

WHAT WERE THE CHANCES? (1977)

by Rutherford

In the autumn of 1976, I shared an apartment in Toronto, Canada with Tony. His (overly-protective) mother and her boyfriend lived in another apartment in the same building.

A few weeks after we moved in, Tony was made redundant from his job. Never having previously applied for unemployment benefits (known colloquially as ‘pogey’ in Canadian argot) – and knowing that I had – he asked me to accompany him to the Canada Manpower office to show him how to complete the application forms.

After completing the form, we took our seats in the Reception area where – together with dozens of others there for the same reason – we settled in for the long wait to be seen by a civil servant who would collect the form issued by his ex-employer and attach it to his application for unemployment benefits.

At a desk facing the rows of plastic chairs sat the beleaguered receptionist whose telephone rang incessantly throughout (“Good morning, Canada Manpower. Can I help you? Just a moment, I’ll transfer you...” “Good morning, Canada Manpower. Can I help you? Just a moment, I’ll transfer you...” “Good morning, Canada Manpower. Can I help you? Just a moment, I’ll transfer you...”)

When the telephone rang for the umpteenth time, just to break the tedium (and because, you know, I’m a really witty guy...), I thought that it would be funny to announce in a loud, clear voice:

“That’ll be for me...”

The dozen or more people seated around us looked up from their magazines (or their hands, or the lint on their shirts) and turned towards me with expressions of thinly-veiled exasperation for the smartass who clearly considered himself to be, you know, a really witty guy.

“Good morning, Canada Manpower. Can I help you?”

A long pause.

“Just a moment, I’ll ask...”

“Is there a [REDACTED] Rutherford here?”

A longer pause.

“Ummm... That’s me.”

(Remember all those people who had looked at me with expressions of thinly-veiled exasperation?)

Now I had their undivided attention.

Trying hard to look nonplussed, I walked over to the Reception desk and took the receiver held out to me by the incredulous Receptionist.

It was Tony’s Mother.

“Is Tony there with you?”