Max's Folly
Max set his smartphone on vibrate-plus-tone and slipped it into his breast pocket so he could “feel the buzz”. Then he put his wristwatch on the same settings, plus a beep every minute. The phone was set for 1:40, the watch for 1:45. Failing to be at the office by 2 p.m. was not an option, and Max’s formerly excellent relationship with time was no longer reliable.

He was walking around downtown Halifax, something he did religiously when he had problems to solve, and he had three of them. Big ones. He struggled to focus on the most urgent, but his issues with time had gripped him hard and would not let go.

Until recently, Max had paid little attention to time, even though it had been kind to him. (He looked young for his age, everyone said.) On the rare occasions when he thought of time, he pictured himself on some sort of rocket-sled; the future and the present blurring by him, the past a short, bright rocket-flame pushing against his back. And, sometimes, Max could see just enough of what lay ahead to give him an advantage. So for decades he had been secure
in his rocket-seat, content but not grateful for time’s gifts to him. He was untroubled by the time paradoxes that so tortured other people.

Lately, though, time seemed like a neglected friend who had finally left Max’s life, creating an unexpected hole in his cosmic view and causing him to think about it constantly. Worse, time had taken to leaving him ominous messages. Once long ago, after a disastrous high school prom, his date scratched a note on his car door: “You’ll be sorry, psycho!” That’s how the messages from time felt. Just the other day Max was wholly engaged in thinking about time (and boiling an egg) when he felt someone squeezing his right elbow.

“Ground control to Major Max ... ground control to Major Max ...” the Wife sang, her voice affectionate but artificially bright. “Ground control to Major ...”

“I get it, Cactus, I get it,” he said as reality — for which he also had a newfound respect — flooded the room.

The Wife said she had been all but hollering at him, trying to get his attention, but he was just staring at the stovetop. She thought he might be having a stroke. “Headache? Vision problems ...”

“No. Nope. I’m fine.”

“Well, pay attention, then. You scared the hell out of me.”

“A watched pot never boils,” he said. “I was watching this pot until you interrupted and now, look, it’s boiling.”

“You going all inscrutable on me?”

Max tried to return the hard look she was giving him, but couldn’t. Instead he kissed her left cheekbone and grabbed her right buttock, one of his favourite moves.

“Don’t even think about jiggling my butt-fat,” she said. “What fat?” he asked, squeezing a little harder. “This is all muscle. You could crack walnuts with those glutes.”

The Wife leaned into him: “That’s more like it, Maxie.”

Watching the water simmer, it had occurred to him that you need more than heat and a copper-bottomed pot from La Cucina to get water ready. You have to have time. You have to allow the pot to move through time. Time is a critical ingredient for boiling water. Does that mean the cook and the pot move through time at different speeds? Does “turning up the heat” really mean speeding up time for the pot? Jeez, what if you could really do that?

Could this be an insight? Max tested the idea in his usual laboratory — an imaginary, gas-lit, 19th century lecture hall where he stands before a learned but rapt audience. “And so, ladies and gentlemen,” he says grandly, “I submit to you that time is ... an INGREDIENT!”

Alas, no one in the audience gasps in astonishment. Instead they arise as one and file out of the hall in an orderly fashion. So, not an insight.

Max’s grandmother once told him that time is a river. The metaphor was lost on him because he imagined himself on the riverbank, watching dark water slide by. Now Max realized he should have been on the river, paying attention to what he saw on the banks. Damn, he thought, is it possible for someone to be so wrong about something for so long?

Now — walking downtown — Max was worried about losing time’s greatest gift of all: his ability to travel it. Time travel was getting harder to control.

To his mild surprise, Max had already reached one his favourite stops — a flower shop. Its most colourful blooms spilled from the front entrance onto the sidewalk display
from the earliest days of spring until autumn snatched the last of the leaves from the trees. Max admired the owner for his determination to ignore the weather despite the toll this took on his product. He stopped and bought his customary discounted bouquet of whatever was about to become unmarketable. Tulips, on this occasion.

“How are you doing?” the shopkeeper asked, bowing quickly at him, like a bird bobbing for insects at the beach. “If I were any better, I’d be dangerous,” Max replied brightly.

Time-jumping had been helpful in all aspects of his life except, maybe, family. At work, though, where Max was his firm’s head of communications, it was critical. He always seemed to know what others at meetings were going to say a few seconds before they uttered the words, and he was ready with the right response before they even completed their sentences. Clients were in awe of his ability to know what they were thinking before they thought it.

Max’s enemies were aware of it, too. He once overheard their take on it while walking past the smoking shelter. “If you think you’ve got a bright idea about how to cool the fucker’s jets, forget it,” one of his victims was complaining. “It just means he’s set a trap for you. He does it for sport.”

Well, that was true, but Max focused those efforts exclusively on the shitheads the CEO liked to hire.

“It’s always good to keep a shark in the tank,” the CEO liked to say. “It keeps the other fish alert.”

But Max enjoyed a happy workplace. He admired and loved his younger colleagues — almost everyone — so when a shark showed up, Max would wait patiently until the moment he had foreseen occurred and the big bully-fish exposed a flank. Then Max would casually fire a political spear into its vitals.

The CEO hired the sharks, and Max got them fired. It was part of the rhythm of the office. It kept all the fish alert and happy.

Max passed the drugstore, a key landmark, which displayed a large sign declaring “your health matter’s”. The owners imagined this to be a clever pun, but it earned only derision from Max because of the egregious use of the apostrophe. But health definitely mattered these days. Max had heard through the family grapevine that the Brother was having “difficulties”, and he suspected these, like his own troubles, involved the same ability to travel through time. Why wouldn’t time-jumping be an inherited trait?

He felt terrible. Time-jumping had been critical to his life but his head had been so far up his own backside that he never really noticed. Now — and this felt like a premonition coming on — it might even be too late to talk it over with the Brother.

The need to talk was urgent because time-jumping had begun putting Max out of sync with the rotation of the Earth, and sometimes he would find himself east or west of a destination without any recollection of how it happened. This was because during the jump Max would continue to “rotate” from east to west, while the planet and its inhabitants stood still.

Max attributed these difficulties to his metabolism changing as he aged. He adapted by buying the latest in wearable “smart” technology. This brought most of the jumping outcomes under control. He dealt with the rest according to circumstance. If his trip took him west, he would
compensate for rotation by walking faster. When headed east, he set his watch for 10 seconds less between beeps. This kept him out of the harbour. Walking north or south, he would subtly walk to the east by leaning that way to resist the rotation. He could not imagine how it looked to passers-by, but it seemed to work. On the other hand, it might explain why the CEO had been urging Max to ride with him to meetings in a taxi.

Max stopped at the newsstand which, as usual, was festooned with *Cosmopolitan* magazines that were in turn festooned with images of women who lacked pores and apparently knew gazillions of sexual techniques: *The longest weekend: Blast His Roman Candle to New Heights, Six Ways to Make His Star Burst, How to Make his Cracker Fire.*

Sex was another facet of Max’s life affected by time-jumping, although with results that were more agreeable: the marital bed, mostly lukewarm since they hit their fortieths, had re-ignited.

Until recently the *Cosmo* surveys the Wife left lying around indicated that she was “not at all interested” in sex and “almost never” had an orgasm “with a partner”. Max concluded that he must be at fault for this. Faulty time-jumping, he deduced, was causing him to “arrive”, as the French say, early.

But now Max sometimes arrived later. This development might well be what shifted his wife to “somewhat interested” in sex, and it got Max thinking. He realized that if he could point the Wife due east, he would finish inside her no matter when he arrived. So, the next time he came to bed and found the Wife nude under the sheets, which meant that sex was on the table, Max seized the opportunity.

He climbed into bed and kissed her while sliding his hand over her abdomen, his customary opening move. “I want to try something,” he said. “I want to line you up a certain way before we do it.” To his surprise, instead of rejecting him, she smiled a little sheepishly and flushed. Her nipples perked up.

“Okay,” she said, her voice croaking ever so slightly, whereupon she threw off the bedclothes and lay naked before him with her arms stiffly beside her. It had been a long time since she displayed herself like that. Max had earlier made a small mark on the wall that was due east, so he quickly grabbed her ankles and swung her around. She actually giggled as he took sightings along the length of her bare body. When everything was set, he eased between her legs to her centre, where he found a warm welcome.

Even better, the eastward dislocation had the effect of making his thrusts seem harder and increasingly rapid. That, combined with his newly late arrivals, eventually moved her along *Cosmo’s* continuum to “very interested in sex” and “almost always” having an orgasm “with a partner”. She began to suggest new positions and methods for lining her up. Once, breathlessly, she suggested that she go on all fours. It took Max far longer than usual to line her up, in part because she seemed to be resisting while at the same time insisting that the task be accomplished with absolute precision. By the time he had them both arranged, the Wife was urging him in the frankest terms to begin the final act. Max accomplished it easily, she being wildly wanton and he stiff as a flagpole. His last memory before the time-jump was her lovely long back extended out before him, her spine precisely in line with the rotation of the earth.
When he caught up in time, he found she had cuddled up and was looking at him softly. “It’s been a long time . . .,” she said.

“We married young, started a family,” Max said quickly, “and we had busy careers. There’s hardly been time. But now we’re in a new phase of our lives.”

Max was back on the street, relieved and grateful that his mind had turned to the business problem at hand. He checked his watch. Five minutes to go. He felt the countless ideas that had been teasing him for days coalesce into a solution. Time to get to work. The remaining item on his mind, the mystery of his secret admirer at the office, would have to wait.

• • •

Max was at the head of the agency’s long table, which he knew was little more than a glorified piece of Plexiglas skilfully designed and polished to look expensive.

Paintings, rented from the government art bank, tastefully lined the tasteful walls. They were well-done and interesting, but not so much that guests would be distracted. The Company Values were inscribed on a plaque: “Kindness, Kindness, Kindness.” When asked about it, the CEO would explain that it was at the insistence of the company founder.

The CEO was to his left, flesh spilling over his collar. Nose hairs were visible, poised to become the leading feature of his physiognomy.

Next to the CEO was Max’s Communications Director, playing the foil to the CEO’s iconoclastic genius. Dressed in spotless casuals, she was calm as a cat enjoying a sunbeam, charming the clients and patiently awaiting her day as head of the firm.

The clients—two men and two women, one in a wheelchair—seemed out of place but he couldn’t put his finger on it. Max fished his notes from his jacket pocket, gave them a quick glance and started in.

“Thank you for coming today,” Max said. “Out of respect for your time, I won’t beat around the bush: people love your product.”

Max’s Communications Director was the first to signal alarm, pushing her note-book away and firing her deer-in-the-headlights look at Max.

Christ, only four words into it and already she’s bitching. Max moved on.

“And they love your employees . . .”

Suddenly the CEO looked like he was about to drive his new Mercedes into a concrete post. He stared at his notepad and muttered something like “For the love of . . .”

“. . . But they hate your company,” Max said.

The clients’ eyes widened as though Max had pulled out a gun. The CEO jumped to his feet and escorted Max to a corner. “They’ll just be a second,” the Communications Director said casually, making it clear it was all part of the creative process.

“Maxie,” the CEO whispered. “The power company was yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Max said neutrally.

“Today it’s the Abilities Bakery. Their bakers are all mentally or physically challenged and they have to lay off four of them. You’re giving them the presentation we did for the power corporation.”
Max pursed his lips: “It just seems like that. Let me run with it.” Worst time-jump ever, he thought.

“Please, no,” said the CEO.

“It’s all good,” Max replied.

He returned to the head of the table and paused for effect.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my partner has reminded me that you’re not ‘suits.’” He looked at each pale face in turn: “A teacher, a retired engineer, a former elite athlete and an accountant with a private practice. You are a volunteer board.

“Sometimes I like to show clients how bad things could be if they don’t take action. It’s a shock tactic. But I can see I’ve done you a disservice. You’ve invested heart and soul in the Abilities Bakery. You are not complacent.”

More pause for effect while he ransacked his memory for the correct talking points.

“And I don’t need these notes,” he said, tossing the power company index cards into a wastebasket. He picked up a brief from in front of the CEO and held it up.

“I’ve read your recovery plan, and what we communications folks call the ‘key messages’ are already written — by you. Here’s how it works:

“When asked about layoffs, you simply say that no one is jobless. Instead, four people who’ve proven their skills at the Abilities Bakery have found jobs working side by side with abled people.

“When asked about the bakery’s future without government funding, you show them your business plan and say that you will double the current staff in five years.

“When asked why you think your plan will work, you say that it was inspired by the courage, determination and resourcefulness that your staff demonstrate every day.

“You say that your staff have taught you to see opportunity where others see adversity.”

Jeez, this is good stuff, Max thought.

When he spoke next, his voice was subdued but strong.

“You can say that, because it’s the truth. You tell them that the Abilities Bakery has a new future. That your product is the best in town because your employees understand their abilities and they are ready to compete for their share of the market and on an equal footing. In the past nine years, no fewer than 14 people have gone from the Abilities Bakery to the mainstream workforce. A remarkable record.”

Max concluded with: “My admiration for your company knows no bounds.” And he meant it.

Half an hour later there were smiles all around as he escorted their satisfied clients to the elevator. By God, Maxie, you’ve pulled it out of the fire again, he thought as he watched them disappear behind the doors. But things weren’t quite as rosy at the debrief.

“You can’t keep doing this,” his Communications Director said even before they got back to the meeting room.

“What do you mean? We’ve been through dozens of scrapes like this.”

The CEO spoke up next. “But, Max, it’s always been because the client wasn’t buying the pitch, not because ... not because you forgot it.”

“First time it’s happened,” he replied. He understood how others could interpret a bad jump as a memory lapse.

“No,” said the Communications Director, with a gentleness that unnerved him. “There was Pike Video, the Archdiocese ...”

“The Archdiocese, those sons of ...”
“Nobody likes them, Max, but you gave them the Boy Scouts pitch.”

“Well, they were very similar.” But Max had no recollection of that pitch. Buried memories usually leave a thread, something you can gently grasp and tug on until the whole thing comes free. But here, there was nothing. Not even a gap where a memory had once been. Max felt his heart picking up speed.

“We’re with you all the way, Max,” the CEO said.

With me all the way?

He stared at the CEO’s manicured hands and the elegant gold ring on his middle finger and felt self-conscious. They were partners, they were friends, they made the same salary. Why did Max feel so out of sync?

“What do you mean ‘with me all the way’?” he asked.

“This sounds like the prelude to a buyout offer or something.”

“No, Max, nothing like that.”

“Well, like what then?”

Now the Communications Director put her hand on his forearm: “It’s just a misunderstanding.”

Of course, it was, Max thought on his way back to the office. I’ll never get them to understand the vagaries of time-jumping.

Still, even though the details of the incident were fading, Max had difficulty shaking off his unease. Then, as if to add to the confusion, he walked into his office and discovered that the secret admirer had struck again: there was a bouquet of tulips on his desk.

Max had lost count of the times he had strolled into his office and found flowers, chocolate and sometimes even cigars on his desk, just sitting there, without wrapping paper or even a note.

Whenever it happened, he was careful to be seen taking the gift home that same day, so that no one would think he was engaged in something improper.

“Your wife is a lucky woman,” his Office Manager would say. “So many flowers.”

But the Office Manager was his prime suspect, so to speak. Without question no one had more access to his office. And he was certainly attracted to her. She had a way of smiling at him and a gallows humour that kept him going through assorted crises. Max trusted her completely. She looked great, too. Sometimes he imagined a wild encounter in the stairwell, and then quickly suppressed the idea. He was loyal to the Wife to the point of ditching the flowers before he got home. Even though she would have been thrilled with them, it just wouldn’t have been right to bring gifts from a would-be rival for his affections.

But now it’s time, he thought, to bring this matter to a close. Max asked the Office Manager to come into his office.

“Waddup,” she said, as usual. They kept it light when working together, no matter what.

He took both of her hands in his. In their long association, he had never touched her. “These gifts, the flowers and chocolates and such, they’re from you, aren’t they? If they are, I understand, but ...”

Her tears were sudden and ferocious. She sputtered out a “No!” and fled the room. Alerted by her ultra-sensitive radar for emotion, the Communications Director peered in from across the hall. Max headed out, down to the street, where he resumed walking. But now the streetscape seemed sinister and made him wonder if his time-jumping problems were permanent. He should phone his brother to ask if he, too, was a time-jumper, and see if he had some advice.
The male voice at the other end was unfamiliar.

“Just a minute,” it said.

Max heard agitated conversation in the background.

Then he heard the staccato of high heels nearing the phone.

“Max?”

It was the Sister-in-law.

“Who was that who answered the phone?”

A sigh. “My new husband.”

In some part of his mind, Max knew what was coming next, but he asked the question anyway.

“You’re divorced?”

“No, Max. Your brother died. You’ve got to stop making these calls.”

The dark wave of awful news threatened to sweep him away; and yet it felt familiar. Another bad jump.

“Yes, that’s right, he’s dead, isn’t he?” Max said quietly.

“Yes.”

“Max, you’ve got to stop this. It’s breaking my heart. Can you get home okay?”

The question startled him almost as much as the bad news. “Yes, of course I can get home. Just tell me one thing ... was he a time-jumper?”

It was a long wait for her reply. Max could hear water somewhere near him, gulls squawking and the traffic rumbling. When she finally spoke, he could barely hear her.

“Yes. Just like you. Go home now. Goodbye, Max.” And then she hung up.

Max took a moment to get his bearings. Good thing because, looking down, Max saw that he was one step from a 20-foot drop into the black water of the harbour. The only barrier was a four-by-four railing at foot level.

In a day of bad jumps, this one took the cake. Max headed for his bus stop, his mind resolutely focused on the act of walking, lest he set off another, perhaps final, time-jump. By the time he boarded the bus, he could feel the pull of home and safety.

As the bus rolled on, the harbour-scare slipped from his mind. Instead, he began to wonder if his increasingly complicated time-jumping theory was some kind of denial, like guys who explain away their chest pains as poor digestion until they collapse on the street.
The Nature of Horse

Spring has arrived late in Halifax, but is no less welcome for it. In a downtown park, tall oaks, beeches and maples sway in the breeze. The sun has shaken off its veil. Its warmth is stronger, but still mild. Winter is forgotten and everything is soft. The leaves are a light green that yields easily to the eye, the breeze as gentle as a lover. Even the concrete sidewalks seem soft underfoot. Max and the Son sit close together, munching fries. Max is surprised by the growing muscularity of the Son, who stops eating occasionally to nuzzle his dad’s arm. The boy inhales his father’s scent and snuggles closer.

They’ve been staring at a huge chestnut-coloured horse harnessed to a tourist buggy across the sidewalk from their bench. The animal is peaceful, but not oblivious.

Max says: “Watch! Watch! He’s going to do it again.”

The horse snorts and shakes its head, sending a great string of snot arcing into the traffic, to the delight of the Son. And then, seeming to use the clamour as cover, the animal subtly pulls the carriage ahead until its head emerges from the shade into a patch of sunlight. As the beast executes the
movement its hooves, big as dinner plates, land on the asphalt as delicately as flower petals.

“Oooh!” the Son hollers, apparently overcome by the controlled power of the animal and his father’s omniscience. They have been watching the animal edge toward the sunlight for a quarter of an hour.

“The driver hardly noticed, did he?” Max says.

The boy shakes his head for emphasis. “No!”

They continue to observe in silence.

“What are we going to do with this apple?” Max asks.

“Mommy gave it to us,” the boy replies, as if that’s all that needs to be said.

The Wife had packed an entire lunch for them, but it was supplemented when Max spotted Bud the Spud’s french fry truck, so neither of them has any appetite left.

“But horses like apples, too,” Max says.

“They do,” the Son says gravely, as if he has known this all along.

“We can give the apple to the horse.”

“Yes!”

They hear leather creaking as the animal turns its massive head toward them. Bizarre, Max thinks, it’s as if it knows it might get the apple. But the Son takes it in stride: “He wants the apple, Daddy.”

The horse is edging toward middle age, but still on the right side of it. Strong, straight, and alert. He returns his calm gaze to the human parade in front of him, but his posture suggests he has not forgotten the apple.

Max and the Son walk toward the carriage owner. The horse watches closely.

Max asks the driver if they can give the apple to his animal. They talk. Max wants assurance that the horse is gentle. The driver wants assurance that Max knows how to feed it safely. Max and Son walk forward and the horse lowers his head toward the boy who, with a little help, holds the apple out with his fingers awkwardly splayed to ensure they aren’t accidentally caught. The animal makes a near-circle with his lips, like thumb and forefinger, and carefully plucks the apple from the boy’s hand. There is a satisfying “pop” as the big jaws crush the fruit.

The horse, his head now fully in the warm sun, closes his eyes as his jaws begin grinding the apple into pulp. Juice flows from the animal’s mouth as Father, Son and carriage owner look on intently. They are captives. For just a moment, they can smell the horse’s oaty odour, feel him savouring the apple, and see the bright force that binds together the countless molecules of his body.

The Son turns to Max.

“Horse, Daddy!” he says, bending at his knees and pointing. “It’s horse. HORSE!”

Max picks up the Son and hugs him with one arm: “Do you want to say goodbye to your new friend?”

“We already said goodbye,” the Son says. “He said he liked the apple.”
THE LINK BETWEEN Halifax and Montreal in the journalistic telegraph is a weak one. Max has been able to learn but three facts before his arrival from Montreal:

1. The city is served by two bad newspapers — a hoary old province-wide broadsheet and a “low-class” tabloid upstart — of which Max is now the editor;
2. In Nova Scotia, it is highly irregular for even a low-class tabloid to be edited by a CFA, short for “come-from-away”, i.e., someone born outside Nova Scotia;
3. His new publisher and boss is known to all who work for him as the Smiling Cobra.

“Max,” says the Smiling Cobra. “We don’t mind CFAs visiting here. We love visitors. We’re happy to see them come and even happier when they go. So, if you want to stay you need to adopt our ways, because we’re not going to adopt yours.”

Max strokes his chin to show that he’s taking it in. “How could it be otherwise?”

“We’re tired of central Canadians coming here and telling us what to do.”

The irony is lost on the Cobra. “Well, there’s work to do, too,” he replies.

Max agrees. The morning’s front page features a huge photo of a dead man’s torso. There are three holes in it. The first two are highlighted by small trails of blood running down the man’s chest. The third is plugged with a screwdriver. The headline is *Cops seek killer with loose screw*. On Max’s arrival, the receptionist remarked to him that she was busy taking cancelled subscriptions.

No surprise there. Max’s reaction was to begin estimating the cost of returning his family to Montreal.

The Smiling Cobra places his hands on his desk as if to stand, but remains oddly still. Max finally spots the iron ring of the engineer on his pinkie. The Cobra sees that his ring has been duly noted and offers that he is a mechanical engineer, recently hired from a bankrupt government-run factory.

The Cobra stands. His torso is weirdly long which, combined with abnormally short legs, means that the effect of his standing up is almost negligible.

“Do you have any experience in the newspaper business?” Max asks.

The Cobra backs away. He inhales deeply and straightens up to fully display his towering torso. He moves his gaze down, causing the tissues of his neck to flare out — hood-like — and almost merge with his ears. The black eyes beneath his narrow forehead somehow line up with his nose and hold Max’s gaze. He maintains that position for several seconds. Then he smiles, his mouth a perfect semicircle. He licks his upper lip.

“Yesss,” he says. “That remark confirms what I have heard about you. A nattering smart-ass. Someone with no respect for authority. It doesn’t matter. I plan to fire you at the first opportunity. I know the Owner in Montreal likes you, but eventually you’ll fuck up so badly that it won’t matter. As for my qualifications, I’ve been an engineer for 10 years and a newspaper is just another system. People are just more parts. I know how to make them run.”

Further, the Cobra explains, the Paper’s readership is based in a fast-growing Halifax suburb, and therefore its miserable circulation numbers will improve on that basis alone.

“Give me a bright cocker spaniel for an editor and a hundred pounds of puppy chow, and this paper will grow,” he says. “You, on the other hand, worked for a crummy Sunday tabloid in Montreal — ”

“This is a crummy tabloid,” says Max.

The Cobra talks over Max — “and then bummed around Latin America for a while before getting fired by the only daily you’ve actually worked for, until now.”

And that’s why Max has to be fired soon, he explains. If the Cobra waits too long to shit-can him, then Max will get credit for the growth and may become impossible to fire.

Max agrees in principle but doubts he has much support in Montreal. Further, it’s clear no amount of market growth on its own will overcome the Paper’s ludicrous content.

He looks around the windowless office, which is on the second floor of a business park strip mall. Below is the newsroom. The floor is bare concrete, the desk is an oak veneer piece obviously rescued from a second-hand store. Bays of cheap fluorescent fixtures provide the lighting. The
only acknowledgement of the Cobra’s high station in life is a private bathroom. Its hollow, unpainted door is open, so Max can see the toilet. The drywall hasn’t been finished.

“Okay,” says Max. “I’m onside. Let me get to work.”

“Just one more thing,” the Cobra says. “This province is run by 14 prominent families. You’ll learn who they are. Don’t get in their way.”

“El Salvador,” says Max.

“What?”

“El Salvador is run by 14 families, not Nova Scotia.”

“You see,” the Cobra hisses. “This is what we mean about CFAs.” He displays his fleshy hood again.

The Cobra turns away from Max, signifying the end of the meeting, but suddenly plants a heel and lurches stiffly back in the direction of his new editor.

“I almost forgot,” he says. “There is an Indonesian guy out there in the newsroom. Your first act as editor will be to fire him. I know you don’t want to do that. You don’t have the balls.”

“Of course. May I ask why?”

“You’ll see. He’s from a hot country. It’s October and beginning to get cold. Already I can see his blood getting thicker, making him slower and slower. I want him gone before winter.”

Max and his publisher engage in a staring contest. Incredulity versus dead certainty. Dead certainty prevails.

“Just to confirm,” Max says. “The blood of people from hot countries thickens in the cold, making them slow down in Canadian winters? Is my understanding correct?”

“Nova Scotian winters,” the Cobra stresses.

Max feels a black hole of fatigue take root somewhere in his head and begin sucking at his energy. He now knows that, for the sake of the Wife and Son, he must don the infamous, imaginary kneepads that hang in the newsroom of the Montreal Daily, and make the Cobra happy. How bad can it be? A few years of “Yes sir. Right away sir” and then they can all return to civilization.

Or, at worst, Toronto.

“Of course. It shall be done,” Max says to the Cobra.

Two steps out of the publisher’s office, though, he knows he won’t do it. Technically, newsroom staffing is his call but, in practice, publishers meddle when they can get away with it. Max is sure Montreal will come down on his side if he forces the issue, but the incident will be recorded as evidence that he cannot “manage up” or “find common ground”. When word of that gets out, as it certainly will, his former colleagues will begin circling high overhead, waiting to swoop down on Max’s new job.

Perhaps he should stall for time. Perhaps the Indonesian will be hit by a bus before Max has to do anything. “I was just about to sign his termination papers when I heard the ambulance pull up to the bus stop,” he’ll tell the Cobra. “Poor guy. At least I won’t have to fire him now. His family will be rich, though, because he’s in our insurance plan, right?”

In a way Max is relieved. He’s long been worried that his lack of emotion in tight situations means he’s a psychopath, but his decision to spare the Indonesian is evidence that he actually has a heart. Or lacks “the balls”.

No matter. Job One now is to send a message to his publisher.
Max steps into his newsroom. There are the usual teetering pillars of yellowing newsprint, which is reassuring. So is the sputter of the single police radio. But all that separates the staff from their adoring public are double-paned floor-to-ceiling windows supported by thin metal frames. Max loves the general public, of course, but prefers to do so from a safe distance and two or three storeys up.

Newsrooms are designed to manage the flow of a lot of information in a short time. Instructions originate from central points and information flows back, provoking revised instructions. The cycle continues amid a miasma of profanity and ego until, many hours later, the presses roll.

But here the desks are scattered like marbles. There is no discernible city desk or business desk or anything indicating that someone is in charge of something. Next to one desk, a white Scottish terrier is lowering its butt into position for a bowel movement. An hour earlier, Max would have been surprised.

“So help me god,” says a low voice to his right. “If that dog craps in here again, I’m going to punt the fucking thing onto the cocksucking freeway.”

This would be a sight worth seeing, Max figures, because the speaker is wearing a bright, flowered summer dress and looks like the mother from The Brady Bunch, only nicer and with better elocution.

The terrier looks at her, apparently getting the point. A guy with a Farley Mowat beard and pipe picks up the beast and carries it through a door leading to the parking lot.

“Och!” he says before exiting.

Max turns in the direction of the female voice. She’s maybe 20 years old, sitting at a desk two rows back. She’s sifting through piles of light brown paper that originated from a loud dot matrix printer. Max surmises that each pile represents a category of wire stories. To her right is the only authentic piece of newsroom hardware he can see—a shiny, four-inch spike with a lethal point at the top. These are standard in newsrooms everywhere. Any story that doesn’t make the cut gets slapped on a spike. This makes it easier to find on a slow news day when, hours later, there’s still a hole between the ads of the next day’s paper and any story, no matter how bad, will do.

Max figures the woman is the wire editor. He judges her to be a pro from the way she curls rejected copy so that she can snap it on the spike with one hand. At the highest levels of the craft, this is accompanied by a sneer and sometimes a muttered “piece of shit.” Max walks over to introduce himself, while at the same time scanning the room for an Indonesian.

His divided attention is a mistake: he catches his foot on a random extension cord and stumbles. He reaches out with his left arm to balance himself, but it lands on another spike sitting on an empty desk.

The pain is blunt at first and then sharp, but mild given that the spike has penetrated halfway into his left forearm. Max continues on to the Wire Editor, extending his good arm to her. She has a nice handshake.

“You must be the new Editor-in-chief,” she says with a British accent.

“Call me Max,” he says. “You from Fleet Street?”

“Winnipeg.”

“Winnipeg?”

“Winnipeg. Born and bred. I needed the accent to get hired. Anglophiles everywhere around here.”

“Is there some guy here from Indonesia?”
“Yup. The Cobra thought his accent was British, too, but he figured out the guy comes-from-away and doesn’t like him anymore.”

She continues to scan wire stories and snap them onto her spike. “He’s over there, on the copy desk.”

Max cannot see anything resembling a copy desk, which is normally several work stations arranged in a U-shape with the news editor in the middle. There is, however, a darker than average man hunched over a computer. Max notes with approval that he’s working on the computer while simultaneously spiking stories.

“Is he any good?” Max asks.

“He’s a star in our small firmament. He’s actually worked at real newspapers—Singapore and Hong Kong.”

“And you?”

“I’m a quick learner.”

There is an awkward silence while Max tries to think of his next question. The Wire Editor breaks the silence. “It’s early in our relationship for personal questions, but I was wondering about that spike in your left arm. Will you be removing it?”

“You noticed, eh?” says Max. “I was thinking of pulling it out right away, but I’m worried about making things worse by grazing tendons and such. Not to mention dealing with bacteria.”

The Wire Editor agrees, noting that this newsroom is more soaked in deadly microbes than most. “Best not to wait too long. There’s a walk-in clinic right in this mall just three doors down. I had a Pap smear there last week. Very efficient.”

“Good to know,” Max says. He says he’ll walk to the clinic with the spike in place, not the least because it will likely get him in to see the doctor faster.

“That gives me a better chance of being back in time for the news meeting,” he adds.

“I’ve heard about news meetings,” she says. “But this has been a weekly for three years and a daily for one. We still haven’t had a news meeting.”

“Who decides what stories to use and where to put them?”

The Wire Editor can barely hide her glee. She smiles sweetly: “The fucking composing room.”

Max gapes.

“Yep, the folks who set the type. Welcome aboard.”

This news causes Max to move the Indonesian problem down on his priority list. He heads for the clinic.
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About the Author

Bill Turpin has worked most of his career as a journalist, first in Montreal and more recently Halifax, but has also afflicted government and the communications world. He is currently living off his wits while studying to be a gadfly. Turpin is married and the father of two cats. Max’s Folly is his first novel.