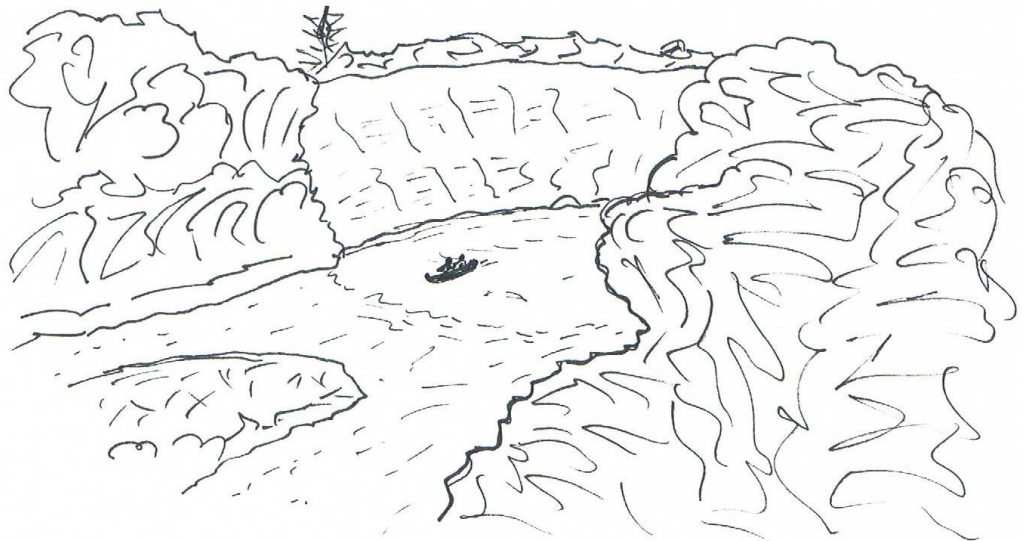


The Saugeen River Trilogy



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

The Essence of the Saugeen River Trilogy

This is a three part work comprised of connected novellas, inspired in part by the Salterton and Deptford trilogies of Robertson Davies. They are centered around the rhythms of a small town in southwestern Ontario, as a backdrop to a coming-of-age story set in the temporal context of the 1970s. The work is fiction, based loosely on some events that actually happened and many other events that did not actually happen. Characters are based on real-world people, but names have been changed to reflect the fictional nature of the writing.

The novellas roll out in chronological order, and contain vignettes that capture the life of an adolescent growing up in this small town. This maturation period is steeped in self-doubt, a fixation on members of the opposite sex, immersion in high school sports and occasional bouts of substance abuse. The story line is focused on seeing life from the perspective of this teenage boy, and is largely autobiographical. The inherent strengths and hidden flaws of the boy's family are uncovered as the story unfolds, with a particular emphasis on the positive relationship between the boy and his Mom. The mother is a beacon of Love and patience, who suffers from a sadness based on numerous losses. One of these losses relates to her closest brother, who was killed in action in World War II. Their story is told in a series of flashbacks throughout the trilogy, italicized and dated for ease of reader comprehension.

This trilogy is named for the mighty Saugeen River, which flows past the town with presence and majesty. The river is a consistent backdrop for the evolving story line, and provides a respite and a spiritual presence for the oft-times jangled life of a teenager making sense of his existence.

The illustrations at the frontispiece of each chapter were put in to break up the sea of text, to provide some greater sense of a subset of the characters, and because they were simply fun to create.

BWB, Dundas, Ontario

December, 2016

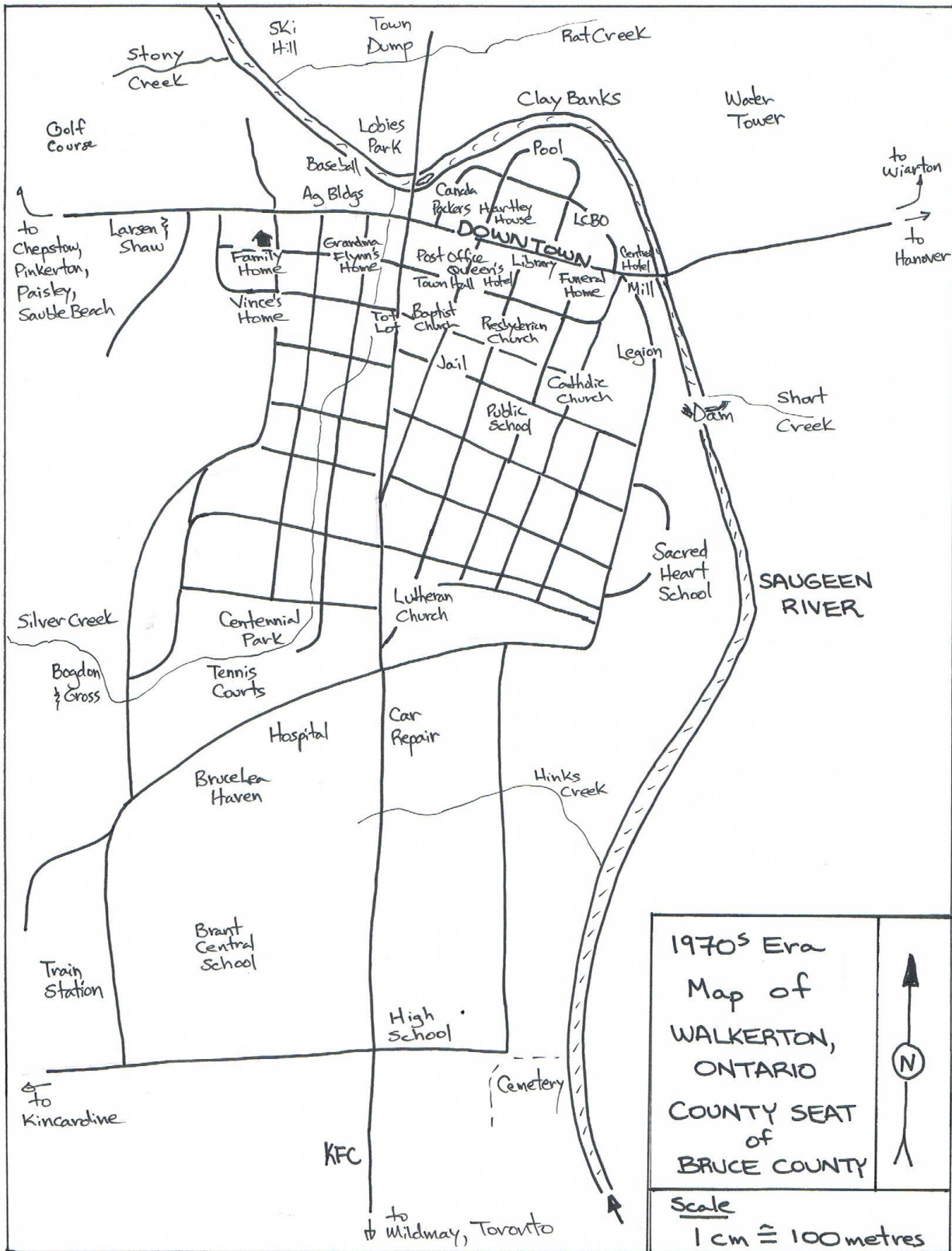
Macro Table of Contents

Navigating Undercurrents Across Time-pages 5 -88

The Assumption of Laminar Flow-pages 89-167

Turbulence at the Edges-pages 168-250

Author Profile – page 251



Navigating Undercurrents Across Time



Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

Set in Walkerton, Ontario, the county seat of Bruce County and a willing host to the mighty Saugeen River.

Date: April 1973

Every Town Needs a Hardware Store



School had let out, and the abrupt end of the basketball season meant no more practice obligations after the final buzzer of the day. The farm kids left for their bus ride home, queuing up obediently and stepping up to the yellow cylinders with bad seats that would take them to an evening full of chores and quiet stillness. He was a town kid, but the charms and downsides of rural living were not far back in the family tree nor geographically due to the proximity of working landscapes to this county seat.

So through hushed corridors, softly lit for either energy conservation reasons or neglected fluorescent tube replacement, he went to his locker and picked up his jacket and bag. The winter had been a hard one, but it was recently showing signs of its inevitable demise. So he stuffed his scarf and mitts in his bag, useful this past early morning, but less so now in warming temperatures and brighter sunshine.

Knots of kids walked back into the town, never questioning why the school been built on the outer extremity of the town. The odd kid had a car that they actually drove to school, but this was rare in those days when most parents still nursed the scars of having grown up in the Depression era. Frugality was a badge of honour, and walking was its highest sacrament.

So he walked along, alone but content. Some of the kids kibitzed around, and some roared or ranted at one another. The odd girl would give him a smile as he passed, perhaps even a touch flirtatious if he had been fully aware. But he walked on in his own head, detached from affairs of the heart or urges of the loins. He wasn't really sure what this all meant, but knew things had changed in late public school and that some kids were doing things that were whispered about in the hallways or crudely joked about in the locker room. He contemplated this from time to time in an abstract way, but that was the extent of it. He felt pulses of something when he sat on the bench after picking up a few quick fouls, and he

would glimpse the cheerleaders on the far side of the court with their smooth legs and spunky pertness. They would smile at him and cheer when he nailed one of his trademark bank shots, but he never once thought about walking home with one of them after school. So he walked alone with a steady pace and a content air.

He had a couple of tasks to do before he headed home. The first one involved stopping in at his church, where he had been an acolyte for a wedding the previous Saturday. This had meant lighting some candles, listening to the sacramental vows being said and observing a number of minute details about the bride and the groom. This was well before the days of slick and overpriced wedding extravaganzas, with armies of attendants and catered meals. These were simple folk, and a little past the standard marrying age of the time. The groom had a big head of hair and a flamboyant mustache. He was sweating profusely, largely from an undersized three-piece suit that may have been borrowed from a more diminutive brother or cousin. He had a ruddy complexion, perhaps from copious outdoor work, and it looked as if he had ingested a few snorts from a flask hidden in his truck's glove compartment. The bride was pretty enough, and sufficiently plump to underline a propensity for sweets. She too was perspiring fully, and her head veil was slightly askew. The minister was a model of tact and decorum and the ceremony ended uneventfully as they minced their way out of the church to the groom's pickup truck. The vehicle had been clandestinely hooked up by a mystery guest with a trailing cacophony of salmon tins and dog food containers. And in the midst of all this the couple had forgotten to leave the requisite envelope for the minister, organist and acolyte. The candle-snuffing kid had gone home without his five dollars that early Saturday evening, but the minister had called this morning to let him know it could now be picked up at the church.

"Pastor Arnhem, just dropping in at your request." The minister sat in his study off the sanctuary, glasses on the end of his nose and smiling gently and genuinely.

"Jayson, come in and sit down. Money isn't really necessary is it, but when these little packages come in they are not unwelcome, are they?"

"My Dad says money is important, and that I need to save money that I earn, so I am really happy that the couple remembered us."

"Absolutely, me as well. I have three daughters and two sons to feed! But I meant more in a spiritual sense. I grew up in the Islands, and saw a lot of poverty as a kid. But people had food, and each other, and they all got along in the end. Some of us were lucky enough to get a university education and a decent job. I never thought I would be a minister, and in such a great place like Canada! So God has a plan, and it unfolds with his grace and bounty, regardless of money."

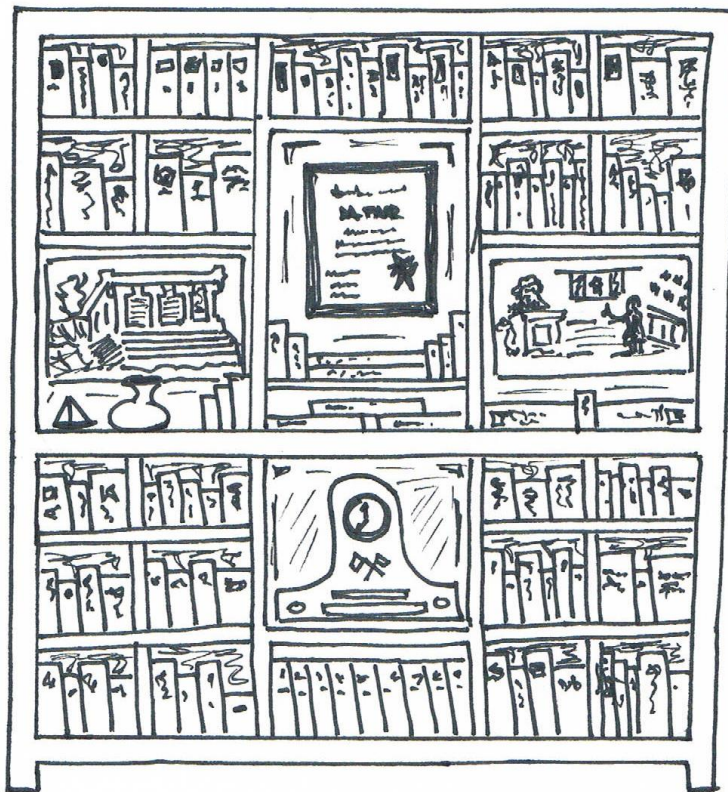
"Hmm, that's food for thought, Pastor. But I suppose I'll just take my envelope now and head home after I run one errand for my Dad."

His father worked night shifts, and had left him a note in his breakfast bowl to drop by the Home Hardware and pick up a pound of Robertson screws for a garage project planned for that weekend. He loved going downtown, and particularly loved the hardware store. Everything seemed to be in that

store, packed tight and high. Pails of linseed oil, paint color swatches, and snowblower displays all tumbled together into some form of coherent chaos. The bespectacled proprietor was leaning up against the hardware dispensing counter, chatting meaningfully with the man who owned a car repair shop and Ford dealership two blocks away. The master mechanic was the father of one of his classmates, a husky boy who had gotten him out of a few scrapes with a mix of brawn and chutzpah. He pretended to read the fine print on paint cans, waiting for the conversation to break up and he could then ask for the bag of screws. But it was a small town, and conversation meandered along like the river two blocks to the north. The mighty Saugeen, still hiding under sheets of ice, its dark beauty camouflaged until Winter finally beat its overdue retreat. But all things eventually come to an end.

“So what can I do ya’ for, young fellow?” Eyes twinkled, with glasses pushed up on the nose slowly.

An Honourable Profession



It was late on a Saturday morning, with no school responsibilities and the house quiet while his Mom shopped for groceries and his Dad slept his eight hours after coming home from a post-midnight punch-out time. The black dog stirred at his feet while he read a book in the living room, with no homework to sully his weekend.

He heard his Dad's footsteps upstairs. Familiar patterns of movement to get dressed, comb the hair and make his way downstairs. Saturday night was the weekly bath night, so a quick splash in the downstairs bathroom would suffice on this particular morning.

"Hey lad, how are ya' doing?" His Dad rummaged in the kitchen to find some cracked wheat bread for toasting and some aged cheddar cheese from the fridge to slice thickly on top.

"All right. It could turn nice later." Conversation between them was minimalist, and this would only become more entrenched as the adolescent years advanced.

"Well, as I say, the last Friday of the month generally tells you what the coming month will be like. And we had a beauty of a day last Friday before the calendar changed. So I'm counting on some good weather, so we can get out and get the garden in shape and ready for planting."

The young man inwardly groaned. Not another year of gardening! Those fine Summer nights, with just the hint of a breeze after a hot day, should be spent outside the pool hall watching muscle cars flex by. Or walking on the main street, hoping to cross paths with a cute gal wearing short shorts or a nice sun dress. Or cycling around town flashing grins at the Moms of his school buddies, who now seemed to give him a bit of a onceover ever since he shot up seven inches last Summer. The bottom line was that Summer should be about girls, not about tending a garden. They had a large plot, almost a quarter acre, and grew just about everything imaginable. It was often too hot to work during the day, and his Dad worked night shifts, so most of the weeding and watering and picking were left for his Mom and him to do in the evenings. He really didn't mind the time to work alongside his Mom, soft-spoken and caring, but another part of him wanted to hurry the chores and get out to roam the town.

"In a few months I'll be slicing tomatoes over top of my cheese sandwich, that's one of the highlights of the Summer..." His Dad often talked with his mouth full, and he swilled a good measure of hot water to wash things down. "I've got some errands to do downtown, and thought you might come along to give me a hand with the carrying." This was said as a statement, rather than an offer.

"I'm in the middle of this great book, and I'm feeling tired after a busy week. Are you sure you really need me?"

"Well, I can probably get along alone, but it might be a bit much to carry back. Mommy wants the sewing room done up on three sides with some new wallpaper, and baseboard freshened up with a new coat of paint. So it may be more awkward than heavy for one enlisted man to carry, but two would make for a perfect division of labour. And then I have to stop by the lawyer's office to sign some documents for second mortgages for a few folks. It might be good for you to see his office, you never know what you might do down the road and lawyering would be a clean and well-paying job. No heavy lifting, eh?"

"Sounds boring. And this is such a good book. If I finish it I might go over to the rink, as they still have open skating on Saturdays. What's a second mortgage?"

"Listen, pop in a bookmark and I'll have you back to it in less than an hour. And I'll explain mortgages along the way."

They walked the six blocks to the downtown, past well-maintained houses with neat lawns. Half a block further his Dad launched in.

"So I was lucky. Made some money and saved pretty much most of it. So when I bought our house, I paid for it fully, in cash. But some folks aren't so lucky, or have more mouths to feed, and they need to go to the bank to get the money to buy a house. They call this a mortgage, and they sock the young fella' who takes out the mortgage with a lot of interest payments. And sometimes the bank gets uppity and won't loan the person enough to buy their house. So they need a second mortgage to make up the difference. They generally go to some finance company to get the extra money, and they charge them even more interest. So I help some young bucks I know, who work hard and will be sure to pay it off. And I charge them close to zero interest, so they can get on their feet that much quicker. But I get old man Barr to draw up some papers to sign just in case they decide they would rather buy one of those new-fangled colour televisions than pay me back. Okay, here's the wallpaper and paint store already. Let's go to the lawyer first, then pick up the decorating materials right after."

They went through a heavy door into a lushly carpeted hallway. The opening of a second-door led them to the lawyer's outer office. A petite stenographer sat typing at a desk, wearing an impossibly snug cashmere sweater that did not escape the attention of either visitor.

"We're here for Barr, some signatures and a quick word." His Dad's tone became downright syrupy.

"Yes sir, he's expecting you. Go right on in. The young fellow can take a seat over there." This was said coolly, with a flippant gesture of a well-manicured hand.

His Dad went through a door and it clicked shut. Muffled voices emanated from within. He sat and looked up at a wide range of degrees and professional credentials, all handsomely framed and nicely arranged against purple brocade wallpaper.

The office assistant extracted the sheet from the typewriter, put it in a file folder and shimmied over to a filing cabinet directly in front of him. She sported a beautiful pair of high heel shoes, wore a pleated skirt that was as form-fitting as her sweater, and wore perfume that was one degree short of cloying.

She bent over the filing cabinet for an extended period of time, and he secretly prayed for her complete amnesia of the English alphabet.

Two things were certain. He was very glad he had left his book behind, and the practice of law now had considerable and definite appeal.

Not Much More Than a Horse Doctor



A few days later, he hung out on the couch, deep into yet another book. The smell of baking wafted from the kitchen, the gusts of aromas that he would take forward in life and summon as a comfort food memory whenever some form of solace was needed.

“Cookies will be ready in a few minutes....” His Mom called this out expectantly and lovingly.

“Can't wait!” Chocolate chip oatmeal cookies had become a major food group lately, washed down with copious amounts of cold milk.

A knock came to the back door. It was Vince, his buddy from up the street. One year ahead in high school, and several years ahead in terms of street smarts.

“Ah, Mrs. B., I smell freshly baked cookies! My timing on these has been pretty impeccable over the last little while. Might I be able to stay for one of these delicious morsels?”

“It would be my pleasure, you two sit down at the table and I'll have a cookie and milk ready for each of you in a jiffy.” His Mom was in her element. The hallway phone rang and she stepped away to take the call.

The two boys sat at the kitchen table, awkwardly, with many things unspoken. Vince was his muse, and his bad boy influence. Attraction to his interests and underlying caution were uneasy bedfellows.

“Hey, what you got going on today? A few of us lads are going to take a bit of a turkey walk over to the South Dam this afternoon. We've caught wind of a birthday party going on for Lucinda Decker. These

girls like to swim, and the word on the street is that there might even be some skinny-dipping after a bit. So us lads might just hang around in the bushes and see how things progress, and maybe even join in if the conditions are right. Can you imagine Lucinda swimming in the Saugeen in her birthday suit, it would take all of my composure to keep the old boy under control!" All of this was said in a stage whisper, with a careful eye to the hallway.

"Uh, well, um, maybe next time. I've got a 4:30 appointment with the doc for some kind of inoculation shot. And then Mom and I are going for dinner over to the Hartley House, as she won first prize last Fall at the Little Royal Fair for her Hartley House chocolate cake."

"Ah, come on, since when does a buffet dinner trump a glimpse of Lucinda's shapely delights! I have to work on you man, to help you get your priorities in order." His Mom came back from the hallway.

"I don't know where the time has gone. The cookies will have to be enjoyed quickly, boys, as we have to leave soon for downtown." Milk was poured, and still-steaming cookies were put on china plates.

"I don't want to rush this amazing treat, you folks feel free to toodle on and I'll make sure the milk gets put in the fridge before I go. And would it be okay to have a second cookie?" Vince smiled fetchingly.

"I'll leave the tray on the top of the stove. Enjoy as many as you like and cover the rest with a tea towel."

The boy and his Mom walked purposefully, she wearing a formal hat and clutching a fabric purse. A truck slowed and a grinning older man called over. "You two look in a bit of a hurry, want a lift anywhere?"

His Mom smiled kindly. "We're just headed to the doctors for a tetanus shot. We'll be just on time, and it's such a beautiful day to walk after that hard winter we had. But thank you anyway."

As they crossed the first of two busier streets, he asked his Mom a slew of questions. "That guy who offered us a lift, what does he do? He waited on us last Summer when Dad bought me my baseball bat."

"Well, it's more like what doesn't he do. He owns the Canadian Tire store, he's been the mayor of the town, he's set up a group of folks to protect the river for fish and birds...he's an important man in this town. Someone for you to look up to, to aspire to be like some day. He's the kind of man I thought my brother would turn out to be, except...he never got the chance." Her face clouded and her eyes turned misty.

"Do you mean my uncle who died in the war?"

"Yes, well, he was killed in the war. At age 25. Too young. Tall and handsome. A future leader, who never came home."

The mood had turned sombre and dark very quickly. They walked in silence to the doctor's office. He saw his basketball teammate, Lou, crossing at the light a block away. They gave each other a silent wave without breaking the sombre mood.

"And so how is my young man today?" The doctor had yellow, leathery skin and puffy eyes under old-fashioned spectacles. His breath could strip paint off a door at fifty paces.

"I'm okay, I guess." He had always hated the doctor's office, with its sterile smells and this old goat of a practitioner.

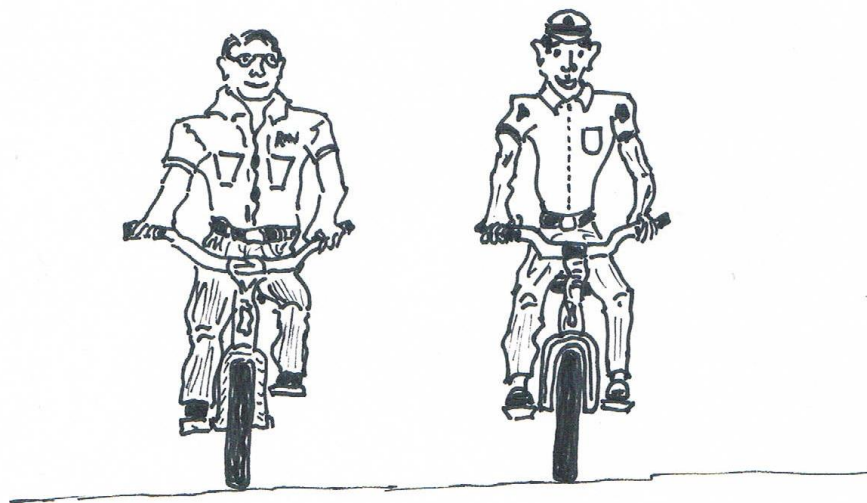
"Okay, sleeve up, a bit of alcohol and then a needle that will hurt like hell." In actuality it was over before he knew it, due to the holding in mind of two very pleasant images: a sumptuous dinner buffet at the nearby hotel and the nubile form of Lucinda three-quarters visible under the roiling rivulets of the mighty Saugeen.

December 1925; Dyers Bay, Ontario

The little girl hid under the stairs of the farmhouse, two kittens in her arms. She heard her older brother, just one year her senior, make his way down the stair treads. Hide and seek was one of their favorite games, and they would laugh uproariously when one found the other. He started to tiptoe down the last steps, sensing her close by. He turned towards the fireplace and came within a few feet of her hiding in the shadows. The kittens, in on the game, leapt at the same time from her arms and landed stealthily at his feet. This caught the boy off guard, allowing her to reach out and playfully tickle him from the back, prompting peals of laughter from the two children.

"Quiet!!" This was bellowed from the kitchen, where ham was being fried by the family patriarch.

Mean Ol' Levee, Taught Me to Weep and Moan



Time went by methodically, like the hands on the clock on the top of the Town Hall tower. Winter had ebbed away, and along came a decent Spring with warming days and beautiful sets of tulips and irises

sprouting quietly and majestically in the side gardens of the homes near the downtown. School went through its normal rhythms, and then it was evident another shift had come and gone. Summer was here, with its lengthy days full of intense sunshine and copious heat. The town slowed down, generally, in the Summer with school being off and factories taking mandatory vacation time for all their workers. The days seemed long, with not much of substance to do. Some kids worked for the Town at the playground camp in the park, a few lifeguarded at the pool, and a few others did odd jobs out at the golf course.

But books kept him going. He was pretty much working through the collection at the town library, trying to mix it up with nonfiction works and a range of novels and adventure series. The library was not a cool place to be for a kid going through high school. Most of its patrons were older folks, reading the newspapers from Toronto with their mouths open, and the pretty checkout gal used an old-fashioned date stamp and green ink pad to record the due dates in the backs of the books he checked out. He noticed her long, elegant fingers as she did her work, and the freckles running up from her hands to her upper arms and into the confines of her blouse. As she pushed the checked out books across to him, he found himself trying to gauge how far south the freckles might go. This was not lost on her, and she emitted a strange little chuckle while straightening up more slowly than propriety would normally allow.

He dropped his new books off at home, into the rear laundry room which was just off the kitchen. No one was home so he decided to sit out on the front grass, on the wee slope that set the contour stage for the front of the house. Two large maple trees made it a shady sylvan glen, and he sat there amidst some amazing birdsong.

In the distance came four men on bicycles. They were workers at the local Spool and Bobbin factory, and he would often see them ride by. Pretty much in all kinds of weather conditions, four times a day, as they went home at noon for a ploughman's lunch. All of this was orchestrated by the factory's whistle-- 7 o'clock for the day's start, noon for lunch, 5 o'clock to end the day. They rolled past now, leaning in a bit to mount the hill towards their homes. A few went to his church, and all four called out some form of a friendly greeting. That was the great thing about growing up in a small town. You got to know everyone, and everyone got to know you. The joke was that you also got to know everyone's dog and cat, but it was no joke, he actually knew all the pets by name and who they belonged to.

Down the sidewalk came Vince, walking as if he didn't have a care in the world. The guy had flair, and confidence, in spades. No wonder girls were sort of attracted to him, although it was uncertain if he was more smoke and mirrors than actual substance.

"Okay, big guy, let's go for a stroll down to the river. Nothing like watching the water roll by on a lazy Summer day, and I do believe the Angels may be having batting practice and with luck the refreshment truck may be out. I'm a bit stony right now, but you might be able to talk me into accepting a Creamsicle from you as an early Summer gift!". Vince said all of this quickly, with the patter of a future salesman.

They cut down between the two agricultural society buildings, and walked alongside the bleachers of the baseball diamond. Some muscular young men, dressed in the Angels uniform, were warming up. No refreshment truck was in sight, so they kept strolling to the dyke at the back of the baseball area.

"Can you imagine when these things were not built yet, the flooding that would happen every year when the river rose?" Vince's eyebrows danced.

"Yeh, my Dad told me they would go around in boats and the water was three feet high at every store in the downtown."

"What did your old man do back then?" Vince was innately curious.

"He was the ice man. Cut it in big blocks from the river. Rolled it in sawdust to insulate it, and stored it in a big ice house down by the river. Then they would chop it in smaller blocks and deliver it by horse to people's homes to sit in their ice box and cool their food.

"Wild, I knew your old man was old, but pre-refrigerator old, that is amazing." This caused the boy to wince inwardly, but no sign of this was evident on the exterior.

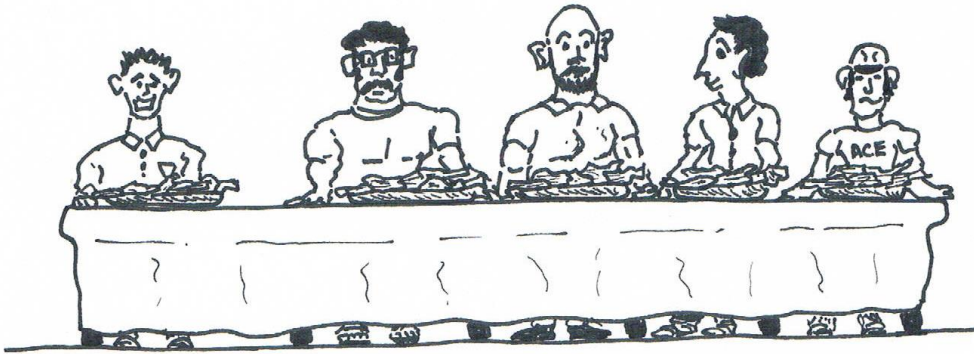
"Yeh, and he was around when they built the dykes in the 50s. They call them levees down south, but up here we call them dykes. And they have a nice view from the top!"

"Hey, Chickenfest is coming up soon, do you want to do something fun? I could get my neighbor to get us a mickey to drink, and we'd be ready for the street dance! Or have a few in the beer garden, what do you think?" Vince was all smiles at the thought of this.

"I've never really drank before, and I'm pretty sure we're not going to be allowed into the beer garden. Regardless, my Mom would be upset and my Dad would tan my ass if he found out."

"Listen, I know your parents, they won't be anywhere near the downtown. And I might just be able to sweet talk Lucinda into coming, and I could ask her to bring one of her cute friends. But we are not going to be getting anywhere fast without the help of booze. Just leave it to me, I'll take care of everything."

A Toothache Might Be the Least of Your Worries



It was Friday afternoon of Chickenfest. A party atmosphere had enveloped the town, all manner of strangers cruising the side streets looking for a parking spot. A beer garden had been set up outside the western-most agricultural building, and a rollicking midway was set up on the baseball diamond, bad music blaring and anemic carnies in full-sales pitch. There would be some kind of dance that night at the community center, but he would avoid this like the plague.

He was sitting out on the front porch, reading some kind of adventure novel and subtly picking up the rhythms of excitement from the passing cars and occasional boats of forced laughter from within them. His Mom opened the front door part way, and gently interrupted him.

"Four o'clock dentist appointment. If we leave soon, we won't have to rush and there might be some congestion to wade through near the post office and the town hall.

"Okay, I'm on the last page of a chapter and I'm good to go. I haven't brushed my teeth in a while so I guess it would be a good idea. I can't tell you how much I hate a visit to Dr. Binder! His office smells, and he's kind of rough and unfriendly, and that cuspidor thing you have to spit into is absolutely disgusting! I honestly doubt if it ever gets cleaned between patients."

"I know, I know, but it's once a year, and today's your day. I never got to go to the dentist as a kid because we couldn't afford it, and I've had a world of problems with my teeth. That's why I only have dentures now, and they're not the most flattering thing and even less flattering when you don't have them in. So finish your chapter."

They walked down Archy Street a few blocks, and saw a wee wisp of a lady picking mint leaves from an overgrown bed of perennials.

"Hi Grandma, how are you doing today?" It wasn't his real Grandma, both of whom had passed before or just after his arrival, but she was very much like a grandmother. Kind, gentle, with a twinkle in her eye. Irish accent, warm hands and cute features made her seem like Mrs. TiggyWinkle from Beatrix Potter fame.

“Oh, on balance, very well. Don't like the crowds in town, so I'll make my tea and sit in the shade on my porch. It's so overgrown that no one will know I'm there. I don't mind eavesdropping you know, and I have heard many interesting things as I mind my Ps and Qs on my hidden porch!”

“We're just off to the dentist for his annual checkup. I'll drop in soon for some tea over the weekend.”

“That would be great. I just baked some scones, and made a jelly to go with them from the mulberries in the back garden. Ta' for now, and give the dentist a big smile for me.” She squeezed their hands with a surprisingly tight and warm grip, and her eyes danced.

There were crowds of folks in the Town Hall area, and it looked like some kind of ice cream social was going on, as everyone had a soft ice cream cone in their hand. He spied his buddy Lou again, leaning up against the gazebo in front of the town hall and snarfing back his cone. No time to stop, so another quiet wave, and a silent intention to get out with him to shoot some hoops or play some tennis. These visits to doctors and dentists were getting in the way of fun.

The visit to the dentist was relatively uneventful, and he came out to the waiting room to see his Mom engrossed in a Readers Digest. An appointment card for next Summer's visit was provided by a receptionist wearing bright red lipstick, and they were soon on the side street that housed the dental office.

“So it's festival time, do you want to have a bit of fun and walk along the main street? We could stop in and order some pizza at the new Pizza Palace, as a treat for putting up with the dentist. What do you think?”

“Sure, that sounds good. I've never been there, but I think it would be open by now and I've never had pizza before, so that would be fun.”

They turned the corner at the funeral parlor and seemed to step into a different world. Sidewalk sales were going on at virtually every store, mobs of people were standing around and sharing stories, and he even saw a few cute gals from school that he gave a shy wave to.

The Pizza Palace was doing a land office business, with what seemed like a score of people waiting around for their pie. A frazzled young man was taking the orders, blowing upward to temporarily move a forelock of hair and provide a modicum of cooling effect. He took the order of a mushroom-double cheese-pineapple pizza from the mother, and passed it over to two cooks in the back who wore white chef hats and worked efficiently in a cloud of flour dust.

“Thirty minutes, can you wait that long for supper?” His Mom smiled patiently.

Their neighbor had just come in for a slice to take back to his work as manager of the LCBO store. “Howdy neighbors, what a packed place. If you're waiting for a bit, consider strolling down to the library where the chicken-eating contest is just about to get underway. It will be fun, but you may get hungry just watching!”

So they did just that, advancing up to a good-sized crowd in front of a stage set up on two back-to-back hay wagons. Long trestle tables had ten strapping young men sitting expectantly behind them, all wearing white bibs and big smiles. A roar went up from the crowd when five lovely young women came out, each bearing two huge platters of fried chicken. These platters were numbered and were pre-weighed, so they could be made weighed again after twenty minutes of eating to see who had consumed the most chicken. A bell rang, and they started to tear into the platters. One big lumberjack type with a formidable red beard appeared to have the early lead, but his initial quick pace had some internal affect, and he slowed considerably. Another beefy chap also slowed down after ten minutes, and cheekily disqualified himself by throwing a piece of chicken out to a dog hanging around the front row. But in the end, the eventual winner was evident. A tanned, wiry lad with eyes like the hounds of hell, ate quickly and methodically. He would tear a large strip off a half chicken, stuff it in one side of his mouth and chew ravenously. He sipped water into the other half of his mouth at regular intervals, and he ate as if he hadn't seen food in weeks. A bell rang and the platters were whisked away for the determination of the now-obvious results.

"After all that, who's hungry for some pizza?" His mom had a sense of humor, in her own quiet way.

Minnesota Fats or Illinois Slim



It was another Saturday morning. He wasn't a big fan of weekends as his Dad was off his night shift work and around home a lot more. Many more chores to do, and under a lot more scrutiny. And his Mom was tenser, more nervous and anxious than on weekday evenings, when it was just the two of them and things were generally calm and easy. But his Dad worked late on Friday nights, and Saturday mornings were quiet zones so the old man could get his sleep and start the weekend later in the morning. No

problem killing time with a quiet breakfast of cereal and his nose in a book until the normal footfalls upstairs signaled a change in pace and energy.

“How are you all doing? What kind of day is going to be outside? Ah, sunny with what seems like a nice breeze coming in the window. Lots of early picking to do in the garden, and a perfect day to wax the car! Mommy, fry us up some peameal bacon and slice some bread and tomatoes and we’ll be down to work in twenty minutes.”

No question, his Dad lived to work. There were positive sides to this as the lawn was always neat and there were always lots of fresh vegetables to eat in the Summer, and the car always sparkled. But it was always work and no play. Or very little play. Perhaps a bit of TV at the end of the day, where his Dad would fall asleep in five minutes from the exertions of the day. But in the middle of the afternoon, no balls were thrown, no board games were played, no lazy discussions over tea. All of these would have gotten in the way of work, and there was always so much to do.

The peameal bacon sandwiches were divine, largely because of the pillowy homemade bread his Mom made every Saturday morning. Warm still from the oven and as light as a song, this was more sponge cake than bread. Lots of butter and some tart mustard, with beautiful tomatoes from the garden. And all of this followed by a slice of rhubarb pie, enveloped in his Mom’s legendary pastry crust. One slice always led to the second for each of the two males, and the tartness of the rhubarb sang beside the crunchy white sugar mixed throughout.

An hour of picking followed lunch, the ground still cool under berry and bean plants. They would eat heartily of all the gleanings, and then distribute leftovers across a range of neighbours up and down the street. It was a small town, and people liked to share. And enough folks remembered the tough times in the thirties, so nobody turned away free, fresh food.

And after the picking and perhaps a bit too much sun exposure, his dad pulled the new Pontiac up under the shade of the side maple tree. They washed it with soapy buckets of water and sponges, and rinsed off the suds with fresh water from a pail using an old margarine container.

In the drying-off time for the body of the vehicle, they tackled the floor mats and the wiping of interior surfaces inside the car. Then they started to wax the car methodically, his Dad working with a wet pad and a big can of Simonize. Tight circles, and a thin layer of wax. Ten minutes later the young man followed with a buff cloth, taking off the dry wax and all of its trapped grime and impurities. His Dad would often have a significant overlap between various sections of the car, and this doubling up caused the boy to groan inwardly.

But the running patter of his Dad and the sunshine dappling through the tree leaves intermixed to create a reasonable atmosphere for work, and before they both knew it they were doing the ceremonial toss of a chamois cloth the length of the car, chuckling at the lack of friction from the freshly waxed surface.

But he was feeling homebound, and just before he got snafued into sorting sparkplugs in the garage, his Mom came out on the stoop and announced she was heading down to the store for a few groceries.

“No, no, much too hot for you to go, Mom. Just give me the list and I’ll run down and pick them up for you. And I may stop by and say hi to Lou, as I’ve blown him off the last two times I’ve seen him.”

“Are you sure? That would be great because I’ve been going nonstop since early this morning. I might just put my feet up on the front porch and do a bit of mending that needs attention.”

So he was out of there in a flash, in case his Dad protested that he needed a second set of hands for some job or the other. He walked down Archy, as the little neighbourhood store was just around the corner from the Post Office. It was a throwback to an even earlier time, and he really liked the proprietor, Clare, who was a tall, portly man with an easy smile and a predisposition to keep a pencil tucked behind his ear.

He mounted the steps to the shop and was taken aback with the number of people in the small store. He quickly pulled a clerk aside, gave him his Mom's list, and told him he would be back to pick up the box of groceries before the six o'clock closing time.

A short swagger down to the Bank of Montréal and a kitty corner deke west of the Hartley House brought him to the town pool hall. The door was open due to the fine day, but the air inside was blue with cigarette smoke. Lou was off in the far left corner, playing spots and stripes by himself on a smaller table.

“Hey, Knave, what's up with you?” All this was said while concentrating on a particularly tricky side shot.

“Not much, just busted out of car waxing prison and thought I'd look you up. I'd challenge you to a game but the smoke is so thick in here you could cut it.”

“I'm game to get outside. I'm just playing by the minute here so I'll go settle up with Duffy and meet you out on the curb.” Fifty cents an hour seemed steep for fun.

They walked the commercial street and bent south at the library.

“Want to go up to the public schoolyard? Sometimes you get bunches of girls hanging around there. Sometimes cute ones from out of town, here visiting relatives. And looking for a little smooch from good-looking guys like us.” Lou smacked his lips and pounded his fist.

“Well, sure, we can see what we can see. It's too bad we don't have a ball, we could shoot some horse.”

They went by the Cenotaph, the statue gleaming in the sun and the area around it shaded by statuesque pine trees.

“See all those names on the statue there? Those poor bastards went to Europe for some strange reason, and never got back. Left their girlfriends behind for some other man. And all that Flanders Field crap, you'll never catch me going off to war. I'm a lover, not a fighter!” Lou hugged himself tight.

“Yeah, I know my dad went over, but he got back. And he talks a lot about the war. Perhaps too much. My Mom lost a brother in the war, she's still very sad about it all.”

The space went silent between them. After several seconds they could hear the Town Hall clock start its hourly bells. “Crap! I've got to run over to Sparlings! They close at 6 o'clock on Saturdays and I've got to pick up a box of groceries.” And with that, any thought of viewing out-of-town cuties disappeared in a flash of sneakers.

June 1930: Dyers Bay, ON

The one-room schoolhouse contained about 25 children, ranging in age from 5 to 15 or so. The schoolmarm was a severe woman, with a penchant for order and harsh discipline. She had given all the grade groups their work for the day, but there was an awful amount of fidgeting and giggling going on here and there. It might have been the good weather outdoors, or the fact they were near Summer vacation, but something was definitely in the air. A boy smiled at his sister who sat across the aisle and she whispered something back. A bit of laughter ensued from the back of the room.

“Quiet!” Bellowed the schoolmarm. “Noses to your work.”

The boy bent over at his desk, touching his nose to his papers and moving it slowly from side to side. This would have evaded notice if his sister hadn't snorted loudly at the sight of him, and the teacher got a view of his actions through the array of seated students.

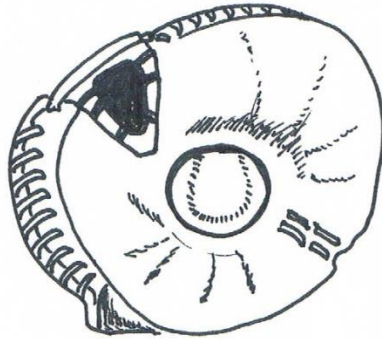
“Bert... on your feet.” This was spat out one word at a time

“Yes'm.” He stood compliantly, nodding to the teacher.

“I order you to go to the edge of the schoolyard and cut out five birch switches. Half-inch diameter, or better. Bring them back in. I will use them to give you 20 lashes at lunch time while the other children play in the yard. This will be with your trousers down. And if I might add, you won't feel much like sitting for the rest of the day. Go now.”

The boy gulped hard and went off into the yard. His sister sat silently, her eyes moistening.

Going Postal



It was just one of those Summer days. Lots of heat and bright sunshine, but plenty of shade because of the three large maples that outlined the external perimeter of the corner lot the family house was on. He had slept nearly to eleven, and had gone downstairs to find a note from his Mom that she had gone out to buy some material for a wedding dress she was making for one of his sister's friends. He heard his Dad stirring so he grabbed the bowl of rhubarb preserves his Mom had left on the table for him and tiptoed across the kitchen and down the basement stairs, putting his weight on the outside of the stair treads to avoid any telltale squeaks. With a bit of luck, he could evade his Dad and avoid a few hours of work out in the hot garden.

He absolutely loved the basement, with its rough walls and smooth, moist floor. The first room was mainly for foodstuffs, and smelled of pickles, sauerkraut, apples and potatoes. The second room housed the furnace and the storm windows for the house in the Summer months, and odd bits of home infrastructure such as the basin for the dog's bath. Anything that wouldn't break down or mold in the humidity. And there was one last, small room right beside the house's cistern. It held virtually nothing but it was the furthest away from the upstairs and the most soundproof. So this was where he headed, slowly enjoying the tart compote and looking at an old phone directory from the forties when everyone had three digit phone numbers. He heard his Dad saying 'Halloo' two or three times with increasing volume, but he slowly turned the pages and looked at the ads for chimney sweeps and cobblers in the musty pages. He heard his Dad banging around, making a makeshift breakfast, reasonably assured that the house was empty. Then ten minutes later he heard footsteps above and the back door banging shut. His Dad would be going to do some weeding with his well-oiled hoe, so he had to stay outside the garden's sightlines.

He crept up the stairs and quietly went outside onto the front veranda. Checking down the right side of the house by the verandah's parapet, he saw no movement whatsoever. So he launched over the wall

and landed on the soft, sun-dappled grass. A quick walk up May Street to Vince's house would give him even more room to breathe.

But in the side yard of his next door neighbour's home, the gentlemen of the house was standing in the shade of a tree and wearing a big grin. The boy had always loved this neighbour, warts and all. So he slowed down and called out a greeting.

"Doing well, how 'bout you laddie? I was just thinking we haven't played catch for a while, and I have a new bona fide catcher's mitt that you can break in. Got time for a few throws?" The older man's breathing was labourious. He was heavysset, and it was shaping up to be a very hot day.

"Sure, if you have the time." He relaxed even more, realizing he would now have two houses blocking him from his Dad working in the garden.

They threw a sponge ball back and forth, red and blue with a white stripe. The kid caught with a stiff round catcher's mitt, not yet creased, with a too-small depression that trapped the ball ineffectively. The man caught bare-handed and despite his girth, was surprisingly light on his feet and showed ample evidence of his ball-playing days as a youngster. And he was highly encouraging, despite the large number of times the boy dropped or fumbled the ball.

"Okay, that's enough in this heat." His white hair was plastered to his head and his forehead and cheeks had become purply-red. "Before you scoot on to other adventures, let's have a wee refreshment in the garage. Nice and cool in there." He nodded over his shoulder.

"Sure, I guess." He hoped the garage door facing onto the street would be closed, or he would face getting caught out by a tool-changing father.

"Come on in and take a lounger, good to take the weight off the feet. I've only got beer, but it strikes me you're old enough to handle a pony of beer. I'll pour yours into a little red glass, so anyone going by might think you're just having a wee spot of ginger ale. All the church deacons around here would be upset with me, but the sooner a lad tastes beer the smaller the deal it is and he won't want it much when he actually gets to the age of majority."

This was his first beer, and truth be told, it tasted pretty awful. But it was cold and the after-taste seemed better than the first instance. So he just sat and enjoyed the experience, and listened to the man's tales of bygone baseball games and working on the road. What he appreciated the most was how he was being treated as an equal, and more time flew by than he had counted on.

He then continued his walk up a tree-lined May Street, to the home of his buddy Vince. It was now nearly one o'clock, but his friend was a record-setting late sleeper. Sounds of Black Sabbath escaped from the cellar window that vented Vince's teenage pad. He went in the back door and down the steps, done so many times that it needed no knocking or any other formality. He did knock twice on the bedroom door and got no response. When he opened the door, the maniacal laugh of Ozzie Osborne pretty much bowled him over. Vince was sitting in a comfy chair, munching on a bowl of Cheerios.

"Aye, top of the morning to 'ya, or I suppose it is the afternoon." Vince said this through a mouthful of cereal.

"What's up? Do you want to hang out? I've got nothing on, beyond trying to avoid some gardening."

"Rain cheque on that dude. Aykins and Chet want me for the afternoon to start practice for our new band. You're welcome to come along, as we could use you as a roadie when we make it big."

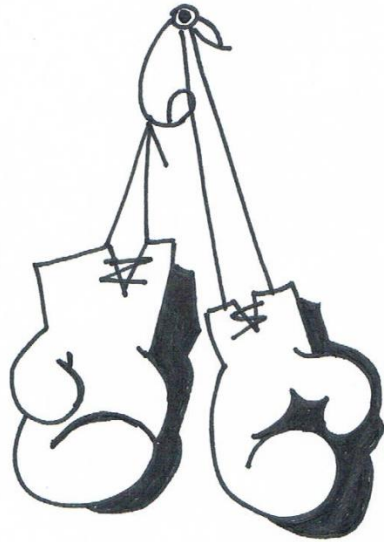
The thought of hanging around in a garage while people tuned guitars for hours on end had very limited appeal. "No worries, I'll catch you another time. Tell your sister she is one beautiful girl, will 'ya?"

"Tell her yourself! But I don't know how keen I am on anybody eyeing my sister, okay? Maybe cast your interests a little wider, Romeo. And I've got to finish this and get ready."

So back on the street he was, with no real agenda. Library? Pool Hall? The possibilities were limited in this one-horse town. Then he remembered he hadn't eaten anything more than rhubarb and sugar. But if he went home now, he would run high chances of getting nipped for some hoeing duty. One errand might just optimize things, and then he could nip home for a nice lunch from his Mom while his Dad napped after a considerable amount of garden work.

So off he puttered to the Post Office. It was a modern government building, put up not so long ago after the monumental red stone edifice in the center of downtown had been demolished for a Mac's Milk convenience store. The Canada Post agents were all handsome, tanned middle-aged guys with ready smiles. They would have his family's mail out to him in a jiffy, and his uncle's and aunt's if he asked politely. So this is what he did, and on the way home dropped off the mail to his uncle. A relative by marriage, he was a short, genial man with nondescript features. He was a chain smoker, who could nurse out a cigarette until the ash was a full half of the original cigarette's length. The man sported nicotine-stained fingers and a pair of rheumy eyes under classic prescription lenses. He appreciated the mail being delivered and caught up on town news. This was a small town, and news was minimal most days, but the creation of a banquet from crumbs was a capacity that many townsfolk exhibited.

See you in September



The Summer inevitably ground to a close, with the perceived shortening of days in late August and the quickening of the pace as soon as Labour Day was over and people adjusted quickly to kids having to be back in school. High school was fraught with a lot of challenges, very few of them academic. People were changing and maturing quickly, and taking on habits and practices that were perhaps too grownup for their ambient abilities to assimilate.

So it was back to a new year, and what interested him most were the sports and the club activity possibilities. He certainly wanted to play basketball again, after last year's successful midget team experience. But tryouts and practices would not start for a few months yet, until football season was nearly over. So the question was what to fill the dance card with in the meantime.

He saw Lou at his locker, trying valiantly to open it after numerous attempts. The guy never perspired, but he was jerking his head nervously, and looking side to side as if someone was watching.

"Relax, Romeo, no girls within a hundred yards."

"Can't remember my bloody combo." More nervous eye-shifting.

"46-30-18. What would you do without me around?"

"Right, I knew that. Are you going to try out for the volleyball team?" Lou flashed him a trademark grin.

"I reserve the right to do so, after exploring other options. Volleyball just kills my wrists, with all that bumping."

"Some fine young ladies play volleyball, dude. And we will travel together on the same bus. And there is the possibility of certain things happening at the back of the bus." Lou scrunched up his face and smiled knowingly.

"I'm going to check out the boxing club first, which apparently has lots of skipping, road work and sparring. Should get me ready for the basketball season! And if it is lousy, then I think I can double back in time for you and the volleyball girls." He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"Your call, big guy. Listen, Pete has a bunch of season tickets to the Braves games at Maple Leaf Gardens. Real NBA action, just 2 1/2 hours away. Says he will drive down, and all it will cost us is a bit of gas, the \$10 ticket, and some food down there. Chicago Bulls a week from Sunday....want to go?"

"Yeah, but not sure if I can. Will have to clear it with my parents. They are not going to be wildly keen on me going all the way down and back to the city with a young driver. My Dad used to take a truck in and out of Toronto every day and he grew pretty jaded. I'll float the idea and let you know."

He went down the corridor and saw Vince standing near a locker, talking up a cute blonde.

"Hey, DiMaggio, what's shaking my friend?" Vince was overly friendly, and he never called him DiMaggio. Never.

"Uh, alright, I guess." He nodded politely to the girl and she beamed a smile his way. He flashed a goofy smile and wondered who she was.

"How about trying out for the football team, Bronco? Can you catch the pigskin? I hear they're looking for a bunch of receivers." Vince leaned in to the young lady conspiratorially.

"I'm keeping all my sporting options open. Right now I'm headed to the weight room for the boxing club tryouts. Want to come?"

"No, football is the thing for me. And I need to walk this beautiful girl out to her bus, which is leaving soon." Vince looked at an imaginary watch and waved him off.

The weight room was full of boys in shorts and T-shirts, standing off on the perimeter with the weight racks. Mr. Dobbs, the junior physics teacher, was standing in the middle of the room in a shirt and tie. He had black horn rim specs, but a good head of curly hair and a powerful build which couldn't be hidden by his dress shirt. He spoke slowly and emphatically.

"Gentlemen. Our first meeting of the boxing club. Today we spar a bit, each one of us, to assess whether we want to be here or not. If one doesn't like sparring, then no sense in skipping or doing road work as you won't like to box. We'll lace on the gloves for a three minute round for each duo. Keep your hands up, protect your face always. Duck, weave and stay light on your feet. When hitting, jab, jab and then cross. Look for openings. Don't punch overly hard today. Just get in the flow and see how it feels."

A few sets of boys went ahead, and they ranged around with quiet encouragement from Dobbs. Not much happened, people sweated a bit and some chaps goofed around and mugged for the bystanders.

“Okay, you two are next.” He felt the gloves being tied on and he looked across to his soon-to-be opponent. It was Jason Zander, the kid who used to live across the street from his public school. Strong, tall, but affable.

“Okay, bring it in, touch gloves and away you go.”

He crouched over a bit and held his gloves in tight. He tried to float like Muhammed Ali, but the floor seemed a bit sticky with sweat. He took half a second to look down at his feet, splayed his hands in the interim, and Jason ran a soft but amazingly direct punch up the middle that hit him right in the solar plexus. Every nerve in his body seemed to go on fire, and he felt himself go down on the sticky, sweaty floor.

Mr. Dobbs was over him in a flash. “C’mon, get up. He rung your bell but get on your feet. Step back, Jason, give him a few seconds to stabilize. That’s it, now protect your face and protect your gut. Hands up, and look for opportunities. Gentlemen, have at it!”

He felt even less floatier than before, but he circled warily, determined to get through the allotted time and get the heck out of the boxing club. But Jason pressed in, so he tried to come around the right side and clip the stronger lad on the side of his jaw, but in doing so opened up his mid-zone. Kerthumph, Jason ran a punch back to the repeat zone, largely because it had worked so well on the first try. He was down on the ground again, this time with Dobbs massaging his torso and looking down at him with an amalgam of humour and pity. Some gangly kid helped by stripping off his gloves, largely unused. Pugilism had definitely fallen off the dance card.

-----X-----X-----X-----

His body ached as he walked along the Saugeen’s dykes down by the treatment plant. He wasn’t quite ready to go home, and this place had always held a special place in his heart. A good place to mend, for both his body and his ego. The trail went this way and that, and the birdsong got stronger as the vegetation got thicker. He came up to a rushing creek, the Stony, which this area was named after. Water spiders and small minnows abounded, and he sat down and took it all in, completely forgetting the boxing club and the ignominy of landing on his back twice in under five minutes.

Where's the beach?



So it was down to volleyball for tuning up his body for basketball season. Something in the back of his head suggested giving football a whirl, but when he walked by their practice and saw the guys doing drills it brought back unpleasant memories of his boxing club experience. Lots of mud, soiled practice uniforms, and far too much hitting. He wasn't even sure of the mechanics of tackling someone, and the idea of getting absolutely nailed to the ground by one of the bigger boys who seemed to all have wild eyes and bad teeth, was absolutely terrifying. So volleyball bumping and setting and jumping seemed absolutely civilized in comparison, and Lou was right, some of the girl players were just downright cute.

Practices were right after school, and were comprised of stretching, a range of drills, and simulated game action. The girls' coach was a lovely, somewhat older PhysEd teacher, Mrs. DaSilva. She herself would have been a doll in her day, and she had just the right mix of good humour and no-nonsense to guide her charges along. And when she jumped in, she showed herself to be a very good player with quick reflexes and skilful play.

The boys' side was being temporarily coached by Mr. Tidge, who was helping out while the regular coach was on crutches from a broken ankle. Tidge was incredibly fit, and inestimably kind. The boys reacted well to this, and he passed along a lot of tips in a good-natured way and coaxed them to play as a team and cover for each other on the court. After a few practices, things were gelling nicely and it appeared that the volleyball season would be a most pleasant appetizer to the upcoming roundball season.

While volleyballs were bouncing this way and that in the sectioned-off gym, his basketball coach lurked around in the corners. He held a clipboard and seemed to be making copious notes. Coach McNairn was a great guy at heart, and had wrung a lot out of the team during the midget season and had high hopes for the junior team in this upcoming year. He had been an athlete of considerable repute in his day, and had the bulk of a football player and the sure touch of a point guard. But his strengths lay in the Zen of basketball. Long before Phil Jackson brought his philosophy to the Lakers, Coach McNairn had his

players visualizing free throws, setting intentions for defending star opponents, and asking each player to identify and crystallize their inherent strengths. There were only four or five basketball players out for volleyball, but it was just like McNairn to stand in the corner, clipboard held tight to his chest, while he beheld the inner spark in his protégés.

Practice ended on an upbeat note. A fun drill of bump and set with multiple balls turned into a near-dodgeball scrum, with everyone laughing and reacting quickly. Just at the end, he zigged sideways and lightly crashed into a getting-ready-to-set Mrs. DaSilva, his right arm brushing her ample breasts. This embarrassed him greatly and he apologized profusely, but she simply straightened up and grabbed his right forearm as a lever point and told him 'good work'. This confused the devil out of him, even moreso when she shot him a warm smile. He pivoted and jogged away, rationalizing that mature but still pretty PhysEd teachers probably get their breasts touched by well-meaning yet very appreciative high school boys on a daily basis, and this was no big deal. But then he looked back at them as she squatted and got ready for the next set, and wondered how he might brush up against them again without appearing untoward.

He went home after practice and found that his Dad had gone off for work, perfect timing as far as he was concerned. His Mom was working in the kitchen and called out to him brightly.

"I'm just going to pop this casserole in the oven on low and we can slip down to Adel's for a bit of shopping. You haven't had a new pair of dress pants since your growth spurt and you will need something nice for church and other occasions."

Shopping was not his favorite thing to do, but Adel's was a neat old-school place. The family who ran it was perhaps the town's sole Jewish family. The old man was dapper and handsome, and wore really good ties and jackets. He had been high up in the *schmatta* trade in the city, but something had brought him here. His sons were also good-looking, confident boys, and worked in the store. It had cloth smells, neat photos of men in suits, and great old woodwork throughout.

"My God, this young man has shot up. Let me measure your inseam." The Adel senior whipped out a tape and discreetly held it just below his family jewels down to his mid-heel. "Okay, let's get your waist and Bob's your uncle."

"What are you looking for, something classic or something dressy with a bit of edge?"

"Classic." Mom was first out of the gate.

"Edge." Half a second behind came his response.

"Should have guessed. Well, let's say we compromise. How about classic charcoal, but in a fabric that is a bit different. How about wide-whale corduroy? Wear this anywhere fancy and the ladies will be watching your every move." The gent gave him a wink and the glint of a silver tooth, while his Mom looked on with a veneer of disapproval and a subtle inward smile.

March 1943; St. Catherines, Ontario

"So you want to serve your country?"

"Well, maybe. I came down to check it out I guess. If you give me a clean bill of health, I might sign up."

"Alright, fill out this form and get into this gown. The wee nurse will be around to take your pulse and stick a greased finger up your arse. Don't flinch, most of the chaps like it! She's a bit of a looker, and I think she enjoys doing it. Then some reflex checking from the Miss and I'll come back and test your hearing and vision, and lastly we'll have a look at any problem areas. With all of that looking good, you'll get your stamp. Off you go, and I'll see you in a bit."

Ninety minutes later the young man with wavy hair sat on the edge of the examination table, his chest and lungs being listened to the reviewing doctor and his stethoscope. "Hmmm, looks like that pleurisy from a few months back has cleared up well. But both I and the cute nurse noticed that you are presenting a hernia in your lower decks. How long has that been present?"

"Oh, a while now. Thought it might just go away. But it kind of takes the pep out of me on bad days." The young man said this in a low voice.

"Dreadfully sorry, old chap. A hernia means no lifting, and a soldier has to do quite a bit of lifting out at the front. But being a machine operator down at Thompson Products is still very much a contribution to the effort." The doctor smiled amiably and left the consult room.

The young man put on his clothes, feeling considerable relief. The memory of the pixie nurse with her rubber-gloved, eager fingers and cooing voice was something he would hold for some time.

All Roads Lead to Rome



There had been a note from his Dad, attached to his gym bag with an old wooden clothes pin. "Mommy will be babysitting in the morning, so fix your own breakfast. Lots of cereal in the pantry. When you are coming home this afternoon from school please stop by at the butcher downtown and pick up a dozen beef wieners and a pound of peameal bacon. Two dollars are on the counter and bring back any change....Dad".

The house was quiet, so much so that the Shreddies hitting the porcelain bowl made such a racket that he thought it might wake up his Dad sleeping upstairs. Not much of interest in the Herald Times, but he read the report of the county engineer and the recent meeting summaries for the 4H Club and the Women's Institute. A quick brush of his teeth and he was on his way to school. He deked in to see if Vince was getting ready to go but his Dad, lounging at a backyard picnic table with a coffee and a honey-glazed doughnut, informed him that he had gone on already to meet the first wave of arriving school buses. Something was muttered about a new girlfriend, this being accompanied by a sly wink.

So it was a solitary walk to school, and if truth be told, it was just fine. He could look at the trees, see various details on the houses as he strolled pass, and give little nods and waves to dogs and cats as he passed by. He adored his own dog and cat, and even had a secret way of communicating with them. And the neighborhood dogs and cats were all friends, so the time rolled by as he walked along at the ambling pace that would get him to school just before the national anthem.

The day rolled out like so many other days. This was high school, something he had looked forward to and what had seemed so sophisticated and exciting. Maybe this would be true down in the city, and it seemed that way when he travelled with the team for exhibition games. But out here, in this sleepy little county seat, it was far from tantalizing. And as he looked around, he didn't appear alone in his feelings. The teachers were okay, and seemed to be trying to make things somewhat exciting, but the results were generally lacklustre. No wonder he heard whisperings that a lot of the kids were doing drugs. Something to break up the monotony he thought, and then chuckled to himself as he knew he could never pull this kind of thing off with the parents he had. So he consoled himself that things would get better once basketball season started and he could enjoy regular practices and the thrill of a weekly game. This sustained him through history class and he locked into this hopeful thought for the rest of the day.

After school, he slinked out through the business wing and took the back road towards downtown, the one that sliced through the newish suburb north and east of the high school. He lived in the old part of town, where houses were at least a hundred years old and large trees stood regally on their lots. But here was different, with low-slung bungalows and two car garages, lots of grass and lollipop trees. He scuttled past this suburban landscape and decided to head over to the river to take a longer, more natural route into the downtown.

He had to cut past the separate high school and he did this with equal parts of dread and trepidation. Three pasty-faced and heavy-set guys stood around an old farm truck, and they jerked their heads up when he approached. He literally knew no Catholics, short of the nice folks who ran the paint and wallpaper store, and he felt something unpleasant welling up in his gut.

"Hey, Protestant fucker, stay on your own side of town." This was spat out by the ring leader, a kid with slicked-back hair and mean eyes.

"Catholics, Catholics, ring the bell; Protestants, Protestants, go to Hell!" This was sung out in a taunting and aggressive manner by the other two lads.

"I'm just going down to the river trail, and this is a free country, last time I checked!" He said this neutrally, with only the slightest hint of sarcasm.

"Nope, only RC's allowed down this road. Go back to your high school and walk through the corn field to get to the river." Mr. Ringleader said this matter-of-factly, and took a menacing step towards him.

Just for a second he lost his nerve, but quickly regained it and then some. "Screw off, fatso. I have a rendezvous with your mother down by the dam. She loves to skinny dip and prance around in front of me buck-naked, and then who knows what else might happen!" He barked this last sentence over his left shoulder as he took off sprinting, the sound of feet pounding gravel deafening him. The three compatriots tried valiantly to catch him, shaking their fists and shouting obscenities. Within a few blocks' distance the result was clear and he stopped a few minutes later at the river, panting hard and his heart beating wildly.

But the experience had unsettled him. Why did he not have any Catholic friends? Why did his Dad's relatives tell sly little Catholic jokes? Why were eyes rolled whenever the topic of the parish priests came up? Why was there a distinct Catholic ward in town, where it felt just a little bit different when you walked through? These were all questions he mulled through his mind as he ambled down the river trail and past the dam.

No forty-something Catholic Mom was doing the breaststroke, *au naturel*, under the caressing waters of the mighty Saugeen. But if he squinted his eyes, he could imagine her and her considerable charms in his mind's eye, and his heart started to race again. But the broader issues of religious differences would be something he would return to at various points in his life.

A short walk along the shopping street, past the library, brought him to the butcher shop with mirrored side windows that allowed you to see the backside of yourself as you walked along. The opening door brought a cheerful bell sound, and the smells of meat and sawdust on the floor were powerful stimulants to multiple senses.

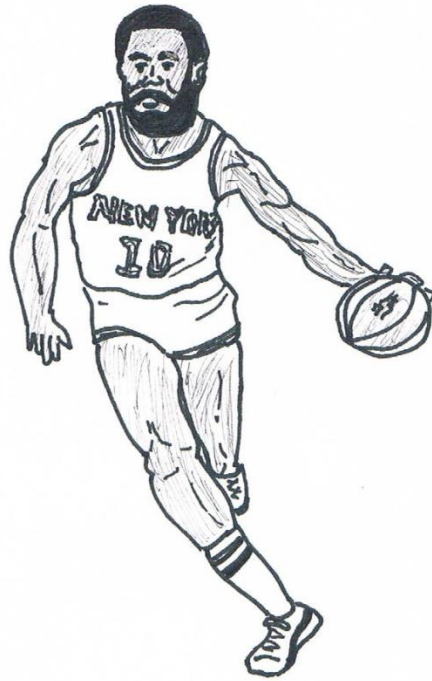
"How about something to wet your whistle?" Mr. Walker dangled a wiener from a pair of tongs.

"Don't mind if I do." All said smilingly.

"What can I do you for?" Eyes sparkled under glasses.

He gave the order, hoping it would all come in under two dollars.

Layers of Grief



He ate his breakfast cereal slowly, thoughtfully. It was early on a school day, and the house was quiet except for the sounds of spoon on bowl and his Mom puttering around making herself a cup of tea to go with her peanut butter on toast and a generous trowelling of creamy honey. His Mom looked a bit mokey, but gave him a few smiles as if to reassure him everything was hunky-dory.

"Are you okay, Mom?" This was said with his mouth half full of cereal.

"Yes, I'm fine. I really am fine. It's just that on a dull day, and with the days getting a wee bit shorter each day, I don't feel as happy as I do in the Summer. And when I am a bit like this, I start mulling things, and then I feel even less enthusiastic about things. And it goes 'round and 'round. Lots of things to give thanks for, Lord knows, but lots of things to feel sad about too."

"Why do you feel sad?" He set his spoon down and looked at her mournfully.

"Well, it's just that I have had a lot of losses to contend with. I'm only in my early 50s, but I've lost my own Dad, then my closest brother, and then.... your brother." She quietly bit back some tears. "It's been a lot to bear. Lots of people have lost their Dad, but I lost mine when I was only 17. He wasn't the greatest Dad, he would often speak harshly to us children, but I had this idea that things might get better. But then he was gone, really before I had fully grown up."

“What happened, was he sick?” He had seen photographs of his maternal grandfather, looking robust and handsome with a very significant moustache.

“Well, yes and no. He was a strong man, worked hard on the farm and was good with his hands. But he lost a lot in the ‘29 crash, penny stocks, and his creditors hounded him relentlessly after that. He took to going out to Victoria to build houses, and logging up on his land on the Bruce Peninsula. Sometimes my Mom and us kids would go with him out West, sometimes we would stay back and scratch out a living on the farm near Dyers Bay. So one Winter he took himself deep into the bush, looking for the best trees that would get the most money. He didn't want to hire a helper, so he worked and camped alone. And he wanted to cut costs, so all he carried in was a hundred pound bag of rice. That's all he cooked on the camp stove all winter, and six months later he died. The body needs more than starch for that long a period, so he developed complications from vitamin and mineral deficiencies.”

“Wow, that is sad.” He looked down at his bowl and scooped up the few remaining banana slices, rethinking how important good food could be.

“So we were all pretty grown by that time, and my two older sisters had already married and started their own families, so the real impact was on my Mom, your Grandma.” She smiled ruefully.

“So what would happen to a widow back then?”

“Well she tried to hang on at the farm for some time. Grew a lot of food in the garden, fruit trees in the orchard, and bartered with the traveling store for bread and condiments. How those lovely folks with the traveling store loved her produce, and they could sell it for a good penny down in Lions Head and Wiarton.” She was smiling now at the reminiscing.

“So everything turned out okay?” He sounded hopeful.

“No, regrettably. She owned a number of farms, but had no cash flow and couldn't pay the annual taxes to the township. So one by one, the farms went to the township for tax arrears. She eventually had to move into a home for ladies, all who were a little bit down on their luck, up on the hill in Wiarton. She was there when she got the news of my brother being killed in the war.”

Her face clouded and they both stayed silent for a long moment, his cereal being far past soggy by this point.

“So my uncle was in the Army?” He tried to say this neutrally, as they both seemed on the verge of tears.

“Yes, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders regiment, Princess Louise's. He should never have been a soldier, and we all believe he didn't get the proper training, and who knows what happened over there? But one thing is certain. He never came back. And he was so vibrant, so kind, so much fun! We were only a year apart. Losing him pretty much broke my Mom's heart. And mine too, if the truth be known. I had lost my Dad, and then my brother. And I had no idea that within ten years I would lose a son on top of all that. And he was such a kind little fellow too, and as cute as a button.” Tears welled up quickly. “I'll

have to tell you more sometime soon, about his last day, but that's too much for one morning. My God, I don't know what's worse?! To bury one's grief and be strong and silent, or to let it out by telling the stories and crying to no end!" She grabbed up a tea towel from the oven and wet one corner, dabbing it to her eyes.

"Mom, I've got to run, I'll be late for school. But if you need me to stay, I'll take the late slip and just stay here as long as you like."

"No...no, thanks. Just go. I'm fine, really I am. It's good to share the stories. It helps a bit. And we have something to look forward to for supper. I won a gift certificate from last year's Fair for upside-down cake, and just came across it tucked in a drawer. It's steak and a baked potato dinner for two at the Queen's Hotel. How about that?" She smiled expectantly.

"Just made my day. I'll be home by five after volleyball practice."

He ran to school at a ragtag pace, the cereal in his belly making sloshing sounds. It was going to be close to the national anthem, and if he tried to make it to his homeroom in the center of the school he would surely be late. So a little trick was to run in the front doors of the school and hang a sharp left into the library. It was open an hour before school started so the bus kids could study or work on projects. The librarian took attendance after the national anthem, and being there on time counted administratively the same as rolling into his home room on time. Judging by the swell of people filing through the door, he wasn't the only one who had figured this out.

"Sit down, sit down please, until the anthem starts." The librarian was a middle-aged man with limited humour, pudgy cheeks and an ill-fitting jacket and tie.

He saw Lou lounging at a table, reading the school's issue of Sports Illustrated. His hero buddy, the farm boy who had got him untangled from the claws of a bully in Grade 4, was sitting beside Lou and looking over his shoulder.

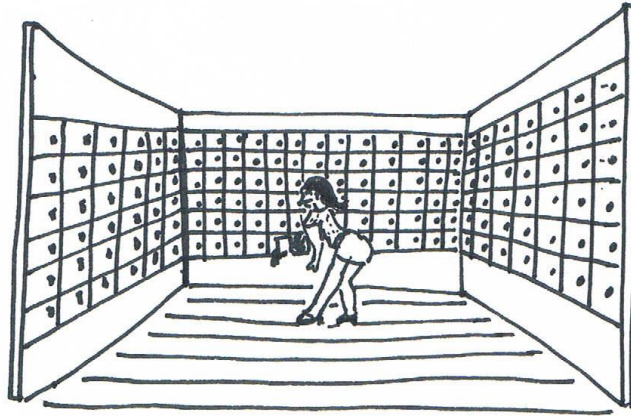
"Hey dudes, good to see you! My two favorite guys sitting side by side, what are the odds?" He winked at them.

"Just boning up on the stats for the Knicks in the pre-season. I think they're playing Buffalo at Maple Leaf Gardens in a few months. Clyde Frazier is the man, and I'm going to move like him on the court this year." Lou smacked his lips and waggled his shoulders.

"I'm too husky for basketball, and too slow for football. How is a farm boy like me ever going to date one of those cheerleaders?" Gerry looked baleful.

"You've got company for different reasons, good buddy. I am never going to get near one of those young ladies either. But I guess that leaves three for Lou, eh?" The sounds of Oh Canada pre-empted further ribaldry.

Hello, Mrs. Robinson



He was well past due for a haircut and it was after lunch on a Saturday, so he thought he would sashay downtown and get a trim at Rick's barber shop near the Queen's Hotel. He used to get a haircut at old Joe Huck's as a youngster and all the way up to this year, but the newer shop with its macho owner appealed in a much more significant way. He fished a two dollar bill out of the piggy bank in the middle drawer of the kitchen, and was just about gone when his Dad stuck his head in the back door to announce he was going out to the South Line to get bunny feed and did anyone need a ride anywhere before that. So two minutes later they were rolling down Archy Street, his Dad jawboning as usual about the weather and work and the need for an oil change. They stopped adjacent to the Post Office so he could run in and pick up the mail, but his Dad reached over and grabbed him by the left forearm.

"Hold back and enjoy the view, laddie! Criminy, that's hot!" The eyes of the older man bulged out as they both glanced towards a sports car on the opposite side of the street. Its driver's door was open, and a woman had one leg out and was slowly extracting herself from the vehicle due to its low- slung coupe seat. She seemed to linger for half a second, enough for both of the males to take note of her bright pink panties that were exposed due to the riding high of a short little mauve tennis skirt. She brought the second leg onto the pavement and literally jumped out. She had on a sleeveless clingy white top, which showed her considerable assets to a great effect. "Jeez, Louise" This was hissed out, with a building of steam, through his Dad's pursed lips.

Now this both shocked and amused the boy, as he had never quite heard his Dad talk like this. He felt a tug of camaraderie, and then some level of discomfort. "I'll just run in and see if there's any mail."

She was halfway to the entrance doors, and he fell behind in lock step, greedily devouring the sight of her tanned and shapely legs. She popped the door open and went through, but then looked behind and held the door halfway open. He jogged eight steps and stammered out some gibberish of thanks, and then her perfume hit him. She strutted towards her mailbox, keenly aware he was ogling her legs and backside. He fumbled around for his postal key and opened his box. Her mailbox was at the rear of the

corridor and closest to the floor, so the opening of this necessitated her bending over and the resultant ever-so-slight riding up of her already short skirt. He pawed at the flyers and envelopes in his hand, never taking his eyes off her until she firmly shut the door and pirouetted all in one motion. He stood there, smiling awkwardly.

"Lot of mail today?" She came directly up to his right side.

"Uh, yeh... well, got to go!" He turned left and headed for the exit.

"You may want to close your box..." She pointed knowingly, with a brittle smile.

"Oh...right...ha, silly me." He retreated and leaned down.

"Allow me." Her hand went over top of his, its manicured fingernails gently scratching the back of his hand. She leaned in, the considerable volume of her breasts gliding along his bicep. He gulped hard and stood up straight. "I don't know your name. I'm Lia." She arched her eyebrows, seeing he was breaking into a full sweat.

"Uh, Jayson, pleased to meet you."

"Jayson, hmmm, you're a cute fellow. Do you do odd jobs? Weeding, cutting grass? I could use a hand from time to time." This was said neutrally, but with an undertone that was hard to be decipher.

"Errh, sure, always happy to do a bit of work! Do you have something specific in mind?" His own mind was racing.

Oh yeah, I have a long of things you can help me with. I live in the big red house west of the Lutheran Church, the one with the large yard. Next time you're walking by, just drop your name and number on a sheet of paper and I'll add you to the list." She was already walking away, her heeled sandals clicking on the waxed marble floor.

"You were in there for a good few minutes, lad." Did you catch the attention of Toots?" His Dad leered over at him.

"Nope, kept my head down, pulled out all this mail and gave it a sort right there at the little desk they have. She never looked my way, and I did the same. Saw an ad on the board for yard work, not far from the church, so may look into that possibility." Nonchalance was his middle name.

His Dad dropped him off at the corner and he swung around to the door of the barber shop. It was strangely quiet, without the normal bustle of a Saturday afternoon.

"I'm in luck, no waiting."

Rick bounded out of a chair, setting the sports section of the paper aside. "Yeah, it seemed like everyone in Bruce County came in this morning."

"I'm a couple of weeks past due a cut, so don't be shy with the clippers." He sat down in the barber's chair and had a smock over him in a jiffy.

"So what are you doing these days?" Rick talked and whistled under his breath while he started to mow off mounds of hair.

"Oh, some volleyball, as a tune-up to basketball. My classes are okay but kind of boring. Once basketball starts, everything changes. School seems more interesting because you're busier. People treat you a bit differently, particularly if you have a good game." He tried not to get over-animated due to the clippers' proximity to his ear.

"Oh, you're talking in code, my man. I'm not that long out of high school, so I remember! Football and basketball players have to push the chicks away!" He stepped back, waving the clippers wildly.

"Well, I wish I could confirm what you are saying, but let's just say nothing like that happened in midget basketball. But maybe junior ball will be the charm. I just had some dishy older lady tell me I was cute!" He smiled smugly, hoping to impress the suave barber.

"Older lady? How old are you talking?" He leaned in, even though no one else was in the shop.

"Hmmm, hard to say. 30, 35? But what a body, and a gorgeous tan! And she was driving a sporty little number." He was just short of bragging.

"Well, well. This is a small town, dudemeister. Would this have happened to be Lia?" Rick said this conspiratorially.

"Yeah. In fact that's exactly what she said her name was." Now he was frowning and Rick let out a sigh.

"Okay, kiddo, here's some unsolicited advice from your barber. Lia is the wife of a dentist, who has his practice over Hanover way. He is a busy guy, works all the time, and the word on the street is that his receptionist is eye-poppingly gorgeous. You catch my drift. So Lia has lots of money, a big house, but not much romance. What's a woman like that going to do? Exactly, find a boyfriend. But boyfriends can get clingy, and this would upset her domestic arrangements. So she has a reputation for liking boys. OK, young men. They cut her grass, wax her car, and one thing leads to another. She might have a number of handy men on the run in the same time zone, as variety is the spice of life in this kind of game. So go into this with your eyes open, young friend. It would not be the worst of assignments, that I can assure you. But don't get attached, as it could end quickly, based on the stories from a few of my younger clients. If I was in your shoes, I might just become an expert at driving a riding lawnmower. But take care of yourself, and know that you can buy a safe at the SuperTest station across the street. The signal is a peace sign over a peace sign, and twenty five cents cash."

The young man sat there, taking this all in, the mirror reflecting the image of a half-shorn sheep.

Up Close and Personal



The note on the table said 'Wake Dad up by 9:30 so we can all make the 11 o'clock service'. He assumed his Mom was somewhere, either dropping off clothes that had been mended or some baking to a friend. He was never crazy about Sunday mornings as this meant having to go to church. Even though he was an acolyte, and the minister still asked him from time to time about studying divinity, he was never totally comfortable going to a service. For one thing, his Dad always wore out-of-fashion ties, ones so short that they only went mid-chest. And halfway through the service, his Dad would invariably drop off to sleep, a result of a long work week and an erratic sleep schedule. So this always prompted the rolling of eyes and huffy sighs from a number of erstwhile lady parishioners, as his Dad typically snored throughout these naps. When the snoring got out of hand, he would have to jab an elbow into the arm of his father. This typically punctuated the snoring in an abrupt way, followed by vigorous smacking of lips and the resumption of low rumble snoring.

But today was a special day, so the church service was much more bearable to contemplate. Early Summer had the Sunday school picnic in the park by the river, with its three-legged races and ice cream treats. Today was early Fall, and the church event was a series of games for the kids in the parking lot, followed by sandwiches and pie and grape Kool-Aid. He was starting to get a bit old for this, but it had nostalgic appeal and a few of his confirmation class friends would be joining in so it would be just bearable.

So having had a quick bite of fresh bread and homemade strawberry jam, he brushed his teeth with baking soda and then stood at the bottom of the stairs. He was prepared to just yell up at the old man, repeatedly if he had to, until he woke up and grunted down that he was awake. But instead he mounted the stairs, stopping outside the bedroom door. The snoring volume was considerable, a tune-up for the church service in ninety minutes. He stepped inside the room, going past the single bed of his Mom to the foot of the double bed where his Dad lay, buried under a number of thick blankets. His Dad had his mouth open halfway, emitting a range of guttural sounds that built to a crescendo and then quietened

down. The boy saw the nostrils flaring, and could look right up his Dad's nose to considerable nasal hair colonies. His Dad's eyebrows were bushy and he still had a good head of hair flecked with considerable grey. The room smelled a bit, the smell of body order and urine, the smell of heavy manliness. He saw the pot in the corner by the bed, brimming with yellow urine, a necessity in a house with only one bathroom on the ground floor. He scrunched up his nose and reached over to his father's chest, a patch of wiry grey chest hair emanating outward from a gap in the pajama top.

"Dad, wake up." The snoring got even louder. "Dad. It's 9:30. Church morning." The snoring stopped, then jerkily restarted.

"Dad, last chance or you can sleep till noon. And we all know you'll fall asleep anyway in church, so what's the difference?" He gave the grey chest hair a shake.

This reminded him of the time that he had been walking down by Cox Signs. He loved this corner shop, and he would always peek inside to watch the craftsmen hand-drawing lines and painting slogans on delivery vans and service trucks. One day, the Saturday of Chickenfest, he was doing this and he saw the Dad of a buddy asleep on the front lawn of the red brick home beside Cox Signs. This was highly unusual, even though he knew the Dad to be a fan of Canadian Club whiskey. So to save him embarrassment, he had tried to wake him discreetly. No manner of encouragement seemed to work, until he mounted the fellow with both knees on his chest and grabbed him by both ears and gave them a sharp twist. This worked well, even though the boy's father had woken up and bucked him off like a Stampede bronco.

So this was what he tried now, but in a slightly watered down way. He climbed up on the bed and put his left knee on his Dad's chest. Leaning over, he grabbed his left ear and whispered into it. "Dad, it's Fall picnic day, and none of the church ladies will be wearing their knickers!"

His Dad jerked awake, the action pushing him directly onto the green fuzzy mat at the bedside.

"Holy crap! What a dream I was having!" The father's voice was groggy and his eyes rolled wildly.

"Sorry to wake you, but it's past 9:30." He slinked away, out of the room.

"Thanks for the callout, 'bye. You're a good lad to have around."

March, 1943; St. Catharines, Ontario

The young man had a bouquet of flowers behind his back, and he mounted the stairs of the boarding house for young ladies with a spring in his step. He pressed the buzzer and waited expectantly, whistling a tune between his teeth.

A young lady opened the door, smiling broadly and flipping her luxuriant hair behind one shoulder. "Ah, a gallant knight arrives! Might it be my lucky day, or are you here for another damsel?"

"Oh, Patricia, you would be a fine catch for any red blooded male in Canada. But my loyalties are to Grinelda. Is she in?" He smiled broadly at the lovely young woman.

"Absolutely, she's waiting for you in the sitting room. Go right on in." She waved him through, with just the slightest hint of regret and longing on her face.

An attractive young lady sat on the edge of a love seat, dressed to the nines and in a way that discreetly displayed her enviable figure.

"Ah, there's my sweet bumpkins! How 'bout a kiss?" He opened his arms broadly. The young woman stood up and held him stiffly, giving him a short peck on the lips.

"Roses for a rose." He brought the bouquet out with a flourish.

"Berty, what happened at the medical examination?" She traced his lapels with a manicured fingernail.

"Oh, had a complete physical, and a good going over." He grinned effusively.

"Cute nurse?" This was said with the scrunching up of her nose.

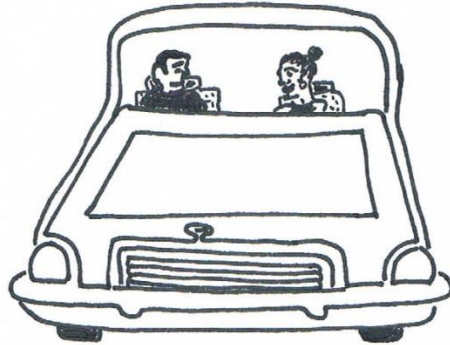
"Just male medical personnel, I'm afraid." He turned a bit pink.

"And the results were?" She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Great news, I think. I'm over that darned pleurisy, but the doc confirmed I have a bit of a hernia to contend with. So no active service for me, either stay on at Thompson or find a desk job in Toronto or Halifax, I suppose. But that will mean we can make some plans, no?" He leaned in for another kiss.

She took half a step back. "Yes....yes. But in a way, that's a shame. Because real men fight, don't they?" This was said coldly, with an acid tongue. The young suitor felt the blood drain from his face.

Down By the River



It was simply painful to wait for the season to start. The volleyball season was over halfway done, but it just didn't hold his attention. He couldn't care less if they won or lost their matches. He was just going through the motions, bumping a ball or chasing another one down the sidelines. But once basketball season started, every game was monumental. Even the exhibition games took on significant proportion, and the conference games were just that much bigger. The anticipation of the game, the game itself, and the endless rehashing of every play and nuance. Now that was something to look forward to.

So to foreshadow the rhythms of the season, he had started to challenge Lou to some shooting competitions in Gym C. These were sanctioned by Coach McNairn, who let them in and then locked the door so they wouldn't be disturbed. This was done just a few times a week, but it was enough to juice the duo and get intentions set for what was to come.

Lou was an offensive whiz, a blur on the court who could handle the ball as if it were on a yoyo string and never saw a shot opportunity he didn't like. He made a lot of distance shots, in that time before the three point line, and had a nice fake-to-shoot with a resulting drive for a layup or a hanging floater. Lou was a good looking guy, almost a baby face, and he even sweated in a cool way. The girls in the stands adored him, and the cheerleaders went bananas every time he touched the ball, which was often. So he generated a buzz in the gym that was contagious.

He knew he played a foil to Lou, and that was part of the charm and their collective strength. He was the defensive stalwart who always got the ball back to Lou on the give-and-go and only took very high percentage shots. But Lou always found him open for a few of these every half, for him to nail the long bank shot or a twisty baseline floater in near the basket in traffic. But he knew his role on the team, and that was to be the defensive stopper for the best player on the other team. If that guy averaged twenty points in a typical game, his blanketing defence with a constant hand in the face and tenacious boxing out meant that he could hold him to six points. Ten tops. And that difference in output often meant the difference in the final score. In a game of offense, good defence typically brought home the bacon. So there was mutual respect in these shoot-arounds, and not so much competition as exploring what was

possible. Lou loved shots from half-court, and flinging up high, arcing shots from behind the backboard. If these went in, he knew he was in a heap of trouble in a game of HORSE. But they usually did not, so he wove his magic with the pecking away through a repertoire of high-probability jump shots and finger rolls, getting enough to test Lou's focus and patience. No one really kept overall score, because they knew in their hearts it was pretty much even and it didn't matter a whole lot in the end.

So they walked home together, after Coach McNairn let them out into a quiet and diminished-light late afternoon. They joked and kibitzed around, and soon found themselves on the main street, where Lou lived with his family above the hardware store. He hung around the door between the store and his Dad's lawyer's office, kind of wondering if he might get an invite upstairs for a glass of juice. Lou's sister and Mom were both very cute, so it wouldn't be painful to hang loose and watch them go about their business of after-school homework or making supper. But no invitation came that day, so his buddy waved 'bye benignly and he found himself standing outside the hardware store, looking at the sidewalk displays of lawnmowers and snowblowers. He had a little time to kill before going home so he just poked along westerly, peeking in at storefronts and nodding to anyone who came abreast of him on the street.

He paused to look at the displays of necklaces and watches at the jewelry store near the corner, and waited for the light while looking at the dark suits on display in the haberdasher's directly on the corner. He crossed the street and took a peek into the pool hall, which was very quiet. Further along was the newspaper office, with its open door and humming printing presses working methodically in the back. He started to navigate the longer dimension of the poultry eviscerating plant where his Dad worked, and he stood outside the chain link fence at the west end watching reefer trailers being loaded with boxes of frozen product. A quick peek into the displays of the Canadian Tire store, and he then found himself at the road that led over the river bridge and up into the countryside.

The river had always held a great fascination for him. It rolled along majestically, with a neat Mark Twain island just east of the bridge. Grassy green, with little hummocks of vegetation and enough topographical variation to give it an air of mystery for a fifteen year-old boy.

The western side of the bridge also had its appeal, as the confluence of Silver Creek and the Saugeen River created a back-channel effect that caused neat swirls in the water. He remembered seeing this time and time again, when he would go over to the Park for the municipally-run Summer Playground program.

He thought he would just take a quick loop of the park and then hurry home for dinner. The sun was starting to set over the hills of Stony, and he absolutely loved the glow in the sky.

At the far end of the bridge, he could look down into a parking lot that was at a considerably lower elevation than his roadside perch. It contained one car, a creme-colored two door coupe that looked vaguely familiar. To his eye, it had two people sitting up front, a guy in the passenger seat and a woman in the driver's seat. It was hard to tell conclusively in the dim light, but it appeared the woman was lying over the man's lap, her head bobbing up and down in a slow, rhythmic fashion.

At that moment he realized that he was witnessing something he shouldn't, and that he knew both actors in this passion play. The guy was a year ahead of him in school, and was the very same individual who had bullied him mercilessly in grade school. He literally felt an involuntary twinge in his face at the memory of having his nose drubbed in the dirt by this ogre. And the woman was the wife of a neighbour who lived a few blocks up the street, the gentleman often being away on the road for his sales job. She sported a few extra pounds, but was very well endowed at the $\frac{3}{4}$ line and had a pair of striking, muscular legs that she showed off all Summer with extremely short shorts. Eastern European and daunting in many ways, she would often give him long and lingering stares as he walked by their house on sultry summer evenings.

So he stealthily sidled up to a pine tree, to watch the action from a less exposed spot. The bully stroked her svelte blonde hairdo in an almost tender way, and she varied her ministrations expertly, building him to a satisfying crescendo with his encouragements audible through the pine boughs.

He stole away quietly, his mind racing with the possibilities that might emanate from what he had just witnessed. He certainly had something on the bully, that could be hissed under his breath if he ever needed to keep him in line. But the possibilities with the statuesque neighbour were what really made his mind spin. It appeared there was more than one woman in town who liked to sample the charms of younger men while keeping domestic arrangements intact.

Get On the Bus, Gus



School was over for the day, and he headed down to Gym B to shoot free throws under the tutelage of Coach McNairn. There was about a 15 minute gap between the final buzzer of the day and the time

when the buses queued up beside the gym to take the farm kids home. Some of them rode the bus for over an hour each way, every day. Well over half the kids in the school were from the country, and they were generally good kids. The work ethic that arose from stewarding the land, nudging crops to fruition and husbandry of animals had a spillover effect on character and attitude. Not all of the farm girls were cute, but the ones that were tended to be very cute. And just a little bit more down to earth than their town counterparts.

So as he ambled in the direction of the gym, three petite young ladies were zipping up their bags near the tuck shop and in the process gave him a pretty good view of their buttocks sheathed in form-fitting Levi's. He lingered a bit, trying to figure out a way to initiate conversation. He fancied himself as a ladies' man, but truth be told, he was far around the block from being anywhere close. He had big hair but it was neatly combed, and he had kept his complexion largely clear with copious water drinking and minimizing the KFC takeout. But he was still a husky boy, and he knew it, and this rippled into how he walked and how he was shy around girls. But this was changing, and conversations like the one about to ensue were positive harbingers.

"So where are you headed?" The cutest one, a blond girl called Daria, trilled this out to him in a forceful manner. She had large, round breasts, wondrously accentuated by a clingy white top.

"Just to the gym. For some shooting, to get things tuned up." This took a lot to get out, and he had to struggle to keep his eyes from riveting on her chest.

"Can't wait for it to start. My parents said I could cheerlead this year if I keep my grades up and get my barn chores done. A bunch of the games land on Friday nights, with a dance right after, and my Dad has agreed not to come to pick me up until 11 o'clock. So it's going to be an exciting year!" She gushed in his direction.

"Daria's just cheerleading to meet some guys on the team." This was said teasingly by a tall, lithe girl from outside Paisley, who had gorgeously creamy skin and lustrous auburn hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was a bit colt-like, but he could see from his limited perspective that she would soon develop into a striking young woman. He shifted his gaze from Daria's breasts to the colt's exquisite neck.

The third enchantress had sparkling eyes and a short-cropped hairstyle, with olive skin that hinted of some Mediterranean roots. Somewhat like Lou's sister in looks and temperament, but more Italian perhaps. "I would love to be a cheerleader as I adore gymnastics, but my Dad would run me out of the gym if he saw those little short skirts they wear." He looked down and saw a pair of heavily tanned, athletic legs below her knee length skirt. A mental squinting had her doing cartwheels in a pleated cheer skirt, and he certainly enjoyed what he saw in his mind's eye.

"Listen, I've got to meet up with my teammate in the gym. I know Daria, but not you two gals?". He said this smilingly, but shifted his weight towards the gym entrance door.

"Melanie...." The redhead actually did a formal curtsy.

"Anna, and I love to dance so don't be surprised if I get to you before Daria does at those upcoming dances." She swayed her hips slowly and beguilingly.

"I hope I can count on a dance from you all." As this slipped out, it surprised him greatly, as he had spent all the time at previous high school dances holding up the back wall.

The shootout was uneventful, as Lou did not show up that day. He was a man of mystery, so it sort of made sense. Coach gave him some good tips on focus, and he rang in ten free throws in a row before going home.

His Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking some kind of a hot beverage. He was normally at work by this time.

"Everything OK?"

"Yup, all okay. I had a few extra days of holidays, so my boss said use them up by the end of the month. Was going to take a run over to Hanover to see Uncle and Auntie. Just a short visit, come along and we'll be back for a later supper."

He hesitated, with a reasonable probability of begging off on homework grounds. But his Great Uncle Jack was one of the nicest people he knew, and Great Auntie Arlene was just downright interesting. Strange interesting, but interesting nonetheless. So he decided to go along for the ride.

They had tea and pie in the older couple's kitchen, heated by a wood stove and smelling of mineral spirits, leather and canned preserves. They were older German folk, who asked questions and nodded politely at just about any response. His Dad held forth as always, and after some time the repeated stories and heat from the woodstove started to put him on the edge of sleep. So he jumped at the chance to go outside with his Mom and Auntie, to pick some things in the flower garden.

"You always have the most amazing garden." His Mom waved her hand at countless flowers and shrubs, all growing healthfully and stupendously high.

"You have to know how to take care of the plants." The older woman spoke slowly.

"Fertilizer, watering?" His Mom posed this deferentially.

"All of that, for sure. But I have my secrets. I pray for each plant, and I work with the *daevas* who watch over each plant. They are sometimes little rascals, but they like praise. So I have a special book on plant incantations, which I recite regularly. But the neighbors call me a witch! To heck with them I say, I have the best garden in town." She shook her fist in the direction of a neighboring yard.

As they drove back, they rolled into the valley and down the main street. At the stop light, just before the Hartley House Hotel, he saw Daria and her family coming out from having had dinner there. She was dressed in a beautiful blue dress, and his heart flipped one or two beats. But he couldn't bear to be seen by her, with his square Dad driving up front, so he discreetly slid down below the window line and was hidden fully from her view as the car rolled past.

Friday Night Lights



“Big guy, listen, we need you.” Vince’s voice was firm and confident.

“Basketball is about to start, and my head’s just not into football. And I don’t want to run the chance of getting hurt.” He said this balefully, affecting a hip injury.

“Listen, we’ve had a lot of injuries of late and our ranks are thin. The coaches are proposing a mini tryout tomorrow after school, to see if anybody who wants to sample football would join the team for the last couple of games of the season. Chances are you won’t even see game action, so you wouldn’t get hurt. But at least we can dress a full team. Puhleeeeeeze?” Vince smiled and leaned in to give him a sideways hug.

In the end he capitulated, more for stoking the friendship than for testing Vince’s assertion that the girls in the stands loved a double varsity athlete. So the next afternoon he found himself out on a muddy field, wearing soiled practice pads and a non-descript singlet bearing the number four. It was not the situation that Vince had described, as the head coach was downright unwelcoming.

“Alright you cowards, there are a dozen of you here today and I have four roster spots to fill. So if you want to play any football this season, you’re going to have to earn the right! Let’s get warmed up with twenty push-ups, and then a lap of the perimeter. Get at it, and I’ll come back to explain the drills to assess you.”

Just for a moment he thought he would bang the push-ups, jog down the sidelines and just keep going, straight to the change room. But right at that point, the trio of Daria, Melanie and Anna showed up on

the lower bleachers and he was stuck. And a bit confused, as they should have been on a bus at that point. But a quick look over at Vince and the relayed smirk told him this audience had been set up in advance. He jogged the perimeter and joined the ragtag group second to last.

“Okay, first off, a combined drill to assess speed, dexterity and toughness. Each player will jump up from a prone position, sprint back to the 15 yard line, pick up the ball and then try to run it back into the end zone. You only have to evade one tackler, this guy here.” A squat young man with a massive neck stepped up and flexed his hands in reaction. “Phil here is our defensive stalwart on the team. His mission is to plant you into the ground before you can get into the end zone. Your mission is to bob and weave and evade him. Sounds easy, but as you'll see, it's not.” The coach emitted a grim smile, and Phil flashed a grin that was deficient of a few teeth but sported one prominent silver-capped tooth.

He was close to the end of a dozen boys, and what he saw ahead of him filled him with anticipatory dread. Some lads gave it a very good try, but Phil brought each one down with a resounding thud well before the goal line. Some fellows were fast, some were slow, but the end result did not differ.

So when it was his turn, his hands turned clammy and his guts turned loose. One of the girls let out an encouraging yelp. He lay on the ground nervously, and on the coach's whistle he stayed planted. The coach let out a second, impatient blast and that was enough to peel him off the turf. He ran back and picked up the ball with wooden fingers, circling wide as he instinctively thought he could use the width of the field and his native speed to outrun the potentially fatigued human bowling ball. So he took off quickly and advanced a good five yards, adjusting his trajectory even more laterally to avoid the tackler. The girls started to cheer vociferously and he became encouraged, but he was running a considerably longer distance than he had initially anticipated and was starting to lose steam. With perhaps two yards to go, he saw a blur on his left side. It was Phil, or Animal, as he was discreetly called in the corridors. Phil was not happy to be doing this much work for another tackle, so his piston legs went into overdrive and he punched his helmet into the soft mid-section of the boy's core. When they hit the ground at high speed, the helmet acted like a hammer on his solar plexus, making the boxing club incident seem like child's play.

Phil was up off the ground quickly, shaking his fist and groaning gutturally. He lay there stunned, perhaps physically capable of rising but mentally unwilling to do so. This would be the end of his football career, and a very short one it had been.

Later, he showered and changed and slowly walked out past the coaches' offices. Luckily, the football folks were still out on the field and it was just Coach Tidge doing paperwork at his desk. He was going to oversee the senior boys' basketball team that year, but had great affection for anybody who played basketball at any level.

“Jayson, nice to see you. What have you been up to?”

“Well, not much. Got talked into going to the fill-in football tryouts. Why I went, I'm not sure. But it was pretty much a disaster, and I think I'm going to feel sore in the core area for weeks! Should have known better.” He scrunched up his face.

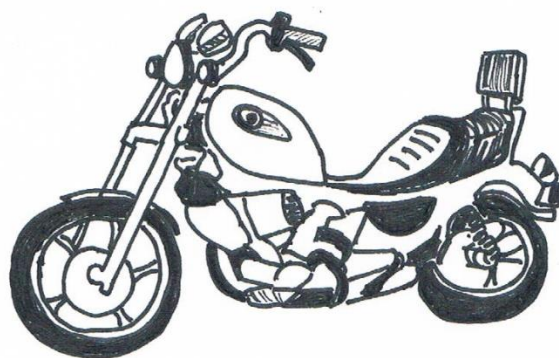
"If misery loves company, I had a similar experience in high school. Football is a game for a certain build, a certain mentality. It's gladiator stuff, y'know. For guys like us, with a bit softer temperament, other sports have more resonance." This was all said kindly.

"Yeah, well, I sure learned my lesson."

"Well, that's not an insignificant thing, what we're trying to do here is get young folks to be active. At something they can do for a long time, well past school. If you can develop a fitness habit in high school, odds are you will take it into your adult life. And be a whole lot healthier as a result. So don't see this as a defeat, more of a crossing-off-the-list, and you can now focus on basketball." The coach made a playful fist and his eyes twinkled.

He walked home alone, in silence. He needed some more time to let the experience wash over and past him before he went home for supper. So he went down to the Oldsmobile dealership on the west part of Main Street and cut down the side street to the river. There were old wooden steps cut into the dyke and he mounted them gingerly. He stood at the top, marvelling at the Saugeen River rolling past him, coming in on a gentle arc from the east and curving slowly to the west. Willow trees lined the dyke, attracted by the moisture. He could look down and see large fish moving in the water, with and against the current. They were dark and ill-defined, but their movements intrigued and excited him. He walked westward on the dyke, reflecting on the day and admiring the beauty of the big sky. It was a small town, with modest excitement opportunities. But at this moment, he was happy and could not have desired to be anywhere else, doing anything different.

Thinking About the Future



It was twenty three hours later, and he was sitting in the school library with Lou, ostensibly working on some kind of civics and careers project. They were both intelligent students, but not overly motivated to study as diligently as some of their female counterparts. So they tended to muddle through, to get done

what had to get done, but not a whole lot more. This might come later, under the right circumstances, but for now the focus was on other things.

"So ten days before the first exhibition game. I am planning to score 30 points against Sacred Heart." Lou said this casually, with just a thin veneer of cockiness.

"Those guys play dirty. I'm glad it's here and not in there gym. We always get killed in that joint! The crowd gets behind them, they start throwing elbows, the referees don't call anything and it all goes downhill fast. I had a near run-in there awhile back so I hope the punks I brushed up against don't come over to watch the game." He looked rueful.

"Dude, our court, our game.. Just shut down their top scorer and leave the rest to me!" Lou kissed his fingertips, the jumping off points for many future long-ball shots.

"So what are you two gentlemen working on?" The heavysset librarian came upon them quickly, smiling in a somewhat menacing way and taking his glasses off to wipe them with a red silk handkerchief.

"Civics and Careers." Lou was terse and to the point, as if he was speaking to a customs agent.

"Okay, and what, specifically?"

"We've been asked to do a 2000 word report on what we see as our future occupation, with background statistics and the capacities and training for whatever line of work we choose." He said this neutrally, as he didn't really like the librarian much but he was looking for some sort of inspiration on this project.

"Okay, so if you had to tell me off the top of your head, what are the most probable three jobs you see yourself doing for the rest of your life?" The beefy man hitched up one of his trouser legs, and sat amicably on the edge of the research table.

"Hmm, let's see." Lou paused for a second. "Dentist, film actor, and commercial realtor."

"Well, that's quite a range. Good potential for any of those, if you set your mind to them." He smiled and nodded knowingly. "And how about you?"

"Not so sure. Maybe something in the government, or building things. Or maybe a basketball coach?" He said the last option with a lot more blood flow than the previous two.

"So there you go, you both have good leads. Now start doing some basic research. Write out the questions you want to answer, and go find the material you need to provide these answers!" He waved his hands to and fro, in the direction of the book stacks.

"So look it all up in books?" Lou was a master at stating the obvious.

"Yes, where else? Are you going to just make it up?. We have 'tousands and 'tousands of books in this library, so go and find the relevant ones and start reading!"

Lou wanted to stay longer than he cared for on that particular early evening, so he found himself walking alone yet again. He thought about going down to the dykes and maybe even out to Stony, as he hadn't been out in deep nature for a while. But something told him to go home, and he found his Dad sitting at the dinner table, drinking coffee after completing his early meal before work. The mood was sombre.

"Ah, there you are, 'bye. I was just talking to your Mom about some sad news that Uncle Ted just called about. You know Milt O'Brien's son, Teddy?"

"Yeah. He's a couple of years ahead of me in school but I know him to say hi and he helped us out in class with some physics experiments. He's a good guy." This was all said optimistically.

"He was a good guy." His Mom turned away after this was blurted out by his Dad.

"He got killed an hour ago. Got a brand new motorcycle for his 16th birthday a few weeks back. A 750, and too much power. He had been nipping around town at high speeds more than once, so I've been told. But after school today he was out in the country and went around a turn too fast. Far too fast. The road may have been greasy, with a bit of light rainfall just before. Lost control of the bike and he went broadside into a big tree. He probably died on contact, which may have been a blessing."

He felt sick to his stomach. He hadn't known Teddy well, but well enough to know he was a standup guy. He had seen the shiny new motorcycle in the school parking lot a couple of times, and if the truth be told, he had envied him. The idea of hitting the open road, surrounded by sunshine and fresh air, was pretty appealing. But too much speed, and look at what it could lead to.

He wasn't well versed in how to understand death, or what death really meant. He knew he had lost his brother before he himself was born and his one uncle and grandparents were also gone. But someone he knew, someone so young, that was different. He remembered crying his eyes out when he was eight, when they had got the news that they had lost their favourite neighbour. He had loved Ed, and was simply shocked that he would never be able to see him again. So now the same thing for Teddy.

"So what do we do?" He said this earnestly.

"Well, I always go around the neighbourhood and take up a collection for flowers for the family. A bereaved family needs flowers. Not sure why, but they do. So you can help me with that. I think his Dad is a Mick but his Mom is not, so who knows where they will hold the funeral. If it's in the Catholic church we won't be going, but if it's elsewhere, we can think about it. And tell any of your friends the sad news. Some people go for weeks not knowing if no one mentions it. And one other thing..... " His Dad's voice trailed off.

"What's that?" He said this softly.

"Stay safe. I've already lost one son. With news like this today, I don't think my heart would survive the loss of another."

The Fun Begins



It was finally the start of the season, and today they would host a late afternoon exhibition game against the separate high school. His parents hadn't come out to any games last year, but that had been Grade 9 and it was only midget basketball after all. But this year was a big step, and they had new uniforms to wear, so it was kind of a big deal. After his breakfast, he made his way up to his Dad's bedside, as the old man had worked until 3:00 and was still catching his winks. He hated to wake him, but he wanted to let him know the game was on, just in case he might be able to shift his work start time.

“Oooooaaaaahhhhh...”. His Dad usually reserved his best snoring for church, but he was in pretty good form at home on many days as well.

“Dad, sorry to bother you....., Dad.” He whispered this over his Dad’s sleeping visage.

“Mumphaaaaaoooooh....” His Dad changed cadence and tone but kept on snoring.

“Dad, I just want to tell you one thing.” He said this a bit louder.

“Aaaah, mxunylph.... what's up, what's going on?” His Dad’s head rolled side to side, but his body stayed rigidly flat.

“Um, I have a game this afternoon, four o'clock start in the gym at school. Against Sacred Heart. Not sure if you are able to come, or have any interest.” He almost knew the forthcoming response.

“Have to be at work at five sharp, need to eat ahead of time. Sorry.....mmmmuuuumph...” His Dad fell back to sleep, starting a low rumble.

“Don't worry about it.” He stepped away from the bed lightly, hiding the sting.

“Mmuuuuaaaahh....oh, and ‘bye? Give those Micks hell!” His Dad rolled over.

After that response, he knew he didn't have the heart to ask his Mom, and from a practical perspective it was doomed as she would be boiling chicken and potatoes right around tipoff time. But he would at least let her know the game was on.

“You look good, anything special going on today?” She always had a nice smile and greeting for him in the mornings.

“Yeah, big day today. Start of the season. Just an exhibition game, but still. We're playing those altar boys from Sacred Heart.” He smiled, adding no embellishment.

“Well, that will be grand. Just have fun and enjoy the game, and good luck. But remember you don't have to win to be a success.... being healthy and fit to play the game is the real reward.” She smiled at him and passed him his lunch. Coming to the game wasn't even on her radar and he was okay with that.

The day passed quickly, as all game days do. The team got out from last class a bit early and went down to the locker room to suit up and take instructions from Coach McNairn. Time seemed to speed up and before they knew it, they were out doing warm-up drills, mainly layups and short distance shots. The visiting team was doing the same thing at the other end, and a few sideways looks confirmed that they were a pretty short team but seemed to be as quick as lightning. Coach called them all over for a pre-tip huddle.

“Oookay, gentlemen. Listen up. These lads on the other side are all height-challenged, so we need to take advantage of that. But they look quick, and scrappy. Undoubtedly they will put a lot of pressure on the ball, so Lou, guard it well and look upcourt to release it without being too rushed. And then careful

passes inside to Davie and Henry, who should have a field day shooting over their little guys up front. Hands in, big cheer to go out!”

The tip went well, with Davie's long arms pushing it expertly off to Jeb at small forward, who eyed Henry cutting quickly to the hoop and got it to him for a back door layup. Up two in under five seconds, but their spunky point guard inbounded the ball quickly and sent it the length of the court for a similar kind of shot. It promised to be a long afternoon.

But over time, by being careful with the ball and hustling back on defence, the tide started to incrementally turn. The size differential was coming into play more and more, and the Raider big men were shooting flawlessly over their opponents' frenetically waving but short arms. He quickly figured out their key shooter, and made a subtle switch with Jeb so he could guard the small forward. He didn't care which position he guarded, center for that matter, as long as he could take on the most prolific points producer. And whittle them down, bit by bit, to half or less of their normal production. And if he got a choice setup for a high-probability shot, he would more often than not make it rattle in off the rim or softly kiss the backboard for a successful bank shot. When the game was almost over, he did this twice in consecutive times down the court, and the flotilla of plaid-skirted cheerleaders went bananas. His old public school hero, the strong farm boy who had deftly liberated him from the claws of his bullying nemesis, was sitting in the bleachers right behind the cheering girls. He jumped up and pumped his fist in the air when the second shot banked through, and high-fived the cutest cheerleader. Coach stood up to send in the substitutes at that point, and the starting five went over to the bench with great aplomb, with the cheerleaders and Gerry the farm boy applauding enthusiastically.

After the junior game, as the senior team was warming up, the rural hero came over to congratulate him and thump him on the back.

“You did a great job out there, Jayson. Really. You nearly shut down there sniper, and you got some sweet baskets yourself.”

“Thanks, I appreciate you coming out. And you seemed to be enjoying yourself over there on the sidelines. Any closer and you'd either be a cheerleader or have one of them on your lap.” He grinned slyly at the older boy.

“Ha, I wouldn't mind that! Listen, along that vein, a whole bunch of us are going down to the Queen's after the seniors' game to have a beer. Want to come along, and see what might happen?”

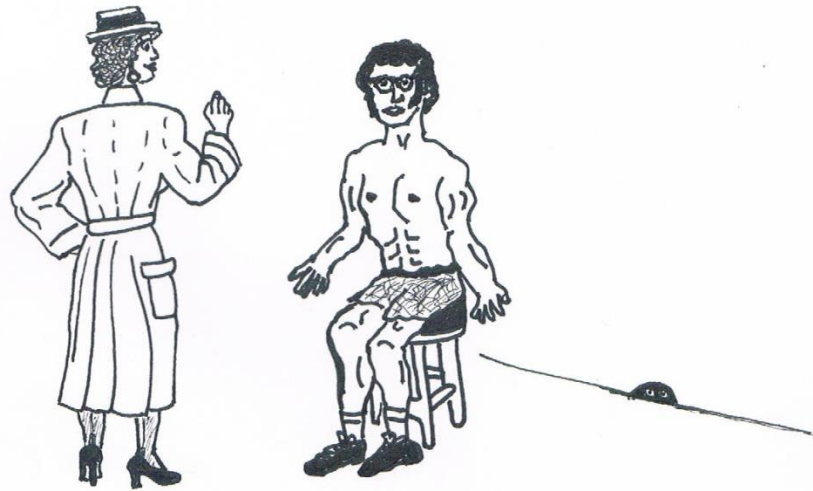
This was the kind of thing that instilled a quiet dread deep within him. He knew he wasn't of age to go into the hotel, and more importantly he knew that his Mom would be sorely disappointed if he even went near the entrance door after the supper crowd had left and the drinkers had arrived. And he had had only had one beer in his life for goodness sake, and it hadn't been particularly appealing. Time seemed to stand still for a moment, and he could see the cheerleaders milling around in the back, eyeing him just a bit in his sweaty and sticky uniform. He could see himself sitting awkwardly in a hotel chair, fending off plumes of smoke and taking small sips of draft beer to make it last as long as possible. And in another vein of possibility, he saw himself walking home in the gathering twilight, and looking in

the front door to see his Mom working on the sewing machine on another of her seamstress projects. A voice was calling out to him, forcing a choice.

“So what do you think, can I buy you a beer?” Gerry was just being friendly.

“Will have to take a rain cheque on that, my friend. Too much homework on the plate tonight.” He had not had real homework in over four weeks.

Hidden Secrets



It was the weekend, and now that they were into the season he thought he might keep his hair a bit shorter so he wouldn't need to wear a headband. He debated this in his mind as he was a huge perspiration producer, and the band sucked up sweat as well as kept his hair off his face. But in the end he convinced himself another trip to Rick would be in order, and he asked his Mom for the haircut money and was soon on his way down Archy Street. He remembered that he had been doing a wee bit of yard work for his little Irish neighborhood grandma the other day, and it had started to sprinkle and he had left the rake under an overhang. So he stepped into her backyard, retrieved the rake and went towards the rear door of her side garage. It was an old house with an equally old garage, and he quietly fumbled around, feeling for the light switch. But then he heard some voices, which caused him to instinctively freeze. The garage had steps down to a door that went to a basement connected to the main house. He knew that Mr. Dobbs, the boxing club coach, was a bachelor teacher who boarded in the house. He was pretty sure it was his voice he was hearing, although it was a bit muffled through the old door. And there was another voice, even more intriguing, which caused him to quietly tiptoe down the stairs and press his ear up against the wood. At this point he realized the second voice was teasingly feminine, and something was going on in the basement that was of definite interest to an adolescent boy.

The door and frame were old, and he quickly determined that if he took one step back up the stone stairs and leaned over to the frame, he could peer into the basement through a thin gap between the top of the door and bottom of the frame.

And his first glimpse made even more intrigued. The basement room was dimly lit, and held two people who seemed to be playing out some kind of role-playing exercise. Mr. Dobbs sat on a chair, wearing only satin boxer shorts. His powerfully built arms and chest were evident even in the challenged light, and he seemed to have his head down in an apologetic fashion. There was a woman wearing a stylish trench coat and fashionable high heels, with her back to the door.

"So you've been a naughty boy, have you?". This was said in a toying fashion, with just a hint of shrillness.

"Yes, ma'am, I must admit I have been." Dobbs smiled tersely.

"And just to review, what did I catch you doing last evening?" The woman put her hands on her hips, rocking back on her heels ever so slightly.

"I was peeking into your boudoir, watching you undress for bed. And I thoroughly enjoyed seeing you stand there in your lingerie, before you reached back and unsnapped your brassiere, letting those large breasts of yours hang and bang down your smooth, svelte torso!" Dobbs said these last few phrases quickly and excitedly.

"Stay in character...it's more fun if we spin it out." The woman took three steps to the left and turned ninety degrees. This made the boy almost fall into the door, as he could see quite clearly it was Mrs. DaSilva, the girls' volleyball coach.

"Yes, I was mesmerized by the absolute beauty of your softly hanging appendages, and could not believe my luck when you took a few steps closer to the window, making them all the more accessible to my voyeur eyes." Dobbs said this slowly, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses.

"That was indeed very bad of you to crouch outside my window like that! Like a naughty schoolboy! And what if my husband would have come in that moment, and spied you on the ledge?" This was said tauntingly.

"I doubt if he would have even noticed me there, as his eyes would have locked in on your amazing chest in two seconds flat." Dobbs licked his lips reflexively.

"And so my bad boy, as you were staring at me half naked in my bedroom, what effect was this having on you?" She leaned over and playfully stroked his nose.

"I must admit, I was starting to get very excited." His voice became a tad hoarse.

"And are you getting excited now?" The woman spun this out slowly.

"Yes,... yes I am." Rivulets of perspiration were forming on his brow.

"Show me, yes, show it to me. Take it out of those boxers." It was evident to the young man watching that things were about to escalate. "Oh my, what a big fellow you are! And what a big fellow you have!!" She threw her head back with a ribald laugh and loosened the straps of her trench coat.

"Take off that coat now." Things seem to be shifting a bit in the dynamic.

"Unh, unh! Who's in charge here? The coat comes off only if you touch yourself for Mrs. DaSilva. Oh, that's a good fellow, I am going to love watching you do that while I shimmy out of this....". The boy saw the coat fall to the ground and the back view of a very shapely gym teacher, clad in some fine matching lingerie.

"Unhook your bra and let me see those beautiful cupcakes of yours!" Dobb again took the upper hand.

The woman teasingly reached around behind and undid the clasp one-handed, with a practiced flair. She slowly slid off her satiny bra while facing Dobbs, whose eyes were riveted to her. The boy kept peering through the crack of the door and frame, not daring to blink. The teacher slowly walked towards Dobbs and then went behind him, taking her voluminous breasts in her hands and teasingly rubbed them from side to side against the back of her suitor's fine head of hair.

The boy watched this for a full moment, drinking in all of the salacious details to the point where he wasn't sure if he could ever attend another volleyball practice. And as things inside the basement escalated, he quietly tiptoed away so that his observation of their secret game would be undetected by either of its eager participants.

October, 1943; Toronto, Ontario

"Okay, pants off, I'll need to examine your unmentionables." The doctor tapped his clipboard with a worn pencil.

"Yes, sir. I'm here to see what can be done for this hernia of mine. I got rejected by the Army Review because of it. I was happy about all this at the start, but after some consideration over quite a few months, I've come around to the notion that I'd like to serve. So can anything be done for me, Doc?". The young man seemed nervous.

"My, that is a significant hernia. But I've seen worse. We could schedule you in for surgery in under a month, and with another month to heal and recover you should be good to pass a re-test." The doctor was confident in his tone, but something was being held back.

"Okay, okay, so let's schedule the repair surgery. Yup, I've thought this through." The young man rushed his words.

"Are you really sure?" The doctor peered over the rims of his spectacles.

"Sorry?"

"Listen, I see a lot of young men these days. Many want some excitement, many want to go off to war. But you seem like a gentle soul, and you're a good looking kid. I suspect your mother would be just as happy to have you ride a desk down in Halifax. And lots of young ladies in that town would love to be on your arm on a Friday night! And no chance of becoming cannon fodder! So before you jump in, boots and all, are you really sure?" A few seconds of silence went by. The young man's eyelid twitched.

"Errh, it's a bit complicated. But I'll get back home. So, yes, I'm sure. Let's do the paperwork for the surgery."

"Right you are, we'll book you four weeks from this Thursday."

Eight Slices or Twelve?



He lay in his bed, sleeping in on a Saturday morning. He woke up for a bit, drifted back, and woke up again. While he was in the waking state his mind wandered from topic to topic. His Dad slept in the next room, the low rumble of his snoring working upwards in pitch and intensity, then ebbing back down in rhythm with some inner dream-state drama. He wasn't sure how his Mom slept, in such close proximity to this consistent rumble. She appeared to be rested, but always retired early and got a lot of sleep before his Dad arrived back from his late shift work.

So he rolled and twisted around between the sheets, waking up slowly. He thought of the unfolding season, and the thrill of upcoming conference games. He mulled over the possible girls at school, mentally assessing their physical virtues and other aspects that were less definable. He couldn't conceive of having a girlfriend, and wasn't really sure what that would entail. But something kept him

thinking of the possibility, and his mind started to wander off to the encounters he had been having with more mature women than the high school gals. Something was shifting, and something was changing in the way these women interacted with him. The legal secretary, with her glossy nails and tight pencil skirt. The dentist's wife, with her hungry eyes and form-fitting tennis gear. The Eastern European woman up the street, with her absentee salesman husband and her long and muscular legs. He was saving the best for last, Mrs. Da Silva, with her sculpted figure and her earthy sexiness.

He felt this line of thinking was just simply torturing himself, as these were real women and he was still just a kid. But then the conversation with the suave barber came to his memory, and the scene he had witnessed down by the park in the car also surfaced. Maybe he would be an apprentice in the arts of love under the direction of a seasoned woman, but it seemed dubious on many levels. He knew instinctively that this would be wrong to do with a woman with a husband, but it didn't seem altogether rare in this slice of small-town Ontario. All of this both intrigued and confused him, so he got up and washed and had a light breakfast.

He went out on the back stoop and saw his neighbor packing some stuff into his trunk. He looked as if he might be going on a long trip.

"How's it going, Bill? Need a hand?" He waved over.

"Naah, I'm alright. Everything's in hand. Got a call to get my butt over to Barrie. Lots of lines came down in a storm and they need inspectors for the crews doing the reinstall work. I'll be back in a week, ten days tops." He affably waved as he went back into the garage for one last bag.

He strolled down past the farm implement yard, thinking he might just amble downtown to see what was going on. He saw his Uncle Ted out in his front yard, raking and pruning, and went over for a brief hello.

"Hi Uncle Ted, how are you doing today?"

"Oh, alright I guess. No use complaining, as no one would listen to me!" The older man took a hand-rolled cigarette out of his mouth, and quietly chuckled at his own joke.

"Anything new and exciting?" He knew the answer to this already.

"Hmmp, not really. Y'know, work in the factory, work at home. Whoever campaigned for the forty hour work week wasn't really looking at the big picture." His uncle grinned and his eyes crinkled.

"Do you want a hand. I'm just strolling downtown?"

"Nah, what would I do if I got this finished earlier than expected? The old battle-axe inside would just have another ten things for me to do. Better to stay out here and putter away where the conditions are nice. And I wouldn't want to interrupt your fun with mundane tasks. When I was a boy in England, my greatest pleasure was to stroll the High Street on a Saturday. See what was in the shops, tip the hat to

the ladies, stop in to the local for a pint. So just toodle along freely, and tell the prettiest gal your Uncle Ted says hello!" He turned and went back to his raking.

He kept on rolling, stopping at the bridge to watch Silver Creek make its gentle descent towards the Saugeen River. All of the houses in this part of town had shady backyards with the creek rolling past. He loved the sound of the water and the mysterious images of darting minnows and elegant water spiders.

Outside the pool hall, he came abreast of Vince, holding up a telephone pole. He looked a bit nervous, or apprehensive, or both.

"Hey, what's going on? Are you okay?". He said this a bit too loudly for Vince's liking.

"Not much, just chilling..." This was said under Vince's breath.

"Do you want to stroll up the street to the Beer Store and back?"

"Uh, I'm just here, waiting for a drop." Vince looked this way and that.

"A drop? A drop of what?"

"Uhh...weed, man. I'm in this band now, and part of the doing the band thing means smoking weed for practices and gigs. The guy who gets us the weed is supposed to show up sometime today."

"Isn't that illegal? And are you going to hang outside the pool hall the whole day?" He was just being practical, but Vince looked ticked off.

"Sure it is, but so is speeding on the highway. All musicians smoke weed, it's part of the game, okay? And I don't know when he's coming, so I guess I'll just have to wait." Vince turned out to the street vacantly.

So he continued on his solo odyssey, crossing the street at the library to read some tattered materials on a community bulletin board. Outside the Pizza Palace, he was almost knocked down by an aggressively athletic boy carrying a box of pizza as takeout.

"Get the hell out of my way!" The older boy was the one who had been his bullying nemesis for several years in public school. He had been rescued by Gerry the farm boy from the clutches of this guy, but the wounds had only scabbed over and had not fully healed.

"It's a public sidewalk. And I'm walking on it. So either go around me, or you go to hell!" He glowered at the older boy and puffed up his chest. Truth be told, he wouldn't fare well in a fight, but he had learned that you can't back down from a bully.

"So you want a piece of me? If I didn't have this pizza to get home quickly, I'd be glad to put you in a headlock and rub your face into the concrete. Just like old times!" He sneered menacingly.

"I saw you putting a headlock on Mrs. Malakova the other night down in the parking lot by the river. But it wasn't concrete you were rubbing her face into!" He snorted and jeered, and this statement caused the older boy to pause and blush before retorting.

"So what's it to you? I'm just a red blooded male, keeping a lonely lady happy. And I have to say she's pretty content, as she rolls by to pick me up almost every night of the week." The bully had regained his composure and was moving slowly towards his opponent.

"Stay back, or I'll knock your beloved pizza to the ground! Maybe I'll tell your Mom what you been up to in the evenings!"

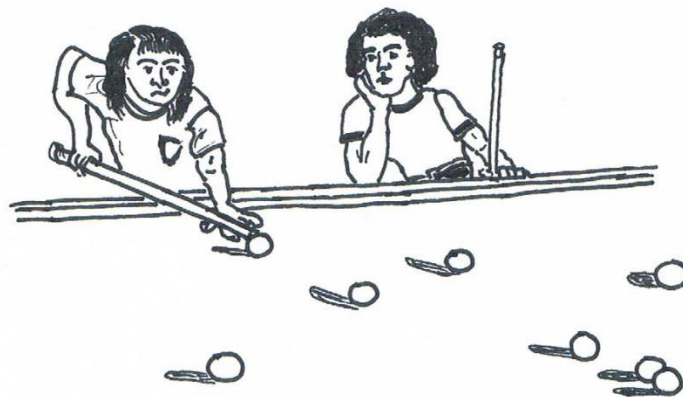
"Be my guest. She's tied up with her own gentlemen callers and is happy to have me out of the house. I've been the kid of a single mom for so long I know how to make myself scarce. So you won't get any traction with that threat." He anchored the pizza box to one hip and started to move in yet again.

"Okay, out with the big guns! I'll just stop by and let Mr. Malakova know what's been going on. He's a bit of a bruiser and will clean your clock good for touching his wife!" He wagged his finger at the bully.

"You wouldn't dare." This was said rather weakly.

"Oh yes I would. Gladly. And if you ever so much as look at me sideways from now on, I will be happy to follow through." Blackmail was not a comfortable position, but he had finally found a way to neutralize his long-term foe.

The Art of Snooker



He was feeling a bit light-headed after the encounter with the bully. He had definitely come out on top of that particular interchange, but it had certainly unsettled him. So he kept walking down that side of Main Street, looking into the odd store window and checking backwards just to make sure conditions were safe. When he got to the point opposite the Beer Store, he cut across the street and ran up a path leading to the top of the river dyke. He paused at the top to look down at the river, flowing along quite steadily with the odd bit of foam or floating jetsam to capture his eyes' attention. After a few moments

he walked northwest along the dyke towards an old industrial building a block north of Main Street. The land to the north and east of the dyke was a mix of scrub forest and open meadow patches, all of which would flood in the Spring when the river rose. Many birds flitted here and there, and he kept looking up to appreciate the trees and the life they contained.

When he got behind the old industrial building, he angled westwards and found his way back to Main Street right at the Hartley House Hotel corner. A score of steps found him outside the pool hall, and he leaned into the windows with cupped hands, trying to see who might be playing. To his surprise, Vince was bent over one of the larger snooker tables, playing a game by himself. Intrigued, he went inside to investigate.

"Hey, I thought you were waiting for your drop."

"He came on the heels of your departure, man. I bought an ounce after sampling the best of what The Man had to offer. Dude, this shit is amazing. I find my snooker skills ramp up considerably with the extra focus a touch of *ganja* gives to me, so I just popped in for a game. But now that you are here, we can play a game. Loser pays for the table." His eyes were hooded and his breathing seemed irregular.

"Sure, I'm in. But when I drub you, don't tell me I was unfair to you by taking advantage of your situation." He grinned sideways at Vince.

"We'll see. I am fully aware of the situation, and completely in charge of my faculties. So rack up those reds, Durango, and I'll spot the coloured balls."

The game progressed well, with both lads taking advantage of opportunities afforded to them. Vince appeared to be in another zone, taking a lot of time to line up his shots, and putting elaborate spins on the white cue ball to skillfully manipulate it around the maze of colored balls. At one point he looked up reflectively at his friend, arching his eyebrows dramatically.

"Dude, you look tense. Are you getting any these days?" Vince said this to him in a very low voice.

"Getting what?" This was said at a normal volume.

"Sex, man. Ass, dude. Poontang, knave. No need to be coy, Roy, you know what I'm talking about." Vince leaned forward on one elbow, rebalancing his cue.

"No.... I mean, not yet. But I've certainly been thinking about it lots." This response was said quietly but jumpily.

"Ah, well, there's your problem. You need less thinking, and more action. More action will lead to results, which will relax you greatly, which will lead to even more action. Positive spiral, you know what I'm talking about?" Vince went back to meticulously lining up his shot.

"Yeah... I mean no! No one has told me how it's done, or how you go about initiating it. So what do you suggest I do?" His tone sounded pathetic.

"Listen, man. I'm in a band now. And everyone in the band is like a chick magnet. Girls follow us around, and they are willing to drop their drawers in an instant for a fella who plays in a band. I know you're not musical, but maybe you can be our roadie? Y'know, set it up and take it down. Some of our lustre rubs off on you, and you catch our overflow. We can't pay you, but you can take dividends of another kind, y'know what I'm talking about?" Vince sank a red ball in the far corner with a definite emphasis.

"But I don't know the first thing about how you do it, and that could just lead to a lot of embarrassment. How did you figure out things before you had, uh, done it?" This question was posed honestly.

Vince scrunched up his face and chalked his cue. "Okay, I understand what you're asking. I had a few encounters with some girls from Owen Sound up at Sauble Beach, but that was pretty much just fumbling around. I guess I really didn't get things figured out until I had special tutoring lessons from some experienced ladies. Their knowledge of the ways of the world helped a lot, and I was a quick study!" Vince winked at him broadly.

"What do you mean by experienced ladies? Like a prostitute?" His eyebrows arched wildly.

"Please, don't be silly. As far as I can tell there is no such thing in this one-horse town. But there are plenty of women who were happy to initiate this big hunk of manhood into the arts of love." Vince jabbed his chest with his right thumb and lined up his next shot.

"Like who?" He was curious, and his voice squeaked a bit on this.

"Ooooh, not good practice to kiss and tell, but for an old friend I can shed a little light on the situation. You know the Czech lady up the street who is like big-time stacked? One night last summer, I'm playing my acoustic in the garage on our castoff sofa. She saunters in and sits right down beside me. Next thing I know, her hand is on my thigh and I have her fun bags firmly in my grasp.. She jumps up and pulls down the garage door, and then spends the better part of the next hour massaging my best asset in every which way possible. She hasn't come by much of late, but my God she showed me a thing or two that I have certainly requested from my band groupies!" Vince smacked his lips audibly.

"So one good teacher can get you rolling?" He said this innocently.

"Sure, but two can be even better! I cut the grass last year several times for the dentist's wife. And after the grass was done, she challenged me to a game of tennis on her court out back. But the match had a side bet. The winner got to call the shots on what went down in a bit of hanky-panky in the attic of her carriage house. This gal has a lot of energy and imagination, and win or lose at tennis we always had a great time!" Vince sank another red.

"So I'm thinking you just need someone to nudge you along, with no strings attached. Do you want me to make the arrangements?"

Vince sunk yet another ball. His opponent felt weak in the stomach, and not because he would be paying for the snooker table time.

Finger Licking Good



Another morning, and it was quiet in the house. Today was a school day, but it seemed to have the ebb and flow of a weekend day. He got up and washed his face and brushed his teeth, and went into the kitchen to pour a bowl of cereal and pop some homemade bread into the toaster. He had been cramping a lot during practices and games, mainly in his left calf. His teammates were joking with him that he wouldn't be fouling out of games, but may cramp out instead. So his coach had recommended more potassium, and he rummaged around for a banana in the bread bin. He found one last remaining specimen, a bit more freckled and ripe than he normally liked, but beggars can't be choosers.

His Mom came down in a house coat, looking a little under the weather. She had a good head of hair that was a bit tousled that particular morning, and she murmured some kind of pleasantry under her breath and started to make a cup of tea for herself.

"Mom, are you doing okay?" He said this between mouthfuls of cereal.

"Oh, I'm okay, I guess. Didn't sleep all that well. And my throat is a bit croaky. But a good cup of tea can solve most of the world's problems." She had this folksy sense of humor that balanced out most of her challenges in life.

"What do you have on today?" He said this gently, knowing that most of her days were spent working in the house and garden, with occasional forays into the downtown. Life in this southwestern Ontario small town was simple and largely uniform. Much like the cuisine that was consumed, or the TV entertainment that was digested by most folks.

"Oh, I'll putter around a bit, just to give myself some rest if this thing wants to brew into a larger storm. But with some luck, I'll mosey downtown to Cuneo's after lunch. I've been thinking of doing some painting and papering in my sewing area of the hallway room. If you're feeling down, a brighter colour can lift one's spirits!" She smiled at him while pouring her tea.

"I'll help you paint and paper! I'm not much good at putting up wallpaper, but I can be your handover person and I am pretty good at painting. We can probably get it all done this weekend." He leaned and looked into the area around the sewing machine.

"Oh, that would be just grand! I'll tell you at supper what colours I've picked and we can round up some brushes and paint trays ahead of time." She looked much better already.

He went through the day in a kind of lackadaisical way, not super-excited about his classes or anything or anyone he came across. Maybe it was his Mom's ennui that morning, or the leaden skies outside, or the fact they didn't have a game scheduled for that week. But after school was over he sauntered down to the gym and bumped into Vince outside of his locker. Uncharacteristically, no young ladies were flitting around the open metal door.

"Hey, dude, how's it hanging?" Vince raised his hand for a high five, which was carried off with only partial success.

"Doing okay, just going to pop my head into the gym and see what's posted up on the board. With luck, might even cross paths with Mrs. DaSilva! Man, that lady is built...." He said this under his breath, but made sort-of-googly eyes at Vince.

"Woo-hoo, the guy's got game! Listen, I haven't forgotten what we talked about over our little snooker match. I was higher than a kite, but find this just focuses my attention. I could arrange an introduction to the Czech neighbour, but it may be a little awkward as she appears cold on the outside and doesn't seem to like small talk. But if I made up something like you are doing a project on her home country with me and we need to interview her in my garage, that just might work! I would slip out after a few minutes and you could stay and keep the interview rolling on my Dad's garage sofa. I suspect one thing would lead to another pretty quick, and you would be on the receiving end of some pretty amazing attention...." Vince looked sideways, nervously.

"Um, I'm not sure, like what if your Mom popped into the garage while all of that was going on? It wouldn't be good, dude." He started to turn a light shade of pink.

"Okay, okay, maybe you're right. The dentist's wife is a much safer bet. She has even asked me to bring some of my friends by, just to meet new guys. She will want way more than her grass cut, let me tell you!" They both guffawed at this.

"What are you guys talking about, it must be pretty funny?!" Lou had come up behind them very quietly.

"Uh, uh, nothing man, like nothing. Vince and I played some snooker recently and we were just recalling how badly he smoked me!" His voice quavered, and Lou picked up on the uncertainty.

To save the situation, three girls were coming down the corridor, smiling broadly and walking slowly as if they were intending to eavesdrop on the conversation. It was the three bus girls, and they had come upon a masculine trio that would be very happy to pay them some attention.

"Hey boys, what's new in the world?" Daria sang this out and put her hands behind her back, causing her magenta top to pop out in a way that had all three young men paying attention.

"Not a whole lot, but things just picked up this second with your arrival on the scene!" Vince smugly smiled at all three girls, and put his hands out for emphasis.

"So we missed our bus, kind of accidentally on purpose. And one of our Dads will be coming in to pick us up in just over an hour. So do you guys want to give three young ladies some company?" Melanie said this very graciously, but expectantly.

"For s-s-s-sure." Lou stammered this out, excitedly.

"What do you want to do?" He was always practical, although he quickly realized this put them on the spot.

"Oh, we were thinking of going up to the KFC shack and getting some snack packs. We're all famished and dinner will be a while. It's only a couple of blocks away, but we need to walk on the shoulder of the highway and could certainly use the big broad shoulder protection that comes from specimens like you." Anna trilled this out and came up and playfully jabbed Lou in the chest.

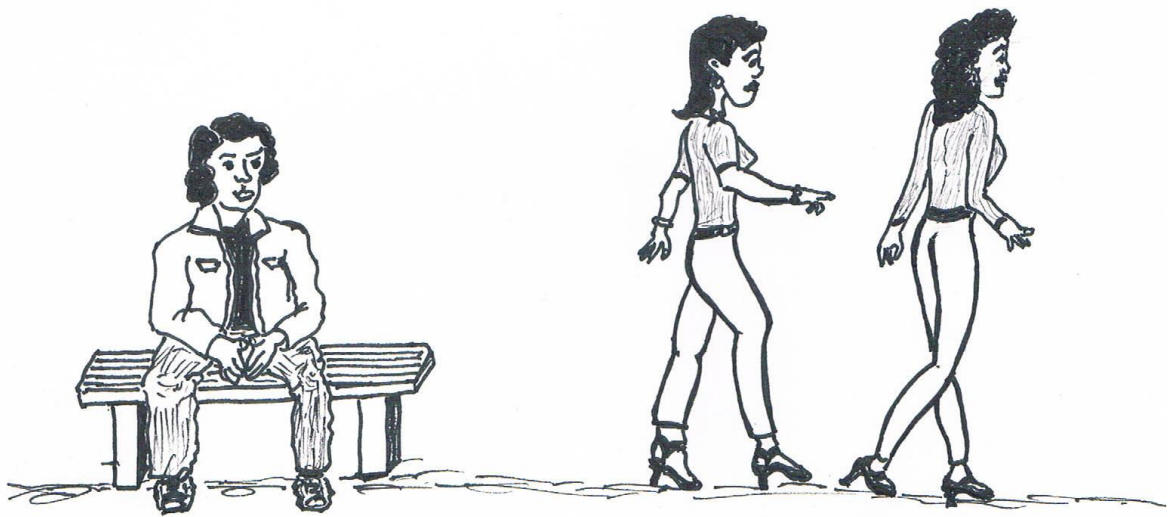
"Sure!" They all responded quickly, in near-unison.

Anna circled her arm around Lou and he looked simply delighted. Daria grabbed Vince by the shoulders and playfully spun him around in the direction of the exit door. He twisted sideways and gave her derrière a playful spank. Melanie gracefully came up to him and shrugged her shoulders, and he mock-bowed and they all started to walk and chatter.

"What kind of chicken do you prefer?" Daria said this to Vince, leaning in seductively.

"Oh sweetheart, I'm definitely a breast man!" Vince smacked his lips, and put his arm around the waist of his new-found paramour.

A Slice of Life



His Mom had asked him to pick up several sheets of stamps at the Post Office after school, and to wait outside on the bench by the flag pole. She was running errands around town and wanted to go with him to Cuneo's so he could carry the paint and wallpaper home for the hallway project.

He was a bit nervous about this, as he had associated the Post Office with the dentist's wife ever since that steamy but awkward conversation they had in the mailbox room over a month ago. But directions were directions, so he sat out on the wooden bench and surveyed the parade of passersby leaving the federal building at the end of the day or people popping in to get their mail after work.

The town was not that large, perhaps five thousand strong in terms of population, but its status as a county seat gave it more presence and facilities than the number of residents would normally have afforded. And the land around the community was endowed with great soils, which made farming a successful endeavour, and all this provided more cash flow and commercial activity than a comparable town elsewhere.

The town was set in a valley, with steep hills on three sides and a gently sloping pullout to the south. The key physical feature of the area was the mighty Saugeen River, which had brought settlers here in the first place, and still very much defined the rhythms of the town. Largely subdued by a hardy dyke system, the power of the river was still evident in the peak flow periods of the Spring thaw. And even in the days before ecotourism, considerable numbers of anglers and canoeists would descend on the Saugeen for fishing and downstream paddling.

So he sat there pondering this town and its people. Adolescents are complex creatures, and he oscillated between deeper questions of why he was born as a son of this town and more mundane issues like the colour of a woman's all-weather coat or the hair growing out of an octogenarian's ears.

A farm truck rolled up, its fender tied to its frame with a copious amount of binder twine. The driver eased out gingerly, and then walked to get his mail with the gait of someone with a bad hip who still put in a hard day's work. He nodded gruffly to the boy sitting on the bench, adjusted his denim rail engineer's cap by its soiled brow, and hitched up his dusty trousers to just below a good-sized paunch. A lady with tiny round spectacles and grey frizzy hair gave the young lad a warm smile and a nod from her perch in the cab. He recognized her as an intermittent church-goer, and waved back somewhat shyly.

A late model Chevrolet pulled up in front of the farm truck. A handsome older man with silver hair, slicked back over his temples, jumped out with practiced ease. He was wearing an expensive looking pinstripe suit, with equally impressive footwear. He gave the lad a knowing wink and a crisp nod, and quickly deked ahead to hold the door open for the rumpled farmer. The teenager recognized him as one of the lawyers in town, who did well because of the County courts that were just a block and a half away. These sorts of folks were not native to the town, but had come with their degrees and training and inherent sophistication to make the community a more interesting place.

A few trim-looking younger women came out of the Bell telephone exchange building right across the street. They will probably in their mid-20s, recently married, and looked very good to his eye. He gave them perhaps too long a look, and they tittered to one another as they went by him for their mail. He got a gust of some attractive perfume, and one of them even looked back at him with a cute smile. He grinned back appreciatively, feeling a funny kind of flutter in his chest.

His buddy's Dad rolled up in an older car that clearly needed a muffler. He got out in a semi-theatrical way, whistling loudly and humming a tune in alternating bits. He sauntered up to the bench, wagging his index finger disapprovingly.

"What's this lounging around? Shouldn't you be home waxing a car or something? No windows to be washed, or potatoes to be harvested? I'll have to tell your Dad that you have gone soft and lazy or even better, run you in on a charge of public vagrancy!" This was all said with a grin, but with a bit of edge underlying it all.

"Just waiting for my Mom. She needs me to carry home some decorating stuff from Cuneo's." He said this innocently enough, trying to smother the urge to be sarcastic in content and tone.

"Oh yeah, I've heard that kind of thing before. Hanging out on a public bench like a boy scout, but in reality scoping out all the local talent. Like, looky here..." He nodded towards the Post Office door, where the two Bell exchange women were coming out with their mail in hand. The Dad hitched up his trousers, to partially obscure his gut, and subconsciously patted down his hair.

"Ladies, good afternoon, what a pleasant surprise!" This was said gushingly, and he had swiveled away from the younger lad almost entirely.

"Ha ha, you old flirt! Where have you been hiding? Have you been up at your cottage, chasing all those Sauble Beach bathing beauties?" This was said by the cuter one who had previously shot him the backwards lingering smile.

"Have been working hard, and following a rigorous exercise regimen to get the body in fighting form!" The older man struck a somewhat unflattering bicep flex pose, and the two young ladies giggled.

"Who's your young friend here? Is this your son?" The quieter one spoke up.

The Dad looked over his shoulder and scoffingly replied. "Naah, just some neighbour kid, who's waiting here for his nurse maid to come pick him up!"

The cuter gal raised her eyebrows and clucked her tongue. "Well, if she doesn't come by soon, one of us might enjoy filling that role!" The adults all walked away laughing, as the teenage lad felt his cheeks burn. He stole a glance at the toned posteriors of the two women as they glided away, and this made him feel marginally better.

The Cruelty of Storms



It was a Friday night and he was walking home from school alone. He still wasn't sure if he would go to the dance tonight, even though the thing would run in less than five hours. Some kind of social anxiety spread through his body in waves, making his gut feel very unsettled. The bus girls would be there, and that was certainly encouraging. But all those guys with big hair from Kincardine and Port Elgin would be out in droves, leather jackets and tight Levi's as their standard uniform. His Mom had actually cut off the red Levi's label on his new jeans for God's sake, and he could hardly bring himself to wear them for fear someone would think he was wearing factory seconds. Lost in his gloomy reverie, he didn't hear the footsteps advancing upon him quickly.

"Bronsky, why so lost in thought, my man?" Vince looked just a wee bit high, and was trailing just a tad of sweet leaf aroma.

"Trying to decide if I should come back for the dance tonight, or just stay home with a good book. They say it may snow pretty heavy later on, kind of a freak early-season storm." He furrowed his brow and grimaced at his friend.

“Stuff and nonsense, of course you're going to the dance. Those bus girls are counting on it! In fact, I think all three of them are kind of sweet on you, bro. Hard to choose between them, they all smoulder in their own different ways. But if you don't go to the game, you can't score any goals. So don't give me any more of this deliberation nonsense!” Vince scoffed heartily.

“But if it snows heavy, my Mom will worry about me.”

“Listen, let's go down to Walker's butcher shop and pick up some steaks. My folks are away and I'll pan fry up the meat with some mushrooms and we can boil up some spuds and Bob's your uncle. I'll call over to your house and let your Mom know I got your supper covered and I'll call a cab if the snow is heavy later. So no worries with me around.”

They stood in front of the meat counter, eyeing the slabs of meat and not being truly sure which was the best buy. Mr. Walker gave them space and time, pounding some ground beef out with a medieval-looking metal tool.

“Listen, I'm a little short on cash, so you pick up the steaks and I'll cover everything else. My dad has a forty ounce of Smirnov's that we can dent quite a bit without anyone really noticing, so that will go well with orange juice as a pre-dance warm-up. Let's take those two porterhouse steaks!” Vince nodded towards the sound of meat being pounded.

Vince gently eased the steaks into a sauté of mushrooms and green peppers. “This will take five minutes a side, so let's have a wee beverage to get started.” He took a large clear glass bottle out of the cupboard above the stove and poured a good inch into cut crystal glasses, followed by two fingers of orange juice. “To your health!” The older boy passed him a glass and they clinked the two together.

“Uh, I haven't really drank liquor before. Just the odd beer. Not sure if....”

“Listen, it's the same stuff, just a bit more concentrated. We don't have all night to get a buzz on, we need to eat and get rolling to the gym where those girls are awaiting. So drink up, chum.” Vince nailed the contents of his glass. He drank his vodka, but was kind of surprised how much it tasted like orange juice. Fortified orange juice, with a bit of an after-burn. But certainly pleasant enough.

The steak and mushrooms were delicious, all the more with three or four glasses of the citrus delight that Vince so generously offered up. When he stood up to take his plate to the sink, it was patently obvious to both boys that they were substantially drunk.

Vince had become even more humorous, almost comical. “I have not forgotten I need to call your mother to offer her my assurances of a safe return for her doted-on offspring. You tidy things up and I will place this call to your lovely Mom.” Vince burped discreetly and headed to the living room.

The band was playing very loudly when they walked in to the gym. The room seemed absolutely vast in their drunken state, and the three bus girls came rushing up to the two of them. Within seconds they were all up dancing, moving and gyrating to the music. To his eye, all three of the young ladies looked absolutely smashing. He wrapped his arm around any of their waists any reasonable chance he got and at one point the five of them were slowly moving around in a feverish five-some group hug. He could see through the maze of dancers that Coach McNairn was standing over by the PhysEd office door, leaning up against the wall and staring over at him with a concentrated frown. This sobered him off marginally, and he realized he needed some air.

He stumbled around in the corn field directly behind the high school, tripping on ruts in the field and looking up to see huge flakes of snow falling down on his face. At least six inches had fallen in a few hours, and conditions looked like they were only to get worse. But the vodka and OJ had made him unconcerned about anything, so he twirled around and around, going a little farther away from the school with each revolution. It was so quiet out here, and there was none of the tension he had felt inside the gym. Maybe he would just stay out here all night, he thought. His coat was somewhere in the gym, but he felt plenty warm and he just kept twirling. But out of the shadows came two winsome creatures, Melanie and Anna. They looked even prettier out here in the field.

"You crazy fool, what are you doing out here?" Anna was playful but direct.

"Dancing... dancing in the dark. You came out to dance with me?" He had never felt like this before, and part of him liked it and the other part was petrified.

"We'll dance with you, but inside where it's warm. Come on, you've been drinking and it's not safe to stay out in these conditions. Let's go back inside." Melanie was achingly elegant, and had one hand on her hip in a no-nonsense way.

"I'll need to be enticed to go back in there." He said this teasingly.

"With what?" Anna chuckled, and grabbed him forcibly by the arm.

"A kiss, from you both!" He lunged playfully at them.

"Okay, here you go, and now let's go!" Anna landed a smacker on one cheek, followed by Melanie on the other.

"Unh, unh, unh...that's like getting a kiss from your cousin! I meant a real kiss." He stuck his tongue out unceremoniously and pointed at it crudely.

"Oh God, all things are possible, but we'll negotiate inside where it's warm." The two girls slung an arm around his waist from either side and the trio walked unsteadily towards the safety of the cozy gymnasium.

The next morning he walked downtown, head pounding, through the eighteen inches of snow that had fallen in a twelve hour period. A car stopped and he was offered a ride. It was his church pastor, looking grim.

"Good morning, young man. Just making my way to a parishioner's house on the South Line. Terrible situation. The mother was working at the Hanover hospital and had ended her shift. Her ride hadn't come yet, so she set out on foot. The snow got so thick that visibility was zero at times. She wandered off into a field. They found her this morning, less than a hundred yards from home. Frozen solid, I'm afraid."

February, 1944; Wiarton, Ontario

The young man walked into the sitting room of the seniors' home, seeing his mother sitting with three other women. He was clutching an official-looking letter and bearing a confused amalgam of emotions on his countenance.

"Hi Ma, how are you doing? Ladies..." They all admired the handsome young man and his mother rose to give him a hug.

"How are things, my boy?" She stroked his cheek fondly.

"Good. I guess. Just got my notice letter, Ma." He held up the envelope.

"Notice? For what?" The older woman raised one eyebrow.

"I will be serving in the Army. For my country. I've been placed in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Princess Louise's. Nice ring to it don't you think? War is almost over, so I'll be back before you know it. To get married, start a family. And you can come and live with us, look after the grandkids." This all came out in a frenetic tumble.

"Oh my...oh my." The woman looked a bit unsteady on her feet.

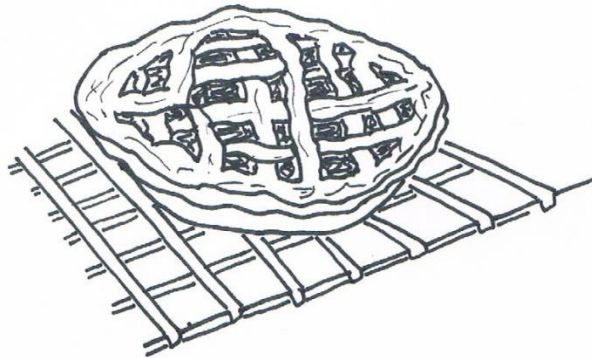
"Don't worry, Ma, everything will be all right." He smiled a bit too eagerly.

"But I thought you had a wee hernia, and that the Army had said no to you." A tear started to roll down one cheek.

"Had that taken care of. We have to stand up to Hitler, he's a heinous monster. But I'll stay out of harm's way, and I'll write home every Sunday. Oh Ma, don't cry now, everything will be perfectly fine..."

The other three ladies discreetly floated away for tea, leaving the mother and son in a tight embrace.

Aromas From the Oven



His Mom had been baking. You could tell in an instant, upon entering the house, that some amazingly delicious things were rising in the oven. The extra heat in the kitchen, the aromas of rising flour and warm fruits and spices all tumbled together to create a sensory experience that stirred and comforted in equal parts. There was always a partially consumed, home-baked chocolate cake in the breadbox, it's lemon half-point filling and chocolate pudding icing mixing so nicely with the Devil's Food interior. Almost always a fruit pie, with a pastry crust so light it seemed to taunt gravity. And always a dozen or so chocolate chip oatmeal coconut cookies, almost seeming like health bars until you factored in the honey and brown sugar that lurked in their interstitial spaces.

So today it was a tray of such cookies baking expectantly in the oven, rising up to join their neighbors in a choreographed, thermally-induced dance. And on the top rack was a lovely raisin pie, its contents pleasantly plump and moist due to an overnight soaking in a slurry of brown sugar and maple syrup. He waited in the kitchen, enjoying the tantalizing aromas and contemplating how many cookies he could reasonably eat before supper. He could see his Mom out at the clothesline, bringing in some laundry that had been placed out on a sunny day, the first of a few unseasonably warm days that would surely melt the blanket of snow that had enveloped the town.

He heard a knock on the back door, and inwardly groaned. He knew by its pattern that it was Vince, and he felt conflicted on a few counts. One, he had heard that Vince had gotten his ears boxed for the large quantity of vodka missing from his Dad's liquor stash; and two, Vince had an uncanny ability to know when fresh baking was set to pop out of the oven. He didn't truly begrudge his friend a cookie or two, but it was just a plain fact that it happened more often than not and teenage boys can be possessive about their dessert inventories. But he shuffled over to the back door and let his friend in.

"Man alive, how can you stand residing in this place? Your house is like a divine bakery, one that I swear I can smell from my place! What's the expected time of arrival on those cookies?" Vince smacked his lips.

He peered through the oven window. "Not even another minute. Better to be a bit under-baked and gooey than over-baked and dry. I'll get out some plates and we can wedge a few out and let them cool. Given how popular you are with the ladies, I don't want you to burn your lips."

"Listen, got places to go, people to see. Just stack two up and I'll juggle them until they cool down. Can't thank you enough, and your Mom too. Toodles!"

He also wedged two beautiful specimens off the baking sheet and turned off the oven as the pie was gently bubbling and the crust looked virtually done. He decided to nibble on his cookies while they cooled at the edges, and take a wee stroll around the neighborhood to burn off a few of the inherent calories so he would be a bit more ready for his savoury and much less-desirable supper.

He meandered down past Moran's implement yard, and bore right at the first right. His Uncle wasn't out front in the yard today, but he could see his Aunt inside the kitchen window, probably washing some supper victuals up in the sink. She gave an impatient wave and a nod of her head, and he mirrored these back in sequence and character. His Aunt probably had some redeeming features, but he wasn't sure what they were. His Mom didn't seem to resonate with this woman, his Dad's sister, and that was enough for him. So he kept his distance, didn't say too much to her or about her, and things just seemed better that way.

He bore left at the top of the hill, and made his way along on the route that he had taken for years to get to public school. At the bottom of another hill, down by the Silver Creek, he saw through a living room window a friendly old guy by the name of Hugh, watching TV. He had waved hello to Huey pretty much every day, twice a day, for the last years of public school. The old guy was always at home, and always seemed to be watching TV. He always waved to the passing boy in an excited and engaged way, and this little waving relationship had become very special to its two participants. He had only chatted once with the old guy downtown, and both of them had seemed tongue-tied at the time. But walking by, TV watching suspended, the interaction was intense and palpable. The kind of connection that was only possible in a small town.

His cookies had cooled nicely and he could bite off even bigger chunks of sensory pleasure as he strolled along. He gave the creek more than a passing glance, and then turned left towards the river. He was walking parallel to the creek now, as it sliced through backyards on its way to joining the mighty Saugeen. Up ahead on the right, he saw Cox Signs had its big bay door open, and a truck was getting a stenciled lettering job painted on its side extolling the virtues of the latest line of Ford automobiles. The business vehicle owner, his bully-busting buddy's Dad, ambled around on the sidelines emitting complimentary commentary and waving to passersby as they glided past.

"Hey, basketball star! Gerry told me you're a force to be reckoned with this season!" The man smiled kindly.

"Oh, you know, Gerry is prone to exaggerating things..." His voice trailed off.

“Not what I heard from a few little lassies that came in to get some gas. Hey, you wouldn't be eating cookies before you've had your supper, would 'ya? Hard to do that and keep up a full court press!”

Wearing Flood Pants



Some days later he came home from school after a short practice and saw by the dishes still on the table that he had just missed bumping into his Dad before he left for his night shift. The conventional practice in town was to have an early supper, typically by five o'clock. Sure, some doctors and lawyers probably took their dinner in a continental way at six o'clock or even 6:30, but this was southwestern Ontario in the early seventies and the supper hour was generally early. But because of his Dad's five o'clock shift start, food was on the table in his house by 4:20 typically, 4:30 at the latest. Most nights it was chicken, often boiled and seasoned modestly with salt and pepper applied at the table. Always potatoes, often mashed, with modest amounts of butter and milk to make them palatable. One veggie, largely for adornment, typically boiled and salted tableside. Basic fare, prepared with love, but it was no small wonder that dessert was considered the main and most desirable course by all the inhabitants of the house.

His Mom came into the kitchen from the hall, wearing a stylish hat and a colorful all-weather coat. “Just put a casserole in the oven for us, as your Dad polished off a lot of leftovers. So was wondering if you wanted to nip down to Adel's? They called me to let me know that your corduroy dress pants are now altered and that you can come in to try them on. What do you say?”

They strolled along purposefully, passing houses of neighbors when people were inside putting the last touches on supper or having already started in on the evening meal.

“How are you doing these days, Mom?” He said this sincerely, genuinely.

“Oh, quite well. Better than fair to middling, I can say. I got this new hat last week and it has really picked me up! I know hats are old-fashioned these days, but I've always loved a nice hat. So call me nostalgic or silly perhaps, but it has simply made me feel good to be out and about with it on!” She adjusted the new adornment ever so slightly.

“Well, I like hats. Not to wear. But to see on people. They make folks look distinguished, if it's the right hat. This one looks really good on you!” He smiled at his Mom. At that point, a flotilla of factory workers

on ragtag bikes advanced towards them on Archy Street, rolling over the Silver Creek bridge purposefully. They were chattering excitedly to each other, and looked up to see the mother and son walking in their direction.

"Yoo-hoo, fine folks, where are you headed just now?" The leader of the bicycle gaggle was someone they knew from church.

"Just a quick trip down to Adel's, for some trying on of pants." His Mom called this out gaily.

"Not sure if that's a good idea, Rita. The mild temperatures have caused all of that snow to melt, and it's all come downriver in one big swallow. They're wondering if the dykes will hold, or they may even be overtopped by this evening. There will be water at the door fronts of the stores in very short order if that happens." One sober-faced man said this with just the mildest hint of a stutter.

"Are you serious?" The young lad said this quizzically.

The church deacon put back his head and laughed mockingly. "Don't doubt Mother Nature's strength, Jayson m'boy. Why just look into that back yard to get a wee glimpse of what is happening right now down by the dykes!" He pointed in the direction of the nearest back yard, where Silver Creek had jumped its banks and was coursing along wildly. Water was slowly pushing its way towards a nice set of patio furniture on an arrangement of stone slabs.

"Oh my, I see what you are saying! You all work at the Spool and Bobbin factory down by the river. What's going on down there?" His mother's eyes had grown large.

We all sandbagged for most of the afternoon. If the river breaches the dyke, or overtops it, the factory should stay dry. But there are some low-lying homes down that way that will take water on. And people have forgotten the floods back in the 30s and 40s, so many of them have finished their basements and put in carpeting and trophy rooms. They will be a royal mess without a big stroke of luck."

At that point a truck rolled up and the Canadian Tire store owner stuck his head out the window.

"Folks, I would get home where it is safe and dry if I were you. This looks like it could turn bad. I just got a call from the Fire Chief in Hanover and they are an inch away from having flooding in their low-lying zones. But they are not as low as we are in their commercial district, and there's lots of farmland between here and there that will have snowmelt coursing off of it. Gentlemen, get on those bikes and skedaddle home. Rita, get your boy home and stay in where it's dry. Your place is up nice and high there on May Street. I would give you a lift home but I have to get back to my store. We have a lot of inventory in the basement that we are rushing out to a flat-bed trailer that will be in my driveway until this is over. Folks, to your stations." He roared away in a flash.

They turned homeward, to a hot tuna casserole and a dry house. He wondered about his altered corduroy trousers, and if they would stay dry. He was about to ask his Mom about the chances of this, but she was nervously adjusting her new hat, so he thought better of it.

My Fair Lady



The water had crested just half an inch shy of overtopping the dykes, so the downtown stores and offices were spared along with all of the finished basements in the old part of town. Good thing, too, as the Fall Fair was just getting set to unfold and the agricultural buildings down by the rink were all set at a low elevation in the floodplain and this would have been disruptive for its launch if the dykes had been breached.

The Little Royal Fair, as it was officially and affectionately known, was a much smaller version of its namesake in Toronto. But it was a big deal for these parts. For three days every Fall, it seemed like every horseman and auctioneer in the rural part of the province would show up to show off their horses and make related deals. School kids would come out in droves to see both the farm exhibits and the arts and crafts sections, and the ladies of the town would feverishly prepare entries for the baking and handicraft competitions. His Mom was a master baker, and would have over a dozen entries planned for various

cookies, cakes and pies. And she often walked away with the prized blue ribbon for many entries, and the related prizes were a great source of inspiration for her and her family.

So on this particular afternoon he was home early as school had let out for the kids to come see the arts and crafts, and he had been enlisted to carry boxes of baking over to the Fair pavilion building. In town was his great aunt Arlene, who had come over from Hanover for her annual visit at Fair time. She always got a lift from some unidentified stranger, and she herself brought an air of mystery to pretty much everything she did or said.

"Have you been sampling these goodies as they've come out of the oven?" She looked at him over her spectacles, while standing in the kitchen with a purple shawl draped over her shoulders.

"Cookies, for sure. Pies and cakes, no. But sometimes Mom will bake doubles or triples, and the best looking one goes to the Fair and the others are just as tasty, and are easy targets." He smacked his lips.

"Everything in moderation, young man. The voices tell me you should eat more vegetables and less chocolate cake! And the voices tell me you should have some female companionship in your life, but the choices may be many and the correct choice may be obscured." This was said when his Mom was down in the cellar looking for the perfect box for the Hartley House chocolate cake, much to his relief.

"Got your point on carrots and celery, Aunt. But not sure what you meant by the other?"

"Don't be coy with me! I was young once, too, y'know. Nature has its rhythms, and these are sometimes disrupted by society's strictures. Be a good boy, but listen to nature!" She hissed this out as his Mom ran up the cellar steps.

His Dad came in from the garage and smiled beatifically at his aged aunt. "Lad, let's help the ladies down to the Fair with the boxes and why don't you come along with me on a few stops before I have to come back for a quick dinner? I know, Rita, I know. A ploughmans lunch for dinner this evening. I know you're busy with all the Fair preparations. Being a good German farm boy, a pile of cold sauerkraut and a slab of summer sausage with some cracked wheat bread will make a fine supper." He patted himself on his broad chest.

They walked over with three boxes, heavy with delights, to an intake table near the entrance of the Fair building. The two then stepped away down Main Street, heading in the direction of downtown.

"What do you need to do?" The Fair had given the town a lively energy and he was actually happy to be perambulating along with his Dad, a rare occasion.

"First to the lawyer for signatures for a second mortgage. Then over to see Doc O'Toole to get some awful things burnt off my back with liquid nitrogen. When I was a hired hand back in the thirties I would take my shirt off in the morning and put it back on at supper time. Got so much sun and turned a deep nut brown. But old Mr. Sun has created these nasty bumps here and there, so the old horse doctor will do his best to singe them off. It will hurt like hell, so maybe it's best for you to loiter around the pool hall

after the lawyer's visit, and I'll roll around and pick you up when I'm done my cussing at the hands of old Doc O'Toole!" The older man winced.

They went to the lawyer's office and they repeated the process from the last visit, with his Dad being shown right in and he taking a comfy seat just opposite the stenographer's desk. She had her hair up today in a svelte bun, and was wearing a lovely purple silk blouse buttoned demurely up to its very top. The room was heavy again with her dizzying perfume, and he found himself feeling very nervous as he shifted in the heavy chair.

As before, she got up to file some paperwork in the cabinet directly in front of his chair. He caught his breath audibly, as the office assistant was wearing the shortest miniskirt he had ever seen. She had absolutely beautiful legs, and as she bent over to file the sheets of paper he could have sworn he saw just a glimpse of her mauve panties peeking out from under the hemline of the off-cream cotton skirt. She turned towards him, scholarly glasses perched at the end of a very pert nose.

"Like what you see?" This was said quietly but firmly, with just a modicum of teasing.

"Uh, pardon me?" He sat up awkwardly in the chair, the leather squeaking in an unflattering way.

"Hmm, a leg man. Great stuff. Certainly works to my advantage." She swayed one way, then the other, slowly and purposefully.

"Listen, you're a pretty lady. And I have red blood flowing through my veins, but you are way out of my league." All of this was said softly, pathetically.

"I'll cut to the chase. My boyfriend's in the reserves, and just got sent to Gagetown for eighteen months. I live with his parents. God-fearing folks, who are as boring as hell, and they watch me like a hawk. But I come to work and I'm here all day pretty much by myself. Old man Barr is in court half the time, or out golfing the other half. If I had a boy-toy like you as a high school intern, you would learn a little about law and I would most definitely teach you a lot about life. We could lock the door and draw the shades for an hour a day, and nobody would know the difference. What do you say?" She coquettishly put her right index finger on one of her dimpled cheeks and rotated it slowly.

"Uh, I kind of get your drift, but I'm not totally sure what you mean?" Now he was starting to stammer.

"Listen, peanut, and listen good. I'm twenty-four and my boyfriend's out of town for the long haul. You're what, sixteen tops? Not even legal, but we're in a law office, so that would make it all okay. I have physical needs big time, and a future mother-in-law that would sniff out anything untoward in a flash if it was done anywhere other than the office. So I'm offering you a little work-play arrangement, where no money changes hands but your hands get to be all over me! And don't tell me you're not interested, I could see it in your eyes on your last visit. Do any of your high school girlfriends wear a skirt like this?" She stood with her hands on her hips.

At that point, the interior door opened and the two men came out. "Penelope, I do hope you've been giving this young man good company?" The lawyer emitted a faint, patrician smile.

"Oh yes, Mr. Barr, we've been getting along swimmingly. Jayson has even expressed an interest in the profession, and we're just discussing the possibilities of a work-study arrangement." She scrunched her cheeks smilingly and minced back to her desk.

"Splendid, splendid. Young man, you would learn a lot under Penny's direction, as she really loves her work."

September, 1944; Toronto, ON

He was wearing his uniform, complete with the dress beret. His curly hair barely fit underneath the confines of the headwear, but he got so many adoring looks from young women on the train up from Hamilton that he just couldn't bear to take it off.

His sister was waiting for him at Union Station, having come in by streetcar from the Sunnyside area just west of downtown. She looked lovely as always, wearing a full length coat that had taken the better part of a year's savings from work as a domestic in some of the finer mansions of Toronto. They had always been close, so today would be tough as he was shipping out soon and this would be the last day he would see her for some while.

"I'm surprised the girls would let you off the train!" She came up and gave him a big hug.

"Oh, I don't know, a man in uniform seems like a dime a dozen these days." He put both hands on her cheeks and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

"I've got big plans for today, as it might be some time before we meet again." She smiled sadly.

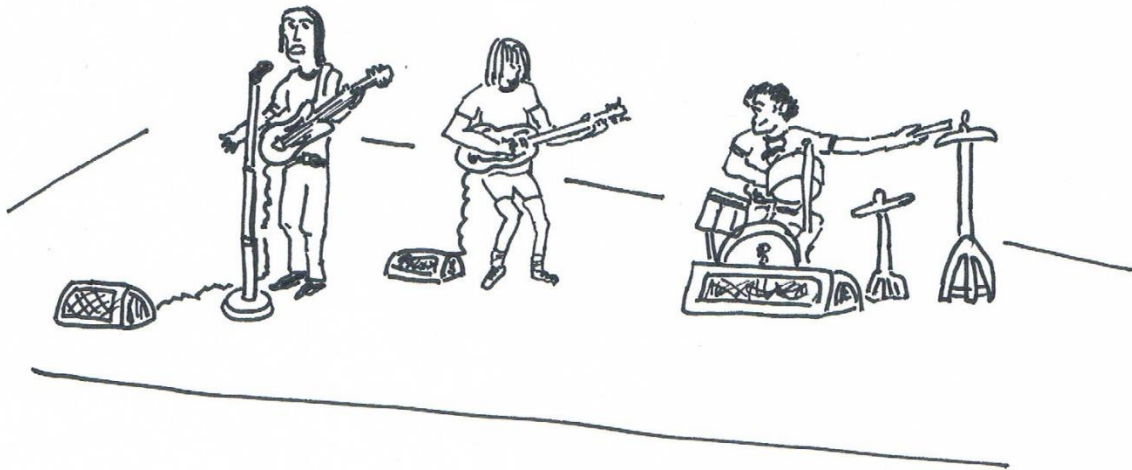
"What's on the agenda?" He gave her a reassuring smile.

"First off, photos at a studio on Yonge Street. Have to have something of you in uniform while you are away. Then a bite of lunch at a little diner I know on College, and then we can catch the 2:10 showing of the White Cliffs of Dover. We should get there early as there will be lineups, it's very popular with all the servicemen and their families. Something for them to hold in their memories, until you all return home and we can go out for dessert and dancing..." Some kind of foreboding waved through her and she teared up.

"Oh Sis, I'll be back before you know it. It will be like an extended vacation, and I'll be back a bit older and a lot wiser."

"Oh Bert, do you really have to go? I mean, really?" Tears slowly coursed down each cheek, with irregular velocities.

Dancing Alone



He had a terribly sore tooth the next day, and the dentist was able to squeeze him in for an emergency appointment. Some kind of infection in the gum apparently, and best handled by salt water gargling on a regular basis. This prognosis relieved him greatly, as tonight was another school dance and he really did not want to go to this kind of event with a recently yanked tooth. So he left the dentist's office floating on air, and since his Mom wasn't with him he took the advantage to chat up the receptionist sitting behind a big wooden desk. She seemed eager enough to break away from her record filing, and the experience yesterday with Penelope the paralegal had definitely given him courage on this particular front.

He had noticed her bright red lipstick on a previous visit, but what he had missed was the fact that she had a simply superb figure and a hearty laugh when he said anything remotely funny. She sported a pair of clunky glasses, but when she took them off momentarily to clean them, he realized she was very pretty with the most arresting of eyes. He knew he was just a kid, but he also had an internal knowing that she knew she was being flirted with, and that she didn't mind this or rush him along in the least bit. His cheeks started to burn a bit at the prospects of this, so he cracked one last witticism and gave her a pathetically roguish smile as he bade her a good afternoon.

Walking back home, he had the inspiration to get a haircut to spruce up a bit for the dance. Peeking into Rick's, he saw a long lineup of men with the same idea of looking their best for the weekend, so he gave the cool barber a wave and kept on rolling. He saw Clare Sparling carrying out a box of groceries to a customer's car, and gave him a friendly wave from across the street. Traversing the front of the Post Office building, he saw Lia the barracuda dentist's wife and the winsome Bell telephone exchange girls in his mind's eye, but the actual reality was the brisk flapping of the Canadian flag against its metal pole.

He met up with his Dad halfway up Archy Street, standing on the sidewalk with Grandma Flynn. She was simply a dear, and everyone in the family thought she was special.

"Going to work?" Most of his communication with his Dad was pretty direct.

"Yep, but got a few minutes to spare so just having a chat here with Mrs. Flynn."

"Laddie, are you going to the dance tonight?" The elderly lady was as sharp as a tack.

"Thinking about it. More probable than not." He looked at her but still seemed to be tersely communicating with his Dad.

"Oh, the belles of the ball will want you there, aye, that's for sure!" Her eyes twinkled, and he couldn't help but recall how much she looked like Mrs. TiggyWinkle from the Beatrix Potter books.

"Grandma, how did you know there's a dance on tonight?" He said this softly, but with real curiosity.

"Oh, Mr. Dobbs told me. He's been in his room fussing with his hair for over an hour. I think he's sweet on one of the single lady teachers, but when I quiz him about it, he clamps right up! Perhaps you could keep an eye on the chaperone corps this evening, to see who is catching his fancy, and report back to me at a later date? I know I'm awful, but nosiness only get worse if you deny its existence! I'm a nosy parker, I am, and not too shy to admit it! So keep an eye out, m'boy?" She smiled cutely.

He moved on quickly, working hard to get the image out of his mind of a cowering Mr. Dobbs and a playful Mrs. DaSilva, seen through the crack of the cellar door frame.

He got home and the house was pin-drop quiet. A cold supper was waiting for him on the kitchen table. He thought he was home alone but then he heard a soft noise from the darkening living room.

"Mom, are you in there?" He said this gently.

"Yes, yes, I'm just here in the living room. Have been looking at old photo albums, and... just feeling sad."

"Who are the photos of?"

"Oh, the kids when they were young. Before you were born. The date stamps on the photos are from 1952, '53, '54 and a few from '55. He was a cute little fellow. Eyes that danced, and he loved to play. He was just a wee sprite of a thing, because of his condition. He loved running after the neighbour kids, but he would fall behind and then just slump down. He would call out to me, his arms up in the air asking to get picked up, and say 'Mommy, I need to get wound up'!"

"Why was he sick?" This has all been vaguely explained before, but it was fuzzy in his mind.

"He had a hole in his heart from birth, in his septum. That's the wall that keeps the oxygenated blood from mixing with the deoxygenated blood. So they called these kids 'blue babies', as the mixing of the blood gave them a bluish tinge." Tears started to form at her eye extremities.

"And there was nothing they could do for him?"

“Not back then. Nowadays they have a short operation that solves the problem. But back then it didn't exist. We were in and out of Sick Kids Hospital more times than you could count. Best doctors in the Province, but they told us to enjoy him fully as it was just a matter of time.” She ran her palm over her face slowly.

“And he was five when he died?”

“Yes, exactly. I remember his last day like it was yesterday. We were playing with his toys in the living room of our first house. He quite abruptly told me he had to go to the bathroom. I carried him into the toilet and he had a bowel movement. I later learned the body wants to clear itself right before death. We washed up and I carried him back to the chesterfield. Something told me to hold him tight, to hug him for all he was worth. He hugged right back, and looked up at me so sweetly and said ‘I love you, Mommy’. Then he went limp in my arms and made a rattley sound deep in his throat. That's what they mean when they refer to the ‘death rattle’. And then he was gone. I literally felt his spirit lift off out of his body, and I very sadly knew what was happening. I sat there for a moment holding him, kissing him, praying that my instincts were wrong. We rushed him off to the doctor but there was nothing to be done. He was always a wee angel, and he just needed to go home.”

The young man held his Mom for a long time after the telling of that sad chapter of the family history. She told him he needed to go eat, and encouraged him to go on to the dance. Life was to be lived fully, if only to challenge the reality of death. So he polished his plate and walked the block to Vince's house.

There was to be no drinking before this dance, as both parents were home and the liquor cabinet was now under lock and key. Vince and he didn't seem to mind, were relieved in fact. They hatched plans and backup plans on the way to the school, concocting schemes around who to ask to dance and in what sequence. When they got in to the gym this all seemed to fly out of his mind as Daria came out of the girls' room and promptly took Vince up to the dance floor. He looked around for someone to talk with, but it was dark and noisy and he started to wonder if he shouldn't have stayed home to console his Mom.

And then he saw Melanie, walking across the edge of the dance floor. She looked beautiful and ethereally elegant, wearing a wispy peasant dress that showed off her lithe body to great effect. But trailing along behind her was some tall guy, with wire-framed glasses and a beard.

“Jayson, nice to see you.” She was friendly but reserved. “Let me introduce you to Alan.”

The two young men shook hands awkwardly.

“Alan is in first year at Laurier. Physics. He's a friend of my cousin's. He's come up all the way from Waterloo to visit me.” This was said neutrally, but caused the younger lad's stomach to churn.

“Nice, very nice to meet you.” He turned away, his eyes burning a bit. His gaze took him to the chaperones' corner, where Mrs. DaSilva stood beside two male teachers. She was wearing a beautiful white cashmere sweater, a long form-fitting black skirt and stylish high heels. He had seen those shoes before in a different setting. She seemed to be touching both men a lot on their muscular forearms, and

both seemed to be enjoying her attentions. He would have a lot of material to report back to Grandma Flynn, but knew in fact this would ultimately go unspoken. He headed to the exit door and an early night home.

Swirling Realities



He could hear the soft tittering of female laughter, but he wasn't exactly sure where it was coming from. The light was very soft and there was a sweet fragrance in the air that he couldn't put his finger on. He crawled down from the branches of a sprawling tree, and found himself at the steps of the Carnegie Library. He mounted the steps slowly, remarking inwardly that the street seemed too quiet. He opened the heavy door and stepped inside.

The cute little librarian was working at the checkout desk off to the left. She wore a low-cut cream coloured blouse, and he could see her lovely freckled skin plunge down into the mysterious depths of a lacy black bra. She stamped one more book emphatically, bent down to file it on an underlying shelf, and when she straightened back up it seemed to his eye that her bra had disappeared. She smiled at him knowingly, put a finger to her lips to silence any response, and pointed down a line of book shelves.

At the end of the row stood the two young ladies from the Bell telephone exchange building, along with Lia, the demanding dentist's wife. They were all wearing one piece bathing suits that showed off their athletic figures, but each of them had on a pearl necklace and expensive dress sandals. They smiled at him in a beckoning, come-hither way, and then abruptly put up their hands in a choreographed halt gesture. His disappointment showed, and they all giggled softly, the same sound he had heard while being perched in the tree out front. They then pointed excitedly to their left and he reluctantly moved on to a corner of the library near the history section.

On a soft couch were the three bus girls, wearing cheerleader uniforms and expensive-looking hoop earrings. The centre of their attention was Alan, the bearded and bespectacled physics major from

Laurier . Anna sat in his lap, massaging his chest through his plaid shirt. Melanie was immediately on his left, stroking his beard and hair. Daria was kneeling on the right, hungrily kissing him. Alan looked over at him, slightly embarrassed, and appeared to give an off-hand shrug from underneath the mass of femininity enveloping him.

He heard a mewling sound coming from around the corner. He peered around the end of a book stack and saw another couch under a bust of the town's founder, Joseph Walker. On the upholstered surface sat his buddy Vince, wearing only a pair of Mr. Briefs and a big smile. It was as if Vince couldn't see him, as his eyes were transfixed on a woman standing in front of him. It was the Czech lady neighbour, wearing a bright red corset and striking hosiery and footwear. She walked over to Vince very slowly, and put one heeled foot up on his bare chest. He grabbed her leg and held it in place, muttering something under his breath. His neighbour, the LCBO store manager, came in from the side bearing a tray with a bottle of vodka and two cut crystal glasses full of ice. He set them down beside the couple on the sofa and motioned for his young neighbor to follow him. They drifted to the rear of the library, where his Aunt Arlene stood waiting impatiently.

"Life is all about choices! Choose wisely, choose well, then you will have a full and happy life! So there are two doors in front of you, both will have light and both will have shadow. But one will be better for your overall development. Now, take your pick!" She raised a wrinkled hand towards the back, where two doors stood side by side. One was green and one was chartreuse. Both made of heavy wood, with nice-looking hardware. He stood outside both of them, contemplating. No real inspiration came to him.

He randomly opened the green door and stepped inside. The smell of antiseptic hit his nose, and he immediately knew he had not chosen well. Doc O'Toole came out from a side room, bearing a capped bottle and a large fuzzy Q-tip.

"Ah-hah! I see you're in to get that plantar wart burned off your foot. We'll get to that eventually but get up on the examination table and drop your drawers and will see if there's anything else that needs singeing off. Jump to it!" The old man snorted a bit, and adjusted the glasses on the end of his leathery nose.

The young man recoiled in horror. He wheeled quickly and dashed to the door. He had a premonition that he was trapped, but it opened easily and he was out at the previous junction point. Without thinking, he plunged through the chartreuse door and entered a corridor that was dimly lit and went for over half a block. Just at the point he realized he would be roughly behind the lawyer's office, he saw up ahead his Dad stepping into Mr. Barr's inner sanctum. He stopped dead in his tracks and immediately savoured the aroma of Penelope's latest scent.

"I knew you'd be back." She was behind him, and whispered this seductively into his left ear. She ran her hands gently and methodically over his pectoral muscles.

"Um, I'm not really sure how I got here." His throat was very dry.

"We only have about 15 minutes before they will come out. Lay down on my desk and I'll give you a taste of what I'll be dishing up to you on a regular basis when you're working under me as my little intern. Keep your eyes closed, it's better that way."

He lay down, and knocked a pen stand off the desk while doing so. He immediately felt a weight on his chest, pushing down on him, warm and moist. He heard a feline-like grunt, and felt the weight push down on him again, and inch closer towards his chin. As he thought to himself, 'I could get used to this', the air seemed to thin a bit. The arousing perfume smell was gone. And he opened his eyes to see Blackie, his large charcoal coloured cat, sitting on his chest.

He walked downtown, circuitously, by way of the river dykes. The Indian Summer weather had receded, and snow was falling. It hit the river softly, melting instantly into its rushing waters. He took the dream seriously, that he needed to step outside the box, and that he must take up opportunities presented to him. He would man up and do the work-study in Barr's law office. He knew it was wrong on some levels, but very appealing on many other levels. So he would drop by now, before he lost his nerve. She might be in the office on a Saturday afternoon, if only to get away from her future mother-in-law.

The door opened from the street, and he was indeed in luck. Penelope sat behind her large desk, typing a memo, with her glasses set attractively on the end of her pert nose. A butterfly feeling in his stomach intermingled with a strange feeling in his loins, and he wondered if her special lessons might even commence this very day.

"Jayson, what can I do for you?" She smiled at him thinly.

"Um, I just wanted to come by and tell you I would like to do the work-play thing....I mean, the work-study arrangement." He smiled at her knowingly, and tried to appear to be suave and nonchalant.

"Is this something you discussed with Mr. Barr?" She said this all very neutrally.

"No, uh, but I believe he's aware of it. But it would be working under you." He started to sweat just a bit.

"Oh, well, it will have to wait a few weeks then. Until the new paralegal starts here with Mr. Barr. I learned just yesterday I'll be moving to New Brunswick to get married. My fiancé found out he will be stationed there now for five years, so we decided to go ahead and tie the knot and get me down there. But I'm sure you'll enjoy the new office lady, I understand she will be coming out of retirement and has over forty years of experience as a paralegal."

Penelope went back to her typing and the chastened boy started his slow walk home.

A Dark and Quiet Road



It snowed copiously every day for the next four days, creating a thick blanket of snow through the farm fields surrounding the community. Things got quieter, and all of this matched his mood. He still had basketball to keep juiced and excited, and even some of his courses kept him mildly interested, but there was no question that his hopes for something in the paramour department had been dashed. He had stuck his neck out in the law office, and it had all ended so strangely that he wasn't even sure if the nubile paralegal's naughty overtures had actually been part of reality. Might he have day-dreamed of her advances that day, as some sort of wishful-thinking fantasy? His library dream had certainly seemed real enough in the unspooling of it, so when he mulled it all around in his mind things just got murkier and more confusing.

So to clear his head and realign his realities, he went for a long walk in the dark in the snow. The town seemed magical, as snow was falling quietly and still fairly thickly. He trudged through it and admired the homes and the illuminated rooms that were visible to his eye. He would have a game in two days' time, so he was absent the nervousness that would come to him in waves the day before a contest. No real agenda, no timelines, just walking. One foot in front of the other, a metaphor for life in this quiet town.

He turned at the courts buildings and came abreast of the old Town Hall. Walking orthogonally was his good buddy Vince, who he hadn't really seen that much of since that wild Friday night dance evening awhile back.

"Hey, hey, buckaroo, what's up with you?" Vince sounded animated.

"Not much, not much at all. Just out walking, on this balmy evening."

"It's coming down as thick as thieves. I was supposed to go snowmobiling in the country with a couple of guys I've come to know through the band, but the buggers have stood me up. They were planning to pre-lube a bit to keep warm, so maybe their plans changed. Who knows? Anyhoo, I'm without plans, so why don't we pop into the Queen's for a beer? We can warm up a bit in there, and slake our thirst. What do you say?"

He found himself agreeing without any real thinking being put into it, and they were sitting on a barstool ordering a Black Label in under a minute. The place was packed and crazy-noisy, with a cow band playing

old-school tunes and most of the patrons talking at the top of their voices. He hardly knew a soul, even though he prided himself on knowing most if not all of the people in town. One thing did catch his eye. Over at a corner table sat Mr. Dobbs and Mrs. DaSilva. Dobbs was sporting a nifty corduroy jacket, and the gym teacher was wearing a stunning black sweater that wondrously displayed her curvaceous profile. His mind went back to the scene he had seen through the gap of the cellar door frame, and he started to wonder if he had dreamt that as well. But when he saw Dobbs get up and sashay his *petite amie* around the dance floor, the way he held her and the way she clung back dispelled any doubts. This vaguely comforted him, if only as a reassurance that he wasn't completely losing his grip on reality. Mrs. DaSilva even gave him a sly wave as she glided past him on the bar stool, and this made him feel even better.

So he and Vince sat there, sipping their beers and making the odd bit of chit-chat. Just a few moments later, two OPP constables came in, looking ashen-faced and striding purposefully to the stage. The band was halfway through a classic country ballad, and the singer stopped on a dime when he saw the two officers step up level to him. The music petered out one instrument at a time.

"Folks, pardon the disruption. We are looking for anyone with information about the identity of some young lads who were snowmobiling down on the 14th Concession. They were apparently going at high speed, and they did not see the poles for the extensions of the mailboxes due to all the snow buildup from the recent ploughing. We regret to inform you that two of the lads were killed on impact, and two others are in critical condition at the hospital. No one had any ID on their persons, so we're looking for anyone who knew any young men who planned to go out this evening in that area. Is there anybody who can offer us any information?" Their eyes looked imploringly at the hushed crowd.

He looked at Vince and saw his friend bite his lip, and slide off the barstool in the direction of the stage. He sat there, stunned, and had plenty of company in that establishment. He contemplated many things while he sat there waiting for his friend to return. He gave thanks for his friend being safe, but also saw that Vince could have easily been on a racing deathtrap if one or two subtle things had gone another way. Life in this small town was relatively simple, but there was enough drama to make him realize that he was blessed. Fortunate to have a loving family, with shelter and food provided, and things to do to keep him happily busy and out of trouble. But this could have also been said for the two lads who just died on a quiet and snowy country road. Life seemed a bit random at this point, so he quietly slipped on his coat and started to wend his way the five blocks to home. He would mask the beer on his breath, and ask his Mom for a hot chocolate with a few chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies. He would also give her a lingering hug, something the two mothers of the snowmobiling lads would be bereft of on that sad and poignant evening.

~the end~

The Assumption of Laminar Flow

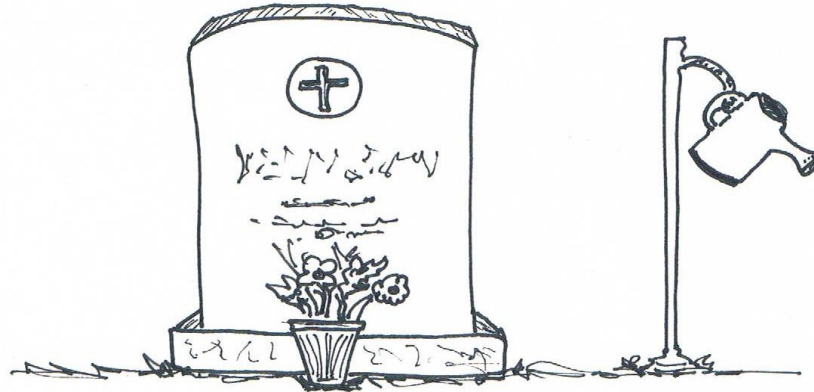


Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

Set in Walkerton, Ontario, the county seat of Bruce County and a willing host to the mighty Saugeen River.

Date: May 1975

Rattling Around Amongst the Gravestones



It was an unseasonably cold morning, even by South Bruce County standards. He kept his hand on the pane of glass in his bedroom window frame, mentally willing it to be warmer but quickly knowing it was a futile gesture. At least it was bright and sunny, judging by the ambient light filtering through the new buds of the silver maple just outside his window. It was later than normal, as he had consciously slept in. It was Track Meet Day, where half a dozen high schools in the region would converge on his high school's track and compete in a range of running and jumping and throwing events. It was exciting in theory, but he had only made the relay team due to Bob Jeevers getting the mumps, so he felt a little bit like a fifth wheel.

He slid into his singlet and shorts and put on a fleecy tracksuit due to the outside temperatures. He went downstairs to wash up and was surprised to see his Dad sitting at the table, wolfing down a platter of scrambled eggs while his Mom quietly sipped at a cup of tea.

"Sleepy head, eh?" His Dad arched his eyebrows in his direction.

"A little bit. Excused from regular school because of the track meet and I don't have to be there until just before 11 for my only event."

"Wash up and I'll make you some eggs." His Mom nodded in the direction of the platter that was slowly unveiling its porcelain design features.

"Um, appreciate the thought, but they might sit heavy later for the relay. Perhaps just some cornflakes, and a bit of fruit."

He went into the bathroom off the laundry area, leaving the door a bit ajar so he could intermittently eavesdrop on his parents' conversation. His Dad was rarely up this early, typically getting home late from his night shift. Must have something special going on, but it wasn't evident from the snatches of patter he could hear in between bursts of running water.

So ten minutes later he was on the route to school, wearing his tracksuit and a shell windbreaker to stay toasty. He decided to lightly jog it, to save some time and get warmed up. This was his first track meet, and they had had only three practice sessions since Jeevers was laid low. The relay team seemed cool enough, but coming late to the party always meant a little bit of awkwardness fitting in.

The track and infield area were abuzz with athletes from the various schools. There was light snow falling still, while the sun shone wanly overhead. It was more than cool, but most of the young folks were dressed in shorts and singlets, running around and jumping up and down to stay warm. Lots of leg muscles were evident, but in that pasty white skin sheath so common after a long Canadian winter. He kept his track suit on, and went over to the stub end of the track where the relay teams were marshaling. A coach from Chesley was the coordinator for the event, and barked out instructions on a megaphone in a desultory and offhand way.

He stripped off his fleecy suit and the wind hit him right in the middle of a damp spot on the chest of his singlet. He was the slowest runner on the team, so he knew he was running second. He jogged out to the 100 m mark for the 4X100 event, with a motley crew of other second runners from the various schools. He lined up in the third lane, nervously checking the lines of the transition zone and alternately stretching his hamstrings.

Someone yelled at him from the stands. He thought it might be Anna but he wasn't sure, so he waved offhandedly and offered up a crooked grin in the approximate direction. Then he heard a gun and looked across the track to see a stampeding herd of runners intensely heading his way. His competitors were jabbering nervously, and his relay runner teammate came up to him breathing heavily. The baton was passed cleanly to him but he was running in last place due to the first runner's performance. The second element was straight down the track, and he knew he had to make back some time. He bore down and sprinted hard, actually passing a few runners and cleanly transitioning off to the third runner on his team, a wiry kid with curly ringlets of hair. He leaned over on his knees, satisfied with the result of his running, and kept his eyes on the progress of the race. Mr. Curly Ringlets also did well, and got the baton to their anchor runner, a handsome chap with absolutely huge quadricep muscles. At this point it was a contest between his team and the Owen Sound squad, and the massive quadriceps won out in a photo finish. He felt happy about the result, but the not-quite-gelled team chemistry and the cool conditions caused him to scurry back to the start area and slip into his tracksuit. He saw Vince out of the corner of his eye, walking sneakily away from the track area with two very cute girls on some out-of-town team. He decided to perhaps tag along.

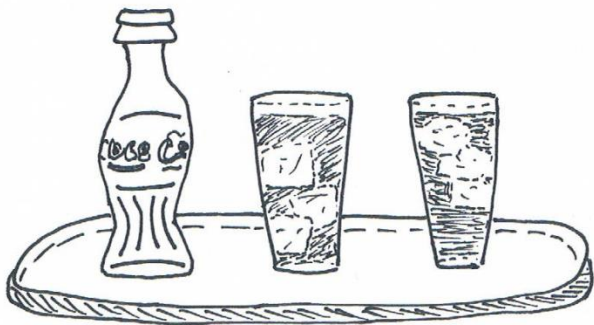
Vince and the two gals were leaning up against a massive tombstone in the Protestant Cemetery, just a block from the south end of the school. They tucked in out of the wind, trying to catch as much sun as

possible. The girls were wearing shorts, not unwelcome but it was simply too cold for this to be comfortable.

“Ladies, some of Perth County’s very best sampling. Nothing like a good toke to get your mind off the weather!” He looked over at his neighborhood buddy. “Ah, Bronco, you looked good out there on the track... well done, my man. You deserve a puff of this, after the ladies have imbibed freely.” The two girls tittered.

Truth be told, he had never smoked weed before. But there was something about the setting, the presence of death all around him, that made him waver. Just when he was about to decline, the cutest young lady flipped the lit joint around in her mouth and leaned up to him, gesturing that she wanted to blow smoke into his throat. He awkwardly allowed this, and as he looked into her stunning emerald colored eyes, he felt some kind of mental partition rearrange itself in his head. A crow landed on the nearby tombstone and cocked its head.

Skullduggery Squared



The next day, still a bit floaty from the success of the track meet and the ensuing encounter in the cemetery, he went through the school day in a not-completely-present fashion. Connected enough to be polite and socially benevolent, but not razor sharp on the details of the day. He left school on his own, but he wasn’t going straight home. He had a special invitation for later that afternoon, and he needed to kill some time before he wended his way to wherever it was he was meant to be for 5:00.

So he took himself down to the river, near the town dam that spilled the volumetric contents of the Saugeen on an unrelenting and rhythmic basis. He watched the water flow, soothing and inspiring in the same instant. Some chap in hip waders stood out mid-river, hood pulled down to prevent any recognition. He waved over just in case, but no response flowed back. Fishermen were often solitary creatures, immersed in fluids and the fluidity of their inner thoughts. So he gave another off-hand wave and moved in the direction of the Hanover highway bridge.

On the other side of the bridge was the Spool and Bobbin factory, set down low in the floodplain. Work was finished by mid-afternoon on a Friday, so the yard was quiet. But poking around in the wood storage area was a middle-aged man, wearing a five o’clock shadow and a battered black fedora. He

recognized him immediately as Dave Cooper, a somewhat eccentric neighbor of Vince's. The guy always looked at his Mom in kind of a creepy way, and he was strange in many other ways. Inward, odd. But something made him amble down the bank to speak with the eccentric neighbor.

"How's it going, Dave?" He flashed a broad smile, coming up to the man who seemed to be sorting through things in a metal pail.

"Errh, alright, I guess." A long pause ensued. "Just looking for some...metal parts, sort of." His eyes shifted left and right frenetically.

"I think this place is pretty much all wood. Y'know, spools....bobbins."

"Nope, not at all. Some bobbins are made of metal. But wood might do the trick as well....for..."

"For what?" He was being genuinely curious.

"Oh, nothing. I'm a little shy on work. So I'm looking for materials to keep my hands busy. For a special project I have in mind."

"Hmm, OK. Can a person just take stuff away from here?"

"Hah, this is just garbage, m'boy. I'm doing them all a favour. Nobody thinks much of ol' Davie here, but he gets things cleaned up. Oh yes, cleaned up good." Cooper's eyes bugged out and he was just one degree short of menacing.

So he quickly extricated himself from the loading dock area, claiming he was late for an appointment. Truth be told, he almost was, as it was ten minutes to five on the Beer Store clock and he had a 5:00 rendezvous with one of the girls from school. She was a very cute young lady, well put together, and was a cheerleader. He recalled admiring her shapely legs under her cheerleader skirt, and she was both spunky and intelligent. Out of the blue she had asked him to come over to help her with her math homework. He had stammered out some kind of positive response, and now he stood outside her door. She lived in one of the old Victorian homes across from the Public School, with her Mom and a passel of sisters.

"Well, helloooo." The heavy wooden door opened and she was standing there with one hand on her hip and a sultry tone to her voice. The sounds of light jazz drifted in from the living room.

"Uh, hi." His throat became achingly dry. He stood frozen to the spot, staring unabashedly at the cleavage exposed from her low-buttoned blue plaid shirt. She instinctively pulled up its lapels, causing her breasts to reform themselves in the most appealing of ways, and gave him a sly smile.

"Well, come on in, silly. It's too cold to stand around with the door open."

They went into the living room, while he soaked in the well-appointed home, and the equally charming visual pleasures of her posterior that snugly inhabited the confines of a pair of well-worn blue jeans.

“Thirsty? Want some Coke?” She gestured towards a tray with two glasses, some ice and a bottle of Atlanta’s most popular beverage.

“Sure, why not? That’s kind of you to offer...” He grinned awkwardly, and felt blood rush to his head. He had never really been in close proximity to this young lady, and he was becoming smitten with her lovely eyes and gorgeous hair. And to his increasingly discriminating eye, it appeared she had a superb figure, athletic with nice volume in all the right places. He grinned again and rubbed his eyes, almost in disbelief.

“I know I asked you to come over to help me out with a few bits of math, but it’s almost the weekend and everyone is out, so why don’t we do the serious stuff some other time?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

“Oh listen, I don’t mind doing math on a Friday. My family works all the time, so no problem. I came here to help, so let me earn my Coke!” He laughed at his own joke, but saw a shadow cross her face.

“No, math next time. Let’s just use today to get to know each other better.” She slid closer to him on the red upholstered divan, and leaned in imperceptibly. He thought he could smell some orange-scented perfume, and swore one additional button had become undone on her plaid shirt. Just when he thought how unexpectedly great this math tutoring session was becoming, he heard a key in a lock and her mother’s voice hallooing in from the hallway.

Training Day



He was up early the next morning, a day with great promise of bright sunlight and warming temperatures. He had made arrangements with Lou to get together for a training session, one in a

series that would get them in top shape for next year's basketball season. The past year had been over for a while, as their Raider team had bowed out early in the first round of the playoffs. But there was a spark to the team, and the fact that the entire starting five was moving up together to the senior team intensified hopes for a deeper run next year. Coach McNairn had suggested a lot of things for off-season training, many of which had little to do with handling a basketball. Weight training, stretching, speed work, hill training---these were all on the docket for making themselves tougher and fitter for the travails of the season.

So today had been planned for a hill training session, but the location was up in the air. He had suggested going up and down a portion of the long West Hill, the one that famously hosted the annual soap box derby competitions each June. But Lou had countered that this would be running in some traffic, with its attendant vehicle fumes and elevated safety risks. And Lou was a very private person, so he naturally wanted to do his training out of the limelight. It was a small town, and a couple of hundred folks would surely observe them with sharp eyes over an hour of charging the hill.

Lou then suggested they meander over to the ski hill area and give this a try for the first session. It was found at the end of a winding access road from the riverfront park, and was certainly a beautiful location. Ski season was well past, and the only thing they might have to negotiate would be some muddy patches caused by water seeping out of the ski hill's clay soil. He had never really been back to the ski area before, and associated this with the cool kids in school who had money for a perceived frill like skiing. They would have nifty ski jackets instead of his frumpy yellow model, and would leave their daily ski pass cards dangling from their side zippers. Why these dangling card passes would bother him was a bit of a mystery even to him, but he had a vague feeling that it spoke to affluence and the feeling of being better-than, and this was something he would return to contemplate at different points in his life.

He met up with Lou at the Canadian Tire corner, and they crossed over the bridge. He looked intently at the roiling water of the river, but the other boy was lost in conversation and paid no heed to the adjacent natural wonders.

"Man, I am glad we are putting our off-season plans into action. Coach is going to be so impressed! And the fitter we get, the more we can press, and the more turnovers we can force, and the more easy layups we will get. I'm going to average thirty points a game next year, mark my words!" Lou's eyes danced and he did a little swagger step.

"Thirty points? Get real, there's lots of games we struggle to even put up forty on the board for the whole team. I'm all for success, but you've got to be realistic." He grimaced a bit, and immediately disliked the tone of his own voice.

"Dude, Pistol Pete Maravich didn't get to where he is by thinking small. I'm thinking big, my friend, both on the court and off. When I light up the stat sheets with thirty or more each game, the lineup of ladies for ol' Lou will be out the door!" The good looking lad jabbed a thumb into his own chest and smiled broadly.

“OK, with that imagery, you’ve sold me! And what can hurt to be as fit as a fiddle? Remember when we played that exhibition game at St. David’s down in Waterloo? Those scrawny little choir boys did a full court press all game. They had us in their back pocket barely two minutes into the game. How did they do it? Pure fitness, and being as scrappy as hell.”

“I found that loss to be humiliating. Do you know how many times I couldn’t get the ball over the half line in time? Or even get a pass into play from the end line? God, I thought I had gotten that out of my system, but it’s all flooding back! Humiliation is a great motivator for making change...”

“Or even a good memory, but one that could be enhanced. Do you remember the tournament we went down to in Acton?” He looked over at Lou as they both mentally verified that they had chosen the correct fork in the road to take them out to the ski hill.

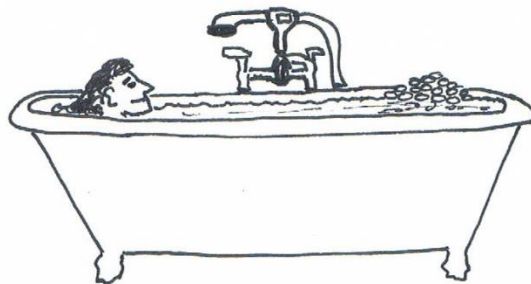
“Are you referring to the championship game, where you held their sniper to a mere eight points?” Lou wagged his eyes dramatically.

“Thank you for remembering. But what was the point I wanted to make? Oh, right.... we got to take home the hardware, but I was absolutely knackered by the end of the game. If it had been a closer contest, who knows what would have happened? But if I had been fitter, I could have stayed tenacious up to the final buzzer.” He pursed his lips and nodded knowingly.

“Alright, we’re here. The hill is our opponent. For today, we’ll charge the hill ten times up to the top station of the chair lift. I’ll time each one and we’ll try to shave the time a bit as we get warmed up. We’ll keep track of who wins each interval, and the overall loser buys root beer over at the car wash when we’re done! OK?” Lou explained this earnestly.

“I’ll wait for you at the top, sucker!” He sprinted off without Lou being fully set, and he immediately knew each of the intervals would be one part hard work and an equal part of agony.

Thespian Daydreams



He was absolutely bushed after running the hill intervals. He had done fairly well, having better native speed than Lou but sporting thirty pounds more than his graceful friend balanced out the speed dimension. So they jogged home to warm down and parted ways just past the bridge, taking a rain cheque on the root beer. Ten minutes later he was soaking in a hot tub, laced with lavender-scented

Epsom salts from a purple pail his Mom kept in the cabinet under the sink. He needed the therapeutic aspects of the salts, but he wrinkled up his nose at their lavender aroma.

The house was blessedly quiet. He had no idea where his parents were, and he really didn't care. He had his agenda fully planned out-- a good long soak in the tub, followed by a quick pick-up lunch of whatever was in the fridge, followed by a stretch-out on the sofa with his latest library book.

Bath tub soaking causes a person to think, and a teenage boy in this situation will inevitably start thinking about girls. He laid back in the tub, coming close to full body immersion, and started mulling over a situation that had transpired over the last week in English class. The teacher was Mr. Tice, a fairly young instructor with reddish pageboy hair and milky white skin. He had the physique of a ballet dancer, slim and lithe yet muscular in an understated way. He was from the city, and brought an air of intrigue and sophistication into the classroom.

They had been spending the last two weeks reading short plays. The particular class under this daydream review was when Mr. Tice wanted them to act out portions of one particular play, a short dramatic bit about star-crossed lovers. The class was lightly attended that day, and he was the only boy there along with seven or eight young ladies. He played back the classroom dialogue in his mind, to the best of his memory's ability.

"OK, let's get down to it. We need a young lady girlfriend, who is up for the role? I'll allow reading from the playbook for today. If I don't have a volunteer, I'll simply have to choose!" Tice splayed his hands and raised his eyebrows theatrically. All of the girls smiled awkwardly or looked down at their feet.

"Alright, bashful beauties, you force my hand. Lucinda, you will do nicely for the first read-through." He pointed to an absolutely lovely young lady in the middle of the group. Lucinda Decker was not only pretty, she also possessed gorgeous hair and a bombshell of a figure. She wore a crème-coloured sweater that wondrously accentuated her voluminous breasts. Lucinda winced a bit, and then tentatively rose to stride to the front of the room.

"Splendid. For the male part, let's see. Hmmm, Jayson by singular default, it looks like your lucky day! Get up here." He rose out of his seat, and awkwardly banged his thigh against the writing surface. Part of him was thrilled by this turn of events, and a larger part was mortified. Vince had designs from time to time on Lucinda, but both boys agreed she was probably out of Vince's league. But to even stand near her started to make his throat dry.

"OK, have at it!" Tice wheeled off to the side with a graceful pirouette.

Lucinda looked down at her playbook and read woodenly. "It's not working out, Rodrigo. I think we need to see other people."

There was a pregnant pause until he realized it was his line. "No, Isabella, that's preposterous, we can make all things right." He said this unconvincingly, shooting Mr. Tice a wan smile.

The teacher was at their side in a second, tut-tutting and flashing his teeth. “Rodrigo, come on man! This thing of beauty is saying she is going to walk out on you. You don’t just stand there like you’re reading box scores from a newspaper. Show some passion, dude, and at least put your arm around her!”

He put his arm tepidly around her back on her opposite shoulder, repeating his line with a modicum of increased heat.

“Argggh, not like she’s your sister...she’s your lover! Put your arm around her waist, and draw her close, look into her eyes!” The instructor grabbed his hand and moved it down to Lucinda’s waist and unceremoniously pushed the boy into her. This action caused her breast geometry to rearrange itself considerably.

So as he lounged in the bath, the most distinct memories came back to him. His hand on Lucinda’s waist was instantly warmed by her tantalizing and almost feral energy, and when he looked briefly into her eyes he saw a deep but heavily wounded soul.

He knew in an instant that this might be the closest he would ever get to Lucinda Decker, and under the cloak of respectability offered by this dramatic exercise he was determined to slow time and fully enjoy the experience. And as he did this he looked past Lucinda to the back of the class, where another girl sat with her eyes riveted on the unfolding drama. She was a bus kid, living in a town outside the county seat, and was very pretty in her own right. She was more conventional, old-fashioned even, and clearly stood outside the limelight of Lucinda’s ilk. But while he soaked up the heat of Lucinda’s waist, he locked eyes with this other young lady. And she said to him, without words, but with her eyes... “My breasts are just as wondrous as Lucinda’s, but you can’t tell that from the way I’m dressed. But if you give me a chance, either now or sometime down the road, I’ll show you heat that will fully melt your hands away!”

In actual time, their gaze was sustained for perhaps two seconds tops. But the intensity of it, relived in the confines of the Epsom salt bath, made him involuntarily shudder. He drew some more hot water from the tap and mentally went on to the unfolding plot of his new book.

Late September, 1944: Riviere du Loup, Quebec

The train rocked gently on its rails, making its way through beautiful scenery unfolding in the morning light. Uniformed men sat cheek by jowl, most still sleeping but others gradually stirring. The young fellow with the mop of curly hair was painfully homesick, but determined not to let it show. He was going off to war, but only in a superficial sense. His heart and soul wanted to be back in Ontario, with his family and his girlfriend.

“Best to get up and into the WC for a shave and a dump while the coast is still clear.” The young man opposite him was handsome and swarthy, with a hearty bit of stubble looking for a razor’s edge.

"Good advice, I'll get my shaving kit. Where are you from?" He smiled at the other chap.

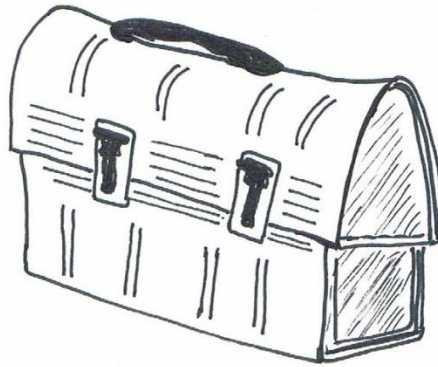
"Ontario. Farm country. This war service is my ticket out of the fields. Can't wait to get over there." The swarthy chap's eyes danced.

"Me too. At least for the province and farm part. But my reasons for being here are complicated. And as I get in deeper, I'm thinking I should have stayed home. Could have done so, honourably, on medical grounds." He frowned, casting a shadow over his handsome features.

"Listen, we might get split up in Halifax, as I'm in the RCAF and you're Army. But before that we can watch each other's back. Some of the guys on this rig drink, gamble, and chase women. To do that, they need money, and lots of it. Clean-living farm boys don't need their pay packets lifted, so we'll keep an eye out for each other. Sound OK?"

"Much obliged, friend. Now let's take your advice and go get washed up."

Squaresville



A few days later, he found himself helping his Mom clear the table after his slightly later dinner. Since school was wrapping up relatively soon, and he didn't have any sports practice after class, he found himself short of his normal excuse to eat his dinner later. He would often fabricate something so as to time his arrival home just after 5:00, the first safe point where he wouldn't have to cross paths with his Dad. He loved chatting with his Mom, or just sitting quietly in her supportive energy. But his Dad was a different case, full of oft-repeated war stories and a knack for asking far too many questions. He had his heart in the right place, cared deeply for his family, but was just plain cantankerous to deal with.

So tonight had been one of those fabrication nights, and he had first hung around the bus departure area in a vain attempt to ogle any of the country or far-flung town gals who may be queueing up for the bus. Prospects had been limited, so he had poked along the back road looking at the budding trees and noting the increasing amount of daylight afforded by the advancing calendar.

A quick nip into the library had granted him access to the latest issue of The Sporting News. There was no cable TV in town at that time, so this kind of coverage allowed him to stay reasonably abreast of

professional sports developments. The Golden State Warriors were playing the Washington Bullets for the NBA Championship, having dispatched one of his favourite teams, the Chicago Bulls, in the Western Finals. The tabloid format had a nice picture of Rick Barry unleashing one of his trademark underhand free throws.

So from there he ambled home, going two blocks up in a roundabout way to Cayley Street to eliminate any chance of bumping into his Dad on his way to work. A quick supper of still-warm mashed potatoes, green beans and boiled chicken followed his arrival, topped off with two slices of cherry pie. As he cleared the dishes off to their soapy destination, his Mom groaned audibly.

"He always rushes off to work so quickly! I just realized he has left his lunch box here. And once he gets there, he doesn't have five minutes to himself and he just grabs what he can from the pail here. One of us will have to run it down to him."

After a second or two of hesitation, he was out the door carrying the lunch box. His Dad had been a long-term employee of the poultry processing plant right on Main Street, just a short block away from the Hartley House Hotel. For many years after the war he drove truck, running butter and chickens every day to Kensington Market in Toronto. Twenty or more years of sitting in rigs with poor suspensions, on top of his war-related back injuries, had required a change of pace. He had been assigned to the duties of a security guard at the main gate, keeping track of workers going in and out of work and trucks arriving with live cargo and other vehicles leaving with frozen boxed product. It seemed like trivial work to the younger lad, but to the father's credit he took the duties seriously and worked hard.

So on that fine Spring night he walked over to the plant, swinging his Dad's lunch box and contemplating the rigours of a blue collar working life. The air quality around the plant was not high, equal parts chicken barn and diesel fuel. He scrunched up his nose a bit, and peered into the window of the security shed. No one was inside he thought to himself, but he could see his Dad's jacket draped around the swivel chair hugging the desk. He would have to wait to get rid of the lunch pail, and he hoped and prayed it wouldn't be overly long.

And as luck would have it, at a time when he wanted to be inconspicuous, he saw Vince standing over at the corner. He was opening up a popsicle, recently purchased at the Mom-and-Pop convenience store on the corner.

"Hey, you ruffian, have you joined the ranks of the chicken catchers?" Vince called this out in a playful way, and started over in his direction. He inwardly groaned.

"No. Not a chance. I'm just dropping off fuel to my Dad." He dangled the lunch box as proof.

"Whew, that's a relief. Want half of my 'sicle? Banana."

His Dad came out from the plant at that time, bustling officiously and sweating a bit. "Hey, 'bye, what's your business here? I've got a loaded reefer coming out any minute that will have paperwork to be signed, so I'm in a bit of a push!"

"You forgot your lunch pail. Just dropping it off to you." His voice stayed low, impassive.

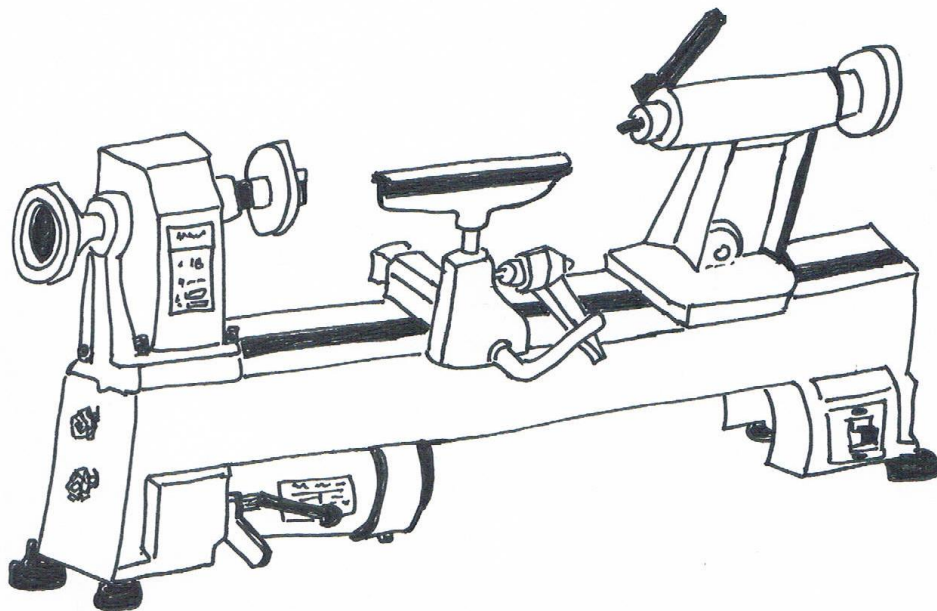
"Oh, my, sorry about that. Mummy and I were talking about Summer vacation for this year, and where we might go with Aunt Lottie. Either upstate New York, or perhaps out East. But we forgot the time and I fairly flew out of the house! So thanks, lad, and don't mind me rushing off." He left with a swirl of his scuffed white coat, covered in avian blood and residue.

Vince and he walked home, savouring the sweet creaminess and synthetic banana flavor of the popsicle.

"Dude, you are a throwback to an earlier time. Still going off on motor trips with your parents and elderly aunt? How am I ever going to bring you into the zone of respectability?"

He sucked on the cold treat, counteracting the slow burn in his cheeks.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?



School was winding down, with just a few weeks to go before exams. Ever since the track and field meet, and the longer days and promise of better weather, things had seemed to shift into a more relaxed mode. It was a high school for a wide swath of the district, and it had programs that catered to the wide range of students it served. There was a two year occupational program, where academically challenged kids would get a bit more maturity and some experience in a broad sampling of industrial arts, and would go out into the world looking for employment as tire installers and truck drivers. There was a four year applied program, where middle of the road kids took challenging yet practical courses across a breadth of disciplines to work one notch up from the occupational kids or go on to an applied program in pharmacy or golf course management at one of the Province's newly birthed community colleges. And finally there was the five year academic program, with the most scholarly kids hopefully

going on to a berth in some program of interest at a university. He had the talent to be a five year program student, but had despised French so much he had dropped it in Grade 9. His Dad had been a big fan of French, not for cultural or linguistic reasons, but for the potential it offered for a high-paying federal government job in this bilingual country. So the only way clear to dropping French was to agree to take on extra credits, so he signed up for a double-credit applied technology course. This put him in class with a bunch of rough-and-ready four year shop boys, and he secretly relished the change of pace it offered. It was a bit of a sampler course, with the time over the year evenly divided between woodworking, sheet metal and welding, auto repair, machining, mechanical drafting and architectural drafting. He liked all of the modules, with perhaps the exception of auto repair, but this was taught by a tall and gentle older man who was so kind that even the grease and exhaust were palatable.

So on this mid-week afternoon, he found himself sitting in his mechanical drafting class with only two other boys. The teacher was a dapper, middle-aged man with a sharp eye and a tendency towards sports jackets with a bit more colour and style than the typical instructor.

“Ok, lads, listen up. There’s some kind of safety training going on for one of the after-school clubs, and I believe a few of your peers have gone up to Meaford for the next level of track competition. Hence, our depleted ranks. But not to worry, I won’t make you sit here on a lovely day and draw cam shafts! I have a few boxes of parts at Larsen and Shaw, that I have been meaning to get picked up and brought back here as props for drafting. We can get them in my trunk and you can help me carry them into class here tomorrow morning. That way you can leave for home early on a nice day and I can get a round in at the golf course before supper. Field trip!”

Within ten minutes they were standing in the parking lot of the machining industry, situated at the top of the West Hill and conveniently close to the town’s nine hole golf course. It had previously been right downtown, near the Queens’ Hotel and the Town Hall. He remembered walking by it and peering in curiously at a whirling mass of drills and lathes during his public school days, but the old factory had been sold to the federal government to make way for the new post office, and the industry had built a new and larger facility up on the hill.

He followed the teacher and the two other lads into a reception area where they got visitor badges and fishbowl safety glasses, and then they walked a yellow taped line to the rear of the building. He was mesmerized by the whirl of activity, the smells of oil and cutting fluid, and the earnest application of skills by the workers. To his eye, many were grizzled and portly, but a sizeable fraction were young men not that much older than himself. He tried to step into the space where they lived and worked, tried to feel the stress of a mortgage and a baby on the way, the pressure of hard work that really mattered. He gripped this for a second, but it was elusive and slippery due to his age and preferences. Not for him, he quickly concluded. As he hefted a box of metal parts up for carrying back to the trunk of the teacher’s car he certainly felt respect and a bit of awe for the workers he passed on the way.

As the crow flew, he was only about four blocks from home, through a zigzag path from the far depths of the parking lot and straight down a hill path past the horse field just up from his house. He was going to get home early, much earlier than his normal arrival time and early even for his Dad’s supper time.

So he thought he might just grab a snack and head down to the river dykes to fully enjoy this found time on a warming afternoon.

As he came up to his back verandah, he spied the distinctive plaid shopping cart of his Mom's best friend, Doris. She stopped by regularly for tea and one of his Mom's baked treats, and was a kind and elegant friend to his mother. He could hear the tinkle of china tea cups on china plates and the murmuring of voices. Something made him tread lightly and stand back a few feet from the open screened door to the laundry room. The women were in the kitchen directly beside the laundry room, and if he leaned in a bit he might be able to listen in on the conversation. Why, he wasn't sure, as eavesdropping was not one of his practiced skills.

"It's getting pretty bad. I'm hounded a lot about every little thing, and if I speak up for myself, I get the silent treatment." His Mom's tone was sad and despondent.

"Oh, my." Doris tut-tutted this out, and sipped her tea loudly for emphasis.

"I never thought I would say this, but I'm thinking of leaving." This was said so quietly he had to lean in to catch the last bit. His stomach fell.

"Where would you go, and how would you get by?" All said supportively, but with a practical veneer.

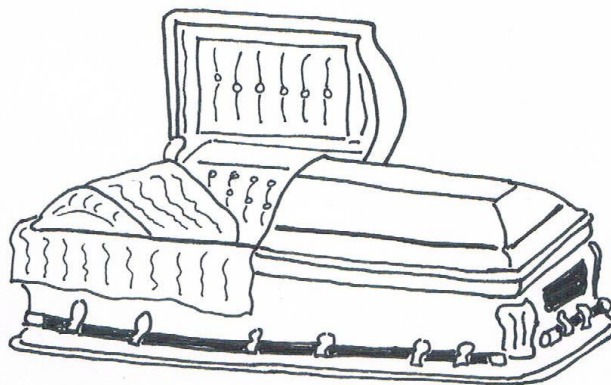
"Oh, I'd stay in town, get a little apartment above one of the stores downtown. And I've always dreamed of owning a bakery. I'd have them lined up around the block for my pies and cookies!" This was said quickly, hopefully.

"So do it, and don't look back." Doris said this firmly.

"Well, another part of me says hang in there. Just for Jayson's sake." His Mom said this with a certain degree of resignation.

He had heard enough. He quietly pivoted away, river bound, with moist eyes and a sad heart.

It's Later Than You Think



He distanced himself from his Mom over the next few days, not because of taking his Dad's side but for reasons he couldn't quite put his finger on. He felt quite grown up and emotionally robust, and he finally figured out it was more of a disappointment welling up in him. If she wanted to leave, she should leave, he reckoned. No reason to hang in there for his sake. He could happily live in an apartment downtown, even if it meant sleeping on the sofa. Lou lived in an apartment above the hardware store with his whole family, and every one of them seemed pretty content. And he actually thought he could help out a lot with this bakery idea, and he knew they could be a success. And deep down he knew he wouldn't be in this small town forever, and that hanging in because of him would be a fool's game in the end. He didn't want to see her get trapped, and he knew instinctively that with each passing year it would be tougher for her to change life's course.

But genuine affection trumps disappointment in the end, and he found himself sitting around on a Saturday afternoon reading a good book on his favourite spot on the mildly battered chesterfield. His Mom came down the stairs, dressed up a bit and looking expectant.

"Can the book sit for a while?" She said this in a gentle tone, not wanting to interrupt the flow of his reading.

"Sure, what's on the program for this aft?" He tucked in a bookmark, happy the thin skin of ice between them had melted so quickly.

"Well, I was listening to 'In Memoriam' yesterday afternoon on CKNX. Ernie Schmeltzer from church passed away on Thursday after a lengthy illness. He was a very nice man, and his wife Edna is such a dear. I thought I'd pop down to Tanner and Pearson's and pay my respects to the family. Viewing hours run until 4:00, and if you could jump into a nice shirt and good pair of pants I would appreciate the company."

Fifteen minutes later, after a quiet walk to the downtown, they entered the side door of the funeral parlor. The first thing that hit him was the strong aroma of overly ornate flower arrangements and the off-gassing of embalming fluid. It was a sunny day outside, but it was very dark inside the viewing room. Only a handful of people were there, owing to the advanced age of the deceased gentleman and the beauty of the day outside. His Mom greeted the bereaved widow warmly and with a lingering hug, and then turned towards other members of the family. He muttered some kind of semi-intelligible condolence remarks to Edna Schmeltzer, and she grabbed him by the wrist and walked him over purposefully to the casket.

"He was a good man, and a good provider." Her bottom lip started to quiver.

"Hmmm, yes, he always said hello to me at church." He looked into the half-open casket and his eyes bugged out. Ernie in repose looked twenty years younger than the mental picture he had of him before his illness. His hair was coiffed, which was not in keeping with Ernie's style metrics, and he appeared to have had rouge applied to his waxy cheeks.

“Not sure what I’ll do without him...” Edna pulled out a lacy cloth handkerchief and did a reasonable representation of a flugelhorn as she blew her nose.

“As I said, I’m really sorry.” He saw a large housefly float down from one of the gladioli arrangements and land on Ernie’s nose. He looked over at the distraught widow, and then back at the corpse just in time to see the fly adroitly crawl up inside Ernie’s left nostril cavity. This caused a telegraphing from his brain to his diaphragm to emit a belly laugh of significant proportions, but he suppressed this communication and signaled to his Mom that he would see her back at the house.

He popped out through the heavy wooden door of the front entrance of the funeral parlor, almost knocking over a young woman pushing a baby carriage. The mid-afternoon sunshine and balmy fresh air were like a drug transfusion to his senses. He felt like leaping up in the air, shaking his fists, hugging any female between fifteen and fifty and fully celebrating life. He had just experienced death up close, housefly-up-the-nose close, and he wanted no part of it.

“Yeeeeeeoooouuuhhhh!!” Two young ladies from Sacred Heart popped out of the Chinese restaurant, resplendent in pastel Spring windbreakers. They giggled at his outburst, and then looked a bit wistful. He saw Lou up ahead, sitting on a bench outside the library.

“Dude, you are a sight for sore eyes! What are you doing just hanging out here by your lonesome?” He simply felt high on life.

“Hey, apartment living can be a bit constrained. Sometimes you just need to get out and change the air a bit. And run into crazy *hombres* like you! Why are you so wired?” Lou wrinkled his brow.

“I went with my Mom to pay our respects to a fallen church deacon. Man, just crossed mortician off the prospective job list! Let’s go shoot some pool, get some food, anything fun! It’s my treat!” He patted the pocket of his dress pants.

“Well, can’t turn down a kind offer like that. They have a midway down by the arena. Want to walk over there, and perhaps try to talk a few gals into joining us on the bumper cars?” Lou grinned in anticipation.

Ten minutes later they were at the parking lot between the arena and the westernmost agricultural society pavilion. There were half a dozen rides set up, plus games of chance, all being run by tough young men with bad teeth and equally bad tattoos. They saw Vince across the way, ferrying Lucinda Decker through the crowd. They pulled up at a stand where Vince confidently started to cover a red square with flat silver discs, in an attempt to win an over-sized monkey. Lucinda stood a half step off to the side, smiling thinly at Vince’s antics but with her eyes scanning the crowd intermittently.

“OK, which one do we start with? And remember, it’s my treat.” He swept his hand in the direction of the rides.

“Crazy Tumbler. I hope you ate lunch a while back.” Lou pointed to a device where people were being lashed into a wire cage, and then spun wildly with the individual cages turning like a whirling dervish.

“Oh, child’s play! I’m high on life, remember?”

Just a few moments later, they started their ninety seconds of adrenalin rush. Halfway in, the carnie torqued the machine even higher. A second or two later he felt all of his coins centrifuging out of his dress pants pocket. Judging from the squeals of delight from the people below getting rained on by quarters, he quickly and grumpily realized this would be the first and last midway ride of the afternoon.

He’s Got the Power



Every so often he would stop in at the Smoke Shop on the first floor of the Hartley House Hotel. The place had a certain sophisticated allure, there was no doubt. Tins of pipe tobacco, fine Cuban cigars, rows of Sports Illustrated and Field and Stream magazines, stacks of the latest newspapers from Toronto—for a small town it was all a bit upscale and intriguing. There was a heated glass bin that had a rotating disc on it that held a large mound of fresh and delicious salted cashews. These were sold by the ounce in small white paper bags, and every now and then he treated himself to a few ounces of these golden delights.

But the real reason he loitered around the Smoke Shop was to steal the odd glance at the hotel owner’s daughter. Cindy Steutz was in her early twenties, and she was a bona fide looker. Rumour had it that she had gone down to Guelph for a program in hospitality management, but even though the hotel business was in her blood it turned out post-secondary academic rigours were not. So she discreetly returned home to work at the Hartley, and a score of local young men secretly cheered. She wasn’t particularly pretty, but she had great hair and a killer figure. Her strongest asset, arguably, was a pair of athletically toned and deeply tanned legs. She typically wore a short skirt or dress that emphasized her best features, along with flashy footwear that had a distinctly European flair.

So on this fine day in late May he found himself in the Smoke Shop, near the cashew roaster and with a perfect viewing angle of Cindy’s side profile as she served a cigar purchasing customer. There seemed to

be extra excitement in the air today, and she looked absolutely lovely in a clingy one-piece blue shift dress with a string of pearls around her tanned neck.

“And if I may say, young lady, you are looking particularly fetching this afternoon!” The older gentleman set his cigars on the counter and peered at her intently over his glasses.

“Oh, thanks, I thought I should pull out my special jewelry for today. How often does a Prime Minister come to town?” She fingered the pearls nervously.

“That guy could stay up in Ottawa, as far as I am concerned! How long will he be here?” The chap pulled his wallet out of his back pocket.

“Comes in by helicopter very soon, touching down by the ball diamond. Invitation dinner for the party faithful out at the golf course, then he stays here at the Hartley for the night. Up early and gone for a prayer breakfast in Owen Sound, and then part of a kayaking entourage out on Georgian Bay. He’s very fit, y’know?” The young woman smiled gushingly, then realized her customer’s political affiliations.

So he took himself out into the bright sunshine, and followed the stream of people heading west to the ball diamond. When he got there, a good-sized crowd was milling around, with a lot of people he did not know. They were out-of-towners, hoping to catch a glimpse of the popular Prime Minister.

A few moments later, a stir went through the crowd and a number of people pointed in the direction of the Stony Hills. A green military helicopter advanced quickly, setting down near the third base line in a cloud of dust and lime. Out popped a few folks in military dress, the mayor of the town stepped forward in an ill-fitting suit, and a lithe man wearing a snappy dark jacket came bounding out of the helicopter. He shook hands with the mayor and gave him a warm and engaging smile, and then turned to the crowd to acknowledge its applause. He strode purposefully to the baseball fence and started shaking hands with various people over the chain links.

At this point the boy knew he just had to shake hands with the leader of his country. He started to work his way quickly through the crowd, on an angle to optimally intercept his target. As he got closer to the fence the density of people increased dramatically. He made a number of uncomfortable slide-pasts to get within one person of the charismatic figure. At that point one of the military handlers made some kind of gesture and it appeared the handshaking portion of the field arrival was about to end. So he elbowed a beefy thirtysomething fellow, to allow him to reach out and clasp the firm hand just about to pull away. He did this with an intensity that seemed mildly surprising to the politician, who then gave him a wry grin as he pulled away in the direction of a waiting limousine.

He floated through the rest of the day and into the next, having had a fleeting brush with celebrity and greatness. He walked downtown midday, telling everyone he met that he had shook hands with the Prime Minister. Lou was hanging outside the pool hall, and was disturbingly unimpressed.

“OK, you shook hands with him, but that pales with the juicy rumour that’s floating around town.” Lou smacked his lips.

“Alright, big shot, pray tell.”

“Well, he stayed overnight at the Hartley, right? Second floor, in their royal suite. So I have it on good account that he saw Cindy and her pearls, and took a fancy to her. So much so that she kept him company into the wee hours. Small town hospitality, wouldn’t you say?”

He was stunned. He would never be able to stand by the cashew roaster, ogling Cindy’s long and lovely legs in the same way again.

Early October, 1944; onboard the Queen Elizabeth

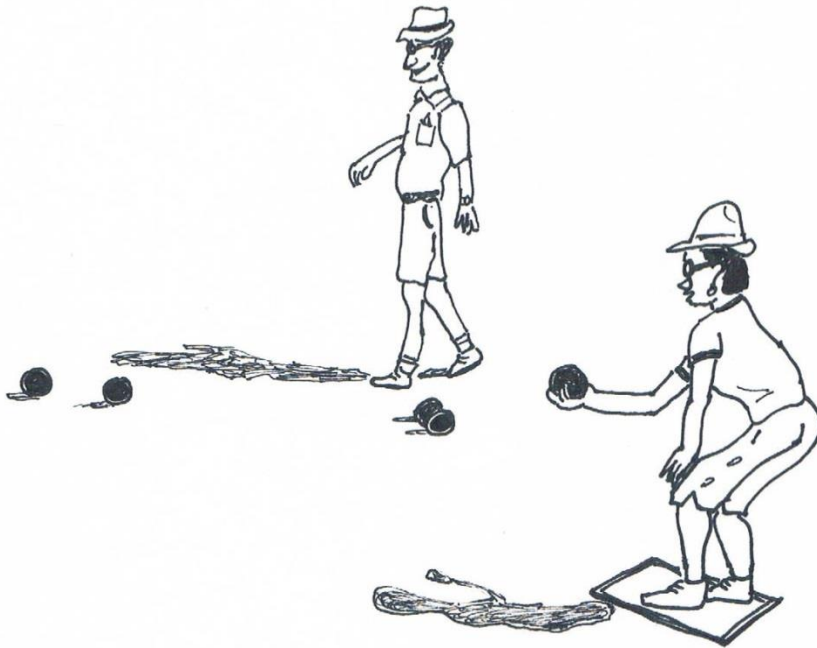
The fog horn sounded deep and long. They were only about two hours out of Halifax and it already seemed like a long voyage. The time in the city had been fun, as it was full of young people either going off to war or supporting this departure. He saw one young lady after another on the street, catching his eye and giving him a warm smile. Wearing the uniform and beret had dividends, no question. But it made him wistful about his choice. He could be riding a desk, and going out dancing in the evenings with all of these young ladies.

He was first in to a bunk chamber that slept four men. Very snug quarters. He claimed the lowest bunk, easiest to get up from if he needed to take a leak in the night. Two roomies stumbled in a few moments later with their packs. They were obviously a few sheets to the wind. The Halifax bars had been a momentary temptation to him, but he caught himself as he believed he needed to stay in full control if he was going to make it home. He spoke to them in a friendly way, and they spoke back to him in an equally warm, guttural French. It could be a long trip, he thought.

But then the fourth roomie came in. Calm energy, tall and upright. He shook hands with the two French fellows, then came over to the lower bunk.

“Steve. Steve Hnatiw. From out Manitoba way.” They shook hands firmly. He felt that feeling, the one where you think you know this person. But you don’t. But maybe you do.

What They Now Call Family Studies



Vince leaned in to his locker conspiratorially.

"Listen up, Mr. Big. I need you on this one. Just be my straight man for one class. And there will literally be some sweet benefits, that I can guarantee. Just back up your main man." Vince looked at his friend pleadingly.

"Always happy to help out, dude. But we have a Classics exam coming up soon and Mr. Lamb Chops is doing exam review all week. Do you know how much detail exists around the Greek and Roman civilizations? If I skip class, that's a lot of content gone from the zone of possibility." He winced a bit, apologetic to a fault.

"Now this is perhaps a technicality, but you wouldn't be skipping class. You would be in Home Ec rather than your normal Classics. So no guilt, no ethical issue, just a transfer of body mass." Vince wagged his finger knowingly.

"OK, you're starting to wear me down. But why don't you just go by yourself? And why do you even want to go to a Home Ec class, for Pete's sake." He stuffed some books in the top compartment of his locker and shot his friend a withering look.

"Ah, romance, *mon ami*, romance. Lucinda is in this class. It is currently an all-girl class. Her teacher, Mrs. McEwen, wants to shift the gender balance for next year and get some boys to sign up for the course. So they are putting the call out through the current students, to come for a sampler class to see the facilities and get a feel for the vibe of the class. Not so many takers to date. So Lucinda has asked me to come, and to ask you to tag along. I'm not a jealous man, but she has been making the odd

reference to you ever since you two did that skit play in Tice's class. Anything I should know about, my friend?" This was said lightly, with only the mildest undertone of malice.

"No, man, she's all yours. She is one beautiful girl, with gorgeous eyes and a figure to match. Listen, she's way out of my league, so it's flattering to know she even remembers my name." All of this was said haltingly, and a bit uncomfortably.

"Well, she has a lot of interested flies buzzing around her, so you would help me greatly by coming along to this. Hey, it starts in like, two minutes. Let's call yourself convinced." Vince put his arm around his shoulder and they quickly moved in the direction of the technical wing.

They shyly opened the door to the home economics classroom, and were bowled over by the aromas of fresh baking and the warm welcome from Mrs. McEwen. She came over to them, wiping her floury hands on her blue apron.

"Boys, how nice to see you! I assume you have come to get a feel for our class. Who invited you, just so I can give bonus marks out?"

"It was the lovely Lucinda that invited me, and I then applied my powers of persuasion to get ol' Jayson here to grace us with his presence." Vince hitched up his jeans with a modest bit of swagger.

"Ah, Miss Decker. For sure, lovely, and very popular with the lads." The teacher said this in an off-hand way, but with sufficient emphasis to cause Vince's radar to shoot up. The teacher continued on to safer ground. "So it's Vince and Jayson, just for my records. Jayson, you look familiar to me. I've possibly seen you in the hallway, but it seems like somewhere else perhaps. Do you attend services at the Anglican Church?" She peered over her glasses at him.

"No, ma'am. Lutheran." He said this somewhat bashfully.

"Are your parents merchants in town? Perhaps you help out in the shop?"

"No, ma'am, my Dad used to drive truck but is now a security guard down at the chicken plant. My Mom is a seamstress, and takes care of the house." He said this even more bashfully.

"Ah, well, you are a perfect candidate for a home economics course. I am sure your Mom has trained you well in the use of a needle and thread." She turned sideways and he got his first viewing of her backside projecting out under the strings of her apron. It was encased in stretchy black fabric and was impressive in its sheer size and exquisite form. He knew immediately where he had observed this lady.

"Mrs. McEwen, are you a lawn bowler?" He said this tentatively.

"Yes, yes, I am. My husband and I bowl in a mixed league Tuesday and Thursday evenings." She turned back toward him, swiveling her impressive derriere away from further viewing. "Do your parents lawn bowl?"

“No, but sometimes we walk over and watch the bowling on a nice Summer evening. My Mom and I. My Dad works nights. It’s a pretty place, right beside the cenotaph, and the lights are on and the grass looks so green. We’ll just sit on a bench for a while and watch people like yourself bowl. Seems like fun.”

“And you recognized me from there? Curious, since our backs are always to the viewing benches. But there you go, we’ve established our connection.” He nodded dumbly, hoping to move on to safer turf with baking or sewing.

“Alright, young ladies. Two gentlemen guests today, so let’s do our best to avoid cookie dry-out. Suggest the first batch needs to come out momentarily, and then we’ll get mixing up a second batch while the first round of delights cools. We’ll have a treat from them while the second batch bakes. To your stations, please!”

He and Vince migrated over to Lucinda’s side, awkwardly picking up mixing spoons and a measuring cup. She shot a funny look in Vince’s direction, and there appeared to be some kind of unspoken tension between the two. Vince coolly took a half step towards the safety of his trailing buddy.

“Lawn bowling? Good God, dude. What kind of a wing man are you? I don’t need you to be something you’re not, but just keep a lid on the embarrassing vignettes about hanging with your Mom while old ladies roll a ball down manicured grass. Just think about how this splashes back on your cool friend, Vince!”

“Oh, watching lawn bowling is not so bad, better than you may think.” He said this quietly, holding the mental image of Mrs. McEwen bending over and slowly planning her shot on a humid Summer evening.

Calmness Upstream



He sat in the drafting classroom, staring at his slowly emerging technical drawing. They were now in the last of seven shop modules, architectural drafting. Somehow this wasn't causing a fire to ignite in his belly, even though he had always loved looking at buildings and admiring their aesthetic details. Blame it on warm weather and end-of-year fatigue, but he was feeling unmotivated and lethargic in equal parts.

The teacher was working his way down his row, stopping to comment on drawing details and giving bits of encouragement and correction. This teacher was a good guy, a definite bright light. Obviously an athlete in his day, judging by his bulging forearms and agile body presence. Football tight end, he guessed, or maybe a wrestler. If not wrestling, then perhaps fencing. Some sport with the need for quick reflexes and sharp thinking, as the guy was also bright. So this reflection caused him to start back on his drawing, if only to appear motivated to the teacher as he came by.

"Jayson, how goes it?" The teacher's eyes darted between the drawing and the student.

"Ummh, doing OK, I guess. I like drafting, but I'm not sure how good I am at it..." He waved apologetically at the taped-down paper.

"Which structure did you get in the random pull?" They had each pulled a name from a hat two classes back.

“Uh, the main dam on the Saugeen, the one down near the Durham Road bridge.” He said this quietly, looking at the intricate pattern of freckles on his teacher’s muscular forearms.

“Ah, yes, one of my favourites. Not a building *per se*, but enough detail to make it interesting and all in such a beautiful setting. Did you get the listing of the design specifications for the dam?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve got everything I need. Just need to get down to it.”

“But I would have thought you’d be a little further along, given that we’re two classes into it. Anything you need to tell me?” The teacher leaned in a bit, his voice going lower.

The boy grimaced a bit, then smiled nervously. “No, not really.”

“Bit of Spring fever?” The teacher sported a sideways grin.

“Uh, not something I’d care to admit to.” He looked sideways out through the window, to the open field beside the music portables. There, in bright sunshine, were half a dozen Grade 12 athletes doing a variety of running drills and some javelin throwing. Boys and girls alike, they were in tiptop shape, and seemed to be having a lot of fun.

“Hard to sit inside and work when others are out in the sunshine. Doesn’t seem fair, does it?” The drafting teacher broke out in a broad smile.

“Is that a Phys Ed class?” He asked this genuinely.

“No, those are elite athletes. They have been selected by the coaches to go to Lake Couchiching over the Summer to attend the Ontario Athletic Leadership Camp. It’s rigorous, so they are in intensive training now to get in shape. I went to this back in the day, excruciatingly tough but wonderful at the same time. Perhaps one year you might be picked to go.”

“Hmmpf, doubt it. I’m just a basketball player, and not a star. But a team relies on its journeyman players. I have to admit, it is hard sitting here while they are outside in the sun.” He picked up his white gum eraser and absent-mindedly rubbed out a blotch of pencil lead.

“OK, here’s what we’re going to do. This is the last class of the day. So you’re now excused, forty-five minutes before the final bell. Take the time to go down to the dam and make some field observations. It’s a beautiful day for it and you will learn something significant from a field visit, as it’s always the way. And you can go out the back door so you can get your fill of those young ladies throwing the javelin! But come tomorrow full of focus and determination, and get your field observations down on paper. No more moping around—get out of here!” The teacher walked on to the next drafting table.

He was packed up and gone in under thirty seconds, walking down the quiet corridor of the business wing. He popped the exit door and was out into the delicious sunshine and soft breeze of a late Spring afternoon. He pulled up at the edge of the field and watched the three girls taking turns throwing the javelin down its length. Their male counterparts were further away, doing a series of reaction drills with one of the coaches. The young ladies were marvelous to watch, lean-muscled and lithe. They looked

over at him standing awkwardly on the perimeter. One of them muttered something under her breath, and the two others tittered. It was enough to move him along, but not before he stole two well-timed parting glances.

Fifteen minutes later he was on the edge of the Saugeen River, just upstream of the main dam. The flow was considerable, and turbulent pulses of water cascaded intermittently over the top of the dam in the center of the river. He stood on one of the side abutments, and walked down its length, going as far as he could without running the risk of getting his feet wet. Not a soul was out here with him, he thought, and he looked down the length of the dam in an attempt to gauge its girth for tomorrow's drafting class. A pulse of water came along and threatened to soak his sneakers. He thought he saw the form of a large pike, but he couldn't be sure. And then he looked upriver and saw a solitary figure in hip waders, casting out his line on a regular basis. The water there was very calm, and the angler looked unruffled. But just a hundred yards downstream the river was turbulent and angry. Calmness to turbulence. Looking further downstream he saw the river flowing along, light ripples on its surface as it went under the main bridge. Turbulence to calmness. He went back to the abutment edge and sat down, reveling in the day and the subconscious opportunity to contemplate the rhythms and flow of the river, and of his evolving life.

Learning a Trade, Not



The day spun out its beautiful afternoon, complete with copious sunshine and the lightest of breezes. After at least forty-five minutes of close watching, he was sure that the upstream angler had not caught a single fish. He would cast quickly, let the line float on the undulating surface, and reel in and repeat. There was a hypnotic rhythm to it that intrigued him. He felt the chap needed to be doing something, something productive, then he realized he was letting his Dad's voice come through him. He chuckled at this, then turned back to the outdoor vigil keeper, and began to see his fishing as a form of meditation. Staying in flow, while immersed in the river's flow.

As the sunlight shifted a bit, he decided to move on as he felt he had absorbed sufficient inspiration from sitting on and near the dam structure. The next day in drafting class he would apply himself diligently to the drawing task so as to reward his teacher's kindness in liberating him on such a fine afternoon.

He walked along the dam access road, mentally noticing the odd case of beer empties that jaggedly littered the beautiful natural landscape. Kids of all ages seemed to party in this town, and drinking in the better weather was often done in the great outdoors. He had heard exaggerated stories of wild bush parties out in a woodlot off of one of the Brant or Carrick township roads. With hundreds of kids, the scene awash in booze and drugs, and the inevitable conclusion of several OPP vehicles arriving to put an abrupt end to all festivities. He had been able to stay out of the zone of these bush parties and that suited him just fine.

He turned towards town on McNab Street, just south of the Legion's parking lot. He had never been inside of the Legion building, although he knew his Dad went in once a year after the Remembrance Day parade to have a beer with a large pack of veterans inside the smoky bar area. As a public school kid the Remembrance Day parade impressed the stuffing out of him, with its large corps of fifty-something men in dress uniform marching stiffly behind a smaller group of older men who had served in the Great War. He had to admit to himself that his old man looked pretty good, in his blue dress beret and blue blazer with its military medals festooned on its left lapel. His Dad marched formally, and it appeared to his observant eye that a goodly fraction of his marching colleagues were from the Catholic ward of town. War had not discriminated on religious grounds, with young men of all stripes pressed into service for God and Country. And just when he would start to get wrapped up in this, he would look over at his Mom, standing at the Cenotaph with a dress hat on and tears silently running down her cheek. Remembrance Days were tough on sensitive souls who had suffered a loss to war, and if truth be told, contemplated this absence in their life every day of the year.

So he thought about all of this as he went past the Legion's parking lot, and nodded at a few of the members going in and out of the back entrance. He noted that they all seemed to wipe the cuff of their shirt against their lips as they stepped out into the sun after quaffing a beer with foam in the darkened hall. And there was a certain hitching up of their trousers, perhaps after a trip to the horizontal tray urinal in the men's room, before they jumped in to their cars for a careful yet blurry drive home.

He ambled northward, crossing the road so he could take a peek into the loading dock area of the large feed mill on the corner of McNab and the Durham Road. This place always intrigued him, and typically had distinctive smells emanating out of from the docks and the milling area. Wheat, rye, sorghum, soybeans---all manner of things that had been brought in a raw form from some nearby field and then ground up into a powder for downstream city bakeries. A young chap with a dolly was loading a truck with large boxes and gave him an off-hand wave.

He walked back across the road and stood outside the Walker House, a 19th century stone structure that had been the home of the town's founder, Joseph Walker. He was a Scot who had come up into the Queen's Bush, and had gone downstream in a canoe from Durham. When he came to the clay bank

cliffs just north of current-day Walkerton, he had excitedly stopped as he had found the perfect spot to found a town. The Saugeen was still flowing past those very same clay banks, and old Joe Walker's house was still standing and looking pretty good.

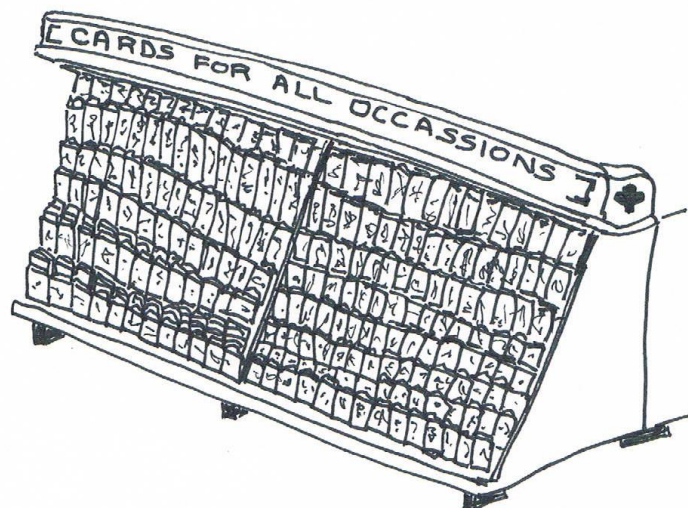
He heard a mechanical sound coming from down the driveway, and to his surprise he saw Vince kneeling and leaning into a wooden frame with an industrial strength drill. "Dude, what's going on? What havoc are you creating in the environs of this lovely heritage home?" He trilled this down the driveway.

Vince smiled and stood up, grimacing a bit from the exertion. "Paying off some extended allowance from my old man. He parties from time to time with the folks who live back here. The missus wants a clothesline put up so she can air-dry her unmentionables, and I am just framing out the stoop. I'm really only a jack-knife carpenter, but my Dad's even worse than I am, so guess who got the nod? But I wouldn't turn away an offer of help, as I need an extra hand to hold these pieces together while I drill through to allow me to thread some connector bolts."

"Unhh, not sure. I would normally be happy to help, but drills scare me a bit. Even more since I had my accident a few months back in Mr. Cyr's electrical shop. I was leaning into the drill press like a good fellow, and when I tried to straighten up, I realized I was locked in to the apparatus as my long hair had gotten sucked up and wound into the rotating drill. The only way out without a big fuss was to yank my head back. The feeling of getting your hair pulled out by the roots is not something you want to repeat." He scratched his temple tenderly.

"Dude, quit being such a girl. Tuck your hair back behind your ears and hold these two pieces snugly. Never fear, when Vince is near!"

Sit Down and Write Myself a Letter



Sixty minutes of intensive work with Vince had counter-sunk all of the bolts needed for the laundry stoop frame, so he tottered off down Main Street while there was still sufficient sunshine to enjoy. It was a day of partial hooky after all, so it didn't seem right to fritter it away on construction chores that had little meaning or interest. He turned the corner onto the shopping drag, intent on walking home slowly and soaking up the pulse of his hometown as it wrapped up another business day.

He stopped just a half block down the street, outside the town's former movie theater. The marquee was still up, but it merely advertised the company name of the business that had taken over the space, a paper products company run by one of his more studious classmate's Dad. He wistfully lingered, almost seeing ghost images of families lining up for a popular movie and kids ferrying popcorn and fountain drinks to their plushy upholstered seats. You now had to go to Hanover to see a show, and it had been this way for a while. One of his sweetest childhood memories was going on the little bus across the county line to see the Topo Gigio movie, featuring the sweet little mouse made famous on the Ed Sullivan Show.

He kept on strolling, stopping intermittently to window-shop at the ice cream joint and a fully appointed stereo shop. He slowed down at the funeral parlor on the corner, to read the card that announced the name of the most recently departed patron. Then past the furniture store, where he gave a shy wave to a lithe lady clerk he recognized from church. Outside of the TV and appliance store he stopped, ogling the latest colour television technology on display and fully operational in the showroom window. Something seemed intriguing about it and vaguely off-putting, but he stood there and watched a soap opera unfold in full colour. Everyone's skin seemed orange, and the blues were just too blue, so he made a mental note to congratulate his Dad on staying with the old tried-and-true black and white set cocooned in a heavy furniture frame in their living room.

As he stood there, with his back to the street, he had a vague sense of being watched. He looked over his shoulder and didn't notice anything untoward, so he turned back to the show. But the feeling persisted so he looked over his shoulder a second time. And there, standing in the entrance of the Wunderbar Restaurant, was a girl he had been in school with since kindergarten. He never had got to know her well, as she lived out in the new suburbs near the high school and that was the opposite walking direction to his habitual path. But as they progressed into high school, it wasn't lost on him that she was turning into a very pretty young woman. Not just pretty, but with a figure that would soon be drawing a lot of attention.

She seemed to be looking over at him in a peculiar way, so he shyly turned back to the flickering magentas and umbers of the TV display. A few more seconds of this and he pushed westward. At Joe Huck's barber shop he looked across the street and found her directly opposite, just outside the Chinese Restaurant and looking over at him. He cast her a bit of a frown, and kept on plodding, increasingly self-conscious. He held off looking until he was abreast of the library, and there she was outside the bank on the corner. Same thing outside Walker's Meat Market, and sure enough, she was still moving in lock step just outside the pharmacy.

This intrigued him and rattled him at the same time. Five years hence he would cross the street and audaciously confront her, hoping to walk away with the promise of a date. But at this stage, his hands felt clammy and he wasn't sure what to do. So to mix things up a bit, he decided to pop into the stationery store he was presently outside of, and keep an eye on what her reactionary move would be.

It was cozy and warm in the shop, with hundreds of cards displayed for various special events and celebrations. He looked down one row and his jaw dropped. His Mom was standing there in her all-weather coat, looking at a range of cute mouse-themed cards with great focus.

"Hi, Mom." He wasn't sure how he was going to explain his presence in the store.

"How's m'boy?" She seemed faintly distracted, a bit in another world.

"Whatcha buying?" He was just making small talk, thinking of when he could discreetly swivel and catch a peek onto the street.

"The Spring is here, and I am truly glad, but it's a season tinged with sadness as well. My Dad died in the Spring after a hard winter. And I still remember VE Day in early May of '45, mourning my brother who would never come home. So to help me through this, I've developed a little tradition." She cradled the cards thoughtfully.

"What's that?"

"I buy some cute cards. And I take them home. And I write them to me, as if it was my Dad and brother writing them to me. And a day later I have some nice mail waiting for me, giving me their news, and telling me how much they love me. And you're the first person I've ever told that to." The boy hugged his Mom amongst the stationery, completely forgetting the young lady who was now on her way home, wondering why she had been shadowing her classmate of so many years.

Late October, 1944; on a train, westward from London

"Next stop, Ascot Station."

The train started slowly, going past English homes with vegetables growing in the backyards. He had a 48 hour furlough, so he had decided to leave base and get out into a town that would allow him to experience something close to what he had left in Canada. A town on the smallish side, near enough to working fields and woodlots that he could get out and walk and get his thoughts straight. London was too big and too depressing, with its focus on survival. It had been a brutal time for most Londoners, and would only get worse. So the countryside seemed like a much more attractive furlough destination.

He got off in Cholsey, a small town that did remind him of home. He walked away from the station, hoping to find a rooming-house that would have a spare bed for a one-evening lodger. Two blocks away, he came across a tea house. Stepping inside, he was struck by the warmth and aromas of fresh baking, and the vibrant hello from the young lady who was tending the shop. In less than five minutes he was

well into a pot of proper British tea and a heavenly scone with clotted cream and boysenberry jam on the side.

"So you're in the service." She smiled at him and arched her eyebrows a bit.

"Yes, Ma'am. Canadian Army. Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Princess Louise's. He now realized she was the spitting image of Patricia, his girlfriend's roommate back home.

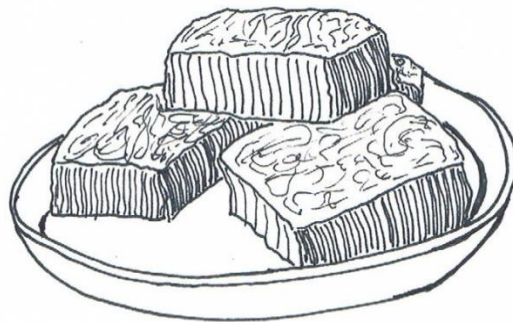
"And what are you doing in this little hamlet?" Her voice took on a playful tone.

"Just wanted to get out and see the countryside. Anything that reminds me of home. Would you be able to recommend a place to stay in Cholsey?" He said this earnestly.

She shot a sideways look to the back kitchen, where a clatter of dishes emanated from. Her eyes twinkled a bit, and she replied in a low voice." We're closing up in fifteen minutes, and I have a wee flat just three blocks away. I hope you don't think I'm too forward, but it's war time. My fiancé was killed six months ago, high over Germany by anti-aircraft fire. So I'm a war widow, I suppose you could call me, one who is slinging tea and scones until this thing is over and I can meet someone else. But in the meantime, I might simply enjoy the company of a lovely Canadian soldier. What do you say?" Her eyes flashed and she curtsied mischievously.

He gulped and turned red. But something told him he wouldn't be walking too many rural byways this weekend.

High on Life



A day later, he was walking alone after school and decided to take a slightly longer route home. He angled right at the triangle-shaped block that housed the Lutheran Church and went in the direction of the Public Library downtown. He rarely was in the vicinity of the church except on Sunday mornings, and he saw a couple of cars in the parking lot and that the entrance door to the Sunday School area was propped open to let in the warmth of the afternoon. He could see shadowy images inside, moving a ladder and picking up paint trays and rollers and drop sheets. He wasn't exactly sure who was in the

painting party, but he could have guessed reasonably accurately. Churches and volunteer organizations almost always moved forward with the dedication, donations and elbow grease of a small number of stalwarts. The old and damp Lutheran Church was no exception to this rule.

He walked along, slowly and methodically, admiring the details of the older homes and gardens. The vast majority were impeccably well-kept, and all were unique. The Lutheran parsonage on the corner was a handsome home, but looking a bit frowsy due to spotty maintenance. The Bank of Montreal manager's home was directly opposite the parsonage, a symbol of an earlier time when bank managers were moved regularly to avoid corruption and couldn't be expected to invest in an admirable property. The home of his friend was mid-block, whose parents owned the Wunderbar Restaurant, and where he had attended his one outside birthday party as a kid. It was a beautiful place, with a wraparound front and side porch and three stories of mysterious and well-appointed rooms. A little further along on the left was the Alton house, its butter-yellow masonry striking in the afternoon light and its antique window frames painted an arresting forest green. A quick look at the Pentecostal Church, quiet this day, in sharp contrast to the ecstatic speaking-in-tongues and near-spastic body gyrations he himself had shockingly witnessed through an open door during an evening service last Fall.

He came abreast of the Public School, and slowed to a halt. This place had a lot of memories for him, particularly the older south portion that he now stood in front of. He looked left to the kindergarten room, where he would have taken naps on the floor on top of a soft green mat with his name on it in black magic marker. The cloak room was right beside the kindergarten room, which always had high humidity and a curious mix of smells. The Grade 4 room, in which he had almost started a fire with a bunch of paper and a magnifying glass on a bright, sunny day. The Grade 5 room where he had tried to avoid getting entangled in a frenzied fight with potatoes, that had been cut and shaped into artistic stamping devices. All of these and many more memories seemed to tumble out of his mind and weave together into an incoherent but pleasingly nostalgic *mélange*. Simpler times, perhaps, or maybe he was just living in a coddled world back then. He remembered one of his classmates standing up on a desk, falling backwards and brutally banging his head on a cast iron heating register. The other boy was never quite the same after that accident, took three years to get out of Grade 7, and was now in some reform school up in Grey County. Poor chap had always been a bit reckless, but what magnetizing influence had drawn his cranium down to that hard metal surface? Could there be another universe where he had stayed put, or fallen into someone's arms, and was now a budding scholar with great promise?

These questions made him reflective and a bit morose, so he walked around to the back of the school playground, hoping to see some activity. School had let out a while back, and it was very quiet and subdued. He walked past the school's bicycle sheds, a huge covered structure, over-sized given the number of kids who actually cycled to school. On the North side of the sheds was where he had his first and last school fight. It was with a bigger boy who completely cleaned his clock, and in the end he wasn't truly sure what had prompted the altercation in the first place.

He saw some movement near the basketball court, beyond the first baseball diamond and the large swing set under mature oak trees. He walked in that direction, not sure if it was younger kids or someone like him dropping in to savour an earlier haunt. Within a few steps he happily realized it was

Lou, shooting the odd free throw and working on his ball-handling skills. Two girls lolled on the grass nearby.

“Hey, buckaroo, what’s up with you?!” Lou trilled this out in his direction, and the young ladies giggled. He thought he recognized one of them from his school, but wasn’t sure about the other.

“Just walking down memory lane, in this ghost town of a schoolyard. But now that I see you here, I remember many times shellacking you in a game of H-O-R-S-E on this very court.” He jogged over, signaling for the ball, and then arched it towards the net with a satisfying swish of the metallic mesh.

“Nice shot, man. But I seem to remember you buying the popsicles a lot over at Pitt’s Store, so I think you’re revising history a bit.” Lou threw up a soft hook shot and hit the target sweetly. The girls just sat there, wearing amused but goofy grins.

“Who are your admirers?” He said this to Lou under his breath.

Lou bent down to fake-tie one of his laces, replying in a whisper. “These are crazy chicks, man. One of them is in my history class, and the other is her cousin up visiting from Guelph. They have been saying some wild shit to me, so I’ve been hanging around to see what might go down. I finally got it out of my classmate that they have eaten some hash brownies, brought up from the city by Miss Guelph. They’re higher than kites and horny as hell!” Lou rolled his eyes.

“Hash brownies? What’s that?”

“It’s the sticky stuff from the flowers of a weed plant, scraped off and baked into a brownie. It’s like smoking twenty joints of weed, so no wonder they’re loopy.” Lou bounced the ball and looked over nervously at the two girls.

“Hey boys, now that there are two of you, who wants to see some tits?” The girl from Guelph rolled this out slowly, a bit slurred but lasciviously.

“Hell, ‘ya!” Lou jumped out of the blocks.

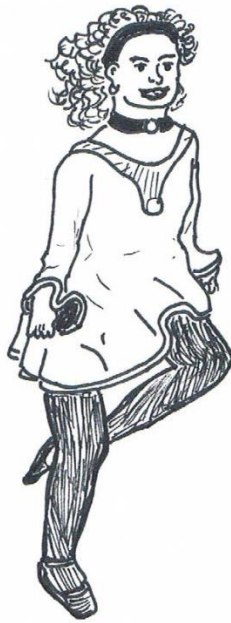
“Well, we’ll pull up our tops and give you a good look, but first you have to drop your shorts and nicely show us your dicks!” Miss Guelph was certainly quick on her feet, but this caused some muttered feedback from her more demure cousin.

“Oh for sure, we’ll show you the heavy equipment. But it will be after we see your very nice jigglers. Let’s get the sequence right!” Lou was enjoying this negotiation.

“Nope, we need to see what we’re working with here. Dicks first, then tits!” She stuck out her tongue, a bit saucily and with considerable appeal. Both boys looked over at the girl from their school, her eyebrows arching highly.

At that point they heard a push of a metal bar on an exit door, and saw their old public school principal walking over in their direction. Without missing a beat, the two boys took the ball and walked quickly in the direction of the downtown. Show and tell had been foiled by the impeccable timing of Mr. Spong.

Lodge Night



He left Lou just past the County Jail and the court buildings, each making a straight line for home. The bold encounter with the brazen city girl had rattled them both. As he walked on by himself, he felt a range of peculiar emotions. The girls had looked relatively normal and OK, but to think they would have popped up their shirts to show the two boys their chests intrigued the devil out of him. He had been very close to agreeing to show them his wares, even though he was pretty sure the only person who had seen his family jewels since his early years was his family doctor. He wasn't sure what would have happened if things had been allowed to progress in that secluded part of an already quiet school yard, and this was in the days when sex education in schools amounted to merely displaying charts of reproductive systems. So it had unsettled him considerably, and intrigued him in equal measure.

He walked on home steadily, seemingly encountering fewer passersby than normal and plunging deeper into his tormented reveries. When he was about a half block from home he heard the roar of a lawnmower, and wondered if his Dad was cutting the grass. But he was off by a house, and as he walked further he saw the neighbour's daughter pushing an old-school LawnBoy along the side of the home that had a fairly steep falloff to it. She was struggling a bit to keep the mower from tipping, and in the bargain was exposing a fair bit of cleavage under her pink tank top. She was a year behind him in school, was pretty quiet and didn't have much of a neighbourhood presence. But over the last year, she

seemed to have stretched up and out in a number of appealing ways, and this had escaped his attention pretty much until now. She seemed to be just inching along, straining to hold the mower in check. He slowed down in lock step, enjoying the view and not wanting to rush past. She gave him a little shy-but-friendly wave, turned around 180 degrees and started to inch back in the opposite direction. This allowed him to ogle her buttocks under a pair of greyish short shorts, and he did not fail to notice she also had a very nice pair of legs. He thought back to the schoolyard incident, and fantastically wondered if she might pop up her tank top if he showed her his manhood. On the surface it seemed unlikely, but he was intrigued at the prospect and wondered how he might explore the possibility if and when both sets of parents were away at the same point in time.

He slunk into the house through the unlocked front door, anticipating his parents might be out back doing chores before they had an early supper as it was a work day. He hit the sack with a vengeance, falling into a deep slumber with fitful dreams of young nymphs running in meadows with their shirts raised high. He woke with a start, realizing he had overslept and that he was covered in sweat from burrowing under a too-dense comforter. He popped on a new shirt and went downstairs to wash up.

“Did you just get home?” His Mom was washing dishes from the early supper.

“Uh, no. I came in through the front door on a lark and popped upstairs for a quick nap as I was feeling....tired. Overslept, I guess. What’s for supper?”

“Minced beef, cabbage and mashed potatoes. Made a lemon meringue pie today.” His Mom knew his favourite treats.

“Great, will just throw some water on my face and will be back in a jiffy. Not too much main course, please, as I want to leave plenty of room for a second slice of that pie!”

He sat and ate his meal reflectively, while his Mom tidied things up. She looked alright on the surface, but something seemed to be bothering her underneath. He thought back to the conversation he had overheard between her and Doris, and he felt bad once again about the whole situation.

“Doing much tonight for exam studying?” She was smiling gently, knowing full well he wasn’t prone to long hours of study.

“Nope, not at all. Why do you ask?”

“Well, they have a talent night down at the Orange Lodge. Grandma Flynn asked me if I would want to go, and she would love it if you would come along.”

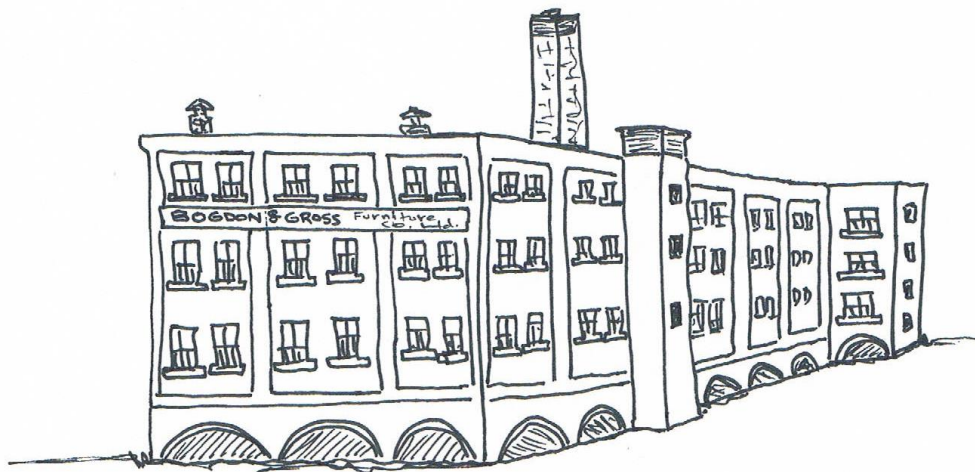
The Orange Lodge building was kiddy-corner to Grandma Flynn’s house, and every year it was the staging area for the infamous Orangemen’s Parade. He vaguely knew it was something hailing from Ireland, and that they were Protestants, and that they didn’t like Catholics. It would be some time before this kind of thing bothered him, so he happily combed his hair and went down Archy Street with his Mom.

The Lodge building was buzzing, with a full crowd already in place, seated on flimsy wooden folding chairs. Some Celtic dancers were up practicing off to one side, and the portly master of ceremonies was getting ready to launch the event. He sat near the back with his Mom and Grandma Flynn, and they were both in their element, waving at friends they knew and nodding to strangers. He could see his Lutheran Church pastor sitting up front with his wife and oldest daughter, and noticed they were holding one chair open for a latecomer to their party.

He didn't have much time to think about this before he caught an image of the pastor's youngest daughter whirling down the centre aisle towards her family. She was also one year behind him in school, and had seemed to change dramatically while he had metaphorically turned his head for a second. Her Indian heritage was evident, with glowing brown skin and a mane of lovely black hair, thick and hanging long to her waist. As she walked by his aisle vantage point, time seemed to slow down considerably so he could drink in all the salient details. She sported a classy pair of dress sandals with a bit of a heel, and a floral print skirt that was sufficiently tight that he could see her admirable buttocks flex beneath it. She wore some kind of bangly jewelry and had a flower in her hair, all accoutrements that were exotic and foreign to this one-horse rural Ontario area. And as the wave of her perfume hit him, he realized he would need to stay open to wider possibilities in life. It was if he had a precognition, through this lovely but haughty girl, that something distinctive and outside of his zone would significantly shape his life down the road.

And with that, the first round of Celtic dancers took the stage to thunderous applause.

Buried Rifts



It was after lunch on a Saturday afternoon. He had done a few chores and had been given a shopping list of things to pick up down at Sparlings. He popped out the front door, leaving his latest book on a chair on the front verandah. If he got the grocery pickup done earlier than expected, he would double

back and get some quality reading time in before he would be expected back for a second round of chores.

But as often happened on Saturday afternoons, the little grocery store was mobbed. He had experienced this more than once before, so he left his list with a sympathetic but harried clerk and told them he'd be back in ninety minutes to pick up the box that would get filled in between other less-patient customers. So he had some time to kill, and he considered his options. Public School yard?

His cheeks burned a bit thinking about the girl from Guelph, who might still be visiting. Pool Hall? Too nice a day to be indoors. Down by the river? Pretty hot in the direct sun. Then the thought of his latest book, a thriller set in cathedral-building England, came back to mind. If he nipped home and was quiet on the porch treads, he could happily while away the time unnoticed even if his Mom and Dad came in and out through the back door from their gardening work. He walked back in a jiffy and eased himself onto the porch and the comfortable chair. After fifteen minutes of absorbed reading, he heard voices in the kitchen.

"I'll take a tea, if you're making some." His Dad's voice was fully legible from the kitchen.

"Mmnnnph." His Mom's less audible reply seemed to be in the affirmative, but wooden in tone.

"And a piece of pie, if you have it." There was an undertone to the communication that made the porch reader pause and lean in a bit in the direction of the kitchen.

"Vmphm, syblups, YOURSELF!" The front end of her reply was blurred, but the caboose end was clear and comprehensible. The boy popped in his bookmark and listened intently, his heart pounding a bit.

"Why are you so goddamn chippy?" This was bellowed out, the thought of tea a distant memory.

"I have told you not to talk like that around me. I will not tolerate taking the Lord's name in vain." This was spat out, icily.

"Alright, alright, but what's a man supposed to do? I've been walking around on eggshells more than I like these days! You're sullen and inward, more often than not. How can I make things better, so I might see you smile every now and then?" This was said quietly, plaintively.

"Well, perhaps you need to take a look in the mirror. What would you see? Someone who never stops talking, who is always quick to criticize. Who can never shut up about how great it was to be off at war?" The tone and volume escalated synergistically.

A zone of quiet hurt fell in layers between the two. A few seconds ticked by and the boy sitting out front squirmed in his seat.

"But what if it was great to be off at war? Living rough, but feeling every corpuscle pumping through your veins? Giving Jerry hell and keeping the world free? What if that actually was the case, and I'm a storytelling man who likes to talk about that chapter of my life?" All said honestly, pleadingly.

“Maybe for you, but non-stop, day after day? And when you know my dear brother lies in a cold grave in the Dutch countryside? Have you ever stopped to think of my feelings, Mr. 410 Repair and Salvage Unit Corporal? How a Private with the Princess Louise’s never made it home on a troop train? And how your prattling on and on doesn’t allow me to let go of my grief?”

The back door banged shut hard and he heard his despondent father moving around in the kitchen. He would have liked to deke around the side of the house and give his Mom a comforting hug, but this would have meant admitting he was listening in. An eavesdropper is always in a conflicted position, so he thought for a minute and placed his book safely under the porch chair’s cushion for later retrieval. He tiptoed off the porch and headed south on May Street, wanting to put as much distance as possible between himself and this emotional confrontation between his parents.

He kept walking and walking, mulling over the interchange and seeing both sides of the argument. He knew his Mom was fragile, but he could understand this due to her losses and the resultant grief. He knew at heart his Dad was a reasonable fellow, but that he was emotionally blunt and did not take any great pains in reading the feelings of others. So he did side with his Mom overall, but was starting to realize the nuances involved in family conflicts, and the building of resentment when things were never fully resolved.

He had been lost in this domestic dispute reverie, and hadn’t realized how far he had walked. He was directly opposite the Bogdon and Gross furniture plant on the south side of town. No production that day since it was a Saturday, but fifteen or more men were working diligently off to the side, taking metal hasps and hinges off of wooden frames. They didn’t look like factory workers to his eye, and then he spotted one of his teachers hoisting up a door frame onto a work horse.

“Mr. Phelps, nice to see you. What are you folks up to?” He called this out to the gentleman who taught geography and had spawned his abiding interest in cartography.

“Jayson, good afternoon. We’re doing a scrap metal drive to raise money for overseas water projects. Service club colleagues, all pitching in. Rotary International. Good group of guys, and all for a good cause.”

“Where does this stuff come from?” He was genuinely curious.

“Bogdon and Gross, or Bugs and Grubs as we like to say, pulls out old office furniture to sell their new lines. And they donate it to us to strip off the metal which is worth something, and we chip the wood which is unfortunately not worth anything. Want to pitch in? Down the road you would be a fantastic Rotarian!” He picked up a screwdriver, if only to avoid thinking about home for a while.

Put on Your Red Shoes and Dance the Blues



Exams came and went. He wasn't really putting much stock into school, but seemed to do enough to get by and largely enjoyed the experience. The teachers in his high school were uniformly excellent, and he got along well with most if not all of them. He knew he was cutting corners throughout the year, as he was more focused on sports and the reading of books than the detailed work around an essay or a lab report. It was as if he knew he was pacing himself, saving energy and grit for a time down the road when it would count for more. But exam time was different. He liked the thrill of it, almost like a game. A huge quantity of material to go through, limited time to assimilate, and a short and intense examination interval to get it all down on paper. They held the exam writing in the big gym and this suited his purposes very well. It was as if he was going into a big game against a strong opponent, and with focus and daring one could pull off the win. So the end result was often favourable, and the heavily weighted exam score typically gave him a very good overall grade. This wasn't done with a lot of cockiness or ego spill, it was almost the opposite. Some inner voice had detailed the rules and rhythms of the game, so he heeded these with gratitude and kept his head down below the radar.

With exams over for another year, the cycles of the town went into another Summer period with little hesitation. Some people went away on vacations, some kids had formal jobs, and the rest stayed open for odd jobs like cutting grass or helping a farmer take in his hay. He was definitely in the last category, as his folks hadn't said much more about a Summer trip for that year. He was quite content to sit around the house and read all day, after a lengthy sleep-in each morning. Most days were too hot to work in the garden during the day, so he often helped his Mom out for an hour or more each evening with the weeding and picking. The sun was much lower in the sky then, his Dad was off to work, and the garden gave off earthy smells and buckets of produce for their table and for neighbours.

Today was a Friday, and after a period of picking in the garden, he found himself with a thick book ensconced on the front porch. His Mom pottered around inside on her sewing machine, and its familiar

whirring sound provided the perfect backdrop for reading until the daylight failed completely. There was some kind of dance going on at the community centre, and cars were pulling up to the curb up and down May Street as the facility's parking lot was probably full to its gills. He slid down in his chair and inched his book up higher, peeking over its top every time a car discharged its dance-bound passengers. To his eye the crowd looked like it was mainly folks in their early to mid twenties, dressed up a bit but not overly so. He was a bit like Grandma Flynn, hiding out on her front porch during ChickenFest, eavesdropping on a multitude of conversations.

A sporty blue Mustang stopped just up from his house and he almost fell out of his chair when he saw Lucinda Decker jump out, wearing a tight satiny top and form-fitting Levi's. She was on the arm of some tanned guy with white-blond hair. He looked very hip and cool, older than Lucinda by a number of years. Vince would flip his gourd if he saw this, he thought to himself. Another attractive couple got out, both smoking cigarettes, but they were nobody he knew. And last but not least, jumping out from the back seat was his cute cheerleader friend with the plaid shirt and its magic buttons. She had not asked him back for math tutoring, but something roiled in him when he saw her. He hoisted the book up several inches and dared not to look for a full minute or two until the group was safely down the block. Every line of text was tortuously read, as he desperately wanted to avoid detection.

He heard light footsteps on the porch to his right. "Good book?" She said this teasingly, almost mockingly.

His throat was dry, almost incapable of a reply. "Hmnh, unhh, hmmmh. Yeah, it's good."

"We're heading down to the community centre for the dance. Lucinda and Rob, and her cousin from London and her boyfriend. Want to come along?" This was posed neutrally.

"Unhh, a dance? Uh, I don't dance, really. And I don't have a date." All of this was stammered out.

"A date? Silly, I'll be your date! Now get in there and get some decent clothes on instead of those gardening duds. And tell your Mom not to wait up!"

Five minutes later he was walking down May Street, part of a cool six-pack where he definitely felt the odd man out. The corduroy pants he had slipped in to were definitely too hot for that particular evening, and the dress shirt he had hastily selected was in need of a good ironing. But setting all of that aside, he was absolutely delighted to be in their company. Lucinda and her cousin were sporting too much makeup, but they both looked simply smashing. The two other chaps were verbally challenged, and he got the sense that the foursome subset were all higher than kites. But Cheerleader Gal, well she looked lovely and bright-eyed, and talked a mile a minute as they walked along and found a table.

The band was a multi-piece affair, with two *chanteuses* in slinky evening gowns fronting the group. The lights got funky, and they launched into a spirited version of 'Kung Fu Fighting'. The nubile cheerleader quickly got him up on the floor, gyrating wildly while the band girls did visually arresting Kung Fu moves.

He knew mid-song that his corduroy trousers were soon to be saturated with sweat, but he mopped his brow and moved even more wildly to the beat.

Late October, 1944; outside of London

It had been a hard day of training, both mentally and physically. He was a tall man, in good shape, but not overly strong. Wearing a full pack, crawling through obstacles for hours on end literally sucked his remaining strength. Some of the other lads seemed energized by it all, others were stoic, and a few others like him were becoming dispirited. They were soon going off to war, but the internal reaction to this certainly covered a wide emotional spectrum across the regiment.

After an early supper of semi-recognizable food items, he went out on the parade grounds where he found his friend from the Prairies sitting quietly off to one side.

"Hey, Ontario. You look lost in thought." Steve said this in a kindly manner.

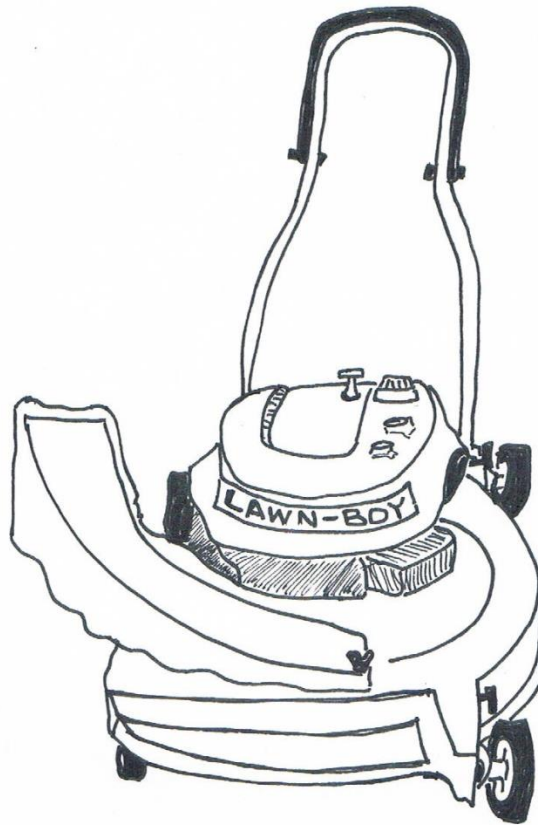
"Very astute of you, Manitoba. If the truth be told, I am completely whipped. I was so fatigued out there that my rifle shooting at the targets was abysmal. Not much of a soldier, I'm afraid." This was confided with a grim grin.

"Neither am I, to be completely honest. Farm boys like us should be back home growing food, and going into town on a Saturday night to keep the ladies happy. But we're here, and I think we should make the best of it. A positive attitude may mean the difference of getting home in one piece." Steve arched his eyebrows playfully.

"Hmmm, home. I thought I wanted to get back home, and marry my girlfriend and start a family. But...well, I've been mulling it over in my mind non-stop. She can be a bit mean at times...and she kind of guilted me into getting signed up. And...well, I've been keeping a lid on this. But on one of my furloughs I met a wonderful English girl. She's a war widow. My God, what a woman! Kind, smart, beautiful in all ways. When this is all over, I don't think I'll be going home. I'll stay here in bloody Blimey, and marry her. And start that family. I'm still not sure, but that's where I'm heading at the present moment. Ol' Grinelda in Canada will have no shortage of suitors."

Steve paused for a moment before responding. "Whoever is your missus will be a very lucky lady. But let's get trained properly so we can see the end of this thing in style. And now let's get some rest."

Love-Love



The roaring sound of the lawnmower was deafening, and he stopped to catch his breath in the shade of the apple orchard on the side of the century home on the 14th Concession of Carrick Township. This was the residence of his basketball coach, and he had been given a few odd jobs by Coach to earn a little pocket money over the Summer. One of these jobs was cutting the grass on a good acre of land surrounding the home, and there was no riding mower at his disposal. Normally a few hours of pushing the heavy LawnBoy would have been a welcome workout, but it had turned hot and humid by mid-morning and the air seemed closer every minute that ticked by. The discomfort was compounded significantly by the fact that he had had a substantial Plantar's wart burnt off his foot by his favourite horse doctor earlier in the morning. It had been neglected a bit, and had been worsened by the recent evening of sweaty dancing at the community centre. So prodded by his Mom, he had made an appointment with the leathery-skinned Doc O'Toole. The old man had made him cry out when he had pinched the sensitive tip of the wart in a callous and cavalier manner. The cutting off with a surgical knife had been a welcome relief, but the burning out of its root with a large Q-Tip soaked with liquid nitrogen brought him again to the point of swearing at the doctor. Application of some black tarry disinfectant and a cushiony bandage did little to appease him, and he walked out of the office firm in his mind that he needed to change doctors.

A more sensible person would have gone home to elevate the foot for the rest of the day, but he had promised Coach that he would get the grass cut today since it had been some time since the last cut. So he pedaled his bicycle out past the high school, and then on down the highway for two concession roads, watching out for traffic and baling to the packed gravel shoulder when a truck or farm implement came abreast of him.

So he was over half done the grass, but it had been slow going as he couldn't push down on the ball of his right foot where the wart had been. He had devised a funny rolling gait, putting the weight on the right heel and twisting quickly outward to the right. This was having some kind of negative effect on both his right knee and hip, so he attempted to minimize the twist and just get the job done without causing significant damage.

The lady of the house brought out a tray of iced lemonade and Peek Frean cookies. He didn't know her well, and she typically looked through him and let Coach handle the handyman instructions. But on this hot day she had on a multi-coloured halter top and a snug pair of beige shorts that distinctly showed she had kept her figure intact after the arrival of her two children. Perhaps he noticed this a little too obviously, but she stopped from her quick turning back to the house and fixed him with a steely gaze.

"Jayson, are you doing OK out here in this heat?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

"You seem to be laboring while you are pushing the mower, and your gait seems a bit off. Are you sure you're doing OK?" She softened a bit more with each sentence.

"I'm doing alright, I guess. I had a wart burnt off my foot this morning, and I think the bandage is slipping off a bit. But I'm compensating well enough, and I should be done and gone in half an hour."

This did not impress the lady of the manor. "For goodness sake, don't be ridiculous. Stop right now and go home and get that foot up! A sweaty running shoe is no environment for a foot that has been traumatized. Apply some ice and elevate and let the air get to it and dry it out."

"But I told Coach I would have the grass cut today." He made a motion to restart the mower.

"Nonsense. I'll let Kieran know what your situation was. He can finish it off after supper when it is cooler. And he will be impressed that you even came out here, and got more than half of it done in spite of your foot. Take a long drink and go home."

The pedal back into town was pleasant enough, with the effects of the iced lemonade and a good tail wind combining for considerable cooling. As he rolled up to his home he saw Vince waiting for him under the shade of the side silver maple tree.

“Bronco baby, just in time for some exercise. The new tennis courts up by the hospital are now open, and if we join as club members we get free tennis lessons. I’ve got a couple of racquets and a tin of balls, and we can be up doing ground strokes in fifteen minutes or less!” The older boy made a graceful backhand motion.

“Ooooh, rain cheque on that, dude. I had a stalactite abraded off my foot this morning, and thought I would celebrate by doing laps of Coach’s palatial estate with an heirloom lawnmower as my trusty sidekick. Not a great idea, in retrospect. I am going to go in and find a bucket of cold water and sit out front with a good book. But give me a few days and I will look forward to making you run your backside off on those new courts.”

A few moments later found him sitting on the shaded front porch, book in hand and a ham sandwich with amazing bread as its two bookends. He slid deep into his book, but heard his Dad come down from upstairs, rising for the day after a night shift that had gone past its normal ending time. Sometimes the trucks coming in from down-country had reefer trouble, and his old man’s time on the road had made him a bit of an expert on the mobile cooling of poultry. He heard his Dad greet his Mom in a desultory way, but didn’t hear a response back. There was certainly tension in the house, and the battles were often fought without words. Cold, steely silence is often the most effective weapon of choice in a marital duel.

Lucinda in the Sky With Diamonds



A few days later, he was feeling back in the pink and walked downtown via the main drag rather than his normal residential route down Archy Street. It was as if he felt the tug of some kind of pre-destination influence, and he felt both excited and expectant. This feeling was substantiated when he looked down the street and saw Lucinda Decker pop into the Canadian Tire store. When he came abreast of its entrance a moment later, something glued him to the spot and he waited for her exit. More than a few moments went by and he started to ponderously evaluate why he was lurking on the stoop of the store. But another moment later, he was rewarded with Lucinda walking towards him, yielding a shy smile and an off-hand wave.

"Are you waiting for me?" This was said in a much more animated tone than he normally got from this gal. Perhaps the night of dancing at the community centre had shifted her a bit.

"Hmm, nope...well, uh, yeah, sort of. I saw you go into the store and I thought to myself, why not say hi?" He spun this out awkwardly.

"Well....hi." She smiled at him, and he positively melted. She was beyond stunning, with lovely green eyes and high cheek bones.

"Hi." He realized he was staring, and couldn't think of anything else to say. She smiled again, as if she didn't mind his complete lack of eloquence.

"Are you doing anything this evening?" She said this quietly, but in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Uh, no, not really. Maybe hang around the pool hall, try to stay out of trouble. Why do you ask?" He felt something flip in his gut.

"Well, I have to serve for a banquet out at the golf course. But I get off around 8:30. The fellow I've been seeing has gone down to London for a music festival. I had to stay and work to keep my shift rotation intact, so I'm kind of looking for something to do after work. I'm pretty much open to anything, and it sounds like you're pretty free." She dropped her chin and looked over at him, almost shyly. He realized once again that even though she was gorgeous and completely out of his league, there was lot to this girl under her glossy surface. Some of it wounded, but a lot that could be wonderful.

"Right, sure...sounds great. Absolutely great. I got my licence last year and I'm pretty sure I can get our car if I ask my Dad in the right way. So I'll be out in the golf course parking lot by 8:25. And I know this sounds weird, but this isn't so much a date as just hanging out together, OK? I mean if it's a date, my good buddy Vince will bust my ass hard. He really likes you, and he would roast our friendship in a second if he thought I was even contemplating anything with you." This statement hung in the air and the young lady's visage clouded considerably.

"Vince is so yesterday's news. He plays in his cow band and has his little groupies hanging off of him, yet expects me to take him seriously. And this guy I have been seeing lately, he also likes to see other girls

as well. One in Kitchener, and one in London. I'm no fool, so why should I be treated like one? So call it hanging out, or whatever you want. It will be you and me in your Dad's car, and we can go anywhere and do whatever we want. And frankly, Vince doesn't need to know anything about it."

He walked down the street in a daze. His face burned and his mind raced, while his stomach did high-energy gymnastics. For good God's sake, he had a date that evening with Lucinda Decker! He knew he was a bit of a pudgy Momma's boy who would normally be reading a book in the low-angle sunlight of a Friday evening, reveling in its birdsong and anticipatory weekend rhythms. But instead he would be waiting outside the Golf Course dining hall, brightening when she slipped out the door and glided over to his Dad's car. She would reach back and unleash the ponytail that had held back her silky tresses of hair while she ran plates of food out to well-heeled diners. He would swear to himself that she must have undone a number of buttons on her white silk blouse as she left the kitchen area, as he could look down and see considerable cleavage with only a subtle glance. He told himself he would give her a snug and lingering embrace right off the bat, and interlace his fingers with hers while he held the door open for her. Once they were both in the car he would reach over to kiss her, and her black skirt would ride up high on her smooth and creamy thighs. She would then coo in his ear to drive slowly down the service road to park behind the equipment shed opposite the ninth hole where they would spend an hour or more in failing daylight exploring the wonders and mysteries of adolescent bodies.

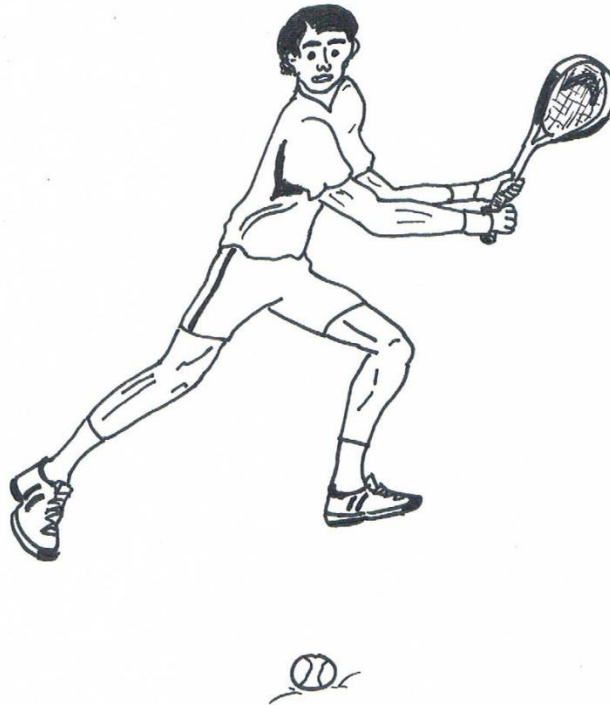
He snapped himself out of this anticipatory reverie, and suddenly panicked. What was he thinking? Was he kidding himself? The whole thing must be a hoax, a setup to embarrass him. Perhaps the ultimate practical joke, orchestrated by Vince, who would pop out from the caddy shack after passions were only barely unleashed.

He resolved to himself that he needed fortification, to be ready for anything that might unfold. He contemplated sneaking a bottle of his Dad's homemade wine, but thought it would be tough to drive if the date turned out to be authentic. But then he remembered the perfect thing to take him through the potential rigours of the experience. A few months back, Vince had given him an envelope with a small piece of onion-skin paper inside. It was acid, windowpane acid. Dissolved under the tongue as a ticket for an eight hour trip. All with surreal focus, so he was told, so perfect for a driving experience. He had never done chemical drugs, but it seemed ideal for tonight's unusual encounter with Lucinda.

He got dressed up, and put the wafer-thin slip of paper under his tongue at 8:00 sharp. He fired up his Dad's car, which had been requested sheepishly but given willingly. He parked in the golf course lot, a full fifteen minutes early. He looked out at the misty greens, and she was at the passenger door before he knew it. No lingering embrace or exposed cleavage, and she suggested driving out to the street dance in Cargill. Conversation was light, as he seemed to need every bit of concentration to keep the car on the road. Once out on the streets of the village with throngs of people, he became jumpy and paranoid. Lucinda sweetly grabbed his arm, and ferried him around knots of revelers. At one point he saw a catch-basin and felt as if he could easily slip through its cracks into its murky depths and dimensionalities. The girl smiled wanly at him, more out of pity than passion. She may have had similar experiences before, as she suggested she drive him home and would call her brother to come pick her

up. The boy lay in bed all night, hearing strange sounds and seeing the layers and angles offered up by light coming in from a street lamp. He felt strange and detached, and it would be a full day before he realized he had played with fire and gave up a great opportunity to explore the mysteries of a strangely available and nubile goddess.

Charging the Net



A full thirty hours later, he awoke feeling rested and strangely focused. It was as if he was walking down a tunnel, straight and narrow. Outside was lots of noise and hubbub, but in the tunnel he was moving forward independent of any commotion. He went downstairs and splashed water on his face, and the feeling continued unabated. It was eerily quiet in the house. He realized he had slept in, and it was 11:30 AM. He also realized it was a Sunday, and that he had been allowed to sleep past the normal hour for rising and getting ready for church. In fact this was where his parents would be right now, and he was a bit shocked that he had been given a pass on attendance. He had been ranting lately to his Mom about the perils of organized religion, so maybe it had sunk in a bit. Or maybe she had wondered if he was well, as yesterday had been a funny day where he had listlessly moped around the house.

He poured a bowl of cereal and sliced a banana over top, and saw a note on the table in his Dad's handwriting: "Vince stopped by. Going to play tennis. Wanted to ask you to come along. Said this would be your second and final invite. Told him you were under the weather but I would write you a note to let you know. See you after church...Dad'.

He looked at the clock. Downing the bowl of cereal and finding his racquet, with a quick pedal over to the courts, would put him there at noon. Vince might still be there then, so it was worth the try.

He came up to the new courts perched high atop the hill overlooking Centennial Park. All the courts were full and a few people sat waiting on benches. On the far court he could see Vince stroking the ball back and forth to Lou, and they both looked pretty good. He waved through the mesh of the wind screen on the chain link enclosure, and they motioned at him to come over.

"Jay, come on with us, you'll sit there for hours if you don't. We just got back on for another half hour stint. We can hit two against one, mix it up a bit." Lou was quietly in control, tanned and sweating heavily.

"OK, sure, I'll just get the old legs stretched and I'll jump in." He squatted and rocked from side to side.

"How's that bum foot?" Vince said this under his breath, while he waited for Lou to send back his return.

"Strangely, all healed up. That black gunk the doc put on was vile and smelly, but it must have had some amazing capacity to put new skin on top of old. So I'll put it to the test."

They hit back and forth from their respective baselines, with Lou advancing to the net quickly to put a snappy volley in the ambiguous zone between the two other boys. They got into a fluid pattern, and had a streak going of forty continuous hits before everything came screeching to an unexpected halt.

"So anything to report on the romance front?" Lou said this teasingly, and flashed a crooked grin.

"Me? Well, a couple of gals came down from Port Elgin to a gig we were playing in the Town Hall in Paisley. I was kind of sweet on the taller one who had an amazing ass, but she wouldn't go anywhere without her little mousy sidekick friend. We went down to the park by the river, and things got steamy pretty quick in the back seat of one of their Dad's late-model Cadillac. And I have to say, the petite wallflower turned into a real barracuda! They both went home very happy, thanks to ol' Vince." This was all said out on the open court, with no hint of a filter.

"Thanks for the too-much-information update there, dude. But I was actually pumping Jay-boy here." Lou raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Who, me? My social life is restricted to the library staff, who furnish me with good books to read on my front porch on Friday and Saturday nights." He hit the ball back at Lou with a certain emphasis. Lou took the hard ball as a volley and parlayed it right back to him.

"Just curious. My sister serves at the banquets out at the golf club. Works with Lucinda. You know how girls like to talk. But on Friday night Lucinda let it slip that she was going out with someone new, but wouldn't say who. So they got off around the same time and Patty saw Lucinda slip out and get into a

car. And the car looked a lot like your dad's car, Jayson." Lou delivered the last sentence with a certain twist, causing Vince to palm the oncoming ball instead of stroking it back.

"Hold the press. Are you saying Lucinda Decker was seen in the vicinity of Bronco's Dad's car, on Friday night? I was up in Paisley, playing chords and servicing the women of Port Elgin. But Lucinda and Bronco? Lou baby, are you in your right mind?" Vince scoffed this out.

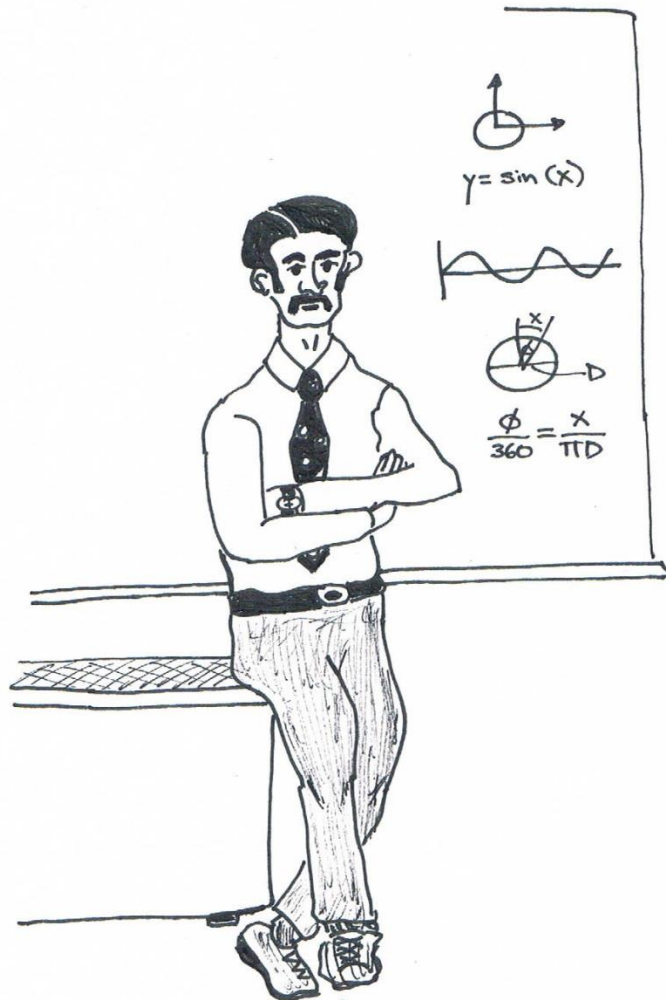
His cheeks burned and he sputtered back a response. "Not me, dude." His mind roiled for a plausible alibi. "Friday night was a bit of reading, and then I walked over to help my Mom at the United Church. The Ag Society had a fundraising supper, with half the proceeds going to the church and the other half to the Society. She had lots of pans to wash and get home, and she needed a hand. Golf course, nope, not me." He realized his voice was a bit too squeaky to be credible.

"Okay, but would it be anything to be embarrassed about? Lucinda is a future super-model, so lifting her home would be like winning the lottery." Lou grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yeah, sure. But dude, the girl's NHL and I'm playing Junior C." He shrugged right back.

"Good to hear, Bronco. Because if that were ever to change, you'd be doing a lot of explaining to me, while I busted your chops." Vince gave him a surly look and hit the ball sharply at Lou's head.

Changez l'air



The Summer rolled by lazily, just like the torpid currents of the mighty Saugeen River. He was content enough to shoot some hoops with Lou, or grab a bit of tennis action with either Vince or Lou, or read out front on the wind-cooled porch or keep his eyes peeled for girls walking downtown or in the neighbourhood. But it felt as if something was incomplete, something that might be around the corner or yet to be realized. He understood, at least subconsciously, that he had let something potentially meaningful slip away with the whole Lucinda incident. Why he had turned to that little slip of blotter paper, to sandpaper down his fears, he still didn't know. He mulled this over a lot, but nothing seemed to clarify itself. He even tried to call the cheerleader gal, thinking she might be fun to hang out with and perhaps proximity to her may rekindle some kind of tenuous link back to the goddess Lucinda. But her house seemed gravely quiet all Summer, a cottage commitment he surmised. Once he got one of her sisters on the phone but he locked up and started to stammer a bit and had to ring off quickly.

So it was one of those lazy afternoons, where the heat had set in and the whole town seemed quiet. He got his latest thriller novel off the living room shelf and went out to the shadiest corner of the front porch. He sat on a lawn chair, shifting a bit from time to time due to a sweaty posterior caused by the acetate weaving. His Mom worked quietly on a sewing project in the front room, the one where the Christmas tree was set up in and the one that held the table of Easter treats every Spring. Not much else was in there, except for the rotary phone and a long freezer full of turkeys and chicken pieces. But most importantly it housed his Mom's sewing machine, where she would spend many hours a day working on seemingly complicated mending assignments. She had taught him how to use a needle and thread, and a big darning needle for wool sock hole repair, but the electric Singer had always intrigued and confused him. He had given it a serious go at several points under her earnest tutelage, but when he had stitched right over top of his fingers a few months back there had been an unspoken understanding that the machine might be best left alone for the time being.

The phone rang but he largely tuned it out, focusing deeply on a juicy twist in the unfolding plot. He could hear his Mom's voice at a murmur level, and then his name at a crisper and louder pitch.

"It's for you, one of your teachers." She sounded expectant.

"A teacher? Cripes, school's a full three weeks away." He thought it might be Lou, setting him up for one of his trademark practical jokes.

"It's Mr. Lane..." This was said with a certain emphasis, and she cupped a hand over the receiver to conceal his reluctance.

"OK, be right there." Mr. Lane was perhaps his favourite math teacher, and that was a difficult choice as there were three or four teachers who focused on math who were uniformly excellent. And they all seemed like nice guys, and cool to boot. But as he lurched through the front door he was perplexed as to why he was being called on a stifling hot afternoon with the better part of a month left in Summer vacation.

"Hello?" His voice sounded too high-pitched, even to him.

"Jayson, Mr. Lane here. How's your Summer unfolding?" Smooth and confident.

"Uh, fine, good actually, Mr. Lane. How's yours been?" This was done with a tonal improvement, but still sounding nervous.

"Top notch. Listen, you may or may not have your schedule open for the rest of the Summer. But each year the Rotary Club sends a high school student down to central Michigan, to attend a leadership camp at a place called Copneconic. Great stuff happens there, with a mix of Canadian and American students. The club had selected a young man to represent WDSS, but we just found out he has severely fractured his leg. Camp attendance is simply out of the question for the poor chap, and it's going to run in under a

week. So the Rotarians are scrambling to find a willing walk-on substitute. Mr. Phelps said you came by the scrap metal drive some time back and the members were happy to have you pitch in. Do you see where I am going with this, Jayson?" The math teacher was playing this out a bit.

"Uh, no, not really. Do they need more help with the scrap metal side of things?"

"No, not for now. But they do want you to go down to Michigan, to participate in the sports activities and leadership workshops. They recognize it is last minute, but they're hoping you can sign on. You've made an impression on them, so talk it over with your folks and give Mr. Phelps a call tomorrow. He asked me to ring you as he's finishing up a canoe trip today and didn't have your number. But he knows mine by heart, so I'm the message bearer."

"Sure, I'll go. Be pleased to." It was starting to sink in that this is what he had anticipated, the change of air that he needed.

"Well, chat it over with your folks, and let Mr. Phelps know."

"No, it's OK. I'll be happy to go. Honoured. My folks will be delighted." His Mom engaged the Singer sewing machine, oblivious to the phone call.

November 1, 1944; Cholsey, England

It was the last furlough before they would mobilize to the Continent. They didn't know that for sure, but there were all kinds of hints being dropped that it was imminent. Some of the more brazen lads had taken to standing outside the mess hall and chanting 'Let's go, let's go, let's go', followed by a splutter of coughing and laughing. But this chilled him to the core, as he did not want to go fight, he just wanted to go someplace he could call home.

So he had trained to Cholsey, and had met his tearoom war widow at the station. Forty eight hours of passion can wear out the most erstwhile suitor, so he had begged her to come out with him and walk the byways and footpaths towards North Moreton. The afternoon was lovely, bright and sunny. And this was an apt description for his walking companion as well.

"I'm afraid I'll have to kidnap you, and tie you up to the bedpost until your commanding officer has written you off as a deserter!" She playfully jimmied one of his arms behind his back and gently pushed her chin into his shoulder.

"Ha, it wouldn't take much to go along with that plan." He spun out of her grip, and then drew her close. There was something about her eyes, and he himself started to tear up. Blinking a bit, he looked away and pursed his lips before continuing. "I've signed on for this, against the odds. But it doesn't mean I'll be going back home after all of this is over."

"What are you saying, Bert? I thought you had a Canadian girl waiting anxiously for your return. And a lucky young lady she will be!" The English woman said this genuinely, charmingly.

"War, or at least the preparation for war, has given me a lot of time to think. My girl back home is beautiful, but somewhere deep inside her lies a mean core. And I'm not sure I want to be around that for the rest of my life."

"What are you saying to me, kind sir?" She gushed this out, tripping on her words.

"That you are truly beautiful, inside and out. And after this is all over, I will find you at the tearoom. And it will be a 48 hour furlough, permanently."

The World Seems Upside Down



The camp experience came and went, and with it came the start of a new school year and all the excitement and anticipation that would accompany the rollover of the calendar into the Fall. September was always one of his favourite months, with the start of school and the opportunity to redefine oneself. Plus the Fall colours were starting to gradually turn, and it was his birthday month. Birthdays were not a big deal in his house, and this lack of tradition was being maintained, but as he went deeper into adolescence and matured incrementally the idea of a milestone each year seemed to take on more significance.

So on the day of his birthday, his Mom had rummaged around in the kitchen drawer and had pulled out a gift certificate to the WunderBar Restaurant, the eatery owned by the parents of one of his school chums. It had been won for best cherry pie at the previous Little Royal Fair, and it had a \$15 value. The WunderBar was certainly not fine dining, so this would yield a reasonable dinner for three people eating

modestly. So his Mom had announced this would be his birthday celebration, and to allow his Dad to join in they would need a very early rendezvous time of 3:45 so that his Dad could eat and get to work for 5:00. This sounded reasonable to the boy, but meant he would have to nip out quickly at the last bell and dash the twelve blocks to the downtown for the appointed time.

The day tumbled by quickly in anticipation of even this modest outing, and he was out the door and walking quickly at 3:30. He met his parents and they got right down to menu consideration and ordering of fountain drinks. Eating out was a very rare treat, and the drinking of something other than water even rarer. Within just a few moments, their orders for fried chicken and fries and onion rings and white buns with butter were taken by a diligent, older waitress. Pretty much everything on the menu seemed fried, but all entrees came with little dishes of coleslaw and apple sauce so this somewhat balanced things out overall.

They were done with their first course, with mounds of chicken bones piled up on greasy platters, and everyone asking for their free refill on their fizzy fountain drinks. His Mom suggested they all needed pie *a la mode*, as this was a birthday celebration. His Dad muttered that this would take the total bill over the gift certificate's limit, but the mother shot a daggers look that suspended all conversation until the pie orders were summarily given. They all sat there in that comfortable zone of having already eaten too much, much of it greasy or containing white flour, and the impending arrival of something sweet and memorable. His Dad tried to redeem himself and offered a birthday toast, and for just a single moment everything seemed blissful and quiet.

He looked out the plate glass window and saw Lou walking on the other side of the street. He waved over to him, and his friend and teammate stopped in his tracks, peering over at the restaurant window. He realized that his friend may not be able to make him out clearly, so he stuck his face close to the glass and waved again. He thought his buddy looked agitated, that something seemed a bit off. Lou raised his eyebrows and dodged traffic to cross the street, and was at their tableside in seconds.

"Mr. and Mrs. B., nice to see you. And happy birthday, old man, a little bird told me it was your special day." He said this jauntily, but still wore a frown.

"Will you join us for pie and ice cream?" His Mom graciously pointed to the empty spot in the booth.

"Uh, sure, that's kind of you. I was just rushing home to tell my Mom about what just happened at school. She cleans homes on the side, and one of her clients lives out in the country, and something terrible just happened to the son." Lou's voice was jumpy.

"Who would this be?" His Dad knew everyone in town and its environs.

"Tony Heatherwick." This was the child of one of the couples who came periodically to their church. Nice enough folks for sure, but the kid was a bit of a smart aleck and somewhat headstrong.

“Did Tony get into some kind of trouble?” The mother seemed very concerned, looking at Lou intently.

“They think he’s going to be OK, but he’s been rushed down country by ambulance. I was shooting some free throws in the gym after school. Then I decided to come home by the back road, and walked through the business wing. There was a lot of hubbub going on. Paramedics, bunch of teachers, the vice-principal—all standing there and looking mortified. A couple of janitors were standing off to one side, muttering under their breath to each other. I asked them what was going on and they said the older janitor had been chem-mopping the business wing after school and heard noises coming from one of the lockers. He had to run to the shop and get a pair of bolt cutters. When he opened the locker, he found Tony jammed inside. But here’s the thing. He was upside down. Who knows how long he had been in there, but his face was literally purple from all the blood that had rushed to his head.” Lou said this quietly, almost dumbstruck.

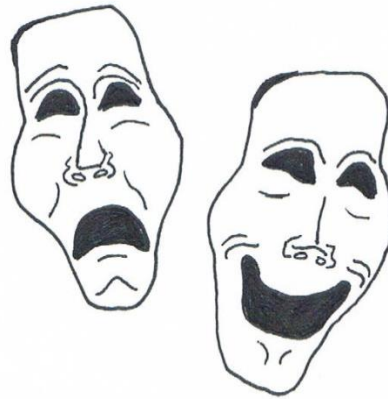
“Oh my, my, my....who would do such a thing?” The Mom started to cry.

“That was the question on everyone’s mind, once they had him right side up and had called the ambulance. It looked like he might just be OK, but a few more hours and it would have meant permanent brain damage. But who would do this? Hmm, don’t know for sure. But Tony is not uniformly popular around school.” Lou winced a bit.

“The stuff I’ve seen just a couple of times over the past week hasn’t been pretty. Tony is handsome and athletic, but not necessarily kind to those who are not.” The birthday boy paused for effect. “I was down by the machine shop the other day and he was out-and-out taunting some of the slower two-year occupational kids.” He paused again, reflecting on how much he should say with his Mom there. “The kids swore back at him, and he gave them back twice as bad. Some of these boys might be challenged, but a number of them are plenty strong. They have an occupational resource room just around the corner from the business wing where Heatherwick has his locker. It’s quiet down there, last period. A bit of jawing back and forth, and two or more guys grab him and flip him and jam him in his locker. They’re simple lads, they lock it up and run and maybe don’t tell anyone until it’s almost too late. Not condoning what went on, but it could be classified as a bit of frontier justice. From their perspective, take an aggressive bigmouth and quiet him down, boomedy-boomedy-boom.” The table went quiet, even as the waitress brought out the pie and ice cream.

“Thank God that janitor was there doing his job, and that he had good hearing.” The Dad always had a practical take on everything.

In the Shadows



The next day of school was full of tension, with everyone quietly whispering about the locker incident. No one really knew what was going on, but everyone seemed to have heard something or had a strongly held opinion on some aspect of the situation. A rumour abounded, that a gang of boys had done it, and then had gone to the machine shop to get tools to bang on the locker with its inverted occupant. Another rumour was that Heatherwick had lewdly insulted one of the Occupational girls, a simple farm girl from out near Pinkerton. She was heavily endowed at the ¾ line, and this had been crassly pointed out within earshot of her Occupational boyfriend, so that within minutes the deed had been done by the angry suitor. Other speculation swirled about the condition of Heatherwick, some having him on a gurney in London awaiting brain surgery and others having seen him walking around town with a certain jauntiness that came from a near-brush with Lady Death. It was a small town, and the conversation ebbed and flowed throughout the day around this single incident.

At the end of school, he had a bit of time before the auditions started for that year's school play. So he decided to walk around the institution's perimeter, summoning courage for the speaking part he was hoping to try out for. He went out the front door and around the semi-circular driveway that led out to the main road out of town. Across the street from the school was the OPP detachment office, and it was a place he rarely paid attention to. The town had its own local force, and he knew most if not all of the town officers. But the OPP was a different matter, and it seemed to him they were a significant step up in caliber and quality of character. He might see the odd OPP policeman get out of his cruiser and walk to the office, often with what he thought was a bit of a swagger. Today there seemed to be a bit more activity in the parking lot, and he could have sworn he saw a couple of the Occupational Program boys being ushered out to one of the cruisers. They were in the back seat in a second, but his sight distance was considerable, and he mulled around the possibilities and implications of this as he continued to stroll.

The auditions were to be held out back in the school's music portables. He took a deep breath, and popped open the metal door of the portable building. It was pandemonium inside, with scores of

students milling around and a motley pit band playing music at the side of the room, randomly and discordantly. He looked around and didn't really see anybody he knew well enough to hang beside or chat up, so he ambled over to a corner and tried to calm down and settle into the rhythm of this first-time experience.

Ninety minutes later, after a number of increasingly longer readings, he left the portable feeling elated. The director had been somewhat odd and definitely flamboyant, but had praised him at a number of different points in the sequence of readings. He left the building with a coveted red card, which meant he was in the running for one of the key roles. He had been given instructions to take himself and the red card over to the backstage of the main gym, where there would be some preliminary choreography and singing appraisal to assist with the proper casting. He thought there would be mobs of people there, but it was very quiet with just a few folks standing here and there. He sat in a comfy chair just off to the side and closed his eyes just for a few seconds.

A tall woman came out of the shadows of the backstage area and clapped her hands three times. He looked sharply in her direction, and realized it was a lady from his church. She was quite striking in a slightly off-putting way, and today she had her long hair up in a bun. She was married to a good-looking chap who always appeared a bit hen-pecked, and they had no children that he knew of.

"Young folks, my name's Vanessa. I'm the voice coach volunteer. The choreography director had to scuttle back to Toronto. Anyone with a yellow card is free to go as you will be evaluated another day. Only the red cards stay today." She wore black thick-rimmed glasses, and looked expectantly at the potential cast members as the dancer aspirants moved off and away. She waited a moment, and then cleared her throat before breaking out into song. It was sung in Spanish, or perhaps Catalan, and had a resonant effect on his body as he stood there absorbing its richness and cadence.

He looked around and realized he was the only young person remaining. This didn't seem to faze her. She kept singing, somewhat lower in volume but no less passionate. She walked to his side, and he admired her willowy frame as she did this. She walked behind him, and he resisted the urge to turn around, letting the sound envelope him from the back. He closed his eyes, transporting himself to a foreign land where a bevy of women surrounded him in a circle of song, as some kind of precursor to frenetic romance.

She touched his shoulder lightly and he almost jumped out of his skin. He turned involuntarily, and she pushed him sharply to the planks of the wooden stage floor. He got up partially, a bit stunned from it all, but she took one of her high heeled shoes and pushed him back down. She kept the shoe firmly in place on his chest, and he slowly looked up her thigh as it disappeared into a maze of crinoline and black skirt folds. She swished her skirt sideways, and he could have sworn she was wearing no panties.

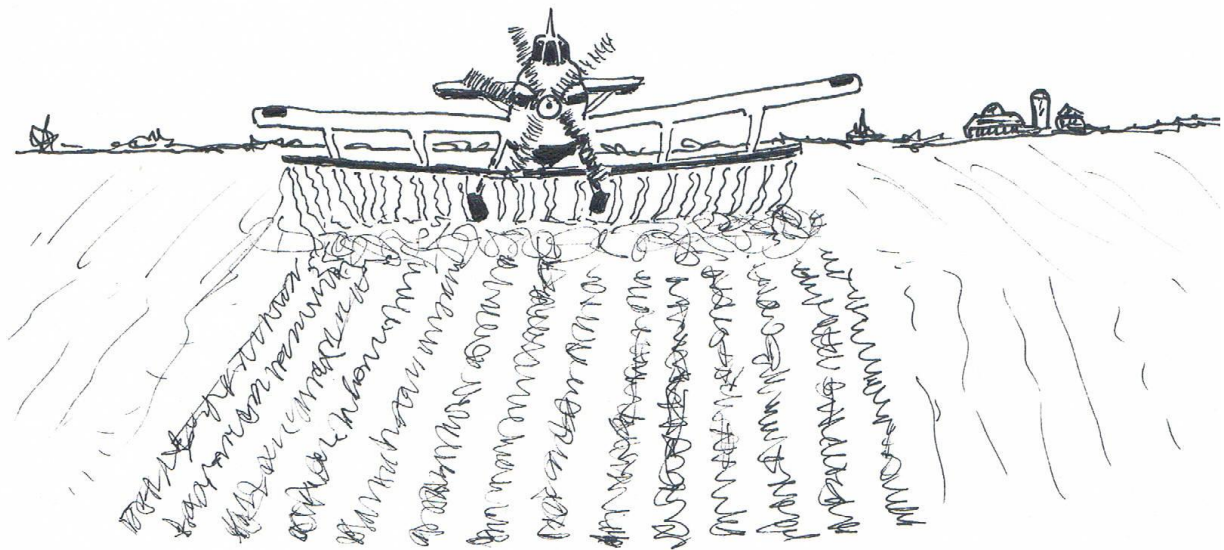
"So, you are here to sing?" She spat this out lustily.

“Uh, yes ma’am!” He said this as a reflex response, but it was untrue. It was indeed a musical, but he couldn’t carry a tune in a pail. This negative thought caused him to grimace, and she ground the heel of her shoe into his chest.

“Well, before we sing, we need to warm up with the scales of Love. This can take many forms, and we will start out slow and build up to a resounding climax!” She reached back and undid her bun, with her lovely hair bouncing downward past her shoulders.

A late bell rang off in the distance out in the corridor. He awoke to see twenty people milling around backstage with red cards in their hands. The voice coach volunteer, who he recognized as a statuesque lady from church, walked through the crowd saying hello to everyone. When she came up to him, she threw him a sly smile and reached out to pat him gently on his chest.

Not My Missus



Lou had been one of the red card holders as well, and was perhaps even worse than he was when it came to singing. So they were dispatched quickly, in a merciful kind of way, with the instruction to return the next afternoon for major speaking part auditions that had no or minimal vocal responsibilities. He and Lou bust out of the rear door of the gym, chuckling at themselves and relieved that their singing would be limited or not at all.

“I think that vocal coach likes you, dude. Did you see the way she was looking at you over the top of her glasses?” Lou wagged his eyebrows and cuffed his friend on the shoulder.

“Sorry to be called out on this, man, but that’s the way most chicks look at me. Hungry kind of, y’know, primal. I do my best to keep them at bay, to keep my virtue intact, but it’s a struggle, I tell ‘ya!” He swaggered a bit at this, and rolled his hips comically.

“Ya, ya, funny. I get my share of stares, and I know it when I see it. This lady wants you, dude. Why would she be a high school drama volunteer, unless she wants to bag a few young guys backstage?” Lou said this matter-of-factly.

“People volunteer for all kinds of reasons. Maybe she’s a good singer and wants to pass it on? She’s in the choir at my church, and she seems to really get into it, at least from what I can see from my acolyte’s bench back at the side of the altar. I’ve only seen her in a frumpy black choir robe up until today, but she did look good in her twirly skirt.” He said this slowly, with his eyes half-closed.

“I’m telling you, lithe and leggy she is. So keep an eye out for an opportunity, I think you’ll get a green light in a flash.” Lou smacked his lips.

“Dreamland, man, she’s married. I see her husband every Sunday.”

“Do they have kids?” Lou followed up very quickly.

“Nope, not that I know of.” He scrunched his eyes, trying to recollect.

“Ah, there you go. Churchgoers in a small town have kids. No kids probably means the guy’s impotent. Unsatisfied wife becomes a drama volunteer to recruit some action from potent basketball stars and budding actors. My logic is unassailable.” Lou nodded firmly, resting his case.

This kind of banter continued on and off, and they had cut down the trail near the subdivision that led down to the river. It was quite secluded at that point, and they walked along for several moments without speaking, both boys enjoying the changing foliage and the dappled sunlight under the tree cover.

“Shhh, do you hear something?” Lou put out a hand to his chest, halting progress on the walking front.

“Unhh, not sure, but maybe something.” He paused, and then picked up a steady, rhythmic grunting coming from up ahead. “Some kind of animal in distress?”

Lou rolled his eyes saucily. “I happen to live in an apartment with thin walls. That sound, my friend, is the unmistakable chorus of two people having it off!” Lou snickered at this.

“Having what off?” He was genuinely perplexed.

“Oh my God, having sex, bolthead. If we are quiet about it, we might just be able to see the show! Shhh...” Lou put his finger to his lips.

They walked on tiptoe, with bated breath, up to a stand of trees that would offer some cover. Up ahead was a clearing that housed a picnic table, at the end of a trail from a distant parking lot. In full sun, a man stood at the edge of the table, his jeans bunched around his ankles. His white buttocks were turning pink from the considerable sunlight. The woman laid back, her legs up high over the gentleman's shoulders. Both participants were oblivious to the boys' presence, and the man's energetic thrusting caused the women's prominent ass cheeks to quiver in the most appealing way.

Lou whispered into his ear. "I know the dude, he comes into our restaurant all the time. Man, I haven't seen such energetic crop-dusting in a long while!"

"I can't be 100% sure, but I think I know the lady." He bobbed a bit under a leaf to see her face as she lolled it sideways, letting out a satisfied moan. "Dollars to doughnuts, it's Mrs. McEwen, the Home Ec teacher. I could recognize her amazing ass in almost any situation. But what is she doing out here in open daylight, shagging her husband for the world to see?" He said this genuinely.

"Shh, let's not interrupt the show. But dude, that's not her husband. The guy works at the Ag Office, and he brings his grumpy wife into the restaurant from time to time. This little dalliance in the open air might be all they can arrange in a conservative small town where neighbours are always watching who comes and goes. And by the sounds of it, he's going to be coming soon! Let's get out of here before we get caught."

They walked through the bush to an outlet point near the Sacred Heart High School. The visual titillation had been both a shock and a pleasure, and they kept quiet for most of the walk home. Just past the court buildings and the county jail, where a few brazen inmates yelled out at them, they parted ways with a sardonic smile.

He came into his kitchen, his Mom with floury hands and the makings of a pie on the table.

"There's my boy. What did you learn today?"

His shy smile did not betray his inner thoughts. The ones that stemmed from the visual memory of Mrs. McEwen, passionately absorbed in some of the finer points of home economics in the great outdoors.

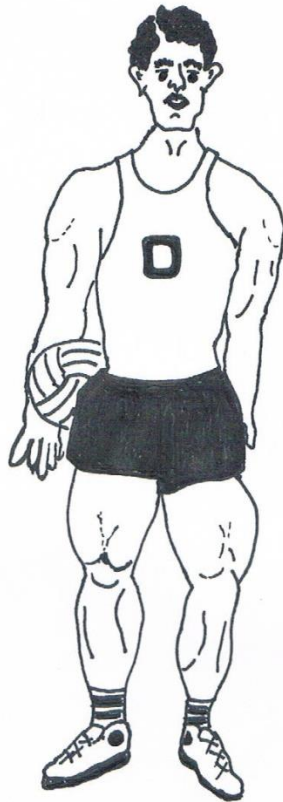
November 3, 1944; Southern England

They were up hours before the dawn. All of the preparations had been made, and now it was simply execution. By the end of the day, a flotilla of crafts would have made their way across the Channel, and many men in jeeps would have found their way onto the Continent. This is what they had come for, and this is what they had dreamt about for weeks. By the end of the day, many of them would no longer be alive. Rising above the French beaches, in a flotilla of souls moving upward to their celestial destinies.

He cinched up his belt, adjusted his pack, and said a prayer. He joined his regiment mates in the queues that would see them assigned to a specific vehicle. Most men were quiet on this momentous day,

pondering their role and what it all meant. He started to cry, just a bit, and then caught himself. This is not what he wanted to do, even less so each passing day. But he would go forth, with a goal to get past it and start a new life based on love, peace and commitment. The line moved forward, slowly.

Death Comes Knocking



Gym was one of his favourite classes. He was a reasonably good athlete, the instructors covered a wide range of sports and activities, and most students appreciated the break from conventional classroom courses. But every now and then, gym class offered up some experience that was notable in terms of the human experience. Like the time the farm kid from near Teeswater showered in his long underwear, afraid of exposing his private parts to other developing boys. Or the sight of more than a dozen relay participants throwing up their wieners-and-beans lunch at the side of the track on a too-hot day. Or playing singlet coed basketball against the girls' class, and having the opportunity to hand-check a range of buttock sizes, from the disturbingly gaunt to the cringe-inducing plumper ones. No doubt about it, gym offered up a slice of life in many flavours.

Today was a coed class day, and the activity was a modified dodgeball game affectionately called 'murderball'. It was led by Mrs. DaSilva, which was cause enough for celebration in certain quarters of his body. He had not bumped into her much of late, but he remained intrigued about what he had seen

way back in Grandma Flynn's basement. The picnic table crop-dusting the other day had whet his imagination along similar lines, so he gave Mrs. DaSilva a playful smile and felt he got something similar in return.

The game was simple enough. A circle of people, with one or more in the middle. Outer people threw the ball at the inner people, and if you were hit you had to sit off to the side. If you were an outer person you had to stop the ball coming from across the way, or you had to go inside the circle and start dodging balls. It was a game of quick reflexes---throwing, catching and reacting to the changing situation. It was called murderball since a lot of people threw the ball very hard and often at heads or groin areas. He learned to stay up on the tips of his toes, and his basketball training allowed him to pivot on a dime or to jump up or duck down to avoid getting beamed one place or the other.

One of the best athletes in the class, Pete, loved this game. Pete was a good-looking kid, and everything on him was fleshy and muscular. He had a large nose, and gargantuan quad muscles that bulged out on his legs. And when he played murderball, he became possessed. A maniacal smile took over his tanned face, and he faked his throws expertly, throwing off his target and nailing them with great aplomb. The ball was presently in Pete's hands, and he skillfully faked but held the ball back so that his target jumped high in anticipation.

"You want it, hunh, you want it bad, don't you Jayson old boy?!" Pete rifled a head-beaner missile that narrowly missed its connection.

"Cut it out, Pete. It's only a game, man." His voice sounded weak, frightened.

"Gimme the ball, gimme the ball." Pete motioned for the ball to come back to him.

"OK, big stuff, give me your best shot! Brains always beat out brawn!" He had his mojo back.

"OK, dipshit. I was going for your head, but now I'm going for your nuts. If you're so smart, we don't want to touch that pretty head of yours. But a shot to the family jewels, that's fair game for a wise guy, don't you think?" Pete's eyes burned like torches.

He danced on his toes, getting ready to shift to take a mid-point ball on his hip. But Mrs. DaSilva's whistle from across the way saved his skin.

-----X-----X-----

He came in through the back door of his home, the smells of a simple supper still lingering in the air. His Dad would be off to work already, and it should have been quiet in the house. But he heard muffled sobbing coming from the living room, and he shyly peeked around the door frame to see his Mom sitting in an upholstered chair with her head in her hands. "Uh, Mom, are you OK?" He said this quietly, almost wincingly.

-“No.” She burst out crying, stopped, then blew her reddened nose. “Did something happen? Can I help in any way?”

“Yes, we lost Doris today. Had a call from Ernie just after lunch. She had not been well, had been admitted to hospital, and failed very quickly. I had her for tea and pie just ten days ago, and she had complained of a sore chest.” The mother sobbed loudly. “She was a bit older than me, but still quite young. And a very dear friend. One who really understood me, and who offered her unwavering support.” A cloth handkerchief was brought up to an increasingly reddening nose.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. She was such a nice lady. Always kind, with a nice word to say.” He himself didn’t know what else to say.

“That she was. That she was. Kind, gentle, loving. She will be missed. I will miss her dreadfully, and Ernie will be just lost.” His mother sat up straight, dabbing her eyes and issuing a faint smile. “I’ve lost a lot of family, and now find it’s also tough to lose a good friend. One who was almost like family.” She motioned for him to come and sit on the edge of the chair, and he did so, awkwardly.

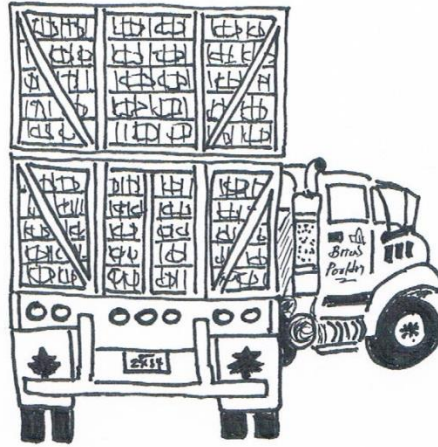
He went with his Mom to the visitation the following evening, at the funeral home down on the main street. They were let in the main room by a sober man in a dark suit. He gave the boy the thinnest of smiles, and inquired as to who they were paying respects to as it looked as if multiple visitations were underway.

They went into a salon on the side with perhaps a dozen people in it. He recognized Ernie, looking sad in a handsome charcoal suit with an ill-fitting ultramarine blue tie. A couple of youngish women in their thirties, one with a passel of children at her side, made a move to greet his mother as she drifted in their direction. Doris’ daughters, he correctly surmised, and found himself standing awkwardly off to the side and watching the play unfold.

No one seemed to pay him any attention, so he ambled over to the half-open casket. Doris in repose was lovely, her hair coiffed to perfection and her facial skin in death taking on a delicate translucence. She had been a fine-featured woman, and he unabashedly stood there and took in the details of her jewelry and clothing. She looked as if she was simply sleeping, with her delicate rimmed glasses perched on her nose. He wanted to reach out and touch her folded hands, but thought better of it. He looked at the flower bouquets behind her, in unattractive urns with garish sashes on them that said ‘Trinity Lutheran Church’ and ‘Walkerton Lawn Bowling Club’. He stood there and reflected on what life was and what death really meant. The shift was evident, but beyond that many questions remained. Where had Doris gone? Was there a heaven? Were its streets paved with gold? Did her loved ones await her there, the ones who had gone on before? And what does a person do once they get to heaven?

He stood there looking down, as if he expected Doris to furnish some answers, but the peace of the casket remained unbroken.

Throwing Rocks



Time slipped by quickly after contemplating the deeper questions of life and death after the passing of his Mom's close friend. The leaves turned completely and fell off, with several weekends of raking in cooler and windier environments than he may have preferred. His courses got more interesting, and basketball season started up in a gradual and steady way. So there was lots on his plate, but he felt a bit listless and wondered if he might land some part-time work. He overheard his Dad mentioning to his Mom that some folks were being brought in on day passes from the County Jail to work at the plant, so he chimed in with a question relating to potential night shift work. Within two days he found himself standing at the plant gate, wearing a hair net and a hard hat and a starched white smock coat. His orientation foreman was the older brother of one of his basketball teammates, a tall lanky fellow with the eyes of a hound from hell. He was apparently running a bit late, so the boy stood out by the gate and watched the parade of trucks going in and out to the kill floor.

It was not a new plant, and it seemed huge and vast to him as he stood there and craned his neck towards the roofline. The company did all things relating to chickens or turkeys. Fresh chicken, frozen Cryovac chicken or turkey, nine piece cutup for Colonel Sanders, and chicken feet bound for Hong Kong dim sum parlors. The fowl were taken off trucks by earnest and tough young men, and hung by their hackles on a moving assembly line of restraint hook devices. The birds were moved along flapping and squawking to an electric field device, where they were almost instantly stunned into a quiet and slumping mass by the high voltage. From there the line took them to a single man wearing hip waders and standing in a reservoir of blood, methodically cutting each fowl's neck with a tool that seemed part knife and part scissors. The whole plant's output relied on this one chap, and he dispatched a bird approximately every four seconds in an efficient and dispassionate manner. From there on it was a mystery to the common man, as these were the only pieces of the process that were visible from the street.

His foreman came on the heels of this reflection, shaking hands vigorously and a bit awkwardly, and taking the young man through the entrance door. He was introduced to the satisfying punch-in of the time clock, and they moved into the eviscerating room that came directly after the neck cut and bleeding process. His host was joking with him and a number of ladies on the evisceration line. The boy himself stood awkwardly off to one side, watching the fast-paced motions of the workers as they cut the birds and pulled out a range of organs for sorting. He looked up and down the line and saw that they were all women, some heavysset but a number of cute younger ones with good figures evident under their white work coats.

“Ladies, we have a new employee to break in.” The foreman worked alongside the women, nodding over his shoulder towards the boy.

“Fresh meat!” This was trilled out saucily by a brunette in her twenties with a florid complexion, and was followed by a chorus of tittering.

“Easy now, girls. Go soft on ol’ Jayson for a bit. Let him get used to things a bit before you start hitting on him.” The foreman chuckled at his own joke.

“I think he’s the son of the son of a bitch who guards the gate?!” This was muttered under the breath of one sharp-eyed woman, audible enough for all to hear.

“‘Tis true, ‘tis true, but many of you have been recommended for work by family or friends, so let’s give up that line of conversation.” The tall man leaned over and shut off the line with the push of a big red button, as chickens were starting to pile up at the incoming end of the line, due to the disruption from the conversation.

He stood there shyly, waiting for the foreman to finish up and move him through to his work station. He realized that the women working there were a bit rough, and their faces showed evidence of hard living and blue collar stress. Many of these folks were high school dropouts, but a healthy percentage were pretty much on the ball and were dexterous and efficient in their manual work. And a number of them were downright cute, with a couple of them showing considerable evidence of voluptuousness and earthy sex appeal. These two gave him a subtle eyeing over, and he gave back as good as he got. He knew instinctively these were not the kind of girls he was supposed to be attracted to, but he gave them a rakish smile just the same.

The lanky foreman walked him out to a large high-ceilinged area full of cooling tanks. Most of these tanks were filled with gutted and processed birds, and they needed to be soaked over-night so that they could be packaged later in a thick plastic Cryovac skin, with a considerable amount of ice water being part of their selling weight.

“OK. A simple job to start. But tough enough, and important to boot. Take a shovel and make sure there is a layer of ice on each tank that is six inches thick. Shovel to start, then smooth out with your hands at the end. Wear these rubber gloves to avoid contaminating the ice. Any questions?”

“Uh, I was hoping to go curling tonight with my buddy Vince out at the Curling Club. The sheets free up after 9:00. If get all the tanks done well and efficiently, do you mind if I punch out and run off to meet up with him?” He felt bad asking this, on his first night no less.

“Dude, knock yourself out and curl to your heart’s content. But get all the tanks done, and done right.” Mr. Lanky was already walking away.

The work went well at the start, but got progressively harder as the tanks got further away from the ice unit and he found himself dropping a lot of ice and the floor surface was becoming dangerously slippery so he had to slow down considerably.

“Fuck it! Fuck-fuck-fuck it!!” He heard a dark, bushy-haired man yell this out from the area just past the ice unit. He tried to ignore it, but the line was repeated with even more vehemence. Then he saw the man reach into a box of frozen product that was on a pallet waiting to be loaded onto a truck, and pulled out a large frozen turkey. Shouting obscenities to no one in particular, he twisted sideways and threw the frozen bird at a concrete wall as if he were a deranged Scotsman doing a caber toss. The specimen crashed into the wall, dislodging a few flakes of surficial concrete. The process was repeated over and over, with more shouted profanities, as some form of twisted therapy.

The boy glanced nervously at his watch, visualized Vince curling in a relaxed and steady manner, and realized this display of emotion was the closest thing he would get to the throwing of rocks on this particular Friday evening.

Odd? Even Odder?



He spilled out onto the street after his work was done, his back aching from the unfamiliar rigour and his right hand numb and stiff from handling ice for several hours. It was definitely too late for curling, and even if he had been out in better time he was not sure if he would have been up for bending, throwing and sweeping on a sheet of ice. He looked backwards to the security shack, bathed in shadow, with no sign of his Dad. He wouldn't be paid for more than two weeks, but he had the sense he had just earned some money with hard, honest work and he needed to celebrate this in some way. It was a Friday night, so he turned left towards the commercial district of the main street rather than his customary right turn to amble home.

Not much action out front of the pool hall, and he peeked in through the windows to see two or three tables occupied with fairly serious snooker play. A few older guys he didn't know, a couple of younger guys he did know, and the tall and dapper owner who had his special cue out and appeared to be decimating the competition.

He strode on to the Hartley House, stopping at the corner and looking in to the Smoke Shop on the off-chance that the nubile Cindy might be working the counter on a Friday night. In her stead was a sweaty and rumpled middle-aged man, with a cigar butt wedged in between his protuberant lips.

So he walked on, past Lou's parents' restaurant, which was closed up tighter than a drum. He looked up the street and saw the odd person coming and going, but it was pretty darn quiet. He wanted something warm to drink, and perhaps something to eat, but it didn't look too promising. And then he remembered that the Chinese restaurant was typically open late, to catch any possible business from late-night carousers experiencing hunger pangs. This was white-bread Ontario, still racist in many ways,

so no one flinched when they heard someone saying they were going to 'The Chinks' for a bite of food. The fare was generously billed as Chinese-Canadian cuisine, and was in truth not authentically Chinese at all. Lots of BoBo balls in their fried, puffy wraps were served, with a spicy gruel passed off as soup. Chow mein noodles paired with pork chops, or ground beef in some kind of cloying sweet 'n sour sauce.

The folks running it were a family, and they grew vegetables out back in a big garden and generally kept to themselves. Their English was functional at best, with a heavy accent that caused plenty of misunderstandings and some unkind mutterings from the rednecks of the area.

He himself thought the Mom and Dad were nice in an odd way, smiling wincingly at him on the street. They had a daughter with jet black hair and large, unflattering black-rimmed glasses. She wasn't pretty, but had a cute little figure under a yellow uniform dress that didn't escape his attention.

So he walked into the restaurant, hoping to score an egg roll and some hot jasmine tea. And some of that red sauce squeezed out from those little plastic packets that you only saw in Chinese restaurants. The place was very quiet, with only two tables occupied at that point on a Friday night. One table had a boisterous party of four, two couples out on some kind of shared date night with lots of guffawing and an enviable spread of dishes in front of them.

The second occupied table was more interesting. It housed a mother and son, and it wasn't immediately evident to him who they were as the lady wore a scarf on her head and the young man had a toque on, pulled low. They had their heads down as they worked on some bowls of soup. But then the other boy looked up, and he knew in an instant it was Tony Heatherwick. He had not seen him since the locker incident, and even more rumours had swirled around since then. Tony's eyes looked different—distant, cold and vacant. As if he had checked out to some degree. It reminded him of the time in physics class, when an exasperated Mr. Baker had taken a smartass Jim Lichter and thrown him up against the wall in the physics classroom. It was still shocking in the recalling of it in his memory. When young Lichter had pulled himself up from the floor, it was as if part of him had been separated from his main consciousness, and this was reflected in the same vacant eyes he now experienced in the restaurant. He felt he needed to be civil, and say something his Mom might say.

"Hello, Tony. I was awfully sorry to hear of your mishap, and hope you're feeling better." He smiled half-heartedly.

"Go to hell." This was said dispassionately, with the slightest hint of a nasal twang.

November 4, 1944, later in the day; near Beny-sur-Mer, France

The crossing of the Channel had been surreal. The excitement on the boats had been palpable, almost too much to bear for his sensitive disposition. The only thing that kept him together was the calming presence of Steve, who said very little but kept giving him a tight-lipped smile and a raise of the eyebrows that cumulatively told him that it would all work out in the end.

When they had been fifty metres offshore of the beach, things really started to bog down. Planes hung low in the sky, strafing the beach and near-shore with aggressive fire. He had been assigned to a jeep that had been modified to haul provisions for the mess tent. He and Steve and four other men huddled in the back with the provisions while the driver zigged and zagged, to avoid the heaviest fire from above and the obstacles of stalled vehicles and fallen bodies on the beach. The driver gunned the vehicle when they came onto dry land, and drove like a madman in case the strafing was done on a wider swath. They all sat in stunned silence, looking out intermittently at the back of the frenetic driver's head.

Twenty minutes later they came up to a fork in the road, where a British military policeman stood nonchalantly, directing traffic.

"We were told to go to Caen." The Canadian driver spat this out, but with some degree of uncertainty.

"Change of plans, squire. Caen may not yet be a safe place to be." The accent on the officer was downright plummy. "We're marshalling our resources in the nearby village." He pointed towards a distant church. "Keep yon spire in sight and you can't go wrong. Actually, not a bad way to lead one's life." He lit a pipe and waved the truck on.

Summer Days in Late December



It seemed hotter than it should have been that time of year. He wasn't much of a swimmer, but it appeared to him that he was floating in the Saugeen River near one of the very small islands opposite the Clay Banks. These were fairly steep cliffs of slippery soil that rose sharply from the river as it bent sinuously north of the downtown. Sometimes boys would bring an old tub along from one of their basements and use it to haul water up from the river's edge to create a slick natural slide that they would zip down on and plunge into the meandering river.

On this day it was also very muggy, and he was glad for the opportunity to immerse himself in the cooling waters just north of the island. He wasn't sure if he had something buoyant under him or if he had suddenly become very adept at treading water, but at that point it didn't matter. All of his attention was directed to the river's edge at the base of the clay banks, because a trio of femininity had just appeared out of nowhere. There were two girls and a woman, and they all wore pink T-shirts and cutoff jean shorts, in some kind of tribute to a Daisy Duke uniform for a waitress in a Southern roadhouse. It appeared to him, with some degree of uncertainty due to their hair being pulled back in tight ponytails and the wearing of oversized sunglasses, that it was Lucinda Decker, her cheerleader friend and Mrs. McEwen of Home Ec class. And if this wasn't of significant interest already, they started to wade a bit into the water, splashing each other and twirling playfully. The cheerleader yelled loudly, and started to spray both Lucinda and the teacher with considerable water from repeated flails of her hands in their direction. The pink T-shirt material started to cling in the most appealing way, and they boisterously removed their tops and used them as water whips to send a good soaking back in the direction of the cheerleader. Within a few seconds he was looking at a veritable Goldilocks selection of jiggling breast flesh---Lucinda's large and meaty orbs, Mrs. McEwen's pert and pointy delights, and the cheerleader's well-shaped intermediate-sized dangles with over-sized nipples that seemed to point outwards and upwards. He could not believe his luck, and couldn't decide upon which person to focus his attention on so he flitted from one visual feast to the next.

But when Mrs. McEwen turned around saucily, and dropped her jean shorts to her ankles, he almost lost his mind. Her large buttocks glistened in the sun, and she swayed them provocatively from side to side. Lucinda splashed water up on them, and the cheerleader rang down a series of light spanks that made the flesh quiver in the direct sunlight. He was almost deranged with lust, and he started to swim towards the naughty trio. The two girls had now also slipped out of their shorts, and bent and twisted in the most seductive of ways. If he was quiet about it, he could come right up to them without fanfare and perhaps join in on the spanking fun.

"Should be in Wiarton in another twenty minutes." His Dad's voice broke him out of his backseat napping state. He looked outside to the white and frozen fields south of the hamlet of Oxenden. He blinked twice, attempting to bring back the images of female flesh warmed by Summer sunshine and cooled by rushing river water.

His Dad never drove the family car during the Winter, putting it up on blocks and taking the insurance off the vehicle. Salt tends to eat up a car, and there was also money to be saved in the avoided gas purchases and insurance payments. But by tradition, his Mom needed to see her eldest sister in Wiarton for Christmas dinner. Eighteen years separated their births, but they were very close. So if the weather looked clear, his Dad would call the insurance agent for a one-day coverage, and off they would roll northward.

As he flopped around the backseat, trying to wake up fully, he could see his Mom's jaw line set in the firmest of ways. Things had continued to be frosty between his Mom and Dad, and an hour long car journey with no conversation seemed to be an eternity to his reckoning. He would ask a question to his

Dad about something practical or farming related, and get back a gruff reply. Or he could ask pretty well anything to his Mom and she would turn sideways and reply in a gentle and patient tone. But no conversation went on between the two in the front seat, although if body language counted there was lots going on.

They made their way into Wiarton, going past the Propeller Club and the various edge-of-town motels that supported Summer cottage traffic and February groundhog watchers. The town had a beautiful setting, nestled in the Niagara Escarpment and opening up into the reaches of Colpoy Bay. They went down the hill into the December-quiet downtown, and turned left at the Post Office for the steep ascent to the street at the edge of the brow. The Presbyterian church was on the corner, with the Catholic church directly opposite. His Aunt lived two doors down on the Catholic church side, and from her front window she had a drop-dead gorgeous view of the blue waters of Colpoy Bay. Two more doors down was a retirement home, where his maternal grandmother had spent her last days after the war.

They rolled into the driveway. A late model Chrysler was already there, the car of his Aunt's son, a bachelor cattle farmer from further up the Peninsula. This was the boy's first cousin, but twenty five years or more separated them in age. They went in the back door to the kitchen and the smells of chicken and stuffing, stewing cranberries and Christmas pudding all came to his nose in a riotous tumble. His Aunt came up to him and gave him a crushing hug, and this was followed by a lingering handshake from his older cousin. Food and family and holidays, all combined into a mosaic of experiences that would be carried forward over the years and remembered fondly.

Odd Ducks



The Winter tumbled by in a predictable fashion. Plenty of lake-effect snow, followed by days of sharp cold and impossibly bright sunshine. Lots of snow shoveling to stay fit, plus walking to school and work on crunchy-snow roadways. He had snowmobile boots, with blue thermal liners that were pulled out every night and dried and warmed on inch-square dowelling that had been thrust into one of the hot air grates. His yellow ski jacket was now reasonably well-fitting after he had grown and fleshed out, and he had an assortment of scarves, toques and mitts to keep him quite warm as he made his way here and there. It was Canada, but it seemed like no one really loved Winter except the skiers and snowmobilers. The streets were largely quiet, as people hibernated indoors and watched TV or caught up on their reading or knitting.

School was certainly a blessing in those Winter months, and the West Side Story rehearsals were the best part of each school day. Performances were still a long way off in the second week of May, but each day saw scene rehearsal and choreography practice that were both fun and a bit nerve-wracking. His role as Riff, the leader of the American gang known as The Jets, had a lot of speaking lines and at least two key dance scenes to keep him on his toes. The choreographer was sweet, and tough as nails at the same time. He and all the other boys had a huge crush on her, for her limpid eyes and lithe figure, but also because of the endearing way in which she treated the entire cast. His dance partner for the big throws and jumps was a quiet girl from a grade down, who didn't have much to say but was malleable and fluid enough to cover for his many gaffes and missteps. Thank God his singing parts had

been reassigned to the character called Action, who had a nice voice and had been his main competitor in the auditions for Riff.

One late afternoon in mid-March, with lengthening days and a bit of mildness in the air, a number of the cast mates decided that they would go downtown to the Central Hotel for a beer before going home for the evening. All were underage, but this didn't seem to matter to any of them. The Central was the third drinking establishment in the downtown, and the furthest away from the cop shop so it was thought to be the easiest place for young roustabouts to avoid detection. He went along mainly to get a ride downtown, and thought he might actually go in for a beer if the girl who was playing the character of Anita was in the group. He hadn't seen much of her since that day outside the card store, but had certainly caught enough glimpses of her during rehearsals to keep more than an interested eye out for an opportunity to talk to her. Made up as a Puerto Rican stunner, with flowers in her hair and gaudy jewelry and a low cut dress, she was simply breathtaking. But she had evidently gone home for an early evening, as he stood in the Central's parking lot and watched the last car empty out its occupants. People were streaming inside giddily, so he slyly started to walk down Main Street without even offering an excuse for not going in to the hotel.

Shops were closing up, and the winding down of another day and all of its attendant practices caught his attention as he walked along. He knew many of the people who were locking up storefronts, and he gave most if not all a friendly wave or a called-out hello. At the Packers plant he trained a well-practiced eye down the street in the direction of the security shack, but no silhouette of his Dad was evident. A block further west he came to the main bridge over the Saugeen. He decided that he had a few minutes to spare, rationalizing that he could easily have been back in a smoky hotel lounge with a bunch of boisterous young thespians all talking at the same time. So he strolled mid-bridge, and looked down to see the rushing waters just starting to emerge from their icy covering. The river was black and mysterious in the waning light, more like oil than water. He stood there mesmerized, in his head, until he felt something at his right elbow.

"Beep, beep." The youngest kid from the poor family who lived in a rundown house in the floodplain of the park was almost on top of him, throwing a crooked grin that showed evidence of several missing teeth. Behind him came his two older brothers, pushing a makeshift dolly across the rutted ice surface. The two older brothers were equally rough, but even more menacing.

"Get the fuck off our bridge!" The older boy said this matter-of-factly, dismissively waving his hand while pushing the cart.

"I'm just looking at the water, George. Plenty of room for you guys to pass." It took every ounce of self-control to make this sound nonchalant.

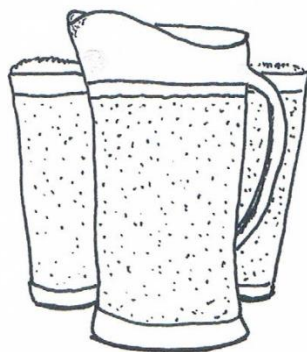
"Nope, we're the only people who live north of the river, so this bridge is ours. Get off it, now." The middle boy said this loudly, his eyes flashing.

“No, fuck you and anyone who looks like you. The cops just passed by, going north. They’ll loop around momentarily and your asses will be mincemeat when I flag down the cruiser. And what are you guys rolling on the cart, anyway?” He pointed down to two fuel containers, one missing its cap and having a bright-red kerchief stuck into its pour neck.

The older boy reasserted himself. “You’ll be swimming in that cold river before any cruiser comes to see you go over the side, so stand away so we can get to our business.” The river viewer reluctantly stepped backwards onto the bridge deck, not wanting to take any chance of getting bumped over the rail. The three brothers trundled along, looking back suspiciously as he watched their progress. When they got to the town side of the bridge, they wheeled up the cart and crossed the road, quickly going behind the receiving dock of the Canadian Tire store

He started on his way home, and when he got to the end of the bridge, curiosity got the better of him. He stole across to the other side, and tracked low along the rear wall of the store in his best Hardy Boys investigative stance. He pulled up short at the corner to the loading dock, and slowly peered around its edge. The store was closed, but there was a car there with its trunk open. The fuel containers were being loaded into the trunk by the two older brothers, while the youngest brother posed as an ineffective lookout. The driver of the car stood with his face concealed by the hood of his jacket. He gave a ten dollar bill to the oldest brother, and turned sideways to nod to the youngest one who stood off to the side. In that instant, the boy peering from around the corner saw that it was Dave Cooper, the eccentric neighbor who liked to hang around the Spool and Bobbin. Why on earth would Dave Cooper be buying fuel from the Draymeister boys? He pivoted quickly and hustled home, thinking feverishly but coming to no conclusions.

It’s Time, Gentlemen, Please



It was a Thursday night, well into April with signs of early Spring weather. Considerable snowmelt had occurred, early indicators of bountiful garden life were appearing, and primary school kids were playing marbles. He had dashed home for an early supper, so he could get started on the write-up for an extensive physics lab. School work was starting to become a bit more serious, and interesting, if the

truth be told. His Mom or Dad would never ask him about school work, with not the least bit of pressure or interest it seemed. So it was up to him to stay focused and get things done well and on time. He loved sports and part-time work more than school, but he realized subtly that school success was going to allow him to go off to university and get out of this town.

So by 8:00 or so he had finalized the calculations and the writing, and had pulled everything into a reasonable whole for hand-in. He zipped upstairs and put on his corduroy trousers and a reddish velour shirt. He used an old brush with his matted hair wedged into it to moderately tame his substantive tresses.

"You're all dressed up." His Mom was working at her sewing machine.

"Uh, not really. Lou is picking me up and we're going to see some friends."

"Nice. Not too late, you have school tomorrow."

He stood outside on the back stoop, with his brunt umber windbreaker unzipped, to avoid more questions. Lou had just got his license, and to celebrate they had made plans to go out for an illegal beer at the hotel in the hamlet of Chepstow.

Lou rolled up in a late-model Chevy, windows down, flashing a peace sign. "Get in hombre, it's time to let Uncle Lou show you a good time. Better to drink a bit out of town, so the local wags don't see us and report back to the parents. Small town living is great, but no secrets stay that way for long!" They zoomed off quickly and turned up the steep west hill out of town.

"My sources tell me that the Chepstow Hotel is the preferred watering hole for beautiful women. With luck, we may even get a few university students back home from their final exams, thirsty for beer and hungry for love!" Jim smacked his lips and his eyes danced.

"I was kind of hoping Lucinda might be out, and maybe my little cheerleader gal." He surprised himself at the syrupy tone of his voice.

"Dude, just some advice. Leave Lucinda for Vince, if you value your friendship and the evenness of your teeth. She's way out of your league anyways, so abandon hope now and all will be good." Lou went quiet and serious.

They parked beside the hotel and started to walk down the crunchy gravel laneway to the main doors. They could hear cheers and a lot of boisterousness emanating from the old, historic building.

When they went inside, everything seemed to amp up tenfold in terms of decibels and temperature. The place was packed to the rafters, with a chugging competition going on at the bar and spirited games of shuffleboard and darts being played out in front of throngs of engaged onlookers. Lou and he looked around somewhat bewilderedly and came to the same conclusion at exactly the same time. Beyond a

buxom older lady with a huge hair bun serving behind the bar, everyone else in the establishment was male. They retreated off to a side room, which was busy enough, but at least sufficiently quiet to talk and order a pitcher of beer.

“Wow, so this is what goes on out here in the country?” He said this matter-of-factly.

“Patience, knave, patience. Good-looking women take pains with their appearance, and always show up a bit late. Good things come to those who wait.”

The beer was brought out with a good head of foam, and two elegant draft glasses, by the proprietor who had glistening beads of perspiration on his forehead and a smile on his face. “Lads, nice to see you. \$3.50 for the pitcher, please and thank you.” This was said with some kind of British accent.

They were perhaps two good sips into the first glass when the owner came back to them, serious as a church deacon. “Lads, don’t mean to rush you out. If you have reached the age of majority, please slowly quaff your beer. But if you might be underage, I suggest bottoms up and pass any residuals over to the grizzled gentleman on your left. The OPP have just arrived and will be making their way through the establishment, carding any young gents like you two. There is a side door that you can use for a quick stepaway, if you catch my drift. Hope you’ll come back another time when the boys in blue stay at home.”

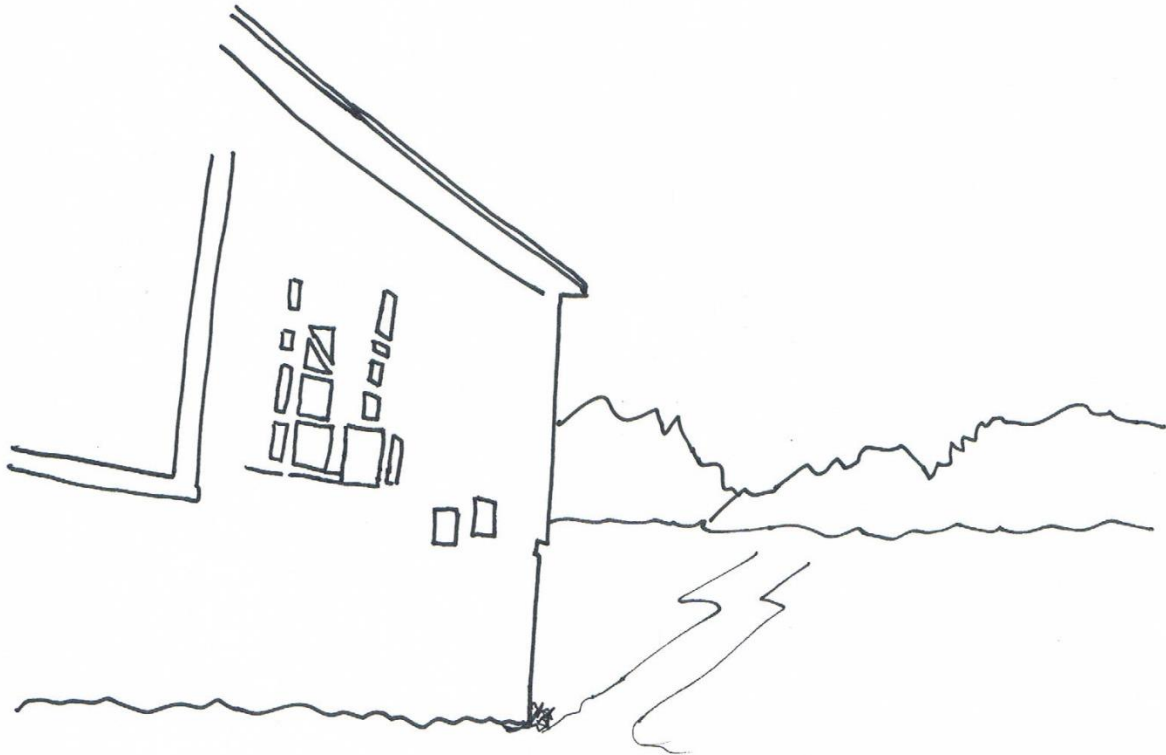
Late November, 1944—Battle of the Lower Maas, Southern Holland

The land was flat, reclaimed from the sea. The polders would have been fertile agricultural land under any other scenario than war, and both he and Steve kept their sanity by recalling stories to each other of the fields of their youth. There were ditches everywhere, and plenty of mud. He couldn’t remember the last time his feet were dry. Blisters had turned into swollen masses of spongy flesh, and this made the putting on of boots every morning an excruciating ordeal.

The regiment was making progress, moving slowly North and East towards the outlet of the Lower Maas River. There were reports of German soldiers laying low in the polders, cut off from their forces, and trying to take down as many of the Allied soldiers as possible before they themselves got picked off. But things stayed quiet and they trudged along. Orders were given by a field sergeant, and somebody somewhere was giving him the orders.

When they came within a few kilometres of the Leopold Canal, they could hear heavy machine gun fire. He winced at this and looked over at Steve who gave him a grim smile. They were given orders to drop low and keep rifles at hand. He did as he was told, but looked at the weapon in his hands as if it were some foreign object. And it was, in truth. He had never liked to hunt deer on the Bruce Peninsula, even if it kept his family in meat during a lean Winter. But to shoot a man? He had plenty to ponder before they were given the order to advance.

Light Up the Sky



Time sped up as things got busier with school, and before you knew it exams were being held once again in the gym. Row upon row of desks, with students bent over in a fever of writing and squinted brows. On the last day of exams there was a collective sigh of relief. People cranked up Alice Cooper singing 'School's Out for Summer', and it was actually true.

He had no real plans for the break, beyond cutting some grass and helping out with his folks' garden. And plenty of reading on the front porch. But it appeared to be a Summer just like the others, and there didn't seem to be much room for changing that. So he walked home from school, alone as was his custom, luxuriating in the absolute wealth of over two months of uncluttered days lying ahead of him. Halfway home, just opposite the Lutheran Church, a car pulled up. It was a nice car, with fancy hub caps, and was driven by a chap he knew from public school but who he had drifted away from a bit in the changing currents of high school.

"Hey, Jay-boy, what might you be doing tonight?" Ted was tanned and fit, with a good head of hair and a mildly sincere smile.

"Unhh, nothing, really. First night of Summer vacation. Put the feet up a bit and rest after those exams." He tried to sound self-assured.

“Hah, you can do that any night of the Summer. A few of us are going out to the bush party behind the Haunted Barn. We’ll pick you up around eight. I’m getting a few bottles of cherry whiskey that you can chip in for if you want. Should be a wild time.”

He had been lying very low for the last few months, so something about this invitation intrigued and excited him as he finished walking home. He was extra nice to his Mom, helping her with the supper preparations and informing her that he would be going to Ted Berwick’s house that evening to play some cards. He felt his cheeks burn a bit when he said this, and felt even worse when she said Ted was such a nice fellow. He read a bit after supper and then got into some rough jeans and a brown plaid shirt. He saw his Mom review his chosen attire with minor furrows in her brow, but nothing was spoken. He hung out by the large silver maple on the side yard at five minutes before eight, hoping to minimize further suspicion. Thank God his Dad worked nights.

Ted pulled up right at eight, with two young ladies sitting up front with him and some couple in the back. A few were from public school days and the rest were from the country. They were giddy and giggly, and were passing around the two bottles of cherry whiskey between them. Ted took a long pull while turning around in the driveway, and he hoped upon hope that his Mom or a neighbor would not be looking out a window. They roared away up May Street, taking the back way to the haunted barn which was on a concession road not so far away from the high school. When they got there they had to park a piece away on the side of the gravel road. When the six of them walked up the laneway to the abandoned barn with its derelict farmhouse nearby, it became evident that there had to be several hundred high school kids on the premises. A lot were standing around with beers in hand, and lots more were holding open bottles of liquor. He himself had had only one swig of cherry whiskey as the idea of a shared bottle was quite unappealing.

He didn’t think much of the venue or its vibe, and he soon lost touch with Ted’s gang. He ambled around back of the old farmhouse, where twenty or more kids were standing in a circle and passing a number of joints from person to person. A cheer went up from this crowd as they pointed in the direction of the barn. One acrobatic and athletic kid had scaled a ways up a wall and was waving down to anyone and everyone.

He kept going, around behind the barn to where a huge bonfire had been lit. Scores of people were dancing around it, and they were all higher than kites. He kept looking for someone he knew—Lou, Vince, even Lucinda. But none of these stalwarts seemed to be there, and he started to regret that he had come. And while he pondered this, a frisson of mild panic went through the crowd.

“Fuzz are here. They’ve put cruisers at the end of the road to block the exit and are working their way through the parked cars to nab anyone necking or whatever, who might have open alcohol.” This was spat out by a husky boy who seemed to know what he was talking about.

“Oh God, my Mom will kill me if I get arrested!” This was swooned out by a cute and petite brunette, with lovely eyes and smeared lipstick.

“Head to the bush and fan out. Go over the fields to the main road and walk back into town. Come and pick up your cars tomorrow, there are too many of them to tow.” Mr. Husky was already heading to the forested area.

He ran with the mob, and the relative absence of alcohol in his bloodstream helped him step over and under several obstacles. He looked back and could see half a dozen OPP officers walking up the laneway, black silhouettes intent on tamping down the illegal fun.

Half an hour later after dodging a lot of cornstalks, he found himself alone on Propane Road. He walked briskly into town, and retreated to the edge of the field and laid down whenever a car’s headlights showed.

Going back into the west of town, he could see a part of the night sky, lit up and glowing. As he walked down May Street he could see two fire trucks pulling up several blocks away and he wondered if it could possibly be for his own house. But as he walked further he realized it was a block away from his home, and it was either Vince’s house or Vince’s neighbor. A few hundred steps later and he could see Vince’s family huddled outside, watching the firemen battle the blaze at the rear of their home. It appeared that they would largely contain it in time, and perhaps it might only be modest smoke and water damage. Fifteen minutes later the crews had done their good work and were returning to the trucks.

“Whoever called this in so quickly saved the house.” The fire chief called this out to all within earshot.

“That would be me. I was sitting in the back room and saw this shot of flame flare up.” Vince sounded grim.

“This was no accident. The fire marshal will be around in the morning with many questions. I found this in the backyard.” The chief held up a can of kerosene and looked baleful. It was the spitting image of the fuel container the boy had seen a while back behind the Canadian Tire store. He closed his eyes and ruminated. He would have to ask Vince to let him know when the fire marshal would be showing up the next day. Life in a small town was generally simple and straightforward, except when it was not.

~the end~

Turbulence at the Edges

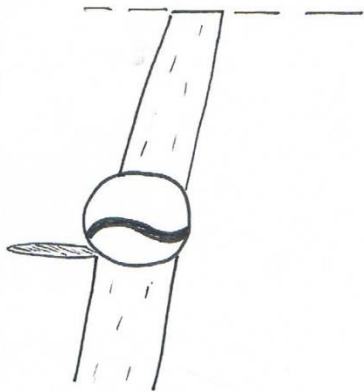


Written and Illustrated by Brian Wilson Baetz

Set in Walkerton, Ontario, the county seat of Bruce County and a willing host to the mighty Saugeen River.

Date: July 1976

In the Silence



His shirt clung to his back, sweaty and sticky in the mid-Summer heat. His socks were beyond damp, so much so that he was starting to court blisters on both of his feet. He and Lou had been playing for the better part of two hours and they were both starting to drag a bit. They had come over to the run-down courts behind the Catholic church, with their frayed asphaltic surface and weathered nets, largely due to the fact they were just a few blocks walk from the downtown and were almost always open. A couple of middle-aged men played listlessly on the second court, wearing pastel-coloured Summer boater hats and guffawing loudly at each other's miscues. But for himself and Lou, it was serious business.

"C'mon, don't hold back. Give me a serve with some juice on it, not this sidespin crap..." Lou looked over at him from across the net, wiping sweat from his brow. He had won the last two points of his service with well-positioned serves with a nice dash of spin, enough to cause his opponent to send them wildly into the net. Or through the net, more accurately, given the porous nature of the poorly maintained mesh.

"Hey, I'm playing to win! And sometimes finesse will win the day over raw power. And mixing it up a bit keeps you on your toes, squire." He went up with the ball, faking another spin serve, but at the last moment adjusted his racquet and sent over a serve that had considerable speed on it. The ball found

the back stripe of the service box and Lou reacted hurriedly, sending his return long and the gifting of a third consecutive point.

“Forty love, say goodnight, m’lady!” He twisted the ball around in his hand, reaching up to wipe sweat from his brow with an azure-coloured wristband. He took the ensuing point but had angered Lou sufficiently that the next two games went the other way and that wrapped the match in Lou’s favour. All three sets had been long ones, and they were evenly matched for the most part. He felt a bit dehydrated, so he drank freely from a plastic jug that had been loaded with ice cubes long melted. The water had a funny plastic taste, with undercurrents of various fruit juices from past use. They walked gingerly in the direction of home, on puffy feet and with clinging shorts and tops. Lou parted ways at the Presbyterian church corner opposite the County buildings, and he continued on his own under a canopy of street trees.

“How’s it going ‘bye? You look a bit wrung out.” His Dad sat at the kitchen table, eagle-eyed and taking in all the details, while he ate a cheese and onion sandwich and a bowl of tomato soup. A simple and early supper for a shift worker who would be going in to his security guard trailer in under an hour.

“Yeah, it’s a hot one. But a few hours of tennis in these conditions tends to toughen up a person. And I need to be really tough this year out on the basketball court.” He grimaced a bit, and then shot his Dad a rare grin.

“Where were you fellows playing? Up on those new courts above Centennial Park?” It never ceased to amaze him that his Dad always seemed to know what was going on in town, what had just been constructed, what needed repair. An unofficial town engineer, you might say.

“No, those are jammed, morning, noon and night. We went down-market a bit and joined Roly and some other geezer over on the courts behind the Catholic church.”

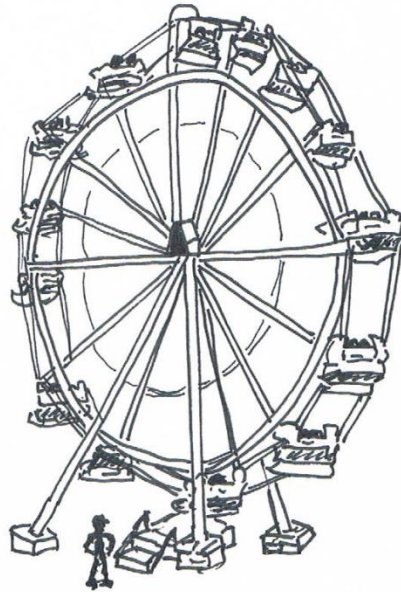
“Hmmp, those aren’t courts! More like an ill-kempt parking lot with a clothesline to separate the cars. But kind of fitting in a way, given the corruption in that church. All led by the priests who will bugger a choir boy or take advantage of a woman who admits to extramarital sex while giving her confession. I know people who live near the rectory, and the stories they tell would put your wig in a knot. It all comes down to having priests who are forbidden to marry. Unnatural, I tell ‘ya. And the whole community suffers as a result.” His Dad’s eyebrows were arching furiously and wee bits of onion were being expelled onto the table as he talked and chewed simultaneously.

He had a quick bath and put some cooling ointment on his blistered feet. While his Dad was upstairs changing for work, he grabbed a couple of oatmeal-chocolate-chip cookies from the breadbox and tiptoed out of the house. He felt drained from the tennis exertion and equally so from his Dad’s heated statements about the church. He needed to get away a bit and come back when the house was quiet.

His footsteps took him to the dyke above the Saugeen River, behind the Ag Pavilion and the baseball diamonds. The water rolled along lazily and he felt the bliss that comes from being in nature. He walked the dyke trail westward, past the outfall pipe of the sewage treatment plant, all the way to the

confluence of Stony Creek and the Saugeen. He sat under a tree, took his shoes and socks off for his blisters to dry a bit, and propped his feet up on a boulder. The burbling of the creek was soporific, and he went into a near-sleep state that was part meditation and part reverie. The world around him seemed perfect, unsullied by images of rotting tennis nets and shadowy men in black cassocks who elicited such a violent reaction from his simple-logic Dad.

Homegrown Delights



A few days rolled by, and he found himself sitting in his living room on a beautiful and bright Friday afternoon. It was way too nice a day to be inside, sunny and warm but not too hot as a series of thunderstorms had rolled in the previous night and cooled things off and reduced the mugginess. He would much rather be out on the front porch reading a book, but it was coming close to the time he was supposed to meet up with Vince to kick off a night of some fun and perhaps considerable mischief. He had only smoked weed a half dozen times or so, but somehow had let himself be pressured into buying a half ounce off of Vince. He had never bought weed before, and he knew he would be in a passel of trouble if his Mom found it in his room. So he had kept it in the same double baggie Vince had it in at the time of purchase, and had kept it hidden under the sofa's upholstered bottom flap. It was tucked in behind a world atlas and a few old issues of Sporting News, and unless she did some early Fall cleaning he was relatively safe. But now he wanted to extricate it from its secure spot and pop it into a little shoulder bag he had for its safe conveyance, and his Mom had just sat down at the sewing machine in the next room to start working on a major sewing project. He was trapped, as he knew he would face some questioning if he walked past her carrying the shoulder bag on his way to the front or back door. So he would have to wait it out, for a clean break in her sewing.

"What would you like for supper?" She said this in a kindly tone, followed by the whirl of the sewing machine.

"Uh, nothing tonight, Mom. Vince and I are going for pizza and then on to the midway over in the Sacred Heart school parking lot." He fidgeted a bit, and took out the atlas and magazines for easier retrieval.

"Oh, OK, if it's just Dad and me I suppose we'll just warm up leftovers."

"But a cookie and a glass of milk might be a great starter for pizza. Any chance of you taking a break and bringing it to me, I'm kind of tied up here with some reading." He reshuffled the magazines and then reached under for the baggie of green plant material.

"Sure, one more seam and it will be good to get up and stretch. Plain milk or some chocolate powder stirred in?"

"Chocolate, don't mind if I do." He popped the baggie into the shoulder bag and slung it over his shoulder as his Mom rose from her workstation and padded to the kitchen at the rear of the house. He pivoted toward the sewing room and headed for the front door. Once out on the porch, he tiptoed over to the left side and dropped the bag over the wall into a nice clump of camouflage foliage for later retrieval.

"I thought you had your nose in a book?" His Mom looked up as he came into the kitchen.

"Finished the chapter. Will have my cookie and roll up to Vince's. We might be out late, don't worry, and don't stay up."

Fifteen minutes later he was walking through town with Vince, his shoulder bag burning a bit of a hole through him.

"Brought the stuff, dude?" Vince looked conspiratorially at him.

"Check. You brought rolling papers and matches?"

"Double check. We're going to get buzzed tonight! And then glide on some midway rides. And eye the local talent. Who knows what else might happen?" Vince chuckled this out, his eyes dancing. "I've asked Lenny to join us. He partied with me last weekend and provided all the consumables, so this is my way of paying him back. Hope you don't mind?"

"No, Len's cool." But it did not escape him that he was settling Vince's account.

The two boys met up with Lenny at the perimeter of the Sacred Heart School parking lot, where lanky carnies were putting the finishing touches on a range of B-grade midway rides. These young men were rough around all their edges, and gave the three boys challenging looks as they walked by.

"Hey, fuckers, we'll be back soon enough to ride your fun machines, don't worry!" Vince said this in a falsetto whisper, and the other two boys laughed. They went down an access road to the river, going

around a few curves until it was just them and trees. A decrepit brown picnic table was on the right side, and Vince jumped up on it and patted its surface.

“Jay-boy, jump out that bag of Perth County homegrown and I’ll start the rolling. I suggest a doobie for each of us to kick things off, and then we’ll roll one at a time and share them.” Vince plucked some papers from their case and had three neatly rolled joints in a matter of a few minutes.

“Ah, nothing quite like it! The sweet smell of it, the taste of it, the smoke going into your lungs and you start to sense a kind of music within your body. Gentlemen, savour the moment!” Vince held his breath, his eyes bulging.

Lenny sputtered and coughed. “Crum, this shit is strong!” He hacked again.

“Uh, amateurs. Draft a little less in, set the intention of full appreciation, and resist the impulse to cough. Let it out slowly, like releasing a beautiful girl you’ve just kissed and you don’t want the moment to pass.” Vince said this with hooded eyes.

Truth be told, this weed was strong. Pungent, powerful. With the individual joint and two shared joints, the three boys were nigh on pasted.

“Holy crap, Lenny, you were right. I am near done in. Let’s go up and ride us some midway rides.” Vince waved back in the opposite direction from the river.

“Nope, we’ve got more weed to smoke.” He held up the baggie. “Maybe two more fat ones to be shared.” He nodded resolutely.

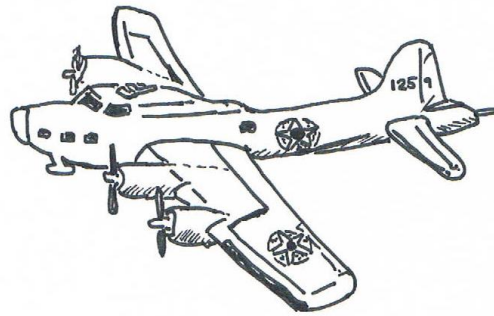
“Oh cripe, no. I’m like hammered already, man.” Lenny protested, with a big goofy smile.

“Yeah, agree. We’ll just save it for another day.” Vince hitched up his trousers.

“Nope, we smoke it now. It’s so little left, and I am not taking a little bit of weed home, or get busted at the midway by the fuzz for two joints. Suck it up gents. In for a penny, in for a pound.” He heard himself say this, but he felt as if he was up in a nearby tree.

By the time they got to the midway, they were beyond being high. Everything seemed hilarious, and the food concessions looked absolutely tantalizing. He saw Trudy Lorton off in the distance, wearing a red clingy top that showed off her gorgeously large and pendulous breasts. He had played varsity mixed doubles tennis with her one afternoon at a tournament in Guelph, and spent the whole van ride slyly staring down her tennis top into some impressive cleavage. If he had listened to Vince and Lenny and had not pressed to consume all of the cannabis, he might have even gone over to her and suggested going for a ride. But right now, they were all having the ride of their lives.

The Patina of Plate Glass



The next morning was a time for paying the piper. He woke groggily, bright sunlight streaming through the window accompanied by copious birdsong. For a few seconds he wasn't sure where he was, or who he was, if truth be told. And then memories of chaotic midway rides came flashing back, and he and Vince sharing an extra-large double-cheese mushroom pizza, and he realized that it would be perhaps the first and last time he would buy weed. The lingering effects were different than a hangover, but he certainly felt a little bit high, and he kept resisting the urge to let out a low, rumbling cough from deep within some distant compartment of his lungs.

He could smell bacon frying and toast toasting, and the sounds of his Mom moving around in the kitchen. His Dad had been on his normal late shift and could sleep through just about any disruption. He thought about getting up and enjoying some of that aromatic bacon and fresh homemade bread, but he felt woozy and unsure of how he would look to his Mom's eye. So he rolled over and went back to sleep, and awoke to a largely quiet house save the sounds of his Dad's rhythmic snoring.

Getting up and splashing his face, he was delighted to see that his Mom had left a four-square toasted sandwich on the kitchen table, featuring the bacon he had smelled previously and some sharp cheddar cheese. A note beside it said 'gone fabric shopping with a few of the bridesmaids—won't be back until late. You and Dad are on your own recognizance.' A half hour later, sandwich consumed and thirty pages deeper into a book on time travel, his Dad came down the stairs in a more kindly manner than normal.

"Morning, laddie. Just you and me today, if memory serves. They're having a Recruitment Day down at the Legion, with food and drink and darts and snooker tournaments. The vets from the Great War are dying off, and even some of our cohort, so they're opening up Legion membership to sons and daughters of vets. That would be you, so I thought you might come along and see what they do down at the Legion. Who knows, over time, you may want to become a member?" His Dad's eyebrows arched theatrically.

"I dunno, that place reeks of smoke even as you walk by, and I'm not legally supposed to be in a place that serves liquor, y'know?" He said this convincingly enough, but felt a bit guilty on inward reflection.

"Ah, we'll sit in a zone where the air is less blue. Who knows, lots of the Auxiliary ladies will be there so that will cause the lads to smoke less. And you're not far from the age of majority, and you're tall for your age to my eye."

Thirty minutes later they were sitting off in a corner booth of the Legion, his Dad quaffing a draft beer as he sipped on an ice-cold ginger ale.

"To your health, and now you can see it's a nice place in a shabby sort of way." His Dad gestured with a sweep of his hand. "I typically come in once a year, for a beer, after dress parade on Remembrance Day. So today is a special occasion." The older man raised his glass and nodded solemnly.

"What was it like to be in the war, really?" He could never ask this kind of question at home, within earshot of his Mom.

"Well, war is a pretty grim thing, but I can safely say that going over was the best experience of my life. I learned a lot, got tough physically and mentally, and saw a lot of sights that a farmer hoeing turnips would never get to see." The father smacked his lips and nodded to himself.

"What were the worst things you faced?" He said this quietly, slowly.

"Sleeping in damp tents in the cold of Winter. Eating hardtack rations day after day after day. Air raids with bombs going off, and we were told to keep our faces down in the dirt, so the vacuum from the bomb wouldn't pull the lungs right out of your body! I got up from one of those on the Continent, and my two buddies were lying to my left and my right, dead as door nails. That's a hard thing to face, 'bye, especially when you get close to your mates." His voice went quiet.

"Wow, I'm not sure I could ever handle that." The boy went equally quiet for a moment. "What kind of work did you do for the Air Force?"

"Two things, mainly. The first was driving vehicles. Cookhouse trucks, supply trucks, and sometimes the commanding officer's vehicle. Fancy, they were. The major thing, since we were a repair and salvage unit, was picking up debris and equipment after there had been a bombing or a battle. This included the handling of dead bodies. Our own boys and Jerry's. We dug a lot of shallow graves, and got the dead into them as quick as we could. Had to, or the stench would knock you over. War means a lot of death, and it's something you don't quite get over."

"Wow, that's incredible. But how come you said it was a good experience?"

"Oh, I've held back the good stuff. We got to see London, and Antwerp and Brussels. All those beautiful buildings, and some survived the bombings. Had lots of fun too. Dances at Biggin Hill, with big bands and lots of beautiful English girls with complexions like Devon cream! Good dancers, and lonely, as so many of their villages had already sent their boys off to the front. Never to return. In wartime you never know when the Grim Reaper will call, so young people tend to live fully. And on the Continent it was even moreso....we'd meet beautiful young French and Belgian gals who would be delighted for a few cigarettes or a pair of nylons. The guys would use up their ration cards and have the time of their

lives, but this is something I wouldn't tell you if your Mom was here." The father winked conspiratorially at his son.

Across the way, they spied their neighbor, the chap who managed the LCBO store. He gave them a wave and sauntered over to say hello.

"Howdy fine neighbours, how are things going?" He chuckled a bit and raised his glass.

"Fine, Rob, just recounting the horrors and pleasure of war to the young lad. How's business?" The Dad was just making small talk.

"Business is booming. But last night, two minutes after closing, a young guy deep into his cups came out of the Central Tavern and knocked on our door to be served. Told him through the door to go away, we were closed. Then ten minutes later, while we were in the back counting cash, we hear a loud crashing sound. The bastard came back and kicked in the plate glass window at the front of the store."

"Wow, what a mess!" His Dad clucked this out loudly.

"I'll say, but still minor compared to what you saw overseas, Will. But I'll keep an eye out for the little prick, he'll never get served if he tries to come back. Gents, enjoy your libation. And Jayson, let me know a few months ahead of your age of majority birthday, we could use a good young lad to keep the stock featured nicely on the shelves. Good wages, and rarely do you have to sweep up broken glass!" The neighbor gave a wink to the other two and shoved off in the direction of the darts action.

December 15, 1944; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

The days had passed in a blur. Making camp, eating bad rations, taking orders passed down the chain of command from some new general. Canadian and Polish troops were in this part of southern Holland, getting ready to make a major push on pockets held by German forces so that they would be shunted back into Germany. But it wasn't easy, and orders seemed to be issued unconvincingly and with no apparent logic. And to make matters worse, Winter was settling in. Not the harsh Canadian Winter they were used to, but a grey and damp blanketing of wind and fog that did little to lift anyone's spirits.

They had a two hour furlough each afternoon, and one day they walked a bit further into town to see if they might be able to find a bakery or restaurant to get something hot to eat and drink. The streets were largely deserted, with the odd young person walking with purpose, giving them a curt nod or a wan smile. The Dutch looked gaunt to their Canadian eye, and no wonder with the pervasive shortage of food.

They saw an inn a half block away, with fresh flowers in the window and its front door open on its upper half. They peeked through the door and saw a young man wiping glasses at the bar.

"Halloo!" He raised his hand in greeting to the two servicemen and beamed out a warm smile.

"Do you speak English, young sir?" Steve said this hopefully.

"Yes, yes, I do. Not well, but I like to practice when I can. Are you Englishmen?" The young Dutch man adjusted his glasses nervously.

"No sir, we're not Limies. Canadians, through and through." Bert put this forward shyly.

"Even better, my friends." He advanced to the door and opened the bottom section in a sweeping gesture. "What can I get you?"

"Tea. And anything you might have to eat. My name's Steve, and this handsome chap is Bert." He offered his broad Prairie farmboy hand for a firm handshake.

"Leo. It is my pleasure to have your acquaintance." It was a formal introduction, but the trio felt that knowing that they had been compatriots for some time, and were being brought together now for significant reasons.

All for Charity



He hadn't seen Lenny since the night of significant weed combustion and uproarious midway riding, but the next evening the kid rolled up in his green Maverick and sat outside the side street beside his home. He had been lollygagging around in his living room/dining room area, reading and watching TV a bit and had noticed the vehicle pull up. But Lenny didn't get out of the car, he just sat there and looked straight ahead. He thought that maybe his friend was there to pick up Patsy from across the street, but nothing seemed to be happening on that front so he looked out the window again and then packed up his book and set it on the TV console.

“Just going out for a bit with Lenny.” He swung a light jacket over his shoulder as it had turned a bit cooler. “Don’t wait up for me.” His Mom was sewing in a focused manner.

“Doing anything special?” She looked up from her machine.

“Nope. Just hanging out. Nothing special.”

He walked out to the heavily waxed vehicle and went around to the driver’s side. The window was down and some April Wine was pouring out of the stereo.

“Dude, what’s up? Are you here to hang out?”

“Maybe. Why not? I was kind of bored and thought I’d come into town. Vince is off playing some gig, so I thought I’d take a little meander and see what you were up to.” His buddy grinned broadly.

“Nice. But you don’t believe in knocking on the door, like real people?”

“Nah, that’s outdated social practice. Figured that you would look out and see me, if you were home and if you were free. If you hadn’t popped out in a few minutes, I might have rolled down to the pool hall to see if you were hanging there. Only so many options in a one-horse town.” This was said slowly, with a South Bruce twang.

“Unconventional, but alright by me. I told my Mom I’m stepping out for a bit with my school chum. So what do you want to do, beyond shooting the breeze?”

“Already ahead of you, old man. The Kiwanis Club has a Fun Fair set up on the school grounds of Brant Central. They will probably have some food, games of chance, and other things to stimulate and amaze. All proceeds to the service club for community projects. Are you in?” This was rolled out with a flash of teeth.

Brant Central was an in-town school that housed the elementary kids from the surrounding township. He had played the odd basketball tourney there in public school, and the change rooms had the most pungent disinfectant smell he had ever experienced. And they had a great little outdoor basketball court, where he and Lou would spend countless hours playing one-on-one and H-O-R-S-E. But he had never been to any kind of social event there before. “Sure, why not?”

They parked in the lot behind the school, on the Canadian Tire side of the school’s land parcel. The school was on a downward sloping area that went off towards an intermittent creek that naturally divided the school lands and the outdoor grounds of the County’s old folks home. The parking lot was packed, and there were throngs of people milling around a dozen or so booths set up in three rows down the length of the schoolyard. From somewhere they could detect the smells of frying dough, and a booth directly in front of them had a huge lineup waiting to buy large wands of pink cotton candy. A bit further down was a booth with a Crown and Anchor game, and they stood there for a bit watching the cut and thrust antics of the Kiwanian running the game and raking in the winnings. Most of the men

betting were also smoking, so they stood at a reasonable distance to avoid being deluged by the clouds of nicotine.

As they stood a bit offset from the gambling booth, both he and Lenny saw that the next stand over was a kissing booth. "Ha, have never seen one of those things! My Dad has told me about them, as they were all the rage in the 30's. Young men would line up and pay for a big smacker, probably a nickel back then!" Lenny said this in a low voice, and smacked his lips at the end.

He looked over at the sign and saw it said '50 cents, all for a good cause.'" But when his eyes drifted up to see who was working the booth, they almost popped out of his head. He said something inaudible and then spluttered a bit.

"I didn't catch that..." Lenny leaned in, his eyes darting sideways to the kissing booth.

"Crikes, man. That lady lives just a block away from me. Vince has said she has been known to bestow special favours on him when her husband is away, and I have also seen her doing the same thing to Jim Steuton one evening down by the river!" His voice trailed off and he realized the buxom European neighbor was looking directly over at him and Lenny. She had her blonde hair pulled back in a tight bun, and her handsome features glowed from some regular Summer sunshine. But best of all she had on a sleeveless ultra-tight white top that highlighted her voluminous breasts in a most memorable fashion. Business was slow at the kissing booth, and it seemed to the boys' eyes that she sinuously moved her shoulders back in such a way that her breasts jiggled and popped out simultaneously. "Man alive! With that as a back story, I think I'm going to spend a well earned dollar and get a couple of kisses from the roving-eye wifey." Lenny's eyes danced. "But if we go over right now, it'll seem too obvious. Let's circle the yard and create a bit of suspense for her!" He nodded in the opposite direction and shoved off.

They went back towards the cotton candy stand, over to a guess-your-weight booth, hesitated at a tea leaf reader, and then worked their way methodically back towards the waiting woman with her pulpy lips painted bright red. With each step, he got increasingly nervous, as he wasn't entirely sure he would be able to go through with the plan. But when they came within eyeshot of the kissing booth, Lenny let out a soft hissing sound. "I'll be peckered, she's gone off shift!"

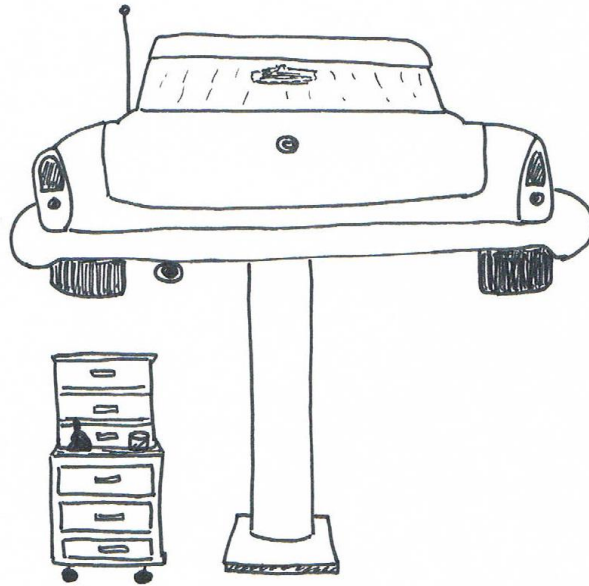
And there on duty at the booth was the older sister of one of his classmates. He had long admired her tanned, lithe legs, and she was pretty enough in a freckly tomboyish sort of way. He was relieved he wouldn't have to disappoint Lenny on the Czech neighbor front, and this emboldened him to step up quickly and pop two quarters down on the pine board.

"Ooooh, Jayson, are you here to be kissed?" The classmate's sister's voice was surprisingly seductive.

"Uh, yep, just one. Have always admired the Kiwanis Club." He stood awkwardly and stammered bit.

"Well, we'll just have to make it a good one then!" And with that she leaned over and grabbed him by the shoulders, pressing her lips tight to his and moaning a little. And when she let her slippery little tongue dart into his mouth for just a half second or so, he realized that this was the best fifty cents he had ever spent.

Oil and Lube



It was still the dog days of Summer, even though the days were getting noticeably shorter with dusk coming a little earlier each evening. He had some grass cutting and some odd jobs at the motel behind his home, but nothing regular to break up the tedium of book reading, TV watching and musing on what his last year of high school would be like. Or musing on what life would be like after high school, and possibly breaking out of this tiny burgh.

So one afternoon, his Mom popped her head out the front door and gave him a winning smile as he pulled his nose out of his latest book. “Any chance of company while I do an errand that I promised your Dad I would get done?”

“Sure, um, maybe. What is it you’re doing?” His eyes went back to his book.

“Need to take the car over to the dealership to get an oil change and filter. You know how much I like driving, so I thought you might wheel it over and we can go to the fry shack and get some chips while we wait.” In fact, she hated to drive. She had got her license late in life, as some gesture of independence. But whenever she drove with her husband, the criticism was brutal and unrelenting, and her reaction to this was to make myriad wee mistakes which led to even more grumbling and criticism. Drives north to Warton were legendary in his mind due to the tension between the two parents.

“Sure, I’ll drive there and maybe you can wheel it back. Shouldn’t take them too long if you have an appointment.”

The family car was a 1973 Buick Lemans, canary yellow in colour and affectionately known as ‘The Yellow Bird’. It had plush fake leather seats, and its body was waxed to within an inch of its life. It never

saw salt or bad weather, as it was not driven during the Winter months. In fact, it was driven rather minimally, and sat most of the time in the white garage out back awaiting its next wax job.

They rolled up past the Lutheran church and breezed through the McGivern Street intersection lights, hanging a quick left into Bud Lidge's GMC dealership. A few men wearing blue smocks came out to guide them through the service doors, and he and his Mom jumped out and handed over the keys. He stood awkwardly to the side of the service bay, taking in the smells of grease and solvent and the ratchet sound of wheel lug nuts being pulled off of vehicles. But what caused him to slow down even more was the sight of Bud Lidge's daughter, Joy Ann, working at a desk in the service office. He didn't know her well, really not at all if the truth be told. She went to Sacred Heart, and he wasn't sure if they had ever really crossed paths. Joy Ann was a short little thing, cute enough in a vacuous spoiled-girl sort of way. But as is often the way for a teenage boy, what caught his eye was her absolutely stunning figure. She was indeed slight of frame, but had perhaps the largest breasts he had ever seen on a girl his age, or any age for that matter. And like the Eastern European neighbor, she had a penchant for tight and clingy tops that showed off her assets to a maximal degree.

"I think that's Bud's daughter. She's always been a nice, quiet girl. Want to pop into the office and say hi?" His Mom said this matter-of-factly.

The thought of this flooded him with a quiet dread. "No, I don't think so, the chip wagon may close soon so we should get over there if we don't want to be disappointed."

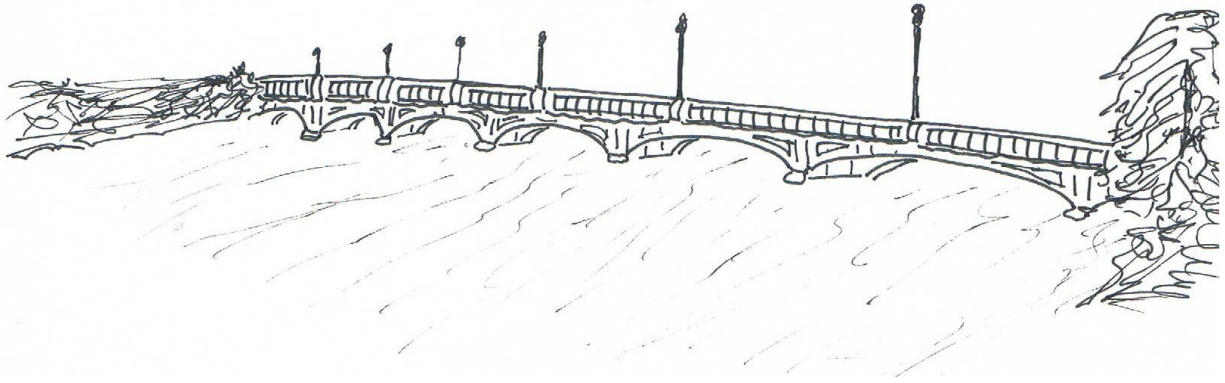
"Are you sure? She's kind of cute and has grown into quite the healthy young woman it would appear. Do you know her?" His Mom seemed to be pressing the point.

He stood there with his mouth open and his mind racing. What he couldn't tell his Mom was what he had heard about this gal from his shop class buddy, Ted Lester. Ted hung out a lot at the Chepstow Hotel, the place where he and Lou had almost been busted by the OPP a while back. But good ol' Ted was from just down the road in Cargill, and he had the luck of the Irish when it came to staying out of trouble. But one day in wood shop, with the planer buzzing and the smell of wood dust in the air, Ted mentioned he had regular rendezvous meetings with Bud Lidge's daughter in the rear of the parking lot of the Chepstow Hotel. At how she always drove a late model GMC truck with a cab in the back. At how, after a pitcher of beer inside the hotel, they would slip out to her vehicle and jump into the rear cab. At how she would have her top off in three seconds flat, her milk-white breasts pouring out over the top of her bra cups. At how she would ride Ted hard for an hour or more, demanding that her perky nipples be pinched hard, and crying out with passion a half dozen times or more in the silence of the parking lot lined with conifers. At how she would then drive him home to Cargill, and ask him to keep next Wednesday free for more vigorous romping. He saw all of this in his mind's eye, replayed again in the theatre of his mind even more vividly than in the wood shop premiere as he looked over at the office and saw the cute little minx filing oil and lube paperwork.

"So are you sure you don't want to go in and say hi? It might be nice to have a little girlfriend in the last year of high school." His Mom smiled in kind of a sly way.

“Oh, Mom, I think I’ll take a rain cheque. And I think Joy Ann may already have a boyfriend, or perhaps several boyfriends. And what would Dad say if I dated a gal from Sacred Heart? Now let’s go and get those chips.”

Mean Old River



French fries were happily consumed, and the car’s maintenance was done without a hitch. His Mom pulled the yellow car, with its glossy wax job, out of the service bay and waited for him to jump in. He peered into the dimly lit service bay and adjoining office, but could not make out the voluptuous form of the owner’s daughter at her scroll-top desk. Perhaps she had stepped around to the showroom for a ten cent cream soda from the pop cooler with the old-school chilled water cooling system, or perhaps she had gone out back to tidy up her vehicle for another nocturnal round of carnal pleasures out Chepstow way. In any case, the sight of her had stirred something deep within him, and he wished he had one of those ice-cold cream sodas to cool off and smooth down his racing mind.

“Boy, those chips were sure filling The grease, I guess. Tasty, but perhaps not so good for a person. So let’s say supper will be a bit lighter and a bit later today? Want me to drop you off anywhere?” She sang this out gaily, largely because driving along without constant criticism was such a rare occurrence.

“Uh, sure. Haven’t been to the pool hall for a while. I’ll see who’s around, and may or may not play a bit. No more than a couple of hours, and I’ll be home for a bite.”

He jumped out at the Hartley House, just between the entrance to the Smoke Shop and the door marked ‘Ladies and Escorts’. He never saw anyone go in that door, and it had a small vestibule inside of it that people would use as a wind shelter to wait for the bus to Kitchener.

He stuck his head in the pool hall, looking left to the three tables on that side, and then down the length of the hall towards the competition-length snooker table. The owner, Duffy, was practicing spin shots with his professional cue. His execution was flawless, and he had that self-assured composure that people at the top of their game possess. In the distance, two old codgers bowled a game of five pins, howling when one or the other steered a ball into the gutter.

He started to think he should have just rolled home with his Mom, and kept going on his favourite book in the late afternoon shade of his front porch. But decisions are typically taken with an underlying purpose, sometimes invisible at the present moment. So he stood outside in the shade of the pool hall's front overhang, and simply watched the passing scene of cars and people.

A mere five minutes went by and he saw a late-model blue Chrysler roll up and park in the grocery store parking lot directly opposite to the pool hall. A woman got out, a bit heavysset with big hair, and with handsome features that indicated she would have been a looker in her day. He didn't quickly recognize her, until her daughter jumped out of the passenger side. This was a girl he had dated a few times in the middle part of high school. She had long black hair that hung below her waist, and was pretty enough with her dark eyes and fine features. The young filly was light-chested, but had a gluteus maximus that was large and shapely and filled out her Levis in the most appealing of ways. This was in an era when the physique of a future Jennifer Lopez was not perhaps fully appreciated, but she certainly had considerable appeal to the boy lurking in the shade across the street.

Their dating had drifted off in a sort of non-committal way, and he was unsure if he should look away and pretend he hadn't seen her or call over to her and go and have a wee chat. Cowardice won out, so he turned his head towards the Bank of Montreal and carried on as if he hadn't seen her. A few seconds ticked by and he thought perhaps he was out of the woods and she hadn't seen him.

"Hey you, what's going on?" He turned his head and saw her standing on the opposite sidewalk, one hand on her hip. Her Mom had gone inside the grocery store.

"Uh, hey Lee, not much. What's up with you?" His throat had suddenly become uncommonly dry.

"Hold on, I'll come over so I don't have to yell across the street." She came up to him, expectantly and awkwardly in equal measure. He thought for a moment she was going to come in for a hug, and his thoughts went back to the time he floated down to the quiet business wing and spent an entire class period French kissing her and feeling her ass through her trademark Levis. She was a feisty gal, and loved the physical contact. But it never went further than kissing, probably because he didn't know of the subsequent chapters in the Book of Love.

"Good to see you. Summer going by well?" She grinned sideways and flipped her voluminous hair back over her shoulders.

"Yeah, alright I guess. What brings you into town?" She lived three burghs up in the direction of Port Elgin.

"Oh, my Mom needed food for a funeral visitation that's running tomorrow. Did you hear about Derek Kurtzweiler?" A frown crossed her pretty face.

"No, what's going on with Derek?" This was a guy from high school, who lived out in the country. He was a known pusher, from weed to chemicals.

"Well, not much now I'm afraid." The girl's tone turned somber. "They dragged the river yesterday and pulled out his body. Dead as a doornail. Nobody's sure if he went swimming on his own or if something else happened..." Her voice trailed off.

"What the heck do you mean by that?" He blurted this out, then looked over his shoulder.

"Did Derek ever try to sell you drugs? Word is that he owed a lot of money to the guys from the city, and he wasn't paying up on time. So some folks think he might have been rounded up, knocked on the head, and thrown into the Saugeen. Death by drowning, in any case."

The two teenagers stood there quietly, with pursed lips and furrowed brows. Small town life was filled at times with certain complexities, and today was such a day.

December 20, 1944; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

They had returned every day after that, for a cup of hot tea and any baked goods that made their way out of the mysterious back kitchen of the inn. The young Dutch man brightened noticeably when he saw the two Canadian servicemen at the door of his father's establishment, and would signal them to sit by the fire and remove their damp uniform jackets. After a week of this he suggested they could go up a flight of stairs to a banquet room on the second floor, where they could speak privately and a bit more freely. The young man's sister, Adri, would spell him during these times at the bar. She was a quiet young woman, who smiled at the two Canadians but kept conversation to a minimum.

Leo more than made up for this. As he got to know Steve and Bert more, he opened up and shared all manner of tales from his earlier years. This was an opportunity to practice his English, but he also truly admired the two Canadians. He was not much more than a gangly boy, and in his eyes they were real men. Soldiers, who had come to free his country. And good men, he could tell by the way they treated him and his sister. He did not have that many friends, and he worked at the inn from morning until night, but these were people he could call friends. And he wondered, just a bit shyly, if he might be able to visit them after this cursed war was over. Just the thought of that cheered him, as many folks in the town had grown depressed and felt this conflict would continue forever.

"Just a few more days until Christmas. My mother makes an awfully good Christmas dinner. Turkey, stuffing, cranberries, potatoes, beans, carrots and plum pudding to end it." Bert was feeling nostalgic. "We're a temperance household so no brandy, but lots of homemade eggnog and soft cider."

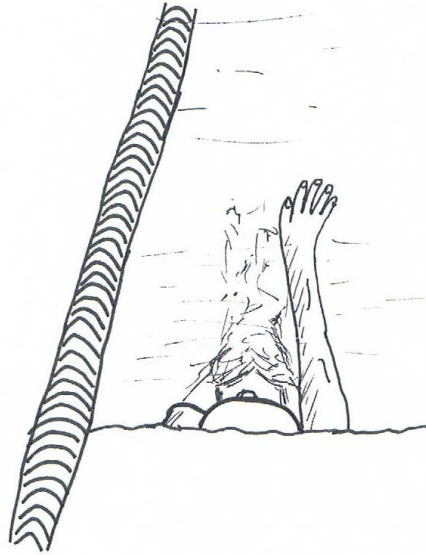
"Ah, my Mom is also a great cook. We eat well out on the Prairies, growing and raising pretty much everything. Winters are cold and long, but Christmas is a bright spot to keep us going. Us Ukes do it on a different day, but it's still a big deal." Steve smiled broadly.

"Christmas is also big in Holland, or at least it used to be." Leo paused and frowned. "Will you have extra furlough time on Christmas Day?"

"Yep, we will take a full 24 hour break from shelling the heck out of Jerry down by the river. Twenty four hours of shivering in our tents, but at least it will be quiet." Steve issued a sideways grin.

"Nonsense. You will rest here in the upper room by the fire. And we will share our goose with our new Canadian friends. Momma and Adri are good cooks, you will have proof of this soon enough." Leo took off his spectacles for wiping, his eyes moistening.

The Trident of Neptune



The news of the drowning had shocked him, mainly due to the pall of uncertainty around the tragedy. It was a good-sized river, to be sure, one that attracted anglers throughout the year due to sizeable flows and the attendant fish populations that came through on the currents. There was a bit of camping down by the park west of the main bridge, and some ragtag outfitters ran canoeing expeditions between the County Town and Paisley upstream. But nobody he knew ever actually swam in the river. Waded in a bit to cool off, but no real swimming *per se*. Sometimes he stood on the bridge and looked into the water just upstream of the river's confluence with Silver Creek. The water was dark and mysterious here, roiling and sputtering a bit, with braided ribbons of water weaving through each other and sometimes diving or rising quickly. The current here frightened him a bit, and if this is what his classmate had faced late at night, it made the tragic outcome seem plausible.

Death by natural means was concerning enough, but if foul play were involved it only deepened the furrow in one's brow. The kid had been in Sunday School with him in earlier years, but something had seemed to go off track since then. Alcohol and drugs floated here and there in this small town, sometimes concentrating themselves and changing lives completely. He reflected on this, and couldn't help but think of his own dalliances over the high school years. This introspection caused something in his stomach to turn, so he went to the pantry larder for a chocolate chip cookie. His Mom was in the kitchen, doing dishes and wiping countertops.

"Why so glum, chum?" She said this with a sideways glance.

“Oh, just thinking about the drowning. Can’t imagine being in the river, and hitting a rock or a stump and going under.”

“Just awful. As always with this kind of thing, I feel for the parents. I know from experience the hole that gets ripped from your heart when you lose a child.” She paused for a moment, a bit lost in thought. “It’s never easy, but perhaps tougher when it’s sudden like this. One can’t say goodbye, or hold the loved one’s hand as they slip away. At least I had that. But to be summoned to the hospital, where they pull back a sheet...I’m not sure I could stand that.” Her eyes misted.

“And maybe it wasn’t an accident? Some say he may have been running with the wrong crowd.” He caught himself before moving on, in some attempt to protect his Mom.

“They’ll be looking at the body, that’s for sure. The coroner from Owen Sound knows how to read bumps and bruises, grim science that it is.” She was more astute than he gave her credit for.

“I’m going out for a bit of a ramble. It’s a nice night, the days are getting noticeably shorter, and news like this makes me want to enjoy life even more. Back by bedtime.”

He walked slowly down Archy to Cox Signs, then along past the Post Office and the Town Hall. He decided to perhaps go over to the Public School yard, to see if anyone was hanging by the swings or if Lou might be out shooting hoops. So he went up a block, and cut through the County Court complex. The old County Jail was quiet that night, with no yelling inmates. He meandered through the parking lot and rested his eyes on the classic profile of the Anglican Church opposite the Cenotaph. This was a beautiful part of town, with lovely mature trees and four or five stately Victorian homes each block. He strolled along slowly, taking in details of their chimneys and cornices and front doors and side gardens. The night was beautifully warm, with enough remaining daylight to fully illuminate the beauty and grace of these residences.

He circled into the school yard, memories of track meets and fitness tests and kind teachers flooding back to him with every step. He walked alongside the wall of the gym, seeing the divots where he and his classmates would play marbles on a melting-snow Spring day. His eyes shot out to the baseball diamond, with painful memories of slow base running and taunting from bullies due to his excess weight. The bike sheds looked smaller to him now, but he could still recall his first and last fight at school around back of this structure. He walked and thought, paused, thought and walked some more. The yard was quiet, all the better for reflection and remembrance.

As he completed the circuit of the yard he remembered he had come up this way to bump into Lou, with no luck at present. So he thought he might amble downtown and see if Lou might be catching some fresh air outside the Library.

Four blocks later came a similar result as in the school yard, so he walked straight on Colborne to the dykes by the river. He walked up the slope to a lookout platform and peered into the depths of the river, almost convincing himself that he could see something or someone floating past at some depth.

He then looked west to the municipal swimming pool, and strolled over to the benches on the south side of the facility.

It seemed as if the town had had a major evacuation, and only a few stragglers remained behind. There was a single lifeguard up in her stand, listening to a CFL radio broadcast and crossing her doughy white legs intermittently. She paid him no attention whatsoever, and he was the happier for it. He looked at the pool and at first it seemed like no one was in it. The light was failing, and on closer observation he could see a single swimmer doing a back stroke in an efficient and smooth manner. As he continued to look into the pool, he could see that it was a young woman, lithe and athletic. She held up for a few seconds at one end, her bathing cap-encased head coming out long enough for him to identify her as the daughter of one of his church parishioners. He had heard her Mom telling another lady at church that her daughter had just finished her BA and would be going on to law school in the Fall. The gal was certainly pretty, and she continued on with her lengths as the light dimmed further and the bugs came out. He decided he would sit there for the duration if he had to, so as to assess her figure when she came out of the water. As he watched her swim he could see she had beautifully pert breasts, encased in a tight blue swimsuit material and pointing upwards ever so nicely as she swam the back stroke.

A bell went off, and the lifeguard blew a whistle. His patience was rewarded, as the future law student pulled herself elegantly out of the pool and went over to the edge to collect her towel and gym bag. Her legs were toned and tanned, and the little blue suit showed off her muscular and nicely formed gluteus. This all seemed to happen in slow motion, and he just sat there and enjoyed the moment.

She walked down the deck, just a few feet away from him through the chain link fence. His throat got dry and he bleated out a pathetic 'hi' when she was directly opposite him. She turned partially and looked right through him. He smiled pathetically, inwardly resolving to get to university where all the girls would be like this Goddess of Neptune.

Choral Chanteuse



The poolside voyeurism had both rattled and excited him, and he knew by common decency and small-town decorum that he needed to quickly walk far away from the swimming pool area to avoid an awkward crossing-of-paths with the law school-bound beauty. It was a bit like Lucinda Decker, but even moreso given the obvious age gap. He knew when girls were out of his league, but some kind of devilish impulse caused him to doubt this when intriguing situations like this arose. So he hesitated, then pushed off the bench, walking alongside the fence in the direction of the change-room building. The ladies' section was closest to him, and its open door emitted the hissing sound of a shower. He could close his eyes and see her in there right now, washing off the chlorine residuals from her tanned and toned body. He could capture her tan lines in his mind's eye, and she put her head back into the stream of water and rinsed out her shoulder-length hair. He heard the water getting turned off, and he imagined her reaching for a thick white towel that would be used to dry off her incredible body. And he further imagined that she would then realize her panties had fallen off the bench into a pool of water on the floor, but would simply shrug and pull a white shift dress over her head and let it fall to the level of her tanned mid-thighs. And she would then walk out to her car in the parking lot, smoothing her dress as she walked and reveling in the sensation and liberation of wearing no panties.

All of this took him ten seconds to imagine, and he knew he had to walk quickly to avoid potential embarrassment. So he headed in the direction of the Hartley House, and peeked in to check the time on the clock above the counter of the Smoke Shop. It was only a few minutes past nine, still early, so he decided to go back to the schoolyard to see if Lou or anyone else had shown up in the interim.

A quick perambulation of the yard yielded pretty much the same results as before, but at the south end of the yard he looked across at the Pentecostal Church on the adjoining corner. Its lights were on and its doors were open, and it appeared that a lot of people were inside. This church had always intrigued him, and on a number of occasions in the past he had walked by and had seen some incredible sights. People yelling out words in a strange tongue, and a lot of folks standing with their hands in the air and swaying back and forth methodically. Just the once he had seen a bald man fly into some kind of convulsion, his body flailing around spastically on the red carpeted floor. He had asked his Dad about that one situation, and he had cryptically said 'they don't call them Holy Rollers for nothing', but offered no further explanation.

So he walked on over, intrigued and a bit nervous. The crowd seemed more subdued than in previous nights, with no shouts of 'Hallelujah' or chaotic bodily responses. Instead he heard lovely piano music, and then the most wonderful soprano voice singing. The voice rose and fell beautifully, to his Mom's favourite gospel tune 'He will meet you in The Garden'. He climbed up the steps tentatively, and stepped into the rear anteroom of the church. At that distinct point he felt a strange rush of emotions, because he then realized that he knew the singer. He was a bit embarrassed in fact that he hadn't linked up the voice with her, as he used to accompany her to the odd wedding a year or two back where she was the soloist. They were dates but not really dates, and the whole thing fizzled before you could call it a true romance. She was as cute as a button, with the voice of a nightingale and smart to boot, but it had cooled and that was that. But as he stood there, nervous and sweating, he saw the true Goddess in her as she sang to her audience. Towards the end of her second piece he felt a blush of

embarrassment, and tiptoed down the steps. Enough voyeurism for one evening, first carnal then sacred. He needed to go home for some grounding.

When he came up Archy to his home, he could see his sister's little car in the gravel driveway his Dad had constructed parallel to their garage. She worked in a bank in Toronto, the city where his Mom and Dad had both gone to seek work, and now that was where his sister had gone. Ten years older, she kept an eye out for him and was always generous in so many ways.

He went into the back laundry area, and saw that his Mom and his sister were having a cup of tea together at the kitchen table. Their voices had been low in tone and register, and they seemed a bit awkward as he closed the back door.

"Hi there..." He had definitely interrupted a serious conversation.

"Hi Bwuz, what were you up to?" He thought of the swimmer and the church singer and quickly concluded that revisionist history might be safer.

"Oh, hung around the schoolyard, walked the dyke. That's about it, nice night though." He pulled up a chair.

"Mom and I were just talking. You're going into your last year of high school, and with your marks you'll probably be going off to university. Maybe down in the city. So we wondered if it might be good for you to come down with me on Sunday and stay the week. Look around, ride the TTC, go to the university. Get a feel for things. I'm working all every day but there will be lots to keep you busy. What do you say?"

His mind raced. The city! Bustling sidewalks, restaurants on every block, subway trains, tree-lined parks, museums, food stands with mysterious foods, office girls wearing high heels and jewelry. He could see all of this in a blur, all tumbling together in an exciting and butterflies-in-the-gut emotional mosaic.

"Heck, 'ya!!" He looked over and saw his Mom smiling, but with the sad eyes of someone who knew she would be soon empty-nest.

Not for Tots



It was one of those nights where time seemed to be expanding. The light was dimming, but the sky seemed to take on a glow from a recently set sun that allowed him substantial illumination as he wended his way home for a second time. The thought of university had caused his mind to race, and he had gone out for one last perambulation of the town to cool off a bit before going to bed. His mind went back to the singing he had heard that evening at the church, the memory of the sound elevating him and taking him into a waking dream reverie. The soloist's voice rose higher and higher, clear as a bell and stirring something deep within him. He started to connect with water droplets, fizzing out of a shower head and running down a mane of wetted brunette hair. The water droplet he was on paused momentarily at the end of a wetted tress, and he looked down to see a lovely white derriere just under a bronzed swimsuit tan line. He willed himself up to the shower head once again, like a skier taking a chair lift for a second run. The microscopic traveler took flight with a semi-transparent water molecule that ran down a pert nose and then drop-dived down onto a stupendously gorgeous left breast, rolling pell-mell down over a raised areola and an extended nipple. He fell to the tile floor in his watery bean bag, beading up in a way to allow full body admiration.

"Dude, what up? Penny for your thoughts?" Vince sat on a picnic table inside the Tot Lot, a kiddie play area by Silver Creek. His reverie had allowed him to walk a couple of blocks on some kind of automatic pilot.

"Uh, Vincio, not much man. Just strolling the burgh, lost in my thoughts." He might have shared his imagined perspectives with his buddy, but he just then noticed that a couple of Vince's groupies were lying on the same table that Vince sat on.

"Well, I and the ladies are just imbibing a tad of the best of Perth County. It's a bit strong, and we're all feeling a bit loopy. Want a taste? I mean of the weed, not the girls!" Vince chuckled at his own joke and the young women giggled goofily. He noticed they were wearing too much eye makeup, but both were somewhat cute.

“Uh, kind of you to offer, but I’m going to pass. Heading home, and I don’t want my Mom to smell pot on my clothes. And after the news of the drowning, makes me a little jumpy around weed and all that goes with it.” He grimaced a bit, and hunched his shoulders apologetically.

“Oh dude, dude, dude...you really know how to throw cold water on a fire! But no real offence taken. So with school starting soon, and it being your last year of high school, any big plans being hatched in that megamind between your ears?”

“Well, not really. I want to do well in school so I can get in to a good university. And play well on the basketball front. Maybe get in better shape—a bit leaner, tougher, stronger. And I’ll probably try out for Reach for the Top again.” He kind of trailed off on this last statement.

“Reach for the Tops, what’s that?” One of the girls showed she had been listening in, and actually flashed him a winsome smile.

“Reach for the Top. Top. Singular. It’s a TV show for egghead student like BroncBuster here to show off how smart they are. A moderator peppers them with questions, and they push a buzzer and blurt out the right answers to earn points. Most of the participants wear Coke bottle glasses and sweaters that match their pants. Bunch of flipping losers.” Vince said this with a swagger.

“TV? You get to be on TV?” Miss Winsome sat up on this, and he could see a fetching little pink halter top under her jean jacket.

“Yeah, but it’s Little League stuff. We just go over to Wingham for the taping, and it runs late or on Saturday afternoons to fill up air time.” He nodded professionally.

“Do you wear makeup when you’re under the bright lights?” The second gal now sat up, plugging into the dialog.

“Uh, nope.” He started to wonder why he hadn’t agreed to take a toke, as these girls were looking more interesting by the minute.

“That’s why they all look like a bunch of washed-out losers on camera, fighting hard to identify a Boticelli or the rings of Saturn.” Vince was becoming surlier in his tone of voice.

“Oooh, art history. That’s my kind of thing.” The more petite gal leaned in to Vince in a placating manner, but looked over at him in an engaged way. “Is the art stuff your thing?”

“Nope. Seymour is our art guy. And Grant is our English lit guy. And Lou handles sports, history and politics. So I’m kind of the geography person and anything that falls through the cracks. Jack of all trades, master of none.” He wiggled his eyebrows saucily, enough for Vince to jump up.

“Ladies, let’s go home for some real fun. What I promised you both earlier. We’ll do more of the academic roundup with this loser another time.”

He was walking away before Vince finished his sentence. He would go home shortly to see his Mom and sister and chat a bit and do some reading before bed. But on this night of many facets, he thought he might stroll down to his Dad's security shack and see if the old man was around. Friday nights were active as many of the workers snuck in a bottle to take a nip from at break time. But if the situation allowed, he would stand outside and let his Dad tell him a few war stories, just to round out this eventful late Summer evening.

Thursday, January 25, 1945; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

"Sit my friends, I'll boil water for tea. We haven't seen you two gentlemen for a bit, and I was starting to worry." Leo looked over his glasses at the two servicemen as they clambered onto stout-legged barstools.

"It's been rough down by the river. The Germans are holed up on an island out in the Maas, do you know it?" Steve had a weary tone to his voice.

"Yes, really just one island north of Waalwijk. But it's quite long and flat." The young Dutchman knew the area well, but it had mainly been of interest to cows before the war started.

"Kapelsche Veer. I may be mangling the Dutch pronunciation, but that's the little bit of real estate that the bastards have established a bridgehead on. They're perched up on a little rise in the land, and replace their paratroopers every few days or so with fresh men from the other side of the river." Bert was morose in facial expression and tone of voice.

"That land is so flat, that anyone coming at them from any direction will be seen quickly." Leo had a furrow in his brow.

"Yep, you are right, young friend. So we will probably try to go in under cover of darkness and hope for fog as well." Steve accepted a steaming cup of tea with a half-smile.

"How will your men get across the river?" Leo knew the Maas was narrow but quite deep.

"Canoes. I've been helping to waterproof a flotilla of Peterborough canoes for the last few days. Cold and muddy work. Makes farming up on the Bruce Peninsula seem like a piece of cake." Bert took a hefty pull from his mug.

"When do you men go in?" Leo said this softly.

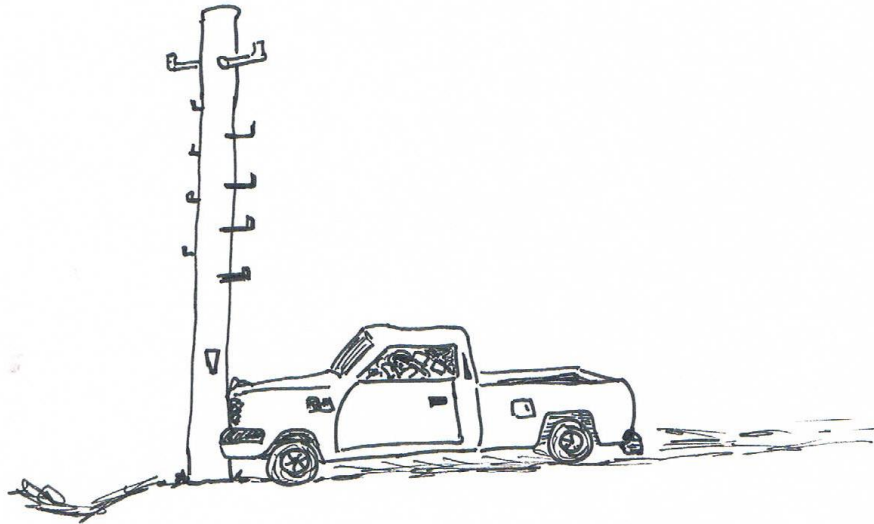
"Whenever General Volles flips a coin, but we hear it could be as early as late tonight." Steve was all business.

"Leo, this might be our last visit for a while. If we are successful, we'll probably keep pushing them back all the way to Germany. If we're not successful...who the hell knows? But what needs to be said, is that we appreciate your friendship. Your family's kindness has made this little campout on the Maas somewhat bearable." Bert looked the young man in the eyes, fondly.

"But you'll come back to visit us when the war is over, surely? I would like to show you more of Holland."
The young man reached out and clasped both of their hands.

"Sure, kid. We'll be back to check in on you. You can count on it." Steve looked over at Bert, and nodded towards the door.

A Pickup Truck



He was standing in front of the library early the next afternoon, feeling as if he had a date with destiny. But something felt off. Inside, he felt a push to go down to the river, hang out on the top of the dyke and watch for pike cresting above the rivulets and foam. But something kept him rooted in place, like he needed to stay where he was so he could face something or learn something important. He sat down on the blue painted bench, and looked up and down at the goings-on along the four block commercial zone of Main Street. A few ladies came out of the Farmer' Bank across the street, heading to the Maple Leaf for a spot of lunch. A mom with a stroller paused in front of Anstett Jewellers, looking at options for future birthday gift suggestions. He saw a lithe figure jump out of a late model Buick, and head into Walkers' Meat Market. It was Mr. Baker, his grade 11 Physics teacher. The guy was balding and seemed like he was eighty years old, but had sinewy tanned forearms and no extra weight at the mid-line. He then recalled vividly in his mind when Jim Lichter had acted up in class and old man Baker had picked him up and threw him against the wall like he was some kind of rag doll. He had respected Mr. Baker before that incident, but now an equal portion of fear complemented that enduring respect.

"Yoohoo, last of the big-time losers, wanna take a run up to Sauble?" Vince had rolled up quickly in a rust-yellow pickup truck, and as he leaned out he extended a beckoning hand.

"Going to the beach? Sounds tempting. But I need to be back for supper or my Mom will worry." He looked into the cab and saw Chet, one of Vince's bandmates, smiling back goofily.

“Oh, shan’t be too long. Just dropping off some stuff for the old man and bringing back some deck furniture. This is a loaner truck and needs to be back before too late anyway. C’mon, loosen up, jump in.” Vince seemed in an incredibly good mood, and may have been just a wee bit high.

“Oh, all right. Summer vacation’s almost over.” He climbed up into the cab while Chet scooted over. They flew up over the West Hill of town and were up at Vince’s family cottage in under an hour.

x-----x-----x-----x

“OK, that’s all the stuff that needs to go back. But before we jump away, time to relax a bit and take off the pressures of the world. Chet, run into the kitchen for some glasses and ice, and there’s OJ in the fridge.” Vince took out a sleek 26 ounce bottle of Smirnoff’s vodka out of a gym bag that he had been lugging around.

“Maybe not the best thing to do, y’know, drink and drive?” He said this kind of half-heartedly, anticipating Vince’s response.

“Oh, dude, you are one fucking downer. We’ve been working our asses off here, and you’re going to deny me a cold beverage?” Vince heaped on the scorn.

“No, I mean...no. But it’s a loaner truck, and in any case you should be careful. Drinking and then getting behind the wheel is not a good idea.” He pressed the point initially, but then his voice trailed off at the end.

“OK, OK, I’ll just have one or two. Half of the people driving up to Sauble will have more alcohol in them than that. You and Chet can drink as much as you want, and have some fun. It’s the Beach!” Vince did a thumbs up as Chet came back with the ice, glasses and pulpy orange juice.

-----x-----x-----x-----x

Two drinks in, he realized Vince had been too liberal in the pouring of the colourless spirit. The ice was soothing, but the alcohol bit strong. He rose to go take a leak, and almost fell over. He was inebriated, and everything started to seem funny and a bit murky.

“Time to roll, gents. We need to get this buggy home, and if I stay planted in this lawn chair with a drink in my hand, I won’t be able to steer clearly. Shall we?” Vince nodded to both of the boys in a courtly fashion.

-----x-----x-----x-----x

As they rolled through Paisley, the driver turned to his cab mates.

“Gents, I am stone cold sober right now. I suggest we drop in to The Inn and have a tequila sunrise as a mid-point refresher. I won’t take no for an answer, and it’s my treat!”

-----x-----x-----x-----x-----x

The grizzled barkeep poured Vince a third tequila sunrise with an impassive countenance. Vince raised the glass to his lips, hesitated mid-point, and did a toasting motion toward his two companions.

“You are amazing company, my fine-feathered friends. And this gentleman has the strongest tequila in Bruce County. And perhaps the tastiest as well. But the bottom line is that I am in no shape to drive.”

-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X

The truck bombed down County Road 9, just south of the Pinkerton turnoff. Vince was most correct, he was not in a position to drive home, and Chet had loudly proclaimed that he was also not up to the task. So they had both looked blearily and pleadingly at the third and last option. He had only sipped a bit of his single drink, finding it too strong and far too sour. The vodka from the cottage was wearing off a bit, and he felt he would be OK. Just take it easy and guide the truck homeward. Traffic was fairly light, and if he kept focused it would all work out well.

They rolled past the Dunkeld Hotel and the two passengers suggested to stop for a drink on the patio. The light was starting to fail and the idea of another stop with more drinking frightened him greatly. So amid their protestations, he kept rolling and incrementally sped up. So much so that they missed the first turnoff into town and kept rolling southward. The speed of the truck worried him, but he had enough alcohol still in his veins that the speed also excited him. He girded up to start the slowdown for the second turnoff into town. Pumping the brakes, he made a wide and not-so-tidy turn, running up a bit onto the right shoulder before getting back onto the asphalt.

This created a bit of bloodlust in the three boys, and Vince and Chet started to howl in unison. The truck came into the thirty mph zone at the edge of town, but it kept rolling along close to fifty miles per hour.

They crossed over the tracks, the non-perpendicularity and irregular pavement causing them to bounce and lift. He saw Ridout Street coming up on his left and he inexplicably decided to take the shortcut home at high speed. The turn was done well for the first piece and he felt elated, so much so that he forgot to straighten out the wheel. The truck rolled quickly across the incoming lane and headed straight for a looming telephone pole. The hit came sharply, crumpling the hood up to the mid-engine. The seatbelt-free boys followed the laws of physics, and moved as one into the glass of the windshield.

-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X

He floated above the scene, looking down at the truck with its engine still racing and his head squished into the space between the steering wheel and the windshield. Just a few yards away he saw the face of his favourite neighbor, Ed, who had passed away about ten years back.

“Whew, alcohol and speed don’t mix well.” The neighbour’s eyes were rheumy.

“Yeah, crazy, I know. Thought I could just bring her home. Take it easy. But something made me lose my judgment. What’s going on here, Ed?”

“Oh, I’m just here to console and support. But you’re going back down. The other lads are bleeding bad, but they’ll be OK. You took the worst hit due to that hard steering wheel. So you’re at that in-between point. But you have things left to do, more to learn. I should say so after this night!” The man grinned and seemed to wisp away.

-----X-----X-----X-----X-----X

The pain was intense across his forehead and gut, and the two friends beside him were stirring. Chet opened the passenger door and slid out, groaning. Vince followed and then he tumbled out last, hitting some cool grass and reeds in the ditch near the telephone pole. The cops would be here soon enough, but first they would need to go to the hospital because of the bleeding. And with a bit of luck and the fact that the town’s doctors played golf late on Summer evenings, enough time would go by before they faced the threat of a breathalyzer and the wrath of their waiting parents.

Aftermath, Reflections



He woke up the following morning, and saw by the ambient light that he had slept in considerably. He went to roll over but the pain in his torso caused him to double up and catch his breath. Just for a moment he had forgotten the events of the day before, but the prickly sensation across his gut and the

dryness of his mouth caused him to remember very quickly. He let out a long groan and then caught himself. But the house seemed quiet, so he could grunt and groan without embarrassment.

His mind went back to the previous evening, and a flood of recollections streamed across his consciousness. The taste of the mixed drinks, the grim smile of the bartender and his slicked back silver hair. The sounds of the truck radio as they rolled along at high speed, the raucous laughter of the three lads that emanated from anything that was remotely funny being said. The oncoming telephone pole, and the complete quiet after the collision with its rooted substance.

He drifted back into sleep with these disturbing memories as a catalyst. He saw the bright lights of the hospital waiting room, and the smell of antiseptic came to his dream consciousness. He could see Vince pacing up and down as they waited for the doctor, fidgeting and full of nervous energy.

“My old man will kill me when I get home! That was a borrowed truck, and its front was completely smashed in by the collision. Who knows what the insurance company will say? Borrowed truck, young drivers, and driving under the influence. Good Christ, I’ll be doing paper routes until I’m fifty to pay for that truck. My Dad will have a bird, I tell ‘ya!”

He looked down at Vince’s shirt and saw it was torn and blood-soaked. He was shocked at first, and then looked down at his own shirt to see blood stains. All three lads had hit the dash pretty hard, and all had injuries to their heads and to their upper bodies. He hadn’t seen this much blood since he had gone to a hockey game at the arena last winter. A fight broke out on the ice, and one player had bopped an opposing player in the nose, causing an uncommon amount of blood to spurt out and onto the ice surface. This had caused a lot of commotion amongst some of the parents in the stands, and one dad started to throw punches against two other fathers. He was getting the worse of it due to being outnumbered, but reached up to grab a railing and pulled himself upwards while releasing his legs in a broadside kicking fashion into his two opponents. One of them stumbled backwards and fell into a gaggle of spectators, and the other came up to receive a second kick from the previously outmanned parent.

His dream state took him back to seeing his Mom as he was released to the waiting room area. Her eyes were averted and her chin was set firmly, but she said nothing. The absence of a verbal rebuke stung even harder as she then sorrowfully looked into his eyes.

“Sorry, Mom. I don’t know what got into us.” He had said this in a low voice.

She let out a sigh and turned to go home. His Dad was muttering all kinds of things, but it was as if he couldn’t hear any of it. He could only see his Mom’s eyes, sad and dejected. Time would heal things, but he realized then in his dream state that he would need to take stock of things and change the path he was on. A bit more speed and they might have all checked out. So as angry as the parents were, they all knew they had been fortunate.

He woke up, resolved to change and make amends. He rolled over and groaned loudly.

Into the Light



The day went by in some kind of a blur. He got up late, and the house was still quiet. He had no real clue where his parents were, or what they might be doing. So he made himself a kind of a brunch, with some fresh homemade bread and a slab of old cheddar cheese and a ripe tomato from the garden. His body ached in several distinct areas, but when he started to read a book this discomfort seemed to ebb away quickly.

Tidying up the dishes, he realized it was a bright and beautiful Summer day outside. He had been so self-absorbed that he hadn't consciously realized this, and felt the tug that all Ontario residents feel on a sunny afternoon. He ambled down May Street and cut through the baseball diamonds to the dykes by the river. The water levels were relatively low, and the water snaked northwestward in an ambulatory fashion. A sandbar island or two had popped up in the center of the river, and seagulls hung out on these looking for a bit of sustenance. He walked along slowly, peering over into the park on the opposite side of the river. He felt a bit disoriented, but also felt the need to see people. So he decided to press onwards along the dyke, and ended up at the parking lot of the swimming pool. The memory of the budding lawyer and her svelte form came to him immediately, and he decided to go up to the observation benches to see what he could see. Lots of little kids jumped in and out of the pool in what seemed like an open swim period, but absolutely no girl of any interest was within a hundred yards of the water. He heard the showers running, and his mind took him back to the previous water droplet surfing and its tactile diversions. He played these entertaining images over and over again in his mind, until he felt someone standing directly behind him.

"Deep in thought, big mister?" The voice was familiar. He wheeled around to see a basketball teammate, one year behind him in school. The kid was a farm boy, but had good looks and was nobody's fool.

"Hmmp, I thought I felt someone's hot breath on the back of my neck. Shouldn't you be out haying or something?" He smiled and extended his hand for a low five.

"First cut's already up in the mow. Got a few days off before we go on to other things, then a second cut before we head back to school. But I don't want to tire you out by the telling of all this, 'cause I know you town boys don't do a lick of real work!" The kid grinned and rolled his eyes, telegraphing that he was just ribbing his teammate.

"Actually, not so far off the real truth, I must concede. Even moreso given the events of last evening." He grimaced towards the end.

"What do you mean by that?" His country friend was genuinely curious.

"Oh, it sounds too tawdry to tell, and not too flattering if the truth be told. A few of us took a run up to Sauble in a truck to do a few chores. Liquid refreshments were imbibed, and then a few more. Instead of sleeping it off and getting home late, we rolled off in haste and got tangled up with a telephone pole on the edge of town. A bit faster and we might not be here to tell the tale!" He shook his head and his torso twinged.

"Holy crap! But don't guilt-trip yourself too much. We country boys have been known to drink and drive as well. I've gone off the road more than a few times. Those fields can be a bit bumpy, I tell 'ya. But I've never hit a pole..." The friend's voice drifted off.

"Yeah, I know. We're lucky. I certainly learned my lesson. Haven't really been chewed out yet by my folks, or Vince's Dad, or the guy who actually owned the truck. All of that fun stuff is yet to come! But I already know what we did was wrong, and I've got to live cleaner and sharper from now on."

"Dude, got to run as my lil' sister is getting out of her lessons. If you ever want to sweat a bit and get out of town, give me a ring and you can come out to the farm for a break. We'll work you hard but feed you well." His buddy clapped him on the back and his ribs ached.

He walked home via the Main Street, looking longingly into the window of The Chicken Shack but deciding against a stop, in an effort to punish himself a bit and save some money in the bargain.

He walked into the back door and took off his running shoes. The house was quiet but he felt someone was home. It was later than he had thought, and his Dad would be at work by now. The kitchen was quiet, but he heard a sniffing sound from the living room. He went into the dining room, and saw his Mom sitting on the couch across the way. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she daubed at her nose with a cloth handkerchief.

"Jayson..." Her voice cracked.

"Oh, Mom, I'm so sorry, I really am." He felt huge guilt that his accident had affected her so dramatically.

"So you've heard? Who told you?" Her voice was brittle.

"Heard what?" He walked towards her, confused.

"That Grandma Flynn died. Poor soul. Loved her as much as my own Mom. Lovely and gentle she was." She broke down and sobbed.

He couldn't believe his ears. He had also loved the elderly lady to bits. He had not known either of his grandmothers, so she was as close to a real grandma as you could get. So many childhood memories, so many kind words spoken. But he also felt a deep sense of relief. That he had not been the cause of his Mom's grief, something real and substantial had come in to replace his errant behavior and just slightly take him off the hook.

He sat down and gave his Mom a tight hug, both of them sobbing and feeling their loss.

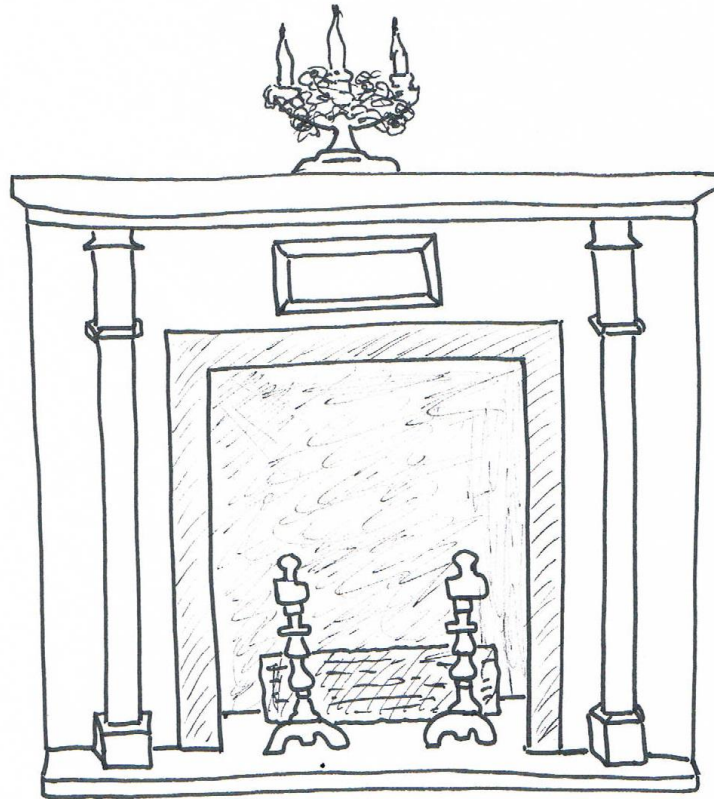
Monday, January 29, 1945-Carboloy Plant, Front Street, Toronto, Ontario

The days were getting a bit longer each day, but the amount of ambient daylight penetrating to her diamond drill workstation was minimal at best. The young woman had several high wattage work lamps that she would reposition throughout the day as her tasks flowed from one to the next. Almost all of the workers in the plant were women, pressed into service while the men were away at the front. They all worked hard, as they realized their work was important as part of the overall effort to bring the boys back home after peace was declared. The work was precise and demanding, but her early training as a seamstress put her in good stead and she wielded a measurement caliper as handily as a cloth measuring tape.

But today she couldn't get her brother out of her mind. She remembered biting back tears as he boarded the troop train at Union Station, and kept holding in mind the vision of seeing him step down off a similar train not too far down the road. What was his life like over there? He wasn't a good letter writer, and was always vague about what conditions they were facing as they put their boots on the ground.

She looked out and saw a bit of sleet hitting the tops of streetcars as they rolled down Front Street. What was it like to live in a tent in the middle of Winter? And to be so far away from family and friends made it all the worse. She went back to her work, biting her lip and thinking hard.

Glimpses of the Future



He kept an eye on his Mom over the next several days. She had an ongoing zone of tension to navigate with his Dad on a daily basis, and his little mishap with the truck hadn't helped things one little bit. He could see conflict had arisen from this, with the old man wanting to bar him from anything fun for the upcoming school year and his Mom providing a more tempered perspective. He had become aware over the last few months that she knew this would be his last year at home, and while that thrilled and scared him in equal measure, it was a prospect that generated dread from her perspective. She would have to do things differently, live life differently. He knew this would be difficult in this pleasant but constraining small town. Friends would play a big part in this, but the loss of Doris a while back and now Grandma Flynn seemed to stack the deck in a very negative way.

He watched her putter at her sewing machine from his vantage point on the couch, aimlessly watching Monty Hall and The Price is Right. The gift hostesses on the show were certainly a bit older than himself, with their short bobbed haircuts and blandishly pleasant features. But it was their legs that caught his eye, and this is what kept him glued to the set. The young ladies wore hot pants, which showed off their muscular and shapely legs to a wondrous degree, all the more accentuated by a pair of red leather high heels. He would look over at his Mom,

ripping out a seam on a dress that she was altering, and then back to the hostesses as they stretched and bent and twisted. This was torture in a way, of the most pleasant kind. He would have switched the set to another channel, but Number 8 from Wingham was the only station for this rural town set in its deep river valley.

The phone by the sewing machine rang. "Yes, unhuh, hold on for a moment." His Mom's voice was friendly and pleasant. "It's Vince, for you..."

He took the phone and stretched the cord around the edge of the fridge line to afford some modest level of privacy. "Halloo, I thought your cow band was playing tonight." He peeked around the fridge to determine if his Mom was bending an ear his way.

"We're the second act, so just getting our gear in a van. Wanted to know if you'd like to come along? You remember Priscilla, the leaner one from that night over at the Tot Lot? She's been asking about you ever since. I suspect if you tagged along you might to get to play tag of another kind, if you know what I mean. She's thin on top but has a beeyootiful ass and a great pair of legs. Sound appealing?" Vince's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Unhh..." The image of the TV hostesses popped into his brain and his groin ached. "Rain cheque, dude. I'm headed out to a social event."

"Damn you, knave, don't ever say I didn't try to help you! Priscilla would be just the ticket to snap out of the blues from the truck fiasco. Toodles!"

He went upstairs to put on a dress shirt and his wide-whale corduroy pants. It was still a bit warm for this kind of garb, but he had been invited to a party at the school-friend/wedding-singer/early-crush gal's house, high atop the East Hill. If he walked slowly through town he might just avoid being a puddle of sweat before he reached the doors of the near-mansion. His Mom was now on the phone, so he wrote her a quick note and pinned it to the dress project, relieved in a way that he wouldn't have to field any questions about where he was off to.

He ambled through the downtown, stopping off at the river bridge and the pool hall for short cooling-off breaks. He came abreast of Lou, sitting on a bench outside the Public Library.

"Where you off to, *amigo*?" Lou sang this out, like the Puerto Rican gang member he was at heart.

"Up the hill, to a party at the mansion." He said this almost despondently.

"Looking good, and ready for some serious hobnobbing. Certainly some good food to look forward to, and some young ladies in Summer gowns to flirt with. I don't have an invitation so I

am a bit envious. But I would actually feel better, not worse, if you could look like you are happy to be going. C'mon, man, get your game face on!" Lou reached out for a low five.

He felt better after this exchange with his friend, and rolled across the east bridge with a bit of gusto. Ten minutes later he was pulling a large brass knocker on a heavy wooden door.

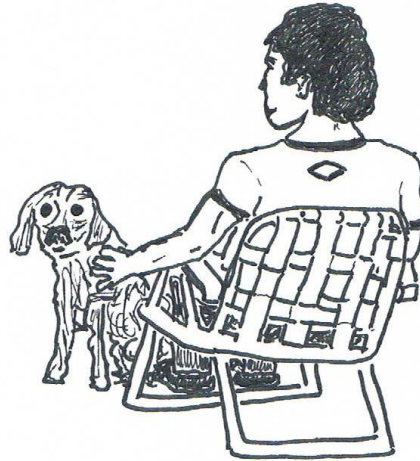
"Oh my, my, the party just got interesting! C'mon in you handsome devil." The girl answering the door was a younger sister of his classmate, and was dressed in a satiny orange frock. She curtsied and linked arms with him, drawing him into a grand foyer where the patriarch of the clan greeted guests. He waited for a few folks to clear away, and he got a firm handshake and a friendly greeting from the gentleman host. The man was a pillar of his community, an educated and skilled professional, but was completely accessible and welcoming to the perspiring and nervous young man.

"Jayson, allow me to introduce you to some fine folks. This gentleman is one of our very best lawyers in town, and this dear fellow is the best tax accountant in the County. And this lovely woman is someone you may know, as she helps so many young folks at the high school get to the right academic programs for their downstream success."

He shook hands and smiled broadly at everyone he was introduced to. He knew internally that the master of the house was someone he aspired to be like at many levels. What he didn't know was that the introduction to the high school guidance secretary would spawn a series of downstream events that would help him leave this town and develop himself in the manner that he had just been shown a fleeting glimpse of. He then had a daydream-like image of lying in the back of a van, kissing Priscilla while he stroked her shapely glutes through a pair of skin-tight black jeans. He closed his eyes and this reverie vanished, and he contemplated the forks in the road and decisions taken for good or naught in the unfolding spool of horizontal time.

His Mom worked on her dress alteration job across town, a smile inexplicably coming to her face.

Si, Senorita



He walked down the hill from the party, slowly and reflectively. The town was quiet, and as he walked along he admired the details of its buildings and the mysteries engendered by the rhythms of the night. He had had a lot of fun, talked to a number of people, and had even danced a bit with a number of the young ladies present. The drawing room of the old house was exquisitely appointed, with artwork and candelabra setting a most celebratory and romantic mood.

But he walked home alone. He somehow seemed happier that way, emotionally unencumbered and able to ruminate on whatever came to mind. He realized he had spent the better part of high school focusing on the females around him. The nice girls who wore silk dresses and jewelry to fine parties. The tougher girls who wore welded-on jeans and hung out in the shadows of the backstage area of Vince's cow band gigs. The young Moms wheeling their prams through the town, giving him a shy smile and the odd second look. The older Moms, sometimes even Moms of his friends, who looked to be in decent shape and exuded a mature sexual energy that he seemed to sense like pollen drifting on a late Spring day. He mulled all of this over as he walked along the Durham Road, and paused once again at the East bridge. The Saugeen rolled under him in its late Summer splendor, the water rich in energy and presence, made all the more glorious in the late evening light.

His thoughts rolled along in pace with the river. In each folded depth he could see all the girls he had crossed paths with this Summer. A new school year was about to unfold, his last in his hometown. He felt nervous and excited at the same time, fed by images of soft smiles and curvaceous figures. The river was tormenting him this evening, with its mysteries and undulating rivulets and its kinetic, fluid energy.

He walked along past the Beer Store, and came upon the entrance to the Central Hotel. He thought for a moment that he might take a quick peek inside, but the memory of its embedded smokiness and beer-soaked carpeting provided a sufficient deterrent. He was almost past the front door when it swung open and out popped the cheerleader gal and another girl he had never seen before.

"Well hellooo there, long time, no see." The cheerleader said this with a drawn out earthiness, and sort of wrinkled her freckled nose at him.

"Yeh, nice to see you. Back to school soon enough, I guess." This was said nervously, and he emitted a goofy grin to partially cover this up.

"Jay, this is my friend Darlene. She's up from the city to visit her boyfriend before she goes back to college." He shook hands awkwardly, without missing the cuteness of her rosy cheeks or the fact her tight blue jeans encased a toned derriere.

"Are you gals interested in a stroll along our beautiful Main Street?" He said this much more confidently, hoping he might be able to impress the cheerleader gal.

"Ooooh, sorry, rain cheque on that, dude." The guy I'm with and her boyfriend are just visiting the men's room, and then we're going up to the water tower to look down on the lights of the town." His friend cringed sheepishly.

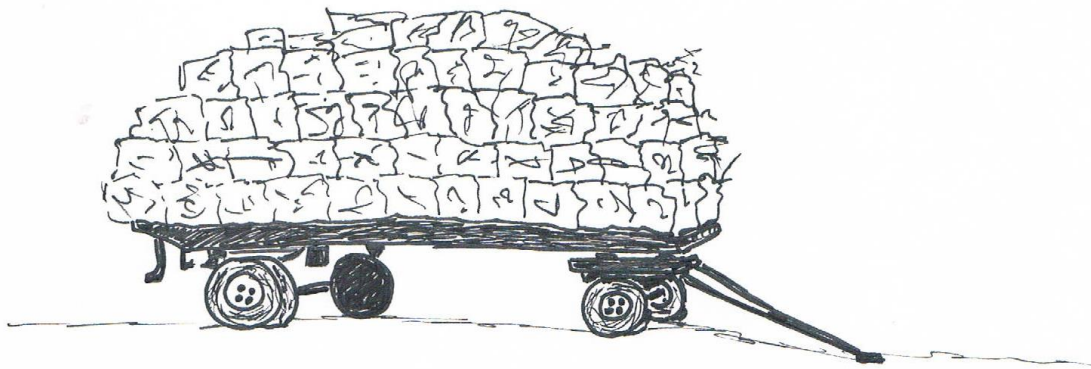
"Great to meet you." He was walking away almost immediately, attempting to smooth the sting that had come from sticking out his neck. Of course girls like this would not be at the hotel without some male company, and of course water tower parking would follow and whatever else might go on in the confines of a sticky car seat.

By the time he got home the heat had gone out of his cheeks and neck and he was back to feeling at some kind of equilibrium. He sat on the front porch, a light breeze blowing through the two large maple trees. The thought of female energy kept coming back to him, in waves, mental image upon mental image.

One of the girls who had been at the party came into his mind. She was an exchange student from a Latin country, exactly which one he couldn't remember. She had lovely dark hair and quite delicate features. Her figure was petite in almost all aspects, except for a pair of large breasts that seemed to jut out from her frame in the most ridiculously pert manner. He could never get more than a polite hello out of her, said in the most dispassionate of tones. But he had heard stories, from a class buddy who lived opposite the exchange student's host family. Stories of the diminutive seniorita having a crush on the youngest son in the household, and that the two of them would regularly sneak out to the play cabin near the property line which

his buddy's home shared. Strange sounds would fill the night air, evoking images of Latin passion, punctuated by shrill releases of 'Si, si, si' to the auditory voyeuristic pleasure of the neighbor kid. The recounting of this had perhaps magnified many dimensions of the actual experience, but it was certainly of sufficient entertainment value to the young man who sat on his porch and contemplated the hot passions that potentially lay below a cool and oft-times disaffected female persona. The year ahead seemed bright with promise and intrigue.

An Honest Day's Work



The phone rang early the next morning, and his Mom took it in her characteristic muffled tone that she adopted when people were still sleeping in the house. He knew immediately it was for him, so he was up out of bed and down two stairs before he got the confirming summons.

"Jayson, Ted Dixon here. I know it's a long weekend, and you'll be heading back to school soon. But I've got a bit of my second cut of hay to put in the mow and I haven't been helped by either the weather or personal circumstances." Ted was a burnt-red farmer up Pinkerton way, who he had helped with his hay over a few summers. He was taciturn, and a smoker, but with a heart of gold.

"Anyways, if you can round up another young fellow to help, twenty dollars for the day for each of you plus lunch and supper provided. I'll pick you up in an hour."

Sixty minutes later he and Lou were crammed into the cab with Ted as the farmer hammered the pickup over the West Hill in the direction of Pinkerton. Lou had been getting his beauty sleep, and wasn't completely excited about a day's work until he mentioned the pay. Another fifteen minutes later they were dropped onto the edge of a field of cut hay, with a tractor and its baling unit getting hooked up to a wagon by a tough-looking guy in his mid-twenties.

"Ladies, nice of you to show up for tea. Ted told me he was going to be short on help for this last little bit, but I had no idea he would resort to pathetic little fuckers like you." Henrik

emitted a crooked grin, exacerbated by a birth defect on his upper lip. Lou was about to retort in some kind of smartass way, but he shot him a look that stopped this in its tracks. He had worked with Henrik over the past haying period, and he was a terrific worker who was actually kind deep down inside. His bark was definitely worse than his bite.

“Nice to see you too, Henrik. I assume you’ll drive the rig, and Lou here and I will stack the bales? We need the exercise to get game-ready for the upcoming basketball season.” He grinned shyly and motioned for Lou to join him up on the wagon deck.

The day was brilliant, with a hot sun but a light breeze from the West. The bales kept rolling off the back of the baler, and he and Lou walked them to the rear of the wagon and started to build a structure that would hopefully stay intact until they made their way back to the barn.

“Cripes, my shirt is drenched already. Did we bring anything to drink? My throat is as dry as a bone!” Lou wiped his neck with an old-fashioned red handkerchief pulled out of his rear pocket.

“There’ll be real lemonade, with plenty of ice, waiting for us at the barn. Ted’s good that way, both with food and drink, but always after a chunk of work has been done. If it’s any consolation, I’m soaked right through as well, and it’ll only be worse once we are up in the hay mow putting these bale puppies to bed!” He grinned and rolled his eyes, catching a sharp look from Henrik.

As advertised, the field work seemed breezy and cool compared to the dust and confinement of the mow at the upper part of Ted’s red-frame barn. The two boys lurched their way back and forth, attempting to secure each bale in a good position and get back to the chute before too many bales built up. But the lemonade on each side of the mow work more than made up for it, and the day passed by with the satisfaction only physical work can bring.

The drive back into town was delightful, with a cool breeze blowing into the cab and the pleasant feeling of a somewhat dusty twenty dollar bill in their back pockets. Dinner was a quick pit-stop at the little diner in the old schoolhouse on the Paisley Road. Ted was indeed generous, and each boy ordered two cheeseburgers, an order of fries and an order of onion rings, along with a homemade chocolate malted milkshake. They consumed this under the stand of pine trees that had been the windbreak for the school, in an orgy of grease and mustard and relish.

“One last task I’ll need help with before I drop you lads off. I have a load of old wood and metal bits in the back. Many hands make light work, so a quick run up the North Hill to the dump and Bob’s your uncle.” The town dump was actually beside its ski hill, a true old-fashioned dump where people backed in and tipped their unwanted residuals over a steep slope. More often

than not they would throw a match onto the pile, so the whole place reeked of smoke. The two boys got out of the cab and climbed gingerly in and around the debris, then started to fling pieces of wood and bits and bobs of metal. They got into it, turning it into a bit of a competition to see who could fling something the farthest distance. Rats scurried here and there, disturbed by the noise and the upheaval. Ted got out of the cab at the end and lit a match, flicking it open-flamed onto the pile.

“With all apologies to the rats. Boys, home to bed. You will sleep well tonight.”

Tuesday, January 30, 1945; Kapelsche Veer, The Netherlands

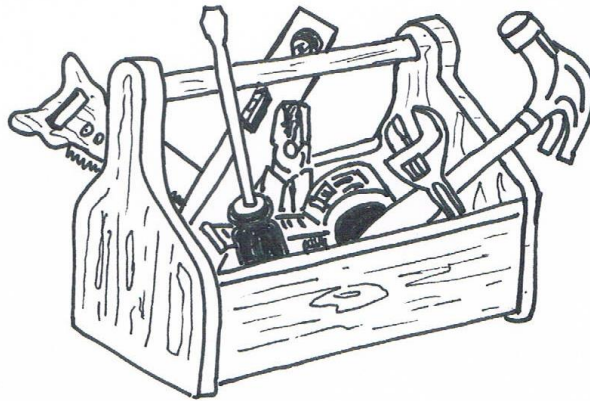
He was cold, cold to the bone. His boots had been soaked for hours now, as they had slogged through mud one inch at a time. Progress was being directed through hand signals from an earnest sergeant, intent on keeping his men safe. Steve was somewhere in the back, and the overall plan was to provide support for the large tank that rolled twenty yards ahead of the group.

It had been quiet so far, eerily quiet. But after a few more moments the tank got mired in the mud. The hatch opened up and men started to pile out and clamber down the side of the tank. And at that exact same time, copious machine gun fire started to rain down around the tank. Bert looked ahead and saw two boys crumple and fall into the mud on the rear side of the tank. It seemed surreal as this was the closest to combat he had been so far.

And within seconds he heard bullets zinging past him and hitting the mud ten yards behind him. Then he heard a sharp intake of breath and a soft groan, and he saw Randolph and Norman fall on either side of him. Shock came to him quickly, preventing him from quickly hitting the ground. He looked up at the crow's nest on the hill, and swore he saw the bullet coming. A sharp prick of pain hit his chest, and then he felt himself floating above the fray. He no longer experienced the cold, but instead felt light and happy. He could see somebody that looked a lot like him, slumped down in the mud. He drifted back and saw Steve lying flat in a bit of a shallow depression in the ground.

‘Stay down, my friend. Lay there until dark if you have to. But stay down, if you want to get back to that farm in Manitoba.’ He drifted upwards, joining the other seven souls that day who no longer felt the mud and cold of that God-forsaken island in the middle of the Maas River.

School's In



School had started up once more, with all of its attendant hustle and bustle and anxiety. People were walking out to the high school in loosely formed knots, chatting with each other about the exploits of the Summer and commenting on different people's back-to-school attire. He walked alone, with a new knapsack on his back and wearing a pair of home-cut jean shorts that would be welcome given the building heat of the day. Ahead of him was a gaggle of Grade 11 girls, giggling in fits and starts and going pin-drop quiet when one or more of them whispered some secret thought or witticism in another's ear. He liked their energy and thought a few of them were actually cute, but they were walking considerably slower than him so some kind of passing manoeuver on the broad sidewalk was inevitable. Behind him came a group of cooler tough guys in a lower grade, walking quickly and sporting new jeans that looked like they had actually faced an iron in the last twenty four hours. He somehow didn't want to get swept up in their preppie energy or be associated with them by the gal-pack, so he took it upon himself to jog past the young ladies and put a block or two gap between himself and all of the gigglers and future hipsters.

The corridors of the school were busier than anticipated, and he saw a lot of people he didn't know. Then it dawned on him that it was his Grade 13, the final year, and some of his Grade 12 buddies had graduated from the four year program and would be down-country right now navigating the currents of colleges such as Fanshawe in London or Humber in Toronto. But with their departure came kids from smaller high schools in the southern part of the County who did not have a Grade 13 program. So these were the new faces he saw, kids who had been at other places but needed their Grade 13 to go on next year to a university. He nodded at a few and smiled at a few more, and largely got back lukewarm responses. He reassured himself by remembering it was the first day back and that hopefully things would settle down after a bit.

He picked up his locker number and combination and found his locker for the year, a slightly bent-door version down near the home economics room. He could almost always smell cookies baking whenever he was in this zone of the school, but today no olfactory pleasures were being offered up. He did stick his head into his locker and thought it smelled like weed, and a finger tap check on the upper shelf gave back a somewhat sticky response, so he made a mental note to snag a wetted paper towel the next time he was in the boy's washroom.

This would be the first year of high school without a shop course in his schedule. Welding and carpentry were applied skills, and seemingly had no real place in an academically rigorous program. But he felt lucky that his home room this year would be in the classroom at the front of the wood shop. This was one of his favourite places in the school, with its cedar wood smells and the hum and throb of bench saws and planers.

So his home room teacher would be Mr. Anstett, or Tricky Dick as he was known to most of the students. He was actually a pretty straight guy, taciturn even, who spoke in low tones and at times seemed slightly menacing. The rules were different back then, so he would smoke a cigarette once an hour at the back door of the wood shop. The aura of nicotine and his generally swarthy complexion gave him a worldly weariness that was appealing on one hand and repelling on the other.

"Jayson, how was your Summer?" Only a handful of students had found this home room, and the teacher gravitated to someone he had taught previously.

"Fair to middling, I suppose. Got a lot of reading in, and a little bit of paid work." He paused for half a second, thinking about how much he should expose himself. "Got into a bit of an accident."

"Yeah, heard about that. Nothing stays below the radar in a small town like this. Heard you boys were lucky you were able to walk away. And lucky you didn't have to blow the breathalyzer. Did you learn a lesson from all of this?" The teacher leaned in, emitting smoke-tinged breath.

"Yessir." He paused for effect. "Keep my nose clean, don't mix alcohol with a steering wheel, work hard, bright future ahead." This was said with a wan smile.

"Good, good, you could almost get that embroidered for the dining room wall. The trick is to hold all of that tight, like your best girl, and not succumb to the temptations of living sloppy. Have you thought about what you will take in university?" The teacher looked at his student over the top of his glasses.

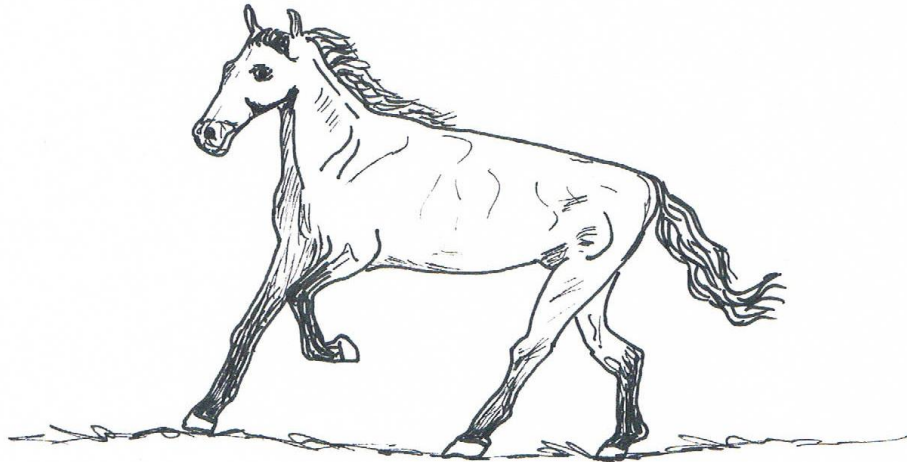
"Hmm, not really sure. Some kind of science maybe, but I don't like chemistry or biology. Physics is cool. Love math. Hard to say. Any suggestions?" The boy said this innocently.

"Well, you've taken four years of technology training, and have seen the inside workings of at least four kinds of shops—wood, welding, auto and mechanical. You got good grades in all of this, but you're not the best with tools or equipment. So something you can use math and physics in, but not hands-on applied. Maybe engineering? Lots of people take engineering but they fall down on the math. An engineer supervises the people who work with their hands and actually get the thing done. You'd be good at managing people. Yep, I think studying engineering at university would be spot on." The older man's eyes seemed to twinkle a bit.

"Sounds good. Let me look into it. Thanks, I needed a push in the right direction."

"OK, for that free advice I'm going to take my pound of flesh. Classes are shorter today as it's the first day. At 1:40 a group of Grade 9 wood shop students will be offloading lumber at Centennial Park. We will be building forms for two outdoor rinks for use this Winter. I need a site superintendent, and that will be you. Get the boys to neatly stack the lumber in the picnic shelter area, where it will be out of the elements. Once done, class is dismissed and people can walk home from there. You'll be my site engineer and my eyes on the ground. Task accepted? Good, now I need a smoke before we take the roll call for the home room!"

Stud Fee



The first week back to school had passed relatively uneventfully. His first semester classes all seemed pretty interesting, with good teachers and decent people to sit near. Football was starting up, and something about that flipped a valve in his gut and made him feel queasy and unsettled. Perhaps it was the eventual turning of the season away from the pleasant Summer

to the cooler Fall, which would then lead into six months of cold and snowy Winter. But no, it was something about the actual football that upset him. The gladiator-like energy of the players, the mud-stained uniforms, the incomprehensible rules. It seemed like a facsimile of war to him, and that was indeed upsetting.

It was a Saturday, and a Saturday meant his Dad would be getting up late but wouldn't be going into work that evening. And it meant his Mom would be out and about, doing errands and shopping. What this all translated into was a stretch of time that was unscripted, with no tasks to work on or things to attend to that his Dad would want help with. He often tried to make himself scarce or be busy with a school project but on this day he had no school work and he had not thought to be out of the house when his old man trundled down the stairs.

"Top of the morning, laddie!" His Dad seemed to be in high spirits.

"More like the afternoon, if I'm reading the clock right." He scrunched up his face and rolled this out sourly.

"You're right. I had a few problems with the reefer units on a few trucks and didn't get away from work until just past three. Have to get my beauty sleep, so here we are. Listen, I had in mind to go up to the Haven and visit some of our older neighbours. Why don't you come along with me? They'd love to see you and talk to you a bit. Life can be short when you get to their age, y'know what I mean? Give me a few minutes to rustle up a ploughman's lunch and we'll hop in the buggy and be up there in two shakes."

Brucelea Haven was the County-run old folks home, the more modern followup to the old House of Refuge that had been up on the lands between the hospital and Brant Central School. He would go there once or twice a year with his Mom to visit her beloved elderly friends, but he had never tagged along with his Dad. Out of guilt, he agreed to go along and they were soon walking up to the reception area of the facility.

"Gentlemen, you'll have to sign in and then look up the room number of whoever you are visiting." The receptionist was a tanned young woman in her late twenties, with a broad smile and a curvy figure somewhat concealed by a greenish coloured uniform. The boy smiled goofily at her and he could have sworn she batted her eyelashes at him. Perhaps this visiting thing wasn't so bad after all? He looked back and noticed a large diamond ring on her left ring finger.

They walked up to the second floor where Manfred Stedinger, a neighbor from up the street was whiling away his final years. He had been a quiet old chap even when he was still in his home. The most notable memory of Manfred he had was sitting in his kitchen by the old wood stove and watching the neighbor throw a piece of wood into the roaring fire. The temperature in the kitchen was over 90 degrees F, but the old dude sported a thick cardigan.

Today he sat in the TV room on the second floor, completely swaddled in thick blankets over top of a wheelchair. He stuck a hand out to greet the father and son, and that was pretty much the extent of his communication. His Dad prattled on about a million boring things, but the boy just sat there and looked at Manfred. He then looked around at the other folks in the TV room, all sitting in their wheel chairs oriented to a television set that no one seemed to be watching but had its volume set too high. They all had their eyes closed and their mouths open, trapped in a sleep-like state that was only punctuated when one emitted a plaintive groan or another dryly smacked their parched lips.

At that point he knew he had to leave. He had to get out in the sunshine, feel the breeze on his face and go where he could hear birdsong. He flew down the corridor, scrambled down some steps, and popped a back door that opened up onto a treed ravine. He ran down a loosely defined path and crossed over a small creek that ran down the boundary of the adjacent schoolyard.

Up on the flat part of the school grounds, on the edge of the basketball court, he saw Lou and Vince sitting on basketballs and staring off into the distance. He charged the hill and came up abruptly to his two friends, causing them to put their finger to their lips in a shushing motion.

“What’s going on?” He said this in a loud whisper.

“Shhh, numbnuts! Keep your voice low so you don’t throw Napoleon off his appointed task!” Vince pointed in the direction of a field that adjoined the schoolyard.

There beside a metal wire fence, stood an impressive horse, brown in colour and imperious in nature. What was most impressive, on a shocking second glance, was that the horse was sporting an erection that appeared to be eighteen inches long and of substantive girth. He mounted a little grey mare who was standing underneath him, awkwardly positioning his member until he made the right alignments and then proceeded to piston his horse schlong in and out with amazing dexterity and rhythm.

“Hah, this reminds me of a field trip once when we saw a horse all excited like that and someone asked ‘what is that under the horse’s belly?’ And Principal Spong said in that baritone voice of his, ‘Uh, Ernie, that would be the horse’s, ahem, sexual organ.’” The three boys all laughed at this, and Napoleon looked over a bit nervously in their direction.

“Man, I could take a few pointers from that guy!” Vince rolled his eyes suggestively.

“Yeah, for sure, they’ll come in handy next time you have to fuck a horse!” Lou started to snicker well before the completion of his joke.

For his part, he couldn't seem to take his eyes off the equine copulation going on right in front of them. Napoleon was quickening his strokes, building to some kind of finale. He couldn't help but think back to when he and Lou had caught the home economics teacher engaged in a similar activity, but through the leaves of the trees it had appeared she was enjoying it much more than the little mare was now. Was this something Mr. Dobbs did with Mrs. DaSilva? The mental visioning of that stirred something deep within him. He then transposed an image of the Brucelea Haven receptionist having it off with her husband, the rigour of it all making the tan lines on her round bottom quiver in the most appealing of ways.

It was no wonder that National Geographic nature shows were so popular in this small Ontario town.

Daydreaming, and Dreaming of the Future



He sat in the living room the following afternoon, in a semi-sleep state after a heavy lunch following church. He had stopped attending regularly a year or two back, but today he had felt sorry about it all in some strange way and had asked his Mom if she would like some company. His Dad used to be a regular church-goer, if sleeping during the sermon still counted for regularity, but some internal political issue had soured him and he now stayed in bed on Sunday mornings. His Mom had been so delighted to have him tag along that she whipped up a fresh chocolate pudding to go along with the standard Sunday lunch of tomato soup and salmon sandwiches. He ate the pudding with gusto, along with a slice of lemon meringue pie and a chocolate chip cookie. The combination of all this sugar and empty calories put him in a delightfully soporific state and he went immediately to the couch to doze.

Alternatingly, over time, he eased out of sleep and read a few pages of a new book centered on medieval England and a secret society with a mission to topple the king. It was well written and brilliantly paced, but his eyelids grew heavy and he had to set the book down on his chest. He went in and out of waking consciousness, until the image of the stud horse plying his magic popped onto his mental screen. The grunting of the horse, the sweat building up on his back, the mewling of the mare, and the final deep thrusting that had sent Vince and Lou into paroxysms of laughter---these all came back vividly to him as he lay prone on the couch.

His mind then turned to similar matters on a human level. He knew a lot of the boys at school had dabbled in some kind of sexual activity, but he certainly doubted if all of their assertions were true. Vince most assuredly was a man of the world in this respect, but he suspected Lou was still a virgin along with a goodly number of his basketball team counterparts. It was certainly true in his case, but not through lack of thinking about it. He felt he just needed someone willing to experiment with a bit, without fear of being caught or scorned for his inexperience. He would often fantasize about women ten or twenty years older than him. Some of these ladies seemed to have really kept their figures, and often had more voluminous breasts or more ample derrieres than the girls at school. And they would be experienced in the arts of love, and may have become disenchanted with their balding and belly-expanding husbands or boyfriends. But he knew the odds of this kind of thing happening were slim, so he let his mind drift to higher probability paramours.

For the ten months he had worked as a KFC cook, there were a couple of the serving girls who just exuded sex. One was more wholesome, with a nice smile, and an absolutely killer body underneath her red pinstripe uniform. She would drop hints about having him over to her place in Formosa for a BBQ, but nothing concrete ever seemed to be arranged. The second gal lived in town, and had a reputation for being a bit loose. She was pretty enough, and had an amazingly large and shapely bottom that she poured into tight blue slacks under her uniform. One shift late into his time at KFC she had come into work quite drunk. She came back regularly into the kitchen as it was a quiet Sunday night shift, and had become increasingly flirtatious with each trip back to chat. At one point he had reached over and lightly spanked her muscular derriere and she giggled and suggested she might close up early. Fifteen minutes later she came back again and announced the doors were now closed, and came up to him and reached around and spanked his bottom. He went for broke and stroked her between her legs, instantly feeling the heat and humidity of her genital area. She mock-slapped him and came in closer, and he dipped his hand in for another hot and muggy slide across the fabric of her slacks. At that point the phone rang, and it was her mother calling to see when she needed to be picked up. That was the quintessential mood-breaker, and he was left with a nagging unsatisfied feeling as he mopped the grease off the floors.

His reverie was broken by his sister coming into the living room and standing over him in a kind but let's-get-to-the-point way. She worked in the city but often came home on weekends, mainly to give the Mom support and to see her army of friends who had stayed in town.

"I'm thinking of going back earlier today, as I have a lot of things to get ready for work tomorrow. But I was wondering if you wanted to come back with me? Less of a holiday than last time, more focused on the university? Check out the residences, perhaps talk to some of the academic adviser folks? A full day wandering around U of T will give you a good idea if it's truly a good fit, and you can spend part of the second day exploring neighbourhoods around the university before you jump on a late afternoon bus on Tuesday evening. Only two days of school missed, but well worth it for the future. What do you say?" His sister always cut to the chase.

He blinked his eyes and wiggled his eyebrows. It seemed to him that it was a *fait d'accompli*, so why not get packed? And deep down he knew another puzzle piece for his future had just fallen into place.

April 21, 1945; Kusten Canal, near the Dutch-German border

Steve shifted uneasily, lying flat on the moist ground east of the canal. He had been pretty much numbed out since Bert had been killed almost three months back. About a week after it had happened, in a lull in subsequent action, he had arranged for a telegram to be sent to Leo via the telegraph station in central Waalwijk. It read succinctly:

'Leo—dreadful news. Bert fell at Kapelsche Veer. Sad as hell. We struggle on. Very best to you and your family. Steve.'

He knew the young man would be devastated to receive this news, but better to know than not. He was a rough-hewn boy from the Prairies, where life and death cohabitated on a razor's edge.

They had come across the canal in small boats at night and had established a bridgehead on the eastern side. Over the last few days they had picked off a few German snipers holed up in buildings or behind hummocks of soil. These were sick bastards, he thought. They knew the end of the war was near, but they were still trying to take out as many Allied troops as they could. So he and a few others had been assigned to lay low and shoot only if they had a clear shot.

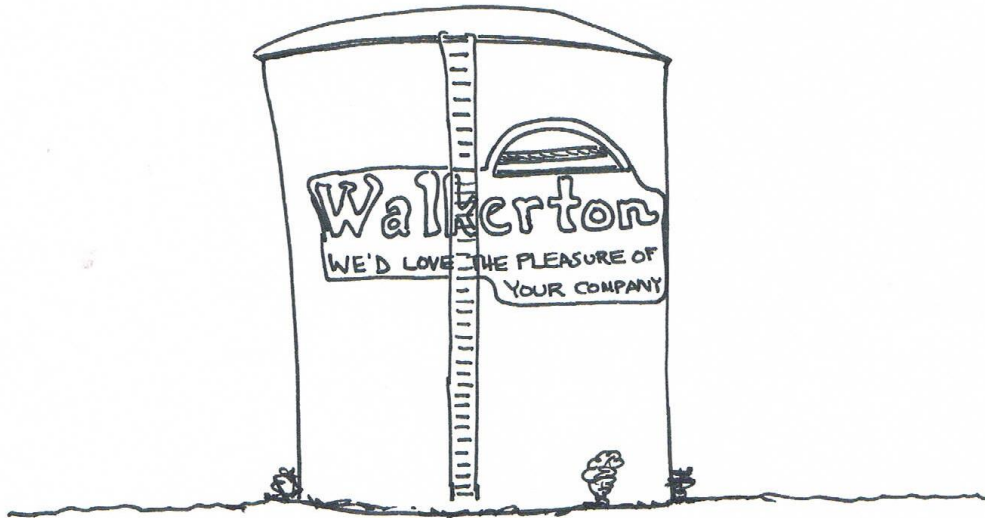
After a few hours, a volley rang out from the top of an old tower. Nobody got hit, and three or four Argylls got up on their knees and shot numerous rounds into the tower. But it was a decoy trap, as numerous German snipers started to shoot in a coordinated fashion from behind trees, hitting the Canadians squarely in their chest. Steve saw this coming and immediately shot out the lights in one of them as he lingered outside the protective plane of the tree.

But this exposed Steve, and a shot rang out in his direction from the original tower source. He had half a second of reaction time, due to a muffled shout, and attempted to get down and drop out of the line of fire. But the bullet made its deadly passage, hitting Steve in the middle of his forehead. His body fell to its knees, and slumped over in the wet grass.

He saw this happen from a vantage point ten yards above his physical body. He felt no pain, and certainly had no desire to clamber back into his now-prone form. Just off to his right was Bert, wearing a grim countenance and shaking his head slowly.

'Very sorry, Steve. I saw that guy in the tower get back on his feet and yelled out at you to hit the deck. Lots of noise swirling around out there. Too little, too late, I'm afraid. I'm not going home, but I had really hoped you might make it back to your folks out West.'

The Human Figure



Time rolled on, and each week was just a little bit closer to the kickoff of the basketball season. This was his last year of high school and part of him wanted it to go by at a snail's pace, one in which he could savour every minute and second of this quickly evaporating time of his life. Contrary to a lot of popular thought, he simply loved high school. Each day had something different going on, any which way he seemed to look he could cast his eye on some gal walking down the corridor, and most people he came across seemed nice. Maybe it was the athletics and activities that were available to folks who wanted to participate, or the great teachers who volunteered their time to facilitate all of this, but it seemed like a golden time that he did not want to end.

Now he was no PollyAnna, and he could see that life after high school would get more demanding and considerably more complex. He saw that first hand in Vince, his on-again off-again buddy from his neighbourhood. Ol' Vince had finished high school the previous year, but hadn't got his act together for college or university applications so he was still in town. With no classes to attend, Vince had gotten work steam-cleaning rugs and doing odd jobs for a local truck mechanic. This gave him plenty of time for practicing guitar and playing odd gigs with his cow band, but also a lot of time to mull things over about where he wanted to go in life. There were days when this thought process was not unspooling well, and Vince looked disaffected and down in the dumps. Other days he was ornery, and seemed on the verge of picking a fight. So the combination of all this translated into a bit of growing apart between the two young men, and this seemed to suit the interests on both sides of the equation.

So one steel-grey Friday autumn afternoon, he found himself walking home alone, his thoughts a million miles away from the sleepy county town. A truck roared up alongside him, with a mechanic's logo and signage on the driver's door. A slightly wild-eyed Vince leaned out of the open window and ominously said, "Get in."

Some Johnny Winter played from a battered tape deck, and Vince whistled between his teeth at the high notes of some of the guitar riffs. They sped up the start of the East Hill out of town, but made a series of quick lefts ahead of a straight shot up a treed slope.

"Where are we going?" He said this flatly.

"Water tower. Great views. Quiet. Good place to talk." Vince leaned over towards him, with just the slightest hint of malice. He was perhaps a little bit high, as evidenced by his mildly puffy eyes, and his grinding of the three-in-the-tree gear shift.

They came up to the large steel structure, built fairly recently, with the town name in two yard high letters and its grey-green painted exterior. Vince swung the truck around in a sharp arc, applying the brakes generously and kicking up soft dust plumes.

"Bronco, get out, we need to sort a few things out." Vince waved his hand vigorously and jacked open his driver's door. The two boys got out and came around to the front of the truck, adjacent to the engine that was subtly hissing after its exertions on the incline.

"Nice view, eh?" He pointed down at the town below him, with its cute little houses and tree-lined streets, in an attempt to fracture some of the underlying tension.

"Oh, fucking nice all right, but not as nice as the views last week in your art class?" Vince spat this out angrily, and came up to his friend close enough that the other boy could smell a thin lamina of weed on his breath.

“Art class? What the fuck?” It was true he was taking art that year with Mr. Brewster, a leftover from the hippie era with soulful brown eyes.

“Yeah, the class with Brewski, the one where you are doing figure drawing.” Now this was starting to make some sense to him, so he judged the width of his exit path but continued to play dumb.

“Yeah, OK. Mr. Brewster has us drawing each other. It’s been interesting and fun, but what are you so upset about?” He said this softly and quietly.

“Who’s been your main model, numbnuts?” Vince moved in even closer.

“Uh, bunch of people, but one mainly. Guess that would be Lucinda.” He took half a step back.

“Ah, yes, Lucinda Decker. *Bona fide* cosmic goddess and future lingerie model. Former squeeze of your buddy Vince, but one who now hardly says a peep to me. Vince gets what Vince wants, and I want Lucinda back, even if I’m no longer at school to keep an eye on her!” Vince thundered this out. “So last week I intercept her walking across the parking lot, dressed in a thin skin-tight sweater with no bra underneath. And she tells me she has just come from modelling in Brewster’s class, and she drops your name! Out of all the kids in that group drawing her, she gets all syrupy and mentions that you were really enjoying the class. So what am I supposed to make of that, dick-breath?” Vince stuck his face in close to his rapidly blushing friend.

“Listen, listen, calm down. Yes, she did have on a tight pink sweater. And her breasts may have been unencumbered by a bra. They are indeed large and voluminous. And as we drew, her nipples seemed to perk up and poke out through the thin fabric. I’m pretty sure of this, as we were asked to observe all details for our figure sketch. But that’s the extent of it, Vince, I swear.” He held his ground but looked sideways nervously.

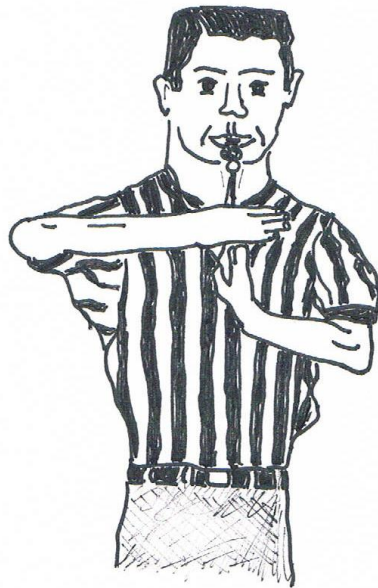
“The one little problem is that Lucinda is more than a bit of an exhibitionist. Why was she smuggling raisins under her little pink top? Because your stares were exciting her. At the end of class, did she ask if you wanted to go down to the seats in the commerce wing so that she could show them to you? Maybe squeeze them a bit? Perhaps pop one of them into your mouth?” Vince came within an inch of him, breathing heavily.

He felt time stand still. He was at a crossroads, not sure how to respond. He could play it safe, and tell Vince the truth that nothing had actually happened. Or he could play the devil, and fuel Vince’s insecurities a bit. And perhaps envision a situation he would have given his eye teeth to birth into reality.

“No, nothing happened that day. But I took a rain cheque to pick her up tonight, so she can do some real life modelling in the back seat of my Dad’s car, and after I am done sketching I will do a lot more than suck on the tips of those amazing tits!”

Vince’s punch landed a bit off-centre of his chin, with enough asymmetry to give him the opportunity to grab him by the wrist and twist him to the ground. They would roll and writhe for the next half hour, underneath the shadow of that large water repository, burning frustrations and settling scores over an event that had never happened. But if it had, or something even close to it might happen in the future, the bruises and scuffs would be more than worth it.

Smackdown Basketball



He boarded the school bus for the last of the exhibition games before the regular season started. This was a supposed ‘friendly’ game at OSCVI, the downtown high school in Owen Sound that had a beautiful old building for its campus and a talented team with absolutely nasty and despicable players. So even though it would not count for the regular season standings, it would be far from friendly and full of blood, sweat and tears.

He had never been a big fan of the bus rides to games. People were nervous and jumpy, the bus rode like a lumber wagon, and the background chatter just made him uneasy. The cheerleaders rode with the team, which was pleasant enough but they sat as a block behind the coaches and contributed a buzz of high-intensity dialogue that drove him to take a seat deeper in the back. This is where it became more old school, with Henry and Davie playing cards with

hooded eyes, with Henry breaking out in a maniacal laugh whenever he took a hand. He liked these guys, and in their own low-key way they liked him right back. They had played together now for five years, from midget to senior basketball, and they knew what each other was thinking and could communicate it all with one raised eyebrow.

He closed his eyes and went off into a dreamy half-sleep state. The odd joke or bit of bantering might infiltrate his cognitive cave, but generally most things floated right over top. His mind went to the previous night, when he had accompanied his Mom to a Fall-time music concert at the Presbyterian church. They were not Presbyterians, but his Mom loved the social events they held there and everyone seemed to go out of their way to welcome them. Halfway through the concert he noticed one of the girls from his grade sitting a few rows back and a bit over. He shot her a glance or two and she gave him a large beaming smile each time. This made him a bit nervous and reluctant to look over again, so he let a number of minutes go by before he ventured a third look. Same result, which made his cheeks burn a bit. She was the same girl from English class a number of years back, when he had to act out a play fragment with the jaw-dropping Lucinda. His chin and arms ached a bit when he held Miss Decker in mind, the result of his exertions with Vince under the bulk of the water tower. This other young lady was more demure than Lucinda to be sure, but she certainly favoured tight fabric tops that nicely displayed her curvy and large breasts. And this barrage of smiles made him squirm and start to consider the possibilities.

The bus dropped into a lower gear as it started its descent into downtown Owen Sound. He sat up in his seat, surprised that his reveries had taken him more fully into an extended sleep state and that the hour and a bit of bus travel had thankfully zoomed by.

The coaches got off first, then the cheerleaders, then the junior team followed by the senior team. The junior game was slated first for the main gym of the old school, played in what was called 'The MatchBox'. It was a gym set down below with walls close to the sidelines on its perimeter, with banked seating for the crowd rising up on all four sides. 'Like playing in a bloody fishbowl', Coach would say, and it meant for an intense game. He couldn't bear to sit and watch the junior game, as it was a rebuilding year for the Raiders and the home squad had returned most of its starters from last year's team that had gone deep into the provincial playoffs. So he went off to the school library and worked on some English and Math homework he had brought along in his gym bag. Because it was a game day, he pretty much had the library to himself and he intensely worked amidst the stacks.

Ninety minutes later, he was in the dressing room putting on his dark blue Raiders uniform and fidgeting with his shoelaces.

"OK, gentlemen, listen up." Coach was always professional in his demeanour.

“Exhibition game, but these guys will be pumped up in front of their home crowd. Their front line is tall and wide and strong. And hungry. We’ll have to play our tempo, not theirs. Deny them the ball inside. Shoot well. No turnovers. OK, let’s go.”

They went out into a gym that was still pungent from perspiration from the junior game’s thrashing. The warmups went well, but when he spied down the court he was shocked at how tall a few of their players seemed. They looked as if they had grown six inches over the Summer, and were lean-muscled and fit. It could be a long afternoon.

“Gents, play well, play disciplined. Play Proud. On three...Raiders!!” Coach had this down pat.

The first few minutes of the game went very well, with Lou hitting some nifty outside shots and actually stealing the ball at mid-court and taking it all the way in for a semi-contested layup. But on the next play, Henry had one of the big guys step harshly on his foot, and he yelped out in pain. With increasing gingeriness, he limped his way over to the Raiders bench.

“Jay, shift on defence to pick up their center. He’s got at least five inches on you, so boxing out on the boards will be critical. You’re a great defender, go get him!” Coach slapped him on his backside.

The guy he was guarding now was Dirk Clyde, a good-looking kid that might be a future Rhodes Scholar. He gave his shorter opponent a wry smile and promptly ran the floor for a quick lay-in.

“C’mon, hustle back, keep between him and the basket.” Coach was encouraging but sounded worried. The next defensive setup he squared up against Dirk, pushing his hips into the taller lad and using one hand to softly check him.

“Keep your fucking mitts off me.” The opponent said this under his breath.

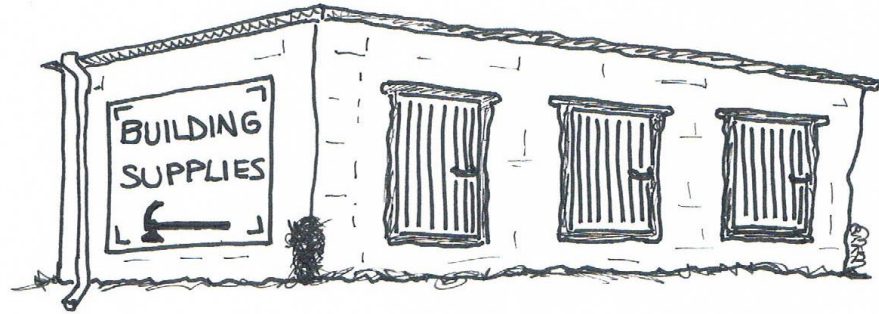
“Just doing my job, and you were hand-checking Henry.” He said this a bit squeakily.

A shot went up. He pivoted and boxed out hard, keeping the taller lad from nabbing the rebound. Jeb grabbed the board and went end to end for a smooth reverse layup.

Next time down the court, Dirk looked at him menacingly. He got the ball, dribbled twice, then passed it off to the wing. The shot went up, and once again he pivoted and squarely boxed out the more athletic opponent. Once again, Jeb secured the rebound and pushed the outlet pass to Lou at mid-court. The flow of play went the other way, as well as the referee’s presence and attention. As he went to run down the court, Dirk slyly drove his elbow and muscled tricep into the cavity of his chest. He literally felt the air being pushed out of him and he went down. Little did he know he would have a bruise on his chest for weeks that was reminiscent of an old-fashioned iron impression.

He picked himself up off the parquet floor and tried to shake off the compressive feeling in his breast plate. It was indeed going to be a long afternoon.

Running as Therapy



His Mom moped around the kitchen, wiping the counter while she waited for some toast to brown in the old-fashioned side-flip toaster. Tea was being steeped, and a few eggs were being poached. A tomato had been sliced. All of the fixings for a nice breakfast. But she looked tired, with sunken eyes.

“Mom, are you OK?” He said this while taking over the vigil at the toaster.

“Fair to middling, I ‘spose. Didn’t sleep well last night. He bumped around when he came home from work, disrupting a deep sleep on my part. Then up at 4 to take a loud piddle in his pot, then started on rounds of sawmill snoring around 6 this morning. I put my pillow on top of my head but it almost made it worse. I grunted over a few times to encourage him to roll over, which only worked for a moment or two before he recalibrated the buzz-saw. Sometime around 7:00 I threw a book from my nightstand, but I think all that did was wake you up. Sorry.” She frowned and turned back to the eggs.

“Really sorry you were disturbed for most of the night. Not fun to go through the day feeling draggy. I didn’t hear much at all, but I sleep like a doornail!” He started to spread butter on the toast.

“Sure going to miss you next year. I want you to achieve your dreams but this place is going to be lonely without you. With just him around.”

“Yeah, I know. And I feel bad about that. I really do.” He paused for a moment and bit his lip. “I’m not even sure what my dreams are. Only that I like school, and I’m at the end of the line for school here. So I’ll have to go to the city for more school, and figure out my dreams along the way. But I’ll come back on weekends, I promise.” He said this last sentence unconvincingly.

“That would be grand. Whenever it’s reasonable. But I’ll get along. Maybe I’ll have to figure out my dreams along the way too. New dreams can be better than old dreams. Fresher, more realistic perhaps. A person changes over time.” Her voice drifted off, and then she caught herself. “Well, time to eat breakfast.”

His Dad came down midway through their meal. He muttered good morning and went into the bathroom to wash and shave. Tension was thick between the two parents, and it seemed to have a deeper source than nocturnal noises and persistent snoring. The boy took the piece of peach pie he was eating as a footnote to his breakfast out on the front porch to separate himself from the underlying parental friction.

He sat on a lawn chair with fraying green nylon strapping. The pie was succulent, with light flaky crust and absolutely lovely peach fruit as its main component. He popped a piece in his mouth and chewed slowly and reflectively. Desserts were what he lived for, and his Mom was a superb pastry chef. He slid the last piece of pie in his mouth and savoured it fully, closing his eyes to heighten the taste enjoyment.

When he opened his eyes he glanced over at the row of coal sheds that faced his parents’ porch from the east side of May Street. These were the back forty of the Building Supplies business that took up three-quarters of the square block, and they currently held lumber and bricks and boxes of staples and screws away from exposure to the elements in a space that used to store mounds of coal. Some days for ventilation purposes the rear doors were popped open, and this was the situation as he gazed over. And he could have sworn he saw some movement behind a big pallet of bricks. He ambled over for a closer look.

“Vince, is that you?” The person he had seen had moved out of sight.

“Fuck off, dude. I’m busy.” They hadn’t really hung out since the water tower incident.

“Busy doing what, for good God’s sake? Have you been checking out the bricks of this fine town?” He chuckled and made a move to go around the pallet.

“Listen, Nosy Parker, just mind your own Ps and Qs. It’s better off for you if you don’t know what I’m doing. Trust me.” Vince’s voice was low.

“But what are you doing? And right across the street from my house?” He said this with a goofy grin.

“OK, douchebag. Curiosity may not be so good. But you asked. I’m trying to raise a little money for school. So I sell a little weed, maybe a bit of acid. Nobody ever comes back here on a regular basis, so the transfer point is under an old pile of coal back here in the corner. I pick up the fresh supplies, leave the money for the last drop in a plastic bag. Nobody’s linked to it,

all done quietly. Which is why you need to get the fuck out of here, and now.” Vince spat this out under his breath.

He felt his face flush a little, and looked over to his house on the off-chance his Mom was looking out the front door. He went back to the porch and collected up his plate and glass. Too many things seemed to be going on today, and he needed to do something that would help him regroup and make sense of life.

Fifteen minutes later he had his shorts and singlet on and was running out towards the country. It was perhaps too soon after breakfast, but he would jog slowly for the first few miles until his food settled and his muscles warmed up. Running was an escape, a kinesthetic therapy that allowed stresses to dissipate and problems to get ruminated upon and at least partially digested.

He ran on the gravel shoulder, admiring the undulating fields and the calmness of the horses and cattle he passed one stride at a time. Each step seemed to solidify the notion that he needed to flee this town, even though he loved it so. Perhaps dreams would never be fully conceptualized, but a desire for change was certainly in play. Foot strike, breathe, foot strike, breathe. The rhythms of life were clear and uncluttered, even though the details of life were certainly less so.

February 12, 1945; Wiarton, Ontario

The old lady sat in the common room of the retirement home up on the hill, with great views out the front window of a grey and icy Colpoy Bay. Only one or two other souls were there that morning, dozing off in their easy chairs with a half-read book or their knitting. The postman came in the front door, bearing a half dozen letters and a few small packages. He knew all of the home’s residents by name and would hand-deliver mail directly if he saw the recipient in the front room. But today he held back, swallowing hard as the telegraph envelope shook unsteadily in his hand.

“Elvira...telegram for you.” He smiled thinly.

“Eh, mail? Not much of that these days.” She stuck out a frail hand expectantly.

“I’ve delivered more of these than I like over the last little while. It’s got to end soon.” His voice trailed off.

She opened the envelope and took out a crisp piece of buff-coloured vellum. The impact of the first line was equivalent to a major body blow.

‘We deeply regret to inform you....’

The old lady slumped in her chair, tears rimming her glasses. How would she be able to tell this horrific news to her daughter?

VE Day, May 7, 1945; Toronto, Ontario

The news had come in fast on the ticker tapes, and people in the Carboloy plant were simply jumping for joy. There would be no need for war work anymore, they could now go back to their lives and start families and dream big dreams.

She shut down her diamond drill press and slipped on her Spring coat. She had received a plaintive letter from her Mother about two months back, grimly telling her that her dear brother had lost his life somewhere over in Holland. Her eyes burned and her heart felt heavy every time she thought of poor Bert. Such a sweet soul, and one who had not wanted to go war one whit.

She walked down Front Street and turned up Bay Street. People were hanging out of windows, throwing confetti, dancing with strangers on the street. She plodded along, dodging merry-makers and clouds of confetti. Yes, it was great news that the war was over and no one else would lose their life in this bloody conflict. But the simple fact was her brother would not be coming home on a troop train, and that realization and its attendant grief were sinking in more and more as the revelry substantially increased.

Finger Licking Good



There seemed to be a lot of excitement in the corridors of the school. He often lived in his own little world, going from class to practice to home on his own rhythms. Not quite plugging in to what was going on around him, like the receptacle of an old fridge that is only half-plugged in to a dusty outlet. But every now and then something or some event would come along and he would get swept up in the pulse and momentum of it all.

He swung around the corner of the Classics section, where it T-boned into the auto shop zone. Coming along with a muted swagger to his step was Ian Metzger, a kid one grade down he had played junior basketball with in Grade 11. The guy was a farm kid but very worldly, with a big head of hair that almost bordered on an afro. He was fine-featured with rosy apple cheeks, and the girls just seemed to go bananas over him.

"Jay-dude, what's happening?" The farm kid put his balled hand up for a fist bump.

"Well, well, if it's not Julius Erving!" He reciprocated the fist bump. "How's Mrs. Erving? Or should I say, your stable of fillies?"

"Now if I didn't know you better, I might just detect a little hint of jealousy there, old boy!" Ian grabbed his own leg at the mid-thigh, pinching a roll of sheath-like leg muscle into the excess fabric in a shape that only a teenage boy would recognize as phallic. "Yep, it ain't much, but it sure enough gets the job done!" Both boys erupted with glee at the time-honoured joke.

"So what's happening, there seems to be a real buzz going on?" He waved his hands up and down the corridor.

"Oh, didn't you hear? They're interviewing down at the Queen's Hotel for more positions up at the KFC? You work there, don't you? I guess you're going to have some new co-workers. Don't they tell you things up there?" This was said with a wry grin.

"Nope, first I heard. Or maybe it slipped by me. I remember going to the first interviews when the store opened, almost two years back. The lineups were over a block long. They did it by lottery then, handing out envelopes with red cards in them, with a one in three chance of snagging an interview."

"Same as today, I hear. I'm thinking of going and giving it a try. But I'm not relishing the idea of putting this bush into a hair net." He pushed up from his ears on both sides and his hair swayed like a tree in a strong wind.

"And then the folks that got a red card went through a screening interview, maybe sixty seconds or so in length. The manager then gave out green cards to those he wanted to give five minute interviews to, twenty cards in total. For ten jobs overall. Quite the process. And I was thrilled when I got one of the actual jobs." He smiled at this recounting.

"Same deal, I hear, for this time around. So all the girls have been dolling up, fussing with their hair, painting their nails and what-have-you. Some of them have slid into tops just a little too snug perhaps for a job interview, but I'm not complaining. Should make the wait in the lineup for a red card more interesting, while I check out the talent." The younger boy slapped him theatrically on the shoulder.

"That may not help them. The manager picked a few lookers for sure, but they're also pretty hard workers and tend to be largely on the demure side. Those gals fussing with the fire-truck red nail polish and heeled sandals might be out of luck in the end." He grabbed his basketball buddy by the cheek and gave it a waggle.

“Dude, don’t take away my fun. Keep your voice down! But in the end, you and I might be working together, cooking fried chicken for the masses!”

“Yeah, that’d be cool. I could show you the tricks of working with the hot fryer grease, and how to best get it off the floor at the end of the shift.” He said this kindly, but with a bit of a frown.

“What’s up dude? A cloud just came across your face. Is the thought of working with me that unpleasant?” The farm kid wagged his eyebrows.

He freed himself from further conversation with another casual fist bump, and pushed through the crowd to the exit door near the running track area. He had suddenly realized he was tired of mopping greasy floors, and running hot trays of steaming and spiced chicken out to the serving area. If he could tie down other work, he could give a quick notice and free up another job to someone running the interview gauntlet that evening.

His footsteps took him in fifteen minutes to the LCBO store downtown. It was close to the end of the day, and he nodded politely to the two cashiers while he ducked around to the manager’s office off at the side. The manager was a dapper middle-aged gent, who was the son of his favourite neighbor.

“Jayson, what can I do for you?” Professionally stated, with just the hint of a chuckle at the end.

“Looking to see if you might need a stock clerk?” He said this haltingly.

“Just so happens my young man quit to go down-county to college in London. Have you reached the Age of Majority?” The manager was all business.

“Turned just over a month ago.” This was said matter-of-factly.

“You can start this Saturday at 9:00. Black pants, white shirt and tie. Keep the bottles pulled up to the front of the shelves, and everything tidy. Lift with your knees bent. Clare will help you with the paperwork. Welcome aboard!”

Small Town Ennui



“What are your plans for this evening?” His Mom asked this in an off-hand way, but he was instantly on guard. When a person feels guilt ahead of time, it tends to cloud all words and actions.

“Oh, not much. Vince’s band is playing out in the country at some hall. They might need help setting up the equipment. Might be a chance to meet some new girls, uh... new people. Not sure when I’ll be back. Don’t wait up.” He said all of this casually, in a breezy fashion that he hoped was convincing.

“Oh that sounds nice, real nice. I used to love to go to dances up in Dyers Bay. We were forbidden to dance by our parents, so we would call them pie socials. You baked a pie, and a young gent would bid on it anonymously. Whoever got the pie, you would sit with and have some pie together. And then the orchestra would start up, and there would be dancing. It was nice.” Her eyes went dreamy and soft at the fond recollection.

“Thanks for that, Mom. You are a great baker, so I bet there was a bidding war for your pies! And I am glad you rebelled a bit, and got out for some fun.” He said this conspiratorially, and she chuckled softly.

Ten minutes later he was out the door wearing a dress shirt and his brown corduroy trousers. The plan was to meet up with Vince at the house of Bob Geipner, a decent fellow in Vince’s class who was also hanging around town after finishing high school. Bob and his Mom had recently moved into town from the country, into a sublet about three doors from Vince’s. Beyond that, he had no more detail on what was on the agenda for the evening.

But any sociologist worth their salt would be able to project that a gathering of three young men in their late teens or early twenties in this landlocked small Ontario town would involve some element of

drinking alcohol. This had not been spelled out in advance, but it was always there as a probable bet. The inherent boredom and general lack of entertainment options, coupled with a lack of imagination or restraint, meant that alcohol and socializing went hand in hand. He had learned a big lesson from the truck accident, but rationalized that if he stayed on foot then some degree of libation would be OK.

He knocked on Bob's door at the side of an old stuccoed house and was greeted with a jaunty but muted 'come in' from inside. He stepped into a crowded living room/dining room that was lined with boxes and bricabrac, and saw Vince and Bob sitting at a table with mixed drinks in fancy glasses. A couple of large bottles of rum and a six-pack of Coke were on a huntsman tray, along with a bucket of ice.

"Ah, there he is, the third element of our dashing trio. Sit down and pour yourself a stiff one, as we certainly have. Not too much Coke, we have to spread the supply across a considerable quantity of rum." Vince looked to be three sheets to the wind already, and was choosing his words carefully in the manner of people who are already drunk but hope to appear to be the opposite.

"Allow me, kind sir." Bob pulled up a chair and opened another can of Coke. "Amber or white, we have options at this fine establishment."

"Hmm, never had amber rum before. What's it like?" He had become a connoisseur of labels since starting work at the LCBO, but had no tasting experience.

"More taste, more substance. Like whole wheat bread vs Wonder bread. I tend to like white, it slides down much more easily." Vince smacked his lips and reached for the white rum bottle.

"OK, amber it is. Might help me restrain myself. Just a bit, Bob." He nodded and smiled in the direction of the host.

"Well, we're just getting pre-lubed here before we head out for the gig. Bob here is not much of a partyer, so I am encouraging him to jump in boots and all. A little buzz does wonders, breaks down social barriers. With some luck, this shy guy might turn into a ladies' man out at the hall, and get lucky later back in the equipment van! What do you say, Bob?" Vince raised his glass in a toast.

"I'm certainly open to that, Vince, but I will need some coaching." Bob looked over the edges of his eyeglasses, nervous and expectant.

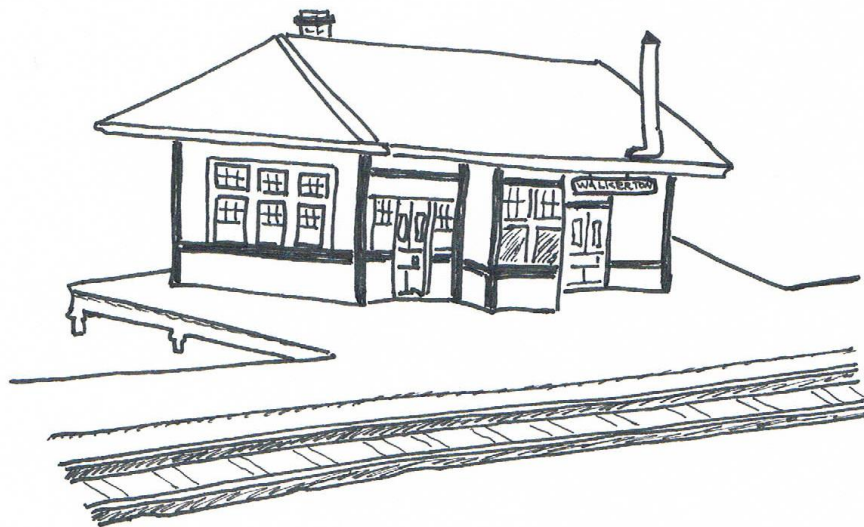
"I'll help you out, but you have to play ball. I keep the best gals for myself, and will give you a clear signal on this. Don't be like Jayson here, who gets too big for his britches at times and starts angling towards one of my beauties. But we have an understanding now, don't we Jay-Boy?" Vince slurred this out and reached over for a semi-reciprocated side hug.

The amber rum was indeed delicious, and within forty-five minutes he had consumed three glasses of rum and Coke that would be conservatively described as double shots in each glass. All three of the boys were getting a bit sloppy in their speaking, and every fragment of conversation bordered on hilarity. They ran out of Coke, and started to drink half glasses of rum with copious amounts of ice.

Everything started to become frenzied, and this translated into the trio draining their glasses of the fiery liquid as if it were Kool-Aid.

At some point he realized he couldn't go to the dance, or be anywhere that required social nuance. He was inwardly disappointed in himself, in that he had stepped onto this merry-go-round with no real sense of restraint. He couldn't go home like this, so he slipped out the side door when Vince was off in the washroom, and unsteadily walked the leafy streets of the town. He had the idea he might go down to the plant and talk with his old man, really talk like men talk with other men. But he still had enough sense to know this could be disastrous, so instead he took himself down to the river. Once at the North Hill bridge, he could look across and see the clay banks high above the river near The Bend. This was the first view the town's founder, old Joe Walker, had of this area when he was exploring for a town site. He bushwhacked across some swampy ground and walked along the ridge until he came to the highest point of the clay banks. The river rushed below, and he could look down and see its majesty and mystery. He was certainly feeling loopy but also a bit cocky, so he leaned back and hollered out a loud 'halloo' down the banks and across the river and into the town. He did this for the better part of two hours, until he sobered up enough to be able to reasonably walk home, tiptoe up the stairs and slide between the sheets. He had learned a lot this evening, about himself and about the world. He only hoped he could get upstairs without his Mom asking him if the dance had met his expectations.

Baker's Dozen



It had been a rough night, where sleep had come with the speed of an anaesthetic, but it was a troubled sleep that seemed one-third dream, one-third hallucination and the last third a frenzied escape from fatigue and boredom. He had consumed far too much high-strength amber rum for a person of his limited drinking experience and sensitivity, so his body labored through the processing of it all which led to several trips to the downstairs bathroom for releases on both ends of the conduit. If truth be told, he

was dangerously close to an intermediate strength case of alcohol poisoning. His body seemed to know this, and did the work it needed to do to skirt the precipice and get back on safer ground.

But while the physical side of things was working itself out, he was locked in a mental gymnasium that had no winner for its floor routines. He first felt as if he was falling down a labyrinth of ductwork and piping that had been greased and oriented such that a downward tumble was a certainty. Every so often he would be able to catch hold of an edge or a seam and arrest his downward progression, but these breaks in the action were hardly respites. Once he had become aware of the shift, a fragment of a dreamscape would unfold. These were vibrantly real, in a technicolor wash that made it all seem so vibrant. His first dream piece brought an image of Mrs. DaSilva in a foamy bubble bath, being served champagne by a tanned Mr. Dobbs wearing only a pair of red satin boxer shorts. He knew where this was going so he twisted marginally and he fell free-form for several seconds, stopping only when he reached out to grab a knurled chinup bar that was installed at a curve in the ductwork. He held on tight, swinging precariously, with his arms straining above his head. This led him into a second dream fragment, where he was doing the back stroke at the municipal pool in fading evening light. Beside him swam the law school goddess, also doing the backstroke but completely unencumbered by the confines of a bathing suit. He swam alongside, working hard to keep up, amazed at his good fortune. And as he moved his arms he let go of the chinup bar in an enfolded universe and took off downward, picking up speed on the lubricated metal surface. He howled and grimaced, partially for hellry and partially out of ill-concealed fright. The ducting seemed to level out and it appeared as if he was rolling parallel to a railroad track, one that was rusted from lack of use with wiry sprigs of ironweed sticking up intermittently. He closed his eyes and saw the abandoned train station on the edge of town, a place that had once been lively and active when several trains a day rolled through. He saw a middle-aged man get out of a sporty car, dressed in a dapper blazer and wearing white leather shoes. The natty fellow let himself into a side door of the station with an oversized magenta key. He whistled a low tune under his breath while he did this, and the man's cologne was strong even from a considerable distance away. And then the petite girl from the church concert came up a side path to the station. She was wearing a thin white sun dress and as the sunlight hit the fabric he became achingly aware she wore nothing underneath. He went to call out to her, to warn her of some possible danger, or perhaps out of some unfounded jealousy. But then she took a large magenta key out of a slim purse hanging on her shoulder, and let herself into the side door.

He caught his breath sharply, and then let it out in an agonizing slow release. This cleared the scene in front of him, and when he rolled over in his sweaty bed he could see that he was lying on a bench near the bowling green opposite the Catholic church rectory. And out of a sensible Rambler car stepped a gorgeous middle-aged woman, wearing a tight sheath of a dress and moderately heeled footwear. She was bearing a tray of freshly baked butter tarts, and shyly adjusted her coiffure as she rolled her hips fetchingly on the way to the side door of the rectory. Rumours in town were that the priest enjoyed home baking, and was pleased to hear confession from any attractive parishioner who needed her temptations of the flesh to be expunged away. He blinked his eyes and she had disappeared inside, and he then realized he was fully awake and his head was hammering as if he had banged it several times on

cold, lubricated ductwork. He rolled over and realized his Mom was on the phone by the sewing machine, out of her sightlines but within easy earshot.

"Well, I don't know, it's not easy y'know." It was unclear who she was talking to. A few seconds went by.

"I know, I know. A person has to pay the bills. But if I leave, I could do something to stay afloat." More seconds went by.

"Well, in a perfect world, I'd rent a little storefront on the Main Street and turn it into a bakery. Could sleep upstairs and be up early for baking. Fresh bread, scones, pies, cookies. I bet they'd line up around the block if things were priced reasonably. Wouldn't that be grand? I wouldn't mind the hard work as long as I could be my own boss. Things are going to change soon with my young lad leaving to go away to school, and it will be just unbearable. But do you think I'm being awful?"

More seconds went by. He rolled over and put his pillow over his head.

September 11, 1945; Waalwijk, The Netherlands

"I know they were your friends, but you have been moping non-stop since late April." Adri tut-tutted towards Leo while she wiped glasses at the bar.

"But they were both like brothers. I feel as if I have a brother lying in the ground at Groesbeek and another at Holten. They gave their lives so Holland could be free again!" Leo slapped the bar with emphasis.

"But you have to move on. Those two men wouldn't want you to stay glum for the rest of your life. They were fun, charming even. Honour their sacrifice by being more like them." Adri said this sharply, and convincingly.

"But their families back in Canada do not know how much we loved them while they were here. And how much we think of them every day. I want them to know this, but how?"

An idea started to brew in Adri's mind. She wrote to the Canadian War Commission and got the names of the parents and their hometowns for both of the Canadian servicemen. And she penned a letter to the Lord Mayor of each town, explaining the situation and how they knew the young men and if they might be able to pass a letter and a Dutch address to the surviving next-of-kin.

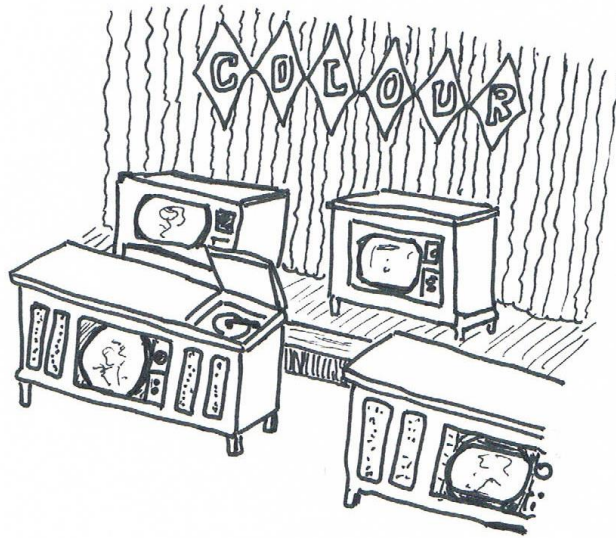
One day in Late November, a letter arrived in the town hall of Wiarton.

"Mail for the Lord Mayor, ha, would that be you?" The secretary cackled as she took in the morning mail.

Fifteen minutes later, the mayor came out of his office, his eyes rimmed red.

"I'm walking up the hill to the ladies' retirement home. I have some very special mail to deliver."

This is Why We Play the Game



Ten young men sat in the dressing room, seven with sodden uniforms and aching legs, with that parched lip dehydration that comes from intense effort, regardless of how much water was consumed. Three of the teammates, the younger and less experienced ones, had relatively dry uniforms and normal hair, but sat with the same exhausted semi-hangdog look of their older teammates. They had just lost a nail-biter of a first round playoff game against Meaford, the first of two back-to-back games, with the team advancing to the next round having the highest cumulative point total across the two contests. This one had been in their home gym, and Lou had tied it up with a beautiful outside shot with just thirty seconds remaining in regular time. Feeling the inevitability of overtime, the home squad was a wee bit flat on its heels and the lanky Meaford star dribbled along a nonlinear and tortuous path and banked in a fall-away hook shot over two pairs of flailing and desperate big-man hands. The buzzer sounded immediately afterwards and the coach asked them to stay for a bit in the locker room once the perfunctory line of handshakes was completed.

“Alright, listen up, gentlemen.” Coach twirled his whistle on its string, wrapping it around two of his fingers and reversing the process in a hypnotic and calming swirl.

“I know you’re down after that, and certainly feel played out. It was a physically tough game. You all played well.” The coach let that sink in a bit, and saw some brightening of several faces.

“So we go up to Meaford for the second game. And I would rather be two points down like we are than two points up. They feel like they just won a game, and part of them is relaxing a bit. But not us. Noooo, not us. We are going to go into their gym and will whip them by ten points or more. And we will do this because we are hungry, because we have just lost a game. This is why we work out all Summer, why we think basketball twelve months of the year, why we feel tingly on game days. Playoffs

define why we play this game, and we will most certainly win the next game, and we will win it decisively.” He gave the whistle another jaunty twirl.

“Coach, they’re a tough team. They played us even and then some. We were down eight with just five minutes to go, and a few steals and a few lucky shots allowed us to tie it up. But they will be ferocious in defending their home gym.” Lou looked a little beaten down.

“I was observing pretty closely out there. We are the far superior team overall. They have one truly amazing player who can do it all---rebound, move it up the court, shoot, pass off. The kid is a star. But he’s one guy.” He went quiet for a second. “Next game we go to a zone defence, and it is much more difficult to dribble and penetrate against a zone. So he will pull up for a lot more outside shots. But the zone will be a hybrid, a box and one. The one is a floater, who will stay with this guy wherever he goes on the court. Jayson, you’ll be the floater. You’ll always be between him and the basket, quick on your feet. He’s great at head fakes and ball fakes, but you’ll focus on his navel, because where that goes he goes. And when he pulls up for a shot, you will have a hand in his face immediately. No fouls, no hand checking. Just constant, rigorous body presence and a challenge on every shot. Oh, he’ll make a few, but he won’t get his normal twenty-five points. And because of that, he’ll get a bit frustrated and try to drive through you and the zone. We all hold our line, hands up, and take the charging foul. Which will only frustrate him even further. We have no one who is as good as him individually, but as a team we will contain him and make it a very long day for him and his teammates. And we will win by ten or more, and advance to the next round. Does everyone have this clearly in mind?” He twirled the whistle one last time. “Alright, off you go to the showers.”

Truth be known, he hated the main gym’s locker-room showers. Poor water pressure, the prevailing smell of perspiration, and a bunch of late-term adolescents still somewhat uncomfortable about soaping their genitals in broad daylight and within eyeshot. It seemed to take forever to get the soap off due to the thin stream of tepid water hissing out of the receptacle, and someone or the other would throw out a homophobic remark that either produced jeers or a punch to the face. He had appreciated Coach’s speech, and the impending challenge of closely guarding the Meaford sniper, but the idea of having to shower caused him to fuss with his socks and shoes and blistered feet so that he could start the process once most of the boys had finished up and were toweling off.

He had wanted to have a few words with Lou, to close the circle on some of Coach’s comments. He would do his part defensively, but they needed the same kind of offensive output from Lou in the next game. But his friend always shunned the showers, and had dressed quickly and was nowhere to be seen.

He walked the back route, wanting to change things up a bit and remembering an errand he needed to run in the downtown. His calf muscles were cramping a bit, and the bottoms of his feet felt like one big blister. After a few blocks he saw Vince taking a box of groceries out of a small delivery van and running it up to the front door of a house. An elderly man accepted the box gingerly, and slipped Vince a green one dollar bill. By the time this had all transpired, he was even with the van upon Vince’s return.

“Hey numbnuts. Thought you were playing basketball today?” This was said in a friendly enough way, but with just a modicum of disdain that had become part of Vince’s modus operandi.

“Game’s over. Lost by two. First of a two game, total points playoff. We’ll nail them to the wall in their gym.” He smiled wryly.

“Hmph, fat chance on that. Want a lift? You look as if you’re hurting.” Vince motioned to the passenger door.

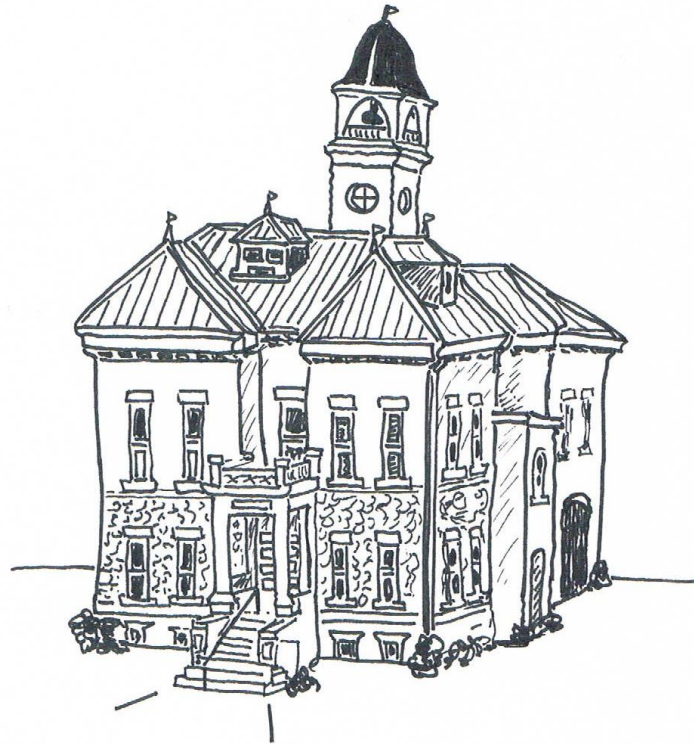
“Don’t mind if I do. I have to go down to Grant’s TV, so anywhere downtown would be good.”

“What’s going on? Are your folks finally buying a colour TV?” Vince revved up the van.

“No, but the old black-and-white conked out. And they had to order in a tube. It’s been over a week so my Mom asked me to check in.” He stammered this out as he knew what was coming.

“Christ, man! Still black-and-white while some people are getting their second colour TV? I’m surprised your old man actually drives a car, when there are perfectly good horse and buggies still to be had! No wonder the ladies don’t even look at you, you’re such a fucking Mennonite, dude!” Vince howled this out, and ran a stop sign concurrently.

Actors on a Stage



He always liked Main Street. No matter how many times he walked it, the street always seemed fresh and interesting. For sure it was a small town, but it had a three or arguably four block downtown with commerce and services. The street was busier than it should be due to the population numbers, but that came from the advantages of being a County seat and the shopping town for a large rural area with good topsoil and hard-working farmers. It was classic in form, with stores tight to wide sidewalks and apartments above each store. There was parking on both sides of the street, parallel in form, with no meters or time restrictions.

He came out of the television store, having determined that the part had been ordered from a Toronto warehouse and should arrive any day. He ambled slowly down the south side of the street, looking in each storefront and mentally evaluating which ones would be decent candidates for a new bakery. His thoughts clouded a bit on this, and then brightened considerably when he had a mental picture of his Mom standing in a pink apron. She was covered lightly in flour dust, filling a box of cookies and slipping in the thirteenth treat to make it a true baker's dozen. With a pencil tucked behind her ear, she tied a secure assemblage of white twine around the box and sent the customer out the door with a broad smile. This just might work out after all. He walked along, peering into the gift and greeting card store and hesitating for a second or two at lawyer Barr's door. He stopped for more than a minute at the jewelers second from the corner, inspecting a nice display of high-end watches. As he turned three of his Math teachers come out of the Hartley House Smoke Shop, with the distinct look of middle-aged men who had stopped in for a beer and a chinwag after a day of work. He liked and admired all three of

them, for different and various reasons. He wondered if he might be able to say hello to them, but it all depended on where their respective vehicles were parked. As luck would have it, they queued for the light to allow them to cross to the Bank of Montreal corner, so he crossed on the waning green light and lingered at the bank, pretending to have an avid interest in the posters for guaranteed investment certificates.

“Jayson, nice to see you. And congratulations on a good game. A tough, narrow loss, but you’ll get them and more next time.” This was called out by Mr. Lane, who had taught him functions and relations in an entertaining way.

“Thank you, sir, and nice to see you all in the stands for the game.” He nodded and smiled at the three men.

“Listen, here’s a thought. A few of us are going to go to a casting call for the town play that will run in the Spring. It will be this Sunday afternoon at the Town Hall Auditorium. You can read and audition for any part you like, but in a quick read of the play I think there might be a role that has your name on it! Think about it, Sunday at 2:00!” The three men drifted off with a friendly wave, seeking their cars for a safe ride home.

-----X-----X-----

He mounted the steps of the old Town Hall, taking some reassurance from the County Towne Players sandwich board at the front door bearing a pink sign that had ‘Auditions Today’ scrawled across it. The heavy front door opened easily enough and he stepped into a darkened foyer that had aromas of cigars being smoked and hallways being waxed. He went up a flight and a half of stairs to the old auditorium, and found fifteen or twenty people milling about.

He looked around and found that he knew a lot of faces but very few names. This seemed like a professional crowd, with more women than men. He appeared to be the only young person, with all of the other folks in their thirties, forties or fifties. He had asked Lou if he might be interested and had received a mildly positive response, but a quick scan around the room revealed that his teammate had not yet arrived.

A tanned man in his fifties, sporting a bit of thickness at his jowl and waist lines, clapped his hands and went into the center of the group. He was still a very good-looking chap, and had a confidence and ease that was noteworthy.

“Fine folks, welcome to the casting call for the County Towne Players Spring production of It’s Never Too Late. A Broadway play that was the inspiration for the TV show, All in the Family. I can see several amazing Archie Bunker potentials here in the crowd.” A titter of laughter rippled through the assemblage.

“So we have the four main characters of Archie, Edith, Gloria and Meathead. Sorry, Michael.” More laughter ensued. “And a host of minor characters to set up events and round out the cast. We’ll read for these in turn. Feel free to read for more than one part, this gives us more latitude in establishing the cast. Miriam has set out bins for each of the characters. Write your name on the relevant lists and pull out a script fragment that you will read out loud. We’ll have myself and two other people evaluating the readings. OK, organized pandemonium for the next five minutes, and then we’ll start.”

He stood off to the side, unsure exactly what he should read for. People dashed about, putting their names on lists and pulling out script sheets. He noticed the dentist’s wife, Lia, moving about slinkily in a tight purple top, flowered hippie skirt and heeled sandals. She looked over at him and flashed him a killer smile. He blushed and turned away, secretly blessing the math teacher for suggesting he come out to this audition.

Across many years, Wiarton, ON; Groesbeek Cemetery, The Netherlands

So the Mayor’s trek up the hill to the retirement home led to a pen-pal relationship between the bereaved mother and the Dutch family who had befriended Bert during his short time in and around Waalwijk. Knowing that someone local cared about him during those cold Winter months leading up to his death, made the grieving process a little bit easier to face.

A number of visits were arranged over the decades, with Leo and his wife coming to Canada to meet Bert’s family and to see where he grew up on the little farm on the Escarpment above Dyers Bay. And a number of his family went over to Holland, to be warmly hosted and to make that trek to the cemetery near Groesbeek with its shocking array of well-maintained Canadian soldier gravestones.

The sister who had walked up Bay Street on VE-day, tears streaming down her face, always held a promise in her heart that she would get to the Netherlands one day. But time took its inevitable toll, and it became evident that trip would never be taken. Her body got creakier, in lock step with other faculties, and one cold day in January 2014 she slipped away while sleeping in her nursing home bed.

She might have been dreaming, but this was something more significant. She felt young again, and lithely stepped along the streets of an earlier-day Toronto. She was dressed in her best outfit, and excitedly walked through the doors of Union Station. Standing in the middle of the concourse was her beloved brother, decked out in his dress uniform and with his trademark mop of curls barely controlled by the confines of his beret.

“Bert, you’ve come home!!” She gushed this out and threw her arms around him.

“No, little Sis, you’ve come home. I never made it back to take you out dancing, very sorry about that. But no matter, there’s lots of dancing going on up here!”

Gospel Rhythms



The coach had been right, they bore down and obliterated the Meaford team by eighteen points in the second game. He had largely shut down their gilded star, save for two beautiful arcing shots he swished from near the mid-court line. By the middle of the second half it was pretty much over except the time-keeping. He left the game due to an excruciating cramp in his left calf, but the other lads defended strenuously and the winning margin was more than comfortable.

A second round two-game victory over the West Hill squad came almost too easily in comparison, and that meant they were given the nod to be one of two teams advancing to the next level, the CWOSSA tournament to be held that year in Orangeville. This was quite a big deal for the school, and had generated a substantial buzz in corridor conversation which led to a high degree of backslapping and high-fiving in the run-up to the tournament. Many of the team's members seemed to relish the attention, but truth be told, it left him feeling a bit uncomfortable. They hadn't actually won a game yet outside their conference. Every exhibition game against down-country opponents had resulted in narrow losses. So all of the hoopla seemed a bit like counting chickens before the eggs had hatched.

The first day of the tournament came up quickly, and there was a spirited 9 AM pep rally to see off the team and the cheerleading squad onto a bright yellow school bus. The hour ride to Orangeville was uneventful, but the cheerleaders kept up a constant run of special cheers all through the trip that set his teeth on edge and Lou's as well. The two of them sat together, eyes closed, praying silently for a rapid and virulent case of cheerleader laryngitis. When that particular pandemic did not materialize, they carried on with their eyes closed, silently visualizing the impending game and their projected parts in its unfolding. Before they knew it, they rolled up to the host school and disembarked from the bus.

The logistical arrangements were such that if they won their first game they would be billeted overnight in the homes of players from the host school's team, and would play a second round game the following day, with the championship game following two days hence. But if they lost the first game, it would be back on the bus for a glum ride home, with no exciting overnight billeting or meals out at Orangeville's unfamiliar but inexplicably tantalizing restaurants. He had an overnight bag packed, and \$20 in spending money given quietly to him by his Mom that morning. It would be up to him and his teammates if he would have the opportunity to spend any of it.

The first round game was against an unknown team from Elmira. During warmups, he stole a few glances down-court and they looked big, very big. Their centre was a muscular kid with a beautiful head of wavy, sandy-coloured hair. He looked good during the warmups, but was a touch quirky as he fussed a lot with his shoelaces and also licked his fingers a lot and wiped his saliva on the bottom of his shoes to gain better traction. He did this so many times that his opponent started to worry about his health as he was clearly tasting the full range of dust particles from the gym floor.

The tipoff went well, but Henry quickly lost the ball off his thigh as a result of tournament game jitters. In the twinkling of an eye, they were ten points down, and the tall lads from Mennonite country had their way on both ends of the floor. Lou and he played fairly well, ringing in a few outside shots and playing good defence. But the other young men were just that much bigger and stronger, and played with an intensity that was palpable. The handshakes at the end came soon enough and were done amicably, and they were back on the bus heading home by 2:00. It had been a great learning experience, but the pitying looks from the cheerleaders were almost too much to bear. He and Lou went inward and quietly sulked all the way home.

"How did you boys do?" His Mom was working on a shirt collar at the sewing machine.

"Lost in the first round game. Against a very good Elmira team. Here's the twenty dollars back, no opportunity to spend any of it." His voice was flat, and he was hopeful he could minimize conversation.

"Good for you lads to get that far. I bet you all played well." She shot a quick smile his way while she set a pin.

"Yeah, sure. But that's it for high school basketball. Five years of hard work and a lot of fun. School would not have been half the experience without basketball. But now it's over." He was progressing his way into becoming a maudlin puddle of tears.

"I'm going to the Baptist church tonight for a special gospel concert. It'll be good for sure. Want to come along?" She had sensed she needed to change the subject, but an invitation to church was the last thing he wanted to hear. His parents had shifted from the Lutheran church to the Baptist church a little while back due to some internal squabbles, and it had provided him with the opportunity to do a little pick-and-roll away from regular church attendance.

"Oh, I don't know, Mom. Remember what I had said about being done with organized religion? The Baptist folks are nice enough, but I'm just not into church anymore. We had discussed all that, right?" His tone was measured, as he appealed to logic.

"That makes me sad. As if you are turning your back on God." Her mouth was set in a tight line.

"No, no, no, no. I still believe in God. Spiritual stuff is fine, but just not through a church. I'm done with the hypocrisy of organized religion." His voice dropped.

"Well, that just makes me very sad. That's all, just sad." She went back in earnest to her collar repair job.

He felt a wave of guilt wash over him, and started to think he should capitulate. Gospel music was kind of fun. And maybe just the ointment he needed for the healing of this early-round basketball loss wound he was holding in his chest, deeply.

Noises Off



He had one errand to run for his Mom before dashing off to a play rehearsal at the Old Town Hall. She had run out of grey thread and her darning thimble had gone missing, so he made his way to Stedman's, the down-at-its-heels department store at the NE corner of the main downtown intersection. The place seemed to carry just about everything, but whenever he went in things always seemed to be packed in too tightly and unappealingly. The store itself had an odd aroma medley of red licorice, rubber gum boots and English breakfast tea, which reasonably mirrored in an olfactory way the range of goods found therein.

He walked through the main doors, nodded politely at the gum-chewing fifty-something cashier, and made his way down the crowded far left aisle. As he pattered along looking for the sewing section, he had the distinct feeling of being followed. He wheeled around quickly, but no one was behind him. But when he turned back to resume his search, his way was blocked by a good-looking muscular lad with a florid complexion. The kid seemed angry, which was not a good situation, since this was the gym class bully who had always had it out for him during murder-ball games.

“Doing a little shopping before the rehearsal?” This was said with a malice-tinged chuckle.

“Uh, actually, yeah. But how do you know I’m soon off to rehearsal?”

“Let’s just say a little bird told me. A cute little bird. Named Lia.” The thug’s voice softened a little.

“Lia? How do you know Lia?” His throat had dried up considerably.

“Listen, pal. I help her out with yard work. She pays me well and gives me certain, uh...favours. So she tells me she has been cast as Gloria in the play, and that you have been cast as the Meathead character, her husband.” This was all said in an agitated tone, but low on volume.

“Yeh, so what of it? I didn’t see you at the auditions. And even if you were, you probably couldn’t memorize the lines for a major part. Stand aside, I need to find some stuff for my Mom!” He went to brush by the other boy in the crowded aisle, but elbows bumped and tempers flared as they came nose to nose.

“So have fun with the play. But don’t lay a finger on her, y’hear?! I’m the only boy-toy right now in her stable, and that’s the way it’s going to stay!” The other boy’s eyes bulged and a white foam appeared on one side of his mouth. They stared each other down for half a second and then both shoved off as the cashier poked her head around the corner.

Thirty minutes later he was standing on stage, walking through his body positioning with the director. Lia stood at center stage, her hands on her hips and a pouty look on her face. She was wearing a form-fitting white sundress and a pair of camel-coloured heels, and looked simply ravishing.

“OK, Gloria’s unhappy with you. She’s telling you that verbally, and with body language. So you need to be more hang-dog in your demeanour, and just kind of skulk around the room at its perimeter. She’ll turn and keep giving it to you, and you’ll just hunker down and hope it will end soon.” The director oozed this out from his chair right up tight to the front of the stage.

“Dahling, I don’t mean to give you grief incessantly, but you’re going to have to step up...in so many ways.” The young man could have sworn this was an ad-lib, but he hadn’t been over this part of the script enough times to be sure. But his facial expression on this was good enough for the director for an early rehearsal.

“Great, you got the vibe I was hoping for! OK, next scene is a short transition piece. So I want to start working on the costume change timing, which is pretty tight. Handlers, take this couple away and step lively.” The director waved his hand crisply.

Two off-stage folks appeared, dressed in black. One was assigned to the wife and the other to the young husband. They linked arms with their respective charges and steered them up a half flight of stairs to the main dressing room.

“OK, you sexy things, we have under ninety seconds to get you ready for your next scene. No time for prudishness, we will undress you and dress you right here by the door. Meathead, you are easier, but for Gloria we have to do costume and hair and a touch more vamp on the eye makeup.” A rotund handler with mutton-chop sideburns and thin wire-framed spectacles was fully in command.

He stood straight while someone unbuttoned and pulled off his shirt, while another assistant zipped off his trousers. Five feet away stood Lia, who had her sundress plucked off by Mr. Muttonchops and was kicking off her camel leather high heels. She had on matching light purple lingerie, with a demi-cup bra that was just marginally undersized for her voluminous breasts. She stood there impertinently with her hands on her hips, while they fussed with her hair and applied purple-tinged eye shadow.

“I guess we’ll just have to get used to seeing each other without too many clothes on?” She looked over at him with a lingering glance to go along with her saucy tone, while he was being instructed to step into a starched white night shirt.

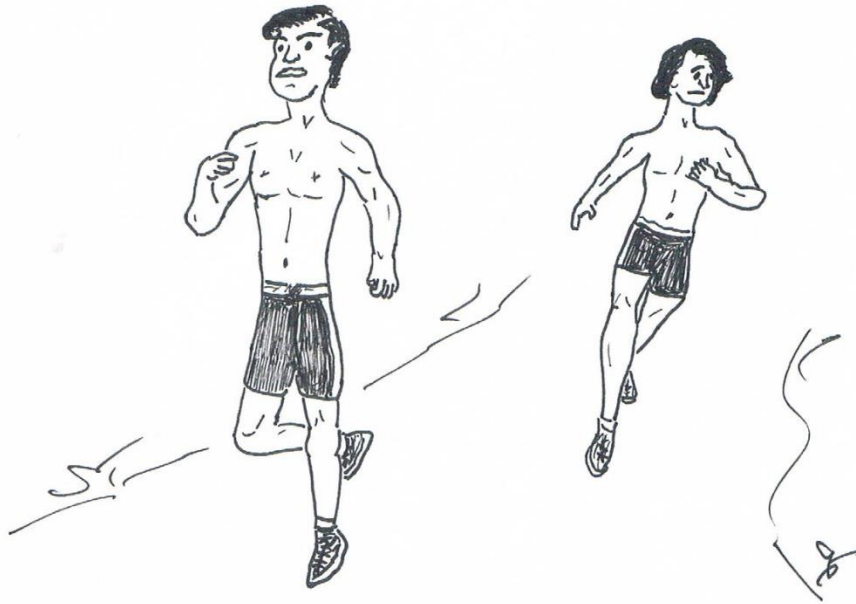
“Yeah, right...hehheh.” He chuckled nervously and kicked himself mentally for not being able to concoct a better comeback line.

They were back onstage less than a minute later, he billowing around in the nightshirt and she in a slinky orange negligee with the light purple lingerie indistinctly featured below. The scene required them to hide in a closet under the stairwell of the stage set, while the mother-in-law and father-in-law characters ranted out some hilarious lines to the great amusement of the rehearsal audience.

The space was quite constrained due to the stairwell’s risers, but the set carpenter had thoughtfully built a little ledge seat to allow a modicum of comfort for their two minute wait until the act ended. After a few seconds in the half-darkness he found the ledge, pivoted, and sat down. Lia giggled at the situation and swung around quickly, her buttocks grazing his face with this movement. She hesitated infinitesimally, and then plunked herself down on his lap, breathing hard. He realized he was sitting in a dark space with a gorgeous older woman on his lap, and one who was wearing only a few ounces of clothing. She leaned in to him, her breasts grazing his chest, and started to make a cooing sound into his left ear. While this was indeed very pleasant and dreadfully exciting, all he could think of was the murder-ball bully kicking the crap out of him in a future encounter in the parking lot beside the Lutheran church.

“OK you two, the act completed well over a minute ago. To your dressing rooms, please.” Mr. Muttonchops had potentially saved him from a terrible fate.

Running Hard



It was a beautiful Spring day. One of those ones that come early and give you a brief glimpse of the impending Summer. One of those days with warm sun and a fresh breeze, with the trees coming into their new-green blossom fullness. Where the smells of the Earth ooze out of its pores and nooks and crannies and make time spent outside a most enjoyable gift.

He had been thinking a lot about going off to university, flying the coop as it were. He had received his acceptance to the university in Toronto, so it was a sure thing he would be leaving, with details of accommodation and day-to-day life still to be determined. He knew it was a big step, and he wanted to make it count. It would be an opportunity to start anew, free of the constraints that come from a small town and everyone knowing your family and all the baggage that went with that. It would give him many opportunities to meet new people, and he was most excited about the possibility to meet new and interesting girls. Young ladies. Women, whatever. When he had gone to Toronto and had walked around the university, he had seen young women that were of huge interest to him. Ethnic girls, wearing different clothes and hairstyles, all walking around and going to class. He could close his eyes and see himself walking with them, talking about all sorts of things, going off to a café or a gallery in the middle of the day. His head swam at the possibilities.

But to make the right impression in the big city, he knew he had to lean down a bit and drop some weight. He was definitely fit, but his penchants for desserts and pizza and the odd beer had certainly turned him into what was charitably called a 'husky boy'. He could feel his thighs rub together when he played basketball, and he certainly knew he had a bit of a gut when he bent over to tie his shoelaces. So all of this would have to go, if he wanted to be appealing to the young ladies of Toronto. But shaving it off would mean some hard work and considerable restraint at dessert time.

He had concocted a plan to skip lunch altogether and go for a long run during his lunch period to keep busy and get his mind off food. Most days he ran alone, but the odd time Lou would join him for company and the opportunity for a little bit of competition. Just in that last mile, to see who could burn it fastest when the legs were warmed up and the horses could smell the barn.

Today was one of those days, and he and Lou left the school and jogged through the town, chatting amiably and soaking up the sunshine. They reached the north-west part of town and went up on the river dykes, taking the trail towards the sewage treatment plant. At that point the trail got a bit rougher, but the natural scenery more than made up for this. The views down the river, birds calling out and the sweet Earth smells all made for a pleasurable experience as they ran along at a moderate pace.

This area was known as Stony, named for the creek that meandered down from the area off the golf course. He loved to walk it and explore it, always had ever since he was a kid. His Mom had been nervous about him coming out here alone, but he always came back safely so over time it became part of his routine.

The two boys did a running jump to get over the creek, no more than two yards wide at this point just before it entered the river. They ran along a swampy area, the moisture making a soft squishing sound, and then started up a trail that ran up a hill above a thick hemlock forest.

"Holy crap!" Lou turned and whispered this forcefully, pointing down into the interior of the hemlock stand.

"What's up?" He had been looking up the hill, having seen a large bird light onto a tree.

"Down there! How often do you see five butts in broad daylight, and four of them are feminine butts?!" Lou pointed in the same general direction, and he looked down to see five unclothed figures jogging along orthogonally to their path. One guy, four gals, and not one wearing as much as a fig leaf. They weren't young, more like twentysomethings. And it did not escape either boy's attention that they were in good form.

"Let's follow them! They might be looking for a place to have it off out in the sunshine. I like that guy's odds!" Lou laughed at this own joke and started to change direction.

"Dude, that's awkward! We'll look stupid running after them. Let's play it smart and just run up the ridge and then bear right at the top. We'll stand a good chance of crossing their path and might even get a glimpse of more than their butts." He started to quickly climb the hill and Lou followed, grumbling a bit.

But as they ran on, no more sightings were afforded. They even doubled back at one point, but still no luck. Maybe they had imagined it all, or perhaps the people sensed they were being followed, or maybe they had come across a stretch of open meadow to lay down and do what people do in the open air.

Thirty minutes late, they were sitting in the front booth of Lou's parents' restaurant, drinking chocolate malts and discussing what they had seen or thought they had seen.

“Can I make you boys a nice steak?” Lou’s Dad was a generous guy.

“No sir, I’m fasting at lunch these days. This chocolate malt is already off my grid.” He grinned at the Dad.

“You seem excited, boys. What did you see out on the run?” The older chap twirled the ends of his moustache.

“Woo, we saw four chicks and one guy running in the woods, buck naked. Crazy, but true!” Lou rolled his eyes.

“Young gents, this is plausible. Expected, even. You know there’s a nudist colony north of the golf course, off of the concession road? People come up from Toronto to doff their clothes and soak up nature. We all snicker at this, but it’s really no big deal. Back home in Europe, beaches are always clothing-optional. You go and get a tan without the lines. But here we’re scared of our bodies, just a big bunch of prudes.” The older man wheeled back towards the kitchen.

He for one had not missed the statement that most of the nudist colony patrons were from Toronto. People he would be seeing on the streets of Toronto this Fall. His drive to run and trim down just got a lot stronger.

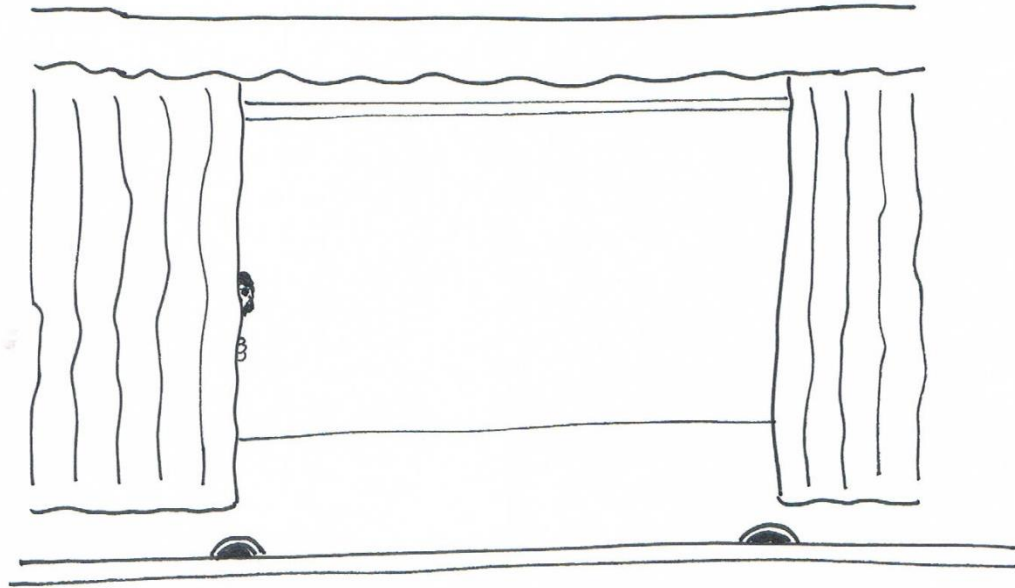
July, 2014; The Netherlands

He had thought a lot about his lost uncle over the years, the family member who had fallen in Holland during World War II. He had become acutely aware of the impact of the loss on his Mom over her life, and how this sorrow had blended with other losses and challenges to impact his entire original family.

He had always wanted to go to the Netherlands with his Mom to visit his Uncle’s grave and meet the family who had been Bert’s friends. So with her recent passing, he knew he had to make this sentimental journey on her behalf. He had always hated the idea of war, as it had robbed him of his vibrant uncle, and it had taken away a beloved brother from his Mom. And a visit to a war cemetery would be a hard pill to swallow. But go he would.

Dates and times were set, and Bert’s Dutch family were welcoming and engaging and wonderful. Leo was gone, but his son still dutifully and thoughtfully tended the grave at Groesbeek. And Leo’s granddaughter was being groomed to be the next generation of caretakers for the simple stone midway down the rows of the manicured war cemetery. And as the nephew rested on bended knee and looked at the Maple Leaf carved into the soft grey stone, he reflected on duty and sacrifice and what good men and women did to stop evil in its tracks. He cried deeply for a time, but then he rose feeling much, much lighter. The weight of two generations of grief and sorrow had lifted, and an enduring image of a great and free country had taken its place.

Grand Finale



It was the final night for the County Towne Players to tread the boards at the Old Town Hall auditorium theatre. They had had a spectacular run, playing to three sellout crowds on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings of the first week of the show's run. Same thing for the first two nights of the second week, even with the shift to a Wednesday night start to allow the last three performances to run before a previously-booked travelling magic show came in for the Saturday night.

His Mom had come to the opening night, and had seemed to enjoy it even though he knew some of the humour and story lines were a bit outside of her comfort zone. But his Dad had not come, and this had disappointed him to a considerable degree. His conscious mind was just fine with it, but his deeper levels felt a bit hurt and disappointed. The old man had come to West Side Story the year before, and had really enjoyed it. But over the last year they had formed a mini-wall between them, built brick by brick with tensions from various situations and miscommunications and resentment at how his Mom was treated. The last brick had been tied to his growing of a full beard for the play. His Dad simply loathed the beard, and kept making snide comments about cutting it off while he slept.

So he had an early supper, even earlier than his parents, so he would have ample time to digest it before facing the rigours of the play. It would be a packed house again, and he had heard rumours of a waiting list for people's seats if they didn't show up for the play. He had snagged two complimentary tickets, these being for the flat area at the two rear corners where folding chairs had been set up. His Mom had used one of these in the first week, and he had shyly suggested to her to ask the old man if he wanted to come to the play with the free ticket. He didn't have the heart to ask directly, but something in him wanted his Dad to come.

He hung up in his room, reading a book and listening to the rhythms of the house. He figured if his Dad was coming, he would eat his dinner and then come up for a nap before the show. He heard the clink of

cutlery on plates that signalled their dinner, and the sounds of his Dad saying something. Then it went quiet and he stole to his window, quickly enough to see his Dad walking down Archy Street with his work windbreaker thrown casually over his shoulder. But he noticed he carried no lunch pail, so he thought there was a chance his father would go in for a few hours and then nip over to the Town Hall for the play.

He went to the auditorium dressing room with a spring in his step. It had been a great experience participating in the play, as he had met a lot of neat people and it had really expanded his horizons. There would be a cast party at the Queen's Hotel afterwards, with drinks paid for by the Players' budget and all kinds of great snacks. Lia had a cousin who was visiting from the City who wanted to go to the cast party but couldn't, as you had to be a cast member or a guest of a cast member. He had been introduced to her on the street a few weeks back, finding her cool and sophisticated, with sprayed-on jeans and pretty enough features. But she had seemed entirely disaffected and she was smoking, which made him wrinkle his nose. So Lia had the bright idea that her cousin could be his date for the cast party, and all would be well. He thought about this for a day or two but eventually demurred, saying that he wanted to go to the party unencumbered. Lia was not too happy at this, and even less so when he suggested that the cousin could be in essence Lia's guest. But all of this blew over quickly as silly things will, and Lia flashed him a brilliant smile from the other side of the staging area as her hair tresses were being swept up by one of the handlers. He went over and offered his encouragement for a great show, and gave her a lingering hug that culminated with his left hand gliding quickly over her svelte right buttock.

As was his custom, he went to the side of the stage and peeked out through a wee gap between the heavy curtain and the stage frame. The crowd looked full and expectant, chattering gaily in that way people do right before a show. In the front row he could see Trudy Lorton, his old mixed-doubles tennis crush. She was a few years ahead of him and would be halfway through a university program by now. She wore a low-cut Summer dress that showed off her superb chest in the most wondrous way, and he caught himself thinking she would be delightful to have on his arm at the cast party. But his romantic reverie was broken with the sound of a bell that signalled the need for the players to take their places.

The last performance rolled out extremely well. Everyone knew this was the finale and put just a little bit extra into every line and gesture. The audience rocked the hall with laughter at many points, notably so at the juncture where he had to eat an onion and sardine sandwich to boost his libido. In rehearsals and for earlier shows, he had always been delivered a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that he ate with gusto while referring to it as sardines and onions. But on this last night the crew and stage manager had got it into their heads to play a practical joke on the bearded young husband, and the delivered sandwich yielded an olfactory surprise that made him jump off the sofa. He ate this very reluctantly, much to the audience's delight.

At the curtain call the applause was thunderous and sustained, long enough for him to survey fully the audience and recognize many familiar faces in the crowd. His gaze went up to the flat corners of the balcony, but his Dad was nowhere to be seen. But standing at the far right, applauding with the audience and smiling faintly, was his Mom dressed in a beautiful pink dress. She had returned for a

second viewing, knowing that the father would not be using his ticket. She knew her son would be leaving this town, this place, very soon. Tears seemed to come to her eyes momentarily, but she clapped bravely and loudly as he stepped forward into the bright lights to take his final bows with the rest of his glowing compatriots.

~The End~

About the Author and Illustrator



Brian Wilson Baetz is a proud son of Walkerton, Ontario, a small town that is the seat of Bruce County and a willing host to the mighty Saugeen River. He has earned civil engineering degrees from the University of Toronto and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Previously he served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and has also served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Civil Engineering at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Brian is a registered Professional Engineer in the Province of Ontario and is a Fellow of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers.

He lives with his family in Dundas, Ontario, a town of considerable charm and historical significance, not to mention its enviable amounts of green space.