

## One-Liners

January & February 2023

We are heading into territory that has never been: CE 2023. No one has gone before us, unless you count time travelers, which in this musing I will not. Heading into the new year, we don't know what is ahead. We can approach the coming months with trepidation or intrepidity, and approach them we must. There will be no navigational aids, such as the horse that always grazes in the pasture at the intersection of two roads indistinctly marked. No huge DOT signs will offer arrows and names and remaining mileage to keep us on our chosen path to Grandmother's house. If only we had a guidebook.

But maybe there is joy in the unknown, for that joy is more often than not accompanied by the trust that soon we will indeed spot the horse or the arrows. There is trust that although we may have felt entirely lost or been oblivious to all that goes on around us, there is a sudden flash of recognition or clarity, a sudden extended hand, or a sudden and simple reply of assistance or knowledge or even caring from a passerby. What often unfurls from the good soul or sage is a "one-liner" that continues to unfurl long after it is uttered, soliciting any number of emotional responses from the recipient, from fear to satisfaction to joy.

Not long ago, I sat with a dear friend in a small, well heated coffeeshop, the smell of coffee beans thickening the air, sustained high winds occasionally whumphing against the thankfully stout east wall of the building. We talked of Christmas's approach, and we talked of those movies of the season that end happily and cause sentimental shedding of tears. Our conversation soon came round to *A Christmas Carol*, the black and white one of 1938, the very one that scared us all to death.

Our conversation hastily flew, with little navigational effort, to fifty-four years later, and a more benign and dearer version of Charles Dicken's classic, *A Muppets Christmas Carol*, released in 1992. My friend and I agreed that one of the most intriguing, meaning-packed moments in the movie occurred when the redeemed but befuddled Scrooge, played by Michael Caine, throws open the sash of his upstairs window, hails Bean Bunny, who he has previously treated abhorrently, with the words, "You, boy, what day is this?" Bean Bunny warily tells him it is Christmas Day.

Think of all that is buried in Scrooge's simple and brief one-liner: "You, boy, what day is this?" Scrooge makes a stunning leap away from his greedy self and suddenly wants to know in what day he is living. He discovers to his joy that he has landed on a day where he can do good. By uttering this question, he acknowledges that there is a world around him that is particularly generous but is in particular need of his generosity. His! He discovers "day" and all that it brings with it. Had he merely awakened, examined all that happened in the frightening night from which he just escaped, and assiduously and slowly analyzed what he might do to spare himself a lonely end, he would have missed "day". Instead, he enthusiastically bounds and dances into the day, with joy and trust in something new and wondrous.

Driving home from the coffeeshop, I couldn't help but think of the enjoyment that the impressive, schooled, and experienced actor Michael Caine must have had in determining the

delivery of this one-liner. How gifted must feel any actor—on stage or in real life—with such a one-liner as this. Caine surely thought of all that lead up to the line, all that would follow. He must have tried on myriad “subtexts” (the meaning beneath the utterance) before deciding how the line would best be said, via voice and heart. Certainly the gifted Caine thought of how he could elicit the right and proper response from his fellow actor, Bean Bunny.

Michael Caine had time to study the one-liner. In real life, we’re slammed with one-liners all the time, whether in receipt or in delivery. Whether in our real lives or in those we step into, thanks to novelists, essayists, memoirists, filmmakers, or others of the imaginative talent.

I will never recover from running full tilt into the closing one-liner of *Jane Eyre*, after I had suffered the taciturn harshness of Mr. Rochester. I must separate the mere four words from this paragraph, it is that profound and powerful, in itself, a study in character of the writer Charlotte Brontë and the world she lived and captured in her work:

Reader, I married him.

We don’t need more than that. It is packed full of insinuation and double-entendre and symbolism. It is hyperbole, understatement, and possibly paradox. It is the intricacies and oddities of human nature. The vagaries and vicissitudes. It is us.

One-liners can chill us to the bone. Recall the line from *Jaws*: “We need a bigger boat.”

I recall my youngest son’s softly uttered words, from the kitchen, where he set to making a box cake mix all by himself. It was right after a whumph sound, as if a bag of cake mix had been squeezed until it popped open, spreading chocolate cake mix throughout: “Don’t come in the kitchen, Mom.” Today, I smile in remembrance and in love. Then, there was power in the words.

My favorite recent one-liner was delivered a little over a year ago, by my husband, regarding the orphaned 75-pound yellow Labrador with the sad eyes who we would keep for a weekend to see if we might consider adopting her: “Remember, there’s nothing that says we have to keep her.”

I close with a one-liner that, in our war-torn and divisive world, I believe should be voiced every day by everyone, to everyone, just as it was written by Charles Dickens, and spoken by Tiny Tim, portrayed by Robin the Frog in *A Muppets Christmas Carol*:

“God bless us, Everyone.”