



## Buttermilk

In the years before I came to Japan to be a printmaker, I worked at a number of things, but for the most part, was employed by a music company that specialized in supplying school music programs. I started 'at the bottom' - sorting music onto the shelves - and ended up years later 'at the top' as the General Manager (although my real function was to be the right-hand man to the owner).

Along the way, I did anything and everything: worked in the retail shop, demonstrated instruments, gave 'clinics' and workshops in schools, designed and programmed computer systems, hired (and fired) staff ... you name it, I did it at one time or another.

One of the most unsavoury jobs that I had to do was that of assisting with the 'collections'. The company rented out musical instruments to students who played in the school bands and orchestras, but it inevitably happened that some parents would fall behind in their payments, and we had to try and either collect the overdue money or recover the instrument. Taking an instrument away from a child in school was the last thing we wanted to do of course, so we focussed on getting some money from the parents, even a partial payment on what was overdue.

We did business all over western Canada, driving our service trucks hundreds of miles between small towns, making visits to schools. Every time one of us in the company made such a trip, we also made a number of phone calls to the overdue parents in that area.

We usually made the calls in the evenings, after our business at the school was done, phoning from the motel room, and asking them to come down with a payment. Some did; some could not. One particular visit I made was very difficult; there were economic problems in the town, and many people could not make their payments. I collected almost nothing. One young mother I spoke to said that she was tied up that evening, so we arranged that she would drop over to my motel to see me in the morning, before I left town.

The next morning saw a continuation of my bad luck; when I tried to get a glass of milk with my breakfast the waitress said that there was none, but that they did have buttermilk. I had heard of this, and didn't actually know what it was, but told her that it was OK, and she brought me a huge tall glass of it. When I took a sip I nearly gagged. So this was buttermilk! What an awful taste ... it was undrinkable! I left the glass alone, and ate the rest of the meal.

As I was nearly finished, the young mother arrived, came to my table, and sat down. Her story matched many of the others I had heard the evening before. She was a single mother, her job was very poorly paid, she had two children ... things were extremely tight. Would I please have some compassion.

Now personally, I of course had all the compassion in the world. Had it been my choice, I would have happily told her 'not to worry' about it. But I knew that when I got back to the home office, I would have to go over my accounts with the boss, and although he also could be a compassionate person at times, he was running a business. If we didn't get enough of these payments, we would be bankrupt, and dozens of people would be out of work. So I (gently) urged her to try and make what kind of payment she could, even a partial payment.

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She opened her purse, took out a few small bills, and thrust them at me, "Here, if you have to, take this!"

The two of us then rose to leave, and as we did she looked back at the table. She looked at my tall, nearly untouched, glass of buttermilk, and then up at me. I looked back at her, not knowing what to say.

She turned and left, without speaking. I paid my bill, headed out to my truck, and began driving toward the next small town, to the next school, and the next group of names on my list.

Sometimes, people say to me, "You had a lot of courage, leaving your good job in Canada to strike out on your own!" No, I don't think so. To stay, now that would have taken some courage ...

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