying that it was all an expression of good taste, there were lots of plastic Elvis sculpture-arrays on mantels, and complete discographies of Liberace, but two important things were different from today – Information, which includes art and writing and movies and all sorts of other culture, was physical, which meant it was finite.

It was also appreciated.

One of the weirdest consequences of our still incomplete information revolution, is that we no longer have that same sweet anticipation of being surprised – of hunting, then finding something beautiful that we never suspected – *and found only through our effort and openness*. Turning-over a heavy stone and discovering gold.

Sadly, the internet is not like a giant warehouse full of everything that ever happened – it is hugely (fatally) biased towards what we ask it for – and way too convenient for anything obtained through it to feel earned or substantial (as indeed it is not).

Nowadays, the big trick is to keep most of the information which is beamed-at-us away, so that we can actually concentrate on the things which are deeply important to us. *But the satisfactions that artistic hunting and collecting used to give, were sweet.*

Back then, the right record or book could absolutely make your week – and most of the best spots in town for any taste you could name, were found down Yonge st.

Sam the record man was a particularly special institution – *in many ways it was the nation's capital of recorded music appreciation*. They had insanely knowledgeable people in their lavishly diverse jazz and classical sections, and every rock, pop and folk record would hit their shelves first. Several times a year Sam's had line-ups going all the way around the block and off-duty cops working crowd-control. Ten-cent records (when they were five or ten bucks a piece normally) really felt like a nice present from Sam himself, even when you had to fight through an elbowing riot to win your take.

Sam's giant neon-record sign was a blazing landmark for decades, right across from my Elm Street corner. Just next-to and around the side of Sam's was a street market full of home-made jewellery, crafts, clothes and trinkets, and behind them, a dozen tables worth of chess for money were kept busy all day long, and far into the street-lit night.

*Several of the best speed-chess players were scruffy and stinky in appearance, but cocky in a way that no other social milieu would have afforded them – confident from nothing other than their continuous challenge to all comers – and their triumphant defence of their right to a regular table, from which to kick the tourist's asses.*

There was another sort of culture-centre around there as well, an extraordinary concentration of decent-sized movie-theatres, and as a recent addition (I want to say harbinger) a ciniplex, with nineteen different way-too-small screens – which was classy and crass – both at once. So many screens guaranteed a brief spotlight for many rarer underground and foreign films, and it also meant that they could offer continuous all-day seating-times for the big-money Hollywood releases.

*Like commuter trains leaving every thirty minutes.* Back then, such over-the-top convenience was outright weird.

Video arcades also flourished, there must have been a couple dozen of them within the four or five nearest blocks – three of which managed to skid all the way into the early twenty-first century somehow, before becoming too valuable as real-estate to even pretend to be valid businesses anymore.

Some of the arcades were vast street-level temples of beeps and blinks and bangs, with bright lighting and hawk-eyed staff supervising everything. Some were seedy basement walk-downs with black-lights, a soda bar and low-rent night-club ambience. *As a completely naive sixteen year old boy, I actually found that I got creeped-out a lot more often in the bright-lit ones – but maybe that was just because the predators up there were a more confident breed than the ones that I was too dumb to ever notice, lurking in the basements.*

The quarter-guys, sitting way up in their raised boxes, where they could see and scowl at everything, would always look at you like you were buying porn, without being anywhere near old-enough to be entitled – and they were trying to decide whether to let you have it (out of the boundless generosity of their hearts) or to yell at you righteously.

Maybe that made giving up a tenner for that precious roll of slugs seem like a more important transaction than it was. *I certainly did it often enough, and I never stopped feeling nervous.*

There were also camera shops, genuine greasy-spoons (from the forties and fifties) tattoo parlours, edgy punky hair salons, pool halls, strip clubs, rub and tugs, head shops and poster emporiums, and used booksellers that featured fine literature in the window, but made most of their money from trading old men's magazines.

The landmarks around the edges? Maple Leaf gardens was just to the north – good for lots of boisterous hockey and rock concert crowds, Ryerson polytechnic squatted east. The two biggest department stores in the whole country had their flagship-stores sited a block or two to the south, and the city's main bus terminal was just a block to the west – complete with the Terminal Restaurant (aptly named, though quite lovely if viewed strictly as a piece of nostalgic sculpture). *A walk-in Hockney.*

But for me, the corner of Yonge and Elm will forever belong to the Mango Spot – though that business has been physically missing for many years now.

I was an extremely sheltered, culty-commune home-schooled, sixteen year old kid – you wouldn't be crazy to wonder what I was doing spending all of my time hanging out downtown in the centre of every freaky culture there was.

It's a long story to tell it all, and it's really not today's story – but I will start with this – my friends, my school, my world-view, and even my living arrangements were all intertwined with the commune. *When I got to a point where I began to question the wrong things too often, I was excommunicated.*

I had no documentable education, no family, no friends. Every validating connection in my entire life was cut-off, all at once. So I guess it was by a tropism that I ended-up where all the shiny lights were.

*And that was where I found my first proper full-time job.*

Asking for the manager of the Mango Spot, then asking him if he was hiring anyone, was really just a dare to myself. *For practise, to help work-on my nerves.* They didn't have a sign up in the window, but I knew I had to do something – *so why not try?*

I was proud as hell when the boss said he did have an open spot, and that he'd give me a shot for a few weeks, to see how I did at it – and I warmed-up to the guy right away, for being able to recognize and appreciate my fine character, despite my cheap clothes and nervous manner. *How amazingly perceptive.*

But then he took a nice hard shot at my enthusiasm without even pausing to notice he'd done it. Told me that he'd just fired the last idiot twenty minutes earlier. *So I'd start tomorrow, when he had enough staff around that he could take the time to teach me the job properly, since I didn't look like I knew a thing.*

I was hurt, but he was right about that. And he was an important teacher.

Also, in fairness, I have to say that he started being outright nice to me (within the limits of his fundamentally gruff personality) quite early-on, as soon as he heard me comment on a terrific piece of big-band jazz that was playing on the radio.

Alas, I was way too dumb to know that being the boss' ally, when it came to what radio-station to listen to – when every other teenager in the place wanted to listen to Chum-FM, read to all of them as if I was doing an obvious double-whammy suck-up.

But hey, I really did like jazz – and I liked that he knew something about it. It was one tiny link of shared enthusiasm anyhow. *I may not have much going for me, but I've always been genuinely enthusiastic – and I've always found that to be the best way to connect with others.*

He worked me hard, but I didn't complain, even though I was a bit frail for all the lifting-work that the job called-for at first. *That hauling and slugging and lifting was the only reason he booked a guy (along with three to six girls) on every shift.* The girls were the prime draw for the customers, he knew that – *and again, he was right.*

He picked pretty ones, and did his best to keep the dumbest of them from screwing up too badly. And for me, to be the one-guy on an evening-shift full of girls was worth all the nightly muscle-aches and the mop-handle blisters there were.

I learned to really scrub a toilet so it would shine, I learned to empty a garbage-pail that was regularly filled with bent syringes. I mopped and I mopped and I mopped, and of course, as 'the designated guy', I lifted all the ingredients up from the basement, to mix the drinks. Milk powder, coconut powder, sugar and more sugar. Huge bags on a loaded-down two-wheeler lift-truck, hauled up a narrow, rickety, under-lit staircase.

The ingredients were a big surprise – *the natural fruit-drinks from the Mango Spot were regarded with reverence by many in our commune, for their extraordinary healing powers.*

But I was set-straight on the first night, "If anyone asks, you always say that everything is made with pure juice, you got that? Now you stay out here and keep an eye out, while I head to the back, so I can mix up another batch."

The actual process was a 'guarded secret' for him and his cronies. Maybe he just felt we'd lie more convincingly if we hadn't actually done it ourselves, but it wasn't that hard to figure it out. I knew what I hauled up to that back room, and I knew what I had to scoop and shuttle to the front, all night long.

Huge ceramic vats filled with bright-coloured liquids and four-foot paddle-spoons, all standing in a row inside a walk-in fridge with wooden doors worn-smooth from hard use, a sink-hose for tap-water, jars of highly concentrated flavourings – so many scoops of this, and dollops of that. Afterwards, when he had done his secret magic, the resulting cauldrons of potion were ours to maintain – *"Now stir-it-up good before you take any – no no, stir it way-harder than that."*

In the front, the customers saw lovely polished stainless-steel cylinders, neatly labelled with each of the flavours of juice, with happy hand-lettered signs (from back when that

was the classy way to do it). They also saw a ceiling-full of plastic palm-fronds in a thatch, walls painted with gaudy 'Hawaiian' scenes, a long faux-wood bar, fronted by chrome swivel-stools with orange vinyl cushion-tops, and just a few matching arbourite tables across the other side, right next to the big windows, where exhausted shoppers could plunk-down their bags for a moment while they supped.

From time to time, as the juice sold, the designated guy (me) would have to refill each of those impressive steel dispensers of goodness from one of the vats in the back, by first scooping a few gallons into a big metal industrial milk-jug, then hauling and pouring. *No one ever asked me what was happening in the back room – where exactly the juice was coming-from.*

I guess maybe there was more faith back then, at least in obviously silly things.

The only drinks on the menu that were completely 100% genuine were the pineapple (which came from standard supermarket cans, which we'd stab in the back room and then empty into those same giant milk-jugs, to make it look better) and the orange juice, which was squeezed-to-order by an elaborate and entertaining automatic whole-orange-pressing machine which lived next to the cash register, by the door.

That orange was some truly great juice, especially because the owner appreciated excellent citrus, and had it shipped-in in grand quantities, direct from Florida.

But the orange juice machine was also a godawful mess by the end of every night – sticky juice and pulp sprayed all over the inside, where the 'collection bin' sat, hidden-away so as to not distract the customers with the waste. And somebody had to not only clean the top of it, but climb right inside and clean that out thoroughly as well.

*It did have to be done – there was no way we could have let it all fester and rot, even for a day or two, without all of us being grossed-out by the stench.* But it made the end of the night a bad time to be a very thin and flexible man. The big guys couldn't ever fit inside there – I could – and what's more, I couldn't ever look at one of the girls and say no, even if it was supposed to be her turn to plunge into the muck.

It was a silly job – perfect for teenagers who are screwing-around for the summer, not sure what they want to do, only knowing that doing it would require money. For me, it was also a lifeline. It meant I knew there were people who I'd see regularly, who were nice to me, and who cared (a bit, at least) if I felt bad or happy about something.

*Sketchy as the place was, it was just enough emotional structure for me to hang-on-to, when I had nothing else in the world.*

It was also money – three-forty-five an hour – which seemed like a lot back then. I had no school, no dreams, nothing happening in my life to spend it on, except rent and macaroni and cheese, so I scanned the ciniplex and ended up watching a movie almost every day I worked – whatever film would end just before my evening shift began.

Often, there was only one decent film that timed-out right, so I'd watch it over and over for several days in a row. First-viewing was always about the story, but soon the other aspects emerged, the acting, writing, cinematography. *I learned a lot about movies from that, back when VCRs were for rich people.* Even the small-screen ciniplex theatres were at least still proper projection-systems – the magic of light through film.

At night, I'd usually walk home – two or three AM didn't really seem prohibitively threatening to me – totally lonely is totally lonely, any time of day – even in the middle of a festival crowd. Plus, I've always been a serious walker with a good steady regular endurance-pace, *approximately inexhaustible.* But it was a tough area – and I wasn't.

Well okay, I guess I can say I was a little-bit cautious, I did buy heavy-soled steel-toed workboots, (later upgraded to combat boots) just in case I had to run-away down a tetanus-junk strewn alley, or kick my way past something scary.

I also bought a hunting knife and started practising throwing it. I even wore it around, stuffed-into the leg of my boot for a couple of weeks, until one of the crotchety old regulars noticed it and explained that the only time it ever made sense to introduce a knife into a fight was if you were sure you were way better with a knife than the other guy you were fighting with – *and you could never be sure enough to make it worth it.*

Because if you guessed wrong, and the other guy knew more – he'd surely get it off you – *and you'd be the idiot who insisted on saying that knives were in-the-game now.*

I realized that he was right, I knew nothing about up-close knife-fighting, so I decided to leave the blade at home and focus on my sprinting-speed as a first and last defence. I still threw the knife for target fun – *as a no-entrance-fees precision sport* – but I knew then that for me, it wasn't ever going to be a practical weapon.

The girls who worked the late shift with me, always got rides-home – from the boss, if he was sober-enough, or from one of the many cabbies who frequented the place, if he was too hopelessly soused – and though I was jealous of their girls-only perq, I was also pleased about them getting it – since I was at least a little bit in-love with every single one of them. *Which is definitely not to say that I was nervy-enough to mention it, or even to touch their hands accidentally, without blushing.*

If I was really lucky and cleanup went unusually fast, I could sometimes catch the very last bus of the night that went my way. But mostly I walked, taking the wavy-diagonal straight up Davenport – one of those old cut-across roads that were laid out by horses, long before there were any lots, let alone pesky blocks of buildings to worry about.

Those lonesome walks were weirdly sublime. A kind of perfect isolation, as if my complete aloneness was being demonstrated by the whole world around me.

Closed doors, lights-off – *Nothing for me, anyplace.* But there were a couple of oases.

I had one positive idea about myself – that really was it. I knew I was weird, I knew that other people didn't get me (I didn't have any idea how to be got, really). I knew that I was by-myself, without a team or faction in my corner – but I also knew that I was creative – musical, artistic, poetic.

One other person in the world seemed to think-so too, or perhaps she didn't, and only fostered my spirit by a kind impulse from her own heart – *but I'd like to think she believed in me, and if you know differently, I'd just as soon not hear about it.*

She gave me a key to her studio. It was not a fancy braggable studio, it was a shared unit within a roughly-divided industrial space, which backed onto the railway tracks that cut across the city, just north of Dupont. For her, it was a place where she could paint huge canvases – gigantic (and no-doubt cathartic) abstracts of action and release.

But it was also the only place where she had room to store her inherited vintage upright piano – *which meant for me, it became a place of perfect freedom.* If I had had a different schedule, I have no doubt that I would have felt nervous and intimidated by all of the working artists in the place – *you simply cannot freely explore with sound, when you are conscious of other ears than yours, listening-in.*

But by two-thirty or three in the morning, three-quarters of the way through my long walk home, there was almost always no one else in the vast building but me. I could write ridiculously sappy love-songs about girls who smiled at me once or twice. I could set old poems that I loved, to music (which is the all-time best way to memorize a poem, by the way).

I could even howl and wail and thrash-out giant cluster-chords as the hundred-car trains roared-by on their missions of crude commerce, shaking the windows and rumbling the wooden floor like a giant sound-board.

Having that place to play and practise – completely removed from every other sad part of my life – was the thing that let me continue to believe in the immediate future – *one more song at least to do, then maybe one more after that.*

And if I was hungry, after pretending to be an artist for an hour or two, there, on the last little stretch before I hit home, was the Vesta-lunch, which was a tiny all-night cafe that every cabbie and stripper in town knew and loved. *Hot lousy food in a fifties diner, when everything else for miles was shut up tight.*

And then *home* – or house, anyhow. A basement flat with illegally-low ceilings, a furnace in the middle of the one long room, and a great big mouldy stink-patch in the cheap wall-to-wall carpeting, where the sewer backed-up quite regularly.

A sofa from the garbage, a table from the garbage, a desk from the garbage – *you get it.* Some of the stuff was pretty kinky (I still miss the original forties steel office-chair,

squeaks and all) but mostly it just reminded me that I was poor – a scavenger.

I really did get into throwing knives for a while there. One of the advantages of having a table that you pulled from the garbage is that if you feel like tilting it on it's side and using it's underside as a knife-target, that is perfectly fine. I practised every day and soon got good enough to get the tip of my hunting-knife well sunk-into the wood from about ten feet away. Then, of course, I broke the tip right off – *and had to go and buy some proper throwing knives, so I could continue improving.*

Kraft dinner wasn't all I ate back then – I threw a lot of extra stuff into it, like frozen vegetables or bits of meat, and I also had a muffin factory just a few doors down.

That allowed for my favourite poor-man's equivalent of a decadent binge. Rather than just chucking them away, the factory sold off all the broken muffins dirt-cheap, and for a few dollars I could assemble a truly massive paper-bag full of what was basically cake (however healthfully named).

And of course, whenever I was on-shift at the Mango Spot, I quite shamelessly indulged my free-food privileges to their very limits (one bratwurst or burger per night – but drinks and shakes and hot-choc-coffees galore).

--- - o - ---

One of the nastiest shifts in my time at the hut came on a hot autumn night when there was a ton of traffic, a big prog-rock concert at the gardens, and a huge shipment of oranges and grapefruits to unload (a full tractor-trailer of them).

It might sound nuts, but I was actually feeling proud of the many things I'd mastered at the shop. I liked using the two-wheeler lift-truck – for all the interesting maneuvers one could make it do, when one judged the weights and slopes and inertias just right. I could even feel my body building-up a little muscle, in response to the constant demands being made on it. But I'd never before had to unload the whole truck by myself.

Usually there were two or three other guys helping me build 'the great wall' which ran all the way up the long back hallway, five fruit-boxes high, and then crafting the much neater fruit-wall up front in the restaurant proper and the all-important window-display of bounty (oranges against astroturf) – presumably meant to get the strip-strolling customers wandering in to buy fruit by-the-case on an impulse.

About halfway through all the lifting and carting and stacking, I could hear my breathing taking-on the same little syncopated skip-rhythm that it always got a couple of laps in, when I went to run a mile or two on the gravel track outside the high-school, after hours.

But I kept on with it, pacing myself – continually calculating how much I'd accomplished as generously as I could, and minimizing the remaining boxes, so they'd seem less scary. I could see the boss watching me work, each time I carted another load out to the front to add a few more heavy box/bricks to the structure that I was building (to his plan).

A couple of the girls looked worried about me – panting, red-faced, sweating, *but that only made me feel even more heroic and determined.*

And when I finished the very last box and skidded the lift-truck around for a neat one-eighty into its corner by the fruit-wall, I felt immensely satisfied. *I'd earned my shake and my Bratwurst-and-sauerkraut.* I grabbed the stool at the very end of the bar and waited for one of the girls to serve me – also expecting the boss' thanks, at any minute.

But when I spun my chair, still catching my breath and hearing my heart in my ears, I saw the boss looking at the fruit wall I'd constructed and scratching his beard. Then he walked over to the other wall, stared out the window for a moment, then finally said, "You know what? I think I'd like you to put them over here instead."

I went from exhausted elation to resentful hopelessness in one nasty second.

I didn't even ask if I could do it tomorrow. *He was smiling, it was a test.*

Maybe his wife or his mistress had pissed-him-off that day, and he felt the need to make someone suffer, or maybe he was trying to toughen-me-up for my own good – *or maybe he was laughing at a dirty joke he'd heard earlier, and really did think the fruit would look better on the other wall – and wasn't thinking about me at all.*

In any case, I did it. Glowering, muttering all manner of curses, pushing my muscles violently to do what they really did not want to do. When he thanked me after it was all done, I said nothing. *Not even the big Ellington number that came on later could cheer me up – and when Xavier Cugat can't make you smile...*

The next morning I was awoken by pain, or awoke into it – at any rate pain was pretty much all that was going on. My entire lower back had seized-up into a hard-clench muscle-spasm that was excruciating. I couldn't stand up. I couldn't even crawl on all fours. The best I could do was roll out of bed and wriggle over to the phone to cancel my shift. *Just as well I'd gone crazy on the muffin-buying, or I might have starved.*

I couldn't get out of my basement flat for almost a week, then I finally dragged my ass back into work, having no other way to pay my rent.

From my perspective it was stupid, but the boss seemed to consider me to have passed some important manhood ritual – not that he eased-up a lot afterwards, but at least he made fewer jokes at my expense. Or perhaps he could just see how much less I was beginning to care about everything, and was afraid to push-it.

*What was this for?* That week of pain, then returning to a goddamned hamster-wheel? Pointless in the extreme – *the very definition of a waste*. No one liked me, or gave a shit. So-what if I could write a song about a girl that I liked? – *that still didn't mean I could work up the nerve to actually talk to her*.

I made my best-ever suicide-attempt right around then.

Oh, I'd sat out on the roof of an old boxcar on a siding behind the house late at night, playing-with one of my throwing knives, testing-it, just at the edge of lancing into my skin, several times. *Will and masochism, struggling*. Toughness, DIY. But I'd always felt that was just curiosity, *how close could I get?*

This time I'd really had just about enough. I bought a whole bagful of boxes of bottles of lighter-fluid and old style super-striker wooden matches (*what exactly was the moron who sold all that to me, thinking?*) then I took that all home, added some newspaper and other various flammables to a giant glass container, and tried my very best to set the whole reeking mess alight.

Boom – kablooiie – out. *Why the fuck not make it quick?*

It didn't work – parts of my science-reading were excellent, and parts of my understanding were mercifully deficient. By the time I understood what it was that didn't work about my glorious exit-strategy, I had lost interest in it – stepped back from the edge just enough.

I poured the lighter-fluid off and burned it in the toilet – washed the match-heads out. Then I returned to where I'd been – back to that fine balance-point where chucking throwing-knives at the back of a trackside billboard and watching shooting-stars from the roof of a rusting boxcar was enough to keep my pain in scale.

Astronomy is the best for that empty why, isn't it? *If I'm that small, then how big are my problems, really?* And any tricky sport or skill, can keep you coming back to the field – *at least until you can finally perfect the magic shot you have in mind*.

That Christmas should have been the loneliest time in my entire life. A good excuse for another glorious bang project, even – but I was given another kindness, one that I could never possibly have earned – and will always be grateful for.

One of the older girls at work – (Woo, twenty. *Like, a total adult*) invited me to join her family for Christmas dinner. Her parents were obviously unusually old when they had her – that generation of European immigrants who had to carry their love through war and prison-camps, before finally enjoying the normal things that young couples want.

She was their treasure – their measure of success, despite all of their many professional accomplishments. They regarded me cautiously – *a sad-looking tousle-headed waif, that their kind-hearted daughter dragged home* – but they fed me well, and asked me

about myself, and made me feel almost like I was a prospect for their angel's heart – despite the fact that we all knew she already had a boyfriend.

I asked about some of the interesting things on the walls – a horse sculpture, some cavalry insignia – and got papa's story of charging at German tanks on horseback.

He and mama gave me a bit of a hard time, here and there, and seemed particularly unsatisfied with my vagueness about my plans for my future – but all of their disapproval was expressed in a way that I found entirely flattering – *because they were taking me seriously.*

And that lovely girl did something else besides include and feed me, and make me part of a family-table and feast. She gave me a kiss – a Christmas kiss – she even said that.

It was really nothing sexual, nothing serious – just a tiny little taste of a truly sweet girl's capacity for affection. But I didn't stop glowing from that kiss for months.

*Little things really can save your life.*

Of course – that one particular spot on my lower back, the origin-point of the spasm, all those years ago, remains an achilles-heel for me to this day. One of my reminders of mortality – *one of the ways I get smacked, that I can't ever say I had no warning for.*

--- - o - ---

Two thousand and ten – and some days I feel like a very young old-man (*curmudgeon with a spring in my step*), while other times I am more of a rather old, young-man (*yet-to-blossom, but my eyes are going*). Not a kid, anyhow, *not that I'm complaining.*

Yonge and Elm is also a very different corner now, in a lot of ways.

The old arcades have been turned into hospital-sterile retail emporia full of overpriced designer clothes. Sam's is dead and gone, like all but the tiniest and most artfully specialized independent record stores. The Gardens, one of the great original NHL arenas is also dead – a hollowed-out shell, currently being repurposed by a committee of supermarket and college executives.

Ciniplex too has passed away, but not before destroying all of the wonderful old downtown cinemas, and turning a few of them back into fancy show-palaces for tourists, like they were in the twenties. A generational die-off, to spur new growth?

I dunno, I miss the old places too much to be objective – *and I still can't afford tickets to the gaudily redecorated music-halls.*

Simpson's and Eaton's – both of the prestige national department-store titans – whose catalogues had guided the Christmas dreams of generations of Canadian kids – extinct, kaput, *outmoded, gone – much like the quality of service they once offered.*

The strip clubs, the rub and tugs and even the head shops are still there, many in precisely the same locations – but like a characterful abandoned factory, sandblasted into a rather twee co-op, they have all been renovated right out of their scuzzy charm. – *Oh, what a brave new world, with such marketing people in it.*

The Mango Spot itself? It's now a standardized mass-produced franchise pizza joint.

I do sit in there now and then with a slice, and try to line-myself-up with the big long side-windows properly, but the view outside is too different to give me a really good illusion or flashback.

I've been all the way into a few different careers, which I tried to run concurrently – and which all managed to hit the wall quite conclusively, since those early directionless days. From rank newbie, to accomplished expert, to cast-off, in three easy economic cycles (kidding about the easy). I am once again, a sort of wandering waif.

Now I carry weird costumes, in the same big knapsack that I used to use when I was a tower-walker courier – then I put the costumes on and sit very very still with a spotlight shining into my eyes, so that artists and art-students can draw and paint me.

It's a funny job, and as usual (for me, anyhow) I've found ways to entrain my natural enthusiasm, so I enjoy the work. It's a good and challenging yoga, to control your body so precisely. I've learned how not-to sneeze, not-to scratch when I'm itchy, how to find an eye-line that won't give me a headache in the second hour of a pose, and even remembered how to stretch (which I knew before, but forgot for several years).

I've always liked artists – so the basic working atmosphere is perfect for me. I also like challenges of self-mastery, and the sort of repetitive structures that lend themselves to useful self-experimentation series. *We are our own best guinea-pigs, right?*

Yes, if you can keep smiling for three hours solid without pause, you will feel better. *That's why I'm now known as the guy who can even pose with an expression (very rare) – although no one pays me enough to demand that I frown for that long.* (And I'd refuse for their sake if they did ask – *they wouldn't like me when I'm angry.*)

I also like to be silly – and to share my deep reverence for whimsy – *one of the great and fundamental forces of the universe* – with the artists I encounter. Humour can never have too many partisans – and those with fine humour cannot help but enjoy the fellow-feeling, wherever they find it.

*Wit cuts-through age, race and class, like nothing else.* That was why I decided to offer one of my silliest art-school-targeted costumes, to one of my fanciest clientele.

I don't know what all the middle-aged people do for models, but I mostly get to work with young people just mastering their craft (*or crashing and burning, as they realize how much better everyone else in their class is*) and older people, who don't need to scramble for money, but are determined to pursue their art for their own satisfaction.

When I think about presenting costumes to the younger people, I look for 'characters' that I can give them. Costumes with rich narrative potential, so the really wacky ones can get excited and go nuts – and even the most literal (dull), are best-inclined to think about the context and meaning of their figure.

I do a couple of different pilots, a tailor, a mechanic, a musician from a big-band, a thirties worker-hero, a pool-shark, and of course, my own sarcastic take on a plutocrat.

The costume in question has striped pyjama bottoms, embroidered slippers, a long red paisley-pattered housecoat, which is a proper vintage forties piece (cut and sheen) and I finish the look by wearing a silk scarf at my neck – yes I have looked for a monocle and an ivory cigarette-holder, but as yet, those verdamnt perfection-props elude me.

I add a newspaper and a teacup-and-saucer on a table to one side (so it doesn't block the excellent high-contrast rich-colour drapery of the long robe) and that's the character. I call him "the bourgeois breakfast bastard." But I found myself quickly improvising a new monicker, as I offered him to the Friday group at the Arts and Letters club.

"We like colour," was their most oft-repeated request. I'm mostly a black and white dresser for my normal life, and I felt I might have let them down before. So I figured the red robe would go-over well. *Gotta know your audience.*

Then I decided to add something else for that session – to force a certain proportion of the spirit of the paintings of each of the artists present, by adding a bit of casual-looking body-language – particularly rare (and challenging) for a long pose.

I raised one leg and crossed it very loosely over the other – ankle to knee.

"Ahh, that is lovely, but are you sure that you'll be able to hold that for four hours?" Came the very reasonable (and considerate) question.

"Certainly," I said with a confident smile, "I wouldn't offer it otherwise."

And I did hold that exact position perfectly for the whole session, just as I'd said I would – *although I will admit that I started to have serious doubts about the wisdom of my pose-selection, long before hour-two was finished.*

You see, I'd learned a few arcane things from some obscure exercises – the most useful one being that much of pain and discomfort are purely subjective mental phenomena. I liked training myself to go past my own limits – not foolishly (or not *deliberately*

foolishly) – but not being safe to the point of sloth and cowardice, either. *Pushing.*

Generally, when I set up an extended pose, I'm careful to give myself a backup point of bracing for all of my limbs, so that without moving an inch, I can redistribute most of my supported-weight from the place it seems to fall, onto other less significant *looking* points of contact, to let the circulation come back.

Partial-resting, without breaking a pose. That's one of the few big advantages of the costume model – I know that no one's going to yell at me for a small variance in my muscle-tension, when that muscle is hidden by interesting clothing folds.

But this time I'd left myself hanging – literally. There was absolutely nothing I could use to hold up my leg, except the muscles of my leg.

Still, I was having fun anyhow. When I got up after forty-five minutes to take a break, I could see that my intended whimsy was indeed showing-up in the work the group was doing. I was a bit sore, but I liked seeing the good things happening around me.

I also found it funny to go out onto the fire-escape (first I'd seen in a while, that wasn't crowded with smokers) and look down onto the site of the old Mango Spot – right down the alley where that truck full of oranges had sat – *while I dragged every box inside.*

Lot of years – lot of lessons, nothing that I would ever have expected – *more than that sad and lonesome kid would ever have asked-for.* I'm a lucky son of a bitch (and I mean that). My happiness might vary, from a lot of different forces – *but I have long had a 'happy' to worry-about. I'm not still seeking it's first sweet draught.*

And here I was, still a pauper, really – but doing my bourgeois character for the bourgeoisie – *and smiling happily the whole time.* Back in eighty-one, the Arts and Letters Club had outright scared me. *Rich people, exclusive club – shindigs and hobnobs and whatsits.*

A world that I'd only ever be invited-into as a servant. *As indeed I had been.*

But I had a better perspective and knowledge-enough to understand how to enjoy myself now – and my enthusiasm and story-gathering had worked their way into this strange institution. So I knew that I was modelling in a place that Emily Carr had painted in – standing in the very room where several members of the group of seven would meet and work-out their chops together. *Hallowed ground, in Canadian art.*

Plus it was a beautiful building – sandstone and hardwood – smelled and presented itself like a secular church – with a cocktail lounge by the entrance, a fine little theatre at the back, and cozy office rooms with oak panelling and soft carpets abounding. Sketches in little frames were everywhere, even the weakest showing rare authority. *The place was great writing-food – and the artists were all very nice to me.*

But of course, the morning after I did that pose, I woke up in absolutely excruciating pain – only to receive a not-at-all quick or painless lesson on the nature of sciatica.

It sucks, I strongly recommend against it. But I had to laugh when I realized I'd done my back-in again, thirty years and forty feet from the place I'd done it last.

I was very glad I had a couple of canes around the house from my sore-ankle incident – the cheetah-head one was particularly fun when I could also wear my old herringbone great-coat and homburg. *Why not walk right out of the forties and hobble around a bit?* The pain wasn't going to be any less if I stopped trying to enjoy.

My leg stayed in constant spasm for a couple of weeks. I'm still not a hundred percent back to normal – to this day I can stretch further on one side than the other. But the really sweet realization was all of the other things that had changed around me.

I've had and lost many friends in those thirty years – sometimes getting down to a very slim collection indeed – but I've also had enduring love of a rare and magical quality.

I once said that all I ever needed was true love and a notebook – and I'd still be cool with that as my epitaph, because I have delighted in sharing myself completely with another, and in struggling to create and improve my own loving response to the world around me – as a duty to life, and a thank-you for the many gifts presented to any who will see.

I knew I wasn't going to be buying any lighter-fluid and wooden-matches (not sure they exist anymore, anyhow – and nowadays that sort of thing could get you on a watch-list). I also wasn't mad at the place I'd hurt myself, or the people there. *I got back to work modelling, right-away – and I enjoyed it, even while I was still in significant pain.*

Am I lonely sometimes? – sure. I'm greedy as hell about love and friendship. I want to share good feelings and challenging ideas with everyone in the goddamned world.

Do I know what I'm going to do to pay the rent, a year from now? Definitely not. But I'm not worried about my own irrelevance anymore. *I don't fit-in, I don't go-along with the standard ideas, I don't subscribe-to faddish intellection or art-fashions.*

But I do observe and I remember – I try to see reasons to *appreciate* – and to extend my sympathies, without ever simply fooling myself – and I have yet to hear a good reason to think that 'clear witness' is anything but an honourable calling.

The end of the world may well be nigh, but everything that I was afraid-of back then, looks small now. *I don't need to know what I'm for – or else feel wasted.* All I fear now is missing my chance to help, failing in wit and kindness, when they could really work.

It ain't the what that I am, it's the way that I AM IT.

*Easy boy, be cool now – just get it done – and don't you dare forget to smile.*