

HORSE LATITUDES/  
TOKYO LONGITUDES:

A FICTIONAL MARRIAGE OF IMAGINATION AND EXPERIENCE

by

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## ABSTRACT

### *HORSE LATITUDES/TOKYO LONGITUDES:*

#### A FICTIONAL MARRIAGE OF IMAGINATION AND EXPERIENCE

*Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes* is a work of fiction that explores the creative process. During the process of writing, I was interested in the interplay between memory and imagination. The characters are based on the people of my life; the events are based both on occurrences in my life and in the lives of my friends. The characters described, however, are not the people who experienced the events. With the exception of the narrator, none of the individuals characterized in the story is acquainted with any of the others. The events are real, the reactions of the characters are drawn from the imagination. *Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes* is not simply the result of 'copying down' my life.

While on a Trans-Pacific flight, the central character begins the story by reflecting on his life. He is dissatisfied with the choices he has made and realizes that he must change direction. Through the narrator's actions and those who surround him, the issue of Western romantic love, the passion that guides much of our actions, is explored. The narrator opts to seek that 'One Perfect Love' to recover from his rudderless existence. Romantic love, however, is a path with no final destination.

## DEDICATION

For my son Dan . . .

May your novel have a happy ending.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Works Noted .....	15
<i>Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes</i> .....	17
Bibliography .....	174

*Horse Latitudes/  
Tokyo Longitudes:*

*A Fictional Marriage of Imagination and Experience*

It's said that everyone's life contains a novel. Unfortunately, most of these are of interest only to their author. *Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes* represents a fictionalized account of events and people who have crossed my path. As it stands, the first one hundred and fifty pages encompass *Saddle Sores*, Part One of a three part story.

This project began as a journal for a Directed Studies course (Drs. Merler and Koepke, Fall 1997) taken while I was living in Japan. The journal was intended to provide a personal reaction to Japanese literature (in translation) and culture, but my sojourn into the literature of the land was cut short by an out-of-the-blue epileptic seizure that occurred shortly after my arrival. While I was unable to read for several weeks, the journal became a personal journey of reflection, and the works of Oe, Mishima, and Kawabata were relegated to a secondary role. My journal became *Watashi no Kobanashi*, my "Little Stories". At the conclusion of the Directed Studies course, Dr. Merler suggested that some of the events of the journal might be expanded upon in a fictionalized account.

Through the medium of fiction, I hoped to explore "Passion" and "Reason," issues that are central themes in Graduate Liberal Studies. In

addition, the project might be able to provide some light on the writing of fiction, some understanding of how the creative process blends the imagination with experience to produce fiction.

To explain the writing process, Anais Nin refers back to Jung – “Proceed from the dream outward . . . ” (Nin 321). She begins with her definition, that a dream is “ideas and images in the mind *not under the command of reason*” and not simply those which engulf our brain during sleep. Rather, a dream can be any thought that emerges from the subconscious, from simple daydreams to hallucinations resulting from drugs. It is the task of the writer to “learn to walk easily between one realm and the other without fear, interrelate them and ultimately fuse them” (Nin 321). Dreams, the “spiritual underground” as Nin calls them, are the source of literary creation (Nin 322). She also asserts that only spontaneous writing in the present can approach the truth, for as memory rearranges its files, events become altered and fictionalized to match the new reality of each day that follows. Any retrospective must, by definition, become fictionalized.

Mavis Gallant also believes that her fictional characters come from this ‘spiritual underground,’ and it is the writing process that serves to draw them out. She explains that

A character is simply there, out of nowhere, all of a piece, with a face and a voice and an accent and a particular age; with a regional and racial and religious origin; with a personality that impels a certain course of action. One sees them, one hears them – I am not implying anything like a visual or aural hallucination. It occurs in the silence of the mind, as voices do in

dreams. The faces and voices of characters are clear, but one does not meet their eyes. One's knowledge of them is implicit and entire. There is more knowledge of them stored by the writer than ever can be used  
(Gallant 11).

Gallant goes on to assert that source of her characters "remains invisible," for the source is her subconscious. Her task is to transform these people of her mind into "words and sentences, for there is no other way of transferring a work of fiction from the imagination of a writer to that of a reader" (Gallant 11). They are, as Muriel Spark said, simply "letters, words, sentences, paragraphs and punctuation" (Gallant 11).

In contrast, Mavis Gallant suggests that "Some writers know exactly the kind of character they need for a particular purpose and they will deliberately piece the character together, using memory, observation and invention" (Gallant 11). From my experience, the characters of *Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes* are not made-to-order creations. Rather, they exist independently of the persons whose traits have gone into their birth; their inspiration may indeed be visible, but the collage of traits they have assumed has no element of planning. They act on their own and their motives remain a mystery my subconscious has not revealed.

Steven Shapiro suggests that "all novels are autobiographical, made of the transformed experience of the author's life. And certainly all autobiographical writing is structured and conditioned by the 'distorting' conventions of art"



(Shapiro 424). He contends that the genre of autobiography has, until recently, received little academic attention because fiction alone was seen as “imaginative.” In contrast, autobiography was seen as the simple act of “copying oneself down” (Shapiro 425). Shapiro, quoting Scholes and Kellogg, counters that “If any distinction can be said to exist between the autobiography and the autobiographical novel, it resides not in their respective fidelity to facts but rather in their respective originality in perceiving and telling the facts. It is in the knowing and in the telling, and not in the facts, that the art is to be found” (Shapiro 425). The common thread from autobiography to autobiographical fiction is the quest for the Truth. Yet this is a very personal concept, and as Henry Adams has noted, “the mind is a watery mirror at best” (Shapiro 428).

Jill Ker Conway has written that “Every autobiographer wants to persuade others to learn from her or his life. Most aim to convince their readers to take up some important cause, follow a new spiritual path, be aware of particular hazards, develop a new moral sense” (Conway 16). So it is with fiction written in the first person. The readers believe themselves to be following a story, but at the same time an inner reflection on their own lives is set in motion. The popularity of first person fiction and autobiography may be explained in their accessibility to the nonspecialist. The technical language of the twentieth century, formulated as a necessary companion to the quest for an exact understanding of complex problems, has made it difficult for those

philosophy, to apply these lessons to their own life (Conway 17). The “magical opportunity of entering another life” perhaps explains the value and success of autobiography and first person fictional narrative (Conway 18).

The characters of *Horse Latitudes* are based on persons I have known, but they are not copies. Some characters are combinations of people rather than individuals, and in most cases, the people do not know each other. The events are segments taken from my personal history.

Somerset Maugham, in *The Summing Up*, wrote

In one way or another I have used in my writings whatever has happened to me in the course of my life. Sometimes an experience I have had has served as a theme and I have invented a series of incidents to illustrate it; more often I have taken persons with whom I have been slightly or intimately acquainted and used them as the foundation for characters of my invention. Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other (5).

John Updike, speaking of his writing, explains that he “attempted to stake out and explore a quality . . . called ‘middleness,’ or the quality of things at rest. We, the writers of my period, have tried to find the excitements of normal, everyday life “ (Gado 80). This is, after all, where most of us spend our waking hours.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. also claims to merely report a certain reality.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* begins:

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names (1).

Stylistically, I suspect there are touches of Vonnegut, Jr., John Irving, and J. P. Donleavy in my writing. It is not that I attempt to emulate them as much that they have become a part of my consciousness. So it goes. Though I have not read it for over twenty years, *The Ginger Man* by J.P. Donleavy remains my favorite. "Today a rare sun of spring," the opening line, is perfect (Donleavy 9). Each line that follows seems to fit naturally in sequence from its opening. Aspects of my story may seem similar to the *Ginger Man's*, for it too is a story that offers no high drama in world affairs. In spite of the commonplace nature of the occurrences, it is still a story that can appeal. My fiction deals with the issues of hope, escape and betrayal. In some way, perhaps all fictions are stories of escape. It is the one constant that interests all readers at all times. Betrayal is a common human predicament; we all find ourselves in situations with the choice to betray those individuals or ideals we cherish . . . or betray ourselves.

While John Irving's *The World According to Garp* remains one of the most enjoyable books I've read, it was *The Hotel New Hampshire* that made the greater impression. The story of an American family moving to Europe, it takes a dramatic turn when two of the family are killed mid-story in a plane crash. Out of nowhere come the lines "Less than six hours out of Boston, they stuck the Atlantic Ocean a glancing blow - off the coastline of that part of the continent

called France" (Irving 230, 231). Thus the mother and younger sibling vanish from the narrative. Perhaps it made a deeper impression on me since I was in a jet myself when reading it. Still, more than anything else, what struck me was the realism of the situation. Life doesn't always go as planned.

Marguerite Duras seems unable to pinpoint the source of her writing, but recognizes that her work is also a product of her personal literary history. "We never write alone," she states. "We write with those people who preceeded (sic) us. As for me, I write with Diderot, I'm sure of it, with Pascal, with the great men in my life, with Kierkegaard, with Rousseau . . . but completely without my knowing it; it is my first food that I read greedily" (Skoller 86).

During a Trans-Pacific flight, *Horse Latitudes'* narrator reflects on how recent events have changed his life and the lives of others. From take-off to touchdown, he is absorbed in the choices he has made and finds them wanting. He is living a life without a rudder, and is not a man to be trusted. By flight's end, he realizes he has crossed more than an ocean. It is time for a change. It is time to form an emotional partnership, to become part of a couple. Of course, things do not always go as planned.

*Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes* is an autobiographical fiction. The events of the story reflect my history, slightly embellished, and the characters reflect people I have known. In some cases, however, character traits are drawn from more than one individual, the qualities of each fused together to create a new being. Most obvious of these is the character "Anna," a creature who is

both descendant of my own personal 'blonde disease' and also a direct relative of a Japanese acquaintance who, though illiterate in English, managed to sleep her way to a Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. To this point in the narrative, few of the characters, with perhaps the exception of "Derek," display admirable qualities on any consistent basis.

Rather than 'copy myself down,' I have attempted to convey the events of my existence. Replicating those individuals who have been a part of my story was not an intention. Offering an account of the innermost thoughts that inspired my character's actions will, with apologies, have to wait for Part Two of the narrative. These thoughts can, however, be summarized in a word. All characters live in 'hope.'

Perhaps Woody Allen got it right. In the closing scene of *Love and Death*, 'Boris,' who has just died, asks 'Death':

"Now that you've got me, can you tell me the secret of life?"

Death replies: "Sex with someone you love - - and the more of it, the better."

Boris: "Well, I was on the right track."

(Allen, *Love and Death* 146).

Is this simply a screenwriter's joke, or is Woody Allen closer to the truth than we realize? In North America, our basic needs of food, clothing and shelter are easily satisfied, and while most of us outside the monasteries still want 'more' and 'better' material goods, this remains a separate issue. Having

achieved the requirements for survival, our remaining need is to satisfy the demands of social conditioning and acquire a partner, someone with whom we can share life experiences. However, love relationships seem destined to disappoint. In spite of this, we as a culture disregard the evidence and desperately continue our search. Vows continue to be exchanged in spite of the statistical evidence that one of every two marriages in North America will fail. With the fall of religious authority, sequential marriages have become the standard of the late twentieth century, allowing individuals to fail repeatedly with new partners rather than contain their misery to the first spouse. We change partners with the ease of changing television channels, for the new lifestyle offers a continuous hope of success. Enduring love, however, is a rare commodity.

We are victims of our cultural memory. We are expected to marry, regardless of any urge for child bearing, in complete disregard of the new reality. Agrarian society has ended and contraceptive technology has been developed, together creating the possibility of a society where children need only be born where and when they are wanted. Yet we are programmed, as surely by our past as by our genetics, to produce children outside these desirable boundaries. It is the norm.

Our culture is based on the romantic myth that each will find his one 'perfect love,' and having done so, will live on in happiness together with that individual. At Plato's drinking party, Aristophanes tells of the origins of love,

relating a fable of how Zeus split the three sexes into halves because he feared a loss of power. As a result of this split, each person continues to pine for their missing half in an effort to recover a sense of wholeness. Somewhere in the world there is a one ideal mate for each individual, and when these beings meet, the two 'halves' will risk any danger to complete themselves. This remains the basis of our view on romantic love (Ackerman 96,97).

Yet it is increasingly clear that romantic love simply does not work. When the love potion wears off, a process that rarely takes more than two or three years, we tire of the mundane and strike out again in search of a new Perfect One. If marriage has entered our relationship, then the added intrigue of adultery heightens our venture. Each of us is constantly in pursuit of that which is beyond our reach. Tales of forbidden love always strike a chord and inspire us in our personal quest. We long for the passion that the characters feel in these stories, we long for an escape from our normal and routine existence. We long for the thrill, the risk and the excitement of a forbidden encounter. If we can convince ourselves that our new love represents the 'One', we will shed our promises and obligations as a snake must shed its skin. Few of us will admit to drinking a love potion or being hit by Cupid's arrow, but nearly all will admit to the possibility that, if Prince (or Princess) Charming came along, we would gladly try on Cinderella's glass slipper and submit to passion's charms.

As a culture, we search for what does not exist. Infidelity is the result. When the realization occurs that our last choice of partner was not 'Perfect', we cast our nets for the next partner, secure in the belief that 'Mr./Ms. Right' is waiting around the corner. Such is the nature of our literature as well. Readers do not clamor to read of the perfectly happy couple, movies rarely illustrate the joys of fidelity. Indeed, an entire industry, the Country Music business, is built upon a foundation of the broken heart. 'My truck's broke, my dog's dead, my love's done gone away.' To counterbalance this despair, there is the Pop Music industry, offering new tunes on an hourly basis to provide inspiration. Maybe the next love will be the Perfect One. It rarely is.

Infidelity is a main ingredient of *Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes*. The narrator, "Johnson", seems caught in the circular quest for a partner. Things never work out. "Anna", whose unfaithfulness instigates "Richie's" trauma, seems mindlessly oblivious to the pain her actions cause. Yet how foreign must this reaction be to those whose cultures accept the existence of 'lovers' outside of marriage. How foreign indeed to those of cultures where multiple spouses are the norm. Perhaps fidelity, at least sexual fidelity, holds a place in our values that it does not deserve. Is it possible to share love with more than one person at a time? Inevitably, the answer must be 'yes,' but within the cultural prison our ancestors have constructed, this is not an option. Instead, the citizens of the Western world are doomed to repeated failure in our quest for marital bliss. This is the fate of the characters of *Horse Latitudes/Tokyo*



*Longitudes*. They should not be surprised for this is an obvious 'Truth' of our society.

Each work of fiction must give its readers a kernel of truth. It cannot simply be a replication of people or events; there must be a greater quest than the simple narration of a story. Erica Jong quotes Emerson to make her point:

novels that give way, by and by to diaries or autobiographies - captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly (Jong xxv).

Of all forms of written venture, the novel best allows the exploration for the "truth truly". In fiction, the writer and the reader must come to an agreement. The reader must accept that what is narrated is imaginary, but at the same time must also accept that the writer is not telling a lie. There must be a 'suspension of disbelief' which enables the reader to inhabit the lives of the characters about whom he reads. By walking a mile in their shoes, the reader is able to derive benefit from the events which the characters experience (Eco 75). It is a very private lesson, and each reader must find his or her own personal 'truth'.

In his novel *Woman of the Dunes*, Kobo Abe creates a surrealistic scene. An isolated village is threatened by encroaching sand. The inhabitants trap a young biologist who is enjoying a weekend hunt for insects and imprison him in a house buried in the sand. From this unlikely beginning, the character is led through a time of rebellion and then despair, but finally escapes madness by

shifting his attention to solving the village's problem. Abe's audience is fully aware of the agreement between author and reader. It is a contract that readers of fiction willingly accept, even if they are unaware of its existence.

*Horse Latitudes* also had a unique contract. Through the writing of fiction, I hoped to understand not a school of philosophy or science, nor an understanding of politics or history, but rather something more difficult - that is, to explore myself. Fiction, in order to fulfill its contract with readers must be written to entertain, but this fiction's contract also required an evaluation of the events that inspired its creation and the process that turned fact into fiction.

*Horse Latitudes/Tokyo Longitudes* reflects my personal reality. Within these pages are the people I have come to know. Within these pages are life experiences that my friends and I have faced. In some small sense, perhaps *Horse Latitudes* can illustrate that we as a society are looking for lifetime partners who, except in very special circumstances, do not exist. Perhaps too, it can demonstrate that we as individuals are anxious to avoid the consequences of the past, to find an easy way out. Like the character 'Bird' in Kenzaburo Oe's *A Personal Matter*, we all hope to run away to Africa. We live in hope that our lives will find remedy just around the corner. We learn in dismay that it is the same wherever we go. We eventually learn that there is no escape, there is no Perfect One. Yet it is only human to continue the search.

While in Japan, I acquired the film *Damage*, an adaptation of the novel by Josephine Hart. It is a story of two people whose lives are overwhelmed by

passion, and the lessons learned come at a steep price. At its conclusion, the narrator reflects that

It takes a remarkably short time to withdraw from the world. I traveled until I arrived at the life of my own. What actually makes us is beyond the grasping, is way beyond knowing. We're given to love because it gives us some sense of what is unknowable. Nothing else matters, not in the end (Hart 213).

Hart's lines were both the inspiration and theme of *Horse Latitudes/Tokyo*

*Longitudes*. Finding that one perfect love, if only for a little while, is what our lives are all about.

In the film *Annie Hall*, the character Alvy summarizes this sad fact of life.

I thought of that old joke, you know, this guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." And the doctor says, "Why don't you turn him in?" And the guy says, "I would, but I need the eggs." Well, I guess that's pretty much how I feel about relationships. You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd and . . . but, I guess we keep going through it because, uh, most of us need the eggs (Allen, *Annie Hall* 105).

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*Horse Latitudes/  
Tokyo Longitudes*

## *Seiketsu*

I think we've had sex.

My last night in Tokyo. Keiko and I sit close together, almost lovers, in this dark piano bar. She sips her sherry and smiles, giggling and drunk from the party she has just escaped. I mull over my \$10 coffee, watching the circles swirl in the dim light. I'm happy to be with her, yet I'm not quite there. I've seen this movie before and my mind slides off to memories of this magical land, soon to be abandoned. I decide I am not sorry to go, only sad to leave her behind. She rambles on in her own inebriated, sweet way, worrying about her apartment, how messy it is. Should I care? Would I care? Would I even notice? Are we going to your apartment, Keiko?

Times have changed. Rika has lost her magic. Today I found myself making excuses to escape Rika in the hope that Keiko would phone. Which she did. And she's drunk, but not so bad that she can't find the Meridian Pacific Hotel, 38 floors up, with view that displays all of Tokyo. I can see everything in Japan. Big white moon above, a kaleidoscope of colors below. I understand everything in the universe. Except myself.

Keiko rambles on. My mind flips to another channel, searching the database of my mind. "Seiketsu." In *Snow Country*, Kawabata uses the word to describe a geisha who is "pure" and "clean", yet so drunk on sake that she

must crawl to her lover's bed. Even in this condition, her lover finds her perfect in her beauty, perfect in every way. Is that you Keiko? Or is there a better word, "ichinichizuma"? Kawabata uses the image of two yellow butterflies, an image used through centuries of Japanese poetry, to introduce the lover to his geisha. When recalling how they met, the lover can only focus on the butterflies. In this image, "ichinichizuma" is used to describe another meaning, "one-day spouses," the transient nature of their relationship. Are we going to your apartment, Keiko? Are we going to my hotel room?

Rika was the love of my life. Keiko was Rika's friend, our bridesmaid who never was. She was always there, hanging around, next door in the ski lodge, lying on the beach towel beside Rika, in the restaurants, on our walks. The third wheel. Occasionally, she and I found ourselves alone together. Once, when up for a visit from her Washington college, Keiko and I went for a walk on Victoria's breakwater, fighting a strong autumn wind all the way to the lighthouse. We held hands and I giggled when an elderly, smiling passerby offered "It's a little Nippy, isn't it?"

She asked what he meant. I explained that 'nippy' just meant cold, and left out all the racist innuendoes of a former generation, the generation of this passerby. Those same innuendoes had herded thousands of innocents like my Keiko into the concentration camps of the Kootenays, the rape of a culture in the name of common sense. A traitor in their midst?



Of course, 'nip' also had happier memories as the name for a hamburger at the Salisbury House, a restaurant of my youth in Winnipeg. And the story of a friend from Winnipeg who, enjoying a holiday south of the border, asked for a nip in a restaurant and got a slap in the face. 'Nip' in that county meant sex. How was he to know? How can I tell Keiko all this? Her English is not good enough for complex discussions. In fact, we don't talk much anyway. We smile a lot. 'Cold' seems a good enough explanation.

So what's the code word for sex in this bar, so high above Tokyo, so far removed from reality? Sex? Keiko and I never did have sex, I conclude. Only in my imagination, I think. There. That was it. I always wondered if we should, but I was too wrapped up in Rika's spell to pursue the matter. We made love in my mind, but that's all. Or maybe in hers as well. Tonight the thought seems to be there, just below the surface of her low murmuring, her head slipping down to my shoulder. Are we going to your apartment, Keiko? Why not my hotel room? It's just a couple of floors down. But you're about to pass out . . .

Soon she lies sleeping in my bed, a slight smile on her face, her arms outstretched, as if on a cross. Do you sacrifice yourself for me Keiko? Well, maybe in the morning, but I suspect your hangover is going to be vicious. She's only trying to stop the world from spinning. I give her one quick kiss 'goodnight' and she's in dreamland, the blanket pulled up to her shoulders. I

turn from her smile to gaze out the window. Who would think that Tokyo could be so beautiful? Why must I leave? I don't have to, I know. I could just stay and stay and stay.

Another book barges in on my brain. Women and sacrifice. *A Personal Matter* by Kenzaburo Oe. Why did all these Japanese guys win Nobel Prizes? Because they build books like Toyotas, I decide, accessible and long lasting. I was reading it this afternoon on the shinkansen down from Sendai. I'm not like Oe's protagonist. No way. I want to make love with Keiko in the morning, but doubt that I will. No way. Five months ago the answer would have been 'sure, why not?' Now the answer must be no. No more ichinichizuma for me. What I want will take a bit more involvement than a couple of sherries in a Tokyo bar to figure out. I decide it's probably not just Keiko who's drunk.

*A Personal Matter* sticks in my mind, but I don't know how it fits. The central character, 'Bird', is a young student/teacher with a failing marriage and a job he is about to lose. He dreams of escaping to Africa, running away and hiding in his fantasy. He dreams there is a place where he can outrun his frustrations. I think we all do that. His long-suffering wife reports that while sleeping he shouts things in Swahili. I don't think we all do that.

She bears him a brain-damaged son, and Bird hides from the awful truth in the sexual comforts of an old friend. His ally adopts his dream, and the new

couple scheme to leave for Africa right after the baby's death. But the baby does not die, and Bird does not run. He can no longer run from his problems, and even his childish nickname "Bird" evaporates. He has become a new man.

Maybe I have too. Not as dramatic, perhaps. I don't think I shout in Japanese while sleeping. Still, Japan may have been my Africa, my escape. What does that make Keiko? Is she my savior from the reality I cannot face? Probably. If I asked. She would offer herself and my demons would fall into history, at least for a while. Yet even in Africa, my problems would find me. They live within. I must go back to Canada and see where I stand, where I'm going. Keiko will wait for me, if I ask.

And then . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Sayonara*

Morning sunshine, orange juice at Narita. Keiko must be in her office by now. She had walked me to the train station and put me on the Narita Express even though she had not been well. Another sacrifice. And now I wait for this final boarding call to take me home. Home? What does that mean? Home is where the heart is, I've heard. But I must leave her to find her.

Early afternoon and the big jet rumbles down the runway. I supervise the takeoff, refuse offers of earphones and lunch and settle into the low roar that passes for silence in the 747. 'Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth and touched the face of God'. My mind charts its own course. Even the flight attendant and her beverage cart cannot enter. I slip into my past to find my future.

There once was a time.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Once*

Once I had a friend. Grew up with him. For reasons now departed, his nickname when we were children was Horsie Pooh Bear. Brent the Horse for short. I don't think I had read about Pooh Bear at that stage in my life, so probably it was given to him by one of the others. Like Ants in Pants Terry, who got his name as a result of a particularly exciting experience. The only thing I gave Brent the Horse was poison ivy, all over his body. We were little, probably age ten or so. Ants in Pants had a hedge around his yard. There was Poison Ivy in it and for some reason, I wasn't allergic. A discussion ensued about my biological abnormality. We chased each other around the yard, being careful to hold the Poison Ivy by the stem, not the leaves. "Leaves three, let them be." Eventually he caught me, or I him. We rubbed the leaves all over each other. The next day, Brent the Horse was a mass of itchy red blotches and covered with a white ointment. I was fine. His mother was not pleased.

I played more with Brent when we were little. In the dark garage behind his house, we would sit in his dad's car, listen to the radio and just talk. Once, he gave me an explanation of human biology. Brent knew stuff like that. Another time, after some experimental smoking in the garage, we were sneaking back across the lawn, trying not to look suspicious with car keys in hand and his mother at the kitchen window. Then we heard a loud bang come from the neighbor's house, saw the milkman put his case of milk down on the

porch and go in. Brent yelled at him "Is everything all right?" The milkman didn't come out to answer, and we parted. Our mothers talked on the phone. Our mothers talked to us. About smoking. The next day we learned the man next door had blown his head off with a shotgun. Kind of a surprise for the milkman, eh?

We had a postmortem on this event, a debate on the issue that 'he was just cleaning his gun' vs. the 'he was sad so he killed himself.' I opted for the accident version, but we didn't resolve the issue.

A couple of years after the shotgun incident, the milkman's truck stalled on a train intersection at the wrong time. Spilt milk. Anyway, he too was dead. Funny how it goes.

Because Brent's dad was an airline pilot, his family had two cars and a cabin at the lake. I was invited to go to the cabin, and because the family was already there, I drove up alone with his dad. He was normal, but his wife had an English accent and I thought she sounded like Queen Elizabeth. The lake was about an hour and a half from the city, and I sat quietly. Mostly. I remember watching the speedometer on the Chevrolet and occasionally asking him about airplanes. I was especially interested in the air brakes that I'd heard big trucks had, and I wondered if air brakes could be used to stop a plane while it was flying. I'd seen it in cartoons.

Inseparable as children, Brent and I rarely talked after elementary school. In fact, we could go for months without even seeing each other. Different interests, I guess. Though we both registered at St. John's, the Anglican Church affiliate at the University, my allegiances were across campus at University College, a place of political radicals and the city's Jewish aristocracy, and, not insignificantly, a good coffee machine. My friends and I would spend the hours in-between classes perched on the small radiators that ran along the hallway beside the coffee lounge. The student newspaper called us "radiator radicals." We'd talk politics as if it was important and watch the Jewish girls as if we had a chance. Sometimes I would wear my Chairman Mao button. I don't think Brent would ever wear a Chairman Mao button. Too sensible. Of course, neither would I now. Honest. I don't know what Brent did, but I suspect study was involved because he graduated with Honors and went off to England to pick up a Masters. He was always a smart boy.

A few years later, Brent and I ended up in Vancouver. We were both married, and Brent was a reporter for a newspaper. Occasionally, I'd see his byline on the front page. Once in a while, we'd play tennis. Brent was good because he'd belonged to the Southpark Club all his life and had taken tennis lessons. I never bothered with the clay courts. It just hadn't been an interest. Brent could easily beat me as a result, but he didn't rub it in. I could see that in just a few more months I'd be his equal. I doubt that he saw it that way.

Sooner or later, we all give up our dreams. I've stopped thinking I can win at Wimbledon one day. My serve is getting better but I've noticed that sometime during this summer I've given up on my two-handed backhand. It saves a step or two by just reaching out with a one-hander, so I don't have to move so quickly. What does this mean?

Once, long ago, my second wife showed me an article in *Cosmopolitan*. It said that older men were vastly superior to the young because we took so much longer to ejaculate, thus providing the young *Cosmo* reader with many extra moments to enjoy her revelry. Made sense to me. It showed there was more to life than a short refractory period. Alas, it was not to be. Eventually, my second wife left me for an older man. I still haven't had the heart to ask her if there was a noticeable performance difference.

That whole episode with wife No. 2 was a learning experience for me, a daily lesson in reality. Some of us need repetition to have these lessons sink in. I learned that sometimes people don't mean what they say. For instance, "I love you." An interesting phrase. I used to find it quite believable. When they tag on the bonus word "forever," it's time to throw some extra salt in your margarita and phone your lawyer. In spite of this and other lessons I've had, I don't seem to be getting any smarter. Why is that?

Maybe I could beat the Horse at tennis now. I'm better than I was when we last played. Things change. Time flies. But it was not to be. Brent moved



back to Winnipeg after that summer to take an editor's job at a newspaper there, and I was left to console myself by sending him nasty birthday cards and short notes which crowed about my new skills on the courts.

A couple of years later, just before his birthday, I got a note from his wife. She asked me not to send a goofy card this year. Brent had lost his job when the newspaper closed and had been depressed for a few months. Then he shot himself. Funny how it goes.

But maybe he was just cleaning his gun.

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## *The Horse Latitudes*

On automatic pilot now, 35,000 feet up. No turbulence expected, but we recommend you keep your seat belt fastened. To me, airline pilots seem like they're on automatic pilot all the time. That's comforting as a passenger, but I wonder if I could have lived that life, been happy on their course? I suppose if I'd met the right woman, I'd be happier mowing the lawn on weekends, taking the kids to their soccer games. No surprises please. This time I accept an Asahi from the beverage cart lady and settle back in my seat. The movie is starting, but I'll pass. I just want time to look out the window, though there's nothing much to see. Clouds sliding across a gray sea, far, far down. Another world down there. I just want time to figure out my little corner of this universe. What I see isn't that pretty.

Things happen. Life goes on. I'm a pilot. That's my job. Passenger in this 747, I feel as if I'm in my SkyCrane, looking down on the world. Everything looks different from above. Everything is understandable from above. Even Tokyo looked beautiful last night. In the dark. A pretty woman in a long black dress at the piano. Playing Gershwin. And Keiko.

But I guess not everything is understandable, even from up in the heavens. Life, like flying, has its dangers. If you get too close to the earth, it can grab you and pull you down. I won't think about that now.

Another story. Another friend. I used to work with him, but then he went out to the Horse Latitudes.

Do you know the Horse Latitudes? I'll tell you. It's a place in the ocean where not very much happens. The wind stops, and it seems like your life stops too. At least that's the way it seemed to the sailors on their way someplace important. The dictionary says it's one of two belts or regions in the neighborhood of 30 degrees N and 30 degrees S latitude characterized by high pressure, calms, and light baffling winds. When sailors were becalmed there for weeks, they'd run out of food and water and end up throwing their cargo overboard to save supplies for themselves. Their cargo of horses, keys to the conquest of empire. They say the ocean would be thick with horses, thrashing and neighing to wake the devil. And then it would be quiet, the sea thick with carcasses. Still. It's said that the dead horses could stop your ship, just like the schools of herring up at the Grand Banks. At least until the sharks came. So they say. I doubt it. Still, when nothing happens, bad things happen. That's what I figure. Me, I just want to stay out of the Horse Latitudes.

I can remember everything about the last day I worked with Richard Porteous. I was flying my SkyCrane out of a logging camp on Northern Vancouver Island. It's a long way from Viet Nam, which is where I met Richie. My chopper is louder than the ones I had in Nam and that afternoon it was

sounding particularly unhealthy. At least nobody was shooting at me anymore.

Except maybe Porteous, the Chief Engineer, who would shortly be accusing me of over-stressing the engine and would then ground my chopper for a couple of days. And that would force me to head off early for R and R in Vancouver, leaving behind a 12-hour overhaul for the engineers. Poor Richie. No R and R for you.

He would ride me about it some day over a few beers. Maybe I did overdo it. I didn't notice. And I knew that Porteous was only concerned about my safety, and about keeping the chopper flying. We'd both seen accidents. We've seen plenty of choppers fall out of the sky. And lost plenty of friends who didn't make it to middle age. Sometimes it seemed like half my life has been spent in choppers. Too many choppers. Two weeks on, two weeks drunk. Two weeks on, two weeks drunk. That's my life. Asahi?

Sometimes I told myself I should drink less. I had that conversation with myself the last day I saw Richard, coming in after my last load. A silly thought. There I was, altitude 500 feet, hovering my SkyCrane, (which is not the most reliable of God's flying machines to begin with), with a winch holding 20,000 pounds of timber swaying beneath me. One false step and I'll be

spinning, crashing, burning and perhaps even hurt. And there I was thinking gibberish. Drink less? What's the point?

That day I couldn't concentrate on the flying. On the horizon, British Columbia's coastal mountains, virginal snow caps, gifts from God. On my left, the heartless Pacific sending armies of surf crashing onto the shores. Below, the emerald forests, home of trout, of deer, of Paradise. Below too, that small bite of forest hanging from my winch. Destroying God's creation, one bite at a time. Time to fly, and then go fuel up. Or shut down, if I'm lucky. If Porteous is on his toes.

I'm a good pilot. You have to be to fly a SkyCrane. Helicopter logging is restricted to pilots who are very good. A pilot who is almost good enough should buy plenty of life insurance.

The cable released. The timber exploded on the drop point. My giant copter turned for the camp. After so many trips, it almost flew itself. Time for refueling. Time to relax. Time to see Richie. For the last time.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Happy Days*

As the Crane came in for refueling, Richard Porteous thought he heard something wrong, something he couldn't define. But something he recognized. Richie knew his job. Last year he saw a chopper from another company lose power on lift off, come down on the mechanic, explode. Burn. Kill. Another friend. That's the downside to this job. The crash was in Oregon, when we were fighting forest fires. Richie's from California, but we go where the company sends us. Now we're heli-logging on Northern Vancouver Island, stripping away the trees, one bite at a time. Two weeks on, two weeks off.

Porteous too had seen too many helicopters in his life. He hated them. He loved them. They kept him from his wife, the love of his life. They paid him a lot of money.

My helicopter came in to the base, hovering above the landing pad. The crew bustled to the down draft, refueling while the rotors chopped at the air. When a machine costs \$100 a minute to fly, you don't waste time turning it off to gas up. It was more like a pit stop at a Grand Prix race, except that nobody has to change the tires. Porteous sat astride a SkyCrane's engine on the neighboring landing pad, listened intently, his eyes squinting amid the swirling dust. Then he climbed down and marched toward my chopper. His eyes met mine. He wasn't happy, and he signaled to me to shut it down.

I smiled inside. I am the Captain of my ship, but when the Crew Chief wants to play with my toy, he always gets his way.

The crew backed away and the chopper settled. Gradually, the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of the rotor slowed. I stayed in the cockpit, running a few shut down checks. Finally, silence, again.

Until Porteous broke the stillness. Businesslike. "It doesn't sound right. Did you notice anything?" he asked. Not waiting for my reply, he added "I'll have a quick look, maybe save your ass from the crash and burn syndrome."

"Fine with me. It seems to be losing power, and it sounds like hell. I'll grab a coffee . . . hope you find something to send me home early."

And Richie Porteous, sliding the ladder up the side of the crane, hoped he wouldn't.

A few minutes later, Porteous felt gloomy. The crane would need repair, and he knew he would be working overtime again. "And that Bastard Johnson would be in Vancouver early," he thought. I know how he thinks.

Porteous found me drinking coffee, standing shirtless and shoeless in the kitchen of my trailer. I must have had the look of someone who knew he was about to get a present.

"Have you been red-lining that engine again?" Porteous started.

My only defense was offense. "Richie, I'm hurt. If the machine's broken, it's cause we can't get good help up here to fix it."

"Well SuperPilot, have a nice long rest in Vancouver cause the crane's dead for a few hours, and by the time I get it fixed, it'll be time for you to head off anyway."

"I was hoping you'd say that." In fact, I knew he'd say that.

"The rewards of incompetence. You'll do well in this company." With that, Porteous waved and was out the door, already planning the teardown of the engine. Ten meters away, he turned and offered an olive branch. "Have a good trip, and don't catch anything."

Richie smiled, but inside a knot was growing in his stomach. The pressure was on. If everything went well, he could still be back in Vancouver by tomorrow night. I even know what he was thinking. He was thinking about me, jealous of my early departure, wondering if I'd wrecked the engine on purpose. "No," he would think, "it wasn't that Johnson would break the chopper deliberately, and it wasn't that he was incompetent. Just a little careless sometimes, but everyone has those days."



He'd seen me under fire in Nam, in the forest fires of the mountain states, in logging, in getting in safely when the weather gave no room for error. He'd fly with me anytime, anywhere. He's said that to other guys when he was drunk. They told me. But especially today, he just wanted to go home. He had more important things to do. He was going sailing.

He said I'd never change. He used to be like me in Nam. Girls and booze. Always eager to hit Saigon, find a girl, drink a beer or three. Have a good time. Once last summer he caught me having beer for breakfast, but so what? When I'm off duty, I like to have a few beers. Actually, that hadn't started until we got back to the States. We'd worked together, drank together, chased the girls together. But Porteous had caught his, and I was still out there looking. And now it was time to hit Vancouver and continue the search.

Two SkyCranes down, and only 44 hours until he would be off shift. Porteous jogged toward the choppers and gave instructions to his crew.

Work, work, work. Two days to go. Two days till he saw her again. Anna. Anna-Baby, he called her. The love of his life. The Ancient Greeks believed that Zeus split the three sexes into halves because he feared a loss of power. As a result of this split, each person continues to pine for their missing half in an effort to recover a sense of wholeness. Somewhere in the world there is one ideal mate for each individual, and when these beings meet, the two

'halves' will risk any danger to complete themselves. It is the basis of today's myth of romantic love. Richie believed he had found his other half in Anna, his young wife. They'd been married only two years. I was the Best Man.

Richie smiled as he thought of her. He saw her in his mind, lying on the deck in the sun, probably reading those books he didn't understand. His wife, at twenty-four, fifteen years his junior. Still a student at university. He didn't need to keep a stable of women. Suzanna his wife, his Anna-Baby, was all he needed, all he wanted. He knew other men looked at her when they entered. When they looked at him, there was envy in their eyes. He liked that. He loved waking up with her beside him. He loved going to bed with her even more.

His spell was broken by the approach of a mechanic holding a box from the chopper's electrical system. "We've got a problem, Richie. This things fried, and we don't have any more."

There was no option. Richie Porteous would have to fly to Vancouver, try to get the part rebuilt or replaced, bring it back, install it, and then get his break. Otherwise the Crane wouldn't fly till Monday when the parts depot opened again. Downtime is money. In this business, a lot of money.

"Well I guess I'll go find one. Tell Johnson to sit on it for a few minutes and I'll join him on the seaplane." He knew I would have already radioed for

the seaplane, probably before I even had my coffee. He gave instructions to the other mechanics, then jogged to the dock. The drone of the seaplane could be heard coming in over the lake. He sighed. "I used to be like him," he thought, not without some pity.

But I don't need your pity, Richie.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Welcome Home*

The floatplane roared its good bye to the lake and left the camp behind. Porteous watched the men on the downed Skycranes stop work and follow his departure. He knew their thoughts. They too were on this plane in their minds, imagining their arrival back home. But they were a good crew. By the time Porteous returned, my Crane would be ready and waiting, and he could finish up on the electricals in a couple of hours. And then it would be the turn of Jack MacPherson, the alternate Crew Chief, to run the show for a couple of weeks.

We didn't talk much on the flight, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I had told Rika I'd call her when I got in. She'd probably want me to come over. Yuk. Tokyo in summer. No way. No girl was worth that.

Climbing to 8000 feet, the plane provided a post card view of the coastal mountains. Green forests rose up and fell beneath them, hill slopes patterned with squares of clear-cut and laced with ribbons of logging roads. It was beautiful, as long as you didn't look too closely. If you thought about it, it was criminal what we were doing to the earth. I decided not to think about it that day. I'd had this discussion with Porteous and MacPherson and just about everyone else. How do you justify the destruction of a landscape, of an ecology, of a planet, for human gain?

But the money's good. And then Georgia Strait came into view. In a few minutes, Richie Porteous would be on his cellular phone, talking with Anna. He always did. He knew why he worked at this job.

The pilot was silent. He had ferried all the crew many times in and out of these woods and was comfortable in the silence. Silence? The loud roar of the engine and the rush of wind over craft made it difficult to talk without shouting or without the intercom mic. Porteous often had little to say, and the pilot could always talk to the base if he was bored. Or to me, reclining as best I could in the rear seat, my brain in the off position as I readied myself for action in the city. But the pilot resisted the impulse to break the silence. Instead, he busied himself with the radio, listening to the traffic landing and taking off from Vancouver International. They were getting busy.

Porteous watched the needles and dials on the plane's panel. Everything seemed to functioning well. He was glad they didn't make his crew look after these little puddle-jumpers too.

Finally, they crossed Quadra Island, the threshold of cellular service, and the Crew Chief called the maintenance depot about his mission. He was quick and efficient.

Then he called his wife. Business before pleasure.

She answered sleepily.

"Hi Baby. Guess who?" Porteous began. He showed no embarrassment talking like that.

"Hi Richie. Where are you?"

"At about 8000 feet over Quadra Island. I'm just coming in to pick up a part, then take it back this afternoon. Hopefully, everything is on schedule for my coming home tomorrow night."

"Not today?" Anna seemed more awake now. "So you're not coming to see me?"

"Not even time for lunch today, Baby. Sorry. What are you doing today?"

"I have to go up for a 2:30 class, research a bit more for my project, and shop for groceries for our sailing trip," she replied. "And tonight, Cathy's coming over and we're going to go over my paper." She laughed. "Busy, busy busy. I was just getting ready to run out the door."

"It still sounds like more fun than my day" Richie concluded. "OK. See you tomorrow night. Luv yah. Bye bye, Baby." And with that, the roar of the plane seemed louder. He missed her. He wished he could spend every day,

every night, with her. Instead of the half life they now shared. Porteous felt a little sorry for himself. I probably felt the same way.

The coast slid by underneath us. Tugs pulling log booms, the occasional white sail of a heeling yacht, and little houses dotting the coastline, all resembling children's toys. And behind them, just a few hundred yards from this civilized veneer, only trees, mountains, loggers.

Time passed. In the distance, a ferry, then the houses more frequent, the boats more numerous, the residences of the university coming into view, and finally, turning into English Bay, the skyline of downtown Vancouver. On a clear day, it really was Paradise.

The pilot became more active, talking to the controller, decreasing power, checking his instruments, carburetor heat on, flaps down, the trees of Stanley Park coming closer. Someday he was going to fly under the centre span of Lion's Gate Bridge, the pilot threatened.

"The last day you fly", Porteous remarked dryly.

Finally, with a smooth turn, the craft sunk toward the harbor below, skimmed the water, and was grabbed by the city. We taxied to the wharf, Porteous jumped to the dock, instructed the pilot that he'd see him again about 3 PM, and marched up to the terminal door. I waved good-bye to him, then

socialized some more with our pilot as he tied up the plane. Richie Porteous disappeared into the first of the waiting cabs. He waved again as he got in. I finally left the wharf and hailed a taxi of my own. Left alone, the pilot tied up the seaplane, lost in his own concerns.

In the taxi, Richie's cellular rang. It was the maintenance depot. They couldn't fix or replace the part. They would fly one in from Calgary, but it wouldn't arrive till tomorrow. His trip was for nothing. He told the driver his home address, and phoned the alternate Crew Chief, Jack MacPherson.

MacPherson answered with a brusque "Yes!" He was trying to mow the lawn, do the laundry, fix the car and everything else he left until his last day off.

"Good news, Jack. I just got a call from the depot. They can't get me an injector unit till tomorrow. Which means No. 7 will stay grounded till you solve this little problem."

Richie liked MacPherson. He enjoyed giving him this little piece of bad news. Nothing like a crisis waiting for you when you get off the plane. MacPherson had done the same thing to Porteous a few weeks earlier.

MacPherson could only manage a "Jeez! Why me? Apart from that, anything happening up there?"



"The mosquitoes are getting bigger. I saw one this morning with a seagull in his mouth. And the black flies are starving for your return. You have a nice couple of weeks, OK? I think I'll book off and save the company the return trip back."

"Don't blame you. You and Anna goin' sailing again?" MacPherson knew they spent their summer sailing in the islands that sprinkled the Strait.

"Yep. We're going up to Princess Louisa Inlet if the weather holds."

The two men continued talking shop for a few minutes, then Dick excused himself. "Gotta go, Jack. I'm nearly home. Be a good Crew Chief and cancel my return flight for me, OK? I'll be thinking of you."

The taxi rounded the bridge exit and turned onto 2nd Avenue, then turned toward the marina where Richard and Anna Porteous lived aboard their sailboat. Richie was only a little surprised when he saw the Jeep in its parking spot, but thought nothing of it. Absentmindedly, he picked up the case of beer from the back seat and walked down the float. There was a spring in his step. Two days early, just like Johnson. Anna will be surprised when she gets back. Time to get the boat ready to leave, and maybe even get her some flowers.

But he was jarred when he saw the boat. Its hatch was half open. Anna must still be home. "I'll surprise her," he thought.

He left the beer on the dock, quietly stepped on board and noiselessly slipped down into the craft. Then he heard a sound. She was in the sleeping cabin. A noise. And then a voice. She wasn't alone. He opened the door and saw her. Saw him. Saw them. Anna saw his back as he turned. "Oh, oh." was the only sound that passed her lips.

Their marriage ended as he stepped onto the deck.

From the parking lot, he saw her head lift out at the hatch. At that distance he could only see her blond hair swirling in the breeze. Then he was gone.

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## *Distance*

The centre lines flashed by, their monotony broken finally by a highway sign: "Welcome to Saskatchewan." The buzz of the motorcycle had dulled his mind; the wind had deadened his feelings. He began to talk to himself again, something Porteous had done a lot of these past two days. The ride through the mountains and across the prairies had started in Vancouver's Friday afternoon rush hour. He had artfully and recklessly wheeled through the stop and go traffic on the freeway, down the shoulder and even up on the curb. There was no doubt that this was a one way trip. He just didn't know his destination.

He remembered Friday night, the golden arches of McDonald's where his trance had first been broken. He had slowed the bike, u-turned in the street and roared back to the entrance. Stiffly, he walked to the counter and ordered a coffee and took his place in a corner where he could see his bike. Kelowna. He reflected on his ride. He had chosen to ride through the mountain passes from Hope to Princeton because it seemed cooler than to cut through the Fraser Canyon to Kamloops. Now it was night, and getting cold. His hands grasped the coffee cup to bring back the circulation. He should put on his gloves when he starts up again. He remembered incidents in his ride, incredulous faces and

honking cars, and it occurred to him that he had driven recklessly, and was lucky to be alive. It was out of character.

He thought again about Anna. At first he was angry. Then he thought about the ride. At least he was still alive. The world was continuing, even without her in his life. He listened to a couple across the aisle having an argument. He and Anna had seldom argued. He tried to think of the good things in his future. He was certainly not the only person in this city, or probably even in this restaurant, who had been betrayed by a loved one. And the world went on. It was just going to be a little different. "Grab some perspective, Richie," he ordered.

Porteous decided to just keep on going, put some miles on and see what happened. And to bury his feelings of self-pity, hurt and horror. One way or another.

He rode for a couple of hours after that, slower now, more aware of the dangers and the cold. Then he pulled off a side road and slept in the forest.

With dawn, he rose again, feeling sticky and smelly, and looking for a place for breakfast. A gas station cafe offered him warmth, coffee, community. He felt life possible again. After breakfast, he took a side trip up a logging road and stopped at an isolated mountainside hot springs. He'd been there once before, with Anna. The route was the same, even without her. The town had

built a modern facility a few kilometers away, complete with rental swimsuits and towels, but Porteous chose the old site, a concrete tub and some rocks to control the water flow. With Anna, he's spent an evening here watching water bombers fighting a fire on the neighboring mountain. They'd been drinking a lot, and felt no danger from the fire. The newlyweds had laughed a lot on that trip. After their bath, they'd played hide and seek while naked. Richie had won by making bear growling noises and making Anna scream to reveal her whereabouts. And now it was so quiet. Sooner or later some of the younger crowd from the town would come by, smoke their joints and tan and frolic in the sunshine, but for now he was safe. They would still be home in Nakusp, shaking off their hangovers, wolfing down their breakfasts, slaving at their chores. Later they would come, but for now, this pond was Richie's private pool.

So beautiful, so calm. The shock of discovery had come so quickly upon Richie Porteous, but now in this secret hideaway, a quiet horror overtook his soul. Slowly the darkness of his memory slid into every corner of his body, depression sapped his strength, and hope drained away as surely as a fatal wound would drain all life from its victim. Horror had claimed him, more certainly than any knife to his wrists. It was over.

In time, the discomfort of the water temperature brought Richie's thoughts back to his body. Still alive, though pink with overheating, and using

all his will, he crawled out of the pond, sank heavily onto some flat rocks, clutching his knees in a fetal posture. His senses came alive in the cold morning air, and he cried.

He would go on. A day later, he was just inside the Saskatchewan border, again cold, again losing the battle with fatigue. This day had seen more cautious riding, although when he hit the prairies, it had been hard to keep the speed down on the long flat stretches of the Trans Canada Highway.

"Very few things matter, and nothing matters very much." A quotation from somewhere stuck in his mind, but he was too tired to figure out where it came from. It was time to stop for the night. It was time to stop. "No further," he resolved. "Wherever I'm at next is where I'm stayin'."

The glow of a town's lights in the night sky. His destination was near. He gave the bike's throttle a twist and the bike whined at a higher pitch, the wind rushed faster, the tack and speedometer arched on their dials. In minutes there was a turn off. Maple Creek, 8 km.

Maple Creek. He would soon learn to pronounce it like the locals. "M'ple Crick." But as he cruised the streets this first time, there were no locals.

The Savoy Theatre, the Blue Bird Cafe. Chinese and Canadian Cuisine.

The Empress Hotel. He took a room, went up the stairs. Closed the door behind himself, laid down on the bed, looked around. Not much to see.

He awoke in the late afternoon, the sun streaming in on his face. The pain from Anna's wound was still there, but now it was joined by a friendlier feeling. He was hungry. Good bye, Anna. Time to get up. So he did. He wasn't happy about it. About her. Life was so different. But it would go on.

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## *Pebble in the Pond*

It took Anna till Sunday afternoon to catch up with me. She left me a message on my answering machine on Saturday, but I didn't really hear it till I sobered up the next day. She wanted me to call her, but I figured that by the time I got her message, she and Richie would be up the coast on the way to Princess Louisa, and the cell phone reception up the inlets is nil. I didn't bother to call.

She called again when I was planted on the futon, score tied 7-7, Seahawks on the Raider 8 yard line, second down. The quarterback was sharp, but the running game was hurting. An obvious passing down. Watch out for the blitz.

Anna sounded upset. "He's gone!" were her first words. I told her I'd come right on over. There was an interception in the end zone. The TV flicked to blackness.

We walked along the walkway to a marina coffee shop. Anna told me what had happened. Told me about "being with" a guy when Richie came in. She cried as she described the look in his eyes. He hadn't said anything, he hadn't called. I assured her he hadn't called me either. We finished our coffees



and I suggested a long walk to Kits beach. She had stopped sobbing, but her eyes were still red. At least outside, she could wear her sunglasses.

She started to tell me about the guy in her life. In her, as Richie would say.

He was one of her teachers at university. Philosophy Prof. "His name's David. A nice guy, really smart. A little older. Red hair, grayish beard, captivating blue eyes. A real gentleman. He's writing a book on Ludwig Wittgenstein."

Just what the world needs, I thought.

"Do you know who Wittgenstein is?" Anna asked.

"Is this a test?" I countered.

She smiled for the first time today. Maybe for a couple of days.

Encouraged, I suggested that he was a gloomy creature, a safe bet since I supposed most philosophers were. I rattled off his two books names, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, pointed out that they argued against each other, and that his main teaching to his students was to get out of the study of Philosophy.

Anna was impressed, I think. Not many chopper pilots know much about Ludwig. In her eyes, I think I went up a notch. Now I was a drunken pilot who could read. And I do. My only excuse is that there are a lot of rainy

nights in the bush, and since I don't want to spend my whole life playing cards and listening to the rest of the crew tell dirty jokes and complain about the wife and the company, I read things.

"I read him a few years ago," I told her. "The first book he wrote while in the trenches, fighting in World War I. He finished it in an Italian POW camp. I feel like I'm a POW some nights up there, and so it was a good book for the camp. I don't know if I really understand it, but it was good for putting me to sleep. I think Richie started it too, though we never talked about it."

Richie's name erased the smile from her face. "What can I do? He won't come back. You should have seen the look on his face."

"Give it time," is all I could say. I made mental note not to say Richie's name any more. "I'll try and find him," I offered. I didn't know how. I assumed I wouldn't see him until we returned to work in two weeks. I didn't think Anna would ever see him again, but I didn't say that.

We took off our shoes when we reached the beach and walked in the waves. Anna was feeling better, and I tried to steer the conversation away from her crisis. Occasionally, she slipped back to it though.

"David was very kind after Richie caught us. We drove up to his place . . . he's got a condo in West Van, and its got this fabulous view, and we just

talked for the rest of the day. He canceled his day and just looked after me. Then he brought me home yesterday. The boat was so empty after he left . . . I don't think Richie will ever forgive me."

"You got that right," I thought to myself. We both knew Richie pretty well.

"It wasn't such a big thing really, was it?" she continued. David's just a nice guy, and Richie's away all the time, so I was just having a good time. It's not like I'm in love with the guy after all. He's just fun to be with. The sex is just part of the fun. And besides, he's about 30 years older than me, so . . ."

Her voice trailed off.

"Don't worry," I soothed. "Things will work out."

We stopped at The Queen's Bottom Pub for a beer and a burger, then retraced our steps back to the boat. I stayed for a few minutes, then left, admonishing her like a parent to do her assignments and get some sleep. She seemed OK, even cheerful. But she was still 'Richie's wife' to me.

"I'll call you in the morning," I smiled as I hopped onto the wharf. "Be good." The evening light made False Creek a reflection of heaven, with boats slowly motoring in the bay against a backdrop of golden glassed high rises.

When I got home, I phoned Rika in Tokyo and told her I missed her. She said she'd dyed her hair red. I said "Great!" What a liar. It occurred to me that she was in many ways like Anna. About the same age, same attitudes of their generation, both smarter than they looked. Than they acted. My Rika, my geisha with red hair. As in crimson, she emphasized.

We'd met in a bar in Yokohama years ago. She was very young. I was very drunk. Love at first sight, for a while. Now we get along better if there's a Pacific Ocean between us. But once, she'd been the one. I wondered if she was faithful to me. Like Anna was faithful to Richie. Like I am faithful to her? She knew I had some holidays coming up, and I promised I'd come over to see her soon. Guilt. Was my relationship with her any different than Anna's with her Prof.? Yes. I got more Air Miles. And I always hoped I could fall in love with her again. Then I fell asleep.

Monday morning started with the phone ringing. It was Anna. She apologized for interrupting, and seemed surprised that I was alone. She asked me to come over for dinner after she got home from class. I agreed. Just to be a nice guy. She said she felt better now.

Her call reminded me that I'd promised to try and find Richie, and as I brushed my teeth it dawned on me that it would be impossible. So I forgot about it and went out for breakfast. I didn't have a clue where Richie would

be. Just far from Anna, that much I was sure of. Thinking back, a twinge of pain stabbed me. Marriage breakdowns sure made for messy lives, and I resolved to become a lawyer in my next life.

It was a normal day. After breakfast, I called my stockbroker, then my friend Ted. I met him at the golf course and I played pretty well, (if I do say so myself). Beat him by 8 strokes. Got home at about 5 to hear the phone ringing off the hook. Just before the answering machine took the call, I caught it.

It was Richie.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Welcome to Saskatchewan*

I hadn't expected his phone call.

"I need a favor," he started. "Anna and I split. Well actually, I split. I'm in Saskatchewan."

What do you say to a guy whose life just went poof? Nothing much of use, but I tried. "I know Richie. I'm sorry. Anna called me yesterday. She's pretty broken up about it. I guess you are too. But personally, I think Saskatchewan is going too far. What the hell are you doing there?"

Richie Porteous found himself smiling. "Well not much I guess, I've been asleep since I got here. I'm in some sleepy town, so I fit right in. Anyway, I want you to talk to MacPherson about switching my next shift. He'll complain, but I think he'll do it. If not, ask him to arrange for Matty or Ken to be Crew Chief on my next shift. I'm probably going to need another couple of weeks to sort things out."

I agreed, then asked the obvious. "Why Saskatchewan? Personally, I would have chosen Bangkok or Macao to sort something like this out."

"Yah, I hear you. Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are," he replied. "I just got on my bike and rode. When I couldn't drive anymore, I stopped. But

don't tell Anna where I am, OK? I don't want to have anything to do with her.

The movie's over."

Then his voice changed. "Did she tell you what happened?"

"Got caught with her pants down is how she explained it to me. The guy was one of her professors," I added. It was a fine line to walk. He probably didn't want to know any details, but I wanted him to know that I was on his side.

"Yah well I hope she gets a good grade. Anyway, can you deal with her over the next few days? Basically, I want her off the boat. She can take the money in the joint account, though I'd prefer if she only took half. Just tell her to take her stuff and go. I'll deal with the lawyers when I get back."

Porteous knew what he wanted. Anna was history. He might use her name as a curse word for months, but he just didn't want to have to see, hear about or think about the life they had shared. The door was closed and there was no going back.

I agreed to do what I could, and our conversation shifted to what he was going to do.

"Tonight, I'm just going to get really drunk, just like you do all the time. Tomorrow, I'm going to get over my hangover. After that, I'm going to get on

with life, put a little distance between me and this experience, and wait for a sense of perspective to develop. Then, I'll come back to work."

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed. Porteous said he'd call in a week to check up, then hung up. He sounded like he was in a better mood at the end. I'm not sure I was. Getting MacPherson to take on back to back shifts should be easy compared to getting Anna out of Richie's life. Women were like that. They get acquisitive at the end of a relationship. Ask my wives.

\* \* \* \* \*



## *Dinner*

On my way over to the boat, I was thinking about the romantic disasters in my life. Nothing quite as traumatic as Richie just had, but I still knew how he felt. The love of my life done me wrong. Everybody has at least one country song inside him. My wife's gone, my dog's died and the truck's broke.

After high school, I went on to university, but it didn't take. I was too much in lust with Tanya, my high school sweetheart, and I cut a few too many classes. Too many coffees, sitting on the U.C. radiators. Tanya worked hard and got the highest marks in her class. Engineering. Eventually, she went on to win the Gold Medal, the award for the top student in her graduating class. I quit at Christmas in my second year. Went to Vancouver on the train, got a job with the Bank of Montreal, and promised my parents that I'd be back in September to start again at university. Tanya promised to wait for me. She did too. For about a month.

That summer I quit my job at the bank as promised, but went to Seattle instead of returning to university, and the next thing I knew they were teaching me how to fly helicopters. Then I was in Viet Nam, getting shot at. That's where I met Richie.

And that was just the beginning.

I phoned Tanya when I got back from Nam. She was in love with a pharmacist and didn't want to see me. Oh well . . . just checking. So I never did see her again.

She had waited four weeks. I've still got the note she handed me the afternoon I left. We had spent the morning at my parent's house, a tearful and passionate good bye. She gave me the note from her coat pocket as we dressed. She had to go back out to the university to study. The note said "I'll wait for you always. . . love, Tanya"

Uh huh.

I stopped at the wine store on the corner and picked up a litre of white, then turned in to the marina. I parked beside the Jeep where Richie's motorcycle had been just three days before. It started to rain lightly as I walked down the wharf towards their boat, "Margaritaville." Anna popped her head out of the companionway when I stepped on the deck.

"Hi! Don't slip Old-Timer," she greeted. With enthusiasm. She was smiling again.

The cabin had a warm feeling, from the lights, the aroma of Anna's cooking, the affection she offered with the glass of chilled Cinzano.

"Here. This will keep you going till dinner. Put on some music if you want. I haven't had time."

I settled in, almost curled up on the cushions, and studied Anna as she stir-fried some greens in the wok. "Dinner in 10 minutes" she called without

turning. She wore a baggy gray sweatshirt over loose white shorts. I fantasized. She looked so soft.

"Richie, Richie, Richie," I calculated, "would you mind if I had Anna for dessert?"

Dinner was baked salmon, done to perfection, and dessert featured a strawberry strewn cheesecake. We did the dishes, trying not to collide with each other too often, then collapsed onto the settee to finish our second bottle of wine. Long before the cheesecake arrived, I'd stopped thinking of Richie. We didn't talk about him. Anna had my full attention. Returning from the head, she cuddled beside me to watch whatever we could find on TV. I guess it wasn't too exciting because we both started to doze off. Off went the TV, down went the lights. Leonard Cohen sang a bit, then left. Neither of us wanted to get up to make another selection. Our conversation was restricted to each other's comfort. The rain was steady now on the roof. If I got up to go, I'd get soaked before I got to my car.

It occurred to me that one way of getting Anna out of Richie's life was to take her home with me. I kissed her gently.

Anna opened her eyes and said "Do you want to stay?"

She had grayish blue eyes, and when they caught you, you could look at nothing else. I carried her to the stateroom in the stern.

The wind had come up, and a gentle swell lifted 'Margaritaville'  
rhythmically against the dock. We joined in the rhythm.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Wheat*

The air felt different. Dry, with the scent of ripening wheat. (Well, you had to be there.) It was still hot, though the town folk were getting ready to pack it in for the day. A steady breeze tried in vain to cool the air. Good sailing wind, he thought. That life seemed so long ago, so far away.

Porteous was unfamiliar with prairie summers, that dry scorching oven that left you feeling like you'd been forgotten on broil. The temperature bore into everyone's mind, forcing all living creatures to concentrate on the search for shade or air conditioning. The uniqueness of this small farming town kept memories of Anna at bay. Now past the initial shock of discovery, he felt a boiling rage rise up with every recollection. He tried not to think of her. Which only made him think of her. So he resolved, over his Chinese tea and chow fun with beef and greens, to think of other things. This was a good place to begin. Every moment brought something new. Air-conditioned too.

The Blue Bird Cafe wasn't bad. It had the usual pictures of Hong Kong high rises and Chinese Junks, interspersed with smiling blond girls in 1950s hairdos urging patrons to Drink Coke. He didn't mind the blondes. They didn't look like her. His waitress was Chinese, as were the cook and the woman sitting by the cash register. He decided that it was a family operation, a suspicion reinforced when he heard the cook admonishing the waitress as a

father would to a daughter. He left her a two dollar tip, not bad for a check that totaled \$5.25. She deserved it for having to put up with her father, Richie figured. And the service was pretty good, although he had said nothing to her outside the realm of ordering his meal. He wished he had joked with her and made her laugh, but having failed that, maybe she would remember him for the \$2 tip. She was cute, he thought. In that same way as the girls of Saigon, so many lifetimes ago . . .

He wandered around the town, up two blocks, then a block over, then back toward the hotel. MacLeod's Hardware, John Deere farm machinery, a Ford dealership, Jackson's Pharmacy, a Co-op Grocery. Like many prairie towns, grain elevators marked the spot. At the end of town, two red, one white, stood guard over the main drag. A long train, filled with prairie grain, rattled through town while he walked. It didn't stop. On the entrance road from the highway, a couple more farm machinery dealers. And the movie theatre. James Bond comes to Maple Creek. Now that would be a real shock for James. Probably a hard place to get a martini, either shaken or stirred.

There were a few people in the streets, doing their last minute shopping before closing time. They looked like farmers, or farmer's wives, or farmer's children. Sun-baked brown people, matter of fact people, nothing fancy, except maybe for a couple of the teenager's pickup trucks. Even here, teens played their stereos louder than Porteous felt necessary. No one else was

walking though, except from the store to their pick up truck. Window shopping was evidently not a popular pastime in the Crick. Most looked at him as they drove past, but they didn't stare and they didn't judge. The local Mountie tipped his hat in greeting as he cruised by, and one lady, who appeared to be in her eighties, smiled and said "Hello, young man," as she passed him on the street. The rest didn't even look curious. They just let him be.

Porteous stepped behind the hotel to check on his motorcycle. He checked the oil, felt the tires for pressure, started up the engine, then quickly turned it off. It seemed too noisy for this quiet country town, somehow out of place. Like himself, he thought. This was a pickup truck kind of place. Should have taken the Jeep. Why didn't he take the Jeep? He didn't want to inconvenience Anna. He called himself a jerk, and meant it.

A new life. He should be lying in the sun up in Princess Louisa Inlet. But that was a done deal, he concluded for the hundredth time. Everything he touched reminded him of her. Ten minutes away from air conditioning and already his shirt was drenched and stuck on his body.

Porteous climbed the stairs to his room. He was feeling energized after his long sleep. But what was there to do? His room, now catching the late afternoon sunshine, was hot. He opened the window, then pulled down the

blind. A yellowish glow from the light bulb overhead gave the room a little more romance, a little more character than the cold clear light of day had allowed. It wasn't so bad. At a hundred bucks a week, he could afford to live right here quite a while. No, not a good idea.

The bed had been made while he ate, and his motorcycle helmet placed on the chair by the TV. He wondered if helmets were mandatory in Saskatchewan. He had no clothes except his dirty laundry from his work shift in the bush, so he resolved to go shopping in the morning. He flicked on the TV, but neither channel caught his interest. Click. For entertainment, he did some laundry in the bathroom sink, then hung it on hangers in the window.

"Got to phone Johnson in Vancouver, get him to look after some details in that world," he reminded himself. But he lay back on the bed instead. The phone was so far away.

She had shattered his world, yet he was still alive. He sat up on the bed and stared at the face in the mirror. Yes, it was him. It was a newer version, yes, and there was something about his eyes. She had been a lesson, that's all. He felt himself moving towards the discovery of his real self, crawling away from that self which had lived on its knees in worship. Of her. He revisited his days of Anna and felt unharmed; she had betrayed him, but it was not his doing. He was blameless, he had tried his best, he could do no better. He



could not have loved her more. Anna was sent to teach him this. That he was alone. He would live alone. He must die alone. He had always been alone. Everyone learns this. Eventually.

There are many different versions of the truth. This he took to be his. And he slept.

A couple of hours later, he woke and dialed me. The world he left behind. It all came swirling back to him, and a weight came off his shoulders as he hung up. He was content that I would take care of everything. Anna was no longer his problem. "It's over," he thought.

He decided to go downstairs to see what was happening in the bar. At least the TV there probably had more channels. He remembered seeing a satellite dish on the hotel roof. And he could begin the day's main chore of getting seriously drunk.

Ah, the fresh aroma of stale beer. There was music and a swinging door like the cowboy movies of his youth. He imagined Gary Cooper, six shooters at his hip, making an entrance. He did the same. It was dark inside, with a moose head on the wall and standard neon Budweiser and Coors signs above the bar. A Bohemian Beer sign caught his eye. Something different. A few patrons, sitting around small tables covered with terry cloth covers, a couple of

TVs anchored to the walls, a green oasis of a pool table in the corner. It felt familiar to Porteous, like a hundred other small town bars that he and I and Ken and Matt had wasted our days in when the weather had shutdown flying operations.

He sat near the corner, his back to the wall, close to the pool table, but with a good view of the TV. He didn't have high hopes for the TV. Probably just a Blue Jay's game. He hated the Blue Jays.

The waitress approached his table with her standard "Whaddie you have?"

"Coors light and a bag of salt and vinegar chips, please," Porteous replied. He always said that.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he noticed that most of the bar's patrons were Indians. A couple of elderly men held forth on the problems of politics near the entrance. One, with an eagle nose and bony finger stabbing the air for emphasis, accusing the Prime Minister of being a crook. His friend, a red faced jolly man whose false teeth had moved down to his shirt pocket, offered no argument. Farmers and politics. Farmers and weather reports. Farmers and commodity prices. And the Indians? They spoke in tones so low that you could forget they were there. That's Saskatchewan.

Porteous studied the moosehead above his table. Nobody's perfect. He settled in with the TV and his beer. Turned out that it was to be the Yankees and the Tigers. Thank God for satellite dishes, he thought. Let there be no mention of Blue Jays.

By his second beer, the Yankees had scored a run and the bar was beginning to fill up. The 5 o'clock crowd they call them in Vancouver. Guys just stopping in for one or two on their way home from work. Groups of twos and threes started to fill the bar. Then a crowd of loud young men burst through the swinging doors. They waved to the bar tender and the waitress, smiled in the direction of the remaining Indian table, and settled in. Soon after, three women, then three more, then a couple who looked like they were married.

By his third beer, most of the tables were taken. The din of conversation had overrun the baseball announcers, and the waitress was walking fast. He had landed in the social hub of the Creek. Porteous observed that the bar was nicely divided into a cowboy half and an Indian half, whether by coincidence or custom, and that he was parked right on the borderline. There was a crescent moon design on the floor, dividing the room into carpet and linoleum. The Indians held the linoleum half. Their reserve.

A couple of cowboys pushed through the swinging gate, crossed the bar, and moved to the table next to Porteous. One of them was simply huge. With a quick glance, they tipped their hats in his direction, then waved to the waitress. The giant was about six foot six, but with boots underneath and a Stetson on top looked to be scraping the ceiling. Porteous guessed his weight to be way over 250 pounds. Just muscle.

Porteous vowed not to make him mad. He wished for his friends back at the camp, and a twinge of loneliness crossed his mind.

The giant's companion, even with the boots and hat, looked small beside him. He was built like Richie, but when he took off his hat revealed that his head was showing the early warning signs of severe balding. He was grinning widely at the giant's story of frustration.

Their beers arrived, which turned out to be the mysterious Bohemian brand. With the waitress gone, they turned their attention on Richie.

The Giant looked over at Richie. "Hi. New in town?"

Richie just nodded the obvious. "Yah. Just got in last night," he replied.

"Come on over and join us if you want," his friend offered.

Usually, Porteous would have said 'No thanks' and kept to himself, but the energy of his new existence was now flowing, and he'd talked to no one except a couple of waitresses and the hotel clerk in the last three days, so he was ready. He skidded his chair to the adjoining table.

"Bring your table and spare chair too if you like. I think we're expecting more people later on." With that, the giant stood to help slide the table, but he moved stiffly and didn't make much progress.

Sorry. I'm kind of useless these days. Fell off my damn horse on Saturday and nearly broke my ass." And he laughed at the thought of that. "My name's Derek," he said, offering his hand.

"Hi, I'm Jim," volunteered his friend. His handshake was tight, his teeth were white, his voice had a built-in chuckle.

Richie introduced himself, and asked how the giant had fallen off his horse.

"Rodeo," replied the cowboy. "I was trying to do some bareback riding, something I'm not that good at, and I was coming down when the horse went up, and Pow!" his hand arching over the table to show his trajectory, "I was airborne."

Jim joined Richie in appreciation.

"About five seconds on the horse, twenty seconds in the air, and three weeks before I want to see that sucker again!" he added. " And I was telling Jim when we got here, today I was driving my tractor into the field, and every rut felt like I was going over the Grand Canyon, so I gave up on that. I started to change the oil, but I couldn't get under it because my side is so stiff. I figure the only thing I'm good for now is drinking beer."

"You and me both," Richie commiserated.

So began the introductions, from which Richie learned that Derek had a ranch about ten miles south of the Crick, and Jim had a wheat farm fifteen miles further east, near the town of Piapot.

"He doesn't usually tell people where he's from," joked Derek "but if he keeps buying up all the land around there, pretty soon he'll be able to rename it."

"Yep, that's my goal," Jim laughed. "I'm goin' to surround your piece and charge you a toll to get out."

Derek explained that Jim had just purchased another half section to go with the land he already had. "I think he's screwing his banker," he added.

"That would be a change - it's usually the other way around," Richie offered. Piapot. The prairies certainly had some interesting place names, he thought. He'd noticed them on the map at the gas station in Alberta. The cowboys learned that Richie was from Vancouver, rode a motorcycle and worked on helicopters. He said nothing about Anna.

Within minutes, the three men felt comfortable and a chemical reaction took place. They became friends before the beer was warm. Richie volunteered to come out and have a look at Derek's tractor, and Jim offered to show Richie a couple of places that he knew were for rent.

"This sure feels like the end of the road," Richie thought. "I'm home."

The cowboys liked their new acquaintance too. He told funny stories of life in the logging camps and was self depreciating in tales of his exploits while learning to sail. And he laughed at their jokes too, which was important. He was also a curiosity, since new people didn't come to 'the Crick' everyday.

Karen joined them soon. She had picked up a pint of draft beer at the bar, then smoothly navigated to their table. Putting her bottle on the table, she offered her hand to Richie, "Hi. I'm Karen." And sat down. "No sign of Jennifer yet?"

"Not yet," Derek responded. "She was saying she's having problems with her parents again."

"It's hard to get parents trained properly," she laughed. "I should know. Still, Jennifer should come. She needs a break from them. Besides, I feel like playing a little stick."

"Let me go powder my nose," offered Jim, "and then I'll show you the finer points of the game."

"You put it so elegantly," Karen laughed. "A few more beer and you'll be announcing to the whole town that you're off to drain the lizard."

Karen had a civilizing effect on the men, and Derek did not finish the joke he was telling when she arrived. That was OK, thought Richie. Heard it a few times before. And Karen was OK too. Dressed in jeans and a white sleeveless T-shirt, her cowboy boots made her seem even more tall and slim. Richie wondered if he was staring. He noticed that he was feeling the effects of the beer. He'd had a few.

It reminded him of Army training, of the feeling he had when he was first learning to fly helicopters. Before you can fly, you have to hover. The instructor had emphasized that when first trying to hover, you have to look straight ahead. If you look at the ground, you get weird gyrations in your



head. A few too many seconds of that and you'll lose control. Instead of concentrating on your surroundings, you have to use your peripheral vision to figure out where you are. A simple rule: if you look directly, you can't see.

So he tried this technique with Karen, but his world began to swirl. Feeling he might crash, he excused himself and went to the washroom, passing Jim on his way back.

Seeing himself in the washroom mirror, Richie decided it was time to slow down. He picked up a Coke from the bar and came back to the table. Jim and Karen were playing pool, and Derek was talking to a Chinese girl, now comfortably occupying Richie's seat. It was his waitress from the Bluebird Cafe.

Derek introduced her as Jennifer, and she smiled at Richie and said "Hi. I see you survived lunch."

His two dollar tip had paid off. He was feeling better already.

Richie spent the next few minutes watching Jennifer and Derek talk. They had an easy familiarity together, like an old married couple. They were close and seemed to share secrets. He couldn't figure out if they were lovers or not, but hoped they weren't. He turned his attention to the pool table, where it seemed that Karen was about to finish off Jim. She was good. Richie was

generally considered the pool champion of the logging camp. Back in that other world. After a few moments, Karen banked the black ball into the corner and a vanquished Jim returned to their table. "I need, need a drink," he stammered. "She's too hot for me."

"Next," was Karen's challenge.

Derek deferred to Richie, saying he couldn't bend over right now.

"OK, but you'll have to explain the rules to me as we go along." Richie found himself smirking. "Anna who?" crossed his mind.

He selected his cue, and Karen offered "I'll break."

He studied her as she lined up her shot. "Definitely a ten," he smiled to himself. "It's gonna be hard to concentrate."

Derek stood up slowly and came over to watch. "Give up now" he whispered.

Richie laughed politely, and sipped from his Coke. "Maybe I'm not the only one who's been drinking too fast."

But Karen's opening break was sloppy, a little too hard, and nothing dropped. It gave Richie a couple of easy plays. He moved briskly about the table, shot through till only the eight remained for victory, but missed it on a

long bank. Karen took her time, shot deliberately, but missed her fourth shot, leaving Richie an easy tap in for the game. Richie reluctantly knocked the ball into the pocket. He had enjoyed that. "So that's how you play this game . . . Next," he challenged the table.

"I can't bend over yet. Maybe next month," offered Derek as he sat down. "Maggie," he waved to the waitress, "a giant nachos por favor, and a round of 'Bo's."

"Bo's", Porteous thought. "Nobody called them Bohemians. There's a language to be learned here."

Jennifer rose to take Karen's cue. "Your break," said she said softly. She smiled as she spoke.

Richie wondered what she meant by it.

His break was polite, not too tight in case she was lousy, not too loose so that she could run the table.

At least that's what he thought.

It was over in minutes. "That's why they call it eight ball, I guess." She was still smiling.

"I think maybe you've played this game before."

"Once or twice. Want to try again?" She giggled.

He was enchanted by that giggle. Richie agreed to another game and studied his opponent as she rolled the balls for him to rack up. She was young, probably even younger than Anna, (who I'm not even going to think about!!) Her jeans were tight, she wore no socks in her runners. Her sweatshirt concealed her body in a lumpy cocoon. It read 'Blue Jays, World Champions' on the front. "I guess they're not such a bad team," he thought. He wished he'd tipped her more.

The second game went a little better, but Richie choked on an easy ball and Jennifer ran the table from there.

"You let me win," she accused him.

"Are you kidding? Richie protested. "These Bo's made my world start spinning a bit, but maybe you're just too good." Then he added diplomatically, "You shoot really well."

Jennifer smiled at the compliment. "So you're saying I could never beat you if you were sober?"

Sensing one of those female debates he could never win, Richie backed off. "No, no. You're very good. You could probably beat me if I were sober

too, once in a while. Say once a year. Six times a decade. But luckily, I don't intend to be sober much anymore."

"Oh, oh. You sound like you're about to write a country song, cowboy. Tell us all your heartbreakin' story," she taunted.

"Its a short story, and really rather boring, so I'll spare you right now." Porteous just didn't want to think about Anna right now. Or ever. Just let her fade away. Let's talk about something else, he thought. "So, tell me about yourself."

"Is this a job interview?" Jennifer countered.

"Go on. Tell him your life story," interjected Jim. "Put us all to sleep."

"I live in M'ple Crick," she laughed. "That's the whole story."

"Your whole life?"

"Since I was born. But I've traveled a lot. Been to 'The Hat' and Regina and once even as far as Calgary. Got a sore neck lookin' at them tall buildings."

Porteous felt the good-humored jab she was taking at him. But maybe she just wanted out of town.

"If you're a good girl, I'll show you the bright lights of Saskatoon some day," Porteous offered.

"It's a date," she smiled.

And so Richard Porteous complicated his life.

The group of five stayed until the bar closed, with Porteous getting more sober as the others became silly. Then he started on the beer again, and as they walked out into the warm summer night, they seemed all equally drunk.

"Why don't you come down to the farm tonight and get an early start on the tractor. I'll even make breakfast" offered Derek.

The warmth of his offer made Richie smile. "Why not?"

"Sure. Just a minute, I have to walk my date home" Richie replied.

With that, he took Jennifer's arm and walked her across the street to her door. She lived above the Bluebird. He bowed in mock chivalry and kissed her hand.

"It's been a pleasure, Miss".

"Likewise I'm sure."

He thought a little peck on her cheek might be nice, but she turned toward the door, smiled, and entered the bright hall. "See ya."

"Drop in sometime. You know where I live. G'night."

Richie returned to the group. They were all smirking.

"You're a real fast mover," Derek laughed. Richie just smiled. "I'm from the big city. Call me Slicker." Anna's face ran through his brain, and he looked away.

Derek drove quickly into the blackness. A case of beer sat between the two men in the truck. "Standard equipment in Saskatchewan," Derek quipped. The road was mostly straight, and the gravel left a long cloud of dust in their wake. They threw their empties at road signs and telephone poles as they sped by. Derek hit two poles. Richie only hit a stop sign.

He slept on Derek's couch that night, slept the sleep of angels with a smile no one saw. Waking to the aroma of frying sausages and fresh coffee, it occurred to him that except for the hangover, life's not so bad.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *The Morning After*

For me, the morning after was not good, but I don't think Anna noticed.

My headache would soon pass, but the ache of guilt that accompanied it seemed a more permanent disability.

We drove our cars separately to a nearby restaurant and met in the parking lot. Entering the cafe, I felt a touch of what Richie must have known so well, that men's eyes followed us when we entered. Envy. Admiration. I decided a little jealousy is a good thing, especially when directed it at you. But if they only knew. . .

Anna, still pretty, was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt; me, still in yesterday's used clothing. I think she had started to offer me one of Richie's shirts, but had thought the better of it. Twice over breakfast she told me "Go fall on your head!" That's what she always said to Richie. Familiarity, I guess. And she could still giggle, as she did when I dropped sugar in my coffee, still dressed in its paper wrapping. OK, so I had a hang over. Anna seemed to have no regrets.

I did. This was Richie's wife!! My best friend's wife.



We talked, we ate, sometimes she laughed. As if nothing important had happened. Finally she got up to leave, but I stayed behind for another coffee refill. She left with her usual "see ya later . . ."

Would I really see her later? I went through my excuses for last night. Could it have been the wine? No. I'd thought of sex with her almost from the moment of my arrival. Alcohol would not get me off the hook. Was it Anna? Was she suddenly so vulnerable? Was she so desperately in need of sympathy or companionship or love? It didn't seem so. Last night she had seemed pretty much recovered from the tears of the day before. Was it simply because she was pretty. Certainly I'd always been a little jealous of Richie, but not because of Anna so much as for his happiness and the companionship the couple had shared. My thoughts had sometimes wandered to forbidden topics when I'd seen her lounging around the deck in her bikini, but these thoughts had always been quickly vanquished by the words "Richie's wife." I'd never seriously considered such a thing. She was off limits.

So how did it happen? Was I seduced? Not likely. Pretty girl, lots of wine, soft music, old friends. But no, she was still Mrs. Porteous. In Richie's mind, she was certainly Mrs. Porteous. In my mind, she was too. It was not a good morning. How was I to know that Richie had seemingly been captured by Jennifer that same night? Had I known, would my guilt have been diminished?

Men. We're such easy targets. Women can see us coming a mile a way.  
Blips on their radar screens.

Like my chopper in Viet Nam. The Army admits to losing about 5000 of them. Heat seeking missiles would catch us from behind unless, with curses and prayers on our lips, the gunner's flares could distract our killer. Decoys sent out to confuse, like a woman's smile? Or Charlie would turn his radar-directed guns on us, wafting hordes of huge bullets into the heavens, hoping to rip our machines and our bodies into fractions. It happened to friends.

In Viet Nam, dawn brought death. You never knew if some missile would get lucky, or some silent, unseen bullet smash through to erase you from the active list. Every evening you came home surprised. Every night you lay awake scared. Afraid of what dawn's light might bring. Dawn could not be delayed. I wish today's had not come.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Home on the Range*

Derek Sawchuck was born to be a farmer. He had grown up here, had helped his father since he was 10, and knew as much about this land as God. He loved this life, a life of battling wits with nature, of winters indescribably cold, of nights when the stars seemed brighter than the streets of Vegas, of planting and harvesting, of summer swims, of friends. Of Jennifer? Maybe. Who knows?

When he was younger, he was infatuated with Jennifer. The sun rose daily on her smile, the moon blushed in the beauty of her eyes. With his brand new driver's license, she had been his first date. She had been his first kiss. They saw each other at school, but were in different grades, and he took the bus home right after class while she walked home to help out in the restaurant. They talked on the phone, but her parents didn't really approve, so every meeting was a challenge. After eighteen months of frustrations, the young Derek moved on to accept the affections of Julie O'Neil, a girl his own age who lived a couple of sections over. It was so much easier, and she was so much easier too. Their parents were friends and encouraged the union of their offspring. Jennifer, after all, was Chinese. Julie remained his sweetheart through high school, but turned her affections elsewhere when Derek started spending more time riding rodeos than she thought proper. Julie went off to

university in Regina, started dating others, and hasn't come back since. Derek formed friendships with other classmates, but no sparks flew. He asked Jennifer to his graduation dance and when her parents wouldn't let her go, he stayed home too. He did, however, go to the post dance parties in town, and for the first time in his life, got roaring drunk.

With school out of the way, it was time to make his mark on the world. For him, there was no university. It had never been an option, but the death of his father during that summer of his graduation had made it certain that he would continue on the farm. Someone had to help his mom. There was no one else.

The first harvest was a time of awakening for the young farmer, a final realization of how hard his father had worked. When self doubt grasped at his every choice, his mother had quietly encouraged him, assured him that his father would have done the same, (even when she knew he wouldn't) and when the harvest was in, Derek knew that he had done well. He knew now, he was more than a farmer. He had become a man. For the second time in his life, he went out and got drunk. That night Jennifer found him sitting outside the Empress and drove him home. Parental opposition during their teenage years had prevented sex from entering their relationship, but it was never far away.

Then Derek's mother died. Sitting in church one Sunday, her best friend and neighbor Bessie O'Neil at her side, she just leaned over and died. Derek was at a rodeo in Montana when it happened. It made the house on the farm seem pretty big without her. Derek worked even longer hours. There was always something to do. Jennifer sometimes escaped from the restaurant to come over and cook him meals. On summer weekends, Derek went to the Prairie rodeos, driving across southern Saskatchewan or Alberta, sometimes into the States, just for a ride. He was good at it, and he liked the bulls best. To ride them you had to be good, and if the bull threw you or you caught a horn in your back or a kick in your rear, it hurt so much you could cry. But when you rode them, you felt invincible. Jim usually went with him, and sometimes the girls showed up, though Jennifer usually had to work at the Blue Bird. Jim rode bulls. Just bulls. He was the best.

Winter was a different story. With no rodeos and less work, the farmers of Saskatchewan could relax a little more. Wheat farmers could escape to Phoenix or Florida, but those with herds were tied to the land, and many joined in the social circles around the local curling rink or the Legion. In his teens, Derek had played hockey, but now those wedding bells had stolen so many of his friends that he had to choose between playing with the old-timers or the kids. Derek and Jim both figured that the old-timers drank too much and the kids skated too fast, so they retired from hockey. Occasionally, they'd

drive to Medicine Hat to watch a Junior game, and a couple of times a year they'd go to Calgary to see the Flames. And there was always work to do.

Derek brought the steaming coffee and the plate of sausages and eggs and toast and placed it on the coffee table in front of Richie.

"Good mornin' You ready for this?" he smiled.

"You just saved my life," Richie replied. His stomach wasn't as sure about the sausages, but the smell of coffee eased his aching brain.

"Showers down the hall, blue towel's OK," Derek pointed. "I'm just going out to the barn for a while. Join me when you're ready, if you like." With that, he went out into the sunshine. It was already hot. "Goin' to be a scorcher today," he called back.

Richie finished his breakfast, then moved slowly to the kitchen. He poured a tall glass of water, gulped it down, then poured another. He carefully washed his plate and cup, then moved out to the door. He could see Derek in the coral. He was pumping water into a trough using a hand pump. Then he disappeared into the barn. Richie moved from the heat of the door and explored the house. It was an old house, well built. The furniture looked like it had been around a while, the style from another era. It suited the house though. The chairs still had lace covers on the arms, the mark of a cowboy's

mother. He went to the bathroom and looked at himself. Needed a shave. Needed a shower. Needed a life. His curiosity overcame his manners and he peeked down the hall at the bedroom. The larger one was obviously that of Derek's parents. The next was Derek's. A picture of Jennifer rested on his dresser. Richie gulped his water and strode down the hall to the kitchen, suddenly afraid of being caught snooping. He hurriedly showered, dressed in yesterday's clothes and went out to the barn.

He found Derek slipping a bridle on a red chestnut mare. She had a white diamond patch on her nose, and her tail flipped in the air as she pranced, turning in her stall. Richie watched this beast with trepidation, so big and dangerous, and stood aside as the two giants passed him by.

"What time is it?" Derek asked when he saw Richie. "It feels like it must be beer time."

"I don't think it'll be beer time for about a week." Just the thought of it made him grimace.

Derek chuckled good-naturedly and led the horse to a paddock on the side of the barn. A black horse at the far side, thinking whatever it is horses think when they're standing alone in a field, saw the arrival of the diamond patch mare and whinnied her greetings. Just another day at the office.

"It's too bad you're not feeling so good cause there's this bar in Consul, over the hills there, near where Jimmy lives, and they've got some Jackalope heads on the walls. I was thinking we could ride the two "J's" over for a little lunch."

"My head, my head, have sympathy! I don't want to sit on anything that moves for a very long time. Maybe by tonight I'll be human again."

"Right then. And what is your head capable of doing now?" Derek laughed.

"Besides pounding, I'm not sure. But why don't I start by taking a look at your famous bucking tractor."

The tractor was in a shed attached to the barn, on the opposite side from the two "J's" coral. "The tools are in there, mostly. If you need anything else, the hardware store's in town." It was unlikely Porteous would need anything. The shed was laid out as if by magic, every tool in its logical place, all lubricants lined up and labeled, and against the wall the switches, also labeled for each of the compressors and air guns and power tools.

Richie felt better now, just being left alone in this brightly-lit tool shed. It was less hot, and this was his world. A couple of wrenches and he was off to solve the tractor's problems.



Two hours later, he drove the tractor to the door of the house, shut it down and carefully opened the door, trying not to spread the grease from his hands to the doorknob. It was a challenge. Derek was on the phone, but gave him a thumbs up sign when he saw him.

Talking to Jim. "I'm not like you, James. When you're a young whippersnapper, your prick just leads you around. When you're a mature and rational being like me, you just let it point the way. Anyway, Richie's just back in and looks like he's going to survive the day after all. I'll talk to you later on."

Turning to Richie, "a little philosophy for Jim. He thinks we should go see the Jackalopes for lunch too, 'cause there's a waitress there that he's in love with. I see you got the tractor to behave.

"Yes to tractor question, maybe to the Jackalopes. I am feeling better though." Richie wondered if he were kidding himself. "Give me another hour. What else do you need help with?"

"Well the truck could use a tune up some time, but I think you should rest up for lunch. Besides, if you don't want to ride the two 'J's, and frankly, I don't want to either, we'll need the truck to go for lunch." And then, changing the subject, "You want to go into town and get your stuff?" he asked. "You

could pick up your things and bring them out to the cabin. No use living above that booze-bar any longer than you have to."

"The cabin?" Richie was puzzled at first, but then the light went on. "Oh yah, the one you mentioned last night. It wasn't something he'd thought about since, lost in the blur of the night's drinking. Sure, why not?"

"Nobody's lived in it for a couple of years, but it's still in pretty good shape. The water pump will have to be worked on, but that's no big deal. A couple of days and it'll be like a castle. I'll show you where it is."

The cabin turnoff was a mile back toward town, but Richie hadn't seen it last night. The road turned to solid mud grooves between hayfields, and the truck bottomed out on a couple of ruts. The path rose into a forest, then descended into a hillside overlooking the rolling hills, south to Montana. The cabin was small, with a chimney of red brick and a deck on the south side covered in plastic.

Derek explained the plastic. "The wind really whips up from the valley in the winter. It's almost a full time job just cutting firewood for the stove"

"I'll survive," Richie assured him. He loved the place. "What's the rent?"

"Oh, I think you paid it this morning fixing the tractor. Don't worry about it. There's not much of a demand for life in the 19th century, and even if

there were, I'm pretty particular about who I'd want for my neighbor. Besides, there's nothing to do around here except come on down to the ranch and fix my toys, so you can pay me that way. And you can buy me a beer once in a while too."

On the path to the pump house, a snake skidded across their path.

Richie was unnerved by its quick passage. It was bigger than the garters back home and looked more menacing, strange.

"Don't see many like him," Derek remarked. "Hope they haven't moved under the cabin. Nothing like a nest of rattlers to wreck your day."

"That was a rattler? Good thing I didn't pick him up by his tail." Richie had chased Anna with writhing snakes after they had made love in the grass one summer afternoon before they were married. A brief vision of her, a stab in the heart. She would love it here too.

The door to the cabin was padlocked, and the lock was rusty and hard to open. Finally it gave way, and Derek threw the lock into the pick up bed and cursed. "Piece of shit."

Turning to Richie, he laughed, "You don't need a lock around here. If anybody steals anything, you can buy it back from them the next night at the bar."

The cabin was small, furnished with musty leather chairs and dust, a wood stove, kitchen table and chairs, and the bedroom had a box frame and mattress standing on its side. The two men carefully removed the plastic sheets that enclosed the deck, revealing the distant vista of Montana.

Richie was home. His hangover was gone.

The two men worked side by side, a spontaneous work party, cleaning windows and floors, putting the bed together, washing the dishes in the cupboards. They worked quietly on their own, and asked each other for help when needed. After a couple of hours, Richie announced that he'd had enough of a housewife's life and was ready for the Jackalopes.

"Great. I'm starving." Derek was half way out the door.

They stopped at the farmhouse to phone Jim, and Richie washed his shirt in the kitchen sink. The warm air would dry it in minutes. "Don't want to give a bad impression to the people and Jackalopes of Consul, Saskatchewan, after all," he explained.

The noon sun was baking the land and the town looked like cookies in an oven, a few scattered buildings sagged, near melting. With the truck stopped, the saving breeze died and the two men dragged themselves across the street to the bar. It was a two-room hotel, needing paint like everything

else in the town, or maybe just a relocation to a different part of the planet, thought Richie. "Who would ever come to stay here?", he mused.

It was cooler inside, though dark till their eyes adjusted.

"Thank God for air conditioning!" enthused Derek. Jim was sitting beneath the TV, watching a talking head give the daily agriculture report. As he grew accustomed to the dark, Richie saw the Jackalopes. The walls were covered with them, tiny rabbit heads adorned with the antlers of antelopes.

"Where else in the world can you see such a sight?" Jim asked in greeting.

"Hi Jim. I see you survived last night," Richie replied.

"Yes, and these here are one of the wonders of the world."

"Where's the new waitress you wanted us to look at?" Derek interrupted.

Jim nodded in the direction of the kitchen as she came through the doors.

"Hi. I'd like a cheeseburger and a Coke," Derek greeted her.

"The same," agreed Richie.

"What? No Bo's today gentlemen?" Jim taunted. He was drinking 7UP himself. "The WCTU would be proud of us."

The waitress had short brownish hair, curling around itself in a pattern of organized anarchy. Derek analyzed her, looking for the magic of which Jim had spoken on the phone. All you saw was her huge smile, bright enough to light up the room. She was short, even tiny when standing beside Derek, but you wouldn't notice that feature if Derek hadn't been there. Your eyes just bounced between her smiling eyes and her laughing mouth. She was just plain cute. But Richie didn't pay much notice, his memory still caught on the waitress he'd met on his first day in the Crick. This one didn't compare to her. At least not to him.

"Two gourmet specials for the gentlemen and you, sir," looking at Jim, "could you handle another 7UP?"

"I'll risk it." Jim smirked.

When she had re-entered the swinging doors of the kitchen, Derek looked at Jim.

"She'll do nicely, James. What else do you know about her that I should know? "

Jim couldn't help grinning. "She's not your type. She hardly ever says 'Baa, Baa'. But I do know her name is Kim, and I know she gets off at 9:00, and I'll be getting off at about 10."

Derek rose to the bait. "In your dreams . . ."

Jim just smiled and said, "I'll let you know tomorrow how it went."

"Never mind." Derek then punched him lightly on the shoulder.

When the waitress returned with the burgers, Richie noticed she gave Jim a look with a twinkle in her eye, as if something else were on her mind. They were sharing a secret.

"Here you go boys. Enjoy your meal." And then what every prairie waitress must say. "You want some ketchup or vinegar?"

"I won't say what Jim would like," Richie cautioned himself. She's just a nice girl from the country. If he'd been in one of those northern logging towns with me, he probably would have said something. Not here.

The conversation drifted back to Richie's new cabin, and what repairs he needed for the water pump and how he should hook up a phone.

"Never mind the wires, Richie advised. I'll just get a cell phone and save all the hook up hassle. Besides, you're the only people I know here, so it's not like I really need it. Who else am I going to call?"

And then he thought of her.

And so did Derek. He wondered if he weren't getting a little possessive of Jennifer. They were just friends, after all. Weren't they?

Derek went back to his chores after lunch, and Jim drove Richie to town to pick up some things. They loaded his bike into the back of the pickup, then parted while Jim went grocery shopping and Richie went to check out of the hotel and buy some new clothes.

Richie left his bag in the box of the pick up and strolled down the street to the clothing store. In thirty-five minutes, he had picked up a pad lock, a cell phone, a black cowboy hat, some T-shirts and tried on some boots. None of the boots seemed to fit his fat, city feet, so he decided to wait on that. On the way back to the truck, he saw Jennifer through the window of the Blue Bird Cafe and waved to her. She waved back, then gestured for him to come in.

"Hi sailor," she greeted him. "How are you feeling today?"

Last night seemed a long time ago. Richie knew that she had been in his mind ever since. He had so much to tell her.



"It's good of you to ask. I wasn't sure I was going to survive this morning, but I'm OK now. . . I think. How are you?"

Richie took a seat in a corner booth. "Maybe a little coffee would clear the brain a bit, though. Can you sit a minute?"

"I'll get your coffee first, and make sure everybody else is happy."

When Jim finally showed up, Richie had already told her of the cabin and the cell phone, and Jennifer was trying to get him to put the cowboy hat on.

"If you're going to live here, you have to actually wear it. Just carrying it around doesn't work," she teased.

"And once you put it on, you never take it off again, for anything," added Jim as he sunk into the booth beside her.

She pushed him, and he rose to let her out. "I have to check the other customers. You wanna coffee Jim?"

"If that's all you're offerin'," he smiled.

"That's all you're gonna get from me," she laughed. And looking at Richie, "I'll be back in a minute."

But more customers came in, and when she went in the back to place their order, her father admonished her for sitting with the customers. She never did get another chance to sit and talk. Finally, the men rose to leave. She came over.

"Sorry I couldn't socialize any more," she smiled, "but the pressures of business, you know. . . "

Richie didn't want to leave her. "Will I see you tonight?"

Call me when your cell is activated and we'll figure it out. I haven't heard from Karen yet, so I don't know what we're doing. Maybe we can come over to your cabin and hang the curtains."

"OK," Richie agreed. The phone guy said they'd activate it by 3 o'clock, so I'll call you then. "Or you could call me so I don't have to talk to . . . " and he gestured toward the kitchen. "If that's easier."

"OK. Give me your number."

Richie wrote his new number on a napkin, smiled at her and waved as he pulled open the door. "Catch ya later, alligator."

When they'd left the restaurant, Richie asked "How'd you know I'd be there?"

"I'd have been surprised if you weren't." Jim laughed his little laugh.

They stopped in a couple more stores for the household things, and Richie, unable to choose sheets and blankets for the bed, chose a sleeping bag instead. "I think I'll leave the fancy stuff for Jennifer to choose," he thought. "You wish," he caught himself in the fantasy.

On the way back to the cabin, Jim offered Richie an old truck which wasn't running, but which might work if Richie spent some time and money on it. They agreed that he'd come over and look at it later on.

As they bounced up the mud road to the cabin, Richie glanced back at his motorcycle, tied up in the pickup's bed. It looked out of place here, swaying through the fields. But the cabin, bathed in the afternoon sun, looked just like home as they came to rest at its door.

Once inside, Richie's noticed that the musty smell of old dust that had greeted him in the morning was now gone. A warm wind had pushed it out the windows, left open since morning. Richie unwrapped his packages from the store and hung his clothes on the naked hangers. He was cheered to see the light in the fridge was on, and slid the case of beer into the bottom shelf.

"The next one will be cold," he commented, handing a can to Jim.

"Derek must have some pull with the electricity company."

Jim settled into the leather chair and raised his can in the air. "A toast to the new master of the castle . . . in summer, may your fridge be full of beer, in winter, may your stove be full of wood, and in all seasons, may your bed be full of women."

Richie raised his can in salute. Five days earlier, he had been happily married, a resident of Vancouver, working at his trade in the forest of Northern Vancouver Island. Now he seemed captured by this new Jennifer, and planned on living in a log cabin in the woods. The pace of change was not lost on him.

Home sweet home.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Silence*

There's an old line from somewhere . . . be careful about what you want . . . sometimes you get it.

The phone rings. We're on the bed. I slide over her body to answer, expecting it to be Jack MacPherson or maybe his boss Henry Yanno, who always seems to call me back to the camp when I least want to go. I am surprised to hear the voice of Richard Porteous.

"Hi Bud. How's thing's on the wet coast?"

"Not bad" I replied, putting a finger to my lips to warn Anna to keep quiet. She stifled a giggle, sat up and tried to press her tongue into my mouth. I managed a "What's new wherever you are?" To Anna, I mouthed words to kill the moment: "It's Richie!" She rolled away and marched from the bedroom.

"Well, I guess I'm havin' a good time, though I've been drunk everyday since I got here. I got a beautiful cabin in the woods, a pickup truck, no problems, and so far, I'm havin' fun." Richie is tempted to mention Jennifer's name, but controls the urge. Back to business. "I was wonderin' if you could check with MacPherson and see if he can arrange a six month leave of absence for me. I want to stay away from the coast and give my brain a break. Oh, and

another thing, could you check with a yacht broker and list the boat with them? I think Whitecap Yachts on Granville Island is supposed to be good."

"No problemo," I replied. Anna reappeared in a kimono and sat quietly on the edge of the bed, watching. "Anyway, it won't be a problem for me. It might be a problem for MacPherson, but that's what he gets the big bucks for."

We talked on, just shop talk. The repairs to my chopper were done, and MacPherson had found some wiring problems. The breakdown hadn't been caused by pilot error. Take that. And I'd heard that Darryl Hawkins, one of the fallers, had broken his leg. When he asked about Rika, I replied that she was fine, except that she was now a red head.

"One more thing," Porteous continued. "Could you sell my Jeep, or bring it to me or something. Or you could buy it - you're rich." Porteous knew that I hated the Jeep. I called it his Teen Machine. Of course, things can change. I closed off with a "Good to hear from yah. Take care."

Anna lay beside me. The phone found its own way to the cradle. "So?" she asked.

"So nothing." I replied. "He's not coming back for a while."

After the lovemaking had passed, we laid together for what seemed hours, entwined. I felt trapped, unsure of escape from these chains I had once

gladly snapped closed upon myself. I shouldn't complain. It was a happy prison. I loved every second with Anna. She made me laugh. She made me happy. I wanted it to go on forever. Until I remembered Richie. And the shame rose up and I knew it must stop.

And Anna. Why was she here? We had made no professions of love. We were simply there for each other. A convenience, I suppose. but she was becoming less and less convenient for me.

Lying in here arms, I was swept into a land of fog. Thinking of Richie, feeling I had betrayed him, somehow trying to justify my presence here with Anna. Thoughts came at me from all angles. Sell the Jeep. List the boat. Remember Richie's cell phone number. And Anna. Anna brought pleasure, with an extra measure of the forbidden fruit. And she needed me. Or did she? Don't kid yourself.

And then Rika came to mind. I'd not spoken to her since my involvement with Anna began. I should go face the music, do a little Tokyo tango. I'd just tell her I've been up at the camp. Another lie, another betrayal. Where will it all end? I thought of the last book I'd read at camp. Milan Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Lots of betrayal there. Kundera wrote that men who are promiscuous fall into two categories, the Lyrical and the Epic. Those in the Lyrical group are seeking their dream woman, their perfect

one, and since by definition you can never find that, they are always disappointed. The Epic men are simply collectors, out to snag every woman they can just to experience the differences. I'm in the Lyrical group. I'm sure of that. Maybe. Was Rika my Perfect One? No, probably not her either, I decided.

The phone rang again. No one spoke. Silence, and then a click.

"Nobody I know," I muttered..

Time of reflection shattered, the mood broken, I moved into the day, showering, dressing and retreating into the kitchen. Coffee to her bedside, a kiss 'bye' and I settled into my car. A sigh slid from my body as I turned the key, a feeling of relief just to be away from her. "Take me away," I commanded, and the tires spun out a sharp 'chirp' as I entered the traffic flow.

Anna sipped her coffee, but it was too hot. Naked, she sprawled across the bed till the coffee was cold. She was lost, lost in thought.

The silent call. She felt so empty. Maybe . . . could she be hoping Richie was looking for her? She didn't know. Confusion was all.

\* \* \* \* \*



## *Riding the Waves*

Her father had died when she was a thirteen; her mother had not coped well. Actually, her mother had never coped well. She had married a man twenty years her senior, a farmer, a worker. On the farm, she too had been a worker. Always, chores to do. Jam to make, baking to do, chickens to feed, eggs to collect, cows to milk, kids to raise. Always kids to raise. Never a moment to herself.

Kids. There had been five, and then Phyllis put her foot down. Enough is enough. So she drew the line at five, and refused to help her husband fix the machinery either. If Al needed help, he could teach the boys. Fixing machinery took too long, and Al always cussed too much. This was not God's way. Besides, she had more important things to do than fix machinery.

The priest supported her in the termination of services. Al was silent for a long time, then settled into a peaceful co-existence. But he died not long after. Phyllis sold the farm, moved into a bungalow in the suburbs. The kids grew up.

Anna was the youngest. Sometimes mother and daughter didn't see eye to eye. Phyllis found herself praying a lot. Phyllis found herself screaming a lot. Banging her head against walls. Slamming doors. When she came home

one night to find the boy next door, on her couch, on her daughter, she stripped her gears. Phyllis talked non-stop for days to Anna about that. So it seemed. Anna had been half dressed when discovered, but she had retained her virginity. Or so the story went. Phyllis didn't believe it. Tommy was banished from her daughter's life. After all, Tommy's parents were drunks and Protestants. Anna must save herself for her wedding night. All these lessons were accomplished at high volume, Phyllis screaming herself hoarse.

After four days, Anna left. She and Tommy, the boy next door, went to Nanaimo, a bigger town to the south. He could still drive to work, and Anna couldn't hear the screaming. She was forty kilometers away. They set up housekeeping in a small place on a hill, very romantic. The story had been true, but was no longer. Tommy's parents wouldn't tell Phyllis where the children had gone. After all, Phyllis was Catholic and crazy. Tommy was twenty, Anna seventeen.

Anna completed her high school before her mother found her, then moved on to university. Tommy paid her tuition and her rent when she moved to Vancouver, but in time their conversations grew shorter, her visits less frequent. Too much homework, she said. In time, she stopped going to see him, and he stopped sending the cheques. That's just the way it goes.

Anna survived. She worked in a restaurant, then a gas station, then got an office job in the university administration. She studied less than she should have, but still did well in her courses. She was not a stupid girl. It was always easy to get an 'A'. It was always easy to get a meal and a movie. The boys thought she was pretty, and by graduation she had lived with several. Then came Richie.

She was just a girl from the farm . . . but one who'd covered a lot of land. Anna met Richie in her final year of her undergraduate study. Surprisingly, it was in a library. They both were surveying the same bookshelf; they both reached for the same book. They touched. It was magic. They went for dinner, had drinks, and before she knew it, Anna was in love, really in love this time. It didn't hurt that he seemed to have unlimited piles of money. It didn't hurt that he lived on a big sailboat. It didn't hurt that they flew to Las Vegas and San Francisco for the weekends, or to Paris as a graduation surprise. And Richie was devoted too. Marriage followed shortly after. Visions of children jumping on the decks. It was a happy time.

Time passed. Talk of children seemed threatening. Anna grew bored when Richie was away at work on his two weeks on. When he was away, her world seemed less and less magical. They stopped going to Paris, instead settling for tiny harbors in the Gulf Islands. It was still fun, but he was away so much. What's a girl to do?

She went out with her friends. Sometimes. Her friends, still unmarried and carefree, often ran into eligible young men. Anna appreciated the attention they paid, enjoyed the thrill of the chase. But she always remained faithful to her vows. At least for the first year.

Things change. In her second year of marriage, she found herself being wooed by her Philosophy Prof. It didn't hurt. He provided her with dinner and drinks and theatre and excitement, the excitement of the kind that Richie no longer provided. Eventually she succumbed to his advances. Wine me, dine me, sixty-nine me, as Socrates would say. He too liked his cups.

It became routine. With Richie, she was an ideal and attentive wife. The couple had fun together. After two weeks, it was David's turn. He showed her adventure, and he watched out for her grades as well.

Occasionally there were others. Sometimes, when out with her friends, she would meet the advances of younger men with smile. Just testing. After all, she was only cheating on David, not on Richie. At least it made sense in her mind. And what's the harm, anyway?

Until that day when Richie found her with David and her neat arrangement crashed like an avalanche. I guess that's where I came in. I was simply Richie's replacement, providing continuity to her otherwise shattered

lifestyle. And besides, I was also two weeks on, two weeks off. How convenient.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Meanwhile . . .*

Back at the ranch. Derek lifted himself slowly into his saddle. Ever so slowly. He talked calmly to Jerkie, soothing his horse and trying to stall any sudden movements. It was so unlike the way he usually mounted, hitting the leather simultaneously with an impatient spur to the side. This time, he wanted only the calm. He felt like he was ninety years old, and laughed at the feeling.

"Come on up. The view's fine," he called down to Richie.

Porteous was less sure. These horses were damn big. He'd never noticed that before. He put his runner in the stirrup, pulled on the horn and swung his leg over the saddle. His right foot wiggled its way into the other stirrup, and the horse skittered to the side, a tiny leap of joy. Her first rookie, she probably thought with glee. Watch me run! The horse did a little salsa and snorted. Derek read her mind, dismounted and took her by the bridle. A few curt words destroyed her mood, and she changed from playful dancer to obedient servant. She seemed to acknowledge that there would be hell to pay if she got too frisky. Or so Porteous hoped. It was a long way down.

Derek handed him the reins with the advice "Just pull back hard if she starts to do something you don't like." Porteous longed for his motorcycle. So

stable. So smooth. So obedient. "Ride beside me," commanded Derek. "Just give her a little kick in the ribs."

Which Richie did. A little too hard. He pulled back on the reins.

"Whoa!" he ordered and his horse began to walk politely beside Derek's. "This isn't so bad," he told himself. "I can do this."

Derek looked over and smiled. The horses walked, ever so slowly, under the baking sun.

"Gonna be a hot one. In about a mile, we'll reach those trees and it'll be a little cooler through the woods," Derek offered.

The two men rode quietly beside the rolling wheat field, the squeaking of the saddles and the clop-clop-clop-clop of the hooves marking their passage along the dry dirt trail. It seemed to Richie that the sounds of the saddle and the swaying of the horse were a lot like sailing through a light chop, back in his previous life. The quiet, the contentment, the breeze, the happiness. It all seemed so familiar. And he wouldn't think of Anna today. No. But maybe he'll talk to Derek about her some time. And ask about Jennifer too. Just to see where he stood. Cupid was making him curious. Where did Derek fit in her life? Why was her picture in his bedroom? Could he see her tonight?

"Don't think of it," he finally told himself. "Just enjoy the ride." But he couldn't stop. She was there, attached to his mind.

Derek broke his reverie. "Whad'ya think about Jim's new waitress?" He smirked.

I think he's got a lot to teach me about fast living," Richie replied. "Didn't strike me as that kind of guy at first."

"Oh Jim's got his moments," Derek laughed. "You just never know. Most times I think he'll be a bachelor the rest of his life, but every once in a while it looks like he's about to get married and move to Las Vegas."

Richie chuckled at the thought. "Well I don't know him as well as you, but I don't see him as the marrying type. He seems too carefree."

Derek agreed. "Yep. He always says that 'Worry is a misuse of the imagination.' That's his motto. He's the only farmer in Saskatchewan who doesn't worry. But I don't think you can get married and not worry. I guess you know that."

"Kind of a touchy subject, all right." Richie's insides seemed a vacuum, and he had trouble taking in air. He felt he'd been punched in the soul. Glad he was slightly behind Derek and could not be seen, he slowed his horse and took a deep breath. He couldn't remember talking to Derek about Anna. Then



he tried to put a cheery ring to his voice. "Still, women are always a problem, whether you're married to them or not."

Derek nodded. Or maybe it was just the motion of the horse. Switching the reins from his two-handed iron grip to a single hand, Richie reached down and patted his mount. Her coat was hot to his touch. "Nice horsie," he praised, ever so hopefully. "Don't know what I'd do if you weren't."

\* \* \* \* \*

## *It had to end, of course . . .*

David had his uses. As her courses required increased effort, Anna came to depend upon him more and more. And he on her. So to speak.

Anna was lucky. School was easy, but now as a grad. student she found it too much work. Professor Gerrard tried to keep her interested, but with limited success. For him too, it was a life of two weeks on, two weeks off. So to speak. But her grades were good. He saw to that.

Yet he felt he could not maintain her devotion. Through some undefined sixth sense, one philosophers rarely admit to, he knew that sometimes she strayed. He couldn't say how he knew that, yet he knew. He supposed it had something to do with the way some men talked to her. Still, he did not speak of it. After all, she was not his wife.

One such man was John Tyler. She had called him only yesterday, but he had made space for her in his busy day. He was businesslike, self assured, well dressed, a partner with three others in the law firm. Things were going well.

Her visit with John Tyler had also gone well. He had assured her that divorce proceedings were routine. Half of the Porteous family assets were

hers, and that he had only to file the appropriate papers to begin the process. It would take a few months. With her signature on the right papers, he could handle everything. It had been a week since Richie left. Why wait?

She agreed to have them drawn up and to join him for lunch early next week when the papers were ready for her signature. After their business was completed, Tyler stood, walked around the desk and took her hands in his. Anna rose, and he put his arm around her shoulder as they walked to the door.

"Nice seeing you again," he smiled, "even in these unpleasant circumstances." Outside in the corridor, he leaned over to kiss her good bye. She felt his hand on her back and knew that a mixture of business and pleasure was in her future. Men were so transparent. Yet why had she chosen this lawyer? Of course. He was the only lawyer she knew. They'd slept together a few times. Just a few times. They'd met at a party. One thing had led to another. The affair had fizzled out when she and Richie had gone fishing. Tyler had other fish to fry. No big deal for either of them. Still . . .

"Call me Tuesday. The papers should be ready by then," he smiled. When he returned to the office, his secretary could not look up, afraid she

would give away her thoughts. "Just another notch," she calculated. Anna wasn't the first client she'd seen attract such attentions.

Driving to the campus, Anna faced questions. "You wouldn't understand," she repeated to the imaginary inquisition. Anna felt she had done no evil. Her only wrong was getting caught, and that could be blamed on God or luck or fate or Richie, but certainly not on herself. After all, it was called 'making love'. What's the matter with spreading love in the world? She had done nothing very wrong, and only wished there had been no discovery. Her carefree life had been shattered, and her future path seemed shrouded in fog. As was the highway to the mountaintop campus.

Anna went straight to David's office. There was a student in his office, so she waved and pointed to the chairs in the alcove.

"Five minutes," the Professor assured her.

The chairs were hot from the mid-day sun, and her legs soon became glued to the naugahide covering. Waiting her turn, she tried to concentrate on her project, but the idea of books was blocked by the overwhelming chaos of her life. She paged mindlessly through her notes, thinking of Richie, thinking of David and John. Life was certainly getting more complicated.

Professor David Gerrard appeared, smiling. "Come on in to my office," he waved. He closed the door and took her in his arms. A long slow kiss made his intentions known. "I've missed you," he started. "How's it going?"

It had been a week since their discovery. Anna thought she's leave out the details, play for a little sympathy. All she wanted was lunch in a nice restaurant, and then a long slow afternoon in the silk sheets on Eaglecrest Drive. They agreed she should have those things.

"Wish I didn't have this class coming up," the Prof. lamented. And it seemed to last forever, his train of thought crashing against the vision of the blond girl in the back row. At first, he spoke as if on automatic pilot, but gradually screened her out, almost able to replace his anticipation of her body with his passion for his topic. In answering questions, he was lighthearted and witty, and replied with precise clarity, consciously attempting to give the students their money's worth, trying to keep his mind on the task at hand. Finally, it was over. At class end, he accepted student assignments as Anna waited by the door. Finally Anna.

"No assignment, Ms. Porteous?" he asked with mock seriousness.

"I'm going to work on it this afternoon," she replied, her tongue darting.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Choices*

When I phoned 'Margaritaville' later that night, Anna was still not answering. I tried Rika instead and woke her from a mid-afternoon snooze. We exchanged the usual "I love you"s, but I didn't mean it. Did she? Nope. Just a game. She seemed interested in seeing me again, and we tried to agree on a date for my arrival. The sooner the better, I thought. At least I'll get away from Anna in a polite and civilized way. By the time I get back, I'll be forgotten.

Well, that was the plan. A little time off to reflect. Yes, I might do that. Something to take me away from this mess with Anna. Run away before Richie found out. I didn't want to hurt either of them. I didn't want to hurt Rika either. It was as simple as that.

And as complicated.

That night we slept on the boat. Anna seemed distracted as we fell into the sleeping cabin and for the first time it occurred to me that this must have been where Richie found her and her Professor. Funny. I'd forgotten about him. It had never occurred to me that she might still be seeing him, might have spent the afternoon with him.

I put my arm around her and she turned from me, nestling back to front like spoons in a drawer. I thought of Marx's famous line - "A man is only as old as the woman he feels." Groucho, not Karl. More profound than Wittgenstein anyway. Images of Anna and the good Professor flooded my brain, and I rolled back to my side of the berth. Anna did not seem displeased.

From the distance, muffled by blankets and distance, she whispered "I love you." It didn't bother her that she'd said the same thing to David a few hours earlier. Well, she didn't mean it that time either.

Why do I concern myself? Last month I watched two well-dressed men playing chess on the ferry from Victoria. They were part of a group, likely returning from a church gathering on the Island. It was Sunday, after all. I glanced at the game they were playing. White, he of the very nice tie, could have checkmated his opponent in four moves. He didn't. Instead, he made a wrong move and what should have been an easy win, a victory concise, pure and direct, turned instead into a battle for his life. Black, he with the new Florsheim shoes, nipped at White's possessions, gradually took the offensive and secured a victory he did not deserve.

If only we knew our futures. We'd play our games differently. I think.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Senses*

Would I be on this plane if I'd known how my fun and games would end? Not likely. Yet I always had a feeling . . .

I remember Miss Berrico, back there in grade 5. Elementary school teachers always teach the five senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing. Miss Berrico was an elderly woman, and one to whom perfume was important. For years afterward, Brent the Horse and I joked about our memories of her, how she would lean over our desks and give us check marks on our pages while we held our breath. Once, in our more mature years, I went to his newspaper office to pick him up for tennis. The elevator had a strange odor, something associated with some aspect of printing presses. Brent and I looked at each other and simultaneously said "Miss Berrico!" We laughed so hard I thought I'd die. I was wrong of course.

Sometimes we acknowledge the sixth sense, as in a woman's intuition that men have been somewhere they shouldn't have gone. That's important. Still, I think the teachers miss the two most important senses, our common sense and our sense of adventure. These are the ones that make a difference. Everyone knows about common sense, that rational



decision making process that guides us down our straight and narrow paths towards burial. A few people follow their adventure sense. They usually die young or in jail, but they live their lives instead of going through the motions. Who's right? How are we to know? Where is our guide? In an earlier time, we needed only follow the Bible or those who claimed to speak for it. Maybe now we live too long, buy too much, think too little.

For myself, when there's a conflict between the common sense and the adventure, I usually let the sense of adventure win. That's probably why I found myself having an affair with the wife of my best friend.

Mistake. Sorry Richie.

The answering machine was flashing its usual greeting when I got home.

It had to end, of course.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Damage*

The calls, for there had been two, had been from Richie. He didn't sound unfriendly, and asked me to call him back. I didn't. Instead, I grabbed a beer and slid out to the patio. When the phone rang a few minutes later, I rose from my hammock and walked to its side, but did not pick it up. When it had done its damage, I called \* 69. It was not a number the system could read. It was probably Richie. It was certainly not Mrs. Porteous. Something inside was chewing on me, and I paced back and forth. Finally, it subsided. I knew what I must do.

Waiting for Anna. Waiting, still waiting. Out on the patio in the setting sun, trying to escape into the pages of a book. Beer at my side, the world is my oyster. Or should be. Used to be. My book is called *Damage*, by Josephine Hart. The main female character is also named Anna. She is damaged, unpredictable, dangerous. The narrator seems intent on destroying his life for her. She is his perfect mate, nothing can stop their love. Would I do that for my Anna? Not bloody likely. *Damage* is a book about guilt, about a wealthy and successful man who has an affair with the fiancée for his son. A man who sacrifices everything for his One Perfect Love. Richie's Anna is not my One Perfect Mate. In fact, she's late. I

wonder where she is. I wonder . . . and it occurs to me that I think I know where she is.

I decide to take a drive to West Vancouver, see if there's a red Jeep in anyone's driveway. He's not in the phone book, but a quick slide through her computer reveals his name and address. Too many private eye shows on TV. Detective Johnson is in pursuit of crime, both real and imagined.

And then the phone rang again. It would be him.

"Richie . . .?" I answered.

"How did you guess?" he snickered in response.

He sounded normal. He didn't know. How could he know? But I knew, and somewhere inside me a knife cut deep. "What's up?" I asked, trying to sound calm.

"Just wanted to know what's goin' on there. And I need a favor. Any luck in unloading the car or getting Anna off the boat."

"No and yes to your questions, although there's more to it than that.

The Jeep's not a problem. I can unload it in a week. But first, it's a matter of you and Anna coming to some kind of property settlement, and I guess you have to sign a few hundred papers and make a couple of lawyers rich. Until

there's a property settlement, I can't do anything. She says the car is hers, period. The boat is also a problem, since she says it's her home and she's not leaving, but I think that's just a bargaining tactic. Still, one way or another, she'll make you buy half a boat all over again, so save your pennies."

Our conversation continued. We went over the details of our separate existences, and I learned of Jennifer, about Derek and Jim. I learned about the cabin and how he hoped to soon buy a garage. It was something to do. Something to make money. He didn't love Saskatchewan. He did love Jennifer. She was his anchor, holding him fast in the Horse Latitudes. He had talked with a lawyer on the best route to keep Anna's hands out of his pockets. Yes, I would sign a couple of papers.

And then, in reply to his question "anything else new?"

A tornado twisted through my being. I wanted to say "Yes, Richie. I've been sleeping with Anna." I did not. There's never a good time to say that. I just said I'd been feeling dizzy sometimes, and that it got me a two week medical leave.

"Extra holiday," he replied. He laughed. Said I'd do anything not to work. We both knew that wasn't true. I loved flying. I just had days when I'd

had too much of it. And on that note we closed our conversation. Our last.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Anna*

So where do I go from here? Once it came to me that it didn't matter. "Very few things matter and nothing matters very much." Richie always said that after he signed off the repairs on my chopper. I could tell he didn't mean it. Yet a time would come when all the little things we spend our days thinking about would no longer be important. One day I would die and it wouldn't matter that I'd won my tennis game today. Richie would even get over my betrayal. Eventually. I doubted there could be a resurrection for me in his life, so I resolved to get on with mine. *Carpe Diem* and all that. Extract myself from Anna and get on with it. By the time I turned the ignition key, I was certain I would find her with the Professor. She was already history to me.

The drive to West Vancouver doesn't usually take long, but today the bridge was clogged by North Shore people, like lemmings all desperate to escape at the same time. Northbound traffic was restricted to one lane, a lineup that multiplied to three lanes up Georgia Street. It was going to take a while. I refused to think of Anna or Richie, instead singing praises to the city fathers of the 1970s who refused to build decent roadways. They had hoped to quell pollution and traffic congestion by making the use of the

automobile as difficult as possible. Didn't work. Everyone makes mistakes, but I didn't want to think about mine.

I fiddled with the radio, but hit a country singer crying over some imagined infidelity. Not proper background music, I decided, for the mission at hand. My lover was unfaithful to me, yet it did not matter. I liked Anna. I loved Anna. I enjoyed Anna. But she was just Anna. Richie's wife. It had to end.

I had betrayed Richie, and that was more important. But this was not the time to ponder that calamity. I cursed the traffic instead. Strange how your mind works, isn't it?

Of course there was a Jeep in the driveway. It was well hidden by the arbutus trees, but it's distinctive silver grill flashed a 'hello' to my headlights. I stopped, backed up my car to the mouth of the driveway and took a long slow look. I was not surprised. I knew she would be here. A Jeep. A red Jeep. Anna's Jeep. And inside the house, Anna. And what would Anna be doing there? My foot hit the gas and I squealed to speed. Thoughts streamed into my brain. "You idiot!" I heard some part of my brain cry out.

But I was not too hard on myself. After all, she was only a passing fancy for me, but for Richie she was much more. Richie. With Anna history, I saw

possibilities of re-writing these months. Thoughts of guilt washed over me, then relief. I shouldn't have played with his wife, even if she wasn't his wife any more. And then I was calm. No more Anna. It was a good feeling, and I drove home humming to the beat of the CD player, intent on severing all ties with Mrs. Porteous.

\* \* \* \* \*



## *Change*

Time passes, things change. Summer had turned to fall and in the fields green had turned to gold. Porteous had turned to Jennifer and she had become a part of his life. Though she came with restricted access due to parental objections and long working hours, the couple, for they had become a couple, were happy to meet when they could. Her parents noticed the change in her, for it was obvious their woman-child was happy. She smiled more, was more cooperative, friendlier to both customers and her parents. The change was not lost on them, nor was the cause. They saw her less, but they knew where she was. There were even occasions when Richie would visit the restaurant and Papa Chin would smile, stop his work, and come to the counter to shoot the breeze with this new presence in their lives.

Porteous too underwent change. Increasingly bored with his restricted role as helper of Derek and Jim, yet now entangled in the life of Jennifer, he took a year long leave of absence from SkyCrane Inc. and began preparing his log cabin for the harsh reality that would be November's wind and snow. After much consultation with Jim, for he was the wealthiest investor within thousand sections, Richie came out of his shell and purchased an Esso garage on the road into town. He worked there day and night, and met with Jennifer, Derek and Jim whenever possible. The garage didn't pay as well as

Crew Chief with SkyCrane, but he was still on leave and could go back any time he ran out of money. Besides, far from the Coast, far from the mountains and sea and his boat, far from the memories, it was easier to forget the summer of betrayal. This was a new world.

The Garage had been a cheap purchase, a couple of years salary which, although he had the money in stocks, bonds and cash, was happily financed by the town's Scotia Bank. Things were cheaper in Saskatchewan, and though the garage equipment seemed from another era, it worked well enough on the combines, bailers, tractors and trucks that rolled into his repair bays. Business grew steadily as Richie's reputation as a guy who knew how to fix things spread through the community. Of course, it was a community where everyone knew how to fix things. That's the way farm communities are. Still, it was sometimes a luxury well deserved to see the job done right. Richie did that. This year the economy of the Crick was booming, with bumper crops of canola and wheat, the hog market surging and the cattlemen were happy as usual. With prosperity in the land, more and more farmers would treat themselves to Richie's services.

Occasional fall rains preceded the onslaught of winter and the roads of gravel and gumbo that ran between the sections became slick with patches of mud and pools of murk. Even so, there were stretches of unstoppable

sunshine, the “Indian Summer” of our racist past, and in one of these stretches the group of friends dispersed.

Jim and Jackalope Kim drove to Calgary, looking forward to an expensive hotel, fine restaurants, shopping and a touch of big city excitement. Derek stayed at his ranch. He busied himself with familiar chores, and even found the time to install a new door on Richie’s cabin. Later, he returned to the cabin with some extra blankets and pillows, leaving them inside on Richie’s bed. The brightness of the day streamed onto the plastic covered porch, and he went out on the deck. It was unheated, though warmed by the sun. Derek pulled the plastic back to reveal the rolling hills to the south, a view that went on for a hundred miles, the Cypress Hills. The most beautiful place in the world, he figured. Richie had given him a book, *The Englishman’s Boy*, a novel based on a massacre that happened right down there in the valley. Derek had liked the book, for it had brought the history of his land to life. What had he given Richie? Then he sat down on some boxes and wondered if there were anything he would not give to trade places with Richie. Derek went home and solemnly moved the picture of his high school sweetheart from its place beside his bed to a drawer in the basement, a drawer where he buried the keepsakes of his mother’s time.

Richie and Jennifer escaped for a weekend of togetherness. Jennifer's parents offered no objection when the subject was raised. Watching their daughter drive off in Richie's truck, Mr. Chin put his arm around his wife's waist, hoping to quell the rising tide of tears in her eyes. Customers pretended not to watch.

Richie drove south for an hour to the parkland near Fort Walsh. The Fort was part of a National Park commemorating the whiskey trade and the conquest of the Assiniboine way of life. Its wooden walls were now deserted of tourist and tour guide, a lone watchman the keeper of Peace, Order and Good Government from the confines of his trailer. He didn't bother them, though he knew of their presence.

The happy couple camped by a small creek, and set up housekeeping amid the sounds of falling leaves, migrating geese, the meandering stream. There was joy in the air. On a brand new barbecue they roasted their hamburgers and hot dogs. They pulled cold beer and Cokes from their brand new cooler. They hiked for miles, slowed only by the predictable foot sores of shoes too new. It was Richie who finally begged to go back. On a brand new blanket, they picnicked, sun tanned, and, when darkness came, studied the stars in the crisp autumn night. And secure in the wonder of the moment, they crawled into their brand new tent, linked their sleeping bags together and, for the first time, followed their bodies' common desire.

But soon, much too soon, winter was upon them.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *That's Life*

One of those days. Even before morning coffee, Richie had skinned his knuckles while wrenching on a combine's nut; he'd been moody ever since. The garage was doing well. People came in for gas or advice, or surprisingly, just to drink some coffee and watch. In a place like the Crick, maybe Richie was the best show in town. He'd never had a job before where it was important to serve the public, so Richie always went overboard in showing hospitality to people, customers or not.

It was a slow day, what with the wind skimming across the plains and a light dusting of snow threatening to bring trouble. Winter was days, perhaps only hours, from the door. When customers came in, Richie put down his tools and came out to visit. He had hired Tom, a young man he'd met at the Blue Bird to be the gas jockey and to keep the books. Only months out of high school, Tom knew nothing about such things but he was anxious to learn, happy to put a little spare cash into his jeans. Eventually he'd go back and work with his father on the farm, but for now he wanted a little independence.

And then there was Pierre. As you might expect, his heritage was French. A refugee from Manitoba. Born and raised in Ste. Rose du Lac, a French enclave on the road to nowhere. At least most of the old people

spoke French. The young, like young everywhere, preferred to blend in to the North American megaculture, preferred to speak English, ignore their history, forget their religion. There is a shrine at the entrance to Ste. Rose, beside the highway. A white Virgin Mary calls for peace. She is a target for the youth. It is a tradition among them to throw beer bottles at Her as they drive by, on their way south to the city.

Pierre's nickname was Pee. He didn't mind. Pee was a good mechanic, and Richie hoped eventually to hire a couple more like him and slide over into a supervisory role. He knew he had to get the best mechanics around. After that, everything else would take care of itself. Pee was good. He didn't have the experience Richie did, no exotic aircraft or memories of working under gunfire, but he could fix a GMC or a John Deere faster than Richie. And probably better. Unfortunately, Pee wasn't always as dedicated as he should be. Today was one of those days. He called in sick. Richie's words showed no sign of complaint, but from his tone Pee was able to discern that he'd better not play this game too often. Hanging up the phone, he felt guilty that his boss would have to work alone all day. He hoped that business was light, for Richie's sake.

The day bumped along. Richie worked quickly and without distraction, and eventually forgot his gored knuckles. He walked over to the Blue Bird at lunch, tasting the sting of winter's wind more than usual. Jennifer put

Ozonol on his knuckles and brought him soup. The other customers could wait. Father Chin waved a 'hello' and abandoned his kitchen to refill coffee cups at the counter. His wife became the waitress, leaving her post near the cash register to take an order. Change. Sometimes it's wonderful.

Sometimes it's not. Richie and Jennifer had agreed to meet at the hotel bar at seven. Last night Jim and Derek had come by the log cabin and they'd played Scrabble. It was close. Richie didn't like the game, but luckily hadn't embarrassed himself, finishing second behind Jim. They had all laughed a lot. The four had agreed on meeting for dinner and drinks the next night.

Evening arrived. Waiting for their friends, Richie and Jennifer passed the time playing on the pool table where they'd first met. Jennifer was still his equal. How did she get that good? His defeats he blamed on his knuckles, his victories he claimed for his good looks. Jennifer just laughed at both explanations. The games were close and neither noticed that time was clicking away.

About eight o'clock that night the news filtered down. An accident. The bar became more hushed, and glances began to be made toward the pool table. The drinkers knew. Someone had to tell them.

Five minutes passed. With Jennifer taunting Richie over a missed shot, an old farmer finally approached the table. They were lost in their own world.



He spoke. "I hear there's been an accident." He had the couple's attention. They looked at each other, for they knew the next words before they were spoken.

"Jim's truck got nailed by a car. I hear it's pretty bad . . ." The sentences took forever to leave his mouth. "They're over at the hospital."

Cues were left on the table. The drinkers watched in silence as the couple hurried from the bar. Neither said a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Loss*

The highway had been icy. Wind combined with light snow made for a ghostlike swirling in the headlights as vehicles picked their way across the plains. A driver, unsure of his route, unsure of the treachery these roads could bring, tiptoed carefully to the bend in the highway. His wheels began a slight skid and his panicked corrections made the skid worse. The headlights of the two vehicles reached out for those of the other. Jim anticipated such an event, but at such low speeds was confident nothing much would come of it. He steered to the side of the road, knowing just how far he could go before the steep-sided ditch would claim them. Not a problem. But the oncomer kept coming, faster now in his panic, and there was no way to avoid his charge. The low crash of rapidly bending metal and breaking glass shouted out above the cry of the wind. "Watchit!" came first from Derek's mouth, "Shit!" from Jim's. The ditch grabbed the truck and spun it sideways, then down. A fence post greeted them. The radio played. Jim was dead. Derek's back was broken.

On seeing Jennifer, he managed a slim smile, but could not give the shrug that usually accompanied this look. Derek then acknowledged Richie. No smile. Their eyes gave away the secret till then unspoken. Jim had died of a head injury. It had been quick. Jennifer began to weep and Derek too found

his eyes clouded with tears. "He was a good guy" was all he could say. It was all anyone could say.

They stayed until the nurse suggested they go. Derek was under sedation and would not wake for several hours. Richie had promised Derek that he would look after everything, and this he set out to do the following morning. He contacted the RCMP first, then called a couple of Jim's relatives, his lawyer and finally, unable to find a phone number, drove slowly to the Jackalope Bar to tell the news to Kim. She had heard already and was not at work, but the owner gave directions to her place. Richie found it in just over an hour after stopping to ask for directions three more times. She was still crying. A girlfriend was trying to console her. No luck. Richie left after tea, promising to help in any way he could. On the afternoon of the funeral, Jennifer and Richie sat with Kim, and after the service went to Derek's bedside, determined to remember their friend with joy. They left the burying to the relatives.

The executor of Jim's will was Derek, so Richie took on many of the tasks of settling Jim's business affairs with his sister from Regina. It seemed to Porteous that the sister seemed more concerned with her cut of the pie than she did about the death of her brother. She didn't want any of the funds to go to Kim.

"She's just a fortune hunter," she commented bitterly. And then "he's only known her for six months!" she wailed.

"Perhaps so, but that's what he wrote in his will," Richie countered. She would not back down until weeks later, once Derek was finally released from the hospital. A long phone call from Derek made her concede Kim her share. Derek had his ways.

Over the next months, Derek began a painful therapy that still left him half the man he had been. He wheeled his chair through the hospital halls at breakneck speed, gradually learning the reality of life from a sitting position. Richie kept the farm running over the winter months, for there was still much to do. Animals to feed, crops to plan, machinery to repair. In the spring, four neighbors gave their time in rotation to plow the fields and plant the crops. Pee, Richie's employee at the garage, became employed at the farm instead.

Jennifer stayed with Derek through the long hours that Richie toiled. At his garage, on the farm, on concluding the affairs of Jim, on concluding his marriage with Anna, Richie compartmentalized his life to perfection. In time, the picture that had disappeared from Derek's bedside was returned to its place of honor. She cooked for him, she cleaned for him. Days went by when she did not work at the restaurant. Some nights she would climb the hill to

Richie's log cabin, but other times she found herself comfortable in the house of her high school sweetheart. Richie did not question her choice.

In time, the pieces fell into place. Richie sold the garage. He sold his motorcycle and his truck. He left his Jennifer behind. There was no explanation required. Anyone could see the bond between the Giant and his high school love was strong. There was no breaking it now.

He told them of his decision to leave the day he sold the garage. There was no surprise. There was sorrow, but happiness too. They would always be friends. Jennifer drove him to town, kissed him good bye at the bus depot. That was it.

The bus took him to Calgary, and from there he caught a plane to Vancouver.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Coasting*

A year had passed. Much had changed. With the profits from the garage sale, Porteous was able to settle Anna's demands. He phoned MacPherson on landing, telling him he'd like to take the next shift. They had been expecting him. His leave of absence was up. MacPherson relayed the message and a supervisor soon phoned to welcome him back to the fold. His shift would begin in one week. Two weeks on, two weeks off.

Porteous took possession of the boat the next day after watching Anna move the last of her clothes into the Professor's Land Rover. There was no sign of the Professor. Richie sat in his new truck, hidden in the anonymity of the parking lot, and watched her go. She seemed older, her hair even more disheveled, perhaps a bit heavier. He thought he could see a flicker of regret cross her face when she took her last look at Margaritaville. It's amazing what you can see when you want to.

He boarded his craft and checked her out. No unpleasant surprises. Home sweet home. And still the love of his life. The other one. Later in the afternoon, he cast off and powered to a new moorage on the other side of the city. No more memories than necessary, he figured.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Ohayogozaimasu*

The flight attendant smiled to my neighbors. To me, a simple "Good morning, sir." Eight hours ago it was early afternoon, Narita Airport, my brain filled with Keiko. Now it's good morning, coming down into Canada, my being overwhelmed by thoughts of Anna and Richie. Too many memories.

The sun is brighter now, though it has never left us on the crossing. My fellow passengers are waking, readying themselves for the breakfast and the landing that will soon come. Offers of Asahi have been replaced by orange juice. I accept.

Across the aisle, two men, sitting side by side. One has displaced the other's wife who has dutifully joined the deserted wife in the row ahead. They are all very well dressed, though the older of the couples is dressed more formally. Did you ever notice that wherever you go, older people tend to overdress for the occasion? The world has changed. They have not.

The two women talk. And talk. In Japanese, naturally. Dutifully, politely, but perhaps without interest or concern. It's just their job. For the men, a battle has been joined. Their talk is animated, though polite. There are no smiles.

The bald man by the window (who wears a very nice tie) opens his laptop. The younger man, perhaps only fifty, is dressed more casually, but expensively. Marks of Polo and Versace adorn his fabrics. He studies the charts displayed on the laptop spreadsheets.

The elder man explains with the exasperation of a tired schoolteacher. He points, gestures, pauses to look at the younger, but with fire in his eyes. They discuss the Nikkei Exchange and the Japanese economy. I hope for air turbulence, something, anything to upset their private world, to make them react in a more human way. The flight is as smooth as silk.

The younger man, Polo, strikes back. He explains in calm and assured tones that the assumptions of the senior are resting on shifting sands. Polo reaches for his own laptop in the overhead compartment. New spreadsheets are displayed. The battle begins. Their wives occasionally look back in dismay.

The elder man reminds me of Uragami, *The Master of Go* in Kawabata's novel. Uragami is a combatant. No competition is joined without the will to prevail. In fact, life for him is only a series of competitions, indeed a series of victories. When defeat finally makes its appearance in his life, so does death.

It seems there is to be no victor in this discussion. The wives have turned to them, ordering them to quiet down, to let it go. In Kawabata's novel, Uragami's wife was so dutiful that she would never draw her husband away



from his games. It seems these wives want their husbands to do more than compete. These are the Japanese wives of the new age. This is new.

I used to have these kinds of conversations with Richie when we were both really drunk. It didn't matter what we said, but whenever we'd talk about it the next day, we were both sure that we'd found a key to happiness in this troubled world. (If only we could remember what it was now that we were sober.) But the conversation of my fellow travelers is not one which can bring happiness to their world. Their world is only a world of business, a game of one-upmanship. These battles do not matter. Both my travel companions have made, I think, a serious mistake. They have become serious about money. Money is only serious if you don't have enough. Most people don't realize this until they're about to die. I don't know why I learned it early.

They order their breakfast juice, then stand in the aisle beside their wives. They laugh now, but not so noisily that we must all share their wit. Japanese are, after all, more discreet than Americans. I am surprised at how much of their conversation I have understood.

They are pushed back into their seats by the morning coffee and juice cart. The flight attendant is very polite. The couples re-unite, wife of the suit quietly endures his summary of the debate, wife of Polo successfully turning him away from his employment toward the vacation they will share. I watch

the couples for a long time. There exists a kind of 'peaceful coexistence' between each husband and wife. He of the tie is older, a little too pudgy for good health. He has been swollen with the good life, and too many trips into booze and beef. When he returns from the toilet, I notice his face is slightly red, and he settles into his seat with a sigh. He is almost out of breath. Perhaps literally. His wife is lean and hard, stylishly dressed, silent in her obedience. She will soon be the recipient of his life insurance, but for now, they are a couple.

A couple? What does that mean? They are growing old together, but he is certain to win the race. Nice knowin' ya, Hiroshi.

It occurs to me that this is not something I will ever experience. Once I lived with a woman my age, but I was young and married for the first time. Our marriage didn't last long. I'm reminded of a story about Hugh Hefner. He asked one of his voluptuous young starlets out for a date and she said "Oh Mr. Hefner, I've never been out with someone over twenty-four." Old Hugh just smiled and replied "Me neither."

Like Hugh, I'll never know what it's like to grow old with someone. Instead, I'll become an old codger, a little Bimbo on my arm, thirty or forty years my junior. Her eyes will dart between my will and my replacement. How did it come to this?

The Beatles' song:

“Will you still need me, will you still feed me,  
When I'm sixty-four?”

Well, something like that. Neither Lennon nor McCartney will know the answer to that one either. Funny how it works out.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Shake Rattle Roll*

There had been no warning, just clues that only became clues after the fact. It was a sunny and hot day, and nothing seemed right. Sunglasses didn't seem dark enough, the Cokes weren't cold enough. The day just wasn't short enough. Ten minutes after my last fuel up and there I was looking forward to my next one.

Finally it came. I radioed in ahead as usual, asked for another Coke as usual. Asked if I could shut it down while I refueled. Visit to the washroom required. Give back the Coke. All fine and dandy. I grabbed the Coke, slithered past MacPherson who scrambled into the pilot seat to idle the craft while it was being refueled. I ran hunched over to miss the rotors, then jogged to the washroom to drink my Coke, happy to be away from the chopper. It was a good system, but I could only use it every so often. Probably cost the company five hundred bucks just to give me a little break.

Then back to the Crane. Temperature's rising. Mechanics are still fiddling with something. MacPherson slowly moves his bulk out of the ship as I slip in. Ready to go, except for those guys with the screwdrivers. Let's look at a checklist. I radio to MacPherson that she's getting warm.

He says he knows. He was just sitting there. "A couple more minutes."  
he sends back.

And that was the end of my helicopter story. Out of the blue, my world went black.

They told me later that I stiffened up, started shaking, then slumped over sideways in the cockpit. They thought I was having a heart attack or something exciting. MacPherson saw it all, took 2 or 3 seconds to realize it was for real, then set a new world record for the 30 meter dash when he saw me go over. He hit the emergency shut down on the dash so hard that he broke the switch. It took three of them to drag me away from the controls, and they just laid me on the dust under the rotor. I danced. MacPherson barked out orders. One of the mechanics tried to stop my head from thrashing. Before the chopper had stopped it's whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, they had called Campbell River Hospital, started up Number Three Chopper, and had sent for a stretcher. They never did find the First Aid guy, not that he'd have been much good. Charlie was having coffee down by the river. I came to after a couple of minutes of blackness, and except for the bump on my head where I rattled the cockpit window, I guess I was OK. Sort of. Dazed. There was blood running from the swelling in my head where I'd contacted the window. It was a sunny day, but I was in a fog. I felt tired, old, confused.

They convinced me to board the Number Three and off we went to Campbell River. I felt embarrassed, but gradually my thinking returned to normal. "Looks like this Coke break might cost the company more than five hundred bucks," I thought.

The doctors asked me the questions, but only MacPherson had the answers. All I knew was blackness. They touched my head. It had a bump where I hit the windscreen. The nurse, a motherly thing, bandaged me, then led me to a machine. Just going to take a picture she said. I laid on the padding and she put a strap around me. Why? Probably so that I wouldn't break their precious machine if I danced again.

"Ready for a ride?" she smiled.

An electric motor whirrs, and then the big camera slowly begins to pull me into its mouth, devouring my upper body. The large mouth then rotated slowly. Interesting and boring at the same time. I remember thinking "I hope they find a brain in there."

And they did. One with a dark spot in the right front lobe, the result of my war injury. Good old Viet Nam, it never lets go. Being young and invincible, I hadn't thought much about getting hit when I first went over. Gradually it became more and more obvious that the Viet Cong were no worse than us, and at least it was their country. I had stopped liking what I was

doing. It was hard to feel sympathetic for those guys down there shooting at me, but when I was drunk I wasn't happy to be an invader in their land. One day, just hanging around the bar in Saigon doing some serious R and R, a cold Bud in my hand, warm cutie by my side, and WHAM!, an errant beer bottle came flying through the air, smacked me right above the eye. I was down for the count. My friends dragged me to the hospital. My Viet Nam war injury. Though blood flowed from the gash over my eye and my head pounded, the doctors were not impressed. Not as important an injury as the rows and rows of bullet wounds they had to look at daily, but they checked me anyway.

Variety is the spice of life.

A few stitches and a bruise, they said. They wrapped it impressively, so that when I was back up flying an air ambulance a couple of days later, I looked like one of my wounded passengers. Just a bruise. On the inside. No problem, the doctors said. It will get better. Maybe. Get on with life. I did.

Until that day in the bush, just fueling up and drinking a Coke. I guess the timing was good. Five minutes earlier or later and I'd have spoiled a perfectly good SkyCrane. In Nanaimo Hospital they attached some electrodes to my head, making my hair greasy in the process. An EEG they said. I watched flashing lights, I took deep breaths, I was told to sleep. How can you just fall asleep on command? I did. They looked at the reams and reams of

paper the dancing pens turned out. The doctor showed me the little jumps called 'spikes.' The jury was in.

The 'spikes' indicated that I had had an epileptic seizure. I should not drive a car for a few months, I should take pills every day, I should not drink alcohol, I should not go to work. My flying license was canceled for two years. After that, they would decide. Probably cancel it forever.

My mother always said Coke was bad for me. That day, it saved my life.

\* \* \* \* \*



## *Falling in Love*

It had seemed so simple. Shortly after Richie returned to the Coast, Mrs. Porteous and he met. Officially to sign some papers. They had lunch on the boat. Life went on. He could pretend nothing had happened. Almost. He could forgive her. Almost. Turn back the clock. Almost. They parted friends. Almost. He had loved her so.

A sunny Sunday afternoon. The Yacht Club sat on pilings overlooking the harbour, a white castle anchoring the surrounding flotilla. Margaritaville lay moored on a nearby float, her emerald hull and teak decks drawing admiring glances from her neighbors and passersby. Though furled, her burgundy sails set her apart as the jewel of the fleet. Porteous had spent the morning adjusting her rigging, varnishing her hatches, making her perfect. As she had been. Before. He looked up from his drink and saw her, ever so gently, waltzing with the sea.

“At least I can forgive Margaritaville.” The thought so strong it was almost verbalized.

He studied the bottom of his glass, and the waiter promptly came by to meet his needs. The waiter knew a good drinker when he saw one. Porteous

kept him busy, but at least he was quiet. Maybe a big tip coming, the waiter considered. Sometimes drunks don't care about how much they leave. Maybe no tip at all from this guy. He couldn't tell by looking at Richie which way it would go. Just one of the hazards of the business.

The Yacht Club. Built on stilts out over the bay, like a flock of flamingoes carrying a castle on their backs. A forest of sailboat masts, and the sun reflecting off the sea and the office tower windows. Not bad, thought Richie. A table with a view, a table with an umbrella. Cold beer. MacPherson had dropped by, stayed for a few, but then had to leave. A forest fire closure had delayed Richie's return to camp. And given Jack MacPherson an extra few days off. Richie was now scheduled to return as Crew Chief on Wednesday. Plenty of time to sober up.

MacPherson had felt embarrassed. Richie had complained to him about Anna. He wanted sympathy. He wanted Anna, the old Anna back. I was the liquor talking. It was unlike him to reveal his feelings to this man from work. MacPherson could only take so much, and left after an hour. It occurred to Richie that he felt more drunk than at any time since Saigon. And that was a long time ago.

Anna had been his bonfire, bringing light and heat to his life. That day on Margaritaville when he had discovered her infidelity, it had been as if a

prairie storm had opened the clouds above. Yet still the campfire had burning coals under the soaked logs. With their meeting, he had hoped to re-ignite the flames, but instead it brought a new chill, each new raindrop setting off a puff of steam and a 'fis', 'fis', 'fis'. It could not be as it used to be. They parted on the dock, each sadder and wiser. The fire gave up its life. Richie watched her walk away with regret, but also with relief. As drizzle will slowly take the life of a campfire, a drizzle of disappointment had erased the heat and light from Richie's existence. It was finally over.

The deck of the Club's restaurant was on the second story of the building, overhanging the docks. Richie wondered if he could navigate the stairs to the docks or if he should take the less steep stairs inside the clubhouse. He had trouble standing, and away from the umbrella the sun made his head swirl. Still, he knew he could make it. Life was good. And he was good at life. Back to work in a couple of days. Begin his life again. It's a happy life, even with Anna gone. And he would think less and less of her, with less and less sense of loss. And Jenny? That's the way it goes. He did not mind losing her to Derek. Derek had lost so much. Besides, Richie felt his love had been used up on Anna; there wasn't enough left for Jennifer now. Derek did. And so life goes on.

People in the restaurant say that he staggered as he went to the stairs, not looking at anyone, just concentrating on his feet. He went to the stairs. And down he went.

He went head first, like a dolphin at play. His forehead hit the stair fifteen feet below. Doctors came to his side promptly. Half the boat owners seemed to be doctors. But Richie was already gone. Dead end.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Stopovers*

I had been dozing. One moment there was nothing, the next, the landlocked icebergs of the Coast Mountains stretched along the horizon. The Pacific is behind me. Home never looked so cold, so uninviting. Was this home? The 747 gradually changed course to run parallel to the frozen mountains. The emerald coast of Vancouver Island appeared below; even from this height, the logging scars were visible. We had been descending slowly, but now the approach began in earnest. The jet slowed itself, seemingly digging in its heels down the length of the Island, then turned across the Straight to the towers of Vancouver. The jet lumbered in a U-turn, descended over Lilliputian homes and towers, and followed the river to touchdown. A rare sun of autumn lit the morning.

MacPherson had found me in Hokkaido. I still wonder how. I had told no one else of my return, so there was no brass band. The luggage carousel retained my bag for an eternity, but finally gave up its prize. The Customs Officer was blunt, machine-like in his questions, the taxi driver silent from door to door. Probably didn't know much English. In the elevator, I smiled at unknown neighbors, then finally closed the door behind me. It was quiet. The Tokyo of Sunday night was history, seemingly only hours away by watch, yet months away in spirit. Keiko. What of Keiko?

I showered, then laid on the bed, waiting to sleep. I noticed that I'd missed a call while in the shower, but there was no message. The phone rang again and I quickly answered. A woman's voice. She sounded startled, then explained that she had expected the answering machine again. Introduced herself as Karen, a friend of Richie and Jennifer's, in town for the funeral. She asked if I would say something at the service.

Seemed logical to me. I agreed. I knew him well. I knew his wife well too, but I wouldn't say that at the service. The funeral was to be at 3 PM the next day. I invited the Saskatchewan people to my home, setting a time for later that evening.

They arrived together, two women and a huge man in a wheelchair, Karen, Jennifer and Derek. From Richie's conversations, I already knew them. We talked, although any mention of Richie brought tears from Jennifer. Karen sat beside her and put her arm around her shoulders, and kept the supply of Kleenex flowing. We talked of pleasantries, as unfamiliar people do in a time of sorrow. I asked Derek about his health, his progress, his life. With Jennifer at his side, he seemed content. He also seemed to be managing with the paralysis of his lower body, using technology, ingenuity and hired hands to overcome the new demands upon his life. They asked about my seizure, my

loss of my job, my trip to Japan, my future. I didn't have much of an answer for the last one. Finally Derek asked the big question.

"Do you think he killed himself or just fell?" he asked so quietly. So gentle for such a big man. It was the first question I had asked myself, on hearing the news. If I said "yes" it would cause him great pain. He would think himself somehow responsible. Jennifer too would be wounded. And the guilt should not be theirs. I could not say "yes." I thought back to my childhood, to my debates with Brent the Horse about his neighbor. I thought back to Brent the Horse. If Richie left on purpose, it was because of Anna and I. But he wouldn't do that, would he?

"I'm sure it was an accident," I said. It had to be true, at least for insurance purposes. Whether or not he chose to terminate himself is not something I wanted to think about, for if he had, I too could have been a cause. Other men have discovered their wives were unfaithful, but to have that misery compounded by the betrayal of a friend may have been too much. There was no way he could have known. How would he have known? Only Anna could have been the source. Maybe I would ask. But it seemed so unlike Richie. He had weathered the storm. Just a victory party gone bad.

And so it was. The funeral had been arranged by Jack MacPherson. There had been no one else. I was lost in Japan. Anna was his only family

nearby and, well, she wasn't exactly the best person to do it. The company gave Jack a couple of days off to set things up. Poor Matt had to take the day off without pay. Ken had switched companies and couldn't get time off at all. After all, what's the death of a friend measured against corporate profits? Ken threatened to come anyway. They threatened to fire him. Compassionate company. When he told MacPherson, Jack told him there was always a job for him with the SkyCranes. Ken wanted to, but he couldn't take the two weeks in the bush, two weeks at home lifestyle anymore. There was a new girl in his life. Jack understood. Told him he wouldn't miss much. Funerals? Seen one, seen 'em all.

Still, the funeral home was crowded. Relatives up from California. Vets from Viet Nam. Even Anna and the Professor, down from West Van. I didn't know it till later, but the lawyer was there too, hovering in the back. Anna had red eyes.

I scanned the program and saw my name in the middle. I didn't have a speech written, but knew something would come out. It would be from the heart, and besides, nobody keeps score on these kinds of speeches. Somehow, I would mumble and fumble my way through. People always do. I was working on 5 hours sleep in the past 3 days, a scenario which Japanese neurologists had warned me about if I hoped to avoid a recurrence of seizures. Of course, I was also supposed to avoid alcohol.



Common sense told me I should also avoid blondes. We know how I feel about common sense. I made my face of condolences toward Anna when she looked my way, and gave nod of gentlemanly compassion towards the Professor. There were probably issues of morality running through his head as well as mine. We shared the same woman. We shared the same guilt.

The things you learn at funerals. When it was over, I talked with the familiar faces. The Professor was leaving for Italy in a few days. Anna would follow, but had a number of things to clear up first. She explained that her lawyer had advised her to stay behind a few days. Richie had changed his will, thought the divorce was not yet finalized. It was more complicated than need be. I knew my role would not be changed. I was to take the urn of his ashes and deposit them in the sea. No ceremonies, no big splash. Just me and him. Anna and I agreed to talk the next day. I watched Jennifer's eyes watching Anna, wondering what she secrets Richie had told her. Did she know how much he had loved Anna?

I waited with Derek in the rain, for Jennifer had returned to the chapel in tears, and Karen had gone after her. "She's such a caring person," I started.

Derek gave a start, for he had been away in his own thoughts, and replied "Yes, she's always been like that. Everyone who knows her falls in love with her. It's just the way she is."

I had to agree, but my reply was cut short by their appearance at the doorway. They hesitated under the awning, then returned into the wetness and we walked together to my car. Using the doorframe, Derek pulled himself out of the wheelchair, then launched himself backward into my car seat. Perfect. "Lot's of practice," he smiled. "Of course, I knocked six inch gashes into my head the first few times I tried."

Karen slipped into the back seat while Jennifer packed up the chair and hoisted it into the trunk. By the time I got back to help, she didn't need it. I opened the door for her, then drove them to their hotel. The windshield wipers slapped the time, and we all asked ourselves "What now?"

It was agreed that I should join them for drinks and dinner at their hotel. Again they seemed interested in what my future held. Certainly it was going to be different. No flying. No two weeks on, two weeks off. I supposed I would move from Vancouver, maybe return to Asia.

Keiko? She glided through my thoughts. I didn't need a job. My stockbroker, lousy golfer that he was, had usually done the right thing at the right time. I had a pile of money. I would sell my condo and sever all links with this rainy guilt ridden town. My problems seemed tiny in comparison with Derek's. Trying to run a farm from a wheelchair seemed too much, even for this giant. Too much mud in the wheels. I pitied him, though he didn't

need my pity. He had Jennifer. They would be one of those couples I'd watch grow old together.

The cowboy laughed when I asked him. He reckoned that things were gonna be all right. The insurance company was slow at first to settle his case, but one day Derek wheeled into the adjuster's office with a flock of TV cameras and reporters and the local politician. The case was mentioned in the provincial legislature. Newspapers were contacted. More politicians were visited. His lawyer went on an open line radio show. The insurance corporation, jolted into action by the heat of public scrutiny, announced an investigation of the adjuster. And the three who had preceded him. Shortly afterward, Derek received an apology. The adjuster and the three who preceded him were given reprimands. Derek was able to finally begin acquiring the equipment necessary to bring life back to normal. Now he had a motorized gizmo for just about everything.

Just about everything. I didn't ask about his relationship with Jennifer. Things like that just don't come up in conversation on the day of a funeral. All I knew was what Richie had told me. The accident had just drawn them back together, sewn them up tight. She was devoted to him, caring for his every need like a nurse, like a mother. When he first came home from the hospital, Jennifer had slept on the couch in the living room. Her parents had hired a replacement waitress, just temporarily, until she made it back to the Blue Bird.

A few times she had come up to Richie's cabin and slept with him, but this occurred less and less often. Once she fell asleep while sitting in the chair beside Derek, and waking in early morning, laid down beside him. When he woke and found her, he pulled the comforter over her. She never left. The Blue Bird's temporary waitress gained full time employment.

Karen was silent through most of the meal. She had moved to Regina, had met 'Mr. Right' soon after, and had moved in with him. It was a case of mistaken identity. Mr. Rude, maybe. Mr. Cheap, possibly. Mr. Still Married, for sure. 'Mr. Right'? Wrong! After that, there was nothing much she wanted to say. During a lull in our conversations she said, "Maybe I'll move back to the Crick." But she never would.

We kept room service busy until late into the night, but finally I left. Karen's flight was in the morning. I would not see her again. I regretted that. Surprising even myself, I decided that considering the alcohol factor and the lack of sleep factor, it would be best if I took a taxi home. First I went to the desk clerk and promised him I would pick up my car in the morning. He correctly guessed that I was totally drunk. I was happy to sit in the back of the cab, the silence broken only by the wipers and the occasional replies into the radio by my chauffeur. Keiko again danced across my mind. Why does it always rain at funerals? The courage of Derek stuck in my mind. How many people would even attempt to run a farm, to run a life from a wheelchair?

Wheelchairs. I had been there, had visited my own private hell that first day in the Nanaimo Hospital, and was frustrated beyond limits at the minor obstacles I encountered. In Hokkaido, when I had again been hit by seizure, the waves of self-pity hit me like a tsunami, drowning me. Held in the hospital for two days, I was again a two-wheeler. I thought of Rika, but didn't want her to see me like that. Instead, I found my thoughts sliding over to Keiko, wishing she might be nearby. I felt so old, so broken down. Keiko would understand. Keiko would help me live again. I was released from the hospital on the third day, but found that the medication had made me uncoordinated and I walked as if permanently drunk. By week's end, I decided to ignore my medical condition and simply live. I bused my way up to a lonely onsen in the mountains, laid for an hour in the steamy waters, watched the old men around me, smiled at the children at play. For the first time, I felt I belonged more to the grandfathers than to the children. A revelation. This was it. The only life I had. Might as well get on with it. Returning to my Sapporo Hotel that night, the light was flashing on my phone. Jack MacPherson had called. "Call back. Urgent." In the elevator back up, I calculated the time in Vancouver. I called anyway.

The next day found me on an early morning plane to Sendai for a mid-morning meeting with another Viet Nam flyer. After his tour he had never returned to America, and instead had married his Japanese sweetie. It was so

many years ago, and he now spoke the language well. He bowed when we met, said 'ee-ta-dakie-mass' when beginning his meal. He'd adjusted well. We talked about where we'd been, what we'd done. He showed me pictures of his children. They were cute. I was jealous. He helped me make arrangements with the travel agent, and armed with an itinerary, left him to board the shinkansen. Once again I was comforted by the notion of Japanese efficiency, that if you're at the right track at the right time, you will get on the right train. A couple of minutes early or late and you're going someplace else. Life's like that. Of course even this system has its surprises. If it snows, you can forget the schedules. I guess Derek could vouch for that too.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Margaritaville*

I had asked Derek to help, so he and Jennifer drove the getaway car.

My conversation with Anna had not gone well and the hangover had nothing to do with it. She had stayed behind to finish going over the will with her lawyer friend. She may have gone over other things with him as well. Who cares? I met her for lunch. Richie had changed his will, eliminating her from any benefits. I was one of the executors of the will. Not yet divorced, she had every intention of maximizing her take. If nothing else, she would have the boat, but her lawyer assured her she would have much more than that. She left, presumably to join David in Italy. On her return, she would be a wealthy woman.

Margaritaville left at dusk, early enough that its noisy diesel engine would not wake others in the marina, yet late enough that few would look out on such a rainy night to inquire of her destination. Or her captain. I wore Richie's yellow Helly Hansen rain gear, hood pulled down over my eyes. It seemed the perfect escape.

We, Margaritaville and I, went west toward the Gulf Islands, sliding through Porlier Pass at exactly slack tide. Like the trains of Japan, a few minutes here can make quite a difference too. I rounded Tent Island, then came up on the western coast of Kuper Island. There is a bay at its

southernmost tip, and it is here where Richie and I first anchored when he taught me how to sail. I took the urn from my pack, said a small prayer to the spirits of the sea, and in the blackness, I set our passenger free. Richie's ashes danced with the Orcas.

I readied my getaway boat and secured it to the stern, then went into the cabin to study my notes. I'd seen loggers do this often enough that it wasn't a mystery, but this was my first time alone and my hands were shaking. If it worked as planned, there would be no trace of Margaritaville for years to come. I prepared the charge, raised the anchor slightly, and let the tide pulled us into deeper water. Very deep water. Margaritaville seemed anxious to join her captain in the blackness, and I readied the charge, then said my good byes. There, a hundred meters off that isolated, uninhabited reservation coastline, a small charge opened a hole in Margaritaville and she was quickly sucked to the deep. I watched from the inflatable boat until the mast went under, then searched for any debris that might mark the spot. There was little; it had been a clean wound. I noticed there were tears in my eyes, and started the engine.

The inflatable boat bounced across the swells, aiming at the bright lights of the Crofton pulp mill. There, on a lonely and abandoned roadway, Jennifer and I pulled the Zodiac from the sea, deflated it and loaded it into the back of the rented van. We left.



I don't know what Anna thought when she came back from Italy. There would be no trace of Margaritaville. If she remembered to renew the insurance before she left, I suppose she would receive some money, but when I checked out the papers on board, it looked like the policy would expire long before her return. All trace of her life with Richie would be history. I think he would have wanted it that way.

The Zodiac went back to Jack, the van went back to Hertz and Jennifer and Derek went back to Saskatchewan. They seemed happy to be going.

And me? On the plane again. Traveling light, back to Narita, back to Keiko.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Ichinichizuma*

"Moishi moishi . . . Keiko?"

Tokyo longitudes. City of dreams. Keiko longitudes.

We met at my hotel and went up to the piano bar for drinks and talks.

The Gershwin lady was still there. We laughed a lot. "Marry me?" I asked.

I'm such a romantic. She thought I was joking. Maybe. I don't think so. We

talked and talked. Where we'd live, what our children would look like. We

enjoyed each other, and piled a lifetime of devotion into a single night. My

yellow butterfly, my ichinichizuma. In the end she said 'no' to marriage.

Common sense, I guess. And there's this guy in Nagoya. Well, there were a lot

of reasons. She didn't need me. And maybe I'm not as perfect as I think.

Funny how it goes.

So here I am, back at Narita one more time, this flight leaving for India

in about an hour. Keiko rode with me on the Express, and cried a little bit

when I disappeared down the escalator to the passenger lounge. Maybe I'll

send her a post card when I get to Dharamsala. Still, why bother? She'll be

with me wherever I go. A part of me. Sometimes a memory is baggage

enough. And I know we had sex.

\* \* \* \* \*

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