

I'VE GOT FIVE DOLLARS

I often dream in complete sentences. Maybe this is the result of the years I've spent trying to put words on paper in interesting ways. The other morning I woke with this sentence in my head: "She kissed me like a perfectly placed piece of end punctuation." I dutifully wrote it down. I don't know where it came from or where it leads. It arrived as a surprise.

Speaking of surprises, the actor Jim Nabors died the other week. My generation probably remembers him best as Gomer Pyle, the gas station attendant in Mayberry, N.C. who went on to join the Marines. We remember his catchphrases: "Golly!", "Shazam!", and "Surprise-surprise-surprise!" They sound remarkably unfunny out of context, but there was time when they actually were deep in the culture. We remember, too, the surprise of hearing Jim Nabors singing on television – Gomer suddenly was a basso-profondo emoting, with complete seriousness, "The Impossible Dream."

Jim Nabors' *New York Times* obituary began its third sentence with: *His husband, Stan Caldwell, confirmed his death.* Surprise, surprise, surprise. People are so much more complex than we imagine. I spend my life dazzled and humbled by how little I know.

I collect old sheet music, particularly Rodgers and Hart songs, and I stood recently in the Creative Edge frame shop in the Tano Mall, trying to pick the right frame. There's something delightfully funky and bohemian about that place. Maybe it's all the weird framed stuff you see waiting to be picked up: baseballs, ice picks, bathing suits. The owners, Charles and Cora, emerge from the back to talk to me, and Charles, with his Walt-Whitman beard, examines my sheet music.

"I don't know this song," he says.

“It’s relatively obscure. A real Depression song,” I say, and, without any self-consciousness, I’m suddenly singing it aloud: “I’ve got five dollars/I’m in good condition/And I’ve got ambition/That belongs to you...Six shirts and collars/Debts beyond endurance/On my life insurance....”

Cora laughs. “A perfect song for our time.”

“Look at this,” says Charles. He’s flipping through the music. “It’s got banjolele chords.”

“What the hell’s a banjolele?”

Charles tells me he collects old instruments, and that the banjolele is a strange hybrid of the banjo and the ukulele. It was briefly popular in the 1920s. I also get an entire oral history of the banjo. And suddenly Charles isn’t just a white-bearded framer; he’s an expert on the forgotten history of popular American instruments.

Surprise, surprise, surprise.

I find myself stranded without a car in Nyack, N.Y. I need to get back to Metuchen. Uber tells me it can get me a driver at 10 AM for \$69.50. I hit the yes button, and eight minutes later a beat-up red sedan pulls up in front of Lynn’s house. The driver is a man in his mid-twenties with a Jamaican accent; he wears a wool cap printed with the colors of the African flag. Reggae music plays on the radio. He tells me he lives in Brooklyn; he’s been driving non-stop since six that morning. He and his girlfriend have separate apartments, he explains, and they’re both trying to save up enough money to get a bigger apartment to share. He’s got a dental appointment at 12:30. I tell him he can make the dentist’s if he ignores the GPS and lets me direct him on the faster route.

“Go for it,” he says.

We make excellent time (about an hour,) and to save a minute I take him through Roosevelt Park past the summer playhouse. Reggae music is still playing.

“Do they do any Shakespeare there?” he asks.

“Not really. Mostly just popular stuff – musicals like *Hairspray*. You like Shakespeare? I used to teach Shakespeare.”

“I *love* Shakespeare,” he says, then recites perfectly: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“That’s a great line.”

“I love *Hamlet*. I read that line when I was 14 years old, and it really spoke to me.” He recites it again. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Surprise, etc.

The car pulls up in front of my house, and I give him a ten-dollar tip. “This is to help you get that apartment.”

“Thanks, man.”

I shake his hand and wish him good luck at the dentist’s. He drives away, and I look at my familiar vista of street and sidewalk and sky. I say, “There *are* more things in heaven and earth....” And the sentence sounds like a perfectly placed piece of end punctuation.