

Sunshine Sketch of a Little Jail

Colin McGregor

I am given a copy of a recent *Tempo*, the monthly publication of Brome Lake, a town a few miles from here. I have been in jail for 12 years. Such local publications are not usually made available to we denizens of *l'établissement Cowansville*. Reading *Tempo* in prison is an exercise in existential absurdity.

I study the articles and, especially, the ads. They reveal to me a world at my door I can only fantasize about. I am beckoned to purchase a set of antique lamps in West Bolton, wherever *that* is. A 'good humored' club in Bondville wants to teach me Spanish. Veterinarians compete for the honor of tending to my sick cats. Brome Lake thinks I should help pay for their medical response van. And there are houses, cottages, and quaint properties I can move into immediately, brokered by passport photos bearing beaming faces just a bit too eager.

I put down my *Tempo*. From where I sit I can see none of this world. I have dim memories of quick visits to this region while I was at McGill University, but that was a lifetime ago. It seems too good to be true. *Is it all really there?*

Afterwards I wander my tiny world. It is a brilliantly sunny, unseasonably warm October day. I walk a lap of the track that rims our little yard. I see the same objects that have greeted me for years: guard towers and barbed wire; electrified fences; a narrow roadway just beyond the fences; and on that roadway, modern police vans crawling at a snail's pace along the asphalt, their smoky windows concealing correctional officers toting loaded rifles at the ready.

Barely visible, miles beyond stands of tall trees ringing the roadway, can be seen elysian hills bathed in a riot of fall colours. Nothing else of the outside world makes itself visually known to me. We can hear sounds from a nearby highway and the occasional low rumble of a train, but that's it. I imagine that beneath and around the rainbow canopy covering these hills exist houses and farms, boats and roads, perhaps even quaint little country inns where tourists spend quiet, pleasant weekends with as little inkling that we exist as we have that they might be enjoying a walk through the woods or a good fondue supper. But the only signs of life I can actually see beyond my narrow domain are those relentless dark blue vans slowly, inexorably completing their orbits. These places in the *Tempo* must exist. The *Tempo* wouldn't lie. But that is a guess: for now, such signs of humanity

are just a dream in my head – just as they were once dreams in the heads of architects and town planners and settlers and farmers and entrepreneurs, dreams brought to fruition through toil and ingenuity. Everything starts as a dream. And in my thoughts they remain exactly that.

I return to the gray, drab concrete cellblock I call home. I go to my own 7x10 foot cell and leaf through my *Tempo* once again: 2.3 acres for sale just a few miles from here, only \$449,000, *I 'endroit ideal!* I can have my computer's mouse personally engraved in Knowlton. Steven will clear my trees for an indeterminate price. A man with a hydraulic hammer wishes me a Happy Thanksgiving. Someone who looks like Fish from *Barney Miller* will build a new community centre if only I will make him mayor. And there are many lovely spots where I can eat and even buy groceries (though I don't think the Knowlton IGA would appreciate the nationwide manhunt that would ensue were I to pop in to purchase a head of lettuce).

A uniformed man a few yards away silently presses a button from inside his plexiglassed enclosure. My cell door slides shut. With the cold thud of metal on metal I am locked in for the evening. My world becomes concentrated on the tiny glowing TV at the edge of my desk.

Then it strikes me. Yes, these things *must be*. The guards must sleep *somewhere*. And I recall a point of cross-reference. One afternoon while we were locked down – a search for moonshine 'brew' as I recall, though all these lockdowns feel the same – veteran local TV weatherman Don McGowan took me through the Townships during a televised travelogue. He showed me hills and pubs and a monastery inhabited by serious men who live in silence and make cheese or some such thing. He toured an English-language theatre named after a place where swine are kept – *perhaps a sop to area Francophones* – adjoining yet another pub – *are all the locals drunks?* He neglected to mention the jail, an understandable omission. We are well hidden. Perhaps he will catch us on a return trip. I know now that these *Tempo* places are corporeal. I grew up watching Don McGowan inform me about the next day's weather on Channel 12 in Montreal. Certainly Don McGowan wouldn't lie. *Cogito Brome est, ergo est.*

I think to myself, I am in the wrong place. I belong in my newfound *Tempo* realm. These are my people. The police set me up. Even CSCers were involved before my arrest. I am not insane. I have proof, documents, and eyewitnesses even. Surely those nice folks in that ad who want to board and groom my pet would understand? But nobody cares if I belong in jail

or not. Everyone behind bars has a sob story. I look at the pale blue and white cinderblocks that wall me in. *This is my place*. My eyes wander to the stained eggshell tile floors underneath my prison-issue cot. *You are home*; I say to myself, *this is your world*. The Lyon and the Walrus (another local business with an ad in the *Tempo*) might as well be on the moon running away with the dish and the runcible spoon for all the relevance they have to my piffling existence. Washington, Tokyo, Bolton, and Mars are all the same distance away. Except that at night I can see Mars: brilliant red, closer than in thousands of years, scaring the psychotic who wanders the prison grounds wondering when the flying saucer on fire might crash.

This is hell, Mephistopheles told Faust; *you are in it*.

I fall asleep, my sense of injustice and my notion of absurdity equally satiated, while watching that wonderful undersea documentary *SpongeBob SquarePants*. *October 2003*

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