

Strawberry Fields for Never

Because of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) farmers are having a tough time getting their crops to market. Being out of work and a new resident of Salmon Arm I decided to work at a berry farm, to help out. I do not need the money. For now. They are predicting food prices will go up. Perhaps down the road my grocery budget will circumvent what I had planned for indulgences.

Somewhere I read that 30% of people believe Covid is a hoax. Canadians of late are caught up with Trumpism and Racism and Covidism, if I can coin a phrase. There are several divides in our society and if you believe the media, there are only three issues worthy of in-depth news reporting.

The cast for my portrayal of the berry farm people are as follows: an older First Nations Woman, a Young Mom, a Teenaged Girl, a Lost Boy, a Retired Guy, a Senior Gal, Other Picker, The Boss, The Supervisor, and Entitled Man. Entitled Man is a nice guy but is representational of the western worldview with beliefs and expectations that wouldn't wash in most of the world. To make my case – a day labourer in India will work ten to twelve hours in the fields in heat sometimes upwards of forty degrees and be paid \$2. Not per flat picked, not per hour. For the whole day. And if he or she does not get paid, they have little legal recourse for justice. They simply go hungry that night, along with their children, hoping that tomorrow will be a better day.

First Nations Woman: Did you celebrate Canada Day last night?

Senior Gal: No. Just listened to the radio when I got home. I'm so sick of hearing about Covid and Trump and Black Lives and Indigenous Lives Matter and now they want to get rid of the police. That's all they have on the radio. Sure, there's bad apples in every barrel. But now all cops are bad. It's crazy.

First Nations Woman: What? Get rid of the police? Then who they gonna call when they need help?

Stooping to pick strawberries can be agonizing. Since humans do not normally conduct their business in this posture it is hard on ankles, knees, backs and all the attached muscles. Doing it for a few hours at a time demands an Epsom salts bath when you get home. And lots of stretching. Because it is a cash job, you cannot count on a minimum wage per hour or benefits. Most physical labourers in the work get paid this way.

Lost Boy: I'm part Jewish. Did you know Jews are good with money?

Senior Gal: I've heard that.

Lost Boy: Yeah, I'm good with money. I get CERB. I'm not reporting this job to the government. They get enough of my money.

Senior Gal: Yeah, I knew someone who was mad at the government so he didn't pay his taxes for five years. Then he got sick and couldn't qualify for disability because of it. Screwed himself there.

Lost Boy: Well, they're not getting any more of my money.

There are days when the picking is great. Giant strawberries as big as a quarter cup but boy, do you fill up a flat fast that way. Good pickers can fill three flats netting them \$24 per hour. Then the other days when you are crawling slowly along the rows trying to find something worth picking. Nothing smaller than a quarter – lots of those – no mold, no rust, no bird pecks. They must be bright red. Orange ones are sour. Every other one you reach for turns out to be a dud. Laborious picking means \$8 an hour.

Lost Boy to two boy pickers: Yeah, so you pay cash for a car and then you save money. Work all summer and collect EI in the winter.

Senior Gal: Or get a job.

Lost Boy: It's time for a break. I'm going for a spliff.

Senior Gal: I had you figured for a pot head.

Lost Boy: Oh, why?

Senior Gal: The way you talk.

It's lovely being outside with the sunshine, a gentle breeze sometimes and birdsong. The smell of the earth, fresh air and the fresh berries enlivens the senses.

Other Picker, at eight o'clock: Where is everybody?

Lost Boy: Oh, we're not starting til ten today. It's too wet.

Other Picker: But it's not raining... I should have got a call. Looks like everybody else got a call.

Lost Boy: Don't blame me. I'm just a worker. Just hang out here until then.

Other Picker: For two hours? I don't think so.

If it is raining you do not show up to pick. Strawberries do not survive wet picking well. Nor do they if it is too warm. Hence the six o'clock start so that activity stops when it gets too warm. If it rained overnight, you get pretty wet crawling around the rows. As you try to stay upright you are reminded of that old song by Simon and Garfunkel, Slip Slidin' Away.

Senior Gal: Did we lose Lost Boy?

Supervisor: He was asked to leave.

My first day picking the mosquitoes nearly carried me away. I hate mosquito spray. You know, poison, environmental concerns. After the second flat I spied some on the shelf. The Supervisor sprayed my back, away from the strawberries. Experience, the great leveler of high ideals. She also gave me knee pads, a great help.

Entitled Man: So I went to Canadian Tire and there's only two cashiers and a lineup up the yin yang.

Retired Guy: Yeah. And don't forget your hand sanitizer.

Senior Gal: They should just let everybody get this and whoever dies, dies. Get it over with.

Teenaged Girl: Oh no. I would feel terrible if someone I loved got sick and died because they caught it from me.

Entitled Man: Only 1% of Canadians died from this. And the economy is going to pot.

Teenaged Girl: But we have to isolate. It's irresponsible not to.

Senior Gal: These young kids have been raised in fear. It's all about being safe. Not like how we were raised.

Teenaged Girl: You can't let everybody get sick! And die!

Senior Gal: Honey, there's worse things in life than dying.

Retired Guy: Herd immunity.

Teenaged Girl: You can't do that!

Entitled Man: You gotta think logically. We need to get everybody back to work.

Single Mom: I can see what they mean. Why are the leaders not setting the example? It's okay for kids to go back to school. Let's experiment on the kids. But the leaders have to isolate.

Senior Gal: Kids don't get it bad. They're healthier.

Teenaged Girl: But we're smarter than the Americans. Look at what a good job our Prime Minister did compared to them.

Single Mom: I'm a Liberal but I have to say I don't agree with what he's doing.

Retired Guy: We're ruining the economy. For what?

Other picker: More people are going to starve to death than die of Covid.

Entitled Man: Trump's got his hands full with that other guy. What is that man thinking?

Retired Guy: Yeah. Don't criticize if you don't have a solution to offer.

The Supervisor announces we get ten dollars per flat today, because The Boss wants to encourage us as the picking isn't so great. Nice.

The Boss: Are you coming in tomorrow?

Other Picker: No. We're going to look at some property.

The Boss: Oh, you're buying a house?

Other Picker: Yes.

The Boss: If you don't mind me saying, I think you should wait five or six months. I think a lot of people will be selling then because they don't have jobs and can't keep their homes.

There are estimates that 120 million people will become acutely hungry because of Covid. Many will starve to death. What this means is that they were okay until this disaster struck. These people are in countries that have no, or inadequate, social programs to help them through a crisis. There are already millions who go to bed hungry often, seldom having an adequate food supply. But an extra 120 million? The number is hard to comprehend. Whether or not people starve in this country is debatable. It depends on how deep the pockets are and how many more waves we have.

The world as we knew it has disappeared. Large and well-known companies are filing for bankruptcy. We are now in the twilight zone, many escaping the fact their government will not and cannot look after them forever. They keep saying never. Never known this, never had that. Sooner or later the well will run dry. Welcome to Neverland.

The Supervisor: Um, these berries are a little small. Remember, don't pick smaller than a quarter.

Senior Gal: Haven't you heard of the shrinking dollar?