

Going down the road with Jules and Jim

Jules ran a hand through his thinning, grey hair, glancing occasionally at the clock on the wall of the departure lounge. "Looks like we're running out of time," he mumbled. "What else is new?"

The storms of late December 2033 had minced the schedules of the one airline that still bothered to call on New Brunswick. Normally, any delay en route to the oil and gas fields of northern Alberta meant long lineups for itinerant Maritimers arriving late to Fort Mac's weekly job lottery.

But, today, Jules didn't mind so much. His traveling companion was late. Might as well sit tight, he told himself. A pipe-fitter by trade, 25+ years of going down the road and back had taught him how to wait. He was good at it; waiting and thinking.

He was just old enough to remember a different New Brunswick, when his native home was not just a regional staging ground in the brisk business of exporting human capital. That was before the Wall Street money lenders had called the loans, effectively throwing the province into receivership.

Really, he thought, what other choice did they have?

In 2024, the NDP government had failed to make the minimum payment on its long-term debt of \$42 billion. Sporting an operating budget deficit, in that fiscal year, of \$7 billion, it had needed a miracle to cover its financial obligations. And there hadn't been one of those in this benighted corner of Canada for some time.

Still, Jules could recollect the word "miracle" being used when he was a boy and Greater Moncton, for one, was an authentic economic nexus of the Maritimes.

Back then, in the 1990s and early aughts of the 21st Century, the "Hub City" had hosted a musical group called "The Rolling Stones". Everyone had made out like bandits and it seemed the party would never end.

Of course, as all parties end, this one did too.

To be fair, Jules thought, Moncton had fared reasonably well, as had the other metropolitan areas of the province. Sure, now wasn't their finest hour; still, they had hung on, perpetually "punching above their weight" as the boosters were fond of reminding everyone else.



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Elsewhere, in the rural reaches, it had been an entirely different story.

The schools were the first to close, one after another. English, French; it didn't matter. There was no money to keep any of them open, as hordes of New Brunswickers left for the money-green pastures out west, their kids in tow. In less than 10 years, the population of the province fell from 748,000 to 325,000.

The hospitals were next. General care facilities were retrofitted into emergency and geriatric wards. When they were open (and that became increasingly unpredictable), they served only the gravely ill, the catastrophically injured and those who, frankly, had nowhere else to go – no family to care for them – in their end days.

On the other hand, the soup kitchens (and there were many of these) did a blistering business serving processed pasta and packaged sweet tarts rescued from the dumpster bins of vanishing supermarket chains.

Now, in the setting sun of 2033, only a few farms lingered along the edges of the rural service districts to supply real food to the structurally rich from all over the world, the well-endowed refugees from the planet's polluted megalopolises, who had craved and founded bucolic reservations in the New Brunswick countryside.

Their air strips and helipads, their private highways and roads, their Montessori missionaries, and their cloud computers were all they needed to keep themselves comfortable, serene and apart.

Jules checked the clock on the wall again.

"Where is that whelp?" he muttered to no one in particular. "The boy is 45 minutes late, and the plane is here, finally."

As his 16-year-old nephew Jim's bonded master, Jules was almost looking forward to showing his young apprentice the ropes in Alberta.

On the tarmac, the old man looked back once more.

No sign.

No sign of youth, his youth, herding into the air.

"Well," he said aloud, "may the winner take all... What else is new?"