

## JOHN AND THE COKE

Why a High School reunion was scheduled in Vancouver for people who had spent their formative years in the Interior of BC was a mystery to John Denne, official Chief of his Native Band in 'cooperative' years, unofficial advisor to anyone who would listen in destructively competitive ones. And why he was named as the honored speaker, even more. Most of his classmates were White, enjoyed indoor sports more than outdoor adventures and had on more than on occasion, even when he won at one of those sporting events, referred to him as Tonto, a name that was Spanish for 'stupid'. John would call those pale faced Lone Ranger Wannabees kemosavi, saying it was an honorable name for 'the best kind of friend you can get other side of the tracks', when it actually meant "shitface" in Mohawk.

John had declined going to High School reunions before, since he was one of those people who when finished with a place never wanted to return. And, of course, he would never want to be part of a club that would have him as a member, a situation that made him an effective rather than popular Native Band leader. But this time it was Miss Norma 'Granny' Gladstone who extended the invitation. She had taught calculus to the few who could handle it, and arithmetic to the many who needed it. Way back then she looked and sounded like a spinster 19<sup>th</sup> century Oklahoma schoolmarm, her (rumor had it anyway) 3 foot long brown hair tightened neatly in a bun, complimented by a plain white blouse buttoned to her thin neck and a brown skirt that fell down to her calves. An easy target for ridicule to kids in the mid 1970s who moved their way up the 'who's the coolest' totem pole by competing with jokes and mocking act outs made about her while she was listening, and as well as when she left the room.

From an early age, John was not clever enough to be the class clown, be it in a classroom of brown or white skinned kids. And there was something about 'Miss' (who would never become a Mrs. or Ms.) Norma that demanded John's respect. Not because of her age, but because of what she knew. And because of her inner passion to spread the brilliance of her mostly self-taught mathematical mind to those bold, defiant or responsible enough to carry on the flame. The essence of that flame was in the calculus equations that fascinated John the first time he saw a differential sign. To feel and be able to predict how change will happen is extraordinary. To be able to adapt to change, or influence where that differential is going was and is...something that becomes necessary if you really wanted to be an assess rather than liability to the world.

After getting into his truck at the Merritt gas station, checking the gauges on his car, and wolfing down the better part of 'Genuine Canadian Beef Jerky' made in China, John gazed yet again at the post card Miss Gladstone had sent him along with the details about the Re-Union. The letter said "It took some time, but the assholes and idiots who put you down, after hearing about everything you did after you graduated, want to elevate you up. Why? I don't know. But I don't want those facts and embellished tall tales about how you transformed yourself and so many others to go to waste. While I go to...well..whatever happens next." It was accompanied by a picture of Miss Norma with white hair, a gaunt face and wrinkled arms, contrasted by bright blue eyes sitting in front of a chalkboard on a backwoods porch filled with mathematical equations. "My take on it so far" was scrawled on the top of it in Latin, Cree and colorfully calligraphied English. She defined some of the variables in the calculus equations as 'people', 'economy', 'stupidity', 'Defiance', 'Energy' and 'Light'.

John could understand some of the mathematical jokes, and felt the rest. He looked up at the sky, noting the bright blue sky behind him was becoming a bit grey, then felt a tinge of cold wind blowing onto the back of his neck. He sniffed the air, noting that there were no engine smells of concern. Then he looked at the clock. An Eagle hovered above him.

"I'll race ya down the hill," he said to the bird after which he rolled up the window and proceeded forward towards Vancouver. On cue, the eagle proceeded to head West, in circles and loops.

As is always the perception of drivers on roads like the Coquihalla Highway, you often don't know if you are going up in elevation or going down. The CBC broadcast of Beethoven's 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony, the Pastoral which painted a portrait of a worry free bucolic spring day, faded in and out on John's radio until it was replaced with static. Small flakes of 'sugarplums' on the windshield turned into droplets of white crystals revealing a constellation of patterns on the glass of his windshield before they were wiped away by the about to get stuck at any time wipers. The grey payment in front of John acquired a thin sheet of white, something unexpected in late April anywhere else but which he knew he should have expected here. The sheet of white turned into a blanket of slush, accompanied by waves of thick snow being blown onto the windshield faster than they could be pushed off to the side. Yes, it was time for the eagle to win the race down to Vancouver. And to pull over. And to take a nap.

The two latter tasks were done successfully. The third, to wake up to a drivable road with a refreshed mind was another matter. John found himself drifting of into the Huya Aniya, the alternative universe experienced during 'dream sleep' named such by the Yaqui Indians where,

if you are bold enough, you do things that change the events in the so called 'real' world. Events in John's life shifted in front of his closed eyes as he envisioned himself stuck on a wagon in a deep snowstorm. It was being rocked by people from his past. His biological parents who apologized for leaving the world of the living too early. His sister Caroline, who was angry at him for not protecting her as he pledged to at their parent's funeral. His wife Madeline who said she wasted the best years of her life waiting for what he said he would give her. His son Sky as a young and old man, yelling at John to get up out of the wagon and lend a hand to get it and everyone else in it moving. His new friend Bob, who sat next to him in the wagon, just as cold and helpless as John was, telling John that homeless genius Marvin would figure out a way to get us home. Gus, John's rival at the Band who came by on a skimobile offering him a ride out, but with a big time favor he'd have to pay at some time of HIS choosing. And of course, Miss Gladstone, who finally, clad as a classical music conductor, leaped onto the buckboard, tapped her baton on it, quieting everyone down, then saying 'Differential Divertimento in D Major', after which John saw musical notes leaping in front of his eye in a composition that was both contemporary and traditional at the same time. And then, he felt a push from behind. Alone in the wagon connected to a sleeping engine.

John woke up from the dream, not knowing if it was real or not. Behind him was a tow truck, pulling him out of a snowbank. The road ahead was clear, passable enough for a truck to get through anyway. "That's the Coke, alright," a bearded man in orange overalls with tattoos covering his arms said to John with a big, all is well smile. "If ya don't like the weather, wait ten minutes and it will change."

"But," John said to the tow truck company owner. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Ya seemed preoccupied, and was telling me to fuck off every time I tried to get you up. Like you were doing something important," he said. "Or maybe preparing to do something important?" he continued, as if knowing something that John thought not possible by White men. Most of them anyway.

"Well, eh, thanks," John said as he pulled out his wallet and handed the senior member of the tow truck company a fistful of money. "Tell me when to stop," he said, paying out in individual tens and twenties till the rescuer put his hand up.

"Stop there, pay it forward to everyone else, Professor Denne," he said.

Why and how the tow truck operator knew John's name, and most beloved title, John did not know. What the tow truck operator did know was that there were more cars in the ditch that needed to be pulled out. And what John knew was that he was late to give a calculus lesson to people he went to school with, and their progeny. But one thing in the many universes John had been catapulted into in the last 24 hours was true. Indeed he was being watched for maybe the last, and most important time, by Norma 'Granny' Gladstone.'

There were certain numbers for birthdays, anniversaries, births and deaths that had significance in the White and, truth be told, Indigenous world. The reunion as the big three 0 after graduation, coinciding with the students approaching the big, and self-assessment requiring, five 0. And for teachers, particularly Norma 'Granny well before her time' Gladstone somewhere in her 80s. She no doubt had experienced teaching John's generation, and the kids spawned from his classmates, the ones who decided not leave the nest or those who retreated back to it after exploring the big, bad world beyond the town they grew up in, or, so they said anyway, to 'take better care of their aging parents'. There was no shortage of people in any of those categories.

The reception table at the Hilton Conference room was neatly arranged with pictures of John and his classmates at the time of graduation, along with the names of those who had posed for the camera with a variety of expressions. John didn't recognize any of the pictures, including his own. But he did recognize the woman dispensing them.

'Granny Norma' still proudly presented herself as an outdated 19<sup>th</sup> century schoolmarm, with a plain white blouse buttoned to the top, a brown wool midi skirt, her brilliantly open blue eyes behind wire rimmed bifocal glasses. Her once tight face had many wrinkles, the skin around her thinner than he remembered neck loose. Her hair, only a bit thinned out, was unashamably white, but it was now loose, flowing down to the small of her back. "Miss...no...Professor Gladstone," he said, promoting her to that rank which the inferiors above her at Simon Frasier High perhaps had given her. "You haven't changed a bit," he said by way of a compliment thinking about what he would look like when he hit the big eight 0.

"And you have, for better, worse and a whole lot of conditions in between, John, so I hear," she replied.

“Hear from who?” John gently pressed, feeling himself being seen, found out and lectured to, all at once. “A lot of people have different opinions about me these days,” he continued, flash-remembering his friends, enemies and rivals in the Red and White world.

“And YOUR opinion about you?” she challenged.

“An educated man, or woman, values facts over opinions,” he said. “A wise Sage said and wrote that.”

“Spinoza, Socrates, Kant or Socrates?” she asked, scratching her chin.

“You said that,” John reminded his first real mentor, and role model. The only real White one.

“Reminder appreciated,” her reply. “And,” she continued, turning to John. “Thank you for coming. Particularly this year.”

“This year being...?” John inquired.

“The first year of the rest of our lives, or maybe the last,” her reply. With that, she lifted up the picture bearing John’s likeness at 18 along with his name tag with a shaking hand, her fingers knarled into what was probably painful arthritis. “But, the last act of the opera has to be the best. And...” she broke into a wide smile. “Usually is. Now, time for you to mingle. And to remember the most important thing I tried to teach all of you.”

“That pi is a number that is never completely accurate, the inverse of infinity is not zero and that every equation on the board or in life can be reduced to three variables?” John recalled, confirming that they had always been true.

“And that everyone is everyone else’s teacher,” her reply. “Including...yes, them!” she said, pointing to a crowd of overweight Caucasian nearly 50 year olds stuffing their faces around a

table reeking of cheap mayonnaise, chocolate, rancid cold cuts and excessively sweet, most probably firewater spiked, fruit punch.

John allowed his eyes to peruse those people who, according to Miss/Professor Gladstone, all requested that he finally come to at least one re-union. No matter how much he tried to recognize the faces, they didn't register with anything in his memory. Perhaps because he didn't want to remember their faces. But he did remember their names. And his presence was requested. But for what purpose?

When John turned around to Professor, Miss or maybe now just Norma Gladstone, she was gone. Laying in front of where she had been was John's picture as an 18 year old 'something' and his nametag, which would be pinned on the chest of him now as 'something else'.

As John walked towards the crowd, he prepared to reveal with wit and economy of words how he had been educated by others and how others had educated him over the last 30 years. But, what did he really do? What fights with ignorance and cruelty had he won on his own, and which ones did life declare him as a winner because the opponent gave up or forfeited the contest? Yes, he braced himself for the 'boast fest' starting with Larry, now Lawrence Thomkins, once generously follicled with an oversized Elvis pompadour and now bald as a melon, now clad in a thousand dollar suit. He had been the leader of the 'Four Professors', the highest ranking 'Cool Club' by most anyone's metric.

"Hey, John," he boldly said with a bold, deep voice. "Glad you could make it! How are you doing?"

"Not bad," John's reply, feeling invaded by that 'how are you' greeting that was asked so commonly everywhere, the inquirer not really interested in or wanting a real answer. "You?"

Lawrence boasted about his big investment portfolio, big contacts in the stock market and government legislature providing valuable info about insider trading and big salary. As for what that money was buying—nothing. Clearly, Lawrence had no idea that making a lot of money is not a goal, but a means to getting a goal. As for that goal was, be it a big house, big car and big happy family, Lawrence said nothing when asked about it, diverting the conversation to his money making schemes and successes.

As for the second in command of the Four Professors, Eddy Klassen boasted about the popularity of his mainstream fiction books about characters he would never have the courage to actually be. With each sip and gulp of the spiked punch, he related how each of his books sucked. And how easy it was to write them. "But, better to be popular and liked than to be accomplished, innovative and right, right?" he asked John at the end of his pre-rehearsed rant.

"In some places and for some people, I suppose," John's reply to that claim, which he vehemently disagreed with. He turned to a woman with long alluringly curled blonde hair, shapely legs, big breasts and a large Adam's Apple poorly hidden by a loose scarf. "Jack Newman?" John inquired, looking at the name tag of the once superstud very male member of the Four Professor Posse, who got any girl he wanted with more ease than any of his buds, and most notably, John.

"Now Jackie," the proud reply. Jackie extended her right bear sized nail polished hand to John, pulling him into an embrace that the Indigenous Chief didn't expect. Yes, John was curious about what was between Jackie's legs.

"I traded it in for a vagina," Jackie said, anticipating his inquiry. "And...yes, I have dreamed about maybe, ya know, me coming to visit you," the once man's man who was now a woman continued. "My therapist told me that it is important for me to come here as, the new me," Jackie whispered into John's ear. "But you, I know, accept who and what I am, and always have been, right?"

"Yes, I do, of course," John said, feeling himself telling more of a white lie than the truth.

"So, you're single now I heard?" Jackie asked.

"I'm...eh...married," John said, advancing another lie.

"Too bad," Jackie lamented.

"To my work," John added, feeling the need to be truthful.

“Even worse,” Jackie replied with a ‘can’t have everything or maybe very much of anything’ sigh.. She released John from the hug she, perhaps even in High School, wanted to get lost in with him.

John asked the crowd about the whereabouts of the fourth of the Four Professors, Wesley O’Leary. Silence overtook them all. The Catholics made the sign of the cross with an open hand moving from the left to right shoulder with bowed heads. . Greek VERY Orthodox raised Theo Diamantis bowed his head even more, joining three fingers and moving them from right to left “Sorry,” John said to the crowd. “I didn’t know.”

“Because you didn’t try to find out?” John heard from a woman behind him. A real woman. Christine Halson, unlike everyone else, looked almost exactly like her the picture in the 30 year old yearbook, as well as the image John held in his mind. “But,” she told John after approaching him as he left the banquet table. “You didn’t have to know.” She related how Wesley joined the Army, acquired three medals for bravery fighting bad guys, and gals, abroad, along with cancer from chemicals he was assigned to use to fight terrorists en route to getting ‘some fresh air’ outside the meeting room. “But he rose up the ranks within four years from being a private to being a Colonel,” she continued to John, placing her arm under his elbow. “And, I heard, you rose up the ranks in YOUR world. Your home tribe. Respected and listened to by other tribes. Even White ones. Which makes us...ya know...”

“...Allies in the Cause of fighting racism and destruction of the earth by the Corporate money grubbing, people oppressing machine?” John politely interjected with a smile to the woman who had been the girl he always wanted to be with, and work with. Someone who could listen to music with, and make music with. “Comrades in the struggle for REAL Global justice and healing? Dedicated to the credo that everyone should give according to their abilities and take according to their needs?”

“Adversaries,” Christine replied. “Industrial and economic progress is change. Positive change. And it’s might not right that makes the world go round. But...I suppose without Capitalist racist, as your buds say, assholes like me, revolutionaries like you would just be sitting on your ass, listening to 60s folk songs and reminiscing about a ‘love is all you need’ world from our youth that never existed.”

“Got a point there,” John said, after a thoughtful delay, measuring his words and tone with more care than he remembered infusing into a conversation back home. “But, there has to be some common ground between us,” he proposed.

“All the cells in both of our bodies have 46 Chromosomes,” she related.

“Provided by Mother Nature and evolution,” John noted with a whimsical smile.

“The Heavenly father, and Creation that did take place in seven days!” Christine barked back, after which her phone rang. The conversation was all about stocks, dividends, and investment plans, causing her to be worried, then obsessed with turning financial setbacks into a success. Yes, indeed, the Cree word Munios was an accurate word for White folks. . ‘Those who have gone mad in the pursuit of money’. Something that John, as a Shuswap Chief, should insert into his band’s dictionary.

There was one lingering question John had. “Why the fuck did Norma Gladstone insist that he come to this reunion?” Perhaps she knew it would be her last. But what was the final thing she wanted, and needed, to teach him? A straight answer was required.

He went to the table where he first saw her upon entering the conference hall. There was an envelope there, with his name on it. ‘To open when you are alone, which I know is...always,’ it read in English, the language that John was forced to speak after being placed in the upper level White educational system by the Band as a kid because he ‘had so much potential’. And in German, which he taught himself so he could read Einstein’s mathematical, scientific and political works in their original form. And Cherokee, a language put into written form by Indigenous Visionaries in Georgia nearly two centuries ago.

Inside of the envelope was a simple equation. It was derived from complex calculus above it that John could follow with ease, and the kind of pleasure he hadn’t experienced since he had to deal only with arithmetic of the masses after his formal post secondary education.

“Intelligence times Effort equals Effective Compassion.”

John took Professor Gladstone's advise for the rest of the reunion. He politely and respectfully listened to his fellow classmates who were, because their various mistakes and virtues, his teachers, doing more listening than talking. Some of it was even practical for the tasks at hand in the immediate 'now'. Such as a prediction of when the Coquihalla highway would be passable between two incoming Spring snow storms. One that brought John back home to the Rez, and the world it connected to, or should connect to anyway.