



TIM BOWLING

— *presents* —

The Heavy Bear

A NOVEL



THE HEAVY BEAR

Tim Bowling



This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead; events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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— Prologue —

I SENSED SOMEONE standing beside my bed and flung the sheets back. But no menacing figure, knife in hand, loomed over me. At first I saw only the empty darkness. Then the walls and the dresser emerged from the murk, and I was peering through an undersea camera at the ruins of the *Titanic*, the forgotten contours of some vaguely familiar life. I sat bolt upright. The bottom half of a body still hung in the window, as if frozen in ice. I tried to cry out, but the silence, much heavier than any I'd ever known, drowned the words in my throat.

The body slid out into the greater darkness. A low growl accompanied the departure, immediately followed by a powerful, mysterious odour - rank, wild. The kind of smell I hadn't experienced since my youth on the Fraser River over a Christ's lifetime ago.

A hatful of moonlight splashed on the hardwood floor, the wild smell faded and I was just a middle-aged father and husband again. I pushed the little button to illuminate my watch-face. One o'clock. Someone – or something – had been in my bedroom in the middle of the night. Why? To steal? I dismissed the idea at once. I didn't know why, but the intrusion felt more personal than any random act of thievery.

Careful not to disturb my wife, I quickly rose, dressed and, with my pulse still pounding, followed the figure through the open ground-floor window.

All around me the air flowed like fragranced bathwater. The scent of the neighbour's freshly cut grass filled my nostrils, while the cathedral beams of our block's towering Dutch elms overwhelmed my eyes. Parked cars formed a resting train below the leafy branches and one porch light along the avenue held a vortex of bugs against the night. Even inner-city neighbourhoods at this hour sometimes possess a deep rural calm. If a pampered house cat had been on the loose, I could have heard its tympanic paw-fall over the flower beds.

Instead, I heard only my own breathing as I hurried across the lawn to the cracked sidewalk. Of course, I expected to see no one – even intruders who linger strangely in open windows don't hang around to be caught and interrogated. So, the sight of a slight man in baggy trousers, a shirt of moonlight and an old-fashioned hat standing half a block away caught me unawares, to say the least. He seemed oddly familiar, though probably only because he stood no more than five foot five – my late father's height. Again, for some curious reason, my voice failed, as if I no longer had one. Instead, I waved my arms in what I intended to be a threatening manner, but the figure, whose face I could not make out, appeared to be waiting for me. As I came within fifty yards, however, the little man vanished. At that point, I took a deep breath and began to orient myself,

to be the rational adult of the ultra-rational twenty-first century.

Dreams. Fancies. The phantoms and illusions brought on by stress. The truth was, I had slept fitfully for several weeks, as I generally did in advance of the university year when, as an itinerant lecturer in English, I steeled myself to meet a hundred young people and steer them, often against their will, down the corridors of syntax and through the abundant meadows of metaphor. It was pleasant enough work, but a shy middle-aged man with some talent for language is still a shy middle-aged man, and meeting humans for the shy is the same as it is for a spider or a coyote: a matter of no inconsiderable anxiety. But why cavil? I was a nervous, over-sensitive man who had reached an age of reckoning: I had more time behind me now than ahead, and the future looked increasingly untender, for my own three children and everyone else's. At almost fifty, I had become both disillusioned and anxious. So it was hardly surprising, then, that I should conjure up phantoms from the tangle of my nerve endings.

Yet, when I reached the end of the block, I already knew that the little man wasn't gone for good. And when the low growl sounded at my back, and the wild odour – a concoction of woodsmoke and salmon spawn – filled my nostrils as I turned, I understood that my world had shifted, and whether I still inhabited what the media considered reality didn't much matter.

Approaching the central north-south corridor of 99th Street – which was about as busy as a supermarket aisle after closing – I looked up and saw, forty yards away, my mysterious quarry. Except now he wasn't on the ground. He tiptoed, with astonishing agility, along a telephone wire, his absurdly large shoes flapping silently. He didn't even hold his arms out for balance. His shirt front blazed whitely against the faded confetti of stars. Oddly enough, there was no moon and no moonlight.

So, what had splashed into my bedroom?

With each step that I took, the little man took three; and as I increased my pace, he increased his. Soon we were both sprinting, my feet hardly more secure on the ground than his on the wire. How was it that he didn't fall? How was it that his tiny crushed hat didn't fly off? The houses of my neighbours slid away like trains on parallel tracks leaving the same station. By the time I stood, panting, under the 99th Street telephone wire, the little man had vanished again.

I looked to the south and back to the north. No one. And not even one moving car. I watched the intersection lights on Whyte Avenue change from red to green to yellow and back to red again. Then I watched the whole process once more. Strange – the signals blinking on and off without anyone to heed them. Like a movie running in an empty theatre without even the projectionist in the booth.

That was exactly how the knowledge struck me – not all at once, but in the meticulously timed cuts of the traffic lights. Was it strange that an image solved the mystery? Perhaps. But I had been a working poet for much longer than I'd been a father or a teacher, and the confluence of imagination, truth and mystery had never been an alien force in my life.

“Working? Fat chance, chum,” grumbled a voice from right behind me.

I whirled around to find the same visual emptiness, but the wild odour took me under the armpits and almost lifted me off the ground. It wasn't an offensive smell exactly, but powerful as a river at freshet. Chum? I didn't speak like that, not even in my dream world. What was next, 23 skidoo?

When I turned back to the intersection lights, the red blazing like the torched eye of Polyphemus, I wanted desperately for the little man in baggy trousers to reappear. Because by now I knew exactly who he was, and I also knew I was as

sane as any man in the twenty-first century can expect to be, dragging the bloodied pelt of the twentieth century behind him. The game's afoot, I would have said to Watson as I filled my meerschaum pipe, if I'd had a Watson to confide in.

But I had no companion in the summer dark except for the ghost of a long-dead funny man and a disembodied growl and a wild smell I recognized but couldn't name.

I turned and slowly retraced my steps, my body continually in the moving spotlight of the moon. But the strange thing was, the night remained moonless, and whenever I stopped and looked around for the little man, I saw only the shadows of trees and houses, and heard only a ghostly tinkle of breeze along the trembling tightrope where he had balanced so beautifully, up there with all the other lost voices.

BUSTER KEATON first entered my life in October 1964, when I was nine months old – nine months out after the nine months in. He arrived by train in the town of White Rock, BC, a few miles inland from the fishing town of Ladner, where I lay, all my senses on fire, my capacity for memory unknown. That autumn, Keaton was sixty-nine years removed from his mother’s womb and a half-century removed from the vaudeville stage. After several decades of neglect, he was finally enjoying a small resurgence of fame. An international superstar in the 1920s, who directed and starred in a series of silent comedic feature films that made him both famous and wealthy, he was derailed by the advent of sound and its accompanying studio system in the 1930s and became a lost, forgotten, often-intoxicated figure throughout the 1940s and early ’50s. The new medium of television saved him, gave him

hope and work and kept him in the corner of the public eye until the public could be reminded of the genius of his early manhood.

After his fall from the heights of fame, Keaton took any job offered, no matter how trivial or cheap, and at one time proudly boasted that he worked more than Doris Day. But the work was mostly dreck over which he had no artistic control or input. Keaton fans – and there are thousands all over the globe – who like to debunk the idea that their hero’s life was tragic simply do not understand what it means for an artist to lose the opportunity to employ his gifts. The same world of commerce that deprived readers of whatever greatness Herman Melville might have achieved after *Moby Dick* if he’d been encouraged is the same world that deprived filmgoers of the brilliance Keaton and Orson Welles might have achieved had their genius been celebrated and financed instead of quashed. But, as the poet Adrienne Rich writes, “no one tells the truth about truth.” We all prefer legend and myth and illusion. We all prefer the movies. And why not? After all, we see what we know – which is what we remember – in silent, visual terms. If we recall a scream, it’s the open mouth and the terror in the eyes, not the anonymous shrill cry, that comes to us. That Russian woman’s horror at the runaway baby carriage in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* is all the more haunting because we can’t hear it.

Back at home, I couldn’t return to sleep, nor could I stop thinking about the little man on the telephone wire. Obviously, I couldn’t go back nearly fifty years and see the real Buster Keaton on the railroad tracks at White Rock, at least not directly. But I could certainly see the screen image of the aged comedian there any time I wanted, because it appears in *The Railrodder*, a 1965 production of the National Film Board of Canada, and the reason why Keaton was in British Columbia

at all. The film is memorable for two reasons: it is silent and therefore affords The Great Stone Face, as he was known due to his stoic onscreen expression, a final opportunity to resurrect the gags and gestures of his youth; and it captures the country I can no longer access with any of my senses, the country that is not a physical space but a vision and a time. How do we remember a feeling? How do we remember what the past felt like?

After making a press of dark roast, I slipped in the DVD and watched *The Railrodder*. Then I watched *Buster Keaton Rides Again*, the documentary shot simultaneously with the filming of *The Railrodder*, which is even more haunting in its depiction of a dying legend and a vanishing nation. And I stepped straight out of linear time – just like Keaton as the projectionist in his classic 1924 film *Sherlock Jr.*, who leaves his own body and enters the story he is showing on the screen – and arrived in the past where the light animates the dead and every shadow is a snarl of tape on the cutting-room floor.



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THE SECOND time Buster Keaton entered my life, he was young, athletic, wildly creative and daring. He was also dead. This paradox – between the screen actor and the living man – haunted Keaton from a very young age. Born in 1895 in Piqua, Kansas, to theatrical parents always on the road, he first appeared on the vaudeville stage at the age of three, became a celebrity within a few years, and knew illusion and fantasy and applause as normal, and the world of school and boredom and institutionalized authority as abnormal. The stage *was* life. Everything else simply got in the way. No wonder, then, that the great illusionist Harry Houdini was responsible for giving Joseph Francis Keaton, aged six months, the name the world would always know him by. Houdini, working at the time with the Keaton family in a travelling medicine show, saw the infant Keaton fall down a flight of stairs in a boarding

house. Rushing up, he cried out, “What a buster that kid just took!” According to legend, Keaton *père* – a long, lean Irishman of dubious talent also named Joseph and noted mostly for his violent high kick skills – responded, “Buster. That’s what we’ll call him then.”

It’s a cute story, and very likely only a promotional gimmick dreamed up long after the fact (once Houdini was famous and worth capitalizing on), but it nonetheless makes a critical point: the world of make-believe claimed Buster Keaton for its own almost from the start, and he would both star and suffer under that claim, like a mortal favoured by the gods of Olympus (or, in his case, the movie moguls of Hollywood).

But to return to paradox: the flesh-and-blood Keaton died on February 1, 1966, in Woodland Hills, California, not quite a year and a half after his visit to White Rock to finish filming *The Railrodder*. In the summer of 1969, in the sleepy fishing village of Ladner, one town over from White Rock, I saw several of the two-reel short comedies that Buster Keaton made in the early 1920s projected onto the mossy wooden side of a neighbour’s house.

Imagine it. A sloped lawn, twilight dissolving to darkness, the scents of fresh-cut grass and brine and salmon mingled on the warm air, and a dozen wide-eyed children whispering excitedly as a genial middle-aged neighbour in horn-rimmed glasses arranges a giant praying mantis of a projector on the cracked sidewalk and sets it whirring. And there, at the far end of the shimmering, dusty swathe of light, running away from the police, in lifelong permanent retreat from the world inimical to joy and freedom, is a uniquely handsome, unsmiling, white-faced figure of madcap fun and something else, something a child of five would not understand but might very well intuit, a strange, intensely modern kind of angst, a furious helplessness of the kind that an insect exhibits in the hands of that

unfeeling five-year-old. This figure, funny as he is while swinging over rooftops and diving through windows to escape his pursuers, is not funny in the same way as the Little Tramp of Chaplin, who also animated the side of our neighbour's house that summer, not adorable like Shirley Temple and not downright buffoonish as his co-star Fatty Arbuckle (who was nonetheless, like Keaton, a toy of cruel fate). There is something thoroughly original about this daredevil mime in the porkpie hat and slap shoes, and yet my child self recognizes him immediately as a kindred spirit. The world happens to him, and much merriment ensues, but he himself doesn't laugh; he doesn't even smile. Deep down in every child is an absolute sympathy for Buster Keaton's deadpan face, perhaps, again, because children intuit the real reason for it: that in the world as grown-ups construct it and know it, we are all outcasts.

The story of Keaton's stoic expression goes like this: on those early twentieth-century vaudeville stages, when vaudeville – that bustling *mélange* of live acts, everything from Shakespearean thespians to dog trainers to opera singers to ventriloquists – was the king of American entertainment, the child Keaton soon learned that audiences found him much more hilarious when he showed no emotion upon receiving his father's physical abuse. For *The Three Keatons*, as the family act became known, had quickly won a reputation as vaudeville's most riotous, rough-and-tumble turn. In brief, the gist of the show was mischievous son, aggravated father, innocent bystander mother. In even briefer brief, it was *ad lib* mayhem. Keaton's most thorough biographer, Rudi Blesh, describes a typical performance as “David and Goliath in the nursery,” a violent farce that ended with little Buster literally being flung across the stage and into the wings.

Keaton himself in the late 1950s recalled one of the worst results of this type of planned but unpredictable violence. After

one matinee, his father misjudged the distance when he kicked, and caught Buster in the head, knocking him unconscious, a state in which the boy remained for eighteen hours until the tireless doctors finally revived him.

On another occasion, Buster's father actually picked him up and hurled him at a heckler in the front row, breaking three of the man's ribs. Buster's slap shoes struck the man in the neighbouring seat, and broke two of his front teeth. As was normally the case, Buster went uninjured, mostly because he had trained himself on the right way to break a fall.

Meanwhile, in the midst of all this father-son roughhousing, which did indeed attract the unwanted attention of child welfare societies from time to time (because of his unbelievable comic talent, Buster was sometimes believed to be a midget, which helped legally and morally), the young Keaton learned the value of withholding his own expressions of mirth. He noticed that whenever he smiled or showed the audience any pleasure, they didn't laugh as much. So, on purpose, he started looking haunted and bewildered. Over time, he realized that other comedians could derive an advantage from laughing at their own gags, but that he simply couldn't. The public hated it when he tried. That was just fine with Keaton. He always claimed to be happiest when the folks watching him said to each other, "Look at the poor dope, wilya?"

The jury remains out – a long way out, in fact – on the relationship between Keaton's impassive mask and the abuse he endured at the hands (and feet) of his often-drunk father. How much of Keaton's legendary deadpan, for example, was the result of pure comic instinct and how much the result of his father's fierce onstage instructions? If you are six years old and being pummelled for laughs, and your towering father in a bald Irish wig and sidewhiskers hisses at you, "Face! Face!" in order to keep you from showing any emotion, how does this

experience, repeated night after night until it's no longer necessary, affect your relationship to your own genuine emotions? Keaton himself always sidestepped the question. His parents loved him, he loved the stage: case closed. He would respond the same way when Joseph Schenk, his producer and friend who basically sold him out to MGM in the 1930s and effectively ruined Buster's creative life, was criticized for having been disloyal. Buster would have none of it, even though, as an intelligent man, he knew he'd been cheated and misused by Schenk. It was simply too painful to accept the truth. Face! Face!

Even by 1950, when Buster made a cameo appearance in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* as one of the "waxworks," the deluded Norma Desmond's forgotten bridge players, he didn't openly blame anyone for what had happened to his career. Face! Face! But he drank, so heavily that at one time he wound up straitjacketed in an institution. What his features showed then are not part of the legend. The experiences Keaton lived between his father's hissing of "Face! Face!" and the two words he speaks in *Sunset Boulevard* - "Pass," and then, softly, as in final and permanent defeat, "Pass" - are the truth that contributed to the particular nature of his genius.

In short, Keaton's vision was darkly comic, almost entirely without popular sentiment of the kind found in Chaplin's work. And the darkness, without question, was allied to the deadpan.

Of course, I knew none of this in the summer of 1969 on the neighbour's lawn sloped like whaleback under the buttery stars as I watched, spellbound, the quick, lithe figure walk, then walk faster, then sprint and leap from one calamity to another. All I understood then was the hilarity, but some part of me must have registered the melancholy and tragic vision. Why else should Buster Keaton haunt me nearly a half-century

later? Middle age, the death of loved ones, the challenge to stay positive in a world awash in cynicism, materialism and grotesque sentimentality. Who whispers “Face” to us, and what face should we reveal before we look glumly into our hand and mutter, “Pass”?

AS THE EARLY September darkness continued to melt like chocolate around the house, and the world of mortgages and bills and social noise required me once again to enter a classroom and stand at the head of it, I put on my Buster Keaton deadpan mask in order to hide my mounting anxiety, in order to keep the cornered animal from snarling and lashing out. Meanwhile, the encounter with the little comedian kept returning me to my own beginnings, as if some ur-projectionist had reversed the reel.

I spent my entire childhood in the same small bungalow, literally a stone's throw from the banks of a great river, the wild, 850-mile-long Fraser. My immediate family – parents, two much older brothers and a slightly older sister – made a subsistence income in the salmon fishing industry. It was not as unusual a profession as vaudeville, perhaps, but it was

unusual enough and afforded a certain amount of freedom from the nine-to-five rat race, which, in the 1960s and early 1970s on the west coast, didn't seem like much of a race. Our town was gull-haunted, sleepy, steeping under the lunar changes and the persistent rains like an ever-darkening tea bag. The neighbourhood I grew up in was the most haunted, condensed part of that intensifying darkness. Within a few blocks of my house, in every direction, lay ruins of some kind: stove-in fishboats and moss-sagged net sheds along the river; a whole row of empty, condemned shops on the little main street; at least five crumbling two-storey houses from the Georgian past, abandoned after being bought up by real estate companies waiting patiently for an upturn in the economy that never seemed to approach; and, believe it or not, a mile in the opposite direction, an entire vegetable canning factory filled with silent, greasy machines just waiting for a ghostly hand from Hollywood's silver age to set them in motion again.

My entire childhood world was a Buster Keaton film set, circa 1924. When I look back on it, and imagine the sunlight and the flowering abandoned orchards that had been planted by the pioneers who had built the abandoned houses – all those plum and pear, cherry and apple trees thriving in forgetfulness along with the untended blue-joint grass and the great coal-smoke blackberry bushes – everything quickly becomes black and white and intensely silent. When I see myself, either in memory or in the photographs so rarely taken at the time because to develop them cost money that our family couldn't spare, I was a serious child, even in play – especially in play. As Keaton himself routinely remarked about his legendary deadpan, “I was concentrating so hard that I wasn't even aware that I wasn't smiling.” Between our town's one flaking totem pole with the rain-gnawed raven, bear and raccoon, and the grey, pyramidal, granite World War I cenotaph with,

ironically enough, the names of two Aboriginal soldiers engraved on the sides, I lived the five years of my greatest innocence and watched the ten years of Buster Keaton's most inspired genius.

That the man himself, in the fall of 1964, so close to his own material death, should approach within a few miles of that perfect film set and of the infant who would perform on it seemed at once eerie and joyous. It was as if he had arrived to direct successive generations in the art of the tragic vision, and his most inspired directorial touch was to withdraw.

Fighting sleep, drinking coffee, I saw him there again, outside of the image on the screen – I saw the real man. No, I see him. He's both young and handsome and old and drink-ravaged, and he's looking through the complicated camera of every blue heron set up in the marsh, standing on the rusted rails of the tracks that still ran through town to the riverbank but no longer carried any trains, hovering in his huge mime's face over the slack tide and those sleepers in the houses who, as children, would have watched his films when they first appeared, back before Hollywood had the bureaucratic bit firmly in its glittering mouth. I was not a religious man. I believed in a human fate in human hands – and yet the image of Buster Keaton on the edge of my childhood came close to a vision of God. It was right that this should be so, for what is a vision of God if it isn't an acknowledgement of life's gravity and an intense avowal to keep the faith? Every day in North America life is sold to us as a trivial, passing entertainment, and death as a horror whose spiritual and emotional meanings are to be avoided at all cost.

I would not buy the trivia and I could not turn my eyes from the horror. Keaton was making cold laughter out on the tracks and in the marshes, in the attic rooms of abandoned houses. He was the god of the black and white, of silence, and he was

approaching even as he withdrew – like a more famous god of the human imagination, he was visible nowhere but present everywhere. No, but wait – he is visible. There he is, on the side of Mr. Atkey’s house in the summer of 1969. He is a spoiled rich boy somehow alone with a spoiled rich girl on an ocean liner somehow floating out to sea at night. And that ocean liner floats straight off the side of the house and onto the Fraser River, and drifts past the silt islands in the mouth where the lumber baron, H. R. MacMillan, once entertained Keaton’s even more celebrated peers, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, for pheasant-shooting parties.

There could no longer be any disbelief: Keaton was the god of time and art, and he was as cruel and merciful as the most credible of gods. I placed my bare neck on the altar. While I did not smile, my whole body prepared to laugh.