

# Lost Keys

*by* Todd Maupin

My keys. My house keys. The keys to my house. As the French subtitles would read, *clés chez moi. Clés chez.*

When I patted the side of my pants for the reassurance of feeling my keys in my pocket where my trousers were joined at the hip, I was immediately disappointed. And then subsequently mortified. Not the even the benefit of the doubt. My keys were very much gone. Vanished into thin air. This town's dratted elevation! I had lost my keys. All of my locks, out in the open, ripe for the taking for anyone but me. My keys were living my worst nightmare of being naked in a public place. French *sous-titres*: *au naturelle. The naked truth. Cinéma vérité.*

Impending rain that was forecast for later in the day gave me an extra sense of urgency. A perfect storm that would rain on my parade of linens on my balcony. It was imperative that I made it back to where I had aired my dirty laundry. Three sheets to the wind. It was my theory that nothing was as white as a sheet that has been exposed to the elements before washing. Sometimes I throw in the towel too. It was an easy process: it was a breeze. Sometimes the wind was too strong. It was a force of nature, but had its uses. For the birds, too.

When it rains, it pours. I preferred not to weather the storm. Naturally, I wanted to start searching for my keys right away, but I had been standing in line for a while at the pharmacy. The place was so warm and my shirt so small that I was already hot under the collar. This was not all in a day's work. I had taken the day off because I needed my prescription. I did not like living hand to mouth but I would ingest what the doctor wanted.

The pharmacist's window was visible off in the distance. The line was barely moving, at a crawl, and no one could walk upright with the curiously low ceilings that were only good for the low man on the totem pole.

There is no time like the present. And I had enough of it to study this month's page of the baking ingredients calendar hanging nearby. I was tempted to flip to February to see if next month had any zip to it or would be as slow as the molasses in January. Maybe someone would be sowing wild oats? No, that would probably be March. After all, you reap what you sow. I was glad the people queued ahead of me knew where to stand because I would not have known where to draw the line. I could only toe the line until it was my turn to be served. The fellow ahead of me had a tourniquet on his hand. The obvious swelling stood out like a sore thumb. I was all thumbs when it came to hitchhiking. It got me where I needed to go.

Struggling to quench debilitating thoughts about the fate of my keys, I inched ever closer to the pharmacist's window. I put my foot down, then the other one. I put my best foot forward, then the other one. The wait time was long enough for me to have read between the lines, but I don't like reading while standing up, or crawling. It makes me queasy.

When I was finally next in line, I overheard the interaction of the customer just ahead of me. The impatient patient described how she had woken up on the wrong side of the bed and the pharmacist was searching to localize a solution. The pharmacist handed an object to the patient and explained the method of treatment. It fit the bill that the patient would be paying.

“Put this on your left, and sleep with the wall on the right. Being between a rock and a hard place, you will be able to control on which side of the bed you wake up,” the pharmacist diagnosed.

"But what about my husband? He lies like a rug and is resistant to change," the patient was less than confident about the proposed solution. She was holding the rock limply and cautiously, but rolling it in her hand. Leave no stone unturned.

"Look, I know it can be a pain in the neck. Just warn him not to roll over," the pharmacist suggested. "Thanks for coming by. Good luck. Get some sleep. It's the stuff that dreams are made of." The patient's apparent disbelief in the treatment had not wavered; unimpressed, she slinked away in meek obedience.

Finally, my moment arrived and I along with it. Good things come to those who wait.

I was there at the window, second to none. The pharmacist took a moment to look at the prescription and decipher the doctor's handwriting. Then she nodded, thought for a moment, smiled and nodded again. I smoothed my hair in a vain attempt to remain calm.

"You should read that murder mystery set in the pretzel factory. It is full of twists," she said, chuckling to herself. She made a weird face, tongue in cheek, studied my reaction, shrugged and then called out, "Next!"

"Wait, what about my medication?" I asked in bewilderment. I had expected a bitter pill to swallow.

"That's it. Laughter is the best medicine," the pharmacist explained in a logical tone that did not completely hide her disappointment at my reception of her joke.

"But..." I began, but she interrupted me by thrusting a cheap wristwatch into my hand that was still outstretched on the counter. "Here, if you must, take this too. Now go. Time heals all wounds." Discerning from my quivering lip that I was about to object again,

she preemptively shushed me. "Time is of the essence. Take six each day, bide your time and do not lose track of time. Only time will tell."

"Six of what?" I asked in bewilderment. My blood was boiling - why was that place so hot?

"Six of one, a half dozen of the other. Twelve hours, right?" She scribbled on my prescription and shoved it into a folder. Signed, sealed and delivered.

Disgusted, I abandoned the watch on the counter. This would have reminded me of the separation from my keys, that it was only a matter of time. I needed to make up for lost time, and lost keys.

On my way out of the pharmacy, I passed through the grocery section. I paused to read a few labels. Food for thought. A half gallon of milk was half-overturned on the floor in the middle of aisle. I started to call out, to bellow, a far cry that would be heard all over the store, but a clerk with a mop and bucket stopped me. "Don't cry over spilled milk," he warned me.

Another employee walking by carelessly with a mug of coffee sloshed some of her beverage onto the milk. "Oops. My cup runneth over," she apologized, nonchalantly. I was tempted to add some sweetener to the puddle to complete the mixture, but that was in the next aisle with sugar, spice and everything nice.

The clerk with the mop bucket quickly dispatched of the mess, rendering the tiled floor shiny and immaculate once again. The floor was a clean slate and would be until someone spilled the beans.

Outside, I had my moment in the sun. Ahead of the rain, it was a nice day, all things considered. The calm before the storm.

From the pharmacy, I continued down the street retracing my steps. I started off on my trip down Memory Lane, the main thoroughfare in town. First, was the dry cleaners, and then a church. Cleanliness was next to godliness. The latter's baptism by fire promotion had its neighbors quite perturbed but they were just blowing off steam. I admired the overt approach to faith. This was no blessing in disguise.

Just outside the gold buyer's shop, I nearly collided with a briefcase and the man holding it. Both had been effectively escorted out of the shop when push came to shove. He straightened his shabby overcoat and trudged off muttering. Despite his attire, there had been no rags to riches story for him. I heard him blathering: "All that glitters isn't gold. Give me only a dime a dozen, would you?! If I had a nickel...." As he stepped off the curb, his sloughing dislodged a section of the sidewalk's ancient concrete. A chip off the old block.

As I continued walking, my eyes scanned the sidewalk and curb for my keys. Without my keys nothing else mattered. For me, precious metals held no value. Platinum was as good as gold to me at that moment.

The proprietor of the generational neighborhood bait shop was sweeping the sidewalk in front of his establishment. I admired his technique. His motion was a brush with greatness. His gesture was empty however; merely a device he employed to stare grimly across the street at the newest franchise of the McCoy bait conglomerate that would become his competition and ultimately result in his demise. The mover and shakers had been unloading equipment when I had passed earlier, but now someone was repairing a broken window.

"Why did they have to open it just a stone's throw away?" He guiltily asked no one in particular. "I thought it would just be a red herring but this looks like the real McCoy. I should have relocated to the

dock when I had the chance. I really missed the boat on that one." I felt some obligation to commiserate as he had advised me last summer on catching a big fish in a small pond.

"I'm sorry, sir," I offered. "Maybe you can find another location. People need your services. There are plenty of fish in the sea."

Seeing my friendly face and a potential sale, the bait shop owner smiled and reached for an item from his outdoor display. He described it as he held it out to me. "It's a fine kettle of fish." It really was. Packed to the gills. A perfect scale model. He plucked one out for me to examine more closely. A fish out of water. To each his own, but it was not meant for me.

If he was fishing for a compliment, I was unphased by what he held over a barrel, even if he called it a kettle. "No, thank you," I declined, starting to proceed along the street. I paused after a half step. "Sir, perhaps you could open in the wee hours of the morning and attract more business?" I prompted, watching him drop the fish back in the kettle. It went belly up.

The fellow gaped at me, mired in absolute contemplation. He set the kettle back down, no longer interested in getting to the bottom of it. "You may have something there, son. Of course! It's just a matter of time. When I have to give those Hartz tablets to my cats, I always start with the cat who wakes me up first. The early bird gets the worm, you see." I did not quite see. In fact, it felt forced, but that was okay. The bait shop owner continued unabated. "I'll beat those corporate types by hook or by crook," he pledged.

"That's the spirit, sir. Surely, your customers are loyal and creatures of habit. There will be no bait and switch to the competition," I predicted, attempting to project confidence in my prognosis while not betraying how desperately I wanted the conversation to end.

Fortunately, I was rescued when the bait shop owner told me he had to check on something inside.

“Earlier, I opened a can of worms,” he explained when he excused himself. This was fine. I had more searching to do and would go the extra mile if necessary.

The florist was putting out fresh flowers, but I did not stop to smell the roses. Or the dandelions. Does anyone buy those? They grow like a weed.

As I walked past the candy store, I peered inside and I could see a kid in there. He seemed rather ecstatic. While I do like taking candy from a baby, he seemed a little too old and I was in a hurry. Next door, someone exited carrying a platter, two plates and a saucer. I had never ventured inside that establishment due to all of the commotion inside. A bull market, that china shop.

Across the street, someone waved at me. He looked familiar. What was his name? Adam? I knew him from somewhere. I nodded weakly because I had arrived at the bank. I did not want to make waves that would delay my search. Perhaps my keys had fallen, been recovered and were waiting for me inside the bank. As luck would have it, could we be under the same roof?

The armed guard scrutinized me with a glance that evoked vague recognition, suspicion, envy and boredom. Smiling at him, I approached him and took a step down into his alcove so we would be on equal footing. Unaccustomed to customer interaction, he tensed up as I neared him. This was not a warm welcome. Banks are always too cold, unlike pharmacies.

“Sir, I was here earlier and I have lost my keys. Has anyone turned in a set of keys?” We were not two peas in a pod. To someone who

minds his P's and Q's, I was a Q. I hoped my interrogatory tone demonstrated the innocence I intended.

The guard relaxed in perceiving my innocuousness. This slightly offended me but I shook it off. "No one has turned in any keys to me today. Sorry, sir. You can ask at the tellers' windows. They might be in the vault, passing the buck. Push the button if you do not see them. It rings a bell," he suggested.

He interpreted my hesitation as trepidation. "It's okay, sir, really." He gestured to the main counter in genuine, but stern warmth. I started to walk away but he stopped me. "You're not illegally parked outside are you? The traffic police will lay down the law. It's the law of the land you see, and everyone must pay. It's just the ticket." I shook my head, opting not to explain that someone without keys likely would not have been driving. Spinning my wheels was not even an option.

Unlike the pharmacy, there was no line. I walked right up to the first open window. The teller, Jenny, smiled at me. "How may I help you, sir?" Before I could answer, she thrust a tray of cookies at me. "Would you like a cookie?" Before I could respond, she held up her hand to shield her words from anyone but me. "They are gluten free and not very good. They go against the grain. Each department takes turns baking them. Some better than others. These guys should stick to crunching numbers. There is no accounting for taste."

I took one and it crumbled in my hand. Complete disintegration. I looked at the pile of cookie dust, then at Jenny. We saw eye to eye. Her eyes had tracked just like mine. We sized each other up, waiting for the other to say it, but it never came.

"Thank you, Jenny. Earlier today, I was here, and just now, I discovered I lost my keys. I thought they might be here?" I explained to Jenny after she had awkwardly tossed the cookies aside.

Jenny seemed to seriously consider my predicament before responding. "Hmm, not that I recall but let me check the lost and found. I'll be right back." It was then then I noticed she was wearing a toga. I don't know why. It was all Greek to me.

Jenny scurried away, leaving me alone at the counter. It was then that I discovered that I was no longer alone in the lobby. The guard notwithstanding, of course. Although he was still standing. I heard a pin drop behind me and then a cleared throat.

Giddy for me to address him was the fellow who had waved at me from across the street. I had been correct that he was not Adam. "Oh, there you are! Didn't you see me across the street?" He plucked another pin out of his shirt collar, and then the cardboard insert. He dropped both on the floor. "This is a new shirt. Having seen the light in here, I found more packing materials. Part and parcel, you know."

"Sorry, Clifford, I was in a hurry to come inside. I lost my keys," I explained insufficiently. Clifford and I used to play games together. We had a checkered past. Sometimes backgammon.

Clifford was rightfully perplexed. Had he come to the bank to offer me his two cents? A penny saved is a penny earned. He was not my financial advisor. Why should he care? I felt compelled to tell him something. "I was here earlier today. And some time afterwards, I discovered that I lost my keys."

Sparing me from further explanation was Jenny, who returned with a box labeled "L & F." People are so lazy in this day and age. They

probably would be tomorrow too. Like there's no tomorrow? The silly things I say.

Together, Jenny and I perused the contents of the box. It did in fact contain some keys, but they were not mine. Other items were unusual or disconcerting. There was a remote control for a JVC VCR, a ball of yarn, a jar of fireflies with a sticker referring to them as lightning bugs, and a mousetrap that appeared to be loaded and active. Jenny confirmed this last fact. "Be careful, it's all set," she warned. When I looked at her inquisitively, she nodded. "It was like that when we found it."

I did not expect there to be any currency in the box. Not one red cent. However, there was a pile of wooden nickels in the corner of the box. "People try, but we don't accept those. For what it's worth," Jenny remarked, following my gaze.

My keys had not been found at the bank and placed in the official cardboard repository. I would have to think outside the box. "Thank you for your help, Jenny," I said. She responded with a curtsy before clutching the box and disappearing from view. As I turned to leave, I heard a loud snap and a stifled scream. They really ought to build a better mousetrap.

Clifford was still there. Perceptively, he had noticed I did not have keys in my hand. "Megan had mentioned in our consultations that you are financially careless, that you spend money like you have a hole in your pocket. Maybe the keys fell out of this hole."

"I do not have a hole in my pocket," I scoffed. These were new trousers. No hole, no ace in the hole, and no ace up my sleeve. And who the heck was this Megan?! "Thanks, Clifford, I'll see you later. I have to go look for my keys."

“Good for you, Palmer. Make your way in life. Go for broke. Don't trust these banks. My cousin does not. He plays rock paper scissors professionally and does quite well for himself. He makes money hand over fist.” I did my best to appear uninterested in Clifford's tirade. I must have been genuine because Clifford continued. “Stocks are where it's at. My other cousin is an expert, Jack, of all trades. Interest rates are low here too. And the backing of the Federal Reserve? Ha, I don't trust them ether. They have money to burn.” I left Clifford there to simmer without stopping to ask if he had actual business at the bank or he had just followed me inside.

Before the door closed behind me, I heard Clifford remark to the guard, “there he goes without saying.”

After the bank, where had I gone? Like I did regularly, I had paused at the river overlook park. It was water under the bridge at this point. My eyes could not help but go with the flow. Fighting back a tear, I promised to stay optimistic. If all else failed, I would cry me a river and cross that bridge when I came to it. Provided the phantom arsonist did not strike again, burning more bridges. Where else? There was always the town obelisk, the pillar of the community. I had also lingered outside the kennel, even though I had not ventured inside. Could I have been playing with my keys there and dropped them? Had they fallen by the wayside? It was worth a shot.

Perhaps it was unhealthy that I still stood around outside the kennel after all of these months. Standing there seemed to relax me. I was only following my heart, according to the monitor on my fancy and unnecessary watch.

It was in the middle of the dog days of summer when I had briefly dated Francine, one of the kennel's technicians. I enjoyed hiking with her too. She was a babe in the woods and just a nice girl. The shaggy dog stories she could tell... Once she started to tell me about her job and coworkers, how dog eat dog it was. I begged her not to

continue. One night, we overdid it with gin and I was as sick as a dog, in particular the dog that she had caught drinking from my glass after I had passed out. The next morning was painful. I was dog tired and Francine's hair of the dog remedy was uniquely nauseating.

When I had loitered around the kennel earlier in the morning, they were still performing the dog and pony show. The stable was south of town so someone always needed to pony up before the show. Ponies did not impress me. I used to bet on the horses at the racetrack and could sometimes pull a fast one. Too often, I lost, watching them jockey for position. Secretariat was the all-time best and no horse since had ever come close. You cannot beat a dead horse. Besides, it was maddening when they handicapped the races by putting the cart before the horse.

Arriving back at the kennel, I was relieved that nothing was happening outside that would impede my search. Someone had planted the wrong type of tree out front and the dogs were always barking up it. I could hear happy birthday being played in the courtyard behind the building. There they were, celebrating again: every dog has its day.

The door to the kennel opened. It was not some wolf at the door; they usually brought those out the back. It was Francine. She was not as pleased to see me as I had hoped when fantasizing about this moment. "Palmer," she said coolly. "Look what the cat dragged in," she added, showing me a ratty mouse made out of felt.

"Hi Francine. I lost my keys," I blurted out, as though that should explain everything. "How's work?" I asked, trying to be endearing. It was a labor of love.

"It's really busy. Many new clients each week and the attic ceiling continues to collapse. It's raining cats and dogs. Why are you here,

Palmer?" Francine was nothing if not direct. Previously, I had liked that about her. When I was still using my inversion table, I thought I may have been head over heels in love with her.

"Oh, I thought I might have dropped my keys here this morning, but I don't see them." Francine raised her left eyebrow, the less trusting one. I hurried to derail her train of thought. "I am sorry about everything," I said sincerely as my dad would have. Like father, like son.

"Thanks, Palmer, but it was not your fault. Don't you remember what I said? It's not you, it's me. When we used to make soup together, I would always ruin it. It boils down to that, okay? We could never agree when we would play cards. You never played with a full deck. For once, let's just call a spade a spade. Even when the power went out, it was not romantic. You burnt the candle at both ends." I remembered that night. It was another ball of wax that ruined my lighter. I still could not hold a candle to it. Now, I used matches but it felt like I was playing with fire. She was right. More power to her.

Francine's neutral tone was neither forgiving nor comforting, and not even very neutral. It was not what I wanted to hear. Once, she served me a bratwurst and it did not cut the mustard. Unfulfilling. And I was just as disappointed now. This memory did not speak with relish of our relationship. And I still had no idea what had happened to my keys.

"Look, Palmer, I need to go. One of our dogs is sick. He bit off more than he could chew. Unfortunately, this was Randy, who suddenly found himself armed to the teeth. His left arm, thankfully."

"That monster bit the hand that fed him. I am sorry to hear that. Please give Randy my best, Francine."

"I'll tell him, Palmer. It's bad, to the bone. He'll be okay though. This dog's bark is worse than his bite. He is genuinely sorry, walking around with his tail between his legs."

From her point of view, there was no love lost between us. I was more concerned about having lost my keys. Francine gave me some empathy before going back inside the kennel. "You'll find your keys, Palmer. I am sure of it," she predicted, rapping on the tree emphatically. Her knocking on wood dislodged some fruit. The apple did not fall from the tree. Especially the wrong tree.

From there, what can I tell you? I borrowed a shovel, went to the park and dug around there too, but did not find my keys. Failure. Older than dirt. All of that mud slinging was for naught. It was a last-ditch effort.

The writing was on the wall of the locksmith's shop. This made it easier to compose the number and call for his services when I admitted defeat.

Even now, I never have found my keys. Every so often, I think of somewhere else to look but the keys are never there. All's well that ends well, unless I dropped them down a well. The old wishing well. Did I ever look there? That was wishful thinking. No matter where I searched, my keys were neither here nor there. What do they say when you lose something? It is always in the last place you look. So cliché.

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