

## The Way We Do Things Around Here

~ 1 ~

Try as he might, Father “Black Donald” MacDonald, Donny to those who knew him well, kept losing his focus. His tired gaze would drift around the big room of the village hall and he’d think of how many times he had been here in his life for one community event or another. Just now he was staring at the deep luster of the wide-planked hemlock floors that he and some of the other men had installed after the big storm ten years ago had blown out the windows and ruined the original flooring. It had taken them several days of careful carpentry, with many pauses to tell stories and jokes, at times laughing so hard they had to put the tools down for fear of injury. Tonight he had sat through two whole hours of the public meeting and had listened as carefully as if he had been in the confessional to everything being said on the issue. The company’s position had been set out by its representative, a Mr. Burns, in his very first statement when the meeting began.

“Telfon Natural Resources fully understands your way of life in this community,” intoned the representative, the only one in the room wearing a suit, and an expensive one at that. “Our report proves that we can find a completely safe and effective way to bring our pipeline through this area without the slightest damage to the fishing grounds.”

One by one, a score of community members – fishermen, shopkeepers, housewives, farmers, the teacher, the public health nurse – had all stood up and voiced their concerns, challenging the company’s study of the environmental and economic impacts the project would have. Not one of them was anything but polite and all of them had their facts down cold. They knew what they were talking about and the explanations that the company representative had put forth just didn’t add up. Losing their patience, people were starting to shift about in their seats. The man simply refused to acknowledge the truth of what they were telling him.

Finally, after checking his gold and platinum, wafer-thin wrist watch for the third time, he said, “Yes, well, there may be *some* disruption. *But...* it will be minimal and temporary, guaranteed. It’s a very small price to pay because, don’t forget, we are bringing jobs to your community – jobs that your young people desperately need. The

fishery, after all – and you know this better than I – is dying. This community could die! Do you really have any choice but to say yes to this plan?”

With that, Black Donald, a large man somewhat stooped by the weight of his years, struggled to his feet and waited until all 201 pairs of eyes fell upon him. Mr. Burns relaxed back in his chair, crossed one nicely tailored pant-leg upon the other, and smiling warmly, respectfully inclined his elegant head, which had recently been barbered for \$125 in an exclusive salon near his offices in Toronto. He had excellent public relations technique and he read the audience like a book. With the most attentive attitude his training could muster, Burns would welcome – indeed, encourage – the aged cleric’s views and take it all to heart.

The noise in the huge, high-ceilinged meeting room, which a moment ago had been explosive, ebbed away and a deep quiet took its place, church-like almost. Some of the men and women, who the priest had known all their lives, had big grins on their upturned faces, having some idea of what was coming.

He began to speak, using the voice he knew could be heard throughout the large hall, “My sister Kate, who’s not here tonight, the only one of us who couldn’t come, I figure, told me just before I left the rectory, ‘Donny, I’d better not hear that you went to that meeting, wearing your priest’s collar, and swearing like a Fenian. I won’t have it.’” Black Donald waited a beat and then with one hand reached up behind his neck, unfastened a button and removed the white collar. The grins in the room got wider.

“What you just said, sirrah, is the worst bullshit I’ve heard in a long time,” said the good Father. Mr. Burns’ smile slipped a bit, and there was a subtle change in the coloring of his handsome face. These small reactions were duly noted by all of those who weren’t closely watching the priest and who, instead, had their gaze fixed on the company man. Some folk tried to study both men, their heads swinging back and forth, but this was hard work, not easy on the neck. It was far better to just choose one or the other because, either way, it was going to be a good show and any seat in the house was front-row.

“I’ll be damned,” here Donny made the sign of the cross, while all the Catholics in the audience followed his lead. This caused a wave-like motion that caught the corner of Burns’ eye, jiggling his rapt attention just a tad. “I’ll be *God*-damned,” now all the Protestants joined in, enlarging the wave, “if I’ll sit here one minute longer and listen to

any more of these bald-faced lies. You haven't heard one word any of us said. This pipeline will be a disaster for this community and by the lord dyin' Jesus, I mean to put an end to it."

Those watching Mr. Burns now perceived a dramatic change in appearance. His smile gave way to a slack-jawed, open-mouthed amazement. As one keen observer said to another, that being old Mrs. Fitzgibbons to an even older Mrs. McKillip, who leaned closer to hear, "I believe that young man may have just swallowed his tongue. What do you think, Ethel?"

"He just swallowed something, that's for sure," replied Mrs. McKillip. She was a tiny, thin old bird who looked like a sack of dry sticks in her heavy gray overcoat. Most of the folks wore summer go-to-meeting clothes and, even so, were fanning themselves with copies of the company report. The heat in the hall was considerable despite the tall windows being wide open to the cool June evening. Mrs. McKillip, on the other hand, felt just right.

Now Sonny Dan MacPherson jumped to *his* feet and bellowed out, "That's right! You've got a lot of goddamned nerve coming here and telling us what's good for us. How the hell do you know anything about the way we live? We've had your kind here before and we've sent them packin,' let me tell ya."

"And another thing," shouted Miss Kenney, the teacher, from where she sat. "If our community is dyin', it's people like youse who have caused all the trouble."

This got another side-comment from Mrs. Fitzgibbons, "Isn't it nice, Ethel, to hear the women speak out in public?"

"Yes, dear," replied Mrs. McKillip, "and being able to speak so well, besides."

"Well, she is a teacher after all," sniffed her companion, as if she should have said as much herself.

All heads turned to where Red Donald MacAllister had stood up. Well... people assumed he was standing. Red Donald was awfully short, so sitting on his chair or standing in front of it amounted to the same thing, more or less. But a man always stood when he meant to say something in a public audience and folks just expected Red Donald to do

the right thing.

“I’d just like to say and I think I can speak for everyone here,” says he, looking around, “that you can take that report and stuff it up yer arse.”

A round of “Hear, hear!” indicated that Red Donald had indeed caught the general sentiment and had expressed it rather neatly.

“He’s fit to bust,” said old Mrs. McKillip, nodding toward Mr. Burns, upon whom she had kept a steady watch. She wasn’t able to see MacAllister anyways and what she couldn’t see, she couldn’t hear.

Now Mrs. Fitzgibbons looked toward the dais as well and, sure enough, Burns, red-faced and wild-eyed, was now on his feet and shaking his finger at the audience. Or, was his whole body shaking, and it was his finger that didn’t move? Hard to say, thought Mrs. Fitzgibbons, so she leaned forward in her seat.

“Let me tell *you!*” shouted Mr. Burns, all his P.R. training gone in an instant. “*We will* have our way, the pipeline *will* be built. Our company and the government have a deal and, by god, hell or high water won’t stop it now. So you can either like it, or lump it. And as for me, I’ve had just about enough of this shit. I’m leavin.”

“Tsk, there he goes,” said Mrs. Fitzgibbons, as Burns stuffed his papers into his briefcase and started to leave. If he noticed the sudden quiet that had fallen on the hall, he probably thought that they were all shocked into speechlessness at hearing the god-awful truth.

I should have set them straight an hour ago, he thought to himself, instead of sitting there like a dummy while they heaped all that homespun horseshit on my head. He had no intention of saying another word. He would just march from the hall and head straight to his rental Lexus, unlocking the doors and starting the engine with the remote halfway across the parking lot. He would do a few backstretches to get the kinks out and then slide in behind the wheel. With the air conditioning starting to hum and a CD of Chet Baker’s earlier jazz - definitely his best era - playing in surround sound, Burns would immediately start to feel fine. A two-hour drive to the Sydney airport, a two-hour flight to Toronto, and the sour taste of this public *dialogue* would be gone from his memory. He hadn’t failed, he would tell the CEO, those people were too goddamned

stupid to understand a good thing when it hit them in the face. No problem. The well-oiled machinery of a big corporation doing its business with government would just clear all opposition from its path. The pipeline would go through all right. Nothing would slow it down now.

Burns, his mind already back in Toronto, stopped short, somewhat in puzzlement, as it occurred to him that he wasn't getting anywhere. He was only partway down the centre aisle that led to the hall's entrance with its wide double-doors. Like the windows, they were open and he could see his parked Lexus, its polished surface gleaming in the rising light of the full moon.

He slowly realized that his path was completely blocked by people, all standing quietly in front of him - and to the sides and behind as well. In fact, the whole audience was on its feet. Men and women, young and old, some fairly rugged-looking from the kind of work they did each day, some with softer hands and bodies, but everyone trying to look their best for the meeting.

Staring into their faces Burns couldn't understand what they wanted. Glancing around, he observed one old lady give him a wink and a smile. Her tiny companion, wrapped up in some kind of horse blanket, blew him a kiss.

"What..." he began, but couldn't quite articulate what he meant to say. He hardly noticed when Dickie Collins closed the doors, and then leaned against them with his big arms folded upon his chest.

As the crowd moved forward, Father Black Donald was right there in the thick of it, his collar back on, and a purple linen stole about his shoulders.

"Don't push now, Bert. It's not worth doin, if it's not done well at all."

"Sorry, Father."

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After the meeting was over, Black Donald stood on the front steps and said goodnight to each and every one. It was a bit of a long process – two hundred people, after all – but

they didn't mind. From long practice he was able to keep a brisk and steady pace. Whether Catholic or Protestant, they all treated the old priest as a spiritual guide in these matters and it was important to follow the rituals.

"Now, Lachlan, when will we see you next?"

"Angus, how's your brother doin'?"

"John Allan," the priest stood eye-to-eye with a big fisherman. "Can I ask you to help Mr. Burns get back to Toronto?"

"Be glad to, Donny. I've just the thing." John Allan fished lobster and was a jack-of-all-trades.

The line-up in the hall was getting shorter as the parking lot got busy with cars backing up, trucks revving their V-8 engines, a few ATV's heading for the back fields and pitch-black woods. Here and there, an up-tipped bottle caught a glint of moonlight. There was much laughter as the good mood radiated outward.

"That was a lovely sermon, Father," said Mrs. Fitzgibbons, momentarily confused and thinking she was leaving church and not a public meeting.

"Thank you, dear."

"And Mrs. McKillip. By god, you look just beautiful this evening. Good thing I'm a priest, or I'd be after you."

"Go away with you, Donny, you big liar." The old lady leaned forward and stood on tiptoe, which raised her about a half-inch. Black Donald had to lean way over to hear her whisper.

"I put a bit of lace in, just to make it look nice."

"That's good, Missus. It's the small touches that count the most."

"Thanks to youse fellows." This was said to the group of volunteer firefighters who had stayed behind to clean up, putting away the chairs, and closing all the windows. It felt

like rain and they didn't take chances with the "new" floor.

"All right, good night Father."

"Good night, good night, good people."

Dickie closed the front doors, leaving them - as always - unlocked. Burns' car, as far as Donny knew, was probably the first lock that had ever been set in this community and, hopefully, the last.

"Good night then, Donny."

"Same to you, Dickie. Thanks."

After the last citizen had gone his way, the priest watched as John Allan swung the Lexus out of the empty parking lot. There was Mr. Burns in the front passenger seat. Well, he thought to himself, good riddance!

The long walk back to the rectory took him through the village and along the coast road where the houses became more scattered, then ceased altogether. It was a lovely night and the moon was high. The surface of the ocean was silver bright and lightly wrinkled with waves. They broke softly on the shore and their rhythm gradually tamed the erratic beat of his heart.

Stopping in the middle of the road he suddenly felt the weight of years and responsibility deep in his bones. So he got down on his knees, and then rolled over upon his back, facing up. Folding his hands under his head, he wiggled about a bit until his large frame came to terms with the uneven surface. He then looked up into a heaven chock-full of stars and that quite simply took his breath away. After a few moments he turned his head to the side and watched a whale breaching far out in the bay, then another. Somewhere a loon warbled its weird call.

Lying on the road was a remedy. In his early years, when his personal devils had tried to rout his faith, he had often fallen there in drunkenness. The villagers had learned to drive this section of the road with some care, pulling alongside to ask, "Ya awright, Donny?" Then, a brief wave of the hand or a loud fart would give enough reassurance so they could carry on. These days, it was simply weariness that put him down and he'd

say, “It gives me perspective and does something wonderful for the cricks in my aging arse.”

Tonight, when he felt the peace enter his heart again, he got to his feet and continued on his way.

The front light of the rectory was on and stepping onto the porch he could see the kitchen all lit up through the etched and frosted glass of the oak front door. Kate must be home again, sighed Donny. Well, I’ll just have to tell her the truth, he told himself. I’ll admit that we weren’t able to convince the fellow of anything a’tall. But in the end, I believe we sent the company a strong message.

And with that, Donny stepped inside, unconsciously reaching up and unfastening his collar.

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Mr. Edwin Pendergast, Chief Executive Officer of Telfon, missed his putt. How strange, he thought, I don’t do that. But there it was. His Dunvegan Hard Heart 80 – the finest ball made - was off to the side of the ramped-up metal cup by a good 5 centimetres. Hmmm.

Looking around somewhat suspiciously for the distraction, he could find no likely offender. His office, the whole southwest corner of the most prestigious edifice in downtown Toronto, looked directly from its 27th floor over Lake Ontario. Nothing in the large windows could have caught his attention.

The office itself was absolutely quiet, thanks to heavy-duty acoustical tiles and extra sound baffling. Odd, it couldn’t have been an errant noise.

Mr. Pendergast had his jacket off and was actually barefoot. With the titanium graphite-cored putter – the Whipper - twirling in his hand, he strolled over the luxurious expanse of his carpet, a burnt plum tone with a dapple of jet throughout, which felt most wonderful on the skin. The Chief Executive Officer, need it be said, could go shoeless any time he felt like it.



Pendergast set aside the golf club and poured himself a wee dram of Black Bush from a hand-cut crystal decanter. Settling into a very comfy leather recliner, he used the remote to “awaken” the micro-rainforest, a huge ferny alcove that occupied one whole wall of the office suite. This was a complex and living system of waterfalls, earthwork formations, mist-generators, tropical flora, and deeply recessed lighting, accompanied by recordings of early morning on an Amazon tributary. The designer had assured Pendergast that the whole set-up was an uncanny reproduction of the real thing – that is, what it had looked and sounded like just before Telfon’s heavy equipment stripped it all away.

Although Pendergast liked the flicker of bright-colored fish in the sunken rock pools, the actual sound of trickling water pulled the wrong way across his sensitive nerves. All this mood stuff was for the clients, a way to ease into the most conspiratorial conversation.

His glance wandered to the gray expanse on the other side of the office. This was a rough-hewn and somewhat looming stonewall that had been constructed by mustachioed French masons brought over from Brittany. At its mid-point was a perfect circle, arched with stone voussoirs from floor to ceiling, of brilliant stained-glass – an exact replica, although half-sized, of the rose window in the south transept of the Chartres cathedral. Even this magnificent diffusion of colour – reds, gold, evergreen, and deepest blue – barely stimulated his interest any more. Still, he thought, it never failed to distract certain clients as he covertly studied their intellectual defenses.

With a sigh he finished his drink, put the remote in amongst the ferns where he would not be able to find it again. What were underlings for, after all?

Walking briskly over to his desk he punched a button on the control panel and said, “Miss Higgins, did you ring me?”

“No, sir, not at all.”

“Well, was there anything?”

“A parcel did arrive for you by courier about 15 minutes ago from Mr. Burns. But that’s it so far.”

“I see. Isn’t he back yet?”

“Not as far as I know, but he should be soon.”

“Hmphh. Well, what has Burns sent along?”

“A box of cooked lobsters. You know those freight packages the airlines use to keep them fresh? I haven’t opened it, shall I bring it in?”

Lobsters, eh? Ah, Burns, you are a talented boot-licker.

“Please do that. And, Miss Higgins?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Find some butter, would you?”

Moments later a cardboard box, printed on the sides with bright red lobsters and big enough to hold at least a dozen of the creatures, was sitting on Pendergast’s desk. Its lively lettering proclaimed, “Lobsters from the Beautiful Shores of Nova Scotia.”

Beautiful and profitable, thought Pendergast as he opened the tabs of the carton. Immediately inside the box, he discovered a spongy pad of iced coolant and several layers of heavy, clear plastic. He could vaguely see some of the red shell and hastened to unclosethe wrapping.

When the package was fully open, it took Pendergast several moments to realize that he was nose-to-nose with Burns. Or, to be more exact, Burns’ elegant head. It was nestled in wads of the company’s report. A bright red lobster had been placed just under the chin. Festooned with lace, it looked very much like a bowtie. Someone had done a lovely job of combing his hair and... here Pendergast had to lean a bit closer to make sure, but wasn’t that a lipstick kiss imprinted on the right cheek?

His mind, coming unhinged from its usual self-willed constraints, opened to a flood of images, scenes from his earlier life-story that he preferred not to revisit. One in particular had been completely absent from his memory for some time. He was about seven years old and his family had gone to their cottage for summer vacation. The young

Pendergast, Eddy, was dangling his feet over the dock where their boats were tied, when he noticed a frog sitting on a ledge of stone by the shore. Instead of trying to catch the frog as most boys might have done, giving it a name to bond their relationship, and keeping it in an open cardboard box by his bedside until it would mysteriously disappear after a day or so, Eddy was content to heave rocks at the poor creature until he had crushed it. So much for nature.

“Eddy!” Oh, he knew that voice. “What have you done to that frog??”

“Eh? Mommy?” Pendergast wheeled wildly about, his hand grabbing the control panel where he pushed the wrong button – the one that caused the robotic proboscis monkey, who was mostly hidden within a bower of fern fronds in the corner of the alcove, to hurl rotten fruit, or whatever else was conveniently at hand, towards the exact spot where Pendergast was now standing. This was another Eddy-device he had his engineers design so that other certain clients were angered and nonplussed at precisely the right moment.

So when Miss Higgins arrived and took in the scene before her, she noted that Pendergast was, number one, barefoot (but she had seen that many times before, no big deal), two, most of his head and shoulders seemed to be smeared with what looked a lot like monkey scat, and three, he was busily and rather loudly sucking his thumb while his eyes bulged in her general direction, presumably a plea for some kind of aid.

Miss Higgins did the only thing possible for her to do in that situation, she turned abruptly about so that Pendergast could not see the huge grin that lit up her face, and yelled over her shoulder as she bolted out the door, “I’ll go get security. Hang on. There’s your butter.”