

A brush with Shame: Ignorance and Hypocrisy at the end of the Century

by Jeff Coll

I was driving down Queen Street on my way to City Cinema when I first saw the flashing lights. There was a police van in the middle of the intersection of Queen and Water. I thought there might have been an accident, but I turned left onto King Street before I could get a better view. I parked in the parking lot outside of City Cinema and, with a half an hour to spare, I decided to go to the Prince Edward to piss and get something to drink.

As I walked toward the hotel, I got a better look at the scene: There was an officer standing in front of the police van. He was directing traffic while a few other officers milled around the intersection. As I crossed the intersection, I noticed the Prince Edward was getting some renovations done around the side entrance. I went up to the side entrance and saw a neatly-typed sign saying "Please Use Main Entrance." *It must be because of the renovations*, I thought to myself as I went down the steps and turned toward the main entrance.

Then I noticed the crowd of people standing gathered across

the street from the main entrance. Thoughts quickly ran through my mind: *Was there some sort of horrible murder? Why is everybody so calm?* As I got, closer I could hear a woman's voice clearly addressing the crowd. When I got to the main entrance, I could see a lot of men in suits standing around, but few others. I paused a moment to assess the situation.

At this point the woman was saying, "Tonight, this hotel is a hotel of shame." I saw her standing across from me in front of a microphone. Three candles were lit on the ground. *Are they protesting? Do they not like the renovations or something?* The woman then said, "Bon appetit, Mr. Chretien." Suddenly things got a whole lot clearer. I looked around the hotel's entrance with a new outlook on the situation. The men in suits had their hands pressed to their ears and were talking into their lapels: *The Prime Minister is in town and these guys are Mounties!*

I knew there was no way I was going to get into the hotel to piss without getting frisked, so

I immediately vacated the entryway. I stood near the entrance to the parkade, with a clear view of both the entrance and the mob: *I may not get to piss, but at least I'm going to see the Prime Minister.*

The woman protestor wrapped things up and the MC introduced a Charlottetown youth. To my surprise, I knew the young fellow from high school. He dealt drugs, and to my knowledge, he still owes some stuff to a couple of my friends. He told the group about how the Liberals made promises that they did not keep.

As I listened a young woman in a baseball cap came over and asked me if Jean Chretien was coming today. I said that I guessed so and she told me that she heard something about it when she flew in that day.

I assumed she was a guest at the hotel.



"So where are you from?" I asked casually.

"Toronto, originally. But I live in Boston now." She told me that the last time she was in Canada, she was in Vancouver and Jean Chretien was in town then. Apparently, she was a few blocks away when that whole pepper spray incident took place. We both waited in silence for the Prime Minister to arrive as the drug dealer spoke on.

Suddenly, a group of about four cars sped down the street and around to the main entrance. The mob got very excited as doors started to open and men started to get out hurriedly. Chretien got out, someone yelled his name and the mob broke into a monotone growl. Mr. Chretien waved and quickly entered the hotel within like a rat into a hole. My companion seemed content and walked away. The mob went back to its speeches and I went to City Cinema to have a piss.

Feeling fully refreshed and with twenty minutes to spare, I decided to join the mob. It was beginning to rain and the mob had just started a sing-along. I was disappointed that I did not know the

words, but I did my best to seem like I cared about their cause, raising my fist in the air like I had seen people with causes do in movies. Not that I was sure what the cause was.

After hanging around for twenty minutes, I understood what their goal was. Chretien was having a political fund-raiser and they were protesting poverty in Canada. When I got back to City Cinema, I told the owner about the protestors. He seemed fairly sympathetic to their cause: "These people in the upper-levels of government just don't know what is going on."

On my way home that night, I reflected on what I had heard from the protestors. I suddenly realized that I was no better than Chretien. *Are there really children going to school hungry and barefoot? Why haven't I heard of this before today? Have I buried myself so far into the world of fantasy that I do not know what is going on in my own country? Is Chretien the anti-Christ?* Images of maple leaves and babies starving in gutters and old ladies dying in hospital hallways haunted me as I drove into the night. □