

The
Local Brew



Myles Chilton

paperbytes

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pbytes@paperplates.org

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ONE

“NO, TRUTH BE told, country bumpkins and their awful music aren’t my bag, thank you very much. Hick town hoe-down jamboree! Not my thing, but I gotta go. Those are my orders. Jesus, it’s going to be a long night. And a long weekend. But this will help. I need something to get me in gear. This is good stuff. I haven’t done this since university.”

Paul Ellison fell silent and listened to the little waves lapping the rocks.

“Ah, yes,” he continued, “mental preparation made simpler. I was going to race down there and grab a beer or two before Carolyn and

her folks showed up. The beer they're brewing there now is about the only worthwhile thing about the place. But this is much better. God, I haven't smoked pot since third year. Carolyn forbids it. A fair sacrifice, I used to say. A few racy pleasures consigned to the past. The Criminal Code being what it is makes dropping this one easier, what with being a lawyer on top of it all. Furthering my career all red-eyed and giggling wouldn't do. Today, however, it'll do nicely. She'll have to forgive me this once – that's if she notices. My future in-laws will have to assume that I've had a bitch of a week at the office and gone a little silly, you know, as city people do."

Paul Ellison fell silent again, and again listened to the little waves lapping the rocks. Lapping, lapping, little waves on little rocks. Little rocks lapping lipping rocky waves. Rocky waves on little laps. Little Laplanders licking little rocks. Lapis lazuli rocks lacking waves – oh, but wasn't he starting to feel better! What a great way to procrastinate!

The world put to rights, he thanked his friend and got in his car.

He began moving, although he didn't feel like he was moving, but he must have moved because he soon had a Toronto-ish looking mass in his rear-view mirror. The small-town-ish horizon to the southwest then approached, slowly, vaguely, unpleasantly, and in some other way that made him laugh. Phenomena were coming at him, all because of his friend's invitation to smoke a joint down by the lake. *Must bump into that guy again*, resolved Paul Ellison.

Now he could tolerate the fact that this weekend was going to happen. The plan was full of her old hankering and cloudy imagination, true enough, but it wasn't going to kill him. And she had a point, he never failed to enjoy something of his visits to his home town. Her only crime had been to let the first minor chill of late summer tumble into a sentimentality for the charms of autumn, then let it mix in with the romance of their upcoming spring wedding. That was all, it was silly and he had a good laugh at her. And he told himself that he laughed out loud only because he was stoned. He wouldn't say any of

this to Carolyn, and no way could he laugh out loud at her. Especially because the spring wedding was *his* idea.

He found a parking spot in no time, quite unlike the furious searches he was used to in the city; but he locked his car all the same, in what was probably just a reflex. He was supposed to meet her at five-thirty outside the town hall. However, it was still just five minutes after five. People saw a young man of average height, light brown hair, wearing a blue suit, blue tie and sunglasses shout, “Yahoo!” His original, secret plan had not been offset by the earlier mischief by the lake. He still had time for a beer. *How nicely that will go with a marijuana aperitif.*

There he stood, holding the door of his Volvo, looking at the town where he had been born, raised, and schooled until the age of thirteen. Yes, there stood Paul Ellison, suddenly recalling the exact moment his father moved the family to Toronto. His company wanted him in the head office, said dear old Dad. That’s right, they wanted him, but Mom and Dad didn’t want Toronto, so they moved back here as soon

as they could, but to a different and smaller house beside the river. It was not far from where they lived before, and they liked the broad and beautiful river, and the way it flowed almost imperceptibly. The serene flow was a fitting centrepiece to the town. That's how the Ellisons felt about the place. And that's the story. Happened just like that, not so many years ago now. *Which brings us to me, Paul Ellison standing here, as if attached to my Volvo, looking at the river, wondering just why I'm narrating this television documentary about my parents when I'm supposed to be doing something else. Just what, however, is that something else?*

His two brothers also returned to set up a small business, but he stayed in Toronto to attend law school; that would have to be worked in. Now he was in his fourth year with a big firm on Bay Street. "I'm afraid we won't recognize you," his mother once said.

"You'll know exactly who I am. Don't talk such nonsense," was his reply.

“Well, you can come home as long as *you* don’t talk any nonsense,” said his habitually cryptic father. *Add this in, because it nicely illustrates the effects of force of will or economic shifts or – or says something about ... something. Anyway, it explains itself, so why bother explaining it?*

It was much easier for Paul Ellison to come to terms with his choice of parking spots. He had plonked himself right there in the parking lot of the United Church. This was where they were going to get married. It was also right across from the town hall, right across from the place where they would be selling beer. The beer that was the only worthwhile thing about this village, the beer that would make time glide by and expedite the *Annual Harvest Festival Corn Roast and Dance* to the corner of a distant galaxy. He walked on shoes that had grown extra soles to a blue and white tent. “This, as anyone can see, is the beer tent,” he said, smiling.

“No sir, that’s that stall on the other side of the lawn,” instructed an older woman who was busy organizing decorations and lettering.

Well then, what's this tent all about? But no time to ponder the mystery, there was beer to be drunk. He followed the instructions and found himself at a stall where the smell of food was faint but encouraging. A plump man of about forty appeared, smiled broadly, and asked if he could be of any assistance.

“Yes, a pint of Hammond’s Ale please.” Paul Ellison’s request came with his own broad smile. For good measure he threw in an anticipatory tone of voice, to convey his deep desire for the pint.

“Yessir,” said the plump man. “Did you know that Hammond’s is brewed not three blocks from where you’re standing?” he asked in a friendly voice. Paul Ellison answered yes, and said that he, too, had been brewed, as it were, probably not three blocks from where they were standing. They laughed at this, Paul a bit more than the plump man. But then the attention of the plump man was diverted to something behind the blue curtain on his side of the counter. “Just a moment,” he said, and retreated behind the curtain. He emerged one

minute later, smiled again, and said, “I’m sorry, because of our license I’m afraid you’ll hafta order some food with your beer. That’s the law, I’m afraid.”

“A bald reality that confronts me every day,” answered Paul Ellison. “But, as I’m unbelievably hungry, this law doesn’t upset me at all.” He asked the plump man what sort of food was available.

“I’m afraid we’re not quite set up yet. We weren’t expecting people for about another hour. And then there was no one to show the girls how to hook up the gas to the grills. But there’s some p’dayda salad and I think there’s some hot dogs warming.”

Paul Ellison said that potato salad, and lots of it, would be fine. In his thoughts he said that potato salad served by such a polite and helpful person was just the thing at a harvest festival in the country. As for this food stall not being set up yet, he suddenly noticed that everything was still in preparation and that he was the only person around who did not seem to be involved with these preparations.

The plump man had again darted behind the curtain, so Paul Ellison turned to study more carefully the scene in front of the town hall. There were perhaps three dozen white tables with chairs on the lawn and on the street, over which brightly coloured lanterns and buntings were being hung. Beside the lawn was a small parking lot on which a bandstand had been erected. People were milling about, checking the sound system and decorating the dancing area.

The plump man came back, and they greeted each other with broad smiles. “Your p’dayda salad will be ready in about five minutes, sir.” Paul Ellison said that would be fine; then a queer pause ensued in which they looked at each other unsurely. Paul Ellison sensed something amiss. Finally he said, “Beer?” as politely as he could.

“Oh now, you can get your beer over there behind the hall at the tent in the field – that’s where the beer tent’ll be tonight.”

“I see.” A minor interruption, a faint distraction, but one that even a stoned person could think his way through. “Listen, can I go fetch

my beer while my potato salad is being prepared?”

The plump man said that would be no problem, so Paul Ellison thanked him, paid for the potato salad, and went off to find the beer tent.

Before he took a step in the direction of the beer tent, however, something made him look across to the parking lot of the United Church. There he saw her, emerging from her car, her dark hair curled and piled about her head and shoulders like knots of pitched twine, her little blue eyes in a characteristic squint as she looked at something in the distance, as if she were making sense of strange new surroundings. An angry heat shot through Paul Ellison's back and neck; he snapped his head away and walked toward the town hall, away from her, pretending to be in deep study of the structure. He hoped dearly that Carolyn had not seen him – or worse, seen him turn his head away. How he would explain that one he had no idea. But he did not want to see her at this moment; he wanted this precious time to

be his. Carolyn would never go for this, he knew; she would say she had been spurned, not temporarily avoided. There would be silence after tearful words, and he would have to make it up to her in some grand way, then all would appear well for a while. Then, as was her compulsion, she would bring it up whenever another tender fault in their relationship was bared. The only way out of it was to trust fortune and hope that she had not seen him. He was sure that she was preoccupied with something down the road and that he had turned his back to her before she would have looked toward the town hall. Then if she did see him, he would have an excuse; to make it more credible he could say that he was having a good look at the town hall: she knew he was fond of this building.

He walked quickly into the safe shadow of the town hall. With the town hall on his right and the library and a tall hedge on his left, he figured he couldn't be seen from the parking lot. He was still feeling the angry heat in his back and neck, and reflected with contempt that

the barricade provided by these two buildings and the hedge was probably what decided the location of the beer tent: *There, tucked away in back, out in the field, they're putting the animals. Ensuring that those reprobates who wanted to drink would be well out of sight of the decent folk out front. Let them fall victims to themselves without offending the virtuous. There's nothing like my home town, a church on every corner.*

Then he paused in his thoughts: *It must be because I'm stoned. I'm never like this.*

He made it to the beer tent. It was strange, but now he was entirely at peace with the idea of putting the beer tent out here. There it stood, all cheerfully blue and white, flapping and ruffling in the light breeze. All closed up, too, but it was only a tent, the entrance wouldn't be hard to find. The breeze, and for some reason the image of the tent, took him back to the lake and the little waves on the rocks and the silly games he played with the words, which he couldn't recall just then. Then he slipped back to where he was standing, and felt for a

second that he was reliving another past moment. Except that the moment was now. That made it even better. *Great! Happy memories happening right here and now! Must be because I'm stoned.*

The scenery was lovely. A restful country scene, with the mostly flat field, a creek running through the middle of it, and a woodlot fifty metres away. The plump man had called it a field, which meant that probably everybody did, and when Paul Ellison thought about it he, too, in his childhood, called the yard behind the town hall a field; but it wasn't a proper field. It was odd that people in a rural district, many of them farmers, should refer to this odd little parcel of land as a field, when all around one could see the real thing, and see that there was a substantial difference. But why was he dwelling on what they called this place, when he was supposed to be getting his beer? Carolyn could come flying around the corner any second. Time for action.

He was delighted to find the entrance to the beer tent, and to find that it was on the side away from the town hall, facing the field,

stream and woodlot. *There, I can get lost in the stream and swim to the poplars if she comes to find me.* He looked to the woodlot: the trees were ablaze with red leaves; he found them upsetting, even frightening, but beautiful. Then he wondered why he was getting all emotional about trees when half a second ago he was absorbed in his quest for beer.

He walked into the tent and found himself alone. He was not surprised, things weren't under way yet, but he couldn't help being disappointed with the fact that he seemed to be the only human for miles around. He rested his hands on the counter and listened for any sounds that might come from behind the red curtain. The silence prompted him to clear his throat and drum the counter with his knuckles. Then anger rose volcanically. He called out sharply, "Excuse me! I would like to order now, please!"

A tiny old red face came out from behind the curtain, and with a raspy voice told Paul Ellison, "We're not open yet, come back at seven."

The recipient of this kindness bristled and jumped a great distance from his regular civility. “What do you mean ‘not open yet’? I was just told by someone in the town hall that I could get a pint of beer in your tent. Now come on, you’re not going to turn away a potential customer, are you?” This directness made him a valuable man to the firm. He swayed many a board and committee with his forthright mouth. Carolyn, while admiring his style, held more respect for what she called *the authority of merit*, which meant that, in any situation, the one who was morally correct would, in time, overcome any opposition. If she had been here to see the tiny red face, atop a tiny old body, darting behind the counter, she would have said that this authority was at work, not so much Paul’s tone of voice. She might have been surprised to hear what the old man said next: that *you young fellas are full of shit, there was no way in hell you talked to no one in the town hall, and even if you had they would have told youse that the beer tent didn’t open till seven*. Paul Ellison was certainly surprised, both at the tiny old

man's wrath and at finding it terrifically funny. *No, Carolyn*, he said to himself, *moral righteousness isn't ruling the day here; this old bugger just wants to sell this city-boy his beer and be done with him.* "That'll be three-fifty plus tax ...," said the pleasant face. "Take this ticket and go over to the tent nearest the library, the one on the left, and give it to Ted."

Ah, but this was amusing. "Excuse me, kind sir. But why can't I get my beer here? This is the beer tent, isn't it?"

"Yeah, after seven," snapped the old man. "Until then the beer is being stored out there in the other tents."

"Why couldn't you store it in this tent?"

"Because those tents could be reached by the beer truck; this one couldn't because of the bridge. Any more questions?"

"Seems awfully –" But Paul Ellison broke off here, his enjoyment waned. It was just as well, time was running short. But he couldn't deny that the testiness of the old man gave a spiteful twinge to his

quest. – *Now I'm thinking about quests!* he said to himself, as he set out for the tent with Ted. At the thought of what he was going through to get a simple pint of beer he felt hot twisting flushes in his stomach and chest. *This, by rights, he fumed, should not require a three-day search. First, the old woman at the first stall – completely ignorant! Then the smiling fat man – big fat smiles, nothing else there. Then the red-faced old turd who sends me into these muddy fields because they couldn't come up with a more efficient way of organizing something that should be very simple.* What more could happen in this dolt-ridden bog?

He set out for the white tent, trying to calm his nerves by returning his mind to the lake. But waves came crashing in, smashing through the boulders, washing away the beach. He had to run for his life – just like he was running now. The waves made it all the way to the field, or something had, the ground was all wet. This made running difficult – but why run? *Because time is flowing by.* Just like the

creek, which he was now crossing, which seemed more like a river. The wooden bridge seemed ready to snap, like his nerves. No, a truck wouldn't have made it across. He skipped and danced to avoid the mud patches and little ponds that threatened to soil his shoes. He must have looked very stupid, a lawyer in a blue suit running in sort of a mincing way. Running and looking stupid because he had already spent seven or eight minutes so far in trying to wring a pint of beer out of this quaint country festival.

He strode quickly into the white tent and found that it, too, was empty. *Yes, empty because I'm early*, he said to the interior. *But all I have to do is be a little firm and polite; my demands are not extreme.*

He was set to call out when two women came into the tent. They were calling the name "Mauro" and began looking about the tables and piled-up boxes of beer and food. The women appeared to be in their mid-thirties, one short and slight and dressed in jeans and a pink sweater, the other rather rotund and wearing a much too tight

black dress and cardigan. Then a small boy ran out from behind a pile of boxes near an opening in the tent.

“There you are! Don’t keep running off like that or I’ll wring your neck. Where’s your Uncle Ted?” said the slight woman.

“Ha ha, no way, Mom, you’re way too slow,” said the boy to the slight woman. “Hello, Aunt Julia,” he then said to the rotund woman.

“Is Uncle Ted back there?” said rotund Aunt Julia.

“No, he’s coming any minute,” answered the boy. “He was just down with Mr DeGroot and the brewery man.”

“Probably arranging for his own private supply,” said rotund Aunt Julia as if she knew all too well.

The women and the boy took little notice of the stranger in their midst, other than to say good evening. They moved to the counter as a unit, the boy between the women, and spoke amongst themselves. Then rotund Aunt Julia turned and asked Paul Ellison if he was waiting for someone. He answered that, yes, he was, for a man named Ted

who was supposed to serve beer here. She smiled and said that Ted would be along soon, then – with a laugh – said that he would serve the beer as long as he hadn't drunk it all. Paul Ellison thanked her and stood and waited for this Ted with growing anxiousness. He had recalled that Carolyn and now possibly the parents were waiting for him, not to mention the potato salad.

A large man then shuffled into the tent. Paul Ellison was at once encouraged and despairing. If this was Ted, then the quest might well be hopeless. How did one go about getting beer from a creature caught between animal and man? The big beast moved like a bull on a hot day, and spoke with a loose protruding tongue that reminded Paul of a mule. He had a habit of looking at the floor or the top of the counter in front of his enormous belly. There were stains of unknown origin on his grey sweatshirt and his loose blue jeans. He seemed to express himself most by touching and readjusting the black baseball cap set low on his forehead.

The great effluvia forced out a sort of voice. The others were capable of understanding it. Paul Ellison could make out very little, but ascertained that this man was Ted, rotund Aunt Julia was his wife, and the slight woman was his sister. He missed, however, the fact that Ted had addressed him. The air hung silent for a moment. “Yessir,” repeated Ted. Finally, Paul Ellison realized that Ted was talking to him. Embarrassed at appearing to have taken on something of Ted’s bovine vacancy, Paul Ellison made his order for a pint of Hammond’s Ale with more anger in his voice than was warranted. Ted’s response was to stand still and look at some boxes. Then he looked up at Paul Ellison and said that he had to buy a ticket.

“I’ve already bought a ticket! Here it is!” he said, slapping the ticket on the counter. Paul Ellison, too, was taken aback by his loss of temper. Ted took the ticket without showing any reaction to his customer’s outburst. The women and the boy had stopped talking, and the fresh silence crept up Paul Ellison’s spine. Ted laid the ticket on the counter in

front of his belly, looked at it, muttered, “Pint”, shuffled to the back of the tent and looked at some boxes. Ted then walked back to the women, saying, “Coke, orange, coke,” and pointing to the three of them in turn. They each answered yes. Again Ted went over to the boxes, and it began to seem as though he was searching in there for the drinks he had been asked to serve. What must have been a bell ringing very loudly in his little head provoked him to give it a good scratch under his cap, then walk out of the tent as though wrapped in thought. Paul Ellison let out a long hiss. Rotund Aunt Julia noticed this and smiled. “They’re not always organized for Friday night, but it gets better tomorrow.”

“They could improve things a whole-hell-of-a-lot by leaving this guy in the barn, I’ll tell you,” snapped Paul Ellison. Then he felt himself uncoil and coil up once again. The smile of rotund Aunt Julia faded. Paul Ellison, seeing her fading smile and the colour running from her cheeks, was suddenly shocked with himself for letting out

such a hot-headed remark. At the same time he thought, *Oh, but it's a good thing Carolyn wasn't here to catch that. I'd have been well on the way to days and days of earfuls about how out of character I'm acting, how she's never seen me so nasty, so ill-mannered, so impatient. And what was going on in that brain of mine?*

Ted walked back into the tent with what appeared to be a sense of purpose. He walked straight to the exact thing he was looking at: a small refrigerator. Continuing to move without hesitation, he slid back the lid and withdrew three bottles of coloured liquid. Paul Ellison's heart jumped at the sound of the bottles being extricated, but then stilled itself when he saw that the bottles contained only orange and the luminous brown of cola. Ted found an opener, whisked the tops off and set the bottles before the women and the boy, all the while wheezing through a conversation about tomorrow and some of the people they knew. The young lawyer watched all of this in turmoil, battling swinish noises in his head that sounded like waves

smashing into a parking lot. From this inflamed quarter of his head came a foul-mouthed reminder about his pint of beer. But he stayed silent. Another imagined sound had countered: the wailing aria of disbelief from Carolyn, demanding that he pull himself away from this mad quest and come and sit quietly in front of the town hall.

It looked as though Ted's business with the others was nearing an end. The boy and the slight woman stepped away from the counter. At last, they all turned to leave, saying good-byes and see-you-laters. Rotund Aunt Julia added, "And stay out of the beer for the first few hours anyway, let someone else have a chance!" – then laughed, and then fell silent when her eyes met those of Paul Ellison. Her glance struck him. He recalled his rudeness. This filled him with shame. He also became aware of Ted's size and roughness, and this woman's relationship to Ted. He turned his own eyes away.

Ted seemed to have missed this between his wife and the customer; indeed, it seemed as though he had slipped into a standing

slumber. With the others gone, Paul Ellison felt some relief; his nerves settled and his simple purpose came back to light. He reminded Ted about the beer. Ted replied with a mumble and again went to the small refrigerator. He fished around amid a clanking of bottles punctuated by a couple of hoarse curses, then withdrew, once again looking lost. He said, “Hold on”, and trudged out of the tent yet again. More time passed, another three or four minutes of frustration – of his life being wasted! Paul Ellison could stand it no longer. “To hell with everyone!” he shouted. “Why did I leave that spot by the lake! I want my fucking beer!” He hopped over the counter to search for the Hammond’s Ale on his own.

He swept his hands through the small refrigerator like a rake through dead grass. He pushed around offending bottles of cola and orange, paying little heed to the fact that glass breaks and is a nuisance to clean up. Then one of the bottles of cola broke. He slammed shut the lid of the refrigerator and swore loudly.

He looked through the opening of the tent over the field and to the woodlot. The grey oaks, weedy poplars and bushy maples were having their autumn colours tinted with gold by the receding sun. Many of the trees were dead or dying. A melancholy, oddly alluring sight. *The fragility of it all*, he thought, *the grey limbs ready to snap, the broken bottle, my hopes for today going up in smoke, my work, my mind and its effort to make sense of the last fifteen incredible minutes. Good Lord, fifteen minutes already! Carolyn will surely be fuming by now, perhaps ranting away to her sister and parents and my parents, all sitting together. Like they had done, time after time, year after year . . .*

Carolyn's family were also long-time residents of the town. After he and Carolyn started up, the parents on both sides considered it their duty to become close. It was only proper, and fitting, and Christian. With the parents getting along so well it made Paul and Carolyn seem like an even better-matched couple. True, some said that Carolyn had better stiffen herself or she would end up being the mop to a man like

him. She would have to play second fiddle, they all agreed, but if she mooned about him too much, he'd take advantage of her without a second thought. He's a good young man, they said, but he won't stand a wet rag – not that she was, of course, but compared to him

He knew how they all thought about him and Carolyn, thanks to his mother, tactlessly revealing all this in her ecstasy over the engagement. And he knew how attention had become focused on them because he was a big-shot lawyer, and because they had chosen to live – together – in the city. Thinking of how the townspeople thought made him more livid: *Good God! That they could be so spiteful because we chose to live together – in the city!* Because he considered corporate finance more important than farmers and their dwindling subsidies! Because he didn't even know what time the goddamn festival began and thought he could just come and get a beer any goddamn time he wanted! *Well, folks, in a civilized society*

Yes, it is a good thing that Carolyn is not here. This thought had

risen up suddenly, but was somehow connected to the other ones. Perhaps it was inspired by the damp, chill wind that raced across the field and dried the sweet, sticky cola on his hands. Or maybe he was still stoned.

Ted came back into the tent. Paul Ellison jumped. It would be obvious who broke the bottle. Ted, however, didn't seem to notice, and said without expression, "I'm not sure where the Hammond's is right now, but I'm still looking."

"Listen, is there another place where I can get it, or is there someone around here who might know where it is?"

This apparently hadn't occurred to Ted. He thought for another precious minute. Paul Ellison boiled with impatience. "You can try the town hall," Ted finally said. "Someone in there might have an idea. I dunno."

"Could the beer be down there?"

"Maybe. I really don't know nothin' about where they put what, eh."

Or maybe they told him and he didn't understand, thought Paul Ellison. *They should have drawn Ted a little picture, or left the moron shovelling shit.* “Look, you keep looking here. I'm going down to the town hall to see if anyone there knows what's going on.”

Ted offered no reaction as Paul Ellison dashed out of the tent and over the field.

TWO

PAUL ELLISON WALKED briskly and uncomfortably over the damp grass, danced around patches of mud, crossed over the frail bridge, and slipped childishly up a small knoll. He walked, because running was now out of the question: a list of moral improprieties, weighted heavily in his favour, held him from breaking into a gallop. The moral improprieties weren't clear to him just then, but it seemed they involved needless angry discussions, unpleasant encounters and

unfair treatment; if he had a moment to sit down and think, he could justify every one of his complaints.

He kicked his legs forward as he strained to increase his speed; his jacket flapped in the wind and his hair blew all over his head; shame and frustration rose at the thought that this comical-looking effort was in aid of obtaining a pint of beer that he wouldn't have the time to really enjoy. This, in turn, brought a wave of humiliation at the fact that he was early, things weren't ready and he had stepped on toes – and would step on more toes. His gait became more frantic as he pictured himself, all puffing and fuming, encountering an angry Carolyn or the bewildered parents, all of whom would surely be in front of the town hall by now. He made things worse by imagining the plump man following behind with a huge bowl of potato salad. How could he explain his way out of this? He could say that traffic had been heavy; but no, Carolyn would have seen his car in the church parking lot. The plump man would say, *You didn't need to drive to the beer tent.* No, Paul

Ellison would have to reveal the whole ludicrous tale to everyone.

He came close to the town hall and swept his eyes over the two walls visible to him. There was no back entrance he could see; he would have to go around front and risk being spotted, but there seemed no other way. He walked slowly down the path between the town hall and library, staying close to the hedge, thus decreasing the angle of sight from the tables. He kept his head bowed and looked up as few times as possible. But in one quick glance he saw them there, just as he had imagined, sitting around a table near the United Church, looking in all directions for his arrival. Quickly he set his eyes in mock study of the town hall and walked directly up the steps and through the front doors. His step faltered as he felt their eyes on his back; the heat of a blush reddened him from head to foot. It was not until he heard the heavy doors close behind him that he again felt secure.

The main hall was empty of people, but contained boxes, hand-painted signs and other scattered objects relating to the festival. He

stepped back into the foyer, wondering where to look next, when he heard voices coming from the basement. Over fifteen minutes had passed since he set out to obtain a pint of Hammond's Ale and he was in no mood to have any more of his time wasted. There was also a potato salad sitting on the counter, and a smiling fat man thinking the young customer strange for ordering his food and taking off. *Time to bend metal, knock down walls, move mountains and give an earful*, he resolved, and in his rush of emotion ran down the wooden stairs, giving full weight to every step. He reached the bottom, and once the echo of his angry march down the steps had subsided, he again heard the voices, and guessed correctly that they were coming from a room at the end of the white-washed corridor. He could not make out what was being said, but he could tell that they were women. If he had been able to make out what they were saying, he would have turned around, gone back upstairs, and sat himself quietly with Carolyn *et al.* The women were remarking on the sudden stomping on the steps,

and wondering who on earth was making that racket.

He rushed down the corridor to the room and the voices. The talking became more distinct: it was rapid, friendly sounding bumpkins' chatter, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Then they all laughed; suddenly Paul Ellison felt very stupid. He was going to poke his head into this and say, "I want some beer." *Oh dear, why am I doing this?* But it was too late to turn around, his momentum had carried him to the door. It was partially open, and heads had turned to see the noisy intruder. He saw that the room was also white-washed and contained seven women sitting around a long wooden table, some drinking coffee, some folding papers, some simply taking part in the conversation. He cleared his throat and asked quietly if this was the festival committee room, despite having just read a sign on the door denoting that very fact. There was a confused pause among the women; they all seemed to forget to whom or to what they had been paying attention.

One of the women, however, wasn't confused, she was fully aware of the man and his meek inquiry; but she joined the pause because she was amused by the sudden, politely disguised fluster of her friends and wanted to see what would happen next. But it became apparent that nothing would happen if she didn't soon come to everyone's relief. Which she did by answering the troubled man at the door. "Yes, that it is. And what may we do for you, sir?"

Paul Ellison's eyes were pulled into focus by the woman who answered him. She was closest to him, sitting at the head of the table. Her beauty nearly knocked him off balance. All the coffee cups and debris on the table became a haze of objects behind her. He stared at her face and forgot every minute of today's frustration; he pictured Carolyn searching for him, slipping on the mud. The bodily presence of this woman utterly absorbed him; Carolyn slid down the slope and into the stream. He stared into the pleasant, playful smile she was letting lift the corners of her coral-pink lips, the upper one beautifully

arched, showing a line of pearl teeth. From her smile his eyes rose to the magnetic gleam of her pale green eyes, shaped like large almonds and lined above with thick brows. Then to her tawny hair, brushed back and falling in waves around her ivory face, and softly onto her slender shoulders. From the shoulders it was an irresistible leap down to the golden sweater that rose over her breasts. He tried to control himself, to look again into her eyes like a gentleman – but it was impossible to look into her enchanting eyes and resist the ivory face, now curled with crescent-shaped dimples that were delivering the final excruciating blows to his composure. He had forgotten why he came here.

He would have remained thus stunned had he not smoked a joint earlier in the day. Talk about mental preparation; even an attraction like this is no match for the mighty weed. Certain vital nerves remained unexcited and allowed him to say, “I seem to be having some trouble.” *Nerves*, we say; brain-cells could not be marshalled in time. This unfortunate utterance cost him: she laughed and he felt

his stomach drop and his head loll and it seemed the greater part of his being was incapable of telling which end was up. He leaned against the door frame to reorient himself, and to appear casual. He strained to make a coherent account of himself.

“What I mean is that my plans have all been, uh, washed away. You see, I left the city at, uh, gee, three-thirty. I – met someone, well, got waylaid, and ... but I wanted to get here early. I wanted to, you know, before meeting up with my folks and some other people – just get a pint, you know, of Hammond’s. But, it seems like I, uh, well, can’t right now. I’m not *that* early, I thought. Would you have any idea where I could, uh – ?” Perhaps that was the best he could expect from a brain loaded with cannabis.

“You went to the beer tent?” she asked.

“And paid in full,” came his rather suave reply. Pot can create the odd surprise. She turned to a flaccid woman in a green cardigan and asked:

“Isn’t Ted Drummond in the beer storage tent?”

“Yes,” said the flaccid woman, “but, Karen, you know what Ted’s like. The Hammond’s was delivered there about four, but he probably wasn’t expecting to serve anything until about seven. The beer’s probably still in the cases in front of the counter near the back flap where they put it.”

“Placed so obviously that only Ted could walk right by it,” said Karen. Hearing that her name was Karen thrilled him. She gave him another thrill by leaving aside the matter of his being early. “I guess the label on the cases is in nice, bright colours and easy to read letters?”

“If there’s anyone who should recognize a Hammond’s label, it’s Ted!” The women all had a good laugh. Paul Ellison, however, had to force a smile. He, too, should have recognized the Hammond’s label; he, too, had probably walked right by it. Then he began to shake – visibly he feared – as Karen, still laughing, sprang out of her chair and walked towards him.

“Well, sir, let’s get to the bottom of this.” She looked right into his

eyes; he felt sweat break out on his forehead. “We’ll get this gentleman from out of town the pint of beer that is rightfully his. He hasn’t come all this way to be treated shoddily. Please follow me, sir, if you wouldn’t mind?”

He followed her without thinking and matched her pace up the stairs. Instead of going out the front door he was relieved to find that they were heading for the back of the main hall. In the middle of the big floor she suddenly stopped. “I’m sorry, sir, I’ve just remembered something I should do. It won’t take a second. Would you mind going on ahead to the white tent nearest the library and I’ll catch up?”

She said this with an air of familiarity, such as one might assume with an old friend. She showed him the way to the back door with the same air, and he said remarkable things to himself: *What, no argument about where and when to meet? About who should be doing what and who usually screws it up so I’m doing it this time? No red faces and hands waving like blades?* Then he shut himself up because

there was a howling in his head.

He had taken four steps into the field when he heard the voice. Her yelling brought up the hairs on his neck. He turned to see Carolyn running along the path between the town hall and the library. She ran slowly, and sometimes her feet flew back as they slipped on damp grass. Her dark hair bobbed about her head; the navy blue skirt of one of her more conservative business suits twisted around her knees. He stood still and dead as she ran up to him. She paused to catch her breath, readying herself for a good shout, which she then gave: “Paul Ellison! Where the hell have you been? We’ve been waiting here for ten minutes! My parents and yours are all looking for you, too. We were supposed to meet out front at exactly five-thirty, remember?”

“What’s the goddamn problem? What’s got *you* all bent out of shape?” The uncoiling and coiling up happened again. Everything again felt unstable, his compass spun madly. He could see that Carolyn sensed this. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I’ve been having a hell of

a time here – ” He stopped and wondered how much he should explain. “Look, uh, I’ve ordered a beer, and – oh Jesus, some potato salad too – and someone’s going out of their way ... and I’ve already paid –”

“There he is!” shouted Carolyn’s father as he and Carolyn’s mother came around the town hall from the other direction. Paul Ellison turned to meet them, and they exchanged simple greetings. They were then diverted by Paul’s parents, who were coming from the beer tent, which was about ten metres behind the little group. Paul turned to face them and was greeted by his father’s loud sardonic voice:

“Old McAllister says that some clean young sergeant-major from the city was getting pretty steamed up about his beer. Then he described the fella, then we knew for sure it was you.”

“Look, Dad, you wouldn’t believe the shit I’ve been going through just to get a pint of Hammond’s.”

“I can’t believe you!” cried Carolyn. “You’ve been keeping us waiting

just so that you could get a *beer!* What has gotten into you? I mean, my ... gosh, you could've brought your own beer if you were *that* serious. Oh, but I suppose you had to buy it fresh right here or else it wouldn't be the same –”

Carolyn suddenly cut herself off. She turned her head to one side and knitted her brows – she was looking directly at his eyes. She turned her head again and frowned. Whether she was angry or puzzled Paul couldn't be sure. Paul searched his mind for a way to respond, or for a way to take her attention off his eyes. All he could come up with was rapid blinking.

“Are you all right, Paul?” said his mother. “You haven't caught a cold, have you?”

“No. Looks like he's gonna catch some shit, though,” rejoined his father.

“Oh boy, Paul, I figured by now you'd learned not to get her steamed up,” said Carolyn's father, and the two fathers laughed.

“Dad, you’re not helping. Paul, I just think it’s very rude of you to keep us waiting like this, just so that you can ... drink beer.” *Oh no*, thought Paul, *she spoke of lateness and beer, but she was really addressing my eyes*. Time for another deflection – this time he managed to speak.

“I’m not keeping you waiting. I’ll be there in just a second. I’m not that late. It’s five-thirty now.”

“Yeah, but Paul, you must realize that the bride doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” This was Carolyn’s mother, taking a not-so-subtle swipe at the twenty-one months that would elapse between engagement and spring wedding.

“Uh, kids, we’ll be back in front at our table.” Carolyn’s father said this with a peeved look on his face. He didn’t like what he saw, either. The parents then walked off around the town hall and out of sight. As soon as they were out of earshot, Carolyn spoke:

“Paul, have you been smoking up?”

“What? What kind of question is that?”

“It’s a simple question. Were you?”

“Why are you asking that? What – do I look as though I’ve been smoking up?”

“Yes. Your eyes are red and all scrunched, and you seem totally out of it.”

“Well, come on, I’ve had another hard day at the office. That’s why I wanted to get here and relax a bit. I thought a beer would be just the ticket.”

Their eyes met briefly, then they both let out heavy sighs. His mind ran blindly around the awkward silence that followed, wondering what he could possibly say next. Then he saw Karen come out of the town hall. It was difficult for him to keep his eyes off her, to keep his mind on thinking of a smart thing to say. This flustered him; he spoke out as best he could:

“Look, I see the person who said she would help me, and I’d really like to get what I paid for, and there’s also a potato salad back at a

food stall that I've paid for – it's been sitting there for about half an hour, I guess. Look, stay around here and I'll be back soon. I'll get a bunch of beers if you like" – he had forgotten that Carolyn didn't like beer and his parents never touched alcohol – "and we can all get together like you planned."

As he spoke, he watched Karen approach. He saw the smile on her coral-pink lips and the crescent dimples in her ivory face, and in her eyes he saw that she was not sure whether to interpose or stand back and wait for him to get free. Good Lord, she was beautiful. Carolyn, meanwhile, was watching Paul's eyes glance from her to some point behind. After he spoke, she sighed again, grabbing Paul's full attention. He awaited another blast or more interrogation. But none came; Carolyn simply stared at him, again either angry or puzzled. Paul couldn't stand this and started to move towards Karen; Karen having begun to walk in the direction of the white tent, once or twice looking back as if to beckon Paul. "All right," said Carolyn finally. "Hurry up."

“Do you want anything?” he asked hastily and, he realized, a little too blatantly out of politeness. Carolyn answering no, Paul pointed to Karen and said that he couldn’t keep that kind woman waiting. Then he sprang away and began running.

“Paul!” Carolyn suddenly shouted. Paul Ellison stopped and froze; her shout had again brought up the hairs on Paul’s neck. He turned around slowly, expecting the worst.

“Don’t you want to know where we’ll be?” A wind blew, billowing the tent and making the brittle leaves hiss. Had she lost control of her voice in trying to overcome the noise? Or had she picked up on something and finally decided to be angry – very angry? Whatever the case, he figured it was best just to answer her question. But he almost gave it away by saying, “Why don’t you sit where you were before?” Fortunately, part of his mind was keeping watch; it caught his tongue and put this on it instead: “Oh yeah, right, sorry. Where will you be?”

“We’ll be out in front of the town hall, at the table nearest the door of the United Church.” She smiled. “I thought that’d be an appropriate place for us.” Paul smiled back, not because he was thinking of the venue for their wedding, but because that seemed the best way to put her off for a while. He said something about a few minutes and *see you at our special place*, then turned to follow Karen.

As he neared Karen, he saw that she was laughing. Laughter, which forced Carolyn’s mouth into a dull oval, made Karen’s face a study in the beauty of happiness. Paul joined in the laughter, even though Karen then said, “Hell hath no fury like a fiancée kept waiting.”

“And hell hath no suspicions like those of a fiancée kept waiting.” They might have been insulting Carolyn, it occurred to Paul Ellison.

“Oh? Does she think you’ve been a bad boy?”

“A veritable criminal. Worse than usual. Gone and screwed everything up. Behaved like a fool. A selfish, greedy, pig-headed fool. Oh God, I ordered that potato salad too – ”

It took him a second to realize that Karen had stopped to talk to another woman a few paces back. “Doctor Flanagan?” the woman had called. “When’re we gonna turn on all the lights?”

“Tell you what, Jean,” Karen was saying. “Why don’t you turn them on in a few minutes. Oh, and don’t worry about me for a bit, there’s something I have to look after up here. I shouldn’t be too long.”

Paul Ellison recalled the word “doctor” and was pleasantly surprised.

“You’ve come all this way just for a pint of our local brew?” said Karen, returning her attention to Paul. “You must be a big fan.”

“What makes you think I’ve come a long way?”

“You’re not dressed for a corn roast and country music dance.”

“Aha, yes, you have a point there. I am a creature from another planet.”

“That must’ve been some good shit you smoked.”

“Uh?”

“Oh come on, you’re lit like a Christmas tree. Could tell that right

away. Your fiancée, I assume, doesn't approve?"

"Not at all. She has a point. I *am* a lawyer. It wouldn't be good if word got out that I was a lawbreaker. I mean, she's not, you know, a prude. She has her points."

"I'm sure she's a wonderful woman. Only wonderful women watch their fiancés when they walk away with another woman."

"Eh?" Paul spun around, but Carolyn wasn't there.

Karen started laughing.

"God," he said, "for a second there I thought you were serious."

"A little paranoid, are we?"

"I forgot about how paranoid pot can make you."

"There, you've admitted it. You're a very wicked man – Paul, is it?"

"Uh, yes, Paul Ellison. Nice to meet you. And I hear you are Doctor Karen –"

"Flanagan. Nice to meet you, too, though maybe you will sully my virtue."

“You don’t sound like you’re from this planet, either.”

“No, I too am from far far away.”

“What brings you here?”

“More than beer. I live here.”

“I was wondering what on earth a nice girl like you was doing in this bog of a village.”

“You big city pig! *Bog*, my ass!”

“I apologize. It’s a charming place. Matter of fact, I was born and raised here.”

“And your fiancée?”

“Yes, her too.”

“Did you meet here?”

“Yeah, in high school.”

“How nice it must be for you both to come back.”

“Actually, to tell the truth, I have no trouble staying away. I’m only here because of certain, shall we say, *political* reasons.”

“That explains your desire for intoxicants. You don’t like coming back. Well, I *am* insulted. You don’t like my adopted home just because you associate it with unpleasant relations. If your love life and your relationships were sound, you wouldn’t mind being here at all.”

“And I’d have other things than beer on my mind.”

“Bingo.”

“We’re a little forward, aren’t we?”

They entered the tent. “Now, where the hell is the Hammond’s?” said Karen. Her voice had gone quiet. It was as if she was ashamed of being found out. Paul Ellison was intrigued.

“How long have you lived here? And why do you continue to live here?”

She looked over at the counter and the small fridge and spoke quietly. “It’s fascinating, in its own way. When you’re the only woman MD in a town like this you encounter all kinds of things – the stories I could tell, but of course won’t.” She turned to face him, a smile blooming

across her face. “Here we are, out on a field looking for lost beer. Weird, isn’t it? Isn’t it strange that they’ve put the beer out here, with no one around, instead of the usual spot.”

“Where’s the usual spot?”

“Out in front of the town hall. But I think the church people had enough of too close an association with such open vice. Actually – I’m glad they put the tent out here, aren’t you?” She laughed prettily, and their eyes met. He had never felt such mutual abandonment in a stare.

“Yes, well, sure. It doesn’t make any difference to me. It is nice and, uh, secluded.”

“Important for a beer tent at a festival.”

“Yeah ... yeah, good point”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve been talking too much. We’re here to get you what you’ve come all this way for. Paul Ellison has come all this way, paid good money, and doesn’t want to go away empty-handed.

Do you really like Hammond's?"

"Yes ... I suppose. Actually, I'm not much of a beer drinker. Maybe I just like the label. Maybe there's some mysterious chemical they put in it, that draws me to it – even as it keeps receding into the distance."

"Eh? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, about thirty minutes have passed since I ordered that one, single, so far unobtainable pint."

"Well, here it is. In brightly coloured boxes right by the back flap. Only Ted Drummond could miss them. Okay, now where's your ticket?"

"The ticket? It should be here."

"You did say you paid for this beer?"

"Yes I did, down at the beer tent. I gave Ted the ticket. He must have walked off with it or eaten it or something."

Karen looked around the counter again, then grinned. "It all depends on how catty I want to be."

"I wouldn't invent a story about a thing like this."

“I should hope not. – From a lawyer I would expect something much better.” She laughed brightly, and he suddenly no longer cared about his beer.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t invent a story about this,” she continued, “because this obviously means something to you. I’d like to know what, Paul Ellison.”

She put her hands on the counter. A smile played on her coral lips, made her dimples quiver and spread to ignite her almond eyes. Paul could not help responding; soon his broad smile became a quiet laugh. He too had put his hands on the counter, almost touching her fingertips. She lowered her eyes as she joined his laughter, then looked up at him and said:

“Well, Paul Ellison, I shouldn’t worry, we’ll get you your beer one way or another.”

About the Author



MYLES CHILTON was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1964. His family moved to Mississauga, Ontario, in 1972. He graduated from the University of Toronto (Victoria College) in 1989 with a degree in English. After graduation, he worked as an editorial assistant at *WHERE*, a Toronto magazine, writing features and the night-life column. While there, Chilton found time to direct and write most of the script for a U of T production, *The Phantom Cat of the Miserable Opera*, taking the lead role for good measure.

In 1991, he went to Japan, settling in Tokyo and working part-time as an English teacher. The following year, he completed the first drafts of *The Local Brew* and *The Confessions of Ten Doh*, a novel about a young Canadian who becomes the leader of a Japanese religious sect. In the meantime, he took a position at a private

high school affiliated to Chuo University. In 1994, Chilton married Miho Suzuki, a native of Yamanashi Prefecture, in a traditional Japanese wedding ceremony. In 1997, he began work on a Master's degree in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, graduating in 1999. His MA thesis concerns the use of Toronto as an imaginative space in the work of such writers as Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Robertson Davies, Austin Clarke and Russell Smith.

Myles and Miho Chilton are still in Tokyo, now with son Nicholas, who was born in the summer of 1998.

