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**Sounds To Remember Us By  
and other songs for various voices**

by

Hugh Burkhart

A Creative Writing Project  
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2000

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*For my parents*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A sincere and hearty thanks to all my friends and acquaintances from Maiden, who were my partners in crime, witnesses and accomplices to my shenanigans over the years. To you, and anyone else who crossed our paths and decided to walk with us for a while, I am forever grateful.

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### **To begin with...**

In a town whose hooks and curves, alleys, sideroads and cul-de-sacs, intersections and crescents and sidewalks and shortcuts, complicate and busy its little space, there is a particular street. It is isolated from the town's pocked and scratchy grid, more of a road and not much of one at that. Jutting out from the main artery into town like a hacked off limb, it is covered only in tar and stone chip. There is a dirt path for walking, and primitive, grated sewers that clog up with gravel and leaves and flood at least twice a year.

But silent backhoes, front-end loaders, dozers and dump trucks at the end of the road, resting in a field of torn grass and earth, attest to new developments. Expansion will open the road to a world beyond its boundaries. Construction will reach out to other locales past the horizon line. Today though, the machines' arms, claws and buckets in frozen poses, glazed eyes dull, can merely keep watch over three children at play. There is a hockey shoot-out in progress.

"Remember, no slap shots this time, Jason," says the little goalie, wrapped in makeshift, foam shin pads, a heavy parka and a black and yellow Skidoo toque. He shuffles awkwardly from side to side on torn runners. His brother, older, body thickening and broadening in early adolescence, approaches the net in a breakaway, weaving around imaginary defensemen.

"Watch the ball, Nick," calls the third boy from the side of the road. He leans against his battered fiberglass stick, eyeing the action intently.

Jason closes in on the net, fakes a wrist shot before winding back and slapping at the tennis ball. Nick drops his stick and with his blocker and trapper shields his face against the barrage of stones flying off the road. The ball strikes the net's crossbar and is deflected with a bouncy pop.

"No slap shots, Jason!" Nick yells, banging the stick's splintered blade on the road.

"Yeah, Jason," the other boy speaks. He has the ball now and chops it back and forth with his stick. "It's not fair. Your shot is too hard and the stones fly everywhere."

"Fine. Give me the ball, Dougie."

Doug tips the ball up to Jason's face. Jason catches and drops the ball to the ground.

"Smart ass," he says. His voice has a rumble to it and he clenches and relaxes his jaw while he grins at Doug. Doug is small, ten years old, the same age as Nick but smaller. Jason fakes a slap shot and Doug flinches.

"Come on, Jason," Nick yells. "Just do a regular breakaway. Try to deke me out." Nick moves back and forth on his runners.

"Nick, buddy," Jason says. "You look like you should hit the bathroom or the bushes."

"One more. No slap shots."

"Okay, I'll do it right this time." Jason makes as though to start at the net but stops abruptly, winding back and smacking the ball, harder this time. More stones are

sent into the air, spreading like buckshot. The shot is high and the ball whizzes over Nick's head. He ducks anyway.

"No fuckin' fair." Nick is looking up again. He stomps a foot, then resumes shuffling back and forth, faster now. "I'm not playing anymore." The ball has rolled down the road towards the town's main street.

"I'm just kidding around, Nick. Go get the ball and we'll start over."

"You should probably get the ball, Jason," Doug speaks up from the side of the road. "You shot it."

"You should probably shut the fuck up, Doug. You're not even playing. Pussyass."

"He's my friend," Nick is yelling louder now, pacing in front of the net. "Why don't you leave and let us play."

"Nicky, why don't you use the bathroom before you piss yourself? You know you can't hold it."

"He's just keeping warm," Doug says.

Suddenly Nick rushes his brother. He swings his stick wildly, a weapon. Jason ducks and dodges, laughing.

"Jesus, Nick," Jason sputters. "Don't take it so hard. It's only a game."

Nick gives chase in vain. Wet now shows through the seat of his pants as he cries at his brother angrily.

Doug looks on, considering. He takes off after the ball.

A white sedan pulls up on the road, squashing the tennis ball under its tire. The car rolls over it and the ball is released from under the tire's pressure with a pop. It bounces up in relief and appears to hover in the air a moment, a fleeting flash of time.

## Heart of the County

I suppose I started running because it was the thing I did best. Sports wise, I mean. Like most lads in my hometown of Richmond, I was hustled onto the football field before I could lace up my own cleats. But while other young muckers my age grew into positions like fullback, winger or goaltender, positions they would likely keep for the rest of their active lives, I seemed to get clumsier and more awkward. As boyhood football evolved, from a clusterfuck of children scrambling in the direction of a wildly kicked ball, to a tough but orderly competition based on skill and agility, I found myself sidelined with kneesocks clean as the day I first slid them over my shinpads. It was nothing short of miraculous that I was spared an adolescence marked by gym period taunts and ridicule. Cross-country running delivered me from a lack of football prowess which could have easily led to my undoing.

As a point of fact, I always loved the running aspect of football. Mum talked into late middle age about the joy she experienced watching me run up and down the length of the field keeping up tirelessly with the play. She'd clap and cheer me on, even as the Coach yelled, 'Carter, get back in position! Let the forwards take it up field!' So Mum despaired for a time when I took up running. 'You only get to see the start and finish of the race,' she'd complain. Which was fine by my Coach and teammates. I actually won their admiration by bowing out of football gracefully and excelling at another sport.

Now to tell you truthfully, the solitude of running was always my favourite part. When I raced I always came out well ahead of the top of the pack (first place in all three of my meets in England). And I preferred training alone. Solo runs remained a constant variable of my afternoons in Surrey. Always the same, the footpath along the Thames from Hampton Court to Kingston. By the time I was thirteen, a year into my running life, I had it down to forty minutes both ways. I'd follow in rhythm with the scullers who glided along the narrow waterway, stopping on the return to wind my way through the royal hedge maze on the palace grounds. Sometimes I'd pretend I was a commoner peeking over the shrubs at the princess who was confined to her chamber for loving me. If only I could prove to the King I was worthy of her love, I knew she would be mine.

Alas, as so often happens with young love, our courtship was cut short. Before I could win over the dream princess with my speed on the track, Dad took a job in Canada. Our family packed up and moved to a little hamlet called Maiden, near the town of Windsor, Ontario. With such regal titles, I was sure I'd soon find another place to woo the princess of my mind. Once again my hopes were dashed. Our new home was about as far removed from Surrey as you could get. Dad took work as an electrician in an automobile factory, where he later became a union steward, eventually working for the United Auto Worker's union full-time, before dying an untimely death from too many years of coffee, pints of lager, cigarettes and heated contract negotiations. But the story I'm about to tell takes place long before his death and the subsequent decline of my mother. The following events happened during my first year in this strange, little town on

the Yank border, and, if I can be so pedantic so early in the telling, set the tone for my life thus far.

I.

I continued running when we moved, stepping up my training, partially due to the fact that as the new bloke in town I had no mates. My new route spanned from my parents' home on the outskirts of town, down the highway along the Detroit River, into town and back. Sometimes, just to mix things up a bit, I'd run through the farmers' fields behind my parents' lot and down to the Big Marsh that spread out like a creeping malignancy through the heart of the outlying County woodland.

Yes, Maiden was a far cry from England indeed. Instead of growing into manhood around swinging sixties London, I watched the local greasers tear up the town in the hotrods they built for a living. So, in true Brit fashion with respect to the colonies, I kept my distance from the locals, even as my father became more and more like them.

I guess I should have really tipped my hat at his efforts, although it probably wasn't that hard for him to fit in. Dad had always been mechanically inclined, and the new family garage became a shrine to the local god: the internal combustion engine. Dad helped several of his friends from the plant work weekends on their cars in our garage. Or, if they weren't disposed to spend spare time working, his chums could just come over and help him with his other hobby of getting royally pissed. Again, I can't really complain

here, since this is how I met my first real friend, I might say my only friend, Alex DelRiccio.

See, I come home from my after school run one afternoon to find Alex hacking languidly at a football while his father, Bartolomeo, shared a jug of homemade muscatel with Dad.

‘Ah, Laurence,’ Dad greets me with a rough clap on the back and a tousle of the hair. ‘Meet Bart and his son Alex.’

‘Filio mio,’ Bart fairly growls at his son as he clasps my hand in his work-worn paw. ‘Come chake-a the boy’s hand.’

The fair but muscular boy approaches skeptically and shakes my hand. We exchange furtive ‘Heys’ then part before my father takes charge.

‘Larry here’s a superb footballer.’

Well I try to hide my shock and dismay over this ridiculous statement, especially considering I’d never in my natural life been addressed as Larry, but it ain’t easy. I suppose it was all part of the same New World Order nomenclature that oversaw Bartolomeo’s transformation into a Bart.

‘Bart was just telling me how football, or soccer as they feel compelled to call it here...’ Dad continues, pausing to have a laugh with Bart over the folly of the North American term for the European sport, and the general absurdity of what passes for ‘football’ in Canada and the States. ‘Anyway, they’re holding tryouts for the Maiden Secondary School soccer team.’

‘But, Dad, I’m already on the cross-country team.’

‘That’s precisely it, mate. They need a strong runner on the team. Someone with a little Old World experience, right? It won’t interfere with your meets.’ Dad nudges Bart, who chuckles in agreement before raising his arm to take a long pull off his jug of vino.

‘You do play soccer, don’t you?’ Alex steps forward again. He taps at the soccer ball expectantly. Left knee, right knee, right toe, left heel, header, left knee...

‘As well as he speaks the Queen’s English. No offense, Bart.’

‘None-a taken.’

‘Tryouts are on Monday after school,’ Alex says.

In essence, that settled it. I showed up for tryouts expecting the worst.

Thankfully, the same clusterfuck I experienced as a little mucker was in effect in the organization of the local teenage footballers. While it seemed common sense to enlist the fathers of the immigrant sons as coaches, they were too busy complying with the new ethic of working their arses off. The prospective players ran about with the same aimless abandon I had as a five year old. Though the coaches sussed out the similarity between what was supposedly my native game and hockey, even I recognized their lack of knowledge with regards to the game’s more subtle nuances. My understanding of the sport, combined with my “hustle,” proved enough to earn me a spot as second-string fullback, a feat lauded by my father but loathed by myself. Once again, however, providence would have it that my athletic efforts were rewarded.

## II.

We played our opening game against our Catholic counterparts in Maiden. Perhaps it was the grace of god, maybe it was because they had more Italians than we did, but it was an easy win for the opposing team. I just thanked the Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints for whatever part they might have had in sparing me from being put to the test that day. When it was all over but the crying, the coaches tried to buck up their men, while the team was already groaning speculations about another season of straight losses.

I sat out for the first half of the second regular season game. The Generals played the Mersey Mudhens, a seasoned team with an actual long-standing record, rare in a sport so nascent to Lakeshore County. Mersey is a larger town than Maiden at the southernmost tip of the County (the southernmost tip of Canada, in fact), where the land curls to a sharp peninsula probing Lake Erie, causing a lethal cross-current. They build the boys bigger out there, many not coming to school from the town proper, but from the surrounding area, which consists largely of farmland. The team we faced that clear, autumn day was as fierce a bunch of wankers as I had ever encountered in the roughest parts of London or Surrey. These were boys who knew their way around discs and harrows, who spent summers baling hay and hoeing family plots. It almost seemed unfair, pitting the Maiden juniors against these broad-chested bundles of testosterone who could grow full beards at fourteen.

During the first half of the match, the Generals were done in not so much by the size of the Mudhens but by their skill on the field. Defensively, they boxed-in, intercepted

and out-witted our forwards; in offense they outran and foot-handled circles around our halfbacks and fullbacks. While they racked up corner kicks and goals, our coaches were relegated to shouting, 'Defense. Fuck, fucking defense.' Then, adding insult to injury, one of our own fullbacks, the one player equal in size to the Mudhens, accidentally charged our goaltender, knocking him unconscious against a goal post. The goalie was rushed off the field. Parlette the fullback followed dejectedly, steamed that the goalie should have stepped in his way and gotten him booted from play.

At half-time the coaches, and out of exigency I should mention their names were Beaudoin and Dunn, gave their standard pep talk in a team huddle. I was called to action.

'Listen guys,' breathed Dunn, a rotund, chain smoking car dealership manager of about forty. 'They're up by four and we got sweet dick all. But there's thirty minutes left and we're not out by a long shot. We need to knock 'em away from our end at whatever cost. Carter, you replace Parlette. And for Christ's sake stay away from our goalie.'

'Got it?' added bony old Beaudoin. 'Let's win this thing. Break!'

We broke and spread out along the sidelines after a perfunctory 'Go Generals.' Alex DelRiccio bumped up next to me and muttered, 'Give 'em hell, Killer.'

I kept up with play no problem. My speed certainly matched the size of the Mersey players. But my pubescent growth spurt had yet to kick into gear and, being a head shorter than many of the Mudhens (as well as two years younger because of the educational differential between North America and the U.K.), I often found myself colliding head first with a chest on a breakaway, which sent my brain starved and reeling.

After ten minutes of play, the coaches began berating me from the sidelines. I knew it was only a matter of time before I was pulled.

My speed and tenacity at least gave the Mudhens a run for their money, and I was careful not to knock the ball out of bounds, lest they get a throw-in or corner kick. But then that hairy, overgrown oaf Parlette began hurling invectives each time a forward outmaneuvered me.

‘Hit him, Carter! Make yourself useful or get off the goddamn field.’

Then I noticed DelRiccio, sitting out for the first time in the entire game. He leaned into Parlette and spoke in his ear. Parlette went silent, and bony Beaudoin, who had started motioning for me to come off, just nodded, giving me the old go-ahead now that I think back on it. When the next Mudhen breakaway came, I knew instinctively what had to be done.

As a solo Mudhen rocketed past me towards our goalie, I gave chase. Before I could lag behind I pointed my right leg and let my left drop to its knee. I slid between the Mudhen’s legs, catching one of his cleats, and knocked the ball to our goaltender. The tackle winded the Mudhen, a cheer rose up from our sideline and the play was called. I received a suspension for the remainder of the game, but we were spared an extra Mudhen goal. Buoyed by my courageous effort, our team went on to score two goals. Ultimately, we lost four to two, but a new die was cast for the Maiden Generals.

We left the field cheering like bloody maniacs and jeered by our opponents, especially me for what probably looked to the Mudhens like a cowardly act. The celebrating continued on the march to the school gym and down into the locker room.

‘Good fucking show, Killer,’ Alex congratulated me. ‘I knew you just needed a name to live up to.’

‘We’re lucky they didn’t rush us and kick all our asses for that little stunt Carter pulled,’ Parlette called from the mirror into which he stared, proudly lathering his young face for a shave.

‘We should kick your ass for knocking out Barry, Parlette,’ Alex shot back, moving toward Parlette. ‘Poor guy’s first time in net for the Juniors and you give him a fucking concussion.’

‘Yeah, Parlette,’ croaked a shrimpy little twerp named Rogers, who was even smaller than me. ‘School nurse had to take him to the medical centre.’

‘Shut yer yap, Rogers.’ Parlette turned to us with half a shaven face. ‘Why’re you even down here changing anyway? You didn’t play thirty seconds.’

‘Pick on somebody your own size, asshole.’ Alex advanced.

‘Like you? Better take another look at yourself, fucking dago. Let me finish my shave.’ Parlette made to turn back to his mirror when Alex struck him with a hard right across the jaw. Before Parlette could retaliate we were on him. The whole team descended on his limbs in a feeding frenzy. In no time he was pinned to the floor in a St. Andrew’s cross.

‘Let me go you sons of bitches,’ he bellowed, ‘or you’ll fucking regret it.’

‘Aw, you didn’t get to finish shaving. Is that it?’ Alex twisted up a towel, tightening it under Parlette’s jaw and over his head like Jacob Marley’s toothache

bandage. As if under some secret instruction, the others pulled Parlette's shorts down to his ankles and removed his jock.

'What goes around comes around, Parlette.' Alex seemed pretty furious, even though his ethnicity had just been insulted. 'You should learn to keep your mouth shut.' Alex indicated Parlette's fallen razor on the floor. 'Go on, Killer,' he said. 'Finish him off.'

At first I thought Alex meant me to cut the bastard's throat, which seemed a pretty severe punishment for his crime. Then little Rogers wiped the remaining foam from Parlette's face, reached down, yanked up his prick, and lathered up his balls.

'See, Killer,' Alex said. 'This is a little ritual Parlette started in peewee hockey but somehow missed out on himself.' Parlette tried to thrash his head about but the team's force held him steady. I stood frozen with that blade in my hand.

'Go on, Carter!' Alex screamed. 'Before Dunn or Beaudoin come down here.'

I honestly don't know what came over me. Something about the rage over my recent transplant to Canada and a juvenile need to belong clicked with a fearsome, atavistic urge deep inside the core of my being. But I suppose there's really no use analyzing the matter. In a few strokes I returned Parlette's sack to an infantile form, smooth and shiny as the day god made it. When the team released him, the monster was reduced to a sobbing heap. He collected himself enough to yell, 'You're all fucking dead.'

'No, Parlette,' Alex said coolly. 'I don't think any of us need to let this out. See you in practice.'

We each dispersed to our lockers, changing in silence, sweatier than we had been on the field, the killers inside us calmed to the point of comatose expression.

The next game I spent almost entirely on the field. For the first half, that is. I wasn't all that effectual, to tell you the truth, and everyone was waiting for me to pull what they had already coined my 'signature move.' Near the end of the first half against the Riverside Sabres I got my chance. Same deal as the game, except this time I knocked out two forwards. I was suspended from play, but our opponents were only one goal up on us. During the second half the Generals played like right dirty bastards. By the match's end, three Sabres were sidelined with injuries, four Generals were off with penalties, and we had won by a score of three to two. In an odd sequence of events, I was the catalyst for a group who evolved into the toughest soccer team in Lakeshore County. I was the reverse of the catalytic converter, changing harmless human beings into pollutants contaminating the football field. And old Parlette was the most noxious of them all.

Parlette's position was changed to right wing, the forward counterpart to my fullback. He charged and yelled his way to a Musketeer season record for goals scored, keeping up a vigil of silence against the rest of us. As for myself, my football career was short lived. After yet another slide tackle in our fourth game, which caused my victim to sprain his knee badly, I was suspended from play indefinitely. Despite pleas from Beaudoin and Dunn to appeal to league officials, I accepted the decision with my typical humility. After earning the respect and admiration of my peers, I quietly finished off the

cross-country season. The Musketeers went on to have their best season ever, spurring on a string of smashing teams that eventually won three straight championships.

Dad, of course, was plum proud of my accomplishments. And now you might ask, what about Mrs. Carter? Well I haven't forgotten her. She was there for all my games.

'Dirty little buggers,' she exclaimed after our third match. 'You should be ashamed of yourself, mucker. Taking part in that hooliganism.'

'Let the boy alone, Maggie,' my father said. 'It's all part of fitting in.'

'Yes,' Mum said. 'And you've done a smashing job of that, haven't you, Colin. Maybe you'd like to celebrate with the boy by taking him out to the garage to get pissed.'

'Don't start, Maggie. You want to go back to England, scraping together five quid for a night out of steak and kidney pie.'

'Better than not going out at all.'

See, Mum was nobody's fool. When we lived in England, it was fine to drop by the pub after work, or go down as a family on a Sunday afternoon. But it seemed that in Maiden getting intoxicated was serious men's business. Gone were the days of Sunday drinks at the pub and crisps and soda for the wee lad. When Dad was in the garage or, more and more frequently, at the local tavern, it was strictly boys' night out.

### III.

I first learned of my father's exploits in town from none other than Alex DelRiccio. After my soccer career was stymied I was content to keep my distance from Alex. The

incident with Parlette in the locker room had left me shaken and disturbed by the guy. I never thought I'd be so close to another bloke's scrotum, let alone shave the fucker. But somehow Alex had a way of ingratiating himself. Without my invitation, he started joining me on my afternoon runs.

'Hey, Killer.' Alex jogs up along side me as I trot through the park path away from school one day. I'm not one to slow down for anyone, even on a practice run, and Alex struggles to keep up my pace.

'Still on the run, eh?' he continues. 'Thought track season ended a month ago.'

'Helps me think. Clear my head on the way home.'

'Jesus. All the way to your house, eh? Your old man couldn't pick you up?'

'If I had to, I'd take the bus. Dad doesn't like driving at this time in the afternoon.'

We come up on Old Front Street along the river, jogging past the Georgian and Victorian storefronts.

'I know,' Alex says. 'Same with my Dad. After work is drinking time. I don't gotta tell you that. Half the time they're getting wasted together.'

'How do you know that's what I meant?' My words come out as tufts of breath in the chill, late fall air.

'Hey, don't get sore. I'm on your side. Our dads work like madmen but don't have any fucking time for their families. But I guess we'll end up doing the same thing.'

'Not me.'

‘Oh yeah? Where else you gonna make money around here but on an assembly line?’

‘Who says I’m sticking around here?’

‘Bigger and better things, eh? I hear you, I hear you. All I know is that they’re handing out applications at the gates of some of these places. Good money too. Pays better than school, anyway.’

The road swings in closer to the river near the end of the downtown core. At that time this section of the riverfront was an undeveloped scar on the landscape, an unofficial dumping ground for discarded building materials and spent appliances. One street running perpendicular to Front went all the way down to the river. At its end were the remains of a shipping pier. Its splintered posts and planks were painted a bright green, and the entire rickety structure leaned to one side like Pisa’s tower or one of ye olde pubs in Surrey. I remembered going down to the Green Dock not long after our arrival to Maiden. In the summer, local river rats dove from the pier into the deeply dredged water below. They’d untangle the snagged lines of the black Americans who pulled sheephead and catfish from the dirty river. Then they’d step on the heads of the mutant, bottom dwelling mudpuppies that were no good for eating but provided ample entertainment, as they can crawl about alive for some time with terribly squashed heads.

Anyways, Alex starts jogging down to the river, and I decide to follow, though I have no intentions of stopping. Just a loop, down and around and back and continue on towards home.

‘Hold on a minute,’ Alex puffs. ‘What’s the big rush? Let’s hang out for a bit.’

The wind off the river is bitter with forebodings of winter's chill. A laker slips slowly past and I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt. Alex picks up some loose gravel and flings it into the foaming water, which laps against the dock.

'Ever been to Smiley's?' Alex indicates the tavern in the neighboring lot.

Of course I'd jogged past its gaudy stucco exterior countless times, but had never set foot in the place.

'My Dad doesn't take me to the pub,' I answer.

'Pub? You can eat there too, you know. My Dad takes us for perch on Fridays all the time. I've seen your Dad there. He's always hanging out with that bartender.'

Now I always suspected Dad was up to no good on his nights out, but I didn't need some little wop bastard telling me my family's business.

'The English always respect their bartenders,' I say. 'It's like chumming around with one of your mates.'

'When they look like that chick at Smiley's I can't blame him. I think she really likes your Pop. All over him.'

I suddenly grab Alex by the shoulders, give him a good shake.

'You keep your filthy mouth shut. I'll tear your bloody eyes out, so help me!'

'Hey. Easy, Killer, easy. I don't mean nothing. I'm just saying is all.'

'What my father does on his own time is his business.' I'm angry, but I also want to hear more. There is a certain thrill stirring in me of being a voyeur in my own father's life. Alex loosens himself from my grip. I know if he was starting a fight he could easily drop me right then and there, as he's a pretty strong kid.

‘I’m just saying, Carter, that when your Dad carries on like he does with that bartender he makes it the whole town’s business. Think about your Ma. Your Dad and that girl hanging all over each other. If my Ma caught my Dad cheating she’d slit his fucking throat. Send him to Hell in a hand basket is what she’d do.’

‘You don’t know a thing about my mother.’

‘I know about right and wrong.’

‘Like shaving Parlette’s nuts?’

‘You shaved him. I just don’t want you giving any ammo to guy’s like Parlette. You’re still new in town. Think about your own reputation if nothing else, man.’

‘I don’t have to think about shite.’ With that I push Alex out of the way and start running. I run at a faster pace than he’d ever hope to meet. The words that had just shot out of my mouth leave a tingling taste. I have a foreign tongue. These are not the witty or cutting or decorous phrases of the Queen’s English. I swear the next step, if I hadn’t started running, would have been to kill him with my bare hands. Nobody talks about my father.

But people did talk about my father. At school, behind my back, on lunch break, on the street, in the garage. Once I heard an older chap at the barbers say something about that English fellow who fixed his transmission. A real randy lad, in our tongue, as the old gent put it. My ears burned as the barber clicked his clippers above them, but I kept as silent as that Parlette had in what seemed like so long ago.

## IV.

I couldn't kill the seed Alex planted in my brain once it began to germinate. The roots had already tapped too deep. When I'd occasionally hear my Dad getting dropped off late at night I'd wonder, Was this the mystery woman in his life? Then there was the incident with the police. A couple of the finest from Maiden's constabulary appeared on our doorstep with a summons. Apparently Dad had been in some sort of altercation that resulted in injuries to several parties at the able hands of my father. It was a Friday afternoon when they came. Dad was passed out cold on the couch after sloughing through a shift very hungover.

'You get the bastard up,' Mum screamed. 'He was just going to sleep through dinner and head right back to the pub anyway. He's a rotten lout.' She yelled back inside from the front door. 'A fucking rotter!'

Dad met her voice, coming to the entrance scratching his rumpled head.

'Oi, what's this racket then, Maggie?'

The cops answered by handing over the summons and quickly slinking away from the ugly domestic scene. There were limits then as to how much official interference went into private lives, which was lucky for the bill, since they may have received as much venom from Mum as old Dad did himself, the mood she was in.

You might say Margaret Carter was the long-suffering type. But she wouldn't have that. She would have said she was the proverbial glue that kept the Carter family from coming apart at the seams. Perhaps she was the one who kept the Carter patriarch from coming apart at his own seams, and a pretty successful run of it she had I might add.

Margaret Carter was ten years her husbands junior, all of sixteen when they married under the watchful, shotgun gaze of her father, Captain Laurence Highball-Collington. Highball-Collington was a longtime seadog with Her Majesty's Navy, and by all accounts an ordinarily phlegmatic man with the quiet, solid confidence of a good brogue shoe. That reliable shoeness came down as a hobnail boot when the Captain discovered Colin Carter, who then worked as a dock electrician at Portsmouth, had knocked up his daughter. But while his initial instinct might have been to exact on my father a much worse punishment than fell upon ole Parlette, my grandfather soon collected himself enough to bring the young lovers together in appropriate holy fashion. He used his (considerable) influence and (no small amount of) charm to cajole the base Padre into performing a discreet service. 'Course, thereafter, Captain Highball-Collington (and, apparently Mistress Highball-Collington, though she must have been a very silent partner, since I've not heard word enough of her to warrant mention of more than her name) would have nothing to do with the couple Carter, aside from secretly honouring a monthly, self-imposed fiduciary obligation, to be used for any reputable career or educational pursuits I might undertake after my seventeenth birthday.

Suffice to say, the influence of my grandparents over the general progress of my boyhood was nil. That's not to say Mum didn't wield the memory of her sundered relationship with her parents like a battle-axe over my father's head.

'Carrying on like you do,' Mum would say. 'I should have listened to my father. He warned me about your kind. Dockworkers are like dogs, he'd say. One day they're

your best friend, eating out of your hand, the next they're running off on you, or worse, chomping off a finger.'

'Mind telling me what that's s'posed to mean? Did you ever think about your father running off on you, Maggie? If he was half the man you think he is, he'd be supportive, instead of hiding behind a trust fund for Larry. Maybe if I had been a Sub-lieutenant, things would've been different.'

'Oh, don't go using your union, classist shite on me. You know father was as much for the working man as you.'

'Oi, that's right. He'd always have a pleasant word for us as he strolled past the docks with his briefcase. "Jolly good, keep up the work, chaps. Right." It's one thing to have a laugh with the rough boys at the pub, it's another to have one of them shagging your daughter.'

'Don't be crude.'

'I thought that's what you fancied about me. All grubby and crude. You were a dirty one, weren't you. What happened, Margaret Highball-Collington? Thought you'd just have your fun before you hooked up with some A-level, public school lad? Got more than you bargained for, then?'

'And another thing. Don't call him Larry. His name is Laurence.'

'That's right. Christian name Laurence Highball-Collington Carter. There's some irony there, let me tell you.'

And on and on and so on. It's not that they didn't love each other. But by the time we moved to Maiden they weren't exactly best mates either. And, if Alex DelRiccio

was to be believed, my father was finding comfort in the arms of a young bar wench at Smiley's.

Proof came to me positive upon reading the *Maiden Gazette* the week following Saint Patrick's Day that first year in town. Now, Maiden is a town with a decidedly British heritage. A garrison town in fact. The Maiden Garrison spans a length of a good few football fields across a stretch of land along the Detroit River. Its bastions remain poised to defend the town against invading Americans. But that fact didn't stop the locals from celebrating like leprechauns a mile up the road at Smiley's, which remains poised to quench and quell the thirsts and appetites of marauding American boaters.

Dad was among the revelers celebrating that famous purveyor of Catholicism and enemy of snakes. I know because the special green edition of the Gazette featured my father amongst a raucous group wearing green plastic bowlers and drinking from dewy mugs of green draft, standing under a banner emblazoned with sparkling green letters reading "ERIN GO BRAUGH." Wrapped around my father was a dewy-looking, green-eyed redhead with "SMILEY'S" stretched in Day-Glo across her breasts. I noticed her sandaled feet were quite pretty, and their painted nails seemed somehow vulnerable resting atop Dad's steel-toes. Everything lit by the soft banker's green of pool table and bar lights.

I saved Mum the initial shock of finding the offending image by spiriting away the delivered copy of the Gazette. 'Course if she found me alone with the front page, I may have further deflected her anger away from ole Dad. See, once I laid eyes on that barmaid, my mind harkened back to that mind-princess back at Hampton Court.

Remember? Where I grew up in England? Anyways, gazing upon those emerald eyes, the faint freckles on milky white skin, the clear outlines of breasts perched naturally high on chest, nipples protruding at the “M” and “Y” of “SMILEY’S” (these were the days of bra burning, both an exciting and confusing time for an adolescent boy), I had my knickers at my knees before I could shut my bedroom door, knob in hand, hunched over the paper flung to the floor, wankin’ all over the whole smilin’ crew. I was my father’s analogue for a moment, or had supplanted him in the scene that transformed to include only Red and me wildly coupled, awash in green and tungsten light. To include the others in the picture in my fantasy would have been incomprehensible to my imagination then, and, besides, my father was too heavy and hairy to imagine any other way but drunk and (at least partially) clothed.

But I barely had time to fall to my knees and collect myself before the solid thunk of a car door shutting made its way up to my window from the driveway. I hastily slid the spunk sodden local rag under my bed and pulled up me trousers. What I spied from behind the drawn curtains of the upstairs bedroom window goes beyond any ordinary system of coincidences. Dad had emerged from an olive drab Chevy Impala and was now leaning into the open passenger window, hanging his weight on his arms, which rested on the car’s roof. Staring dejectedly dead ahead in the driver’s seat was the Smiley’s bird. She appeared pinker, younger and sadder looking than in the picture, as if a photo of this new scene might appear in the *Gazette* with a cutline like, “Local maiden should have stayed clear of the randy Brit.” Clearly my father was giving her the big kiss off. That much I could tell. But to do it in such audacious fashion, when at any moment Mum

could arrive home from wherever she was, was a true testament to my Dad's impudence. I gazed down at the tear-lined face, watched my father's chiseled (but bloating, softening) face twitch and move in expressions designed to variously implore, apologize and cajole. The girl could not have been more than a few years older than I. Dad looked more like a father rationalizing an adult decision to a child than a lover letting down the no-longer-loved. And just as I watched as silent third party to the one-sided negotiation, she looked up, yes, she looked up, eyes bore deep into mine, and Dad turned to look up too, so I dipped my head down below the window frame and didn't dare move until I heard gravel grinding under rubber and the car tearing away back into town.

Neither word nor glance was shared between my father and myself that day. And Mum didn't come home for supper. Dad and I ate canned soup and crackers silently, both obviously concerned over where the lady of the house had gone.

No, she didn't abandon us. I heard her slam into the house around midnight, my ear to the bedroom floor listening to the scene that ensued:

'Jesus H., Maggie. Where you been then?'

'I don't have friends? I can't go out from time to time?'

'It's just that I haven't heard of you since yesterday. I was beginning to wonder if I still had a wife.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'What do you mean? You drunk?'

‘This is what I mean. You and Erin Go Braless on the cover of the town paper. Fucking cunt, how could you do this? At least you could’ve saved me the humiliation of having the entire town know.’

‘Now just calm down...’

‘Stay away from me.’

‘Wait a minute. Put that down, Maggie.’

So at this point you’re probably thinking, here comes the really tragic part, and I don’t blame you, since listening from upstairs I was thinking the same, the worst, Mum with a sawed-off shotgun pointed at Dad’s thick skull. What I found when I raced down to the living room was my mother brandishing the rolled up newspaper as you would at a dog or as Flo would to Andy Cap. I chuckled at the scene in spite of myself, frozen in the stairway.

‘What?... What’s so fucking funny there, Larry?’

‘And for Christ’s sake, his name’s not Larry. Go to bed, son.’

‘No, I want to find out what you find so goddamn funny about you’re mother and I engaging each other in conversation over private matters.’

So I say, and this is all I say, ‘It’s not so private when you’re cosied up to some bird on the front of the *Gazette*.’

Then Dad did something he had never done before and never repeated afterwards. In two bounding steps he was on me, and he slapped me hard across the face. Anyone who has been hit with both a fist and an open palm can tell you that the open hand can often be much worse than the fist, delivering the same blow, but with a stinging slap and

impressive accompanying sound when properly connected. I staggered up the steps, more stunned than from any hit I had received in football. Mum rushed to us but Dad just turned to brush past her and crash through the door. I barricaded myself in my room, crying, tearing up the crusted newspaper violently, blocking out the cries of Mum, who stayed outside my door until I fell to a fitful sleep on the floor. Dad tore off back into town, the sound of gravel under rubber screaming into the still night, a sound I heard too many times to count over the few ensuing years my parents spent together.

I arrived at school the next morning in a state. I coasted bodily to my locker but my mind stayed home, or maybe it was on a bender at Smiley's with my Dad. My trance was broken when I arrived at my locker, #2413 near the History Room. Plastered on the blue sheet metal, just underneath the top vent, was my jubilant Dad and his young miss. A new cutline was scrawled in pencil below the picture: "Not the only Killer in the family." While the suggested pun on my nickname and the term "lady-killer" was not lost on me, I was in no mood to be fucked with. I froze in front of that picture, unable to tear it off or open my locker. I went to the W.C. to collect myself. And what should I find there, taped to a mirror, but a Gestetnered copy of that same photograph. One thing I hadn't noticed before, though, was Bartolomeo DelRiccio looming in the background, off far right, glazed and slumped in a bar stool just out of the range of the banker's green tungsten glow. It was like looking at Picasso's Guernica and discovering the light bulb in the picture resembles an eye, when before you didn't notice it at all amidst the general carnage.

My comprehensive study of the work was cut short by the sound of somebody in a stall dropping a morning shit into the toilet. The splash bounced across the yellow tiled room, followed by the door opening. Entering the bathroom was Rogers, the little fellow who had yanked up Parlette's prick to give me a clean swipe at his balls with the razor.

'Hey, Killer,' he says. 'How about your old man making the cover of the *Gazette*? Bet your Mom was happy 'bout that, eh?'

The stall door opened and the dropper of the shit emerged. Alex DelRiccio.

'You better shut your mouth and get outa here,' Alex says, a rush of flushed water roaring behind him.

'Who crowned you king of the washroom, Alex?'

'See that photo there. That's my Dad sitting shitfaced behind Mr. Carter. So when you start, um, insinuating, you're talking about my Dad too. I just hope you didn't have anything to do with posting those pictures around school.'

'What if I did?' Rogers bravely croaks. "'Scuse me. I gotta piss.'

'Sounds like an admission of guilt to me,' Alex says. He's on Rogers as fast as he was on Parlette, but this time it's more like roping a calf than bringing down a bull. And Alex is talking to me calmly the whole time he's leading Rogers into the stall.

I'm not sure why I should be grateful to the guy but I know he's on my side. He has Rogers suspended by his underwear, which has been yanked out over the waistband of his jeans, and held scared and inert over the toilet bowl. This time I know I've got to do something. A chico and a swirly are too much for any high schooler to take in one day.

Just as Alex is pulling the toilet's handle and lowering Rogers to the spiraling aqua I stop him.

'Stop,' To my surprise, and Rogers' obvious relief, he does. 'It's okay, Alex. You don't have to do this. We're better than these wankers. Set 'im down.'

Rogers is off like a shot, heading for the door and tucking in his damaged undershorts.

'You'll fuckin' get it for this, Alex,' say Rogers, who obviously doesn't learn lessons from such unsavoury experiences. 'I'm reporting you fer sure.'

'Yeah, well, you might want to think about taking those pictures down before you do that.'

Rogers stalked off, and Alex and I kind of bonded after that, though I remained pretty skeptical about him for a while. One thing is for sure though. Alex did teach me a lot about how things work in a small town. He said he knew we were "long lost brothers" from the minute he met me, and I'm glad we found each other.

So I started out by saying these events set the tone for my life thus far, and I'm not wavering from that statement, but I really don't feel like proving it to you right now. Right now I'm going to keep talking about tone in general.

Like the drab olive tone of the green Chevy Impala that was pulled from the Detroit River my first summer in Maiden. Not long after my father's public display of infidelity, the young woman who I learned was named Bobby MacCallum appeared to drop off the face of the earth. Since she was relatively new to the town, a traveler from

Manitoba, it was assumed she had just tired of life in small town Southwestern Ontario and moved on. She just left work one night without collecting her tips or waiting for a final cheque. I was witness to her resurfacing.

I was on my usual run on the second to last day of school. The greenhouse humid summer was just making its presence known and I was drenched by the time I reached the vicinity of Smiley's. There a police barricade blocked traffic. A crowd of onlookers watched as divers attached a cable to something in the water at the Green Dock. I ran down as far down to the action as I could before I was stopped by one of the young constables who had issued my Dad the summons. I might mention the constable's name was Bob Smith and that, aside from his prematurely greying hair, he seemed awfully young to be wearing any kind of uniform besides a high school (North American) football uniform. I stood beside him behind the row of yellow sawhorses as a tow truck driver started the winch, which pulled the car back to dry land. Voices around me hummed, 'we was just swimming around there pickin' out fishing lures and cans when we found it,' 'I knew that girl didn't just up and leave,' 'Betcha that car is salvageable,' 'Dang that river's still cold.' The car was raised at a funeral's pace, the crowd holding its breath as water washed out from the bottom of the doors. The front end slid out last and as the frogmen scrambled to right the auto and set it up on the parking lot, the corpse popped out the smashed windshield, it's leg separating, the Police Chief fishing with a stick at what I swear was a chipped and graying, red-painted toe. Constable Smith turned his head with what sounded like a chuckle and I ran home.

I truly felt connected with the road that day. Each stone in the Tarmac winked at me like a jewel. I counted pop cans, wads of paper, tire metal along the gravel shoulder. The river ran into the lake. I suppose I thought of the single time I heard Bobby's voice quivering on the phone, asking for my father, but maybe not.

You might be interested to know that a week later my parents opted for a trial separation and my father moved into a room at Smiley's. My grandparents left Gatwick International Airport for Toronto on Canada Day. Their plane fell into the Atlantic Ocean somewhere around Greenland. Two days later we received a postcard from them, a small print of Picasso's Guernica from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, obviously from one trip or another they had taken – "Looking forward to seeing you. You have always been loved."

When I turned off the road and onto our property I continued down the path through the farmers' fields behind our place. I sped down to the Big Marsh that spread out like a creeping malignancy through the heart of the county.

## **Sounds To Remember Us By**

After six years of what seemed to everyone, including himself, the perfect marriage, Alex DelRiccio had had it. He had come to the conclusion that too much effortless happiness was detrimental before middle age and he wanted out. So he devised a plan to exit what he already thought of as his “old life” for good. The plan seemed at once sophomoric and therefore, Alex thought, foolproof.

He stalked into the kitchen one evening after a long day at an Open House and loaded his briefcase into the dishwasher. His young wife, who at first thought Alex might be the pizza delivery boy, came into the room clutching a twenty-dollar bill just as the machine whirled to work on the leather case.

-- I'm forming a rock and roll band, Alex announced.

-- Great.

-- Don't try to stop me.

-- I always said you should pick up the guitar again. I married a rock god, not a real estate agent.

Sheri planted a kiss on Alex's cheek.

-- I'm out of here.

Alex turned and walked out the door. He headed on down the street. Conformist, uniformist people, houses that I sell to, he thought. Everyone in the subdivision had the same sedan with global positioning option he had. Or mini vans. Alex walked across to the nearby beach and chucked his car keys and Bulova wristwatch, just like Billy and Captain America in Easy Rider. He began hitchhiking along the river.

Rain had mucked up the road's gravel shoulder and he slid in his flat-soled dress shoes each time he turned to thumb a passing car. On the third car he lucked out.

-- Hey, Al.

It was Martin Shore, coming home from work. Martin was a moldmaker who had inherited his father's plumbing business. He eeled out sump pumps and emptied septic tanks on the weekends and did well enough to buy two properties from Alex. Residential and rental. At this moment, Alex would have traded in his Hugo Boss for Martin's Work Warehouse lumber shirt any day.

-- Car trouble? Martin asked the blinking suit at his window.

-- I'm putting a rock band together.

-- Shit. Sounds great. Hop in.

-- Where's the big jam session? Martin continued.

-- Drop me at Larry Carter's place.

-- Carter. Killer Carter? Still down the road at his folk's? Jesus. He still play?

Alex nodded. Martin impetuously turned up the stereo and began tapping on the steering wheel. He slowed to look for the Carter residence, pulling into the long drive of a sprawling ranch home with a large detached garage.

-- I remember it now, Martin said as he put the car in park. I came here to jam a couple times. Ages ago.

-- Not that long ago. Thanks for the ride.

Alex patted the car three times then turned towards the house. Martin leaned over the passenger side and rolled down the window.

-- Hey, he shouted. Give me a ring if you need someone to keep a beat. I still got a kit kicking around the basement.

-- That's what I had in mind, Alex called behind him.

Carter was at the door by the time Alex reached the top step. He scanned Alex up and down cautiously through pale blue eyes. Carter's face was weather-worn but youthful. Hair beach bum bleached, body of someone who not only exercised every day but exerted himself to extremes. Goddamn movie star, Alex thought.

-- I told you I'm not interested in selling, Carter said.

-- I'm not here for that.

Alex pushed past Carter and walked into the front room of the spacious home. He couldn't help himself from immediately assessing the place: ample floor space, hardwood; new drywall; high ceiling; front bay window with an unobstructed view of the river, well except for that willow tree, but these craggy old trees are part of the home's charm and, besides, you still get all that natural light. Alex ran his hands through gel-stiffened hair.

-- What's that you got playing? Alex asked.

-- It's John Coltrane.

-- Sounds pretty whacked, but that's good. That's cool. I'm into broadening my musical tastes.

-- That's very adult of you. Listen, Alex, you mind telling me what you want?

-- Can't I just visit an old friend?

-- If that was part of your regular pattern I'd say sure. But when's the last time you just dropped by, without fridge magnets and calendars and business cards?

-- I've had it with that shit. I want to form a rock and roll band.

-- Oh, well that explains everything then, don't it. Carter sort of giggled and went into the kitchen, which Alex noticed had been recently remodeled.

When Killer returned with a couple Budweisers Alex proceeded to tell him about how he was leaving his wife to pursue his dream. Seems Alex read in *Rolling Stone* about a rock and roll outfit from Cleveland that didn't make it until some of the members were pushing forty. And the leader of the group used to be a high school teacher. And he quit his job to devote his life entirely to music.

-- What did his family think about that? Carter asked.

-- Behind him one hundred percent.

-- And yours?

-- Sheri would never understand. She thinks I just miss playing covers on the weekends.

-- Maybe she's right.

-- I came here for your help.

-- Maybe you were wrong to think I could.

Carter regarded Alex with a puzzled look. Who was this soft, blotchy-skinned man in his living room really? How many people had he been since he was last here socially? Carter could remember it well. Fifteen years ago, lots of booze, drugs, The Clash on the stereo, probably lots of people complaining about the music – where's the

Zeppelin, Tull, Seger! How many people had Carter been since then? That was the question. Had he changed at all?

-- Sheri know you're here?

-- 'Course not. She'd never let me come here.

-- Right, if she knew you were going over to the thirty-eight year old bachelor's place you'd have never even made it to the door.

-- How'd you guess?

-- Oh, I know a thing or two about married women. One is that they distrust lifelong bachelors. As if when we're not thinking about fucking their daughters we're eating babies.

-- Anyway, I left and I'm not going back.

-- Well, you're welcome to stay until this passes. I can't say you've been a bad friend to me, Alex. But I've got a life to lead. A routine.

-- You can't say I've been a bad friend to you. You stood in my wedding for Chrissakes. And this isn't going to pass. And what do you do, anyway?

-- Right now I'm listening to John Coltrane.

'Trane's loose embouchure tenor came through Carter's Pioneer speakers, singing Acknowledgement of A Love Supreme. Carter explained there was a Christian church group in San Francisco who had appointed John Coltrane as their saint. They celebrate God in Christ through the music, playing and listening to it, a lot of the more "whacked" stuff like Interstellar Space. Do you know what that means, Alex? Alex could not begin yet to understand, but for the first time in a long time he started to listen.

-- Later I'm going to fix a stuffed eggplant dish I've been experimenting with, Carter said.

-- That really is a killer view of the river, Alex laughed.

-- Yeah. On the clear days you can see the cooling towers.

The next morning Alex awoke and reached out for his wife's body beside him. His arm flopped down and his knuckles rapped the floor. He raised his head from the folded blazer on the arm of Carter's couch. But it was the coffee table which told him he wasn't home. A worn, wooden thing which had been painted more than once but was currently a bright orange. Earthy, but not unattractive, in a rustic chic sort of way, Alex thought. And it was what sat atop the table that really separated this place from his home. First of all there were several empty Buds. Alex would have never drunk more than one on a weeknight, and would most certainly have never left it lying around empty outside of its case. Then there was the squat jar of organic ointment by someone named Dr. Lim, Amoxicillin in a dropper, a vial of what appeared to be hash oil, a butterfly knife, the HarperCollins Study Bible, a telephone book, a MOPAR catalogue and a red covered *Catcher in the Rye* paperback. The cumulative effect of these objects was an unsettling one for Alex, as if random order touched even the smallest detail in this place, thus signifying that order itself was an arbitrary thing.

Rising, Alex realized it was a beautiful, spring day outside. The twin cooling towers of the Fermi nuclear facility across the water at Michigan stood out crisply, blue-

gray on the horizon. The expanse of water between Canada and the United States here, where the Detroit River merged with Lake Erie, became almost oceanic in its breadth. Alex sat and stared at a freighter rolling onto the horizon, cars flowing towards town in opposition to the river's current, the sun above that had yet to reach its zenith.

Carter, pink with exercise, jogged into the room through the kitchen. He sweated and panted and stretched, gradually slowing to walk in circles around Alex.

-- You're making me dizzy, Alex said.

-- I'm not surprised. You drank a lot of beer last night. Passed out early though. Not used to it I s'pose. But you'd better get your arse in gear. Got to get ready for tonight.

-- Tonight?

-- You wanted to rock 'n roll, right? Got to start with a jam session, mate. You're not hedging your bets now, are you?

-- No. I just... I gotta wake up.

-- I noticed Martin Shore dropping you off, so I rung him up this morning. Need my pipes eeled soon. Martin expressed interest in banging on the skins, so I took it upon myself to invite him. Alright?

Alex scratched his unshaven face in his hands. He had to think. He remembered: the briefcase in the dishwasher, Sheri clutching a twenty, Martin Shore giving him a lift, Killer playing music and offering him beer. That pretty much brought him up to speed.

-- You managed a bit of songwriting before your brain bid you adieu, Carter added. I've got to admit it wasn't bad. I got it on tape. Figured you wouldn't recall the inspired moment the morning after.

Carter walked over the stereo, which sat on a rough-hewn plank resting on red cinder blocks, and hit PLAY on the tape machine. He kicked off his runners and plopped down on the couch next to Alex, clearing room for his feet on the coffee table. He scanned Alex's face for a reaction when the sounds of an open tuned acoustic guitar and vocals cut through the hiss of the home recording.

*Weeping willow, don't weep for me  
With your hang, hang, hanging branches hanging over  
me.  
Got a Bible and a phone book,  
That's all I really need.  
I may not be the best man, but I'm all I'll ever be.*

*Isn't that strange?  
Isn't that romantic?  
Isn't that beautiful?*

Alex and Carter harmonized on a trio of "ahs" after the last line.

-- It is rather short, but I think we've got something there.

Alex stared at the tape machine long after it reverted to silence. He rubbed the fingers of his left hand. Though he'd been playing more of late, he'd not yet built up calluses and the tips were tender.

-- The Dodos play these really short songs. They're...

-- The band from Cleveland. I know. You're not the only person who picks up the odd music mag now and again. But there's more work to be done.

Carter explained how they were to spend the day delving deep into the arcana that was his record collection. Overlooked Brit-pop classics like the Kink's Waterloo Sunset, proto-punk by the Stooges, the quintessential rock album Loaded, obligatory Beatles and Stones, nouveau classics by Palace, Stereolab, some current top 40, a little Tom Waits for good measure and, of course, Brian Wilson. Alex silently questioned why he and Sheri never had children. Aloud he asked Carter what he had actually been doing, for a living, since high school.

-- Well, Carter began wearily, you know I went to university for a few years, on a trust fund set up by my grandparents. We hung out then, you and I, if you recall. Remember jamming with Martin and the boys? I'd be playing all the punk from home and the hardcore Detroit stuff. Silly buggers. They should've been listening to guys like Iggy and the MC5 and all they wanted to do was Grand Funk Railroad. Anyways, then I split for Europe. Traveled about for a bit. Wound up back in my hometown helping wire houses for a bloke knew me Dad. Played some music. Lived with a lady for a bit, came home when my folks died. But I don't have to tell you.

-- It's just that... Where did the time go? What kind of person do I become when I don't do all of those things like go to school, travel?

-- A husband and a successful real estate salesman. I don't know. We both had lives to lead. Our paths just diverged. I tell you one thing, when I stood in your wedding it was the guys like you, successes in their own backyards, got the respect. Not me.

-- Don't let them fool you. Every guy in town is envious of what you got.

-- Then they're fools. Happiness is seeing how good you've already got it in your own life.

Then they talked about Sheri. How she and Alex had met at one of his gigs with the popular bar band Rubber Soul. How Alex figured Sheri wanted him to give up the bar scene completely once they got married, even though Alex had managed to juggle playing with building a reputation as a savvy and honest salesman. How when Carter had become reacquainted with Alex upon returning home after his mother's death, Alex tactfully suggested he play on buyer sympathies to get the highest possible price for the family property. Ultimately, Carter opted to stay at the home and lived comfortably thereafter off the combined assets of trust fund residuals and his inheritance, which were considerable, and Alex and Carter talked about that. Then they got to work.

By the time Martin Shore arrived, at around eight o'clock that evening, Alex and Carter had listened to ten albums and written two more songs. Martin didn't have to bring a kit because Carter already had enough equipment to outfit a six-piece band in his basement. At the back of the red, indoor/outdoor carpeted room there was a drum kit, from which the other instruments spread in a semi-circle. There were three guitars -- a Fender Telecaster, a Gibson ES-335, a Fender Jazzmaster bass and a Martin Dreadnought -- a Hammond B-3 organ and an electric/acoustic piano, Marshall half stack and Fender Twin Reverb amplifiers, Leslie rotating speaker, and a full P.A. system replete with mics and monitors.

-- Jesus Christ, Killer, Martin said. It's a musicians' fucking wet dream.

-- Why do you think I got the indoor/outdoor?

What followed has, in the few short years since its happening, come to be known in hip, bootleg tape and MP3 circles as the **Parlette's Nuts Sessions**, after a muffled comment followed by laughter that kills all other sound at the end of the four-track recording. The tape itself begins after a couple false starts with a version of "Foot Stompin' Music" by Grand Funk Railroad. Then comes another cover, this one of The Band's "The Weight," after which Carter can be heard to say, "Alright, before this starts to sound too much like a bloody beer commercial, Alex has some songs he'd like to work out." There is a break in the jamming and the tape is turned back on to capture a country blues number in F entitled "Kentucky Folklore":

*Kentucky Folklore: "My feet are cold."  
 "So are mine," said the legless man. "So are mine, my  
 friend."  
 Kentucky folklore: "My feet are cold."  
 "So are mine, so are mine, so are mine."*

A rustic lyric sung twice with a somewhat slack-jawed twang. The tune ends on an extended jam featuring brushed drums, with bass and guitar working over a Bb7 to Eb7 progression.

-- Weell, drawled Martin after the tape was clicked off. It's not what I'm used to, but... I dig it.

-- You'd better, 'cause two weeks from now we're getting a gig over at Smiley's.

-- Hey, wait a minute, Alex said. We're not going to be ready to play anywhere in two weeks. We just started.

-- Exactly, Carter said. While the energy is still fresh. Who knows how long this is gonna last?

-- You saying I'm gonna back out? Alex said.

-- Well it does smack of mid-life crisis to me, Carter replied. Not that I'm casting aspersions, but sooner or later Sheri will be wondering what the status of your marriage is, and what then?

-- Killer's right, Martin said, rising from his drum stool. Spring is coming and I'm going to be busy eeling again, and Dianne wants a brick driveway put in. Who are these young people you speak of?

-- What do you say, Alex? Even if we bomb, at least you've done it.

-- These young people you speak of, they are accompanied by young, nubile women?

-- Shut up, Martin. Fine, I'll do it. Let's play.

The four-track was pressed again and the band, as they could now rightly be termed, eased into an impromptu jam of the Velvet Underground's "What Goes On." It took Martin a few bars to get comfortable with the song, get into the pocket, so to speak, with Carter's bass, but by the time Alex hit the mic the rhythm was tighter than a dog's asshole, that is to say groovy. Alex nearly floored the guys with a reverb, fuzz-toned solo in the middle, digging the neck with his raw fingertips as if mining for notes buried inside the fret-board. Just as he and Alex harmonized on the final chorus – Lady be go-od, do what you sho-uld – boots came tromping down the rickety basement stairs.

Alex caught sight of the police as the first one hit the bottom stair. He emitted a startled scream into the microphone so bloodcurdling it stopped his bandmates abruptly and almost sent the authorities running back up the basement.

-- Fer fuck's sake, Jim, Alex yelled into the mic.

Before Sergeant Jim Fox was a policeman he played senior high school soccer with Alex, continuing to play with him in a men's league. Alex had the kind of relationship with this moose of a man that one might expect from lifelong teammates. A relationship close enough to get Alex out of more than a few tickets, at any rate.

-- We received a noise complaint from one your neighbors, said the female cop, a short blonde whose bullet-proof undervest lent to her appearance a certain martial stolidity.

-- So you come down here and scare the shit out of everybody, Alex boomed into the mic.

-- Would you stop talking into the mic, Al? I'm the homeowner here, officers. I accept full responsibility.

The Sergeant looked Alex up and down. Dressed in one of Carter's nylon track suits, the real estate agent turned rock god resembled a mobster on a Florida vacation.

-- Actually, it's Al I was really interested in speaking to, Killer. Al, Sheri's been worried sick about you.

-- Oh, for Chrissakes.

Carter moved to turn off the P.A. Martin, who had been drinking steadily since he arrived, tripped over a boom stand as he came out from behind his drums, sending two

cymbals and himself crashing to the floor. Carter fumbled to recover the downed drummer.

-- Seriously, Sergeant Jim continued. Sheri's really worried. She knows you're here. And the agency's been calling.

-- How does she... Killer, did you talk to her?

-- It's a small town, Al. If you're going to take off for a lost weekend, you could pick a less conspicuous destination. You only live five minutes from here.

-- Well if you see her, tell her the band's kick ass. And tell her...

-- I will, buddy.

-- Should I issue a ticket, Sergeant? The female cop glared at Carter, who was now untangling Martin from a patch cord.

-- I think a warning will do, Rita. These new cops, Al. They forget they were young yesterday. But we know better, don't we. Take care of yourself.

-- Keep it down, guys. Some people have to work in the morning.

With Constable Rita's parting shot the police bumbled back up the stairs and were gone. Alex shook his head at his bandmates.

-- Can you believe that shit?

-- Let's go down to the marsh, Carter said.

The trio trudged through the long grass of Carter's backyard, past a grouping of crabapple trees and onto a worn path that ran along the field Carter rented to a farmer who grew soybeans there. Moonless and still, the night was just barely disturbed by the

rattle of last year's beans, which stuck out in scrubby clusters at the edges of the field. The path was still muddy from the previous night's rain and the men's shoes soon became sticky and weighed down. But the air was brisk so their steps were light, and the scene back at the house was quickly forgotten. They swilled beer and alternated carrying a two-four until they reached the marsh's edge.

The marsh was part of a spidery collection of watersheds and tributaries that met to flow into the lake. Outlines of duck blinds and remnants of old growth Carolinian forest were visible as dark shadows on the inky blue-black of the sky. Carp jumped, crickets creaked and frogs croaked. The sound of a startled heron lifted out of the brush and over the marsh as the men approached. They sat in the grass and Carter sparked a joint, smoked and passed it silently, thinking of nothing. Martin cracked his knuckles and a beer and started to laugh, followed by Alex and Carter in turn. Their laughter too lifted out of the brush and into the dewy, spring air.

Two weeks to that night on the marsh, The Craned Necks found themselves crammed into the cab of Martin Shore's pick-up. A tarp over the pick-up's bed covered most of the equipment from Carter's basement. The truck passed the sign which read **Corporation of the Town of Maiden, population 9500**, and Alex, squashed in the middle seat between his two bandmates, uttered a phrase familiar to anyone who had lived in the town for any length of time.

-- Ten grand and it's a city.

They pulled into town ten minutes after loading the gear into the truck and with several hours to spare.

-- Hey, Lawrence. You guys want to smoke a joint?

That was Doug Bradley. A friend of Carter's, or maybe more appropriately, a former apprentice. At present he was standing on the Smiley's back steps, Carter and company returning from moving the last of the equipment into the bar. In the past, Doug had used Carter's place variously as a crash pad, dope den, music school, that is Carter taught him to play, and recording studio. Now he lived in the nearby city of Windsor, working as a strip bar deejay and a waiter until his big break in whatever came through. Word had gotten to him that Carter had a band called The Craned Necks. And Doug had friends. Lots of them, who were showing up later to see Carter play.

-- Actually, if you wanted to give ownership to the group it would have to be Al here, Carter explained.

Al and Doug clasped hands, and Doug took a moment to wax on how Laurence was the reason he played music, wrote poetry, dug John Coltrane and wore Ben Sherman polo shirts.

-- I'm a regular guru, Carter said. He pronounced it like the last two syllables of kangaroo, the way Marc Bolan sings "Metal Guru."

-- Will there be young ladies joining your friend here? Martin spoke into Carter's ear.

-- Yeah, Marty, they'll be sitting with your wife. Shut up.

-- Don't take the fucking moral high ground on me, pal. You left your wife, not me.

-- We're separated.

-- Separation implies mutual agreement to part ways. I see no...

-- How 'bout that joint now, mate.

-- Got it, chief. Doug led them down to the water, over which the sun settled into the pinkish hue of the evening's smoggy air.

The band strolled over in the direction of a loading dock's remains, which existed as a set of large, soggy green splinters jutting out from the water. They let themselves be led by this pudgy, tattooed boy with urine yellow hair and a pierced eyebrow. Carter told the story they had all heard before, about the girl in the Chevy Impala pulled from the river here when he was a kid. How that girl's disintegrating corpse busted out the windshield, the leg separating, floating away in the current. How the thing that still sticks with him to this day is that the cop who kept him behind the police barricade emitted what sounded suspiciously, sinisterly in retrospect, like a laugh, and not a nervous titter or a cough, but the stifled sound of a chortle that threatened to turn into a full-blown belly laugh. Everybody had a good chuckle over this, then got serious as Doug gave Carter the honour of sparking up.

Unbeknownst to The Craned Necks, what they were about to smoke was not your run-of-the-mill doobie, but a 51 state. In a 51 state the marijuana is sprinkled with cocaine and a cooked rock of coke and sodium bicarbonate is tucked into the roach end. This became apparent to Carter as soon as he tasted the acrid smoke, touched his tongue

to the joint and felt a numbing tingle from the nub of rock. Within one pass, the joint had begun to work its magic on the smokers.

-- Yeah, it's B.C. bud, Doug interpreted the wicked buzz. Skunk #1.

Slowly, the band members broke away from one another. Martin ambled over to one of the more solid pier posts close to shore. He climbed atop it and drummed a furious, tribal rhythm on his thighs. Alex started to walk back to the bar, stopped, thought about home briefly, then just stood and stared across the parking lot at the tavern building. Tacky, he thought. Buildings renovated during the seventies held their own the poorest out of all the architectural eras with which he dealt. All that stucco, the gaudy wrought railings, the dingy tint of the windows facing the river. Everything in unnatural tones of orange and brown. The adjoining hotel rooms in the hacienda style addition were probably still furnished with orange, vinyl loveseats, springy double beds with shaggy quilts, formica topped, faux wood end tables, all on furry, lime green carpeting. The same rooms his Italian relatives stayed in when they came over for his confirmation.

Doug tried to cajole Carter into telling him what the band would be jamming to, what tricks would be played, what stops would be pulled. They paced around one another or, rather, Carter led Doug in a circle as the alpha bulldog leads the obsequious little mongrel, a la the Warner Bros. cartoon. Though Carter's brain was desperate to make him move his mouth and flap his gums, he was resolutely reticent. The show was only to be revealed as it happened. Finally, Carter agreed to let the young man mix sound and record the show, which he had in mind anyway.

The sun had now dipped below the horizon, leaving only a purple tinge to the sky's edge, smoky-looking. Martin jumped back over to shore, announcing that the night had begun. Silently the foursome walked across the parking lot to their destinies.

Inside the bar it was pandemonium. Not because the crowd waited breathless in anticipation for the world premiere of *The Craned Necks*. No. The crowd was riding the high of Debbie Marshall's new well drink, invented approximately eight months prior to the gig and perfected over time. The drink's taste and effect on the consumer's ability to think rationally had now reached its highest pitch. Bar patrons talked animatedly, gesticulating wildly over tables crowded with baskets of fries, chicken wings and highball glasses. While there were still plenty of waitresses and busboys around from the dinner rush, for service most people chose to lurch over to the glossy wood, brass-railed bar, behind which Deb stood mixing her potion and graciously accepting tips.

A woman of about forty, attractive in a hardened, high cheek-boned sort of way, Deb fixed the drinks from clear, unlabelled bottles of pre-prepared liquid. Visible from the waist up, she performed a cocktail ballet, pouring, icing, shaking and stirring, her denim clad heart of a bottom swaying in the bar mirror. Patrons yelled out names of liquor, liqueurs, mixers, juices and sodas as bottle after bottle was produced, measured by eye and poured: *Peppermint Schnapps, Vodka, Club Soda, Lemon Juice, Sangria, Wormwood, Cranapple, Vermouth, Methylated Spirits!* Whatever it was, everyone agreed you couldn't quite distinguish one drink from the next. The first might be light and fruity, the next full and woody. And it got you drunk. It was 9:30 p.m.

An hour later the band had finished a sound check over the din of the crowd. Alex stepped off the stage and onto the tiled dance floor, bumping through the crowd. These were people he knew. People who, like Martin Shore a mere two weeks ago, worked in the auto industry, or taught, sold televisions, or did landscaping design and not much else. People who bought houses from Alex, or even built them for a living. Whatever happened to Alex, and Martin, after tonight, they would have had risen above the everyday at least once. Carter was different, Alex thought. Carter was Carter.

Alex cut through the folks at the bar, who greeted him warmly, said hello, asked after the wife. Three drinks waited for him at the bar. Alex took them as Deb continued to shake, stir and shimmy. Carter and Martin were already at their respective places on stage when Alex got back, Doug at the side of the stage behind the mixing console.

A touch of nerves hit Alex when the house lights dimmed to allow the spots full effect. But when the trio hit the first chords of “Love Potion #9,” in homage to “The Debbie” as they christened it - the Neck’s not being oblivious to the drink’s already legendary status – Alex slid back into his rock god role of days passed.

“Brown Sugar” followed the opener and everyone got into it, rising out of their seats, hitting the dance floor and banging their highball glasses on the tables. Midway through the set, the band stuck in an original, a bossa nova number entitled “Open Field” featuring Carter on the B-3. Enraptured by drink and good times, the crowd kept banging and gyrating right until the end of the set. Doug switched on the house stereo as the band hit their last beat, the live music blending seamlessly with the recorded.

-- Fuck me, that went well didn't it. Carter was ecstatic.

Martin put his arms around his partners as they eased out of their instrument straps.

-- Fuckin' right. Let me get you guys a round.

-- Allow me to do the honour, fellas.

That was Jim Dennis, self-styled rustic History professor at the University of Windsor and columnist for the Maiden Gazette.

-- I was down to do a piece on Deb's potion. By the way, I loved your rendition of "Love Potion #9." Put a kind of nouveau beat spin on it, if I can be so bold. I was thinking of changing the angle of my story, give it a Lester Bangs, gonzo twist, with a small town flavour, without getting folksy. You guys so embody the spirit of what raw, unadulterated genius can come out of a little community. But I'm gushing. I'm just going to let the experience soak in. Write down the bones when I have time to reflect. I'll get those drinks.

-- Make mine a Blue, Martin said. That hooch gave me acid reflux. Thought I was gonna barf all over my new skins.

-- How 'bout just a pitcher, Alex suggested. Will that column appear in this week's paper?

-- You bet, buddy. Jim clapped a large hand on Alex's back. With a worn Local 444 T-shirt, faded Levi's, ragged steel toes, Tom Selleck stache, and barbed wire tattoo above thick, leather watch band, Jim's look screamed working class louder than anyone in the establishment.

-- I just want Sheri to see it is all.

-- Yes, I heard about your marital woes. Sometimes one needs a little R and R to put the zing back into the ole marriage. Rock & roll that is.

Jim went for the beer.

-- Wanker, Carter muttered. That piece will come out as folksy as all his other claptrap. Garrison Keillor with a Ph.D. and a C.A.W. shirt.

-- As long as Sheri reads it.

-- If you're doing all this for Sheri why didn't you just invite her to come down and see the show?

-- Shut up, Martin.

-- Hey, I'm getting a little sick...

-- Take it easy, mates. No need get at each other the first night. Besides, Marty is right, Alex. Maybe you should have asked Sheri out tonight.

-- Where's that fucking pitcher? Alex stalked off in search of Jim Dennis.

Across the room a group of young people from Windsor and Detroit, Doug's friends, were assembling round two tables drawn together. The mostly waifish boys and girls immediately received glares from the regulars, glares equal parts threatening and lewd. One particularly effete boy sporting a scraggly beard aimed a High-8 video camera at the regulars, narrating the beginning of the clan's excursion to Maiden. Doug spied the tension and attempted to relieve it by playing Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll," to appease the natives as it were. The intended effect could not have backfired more.

Doug's people hit the dance floor en masse, flailing about in crazy variations on the Charleston, Jitterbug, the Tighten Up and the Detroit Demolition.

-- Uh-oh, Martin said. We better get back up there.

Alex arrived with the beer, was hustled onstage with a bass guitar, and Carter hit the opening chords to The Rolling Stones' "Happy." Crowd response was generally positive. Some regulars even joined the kids up on the dance floor. Matronly bleached blondes danced suggestively with young men less than half their age. Their husbands, boyfriends, ex-lovers and neighbors tried to pick up some of the young snatch on the floor. Unsuccessfully.

Some of Doug's friends trotted back to their seats only to find them taken by a group of men heavier and hairier than they were used to seeing. The men were drinking from their pitchers.

-- Oh, we take your guys' seats? A man with a black, "Metal Up Your Ass" T-shirt bellowed over the music.

-- That's no problem, said the kid with the High-8.

-- The ladies could try our laps on for size, said another burly fellow bulging out of a T-shirt which read "Moustache Rides For Free."

As the young people turned away, one girl casually tapped her hand against a three-quarters full pitcher.

-- Oops, she said as the beer sloshed onto Moustache Rides For Free's lap.

-- Cunt! Moustache said, and leapt out of his chair.

The band stopped in the middle of blasting out Neil Young's "Down By The River."

-- Hey, hey, Carter said calmly in an attempt to diffuse the nasty situation. We're going to play another original written by Alex, he continued. And I've just learned midnight is happy hour. Deb's drinks are half price.

A cheer rose up from the crowd. Doug slipped away from the soundboard as The Craned Necks eased into their latest southern fried waltz, "Sounds To Remember Us By." As his friends slow danced or swayed, Doug tried to explain to them that under no uncertain circumstances should they fuck with anyone at this place. These were county boys. Their weekends were for drinking, fighting and fucking and nothing should stand in the way of the natural progression of events. Definitely not some punk outsiders.

*Let your laughs wash over me  
Burn my name in effigy*

Alex sang softly over a combination of slide and finger-picked guitar. Carter plucked a loose, rambling bass groove over Martin's brushed drums. At the bar, Deb frantically tried to keep up with the demand for sauce.

*Mix my juice with salted soil  
Bring me to a rolling boil  
But don't you ever...*

-- Holy fuck, play something we know.

-- Zeppelin, Tull, Seger!

-- Give it a rest, fuckin' white trash!

The last voice rose up from the young set. Doug retreated to the soundboard.

In a flash, a malicious little man named Rogers had shoved a bottle into the face of an unsuspecting outsider. Blood poured from the boy's nostrils and a gash on the bridge of his nose. Shards of brown glass went everywhere. The effete boy, who had been filming the whole time, now handed his camera to Doug and slid on a set of knuckledusters. In one flying charge he shattered Roger's mouth, then knocked him to the ground with another blow to the temple. The group descended on the man, the boy with the busted nose kicking Rogers in the ribs until the sluggers who had usurped the table dispersed the crowd with fists, knees, boots, pool cues.

-- It's fucking Altamont out there, mate, Carter said to the other Neck's, who by now had moved to the soundboard to protect it, and their soundman, from violence.

The last of Doug's people scrambled out, but not before a girl tossed a chair over the bar, narrowly missing Deb and destroying the image of her bottom in the mirror, as well as her pre-prepared bottles of unlabelled liquid.

Sergeant Jim Fox and his partner Rita were the first cops to arrive.

-- Christ, Al. Your first show and it's like a Who concert in here. How'd it start?

Deb shot Alex a don't-you-dare-mention-those-drinks look from bar.

-- Fuck if I know, Jim. Friday night at Smiley's, you know?

-- Well somebody's going to be facing some charges, constable Rita said, and she took off in search of somebody to bust.

Jim made his way over to the soundboard, where the High-8 still lay. The camera was empty. So too was the four-track tape recorder used to capture the live show.

-- Maybe Carter has them, Alex explained under Jim's inquisitive gaze.

-- Well they're evidence. Perry Rogers is on his way to Windsor Regional with a broken face and a few cracked ribs. And this bar is a rat's ass. Somebody's got to be held responsible.

-- Did you see Jim Dennis. He probably has the scoop. I'm just a musician, Jimbo. Don't shoot the piano player, as they say.

-- Oh, for Chrissakes, you're a real estate agent, Al.

Sergeant Fox bumbled off to instruct the other officers who had just arrived to clear the area. Alex began packing up his gear.

Outside, Martin Shore was leaning against his truck.

-- You want a ride? Killer left with that Bradley kid.

-- What, no goodbye, good show guys?

-- He wanted to mix down the tape while the show was fresh in his mind. Said he'd see you when you got home.

Alex climbed into the truck. Martin steered the car towards the King's Highway along the Detroit River. A sliver of the waxing moon seemed to open a slit in the sky, casting light upon the sheen of the still water. As Martin, intoxicated, concentrated intently on keeping the vehicle away from the gravel shoulder of the road, Alex watched the moon, the water, the back of the sign that welcomed oncoming traffic to town.

-- Take me home, he said.

-- You're the boss. Can I crash there? I'm not feeling so hot.

Alex hesitated only slightly before saying it would be fine.

Sheri sat in front of the television in the immaculately kept home, which, Alex thought, wasn't looking all that immaculate these days. Pizza boxes were stacked six high on the coffee table. The Craned Necks were on the television. Alex looking tired and sweaty in his borrowed track suit, Martin drunk but still on top of his buzz, cocksure, and Carter playing the rock star and looking the part, just as Dennis Wilson was the only tanned and toned real life surfer out of all the Beach Boys. The band sounded terrific.

-- I told you I would do it.

-- I never doubted you. Carter dropped the video by.

A pause.

-- Marty Shore is too drunk to drive. Can he sleep on the couch?

Sheri calmly walked over to the entertainment centre and ejected the videotape. Without missing a beat she turned and hurled the tape at Alex, hitting him square on the forehead. She went to bed. Martin emerged sheepishly from the kitchen.

-- Everything O.K.? he slurred.

-- You can sleep on the couch.

As the words left Alex's mouth Martin was already ensconced in the cushy velour. Alex fingered the bump rising on his forehead.

-- Alex? Martin said. It was fun, wasn't it?

After covering up Martin's heaving and snoring form, Alex crept out of the house and walked down to the river's edge. He found his Bulova wristwatch laying just out of

reach of the gently lapping wavelets. The outline of a freighter moved past. The lights of Fermi blinked in the distance. Alex slid the timepiece back on.

A week later saw Alex at the dry cleaners picking up his Hugo Boss suit. The counter-person at the cleaners handed him a compact disc.

-- This was in your blazer pocket, she said.

A Love Supreme by John Coltrane.

Inside his sedan, Alex turned on the climate control to relieve himself from the rising humidity that threatened another hothouse Southwestern Ontario summer. He slipped the CD in and smiled at the first gong crash of the suite's introduction. John Coltrane burst out of the high fidelity speakers with a frenetic flurry of notes. Alex started home, wondering if Carter might be interested in selling soon.

## Those Dog Days of Summer

“Always wanting something, a pat on the head or a bone. Thousands of years begging and scavenging, preying on the weak and feeble. These are the animals man chose to domesticate as pets?” That was my Dad on dogs. Suffice to say, the Bradley family never had dogs -- a good thing too, as I’m terribly allergic. You’d think that would be enough of an excuse for my parents, but not for Dad. Normally a man not given to high opinions, those opinions he did hold were generally kept to himself, excepting ones for which he felt particularly strong. Like dogs.

Sex was another matter. While I’m sure he had his opinions, they were never voiced to me. It wasn’t so much that sex was a touchy subject as it was carefully dodged in discussion. Example:

When I was fourteen, Dad let me stay up to watch a Bertolucci special on TeleVisionOntario. The first feature was *Il Conformista*, the late show *Last Tango In Paris*. Elwi Yost warned us beforehand the film we were about to view was intended for mature audiences. We sat through every coupling between Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider in complete silence, my father contemplative in his recliner, me on the floor, neither of us moving. When it was over, Dad sighed heavily and said, “God that Brando’s a fine actor.” He eased his recliner back to upright position. “Goodnight, Doug.” He reached down to pat me on the shoulder as he passed.

Indeed, Marlon Brando is a fine actor, but he’s no way to introduce the sex act to your son, an introduction which, incidentally, had already been initiated three months prior by Nicole Rawson, who let me French kiss her and feel a nipple through her bra. Unfortunately, the next five years did not see the introduction completed. Any steps towards completion were few and far between, culminating with my senior prom date.

Joanne Miller was a rather homely girl with a knock-out figure. Or, as my best friend Rubby Marshall put it, “a body to die for and a face that could kill you.” On

several instances it was suggested that if “you put a paper bag over her face you’ll never know the difference.”

“You’re a sick fuck,” I’d say. I’d like to have thought I was more of a gentleman than that.

For prom Joanne wore a stunning red taffeta, strapless gown with a low-cut back. Her hair was braided and dyed a matching burgundy. The make-up the salon had fixed to her face further complemented the look. It was the best I had seen her, though I balk at pretty.

I was no Marlon Brando, but my acne was genuinely clearing, leaving my face with a rugged appearance. I rented a black tuxedo with a red, paisley vest and bow tie. Admittedly, my freshly dyed, lemon yellow hair stood out in stark contrast to my outfit, but Joanne’s and my combined efforts created an esthetic set of checks and balances. When we entered the hall that night mouths gaped and emitted gasps. We were stunning.

“Hey, crater face. You guys clean up real good.” Nick Kerr, handsome but businesslike in his suit, gave me a shot in the arm as I made my way to the punch bowl.

“Fuck off, Nicker,” Rubby said, pushing past us both. He filled glasses for himself and me.

On the way back to our table, Rubby reported that Joanne had told his girlfriend Kelly she was eager to lose her virginity. At the table, Joanne asked me where was her punch. On the dance floor she said my head would be better off shaved than dyed the colour of urine. Leaving the hall in the backseat of Rubby’s Aspen, she said she had to pick up clothes and stuff at her place.

The pit stop, Rubby informed me when the girls disappeared into the expansive Miller residence, was probably intended for contraceptive pick-up.

“Kelly always takes care of that stuff for us.” And had done for the past six years. Rubby and Kelly had been sleeping together since seventh grade. While there were

plenty of guys who considered him a scumbag, Rubby was generally respected as a sexual authority. He could grow an impressive beard by grade ten and had a ring of barbed wire tattooed around his left forearm, along with burn scars from a father who had been merely a phantom name in the five years I had known him. Though Rubby was amiable for the most part, he was built like a brick shithouse and you wouldn't want to stir any murderous tendencies. He was also a great pot connection. When he stretched back in his bucket seat and said, "She's probably giving Joanne blowjob tips right now," I believed him.

A quick stop was made to the home of Kelly Fortin before we went on to the prom party. Mr. and Mrs. Fortin were standing on the front porch of their home, which dwarfed even that of the Doctors Miller (though the Millers had a swimming pool fed by an actual artesian well). Mr. Fortin, who probably lived most of his life in business casuals, pumped Rubby's and my hands vigorously. Mrs. Fortin sniffled and bled mascara onto the viewfinder of her disposable camera. She was small, pretty blonde who could have passed for her daughter's sister, or at least a young aunt. "These girls are angels," she said. In their jeans and sweatshirts, their look had reverted to dewy, high school innocence. The complicated hair and face paint were the only reminders of their awkward metamorphoses into grown women. In our tuxedos, Rubby and I resembled undertakers, Rubby's Aspen the lead car of some funeral train. The Fortin's husky sniffed my crotch and I thought of my father. I sneezed.

"Cerebus!" Mr. Fortin grabbed the dog's snout. The dog emitted a low moan. Kelly dropped to her knees and threw her arms around the beast.

"Bad boy, Cerebus," she babbled. "Did Daddy scare you? You know you have to be on your best behaviour with guests." Mrs. Fortin sniffed and clicked her camera.

Kelly and Joanne led Cerebus inside. Mrs. Fortin smiled sweetly, if suspiciously, then followed.

“How’s your father, Dougie?” Fortin appraised me as he spoke.

I didn’t usually like to be addressed or referred to in the diminutive, close friends excepted, as I found it belittling. But you couldn’t help but feel belittled under the towering bulk of Ron Fortin. He owned the largest tool and die shop in Windsor; large enough that he had built his own stamping plant, which is no small feat considering he faced over five hundred competing businesses in the area. He was an important man, whose name was stamped on a lot of paycheques, including those of Rubby Marshall. Rubby had been working for Fortin Industries since grade eleven, had enough hours to complete his apprenticeship, and needed only a year’s schooling to get his papers. His boss would foot the bill, perhaps as insurance that his daughter would have a decent provider in the event that she get knocked up.

“He’s doing fine,” I said. “Thanks, Mr. Fortin.”

“He certainly helped out Kelly when she needed it.”

“He’s the best, Ron,” Rubby said. “And Doug here is gonna do just like his old man. University in the fall. A scholar and a gentleman.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll both turn out fine.” Ron Fortin squinted into the floodlight at his front door until his wife emerged with the girls and Cerebus.

Joanne took my hand and pecked me on the cheek. Her breath reeked of booze. “Miss me?” she whispered loudly in my ear. Rubby winked. Mrs. Fortin waved and snapped her camera as we drove away.

We drank from a forty ounce of Seagram’s Crown Royal, which is bottled in our good old hometown Maiden, as we drove out to the barn party at Nick Kerr’s place. Nick’s father was a farmer and his mother was an autoworker. They used to live next door to my family in our old neighbourhood, but now they had an impressive farm on a County Road outside Maiden. While the working barns were located away from the house, there was a shiny, red barn near the house, which had been built expressly as a

recreation area for the Kerr kids and, subsequently, all the neighboring kids. Until they got their licenses, that is. When we arrived there was a group of parents wandering purposefully around a muddy, makeshift parking lot collecting car keys. Rubby parked in a remote corner of the lot next to a cornfield. Joanne and Kelly left the car so we could change clothes, then Rubby instructed us to meet him at the party.

“I gotta make sure nobody fuckin’ takes my keys,” he said. “I reserve my right to drive intoxicated.” He headed into the cornstalks.

Kelly hustled ahead of Joanne and me. Joanne leaned into my shoulder and passed me the bottle.

“So are you nervous about going away to school?” she slurred. She and Kelly had chugged half the whiskey in Kelly’s bedroom.

“Not really. I have family in Toronto, and my Dad knows a couple of professors at the university.”

“Will you miss me?”

“Will you miss me?” I pulled a little of the old reverse psychology, which I believed I employed masterfully.

“That depends,” she said. She hollered something to Kelly, who was stumbling past people to get into the barn. Joanne ran to catch up.

Rubby had somehow beaten us to the barn and was assisting Kelly out the back door when I arrived.

“She’s going to be sick,” Joanne said casually. I decided I would investigate, telling Joanne I’d be back momentarily.

“Get the fuck back in there,” Rubby said. He was patting Kelly’s back as she retched beside him. “This one’s useless. Yours is still conscious.”

I made my way back inside. The concrete floor was covered with feet. I pushed through the crowd determinedly looking for Joanne. She was in the middle of the barn

with Nick Kerr dancing to music barely audible over the general din of the bash. Joanne spotted me over Nick's shoulder and rolled her eyes at her predicament. Nick was obviously drunker than she was, practically hanging on her shoulders for support. But from the angle of his arms I could tell his hands were straying downwards. When Joanne closed her eyes, in what I interpreted as the throes of ecstasy, I lost it.

I ran at them and pulled Nicker away from Joanne, spinning him around. He fell as I cocked my fist in a singular act of reputation preservation. I was about to kick his fallen form when Mr. Kerr descended on me. To my surprise the strapping farmer merely put himself between his boy and me. He motioned at me with a hand that was missing a thumb. The ghost thumb indicated the door and, as Joanne came to my side, Mr. Kerr's eyes seemed to say, "Go ahead, kid. Get laid. You're just lucky my boy was out of his head, or your ass would be in a sling right now." Actually, Nick Kerr had yet to grow fully into the big voice and bravado he had fashioned for himself, but I took the hint and pulled Joanne away. She seemed impressed by my newfound machismo, and she whispered husky nothings then burped in my ear.

Joanne and I made our way down a tire-rutted, dirt path to one of the real barns. On the cushioned floor of straw we collapsed in each other's arms and mouths. My head hummed from the whiskey I had guzzled on the way. It throbbed as my hands made their way up, then lifted off, Joanne's shirt. As I freed her breasts from her bra, her hand found its way down my waistband to my penis. Just as quickly her hand slackened as my member stiffened. She fell into me like a sack of grain, my hands still cupping her breasts as her breaths got slower, heavier and sleepier. I eased out from under her and replaced her shirt, groped in the dark for the whisky bottle, and felt around for the door.

To my surprise, Rubby was sitting on the ground outside smoking a joint. He had somehow gotten hold of a cooler and he reached in to retrieve a beer for me.

"Kelly's crashed in the car," he said. "How'd you make out?" He passed me the

joint.

I briefly contemplated lying before telling him the whole sordid tale.

After a thoughtful pause he said: "It's too bad you didn't get to kick Nicker."

Then: "You sure she's passed out?"

I sat with my back against the door, my mind on what lay sleeping behind it, until I knew Rubby was asleep. Even he would have agreed that he could never be trusted completely.

Then it was officially summer. I had yet to experience teenage sex and time was wearing thin. I'm a Capricorn, so my nineteenth came before most of my friends, which meant I got to buy beer for everyone before they came of age. This had included stocking many people for prom. It also meant I would be twenty in less than eight months. Technically, the vital deed could be done during my first semester at university, but knowing my obsessive study habits it wasn't likely. Besides, I was anxious to be a full-fledged man entering academia.

Joanne Miller, who was sent to camp every summer as a child, worked that same camp as a councilor in young adulthood. I would have to travel other avenues to reach my goal. The only obstacle that summer was that, at nineteen, I had yet to acquire a driver's license. For three weeks, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays were devoted to Driver's Education. Time was as limited as it was worn.

I also needed a job. A scholarship would pay for tuition, and my proud parents would assume most of my bills (they had already helped me obtain a credit card), but I wanted to line my own pockets. Two summers of dunking metal baskets into deep fryers, and another two manning the local community information booth had left me hungry for a decent wage. I turned to Rubby.

"What do you want to work in a stamping plant for?" he asked.

“It’s the only place where I can make any real money.”

“And it’s hard work. You could lose a finger, limbs. How would you get there? And if you found a way, when would you find the time to get your license working ten hour days, six days a week?”

“You’re saying I’m not cut out for it.”

“I’m saying even if I put a word in for you, Ron probably wouldn’t hire you. Remember what happened with Kelly?”

“That was bullshit. No offense, Rub, but she deserved to fail. She’s graduating because my Dad boosted her mark.”

“And Ron had to threaten him to do it. The guy’s a stubborn asshole. He looks at you and sees your Dad. Take it easy this summer, Doug. You deserve it. You got your ticket out of here. Relax. Sponge.”

Rubby told me I was too good for Maiden. Forcefully and often. Doug you have to get out of here. Doug you’ll die if you stay here. I at least wanted a sense of belonging while I was in Maiden. Working in a factory would clinch that one. To me the notion of needing to escape the confines of a stifling hometown was cliché. And I immediately felt guilty for elitist tendencies when I thought that. But maybe Rubby was right. At any rate, not having a job freed me for more libidinous pursuits.

The beginning of July marked summer vacation, and the first Monday I began my new summer routine. I awoke at nine o’clock, that pleasant hour when young children have been hustled off to morning swimming or art lessons and the working populace has left home for the day. My mother, who was a librarian in Windsor, had already been at work a full hour. My Dad was officially on vacation but wasn’t yet over the rush of classes and exams. He still went to school every morning. I could imagine him tidying his office, cleaning chalkboards, drinking coffee in the empty staffroom and bothering the janitors. This would probably go on until my mother’s vacation in a month’s time. The

house was mine.

Easing into my morning, I put on a pot of coffee and ate cereal in front of the television. I flicked between talk shows featuring guests who fly into violent rages upon learning their partners are transexual, and talk shows featuring self-congratulatory celebrities. Then I took a shower and masturbated.

Scrubbed and refreshed, I put on one of my Rolling Stones t-shirts with the Keith Richards coined “Kali tongue” on the front, this shirt lemon yellow, drank a couple cups of coffee and read part of the morning paper. There I found a curious entry among the listings in the Personal Services column. Mandy’s ad assured prospective clients she would be “Courteous and Discreet.” I couldn’t conceive of an alternate MO being possible. Would a hooker tell her john he was a lousy lay after collecting his money, then threaten to expose the man’s private life if he didn’t pay more? I had no experience to bring to this thought, which I kept in my head as I left the house. It was just before noon.

Summer was alive, the cool, breezy air awash with the smell of cut and freshly sprinkled grass. Gardens of black-eyed susans, snapdragons, dhalias and tubers turned up to the glaring orb that pulsed through the atmosphere’s arc. Only jet trails marred the sky, snaking off into the horizon, then expanding into dissipating clouds at infinitesimal rates. Neighbour dogs stirred and barked behind screen doors and fences as I passed. My father approached in his sedan.

“Need a lift?” he called as his window buzzed down. I knew he was squinting through his photograde lenses. His buddy Jim was in the passenger seat. Apparently Dad had found a friend for the day. The roar of the car’s air conditioner was audible over John Coltrane’s *Love Supreme*. It was a blistering seventy-nine degrees.

“No thanks,” I said. “I like to walk. See ya.”

“Suit yourself,” he said as the window retracted. “It’s going to be a hot one.”

I reached in the pocket of my cargo shorts for one of two CDs I carry with me at all times: *Sticky Fingers* and *Let It Bleed*. *Exile on Main Street* is the critics' darling, but you really have to appreciate the Stones to love it, and most people want to hear a few hits if they have to listen to a whole album. Anyone can dig *Brown Sugar* or *Gimme Shelter* at a party, if they're worth anything on this earth. I put *Let It Bleed* into my Discman and hit the highway.

Our subdivision empties onto Highway 7, which becomes Maiden's Main Street. Once considered the outskirts of town, this area is now booming with contemporary signs of prosperity. There are the Woodland shopping mall, the General Brock strip mall, a Canadian Tire outlet, a popular fast food franchise, three gas bars, and a convenience store bigger than most family grocers all within a hundred metres of one another. Add a couple large car dealerships representing two of the Big Three automotive manufacturers and you have a row of impersonal commercial offerings that wouldn't look out of place anywhere on the more suburban end of Yonge Street. When we moved to the Woodland housing development my Dad joked that if you lived and worked in this particular area you would never need to travel further than half a kilometre. You could, however, get a traffic ticket doing so.

The Maiden Police Department had a new headquarters planted directly across from the subdivision. It sits on a freshly cleared patch of land, all concretized and tarmaced, a fleshy orange cinderblock structure surrounded by a chain link fence. Next to it is a vacant piece of marshy property where a lone canon and a sign declared the place, "Site of the Woodland Skirmishes, War of 1812." Before the headquarters' land could be excavated and construction begun a thorough investigation had to be conducted by government archeologists. In the course of their digging, troweling and sifting, a handful of buttons turned up, accompanied by a wealth of arrowheads, two canonballs, and lots of vintage trash circa 1900. The job was a declared a minor historico-

sociological victory, and the plaque and canon were put on a sodded swatch to be forever maintained by summer crews of students hired by the local public utilities commission. Community policing was thus appropriately linked geographically and economically to the town's military heritage.

I walked down the highway and contemplated the route I would take as I stalked Maiden. Nick Kerr whizzed by on his skateboard. He yelled something I couldn't hear over "Love In Vain," probably something like, "Did you get anything on prom night?" I hoped Nick wouldn't slow to talk to me. We had been good friends in grade school before he moved out to the county and transferred to New Malden Public, but right then I wasn't in the mood for chitchat. I wondered if he had come all that way on his skateboard. It was a good ten minutes by car. A Maiden PD patrol car pulled out and crawled up to Nick. Saved! Maiden is a town where young people who dare to overtly celebrate and/or demonstrate their youth are genuinely persecuted. I suppose that's because there are plenty of people a good deal shy of twenty-five who live as though they're middle aged, at least eight to ten hours a day, five to six days a week. Weekends are a different story.

Crossing the street past Nick and a tough-looking lady cop, who was probably giving him the business about highway safety and proper protective gear, I decided I'd pop by Smiley's. Smiley's was a local watering hole where you could get good perch on Fridays and fucked up all weekend. There wouldn't be much of a lunch crowd on a Monday.

When the door closed behind me at Smiley's, the fresh summer breeze was immediately usurped by stale cigarette smell carried on conditioned air. There must have been a fifteen-degree differential between outside and inside. It was pretty chilly. The bartender's nipples stood out as straight through her t-shirt as her ramrod posture kept her at a perfect right angle to the floor. That's probably what kept the drunk at the end of the

bar. It certainly was what would keep me there. Plus, she was my best friend's mother. She was Mrs. Marshall. I removed my earphones.

"Doug! How ya doin', Hon?" She reached over the bar to give me a hug.

"Fine thanks, Deb."

"Enjoying the summer so far?"

"So far so good."

"Rubby's going to be working his tail off. Seven days, they tell him. I tell him to slow down, or that pretty thing he's got will find someone with time for her."

"Kelly'll never leave Rub. You know that, Deb. I was actually trying to have him help me get into Fortin Stamping."

"Oh, you don't want to do that, Baby. Take some time. I hear you're going away to university in the fall. Good for you. Your parents must be so proud."

I smiled and nodded. "Could I get a bottle of Bud please, Deb?"

"Sure thing."

Deb was a good mom to Rubby and his kid sister Kim. And to me. She didn't mind us drinking as long as she knew where we were, which was generally in her living room playing Nintendo. One thing she didn't tolerate under her roof was illegal drug use. Any activities involving drugs were reserved for under my parents' roof. While these activities weren't sanctioned, I can't believe my folks didn't know, with strobe or black light emanating from underneath my basement room door. If they had any inclination to investigate at all, my parents would have discovered a glassy-eyed, dilated pupiled teenage nightmare, Rubby and me painting primitive words and pictograms in magic marker on my walls. But see that *Last Tango* example.

Rubby told me his mom could have been a model when she was younger. He wasn't exaggerating. I fancied her an older, red-haired version of Maria Schneider. She was nice and people adored her. She sent my pulse racing. She set my beer on the bar.

"I'm just going to put some tunes on the jukebox, Larry," she said to the drunk at end of the bar. "You need anything?"

"Super," Larry said contentedly, only it sounded more like "supper" as he indicated his two and one quarters full flute glasses of draft.

"Budweiser?" Larry growled as Deb flipped through the jukebox. "What you drink that Yankee piss for?"

I raised my bottle and examined the label. "Says here it's the King of Beers."

Deb scooted back behind the bar. That old chestnut "Love Potion Number Nine" came over the jukebox. I downed my Budweiser.

"Thirsty?" Deb said.

"Cold beer on a hot day."

"It's not so hot."

Sure it is, I thought. I could just hear myself saying it: Things are sure heating up in here, Deb. I was pathetic. I watched Deb's shirt ride up the small of her back as she bent to fetch some bottles from the cooler. I thought about Joanne Miller's hand working my prick for, oh, such a fleeting moment. A newspaper lay next to me on the bar. I considered looking up Mandy's ad again. "He's a virgin," she'd tell everybody. "For God's sake," wiping a premature load off her ample belly. It had a caesarian scar.

"Another please, Deb," I croaked. "And a shot of 83."

"Jesus, Dougie. Here." She placed a fruity looking concoction in front of me. It practically glowed red-hot. "Try this. It's a little something I've been working on. I'd ask Larry here, but he's no judge after noon."

"Mixed drinks are for fairies," Larry said soberly. He looked at the glass with almost fearful disdain.

"Don't listen to him. Drink up."

"Not bad," I said. I swished the stuff in my mouth then gave it a sniff. "What do

you call it?”

“Love po-tion num-ber ni-i-ine,” she sang. I took another sip.

“Well I’m sold. And I’ll take that beer with a shot.”

Deb eyed me skeptically. “Okay, but I’m watching you. I know your limit, remember.”

I offered to buy Deb a shot. She said it was too early for her. She poured two anyway and brought one down to Larry.

“Your lucky day, Lar. We can’t let the kid drink alone, can we?”

“Plenty of time for that,” Larry said, tossing back the whiskey.

“Cheers, buddy.” I took my shot. I could hold my own pretty good, but the grimace whiskey wrenched to my face made me look like a rat after a dose of strychnine.

Deb shook out two cigarettes from her Camel Lite soft pack. She’d walk a mile for a Camel, or at least make a special trip across the border.

“This’ll take your mind off it.” She lit both smokes and handed me one. I wasn’t sure at that point what the “it” referred to. I needed to clear my head. I took the cigarette and exhaled a row of smoke rings. “I taught you too well,” she said. “But you’d better do something about your breath before you go home. You’re going to smell like, well, like Smiley’s.”

“So, Deb,” I said, screwing up courage, throwing my self-respect out the window in the process. “Seeing anyone special these days?”

“Nope. The only men in my life are you, Rubby and Larry here.” Silence.

“Damn thing.” Deb went over to the jukebox and banged on its side. “It sticks,” she explained. The machine whizzed back to life with a flipping sound as it searched for the next selection. “There.”

Larry stared into the depths of his dregs. I had half a beer left, but my potion sat neglected. I brought it down to roughly the same level as my beer. Concentrating, I

measured the bottle and glass side by side, allowed for difference in container shape.

Deb waved a hand in front of my face.

“I gotta go to the john. Make sure Larry doesn’t, you know, die or anything.”

I made to answer but trapped gas got in my way.

Larry caught me looking at Deb’s ass as she moved to the bathroom. I stared ahead at my reflection behind bar. The mirror said, **Smile, you’re at Smiley’s**. Larry leered.

“I’d like to bend that over. Wouldn’t kick her out of bed, that’s for sure.” The opening snare shot of “Light My Fire” punctuated the remark, a mallet to the base of my spine.

This was by no means the worst comment you’d expect at Smiley’s. But consider:

Larry was not your run of the mill loser. I had visited his place with Rubby to buy weed when we were fifteen. It was in a decrepit rooming house, which was once, before the turn of the century, one of Maiden’s two inns. Gone were the days when itinerant salesman, tinsmiths and farriers warmed themselves for the night, passing through town and country to service farmers and supply the general store. The building was a pest-infested firetrap in a forgotten neighborhood called “back ‘a town.” The insides had been butchered and patched back together in a drywall and particleboard maze separating as many flats as the landlord could stuff legally into the crumbling shell. Corridors echoed alternately with overlapping screams, laughter, hollering children and crying infants. As far as dope dealers went Larry was largely small time, obliging our scant funds by selling gram bags, though at outrageous cost. But we were fifteen and didn’t know any better. At the time, Larry was an imposing figure – a compact five foot seven with a hardness that told you he still did a hundred push-ups every morning. It was only four years later and he’d be lucky if he could manage five, as if he were skipping

middle age and heading straight to infirmity. Back then he was even handsome, in an evil, black dog sort of way. He had a seventeen-year-old girlfriend named Melody, who counted our money and weighed out Larry's shaky stash on a brass triple beam scale. Every time we left, Rubby would shake his head and say, "That poor chick is gonna end up like Bobby the bartender." Rubby alluded to a story his mother had told of a girl who tended bar at Smiley's. The girl had mysteriously disappeared one summer. Her Impala turned up months later at the bottom of the Detroit River not far from her workplace. Her remains floated out the window when the car was raised. She had been dating Larry Brunner. Official cause was death by misadventure, but Larry, who was then merely known as a partier and a bit of a scrapper, began to drink heavily. He lost his job at his father's lumberyard, which, as the eldest of three boys, he was guaranteed to inherit. Not anymore. People talked until he was so far removed from everyday life he was erased from public consciousness. Old news became no news. Still, you really have to make yourself pretty scarce to become a cipher in Maiden.

So I had the fucker's number, though he probably hadn't the foggiest who I was. I aimed a glare at him. I prepared to rise. Taking a sip of Deb's firewater, I said:

"What?"

"What?"

"You heard me. What did you say?"

"Gone and forgotten. Listen, you got a dime. I'm short for a glass." Larry laid out the contents of his pocket on the bar. A dollar in change.

"You should watch what you say about Deb."

"Kid, I'm an old man. I'm not looking for any trouble. You have a dime or not?"

I stood up from my stool, drained my beer in one gulp and raised the bottle. I caught the neon flash of a beer sign over the bar. It was probably closing in on two in the afternoon but it felt like two in the morning. My head hummed. My stomach burned.

Larry rose with an expectant hand outstretched. I took a step, steadied myself on the bar, then slipped and swept his change to the floor.

“Shit,” we said in tandem. Larry bent to retrieve his change. I brought back the bottle to strike, then lurched forward. I puked all over Larry.

When Larry stood he appeared shell-shocked. He was covered. He brought a hand to the top of his head, swiped off a dab of vomit and brought it to his nose like a chef testing a signature sauce. Larry retched.

“Sweet fuck.” He walked in a tight circle, bent over, flapped his arms. Mine was clearly an unexpected move. Deb ran over. Larry continued his attempt at dancing the problem away.

“What the hell happened?”

Larry gestured to himself and pointed to me, but his mouth only made groans and gags.

“This guy’s a fucking pig, Deb,” I said, feeling remarkably clear-headed. “I won’t repeat what he said about you.”

“That doesn’t explain anything, Dougie. I...” Deb stopped. She walked slowly behind the bar and handed Larry a roll of paper towels. “Larry practically lives here. I’m used to him... But I can’t blame you. I thought I had it right.” She reached into the cooler and brought out an unmarked bottle of red liquid. “Another bottle of drain cleaner.” Deb looked baffled.

“Every time,” Larry cried at her. “Every time something fucking happens.”

“Go get cleaned up, Dougie,” Deb said.

I did have a little spray on my face, though for the most part my aim was true. It was all Larry. Had Deb poisoned me?

“Why don’t you test that shit at home?” Larry pleaded.

“You know I don’t drink, Lar.” Deb’s voice wafted into the john.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror told of a head not as clear as I thought. My ordinarily pale face had taken on a deathly pallor. My eyes were two bowling balls rolling toward me. What had she put in that shit? I had to look away as I splashed my face and wiped myself down. I looked at the dispensing machine instead: aspirin, cologne, condoms -- three chasers to a full night at Smiley's. The dominant prophylactic was depicted on the machine in frightening proportions. The lethal-looking French Tickler was "guaranteed to pleasure her." She would "love you for it." Rubby and I had altered the phrasing in magic marker so that it warned, "Guaranteed to damage her. She'll sue you for it." I chuckled in spite of myself, but I couldn't stay in that bathroom laughing all day. I crept out the door, left the bar via the back exit and went down to the river.

Sunglasses in my pocket had never felt like such a comfort. The sky was blinding white when I left the bar. Its reflection shimmered on the Detroit River like an oven's element on foil. I walked Waterfront Park until I came to the end.

Dad was right, I thought as I left the breezy shore behind. It was a hot one. The controlled climate of Smiley's sure would be welcome now, but I'd have to stay away for at least a week. Besides, I had that kind of disassociated buzz you get after an acid trip, and I couldn't risk bumping into anyone downtown. Deb's poison had probably done its worst, but I wasn't taking any chances.

I decided to stalk the route I took to school as a child. Our family once lived in an older section of town near the Maiden Garrison in the days when more neighbourhoods were refreshingly un-uniform patchworks of spacious lawns separating a hodgepodge of bungalows, modest two-stories and larger estates, with nary a split-level ranch home in sight. Before developers and their shopping complexes sucked the marrow from downtowns across North America. I tobogganed between the fort's bastions in the winter, fished the river in the summer, and played with a mischievous little boy who lived

in the woods, wore torn, grubby trousers and seemed never to have any shoes. Idyllic fantasies teemed in my brain as I walked and I passed our old house without noticing.

The route soon forced me across Main Street. Afternoon rush had another half-hour before it hit town. I slipped from Main's west side over to the east. From here I cut through a gravel drive running along a squat apartment building whose sign read, **Colonial Living**. Apparently colonial living meant residing behind a faded, pink stucco façade resembling something from a Florida ghetto.

I had forgotten about the dogs who lived behind the building. A modern home not visible from the road stood behind the apartment complex. This was where I guessed the landlord lived. In the corner of a vacant field behind his home was a group of kennels. The ropey, liver-coloured hounds broke into a syncopated chorus of bays as I entered their territory. Chain link reverberated as they bounded against the kennel walls. Dry wild wheat and crab grass, seeming shorter than when I was a kid, brushed my calves as I broke into a run. I ran until I knew I was off Mr. Landlord's property. While it never occurred to me when I habitually used the shortcut, I was trespassing, and the landholder would probably look less kindly on drunk, smart alecky, scholarship boy, than he would a shy child. His sights were on the back of my neck right now, a .22 trained to sever my spinal column. When he finally set his dogs on me I would be a helpless cripple, able only to shut my eyes and buck my head as they tore me to pieces.

Then I was off the field and on a stretch of blackened gravel. Cinders and spent coal delineated the remains of a freight-rail line, tracks installed before the days of diesel and ripped from the ground before I was born. A few creosote-coated ties and rusted spikes lay among weeds to one side of the path. On the other side was a fence, behind which stood the leviathan hull of a factory where they once canned fruits and vegetables. Brunner Lumber had appropriated the land, using one small structure for sawing and another for the business of selling wood and building supplies. Smokestacks and

conveyers from the factory littered the yard between the forklifts and piles of lumber. I recalled the days when steam carried the smell of cooked tomatoes over the path. Tomato smell would mingle with the scent of Seagram's sour mash when the whiskey barons brewed in Maiden. Oh fickle industry! Bacchanalian fantasy of fermented barley, vegetables on the verge of rot. My throat was parched.

I put in my earphones and Mick Jagger asserted himself as "a cold Italian pizza." What's pizza without beer? If I walked south I would eventually cross the street and wind up at Maiden Station, now an arts and crafts centre on the old Farmer's Co-op land. North would take me through overgrown bushes and trees that formed a tunnel over the beaten path and, again, ultimately to civilization. The field was an enclave in town; surrounding development created an atrium. If only there were an oasis where concubines in billowing robes would serve me. A figure approached from the south, a girl long and slim, backpack over her shoulders, less a concubine than a reconnaissance agent sent to retrieve me. I needed a beer so bad.

"Doug? Doug Bradley?" So she knew my name, but her pretty face didn't register. Her voice was lower and muffled through my plugged ears.

"It's Melody. Melody Lutz."

It registered. She was hardly the same button-nosed wild child who weighed my weed but it was her all right. She looked lean and mature, wore her hair tied tightly back. In a spandex tank top and tearaways, I assumed she had just come from the gym.

"Melody. What are you doing here?"

"I just came from my grandma's house."

She gave me a hug. What big breasts she had.

"It's so good to see you." She held me back by the shoulders. "God, last time I saw you, you were just a kid. But I guess so was I."

I couldn't think of what to say. Apparently our encounters were more meaningful

than I thought, so I said: "Bumped into Larry today."

"Oh God. How is he?" Her voice was neither wistful nor sorrowful.

"He's a fucking mess."

"Well, I guess that's too bad, but that's karma, man." No love lost there. I didn't want to ask.

I scuffed my feet in the dirt. "So, um, what are you doing these days?"

"I dance," she said. That explained the outfit. "Not with the Bolshoi or anything." She laughed. "Windsor ballet. You a patron?"

"I don't get out to those clubs much, but, I suppose, well a lot of my friends are underage."

"Drink at home," she said. "It's cheaper."

The sun was beginning to burn my skin. The dry breeze blew the sweat away.

"So what are you up to?" Melody asked.

"Right now, dying of thirst."

"Wanna drink?"

The fields and ditches would have had to be overflowing with budding marijuana for the moment to be more perfect. We walked through the woody tunnel and cut into a craggy, bonsai brush version of the Black Forest. Beyond lay a field of long, brown grass dotted with crab apple trees. Melody slid out of her backpack and set it against a tree. Most of the apples had yet to fall.

"So is your grandmother sick?"

"Not unless you count attitude. All she does when I go over there is swear, smoke cigarettes and tell me how I'm ruining my life."

"Why go?" I was yelling over the music in my ears. Melody removed the earphones.

"Because she gives me beer, and because I love her." She took the Discman and

put the phones in her ears. She hummed and swayed slowly to “Let It Bleed” as she removed two unlabelled bottles of beer from her backpack.

“Grams brews her own at the Brew-Yer-Own. They should still be cold.”

I was skeptical about drinking someone else’s alcoholic experiments, and considered telling Melody about exactly what a fucking mess Larry was in when I last left him. But it was too embarrassing and would take too many shortcuts to get to the point, so I just took the bottle opener and snapped my cap. We rested against the rough bark of the apple tree and drank beer in the shade.

“I love the Stones,” Melody said as she stopped the disc. “It’s too bad you don’t have speakers for this thing.”

“Thanks for the beer,” I said.

“You know, Doug, it’s funny. I was just talking about you. I bought some weed off Rubby this morning.”

“Rubby sells weed?” I deadpanned.

“He told me your girlfriend was back in town.”

News to me. She was not my girlfriend.

“She was at camp. What’s she doing back already?”

“Beats me. A little old for that, isn’t she?”

“She’s a councilor.”

“Did you miss her?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so? What, are you fucking around on her?”

“She’s a virgin,” I sighed.

“I thought people with money sent their kids to camp to take care of things like that.”

“I’ve never been to camp.”

"I see." Melody nodded and checked her watch.

"Is our reunion over?" I lay back on the scorched grass, feet against the tree, face tilted to the sun. A few stray apples lay about and I tossed a couple into the white glare.

"No. I don't have to get ready for work for another few hours."

I was recovering a sensible buzz, so I felt daring. "What could you possibly have to do to get ready?"

"You think it's easy." She leaned over and pressed her breasts together just above my nose. "Hey big boy, you want a dance?" She sat back against the tree. "You try doing that for five hours in the smoky dark for a bunch of drunk assholes." She didn't seem angry.

"So why do it?"

"I like the money. And they pay for school. I'm already a certified bartender, now I'm going to take business. I want to open my own place. A classy place, a burlesque house. Gypsy Rose Lee kind of shit. The cigar smoking martini set will eat it up."

She had a point. But Lord, a business degree? I couldn't fathom it.

"I'm taking English in the fall. Toronto."

"Lots of universities in Toronto. Which one?"

"U of T."

"I like to read. 'A naked lunch is natural to us, we eat reality sandwiches. But allegories are so much lettuce. Don't hide the madness.' Ginsberg."

I didn't have time for any of that Beat shit. That is, I hadn't read anything.

"Some girls get all caught up in it," she said. "Drugs. End up working for an escort agency. You know, 'courteous and discreet?'" Melody cracked another beer and I closed my eyes and drank.

"Reality sandwiches."

“You got that right.”

Melody laid her head in my lap. I drew my stomach in with a breath.

“I’m not going to suck your dick,” she said.

Behind their lids, my eyes were drawn to the light like tossed crab apples.

Nobody is, I thought.

Joanne Miller sucked my dick. She picked me up in her parent’s Volvo as I walked home from Driver’s Ed. Two campers had contracted hepatitis, she told me. Though the vaccine was swiftly administered to everyone at the camp, her father wanted to check her out for himself. So she was home for a week.

She had been gone less than a week but she had already hooked up with this guy Ricky Dobbs. Old Ricky Dobbs was a former camp crony of Joanne.

“We couldn’t believe it. His parents started sending him to a different camp, but he came back to Rine Lake to council. Isn’t that wild?”

“I ran into Melody Lutz,” I countered, figuring Joanne would assume I scored for sure. I felt a little guilty using Melody like that, but I never did put much stock in that sinning in your heart stuff.

“Who?”

“Just an old friend of Rubby’s,” I muttered.

“Oh.” She pulled into her parents’ empty driveway. “I’ve got prom pictures.”

Joanne had some photographs from prom itself, of she and Kelly with her parents, and of all four of us with the Fortins. Nothing from Nicker’s party.

“I got so wasted that night.” Joanne rolled her eyes, laughed then leaned into my shoulder. “Thanks for being a gentleman.”

She sucked my dick then we had sex on her bed, which was covered with a puppy dog duvet. Joanne was mad for dogs. She had lots of dog stuff, but her parents never let

her get a real one. That was the initial bond between us. Her parents came home shortly after we quit the bed to watch television talk shows in the living room and I was invited to stay for supper.

“So Doug,” Mrs. Miller said, passing me the potato salad. “Enjoying the summer?”

“Things are certainly looking up.”

“Oh?” Mr. Miller raised his eyebrows.

“Well, I’m finally getting my license.”

“Good for you,” he said, carefully stacking sandwich layers. “Though you’ll hardly need it up in TO. Public transport. You missed out on the important years. High school, the mobile bedroom.” He chuckled. Joanne concentrated on her coleslaw.

“Jack, don’t be crude,” his wife gave him the ‘you naughty boy’ look. “Honestly, Doug, I don’t know whether I married a doctor or a construction worker.”

“I can play many roles.” Mr. Miller flexed a bicep. He was a very fit man. His wife was a very fit woman, though you knew where Joanne got her looks.

“Well did you at least play doctor with Joanne?” Joanne and I coughed across the table at each other.

“Clean bill of health.” Mr. Miller told his wife. “Though I’ll have to wait to get the blood work results.”

“Doctor Dad wants to make sure I’m not dying before he lets me back to work.”

“Well if he’d listen to Doctor Mom, he’d realize that the vaccine is foolproof. Of course it’s only my area of specialty.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being thorough.” Mr. Miller said. “Isn’t that right, Doug? Better safe than sorry.” This from the man who dismissed my father’s sore shoulder by saying, ‘the human body wasn’t designed to work after age thirty, Phil. So we all have to expect a few aches and pains along the way.’ As the founding doctor of

the local clinic, Dr. Miller was fond of such pronouncements. My father was suffering from an old football injury. Another doctor found bone chips in there.

“You got that right,” I said.

“Joanne just wants to get back to her friend. Ricky is it?”

“Jack, you’ll make Doug jealous.”

“Oh that’s alright, eh Joanne?” I gave her the wink. We may have just had sex but I got the feeling I was no Ricky Dobbs.

“Yeah, we’re just friends, Mom” Joanne said. “But so are me and Ricky.”

“Ricky and me. They’re only taking Accounting together at Queens.” Mom said.

“All the way up there. Alone. In the cold.”

“Daddy!”

I wondered what kind of person would go all the way to the Harvard of the North to take an Accounting degree. Joanne apparently. Then I wondered what kind of person seriously calls Queens the Harvard of the North. Probably a Chartered Accountant.

“Well here’s to success for both of you.” Mrs. Miller raised her glass of lemonade. Our arms met at centre table and toasted. Ice clinked.

At the end of July I successfully passed my driver’s exam. The next day was Rubby Marshall’s birthday.

“Congratulations, Doug.” Rubby clapped me on the back. “You get to be designated driver.”

I was nervous on the way up to Windsor in my Dad’s sedan. By now the hothouse Southwestern Ontario summer had set in and I had the air conditioner cranked. Nick Kerr came with us. He had just bought some pot from Rubby and the two of them had been at it all day. He bragged about the ticket he had received for skateboarding sans personal protection equipment. Another guy named Dave the Wave, whom I barely

knew, was also there. Dave the Wave lived outside Maiden but attended a French language school in Windsor. The Wave was in even worse shape than Rubby and Nick. He sat in the back seat next to Nick and took a deep toke every time they passed him a joint, and was so stoned he kept forgetting my name.

“Denny,” he wheezed, passing the joint to me through the front seats.

“Doug,” I said, handing the joint off to Rubby. I was even too nervous to smoke. I kept my eyes on the road.

“Tabernacle,” said the Wave. I caught a glimpse of his bearded face as it washed into my rearview.

“Where’d you get this guy again?” I murmured to Rubby.

“Started working at Fortin’s at the beginning of summer. Never seen him straight. Good worker, though.” Rubby brought his face close to mine. “Hey, I really appreciate this, Doug. When we get to The Studio I’ll get you a dance.”

“Someone better looking than Joanne Miller, that’s for sure,” Nick piped up.

Rubby turned in his seat. “Fuck off, Nicker.”

At nine thirty The Studio was packed. Entrance fee was ten dollars. We all wore cotton slacks to comply with the dress code. Dave the Wave almost didn’t get in on account of his beard and dreadlocks, then one of the tuxedoed bouncers said, “The Wave,” and they clasped hands. The bouncer led us to a clear table near the stage.

A stripper writhed naked on a blanket in the centre of the mirrored stage. A slow strobe pulsed. Everything white glowed a soft purple in the black light. The stripper leaned on her elbows and ground her hips. Pushing herself up athletically, she scissored her legs and slid up a brass pole, easing down backwards. Some guys lay prostrate on the stage with bills in their mouths. She moved over each of them, took their money with near kisses and stood up. She shook her shoulders, flicked her nipples with long, pink fingernails, collected her blanket and waltzed off stage with a flirty wave.

“Alright, gentlemen,” said the deejay, “let’s give it up for s-weet, sweet, Can-dy.” There was a lackluster response, so the deejay exhorted us. “Come on guys, put your hands together. Who wants to see some more tits and ass?” Hoots and hollers. I ordered a round of drinks from an austere, tuxedo-clad waitress. I got one for myself because I needed it. Melody Lutz strolled up to our table. She wore a tight little red dress.

“Sacre Bleu,” gasped the Wave.

“Hey, big boy,” Melody said to me. “You want a dance.” She laughed and tossed her hair.

“Hey, Melody,” I said. She offered her hand.

“I’m Kerry,” she said.

I took her hand. “Oh, I get it.”

“You bet he wants a dance,” Rubby yelled. Nicker and the Wave high-fived.

The opening chords of “Start Me Up” shot out the PA and another dancer hit the stage. Melody began to pull her dress down from her shoulders. She had a G-string on underneath. She took that off too and put a foot between my legs on the chair. Her hand snaked down to a neat strip of pubic hair. When the tune was over she pecked me on the cheek and wiggled back into her dress.

“Sorry about the song,” she said. “I love the Stones, but Jesus. ‘You make a dead man come.’” She mimicked Mick and stuck out her lips.

“I hear it’s your birthday,” she said to Rubby. “I’ll send over a round for you guys.” She tapped me on the knee. “That was on me. See you around.”

“Maudit cochon,” Dave the Wave said to me slyly when she left. Nicker gave me a high five.

We stayed at The Studio for another three drinks and had a pretty good time. Then Dave the Wave staggered to the stage with a ten-dollar bill between his teeth, only the Wave seemed more interested in actually dancing with the girl onstage. After a few

awkward attempts and major resistance from the girl, the Wave made it on stage, raising his fists triumphantly.

“Roi de la Monde,” screamed the Wave. “Roi de la Monde.”

We cheered him on and slammed our bottles on the table until beer foamed all over us and the waitress asked us to leave. We were met outside the bar by the King himself. He was none too pleased at his dethroning.

“Calice,” he spat.

Only his bouncer friend kept the rest of the security staff from breaking the Wave.

Nicker called shotgun on the way home. Almost immediately he reclined his seat onto the sleeping Wave and passed out. The pair didn’t move when we stopped for burgers before heading to back Maiden.

In the restaurant I asked Rubby if his Mom had ever mentioned me being at Smiley’s that afternoon.

“Can’t recall, brother,” he said. So I told him the whole sordid tale.

When I had finished he said: “Kelly tells me you made it with Joanne Miller.”

“Yep.”

“My man.”

Nicker and the Wave were still asleep when we got back to the car. We checked to see if Nicker had suffocated the Wave before we started for home. I had a bit of a buzz, but the food in my stomach mellowed me. I could tell Rubby was awake and looking out the window behind me. Highway 7 was fairly quiet but there was some traffic, mainly American vehicles speeding to the Windsor Raceway, where you can play all night slots. You’d figure folks from the Motor City would know how to drive. They are dreadful and dangerous. One car barreled past me so close in the passing lane my Dad’s sedan shook.

“Fucking Americans and our casinos,” Rubby said.

“Rushing over the border to pull slots is like rushing home to masturbate,” Dave the Wave proclaimed from under Nicker’s seat. Then he began to snore.

“Why don’t you get onto a less busy road,” Rubby suggested. I turned off 7 and found a County Road.

It was dark. There weren’t any streetlights. Houses were conspicuous in their absence from my sight and trees were vague outlines in the moonless night. Even with my brights the yellow lines didn’t stretch out very far ahead.

“You mind if I turn on the radio?” I asked Rubby. “It’ll keep me awake.” I laughed and reached for the dial, jerking the steering wheel ever so slightly to the right. Rubby’s voice was lost in the tearing roar of gravel. My Dad’s sedan banked off a ditch and left the earth.

I’m told the car came to rest right side up after at least three revolutions. The force of the landing burst all four tires. The car landed on Nick Kerr. Dave the Wave remained trapped and twisted under Nick’s seat. He suffered a major bump on the head from Nick’s bounce. Like a stroke victim he would have to learn how to speak all over again. They found me walking around the scene of the accident on a broken leg with blood in my eyes. Somewhere up above, Sirius led Orion across the sky.

I remember the hospital. Dr. Miller was on duty that night. He attended to me behind a curtain in an emergency room. I remember the smell you always remember from medical facilities, floor wax and rubbing alcohol. Cool, dry and sterile. A nurse poked her head through the curtain.

“We need to take a blood sample, Doctor.”

“I’m told that’s been taken care of.”

“But Doctor Miller, I don’t think...”

“It’s been taken care of, Pat.” Dr. Miller shut the curtain.

“Oh, Dougie,” he said. My head was numb. He drew stitches through it.

“Where’s Rubby?” I remember asking.

“You’re a good kid, Dougie,” Dr. Miller said.

“Where’s Rubby?”

“You’re a good kid.” He held my hand and told me Rubby would be just fine.

Rubby was well enough to drive to the funeral. Other than a couple cracked ribs and a battered face he had emerged unscathed. We drove out to the committal in his Aspen behind the hearse, the funeral home limousine and two cars carrying Nick’s immediate family.

“Well, if there’s one good thing that’ll come out of this it’s that you’ll never want to live in Maiden. Not with this hanging over your head.” Rubby looked in the rearview. The line of cars behind him seemed to curl over the horizon.

“You’re a sick fuck,” I said. We laughed at each other and didn’t say another word as the tears came and we crawled into the cemetery.

Nick’s mother clutched my arm after the casket was lowered into the ground. Her husband and their older son Jason huddled together behind her.

“I just want you to know I don’t hold it against you. I won’t. The doctor told me Nicky’s bladder was just ready to burst when he died.” The stricken woman at my side laughed nervously. “He must have really had to go, you know. So you boys must have been in a hurry. You must have been in an awful hurry.”

A slight, dapper man in an overcoat pushed an ashen boy with a heavily bandaged head past us. Both of Dave the Wave’s legs were in casts. He barked and stared through me.

“Maudit cochon.”

The Saturday before I left for school, what should be playing on TeleVisionOntario but *Last Tango In Paris*. My parents seemed to grow closer after the accident, as if my brush with death made them appreciate how much they shared. I found them curled up on the couch as Marlon Brando told Maria Schneider to cut the fingernails on her right hand. I sat down in my Dad's recliner.

*Now stick your fingers up my ass*, Brando mumbled.

My father shot me a bemused glance that seemed to say, "There's no damn way I'd ever have your mother sticking her hands up my ass." I doubt he'd let Dr. Miller do that. Better to get a Doctor who knew how to detect prostate cancer. I'll say one thing, though. Doc Miller was what came between me and a possible DUI conviction and I'll never forget that as long as I live.

After the movie my Dad said:

"You know, Doug. When my grandfather died no one had seen him in years. He was old and alone. He was a bastard who beat my father and had driven my grandmother to drink herself to death, but that's no excuse. We all should have been human enough to make peace with him and we weren't. When they found him, his retriever Ralph had pretty much picked his bones clean. If they hadn't got to him in time Ralph would have died alone too. As it was they had to destroy him. So anyway, Doug, I just wanted to let you know your mother and I are going down to the Humane Society next week to pick up a pup."

"I think what your father's trying to say, Dougie, is that you've got a lot to figure out this year. A new school in a new city. New friends. And you've got to realize when you're from a certain place in the world, it's hard for you to change in that place, at least in the mind's of others. I'm from here. Your father's not. People treat him like an outsider, like that Fortin man. People treat me like Reverend MacIntre's granddaughter

because to them it's all I'll ever be. And you'll always be that person who flipped a metal box at high speed and shook a group of boys to pieces." My mother took hold of me and squeezed and cried. It seemed we stayed like that until I left.

I left for Toronto with charges pending as investigators and accident reconstruction experts tried to determine exactly what had happened. Rubby was too busy working to see me off properly, but he said he'd come up to see me at Thanksgiving, maybe bring his kid sister to see the big city. Kim was just entering high school and Rubby wanted his smart friend to be a role model.

Joanne Miller went right to Kingston after camp. Her parents said goodbye to her there. As he removed my stitches clumsily, Dr. Miller told me he'd send my regards.

My Dad wanted me to take the train. There's something about the train, he said. Old time goodbyes; a sense of finality. Gives one time to think.

"Plus it saves money for your father and me," Mom joked uneasily.

It certainly didn't give you much to look at. The train to Toronto is about as scenic as the drive to Toronto. All scrubby woodlots and brownfields like the Colonial Living backyard. Seems I was destined to travel around these topographies. I didn't know if I was moving inward or outward, in which direction I was gravitating. I hadn't a clue what I was going to do when I arrived in Union Station. Clouds got lower and darker as the train moved east. A storm settled in for a long spell. Rain whipped the windows. The wind outside howled with the locomotive driving to its destination. It howled the whole way there.

## **Small Comforts**

Before I embarked on a career as a high school history teacher, I was a Master's candidate at McGill University, one of the oldest and most illustrious educational institutions in Canada. My area of interest was the French Revolution, with a thesis (incomplete) on the writings of Jean-Paul Marat. It was at McGill that I encountered the man who has turned out to be the best male friend I'll ever have. Another Revolutionist, he was nonetheless not the kind of person to whom I was drawn. But over the years I've learned it's no small comfort that sometimes you take what you're given in this life and hold on to it for all it's worth.

I first met Jim Dennis while studying in Montreal. Jim was a gregarious graduate student recently arrived from Notre Dame, where he had received a full tuition scholarship for his volleyball skills. I had just come from four years at the University of Toronto, where I mostly kept to myself. Our paths crossed in the Graduate Seminar on the Literature of Revolution led by one David Klein, who had just returned from sitting at the hem of Jacques Derrida at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France. Auspicious beginnings.

The course itself was designed not "merely for chronological study of specific revolutionary periods and their concomitant literatures," quoting the syllabus, but rather to "show similarities between establishment and reactionary authors, how their writings are inextricably intertwined and interdependent." Since Dr. Klein was cross appointed at the English and History Departments, he opted to teach his seminar in the Arts Building,

arguing that the course had equal significance to both literary and historical discourses, if a distinction could be made between disciplines at all. The supposition that individual academic disciplines were all basically rooted in the same epistemological precepts, that is were all strands in that infinite web explaining how and why we know what we know in our present historical story, was an unorthodox one for the time. The time was 1970 and the methodological rule of law was narrative for History and close reading for Literature.

Class one began with the fashionably late entrance of our professor. Klein was a man lean in a way that suggested malnourishment rather than a high metabolism brought about by regular and rigorous exercise. His tight, curly hair was cut close to his skull and over his ears, but his full, black beard and wire rimmed spectacles lent him a certain counter-culture air appropriate to any young sessional at a Vietnam-era university. Further, his soft facial expressions and willowy hand gestures said *fey*, while his wedding band and frequent, uxorious mention of his new bride said *here's a guy comfortable with his feminine side yet not at all bereft of traditional masculine attributes*. He was the model of the gentle man perhaps typified best in the twentieth century by Mohandas Gandhi, a model which reached its nadir in the seventies with John Denver. The snug, knit turtleneck he wore, often under a Nehru jacket only heightened the nouveau, non-threatening sex symbol status of the man. After just the first class I overheard female classmates speak of his *kind yet penetrating gaze*. But he was not without his detractors.

I observed the cocksure student I came to know as Jim Dennis eye Klein as he breezed into the seminar room clutching an overflowing file folder and a load of dog eared books. *Prince of punctuality*, Dennis muttered, scrutinizing the turtlenecked waif.

*My apologies*, Klein began. *My wife and I just moved into a new apartment, and I couldn't for the life of me figure out where she put my teaching materials. Turns out she placed them right near the front door so I wouldn't forget them. I keep forgetting that I married someone so considerate.*

Not a note of irony in his tone. A collective sigh from the women present.

*If you don't mind, I'll leave the door open for the other latecomers. Not to say that* (he stopped to scan the room in a silent head count) *six students isn't a full enough class.* Klein produced an attendance sheet, which I noticed indicated six absent students. An equal number of chairs waited to be filled around our table.

*Is the classroom half empty or half full?* Dennis quipped.

Klein pulled a book from the pile that lay scattered across his end of the table. He held it up in his right hand for the class to view, waved it about as one would some exotic artifact. *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon. With his left he held up a critical edition of the *American Declaration of Independence*.

*Can anyone tell me the difference between these two texts?*

*Ahh*, Dennis slurred after a moment's silence, *one advocates terrorism and one does not?*

*And which one would that be? The one that advocates terrorism.*

A smattering of nervous titters bounced about the walls of the old room. Before a sneering Dennis could answer, I spoke, spying that other great tome of the Land of the Free, Home of the Brave, *The Constitution of the United States of America*.

*I suppose they could both be seen to advocate terrorism, by those whom the respective books target as quote unquote enemies. The French for Algeria, England for the U.S. And, if I may add –*

*Please do.*

*- the right to bear arms and form a militia, the second amendment to the American constitution, refers to defending America against invaders, specifically the English who would have still considered the U.S. as a group of rogue colonies. Interestingly enough, the right to bears arms immediately follows the right to free speech.*

Klein set the books down, fiddled with his wedding band then chewed on a hangnail on that finger. He paced around to my side of the table and placed his hand firmly on my shoulder.

*Here 's one person I don't have to convince to see things my way, he boomed and laughed. The class laughed with him, all except Dennis, who seemed itching to be rubbed the wrong way, and myself, who blushed and slouched. But seriously, he continued. Everyone 's free to interpret the texts as they wish, both in class and in the term papers. The purpose of this class is to reveal each of the works studied as being fundamentally engaged with the notion of imposed order and the binaries of right and wrong.*

The other books we'd be studying were *Literature and Revolution* by Leon Trotsky, Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" and Pierre Vallieres' *White Niggers of America*. A sharp intake of collective breath followed the announcement of the Vallieres text, for it was the touchstone of the Front de Liberation du Quebec. Klein choose simply to disregard the reaction of the largely Anglophone and non-Quebec-born class and told us what our first assignment would be.

*We're starting with the Trotsky, so please have it read for next week. Have a look over the syllabus and start thinking about who you're interested in writing and presenting on. No more than two students per work. That's about it. We'll drop into the thick of things next week. Now get out there and enjoy the weather while it lasts.*

With Klein's parting words a group of stragglers appeared at the door, the absent six. They were a relaxed bunch. Maybe they had been tipped off that the first class would be truncated. After waiting politely for Klein to finish, a nervous-looking frat boy approached with a drop form, apologizing that he had a *course conflict*. As the words left his mouth, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen pushed past the trepidatious Phi Beta boy, brandishing her drop form. She was positively Germanic, statuesque, milky-skinned and blonde, all clean lines and angles, with a sexy self-confidence unprecedented among the braless and hairy armpitted coeds who stalked the campus with headfuls of causes and pursefuls of their parents' money. A little flower power could have gone a long way with this one though. When she spoke the stream of invective released was enough to poison more than just her intended victim.

*My reasons are due to ideological conflicts, not ones of class*, she stated, holding out the drop form as if it contained the conditions of Professor David Klein's surrender.

*Some might say class is inseparable from ideology*, spoke the bemused Klein.

Miss Bavaria was flummoxed but undeterred. *No course conflict*, she elucidated. *From what I've learned about your politics, Mr. Klein, I find it impossible to proceed with taking your course, as much as I'd like to spend the semester poking holes in your flimsy Marxist rhetoric.*

*You must be mistaken, Ms. (consulting the drop form) Aldrecher. This is 24-598, Literature of Revolution.*

*Call it what you like, sir. But there are still some students on this campus who believe that radicals should look for forums to proselytize outside of the classroom.*

Before Klein could counter, Ms. Aldrecher roared out of the room faster than a V-2 rocket. Dennis, clearly smitten by the Bavarian goddess' performance, rose to follow. I then made the move that I would later replay over and over in my mind in an endless loop.

*Sit down, man*, I hissed, pushing him back to his seat. *She's not taking leave of McGill. Next time you see her you can be her man on the inside.*

*Is there anyone else who has issues with these mysterious past political transgressions of mine?* Klein pulled the neck of his sweater away from his Adam's apple. There was a stir of mumbled *nos* and affirmations from the remainder of the class. *Good. On the bright side, I'll have something interesting to tell the wife over dinner (a*

roll of chuckles elicited by Klein's old-timey usage and enunciation of *the wife*). *A quick attendance check and we're done for the day.*

Klein called the roll, checking off the names as *heres* and *presents* rang out: *Williams, MacIntyre, McDonald, Levine, Lavigne, Highball-Collington, Fipps, Dennis and last but not first, Bradley.*

*Here*, I said.

To be fair to the overwrought German, there was some basis for her hysteria. It was well known that Klein had taken part in the protests and subsequent violence in Paris during the spring of 1968. It was also conceded by most in and around academia that anyone not involved in the student movement somewhere in the world that year might be as equally suspect as one who marched, rallied, threw stones and gave public readings of left wing treatises and manifestos. No more obvious was this concession made apparent than in the very hiring of Dennis by the English and History faculties of McGill University. If Ms. Anita Aldrecher (as I learned later was her full Christian name) had stuck around, she most definitely would have found her academic experience an entirely enriched and enlightened one. Or she may have garnered just enough ammunition to add an element of danger to her already volatile personality. Then there was:

*Hey, thanks for making me take a moment to cool off.* Jim Dennis bounded up behind me as I walked toward the campus' main gates at Sherbrooke Avenue. *It's just that, geez, did you get a load of that chick. I mean, what a presence. And I'm not talking about her body, which just happens to be spectacular, but those – politics. I only wish*

*she could be there to discuss Burke. I bet Klein's gonna completely misinterpret him.*

*That weasel would shut right down if he had a woman like Ms. Aldrecher in his face.*

*I know what you mean. Actually, I was more interested in a frumpy, unassuming girl across the seminar table. She's a knockout alright.*

*Thing is, that Ms. Aldrecher is right. With the political situation in Quebec, radicals like Klein are the last thing we need. Ranting and raving and skewing the truth.*

*If you're going to get to know this girl, you should probably learn her full name.*

*I mean, look at those workers up there and in the Arts Building. Dennis pointed halfway up Mount Royal to The Reservoir, a flat, grassy steppe where construction workers were busy completing the emergency tunnel leading out of the oldest building on campus, one some said was the biggest terrorist target in all Quebec. The men working were most likely all French, maybe with the exception of the foremen and supervisors. Desperate measures to ensure students and faculty don't get blown to bits when it goes off like a great, limestone mailbox.*

*That would take a lot of explosives.*

*Hell, by the time the semester is finished, Klein will probably have half the class renouncing their English heritage.*

*Even though he must know the FLQ have no great love for Jews. We came to the Sherbrooke gates. It was still early in the afternoon. There was a pleasant breeze. Cirrus clouds barely scratched the clean, blue of the glassy, autumn sky. I stopped and turned at last to face Dennis directly.*

*We haven't been properly introduced,* he said, taking the soft flesh of my hand into the firmness of his own. *Jim Dennis.*

*Phillip Bradley.*

*Phil, I think you're right. I really should get that girl's first name. How's about we go for coffee and you can enlighten me on other ways to improve my love life.*

*I'd, uh, love to, but I really should be going. I have a lot of reading to do.*

*All work and no play, Phil.*

*Story of my life.* I managed a sly, sidelong smile. *After next class. First week's always a killer for me.*

*I'll keep you to that. See you around.* He pointed a finger pistol at me and trotted jauntily away.

The image of the frumpy girl silently poring over her syllabus consumed my thoughts as I weaved through the crowded city streets. I began desperately to want to have coffee with her after next week's class. But I was a man of my word, and I now had an engagement with Dennis.

By the following Monday I had resolved to breach my word. I would arrive at class early, where I was ensured a meeting with the frumpy girl (last name MacIntyre), whom I'd noted was first in the seminar room the previous week. Alone for a few, brief moments, I would propose to Ms. MacIntyre we go to a coffeehouse after class for further discussion of Trotsky's discourse on the effects of literary form developments on politico-ideological change. A surefire way to a sullen graduate student's heart.

There to greet me in the room, however, was none other than Jim Dennis. My heart sunk as I recalled the accurate rush I had made during class one in judging the hardy, young man to be an overbearing cad. What's more, the MacIntyre girl arrived late. Klein arrived early, launching at once into a lecture on the role of literature in political movements, citing Trotsky and mentioning everyone from Brecht to Zhdanov, peppering his speech with references to Lennon and Abby Hoffman as insurance against losing his audience. In fact, Klein became so enthralled with the subject at hand that he lectured right through the mid-class break, and left practically no time for discussion at the end. As a consolation he invited anyone who was interested to come for drinks at a little bohemian bistro. On him.

At the *Café Beau Contretemps* we sat around a table in a dim booth. If my mind serves me correctly, John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* was playing on the stereo. The air hung heavy with incense. I was wedged into the corner of the booth, flanked by Klein on my left and Dennis on my right. Also present were Levine and Lavigne, a tiny, handsome girl named Nancy Williams and, on the end of one bench, Marianne MacIntyre. She was quiet, pear-shaped and moon-faced. I fell hopelessly in love.

Drinks were served and introductions were made amongst the members of our group. I flubbed the exchange of hands and *hellos* with Marianne MacIntyre, but when she spoke I was rapt in attention.

*I might be jumping the gun a bit, she began furtively, but I'm interested in knowing how you plan to approach Burke.*

*Well I did want to stick to the Trotsky, but I wouldn't want you to think I was a closet totalitarian.*

I caught a fleck of stardust glint in Marianne's eye. I couldn't blame the guy for thwarting my plans to woo the frumpy girl, but now he seemed, intentionally or not, to be moving in on my territory.

*My wife joke 's that there 's a little despot buried deep within my hard Leftist layers,* Klein added. *Like a Ukrainian doll.*

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Klein efficaciously and brilliantly laid out the bones of his approach to Burke. In "Reflections on the Revolution in France," Burke argues against French intellectuals who altered the linguistic context of the times. For example (actually *the* example), the Committee for Public Safety changed the word "regicide" to something more akin to murder. Burke supports what he sees as a natural hierarchy in which the monarchy is the head on the body of the state, and closer to the transcendent God. He goes on to say that when an angry mob burst into Marie Antoinette's bedroom and tore off her royal robes they reduced her to a mere naked woman, just as terming the word regicide murder reduced King Louis XVI to merely a man. What Klein postulated was that if monarchy was natural, essential and absolute, why was the royal clothing imbued with so much importance, why was the Queen merely a woman after being disrobed? *Did Burke not really believe in his metaphysical conception of a monarchy that transcended the status of common man, or could he simply not present his case without repressing its weakness?*

*I think you're missing the point, Dennis raised his voice. What Burke means is that the necessary order is reversed. This is signified by the torn royal robes. You're making it seem as if there is some weak link in his argument, whereas if you look at the body of his work it all leads to towards a pro-monarchical conservatism.*

*Maybe you're missing the point, my Marianne said softly. If the attack on the monarchy threatens the body of the state, then Burke's misplayed point about the royal robes threatens the corpus of his work, the canon. It makes for a lack of consistency and questions the very idea of authorial intent.*

I was stunned. My love for the girl was quickened by a newfound sense of admiration. I managed to utter a hasty, *I concur*.

Meanwhile, Dennis looked as if he was about to go bananas. Marianne's comments were delivered with such modesty that Dennis could hardly direct his ire at her. But, not knowing him as well as I would later come to, I wasn't ruling out the possibility that he would literally crush the lily-white academic Klein. For his part, Klein tried to soften his argument by backing it up with the philosophy he obviously ate along with his morning crepes in Paris.

*Very good. And just to expand on what Marianne just said, you've got to give up this notion of overriding theme in a group of works. Jacques Derrida, with whom I studied in France, points out that any given theme always has more than one context, a multiplicity of contexts if you will. Why context itself is contextual. But we cling to this idea that the Historian and the Literary critic (paused to nod at Lavigne, an English*

major) *must analyze and isolate texts, in effect creating the canon. The great, transcendent overarching canon.*

*Philosophical mumbo jumbo*, Dennis shot back desperately. *This Derrida guy's going nowhere.*

Two decades later, many academics would have breathed a sigh of relief had this statement been true. In 1970, saying you studied with Derrida wasn't even impressive namedropping. It was, however, too much for Dennis to stomach. He rose to his feet and made an exasperated gesture. I wasn't quite sure, but it seemed he had silent allies in Nancy Wilson, who I thought I caught eyeing Dennis' chest and biceps (which were impressive) and Lavigne, whom I perceived also admired Dennis' physique. Levine, who had left for an extended trip to the *sal de bain*, was non-plussed upon returning to the booth.

Instead of continuing with a verbal assault on our beloved instructor (beloved by Marianne and myself at this point, anyhow) or, worse, twisting Klein's scrawny form into knots more complicated than his prescient postmodernist jargon, Dennis merely took his leave, pressing awkwardly past Lavigne and Wilson to extricate himself from the booth. The timing couldn't have been more impeccable. Anita Aldrecher strode in with all the poise, balance and icy determination of a runway model, looking as if her clay had just been freshly sculpted.

*Well if this isn't a clandestine meeting if I ever saw one*, she purred, hands on hips and towering over Klein. *How goes the revolution, professor?*

*This is fucking ridiculous.* Klein stood to meet her gaze, which required him to tilt his head upwards. *Can I not even conduct an informal discussion in a bloody coffee house without these kinds of interruptions? Honestly, grow up folks. This is fucking grad school, not high school. And if you're not in my class, please stay the fuck away from me when I'm meeting with my students. Don't make me do something I don't want to do.*

*Is that a threat, Dr. Klein?* Ms. Aldrecher was not about to show distress over what was possibly the most impassioned and violent outburst Klein had made in his life. But Dennis was visibly distressed. With a trembling hand he took the German girl's perfectly proportioned waist and led her out of the *Café Beau Contretemps*.

The next three weeks of class were strangely uneventful. Klein conducted the seminar with professionalism. This was not before, however, he proceeded to get stumbling drunk at the *Café Beau Contretemps* and tell Marianne and myself (the only ones who opted to stick around after the big blowup) that we were made for each other, that marriage was the best thing because *sometimes it's the only thing that holds you together in this shitty life*. It was helping Klein to his flat on Durocher that signaled the timorous beginnings of our courtship. After ensuring Klein got to his doorstep safely, we made our way up Mount Royal to the cross' flickering lights. We sat and looked out over the McGill campus and the city sprawl until dawn broke and the lights went down.

Grudgingly, I also kept company with Dennis and Anita Aldrecher. Marianne and I were invited out to dinners, movies and other social engagements with the couple.

Anita proved to be an altogether charming and giving personality to Marianne. She would compliment Marianne on her hair if she wore it in a French braid, say, or tell her how a particular dress accentuated attributes of her figure, while Dennis made every effort to ingratiate himself to me.

My suspicions were raised one evening when the subject of sports was broached. Although I rarely spoke publicly of it, I had been a second string Right End on the school team during my years at the University of Toronto. A crushing fall on my shoulder saw me demoted to Team Manager. It wasn't that Dennis intuited that I was a football player. He had apparently done some sort of background check.

*Found your mug in an old U of T yearbook, he explained. Not to sound derogatory, but I never took you to be a football hero, Phil.*

*I wasn't all that heroic, I replied. I don't think I played more than twenty games in four years.*

Dennis had played a lot during his years at Notre Dame. Volleyball. He had played a little football in high school, he said, but the two sports had season conflicts. Ultimately he chose the court over the gridiron, *which was a good thing, since that's what got me my free ride to Notre Dame, and one National Championship for the University when I was captain.*

I was now beginning to figure this character out. I knew his type. He had a tough exterior but was probably prone to uncontrollable fits of weeping when enraged. This is the kind of person one stays on guard for. Had Klein been as pithy a judge of character as myself he might have been able to prevent what came next.

On Monday, October 12, Thanksgiving Day, 400 combat troops entered the nation's capitol. Since the previous Monday, Montreal had been the scene of the worst Canadian political turmoil since the Riel rebellion. Senior British Trade Commissioner, James Cross was kidnapped by members of the FLQ on October 5. Five days later, Quebec Labour Minister, Pierre LaPorte, was kidnapped by a different faction of the FLQ. Amid hints and rumours, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau announced on October 15 the move many speculated he would make.

*These are strong powers and I find them as distasteful as I am sure you do, our stylish prime minister with sideburns and hair curling over the collar said in a CBC television broadcast. They are necessary, however, to permit the police to deal with persons who advocate or promote the violent overthrow of our democratic system.*

The Emergency Powers of the War Measures Act gave the police the right "to arrest anyone they wished without warrant or permit, to search anyone's house, to detain without charge for up to 21 days and without trial for 90 days; to suppress information, to forbid publication." The Act invoked spoke not just to the kidnappers, but also to the general terror visited on the city of Montreal with the FLQ mail bombings three short years earlier. That weekend saw more than five hundred suspected subversives, sympathizers and collaborators of the FLQ rounded up by the provincial police, RCMP and the Canadian Armed Forces.

As a reputed camp for the reactionary set, the *Café Beau Contretemps* was one of the first establishments in the city to be raided. An informal reception was held there to

“celebrate” the federal government’s new Emergency Powers, invite their employment, in fact. Present on Friday the 16 was one of the key organizers of the event. A young, rogue academic who had been spotted at the Tuesday press conference held at the Hotel Nelson, in which FLQ negotiator Pierre Demers announced his resignation. David Klein. Also present at the press conference was one Pierre Vallieres.

As Klein later told me, when he was arrested police cited his position as a Marxist professor actively engaging in the cause of social upheaval (by including *White Niggers of America* in his course contents) as the root of his offence. On Monday the 19 a notice was posted on the locked door of the seminar room explaining Klein’s predicament in wholly unsympathetic terms. Jim and Anita were strolling away joyously, linked arm-in-arm in sinister couplehood when I got to class. A week later Klein was told to clear out his office. His semester would be finished off by various instructors in English and History.

Pierre LaPorte was killed the day after Dennis’ arrest, garroted with his own necklace. His captors would be arrested less than a month later. James Cross was finally released in December, Pierre Demers returning to secure the safe passage of his kidnappers to Cuba. I stayed at McGill for one more semester, resolving never to have social intercourse with Jim Dennis or his girlfriend again, and to stay close to my frumpy love.

I married Marianne MacIntyre. After that year at McGill I abandoned plans to pursue a Master’s degree and enrolled in teacher’s college at the University of Western

Ontario. Marianne too transferred to Western and took her degree in Library Science. We both found jobs in our respective fields in the city of Windsor, marrying soon thereafter on July 1, 1972.

Marianne had family in and around Windsor, so was quite familiar with the area. She had spent some of her childhood in Oshawa before her father, a General Motors Executive, moved the family. She was patient and helpful in explaining the city and its environs to me.

*No, that's Detroit City*, she said as we made our way down the main drag of Ouellette on my first visit to Windsor. *There's a river between us.*

It's an easy mistake to make. From several vantage points – the 401 Highway approaching Windsor, Ouellette Avenue traveling north, the flatland west of the city limits – the Detroit skyline appears as an extension of the Canadian city. Only as you get closer do you notice the mile width of river separating the two countries, which are attached overhead by the Ambassador Bridge and underground by the tunnel connecting the cities' downtowns. Though the steel and glass Renaissance Center complex had yet to be built, the American gothic office towers saw Detroit dwarf its little sister.

Being from a decidedly white-collar background, I was unaccustomed to the working class grit of the city. W.O. Mitchell, onetime writer-in-residence at the University of Windsor, noted he'd never before seen so many pregnant men, referring to the bellies that rested against porch railings, or draped over pool tables. For my part, I had hips in those days. Though my body was beginning to deposit fat around its waistline, I still exercised regularly and didn't smoke too much. Marianne said she

admired the fact that my athleticism never took away from my intelligence. *You could have been a Rhodes scholar*, she'd say, and we'd laugh at the absurdity of a Canadian playing American football on a scholarship to Oxford. Even the kids at my first placement in the city's tough west side respected my authority. And why not? I was intelligent, but I didn't lord it over them. I somehow managed to appear young and cool, even with a balding pate and horn-rimmed glasses, probably due to my encyclopedic knowledge of all things contemporary. I knew just as much about rock music and "today's youth" as I did the French Revolution, perhaps more. And I was a physical presence. In those days you could still rough a boy up if he became too unruly. Nothing harmful, maybe a shoulder block in the hallway, a tug on the ear, a jab in the gut where it wouldn't bruise. As long as you have a driver's license and enough strength to beat a kid in an arm wrestle, you have control in the classroom.

All told, my experience at Windsor's Laurier High was pleasant. Growing up, I was made aware of our society's less privileged and have-nots only obliquely. My father was the University of Toronto's Registrar, and he also took an active interest in the burgeoning Canadian literary scene. We had a spacious three story detached in Riverdale, where visiting writers and artists were frequently invited to stay at little or no cost. By the early sixties I was aware of each visitor as more than just an extra body having his or her morning ablutions in my bathroom, or being the subject and catalyst of conversation at the dinner table. I began to listen to them.

*We've got to go back to the time when art belonged to the people*, said a willowy poet and essayist with a wispy goatee. The underlying motive of his argument was,

as far as I could tell, that as long as art belonged to the general populace, art could garner public funding. My father smoked his pipe and nodded his head in agreement. My mother, a school teacher like myself (though perhaps a more forbidding one) piped up with the same argument that simmered silently in my brain.

*If you mean public productions of Shakespeare, who wrote for the masses, I couldn't agree more, she said. If you mean tax dollars should pay for a Canadian writer to produce her Finnegan's Wake, I couldn't disagree more wholeheartedly. Those kinds of books were never intended for everyone to get.*

*Joyce said he never included notes with Ulysses because he had enough faith that his readers could "get" it themselves, intoned the poet.*

*Then Joyce was kidding himself.*

*Ellen, Dad exhaled. The man is arguing for government to recognize the necessity of a cultural environment supportive of distinctly Canadian artists. Surely you can't –*

*I just want him to call a spade a spade, George. For God's sake, there are people out there who can't read. Let's help the masses catch up to the elite before we start deciding what Canadian culture should be for loggers and fishermen.*

Often, these arguments led to sparring matches between my parents in which the visiting artist was forced into the position of referee. My parents are still alive, thank Christ, and in good fighting shape. But all their bickering over custom and civic duty under the overarching theme of Canadiana left me with a hunger for anything not

Canadian, especially stuff from South of the border, the great nation that set the model for the French Republic.

Certainly any residual enthusiasm I might have had for things Canadianna was stymied by that awful pixy poet who said to my mother that she *simply would not suffer the small mindedness of those who would try vainly to make the link between my life and my art*. This as she washed her hair in the kitchen with a half dozen of our eggs, a daily ritual followed by her breakfast of one soft boiled egg and dry toast on each of her many, many stays. Years later, when her best seller Taste of Woman was released to much fanfare (most of the masturbatory Canadian reviews written by our former guests), memory left no doubt in my mind what this particular woman would taste like.

What I'm driving at with this lengthy (but I hope enlightening and interesting) digression is that Windsor was a good place for me. It had a grungy and calloused urbanity ringed with a kind of rural suburbia. I had access to a major American metropolis, which, though it was swiftly closing in on East St. Louis as the worst place to live in North America, was a home to fine art, music and health care. Not to say in Windsor itself you didn't get the sense that you were living in an isolated backwater. You did. But there was and is a sense of community in this place Canada forgot. And I got to drink in dives like The Tecumseh.

The Tecumseh Tavern was the kind of bar that attracted my students' parents, if not the students themselves. My students were either dirt poor or acted as if they were. Poor was not just social a standing, but a lifestyle, and if you went to Laurier you'd rather be white trash than intellectually gifted (such gifts would only be wasted at that poorly

funded and regarded school anyway, save for in my classes). I'd stop by The Tecumseh every day after work, cutting through a hole in the school parking lot fence. Once inside I was greeted invariably by two or three students shooting pool under green light in the back corner. *Hey, Mr. B.* They respected my privacy enough that *hello* would do for acknowledgement. I'd sit down and order a Budweiser (I always drank two) from Charlie the bartender and light a Player's Filter (I smoked one with each beer).

Sometimes I'd buy a fresh pack from Charlie and he'd tell me I should *quit those things*, and I'd say, *You're probably smoking more than me a day just working here, Charlie*, and he say, *You're probably right, Phil, you're probably right*. Charlie was heavy set, with ears and a nose that matched his thick forearms. His hair was cut so close you could see the rolling folds of skin just above his stumpy neck. He had served in the Navy in the Second War and Korea, and we talked about this because Marianne's Dad was infantry in World War Two, though my Dad was a conscientious objector and I never mentioned that. After some conversation and listening to the six rock and roll songs I'd select from the jukebox it was time to go home.

Marianne and I lived in the old Walkerville neighbourhood in a home we rented from her parents. I still love those streets; still enjoy rolling by the pre-war, brown brick home set among other identical homes that were built for Hiram Walker executives. Marianne's parents had retired to the nearby town of Maiden, where her father's father had been a minister at St. Andrew's Presbyterian. Marianne loved her mother but despised her father, which he knew and so was understandably apprehensive about visiting. Mrs. MacIntyre did not drive so we could only see them if we made the half-

hour trip into town, which wasn't very often. Marianne and I had each other. The ends of our workdays were never reduced to predictable formula. We'd make love, we'd make dinner, we wouldn't make love, we'd eat at an Italian restaurant on Erie Street, we'd do crossword puzzles, and we might go out on a Friday night and get hammered. Each of these was a small comfort, but different than my ritual comforts at The Tecumseh because I was with the woman I loved.

*Do you ever wish you'd stayed on in school?* she once asked.

*I don't regret any decisions I've made so far,* I said, not knowing I'd soon regret becoming so comfortable at The Tecumseh.

I had a student who'd become particularly troublesome towards the end of the year. Douglas Marshall was a bright boy who at nineteen still hadn't passed the twelfth grade. Distraction came easy to him, as did disruption. In anticipation of such a case I had spiced up my lesson plans. To make my lectures on the French Revolution sexier I told the story of Marat's demise – poor Marat with his swaddled head, in the bath to sooth itching skin, butchered by that minx Charlotte Corday. Here lay the impetus for the bloody Jacobin Reign of Terror led by Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety (I suppose you didn't have to go very far to make the French Revolution sexy). I played a recording of Judy Collins doing a medley from the Peter Weiss musical, *Marat/Sade*, at the end of my final lecture. Douglas Marshall stood up ramrod straight during the final refrain of *We want our rights, and we don't care how. We want our revolution... Now!* He mouthed the lines with affected feeling and expert precision. He gave the Nazi salute then goose-stepped out of the room singing, *Spring-time for Hit-ler and Ger-ma-ny!*

Clearly the kid had a sense of humour. He also had what we would today term Attention Deficit Disorder. Everyone on the Laurier staff, however, was convinced he was the one kid who could excel if given the chance. An exceptional student in French and English, his IQ hovered around 175. But he had trouble remembering any trivial facts he was disinclined to learn. Memorization of names and dates is no measure of intellect but it is a necessity if you want passing grades. I had written a note to Douglas' parents stating just that. Note in hand now, I followed him out of the room.

Douglas Marshall was built like a brick shithouse but I wasn't afraid of him. Not because I was bigger and stronger than he was – I wasn't; he was a very imposing young man. No, I could approach him because I felt he considered me a kindred spirit. He had a gentle manner about him, evident even in his goosetstep. He was no longer goose-stepping when I came up behind him.

*Doug*, I said placing a hand on his shoulder. He turned to me with the blank expression of a drunk who can't remember the past night's events.

*What's happening, Mr. B?*

*Doug, what the hell do you think you're doing?*

*Please, Mr. Bradley. I've heard the 'you're not living up to your potential' speech more times than you've read Marat's journals.*

*That might not be entirely accurate, Doug. I'm a pretty big fan of old Marat.*

*Doug, I'd be willing to help you pass, get a good grade. If you went to university in Windsor I'd be glad to –*

*'The important thing is to pull yourself up by your own hair, to turn yourself inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes.'* Well, Mr. B, I've done what our friend Marat said. I've turned myself inside out, backwards and forwards, but I still see the same shitty world. Just let me take the general history exam and let me get out of here. My Dad won't let my uncle hire me until I graduate. I'm already doing bodywork for him for free and I'm getting pretty goddamn sick of it.

*Give your father this.* As soon as he took the note I noticed the small, circular burns on the underside of his forearms. I wondered if I had done the right thing. *Think about what I said.*

*And you think about what I said.* He took the note in his chafed and grubby hand.

Another weathered hand tapped me on the shoulder at The Tecumseh the following day.

*What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?* asked the hand's owner. He had a good five inches on me, which meant he was closing in on seven feet.

*I'm not so nice. Why just last night I nudged the wife in the ribs for snoring too loud. Yessir, a regular Jesse James.* This elicited a laugh from somewhere behind the man's thick, pubic beard.

*That's pretty tough stuff. Can I buy you a drink, Jesse?*

*I don't normally accept the charity of strangers.*

*Oh, we're not strangers. My son Doug sometimes hangs out here. Misspent youth. Hell, I'm surprised to find you here.*

*Time misspent is often time well spent.* I recognized the resemblance now. *Nice to meet you, Mr. Marshall.*

*I'm not saying I didn't have a bit of misspent youth myself.*

I had a hard time conceptualizing this man in anything close to youth, misspent or otherwise. He probably emerged from the birth canal bearded, growling requests for a razor to shave his mother's pussy through chews on the placenta. *Doug's problems are in the classroom, Mr. Marshall,* I said. He began playing with a butterfly knife, opening and closing it with deft snaps of the wrist.

*Maybe if you teachers would quit fucking around and put him in the right class he wouldn't be having these fucking problems right now. Are we gonna get served around here or what?*

Charlie came over from the pool table, where he had been winning cigarettes from a couple of my students, breaking and throwing the cancer sticks into the trash.

*Your money's no good here, Bob. You know that.*

*Jeez. Memory like a steel trap, eh Charlie? Fine. I don't stick around where I'm not wanted. Just remember what happens to people who do stick their noses where they don't belong, Jesse James.* He snapped the knife shut in my face and walked out.

The line may have been straight out of *Chinatown*, but he looked like a bad, bad man. Charlie confirmed that he was, indeed, a bad, bad man. That didn't stop me from asking Doug about him after school the next day. I told him if he ever needed any help he could come to me. The day after that I was met with a .38 in the face coming out of The Tecumseh.

*You just don't fucking get it do you. Not sticking your nose where it doesn't belong means staying clear of my goddamn kid.*

*He's my student. That's impossible.* I spoke as loudly as I could without shouting. I let my elbow nudge the front door open as I backed up.

Bob Marshall yelled *You know what the fuck I mean*, and Charlie came charging out the door.

*What the hell? What do you think you're doing with that thing, you crazy sonofabitch?*

*This man here is interfering with family affairs*, the crazy sonofabitch said.

*I swear, Charlie.* I tried to keep my cool. *Whatever it is I've done doesn't warrant a gun in the face.*

Bob was already putting the revolver away.

*I know that*, Charlie said irritably. *Get the hell out of here, Bob. The police are on their way. I'll be sure to send them by your place. They know the way. I just suggest not meeting them with that piece anywhere near you, or it will be the last stupid move of your dumbass life.* Bob's bravado deflated visibly with each word Charlie uttered. I turned from him before he could threaten me again to my face.

I learned later that Bob returned home to find his son had packed and left for his uncle's house. With nobody else to turn to he turned on his wife. When police finally arrived at the Marshall hovel, Mrs. Marshall had been beaten into a state of semi-consciousness. Her jaw was broken and the left side of her face was so badly battered that the eyeball barely clung to its socket. Bob Marshall was charged with assault and

battery against his wife and assault with a deadly weapon against me. Douglas Marshall refused to testify to past assaults against him. During the trial the question of Bob's sanity was raised by his defense, but the Crown stuck to its guns so to speak and Bob got ten years at Kingston. Marianne did not go to the trial, opting to pour over job postings in Windsor and the surrounding county areas instead. There was an opening to teach high school history in the town of Maiden and on Marianne's urging I took the job.

*'Talk about a blast from the past.' That's what she said Phillip, but not even surprised to see me, you know. And I don't recall ever mentioning to her or Jim that I was from here.*

*Unbelievable.*

*Jim's finishing his thesis at U of M and teaching at the University of Windsor. And Anita's, get this, staying home to raise their kid. Until he goes to school anyway.*

*Unreal.*

*She still looks spectacular of course. You'd never guess she'd given birth four months ago. But I think child rearing must be mellowing her. We actually had a pretty pleasant conversation.*

*Come on. Really?*

*She said Jim still talks about you all the time. Said you were the brightest student he ever met. Even out of his fellow doctoral students. And apparently you're the reason he got together with Anita in the first place. I don't recall that but –*

*That's me. Guilty as charged.*

*Well apparently he's forever in your debt.*

*Aren't I lucky.*

*Thing is, Phillip, is that Anita invited us to dinner. And it is a small town, and I don't really have many friends here anymore. You don't have any. I accepted.*

*Jesus, Phil. You haven't changed. Jim clapped me good-buddy style on the back. I'm just amazed we haven't run into each other. You've been here how long? Since before the fall.*

*That would raise a few theological issues.*

*Ever the wit. How did it ever work out that I was the one who went on to do a doctorate?*

*Marianne looped my arm in hers and squeezed it between her biceps and forearm.*

*Maybe he figured it was time to get out there and work, Anita said. Academia isn't for everybody.*

*Anita keeps saying she's never going back to school, but I say as soon as Paul's in school she's going to get the bug.*

*Get a job at a library, Marianne said. Being surrounded my books is what I enjoyed most about school.*

*Where is the baby tonight? I contributed.*

*Oh Susanne Barker has him. She's the Presbyterian minister's wife.*

*Intriguing. I didn't know you guys were religious, I said.*

*Oh we never have been. Though if I were, Reverend Barker would be my man.*

Jim seemed pleased with this point.

*Chuck Barker and his wife live next door to us, Anita elaborated. We watch their twins for them when they go out and vice versa with Paulie. Though it seems Chuckie and Sue are going out more than we are these days. I didn't mind this new relaxed, former Ms. Aldrecher, but if she called Jim Jimmy I think I would have called it a night. I silently thanked my personal god that neither Marianne's nor my names could be reduced to the diminutive.*

*Hey Jim. You'll never guess who's becoming a big name, if a controversial one, in history circles. David Kline. Teaches at University of Illinois, Chicago. I heard him give a paper in Ann Arbor last Spring. Western discourses in civil disobedience or something or other.*

Good for him, I thought.

*Ha-ro, chimed our waitress. You ready order now?*

*I'll have the Moo shu chicken, Anita started.*

Jim leaned into me. *I swear to god, Phil, he whispered. I live for the day when I have enough money that going out to eat doesn't mean Chinese every time.*

I smiled in agreement. We didn't have much money either.

I thought I had changed since Jim saw me last. For one thing, I was no longer a timid graduate student. I was a professional pedagogue who commanded respect from students and fellow teachers alike and was coaching my junior boys' football team

towards their first winning season in twenty-five years. For another, though graduate school was five years behind me, I was more studious, more intellectually astute than ever. My personal scholarship took the form of newspaper clippings, not merely cutting the odd article that took my fancy, but enough to fill a growing number of folders on a wide variety of local, national and international issues, personalities, events and oddities. Each morning before class at Maiden's Lord Amherst High School I would stop by the Bookshelf Coffee Shop and News Agents to pick up the Detroit News and Free Press (one of each when they were separate papers), the Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, and Montreal Gazette. Having the papers delivered would have saved me money but I liked the shop's smell of morning coffee and cigarettes, and I would have brief exchanges with my father-in-law, who spent his retirement commiserating with the flannel jacketed old men there, to whom he would have been superior in the workforce. I had subscriptions to the Windsor Star, the Sunday New York Times, Time Magazine and MacLean's, the New Yorker, Saturday Night, Canadian Forum and the New Republic, and purchased the occasional Rolling Stone (though it got progressively worse with every issue and I began to care less about it when David Byrne left the Talking Heads, and even caring about this fact showed my age). Four months of nightly clipping had already earned a shelf in our den. The fattest folder was one labeled "Watergate," with "Pierre Elliot Trudeau" coming a close second, along with clippings on everything from ABBA to Zionism.

*My God, Phil, Jim would say as I declined engagement after engagement on a weeknight. You're busier than I am for Chrissakes, and I have to mark, prepare lectures and finish my dissertation.*

*I know, I'd say. All work and no play.*

For me sanctity came with listening to Coltrane LPs crackle through my stereo at soft volume while I worked through section after section of my papers until my fingers were black. Marianne would always stop me after eleven and sometimes we would make love before I had a chance to wash my hands and we would fall to sleep smudged as ironworkers. The days were full with what I hoped were the expanding minds of my students; fall afternoons were spent with my football boys. With his leisurely professor's schedule, Jim Dennis' days were not quite so full. Volleyball no longer stood in the way of the football season. He began attending my practices.

Not only did he attend, but he also cheered the guys on. I was defensive coach. A craggy, old car dealer named Dunn coached the offensive line. Dunn and I never interacted much beyond making plays and organizing players. Dunn thought I was weird, probably because I never appeared to belong on the field. Even when I wore jeans and a sweatshirt I looked as if I should be in some sort of suit, or at least wearing a sweater over a button down. My mode of speech bothered Dunn, who was happy with non-convoluted exchanges of grunts, nods, headshakes and profanity-laced small talk. If I so much as uttered something about art or politics, or talked about anything other than cars, sports or breasts for that matter, Dunn looked at me as if I was speaking an arcane dialect. I soon learned to undercut all my other-than-football remarks with a liberal peppering of curses. Take the following as an example:

*That Nixon's sure in a world of shit now,* I said once as I walked Dunn to his car after practice.

*Up to his fucking neck,* Dunn agreed looking forward and fingering his ignition key.

*They're talking impeachment proceedings. That's practically unprecedented.*

*Guy should be shot and pissed on. But that's the Americans' problem. Take 'er easy.* Dunn got in his car and left.

Awkwardness presented itself in my flinching presentation to Dunn, but once I started I couldn't stop, though I came off as bumbling and insincere. Dennis proved more adept at ingratiating himself to Dunn. Compare this little trade of banter when I finally introduced the pair:

*Professor, eh?* Dunn said warily. *What kind of fancy equations you gonna bring to the game.*

*Well, sir,* Dennis said, puffing out his chest. *Number one I'm not a mathematician, number two book smarts don't mean shit if you're losing.*

*Ha! Well said.* Dunn clapped the postdoctoral fellow on the back. *You ought to tell that to your quarterback, Bradley. Fucking pretty boy is just as worried about hurting his precious head or breaking a leg as he is about keeping an eye on his receiver.*

Dunn proceeded to invite Jim Dennis onto the field as offensive coach for his side in a team scrimmage, then trotted off to corral his men.

*Want me to have a talking to with your quarterback, Phil?*

*My quarterback also happens to be my best history student, Jim. And he writes poetry for Chrissakes. What Dunn doesn't understand is that being an anomaly is a good thing. Well-roundedness and originality is what's going to land that kid a scholarship.*

*You should know. But do you think this Dunn character wants to hear that. Phil, you gotta learn how to talk to these guys. Play his game, talk shit, tell him what you think and feel in simple and certain terms. That's how you get what you want.*

*I know you're right,* I said grudgingly, longing for my sugarcoated days at The Tecumseh. I'd like to tell Jim Dennis what happens to nosey people. *Welcome to the team.*

I watched Dunn's back as he counted heads to separate the boys into teams. Get what I want by saying it in simple and certain terms, eh? A grin opened on my face as in my mind I shouted: *Hey, Dunn. Suck my dick.*

In December of 1974, the Maiden Generals won their conference finals and went on to play Laurier, whose motley crew beat overwhelming odds to rise to the top of the Windsor heap. The Generals played the Falcons at Windsor Stadium on one of those cold days where your nose gets crackly sticky inside and each breath hurts. Jim reveled in the cold. He was tightly bundled in a parka and toque, clapping on our boys with his gloved hands. Bits of frost and snow clung to the fringes of the beard he was growing. I couldn't have grown a decent beard if I tried, and even if I could have it wouldn't have helped any. My blood must have been getting thinner. I was chilled to the bone. I was starting to smoke too much that winter so I coughed and wheezed through the game. Truth was I needed Jim there to speak calmly and rationally to my defensive line, as my health seemed to rapidly deteriorate with each breath. It was all I could do to nod and

smack backsides in the huddles. Jim Dennis looked so good he could have been one of the high school players.

During halftime I spotted Charlie from The Tecumseh. He stood on the sideline with a bratwurst in one hand and a thermos in the other. He still looked so thick that he probably didn't need winter gear with all his natural insulation. Being near him was like standing beside a barrel of burning two-by-fours.

*Phil, he greeted me warmly. I'd shake your hand, but as you can see I'm kind of full up here. How's it feel to coach against the old school?*

*Tell you the truth, Charlie, I'm not really in the game if you know what I mean. Feeling a little under the weather. I haven't even said hello to Coach Thomas.*

*Well I wasn't going to say it, Phil, but you look like hell. I thought moving to the sticks would have improved your health if anything.*

*It's just end of the term exhaustion, I suppose.*

*And that other coach stealing your fire. Sometimes watching the dynamics off the field is more interesting than what's going on on the field.*

*Old university rivals. I'm actually warming up to him these days –*

*But you can't stand him. Don't let it get the best of you, Phil. It's a small thing. Remember that Marshall guy. You didn't let that eat you up, did you?*

*I left town, Charlie. It wasn't big enough for the two of us.*

*Coast is clear now, bud. Bob Marshall hung himself in Kingston.*

*Jesus. What about Doug?*

*Working for his uncle and shacked up with some girl named Debbie. Barely fifteen, but with a father ten's times worse than Dougie's old man, so I guess she's better off. But some night's it looks like Doug's going the same route as Bob. Seems I'm cutting him off every Friday night. He leaves without much of a fuss, but I'm just waiting for him to turn one of these days.*

*God, I'm sorry. This is the part where I count my blessings, I suppose.*

*Never had to drive a point home with you, Phil. It may be small comfort to you, but you're a helluva lot better off than anyone who ever came through the doors of my place. I sure do miss you in the afternoons, Phil.*

*I miss you too, Charlie. I gotta get back to my guys.*

*You do that. They need you, not just your rival there.*

*I nodded and backed away slowly.*

*And, Phil. Try to let Laurier win. This is probably the best those kids are going to have it.*

*I'm going to do my job as best as I can, Charlie. Which way do you want it?*

*Charlie wolfed down the nub of his bratwurst and laughed.*

*We beat the Falcons 41 to 14. I rallied enough to convince my poetic quarterback not to sit the game out due to an injured ankle. He played through the pain and in the end was carried off the field triumphantly by coach Dennis.*

*Don't worry, I heard Dennis say to him in the locker room. There's always volleyball in the fall if football's too much.*

If there was one thing Jim Dennis' robustness did for me it was to encourage me to take better care of myself. By the time my son Douglas was born, on January 11, 1976, I had not had a cigarette for an entire year. I had also not seen as much of Dennis as one might expect. Marianne and I accompanied Jim and Anita on a few excursions, movies and plays, art exhibit and concerts. We once went with them and the couple Chuck and Sue Barker to a reading by a certain pixy poet who was introduced by a pan of man resembling the goateed guy who roomed at my parents' home so long ago. But my life's work, my clipping, consumed much of my time. Any spare time was spent with the love of my life.

Marianne and I were, and I mean this to be taken beyond sappy connotations, the best of friends. What we shared was not only the trials and tribulations of marriage, of child rearing and mortgages and car payments, not only the love or lust or playfulness or times of repose, but also every facet of our respective existences that preceded our physically and emotionally interlaced lives. Jim once told me that though pieces of Anita's life before him rose to the surface upon occasion, revealing surprising aspects of his partner he never foresaw knowing, he knew very little of her pre-McGill life, aside from what the Aldrecher family divulged to him, and this suited him just fine. I was not so content to let the past lie. I would be careful, as the archaeologist slowly scraping and dusting, but I would be sure to retrieve any artifact, no matter how small. These artifacts

I kept in folders in my mind, fattening and multiplying like the files on my brimming den shelves, under the project title **Marianne Bradley nee MacIntyre**. There were subheadings like “The Move to Windsor,” “Marianne’s First Date,” “Mrs. MacIntyre Remembers...” and “Summer Trips with the Family.” I in turn opened the folder of my life for Marianne’s perusal, just as I had started allowing senior students access to my clippings for research papers. She could learn anything she wanted about my only steady girlfriend in university, my role as dateless disc jockey on prom night or my father’s insistence on a university education. By the time we had Douglas I was sure we had caught up on our separated pasts.

Dennis offered to spring for drinks after Douglas was born. I said I would love to go as soon as Marianne felt like having a night alone with the baby. She would also need a night out herself.

*Christ, Dennis said to me over the phone. Remember Kline always waxing about his wife? No wonder you had such affinity with that guy.*

*You always know how to say the right thing, Jim. How about Smiley’s on Friday?  
It’s a date, Dad.*

Though I frequented bars less and less, I like Smiley’s in the way I liked The Tecumseh. Smiley’s may have been a bit more upscale, but it had a reputation. Just a short time before Marianne and I moved to Maiden, a barmaid’s corpse was found inside her car in the water just off the Smiley’s parking lot. If I had gotten the Maiden Gazette then I would have had a file on the whole case. Besides that, Smiley’s had a reputation as

a place where liquored locals could go and beat the shit out of each other. Unlike The Tecumseh, the crowd there often crossed class barriers. Wherever there was a mechanic pounding on somebody, there was an insurance adjuster watching, and vice versa, which made the mirrored sign behind the bar, "Smile, you're at Smiley's," more than a little ironic.

*Here's to fatherhood, Phil,* Dennis said, raising his glass of Jameson's to mine.  
*May your sins not be visited upon your son.*

*If conscience and empathy be sins, let them be laden upon my boy.*

*Oh, I forgot you were the great moralist. Or was that the great ironist? But maybe you are without sin. Christ, close to it. Was it you who told me you only had one other steady lay before you were married?*

*Good God, I knew I shouldn't have let you get here before me. You're drunk.*

*On my way, buddy. Another babe is about to be birthed. The thesis is complete.*

*Sartorial Discourses of the French Revolution is ready to be defended.*

*Congratulations. That calls for another. But sartorial? Discourses? Jesus, you are drunk. You sound like David Kline.*

*Phil, I've talked to you about my thesis lots of times. I changed my tune with respect to Kline, as an academic anyway. Without his overheated theorizing I wouldn't have gotten into Derrida and Foucault. Kline even gets an acknowledgement, the old lecher.*

*Well I'm more of an historian than a sociologist these days. An archivist maybe. Or maybe I'm just a teacher. So what do you have against Kline now that you're changing your tune and singing his praises?*

*Well, the thing with Marianne of course.*

*What thing with Marianne?*

*Phil, you've got the memory of a hamster. First you forget what I've spent five years writing about and now you don't remember the reason why Kline got tossed from McGill.*

Silence spoke for me. The bartender came by with another round and I drank the truth with my Irish whiskey. Jim revealed that the week before Kline was unceremoniously dumped by the history and english departments, he had caught Kline in a compromising position with my future wife. Experiencing a change of heart over Kline's course and teaching methods, Dennis went to his office for a consultation over difficulties he was having. Hearing voices behind the door when he knocked, Dennis decided to open the door. In the office he discovered Kline employing all the force in his scrawny body to keep Marianne pinned against his desk, one hand up her sweater, the other forcing her hand to rub the bulge in his corduroys. Dennis reminiscence that night at Smiley's was vague due to alcohol, but he was positive he neither uttered a word, nor made any motion to violence. He simply stood in the doorway and waited for Marianne to tear herself away from her molester and run to him. Kline was speechless. His adam's apple bobbed up and down in his turtleneck and he knocked over a picture of his wife as he stumbled against his desk. Literary license was taken by Dennis with these details, of

course, but one thing he was sure of was that he merely told Kline, *You're fucked*, before taking Marianne away from the terrible, terrible scene.

*'Course Marianne didn't want anything to get out at the time. Trudeau's marshall law was a break. Because of that Kline got screwed anyway. 'Course Anita always hated him, even while he grew on me and I couldn't admit to it. But he managed to salvage his career. Had to spend a year or two bouncing from occasional appointment to occasional appointment and publishing his ass off before he could get a full-time position. Jeez, like I said, I knew Marianne didn't want anyone to know, but I thought she would have said something by now. You know, I don't usually let things like that slip. Christ let's have another drink, Phil. Like when Anita said she thought Sue Barker was having an affair on Chuckie. None of my business. Don't see, don't tell.*

I heard a British voice say, *Damn straight*, from somewhere in a corner of the room, which was filling in with the after work crowd.

*Besides, Jim continued, the way he conducts himself around Anita he might as well suggest wife swapping. And he's a fucking man of the fucking cloth. Where's that other drink?*

I excused myself and went to the men's room. Leaning against the condom machine with its gaudy relief of couples having sex, I considered two facts. One was that while Marianne had not exactly been untruthful, she had hesitated in allowing me access to a particular section from a particular chapter of her life, which happened to overlap with a chapter of mine. Two, now that the truth was out about Kline, I would

have to shift my mental allegiances from Kline to Jim. Though I hadn't had anything to do with Kline in years, and though I was his physical opposite, I identified more with his type because of some mental quirk of which I had forgotten the root. Not only was Jim not the person I continued, though in smaller measures, to judge him to be, he was really and truly a good friend to Marianne and me.

Sitting before the blue of this computer screen, retrospection makes me think that machine is where Doug got that cock ring Marianne fished out of his pocket while doing the laundry. Of course she was too embarrassed to say anything, and I wasn't about to do anything about it. God, what was I supposed to do? Say, *Son it's about time we had a talk about what you're wearing on your dick these days*. Truth was Doug and I didn't talk much when he got to high school, except for in my history class, where I pushed him hardest and where he was my best student. You're not supposed to say this, but I liked my boy best between the ages of three and six, before he got that pre-adolescent precociousness, when he saw the world with wide-eyed wonder down to its most miniscule component and I had an answer to every question.

I'm almost finished this chapter now. Perhaps I'll move out from here, forward and back until I have a complete file, but I have no intentions of publishing my wholly ordinary life. I only had answer to a child's questions anyhow. My son is gone from home now. He could have gone away to university, but he simply went away. He flipped our car and killed one of his friends, and I could not explain to him why life unfolds for each individual the way it does. A car accident is a terrible thing when you are responsible and still alive, while people you love are dead or injured, and others are

searching for answers neither you nor your family nor Reverend Barker nor God can provide.

There is no great comfort, but some small truth in my friend Jim's reflection that *there are very few people who deserve to die, but there are definitely situations where you might expect to die, like driving a car drunk on a poorly lit, second grade road at 100 kmh in inclement weather. Even taking a breath is a risk.* What Jim was trying to convey was that I am as lucky as my son that he is alive. And every day lived is a new and exciting chance at anything, and there is always an element of risk involved.

I will go for a walk soon. My new subdivision neighbourhood lacks the character of the old garrison neighborhood in which we once lived but, then again, construction opened it up to the world and now it hardly seems so far removed or different. After all, behind every house you walk past at night, people are living out strategems of love and pleasure and comfort. Couples can be seen through basement windows bathed in orange light working on crossword puzzles, a girl fiddles with her ponytail as she speaks into a room, perhaps practicing a student council speech. Bart, my old, retired Italian neighbour, paces his driveway, surveying his property at night because he is used to a lifetime on the midnight shift. The smiling face of his son beams at me from the realty signs that dot the suburban streets. Bart is passed by young men home from the afternoon shift, jogging and bicycling after work to keep in shape and lose the jitters.

I don't know what else I can tell you. The human condition? Judging from my clippings no news is good news. I've decided this particular story, if it is a story, will find its home in a locked drawer in this study. While I'm alive, my family can make their

own conjectures about what I keep in here. It will be my secret. Their fictions, their conjectures about my locked drawer, will most certainly be stranger than the truth, as is always the case with made up things, contrary to popular belief. Now I save said document one last time, print, seal it in an envelope marked **To be burned upon my death**, god willing these word be heeded and the entire story, with all its contrived arrangement of meetings and events, be hidden by smoke and consumed in the warm comfort of fire.

## Caution Horses

So a few weeks ago I learned the farmer who works my land would no longer be renting from me. That was fine. I parceled the hundred acres into four plots and sold each one for a sum of sixty thousand dollars. I paid my best friend of twenty-five years a ten thousand dollar fee to do the deals. He got an additional five for selling my home and front property. Of course his company took their share, but Alex assures me he made out alright. Alex is all in all a good man and he got the job done quick and easy. 'Course I don't know if I will ever see him again.

For approximately the same cost of one of my plots I purchased this brand new Volvo, the safest car on the road. When you're driving the 401 from Windsor to Toronto you need a good set of wheels, 'cause it's the most boring trip on the fucking planet. I've done my share of traveling and found nothing like it. You might say there's some majesty around Milton once you get to the Niagara Escarpment, but that's like saying seeing the southernmost tip of Greenland on the way to England makes up for eight hours on the fucking airplane. At least in the car I have my choice of music. My taste is impeccable so I'm told, though if one were to choose, say, Celine Dion over John Coltrane, the decision would be quite arbitrary, no matter how bad one might judge another's taste to be. I'll opt for John Coltrane if you don't mind. That's *A Love Supreme* in my compact disc player. It helps you keep your cool when you're weaving in and out of those truckers' blind spots.

Anyways, when I announced publicly my plans to leave home for good my public thought I was crazy.

“Killer,” Alex said. “You’re crazy. What are you going to do anywhere else that you’re not already doing here?”

“That’s the point,” I said. “Lawrence Carter does nothing here, hasn’t done anything for a long time. It’s time for a change.”

As an interested and concerned public, Alex listed reasons why I should stay:

- 1) Maiden is a small town close to a medium-sized Canadian city (Windsor) and an even larger American metropolis (Detroit).
- 2) As a member of the Maiden-based Craned Necks, I belonged to a band that had the potential of reaching genuine cult status.
- 3) Furthermore, as an excellent musician with production skills and a practically complete music studio, I had the opportunity to rent my space to promising local musicians, professionals even, who would in turn appreciate the hip irony of recording in a bucolic setting with a view of the Fermi II cooling towers.
- 4) I enjoyed relative anonymity, even though I was Maiden’s only independently wealthy, eccentric bachelor.
- 5) I would be missed.

Alex may have cited a few more reasons but I had long stopped listening when he started waxing on the possibilities of me starting a horse farm if keeping busy was what was bothering me. That wasn’t what was bothering me. And though I knew each of the reasons I can recall to be accurate, it should go without saying that while certain facts may be true, they are not necessarily positives. Let me explain.

First a few words about this horse farm business. Anyone can tell you that a person who has plans drawn up for someone else probably has had a mind at some time or another to exact those plans himself, but for whatever reason has not. Hence this form of projection. Alex obviously had a romanticized view of the farmer drawn from sources as varied as his Italian father's recollections of a pastoral Old World, cowboy westerns and profiles of idle celebrities and their huge tracts of land. I inherited my farm from my mother. My father had purchased this property that would now be termed "distressed," before that was commonly understood as a real estate strategy. He bought the place with no designs on becoming a farmer and rented out its flat, fertile fields. We were left with a two-acre yard, a shed large enough to call a barn, a two-car garage and a pretty bungalow. Dad died two years later when I was eighteen. When I was twenty, Mum told me she had had it with Canada and was returning to the UK and that I could come along if I wanted. I stayed with the farm. Mum died in England, but not right away. With the exception of five years abroad, I've stuck with the farm 'til now.

The property kept me plenty busy. There were always little projects to take care of. Upgrading the cellar to a basement, then from a basement to a studio, took me two years working in fits and starts. Plus I renovated the kitchen, both bathrooms, the roof and did countless little exterior jobs. Then I started on the barn, winterized it, added a small greenhouse and planted a garden next to that. Oh, there were other projects, but you get my meaning. If you have the money to support yourself, you'll find plenty of ways to spend your time and never get bored. Unless you just lay around and take drugs or something, but that too passes the time. When I got bored I exercised, or learned a

new dish. I'm an excellent cook. Maybe I'll try my hand at it up there in Hogtown, but who knows, eh?

Like I was saying, Maiden was good to me and Windsor's not a bad town. In the seventies and early eighties, at least, it was like any other city. It had its scenes, music and discos and sex and drugs and ways of making money if you were so inclined. Detroit? Well Detroit is kind of like the kid who only her mother could love. If you're just visiting you might not be so impressed, but when she belongs to you you love her to death. Even at her worst, when you hate her so much you could kill her, you'll defend her against outsiders who'll slag her, even when what they say is true. Detroit *is* a wasteland and Detroit *is* a ghost town. The irony is that Detroit doesn't even belong to us. Why, she's an American. But our relationship with her just goes to show that a Canadian is not so quick to dismiss America when you give that Canadian an American sister. She'll love her like her own and it doesn't matter that she's a ghost. Just look at the way Toronto struts around like she's New York. If you know anything about New York City you know Toronto's not at all like it. Christ, even New York isn't New York anymore. It's a bloody ghost that haunts itself at every fictionalized corner. I mean what's the point of even trying to ape it. But here I am moving myself to Toronto. What can you do?

Not that I never had the chance to make it American-style, if you know what I mean. I'm quite the talent, so I'm told. Or maybe quite the character is more like it. "That Killer Carter is quite the character," they say. Just two months ago I had my first and only gig with my band. That would be the Craned Necks. Went off pretty good. We

caused a goddamned riot if you want to know the truth. Oh yeah. The younger crowd was fighting the old timers; the women were fighting the men. We tried to play through it as much as we could. A week later there's some young reporter at my door wants to do an interview. Seems our stuff made its way onto the Internet. "Hottest Online Band," this kid's calling us. 'Course I declined. And my main bandmate, Alex, went back to real estate anyway, so I don't see how he can use that as a reason for me to stay. There is no bloody band and he knows it. Besides, it's better for him not to play, family obligations and all that.

Would you look at that now? There's a trailer full of horses. For a moment I thought the sign "Caution Horses" was referring to breed. You know, like Appaloosa? Funny. Silly mistake. Still, I wonder what the traits of the Caution Horse would be. It would be a might skittish I suspect. But sometimes it's well to have something there to give you a little advance warning in this life. Prudence can be a good friend to you when you're about to go off charging into the unknown. Speaking of horses, reach down there and get that Byrds CD. I want to hear "Chestnut Mare."

So take this kid Doug Bradley, the one person I could honestly call a fan. I mean before Alex even talked me into forming a band, old Doug crashed at my place for a month. I know his Dad. Nice bloke. He's the real eccentric in town truth be told. Clueless about his kid, though. I mean, a whole month and he doesn't even know Doug's not away at school. See, Doug racked up his Dad's car, which in itself is no reason to get all bent out of shape, but he also killed his friend and injured two more. The old caution horse would have been a welcome presence that night, my dear. Come to think of it, I

remember Doug saying something about seeing a horse that night. He crashed into a field I mean and got thrown from the wreck. He comes to wandering about and sees this horse standing there pissing, with its tail straight out at a right angle to his arse like they do and all that. Make of that connection what you will, six degrees and all that, it's all as arbitrary as musical taste. It's neither here nor there really. The kicker for me is that same summer he has his first lay, then he gets his driver's license. Can you imagine losing your virginity, losing a brand new driver's license and killing someone all within a matter of weeks? That'll make you man, if it doesn't send you to the fucking nuthouse.

All in all Doug made out alright. He's got urine yellow hair and jewelry in his face, but what can you do? He videotaped the entire Craned Necks show. He's another one who thought we were going to be rock and roll stars. What he needs is a good stint abroad to set him straight, "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." Do you read Joyce?

*I'm into the beatniks.*

Well I was overseas for five years, as an adult I mean. I grew up partly in England of course. When I was twenty-five I spent two years touring Europe and the Middle East. Right after Alex's wedding. Then I lived back in Surrey for three years. I had a job and a lady. Mum was sick the entire time, absolutely grey with cancer. It's amazing she held up as long as she did. When she died I realized there wasn't really anything keeping me there, so I went back to Maiden, booted my tenants and moved back into the farm. Nothing had changed really, except all my friends were married and had jobs and I didn't want anything to do with them. I hit the bottle, mate, and had a hell of a

time doing it I must say.

See, Alex thinks I could have some sort of residual fame as a producer, but I've already hobnobbed with all the famous people I can stand. I'm wealthy on account of a trust fund that my grandparents, whom I never knew, set up for me. Not to brag, but with investment returns I'm considerably more wealthy now. Even so, I had lots of spare cash to burn back then, and burn I did.

I once spent a week with Wayne Kramer after an incarnation of his MC5 played Leamington. I remember him shouting into the microphone, "It's great to be in the town that makes my favourite fucking ketchup in the world." I knew I had to hang out with this guy. A group of us holed up at the farm and jammed for a week and put Heinz on everything.

Two years later I hear Ted Nugent has heard of me, and I should hope so. I jammed in pretty much every bar in Windsor and Detroit. Terrible Ted was interested in trying a spot of recording at my place. Then I find out the Wackmaster is more interested in my marshland, where he can shoot ducks and other waterfowl and maybe the odd deer who stops by for a cool drink. The old caution horse reared its head then. The Motor City madman wasn't going to be getting help killing things from me.

*That true? No shit.*

Oh, yeah. What else is no shit is that a view of Fermi isn't hip, it's sad. So is the Rouge River. So is ripping up precious forest to make another golf course in the county and so is an auto manufacturer pulling out of town and there's not a thing a union can do about

it and pretty soon no one has the money to golf any more, and maybe some of them will have to work a similar job for half the pay and suddenly life isn't so fucking rosey. Ah well, you don't even know what I'm saying. What were those other reasons why I should stay?

Oh yes, I enjoyed relative anonymity. Well I'm sick of anonymity. I want a little notoriety. No, not notoriety, I want to be in community. I mean really in it. I want a job and friends from the job who I can sit around with and chat about work. There's a mate of mine from England. It's an interesting story actually. She rang me up when I was a kid here in Canada and my grandparents had just perished in an airplane crash off the coast of Greenland. Ha, "on your left you'll notice the southernmost tip of Greenland is getting ever closer." Can you imagine? So we kept in touch and now she's making a success of it in film. She knows I'm a handy guy, so I might get into sets. Who knows? I'm gonna start by refurbishing her loft in return for bunking there for a bit.

What else can I say? Will I be genuinely missed? Hard to say. It's not people we miss much of the time, it's the ideas we have of people. People either change or never were the people you thought they were to begin with, and if you figure that out about someone chances are you aren't going to miss that person. Or whatever. Listen, my father also drove a Volvo, an old wagon, but that never guaranteed the safety of pedestrians. He once ran over two boys on bicycles in England. I was there. It wasn't his fault, but still.

Anyway, I've been socially dormant since Reagan and Mulroney ran North America. What do I know? Does anyone even think about Mexico, for instance? But I guess this is your stop.

*Right.*

I wish you all the luck in the world.

*Thanks. Hey, you ever driven to Chicago?*

As a matter of fact, I have. Come to think of it, it's a helluva lot more boring than this ride.

*You got that right.*

### **And in the end...**

The feet that emerge from the cruiser are booted, shiny, legs clad in blue slacks with red stripes down the sides. Police Chief Bob Smith's uniform is as crisp and clean as his car is spotless. The epaulettes on his shoulders and the badge on his peaked cap are the only features to distinguish him from his officers and constables, just as the red flashers, barely visible behind tinted windows, are the only things setting the cruiser apart from civilian vehicles. Chief Smith eases himself from the car unhurriedly in almost geriatric movements, but then his hand darts out to reach between his legs for the tennis ball now resting against his boot, so it's apparent he could still get to his gun quickly if a situation ever called for that. His gun is a .38 revolver and he's the only member of the force to still carry one, everyone else wearing the M-10 with a ten round clip. Most of the time the sidearm sits locked in his office closet.

Before Chief Smith stand the once warring boys, frozen in a tableau beautiful in its candid, combative composition. The wrought iron fence of the Maiden Garrison frames the background behind them. Only the dead eyes of the construction vehicles look on. When their job is completed, Chief Smith will propose to council that the next major public works project be the building of a new Maiden Police headquarters to replace the current aging station. Chief Smith is not unaware of the historic significance of the town land, which he will propose as the prospective site of the new headquarters. If the town plays its cards right and works with the Maiden Garrison board of directors, it should be able to make the case for federal grant eligibility to excavate the property. The proposal drawn up by the town's Chief of Police is well researched and detailed. He has

at least another month to iron it with hypothetical questions.

When he stands, Chief Smith is tall and sturdy, with a broad chest and confident posture that makes him imposing. He is not really that old, but his hair has been grey for a long time and this gives him the same steely timelessness as the garrison's fence. The impression people get of him, he knows, is one of intimidation. This is the same impression that makes children like these boys before him afraid. Similarly, it commands respect in adults, which for some is a kind of fear. Chief Smith will use this impression to great effect when he presents his proposal to council. One day he will use it to run for mayor of the town. For the moment he cuts the air with a toss of the ball. The boys break and the one who is not related to the other two catches it. Chief Smith winks and nods.

"You boys be careful."

## VITA AUCTORIS

Hugh Burkhart was born in Windsor, Ontario in 1974. He graduated from General Amherst High School in 1993. From there he went on to the University of Windsor where he obtained an Honour's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing in 1998. In the Fall of 1999 he attended the Vancouver Film School and earned a Certificate of Excellence from the Writing for Film and Television Program. He is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Spring 2001.