

## Fleas in my journal

Canadian artist John Gould once said that he never met a serious artist who did not write. The great Renaissance master, Michelangelo, was a prolific writer as well, crediting some five hundred sonnets to his name. So, I write, including an encounter with fleas.

My earliest memory of writing was a thick journal I kept during the years I worked on a weekly breadroute for Canada Bread. Gordon Spiering, who was a friend of the family, had offered me the job of assisting him with a large bread delivery route on Saturdays. The job meant getting up at 5 am every Saturday not to return home until sometime around 6 pm. I earned ten dollars for the day's work, plus all the baked goods in the truck that I could eat. In addition, Gord taught me how to drive the truck, especially the art of driving a delivery truck over treacherous country roads during Ontario's infamous winters. When I turned sixteen, he felt confident to let me do the whole route by myself. By about 5:15 in the early morning, Gord's bread truck rolled up the driveway in front of our house. Together we drove straight to the depot where we loaded all sorts of breads, hamburger and hotdog buns, pies, cookies, donuts, sweet jelly rolls, biscuits, Chelsea buns, and all the goodies that drove a hungry, sixteen-year old boy mad. After the truck was loaded, we were off to Cozy Corners Restaurant just a few blocks away. It was a *cozy* place where Gord and I filled up on eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee. Sometimes sales were not too good and we just had coffee. I also packed a generous lunch. I made my own lunch and earned Gord's respect by making great sandwiches, so great in fact, that he would eat half of them and in turn reward me with anything I wanted from the truck. It was a good arrangement. We drank plenty of coffee along the way as the route, which covered three towns and over one hundred miles of country roads, did not lack coffee shops. Sometimes, especially during bitter cold winter months, I brought a thermos of hot soup. I had given up my paper route because I could earn much more on the bread route. Gord was a generous man. He was very familiar with the hardships of our immigrant family, because his parents were also immigrants. At the end of a long day he packed a large box full of buns, breads, donuts, and other baked goods knowing these could not be kept for the weekend to be sold on Monday. The box was a welcome sight every Saturday night when I came home. Other members of the Christian Reformed Church also had hearts of pure gold. Gord and his wife Mary were two such saints. I carefully recorded all these memories and events in a large journal which I kept in the truck. As both of us were not needed to carry the large breadbasket to the customer's door, we alternated our duties between filling up the basket in the truck and knocking on the customer's door.

When it was Gord's turn to carry the loaded basket to service a customer, I wrote in my journal. Our route took us far into the countryside surrounding Wallaceburg and as far away as the town of Dresden. Many customers were farmers. Often, after months of writing in my journal, I read the pages again and again to dream of one day writing a book about my breadroute journeys. Suffice it to say they were full of adventure, laughter and tears, joy and pain, as we experienced so many events every Saturday. I cannot begin to recount them all. I worked on that Saturday bread route for five years, until I left Wallaceburg to attend college in Toronto.

One Saturday, a few months after I began my job, I gathered the courage to ask Gord a question that had burned in my mind for weeks.

"How can you stand being among all these delicious baked goods *all* day and not eat any of them? Doesn't it drive you mad?"

He simply smiled and said it was easy. Seeing my bewilderment, he made one of the most generous offers I had ever received.

"Tell you what, Gerrit, you give me both your delicious sandwiches and you can eat anything in the truck, all day – anything!"

I was shocked. Anything? All day?

"Are you sure Gord? I can eat a lot you know?"

"I am sure, so why not start now," he replied.

So I did!

"True story!"

Somewhere on a country road just outside town I began opening the baked goods. First I warmed up some small mincemeat pies in the truck's cab heater. Gord had rigged a little door on the truck heater so he could open it up and heat up special treats. If you have never traveled in a drafty delivery truck, bumped over snow-covered country roads, while a small blizzard howled outside, and you had to open and close the big side doors of the truck every time you came to a customer, letting icy winds gust through truck and flesh, you have never experienced the bone-chilling cold I experienced on that breadroute. Despite winter boots, a warm coat, scarves, woolen hat, and thick gloves, the cold permeated us by about 11 am. The work day did not end until about 5 pm. Then it was still a long drive back to the depot to unload and finally make it home by 6 pm. Gord's little heater-oven invention was nothing short of a miracle.

Soon my mouth was stuffed with mincemeat pie. Then I moved glazed donuts. I ate a whole box of six. Gord just smiled. I waited until I had finished serving a few customers only to resume my excursion through the truck's baked goods. I did not, however, waste any food. I finished eating whatever package I opened. We had agreed on that. I was not about to open a box, eat one and leave the rest for Gord, or leave the box's contents to dry up somewhere in the back of the truck. I made sure not a crumb was wasted. The strawberry jellyroll was particularly delicious.

I began to worry whether I would bankrupt Gord.

"Are you sure, it's OK to eat all this stuff?" I asked.

"Just keep on going," said Gord. "If we run out we'll go back to the depot."

He must have known that would not be necessary and that I would soon reach the climax of my eating binge. I do not remember how long it was before I was truly full. Afterwards, I realized, Gord was not surprised how much I managed to stuff into my hungry body. He just smiled. Somewhere along a deserted country road that ran quietly between farms, I turned sweaty and a ghostly pale. Gord recognized the symptoms and immediately pulled the truck to the side of the road. I opened the door hoping a blast of cold air would help. It did not.

I staggered out of the truck, not even caring to zip up my coat. My feet sank into a snowdrift along the side. I bent over and for the next agonizing eternity I vomited until I was sure my stomach and intestines had exited my body. When I was done, I stumbled back to the truck. I sat down on the inverted crate that was my co-pilot's seat and sighed. Gord closed the door. I looked up at him. He sat there grinning.

"You knew that was going to happen didn't you?" I stammered.

He smiled and nodded. I managed a weak smile.

"You'll never be tempted again," he said.

"From now on you will be very selective about what you eat on this truck. In fact, most of the baked goods will just seem like products-for-sale to you and no longer a temptation and

feast for hungry eyes. I know. Believe me I know. I did the same thing myself about a month after I started this breadroute."

I felt strangely comforted. Gord was right. For five years it never bothered me again. In fact, we preferred my homemade sandwiches a whole lot more.

The eating episode was given special attention in my journal.

I continued making long and detailed entries in my journal, with more stories that would one day make riveting chapters in my book, or so I thought. But not as riveting as the story of one customer just outside the town of Dresden.

He was an old man who lived by himself on a large sheep farm. He had made arrangements with Gord that about once a month he would buy all the stale goods on the truck that day. He paid cash every time. He only asked that we would come into his house with the bread basket and go through the ritual of showing him all the stale baked goods we had. He seemed to like the idea of shopping from a basket. When he finished examining all the contents of the basket, he emptied the whole basket on his kitchen table and insisted he pay full retail price. He did not expect bargains. We did not argue. I often wondered what went on in that place when I saw Gord leave the truck and enter the man's house whenever it was that time of the month. I just stayed behind and wrote in my journal until one Saturday in May, Gord said, "Now it's *your* turn!" It is difficult for anyone to imagine what was about to take place. The cliché, "*you should have been there,*" was very appropriate for this particular experience.

I grabbed the loaded bread basket, a wieldy wooden one some two by three feet and about ten inches deep. It was heavy and held a lot of goods. To balance myself while I walked with the basket, I stuck my left arm through the wide handle and put some of the weight on my hip. Over time and with practice, I actually became very good at wielding the basket. Once it actually served as protection from a large barnyard dog that had cornered me in a narrow laneway between a farmer's house and his garage. There I stood at one end of the passageway, basket over my arm and in front of me, and lowered to just above my knees, while the dog stood growling at the other end. He pounced and I quickly lowered the basket even further. He bit the basket and withdrew growling. With the basket still in front of me and the dog jumping and biting I knew I would be safe until I turned to swing myself and basket through the backdoor of the house. For a brief moment my legs were exposed. Suddenly the dog leaped and rushed forward, but he hit the door instead of me.

"Don't mind King," said the farmer's wife in the kitchen, as I tempted her with all our freshly baked goods. "He don't harm nobody. He's all bark and no bite."

She never did see the chewed-up front of my basket. She bought a lot that day. I managed to escape the same way I had come as King threatened to chew some more off the basket. Another time and another dog, a very dangerous one that was so ferocious he bit my large boot and got his teeth stuck in the rubber. I dragged him *and* my basket back to the truck. The dog wouldn't let go. I grabbed a piece of flat iron we kept in the truck for just such a purpose. I clubbed the dog until he let go. I think he was dead, but I did not stick around to lament his demise. I never saw that dog again. We encountered many extremely dangerous farm-dogs on our route. They ran loose and wicked, chasing cars and trucks. They were especially fond of those who dared to come out of their vehicles to walk up the driveway. Gord and I were no exception.

And now it was my turn to cradle the bread basket over my arm ready to meet my next challenge who was the old man sheep farmer and who I had never met. I just had Gord's word for it. Fortunately there were no dogs. Gord stayed in the truck to update his sales journal.

Hesitantly, I walked through a narrow gate at the front of the yard. An old dark house loomed before me, the kind you see in horror movies about ghosts and murderers. I had a vivid imagination.” Why would Gord ask me to go?” I asked myself. Was this another *object lesson* as my eating binge had been a few months before?

I carefully negotiated my way through sheep, dogs, chickens, cats, and critters too filthy to recognize. The yard was cluttered with broken farm equipment, old leaky barrels, hub caps and other car-parts strewn among heaps of what looked like brown earth. However, the putrid odour said otherwise – manure. I walked up the steps while maneuvering the basket in front of me, not knowing what could possibly jump out at me once inside the house. The house had no door. I stepped inside and noticed the only difference between outside and inside was some dark bare walls. Sheep, dogs, cats, and critters, were everywhere. Gord had said to go to the room at the back. There I found the old man. He looked every bit the recluse I had imagined or had read about in books or seen in movies. He was very old and bent-over. He appeared frail and forlorn in an even older armchair. He motioned me to come closer. At first I hesitated but as I looked more closely, he was not a victim of some social disease, or some poor hapless soul destined for welfare and a lonely demise. Despite his filthy sweater, long sticky straggly hair, old gumboots, and a chipped pipe, he appeared to be a whole lot stronger than at first glance. His eyes were clear, bright and friendly. With a motion of his arm he swept aside everything on an equally filthy table to make room for my breadbasket. He pointed to the basket and then to the table. Up until this moment he had not spoken a word.

I put the basket square in front of him and began my sales pitch. I moved my hands over a stale collection of apple pies, soft and sweet jelly rolls, chocolate donuts and a stack of bread that threatened to tip my basket. By “stale” the reader must understand, “day-old,” but no longer considered freshly-baked. And it was the weekend. Freshly-baked good would not arrive again until early Monday morning. Again, he motioned to me to empty the basket on the table. He said little except to ask, “How much?” I remembered what Gord had said. “The man insists on paying full price, no discounts.”

I answered as quickly as I could add up all the figures.

The farmer nodded approval.

He put his right hand deep into his pocket and pulled out the biggest and fattest bankroll my teenage eyes had ever seen. He could barely hang on to the roll of bills. I recognized hundreds, fifties, twenties, tens and fives, all tightly rolled into a bundle. As he began to peel off the required number to pay for his purchases, suddenly a number of large fleas crawled from between the bills. They were cattle fleas of the big kind and very visible to the naked eye. Not one; not two, but a host of fleas. Even in that dark room I could see them crawl from the roll of money on to his hand. He didn't seem to care as he continued to count his money. I shuddered as he reached across the to give me the bills. It was a large amount for a large purchase and Gord would welcome the sale.

I took the bills and dared not look to see if any of the fleas had made the trip from his pocket to my hand. Nor did I put the money in my pocket. I held the money in my hand and closed my fist hoping whatever fleas still trapped in the money would not escape. The basket was empty. I tried graciously to make a quick exit. Were those fleas following me? I looked in the basket, but it was empty - no fleas. I threw the basket in the truck and banged the sides against the steel door, to make sure I was able to dislodge any remnant fleas before I filled the basket again.

Gord burst into laughter.

I checked all my clothes, my hair and my shoes. No fleas. Yet somehow, as I began to recount the event in my journal, I felt a great need to scratch myself. Had those fleas made it to my clothes after all, perhaps even into my journal, to remain there until I would rewrite about it in my upcoming epic novel? In *words* those fleas did make it into my journal, but in *kind* I hoped they were far away. Never again I thought. That man remained as Gord's own customer from that day on. Brrrr. Scratch, scratch.

But this story had an unfortunate ending.

Two years later, while having a coffee with Gord somewhere along the route, someone broke into the truck and stole some baked goods as well as my journal. Baked goods I understood, but a journal? Perhaps the thief thought there was money stuck between the leaves of the book, but that was unlikely. We kept all our money in a large leather pouch we carried on our belts. There were no valuables in the truck, only bread and baked goods. I was devastated because there were many great stories in my journal, stories I had collected over three years and enough material for a very interesting book, one day. So great was my loss, I pushed aside all interest in journaling. I did not even bother to try and recall all those special memories and to record them again in another thick journal. For weeks I checked nearby garbage bins to see if the journal had been discarded. To no avail. It was lost forever. Only a handful of memories remained, and "*fleas in my journal,*" was one of them.