

Faith, Hope and Fiction

The Puzzle Solution's Swift Shift from Irony

By Tom Sheehan

A man in a black suit rides the train to work every day and doesn't talk to anybody because he's been trying to solve a puzzle for seven years and is frustrated by his predicament.

For seven long years, at least by his count, Creighton Manning, architect and music lover, had been trying to solve a puzzle on a morning train ride to his job in the city. Finally, he relented and began thinking of it as his seven-year itch, knowing what it was doing to him, but not what it had done to him. That itch, though, had worn him down, and he had, in turn, been passed over for promotion during those years, and just as casually ignored by others. But contentment, he understood with a grain of reality, comes in strange shapes, often keeps strange company.

Neat in dress, rarely noticeable in any larger-than-usual gathering, his steady move into anonymity did not bother him. Creighton was clean in habit, healthy, and bought a new suit every ten months, giving his oldest one to a charity collection; this action, inside of a year's time, was a sign of contented affluence with him. On Saturday evenings he shined his three pairs of dress shoes while listening to his favorite opera or one of his classical musical composites, or, now and then, watching an old black and white mystery film. There were moments during such

films that, with his eyes closed and concentrating on the music, he would be able to “see” the action, swore he could script it, could put Dick Powell without a song or Grade-B Chester Morris’ *Boston Blackie* into an appropriate atmosphere.

This morning was a morning like all others; he collected his newspaper and his decaf coffee at the variety store less than a block from the train station, now elegantly squeezed in between two much taller but artless buildings. His black leather briefcase bounced at one knee. He carried no umbrella, though he found the sky dreary and gray and believed the smell of rain sat in the air, a kind of immovable notification. With that set of mind he studied the leaves on tree and bush and saw their attitudes fully in place. The thirsty would drink when needed, he acknowledged, and, reflecting on his own schedule, did not hurry his steps. Timing for train departure was ingrained in him, posed all around him in varying evidence; the silent and sometimes erratic clock on the classic Georgian church tower was there, and the bells over at the Wellborne Grade School, and the village bus, with a puff of smoke and sounding as if its pistons were abrading each other, would start abruptly on schedule for its run up to Mt. Hebron Village.

Ultimately, as if driven by an internal primal clock, there was Jake Manther the house builder coming back home at seven-thirty on the button every morning, supposedly for coffee with his wife Corine, but everybody knew the kids had gone to school for the day, all four of them. Creighton had heard it said that if Corine worked a pillow the way she walked, even down the grocery aisle, it was no wonder Jake was faithful and punctual. Creighton had never seen Corine in the grocery store, though he had once seen her standing in line at the post office in that sort of provocative one-legged stance some women have mastered. Once he had uttered the term “hip thruster,” he never let it go. Corine was a “hip thruster.” Occasionally that observation made his throat dry.

Creighton sat in the last seat in the first car, where he had sat practically every workday for the seven years he'd spent at *Carmody, Halliburton & Sands, Architects of Note*. Oh, how he loved the inside joke of that title and had composed a little music for it that not one other person in the world had any knowledge of. None of the other passengers, many of them along for the same ride to the city for work, paid much attention to him, or to his occasional whistle, except for conceding Creighton his usual seat. Other than a cursory nod, they had conceded that seat long ago. None of passengers knew about Creighton's puzzle, which he would set up on his briefcase as soon as everybody was seated. This ascertainment was not seen, not heard, but felt; he never looked up fearing someone, at discovery, would be looking into his eyes, as if the puzzle, *oh abomination*, would be reflected there.

The puzzle was his alone to decipher; his alone. He whistled softly at his work, the whistle saying where he was, what he was at. When the music went wrong, when *Halliburton* hit a bad note, he'd put the puzzle away.

On the upside the puzzle appeared to be a common crossword puzzle, but it had never come out right, had never been solved by the interminable architect. Into huge dictionaries he had delved, gone through strange adaptations found in the dictionary from the Latin and the French, and those sly, short mouthfuls of words without vowels from the Welsh like *cwm* and *crwth*. Nothing he tried ever fit two exasperating corners of the puzzle. Nothing at all!

In his architect's mind, the plot plan of blank and solid squares came scribed and burned into his cerebrum. It was there, he would swear, immediately behind his forehead, swearing that any minute it might broadcast itself across his brow. With those blank and solid black squares he could tile a whole bathroom. It would be a snap. And with a clarity he found unfathomable, he could close his eyes, see the puzzle on a sheet of mechanical drawing paper on his high school

desk and feel old Mr. Bund looking over his shoulder, grading his work, though Mr. Bund's words were lost from memory. What would that long-gone teacher of isometric drawings have to say about a lineal puzzle? There was more than one simple mystery abounding.

Once Creighton said to himself that he could scribe the graphic and text of the puzzle without a miss, and could do it in fifteen minutes. He had worn words and pencils down to their nubs, made copy after copy of the puzzle, at times knew its clutches were rhythmic and constant, like a piece of music had been tapped into his brain, as though a piece of nostalgic music was at once known and unknown. Yet there was absolutely nothing auricular about his puzzle; no word spoken, no huff or puff of breath at annunciation. His puzzle was mated with silence.

Melanie his wife, on about the fourth year, having seen the incomplete puzzle on a number of occasions... like falling out of an inner pocket from one of his suit coats, or scattered in his jewelry drawer like quaint intruders... finally asked him about the rote he was apparently caught up in. "Creighton, I swear I've seen this same puzzle at least a dozen times. It's never done. Can't you finish it? Can I help?" They were watching a *Thin Man* movie.

God forbid, he thought. *Not after all of this*. "It's but a game, Melanie. Like notes out of place and you're positive you know the score, but it eludes you. No, no great importance, dear. I while my time away with it, but only on the train. It's easier than watching the backsides of houses or clothes hanging on porches or on clotheslines like sails trying for the wind, or seeing how long one deserted Buick can stay in one place for years on end." That, he figured, would put her off the track.

She had picked up the newspaper after he had shined his shoes and folded it and placed it in the wastebasket. "If ever," she said, and went back to William Powell with his hair never out

of place, his suit immaculate, and his grin too sly to be real. The puzzle was not mentioned again by her, as if it had been blown away in the wind mere as an October leaf.

Creighton closed down on his seventh year with the puzzle, ultimately content with knowing he had something to do on the train ride both ways, life had certain promises and perils, and time had dictates all its own. Continuity would go on until you met a wall or you fell off somewhere. There was the simplicity; his puzzle was shrouded in silence. The true words might never be spoken. He never saw the derelict Buick chained onto a truck bed to be hauled away, only once had forgotten into the eleventh month about buying another suit, and closed that fault in a hurry; and always felt a flurry of joy when *Halliburton* came perfectly from his lips regardless who was about him, even at the office.

Peak of frustration in Creighton Manning's odyssey comes the night, late for one train, early for the next one, he drops into a small cafe to have a drink. Daringly, time floating in the air, the puzzle forgotten for the moment, he decides on Scotch, untouched by him for years. He is aware of subtle change hanging on the edges. Two older men at the bar, both bearded and a bit crusty, holding beer bottles in their hands like handles of bayonets, are talking about the time when they were in the Marine Corps, in another country with a Marine Legation. Creighton hears how they as editors used to make up crossword puzzles for the Legation's small mimeographed newspaper and the first Marine in with the completed puzzle would get a bottle of whiskey. With their own bottle of whiskey the two editors used to lock themselves in the squad tent that housed the company clerk's office and the newspaper office, and make up the paper and the crossword puzzle. Their guffaws are loud and boisterous and they take turns in slapping the bar top. They laugh heartily and continually about a puzzle they'd made up once when they had

been drinking heavily and there had been no winner and they couldn't solve the puzzle themselves when the whole Legation stormed the entrance to the squad tent and demanded the solution be made public.

That night Creighton Manning took a cab home.

Tom Sheehan's books are Epic Cures and Brief Cases, Short Spans, from Press 53; A Collection of Friends and From the Quickening, from Pocol Press. He has published 4 collections of poetry, has 18 Pushcart nominations, a Georges Simenon Award for Fiction, and a story in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009. He has 254 stories on Rope and Wire Magazine, has been in Rosebud Magazine four times and Ocean Magazine seven times. His newest book, an eBook, Korean Echoes, was released September 2011, by Milspeak Publishers, which currently has 9 short story collections in process for publication in 2012. Work is in/coming in Copperfield Review, Stone Hobo, The Nervous Breakdown, Ocean Magazine, Subtle Tea, Storylandia, Ink Monkey Magazine, etc. He served with the 31st Infantry Regiment in Korea, 1951.