

## **The Laughing Policemen**

by  
Jonathan Lomas

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I guess it started with our return from an equatorial adventure in Indonesia. We needed a car. We'd sold the old Nissan Multi – we called it our bread van with its sliding doors and delivery demeanour. Why let it gather dust and rust while on sabbatical? So among the flurry of returning tasks our family of four needed a new people mover.

The thing is we'd been spoiled while away. Bowing to the expectation of our Indonesian hosts and suppressing our natural aversion to having servants, we'd employed Harjono as our personal driver (along with Jemiyon the house boy/gardener and Iyam the cook). He'd negotiated the initial purchase of our car – a delightful Toyota Kijang, which means running deer in Indonesian – as well as its end-of-sabbatical sale. He'd tended it as the mechanic and taken full responsibility for navigation and chauffeuring. He'd even relieved us of the need to arise at some ungodly weekday hour – we were on sabbatical after all – to get the kids to school in the early morning.

I have three lasting impressions of Harjono. First, whatever the destination or time of day he had an unerring eye for a sliver of shade in which to park, thus facilitating his favourite off-duty pastime: dozing. Second, the aroma of cloves from his Kretek cigarettes lingered like a recently baked apple pie in our Kijang. Finally there was, and presumably still is, his pragmatic spiritual belief combining the animist elements of traditional Javanese Kebatinan with modern mores. When his wife fell sick he not only asked us to pay for the western hospital visits and medications (which we did) but also to lend him our running deer to transport his wife to her birth village (which we also did). There the resident shaman exorcised the evil spirits that had invaded her because their city home was too close to the local cemetery.

But interesting as Harjono is I digress. The point is that we had fallen out of practice on the car thing. Furthermore, we had developed Rolls Royce tastes with even less than a bread van budget

– our adventures abroad had reduced us to near penury. A car loan was the only solution. Having grown up with parents who believed all forms of debt were only a pound of flesh away from eternal damnation my enquiries at the bank focused on the shortest possible payback period. This turned out to be twenty four months; two years teetering on the edge of debtors’ prison.

With the bank’s cash in hand I went in search of the perfect compromise between luxury and budget. My philosophy of vehicle purchase has always been to forego the new with its immediate loss of value once driven off the lot and seek out the nearly new. Something as spacious as our relinquished Kijang – seven seats and commandingly high off the road – but equipped with all the bells and whistles that North America’s best had to offer.

Now Harjono would have shunned the commercial world of dealerships and used car lots and merely put word out amongst his dense network of fellow drivers. With some Kebatinan magic a deal would emerge. Or so went our impression of how it all worked. But that was Indonesia and this was Canada. So off I went trolling through the classifieds (back in those days newspapers actually had useful classifieds), visiting dealers and talking to my mechanic. The latter being my paltry equivalent to Harjono’s network. These forays yielded nothing until ...

It was a Saturday morning and I was visiting the last Dodge/Plymouth dealer in the city. I’d drawn another blank, was about to leave when I spotted our white beauty in a clean-up bay.

“What about that one?” I enquired.

I was subjected to the usual sales spiel, rattling off every irrelevant characteristic along with a liberal smattering of adjectives to appeal to my emotions: “Oh, a real beauty that one. Plymouth Voyager coming off a two-year lease. Just arrived and in the last stages of detailing before we put it on the lot. You’ve a good eye for a bargain Jonathan, I can call you Jonathan right? Seven-passenger, cargo space to spare, four cylinders with overhead cam fuel injection. Automatic transmission using the new continuous variable sport system. Lady driver ...”

You get the idea.

It was the running boards that caught my eye – made it look like something out of a Bonnie and Clyde movie.

A drive around the block and down the highway had me smugly looking down upon all those sedate sedans as I piloted aloft in my multi-adjustable bucket seat surveying an array of dazzling instrumentation. I was sold.

Now for the negotiation.

I felt well prepared, Indonesia my training ground. There just about everything required hard-nosed bargaining. Even the laundry lady expected back-and-forth banter to arrive at a win-win price, usually resolving what started as a mere few cents difference. These hardened hagglers taught me the golden rule, the Trumpian art of the deal: look stern and steadfast and open with an offer that is twice the difference away from the asking price as your targeted final payment.

For the mathematically inclined:

$$O = A - [2 \times (A - T)]$$

where O is your opening offer, A is the asking price and T is your target price.

For the less mathematically inclined: they ask 20K you want to pay 18 so you open with 16.

Now I've taught you this nugget of negotiation you will sail through life accumulating wealth beyond belief, right? Unfortunately not. Theory (and Indonesia) is one thing, practice (and a Dodge/Plymouth dealer in Canada) something else. My opening offer was greeted with stunned silence. The look from the salesman best suited the sight of maggots crawling from a restaurant salad. "Well," I thought, "at least I've shaken his confident composure."

As the power of speech seeped back into his being he spluttered "I'm afraid we'd be losing money if we did that sir." (Whatever happened to that friendly first name basis I wondered?)

Then he added, in a tone dripping with sarcasm, “At that price we’d actually be paying you to buy the car. Perhaps we could include some new floor mats instead.”

“Oh,” I said, knocked off my smooth path to a triumphant win-win conclusion. Meekly I asked, “Could you do a bit better than new floor mats?”

Within moments I’d wrestled him to the ceiling, driving not a bargain but at least our new beauty off the lot.

Two years and many kilometres of people-hauling later we arrived at that day of true ownership – our last payment to the bank. This turned out to be more of an event than expected. Not that we didn’t plan for a memorable occasion at home. We did. That rainy night we shared a special meal, with the loan papers as our centrepiece, and finished it with flare – literally. We clinked our celebratory glasses of wine and set a match to the indenturing contract before us. The simultaneous glow of its dying embers and our satisfaction was, however, rudely interrupted by the squeal of spinning tires.

“What was that?” asked my wife.

“Probably that crazy kid with the souped up Mustang two doors down.”

“Really? Sounded closer than that. Like in *our* driveway.”

“No way, it was the kid down the road,” I insisted, taking another sip of wine.

My wife’s concern was not so easily assuaged, my wine-infused assurance not enough. So, glass still in hand, I sauntered over to the kitchen window and, ready to add emphatic confirmation to my earlier assertion, peered through the dark at our driveway.

It was empty.

Now before this tale unfolds further I have to share something for you to fully comprehend what was going through my head at that moment. It is a practical joke I had occasionally played on my wife. Once or twice over the years, when I knew she would be driving that evening, I had not parked the car in the driveway but, rather, hidden it some distance up the road. On these select evenings she would exit the house only to return in short order still clutching the keys and demanding to know where I had left the car. I would feign ignorance of her problem and, keeping a straight face (something that, if I do say so myself, I am quite good at), claim that I had, as usual, left it in the drive. In the ensuing back and forth it wouldn't take long before she, aided by my deadpan retorts, would conclude that the car had been stolen. It was not until she approached the phone to call the police that I would finally let her in on my devilish deceit. For some reason she never found this as amusing as I did.

Perhaps you see where this is going.

My first thought on viewing the empty driveway was: "When did she slip out and hide it? How did she do that?"

"Okay, where did you park it?" I demanded.

My wife is not good at keeping a straight face. Her lower lip quivers and you can almost see the muscles straining as she works to prevent her 'gotcha' smirk from erupting. None of these tell-tale signs were present as she denied any complicity in the car's absence. I was worried. I sought further assurances that this was just her pay-back for my own pranks. None were forthcoming. At this point I went outside for a closer inspection of the driveway. What I expected to find I don't know. That the car had magically shrunk (that Kebatitan thing again?) and I'd find it in miniature there on the driveway? Who knows. But not only did I fail to find any evidence of our vehicle, either in the driveway or parked up the road, but also I encountered our neighbour who, hearing the squeal of tires, had ventured to his front porch. He reported that he had been just in time to see our car vanishing around the corner at some speed.

I could deny it no longer. The car was gone, stolen at the exact moment of celebration.

I hollered to my wife, “Call the police dear ... for real,” and slunk back inside.

As we awaited the arrival of an officer of the law our minds turned to what Harjono might have done in such circumstances. We realized that in the rarified atmosphere of car ownership in a country as poor as Indonesia, where only very rich people and foreigners had cars and all had drivers, such a theft was unlikely. It would present the perpetrator with some insurmountable problems. To whom could he sell the stolen vehicle? If it surfaced in that close-knit network of drivers to which Harjono belonged its nefarious origins would very quickly become evident. If it was used for private purposes with no driver it would stick out like a sore thumb. No, car theft was an improbable occurrence in our Indonesian context.

This was not the case in Cuba where our eldest had been on university exchange and living with a host family in the bustling city of Havana. Despite the family’s economic struggles they had saved enough over the years to acquire their very own, very dilapidated 1958 Chevy. Now for ordinary citizens in Cuba private ownership of a vehicle is illegal but, as so many surreptitiously told us when we visited our daughter, “in Cuba everything is illegal but anything is possible”. Given the ostensible illegality of their purchase, they could neither register the vehicle with official sources nor purchase insurance. Unfortunately calamity struck them after only a few short months of ownership. It was stolen from the street outside their house. They had no recourse, no remedy for they could neither report it to the police nor claim insurance. Their years of saving vanished in a Kafkaesque cloud.

These recollections alternately depressed us – no Indonesian-style network of kinship to protect us in Canada – and gave us some succour – there’s always someone worse off than you, quite possibly in Cuba.

It was in this mood of serious contemplation that we greeted the policeman who knocked on our door. He took a seat at our table and, head down, studiously took notes in his black book as we recounted our tale of woe. However, as we set the scene – the bottle of celebratory wine, the flaming loan papers, the false accusations of pranksterism – his writing hand slowed and his eyes

drifted upward. A slight crease grew around the edges of his mouth. He stopped taking notes. As if to speed us to our conclusion he forwent further questions. By the end he had succumbed to a full-fledged grin and, without uttering a word to us, lifted his radio to his mouth. With a crackle of static in the background he burst into laughter as he communicated with headquarters: “Hey guys, you have got to hear this!” He proceeded to repeat our entire story, punctuated with enforced pauses for his and his colleagues’ uncontrolled mirth. Initially my wife and I, still mired in the awfulness of it all, looked on in dismay. However, as we heard our own story being re-told the humour could no longer escape us. We joined with the laughing policemen.

*The story does have a happy ending. As the policeman predicted – once he’d wiped the tears of hilarity from his eyes and returned to the serious business of policing – the car was found that night dumped in a suburban street after the thief had driven it home to avoid the rain. When returned to us a couple of weeks later the car had already been processed by the insurance company and, without even the bother of our involvement, emerged fully restored from the auto body shop.*