

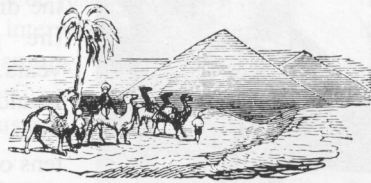
Oh, the Irony of it All

by Samantha Colvin

No one has ever charged television sitcoms with over-intellectualism, but even an ugly duckling does on occasion produce a swan. NBC's *The John Larroquette Show* recently served up a pearl of wisdom to die-hard viewers. Set in a "hollywood" bus station, the resident homeless man approaches his friend working behind the food counter. In reply to the demand for a dollar, the concessioner laments, "the last time I gave you a dollar you called me four times from that phone over there." Gazing back, the beggar retorts in his best mid-western accent, "everyone loves irony, but no one is willing to pay for it."

It is true. Irony rests close to our hearts.

The United States Armed Forces—certainly no strangers to irony—recently unveiled plans for future beach exercises in North Carolina. As part of a military-funded scientific project to research the changing shoreline, technicians will construct transitory coastal fortifications made from the finest local stone. (That's "sandcastles" to civilians like you and me). To date, castle designs remain classified.



For thousands of Florida retirees the beach remains off limits to the military. But if the Canadian government has its way, they may soon be spending less time stretched out on the sand. In an effort to encourage affluent middle-aged and senior citizens to spend their savings in Canada, the Canadian Ministry of Tourism has replaced image-oriented television advertising spots with glossy brochures, ads in such publications as *Modern Maturity*, and even 1-800 numbers.

Since eighty percent of all visitors to Canada come from south of the 49th parallel, Canada's tourism industry has felt the pinch of European and Asian appeal to adventurous Americans. Rather than targeting the international traveler, Tourism Canada hopes to entice the domestic *voyageur*. Said Debra Ward, spokeswoman for the Tourism Industry Association of Canada: "Put Canada up against a Kenyan safari or the Eiffel Tower and it's a hard sell. Put it up against Cleveland, and Winnipeg starts looking really good."

Despite its good intentions, Tourism Canada appears to have misjudged its target audience, and its snazzy new brochures ran head on into an optical hurdle. Now, to help readers with the finer print, a small plastic magnifying glass is included along with the information package. But just think of all the trees the government saved by not printing the materials in large print to start with.

If the Ministry of Tourism provides a magnifying glass to

travelers flocking to Canada, I would suggest they also remember to pack a toothbrush. Dental hygiene giant Oral B recently conducted a study in which they uncovered a perhaps not surprising fact. Ninety-seven percent of those surveyed reported that, having forgotten to bring a toothbrush with them on an overnight stay, they would most definitely not borrow a friend's.



Some of you may or may not be happy to hear the results of another survey, this one by the American Hospital Association in Chicago. Forty-seven percent of Americans replied that, yes, they would indeed donate without permission the organs of a dead family member.

Yet heartening, rather than ironic, is the fact that a homeless person asking for change nowadays may be after more than a cup of coffee. Three years ago, the Worker Center of Seattle instituted a program—Community Voice Mail (CVM)—providing voice mail boxes for the city's homeless. Using a combination of public and private funding, such voice mail has become increasingly ubiquitous around the United States.

Many otherwise employable homeless people are often overlooked for jobs because they have no phone. With voice mail, not only can they be reached but, perhaps more importantly, they can avoid the social stigma tied to homelessness by giving the impression of having an address. The pilot project met with staggering success: of the 148 homeless involved, 126 found work and 78 were able to find new housing. Moreover, average time spent on welfare dropped by two weeks, from eight to six.

With the system now in place throughout many American cities, debates are raging over whether these boxes should be used only for employment and housing calls or whether personal messages are permissible; how much the homeless themselves should pay for the system; and whether 1-800 numbers would be better than requiring participants to find a quarter to call their voice mail. All in all, while homelessness remains a tragedy, having a phone does open doors for a way out.

Speaking of extrication, in the November 2, 1993 municipal elections, 65% of Staten Island's residents voted to secede from New York City. With its 380,000 inhabitants, an independent Staten Island would become the state's second largest city.

Staten Islanders are tired of what they believe is exploitation by the other boroughs. Not only do they feel that they pay more in taxes than they receive in services, they are also irate about the mountains of city garbage that pile up on their isle and on barges in their surrounding waters. The tension has by no means been defused by City attempts to raise the price of the Staten Island ferry which, at 50¢ a ride, remains the cheapest form of public transportation.

Is this the Balkans in our backyard? ●