

BACK TO THE FUTURE



It was warm, very warm ... hot actually, realised Doctor Who as he emerged from Tardis, his telephone booth time machine, at the corner of Halifax's Barrington and Prince Streets. He was momentarily overwhelmed with panic, perhaps he had pressed the wrong key on the console again! He checked, noting with relief the date, April 1st 2063. Why then was the weather so unseasonably warm? Mopping the perspiration from his brow with one end of his scarf, he removed his greatcoat and glanced enviously at his assistant, Clemmie. She, like all television assistants across the time-space continuum was scantily glad: deliciously cool in a flimsy mini dress. It was windy too, noted Doctor Who, as a strong eddy mischievously lifted the hem to reveal her shapely posterior. "Wow", he thought, then immediately dismissed the image: *this* was a children's program, *that* wasn't in the script. Holding down her dress, Clemmie glanced in both directions along Barrington Street, anxious to determine whether her windy indiscretion had entered the public domain, but the street was empty, devoid of traffic, pedestrian and automotive. "Well" she said "I suppose it is a Sunday; but why are all of the shops boarded up?" The buildings looked derelict, gaping holes in their upper floors where once were windows. "Oh dear" sighed Doctor Who, "let's find refreshment, there's bound to be a Tim Hortons at the ferry terminal."

Turning into Prince Street, they headed downhill towards the harbour.

It was eerily quiet. Doctor Who was uneasy, perhaps the city had succumbed to a Dalek attack: Halifax's financial district felt like a ghost town. A block before they reached the harbour, they met the water. Lower Water Street was gone; the buildings in the block before it abandoned, their lower floors completely submerged by an encroaching harbour.

"Of course!" exclaimed Doctor Who, smacking his forehead with the palm of his hand, "Global warming! That explains the hot weather. And the Greenland Ice Sheet must have melted too, that's why the harbour starts here now, a block uphill from the old waterfront!"

Clemmie smiled patiently, she had reached the same conclusion an age ago.

"Let's move uphill then" she said.

They turned, retraced their steps up Prince Street and headed northwards along Granville Street towards Province House. The ancient building's yellow sandstone façade smiled benevolently down at them in the sunshine: the property was immaculate, an oasis in a desert of decay. On its forecourt a line of red flags snapped smartly in the

breeze, complemented by beds of red and yellow tulips. A line of young people, five deep, queued patiently in the heat at the front door. The line-up snaked out through the gates northwards towards George Street, then disappeared out of sight around the block.

“Hmm” murmured Doctor Who “democracy still appears to be alive and well: just look at that crowd waiting to get into the Legislature.”

Just then, the doors opened and a Chinese official emerged. “Consulate closed for today” he shouted “come back tomorrow morning at eight.” He repeated the words in English.

The crowd groaned their disappointment and started to disperse.

“What’s going on?” asked Doctor Who of a young man.

The latter gave him a puzzled look.

“We’re waiting for visas of course” he said “there’s all sorts of work in China: several of my friends are there. Now that Atlantic U teaches Mandarin as a second language I stand a good chance; if only I could get through that damn door.”

“Atlantic U?” queried Doctor Who.

“Atlantic University” explained the young man, “I was at the Dalsmu campus. Got an honours in DP ... Hiss and Piss.”

“DP ... Hiss and Piss. I’m afraid I’ve never heard of that subject” said a bewildered Doctor Who.

“Degenerative politics” explained the young man “how history pissed away our future ... resulted in the bankruptcy of this province, others too, because the politicians were so focused on their own re-election they refused to accept the obvious until it was too late”. He sounded angry.

Doctor Who was intrigued. “We were going to get some refreshment” he said, “perhaps you would like to join us?”

The young man eyed Clemmie appreciatively. “Sure” he said, “why not; I fancy a beer after hanging around all day for that visa. There’s still one bar operating in the downtown. Follow me.”

As they approached George Street two ancient office towers reared up before them. At first sight they appeared abandoned, many of their windows were broken and the top three floors of one building were blackened with fire. However as they came closer it became apparent that the towers were still occupied, a steady stream of people were entering and exiting the ground floor.

“Squatters” explained the young man, noticing Clemmie’s enquiring glance. “Got my pad there. I can show you” he added hopefully.

Clemmie sighed inwardly, men were so obvious. “Perhaps later” she said, smiling sweetly.

They turned uphill along George Street and crossed Barrington Street into the Grand Parade, now a community garden. Ahead of them they could see the slopes of Citadel Hill, waist high in millet and other crops. The Town Clock was in an advanced stage of decay, the roof had collapsed and the clock tower now housed only pigeons.

The little group turned south along Argyle Street. Its intersection with Prince Street was dominated by a huge structure spanning two city blocks, and topped by two office towers. A large sign proclaimed its function “The World Trade and Conversation Centre”. Despite it being Sunday, the complex was a hive of activity.

“Is this the downtown’s financial district?” asked a puzzled Doctor Who, “bankers working the weekend?”

“Bankers?” said the young man, “Of course not: they’re all located in Asia now. This is a call centre, outsourced from India. The pay is terrible and the hours are unreal ... but it’s better than working in the garment industry, they’re housed in the basement.”

He pushed open the door of a small building, its entrance choreographed by a partially lit flickering sign “The Economy xxxx Shop”. Inside, the stignian gloom was relieved by a few guttering candles. Other than a barman gloomily wiping down a sign reading “Cash with Order. Hard Currency Only”, the pub was deserted.

“Hard currency? I have Euros” offered Doctor Who.

The barman gave him a hard look. “Euros?” he said, “What the hell are Euros buddy? We only accept Chinese Yuan or American dollars.”

“American dollars then” decided Doctor Who, “Three beers please”.

“Three thousand bucks” replied the barman, “Cash only.”

“A thousand dollars a beer” protested Doctor Who before reluctantly handing over the money and carrying the drinks back to the table, “I suppose we reap what we sow; it must have been that quantitative easing!” He addressed the young man “You were telling us about DP ... Hiss and Piss?”

The young man’s hands tightened around his glass. “We were sold out: it’s not as though it wasn’t predicable. An aging population, insolvent health care system and a rapidly shrinking workforce unable any longer to carry the burden of a bloated civil service. It must have been apparent fifty years ago! But instead of reducing their overhead by amalgamating the four provinces, cutting the size of the civil service, privatising Crown Corporations such as the Liquor Commissions, selling off their real estate, combining and privatising their health care systems, outsourcing services and eliminating those stupid provincial trade barriers, the politicians sailed on as though there was no tomorrow. Which of course there wasn’t ... isn’t.” He was bitter. “Everybody must have known half a century ago.

We were their future ... how could they have been so selfish?"

The young man smiled apologetically. "Sorry" he said, "I do go on ... Hiss and Piss you know."

"Let's go" said Clemmie to Doctor Who, "back fifty years. I think I might write a Newsletter."