

He was aN eXclamatiOn point

By Greg **Bowers**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *In an email exchange we suggested (just to be cute) that Greg finish the title with an ! He politely declined our suggestion and wrote...*

I thought of ending the title with an exclamation point, but decided against it because it seemed like too much. And after all, I thought, it's a description - not an exclamation.

Bang on. (Serves us right for being cute.) This is good writing. The dialogue and characters are nailed down and we love the whole 'cardboard thing'. As Canucks we can relate to border guard hassles on both sides of the line. Sometimes it's just better to stay home (!) Spacing and format is author's own.

He was an exclamation point

He had an Irish-sounding last name and he wore it like an old sweater. It was part of his identity.

He drank only Guinness. The dark Irish beer was still kind of an unusual choice in the 70s and I think he knew it because, when we went to bars, he'd announce his order in a booming voice, so loud that other drinkers in the room would shoot him the side-eye.

For those of us who knew him, the loud-talking wasn't that big of a deal. He often talked louder than he should've – misreading the moment and making himself the center of attention when most folks just wanted to disappear into the shadows.

He also used profanity frequently. I think he was attracted to the startling aspect of it: How the word "fuck" with its hard-consonant sound didn't carry any real contextual meaning but could be used as an exclamation point for whatever was being said.

It was surprising, and remarkably useful, punctuation. A dog barks. Fuck. A door slams. Fuck. Look at me. Fuck.

He was an exclamation point.

I liked him.

I was more of a question mark. We all have periods in life where we're trying to figure out what we want to be or, maybe more to the point, what we already are. I was deep into one of those periods. I decided it was like going through racks of clothes, trying things on until you find something that's just your size, something that feels right.

That's the story I told myself anyway.

My profanity-spitting friend appeared to have his act down cold and I often found myself feeling strangely jealous. I wanted to be somebody who didn't care what other people thought. Somebody who didn't pay attention to the rules. Somebody who colored outside the lines. Somebody who did what he damn-well pleased.

But of course, I was too timid for that. When I used profanity, it always sounded like I was forcing it. Ketchup on a hot dog, oblivious and clunky.

My friend had a book signed by William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet. It was signed and numbered by Yeats. Go back and underline that. It was signed by William Butler Yeats.

How cool is that? I was a graduate student in Bellingham, Washington studying English and creative writing and, at the time, I couldn't think of anything that could be cooler than a book of poems signed by Yeats.

There was a bar in town where people claimed that the poet Theodore Roethke had written and signed an obscene inscription on the bathroom wall. It was a good story and it fit comfortably into the easy narrative of a poet being a sort of hard-drinking, hard-living free soul.

But I went into that bathroom lots of times. And, although you can't let yourself get caught studying bathroom walls too closely, I never personally found proof that the Roethke story was true.

So, as far as I was concerned, the Yeats book sat solidly in first place. Every time I was in his apartment, I asked to see it. And every time, he would smile, pull it off the shelf and hand it to me like it was nothing.

Of course, it was something.

But this isn't a story about a signed Yeats book.

This is a story about cardboard.

Vancouver, British Columbia was about 55 miles north of Bellingham. You could make it in an hour and change, although depending on the mood of the border guards, it could take much longer.

It was close enough that college students could slip up there on a free day to drink Canadian beer and smoke Cuban cigars. Cuban cigars were available in Canada, even though they were banned in the United States. We didn't know anything about cigars, but that somehow

made them more exciting and attractive. Then, when the fun was over, you could get easily get back to Bellingham later that night.

The only delay was the border and usually that wasn't much of a problem. Most days, the bored-looking guards would smile and wave you through – especially the Canadian guards who seemed totally disinterested in hassling college guys looking to spend some money and have some fun.

“Where you guys headed?”

To Vancouver.

“You going to have a good time?”

That's our plan.

“Well, be careful,” the guard said, waving us through.

The American guards, on the return trip, were not as friendly. They didn't wave you through to the United States easily. Actually, it seemed like they were getting paid by the question.

“Where are you guys headed?”

Back to Bellingham.

“Do you live there?”

We're students.

“So, what took you to Vancouver?”

We spent the afternoon looking at animals in the zoo, then we visited sick kids in the hospital, sir.

OK, maybe that last part would've been too obvious, but you had to step carefully with these guys. Otherwise, they'd tell you to pull over and get out while they searched your vehicle

in the bright fluorescent lights of America. Best-case scenario, you wouldn't be getting back to Bellingham anytime soon.

Pro tips? You needed to have your ID ready. You didn't need a passport, but you needed something. A driver's license would do and maybe a college ID card.

And you couldn't be obviously drunk, at least the driver couldn't be obviously drunk and it was best if nobody in the vehicle was. You also had to ditch the Cuban cigars before you got to the border. It was better if there were no souvenirs from your day trip that might pique their interest and require, if they were in a sour mood, more investigation.

Still, even with all that noise, going to Vancouver for the day was fun and usually worth it. I mean, how many college kids get to actually leave the country for the day?

So, when my friend asked if I wanted to go with him to Vancouver, it was an easy decision. And when he picked me up in his old pickup truck, I swear that I didn't even notice the cardboard.

This is the truth. We were headed to Vancouver to spend the day, tell some jokes and waste some time. And, raise my right hand, I promise that the fact that his pickup's bed was covered, about a foot deep, in broken-down cardboard boxes didn't even register with me.

In my defense, the cardboard actually seemed like it belonged. His truck was big and ugly. Dirty white paint. Rust spots the size of dinner plates. Doors that groaned when you opened them. The radio didn't work. The windows were smeared.

It was not a good-looking truck, but I didn't mind. We were in a good mood. The Canadian border guards were in a good mood too.

We even told them our plan – to have a couple of beers and then head back to Bellingham. Maybe our honesty paid off, or maybe we were just lucky. They waved us through with minimal curiosity and even tossed some good wishes after us.

The day in Vancouver passed uneventfully. Later that night, heading back to Bellingham, we were still in a good mood. But we weren't as lucky this time. The American guard who stepped out to meet us took a long, hard look at the truck. And he had some questions.

“Where'd you guys get the cardboard?”

I looked out the back window at the cardboard, then across the seat at my friend. I didn't have an answer. Did he have an answer? Where'd we get the cardboard?

“We brought it with us,” my friend said.

“What are you planning to do with it?” the guard asked.

“We're taking it back with us.”

“You can't bring that cardboard into the United States.”

Now thinking back, this is the pivot point of the story. This is the exact moment when things started spinning out of control for us.

“Sure, we can,” my friend said. “It's American cardboard.”

What?

American cardboard? We had ourselves a problem. And his poorly-played joke wasn't helping. It *was* a joke, right? I mean, American cardboard?

The guard leaned down and looked at us through the driver's window. Neither of us said anything. I tried real hard not to move. Actually, I tried real hard not to breathe.

“You're going to have to go back,” the guard said, pointing to a turn-around area. “You can't bring that cardboard through here.”

“What do you want us to do with it?”

“I don’t think that’s my problem,” the guard said and pointed again to the turnaround. I could feel trouble.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I whispered.

“That guy’s a fucking asshole,” my friend said in a loud-enough voice that I looked back to see if the guard had caught his exclamation point. An angry three-point turn sent us back into Canada.

We got off the highway and drove through the black British Columbia night, looking for a place where we could dump our cardboard. To put it another way, we had no idea what we were looking for. I looked at the gas gauge.

His first idea was to dump it in a ditch by the side of the road somewhere. I winced. That sounded too much like a lame “Alice’s Restaurant” spin-off to me. A bad idea.

I was able to talk him out of littering and still keep an eye on the rearview mirror, in case the border guards were following us and our illicit cardboard. The night was dark and, happily, clear.

We finally found a place that made more sense, an unguarded garbage bin. He yanked the parking brake hard and, with the engine still running, we both jumped out. The cardboard wasn’t heavy, but there was a lot of it. It took us maybe five minutes to dump it. It seemed like hours.

We headed back to the border. Of course, the guard recognized our truck.

“So, where’s the cardboard, gentlemen?”

For some reason, and you’ll recall that this was one of his special gifts, my friend decided that this was a good moment to be a smart ass.

“We got rid of it,” he said. “You said it was our problem and we solved our problem.”

The guard was not amused. “Get out of the truck.”

We both got out and stood beside the truck while he searched. The cardboard was gone.

We had no more secrets.

Check that. There was one more secret. The guard searched the truck carefully, even got down on one knee and used a flashlight to check underneath. Then he looked under the driver’s seat and came out holding a 10-inch knife.

What?

He held the knife between his index finger and thumb – like he was trying not to disturb any fingerprints that detectives might want to look at later. From where I was, the knife looked old, maybe even a little rusty.

“What’s this?”

I had the same question. What is that?

My friend, continuing to display his remarkable talent for misreading situations, took a dramatic pause.

“It’s a knife,” he said.

What? Of course, it was a knife. Why do you have a knife?

“Why do you have a knife?” the guard asked.

“For cooking,” my friend said. “I’m a cook.”

You’re a cook? Was he a cook? I didn’t know he was a cook. And what kinds of things could you be cooking that would require a 10-inch knife? And why would you keep a rusty 10-inch cooking knife under the seat of your pickup truck?

What?

The guard took us inside and pointed to a metal chair where he wanted me to sit. He took my friend into another room.

Every now and then I could hear voices coming from the other room, but I couldn't make out any of the words. How much trouble we were in? Was I in trouble? Did they see me as some sort of cardboard accomplice? Was my friend controlling his temper? Was he making more smart-ass jokes?

Question marks.

It was early in the morning and the bright light from inside the building pushed hard against the stark darkness outside - like an Edward Hopper painting. There were few cars headed to the United States at this hour. When one of them did pull up, another guard met them and waved them quickly through.

The light reflecting off their windows and side panels made the cars seem shiny and beautiful. The people in the cars seemed beautiful too. Some of them stared at me, wide-eyed, through their spotless windows.

"What do you think he did?" I imagined a beautiful wife asking her handsome husband.

"Drugs," the handsome husband probably answered, then sighed. "That'd be my guess."

"Actually, it was cardboard," I wanted to yell at them.

But that didn't seem to be a good idea and it would've probably bought us even more trouble. So, I sat there, trying my best to project silent innocence. Do you know how hard that is?

When they finally accelerated, pushing their beautiful cars forward into the American night, I felt sad.

Later, the guard finally let us go and we drove back toward the university.

But the air had been sucked out of the day. My friend was steamed. He said he'd been searched. On top of that, the guard confiscated his "cooking" knife and put it in a plastic bag like it was a sandwich that he was saving for later.

It was nearly dawn when we got back to campus. He stopped his truck out in front of my building, turned off the engine, and we sat there for a few minutes – a quiet coda.

The university was dark and still -- except for the sun, which was rising in slow motion over the shadow mountains and punctuating everything that caught and reflected its new golden light.

I told my friend that I was going to go inside and try to get some sleep.

He said that he was going to go the fuck home.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Here's what happens: Most life experiences push past fast, like dark trucks on the highway at night. Whoosh. What was that?

Later, at least with some of them, you go back and spend more thought. Why is it still sitting in your brain all these years later? What does it mean? How, even if it's in a small way, were things different than they were before?

"He was an exclamation point" came from that kind of exercise.

Beyond that, it's just fun to write, to tell the story. Like Dave Kindred, a writer I admire, said: "It's fun to write a sentence that you didn't know you were going to write."

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Greg Bowers taught journalism at the University of Missouri in Columbia, MO and was a reporter/editor in Pennsylvania. His work has appeared in Arts and Letters, Saw Palm, Southeast Review, Missouri Life and Between Coasts. He now lives near York, PA.