

Relief Initiative



STAY SOBER

I don't cry. Not anymore, anyway. I do have those typical vague memories of crying, like when I was lost on a ferry when I was eight and it was docking and I couldn't find mom and dad and I thought they would leave without me and I would never see them again. This, of course, was silly. It just didn't occur to me at the time (being eight) that sensibly, I could simply stand in one place nonchalantly and wait, because the odds of my parents leaving without me were heavily in my favor (later in life my father told me the odds weren't actually that good, but I think he was kidding). I also remember sitting alone crying over a picture-book story of the Country Mouse and the City Mouse. It just didn't seem fair that the City Mouse was so mean and nasty when the Country Mouse had gone through so much trouble to clean up and bake bread and make the City Mouse comfortable. What an asshole. No, I don't cry anymore. At least I thought I didn't.

Laughter is pretty easily explainable. It's social. People very rarely laugh when they're alone. Watching your favorite sitcom by yourself is okay, but it's much better if there is someone to share it with. That's why we relate it back to one another, as in "Hey! Did you catch Saturday Night Live last night? Wasn't the bit with George Bush and Bill Clinton hysterical?" And then we can laugh and nod and poke each other and it's all part of communication and friendship. I like to think I laugh a lot. Crying is a much more personal thing.

Pain can make your eyes water, and I suppose that's like crying. Little children cry at the drop of a hat, but I think that's mostly for attention and has little to do with the empty, hollow feeling when you cry as an adult. There are good cries, too. You can cry "for joy" as it were. Mother's at weddings and graduations, for instance. Father's often cry during the birth process. Crying has a lot to do with relief.

So I'm standing in front of the penalty box in the Aitken Centre watching this reggae band from Ottawa playing *I Shot The Sheriff*. There were (maybe) a hundred people scattered in the stands and around the stage. The whole thing was stupid. Suddenly, though, unnervingly, I felt that little twinge in my throat and realized that my diaphragm was starting to squeeze. The band finishes a clean and kicking version of the old Marley classic to about as much noise as a hundred people in the Aitken Centre can make, and announce that they are going to do an original tune. The whole thing is ludicrous - a waste of time and money. But now the little wet prickles are stinging the corners of my eyes. All day I have been looking at the empty arena. I knew that people wouldn't come. Musicians and dancers had been filing in all evening, all with the same blank stares on their faces. We were all in the same boat. No one there had to feel the least bit guilty or uncomfortable about their attendance or participation. Yet there I was, blinking back tears. *Come on, this is silly*, I thought. I shifted. I walked around. I found that turning my gaze away from the stage helped a bit. Someone came and started a conversation. I shrugged him off in what I was mortified to find was a quavery voice. *Damn, this is stupid*.

Most people have this reaction, I think. We get into situations as adults and we feel that tightening in the diaphragm that rises to our throats and literally begins to squeeze water out in little pin pricks from the corners of our eyes. *Come on, this is silly*. We think, and blink it back. We look around and blink, trying to think of something else. This often works, but sometimes you just have to pull yourself away from the situation - go for a little walk, buy a beer, pick up a newspaper.

Was I getting choked up because Somalians are starving to death and no money was being raised for relief? No. I wish (I really do) that I could get bleary-eyed at the thought of the pain and anguish and grief of those millions (not just the Somalians) of people whose every waking thought is survival. I can't. It just isn't *real* enough. It's part of being separated so drastically from the rest of the world here in North America. I can't help it. Neither can most North Americans. That's why we have these extravagant benefit things - we can't seem to bring ourselves to give money and effort unless there's a good time to be had (or occasionally some warped pseudo-social consciousness to be fulfilled). *Ten thousand dead in Bangladesh flooding* - what does it mean? It's like the universe is infinite or hummingbird wings beat 150 times a second. There has to be a hook - cheap beer usually works. Apparently good entertainment doesn't anymore. It wasn't anguish or grief I was feeling. It was more anger and joy. I guess I cry when I'm confused. I was angry that there was no one there. I was angry at the promotion (or noticeable lack thereof). I was angry at the city of Fredericton for not getting off their stuck-up neo-colonialist butts and getting entertained by someone other than *Rossini's Bar*. I was so angry that I started being angry with the Somalians and their stupid civil war.

But here we were. Here was *Al Miller's All Star Reggae Band* from Ottawa or Montreal or Toronto - or wherever playing music for us. Good music. Great music. That was sad. I guess there were less than a handful of people defiantly having a good time. That was also sad. But the band and the people were having a great time. A big stage, lots of lights, a killer sound system - the band grooved and kicked and...smiled? Apparently the music won on that cold Friday night. That was wonderful.

I guess I shouldn't have expected any less from professional musicians. Fredericton has yet to earn the right to have entertainment and people like this even within driving distance of the city. Unbelievable. The *Wolcott* drum group joined with the *Ballet Crochet* to dumbfound us with concepts of dance and rhythm utterly new to us. And the drums. I don't mean drumming. I mean *incredible* drumming. And they gave everything they had. Despite the crowd, despite the crushed expectations, despite everything. It seemed as though the Aitken Centre must be filled with people, when in fact the pathetic snattering was barely noticeable. But they were audible. The few people there managed to feed the energy of the performers, god knows how, but it happened. And then Lorraine Klassen. Begged on by the announcer, the people moved up to the front of the stage as Klassen's band started up. Awash in the punchy high life sound, people grooved and danced. It just didn't matter anymore. Lorraine and her backup singer, in intense technicolor, move fluidly, energetically, and *abominably*. I'm dead. Twice. Lorraine got into a chat with some people from Swaziland between songs. They chatted about local night spots there and Chinese restaurants. Then they played more. It wasn't making the best of things, it was *it*.

There is little point in reliving the incredible musicianship and groove that we experienced throughout the night. And I guess it would be dumb to talk about the closeness we all began to feel to the musicians and to everyone there. That would be like a review, and reviews rely on a crowd of people to read and relive with. If I want to relive it, I can call most of the people that were there.

Maybe it was a little too much like the Country Mouse and the City Mouse story for me. Here all this fresh baked bread and carefully and lovingly created space - and I couldn't help feeling like I was somehow responsible for the cruel and cold treatment offered in response by this city and this campus. I can, however, say that it wasn't *none of it* - my fault. Not many people in this town can say that. About a hundred, actually.

Thank you to the musicians and dancers first. You showed us true professionalism. Thank you to those who went - I don't care why. Thank you to those who thought it would be a nice idea to help someone by putting on an incredible show. The chance to get together with other musicians and play for people - no matter how many - seemed to be enough to fuel what was one of the best shows this pathetic little town will ever see.

The blame cannot be placed. If you stayed at home to watch re-runs of *Growing Pains*, that's fine. Your loss, not mine. It is truly sad that we live in a world so pleasant as to have the luxury of making decisions on thousands of people's lives by flipping through the TV guide or hedging on the couch because of too much Chinese food for dinner. But I'm not blaming anyone for famine in Somalia - that would be stupid as, like I said before, it's just not *real* enough. No, I didn't cry for the Somalians. It's that all those people who whine about Fredericton weren't there. All those people who appreciate good music weren't there. All those people who tout their morality and social consciousness around like a bizarre pheromone weren't there. There simply wasn't anyone there - and it didn't matter to me, to the musicians, or to the crowd. What happened, however, *was* real. That, brought tears to my eyes.

chris hunt