

## **The day I became a hero!**

What makes a hero? Such was the topic of conversation with a clever young Korean woman I met at the local library. She had been sitting across from me at a small table leafing with purpose and attention through an impressive pile of books with a particular type of content, either biographies or tales of daring-do, for example Conrad's Lord Jim. Curious as always I coughed discreetly (we were in a library after all) and she looked up. Noticing I was obviously trying to initiate a conversation, she raised a quizzical eyebrow. Hmm, lovely eyes, I thought. Still this was really inquisitiveness at that time and nothing more. I pointed to her stack asking in a low voice, "What are you looking for?" Immediately she responded in an equally subdued voice, "A hero!" Now that definitely piqued my interest and without hesitation I declared. "I know a hero." I further confided, "personally and intimately."

"Really," she smiled, "I'd really like to know about such a person. I have an essay to write for my psychology mid-term paper about personality and character - I chose to write about heroes in history."

"In that case, I'm your man." I didn't know what I was going to come up with but at that moment I thought something had come along to brighten up a dull, rainy Vancouver day. "We can't talk here. How about we have a coffee across the street?" If you know this city there's a coffee shop at each corner of any two crossing streets.

A little bit to my surprise she accepted without demurring, “I was done, so sure, I’ll let you buy me a coffee and entertain me at the same time.”

Now that’s no ordinary bird I thought, maybe she won’t easily fall for just any blather now that I’ve committed to tell her a tale, what can I come up with? Ah, immediately I knew, all I needed to do was conjure up a good set-up.

We crossed the street, carried a couple lattés out to the patio under the protection of an awning and warmed by an overhead electric heater, full blast on. It was cozy to be sure and confident, I started on what would have been a fine exposition of well-documented case histories, to wit: Ulysses, Roland, Robin Hood, Napoleon, the first unknown marathon runner, the Dutch boy with a finger in the dike, Billy Bishop (who? She politely inquired), Charles de Gaulle (my own favourite), Mother Teresa and so many more – laced with psychological insight, detailed facts, leavened with a dash of humour, cleverly designed to show off mastery of that particular subject, as with all others if I’d be pushed to admit.

But quizzical by nature, she kept raising the darnest objections, lucid questioning that I, anyone who knows me will readily vouch that such would never happen, I actually began to sputter, hiccup, hem and haw, in fact perilously come close to speechlessness. I conjured up one last supreme cerebral effort (resulting in a mild contusion of the cortex); waxed about fate and circumstances, about being in the right place at the right time and simply, as Nike keeps reminding to when the decisive moment comes to - just do it!

“No,” here eyes narrowing at me in a manner that I didn’t want to see, she stated flat out, “no, character is most important, not chance or place or time either.”

‘That’s typical Korean martial arts nonsense,’ I retorted not a

little put off, and I've read your fairy tales. The hero is always a Prince with a character beyond reproach but it's just not that simple. At any rate, I'm much older than you are, with a lot of experience. I was, I am, once a journalist, always remain one. Don't argue with me." The last words said I immediately wanted to bite my tongue, severely and painfully.

And yet she'd burst out laughing, "How do you say it in this country? Don't boil your blood."

"You mean don't get your blood in a bubble." I corrected, relishing pointing to her mistake; I was at that moment really small.

"Exactly," she said reasonably, "first you **boil** your blood, then it **bubbles**." Oy, there was no come back to that besides her honest smile, devoid of subterfuge spread a calming oil over storm tossed emotions. And yet, deep within I was drowning in my own incoherence, sucked under by a whirlpool of insipid triteness. I was on a tottering pedestal, out on a dry and slender limb, my 'standing' crumbling as a sand castle besieged by a full-moon tide. Lose face to an Oriental once and your reputation is irretrievably gone, kaput and buried.

Was I the veteran fisherman being reeled in? My mind churning, I prayed for a replay of Archimedes's bolt of genius although a bath was at that moment impractical and just when it seemed not a shred of inspiration was to be found inside a bone-dry cranium – Eureka! A distant voice whispered urgently – if you tell the truth it will come. Wow! Neither did I question from whence nor from whom the strange message came, only an ingrate would quibble in the face of a much needed miracle. I grasped at that bit of flotsam and yes, indeed much as St. Paul got zapped on his way to Damascus, the answer was in the truth, serendipitously I was tossed a ladder to scramble out of the deep hole I'd dug for myself.

And it became so simple, with just the right tone of self-

effacing modesty, I recounted a true tale, one hitherto never divulged, either to friend or foe, the story of how I became a hero for a day. Now composed and sure of my ground I spun my saga.

I'd just finished my first year of high school when I was lucky enough to find a summer job. It wasn't your typical student four-bit Joe-job, heck no, but almost beyond my most extravagant imagination. It was thanks to Andy, a family cousin on my father's side, who worked for a medium-sized manufacture of conveyor belts, the kind destined for an assembly line in some other factory. Soon after I started, the owner showed up to announce a new contract had been signed and to the relief of all employees steady work at least into the next year. (Many a candle to numbers of saints above must have been promised secretly as the firm had been just barely surviving from month to month.) The news were indeed so good the boss, a big Irishman had felt the urge to come down to the factory floor with the great morale booster. The contract was to build the complete moving works for a new plant being built by a multi-national canned food processor. Incidentally, I feel secure in divulging all as I've only recently learned that Rapistan didn't survive much past that one big break. Although I do feel slightly profane even thinking it, maybe it was after all a waste of a lot of candles – too bad for the workers.

By almost anyone's standards, Andy was a peculiar sort of fellow, yet most definitely a special employee. His job description although not stated on paper, was simply to fix whatever didn't work. No kidding! He puttered around, kibitzed co-workers, chain-smoked and mostly just waited for something to go kaboom-boink!!! And that happened most of the time.

"Andy!? Where the fuc\*&\* ^%& (censored) are you? That fuc\*&^&^ thing's busted." At any moment the strident, profanities punctuated call went up and down the factory floor.

"Go-dah-ell!" Came the ready response from somewhere

under a piece of equipment he was then patching up. My cousin was a bona fide mechanical genius, self-taught, who could repair anything with a bolt and a nut here, a bracket there, a length of wire or maybe a couple blows with a sledge hammer, his efforts seasoned by the most fearful litany of expletives in at least four languages. He was prodigiously adept at it; Andy's all-purpose English commentary to everything was alternatively 'go-dah-ell' or 'sa-na-ma-beech!' He didn't spare the plant Superintendent, co-workers, friends or foe. Although it must be pointed out, he took it easy on me most of the time; perhaps because of my tender age or that he felt a special responsibility as he'd gotten me the job in the first place.

My work was rather routine although at times arduous, but I was thrilled working a forty-hour week amongst men and paid an undreamed of dollar an hour. To put that in perspective, my father was making just a few cents more slaving on the night shift of a down-at-the-heels barely viable foundry. I was hired because of Andy's lofty standing, prickly personality notwithstanding, with management. When he introduced me, he insisted, "He work like a man – pay him like a man." That was done without a quibble; to them he was worth his weight in gold but paid for in nickels and dimes and a lot of bemused acceptance of his quirks and foibles. When the chief-engineer, a head-scratching Scotsman and the head tool and die maker, a permanently vexed-looking German, couldn't collectively fathom something gone awry, 'Andy the Terrible' was grudgingly called in the office for a consultation. Through the glass partition of the Superintendent's office, not a little proud, I'd surreptitiously watch my cousin jabbing a grease-stained finger at the blueprint sheets spread out on the desk, and 'go-da-ells' and 'f... en dis and dat' crashing thick and lusty clear through the racket and din of metal sheets and pipes banging and clanking.

In time he'd stomp out with one last clarion 'go-da-ell' and swagger back to the factory floor boring the right index finger to his head in derision. "Dem educated guys don't know *shisen*." His co-workers would smile knowingly, wink and nod; they knew his

value. Later, he'd take a gander at whatever was being fixed or adjusted according to his instructions and he'd crow louder than a morning cock. "I told ya. Go-da-ell!" Yes sir, Andy was a prince of cool detachment.

My particular job was cutting lengths either of iron pipes, metal plates or 'cold' or 'hot' roll solid steel rods or bars to very stringent standards; the minute measuring the only somewhat tricky part of my day. I used either a heavy duty band-saw or another piece of equipment I can only describe as having a large circular disk of hard compound material that whirred at thousands of rpm's; the friction on metal melted rather than cut through the pipes. It was my favourite occupation as voluminous jets of sparks and molten bits of metal flared in flashing tongues three or four metres about my head. Moreover, I had to wear a welder's mask for protection a fact that made me feel, well, rather a tough guy doing a dangerous task with cool professionalism. (Don't scoff; I was only fourteen at the time.)

After a few days, the novelty over, that heavy mask proved too bothersome; it got very hot underneath and sweat pouring down would sting my eyes. Against strict regulations I'd taken to wearing only safety goggles and for once caught a fearsome dose of Andy's wrath. He'd snuck up behind and blasted in my ear; "Sa-na-ma-beech!!!"

I jumped clear out of my skin!

"What da ell ya doin'?" He tore the goggles off my face and slammed the welder's mask on my noggin, and none too gently. "Wear da f...en ting. Whatsamatta wit you? You wanna go blind? What your mother gonna say to me? *Dourak!*"

Ten minutes later the fearsome Cossack handed me a coke and a playful punch in the arm that numbed it for the rest of the day, just so I knew he'd not been angry for real. Need I tell you that

henceforth I took to wearing the darn thing without fail?

The smell was acrid and the smoke none too pleasing but it seemed man's work and that's what mattered. I also had to learn how to read specifications on blueprints adding to my sense of self-importance. First thing in the morning, the foreman would bring a list and detail what needed to be done in order of priority and that was basically the last supervision I had all day. My private domain was set in an enclave at the very far end of the factory floor because it was nearest a rear exit and the bay doors were kept partially open most of the time, particularly when I was cutting lengths of hot roll pipe, to suck out the foul smelling black smoke. None of the stringent clean air rules that today are thankfully part of factory procedures were in vogue then and ventilation was achieved mostly by the expediency of open windows and doors, summer and winter.

On a Friday evening, proud as D'Artagnan, I came home with my first pay packet. I remember the contents exactly, three ten dollar bills, one five and five ones – cash! No income tax or deductions to lighten the take-home as I was not expected to fork over as a temporary summer employee. Great, eh? Mother accepted with great dignity, pulled out the five dollar bill and handed it back. "You've earned it. Don't spend it foolishly."

That's as much as I'd ever had to spend and felt a teenage Croesus. In those days on a Saturday night you could take in a full length feature, treat yourself to a hefty box of buttered popcorn, a large pop and a frozen Eskimo or perhaps a chocolate bar. You might have taken along a young damsel if you were lucky enough to have a pretty girlfriend, (not that I was so lucky) so you could hold hands in the dark, and still have a nickel or two left. You get the idea. I don't recall how I spent the money except, yes, except for one item – my first pack of cigarettes. What devil pushed me to it? I guess it had something to do with doing a man's job and, as I saw it, having the privileges of one to go along with it.

My new found independence was problematic. Where to enjoy the forbidden smoke without being found out. And at the same time I wanted to feel and act like the man I'd become, or so went my theory. It turned out to be quite simple. Just outside of my work station, the metal doors I kept cracked open for fresh air faced one of Toronto's major railway corridors. I could just step out on the loading dock running parallel to the back of the building where large orders of steel material were shipped in via a short rail spur. It happened but once that entire summer but it was a big deal for all of the employees who'd turned out to take at least a few moments look. It was satisfying and somewhat comforting to know so much material had been purchased and therefore work was guaranteed for at least a few months more.

For my part, I surveyed the unloading of pipes of varying calibre and lengths as well as steel plates of different thickness and weight with a proprietary feel as after all it was there for me to eventually cut down to size. (I wonder is it worth mentioning I insisted on lending a hand although I wasn't expected to do so and in overexerting myself managed to tear a small muscle behind the right shoulder blade? For years afterwards certain mouvements, the swing of a baseball bat for example, would elicit a sharp reminder; a stab of pain, akin to a needle jabbed deep in my back but thankfully brief. No, I didn't tell anyone about it. I'd like to claim I was being stoically Spartan but in reality I was afraid of being too weak physically for the job and shamefully dismissed. How stupid could I be?)

A couple metal benches rusted from boredom on the dock and astride one I sat munching on Mom's lovingly prepared sandwiches or when during breaks I'd sip on a cold 'Orange Crush', my favourite beverage at the time, dug out ice cold from the pop cooler. I well remember the distinctively shaped ember coloured bottle; the contents that today I'd snub were overly sweet and fizzy but back then it tasted like a vintage '*Chateau Margaux*' rolling down a dusty throat. Moreover, it was always fun to watch the merchandise trains

chugging up and down the track and hoping to reach beyond one hundred and one wagons, my all time record count, excluding the engines and caboose. Yes, these were the times when a ‘caboose’ at the back of every train was still a golden rule that no one ever thought would eventually be abrogated.

Except on a rainy day I was the only one inclined to make use of my grimy patio. Most of the men gathered in a cramped lunch room where they shot the breeze, traded lascivious jokes, played cards or hustled to the local tavern to suck down a draft or two. I'll confess to being a little shy in their sometimes ribald company and thus I'd soon head out to the back where I wasn't likely to be disturbed and when I'd light up a smoke. In those innocent days I didn't inhale because I feared the inevitable fits of coughing would tell the tale and besides it wasn't all that enjoyable an exercise in the first place. Further, I had the idea if I inhaled the smell was sure to linger and Mother was bound to sniff me out when I gave her the obligatory kiss on the cheek when coming home from work. In the event Andy might make another courtesy call to my slumy hideaway, I could see him coming. He'd done that but once but luckily I'd spotted him in time, jettisoned the fag while madly fanning and blowing at the lingering cloud of smoke – henceforth, I made sure to take a position where I had a good view of the interior through the crack in the door jamb.

On a particularly hot day, I was sucking on one last drag on my cigarette when a flight of sparrows alit on the chain link fence surrounding the loading dock. I snapped the butt in their direction and watched them scatter; all in all a meaningless act, done unthinkingly and without malice. The whistle that called us to our work stations, at one o'clock sharp, dragged me back to my routine.

That day was particularly easy. I was cutting a dozen slices from a rod five inches in diameter to the thickness of a hockey puck. Cold roll steel of that size took about twenty minutes, perhaps more, for the band-saw to cut clear through. My only concern was to

make sure it was calibrated on the machine and tightly clamped to within a hair's breadth tolerance. I used a set of callipers for the task and made doubly sure every time before letting the teeth bite into the steel. Once, I'd miscalculated, perhaps by not more than 1/64 of an inch. The error had been caught by the German tool and die maker who'd come to pick up the first piece as he needed it in a hurry. Thankfully, I'd erred on the side of too much and he was able to grind it down to where he needed it to be. He was very good about it and didn't make a fuss. "*Ach so... das ist nicht gut Teknik...* must be perr-fectt, ya?" Grateful for his leniency, I made sure never to make another mistake.

The very same man left for Philadelphia before summer was over receiving heartfelt congratulations from envious countrymen, immigrant co-workers also awaiting the blessed say when they were granted a most precious Canadian citizenship. Hang on, here's the supreme, delicious irony! Canadian citizenship was their ticket to their heart's true destination – the mighty U.S. of A. The Americans, good sports that they were, had decided the losers of World War II had to pay a kind of penalty, as it were. They were denied landed immigrant status in the Home of the Brave unless first renouncing their German origins, or unless, that is, you happened to be a rocket scientist. I suppose they considered five years (before Canadian citizenship was devalued to a mere three year's wait,) a sufficient time spent in a snow-bound purgatory to expiate the Wermacht's debacle at Stalingrad. Canadian status was not a total waste either; just in case you got very sick south of the border, why, a quick trip to a Canadian hospital took care of your health and wallet at the same time. What an easy mark of a country, eh?

At any rate, there I was sitting, vacuously watching the saw imperceptibly nibble through the steel hard metal. Now and then I'd get up and do a couple knee bends just to limber up and keep my eyes open. Once before, I'd fallen asleep on my stool, my chin propped up on my hands, elbows on the metal work bench. The razor sharp teeth were mere seconds from slicing through a six-inch

piece and I would have had a very painful wake-up call but as it was I'd gotten a dose of Andy's own special good morning – ‘**sa-na-ma-beech!** And a good shaking up by the shoulders. (Come to think of it, my father's relative was rather like a bad-tempered Guardian Angel and I ought to send him a note of thanks, belated as it might be.) On that fateful day, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes had gone by after lunch, when I had a whiff of an unusual odour, not from inside the factory floor but somehow working its way in from outside. It was strong enough to be noticeable even in a plant redolent with oils, grease and molten metals. Suspicious, I took a step towards the back in time to see a thick black cloud curling past the partially ajar back door. Curious too, I stuck my head out and gasped! Already ten foot high flames were shooting out from between several of the dock's creosote treated wooden planks – but, most ominously thickest where I'd chucked my cigarette butt. Instantly, I recognised the identity of the arsonist and my goose was stuffed and cooked.

Along with the first-aid station, I'd been shown how to handle a fire extinguisher the very first day on the job when Andy had been showing me the ropes. There was one in my work station and my heart in my mouth, not knowing exactly what I was doing, I managed to partially carry but mostly drag the heavy cylinder to the fire that was rapidly gaining alarming proportions. Simultaneously I was yelling at the top of my voice; “**Fire – Help – Fire – Help!!!**”

Truthfully, I don't rightly know how I managed to break the extinguisher's seal or turn on the hose in the right direction but indeed that's what I did. By the time the other men rushed out with more extinguishers I'd already used up my container but had put a slight damper on the incipient disaster. With several extinguishers the men completed the job in five minutes at most, and soon nothing remained of it but a dirty, oily smell and a very slick and foamy dock.

Trembling with fright, I was sure to be fired on the spot and

how was I to explain that at home? The Superintendent spotted me and took three purposeful strides in my direction. “Jesus, Maria, Joseph! Help me,” I mumbled deep within my Roman Catholic heart. He administered a big slap on my back. That’s it. He’s going to beat the hell out of me first and then fire me, I desperately thought.

“Quick thinking, son. You saved the deck and maybe the whole damn building too by reacting so quickly. That was just fine.” My face red with mortification was mistaken for the heat of the action and black rivulets of sweat ran down my cheeks. “You sure look beat. Go wash your face, change your clothes and go home.”

He misinterpreted the incomprehension on my face and laughed, “Don’t worry. Take the rest of the day off to rest up. You’ll be paid for the entire day, and maybe a little bonus if the big man okays it. Okay? Now go.”

One by one the men drifted over to pat me on the back. ‘Way to go, kid!’ or ‘Atta boy, you were pretty fast on the draw’. One of the older men solemnly shook my hand. Quite seriously he stated, “Sonny, you might have saved our jobs today. There’s so much junk, old newspapers, oily rags underneath not to mention the grease on those wooden planks, another minute or two and it might have been too late to do anything but wait for the firemen. You’re a hero!”

“That’s right. You’re a hero!” came as a chorus from the other dozen or more men still milling around taking advantage for an unscheduled cigarette. I was momentarily dumbfounded but self-preservation is a potent pill and soon an inchoate hope that maybe there had been an incredibly fortuitous twist to this incident. The thought made me blush with shame, something the men took for modesty.

“Sa-na-ma-beech – go-da-ell!” Blam! Another slam between my shoulder blades sent me lurching five feet forward. “That’s my family, you’re guys. We’re all real men. Right, Johnny?”

Oh sure. Most co-workers straggled back to work giving me a last pat or a friendly wink and some accompanied me to the change room to wash up the grime off their own faces. Well, finally, as I had been afraid, one of them finally began to wonder out loud how the fire had started in the first place. That’s right. No one till then had actually questioned the mysterious mishap but now everyone had his own opinion. “Simultaneous combustion,” one suggested and it seemed to grab a lot of initial approval. Oh, yes, please, I prayed, let it be whatever that was supposed to be. I’d not yet learned about it in chemistry class, that was to come a year later.

“You’re the one who discovered it. What do you think?” The old man who had first stuck the wreath of laurels on my undeserving brow wanted to know.

“Jeez... huh... I dunno.” Ominous silence followed while everyone digested that lack of information and still trying out their own theory. Somebody was bound to put one and one together, me and my habit of lunching out on that platform, and come up with two... me, that is. I couldn’t stand it and blurted out: “I think it might have been those kids.” So help me, at that time I didn’t really know why I’d said it but now I’d gotten everyone’s attention.

“What kids?” they asked in unison.

I had to think fast, or rather, spin a believable tale. “Well, when I was eating lunch at the back I noticed there were these three teenagers. They were coming along the tracks. You know, goofing off. Throwing stones and breaking windows in the abandoned building across the tracks. They were all smoking too... they started walking this way... I mean towards me but the whistle blew and I went in ... maybe they didn’t like that I saw them breaking

windows... I dunno... maybe..."

"Sure. That's it. The little beggars probably set the place on fire for a lark. I wonder if we can catch them. Maybe they're still out there having a good laugh. Could you recognize them?"

Oh my gosh! What had I done? Sure there'd been three innocent little kids out there, doing what all little kids like to do along a railroad track, doing a balancing act on the rails. You've done it too, remember? Eyes closed. light on your feet while pretending to toe-walk a tightrope across Niagara Falls. (For me, it was a rope stretched from the Eiffel Tower clear across the Seine ending up on top of the Arc of Triumph, where naturally I was crowned the king of all tight-rope walkers, ceremoniously kissed on both cheeks by the President of France and kissed on the mouth by Miss France still wearing a skimpy bikini. That last detail was important.) Not one of the lads could have been more than eight years old and I was perfidiously fingering them. What if they were still there? What then? Maybe they saw me fling my cigarette at the sparrows.

"No – no! I remember now. When I came out with the extinguisher, I kinda saw them out the corner of my eyes. They were running away on the other side of the tracks. They went through a hole in the fence." That last detail, the hole in the fence was sheer fantasy on my part but there's always a breach in a fence especially in a run-down industrial area.

"Yeah, sure. They're long gone. Lucky for them." All agreed it the most likely scenario. These blessed words gave me back my life. "Well kid, wash up and go home like the boss said. Tell your Mama you was a hero today."

Another invitation I didn't need – I cut and ran out faster than a jackrabbit flees a Tasmanian devil. And sure I told Mom, and my father and my sisters and anyone who came along my version of

how I saved a hundred men's jobs that very day by being a hero. In the next few days I repeated that story enough times that I began to almost believe my own version of events. Sure, deep down I knew the truth but I did react the right way, I did get the fire extinguisher, I did start the process of dousing the fire and kept it from getting out of hand. Yes sir, whatever reason for the fire starting didn't change the facts of the aftermaths. I did strain myself with that damn heavy thing and I did swallow enough smoke to choke a horse for a week. Had I not been on the '*qui vive*' and not poked my nose out the back door probably a hundred men would have lost their jobs. Oh, my goodness, how easily I could conjure up all the right reasons later on to annul the wrong deed in the first instance. There was one real beneficial side-bar to this incident. It was the last cigarette I had for the next four years. Why I started again, that's another story and certainly not worth your while reading about.

Now that you've discovered how I came to be a hero for a day, you too know for a fact that character has nothing to do with heroic deeds. It's exactly as I said, being at the right place at the right time and doing the right deed is all it takes. Huh, especially when you give fate a little nudge with a big fat lie.

Ara, that was her name, had listened in what I had taken to be rapt attention but her words said otherwise, "I'm not sure about my essay now. You surely have cast doubt on my theory that it takes an outstanding, moral and brave man or woman to become a hero. Maybe," she paused, "perhaps, you're the living proof no such attributes are a necessary requirement." She got up to leave and again her smile mitigated the last skewering, "I wouldn't repeat that story too often if I were you, people might not come to the same conclusions as you did."

That was it but it did in that particular instance promptly devalue me from self-proclaimed hero to a lovely woman's zero rating. She walked out of my life and I trudged home oblivious to

the rain coming down hard on my bare head. And if you know what a Gallic shrug looks like, imagine it and you might also hear me muttering, "Bah! C'est la vie!"

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