

The Misdirected Curse of Jimmy Whittle

I never knew Jimmy Whittle that well.

I doubt he even knew my name during the few weeks I was in his presence one winter back in the early 1980's. Even if we had exchanged names at the time I'm sure he has not remembered my name more than 30 years later like I remember his.

Jimmy Whittle lived in Harbour Breton on Newfoundland's south coast. I lived in Bonavista on the province's east coast. Back in those days, Jimmy Whittle worked as a fish filleter (cutter) at the seasonal Fishery Products International (FPI) plant in his town. Although there was a seasonal FPI plant in Bonavista, I worked as a cutter at the year-round FPI plant in nearby Port Union, about 16 kilometres away.

The Port Union plant was where our paths crossed.

During those years the northern cod fishery was in full swing. Canada had secured its 200 nautical-mile limit in 1977 thus taking control of the majority of the rich and bountiful Grand Banks and forcing the foreign fleets to its outer reaches. Fish companies such as FPI had built up their offshore dragger fleets and plants where the draggers landed their catches — such as the huge Port Union plant — saw year-round work and the opportunity for a lot of overtime hours and monetary bonuses. Upwards of 1,100 men and women were employed at the Port Union plant at its peak, from the dragger crews and dock workers to those doing the processing and packaging of the thousands of pounds of cod, yellowtail, flounder, turbot, catfish and redfish the draggers brought to shore.

The first time I saw Jimmy Whittle was when he arrived at the Port Union plant for a shift one cold February day. He was one of a bunch of cutters from Harbour Breton that the company had brought in to help out with a backlog of fish that winter. Workers from other FPI seasonal plants were brought in to help out, as well.

Jimmy Whittle didn't stand out to me in any way. The Harbour Breton cutters as a group, however, were of particular interest to me. I'd been trained to cut yellowtail, flounder and turbot the "Harbour Breton way." Managers back then figured the Harbour Breton method achieved more yield off the

fish and so new hires at the Port Union plant, like me, were trained to fillet flat-fish species using that method. I was interested to see Jimmy Whittle and the other Harbour Breton cutters at work to see how I measured up.

The suggestion that the Harbour Breton boys had developed a more efficient cutting method was something vehemently disputed by veteran cutters at the Port Union plant, but that's another story.

The onslaught of extra workers brought a new energy to the plant during those long and dreary winter day and night shifts. The lunchroom, in particular, became infused with new stories and jokes. Though a fairly large room, the lunchroom at the plant was often overcrowded. To maximize space and seating capacity, tables were placed end-to-end in long rows, with wooden benches running along at each side for seating.

A sea of workers in their company-issued blue shirts and white paper caps would quickly pour into the lunchroom from the processing area after the buzzer sounded. The workers would squeeze in at the tables, elbow to elbow, opening their lunch tins oblivious to the stink from their fish-stained clothes, or the smear of fish guts and tiny fish scales stuck, as if glued, to their hands and arms. Chatter and laughter, rising cigarette smoke and the noises of creaking metal lunch tins, and the snapping and sizzle of Pepsi cans being opened, filled the room.

To break up the monotonous routine of cutting fish after fish for eight hours a day, pranks became commonplace at the plant. These included the common — and cause for suspension if caught — act of flicking fish guts at one another. A small piece of slimy fish gut could travel a fair distance when whipped from the tip of the thin steel blade of a fillet knife.

Other pranks could include secretly putting an ugly catfish head in someone's lunch tin or turning a person's clear plastic apron around so that when that person returned from a washroom break he pulled the apron on with the wet and fishy side going against his body.

Sometimes jokes were carried a little too far.

One day a worker known to be a little more anxious to get out of the plant than most at the end of his shift, ran into the lunchroom to retrieve his lunch tin that had been left on one of the wooden benches. He grabbed the handle and turned to quickly make his exit only to rip the top half right off

the lunch tin.

It turned out that someone had nailed the lunch tin securely to the wooden bench with four-inch galvanized nails.

As the victim stood there looking in shock at the mangled pieces, laughter rang out from those who witnessed the spectacle and the story passed through the plant as quickly as a fall wind whips across a bay.

Jimmy Whittle liked to laugh, too. I recall he was a nice enough fellow with a few stories of his own to tell. I can't remember exactly what he looked like, but in my mind's eye I see an average-sized man with light brown hair, bright eyes and his mouth shaped into somewhat of a mild, permanent smirk.

One lunch time Jimmy Whittle happened to be sitting next to me. He was in a discussion with Paul Russell of Bonavista who was sitting directly across from him. Somehow the conversation between those two turned to how strange the human mind can be. (One of the many fascinating discussions around the lunch room tables). I was quietly eating my lunch, eavesdropping on their conversation, when Jimmy Whittle suddenly pulled his fillet knife from its plastic case attached to his belt and laid it upon the table in front of Paul. The sharp edge of the knife was facing up.

"From now on every time you see a knife facing up like this you'll think of me, Jimmy Whittle," he said to Paul.

Paul shot him a skeptical look and seemed to shrug the suggestion off. Jimmy Whittle retrieved the knife and returned it to its case. They resumed their conversation and soon it moved on to other subjects.

I never thought any more of it myself until a couple days later at the plant when my knife slipped from my hand and landed on the cutting table with the sharp edge pointing up. "Jimmy Whittle" I said to myself with surprise.

As that winter neared its end, the seasonal workers who had been brought in were let go to head back to their towns and their respective plants.

Jimmy Whittle took his knife and his sharpening stone, and the other things a fish filleter brings to

work, and headed back to Harbour Breton. I presume he went on about his life without ever any thought of me or my name, or that moment when he placed his fillet knife sharp-edge up on the lunchroom table.

I wish I could say the same.

In the weeks after his departure, each time I came upon a knife with the sharp edge up — not a hard thing to find in a plant full of fillet knives — I thought of Jimmy Whittle and I'd say his name.

I'd just laugh to myself and shake my head thinking back to that day in the lunchroom.

Some months later I decided to put my fillet knife down for good and move on from the plant to pursue post-secondary education in St. John's. It was a new life in what to me at the time was a big city complete with studies, roommates, parties and a lot of other exciting things to fill my young mind with. I left the plant and Jimmy Whittle's misdirected curse behind.

One evening at supper, however, when my roommates and I were cooking up some awful mixture of potatoes and beans, I noticed the bread knife left on the counter top with the sharp edge pointing up.

"Jimmy Whittle," I said aloud.

"What? Who's Jimmy Whittle?" they asked with baffling looks upon their faces.

In the years that followed, the number of times I came across a knife with the sharp edge facing up were few and far between. I remember some of those times though, at a restaurant, attending a barbecue and even in someone's tool shed.

But, no matter where or when or what type of knife it was, I'd either blurt out or say to myself,

"Jimmy Whittle."

Once I remember wondering if Paul Russell — the intended target of the curse — had been afflicted in the same way as I had. Tragically, I never got a chance to ask him. Paul died in a traffic accident some years after I had left the plant.

I felt that, I alone, was left with the curse of Jimmy Whittle.

Eventually I began a career in journalism. It was a very busy job with long hours that constantly tested and pressed my mind. My life was filled with new ideas, new learning opportunities and adventures, and new relationships. I had no time to let trivial things bother me, such as a lame

reaction to seeing a knife lying in a certain way.

The occasional time during those bustling years that my eyes would fall on a knife with its sharp edge facing up I'd again reluctantly mutter "Jimmy Whittle" and quickly tell the story to those curious enough to ask about it.

In recent years though, as my journalism career winds down and I've found I have more time to think, I've grown tired of that stupid curse. I don't want it in my head, at all, any longer.

These days if I come across a knife with the sharp edge facing up I quickly go into defensive mode and turn my thoughts to the previous night's hockey game or to a movie I had seen, or to something else, anything else, or toss myself abruptly into the middle a nearby conversation.

I work hard to push that . . . that name out of my mind.

And it seemed to be working.

Then on a recent family gathering, my visiting 86-year-old mother finished cutting the turkey and the knife she was using rolled off the side of the turkey plate and landed sharp-edge up on the table.

I was tired from working some long days and being out late to a house party the previous night, and there was no one saying anything of interest in the kitchen to grab my attention.

I stared at the knife and tried to press my mind into defensive mode. The attempt failed. I lacked the energy at that moment to force it out of my head.

I turned away from the knife and sat back quietly pondering it over. I let my head drop and my eyes gazed spiritlessly upon the white-canvased floor beneath my feet.

His smug face, the blue shirt, the elbows on the plant's lunchroom table, the fillet knife . . . and that . . . that . . . that name all began to materialize once again in my mind.

I slowly took a deep breath and raised my head high as if summoning courage in defeat.

I looked around the dining table and loudly and clearly to the utter astonishment of all there pronounced, "JIMMY . . . FUCK'N . . . WHITTLE!"