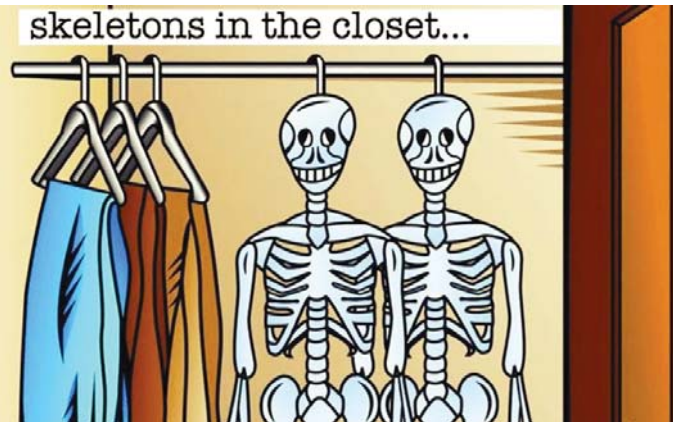


#PHRASES

Skeletons And Sweet But Nothings?

Uncovering the Origins of Common Phrases: ‘Skeletons in the Closet’ and ‘Whispering Sweet Nothings’



Language is full of colorful phrases that we use without thinking twice, often unaware of their intriguing origins. Two such expressions, ‘skeletons in the closet’ and ‘whispering sweet nothings’, are used widely in conversations, books, and media. But where did they come from, and what did they originally mean? Let’s explore the surprising histories behind these two popular idioms.

‘Skeletons in the Closet’

Meaning Today:

The phrase ‘skeletons in the closet’ refers to secrets or past misdeeds that someone wants to keep hidden, often because they’re shameful, damaging, or incriminating.

Example: The politician seemed perfect, until reporters found some skeletons in his closet.

Origin:

The expression likely originated in early 19th-century England, though the exact source is debated. The earliest known printed usage appears in William Hendry Stowell’s 1816 work *The Eclectic Review*, where he describes ‘skeletons in the closet’ metaphorically as hidden scandals.

At the time, ‘closet’ referred not just to a clothes cupboard but also to a private room, often one where a person could be alone or hide things. The skeleton, on the other hand, symbolized death, shame, or something sinister.

One theory suggests the phrase might be loosely connected to anatomical skeletons used by doctors or scientists, kept hidden from polite society due to their association with death and, in some cases, body-snatching practices for medical dissection in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Why It Stuck:

The phrase is powerful

because it combines two strong images:

- The skeleton (a universal symbol of death or past wrongdoing).
- The closet (a symbol of secrecy and concealment).

 Together, they evoke the chilling idea of hidden truths waiting to be discovered.

‘Whispering Sweet Nothings’

Meaning Today:

‘To whisper sweet nothings’ refers to the act of saying romantic, affectionate, or flirtatious things to someone in a soft, intimate voice, usually in private.

Example: He was whispering sweet nothings in her ear at the candlelit dinner.

Origin:

This phrase dates back to the 16th or 17th century, though it became popularized in the 19th century. The term ‘nothings’ doesn’t mean the words are meaningless, it suggests that what’s being said may not have literal importance or substance, but is emotionally significant. Think of soft phrases like ‘you’re beautiful,’ ‘I’ve missed you,’ or ‘you make me so happy,’ none are deeply informative, but all are emotionally powerful.

One early literary use of a similar phrase appears in the work of William Congreve, a 17th-century English playwright, who referred to lovers ‘sighing and whispering soft nothings.’

Why It Stuck:

- It reflects the delicate, emotional side of love.
- The phrase carries a sense of romantic intimacy.
- It balances the idea of saying something seemingly trivial but emotionally impactful.

Interestingly, in modern usage, it can sometimes be cynical, implying that what’s being said is empty flattery or mere seduction.



Trees fall.



Tools you will need to make dinner.



Preparing dinner on a simple tree branch.



Mirza Yawar Baig
Naturalist and Wildlife Conservationist

Hunting in the rainforest is very tough because though it is teeming with wildlife, the forest is so thick that you can’t see more than a couple of feet on either side of the trail. While driving, you had to concentrate on the trail, watch for tracks and when you did see something, be quick and accurate if you wanted to eat. If you walked through the forest in search of game, you must be prepared to become very sweaty and hot and get bitten by a zillion mosquitos and other insects who considered you manna from heaven. The forest extracts its price in sweat and blood for what it delivers up to you.

The canopy was so thick that

more often than not, we would be driving in semi-darkness. But that didn’t mean that it was cool. It was more like a sauna with very high humidity and almost no breeze. Sometime if you got lucky, you came into a forest clearing where you would feel the breeze as the jungle was open enough to allow for airflow. That must be one of the most pleasant experiences of mankind, the feel of the cool breeze on hot sweaty skin. The thick cover, resembling a green ocean as you fly over it in a small plane, is very deceptive in that the trees have very shallow roots. Most rain-forest soil is extremely poor and sandy with all the nutrients largely remaining at surface level and thus getting washed off or leached out of the soil, thanks to the heavy rainfall. Because of this rain-forest, trees have very shallow roots. Some trees have developed ways of obtaining much needed additional support by forming buttressed roots, which grow out from the base of the trunk, sometimes, as high as 15 feet above the ground. These extended roots also increase the area over which nutrients can be absorbed



from the soil. The forest floor is carpeted thickly with leaves on which grow mosses and lichens. Roots of trees take from this thick carpet and go very little into the earth. The soil beneath this thick cover of leaf mold is sandy and loose. As the trees grow, they literally hold up one another with their intertwined branches and the many creepers and vines which climb up the trunk of one giant and across the canopy of another also add support. Roots intertwine on the ground surface and below it. It is a huge network which communicates across vast distances.

A clearing is created usually when one of these giant trees falls, either the result of logging or when with age and disease, it succumbs to the wind. When that happens, it usually takes down a few others with it and an opening is created in the thick canopy of the forest. The unprotected soil gets quickly washed off its nutrients with the almost daily rainfall and is taken over by grasses and other secondary growth. A piece of rainforest is thereby lost forever. This is the problem with the slash and burn agriculture so common in these parts as well as with the indiscriminate logging that takes place everywhere. For every tree that is harvested, there is a huge swathe of forest that is laid bare, never to regenerate gone forever.

The rain-forest is a very fragile and delicate ecosystem, easily destroyed and impossible to repair. One may argue that given time, forest regenerates, and that is true. The problem is the amount of time that takes and what emerges at the end of that period. What is lost is almost never regained as it was.

Forest clearings, however, are good for hunters because herbivores come to eat the new grass and



Walking in the rainforest of Guyana.



A typical sleeping camp on a survival trip.



Corentyne River on the Orealla Trail.

Bush Calling !!!

PART:2

The forest floor is carpeted thickly with leaves on which grow mosses and lichens. Roots of trees take from this thick carpet and go very little into the earth. The soil beneath this thick cover of leaf mold is sandy and loose. As the trees grow, they literally hold up one another with their intertwined branches and the many creepers and vines which climb up the trunk of one giant and across the canopy of another also add support. Roots intertwine on the ground surface and below it. It is a huge network which communicates across vast distances.

#AFRICA



Buttress roots.

where trees have been burned, to eat the ash, and if you sit quietly just inside the forest bordering the clearing, you can usually get a clear shot. Clearings are also where you can get a breath of air as there is space for airflow, and so if you have been walking in the rain-forest, you welcome a clearing when you come to it. As I mentioned earlier, walking in the rain-forest is a very hot and sweaty affair and any breath of air is welcome.

Driving on the forest tracks also threw up a unique challenge, which when it happened for the first time, was very shocking for me. We came around a bend, and without warning, Peter stopped the Land Rover. Right ahead was a deep gully about

20 feet across at the bottom of which flowed a stream. Land Rovers, for all their excellent qualities, can’t jump or fly. So, what do we do? Peter was having a laugh at my expense; I could see that. He got out and stretched and then said, “Asriel! We gaffa bil a bridge.” (All right! We will have to build a bridge)

Build a bridge? This I had to see. Peter took out the chain saw, and we went hunting for trees of the right thickness. We wanted something with a straight trunk and thick enough to have the strength not to snap with the weight of the vehicle. We needed eight logs: four for each wheel track. Once we had cut the eight trees, we trimmed the branches off with our machetes and cut



Roasting fish over fire in the jungle of Guyana.

the trunks to size, ensuring that we had a good length on either side of the gully. Then, we laid the first set of four logs across the stream, standing each one up and dropping it across and then fixed them together by hammering in thick wooden pegs on either side so that they would not slide apart when the Land Rover wheel ran on them. Then, we went across the little bridge and pegged it on the other side in the same way.

Once we had one track in place, we drove the Land Rover up to the track to get an idea of how far apart the other track needed to be and repeated our bridge building. Then, I went across to direct Peter over the bridge and he drove across.

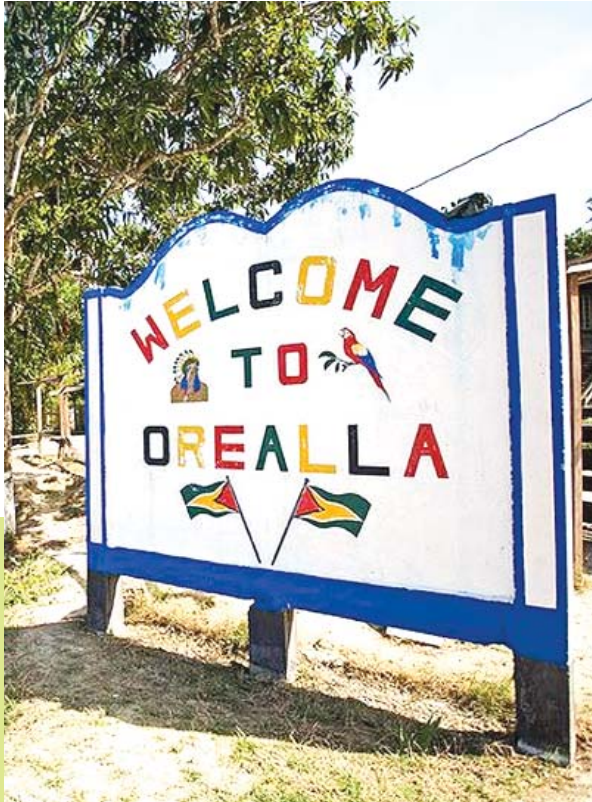
Took us about an hour of sweaty work, but then, we were off on our journey once again. Bridge building is a particularly important activity and the main reason why anyone driving in the bush would always carry a chain saw or axe and machete. If you couldn’t build a bridge, you would have to turn back because thanks to the thick forest on either side of the road, there was no way of going around the gully. Another important survival lesson I learnt is that whenever you come to a bridge, you always stop and carefully inspect it to ensure that it was strong enough. Green wood doesn’t last too long in the rain-forest and a bridge built a few weeks earlier can be seriously damaged by



Our bridge.



Sleeping under a shed made from branches.



Signboard in Orealla.

insects such that if you drove across it without checking, you’d most likely find yourself in the gully headfirst. So, we always inspected each bridge, and when necessary, strengthened it by cutting new logs and replacing any doubtful ones.

One day, Peter and I decided to drive to the Corentyne River on the Orealla Trail. Orealla is small Amerindian village on the Corentyne River overlooking Suriname. It is a lively and friendly place and we intended to drive there, spend a night, look at Suriname across the river and return to Kwakwani. The trail itself, if you walked would take about three days, but since we were driving, we didn’t expect to take more than the day. What we did not bargain for was the condition of the road. For one thing, we had to build bridges in two places and then took a couple of hours out of our schedule. Then, we came to a place where the road was deeply dug up by timber trucks so that the two tracks were more than two feet deep with a high central ridge. If we drove the Land Rover into those tracks, the central ridge would hit the oil sump and either smash it or jack up the car with the wheels spinning uselessly in the air.

Peter came up with a solution. He put the Land Rover in 4x4 drive and rode one wheel on the center median ridge. The vehicle tilted and tipped over to one side and the roof of the cab rested on the high side of earth bank that bordered the road. The two wheels on the opposite side were up in the air. Slowly the vehicle moved, with two wheels in the rut, two occasionally touching the median and the cabin roof sliding along the earthen bank. I can tell you that it didn’t do much good to the cabin, but then, that Land Rover

was already so beaten up that it didn’t matter. In any case, the soil was so soft and sandy that it did not do any permanent damage. At the end of the track, I stood on the runner which was in the air to tilt the vehicle back onto all four wheels, and off we went on the trail.

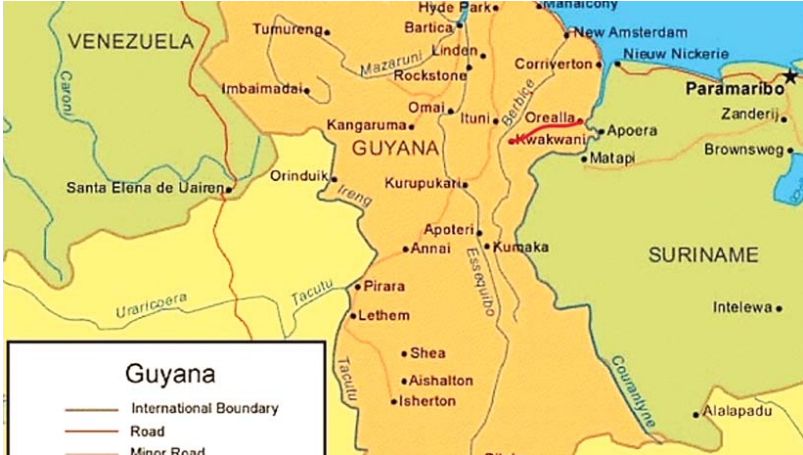
As always, our rule of eating what we shot was maintained and I shot a couple of Curassows, and at midday, we decided to take a break and cook our lunch. I made the fire and prepared the camp while Peter cleaned the birds. As always, first the tea, then the rest. By the time, the tea was ready, the birds were also ready for the pot, and while we drank tea, the birds cooked. Then, we both had hot Curassow stew with potatoes and red pepper, with bread which we had brought. A good lunch, an hour of siesta and then off again to Orealla.

We reached Orealla late in the evening and found a place to stay. There was a guest house, and we took a room. Then, we went out to get something to eat and ate some very fine fresh Corentyne fish curry and bread. The waterfront was like all Guyanese waterfronts,

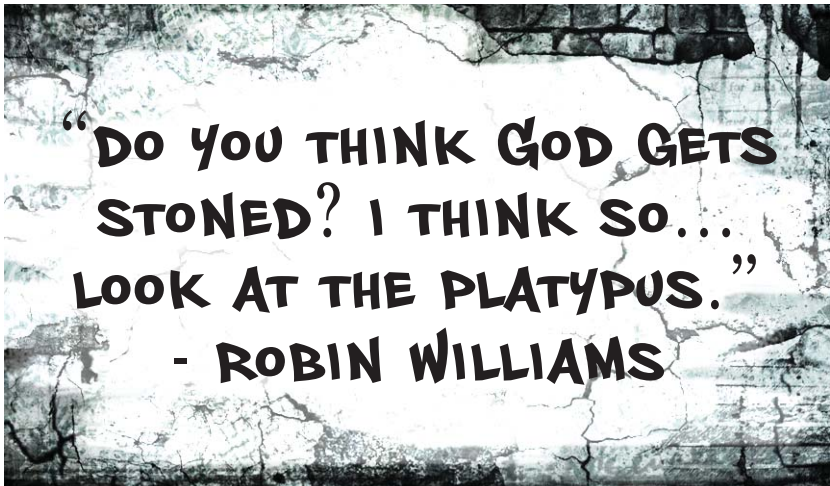
with very noisy bars which got noisier as the night progressed and people’s ‘spiritual’ levels increased. Mercifully, there was no violence the night we were there, but tempers tend to run short when people are operating on alcohol fumes and it is a matter of an instant for a bottle to be smashed on the edge of a table and then used to carve up the opponent in the argument. Dominos, as always, seemed to be popular with the people, probably because of its amazing noise making potential, slamming the dominos on the table with great force accompanied by a huge shout. Peter and I walked to the bank of the river and watched the lights across in Suriname for a while. It would have been illegal for us to cross over as we didn’t have visas. In any case, this place was famous for smuggling, and so, it was not safe to be caught on the river in a small boat at night by the Surinamese and Guyanese patrol boats which cruised the waters.

Concluded.

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THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman

