

HAILING THE MAGIC OF 'JUST ONE MORE THING'

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Peter Falk as Columbo.



As a child of the 1970s, I grew up watching *Columbo*, which starred Peter Falk as the title character, a rump

Los Angeles police detective whose disheveled appearance belied his razor-sharp powers of discernment. Falk's Columbo endeared himself to millions of viewers with his signature habit of pivoting just as he was about to leave the room after a polite chat with a prime suspect.

"Just one more thing," our apparently addled sleuth would casually implore before asking an especially incriminating question. The charm of Columbo's little addendum was that it seemed like the utterance of an old cop who wasn't quite on the ball, a man on the verge of forgetting the essence of his case.

Viewers were left to wonder, though, if Columbo's gesture of absent-mindedness was really just the ruse of a genius with much more grey matter than his rivals assumed.

Maybe the best conversations are those that never seem to end.

Columbo's save-the-zinger-for-last technique chimed with a tactic I later learned as a newspaperman — the principle of saving your toughest question for last. That way, if your interview subject chafed at your line of inquiry, at least the entire session wouldn't be lost.

Whatever its ultimate meaning, Columbo's "just one more thing" endures as a cultural meme; versions of it abound as internet GIFs. I sometimes wonder if the durability of the line also stems from our shared sense that the best part of a conversation often comes after the exchange is supposed to be over.

A variation of this phenomenon is the car door chat, which typically happens as guests are pulling out of the driveway at the conclusion of a dinner party. After steaks and wine, coffee and dessert, anecdotes and a general catching up on everyone's lives, the evening seems sublimely spent. Goodbyes are traded, hugs extended, and slowly, a sedan full of visitors begins receding into the night.

But wait, you gesture, hailing the car to a stop. There's just one more thing you forgot to say. The car window glides down, and you rest your elbows on the door, passing along another piece of news — or two, or three — that had somehow escaped your mind during the past three hours of fellowship.

"Just one more thing" might be our most apt description of what good talk can be.

The best conversations, it turns out, are the ones that never seem to end.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for other national publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Humanities* magazine.