

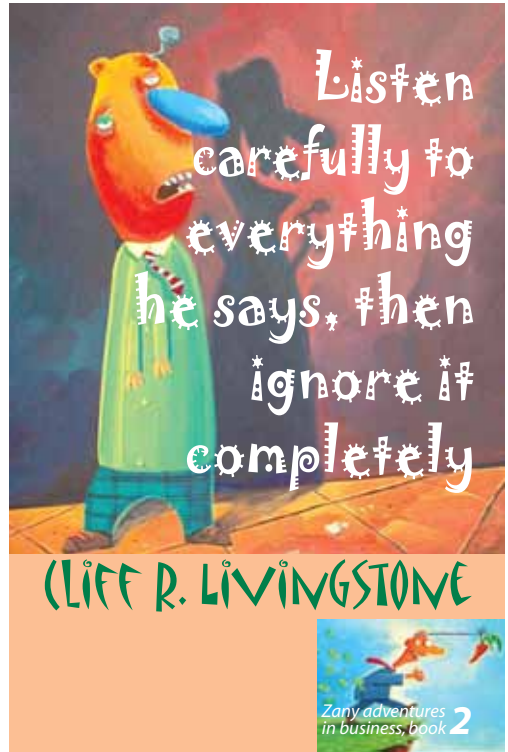


Cliff Livingstone (Rt)

He’s turned down the McDonald’s franchise for Canada—twice, and

once had the Athabaska oil sands leases in his possession. Owner of a multimillion dollar website, yet he can’t turn any of this into a fortune, big or small. He has turned these and dozens of other amazing stories into this book for your reading enjoyment.

Book 2 in the “CliffR” mini-series has a lifetime of funny stories about chasing the brass ring in business, from music to software to flowers to websites. Stories about John Lennon, Rochdale, selling flowers in a biker bar, being faster than the Snowbirds, NABU, and selling speakers to the future hearing impaired. You get to meet more interesting characters from the CliffR reality such as Coupon John and Ottawa’s Max Keeping. Seventy stories of adventures in Canadian business. Or one long adventure in “close but missed” opportunities, brushes with fame and fortune, humourously described in short, true, autobiographical stories.



Selling posies in a biker bar

My flower selling days had its start in early 1972 with some friends in Vancouver BC. For a while we sold in Spokane, Washington. We would often head out for week or two week-long flower blitzes through the bar crazy territory south and east of Spokane and into Montana.

I was on the back roads of Montana one week with a couple of the friends and a big shiny waste paper basket full of roses and carnations. From Missoula, our week-long flower blitzes would take us down through Helena the Capitol City. We would then head back up towards Butte and Anaconda. Altogether over a year, we went through

Butte twice and Anaconda once.

Like brother and sister, Butte was the mine, Anaconda was the smelter. Anaconda was, maybe still is, home to the world’s largest freestanding smokestack.

The smokestack was red brick and enormous. It almost kind of made you think of Jack and the beanstalk because it was a whole city block wide at the base and went way up there. It was also quite the belcher. Talk about a finger up to the environment.

Likewise, the mine itself wasn’t all that hard to find. It sat smack dab right on half of downtown Butte at the time. As the mine encroached into the city day by day like a Pac Man relentlessly gobbling up your good stuff, the city was being moved a street at a time by engineers to a new location way out in the boonies, way out of way of the shovel. An unfailing example of the good old “American way” of making money at all costs.

The town of Anaconda was way off the beaten path. The only thing to do in Anaconda apparently was to work and drink, because the only thing in town besides the five square miles of smelter were a few small houses and a whole lot of big bars.

On the trip through, my friends dropped me off with a full load of flowers around seven in the evening on one of the town’s more promising strips. The cue up was that they would pick me up again at eleven.

The strip looked like any small residential commercial zone away from the principal main drag in any reasonably small sized town just about anywhere in North America. Namely, a few storefronts and the rest all houses.

At every intersection though was a hot spot watering hole or two. A flower seller’s dream come true.

I had already finished plying up one side of the street and had been busily working my way back down the other. It was round about nine o’clock in the evening. The next place up was a really neat looking little place, quaint, with weathered barn siding and a liberal festooning of wagon wheels and lanterns all over the place.

“Ah”, I said to myself in eager anticipation, “a Country and Western bar”. At any given moment on the planet, the two things you could always count on were that taxes would go up and you would sell a flower or two in a country and western bar. It was either something about smelling the roses along the way or that everyone suddenly saw light at the end of the tunnel.

At any rate, well pumped before I even got into the place I did my usual quick check for tidy attire and no spinach bits in my teeth. Spinach in your teeth at an inopportune time is one of the things that goes off in life like clockwork when you’re trying to make a good impression.

Satisfied that all was well, I burst through the door and headed straight for the first table asking if anyone would like to buy a flower.

My plan had been to do a few tables on the way up to the bar at the back to get a buzz going. Then ask the manager for permission to do the rest of the place hoping they would by then notice how well it had been going over. This was a common and well-honed corporate practice called priming the pump. Where time was of the essence and priority superseded the normal protocol of asking the manager first then waiting a couple of weeks while they made up their mind.

I stopped in mid-sentence halfway to the first table. Actually I stopped in mid-stride. I had stopped so abruptly my right leg was still frozen halfway up in the up cycle.

Then in what is surely one of the peppiest little bromides ever uttered in the annals of flower selling history, I answered myself out loud by saying, “Nope, guess not”, and went straight back out the door in the exact reverse order of the way I had come in. Literally, like a video tape in reverse.

What had stopped me so suddenly in my tracks was the fact that I had looked up to see nothing but a sea of black tee shirts, black caps, black beards, lots of tattoos, and big round white eyes staring out at me from slack jawed blank faces like a momentary stoppage of time. It was a goddamn biker’s bar.

In the twelve odd years I eventually sold flowers around the country north and south and east and west, that was the one and only time I ever beat a hasty retreat. I think what had probably tipped me off so abruptly was the sound of about a hundred and fifty rattlesnake tails snapping instantly to life when I first came bursting through the door carrying a big waste paper basket full of posies.

I may also have subconsciously heard the unmistakable patented sound of a dozen or so Harleys idling quietly out back. “Potato, potato, potato.”

Faster than a speeding Snowbird

My flower selling career actually had its real actual start in Vancouver, BC. I woke up one morning selling flowers in hand in late 1971, and found myself eventually selling flowers though bars and restaurants all across the country and for awhile into the States. I had gone back into the rock scene, only this time as a hawkker instead of talker.

The long and short of it is I ended up selling flowers for almost twelve years altogether. The last few years were spent in partnership with Greydie in Ottawa. In fact, selling flowers was my main reason for coming to Ottawa in the first place. Strictly economic.

They say that when you’ve seen one you’ve seen them all. When it comes to identical twins nothing could be truer. Though unlike some twins who are peas in a pod

and stay together for life, for most of ours Greydie and I were absolutely identical in appearance but as un-identical as individuals can be. I did my own thing, he did his own thing. We were often in cities thousands of miles apart for three or four years at a time.

Even when in the same city, we usually ran in our own circles and had our own circle of friends. We stayed mainly each with our own friends and didn’t talk with each other sometimes for months on end.

Even today, even though dire economic circumstances have joined us together at the hip for the last twenty-five years in Ottawa, you might say we are two completely different people with exactly the same face. In other words no twin-based twilight zone of hazy veiled realities. Well, most of the time.

I have to tell you, even at the tender age of sixty-eight, as hard as I’ve worked at it over the years, I’ve never been able to be in two places at the same time. One place at a time I can handle but not two.

For a few minutes back there in 1977, it looked to someone like I’d refined it to a fine art. Then I was selling flowers in Halifax/Dartmouth in the lobster-drenched East Coast Canadian Province of Nova Scotia. Greydie was in the elk-drenched area of Whitehorse in Canada’s Northwest Territories.

One Sunday evening in the early summer I had been doing my first run through the Matador Club in downtown Dartmouth. It was about nine-thirty in the evening.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw four guys come in wearing blue jump suits and sit down at a table. They looked little different than cross country moving van grunts. That was nothing out of the ordinary here as moving van crews ebbed and flowed through the Maritimes on a daily basis and usually ended up at the Matador for respite and to get drunk.

After about ten minutes of casual selling around the tables, I had worked my way around to their table and came up carrying my huge bucket of flowers. “Anybody like to buy some flowers”, I asked in my usual casual non-assuming way.

The four guys leapt instantly to their feet, eyeballs bulging like pointed arrowheads from their eye sockets and hair standing straight on end like bristles of a hair brush. All four sets of hands were waving frantically in front of them like trying to wipe away an impossibility.

If I had pulled out a live grenade and popped it into the middle of the table, I couldn’t have imagined them coming out of there any faster. Al Capp, who used to do the comic strip Li’l Abner, had this particular shock syndrome down pat. All they could do was babble something incoherent like, “no, no, no”.

These were four seriously freaked-out dudes I kid you not. Table, chairs, and drinks had gone flying in all directions. Pandemonium wasn’t even close a second cousin.

Everyone else in the place thought the flying table and chairs signalled a big one on the start up. The testosterone was starting to hit the lymph glands real fast and the whole place was gearing up for a good one. I had not the foggiest idea of what was going on.

The moving van guys weren’t helping much either. They just continued standing there gulping air like a fish out of water, still frantically waving their hands in front of them like no, no, no! They were obviously totally blown away and well beyond any thought of quickly re-appearing. Although what sounded a lot like “teleport” started slipping into the babbling every now and then.

After a few more seconds the word, “Whitehorse”, also started poking its way in through the croaking conversation. “Ah”, I said, the great light of understanding finally dawning at last, “You must have been on the road out west sometime in the last half year or so on a moving van run and run into Greydie hustling up some flower sales somewhere in Whitehorse”. “No, no”, they wheezed and geezled, eyes bulging like they were looking at a ghost, “it was you, it was you”, plus something that definitely sounded a whole lot like “teleport”.

Suddenly one of them bolted for the door leaving me to deal with the other three air gulping gold fishes and a quickly gathering crowd hoping that maybe it was finally going to go down. The other guy was back in about five minutes and much calmer. “Ok guys”, he said, “sit down, it’s ok, I got the story”. Then he started to explain.

First of all I need to explain a little something myself. If a half-bombed patron in a dimly-lit bar sees someone standing in front of them selling flowers out of a big waste paper bucket full of posies, then sees another guy doing the same thing somewhere else, then even if the first guy is short and fat and the second guy is mountain high and thin, chances are better than good that between the blur of the poor lighting, the dominance of the flower bucket, and the influence of the booze, the patron will conclude it’s the very same person. Now factor in the element of absolutely identical twins.

During the mid-seventies, Greydie had also been in Halifax, Dartmouth for awhile selling flowers. Don’t forget we were absolute peas in a pod. This, plus the bucket, caused more than a few people around the Halifax/Dartmouth area to have a minor conniption.

Sometimes someone would see me in a bar in Dartmouth, red line it over to a bar in Halifax only to find Greydie already in there selling flowers. The problem was, “how could I have beaten them”. They had gone from point A to point B at illegal speeds. So how could I basically be in two places at the same time?

Then during that summer we visited some flower selling buddies in Calgary. Afterwards Greydie decided to move up to Whitehorse in the Northwest Territories

to ply his luck there. I had stayed on in Calgary until the early fall and then had gone back to Halifax/Dartmouth to go it by myself. Halifax/ Dartmouth, in case you didn’t know, is over forty-two hundred miles straight as a die southwest from Whitehorse as the crow flies.

The episode at the Matador was on a Sunday night almost a year later. The Whitehorse Air Force Base had just held their annual air show the day before. The featured act of the show that year was the famed Canadian Forces Snowbirds precision jet flying team. And now comes the Twilight Zone intro music.

The team had done their bit, landed, cleaned up, had dinner on the base, and eventually found their way into downtown Whitehorse for a night on the town.

In due course they ran into Greydie grinning ear to ear behind his big bucket of flowers in a bar at the big Motel. They yakked a bit, bought some flowers, and went back to drinking. The next day found them in the motel restaurant having lunch with the owner. Greydie went in for lunch. Since Greydie and the owner were buds, the owner in no time had them all sitting around the same table chewing the fat.

At about twelve-thirty noon, the Captain stood up and said, “Well boys, we’ve got our next show to do”. So everyone said their goodbyes, hands were shook all around including Greydie’s. The flyboys grabbed a cab to the airport, then took off into the wild blue yonder to their next gig going east faster than a speeding bullet.

Their jets headed due southeast towards Halifax/Dartmouth at over nine hundred miles an hour. They were scheduled to do a show later that day and you think your schedule is hectic.

They had even fuelled in mid air over North Bay, Ontario which is the part I like. After losing more than three hours clock time for flying into the sun, they arrived at Shearwater Air Force Base in Dartmouth just in time to be the grand finale of its annual air show.

The Snowbirds came in out of the clouds, did their loops, landed, cleaned up, had dinner on the base, grabbed a cab, and hit the Matador Club in downtown Dartmouth just after nine-thirty in the evening. Just as I had gotten there to do my first round. The lads were dressed to the nines in their famous blue jump suits which looked exactly like blue moving grunt overalls only with expensive stitched logos.

So they had just shaken Greydie’s hand about seven hours earlier by the clock, forty-two hundred miles away in a die-straight line to the compass, at nine hundred miles an hour in the upper stratosphere and no rest stops, and had fuelled in mid-air over North Bay to boot. It was humanly impossible for anyone to have beaten them to the punch from Whitehorse to Halifax unless they had teleported. And there I was, the living proof, standing smack dab in front of them grinning from ear to ear like the man from Glad.

I can’t imagine any circumstance on the planet where someone could have had their heads torn off faster than that. Or found themselves so suddenly in the middle of the Twilight Zone quicker than these poor blokes. I mean I had to have teleported to be there. So they did what any self-respecting team of acrobatic jet pilots would have done under circumstances like that and completely freaked out.

What finally calmed them all down was that the Captain, evidently the more pragmatic one of the crew, had decided to find out the sure way by the first principle, Missourian way of ‘show me’, and had gone out and phoned the motel in Whitehorse asking frantically if *sic*, “That guy’s still there selling flowers”.

Greydie was in fact in the bar on a happy hour run when the Captain called. I shudder to think what would have happened if Greydie had decided to take the night off or had run out of flowers.

So again, what are the odds, I ask? I don’t think it’s even worth trying to figure out the numbers on this one. Personally, when you put the Snowbirds’ perspective together with mine, and mine together with theirs, the whole universe could go completely around again, twice, before this particular set of circumstances could ever come up again. Don’t forget, until the explanation, I had no more of an idea about what was going on about it than they did.

At any rate, all things considered, I’m putting this in for the record for the world’s biggest kerfuffle to do with twins. I figure I’m also probably part and parcel of the Snowbirds’ perpetual scrapbook entry for the world’s most up and running déjà whew.

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