

The Village

by Mark Andrew Busby



Chapter Sampler

1. A PARTICULARLY WARM MORNING.

It was not quite 6:30 am. Morning sunlight wandered across the fresh fruit and vegetables stacked outside Abdul's corner shop. Reaching up he drew forward a candy-stripe awning to protect his goods from untimely decay. Warm air had even now filled the space where villagers would soon bring aboard their excited chatter. Today, life was answering daybreak's call sooner than usual because, as the village well knew, it was Abdul's infamous two-for-the price-of-three sale.

Abdul glanced over his shoulder. It was enough to tell him that today's bonanza was going to be a match for any before it. Mrs. Shepherd, who was a known loyalist amongst bargain hunters, headed up the queue like a figurehead fixed to an old sailing ship. Some suggested that her warts looked like barnacles encrusting a ship's underside. For Abdul, it was a good sign because Mrs. Shepherd was thought of as a local oracle to whom housewives would address their enquiries on matters of thrift.

Civic events like this naturally brought along minor inconveniences. The queue was disorderly, ever more so as opening hour crept up. A pot of tea had already been tossed over Tom Skye, a man of some infirmity who'd goaded the crowd by queue-jumping in his wheelchair. Just because he was man of poor mobility didn't mean the crowd would grant him compassion. Woe to anyone that tried to curry unfair advantage on this day, of all days.

Another incident reported just before dawn was equally as shocking. Two pints of Gold Top was taken from an electric milk cart owned by the dairy. The likely culprit - Mrs. Shepherd - was observed wearing a cream moustache soon after the event, and police were summoned. After long and noisy protestations, including some minor acts of civil disobedience, it was agreed Mrs. Shepherd was simply foaming at the mouth given the vicissitudes of heat. Any links to thievery were dismissed as purely circumstantial. Those who knew Mrs. Shepherd well also knew of the intolerable flatulence she suffered following consumption of anything unpasteurized. Had the specific means to collect the evidence been available, it would have been an open and shut case for certain.

The drought was relentless. It helped Abdul tremendously that the Emergency Council had chosen to erect a row of standpipes on the same street as his shop. Citizens filling their buckets could synchronize each trip with a visit to his store. Indeed, a stopover by the *Right Honourable Minister for Hot Weather* stirred up such feverish conservation that people thought it their patriotic duty to consume from the pipe instead of their faucets. Times were good for Abdul.

Many villagers noticed how the heat rendered their neighbours more insensible than usual. The exceptional season appeared responsible for people backsliding into their infancy. Abdul's generous smile at this time of crisis offered much comfort to perspiring villager folk, all anxious to alleviate their distress without requiring much in the way of change. Abdul was a great theorist on these matters. It was his belief that any man would accept ridiculous suggestions providing he was relieved the burden of critical thought.

He'd tested his theorem a week before on a customer who'd entered his shop one afternoon, completely delirious. Abdul suggested that a can of ice cold Cola from the fridge might expedite his return to sensibility. It was too good an offer to refuse. The customer lunged at the fridge, grabbed his pop and poured it down the windpipe. Within seconds the unfortunate man began quite a performance, including several well-executed pirouettes, before succumbing to stupor. Touchy as ethical considerations are, Abdul knew his subject was diabetic. But as touchy as ethical considerations can be, science sometimes pushed the envelope for the sake of knowledge. He later wrote in his journal: *"The customer, disabled in mind, accepts without question a way out of his misery."*

All of a sudden Robert Middlefinger entered the shop, extending Abdul a greeting more fitting of the gutter than one between fellow men. Seemingly oblivious to his surrounds, Middlefinger walked toward the refrigerator intent on grabbing himself a pop. It mattered not that Abdul was yet to open, nor that there was a long line waiting outside for his extraordinary sale to begin. Middlefinger's complex character was apt to let chaos reign down wherever he went. Whispers of disapproval were filtering through the ranks of awaiting villagers; Mrs. Shepherd had already drawn her nail file in anticipation of filleting the young man as he left the store.

Inside Abdul's shop, the smell following Middlefinger around was that of stale cigarettes and halitosis. It was probably the reason no one cared to spend time with him anyway. In his defence, Robert Middlefinger's father had acquired from Robert Middlefinger's grandfather, who'd acquired from Robert Middlefinger's great grandfather, who'd acquired from Robert Middlefinger's great, great grandfather, a perception of the universe derived from taproom discourse, or the shit houses to which they were indentured for a living.

Abdul was too busy roaming the field of possibilities to be much offended by Middlefinger's invective or his presumptive nature. Besides, with employment fast becoming a rarity in these parts, Middlefinger's regular toil at Hampton-Fuller meant he had some real money to spend, and Middlefinger expressed his contempt for Abdul by spending a good chunk of it at his corner shop.

With the heat being as ferocious as it was, Middlefinger too gave off the impression he was becoming more insensible than usual. With the mood outside turning uglier by the minute, Abdul could not resist the call to science. He felt moved to repeat his experiment of the week before.

Abdul began. "Phew! Even now I'm finding it hot, Robert. Would you care for a cold pop from my fridge?"

Middlefinger was not one to mince his words.

"I have no doubt your powers of observation are not functioning today, Abdul, given the extremes of temperature. But none the less, your question is so perplexing that I shall remain open-minded a little longer as to the question of whether I am in the presence of a great sage or a great oaf."

In order he might maximize a sense of equanimity and not upset the universe too much, Abdul replied through his ephemeral smile.

"Robert, I recognize that rich and fertile vocabulary as indicative of your outstanding talent for fecund, oral composting. What's more, you host a fine Virginian perfume that leads one to disavowal all knowledge of your person lest ostracisation be their destiny."

Middlefinger believed Abdul was avoiding confrontation by showering him with compliments. He sensed a personal victory over the shop-keeper.

Abdul had not quite finished. "It is such a hot day that I'm offering a special price on all of my pops...I'm offering you two-for-the-price-of-three," he said.

Robert Middlefinger stood like a big peacock, proclaiming himself Master of the Penis Jousts. He snatched two tins of lemonade and quickly paid for three before Abdul changed his mind. He would have grabbed more had he the capacity. But as life would have it, several fingertips were lost to a cropping machine at the Hampton-Fuller factory one year earlier.

"It mystifies me, Abdul, how on earth you can turn a profit with such ridiculous discounting of your livelihood. Although I lament the loss of our traditional shopkeepers, I find great sport in wringing the goose's neck at any and all opportunity."

"Allow me to open the door for you, Robert." Abdul replied. "With the encumbrance of your purchase it is but the humblest of assistance I can offer you."

Middlefinger left the shop grinning like a Cheshire cat. Abdul closed the door and began counting to three. A yell arose from outside that could be heard as far away as the church hall. As predicted, Mrs. Shepherd speared Middlefinger in the rump with her nail file. The poor youth could do little else but howl under the judicious eye of all who awaited in the queue.

"Nobody jumps the queue," Mrs. Shepherd said, heading back up the line. "Not even you."

2. A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ALONGSIDE THE CANAL.

The Reverend Cobbler tucked a half-eaten piece of toast into his pocket and set off to greet his parishioners. Cobbler enjoyed his regular morning walks around the village and was in the habit of taking shortcuts alongside the canal when time was against him. The old watercourse was bone-dry given the unrelenting summer heat. An old shopping cart could be seen embedded in the baked silt. Bulrushes had come and gone, leaving their stalks to the sun. There were neither ducks nor fish this year; just an arid canyon where water normally sat.

Something told Reverend Cobbler he was being observed.

What looked at first to be a tiny animal turned out to be a young boy of about 10 or 11 years old. Had Cobbler not been enjoying a serene moment he may never have picked out the lad's features. It was the eyes that caught him first: doe like, yet full of curiosity. Reverend Cobbler noticed he was dressed up in some type of costume with a strange, mismatched elegance to it. Under camouflage it appeared the little mouse had been quite busy for some time already. He was obviously up to something that was not yet fathomable to the Reverend Cobbler's own inquisitive mind.

"Good morning Reverend," said the boy, noticing Cobbler's clerical collar.

“Good morning,” replied the Reverend.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m the Reverend Cobbler...what’s yours?”

“Farquhar.”

“Nice to meet you. Farquhar.”

“And you too, sir.”

The Reverend Cobbler made an attempt at humour. “No need to call me sir! I have no Knighthood that I am aware of. Are you out here all by yourself, young squirrel?”

“In a manner of speaking, sir yes, I am indeed so. In fact, my purpose is to establish a structure from where I can.....”

Farquhar’s voice was suddenly drowned out by the noise of a diesel locomotive passing along in the distance.

“.....when I am older”

Reverend Cobbler managed to catch only the last couple of words. He was sorry to have missed the crux of Farquhar’s explanation. Still, he asked for no clarification.

“So you like camping out of doors...isn’t it a bit dangerous to be out here all alone?”

Farquhar, feeling he’d been misheard, took Cobbler’s confabulation to mean he’d not caught the full story. To his credit, Farquhar made no assumptions about the Reverend’s

ability to understand the native dialect like so many of his peers would have. To help explain himself, Farquhar picked up a stick and etched something into the dust. Cobbler watched as an image began to appear. Was it a group of buildings he was drawing? Perhaps it was compound, or an arena? Cobbler lifted his gaze and began to look around the place. He could see Farquhar had been busy building makeshift walls from discarded junk scattered around the place. Something important was contained within the sketch.

Cobbler bade he be allowed to make an observation.

“I see you have put up what appears to be three walls over there, but not a fourth ... it looks like they offer protection from three directions, but why then this great gap facing north?” he said.

“Ah! There will be a wall, but it will be made entirely of glass,” replied Farquhar.

“Glass? Why glass?”

“To let in a lot of light.”

“Hum, if you build the great wall to face south it might heat up your structure too.”

“Yes, it might...but then it might be built on the other side of the equator.”

Reverend Cobbler was cursing the passing of the diesel-electric locomotive. It had denied him vital information necessary for deciphering the great puzzle set out before him. Farquhar moved to take up position within his partially-constructed building. As he did, Cobbler became aware of

what had been teasing him about the boy's wardrobe. It was weird to say the least. Farquhar was wearing a pair of inflated, shiny pants like those belonging to an ancient maharaja. Yet, the green topcoat flopped across his shoulders made him look more like a leprechaun than anything else. Reverend Cobbler took a step back to compute the scene more fully.

"Pardon me young sir," he said, returning the same respectful, yet inaccurate form of address.

"What manner of dress is that you wear?"

Farquhar paused to inspect himself. "Well, it's fancy dress. Does it scare you?"

"On the contrary, I'm captivated by your, er, unique style."

"I don't always look this silly!" said Farquhar, giggling. "Do you see that cardboard box over there, next to the west wall?"

Reverend Cobbler's eyes shifted in the direction Farquhar was pointing.

"Yes indeed...what's inside of it?"

"Dress up clothes."

"Dress up clothes?"

"Yes, for dressing up...like at a fancy dress party."

Cobbler's expression was one of strain.

"Are you having a party?"

,

“No. Let me explain my undertaking here, Reverend. Yesterday whilst I was watching television, I became aware of the devastating suffering across the world. The names of these places I could not pronounce properly. I could see children whose parents had been lost to the bombs. Luckier children were crying, but for the most part it was possible to see that they were all dying slowly, in silence. This horror in a box kept me from sleeping throughout the night. I thought about what I could do to bring some relief to their suffering.”

“Please do go on,” said Reverend Cobbler.

“Then it came to me. The answer would not come from the confines of my usual state. Somehow I knew I must step outside of my own brain if I could see more clearly. I rummaged about the house for hours collecting bits of queer clothing, silly hats and old stuff of mother’s, now long out of fashion. I threw it all into that box over there. When I arrived at daybreak I began using these clothes to dress up in all kind of funny ways. By suspending normal thinking, I was able to create *Make Believe World*, a place where anything becomes possible.”

“Let me be clear about this,” said Cobbler. “You’ve entered an imaginary world where anything is possible?”

“Endlessly so.”

“You see, as I arrived at *Make Believe World*, this structure rose up around me almost at once. It’s an orphanage, Reverend, can you tell? It’s where children are safe. The canal isn’t a barrier, it’s a watercourse. Look to your left and look to your right. You can see the fields where food will be grown to feed all of the children. They can learn in that school over there;

the one I'm building under that shady canopy I've just imagined.”

Cobbler felt glued to the spot, which was just as well because Farquhar had not quite finished.

“The large opening at the front is not unfinished construction, as you first thought. It is a gateless portico that relieves the child of her fear of becoming imprisoned. She may enter and leave the orphanage as she chooses.”

Reverend Cobbler felt as one might when the lights come on. His awareness reached new peaks as he came to realise that Farquhar's project, his great testimony to the continuity of humanity, had already entered into existence. It just hadn't been built yet.

3. KERFUFFLE AT HAMPTON - FULLER.

Generally speaking, it was Robert Middlefinger's habit to visit the clocking-on machine at 8:00 am precisely. To give the factory one minute of his time without pay was unthinkable. To allow the factory an excuse to dock pay for being one minute late was equally absurd. However, given the earlier mauling by Mrs. Shepherd, today was an exception. He was late. His rump felt as though a great fire was built under it, whilst his gait mimicked that of an ostrich. Word of Middlefinger's catastrophe had spread quickly across the factory floor and there was no shortage of boyish jokes to keep people amused. Middlefinger knew all hope of rehabilitating his reputation - whatever it was - had long since passed when a rhythmic epitaph appeared on his locker door:

*Mother does my laundry whilst father shovels coal,
thank you Mrs. Shepherd for my lovely new
butthole.'*

What was less clear to people though, was the extent to which his anger seethed.

Robert Middlefinger knew that any form of unconcealed vengeance visited upon Mrs. Shepherd would almost certainly be traced back to his hand. Not a single soul in the village doubted he was capable of vicarious acts of mean-spiritedness, since the day he dug up a Chestnut tree planted

out of respect for fallen workers. Under these circumstances, retribution would need to be of an altogether more clandestine nature. Bludgeoning, vandalism, or arson would certainly point a finger in his direction, and there could be no guarantee he would escape from justice. It was indeed an oddity, that given the scope of things he could have directed his mind toward, it was to his abhorrent self-loathing he remained apprenticed to.

The clocking-in machine received Middlefinger's time card, and promptly returned it with 8:06 am clearly stamped in red. Pay would be stopped, that much was certain. Yet the much bigger question occupying him concerned the restoration of balance to his wounded pride.

Middlefinger was required to take up his daily duties at the packaging platform a short distance away. Following the impromptu amputation of his fingertips, alternative employment had been found for him in Dispatch, where components were sent forth into the industrial world when, and wherever, nature resisted occupation. It was not just heavy objects that left the factory, but nails, screws, and nuts and bolts, by the hundred thousand too. The destructive threat of tedium inhabited every nook and cranny.

A labourer called Paul finally broke the ice. "Word has it that you were harpooned in the buttocks this morning, Robert. Is that true?"

Middlefinger was upset. "Believe me Paul, there can be no question that the broom you so smugly lean upon will fit ever so tightly up your nose, should you choose to continue this conversation."

Large applause, wolf-whistles, and general expressions of satisfaction rose from behind every conceivable hiding place on the factory floor, as Middlefinger swallowed the bait laid out by his comrades. Middlefinger turned beet-red with rage.

“Be gone all of you bellicose, bloated fools! I want nothing more to do with anyone here!”

Paul was unmoved. “But Robert, every day you appear intent on making one of us a target of your own distasteful bantering. If you are not making rude remarks, then you are likely taking it upon yourself to undermine the efforts of our labour to make good a poor situation.”

It was unfortunate but the only method Middlefinger had of responding to such discourse was with knuckle sandwiches. He turned sharply toward Paul, fists clenched, bearing his teeth like a scraggy hound dog. Being a more measured sort of person, Paul had been anticipating Middlefinger’s next move, dropping his broom handle sharply into the nether regions of his challenger’s midline. Middlefinger dropped to his knees, grasping his crotch. He whined woefully. Tears welled up in his eyes. The day had not started well for this young man.

Humiliated, Robert Middlefinger crawled off towards a row of nearby vending machines, hoping to find some kind of shelter. After a few minutes of trying, relief came in the form of some kindly words spoken by an unseen friend.

“Here, give me your hand lad.”

There was respect in the offer. Middlefinger looked up and saw a large, shovel-like hand reaching out to him. He allowed himself to be helped up.

“You cannot go about upsetting people like that, Robert,” the Stranger said. “I’ve been watching you. My observations give me feelings of unease. Your young life may soon crash up against the rocks.”

The words were authoritative, but cushioned none the less.

“Who are you?” Middlefinger asked.

“Call me Stanley,” the Stranger replied.

“Who are you, Stanley?”

“I just told you, I’m Stanley. But call me Stan if it’s easier.”

The shovel hands pulled Middlefinger up onto his feet. The pair stood in silence, the type of silence that consumes time at a different rate. For Robert Middlefinger, the feelings arising inside told this was no ordinary encounter. He became fearful.

“Thank you Stan, but I was about to get up on my own.”

“Of course! But let me buy you a cup of tea all the same.”

The two men took leave of their dance and wandered toward the vending machines. When they worked properly, each machine was supposed to dispense plastic cups of tea to thirsty workers at their designated hour. The machines themselves were not remarkable. What was remarkable though, concerned their position: each one being installed such that it was directly visible through the production manager’s office window. One was not as free to refresh the body at such places as one would think. From his observatory,

the production manager calculated enough information to determine the 'height of the bar' over which a man's usefulness could be gauged. Should the axe be called to shave the workforce, such observations proved useful in deciding who stayed and who would go.

It required much skill feeding coins into the machine with missing fingertips. Stanley's shovel-like hands could fare no better, either. An interesting reciprocity occurred between them.

"Here, let me...."

"Thank you..."

"My rump is sore..."

Something approaching laughter came and went between them. A pile of freshly-laundered cover-all's provided a place to sit so they might enjoy their tea in some comfort.

"I'm not surprised, Robert. It's become clear when I see you moving about your world that there is something about your disposition speaking to an unhappy life."

"I'm fine."

"Naturally, of course. I was not suggesting otherwise. Does it hurt?"

"It is nothing dire. Nothing I can't survive. A wounded backside will not keep me down for long."

"Do you want to cry?"

“Cry? For heaven’s sake! Why would I want to cry? Do you think of me as a baby?”

“Babies often cry when the nourishment they need is not forthcoming.”

“I am nourished well enough, thank you very much, as are all at home.”

“Whose home?”

There was a pause. Not a long pause, but just long enough.

“My father and I.”

“What’s there to say about him?”

“A great deal in fact. He is a big man. I have witnessed his inordinate feats of strength and prowess. Once, he fell to the floor and performed one-hundred push ups. After, he lifted a couch high above his head and remained still as a statue for seven minutes. I know this because he made me time him. There is nothing his impressive form cannot do. I have witnessed his dealings with malefactors; laying to the floor those who would challenge his right.”

“Are you like your father?”

“I once tried to achieve the same number of push ups at his request, but could not reach even a half of the amount.”

“What was his view?”

“He called me a waste of space and gave me a new name.”

“A new name?”

“Weedy Rob the Useless Sod.”

Stanley paused to consider this information.

“What picture do you have of him in that mind of yours?”

“I see an oak reaching tall into the sky... huge branches creating a canopy of leaves throwing shadows across the ground beneath.”

“Have you ever sat under a big tree like that, Robert?”

“Yes of course, in Evendine Wood.”

“What else sat under that tree with you?”

“Nothing much, just dust and dry dirt. Nothing seemed to be... growing.”

Middlefinger lowered his eyes and began staring hard at his steel-capped work boots. His contemplations spoke more to his gut than his head, as the words he'd heard himself say soaked through. His eyes did what nature intended. The yardstick by which life was to be measured suddenly did not feel so absolute. Middlefinger raised his head a little, yet continued to stare blankly into space. The motivation for packing boxes full of nails and screws had disappeared. The person who'd left his work station earlier in the hour was no longer the same person sitting atop the laundry pile now.

He was rudely disturbed by an ill-tempered voice approaching from his side. It was none other than the production manager, who'd left his nest to address Middlefinger's malingering.

“Have you no more work to do Middlefinger?” he said bluntly.

Middlefinger turned towards him. “I am taking a break, as is my entitlement,” he replied, looking around for the Stranger.

“Shish! The entitlement is ten minutes, no more. I have observed you sitting in the same space for more than twenty!”

“Then I’ll make amends. I’ll forfeit my afternoon entitlement and all will be square.”

“There’s too much cheating amongst you all. It seems that at each and every opportunity one of you conspires to perform some act of sabotage upon the line of production. You alone cause all kinds of mischief to the management of these operations, Middlefinger.”

“I was having a cup of tea.”

“You were idling.”

“The proof is here in my hand for you to see, look.”

“Shish! You’ll say anything to escape a moment’s work!”

It was perhaps unfortunate for the production manager that Robert Middlefinger was having an exceptionally bad morning. Although Stanley’s kindly words continued to reverberate about the young man’s brain, an altogether more familiar character showed up to deal with the production manager’s pomposity. Within the shake of a cat’s tail an almighty thud gave notice to all around that Middlefinger had laid the poor fellow out cold.

Realizing his time at Hampton-Fuller had passed, Middlefinger found himself taking the short walk back to his work station. Before leaving the factory for good, he needed to clear all stolen artefacts from his locker as not to incriminate himself further. He would then take the final liberty of planting a right hook on Paul snout as a good-bye gesture. Once these sundry matters were taken care of, Middlefinger felt it right and proper he could leave the works with his chin held up high.

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