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What is this, the Canadian Inquisition?

By James FitzGerald

"Which Toronto mayor said: 'Toronto is the city of the future -- and always will be...'?"

The question hangs in the smoke-filled air as ten middle-aged urbanites huddle around a clutch of circular mahogany tables, deep in brow-knitting concentration. A plate of freshly gnawed chicken wing bones is nestled among brimming pint glasses and ash trays.

"Allan Lamport?" comes the tentative reply.

"Correct for two points."

It's Monday night, downstairs at the midtown Artful Dodger, where a familiar scene is unfolding: five-a-side pub league trivia. Tonight, the questions focus on Toronto -- ten rounds of crafty brainteasers on the city's history, geography, sports, music, literature and architecture. The league-leading No Mensa No, boasting a nifty 7-1 season record, are fending off All Over Twisted, the 5-3 home team. We're now deep into the second hour of serious fun, and the score is 43-42.

Turning to Paul Quarrington -- a Governor-General's award-winning novelist/screenwriter and charter member of All Over Twisted -- the presiding quizmaster, Vic, unfurls the next poser:

"Who wrote Fables of Brunswick Avenue?"

Quarrington is quick on the draw: "That would have to be Katharine Govier." His four teammates -- Bob, a TV producer; Bert, a film editor; Jim, an insurance company VP; and Cindy, a magazine association executive -- nod sagely.

"Nope, it's Susan Swan."

An animated yet good-natured dispute erupts. All Over Twisted is convinced Govier, not Swan, is the correct answer. When Quarrington's crew threatens, politely, to lodge an official protest, the opposition across the table, in Canadian peace-keeping tradition, generously concedes the points.

On to the next round -- Toronto bands. Out comes the boom box and a ninety-decibel chorus of "Ohhhhh, what a feeeeeeling, what a russssssshhhhhh" explodes across the barscape.

Scot, the top scorer for No Mensa No, confidently pulls the trigger -- "That's Crowbar!" -- and bags two more points. Successfully identifying tunes by Blue Rodeo, Cowboy Junkies and Martha and the Muffins, his elite squad of tall foreheads dominates the rest of the music round. Amid desultory muttering that Crowbar was never, in fact, a Toronto-based band, All Over Twisted knows they're twisting in the wind.

It's a fact: Toronto is the trivia hub of North America. Ever since the Canadian-born board game Trivial Pursuit conquered the world fifteen years ago, generating more than one billion dollars in revenues in thirty-three countries, urban trivia sub-cultures have thrived and crossbred in this our restless, bottomless Information Age. Toronto bars regularly finish at or near the top of NTN, the electronic, interactive trivia game installed in thousands of bars and restaurants across the USA and Canada. But it's in the quirky, subterranean pub circuits where the hard-core aficionados congregate.

How hard-core exactly? Back in 1986, a revolutionary cadre of trivia quislings, including Quarrington's brother Tony, broke away from the Toronto Pub Quiz League to form a rogue twelve-team loop known as the Canadian Inquisition. They deemed the established league's questions too simple, too popular, too often recycled. Even worse, it was a business.

Split into A and B divisions, the Leon Jaworski and the Torquemada -- allusions to the astringent Watergate prosecutor and the top terrorist of the Spanish Inquisition, and thus the often thumb-screwing nature of the questions -- the Canadian Inquisition is plainly a league unto itself, a happy community of seasoned trivia-philes who know there's a fine art to researching and composing the most satisfying trivia questions. Not too easy, not too arcane, the ideal trivia answer should hover tantalizingly close to consciousness, equidistant between thought and articulation, teetering on the tip of the tongue, eliciting a quasi-sexual tension. In this schismatic sect, if you get fifty percent of your questions right on any given night, you're likely a blood brother of the Rain Man.

After the game (All Over Twisted loses honourably, 74-62), Quarrington socializes briefly with members of both teams, assessing whether the defeat has killed All Over Twisted's chances of making the playoffs and scoring a small cash prize. But for Quarrington, the real reward of playing weekly trivia is the chance to rub shoulders with "a rare breed of Torontonians who display an astounding ignorance of mainstream culture."

"Many of the people in our league literally don't know who Madonna or Michael Jackson are -- and it's to their immense credit" he observes. "There's something wonderfully quaint, quixotic and human about storing offbeat, disparate information in your mind for later retrieval. I thuink it's partly a natural human resistance against increasingly invasive technology. As a writer, I find playing trivia is a good way to keep my synapses firing...and also a convenient way of picking up extraneous details to fill up novels."

Quarrington thinks people are wrong to dismiss trivia as nothing but isolated, meaningless bits of fetishized information: "The word 'trivia' is a misnomer. It really is knowledge" he insists. "Historically, knowledge was something some people had and others didn't. I like our league because it's a real meritocracy. Normally, you have to prove yourself worthy to gain entry to an institution to earn an MA or a PhD. I think it's great that a cabdriver or a professor can walk into a bar in Toronto unarmed, have a few beers, and throw facts around like cream pies."

Allan Lamport, former mayor of the city of the future, would doubtless agree.