

Flying Pigs

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Foreword

A true story if ever there was one.

Clouds

"The great Canadian novel." Well, who am I to argue with curious critics, arrogant academics and innocent bystanders? I'm just the poor sap who wrote the damn thing.

Like every great Canadian whipper-snapper of a cultural milestone—henceforth known as the kilometre marker—this short-winded little thing staggered its first steps in Ye Olde England. There I was, as Canadian as a Yorkshire pudding, with neither a single nor a solitary Canadian thought in my assassin's line of sight. Of course, I'd never shoot to kill. The Canadian kneecap, a direct hit, make the bugger limp, that's all.

It was autumn and I cut through a neighbourhood park, where a few remaining roses yet bloomed, buttercups tested children's fondness of butter, and dock-leaves cured the sting of a few remaining nettles.

And then the front door: stained glass and lead twistings. Inside the hall: a tottering table piled with brown envelopes whose plastic windows warned "Last Demand," or pleaded "Urgent," all addressed to nomads who had moved on to another house with another table. I clambered the stairs, as sure-footed as a mountaineer on a shopping centre escalator, upwards and onwards to the attic, where Atticism ruled like a short sentence on a long page.

I slammed shut the door, turned on the gas fire and huddled. The roof slanted across the living room. The window looked upwards to heaven.

I sat at my desk, opened a screw-cap bottle of wine substitute (all the alcohol with none of that bothersome flavour), turned on my computer. Oh yea, this is the life: a bucket of booze and a word processor.

You see my father owns the house. Rent free, though I do have to pay the window tax. He gives me 300 quid a month pocket money. Now a £10 a day stipend to a twenty-seven year old lad strikes me as a bit on the unusual side. Maybe I should get a paper round.

And of course, as I gulped and gaped at the computer's welcome screen, which is to say at that moment—and indeed many other moments—"The Great Canadian Novel" was as remote as Canada—though not half so cold.

Oh, a knock on the door came a-knocking.

"Come in." It was Aaqib from the flat downstairs.

"Ah, lovely English heat," he sighed and strode over to the gas fire. And yes, you're right, there was definitely a curried sarcasm in his tone. I swivelled around in my chair and deigned silence. Actually, I mean I *feigned* silence because I was already talking.

"It's as English as it gets," I claimed.

"Let me warm me bum." For a Pakistani, he had an almost perfect Yorkshire accent. He was still wearing a pair of gloves that fit like a glove.

"Ah, that feels bloody good. Guess what?"

"What?"

"No, guess what?" Aaqib was a melodramatist with minimum belief in the actual drama.

"What?"

"I said guess, you bloody fellow."

"You're seeking to become a Sikh."

"I'd bloody well rather hide than Sikh."

"Mmm, good, Aaqib. Can I write that one down?"

"Feel free. Maybe you should plagiarise more often. Maybe then you'd get something published." Plot line? Me thinks so.

Actually, the thing I liked about Aaqib was his quintessential and some might say monumental Yorkshire bluntness. Unfortunately that bluntness was usually covered in pigeon shit.

"So what?"

"What?"

"The thing I'm supposed to guess."

"Oh, yeah. You'll be losing your old pal."

"What are you on about?"

"I'm off to Canada."

Well, this time, this time, if that's not a plot line, what the hell is? It's a plot line with bells and whistles. It's a dancing, prancing, juggling, tumbling plot line. It's a plot

line disguised as a plot line, introducing itself as a plot line and handing out business cards with plot line written in red ink.

"They accepted you?" Now why would the Canadian government want an Aaqib messing up the country?

"Course they did. They've done all the paper work. It only took them a year and a half."

"That quick?"

"Yeah, I was in the express line. I'm being sponsored by Bob in Toronto."

"Whose Bob?"

"Bob's my uncle."

"Bob's your uncle?"

"Yeah, Bob's my bloody uncle."

"Well, how does a fellow from Pakistan have an uncle called Bob."

"Look —," he said my name, which shall remain nameless, "ya know damn well I'm not from Pakistan. Me muver's from Pakistan."

"So you're *really* going." There was actually a tear welling up. He knew.

"You can be as free as a bird in Canada," he said, trying to convince at least one of us of Canada's ornithological supremacy. "And anyway, ya can come and visit."

"Sure."

"Why not?"

"Well . . . I suppose I could." The idea of Canada hit me, all of a sudden, like a wet snowball. Sure I could visit him.

"Imagine, you and me in Canada."

While I was imagining, I clicked open a document and the screen filled with words. Row after row of them.

"What are you working on?"

Aaqib was my biggest fan. Actually, he was my only fan.¹

"It's a novel. Another novel."

"What's it about?"

"It's a love story. It's about two people who meet, and their love affair seem connected with world events. Every stage of their romance is matched by some world-shaking news making phenomenon."

"Maybe this'll be the one. I mean, people like to read a love story."

"Unfortunately, its dripping with literary artifice. It's a love story that mocks romance. I do things with the subjunctive that make my knees shake."

"Well stop your bloody shaking. Just write a *nice* love story."

"It's too late for that."

¹I've always hated those novels where the protagonist is a writer. The stench of biography disguised is more than I can bear. It makes no difference if the fellows name is Tom Dick or Larry, his real name is giving me the hokey-jokeys on the dust jacket. It seems to me a mockery of the novel. Give me a break. Give me a God damn Kit-Kat.

Streets Paved With Cold

All of a sudden, the idea of a love story connected to world events seemed like madness founded upon folly. I stood up from my swivel chair, walked over to the gas fire, walked over to Aaqib, put my arm around his shoulder and said, "I'll miss you."

"It's the chance of a lifetime: unspoiled wilderness, wildlife, wombats—"

"That's Australia."

"What ever."

"You know you'll never fit in."

"How's that?"

"It's full of Canadians. You're a Yorkshireman."

"Canada's multicultural, you bloody English buffoon. Everyone fits in there. It's the land of opportunity."

"Yea," I said, "the streets are paved with cold."

The Refugee

Within the week Aaqib was gone, off to that non-fixed abode otherwise known as Canada. He flew Air Canada. He promised to keep an eye on the map for the pilot so they gave him fifty quid off. Unfortunately, it was a map of Australia. The plane landed in Melbourne and he had to take a coach the rest of the way.

Meanwhile, a new female tenant moved in. In one of those great twists of irony that rescue life from pure sarcasm, she was from Canada. One day our eyes made contact at the front door. Well, when I say made contact, I actually mean that she looked into my eyes but I looked in the opposite direction. Of course, this is mostly supposition because I was looking in the opposite direction when contact supposedly was made. Nevertheless, I wrote a pornographic story about her, tweaking the dangling modifier until it no longer dangled but certainly continued to modify.

And then, one night dark and stormy, off I went to the *Cock and Bull* for a few pints. No further than the next landing when Aaqib's door opened and out came the Canadian, dressed like an arts student with everything miss-matched, a fluttering skirt over a pair of jeans, her dark hair heading off in a dozen directions at once. It was too late to turn back and make a hasty retreat: like the proverbial Dick, I'd been spotted.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi." I returned her smile and then watched my feet.

"Going somewhere nice?"

"Just to the local."

"Oh, I'll go with you. That's where *I'm* going." We walked down the steps together and out into a misty night.

"What's the library like?" she asked.

"Library? I'm off to the local *pub*."

"Oh, yeah, I mean pub."

"It's a yuppie paradise. They go through more Labatte than half of Vancouver." It was a weak joke, I admit, though the Canadian content was, I think, impressive.

I watched her secretively as we strolled along. Her breasts were impressive, causing her to walk with a slight forward stoop. Once, whilst in a hospital emergency room, she was examined, X-rated and sent home.

"What's your name?"

I told her.

"Hi, I'm Molly. Molly Coddle." We actually shook hands.

"Hi Molly."

"Are you meeting someone?"

"At the pub?"

"Yes."

"Yea," I lied.

"A girl friend?" Now, I admit, the thought did cross my mind that she was fishing. Or maybe it was just a red herring.

"No," I said, which, I suppose, was true.

"Do you mind if I join you for a quick one?" A quick one! Now, I might be a slow thinker, but the comedic possibilities were as obvious as a dog's bottom in a cat's mouth museum.

New strategy: rather than nursing a single pint, I'd abuse a whole family of them. First, the mother of all pints; then the father; and then, one by one, the children of all pints. The incest would loosen up my tongue.

We walked on. Through all the layers of clothing, I could feel her arm occasionally brushing against mine: it felt like naked skin to a starved cannibal.

When we reached the bar I noticed Molly's mismatched clothes were *stylishly* mismatched. It was at that moment I knew she'd order a Labatte.

"What would you like?" she asked.

"A pint of Tetley's, please."

"A pint of Tetley's and a Labatte," she ordered.

"Cheers." Her designer label bottle clinked with my humble pint glass.

"It's Canadian," she told. I'd have to watch out for this one: her comprehension lacked the sharpness of a knife, the utility of a spoon as well as the three-pronged pointiness of a fork. I had a feeling she would be useless in the kitchen as well.

"I'm an arts student." Well, hang me by the ankles and thrust the head of a salmon in my gaping mouth. "I just transferred here from London where I transferred to from U of T in Canada."

With grammar like that, who needs a granddad. Obviously she was numb from her toes down.

"Why's that then?"

She told me all about University of Toronto and how awful the teachers were. And then she concluded: "I suppose I'm an intellectual refugee."

"I agree," I said, thinking that in all likelihood she had probably escaped the dangers of intellect for good.

"Anyway, I love Yorkshire."

"Spoken like a true foreigner," I said.

"No, I'm serious. I think the dales are sublime."

"Not to mention picturesque," I mocked.

"I feel very spiritual when I'm there," she said, oblivious to my craggy scorn.

"Spiritual . . ." I mused.

"What I mean is, have you never seen something or heard something or done something and felt some kind of weird overwhelming sensation?"

"Well, I was very dizzy once, but I'd been spinning around a lot that day."

"Have you ever been to university?" She dismissed my dizziness as if it was all in my head.

"Yea, yea," I said, offering a smile so reluctant it was guaranteed to untie the laces on the best-laced boots. "I went to university."

"Which one?"

"Oxford."

"Oh, really?" Well, obviously her boots were still laced.

"What did you read?"

"Comics, mostly."

She laughed, oh she of little faith, a faithless wench.

"I wrote my thesis on—"

"You wrote a *thesis*?"

"Yea. I wrote my thesis on comics. *The Beano* mostly. Roger the Dodger, you know. It was rejected. They said if I wanted to do something on comics, I should focus on Dickens. But what the dickens do *they* know? So I quit and never went back."

We'd had a few drinks by then and Molly entertained me with stories of student sexuality the likes of which I'd never myself experienced. Perhaps I should've read a few less comics. Now let me explain: I was not what you would call a virgin, at least not in the religious sense, nor the official handshake sense. In the medical sense, however, I was as unused as a psychiatrist's rubber glove.

Art History

Autumn slipped into winter, though, of course, no one noticed. One day I was caught on the landing and invited into Aaqib's old flat. Changes had been made: all the old furniture had been replaced with no furniture. There were vast areas of space where no space should have been.

"You're a minimalist," I said.

"Not really. I'm just trying to keep my life simple."

"It's snowing outside," I small talked.

"I have no tea bags left," she replied. "What's that you've got?" I was clutching an oversized library book.

"Nothing."

"I should go out and get some."

"What?"

"Tea. It's snowing?"

"How's school?" I asked, trying to find something to which her mind could cling.

"What's that?" she asked again.

There was something extremely erotic about Molly's inability to understand simple sentences. I new I could have sex with her and no matter how bad I was, afterwards she would have no comment.

"It's just a library book."

It was an art history book and Molly gave me a suspicious look.

"I'm an arts student and suddenly you're carrying around an art history book which I accidentally notice." That's what she was thinking. I know this for a fact because her lips were silently moving.

I was ready to point out: my art history traipse and her arts student limp were purely coincidental and that no hop, skip, shuffle, prance, swing, or caper was intended; that I had a natural interest in canvas which manifested itself in vicarious camping; that pigment was not just for the pigs; that I was once tickled by an air brush; that I was in fact a closet intellectual suffering from severe claustrophobia. But then, what was the point?

"Show me."

So I showed her. She was definitely thinking there was more than coincidence going on here; that this book was my way of getting into her knickers.

"Look at this," I began, sitting beside her on a floor cushion and ready to show her a thing or two. "Check out this print from Vernet: See those trees? Well if they're not Salvadorian, then I don't know the *Mona Lisa* from a face in the crowd."

There was an awkward silence.

"And look at the emaciated French dancing master dressed like Salvador's banditti, intended, I assume, to be a fisherman." That's what I said. It was then that I realised art students really know nothing about art. She was agog. Worse than agog, she fainted and her eyes rolled around the room.

If she only knew my knowledge of art history was really as fragmented as a Picasso portrait. Sure, I can point out a Seurat, and my impressions of Monet are worth their weight in gold; but that hardly makes me guilty of trying to get into her knickers.

She was still unconscious. Or perhaps agog. I put my hands in her knickers.

Filly Wooing

If there is such a thing as fate, well, yea, fickle is his name. Five or six months had passed since Aaqib went off to rub noses with the Eskimos—or at least the Eskimo's huskies. It was early evening and Molly Coddle was up, dressed in a kind of hippie dress so sheer I was dizzy with vertigo. Lounging on the couch, reading some obscure Nabakov novel about Lolita love—I forget the title—I looked up and noticed my beaming stare penetrated the fabric of her swirling dress, revealing enough of her body to feed a thousand hungry fantasies. Molly sat down on the couch, lifting my legs and placing them on her lap.

"Did you ever think of making a pass at me?"

I've never been good at getting girls. I'm not sure how it works. Making the first move? What is it that's supposed to move? In fact, at that time I had no experience whatsoever in wooing the filly.

"I don't make passes," I said.

"Why not."

"I play a defensive position."

"That means you never score."

"It also means I never lose."

"And never win."

"You're absolutely wrong," I answered. "I agree with you incompletely. Do you want me to make a pass at you?" Oh, what

had I said? The fear. I mean, what if she said *no*? More to the point, what if she damn well said *yes*?

"Why don't you try and find out?"

I changed the subject.

"I'm going to Canada."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean: Canada, me, go." Oh, yea, these arts students only understand filly speak. "I mean: go, me, Canada." Molly pushed my legs from her lap, stood and galloped out of the flat without another word.

Was I really going to Canada? The funny thing is, committing the thought to words made the whole thing seem inevitable. The honest man has only to accuse himself of dishonesty and, for all the world, he at once becomes a liar. So there I was, going off to Canada for no other reason than fear of intimacy.

The Picaresque

I was reading Keats.

Well, let me explain: you see I hate poetry. Whatsoever be my thoughts on the delicate daffodil or the bumbling wasp or the waspy bee, I keep 'em to myself. So, when I say I was reading some Keats, firstly you can be damn sure it was none of his flauntingly feminine rhyming ridiculousness; I mean, how can you take a fellow serious who juxtaposes "Nature's gentle doings" with "softer than ring-dove's cooings." I mean, Keats is either a complete homo or he needs a blunt object repeatedly shoved up his anus. The choice is entirely yours. I was reading, rather, his correspondence, written, without doubt, with the certain hope that future generations would read it.

Dear mum and dad,

I have just seen Wordsworth. Fortunately he did not see me and I quickly ran away.

Love, Keats.

PS, I saw a dove. It was cooing. I suppose that's just nature's doing.

Dear son,

Why do you write so many *epistles* yet visit so seldom?

Love, mom and dad.

PS, we have a pigeon pie in the oven.

Still and even so, I came upon something that stuck in my head: in mid 1818, Keats comments that "there is something else wanting to one who passes his life among Books and thoughts on Books." In April, Keats proposed

within a Month to put my knapsack at my back
and make a pedestrian tour through the North of
England, and part of Scotland—to make a sort of
Prologue to the Life I intend to pursue.

I once had an idea to be a great writer with a mediocre mind. This was my chance. In any case, I said, to Canada am I off, so off I would go. Sometimes—usually—life is as simple as the words we say: if Keats could tour Britain in search of the Picturesque, surely I could tour Canada in search of the picaresque. Why the hell not?

The American

Needless to say, I kept the whole business from my father: I needed the 10 quid a day to finance the trip. A few half-hearted acquaintances were bid farewell. Ironically, only my arts student showed any kind of sadness.

I took the National coach down to London. There was romance and adventure in the purified airport air as I waved my ticket like the flag of an ancient explorer. It was like the first day of school, without the teachers; like climbing a rope ladder to a tight rope, without the sequined trousers. It was like dancing in a thunderstorm with a lightening conductor rammed up my left nostril. It was like climbing a molehill that seemed like a mountain; like doing the hockey-pokey; like walking on stilts through a field of broken glass. It was like spinning around until you fall flat on your face, which turns out to be the back of your head. It was like a solo trek across the Texas Panhandle without a pan.

"The flight has been over-booked, sir," the uniformed wench told me with a British Airways' smile. I should have told her there was no need to call me sir, since the knighthood was still in the post. "Do you mind if we up-grade your ticket to First Class?" Now what kind of question is that? No, perhaps you could just stuff me in the cargo hold.

I never knew that first class was so *first class*. It was more like a living room than a cabin: seats scattered about, a cross

between easy chairs and chairs a tad more difficult; a large television; a few coat racks standing about in corners; a coffee table beside each chair. Of course, the surprise of this living room affair was short lived—although I did raise my eyebrows slightly when the pilot threw some coal in the fireplace.

“Which is my seat?” I asked a stewardess with a buxom bosom strutting its stuff inside her white blouse like two boy scouts rolling and tumbling in a canvas tent.

“Which ever you’d like, sir.” Again that *sir* thing. Maybe everyone who travels first class actually does have a knighthood. So there I sat, alone in my solitude.

“Would you like a paper sir?”

The stewardess held a stack of papers beneath the shelter of her appendages. I took a copy of *The Times* and *The Sun*, in a vain attempt to throw her for a loop.

So in comes this American fellow, loud and fat and as ugly as a duck’s bottom without the saving grace of the waddle. He took off his jacket, revealing a short-sleeved white dress shirt. He loosened his tie and all the flab on his face fell to his navel. When he plonked himself down, the whole plane seemed to shake.

“This is the pilot of BA 437 to New York: we are experiencing extreme turbulence.”

“This is the tower, BA 437: you’re still on the runway.”

Well, we were rumbling down the runway and the American was the only other first class passenger. I was still reading the

paper, taking the odd peep at his portly self and listening to his banter.

"Your seat belt's not fastened, sir," she had told him.

"Don't believe in 'em," he had said. "If this thing crashes, I want to be the first one out." As a first class passenger of girth, he was pampered with silence and the hopes that if this thing crashes he'd be the first one dead.

"Two weeks, I've been here, and you English sure could learn a thing or two about business. I mean, this ain't the cotton-picking nineteenth century . . . I call a spade a shovel . . . we just don't *need* castles in the US of A—never did, never will . . . the freest country in the world, so help me God . . . "

So this was a real live American. He seemed more like a character in a third rate satire. He at least provided some distraction while the plane accelerated, rumbled, roared and almost—it seemed to me—shook itself to pieces. I told myself, between the cotton picking and the castles, that surely, of course, the plane was safe and the pilot still sober enough to get us off the ground. I had no idea that a computer was running the whole show and that the flight crew were busy playing cards and gulping down Champagne, although my suspicions were aroused by the muffled calls of "snap" followed by lengthy giggles.

I was drinking my own first glass of Champagne—and when I say *first* I speak literally—when the fat American offered me his notice.

"Where you heading?" he asked, with infinite eloquence and respect.

"Montreal," I told him, enjoying the odd overly excited bubble that managed to reach the mysterious bubble nirvana of my nostrils.

"Well, that's real cute. You know this plane's heading to New York." Obviously this was very funny, which explains why his blubber shook like shaking blubber in a blubber shaking factory. Now, what was I supposed to say? Actually this is the cheapest way to Montreal. No, I was a first class fellow. Such notions of economy were uncouth.

"Yea, I know. I'm spending a few days with friends in Manhattan." Manbloodyhattan? I've barely heard of the place. I was only half sure that it was even in New York. So what I didn't need was any damn questions about whereabouts exactly.

"Oh," he said, "whereabouts exactly?"

"I'm meeting them at the Ritz-Carlton?" The Ritzbloodycarlton? Was there even such a place?

"Oh, the Ritz-Carlton. That's a great place. I've stayed there myself and I can tell you they serve up the best of American hospitality. I'm on my way home myself. I'm an American."

"Really."

"You betcha. From the great US of A." Usually Short of Acumen. Ultimate Supercilious Arrogance. Ultra Stupid Assholes. Uncouth Slovenly Apes. Unfortunate State of Agitation. Actually, am I the only person to notice that the word *acronym* is itself

etymologically acronymistic, derived from A Crude Reduction Of Nomenclature Yielding Meaninglessness? I contacted the OED regarding this discovery. They said my idea was okay, but that editorial aids overwhelmed by bumf and confounded by problems with Oedipus Lex (Oxford English Dictionary Integration, Proofing and Updating System) would research the issue and issue a decision ASAP. In other words, snafu, a letter of BS ultimately leading to FA. Now, if only I'd finished my Oxford degree. . . .

"Now, Montreal. Heard of it. Is that in Maine?"

"Canada."

"Canada? Nope, never heard of that."

"It's a small country."

"Oh, it's a *country*? Not in the states then."

"No. They have their own government with their own Prime Minister—that's like a President, only he wears smaller boots."

"Well, I bin rustling up some business in the old country."

"Is that like cattle rustling from the good old cowboy days?"

"You betcha."

"Wasn't that something like stealing?"

"Ah, the Wild West," he oozed nostalgically.

"What's your line of business?"

"Well, I'm what made America great." By *great* I assumed he meant big and fat. "I'm an entrepreneur and an inventor. Progress my boy: now that's America."

"What did you invent?" I asked, taking a gulp on my Champagne and holding up my empty glass towards the stewardess.

"The first thing was the biggy. I got the idea in a supermarket, buying some fruit, and in America we have all kinds of fruit. . . ." He proceeded to catalogue the various kinds of fruit available to the American consumer.

"Thanks," I said to the stewardess.

". . . and there's kiwi and mango and banana and orange. Oh, yeah, we've got them all. And one day I was thinking that most fruits are kind of juicy and you could probably squash 'em and people could drink the juice. I tried it and it worked. I called it Fruit Juice."

"You invented that?"

"Sure did. You'll have it in England pretty soon."

"Thank god."

"Well, my thoughts exactly. I mean, this ain't the cotton-picking nineteenth century.

"The next thing I invented was the telefoam." Now to the naked ear this homonym was a synonym. "You've heard of it, I'm sure."

"I'm not sure," I answered, thinking perhaps that it was simply a question of North American mispronunciation.

"Sure you have. You see, I realised one day that people get pretty mad on the phone; and when they hang up, they feel like throwing the thing at the wall. So, I thought, what if the phone was made of foam? That way they really could throw the thing. It was a big hit."

When the plane touched down at JFK, the American, to do him justice, did wish me the transatlantic equivalent of a toodle-pip.

"Is the first class always so empty?" I chatted to the stewardess.

"It depends."

"Well, *he* was first class, that's for sure."

"Actually he was bumped up, like you."

Such Scandalous Distances In Such Confined Areas

JFK was a veritable brothel of Americanisms: howdys were having frivolous sex with doodys and giving birth to hordes of dandies.

Now, we've all heard about how safe New York is nowadays: murders are down 60%—though the other 40% seem far from impressed. So how come there was an armed guard on the train? Worst of all he carried a truncheon which they call a nightstick, even though it was early morning.

We finally arrived at the chaos of the Port Authority Bus Station. I wandered about and picked up a free map of New York State from the tourist office. The next coach to Montreal was at 12.30. There were already a dozen or so people waiting at the gate, mostly with backpacks. I sat myself down on the floor with a sudden sense of belonging: yea, I'm one of you, a traveller, been all over the place: Leeds, Bridlington, Blackpool. London? Sure. A worldly fellow then, a wordy worldly fellow who knows the travelling game from the inside out. Of course, none of them spoke to me.

To pass the time, I examined closely that there map of New York. The map itself was big, but the state was even bigger. I was boggled by its bigness. I was staggered, astonished and dumbfounded. My head was doing the waltz, my heart the tango. It was foot-tappingly amazing. I felt like a small lad with a penchant for model aeroplanes suddenly drafted by a wartime

government—admittedly in some disarray—to design the Spitfire. I felt like Jack in the land of the Giant standing on my toes merely to reach the floor. I looked again at the map and realised there was something seriously wrong with a world that allowed such scandalous distances in such confined areas.

Welcome to Canada

So the coach came. I sat to the right of the driver with a view to the open road, strategically placing my coat on the seat next to me to discourage unwelcome occupation.

"Is someone sitting there?"

So much for that idea. I wouldn't mind, but when we finally got going, rumbling from the bowels of that awful coach station, the coach was half empty. I'd stolen a copy of the *New York Times* from the plane and established immediately a non-conversational relationship with the woman sitting in my extra legroom.

"Are you Pakistani?" she asked.

"No, I'm English."

"Oh, you're from London."

"That's right." I turned back into my paper.

"I'm from Canada, eh."

We were moving out of New York, over the Brooklyn Bridge with its over sized trellis work. Strange road signs with words like *turnpike* and *freeway*, *uptown* this and *downtown* that, challenged the eye with foreignness and obsolescence. We had travelled England's east coast to west and were still struggling through the Big Apple: monstrous grim tenements with black socket eyes where windows once were, some roofless, some burned out, some surprisingly occupied, ghettos of shanty houses sagging on their foundations, gun shops with cage-like windows, shadowy

characters leaning on street lights. And this was the richest country in the world?

I was trying to get an eyeful of all this, but the woman insisted on giving me an earful of her life story. She was the type that rattles on endlessly, floating from one whim to the next like a pile of leaves caught in a sudden gust of wind.

"So I started seeing this psychiatrist recommended by my GP and it was really quite nice at first eh with the couch and all that they really have couches you know I thought it was just on TV but there it was you see I had this problem about going outside and talking to people and I felt nervous inside and I was always depressed and I've never never like high places I don't like low places much either but that's another story and it took several months before Doctor Schwartz could figure out how one person could have so many problems and he was beginning to think I was a medical marvel until one day he said "Jill I've figured the whole thing out" and it all had to do with multiple personalities have you ever heard of that?"

"Ah?"

"Multiple personalities."

"No. We've never heard of it."

"It's when you're all different people like having a big party in your head all the time and all the guests take it in turns to be in charge only one at a time mind you other wise you'd be really crazy now wouldn't you so he hypnotised me ever been hypnotised?"

"Ah?"

"Hypnotised."

"Never."

"It's like going to sleep only you stay awake the whole time and my mother always said I was a good sleeper even when I was awake she said it so I guess this hypnotism stuff was just right for someone like me and when he did it for the first time well that's when he found out about this big party going on in my head."

"Were drinks being served?"

"You know I've no idea eh and that's the truth though I suppose there must have been 'cos I felt awfully dizzy sometimes I'd spin around just *not to* feel dizzy that's what kind of a state I was in eh so the first person he meets is this woman called Mary who was the one scared of all those high places and it turns out Mary's pretty bossy—though not without good reason—and none of the others like her very much—without good reason if I say so myself—so I go there week after week lounging on his nice couch and he hypnotises me and hey—presto there's someone else from the party Sally or Judith or Ruth and there is even a George and a Harold and if you think that's strange I won't even get into Rex the dog and mums the word when it comes to Goldie the gold fish and let me tell you there were 12 of me in their including myself of course you see how strange it can be when you get hypnotised and find out what's really going on inside your head I bet you had no idea eh?"

"Ah?"

"I bet you had no idea."

"Not even a vague inkling. Not the slightest whiff of suspicion. Not—"

"Well neither did I although I must admit, ooh, is that Albany coming up? I think we have a stop-over there I could do with stretching my legs a bit and a drink would be nice its such thirsty work all this talking don't you think?"

"Ah?"

"I said it's thirsty work all this talking."

"I'm parched."

"So I'm sure you're thinking that everything was working out fine with Dr. Schwartz and I wouldn't blame you cos I thought so myself at the time only then you'll never guess what he goes and does well one day I get this bill in the mail and you've never seen anything like it in your whole life not that I expected to have the treatment for free but still you must admit it came as a bit of a surprise when he charged me for *group therapy* I mean I know there were a lot of people at the party but I think most of them kept him entertained if you know what I mean and he had 12 names on the bill and Bill was even one of them and I thought that was a bit of a strange coincidence and he wanted thousands of dollars so of course I was mad well I was crazy really but there was no way I was going to pay and so the devil took me to court have you ever been to court?"

"Ah?"

"Court."

"I've been to a tennis court."

"Well I'm no judge about that I'm sure but of course the judge in *my* court wasn't having any of that doctor's fancy foot-work."

"So you won?"

"Well of course I won you see there was something wrong with the bill cos it was made out to Jill Reed but I'm *Mary* Reed so you see straight away the problem why would I be paying for treatment that Jill wanted when I'd always thought it was a waste of time? you tell me that if you can."

Spring gradually developed into mid-winter as we approached the Adirondack National Park. Several feet of snow lay on the ground, heavy and dingy from exhaust fumes.

And then we arrived and were forced out of the coach like criminals. Immigration. The rooting began, the rooters leaving no stoned unturned. We all of us were untruthful and planning something untoward and the rooters would root out the truth even if they had to use their snouts. A married couple from India were singled out for maximum degradation and when we all finally climbed back on the coach they were taking their luggage from the boot never to be seen again. Thousands of people disappear this way every year.

The Great Canadian Indoors

Finally in Canada, with no idea that here was I to write my great Canadian novel.

Looking out of the coach window came the shock of discovering that every saint was named after a town: Saint Jean, Saint Philippe and even Saint Chrysostome—which, when properly pronounced, sounds like “chicken.” And then Montreal looming ahead, an island city of glass towers and light. Actually, Montreal, in the month of 1888, was the first city in North America to install electric streetlights. Unfortunately the first power station was still decades away, so they were mainly used for locking up bicycles.

The Champlain Bridge slipped underneath the coach with a riveting thud thud thud, the whole city swallowed in a white hole of swirling snow. And then there was that ten second walk from the coach to the coach station entrance, ten seconds of bone chilling cold that cut through my duffel coat like the red ink of an editor’s pen. Something would have to be done and I could see only three possibilities: complain to the management; buy a new coat; head south.

Down into the metro, early evening now and the jet lag beginning to slow me down, hellish heat as I descended the escalators into the modern, clean yet still grim tunnels. Oh, and look there: a busker. Something familiar. A black fellow carrying a few stone too many, playing “Jail House Rock”—well,

he was singing some of the words and making up the rest, the tune was of his own spontaneous invention and actually carried no tune, the chords numbered two and were played endlessly to a vague shuffle rhythm.

So we zoomed along on those rubber tyres that offered a surprisingly noisy though delightfully bouncy ride, just a few stations down the line—which was fortunate since there were only a few stations *on* the line.

In a place like Quebec reality is in the eye of the beholder. The metro map inside the carriage was a case in point: colour coded lines three inches thick so that the system *seemed* to cover the entire island, only, of course, it couldn't and wouldn't and didn't. And then there were those few stations bearing—through some terrible historical happenstance—English names—McGill, Snowdon—conscientiously blotted out by a marker flourishing nationalist for the greater good of the Quebec people. It was a dandy ride, no doubt about that. Keats in search of the Picturesque? Ha! I was definitely on the trail of the picaresque in a knavish land of creative reality.

And then back out into the real world of blasted frigid air and frail duffel coat, Rue Rene Levesque to the Youth Hostel. Oh the relief of the great Canadian indoors.

"Hi."

This was the West End after all, bastion of abandoned buildings and Anglophones, boarded up shops and 99¢ pizza, illegal commercial signs bearing the apostrophe *s* and even the

odd unexpurgated English word: "Florist"—surely sowing the seeds of discontent; even the lowly panhandler playing his linguistic part, gathering his change for that mythical "cup of coffee" and not "a tasse de cafe"—although in any language it turns out to be a bottle of booze.

"I'd like a room or a bed or something." This was, after all, my first stay in a Youth Hostel and for all I knew it might be hammocks all round.

"You want a room to yourself?"

"I don't know. How much is it?"

"\$30."

"Fourteen quid?! How much to share?"

"\$24."

"I suppose I'll share."

When it came to sign in, I felt the familiar nudge of a strange notion: why not assume a new name? and perhaps a new improved and dandy personality would come with it, like the toy at the bottom of a box of sugar coated breakfast cereal.

The girl read the entry and offered a smiling, "Hi, *Harry*." I admit, the only reason I chose Harry was for its alliterative merit in conjunction with the ubiquitous *Hi*. I walked down the corridor detecting no immediate signs of that new dandy personality.

For all the discussions of high finance I found myself in a room with four empty beds. I threw down my back-pack and stretched out. An old newspaper, overlooked by the cleaning

staff, featured an article supporting the notion that the Maple leaf was not an appropriate symbol for Canada since there were several places where it grew not. The beaver was offered as an alternative, although I had yet to see one and wondered if they, indeed, were everywhere.

The Name Game

Two days, gradually learning the loneliness of the long distance traveller: endlessly sipping creamy coffee in trendy cafes; strolling streets robbed of their snow in the dark of night by masked men in clamorous lorries; wandering about Mont Royal. My only human contact came from evening chats with Catherine Wheel, the receptionist at the hostel and a graduate history student.

Now, in Montreal there is a chain of chemist shops called Jean Coutu. There is a metro station called Cote Vertu and another called Jean Talon. To the below average Francophone, the similarity between Jean Coutu, Cote Vertu and Jean Talon is far from striking. The humble Englishman, on his hols, invariably finds himself out to buy a bottle of cough medicine only to end up being taken for a rubber wheeled ride.

To make matters worse, street names in Montreal change faster than the traffic lights. You stop at red on what was Dorchester Boulevard and by the time the green flashes you are on Rene Levesque; as you adjust your rear view mirror, Burnside has suddenly become De Maisonneuve; and Craig Street is Saint Antoine before you shift into second gear. Obviously, all these English names becoming French names is one small element of a larger plan. So much for the plan, besides having no idea if you're coming or going, you actually wonder where you've been.

Enjoying a bite to eat in Sandwiches R Us, I noticed a young fellow feeding his small son.

"Sqweechy sqweechy squeeched," he said to the baby.

"What's his name?" I asked with uncalled-for innocence.

"What's his name? You know, he almost doesn't have a name. When he is born we decided Thomás. Now, you see, it's got an accent over the a to show that we're from Brazil. So, I filled in the form for the birth certificate, or something, and handed it in. After a few minutes this guy came back. 'I'm sorry, he says, you can't use that name.' 'Why not?' I say. 'Well, you see—' and mind you all this talk was in French—'you see,' he says, 'we are allowed certain discretionary powers—I remember that—and we have the obligation to refuse applications not acceptable.' 'What the hell's wrong with Thomás?' I say. 'The problem,' this guy says, 'is the accent.' Now, I know I got an accent, but so what?"

"Didn't he mean the accent on the a?"

"Yeah, yeah, he means that; but it's all the same thing."

In actual fact, Guy Lavigne was Quebec's Registrar of Civil Status at the time. The fellow, evidently, has no notion of civility. During Lavigne's reign of error, twenty names a year were rejected. These days, thirty are rejected, fifty suspected and ninety detected, inspected, dissected and duly re-inflected. In one particularly busy week, Lavignö refused Gazouille—because it sounded like *chirp* in French, although it takes a bird-brain to mix up a small child and a throaty sparrow. He also rejected

Loveny—because it sound like the acronym for UFO in French; and Goldorak, because it reminded him of his mother who, during the old days of unnecessary liberalism, gave him the middle name Dickhead, because, apparently, or so she claims, it sound like lovely-boy in French. Latignit rejected Lion, for no apparent reason. “Naming a child is no whim,” he said in an interview, although rejecting a child’s name clearly is. Mind you, Lotigesque had good and several reasons for rejecting little Thomás. First of all, his computer could not put an accent on the a. Now, I know I’ve mentioned my own lovely computer already; I must confess though for all its magnificence, the old dear’s getting on a bit. Nevertheless: á. No problemo. And look: é,ú,í,ó. Not impressed? What about: èùìòà. Okay, time to take out the big guns: ÿöü ñéèð ãççéñts? A doddle. Second of all, Lavignitili’s office points out that, “In our Québécois—[ouch]—tradition, names were registered in English or French. If it’s in Spanish or Portuguese, I can’t properly pronounce the accent. I’m not at ease.” And it’s true, Lavatoryigne is phonetically challenged. What he actually said sound more like, “Skwinge unt vringo onst dos vrebbe, ist est conficting a dringle frob.” And let’s face it, we should realise how important it is for Lavignitilioso to feel at ease. A Quebec superior court judge finally ruled Lazinimititious out of order and suggested there was a xenophobic accent to the cáse. Money well spent, I’d say.

“So you called him Thomás,” I said finally.

"Oh, no. We change mind a bit later. Thomás sound too, how you say, ethnic."

"So what did you call him then?"

"Guy. A good Quebecois name."

"Sure is," I agreed.

Meanwhile, in the third world, a Mexican Roman Catholic Cardinal baptised a child Juan whom the parents wished to call Giovanni. Samantha became Maria. Cardinal Sandoval said: "They have strange names, or names of people from a very different culture, like an Eric. Here we are called Juan, like I am."

Maritime Literature

More from loneliness and boredom than intellectual curiosity, I started to read some Canadian novels. I'd found a copy of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* at the hostel—something like a Bible in an American motel, perhaps, which should have been warning enough, though the dystopian pulp was scrawny enough to finish over breakfast.

The main bookshop on Saint Catherine's—Books R Us—was something of an eye opener, selling newspapers and cappuccino and cakes, magazines and maps, toys and trinkets. Oh, and a few books. It was the autochthonous section, though, that really surprised me. It was empty. There were vast areas of space where no space should have been. I know Canada is a young nation, but how long does it take to write a few damn novels? With the same kind of self-consciousness as a teen buying his first packet of condoms, I purchased a copy of Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

Convinced that nothing was likely to happen, I packed my bag and span a few parting words to Catherine Wheel, who was still wondering why I'd left the balmy breezes of Britain for hypothermic Canada.

And then, either by coarse chance or the manicured hand of fate, I stopped on the way in Coffee R Us, a cafe popular with film students, with its tired, beat-up, second hand furniture and prominently placed bookshelf crowded with such notables as:

The Effective Use of Under Exposure; and *The Effective Use of Over Exposure*; and *How to Get the Right Exposure*—all written by Richard Von Flasher; as well as that academic classic: *Film Graphics, Abstract Aspects of Concrete Editing*, by Sharler Tan. At the back of the café: an actual film screen, presently flickering with *Dots*, by Canadian Norman McLaren, a soul searching, poignant and sensitive film composed entirely of dots scratched onto the actual film by Norman himself. What ever it lacked in plot it infinitely made up for in dots. A masterpiece paid for by some mysterious institution called the Canada Arts Council. And of course, a crowd of filmy types were swilling down their cappuccinos and discussing either Fellini or Fettuccini—I forget which.

So I ordered my coffee, no frills, no foam, no whipped cream, no bits of chocolaty-cinnamon floating on the top—I mean, come on, I want a coffee not a damn cake—and then found myself sinking from view in an easy-chair that seemed inclined to gobble me up and never spit me out. To be pushed to your death is bad enough, but to be plushed to death is absolutely crazy. The whole business was watched by a fellow of singular appearance: gaunt, withered and uncertain looking, like a vegetarian in McDonald's; curiously brilliant eyes framed in tarnished chrome spectacles, like car headlights rusting in a scrap-yard; a mop of brown hair with a life of its own, like a run-away wig on holiday; whiskered face like an unkempt cat; elongated feet like squashed eels in an unhygienic fishmongers;

and the wardrobe of a scarecrow experiencing hard times. In aggregate, a vision of mild insanity or outright eccentricity. Yea, this fellow watched the whole life and death struggle and was, I think, on the point of coming to my rescue like a mariner with good manners, a kind heart and half decent kidneys, finally changing his mind after noticing the phase of the moon, the height of the waves, the colour of the sky and the proximity of the albatross.

"Made it," I said with a gasp of relief, clambering out. The odd fellow resumed his newspaper perusal. Even though this fellow seemed as inclined towards conversation as a trappist monk in the middle of a circus routine, yet still I ventured out on the vernacular high wire.

"It's an unusual cafe," I offered my platitude, taking that first tentative step. He looked up, his eyes now like spotlights on my lofty daring, looked down, looked up again.

"Are you from England?" Ah, now the virtues of nationhood: was this an anglophile?

"Yorkshire," I answered.

"Have you ever heard of Buffalo Bill?"

"I've heard of *him*, though I'm not sure he's heard of me."

"He was in Yorkshire, you know."

"Really."

"He gave the farewell performance of his British tour in Hull. In 1887, May 6th I think it was, he sailed for New York aboard the good ship *Persian Monarch*. I forget the name of the captain.

Anyway, his favourite horse, Charley, caught a chill and died. The sailors stitched him up in canvas covered with the American flag. It's the only equinal burial at sea on record." Never mind the equinal, was the fellow aware of my equivocatory daring and my equally equanimous equilibrium?

"Are you a fan of Buffalo Bill?"

"Not in the least."

"Horses?"

"Neither."

"Yorkshire?"

"Hardly."

"Funerals?"

There was a decided pause here, as if the fellow had been studying comedic timing and was trying out his new knowledge. In fact, he had no sense of humour whatsoever.

"I have a passion for sea faring," he explained. "I wouldn't normally mention it, only your coming from Yorkshire. . . ."

"That's understandable." Another pause. Again I became aware of my tightrope walk. "Have you been to sea then?"

"No. Never managed it. I've got flat feet."

"I see." And I really did see.

"Are you from Montreal?"

"No. Booksville."

"Where's that then?"

"Ontario. I'm just here for now."

"It's the best time to be somewhere. Visiting friends?" It seemed ridiculously optimistic.

"I'm here doing some research."

"Anything interesting?"

"Well, actually yes—only I don't usually talk about it . . ."

"Go on."

"No, really."

"No, really: go on."

"Well, a graduate student wrote a thesis last year about the *Serpa Pinto*."

"What's that then?"

"A refugee ship that sailed in 1944 from Lisbon to Philadelphia with a cargo of Jews. I wanted to meet with him and ask him some questions."

"And have you."

"I tried, but they won't give out his address at the University and he doesn't seem to be listed in the phone book. I think they thought I was a mad-man or something."

"Where does he study?"

"Concordia."

"History?"

"Yes."

"What's his name?"

"Bertram. Bertram Woodhouse."

"Hold your horses," I said, thinking for the first time in my life of Buffalo Bill, and went off to the public telephone by

the door. Catherine had just arrived at the hostel desk. She knew this Bertram Woodhouse fellow and promised to get his number.

"I'll have his phone number in an hour or so," I told the flat-footed land-lubbing vicarious mariner who usually answered to Barney Brightly. His beaming joy was like a child's on Christmas morning.

Barney Brightly was 42 and confessed to collecting literature on old passenger liners and battle ships—though he didn't usually talk about it. He also mentioned something about his brother, though that too seemed to be a stormy subject. When I bought him a second coffee he acted as if it was the first offering of human kindness he'd ever received. After an hour I called back the hostel and gave him the phone number.

"Thank you thank you." He actually said it three times, condensed here to save space. There was no answer and Barney resolved to spend the night in town and try again the next day.

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

"I thought I'd just sleep in my car."

"In this weather? Why don't you come back to the hostel with me."

"How much?"

"It's about twelve quid," I answered.

"Twelve quid?" he flashed his headlight eyes. "That's rather a lot," and in such a casual way, as if he'd been spending sterling all his life.

So there I was, back in my old room, sharing this time with this eccentric, and all thoughts of leaving Montreal temporarily banished.

"Do you work in—where did you say you're from?"

"Booksville. No, I just collect."

"The maritime literature?"

"That's right. I live with my parents and my brother."

"You never moved away from home?"

"No."

"Never?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We have a large basement and I need the storage space for my documents." Well, who could argue with that?

Barney telephoned the thesis chappie on and off throughout the evening, finally got through and arranged a meeting.

Smoke and Mirrors

There was a welcome break in the weather: by 10 a.m. it was already a heady five above. Spring was in the air and with it spring fever: several optimists were walking around town in shorts, the goose pimples as predominant as a goose without pimples in a flock of overly pimped geese.

The meeting took place at *Coffee R Us*. Bertram Woodhouse arrived a dainty 30 minutes late; his short curly locks combined with mismatched second hand clothes gave him the look of a pedant who had sworn off books. Barney, on the other hand, was immediately impressed by his wardrobe and was probably thinking on the lines of kindred spirits and green gables. Oh, the disappointment of disappointment. Whatever obsessive and eccentric peccadilloes Bertram might have up his threadbare sleeve, it soon became obvious that maritime literature was entirely excluded. His interest in the *Serpa Pinto* was not only academic but incidental.

Barney inquired after the tonnage of the ship, weather conditions, the name of a u-boat—which temporarily caused lifeboats to be launched—and the death of a child. Bertram, on the other hand, kept going on about the Jews.

"You see," Bertram explained, daintily waving his hand about as if he was about to write on a blackboard, "I wasn't so much interested in the maritime angle as the Jewish."

"Are you Jewish then?"

"No."

"So why were you interested in the cargo?"

"You see, the holocaust is on the cutting edge of history studies." Bertram actually licked his lips when he said this, as if the cutting edge was cutting a slice of roasted pork.

"So you wanted to chop up the story and turn it into something of your own."

"In a manner of speaking."

"So, actually, you had no genuine interest in either the ship or its cargo. Your only concern was to appear the sharpest knife in the draw." Barney was growing increasingly agitated.

"In a manner of speaking, though in the process I did become something of an expert on the subject," he said with a knowing nod.

"An expert? You don't even know the tonnage!"

Before Barney stood and stomped out of the cafe, he offered one parting shot across Bertram's bows, which seemed, as far as he was concerned, to settle the whole debate:

"Do you know that the glue on Israeli postage stamps is certified Kosher? And do you know they're planning to do the same in Canada?" And he left.

There was a feeling of playing in a soap-opera which daily explores the profundities of life and is popular with retired hermits, unemployed philosopher kings and housewives who vacuum only the shadows of dust. A soap opera made by the BBC and starring ex-tightrope walkers.

Barney was right: there was, plain and simple, only one reason Bertram agreed to the meeting: like every other masters student, he'd written a thesis academic in its relevance; and the idea that someone was *actually* interested in it seemed like vindication.

"He's quite intense," Bertram said.

"Too bad you didn't know the tonnage," I joked. "You must think he's a bit of a loony."

"I don't know. I'll give it some thought." The strange thing is, I was sure he actually would, that he'd sit down, with a pen and paper, and consider the whole thesis of Barney's looniness.

"I'll tell you what though," he continued, "some people might think it's all a sham, all smoke and mirrors. But as far as the department was concerned, my thesis concerned Canadian history, and that was good enough. We *need* history, that's what you have to understand. And besides, now I have a master's degree."

Out of nothing came something.

Obsessed By Loss

So we chatted a while. I suppose Barney was standing outside someplace, peering into the cafe like a submarine captain manning his periscope: he reappeared almost as soon as Bertram proffered me what seemed like an overly intimate handshake and went on his dainty way.

"I shouldn't be so confrontational," Barney said instead of hello, sinking back into his chair. "It's just his attitude: it seems to belittle everything I believe in."

"I don't see it quite like that."

"How then?"

"Well, in a way you're lost in your obsession, whereas Bertram seems obsessed by loss."

"That sounds nice and cheesy."

"My father owns a dairy."

"So you spread the wealth."

"It's spreading cheese."

After a suitably comedic pause I asked Barney if he wanted another coffee.

"Yes, yes, yes, thank you." So we drank our coffee.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. It's kind of late. Maybe I'll spend one last night in Montreal and head home tomorrow morning."

In fact, it was quite early.

"Let me take my stuff back to the hostel then, and we'll go for a beer or something."

Busy Remembering

Something strange had happened during our hiatus in *Coffee R Us*: the handful of degrees, which in themselves had sent Montrealers spinning, somehow, with the setting of the sun, had increased to tropical teens. A gentle warm breeze caressed the darkness as if winter finally had been deported. Even the door to the Youth Hostel had been left ajar and the blackened warmth whooshed in and blew away the dryness of radiator atmosphere.

"Did you see Bertram?" Catherine asked, in what to me seemed like a summery voice.

"We did, actually," I answered, as Barney furtively and expediently moved out of earshot.

"How did it go?"

"Not too well. It was like a weather man meeting weather."

Back in our room: "Let's go eat, drink and be merry," I said, plonking my backpack on the bed.

"Sure," Barney acquiesced, surely the least merry soul on the planet.

Mexican Food R Us, a bar specialising in Latin American food and serving up Corona swamp water specially priced for Canadian bottom feeders.

"Mexican food," I said. "I've never tried the stuff."

"You don't like spices?"

"Nothing to do with spices—in fact I've been known to be quite liberal with the old salt cellar. You see Mexican food in England is like English food in Mexico."

"Rare?"

"Rare? The stuff isn't even cooked. Now what shall I have?" I perused the menu with my peruser. "It's all Greek to me. What should I have?"

"Tacos are nice."

"What's that then?"

"It's like meat wrapped up in a tortilla."

"What's a tortilla?"

"It's like corn bread."

"So a tacos like a sandwich."

"Exactly."

"Fine."

Barney ordered a burrito, which turned out to be like a sandwich as well. When my tacos came Barney showed immediate concern.

"What's wrong?"

"There's something wrong with your food."

"What?"

"The taco shell's not the right colour."

"It's green."

"Exactly."

"That's not the right colour?"

"No, it's supposed to be whitey-yellow."

"Not greeny-green?"

"No."

Barney called the waiter over.

"His taco shell's green."

"Just for today, señor."

"What, Tuesday?"

"Saint Patrick's Day."

"What's the patron saint of Ireland got to do with a Mexican taco?" I asked, immediately caught up in the culinary absurdity.

"Well, señor, strictly speeking, not a lot," the waiter admitted.

"And casually speaking?"

"Not a lot either."

"So why is his taco green?" Barney butted in. "I mean, as far as I know, Saint Patrick never got as far as Mexico."

"Well, señor, like I say, it's Saint Patrick's day."

It was clear this question and answer thing was going no where, so the waiter skulked away no doubt wishing he'd listened to his Mexican mother and become an illegal immigrant working the fruit fields of California.

"It's the Irish," Barney said.

"What that then?"

"It's the Irish, trying to take over the world. It's their master plan."

"Impossible. They're too dumb to have a master plan. Unless, perchance, they got a dastardly Englishman to think it up for them."

"The whole thing's impending."

"Impending?"

"Watch." Barney again called to the waiter, who came over with all the enthusiasm of a libertarian invited to a despot convention held in a small African nation.

"Si señor?" he asked with as much fear as sarcasm.

"We'd like a pitcher of beer please."

The waiter returned with a small bucket of beer. At least I thought it was beer.

"You see what I mean?"

"I'm starting to."

"What kind of beer is this?" Barney asked the waiter who was moving away with the cunning rapidity of an illegal immigrant crossing the Texas border.

"It's a German larger."

"So why is it green?"

Either Canada was a nation of loonies or there really was an Irish master plan. There could be no other explanation.

"There's a great upsurge in Irish and Celtic music and dance these days," Barney told me. You know why?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

"Because it's the only way white people can see themselves as ethnic. They want to out ethnic the ethnics. It's completely

racist. And look at this," Barney said, pulling a crumpled copy of *The Gazette* from his pocket and pointing out an article. "Listen: 'Their aim was to create a programme in Irish Studies at Concordia University.' I mean, *why?* Listen: 'The prime movers were smart, tireless and well educated members of the Irish community.' I mean, come on, the *Irish?* That's the problem with this country: everyone's so busy remembering who they used to be that they have no idea who they actually are. Beside, 99% of the Irish here have never even been to Ireland. They wouldn't recognise Ireland if a jet plane took them there. It's the same with the Jews and the Arabs and the English, the Germans . . . everyone. The only culture we have here is a remembrance of another culture that doesn't even exist in the first place. Call this a country?"

Mmmmm. I was starting to like the fellow. He might have his little boat-bobbing obsession, but his headlight eyes were wide open.

And then, in a by the way kind of way, Barney said, "By the way, aren't you heading to Ontario?"

"That's right."

"I can give you a ride in the morning—if you want."

"I'd prefer a lift in the afternoon."

"What about a spin in the evening."

"A deal."

The Norm

The drive to Booksville: with no place for bilingualism in this province of an officially bilingual country, pictograms served as traffic signs. For those who speak not sign language, the whole scheme seemed an exercise in illiteracy.

A serrated horizontal black line on a yellow background: waves ahead? Wave? Wobble?

Three serrated vertical black lines on a green background: subterranean worms at work? Tornado warning?

A black question mark on a Yellow background succinctly expressed the confusion.

Crossing the Quebec Ontario border, the Macdonald-Cartier Expressway inexplicably became the Trans-Canada Highway; the pictograms became English text; and towns followed a secularised nomenclature. We were also heading southeast and the air became progressively warmer. It was seventeen above zero by the time we reached Booksville.

The house: an old wood frame with once white siding and a roof that was fooling nobody. Inside, the place was furnished with the stuff they'd refused at *Coffee R Us*. All was dust and silence and the peculiar, vague, yet undeniable smell of old age.

Barney lead me down the corridor, past a hatless hat stand, a doorless cupboard, a cupboardless door and a thing with yellow tassels and a heart of gold that turned out to be his mother.

"Mother, this is my good friend, Harry." She was shuffling along towards the kitchen and paid me no heed. "Come on, mom, let's get you into the kitchen and brew up a nice cup of tea." Barney took her by the arm and lead her to the kitchen table.

"You all right, mom?"

"I'm fine."

"Where's Old Nick?" Nick was his elder brother.

"Out with his hussy again, I should say," and shook her grey haired head.

"What's this?" There was a note, folded in half, on the kitchen table.

"It must be a note," she said.

"Can you believe it?" Barney read the note. "Where did you say Old Nick is?"

"Ah, Old Nick . . . he's always been a bad boy."

"Did he say anything about Florida?"

"Florida? No, he never mentioned her. Who's that then, another of his hussies?"

"*Florida*, mom, in the states. It says here he's gone to Florida again."

"Another of his hussies."

"Listen, mom, *Florida*, in the *states*. You know all about Florida."

"Oh, oh, Florida," the penny dropped; her expression changed.

"Did he tell you he was going?"

"To Florida? I don't think so."

"Can you believe it?" looking at me. "He left mom here all by herself, and with me off in Montreal. Can you believe it?"

"He's gone on holiday?"

"I don't know. No one knows. He's always going there."

It was a mystery worthy of Inspector Clouseau, or his ocean exploring brother, Jacques.

"I thought you lived with your dad, too?"

"He's in hospital."

Barney busied himself making the tea, talking small talk to his mother, repeating himself when she lost track.

"There you are," he said, handing his mother her cup, "just the way you like it."

"Harry's from England, mom." It was funny, this Harry business. I hardly recognised myself when I heard it and was beginning to wonder if the whole thing wasn't the kind of mistake you make after accidentally falling into an isolation tank.

"England?" she looked up at me and there was a remnant of Barney's headlight eyes. "That's a long way. You like your tea, I'll bet."

Of course, I didn't have the heart to tell her that my appreciation for tea is equalled only by my respect for fox hunting, the House of Lords, the stiff upper lip and the development of the motorway system, public schools, the end of subsidised public transport, private clubs and secret hand

shakes, Margaret Thatcher. Give me a cup of damn coffee any day of the week. Worse than that: it was already Thursday.

The tea was served.

"So, when do I get to see your collection?"

"Oh, you want to?" he asked, with an odd mixture of apprehension and enthusiasm.

"Sure."

We took the stairs down into the basement. Luckily, they also went up. Covering the floor like so many alabaster columns, stacks of newspapers and glossy magazines, a certain majesty in their multitude, dwarfing Barney, who wandered between them, touching each column lovingly as he passed. There was nothing absurd in this vision, more a sense of silent reverence, like an old church harbouring pagan gods.

"Look at this," Barney said, picking up a magazine. "This is a very rare one, published four days after the sinking of the Titanic. And look at this." And look at this and this. "You know, I might seem like an eccentric to most people, but, when I'm hanging around with other collectors, I'm the norm." And what was that: a wry grin? The wryest I'd ever seen, and I've seen more than my fare share.

Eventually we made our way back up into the land of the living room.

"Your father should be home soon," Barney's mother greeted us.

"He's in hospital, mom."

"Hospital? Is he? Oh, yes. We should go visit him."

"After supper."

"Can I make a phone call?" I asked. I took out my phone list and looked up Aaqib's uncle Bob in Toronto.

Well, there really was an uncle Bob, and apparently Aaqib was now living in a place called Vinetown.

"Where's Vinetown?" I asked Barney.

"It's down a-ways. Why?"

"That's where my friend's living now."

"I can give you a ride there if you want."

"No, no, I wouldn't dream of it."

Apparently there was no dreaming involved: it was a simple matter of stuffing his mother onto the back seat and off we went.

Cloud Cuckoo Land

The ride to Vinetown was longer than I expected. Still, in the vastness of Canada, distances are relative. Twenty kilometres here is probably like a zippy ten miles in England.

Barney bid me farewell—unfortunately the sale went to a Mrs Ecclescock, of 21 Gasworks Way, Clapham, who bid two cheerios and a toodle-pip.

Aaqib's address was actually beyond the bacchanal charms of Vinetown and I had to walk a while, or maybe even longer. Canada has been described—admittedly by a florist—as a Garden of Eden—perhaps where birds and brains live in harmony. Well, there I stood, solitary, in a kind of factory landscape, where row upon row of vegetation was geometrical and practical and infinitely depressing, like taking the spirit out of the holy ghost, the ink from the page, the break from the fast. Just ahead: some kind of chicken-shed-bird-house, characterised by an ornithological silence, leaned lop-sided and ready to fall.

I opened a rickety gate and walked up the small allotment towards the shed. I pushed open the door and saw Aaqib perched inside playing dominoes with a black fellow.

"Hi, Aaqib," I said.

"Hi —." He uttered the unutterable.

"By the way, I've changed my name. I'm called Harry now."

"Hi *Harry*."

"You don't seem surprised to see me. "

"Half-Joe, this is, er, *Harry*, I guess. The bloody Englishman I told yer about when 'e was called -. *Harry*, this is Half-Joe Hack ."

"Hi, Half-Joe Hack." He shook my hand with more enthusiasm than two handshakers at a handshaking convention.

"What's that you're drinking?"

"*Me* drinking rum," Half-Joe said. "Straight from Barbados. De best of de best. Him hitting de Ribina like dem's no tomorrow. Get you a glass." His English had all the accuracy of a child's colouring book.

Aaqib grabbed a glass and rinsed it in a sink that needed rinsing, the water pouring from a tap that had never been rinsed.

"Cheers," Half-Joe clinked my glass, again with more enthusiasm than propriety.

"So what's with the Ribina?"

"I'm off alcohol. It's a vice."

"A gripping notion."

"I know someone once," Half-Joe began, "who off his food. He die."

"Starvation?" I asked, taking the bait.

"He 'it by truck. De funny t'ing, de truck is delivering groceries at de time." Half-Joe Hack, admiring of his own mirth, laughed long and hard.

"Sit down, ya make the place untidy," Aaqib told me.

"What, shall I sit on, this old fruit box?"

"Feel free, me old fruit," Half-Joe said, choking on his imitation of Aaqib as if it were a half-chewed chunk of mango.

"The rum's good," I offered wryly.

"De best. Straight from Barbados."

"Really?"

"I was wandering when you'd show up," Aaqib said, with a twinkle of the enigmatic.

"You were expecting me?"

"Look on the table," he gestured.

Imagine a dog's posterior hanging from the window of a fast moving bubble-car: imagine a similar level of surprise when I saw there was a letter addressed to me, care of uncle Bob in Toronto.

"Who the heck's it from?" I asked.

"How'd I know? Me uncle brought it down yesterday," Aaqib said. "He fought it might be somefing serious."

It was from Molly Coddle, written with flourishing strokes, decorated with little flowery things and hearty things coloured in around the margin.

"So?" Half-Joe asked.

"It's from this girl who moved into Aaqib's old flat. Apparently—she's dropped out of school."

"That's nice," Aaqib said.

"I just noticed something," I said.

"What?" Aaqib asked.

"I'm actually detecting the presence of curry."

"I made curry for dinner," Aaqib mentioned.

"You? Eating *curry*? I thought you were a Yorkshire pudding fan."

"I like Yorkshire pudding," Half-Joe boasted.

"I'm glad to hear it." I took a swig of the rum.

"Any way, what the bloody 'ell are you doing in Canada?" Aaqib asked.

"I'm in search of the picaresque—or something. I've decided to experience life, to expand my horizons and follow in Keats' footsteps."

"What, did 'e come to Canada then?"

"No, but he walked a lot. Besides, what are *you* doing in a chicken shed?"

"I live here."

"Why?"

"I work in the vineyard."

"The vineyard? Doing what?"

"I 'elp out: they make ice wine."

"Wine made from ice. It's a sobering nation."

Ice wine is a peculiarly Canadian concoction made from grapes exposed to the biting teeth of frost before being picked.

"And what exactly do you do in all this icy business?"

"I told you, I 'elp out. When I first arrived 'ere they were waitin' for the ice to form. The problem was, all the birds were trying to eat the grapes, so they 'ired me to keep 'em off."

"So, basically, you're a scare-crow living in a bird house."

"I like de irony of dat!" Half-Joe laughed his belly laugh.

Ice Wine? Ice grapes? Human scarecrows? This was all too much for a Yorkshireman. I was beginning to think I was in cloud cuckoo land.

"You know the British economy is going through the roof right now," I offered in desperation.

"Well, they'll 'ave to re-slate."

"Exactly."

"I like it 'ere. " he said.

Alas, my old pal, childhood pal, dearest pal: I sensed a subtle intangible division like the space between one empty field and another.

In Canada, night falls with a thud. We heard the thud and oil lamps were lit, casting a sombre mood rather than illumination.

"By de way, me have some confession to make," Half-Joe said, enjoying the anonymity of the semi-darkness.

"Who a ya confessing to?" Aaqib asked.

"Harry."

"I'm not a priest."

"De rum is fake."

"What?"

"De rum."

"What is it then?"

"Ribina lace with cheap vodka. I can't afford rum."

"I can't afford vodka," Aaqib said.

"And *I* can't afford Ribina," I met Aaqib's parry with a thrust.

Plain and Simple

It was neither night nor day when I woke up: Aaqib was kneeling—I swear to god—on a prayer mat facing in what he thought was the direction of Mecca, but was actually more towards Vancouver. And then I found myself catching the first rays of sunlight—well, fumbling at least. A novel experience in the same way a poem isn't an essay. Reluctantly I climbed from my sleeping bag and took a wash at the tap outside. It was the weekend and we all took a leisurely breakfast and downed bucket loads of coffee. And then out into the vineyard.

Aaqib inspected one of the vines.

"Oh my Allah," he said, "there's fungus amungus."

We walked on.

"So what was all that praying malarkey?" I asked, as another identical row of vines passed by, still stunted and limping from their autumn pruning.

"It's no big deal."

"So why do it?"

"Well, you see, in Canada you can be who you *really* are. You 'ave the freedom 'ere to maintain yer culture."

"Aaqib, you're from Bradford, you speak with a Yorkshire accent, you were raised by parents who taught you the value of atheism."

"I'm a Muslim."

"Yea, and I'm a Hindu. As far as I'm concerned, the cow is sacred—ugly, awkward, obsessively bovine, but sacred. I take my hat off to cows."

"You don't have an 'at."

"Well, I take off my shirt then. My upper torso is naked in respect to the sacred cow."

"What can I say? I'm a Muslim."

"You're a scarecrow, Aaqib, plain and simple."

The Canadian Arts Council

The first thing I noticed about Half-Joe Hack was the hole in his T-shirt which somehow always managed to get caught on door-knobs, table corners and—according to him—women's nipples. The second thing I noticed was that every question met with glib humour. For example:

Me: So, Half-Joe, what're you doing in Canada?"

Half-Joe Hack: Drinking Ginger Ale. I drinking Canada Dry.

Me: What's it like in Barbados?

Half-Joe Hack: It like everyt'ing. It has very liberal taste.

Me: How long have you known Aaqib?

Half-Joe Hack: About six inches.

And every line was followed by that bellowing belly laugh. And then Aaqib told me something.

"Half-Joe's a writer," he said.

"Yea, all the world's a writer," I answered, wondering who the damn publishers were.

"'e's been published. 'e's *famous*."

"Really?" I looked over towards Half-Joe, hoping he wouldn't open his mouth.

"Yeah, all me family knows who I is," he said.

"Give 'im one of your books to read."

Half-Joe Hack fished a book from a pool of flotsam in the corner, casting it over with impressive nonchalance. It was

called *Him Only Make Him Scream*. A slim volume written in Barbadian Creole which began:

Miss Crow and Broder Crow go buy pork. When Miss Crow go buy de pork and come back and come se Miss Crow sit down. So den Miss Crow go back and carry pork come put down, Miss Crow come come, take you time, cos for fry it. And when she go into her bathroom go bed first, when him done Miss Crow come and den him come in upon him and cut off him bottom and put it in a pot for fry. And him go back and come back and come back and do de same ting.

I had two immediate questions: *what* exactly was the same thing they both did? And whose bottom did they cut off and fry?

I once wrote a one act play on the loss of regional dialect and the spread of American neologisms. It was called, *A Play On Words*, performed by a mime group using hand puppets. Was this the alternative though? Pidgin English that never settles down to roost?

Padi dem, kohntri, una ohl wey dey na Rom. Meyk una ohl kak un yeys. A kam ber Siza, a noh kam preyz am. Dem kin memba bad wey pohsin kin du lohng tem afta di pohsin kin dohn dai,²

for example, can be translated as:

²Krio, from Sierra Leone.

"Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them."

Half-Joe Hack's novel, for all its crypticism, had a publisher's stamp (Kosher), a seal of approval and my antipathy was temporarily qualified. I read his other three published books over the next few days, each written according to the unwritten rules of Bagian Creole.

"I knew an English writer once," Half-Joe said, setting up a joke for himself that could be seen from the other side of Saint John's.

"Really?"

"Him die of relaxation."

"How'd he manage that?"

"Over-dosed on valium." And, of course, he laughed his infected laugh.

"Have you ever read Nitchie?" I asked.

"Not on purpose. Why?"

"Well, I'm reminded of something he once wrote."

"What?"

"It concerned eternal recurrence. He suggested that we die and repeatedly come back to life and live the same shit all over again."

"Well, Nitchie him jerk. If I say it once I say it a t'ousand times."

And oh, how he laughed at that little gem.

During the afternoon, as I puzzled my way through the last of his novels, out of the blue on that exceptionally grey day, Half-Joe offered, "It easy to get published in Canada."

"How's that then?" thinking he was setting himself up for another gag.

"De Canada Arts Council. Dey pay for you write an' den make de publisher sit up and take notice. De Council stamp is like medal from de Queen."

Intriguing: a fraud, authenticated by various levels of confidence, like a clever conjuring trick.

"They pay you to write?"

"Sure, mon. Dis country crazy wiv money. Dey give de stuff away for free. First, you 'ave to be Canadian, dat de problem."

"Are you Canadian?"

"I'm one of dem. Sure mon."

Well, as unlikely as the whole thing sounded, Half Joe Hack's published novels offered strong supporting evidence. In fact, there was no other explanation that could explain the otherwise unexplainable. I suddenly found myself not only wishing I was a Canadian—which was hideous in itself—but also wondering how I could become one. Worst of all, the increasing awareness that Canada, rather than being Aaqib's land of opportunity, was the land of smoke and mirrors, suggested that very soon I might find out.

The Adventurer

Besides watching the gradual spring appearance of alsike clover, black-eyed Susan and the occasional five-hooked bassia, there was nothing much to do in this silent industrial vinescape.

Dominoes and absurd conversation ruled days that blended together like a fruit cocktail without the tail.

"I'm going into town," I told Half-Joe. "My computer's hungry again." The chicken shed was, of course, unelectrified.

"I come for de ride."

I still had no idea what, precisely, Half-Joe Hack was doing in this chicken shed corner of Canada, though he once admitted there was a strong chicken flavour in his current long-hand masterpiece.

"I love to peddle," he said, as we climbed onto the rusty old bikes that came with the shack.

"You're a peddler," I told him.

"I peddle in peddles."

"In puddles."

"I peddle in peddles in puddles."

"You certainly do."

It was a half hour ride into Vinetown. We were there within forty-five minutes.

"Coffee shop?" Half-Joe asked. He knew the ritual.

We sat drinking our coffee at Hot Drinks R Us, reading the free newspapers, my Powerbook secretly plugged into an outlet under the table. A flock of Canadian males dressed in plaid and baseball caps pecked at their cookies, discussed the Maple Leafs—the Toronto ice hockey team famous for never winning—oblivious to the grammatical error in the nounish pluralism. The door swung open.

"Jack!"

Entering: a ruffle-headed middle aged Jack with a prominent beer belly, wine knees and cider elbows.

"How's it goin' mon?"

"Ah, you know," he said.

"Harry, dis Jack."

"Jack Knife," Jack introduced himself.

"Hi."

"Jack a big adventurer. He once climb de highest mountain in Manitoba. Climb de highest mountain in Manitoba!"

"Actually, it was Saskatchewan." They both laughed.

"I think I'm missing the joke," I said.

"And what about de time you took de sky train without even de parachute?"

"Unforgettable. I still get fan mail from that one," Jack said.

"And he swim from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland."

"I did. I was in a pool on a cruise ship." They both laughed their heads off and slapped each other on the backs. "I'm gonna get a coffee."

Jack Knife returned.

"So, Harry, you've got a bit of an accent there. You sound like Aaqib. You from Pakistan as well?"

"That's right."

"Doing some adventurin'?"

"I'm not sure. I've been thinking about crossing Canada: I'm in search of the picaresque, you see; but I think it's a largish country."

"I not sure it largish," Half-Joe pondered. "Dem certain bigish, eh Jack?"

"Yeah, it's bigish—as the crow flies." Jack agreed. "But you could always hitch-hike."

"I don't know," I said, in a tone that suggested I actually did.

"It's a doddle."

"Yeah, mon, a doddle," Half-Joe agreed, notwithstanding the fact that the closest he ever got to hitch-hiking was a ride in a police car.

"And the best way to meet the people. I don't know about that picaresque thing, don't know where you'd find that, but hitch-hiking you'd meet a bunch of people."

"Some dem people might even be Canadians," Half-Joe offered.

"Yeah, some. These things do happen—especially in Canada. Let me get a pen and paper and I'll write down a list of adventuring stuff. You have to have the right equipment for a job like that."

Essential Items for the Adventurer

Compass

Map

Rifle

Hunting knife

Boomerang

Pocket booby trap (x4)

Bottomless boots

Leggings

3 season sleeping bag (excluding autumn)

4 season tent

4 season hip flask

Hip

Sun hat

Snow hat

Rain hat

Hail hat

Fog hat

Flowery hat (optional)

Knotted string

Goggles

Stove

Pots and pans

Utensils

Strike proof matches

Castanets

Intoxicated by the aroma of bad coffee, I pretty much decided there and then: I'd try the hitching game. You see the yearning for the picaresque was womanish in persistence, and I obeyed for all I was worth—which, as you know, was ten quid a day. Besides, by now I'd spent over a month in the chicken shed and I was about to lay an egg.

And so, a few days later, I went into Toronto to do some shopping at Camping Are Us: light weight tent, sleeping bag, castanets and so on.

"So you're off then," Aaqib said, giving me a hug.

"I'm off. And I'm leaving my computer here, so take care of it."

"I use it as typewriter," Half-Joe suggested.

And that was that.

The Black-hole

Public transport got me to the northern limit of the Toronto and then, feeling self-conscious, with dust and exhaust fumes blocking out the sun, I stuck out my thumb.

Within five minutes a mini-van pulled over and off we went. The driver was the kind of simple-minded character who explains all the lights on the dash board and shows you how the cigarette lighter works, even though neither of you smoke.

"I never get hungry," he told me at one point.

Three more mini-vans to reach North Bay—covered in a thick coat of either fog, smog or gaseous grog. I was dropped off close to the city centre. It was an exhausting forty-five minute walk—by bus—to the western suburbs. Yea, I was knackered. And then, when I finally arrived and found a place to twiddle my hitch-hiking thumb, nothing happened. And it continued to not happen for two hours—as the crow flies. Unfortunately, the crow was sitting in a tree, so two hours seemed like four. And then a young laddie-me-boy with a backpack climbed from a car, which promptly made a U-turn and disappeared. The epithet that misery loves company was obviously written by someone seldom alone. If a solitary hitch-hiker couldn't get a ride, what chance did two solitary hitch-hikers have? This laddie was clearly a thorny issue—or so his much thistled father claimed.

"Shit, shit, shit!" he shat, walking towards me.

"Hi," I offered, impotently and half-heartedly.

"You been here long?" he asked in a girliefied voice.

"Ages."

"How long?"

"About two hours—as the crow flies." He actually looked up into the tree and saw the crow sitting there, calmly, as if there was no tomorrow.

"Only two hours?" And now he actually giggled. "You've just arrived."

"It's the longest I've waited all day," I pointed out, trying to sound like a real expert. In any case, this laddie clearly needed a good talking to. Only just arrived my foot, my arm, my left goddamn buttock.

"Yeah, sure, but this is *North Bay*." The laddie seemed to be suggesting something with serious geographical implications.

"So?" I whimpered, in all my ignorant inferiority. The laddie had me over a barrel which, I suspected, was full of bad apples.

"So?"

"So?" I repeated, knowing I was on shaky ground. Even the crow knew it, watching from above, expecting an eventual earthquake.

"So, this is God-damn *North Bay*, Canada's most famous hitchhiking black-hole."

"Who else knows about it?" I was trying to establish some link between my ignorance with every one else's ignorance, thereby establishing a lack of *relative* ignorance based on the dubious notion that idiots love company.

"Everyone who ever hitched here."

"Is that a lot?"

"Well, there's me and you." Clearly, hitch-hiking was not in Canada's top ten favourite ways of getting around, coming eleventh—just after the pogo-stick.

Canada's Top Ten Favourite Ways of Getting Around

Car (red)

Car (blue)

Car (not red or blue)

On foot (somebody else's)

Irish Jig (horse optional)

Skis

Bob Slay (you have to pay extra for Bob)

Jumping

Jet

Pogo-stick

Canada's Most Famous and Audacious Runaway

"I never knew there were any hitch-hiking black-holes."

"Where the hell are you from, man?" I took this final noun as a direct acknowledgement of my senior status.

"England."

"Well, how the hell would you. This is Canada, famous for its black-holes. In any case, look at the time." It was five-thirty.

"It's five-thirty."

"Yeah—as the crow flies." Now what was all this "as the crow flies" business. There was something spooky going on and I was going off the whole spookiness. "It's the worst time of the day to be here."

"Fortunately it's almost evening."

"It's the worst time of the evening as well. Although it's the best time of the morning."

"How's that then?"

"You got a map?"

"Yea."

"Get it out. Now look, between here and Manitoba there's nothing. See all that green stuff there? Well, you probably think its nice rolling hills or the manicured lawns of somebody's garden. It's not. It's wilderness. Almost anyone passing here is going to Manitoba, and who the hell would be going that far at this time of the day? Nobody, that's who.

Besides, I have one rule: never hitch after dark. That's when all the creepy-crawlies are out driving about."

"So you think we're stuck here."

"I know we're stuck here." This laddie was too cock-sure—though I had a sneaky feeling his cock was right. "I'm gonna give it an hour and then I'm done for the day. Listen though, if someone stops for either of us, we ask for the other, okay? And make eye contact with all the drivers, that way your thumb is making a personal request rather than an abstract gesture." There was something I didn't like about this wee laddie with his corporeal orders.

"Sure," I said.

So the laddie picked up his bag, walked down the road a few hundred yards and we both hung around like a pair of socks in a one legged man's wardrobe. Was this really the Trans Canada Highway? What, no traffic?

So we stood, and strolled, and stretched, and squat, and sat, and sauntered, and stepped, and stumbled, and strained, and straddled, and skipped, and sprang, and—notwithstanding all that movement—remained exactly where we were. Between all that frantic inactivity, I read Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*—the story of Samuel Slick, who could sell glass boxes to a mime artist and lip balm to a ventriloquist—half listening for the sound of an approaching car, whereupon I'd hide the book and copy the laddie's stylised stance which suggested determination and keenness. And then, at the end of my third hour, with crickets

chirping madly like an antithetical alarm clock, I knew we were *really* in a black-hole and there was no turning back and no going forward. And, as I pondered this, Canada, in all my mental melodrama, seemed like one enormous black-hole. The laddie picked up his bag and walked towards me, like Billy the Kid ready to shoot his six-shooter, which in the laddie's case was his mouth.

"I'm done," he said. "You coming?"

"Where?"

"I know a good place to crash for the night." He was beginning to seem like a walking encyclopaedia of '70s expressions and habits. Even his trousers were flared. It was only later I discovered his legs were flared also.

"Sure."

I picked up my bag and followed this laddie. We turned off the road and followed a track that made its careful way into a wood.

"How far is it?"

"Not much farther—as the crow flies."

We finally came to a small circular clearing in the woods. A thick carpet of pine needles, a ring of stones for a fire place and the final elongated rays of sunshine flickering through the trees all conspired to create a cosy site for my first night in the great Canadian outdoors.

"Cosy," I said, dropping my bag to the floor.

"It has to be: we could be stuck here for days."

I looked up. "What do you mean, *days*?"

"It's a sort of measurement of time—like metres measure meat."

Now, does the whole world have to be so sarcastic?

"I was once stuck here for a week."

"Jesus." The Great Canadian Black-hole was more formidable than I imagined.

I opened up my back pack.

"You have a *tent*?" the laddie accused.

"Yea."

"I'm a minimalist, myself. Travel light. You'll learn. A mosquito net and a sheet of plastic's all you need." He pulled out his mosquito net and a sheet of plastic, as if their physical presence proved the point.

"My tent actually weighs less than your mosquito net and sheet of plastic—with the added advantage that it also keeps out rain *and* tigers." It was a glorious moment: the know-it-all laddie, who did seem to actually know it all, wobbled conspicuously.

"There're no tigers in Canada," he offered with the arrogance of youth.

"That's why the tent is also portable. I can take it to places where there *are* tigers."

With tent fully tented, its magnificence, its anti-mosquito, anti-rain and anti-tiger qualities undeniable, the laddie glanced over with envy and finally said not a single word.

Finally: "We'll have to get some fire wood before the light goes." As usual, I obeyed the youth as a migrating bird obeys

the changing seasons, though with a good deal less flapping about.

The sun finally lost to another land, we sat around the crackling and spitting camp fire on our respective sleeping bags and shared our frugal food.

"So why were you swearing when you first arrived?"

"Well, when the last ride told me he was going to North Bay, the black-hole was still kind of abstract—and you never know, it's possible to get away from here pretty quick. And then when I saw you, standing there, the black-hole became concrete."

"How can a hole be concrete?"

"The road, man, its as concrete as concrete gets and the hole is in the road."

"That's a good point. You have wisdom beyond your ears."

"That's why I wear a hat."

The fire crackled, our shadows began to frolic behind our backs, jumping through bushes and climbing trees.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Seventeen."

"Is that all?"

"How old do you want me to be?"

There was something infuriating about this worldly youngster, something almost unnatural, as if he'd been created by some post-modern novelist in order to make an obscure point; a point that baffled readers and pierced red balloons tied to occasional and casual lamp-posts. I gave a shrug.

"I have a bottle of wine," the youth said.

"You have wine?" I felt like Bacchus after a hot afternoon of debauchery.

"Sure do." He took the bottle from his backpack, popped its cork, took a swig and handed it to me. It was a cheeky wine, perhaps slightly brazen with a cherry blossom aftertaste and a kick to fell a mule.

"What's your name?"

"My family name's Nillie."

"What's your first name?"

"Willy," he said with a straight face.

"Hi, I'm Harry," I said, handing back the wine.

"If you were Canadian you'd have heard of me."

"How's that then?"

"I'm Canada's most famous and audacious runaway."

"Where do you run from?"

"Canada. When I was thirteen, I ran away to Mexico, but they caught me before the bus left the station. When I was fourteen I cycled to the American border and sneaked across through a field. They arrested me on the interstate in Virginia. Not bad, eh?"

"Not bad." I was impressed.

"The next year I stole my father's credit card and flew to Calcutta. I spent a month in India and then went on to Singapore."

"Where did they catch you?"

"They didn't. I came home by myself. India was amazing. The culture's very rich—and yet surprisingly affordable."

"Really?"

"I bought a carpet made by child slaves for ten bucks."

"And what about your parents?"

"My father's a civil servant and my mother works in an insurance company. They're too busy being rich to notice anything."

"You're trying to tell me they didn't notice you were gone?"

"Not really. I said I went camping for the weekend. It was a long weekend."

"After that, I mainly hitch-hiked around the states. I had fake I.D. I went down to the Florida Keys last year, stayed two months until I ran out of money."

"Then what?"

"I phoned home and my parents—who thought I was spending the night at a friend's—paid for my plane ticket home."

Making use, for once, of North American vernacular, I said, "They should ground you."

"Ground me? Ha. That's rich. They paid for me to have pilot lessons!"

A Custard Pie-Like Thought

Early next morning I heard Willy Nillie up and about. Unzipping the door of my brilliant and practical and portable tent, which, pound for pound was worth its weight in nylon, I saw the laddie puffing at the embers.

"You're up early."

"It's five."

I clambered out and realised there was no toilet, no shower, no tap, and bacon and eggs seemed out of the question. Of course, I could never ask Willy the nitty-gritty of hitch-hiking hygiene. So I watched. Once the embers flamed, the laddie-me-boy reached into his backpack, brought out his water bottle, toothbrush, toothpaste and a small slither of soap. He brushed his teeth, using only a drop of water to rinse his big mouth. Pulling off his T-shirt, shorts and underpants, he poured a trickle of water into his cupped palm, moistened the soap, and washed his face and neck, under his arms, and his laddie-me-boy penis, rinsing with another palmful of water. It was a thirty minute walk-by bus-to the nearest tap.

I promptly followed like a goddamn copy copy copy cat. My own penis, being a man-sized item, required a palm full of water all to itself: such are the hydrodynamics of endowment.

The laddie had a banana for breakfast. I had a banana for breakfast.

We packed away and were back at the road by 5:40. I opened up Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*—which seemed to me like easy-living compared to a night with laddie-me-boy and the great Canadian black-hole.

The pages turned, the hours slipped by, the crow crowed the occasional crow. And then, at exactly 2:34 PM, too busy reading my novel to notice, a mini-van pulled over beside Willy. He opened the door and I watched with bated breath as he mouthed words to the driver and gestured towards my own solitary self. And then he turned towards me and, with an expression of regret, shook his head and climbed in.

The car pulled away. A sense of abandonment. I actually cried with self-pity. There was no reading Moodie's listless yarn, which had all the pacing of a stranded hitch-hiker. Literature suddenly seemed the stuff that books are made of. Real life was like a maniacal editor, scratching out every word and rejecting every idea. Woe is me, I woeed. From that moment on, I decided, I would refrain from reading on the job: I would make outlandish eye contact with every driver that came along.

I decided to head into town and get a coach back to Toronto. The eye thing was useless. I might as well attempt tongue contact with the drivers for all the good it was doing me.

And then I was hit in the face by a custard pie-like thought: Lucien Butcher, once a federal Conservative, became leader of the provincial and socialist Parti Quebecois; Jean Charley, once a federal Conservative, became leader of the provincial Quebec

Liberal Party; Vinder Zilm, once leader of a provincial Social Credit Party became leader of a provincial Reform Party; and so on. . . . I could turn and turn and turn again, but surely I'd just wind up dizzy and have no idea, at the end of it, who the hell I was. So, I had no choice but resist the forces of mutability and continue onward, forward, or at least continue exactly where I was.

The fire burned for company. Darkness fell. The moon rose and trembled behind leafy branches. And then clouds shifted over and rain began to speckle down and fizzle in the fire. Inside the tent, with the pitter-patter increasing, I knew that this was *really* roughing it in the bush and that it really had nothing to do with Canada—which was mostly kept under roof and behind brick walls.

The Canadian Wildness

The next morning I followed Willy's advice and again hit the road early. By noon I'd made more eye contact than a hyperactive optometrist.

At two o'clock a mini-van pulled over. I climbed in without asking where the driver was going, elated and feeling at once the diminishing gravitational pull of the great Canadian black-hole. Small talk until I was finally sure I'd escaped.

"Where are you heading?" I asked.

"Dryden."

"Where's that then?"

"About three hours east of Winnipeg—as the crow flies." I was beginning to think there was something entirely unnatural about Canada with this constant aerial qualification.

I took out my map and perused. It seemed a simple matter of going from *a* to *b*. Of course, I was forgetting that there was some of North America in between.

The driver had only one identifiable characteristic: a vehement hatred of French Canadians.

"They have all the power . . . they get all the money . . . and still they want to separate. I say fuckin' let 'em go. We'd be better off without 'em." Somehow he managed to express this sentiment in a circular fashion, which meant it never came to an end. Still, it passed the time and we had plenty of time to pass: that *a* to *b* was increasingly looking like *a* to *z*. You see,

what was happening was the great Canadian wildness, untouched, unspoiled, unwanted, rocky ground swamped by a thousand mosquito ponds and covered in dark pine; wildness that disdained even the picturesque.

We stopped in a lay-by to stretch our legs, which were summarily eaten by mosquitoes; black fly picked at our bones and horse fly tormented our souls. We were soon on our way, protected by speed and a willingness to be somewhere else.

Thrice in a while we'd spot a blue heron, majestic in its mosquito pond kingdom; twice a racoon; a solitary beaver. Never was there a town or any sign of humanity.

"I hate this stuff," the driver said.

"What stuff?"

"That." He pointed everywhere. "And *I* was born here. They should move all the Frenchies here: that'd keep 'em quiet."

Yea, this was northern Ontario, an area of wildness as large as the Yukon—which, of course, is another large area of wildness.

Peace-Keeping by Force

It was almost dark by the time we arrived in Dryden. The lack of light flattered the landscape. Walking towards the edge of town, I came to a school playing field where I spent the night, camping beneath football posts. It was an ideal spot, though the visiting team suggested my tent offered an unfair advantage.

So there I sat, inside my tent, watching the darkness seep in through the nylon walls. I had neither food nor drink. Sleep remained a distant dream. Eventually I found myself outside the tent, wandering about the moonlit night and swatting mosquitoes. Blood splattered left right and centre and my skin began to look like an abattoir floor. If only I could kill a few cows I'd have something to eat. My stomach grumbled. I found a water fountain in the playground and gulped away. And then back into my tent.

A nice little family run cafe called Mugs R Us for a feast of a breakfast.

I stood shuffling by the roadside, digging my destructive heel into Common Crupina. After an hour or so a mini-van pulled over, a red sporty mini-van with wall to wall windows. I climbed in. A woman driver. She was all legs and breasts and face and feet and stomach and back and hair and neck and ears, teeth and eyes. Now, if this wasn't a woman, I didn't know what was. Mind you, I'd once thought the exact same thing about a man.

"Hi babe." Wait for it, *she* actually said that to *me*. I looked in the back seat, just to be sure.

"Hello darling," I answered, thinking it was some kind of innocent game.

"Oooh, what a lovely accent. Are you from Pakistan?"

"No, England."

"England? Wow. That's amazing."

"I'm sometimes surprised myself."

So off we went in a cloud of chaff.

"Where are you going?"

"Vancouver."

"What, *today*?"

"No, it takes more than one day," I pointed out.

Manitoba: the dizzy tedium of wildness gave way to the underwhelming monotony of prairie.

A few hours later, with Winnipeg zooming towards us, Alice Fresco—who insisted I call her Al—offered me accommodation for the night. Immediately I began cowering in my boots—which was pretty amazing because I was sitting in my stocking feet.

She lived in a lovely wood frame house—made of brick—situated out in a leafy suburb of Winnipeg.

It was 9:30 and the sun hung on the horizon like an exhausted yo-yo.

"Do you mind if I take a shower?" I asked, self-consciously.

"Go ahead, it's the second door on the left. Are you hungry?"

"Actually, I could eat a horse."

"I'll make some supper," she said, heading for the stables.

Oh, the glories of splashing, jetting, pointed water. It hit my body like bullets from a Gattling gun. My only defence was soap and shampoo. When I climbed out, victorious, elated, I realised there was no towel. Coincidence? I think not. The battle was won though the war could go either way. Opening the door a tad, I called out:

"Al, do you have a towel?"

"Just a minute," came the answer. I closed the door and manned the barricade. It was a full frontal attack that caught me by surprise: Al, with neither a knock nor a by your leave, opened the door and stepped in brandishing the towel. There was eye contact, though not until she'd inspected my weaponry. The big gun was out and she staggered half a step back in disbelief. With perfect timing, I grabbed the towel and turned it to my own defence.

"Thanks," I said.

"My pleasure," she said with threatening sincerity.

Oh the glories of a clean body and, mind, underpants, shorts and T-shirt.

"I thought we'd eat out on the veranda."

"Great."

Al led the way. A table was set with a white cloth, candles and a vintage bottle of Beaujolais Nouveau. I was clearly being out-strategied: she intended to keep peace by force. I needed foreign aid. I shyly inspected my boots—which was more difficult

than you imagine: they were still in the bathroom. Al was now on the attack:

"Some wine?" she said with great strategic cunning.

"Thanks," I said.

"Your welcome," she answered, bringing up the rear guard—by which I mean she filled my glass to the brim.

"You have a girlfriend?" she asked, taking a bite of a sausage with deliberate thoroughness.

"Not that I know of," I said.

"What, a charming guy like you with such a charming English accent?" She fired both barrels.

"Well, I live in England and it's not quite as charming over there."

"You have lovely eyes," she said.

"Well, they do match," I admitted.

Beneath the table, I felt her leg brush up against mine. It was like an electric shock, a promise of delirium, and a sentence of death all rolled into one. I ate a sausage.

"So what do you think of the prairies," she said with momentary mercy.

"They're very . . . functional."

"You're just passing through. How would you like to be *tied down here?*" My knees wobbled, my loins lurched, my palms grew hairy.

"Er," I said, with great conviction.

She eyed me suspiciously. "Are you a virgin?"

"Not in the official handshaking sense."

"How about in the religious sense?"

"No."

"The medical sense?"

"Absolutely."

Oh, woe is me. She actually seemed to like the idea. She seemed really fired up now.

We both drained our wine glasses. She was head over heels in sex and legless; I was foot-loose and fancy-free—though with no stomach for hanky-panky. I knew that combined we had enough bits to make a complete body.

And then, all of a sudden, extra-terrestrials appeared on the street. Three beings dressed in white body suits, white boots and a domed helmets that hid their unimaginable faces from human scrutiny. Upon their backs, large twinned cylinders, each protruding a single nozzled pipe which they brandished threateningly: some strange alien weapon designed to squirt people to death.

"Jesus Christ, what's that?" I asked, sitting up as rigid as a corpse suffering from full rigidity.

"Oh shit, it's almost eleven. We have to go inside."

"What's going on?"

"Quick," she took my hairy hand and dragged me indoors. "I've got to close up the windows," she said, running about the house. And then came the sound from without, a strange shushing pitter-patter.

"Just in time," Al said, returning.

"What the heck's going on?" I asked. We were standing by the closed window, side by side, so close I could feel her centre of gravity pulling at my centre of gravity.

"They spray the area. It's very phallic." Indeed, the aliens brandished their squirting tubes with self-conscious eroticism.

"Aliens?"

"Just men in suits."

"I've seen men in suits before. I went to a bank once. *They* aren't men in suits." Al laughed, insidiously wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

"They spray to keep the mosquito numbers down. They use planes in the rural towns. It's no big deal." She tickled my neck.

"Spray? With what?"

"I don't know. Mosquito spray."

"Pesticides?"

"Well, they are pests."

It was the new frontier of germ warfare. Clouds of poison were soon swirling willy-nilly, swirling clouds, all poisonous.

"Squirt me," she said.

Dick-Heads

A night of hectic movement, heavily reliant upon parachute drops, juices flying about like so much aerial flack. Ceilings were splattered, walls splashed, carpets drenched, with the Royal Navy finally tossing in a rubber dingy.

After a frolicking good-bye, Al dropped me at the highway.

I stood there in the handshaking sense, thinking in the religious sense that I was no longer a virgin in the medical sense. I smiled a smile to myself and stuck out my thumb with great self assurance.

And I continued my prairie-crossing journey. It was Sunday. I was offered a ride over continuing flatness by two beer drinking dick-heads driving a beat up mini-van, the road a narrow band through wheat fields that had no beginning and no end. Inevitably we stopped off in a bar, where they paid for all the beer, insisted I down shots and entertained me with outrageous sexual anecdotes. I blushed not, riding my new-found confidence like a whore.

"I knew this girl called Pride—her parents were hippies, you know what hippies are like. Any way, we went out of the bar and she dragged me up this alley. When we came to the end she started to grab me and pull her knickers down. And then she pushed me down on my knees and forced my head between her legs, locking me in place with her thighs. She was gyrating like crazy

and tiny bit of masonry and brick kept falling on my head. Finally she orgasmed and ran off."

Me: "So, Pride came before a wall."

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, English: he always talks about his penis. He thinks it's the greatest thing that ever walked on earth.

"You know my dick's the size of an Italian sausage."

"Yeah? Well my testicles are the size of Swedish meat balls."

Me: "It's not size that counts: it's what's on the menu."

"Yeah? Well, I use my dick as a magic wand."

"Yeah, every time you wave it around a woman disappears."

Me: "He can turn a hot woman into a cold turkey."

"Yeah? I once had sex with a midget."

"I once had sex with a widget."

Me: "I once had sex with a midget widget."

"I once had sex with a digit in a midget widget."

"I once had sex with Bridget with a digit in a midget widget."

"I once had sex for 12 hours straight."

"I once had sex for 12 hours bent."

Me: "There aren't enough hours in the day for *me* to have sex."

Yea, I knew they were dick-heads, but I had a newfound fascination for dirty jokes and manly banter. For the first time in my life I felt like one of the boys. Unfortunately they both refused my advances.

"You think we're homosapiens?" they both asked.

Why Canada Adopted the Metric System

That night I camped in a cemetery. It was very peaceful.

The next morning I took shower under a tap used for watering the flowers. I packed and hit the road. The road hit back. I kneed it in the shoulder—which was harder than I'd expected. It was a hard-shoulder. My knee buckled. Combat continued until a mini-van pulled over. I climbed in.

"Town Ville okay for you?"

"Where's that?"

"About 60 clicks down the road," the driver said, clicking. "I'm delivering some straw bricks there, eh."

"Straw bricks?"

"Yeah, there's a stone mason who likes to lie down on the job."

"Fine."

"Oh, look," the driver said, "we're in Saskatchewan now, eh?"

I looked outside at the blowing fields of wheat. We'd passed the imaginary line between wherever I had just been and wherever I was now.

"Nice."

"It gets pretty flat from here."

"I'll miss the hills."

Suddenly, in what appeared to be more of the middle of nowhere in a region that was all middle with nothing on the outside, the driver pulled into a lay-by.

"Come on, I want to show you something, eh," he said, climbing out. For a moment I thought he might be one of those famous Canadian homosexuals. No such luck. We walked along the edge of a field and then stopped.

"Notice something?"

I looked around. There was an ocean of wheat, but no beach, no palm trees, and nowhere to buy an ice cream.

"No," I said.

"Look!"

I looked.

"No," I said.

"Oh. Well, I'll tell you, eh? We're standing at the base of Saskatchewan's highest mountain. This is Mount Indifference. If you look in the distance, over there by the wheat, you can see Saskatchewan's second highest mountain, Mount Hill."

"Wow," I said.

"Yes-sir-ee. Mountain Indifference's 24 feet high. Mount Hill's 22 and a third feet high."

"Wow," I said.

"Yes-sir-ee. Want to climb to the top?"

"I don't have any equipment," I said. "Besides, I'm dizzy with vertigo just looking at it." At that point I realised something astonishing in its implications: "Just a minute," I said, "Mount Indifference is 24 feet high?"

"Yes-sir-ee."

"But two of those feet are yours and two of those feet are mine."

"Cripes."

"That means that *Mount Hill* is actually the highest."

"I'll notify the government. This changes *everything*."

And so we drove away from Saskatchewan's second highest mountain.

How to Frolic in the Canadian Gene Pool

One: Jump in at the deep end.

Two: Frolic.

"Well, here we are, eh?"

"This is Town Ville?"

"Yes-sir-ee."

There were fifty houses and six hundred grain elevators. The whole town was like a cloud on the horizon, even if you were actually on the horizon.

"Watch yourself though, they're an odd lot hereabouts. There's only two family names in the whole place: the Reeds and the Wrights. They're all alliterate."

I climbed out the mini-van.

"Want a straw brick?" the driver called, holding one out of the window towards me.

"Not today, thanks," I said and gave him a wave farewell.

The first thing I noticed was a sign in the garden of something that looked like a chicken shed, smelled like a chicken shed, but was actually a house: "No Trespassing Without Permission."

It was 10:30—as the crow flies. Unfortunately the crow was presently sitting down to lunch. Peckish, I wandered over to something that looked like a cafe, smelled like a cafe, but was actually a hardware store called Hardware R Us.

"Do you know where I can get a coffee?" I asked the old shopkeeper.

"Nope. Want a hammer?"

"Not today, thanks," I told him.

Out I went and wandered over to something that looked like a hardware store and smelled like a hardware store, but was actually a cafe called Food R Us.

"If you want a hammer you're in the wrong place," the young waitress, who looked remarkably like the old shopkeeper, told me.

"I'll have a coffee instead."

I picked up a tattered copy of the town's fortnightly newspaper, published the first of each month. An interesting front-page article caught my attention:

On the eleventh of winter, according to local police sturgent Reed, Towns Ville, Daniel Reed [related], 27, and Randy Wright [related], 33, died in a head-on collision, earning a tie in the game of chicken they were playing with their snowmobiles.

What drivel. I wrote a letter to the editor. It was the letter *b*. As far as I know it was never published, though there was once an anonymous letter *s* that appeared shortly after, which could have been my letter with a typo. Who could tell?

There were two other customers. They both looked remarkably like the old shopkeeper.

A: "I never get hungry."

"I love spaghetti balls."

A: "Oh, yeah, I love spaghetti balls."

"They block up me pipes, but I still loves 'em"

A: "Ah, the bowel movements—not what they used to be?"

"No, no. They used to be leg movements. Not no more. I have a lot more gas that I . . . well, I fart a lot more; and when I do, they're much stronger than the normal person. Oh, yeah, much stronger than the normal person. Ain't that true, Jane?"

Jane, the waitress, answered, "I know it's not funny, but it's true."

A: "An' one day my 'ouse blowed away."

B: "Blowed away?"

A: "Yeah. My 'ouse."

B: "Your 'ouse?"

A: "What?"

B: "Eh?"

A: "My 'ouse blowed away."

B: "Blowed away?"

A: "My 'ouse blowed away."

B: "Big fart blowed away your 'ouse away?"

A: "No. Dynamite."

B: "Blowed away."

A: "My 'ouse blowed away."

B: "Big fart?"

A: "Dynamite."

B: "My dog died."

A: "Your dog?"

B: "Yeah. My dog died."

A: "Old age?"

B: "'is legs fell off."

A: "Oh."

B: "And 'is 'ead."

A: "Old age?"

B: "No, 'is legs fell off."

A: "What?"

B: "Oh."

A: "Oh."

B: "And 'is 'ead."

A: "Oh."

B: "And 'is tail."

A: "Oh. Your dog."

B: "Yeah, and 'is body fell off."

A: "My 'ouse blowed away."

B: "Big fart?"

A: "Dynamite."

B: "My dog died."

A: "Where was 'e, your dog?"

B: "My dog?"

A: "Yeah."

B: "In your 'ouse."

A: "My 'ouse blowed away."

B: "Dynamite?"

A: "Yeah."

I finished *Roughing it in the Bush* and tossed it into the bin. I was running out of reading material. I took out the last novel I'd packed for the trip, noting that I was still only in Saskatchewan. At this rate I'd need a yard of Canadian literature for every mile of Canada.

About ten thousand kilometre, seventeen weeks, 92 mini-van rides later I was still in Saskatchewan. Not only was the entire province in the middle of nowhere, but nowhere was in the middle of *it*, I was in the middle of *them*, and *they* were in the middle of *me*. Good job we were all having sex.

My present driver was a fifth generation Canadian, though his mother and father were only just off the boat. The numerical difference was once explained by Statistics Canada in a three thousand page report, 99% of which was an index.

"There're very few production places in Saskatchewan," I pointed out.

"Generally speaking," answered the driver, "there are very few *places* in Saskatchewan. What we need is something interesting in the middle—to attract people. And we could give out free shiny things, you know, the kind of things that attract magpies."

"And maybe offer free trampoline rides."

"There and back?"

"Why not."

"And people could flap their arms at the same time."

"At the same time as what?"

"At the same time as other people."

"Yea. And what about a casino?"

"Too much of a gamble."

Finally I was in Alberta, in the middle of nowhere. Wheat
grew.

Reservations

Well, yea, the flatness continued without relief, though eventually the wheat gave way to the bovine. I'd reached cowboy country—or so I thought. For every human being there were two cowboys; for every two cowboy there were ten cows; for every ten cows there were a thousand mouths to feed; for every mouth to feed there were knives and forks.

Passing roadside time swatting flies, kicking knapweed and reading *Wacousta*, a monstrous American car pulled over: the size of an articulated lorry, it was strangely cramped inside.

"They no make cars like this no more," the driver said with peculiar pride.

"Thank god," I thought, resting my chin on my knees and trying my best to at least stretch out my toes.

"You go Calgary?"

"Yea."

"Big brave Running Water go Calgary."

"Are you an Indian?" I asked in all my transatlantic innocence. Apparently the Indians these days are First Nations peoples, or native peoples, or aboriginal peoples. Equally apparent, Running Water was blissfully unaware of all this nominal change.

"I no Injun. I cowboy."

"How?" I asked.

"How!" Running Water said, mistaking a question for a greeting.

"How," I answered, showing him the palm of my hand.

"Running Water always cowboy, that how," Running Water said, mistaking a greeting for a question. "When heep big chief Canada government make heep big kill buffalo, Injun have no food. Injun have knife and fork and reservation, but no food. Many Injun die waiting with knife and fork. White man magic heep big magic. Heep big smoke magic. Heep big mirror magic. White man tell lies: Custard's last stand really heep big pie shop. Injun he no like grow cabbage and carrot and turnip. Injun grow tired. So Injun come cowboy. Running Water proud cowboy, sit high in saddle."

"Tall horse?"

"Marijuana. Injun best cowboy. Sitting Bull of Hunkpapa Lakota: he heep big famous cowboy. Tom Three Persons: he heep big famous cowboy. Now, Running Water: he heep big famous cowboy, work rodeo, throw lasso, ride bronco, shoot gun, kick dust."

It was a remarkable story and, as it turned out, utterly true. Yet I was astounded: how was it that the Indians had reservations and yet no food? Could service be so bad? This was more than an historical enigma, it was a national claim.

The Strine³ Shrine

Calgary galloped towards us, a peculiar island of modernity: shiny buildings, state of the art paintings, shops that sold ballet shoes (Ballet Shoes Are US), pristine public transport, mini-vans, concrete cowboy hats. There was even an artificial hill in the suburbs, made from a British Colombian hill brought by lorry and used as a general-purpose slope. Reflected in a thousand office tower windows, the Canadian Snow Birds were doing one of their aerobatics displays, zooming across the sky and filling it with smoke.

First order of business: off to a downtown bookshop where I replenished my supply of Canadian Literature. The shop itself, Literature R Us, was much better than Books R Us in Montreal. Apparently Montreal did not have the complete canon of Canadian literature. Yea, here I discovered a rare and very readable bus timetable whose temporal delineations waxed poetic, stretched credulity, and made everyone late for work. Oh, and a pamphlet published by the Mormons knocking the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I sat on the terrace of a cafe in the centre of Calgary and admired the Rocky Mountains looming in the distance. I pondered the wildness of northern Ontario and the dullness of the prairies—where I'd lost at least two kilos wheat-watching. I sipped on my coffee and opened up the *Calgary Herald*.

³Aussie slang: a lot of Aussie slang said at once.

According to an "inside source," the University of Alberta's medical school employs actors and other people for \$12 to \$35 per hour to be practice patients for its students. Bob LeRoy, 45, commands the top pay because he is a rectal-exam patient. Said LeRoy, "I always hope the student with the biggest finger goes first."

"Anything in the paper, mate?" I looked up: a handsome looking fellow, his rugged manly face suggesting early thirties, his knobbly-knees, late sixties.

"Nothing you'd want to take seriously."

"There never is," he said, with what can only be described as an Australian accent. "The whole country's like a mirage."

"Maybe," I pondered, still clearly in a pondering mood, "but you actually *can* get a drink at the oasis."

"You've got a bit of an accent, mate. Where you from, Pakistan?"

"Yorkshire."

"Ah, land of the pudding."

"It's our fame to claim."

"I'm starved. Fancy a bit a tucker?"

"Why not," I said, definitely in the mood for some tucker, and off he went to bring out the lunch menu.

"What's yer name?" he asked, plonking himself down at my table.

"Harry."

"Gordon—Gordon Bennett, pleased to meetcha," we shook hands and wobbled feet.

"Gor blimey, look at that Sheila." He was eyeing a Sheila who had inadvertently crossed his line of vision. "Bugger me dead, she's a bit of a bush pig." Apparently, this meant that the Sheila was ugly. Gordon yawned and picked up the menu while the bush pig went on her merry way. "Now then, I think I'll have a cut lunch."

"This place is a bit pricey," I said, checking the menu.

"Don't worry about that. I'll fix your Jack and Jill. Get what you want."

Gordon chose a ham sandwich. I ordered smoked salmon fillet, oysters, a quail egg omelette, fillet of turtle, humming bird tongue soufflé, angel fish penis paté and half a gallon of Chateau Snob 1988.

"Well, hop into the grub," he said. And then, having hopped himself, asked, "So, you're heading towards the Rockies?"

"Yea."

"It's grouse."

"Grouse?"

"And picturesque," he said, cunningly. "I tell you what, I can take you up to Lake Louise, if you want."

"Lake Louise?"

"It's Canada's most famous billabong! The scenery's a real rip-snorter."

"Well sure," I said, looking at my faithful map, "if it's a *rip-snorter*."

After the tucker we padded the hoof along the frog and toad—or so Gordon claimed—crossing a cracked car park blooming with leafy spurge, naked-flowered sneezeweed and western bleedingheart and clambered into a jeep that looked strangely like a mini-van.

Soon the streets of Calgary's suburbs were receding. A sense of anticipation gripped me as the cheeky Rocky Mountains lumbered towards us with the promise of verticality.

"You live in Canada?" I asked Gordon as he switched into high gear—which was pretty clever considering the car was automatic.

"Bloody oath I do."

"Bloody."

"In Banff. A little place just up the road. I work for Parks Canada: I tell the wardens what to warden. Course, I felt like a pork chop in a Jewish synagogue for the first few months. And then I realised everyone in Banff—well, all Canada for all I know—is either from somewhere else or is *still* somewhere else."

Billabong Louise

The road climbed steadily into the mountains, the air progressively cooling. The Banff turn-off passed by and then the strange artificial town of Billabong Louise pulled in towards us: a collection of hip and over-priced hotels, shops and restaurants, log cabin style dormitories for student employees of the park. We drove through and soon the busy Billabong Louise parked itself in front of the jeep.

Chateau Lake Louise, a kind of palatial log cabin; fat flabby Americans herded off tour buses like cattle; thin emaciated Japanese herded off tour buses like sheep; nothing couldn't spoil the amazing splendour of Billabong Louise. The azure billabong reflected the clouds and mountains to either side and the awful and pristine glacier behind. The whole scene was caressed by the purest air ever to cause breath.

In late June of 1818, Keats' travelling companion, Charles Brown, wrote in his journal:

The country was wild and romantic, the weather fine, though not sunny, while the fresh mountain air, and many larks about us, gave us unbounded delight. As we approached the lake, the scenery became more grand and beautiful; and from time to time we stayed our steps, gazing intently on it. Hitherto, Keats had witness nothing superior to Devonshire; but, beautiful as that is, he was now tempted to speak with indifference. At the first

turn from the road, before descending to the hamlet of Bowness, we both simultaneously came to a full stop. The lake [Windermere] lay before us. His bright eyes darted on a mountain-peak, beneath which was gently floating a silver cloud; thence to a very small island, adorned with the foliage of trees, that lay beneath us, and surrounded by water of a glorious hue, when he exclaimed: "How can I believe in that?—surely it cannot be!" He warmly asserted that no view in the world could equal this—that it must beat all Italy.

Like Keats, I was confronted with a landscape that seemed inspired by the united powers of Claude, Salvator and Poussin, and briefly, oh so briefly, I wished I too was in search of the picturesque rather than the picaresque.

"So, mate, whadaya think?"

"It's amazing."

"You should stick around a few days."

"I think I will."

"You know, now I think of it, there're some nice log cabins up the road—"

"I'm on a tight budget. I can just camp somewhere."

"I work for Parks Canada, remember? You can stay for free. We run the lot of 'em. Well, run's a bit of an exaggeration—we never do anything *that* quick."

The Sleepy Hollow

We turned our backs on Billabong Louise and strolled back to the jeep.

"You're not working today?"

"Mundee? Sure I'm working. I'm busy as a one legged bloke in an arse kicking contest."

"It's seems like a cushy number."

"It defies mathematics. It's a government job, mate: it's all about smoke and mirrors. We spend most of our time bending bananas."

As far as I was concerned—and it was about as far as you could go—this smoke and mirrors talk was itself a case of smoke and mirrors.

"The cabin's only a weather board, but if you're not particular and you don't mind the woop-woop. . . ."

Well, what could I say to that? Of course I don't mind the woop-woop.

And then the place arrived: an alpine paradise with a rustic cabin nestled between evergreens. It was a great place and, for the moment, there was no sign of the woop-woop. A clearing provided a view that I viewed with a view to painting—notwithstanding the fact I had neither paint, brush, canvas nor skill.

"Grab your Matilda," Gordon said as we climbed out. I couldn't find my Matilda so I grabbed my backpack instead.

"And I can stay here for free?"

"Sure, mate. Stay as long as you want. There's a dozen more cabins up the road, so I'll steer all the punters up there." Above the door a rustic hand-carved plastic plaque read: "Sleepy Hollow Cabin." The plastic plaque was made in China by a sleepy Chinaman who lived in a hollow cabin.

"They're all called 'Sleepy Hollow Cabin,'" Gordon told me. "Now, this is a master key, so I'll have to bring you up a regular one later." Gordon Bennett pushed open the door and in we went.

The Sleepy Hollow Cabin offered an elegant and sophisticated floor plan designed comfortably to accommodate up to six guests or one lonely hitchhiker. A dramatic twenty-foot high cathedral ceiling and cedar-panelled fireplace, combined with the extensive use of windows, glass, smoke and mirrors, created a feeling of openness and space. The light, airy, superlative feeling was further enhanced by the spectacular floor boards cunningly fashioned from raw wood. An exposed beam ridge and rafter roof highlighted the soaring tongue and groove wood ceiling upstairs, while exposed beams downstairs added a cozy feel to the large kitchen and master bedroom. The full-length covered porch, with its green metal roof and oversized porch swing and comfortable rocking chairs was the perfect place to relax and enjoy a spring or summer rain or the splendour of a fall day. Cool mountain nights in front of the romantic wood-burning fireplace were guaranteed.

Professionally decorated with local antiques and hand-crafted furniture in a subtle fly-fishing theme complemented the pristine fly-filled wildness outdoors. The Sleepy Hollow Cabin was located just three kilometres from the quaint shoppes of Billabong Louise. It was the perfect place for a romantic weekend for two, a week for all of the family, or an unspecified period for the lonely hitch-hiker. Parking was conveniently located next to the cabin.

"You like it then?"

"It's amazing. I never knew you could do so much with raw wood."

"These places are all the go these days. We charge two-hundred bickies a day."

"Holy crumbs," I said, forgetful of the cathedral ceiling. "Two hundred bickies? That sounds like a lot."

"Well, it is. It's two hundred bickies."

"How much is that in dollars?"

"Two-hundred."

"Wow. So I'm living the high life."

"It's the altitude, mate. Any how, I've got to get down the office and give them all a bit of curry. I'll see you later with the key."

"Bye, and thanks again."

"Hoo-roo, cobber," Gordon told me.

I threw down my backpack, containing newly purchased copies of *Anne of Green Gables*, Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* and

Marian Engel's *Lunatic Villas*. It was beginning to suspect that Canadian literature was like a Do-It-Yourself manual written for the accident-prone.

I walked around the place, bouncing on the master bed, turning taps on and off, flicking light switches and generally frolicking with an assortment of common household items that now seemed the cat's meow of sophisticated living. I took a shower, changed my clothes, surveyed my kingdom, fed the cat and then strolled down the road to the shoppes of Billabong Louise. A leisurely coffee in Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe Are Us, watching the Shielas go by and then the shock of Billabong Louise grocery prices. Everything cost a bickie more than it should, with the exception of bickies, which cost two bickies more than they should.

Thin Air

I'd followed laddie-me-boys advice and never hitched after dark. Consequently, I slept at sunset and was up with the birds. When Gordon Bennett finally came over at eight the next morning, not only was I awake but I'd already eaten breakfast, taken a walk, written my diary, read the complete novels of Charles Dickens, discovered the meaning of life and redecorated the kitchen.

"Giddyay you old bastard," he offered with a smile. "Here's the key."

"Thanks."

"So, you're comfy then?"

"I'm like a pig in muck."

"You're on a good wicket here, mate. I'm on walk-about today. Fancy a walk-about?"

"Where to?"

"Any where you want, mate."

"How about up to the glacier?"

"Right-o. Had your breaky?"

"Yea."

"Let's hoof it then."

Back down to Billabong Louis, we took the path along the shore, paved for the hoofing comfort of the fat American cattle and the delicate Japanese sheep.

"It gets more interesting from here," Gordon said as we switched onto a well-worn backcountry trail interspersed by occasional patches of Syrian Beancaper and Scotch Broom.

"So what made you come to Canada?" I asked, as the path steepened.

"Well, I was pretty much up the gum tree down under. I was arrested for computer crimes."

"You were a hacker?" impressed at the thought of ruthless intelligence foiling the security systems of ruthless commerce.

"A hacker? No, I just stole computers. Any how, mate, I had Buckley's chance after that, so I came over here to reinvent myself."

We'd been walking for over an hour, passing the occasional hiker who, notwithstanding their super expensive boots, puffed and huffed as if they'd only just learned to walk. And then, remarkably, the trail became mottled with patches of snow.

"This is amazing. Snow on the ground in the middle of summer," I said, making a ball and throwing it into the chasm below the trail.

"It's a magic show, cobber. Canada's like Disneyland without the stupid mouse."

We padded the hoof another hour, along a ridge of granular snow with the massive glacier ahead, filling my entire field of view, gleaming and sparkling in crystalline air that seemed to magnify its nearness.

"Are you on the wallaby track?"

"Not that I know of."

"Looking for work?"

"Not really. I was talking to this writer fellow in Ontario though. Half Joe Hack. He says the government here pays people to write and then helps them get published."

"Of course. This is Canada. A writer are you?"

"Mmm, kind of . . ."

"So why don't you do that?"

"I'd love to, only you have to be Canadian."

"Is that all, mate?"

"It's enough. I'm not Canadian."

And then I spotted something.

"What the heck's that?" Up ahead, in what I considered to be the middle of nowhere, or the woop-woop according to Gordon, there was a log cabin with a large deck furnished with tables and chairs. Smoke rose from the chimney.

"It's the teahouse."

"There's a cafe way out here?"

"Sure."

The remaining kilometre of trail was bordered by Toothed Spurge, which seemed to have overwhelmed all other vegetation. Inside the teahouse, not only was there tea, but coffee, scones, veritable three-course meals, beer and wine.

"They helicopter everything in," Gordon told me. "Now then, mate, waddya want? It's all free."

"How's that then?"

"The walk-about uniform."

I had tea, coffee, scones, a veritable three-course meal, beer and wine

Out on the deck, slurping and chomping, comfortably seated, table cloth, hand crafted pottery from Hornsea and shiny Sheffield Steel cutlery, we were nevertheless surrounded by Canadian wildness.

"This whole thing's surreal," I said. Gordon nodded and then began to levitate slightly above his chair. And then, as I chomped delicately at my scone, there was a mighty rumble, like the grinding of tectonic plates.

"What the heck. . . ?"

"It's an avalanche," nodding towards the ice-field.

"Jesus." I followed his gaze—which unfortunately took a detour and climbed on a number seven bus to catch a quick film at the Odeon—and there it was, an actual avalanche of snow-balling proportions, rumbling its way down the mountain, dropping into a void and crashing thunderously in the valley below.

"Jesus," I said again.

"It's only for the tourists," Gordon answered.

We finished our lunch, wiped lips with linen napkins and then left the anomalous teahouse. And then the trail, less worn than well, dragged us bodily up, meandering towards general snow cover.

The glacier, with its mysterious powers of attraction, continued to pull Gordon and myself up a track that was

multiplying treacherousness with hazard. Meanwhile, the summer sun beat down, fiery hot and yet, somehow, unable to heat up any particle of the thin air.

The Provincial Park

Besides a few calm clusters of Saint John's Wort, the only vegetation that remained was a piece of wilted cabbage dropped by an untidy hiker. The path gradually lost itself in the opening expanse of the Columbia ice-field and the peaks of surrounding mountains no longer seemed lost to heady heights but virtually at our feet.

"We're actually hoofing it on the glacier now," Gordon said, hoofing.

I'd like to quote Keats' poetic description of a glacier now, describing in a manner and to a degree the sensation involved in ice-field frolicking, with all kinds of allusions to the dainty wings of Arctic butterflies. Unfortunately, Keat's, for all his picturesque searchings, never saw a glacier, let alone an Arctic butterfly. Instead, I present my:

Ode to Ice Stuff

Oh Goddess! hear these tuneless words, wrung
From agéd laundry Oh! char-lady humble
Hear icy secrets wafted thrice sung
By Arctic butterfly, so fly and bumble
Be patient, Lord Goddess, for surely I dream:
Of icy field and frozen father time
Of winter's mother who canst ne'r be seen
Unless by sound of wing flapping rhyme
The ice, the snow, the mountain, the sky

From the top of the world I feel with repose:

The shrine, the church, the holy espie
Oh Goddess, the frost is hard on my toes

Truly, one hundred words of bad poetry is equal a thousand of bad prose.

"So, wha'd'ya think," asked the non-rhyming Aussie.

"It's really great, though I was bit by a mossy."⁴

"We'll kill the lot, one of these days."

"In Winne' they try in thousands of ways."

"The best is a gun loaded with lead.

Shoot them all squarely right in the head."

"You need a good marksman for that kind of plan."

"I know one already, he's called desp'rate Dan."

"Why's he so desp'rate, pray do relate."

"On account of the lacking of food on his plate.

"For mosquito hunting ain't common employment

"Though Dan lays a claim to enormous enjoyment."

We hoofed it up the icy field for an hour, until we reached a ridge that climbed rapidly to the mountain's summit. We were on nodding terms with clouds and the whole world stretched out below us.

"I never knew the world was so wrinkled."

"It's down-right untidy in some places," Gordon agreed.

"I guess."

⁴*Mosquito Horibalus*

"Just look. We can see the logging road from all the way up here."

"Logging road? I thought this was a National Park."

"It's a Provincial Park, and the province is Alberta. That means big business sets the rules. They're taking the axe to Alberta's forest right now, at this moment, as we speak."

"What, now?"

"At this very moment. The boreal forest here is disappearing as fast as the Amazon rain forest. Less than 9 per cent of it's wilderness any more.

"And it's not only the boreal forests, mate. Alberta's minister of Environmental Protection, Tie Fung, has decided to allow logging in the Lakeland Provincial Park. In '92, when it was officially designated a protected zone, it was hailed as proof pudding that the provincial government was committed to protecting endangered areas and species. The environment minister back then is the present day premier, Rolf Kleen. Now they're saying that logging will help protect the forest! It's pure smoke and mirrors.

"At least in the Amazon they do it to feed hungry mouths. Here they do it to feed hungry investors who all live in Toronto, planting trees in their back garden, doing their bit for the environment. The whole thing's a joke."

And yet we never laughed—which is a shame really, because I like a good laugh.

Interestingly, while the Alberta government was busy handing out those logging licenses, the federal government was handing over nine million dollars to the University of Alberta to fund research in sustaining Canada's boreal forests. This really is a remarkable country—smoke and mirrors notwithstanding.

Our extended hike was almost over as we left the trail close to the Billabong Louise shopping centre.

"Civilisation," I gasped. "Let's get sustenance." We grabbed a few Danish pastries and coffee and I collapsed onto the ground, resting my back against a wall and leaving my front to support itself. A bunch of kids were hooping about on the precinct.

"Bloody ankle-biters," Gordon complained.

"I'm starving," I said, stuffing a pastry whole into my mouth.

"Tell you what, why don't we go over to my place for a barbi and a drop of amber fluid."

"Bonzo there mate," I told him.

A Cunning Plan

There was a cow in his garden.

"There's a cow in your garden."

"That's right. I call her Nessie."

"You keep a cow?"

"I like milk," Gordon explained, starting the barbi.

I drank beer while he cooked.

"I could eat a horse and chase the jockey," Gordon said, finally hopping into the grub. "Come on, cobber, hop in. You could do with putting on some poundage: you'd have to run around in a shower just to get wet."

We had carpet-bagger steak, cherio and mystery bags, all washed down with a coldie. Gordon claimed it was all dini-di.

"Ah, the great Australian salute," he said, swatting flies. "You like the tucker?"

"I'm tuckered out."

"Good-o. So, you want to become Canadian?"

"What do you mean?"

"Of course, it's slightly illegal."

"How illegal?"

"Well, it's actually breaking the law."

"Mmm—."

"There's no risk."

"How much risk is 'no risk'?"

"No risk."

"No risk?"

"No risk at all."

"Completely riskless?"

"Completely. Are you game?"

I nodded.

"Fair enough, cobber."

And then Gordon Bennet explained his cunning plan. It was cunning.

The meal finished, we sat quietly, surrounded by the buzz of night, swigging on coldies.

"When shall we start the plan?" I asked.

"The plan? Soon. Pretty soon. Of course, it's a bit risky."

Five-Finger Discount

Early morning mist blew about like the white shoes of ballet dancers funded by a grant from the Canadian Arts Council. I was aching all over from the hike and spent most of the day lounging.

In the evening, Gordon stopped by and we walked down to Billabong Louise shopping centre for a coffee.

"I'm gonna go get a newspaper," Gordon said.

I ordered a couple of espressos and sat down outside. After a few minutes Gordon reappeared.

"There's a kid in the store getting a five finger discount," he said with a smile, joining me at the table.

"What's that then?"

"Five finger discount? Shoplifting, mate. Mind you, you can't blame the laddie-me-boy—the prices they charge around here. Ah, there he is." Gordon glanced up as a youngster exited the grocery store. It was laddie-me-boy.

"I know him. Hey, Willy! Willy Nillie, what's up?" I called. Willy smiled and came over.

"This is Willy Nillie, Canada's most famous and audacious runaway. Willy, this is Gordan."

They shook hands.

"So you escaped the black-hole," Willy said.

"Two days after you."

"That's not bad."

"What're you doing here?"

"The five finger discount!" Gordon jumped in with a chuckle.

"Eh?" Willy spoke no Australian.

"He saw you shoplifting," I explained. Now the whole thing looked dodgy to laddie-me-boy: Gordon, after all, was in his walk-about uniform. Canada's most famous and audacious runaway looked disconcerted and about to run away.

"Don't worry," Gordon said, "I'm no blue-heeler."

"Eh?"

"I'm not the police, laddie. I'm from Australia, fer Christ's sake."

"Well if you must know, I *wasn't* getting a 'five finger discount.'"

"I saw you grab a packet of bickies."

"This one?" Willy took exhibit number one from his jacket pocket.

"That's the one."

"And what about this chunk of cheese?" Willy asked, pulling out exhibit number two.

"Crafty," Gordon said with a hint of Australian admiration for a crime well committed.

"So you see," Willy began, "it was the *ten* finger discount."

Very crafty.

The Kind of Cunning that Can So Easily Lead to Odium

Of course, I invited Laddie-me-boy over for the night.

Lounging under a tree beside a moonlit stream, Willy told me extravagant yarns that seemed not so much spun as actually woven, forming a kind of safety net for his profound lack of direction.

"Are you still hitching to the west coast?" he asked.

"Eventually," I said, dangling my fingers in the cool water and accidentally tickling a trout that we had for supper later on. "I think I'll hang out here a while first. What about you?"

"My final destination's a secret. You'll read about it in the papers in a few months."

"This is a particularly daring run-away?"

"The most audacious runaway ever. They'll probably have me on the TV this time as well."

"You can stick around here a while if you want," I offered with more second thoughts than first intentions.

"If you hang around in one place too long the comforts of home weaken your resolve."

"What if your resolve's to hang around in one place for too long and enjoy the comforts of home?"

"Then you're a Canadian."

"My resolve *is* to hang around and yet I'm clearly not a Canadian."

"Only according to your passport," he said, with the kind of cunning that can so easily lead to odium.

Picture Perfect

The next evening, stirring a pan of pasta, there came a jingle-jangle in the key hole. A figure appeared, framed in the doorway.

"Oh."

"Hi," I said.

"There must've been a cock-up." She looked at her key. "Is this Cabin three?"

"I have no idea."

She tried the key and the lock clicked.

"This must be cabin three," I said.

"Are you staying here?"

"Well, not what you'd call officially. A friend of mine works for the park."

"Oh, I see."

"Don't worry, I'll pack up."

"What about your supper? I don't mean to kick you out so quickly. At least eat your supper before you go."

"You want some?"

"Sure," she said. "I have some wine in my bag."

"Great."

"It's a very campy camp," she said, looking around.

"It's all yours," I conceded.

She began to unpack. Her luggage was quite remarkable, consisting almost entirely of hats. Even items not strictly

speaking hats seemed to offer the possibility of being worn on the head.

I served the spaghetti with classical Italian basil and oregano sauce.

"Oh," she said, "I prefer spaghetti western style."

"Sorry, I don't know the recipe," I said.

"You have a strange dialogue. Are you from Pakistan?" she asked.

"Yorkshire."

"That's nice."

"And you?"

"I live in Vancouver. Mind you, my parents are both from Portugal."

"What's your name?"

"Wood. Holly Wood."

When we shook hands it was like palm Tuesday and fish finger Friday all rolled into one.

English was her second language, though she listened to me fluently.

Was there romance in the air, or was it just smoke from the candles and a chance reflection in a window? We had no candles. The windows were all ajar. Eye contact was like bush telegraph delivered by a topless dancer.

"This place is amazing. Did you notice the soaring tongue and groove wood ceiling upstairs?"

"Yea."

"And the light, airy, superlative feeling?"

"Yea."

"What about the subtle fly-fishing theme?"

"Yea, it caught my attention."

"And there are two bedrooms."

"Really?"

"You can stay if you want. I mean, *two* bedrooms."

The invitation caught me by surprise. I stared across at her: the kind of face that could launch a thousand hips, breasts like tennis balls from a Wimbledon quarter final, legs that went all the way down to her feet.

"Well, if you wouldn't mind," I said.

And then, believe it or not, her foot actually began to make its way up my shin towards my thigh.

"Oh, I'm sorry, she said, "I thought it was the table leg."

Ha! From then on, everything she said had sexual connotations. She asked me if I was on holiday in Canada. I mean, how obvious can you get? And then she said it must be interesting hitchhiking all that way. Well, *hitching all that way!* She may as well have ripped off my shirt and dragged me onto the floor. And then she said she'd changed her mind, that the pasta was excellent, that the sauce was super! *The sauce was super!* I mean, saucy wench!

I must admit I was quite surprised when we both went to our separate rooms.

Things Might be Crook in Musclebrook

The next morning I was up with the crows. Gordon came over very early.

"Willy gone?" he asked.

"Yea, ages ago—I'm happy to say. He's the worst kind of know it all."

"What kind's that?"

"The kind that knows it all."

"I heard about the girl coming over. There was a big cock-up."

"If only."

"I left a note in the office saying that cabin three was closed for repairs, but someone never noticed."

"Never noticed the notice?"

"It was a noticeable oversight."

"How long did she book for?"

"Just one night, so she'll be gone soon. She let you stay?"

"Yea, we had a nice evening."

"Things might be crook in Musclebrook, but things are a breeze in Lake Louise," Gordon said.

"Exactly," I agreed, with all the conviction of a wrongly accused convict.

"Right then, I'll get going, and I'll make sure everyone knows this cabin isn't to be rented out."

"Are you sure you're not taking a chance?"

"I keep telling you, it's a government job. You'd have to commit murder to get fired. And even then. . . . I tell you, mate, I'm on a good lurk here."

Gordon Bennett drove off and I thought affectionately how things might be crook in Musclebrook, but things were indeed a breeze in Lake Louise.

Lip Dive

I heard the stirring of life from Holly's room and began fixing an omelette I'd broken the day before. She came out ruffling her hair, dressed in stripy pyjamas that served as a perfect foil to her polka-dot skin.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning," she said. It was unanimous.

"I'm making breakfast if you want some."

"What?"

"A Spanish omelette."

"I don't like foreign food," she said, and then directed me to fix her some toast. "I'll just take a shower first." She took it into the garden. I relished the thought of her naked body in a bubbly soapy film.

I found some broken bread and fixed the toast.

"How long are you staying in Billabong Louise?"

"I'm not sure. A few days."

"Mmmm," I thought, building all kinds of erotic hopes upon her fabrication.

"Why don't you check out officially and then check back in with me. There's no point paying rent if you don't have to."

"Sure."

We took a hike, passing bighorn sheep, elk, a bear. Birds flitted about and tweetled.

We eventually reached a narrow trail leaning towards a cliff-hanger of a precipice and the western side of the glacier.

"You know, this ice formed from snow falling as long as 400 years ago," I said.

"Why did it take so long?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said and looked heavenwards. This was a bad idea. I never noticed what ever it was on the trail that caused me to miss my footing. I tripped and my tripping tripped Holly. She twisted in free fall and landed flat on her back. For some casual reason my hands were stuck in my pockets. I stuck out my pursed lips as the only obvious method of breaking my fall. A trip had suddenly become a serious and dangerous lip dive. I fell towards Holly Wood and my lips landed squarely on her lips. For some reason I was sucking in air at the time and the lip dive turned into a daring kiss.

A Flight of Fancy

Holly Wood was a filmmaker, or so she claimed, on holiday between "shoots."

"We're starting a new film next month," she hummed. We were back at the cabin after our trek and memorable lip dive, lounging about on the veranda.

"What kind of film?"

"A documentary for The History Channel."

"What about?"

"Well, my original idea was a Jewish film about this woman called Trapunsky. She was on a refugee ship stopped by a U-boat in WWII. All the passengers were forced to get off. Panic set in and her child fell into the water and died. It's a touching story."

"I know that story. Where did you find it?"

"It was in a master's thesis I read once. Full of big words and long phrases."

"By Bertram Woodhouse, by any chance?"

"Bertram Woodhouse? The name sounds familiar."

"So you didn't give him any credit for the research?"

"Credit? Why would I?" She was flapping at the very idea. "I told you, it was only an academic thing. No one reads stuff like that."

"You did."

"In any case, Telefilm Canada refused to finance when they found out I wasn't Jewish. Is this Bertram Woodhouse Jewish?"

"No."

"Well, there you are then."

How could I argue with bird-brained logic like that?

"Anyway, I thought, 'So close yet so close.'

"So I submitted another immigrant piece, about this Dutch woman called Jane Aberson who comes to Canada in the 1920s after hearing government propaganda about farming in the Garden of Eden. So she comes and is tremendously disappointed by the whole experience. She writes letters home denouncing all the lies; and the truth about Canada finally gets out. Eventually she goes home and becomes a famous public speaker, warning future immigrants about the way things really were."

"It's not exactly a ripping yarn."

"We've been budgeted 120,000 for a twenty-two minute short."

"How much?"

"120,000."

"All from the government?"

"Yes."

"Did they ask you if you were Dutch?"

"No. Any one can tell a Dutch tale. They don't have much political clout."

"The whole thing's like a flight of fancy."

"It's just the way the country works. We have no choice, otherwise the Americans will take over."

Canada's Most Audacious Director

That night we shared the same bed—although she insisted on different rooms. What began as a romance quickly turned into a docu-drama.

First she removed her make-up, her hair-piece, her baubles: what remained was barely recognisable.

"Kiss me," she directed. "No, no put some life into it. Let's have some action." She pushed my head down to her nipples for an extreme close up. Between her legs my tongue began to work on cue.

"Oh, yea," I said. "Yea, do that."

"You're dialogue's corny," she told me. There was what I can only describe as a jump cut: all of a sudden, Holly was slapping my face with her bouncing breasts.

"Take one," thwak! "Take two," thwak! "Take three." There were several outtakes and she blamed me for them all. A lap dissolve turned into a layout. Oh, the agony of pleasure.

"God, yea," I said. She frowned. I knew then I had a non-speaking role. She took an empty coke bottle from the bedside table, pushed my legs over my shoulders and began some product placement.

"We need some pre-production," I begged, trying to grab hold of a jar of Vaseline.

"Not from my point of view," she said with directorial sadism. And then, thank God, it was time for a reel change.

"It's time for some slapstick," she said, grabbing a stick.

"Owww!" I cried in surround sound. "Can't you get a stand in for this bit?" It was a wicked stunt.

"Wait until I give you a whip-pan," she smiled.

"Owww!" I answered.

The whole thing developed until she finally reached orgasm with a call of, "CUT!" She grabbed my bit part and provided some welcome denouement. I finally came, hoping there would be no call for a re-shoot.

I knew there was no chance of equal billing.

Reading Canada

The next morning I bought a copy of *The Globular Mail*, possibly the most boring newspaper in the world. There was a peculiar article in the paper:

DYSLEXIA—A COMMON LEMPROB

Dyslexia is a lemprob many Canadains smut face on a daily basis, infecteg all ass pects of their levis. Its sauce, a malfunction of the brian, is tills only party alli stood under, and researchers mitad they may never a river at a mocplete standings under of its nature. week Next we gin be an depth in report no Dyslexia, and why so many people have trouble spelling it. Our first sofuc will be no the dyslexic child, and woh the ist special teacher leads with hist acute and ledicate lemprob. ficaly Speci we all sh ask what the rich parent can od fi he should cover dis his child suffers from disease the. money Can cure buy a? How much cost it will? sI ti tax deductable? nAd should the high sclas serpon ly simp pretend reading is bad the eyes for, there by avoiding the lemprob all to get her.

Holly finally made an appearance. She poured some coffee.

"I have to start work on the film in a few days," she said.

"And what *do* you do?"

"Well, directing, of course. The lions share of the budget goes to the director. And I pay myself as researcher and writer—

although it's going to be all interviews, so I don't actually write anything—editor, production assistant and assistant camera—assisting myself, of course.”

“*Can you write?*”

“Not really. I suffer from dyslexia. It's a common lemprob.”

“So I've read.”

“You read too much,” she said.

A Grave Decision

The next morning, Holly was flapping about like a headless chicken.

"What do you mean, you're taking off for the day?!"

"I have some business to take care of."

"You're unemployed."

"The least you could do is ask my permission," she directed.

Gordon Bennett and I drove down into the flatlands of Alberta.

"Well mate, this is it. This is where you finally become Canadian."

"If everything goes well," I said, dubiously.

We'd turned off the Trans Can facing north, the road slipping straight through cowboy country, *Waterside Ranch* passing by, though there was no sign of water; and then *Little Ranch*, which was vast; and even *Ranch Ranch* which had recently become a farm. And, of course, my personal favourite: *Cows R Us*.

"Let's give this place the once over," Gordon said Potsville, population 984, approached.

The main street passed by, turned onto a dirt road that entered the cemetery. Gordon pulled over and we climbed out into the hot and now unmoving air.

"I hate the low country," Gordon said. "It's as hot as cakes."

We wandered around the graves in a grassless gravel cemetery burning beneath the sun, where the bleached bones of

Skeletonweed rested amongst the Nightshade and the poisonous and noxious Tree-of-Heaven.

Tomb stone inscriptions offered a variety of memorials:

"Not dead, only sleeping."

"Today is the first day of the rest of my death."

"John Smith died suddenly." [Is there any other way?]

"A soldier of piece, he died in action."

"What's his name will be fondly remembered."

Written on a paupers wooden cross in blue biro:

"He lived a rich life." [Too bad he didn't save something for the funeral.]

"Don't spend your time bending bananas."

"Don't what?"

"You're not supposed to be reading the inscriptions," Gordon told me. "We'll be here for all eternity."

"Sorry."

"Bingo! Look at this!"

I walked over and read the inscription:

Robin Hood

Born April 1 1970

Died December 25 1975

An angel child now resting with the angels.

"But the name!" I protested.

"No worries, mate!"

"And the dates."

"Who cares. Let's head back into town."

Leaving a wake of flying dust, we parked outside a diner that looked like a stables.

"Two lunch specials," Gordon ordered. The waitress offered a smile that seemed like a swirling lasso. She placed our order and returned with two glasses of water.

"Does the Hood family still live in town?" Gordon asked with premeditated casualness.

"The Hoods? Sure they do. You know them?"

"Slightly."

"Only I think they're still on vacation. Hey, Jonny: Bill and Sue, are they still on vacation?"

"Yep," answered a solitary cowboy customer from beneath his ten fluid ounce hat. "Back Sunday."

"Thanks," Gordon said. And then, whispering to me, "I think we've struck gold."

After lunch we strolled through the sleepy dirt town. None of the streets had names: all of the houses had American style letter boxes facing onto the street with signs reading the family names.

"Such stuff as dreams are made of," Gordon said. After thirty minces we'd walked past every house and still there was no sigh of the Hood residence.

"Let's go back to the jeep and drive around. They must live outside town."

The main road took us out of town, turning the jeep onto a dirt road that seemed to go nowhere and lead to a tumble down house that belonged to Bill and Sue Hood.

"Jesus, such stuff as dreams are made of," Gordon said again. For the moment our job was done. We turned the car around and Calgary gradually pulled itself towards us.

A Great Piece of Canadian Street Comedy

We spent the day in the city. There was some kind of festival going on and the centre of town had been closed off to traffic.

"I have an idea."

"What?"

"Imagine if we dress up in private detective outfits: trench coat, trilby, you know; we have a padlocked suitcase with some monopoly money spilling out at the seams; we walk around the streets without talking, like a mime routine—without ever having to actually learn anything about mime, of course—gesturing to passers by for their keys; and we get them to try them in the padlock, 'cos we want to get at the money, only we have to search for the right key."

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"That's the idea? It dumb."

"No, no, that's not the idea. The idea is that we submit this to the Calgary Festival Organisation as a piece of street entertainment. You know they're always trying to find something new."

"It's brilliant. But will they buy it?"

The result was plainly visible: two girls dressed as inspector Clouseau and carrying a suitcase stuffed about the edges with monopoly money, silently wandered around the streets victimising innocent pedestrians with this hilarious piece of key searching

comedy. None of the victims laughed. On the contrary, red faced from pure embarrassment, they all breathed guileless sighs of relief as the gumshoes moved on to their next prey. Of course, the two girls already had discovered the key to a treasure chest of real money—\$28 an hour—and the suitcase was just a joke. It was a great piece of Canadian street comedy.

A Crisis of National Identity

Black nightshade silenced our creeping steps as we walked up the Hood's garden path. The whole town slept. A bed of caper spurge underscored the caper's danger, though a flowering Devil's-backbone urged me on. In that blacker than black darkness—well, actually there was a full moon—the importance of weeds became clear. A suitably mysterious mist began to blow about our feet like dry ice from a theatrical machine.

"How do we get in then?" I whispered.

Gordon lifted up the doormat and picked up the key.

"This is cock of the roost," he said.

"Such stuff as dreams are made of," I said.

In we went.

"Check all the rooms," Gordon Bennett whispered, "and make sure no one's here." We checked. The place was unoccupied.

"This is *really* cock of the roost. Let the search begin."

The search began, chests, drawers, cupboards were opened and examined, leaving no sign of examination.

"Oh shit," I said, rather louder than I'd intended. Gordon came into the bedroom.

"What's wrong?"

"I've found it," I said. Gordon took the birth certificate from me, scanned it and told me it was cock of the roost.

"Look at it carefully," I told him.

"What?"

"I'm supposed to take on this dead kid's identity, right? And then I magically become Canadian. Right?"

"So?"

"Look where he was born."

"Oh shit. England. Robin Hood was born in England."

"Exactly."

"No worries, mate; it's not as bad as it seems."

"How's that then?"

"Let's get out of here first and I'll tell you."

After a quick check that nothing was visibly disturbed, we legged it out of the house, crept down the road to the jeep and took off into the grasshopper rattling night.

"It's useless," I said, still clutching Robin Hood's birth certificate. "*I'm* from England."

"Sure, buckeroo, sure; but this kid must've been a landed immigrant: his parents are still here, aren't they? That means all you have to do is apply for citizenship, like any other landed immigrant. It's not a crisis of national identity, it's just a borderline difficulty."

Continuity Error

We drove back through the night, arriving in Billabong Louise just after seven.

"I have to get to work," Gordon said, eager to escape a possible dolly shot from the gaffa, Holly, who, for some reason, was already up and waiting.

"So you're back," she told me from the veranda.

Holly Wood, who seemed at first nothing more sinister than a *femme fatale* wearing a Freudian slip, turned out not only to be director but producer, location manager, insisted on the lead role, and co-ordinated—from a safe distance—all the stunts. But what could I do? We were in love. She insisted we were in love. She told me we were in love. She directed me to be in love.

"Yea, I'm back," I said.

"Ah mate, you can't beat a good coolie on a hot evening." Gordon said, lounging in a wicker chair with his feet resting on the veranda rail, the sun now rapidly slipping down towards the horizon.

"Yea, you're right there," I answered, looking around, sensing something weird was going on.

"And I'm glad you got rid of that hyper director woman: she had about as much serenity as a headless chicken."

"Yea," I said, puzzled by a leap of events that seemed to have neither national nor historical precedence and yet seemed

hoppingly Canadian. Something had happened. Everything seemed normal, and yet I knew something had happened⁵

⁵Continuity error: The tragic and hugely funny departure scene, in which Holly cried fowl, was unfortunately forgotten on the cutting room floor.

Simple Simon

"So, what do I do now?" I asked.

"All you need to do is make an application at a citizenship office."

"Are you sure this is all safe?"

"Strewth, I did it myself."

"You did it?"

"Sure, buckeroo, sure. Years ago."

"You mean your real name's not Gordon Bennett?"

"Buckley's chance!"

"What is it then?"

"Simple Simon."

"That's an unusual name."

"My father was a Simple Simon and so was my grandfather."

"So this citizenship thing's safe."

"As a house of cards. Just don't chuck a wobbly. Put a bit of waffle dust on it and you'll be fine."

"I'll try to remember that," I said.

"Mind you, do it as far away from Alberta as you can."

And with that, and Robin Hood's birth certificate carefully stashed away in my backpack, my plans suddenly changed. Off to BC was the idea and apply for citizenship in Vancouver.

Departure day. Gordon came over to wish me a fond farewell.

"Right then," he said, "I'll see you in the soup."

Climate, Age, Lack of Age, Public Transport and Equality

So there I was, back on the solitary road, the Rockies slowly passing by, British Columbia, the foothills, covered for the time in a strange and heavy fog, Fraser Valley—where peaches grow like apples, grapes like pears and men like women—merry with the certain knowledge that the trip was almost over, my hitching days almost done. Once again, as I stood just outside Kamloops, the Trans-Canada seemed little more than a lane, the kind you'd find in weed filled country.

It was a lonely wait, half an hour or so, before an old mini-van stopped. The driver, a middle aged man with large teeth and a handle-bar moustache, seemed—at least according to his turban—to be a Sikh.

"Oh, your a Sikh," I said, feeling a twinge of homesickness.

"Well—"

"I'm from Bradford—England. We have a large Sikh population there."

"I'm not really a Sikh," he told me.

"In that case you have a serious head injury. That bandage looks remarkably like a turban."

"It is a turban; and I am a Sikh; only I've been excommunicated."

"Isn't that a Catholics trick?"

"Well Bhai Ranjit Singh is acting more like the bloody pope every day."

"So you've been kicked out."

"I have."

"Are you a non-conformist?"

"I have a fondness for tables."

"That's bad."

"I also have a fondness for chairs."

"That's worse."

"A fondness for tables and chairs furnished sufficient material for my excommunication."

"Hell, you could furnish a dining room."

"Indeed."

"And you seem to have no accent."

"The accent is on the furnishings."

"You do realise I have no idea what you're talking about," I pointed out.

"Absolutely," he answered. And then, after a dramatic pause that reminded me of a moonlight flit, began his commodious explanation.

"You see the whole thing began a couple of years ago—Oh, look, a Brew R Us. Fancy a coffee?"

"Sure."

We pulled off the road and stopped in the car park. The day had become increasingly hot and my Sikh companion actually took out a white parasol, opened it and walked protected to the cafe.

"Have some shade," he offered.

"I'm trying to give it up."

We ordered our coffee and curry filled doughnuts and sat down beside the air conditioner.

"I can't stand the heat," he explained. "So, as I was saying, the traditionalists are concerned about assimilation. There was a bloody melee at the Guru Nanak temple in Surrey, a couple of years ago."

"A bloody melee?"

"Precisely."

"Bloody hell."

"Some of the traditionalists were charged with mischief, some with attempted murder—neither of which strikes me as being what you'd call 'religious' behaviour."

"At least not in the traditional sense."

"A recent edict ordered a return to the 500 year old tradition of sitting on the floor for meals after religious services."

"It's a long time to sit."

"Well that's why we need the chairs. The edict demands the removal of chairs and tables from temples. You see, we aren't breaking any religious laws. Basically, as I see it, a shortage of furniture, which lasted centuries, has been transformed into a pseudo religious principle. It's like the pope insisting that Christian law includes a priest's right to fondle little boys just because its been going on for so long. I'm moderate enough to say that it *might* be all right, though it's certainly not a basic Christian belief.

"It all comes down to climate. In North America, the floors are too cold to sit on. And old people are more comfortable on chairs."

"So it comes down to age too."

"Yes, climate and age. And younger Sikhs would not want to have their marriages in temples if they had to sit on the floor."

"So it comes down to lack of age as well."

"Yes. Climate, age and lack of age. And besides that, there are a lot of traditions we modify: people once walked to the temple, now we go by bus."

"So it comes down to public transport."

"Yes. Climate, age, lack of age and public transport. If we sit on chairs, everyone sits on the same kind of chairs, there are no special couches, so we still have equality."

"So it comes down to equality."

"Yes. Climate, age, lack of age, public transport and equality."

Canadian Content

From Lytton to Chilliwack, the ubiquitous mini-van took me. Vancouver now was just around the corner. The next ride was, finally, my last ride. A dude and his dudess had stopped for me in a VW van, its lawnmower motor straining at every hill though leaving a trail of nicely cut grass.

"Do you believe in UFOs?" the dude asked me.

"Not really."

"You should. We had a close encounter the other night."

"Really?"

"Yeah. A close encounter of the 4th kind."

"4th kind? What's that then?"

"That's when *it* sees you, but you don't see *it*."

The dudess turned on the radio: such strange eerie sounds, stirring the soul and shaking the liver, a resonance of profound mystery and wanton wonder—what was this other-worldly timbre, such that my yin offered a fleeting kiss to my yan?

"It's CJKW 88.5 FM."

"Oh," I said. "That explains everything." Of course, the dudess, and the dude as well wouldn't recognise sarcasm if it made them a custard pie and invited them over for tea. And so we drove on in absolute silence: no questions, no conversation, just the whine of the tiny engine and that weird music from the radio. After half an hour the dearth of conversation was dearthy. Mind you, what they lacked in curiosity they made up

amply in charisma: I was drawn to them like a horse to slaughter.

Finally, the silence became too much.

"There's not a lot of variety on that radio station."

"You don't like it?" the dudess asked, her disbelief as palpable as a native palp.

"I'm not sure what it is. I'm not from Canada," I pointed out.

Apparently, it was a Vancouver radio station devoted entirely the broadcast of whale song.

"This is a live concert. They have the underwater mikes out in the bay. It's awesome."

"Totally," the dude agreed.

"It's radical," I conceded, with the sincerity of a politician's handshake.

"Totally rad!"

"Awesome!"

The government foots the bill. There was only one problem: since the whales were not actually citizens, the radio station was in violation of Canadian content regulations. This is a regulation that states there should be Canadian content.

Vancouver: the Promised Wetland

I'd heard so much about Vancouver: Pacific rim, snowless winters, mountain backdrop, totem poles in Stanley Park, friendly people. It was the Zion of Canada. Unfortunately no one told me about the rain. It was raining when I arrived at 9 in the morning and it was still raining at 9 the next morning. This was the Promised Wetland. I cancelled my appointment at the citizenship office, climbed on a plane and flew back to Ontario.

Great Canadian Jokes

It was dry and sunny by the time I reached the chicken shed; Half-Joe Hack sat alone, building a tower with a pile of dominoes.

"I'm back," I said.

"Your front."

"Are you sure your real name isn't Alec?"

"Sure I'm sure. But I am smart, if dat's what yer thinking."

"Anything to drink?"

"Yeah, mon, some rum over dere."

"Ribina and vodka?"

"No mon, real rum dis time."

I poured myself a glass. It tasted like Bacardi and Tizer. I plonked myself down in something that passed for a chair.

"Listen to dis: dere was and English mon, and Irish mon and a Scotsmon, stranded on a desert island. De Scotsmon he say, 'Och eye the gnoo, I'm gonna chop down some wee trees and build missen a log cabin.' 'Oh, yes,' say de Englishmon, 'I'm going to collect rocks and build myself a *house*.' 'Oh yeah,' say de Irishmon, 'for truth, I will be digging in der sand and build myself a *castle*!' Get it?"

Half-Joe laughed his head off. Now the joke itself was incidental; what was particularly interesting was the toothy authenticity of the English, Scots and Irish accents, which suggested not only mymic expertise but, more importantly, that

his heavy and limping Bajan accent was possibly a graduate of the same school for the handicapped and that the ink on the diploma was still wet.

"I writing a new book," he limped. "Solo dis time, no gov'ment backing. I have de idea few days ago. I go dis book shop and see dis new breed of book: *The Book of Dumb Questions; 1001 Dumb Pick Up Lines; 10 Dumb Steps to Success*. Dey is all books for dummies and no story, just one mighty big list of dummy stuff. So, I t'ink, why not *1001 Dumb Jokes for Dummies*? Good idea?"

"Sure. How many have you written so far?"

"Two."

"Mmm. What's the other."

"Why do giraffes have long neck?"

"I don't know."

"Because dem heads so far from dem shoulders!"

"Don't give up your day job," I told him.

"Dis *is* my day job."

"Oh, yea."

The Quamees

The bird house door swung open and in a halo of back light Aaqib came in like a phantom spirit, all white and flowing. He shook my hand firmly.

"What's that you're wearing?"

"What? This? Nothing."

"It looks like *something*, though I'm not sure quite what."

"If you must know, in Saudi Arabia they call it a bloody Thawb; in Egypt they call it a bloody Galabyya; in Kuwait they call it a bloody Dishdashah. It's a very traditional Muslim garment."

"You're not from bloody Saudi Arabia."

"I know."

"Or bloody Egypt."

"I know."

"Or bloody Kuwait."

"_"

"And what do they call it in England?"

"England?"

"Yea, you remember, the place where you were born and grew up. You cross the Atlantic until you hit something solid. That's England. All right, what do they call it in *Pakistan*?"

"I'm not sure."

"Oh, Aaqib, Aaqib, Aaqib," I said, shaking my head thrice. "I'm afraid I'm winding you up like a cuckoo clock."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, *I* know what they call it in Pakistan."

"Really?" He looked most excited, like a child ready to put the final piece in a large jigsaw puzzle depicting a flock of pigs flying over central Canada. "What?" He almost throbbed with anticipation.

"They don't actually call it anything. Pakistan might be Muslim, but it has as much to do with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as a pig in tweeds. The tradition dress in Pakistan is the shilwar kamiz and looks nothing like that oversized sheet you're wearing."

"Oh bloody Allah.

"Still, it 'as great religious significance for every Muslim."

"Tell that to your tailor."

Aaqib was progressively regressing, as if he were caught up in some kind of weird black-hole, being sucked further and further in.

Canada's Biggest City

Days slipped into weeks. Robin Hood's birth certificate was still stashed away in my backpack. With Gordon out of the picture the whole plan was starting to seem like madness.

I began reading Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*, which reminded me to telephone Gordon to see how things were going. He said everything was going down hill. That's what happens when you live at the top of a mountain.

"By the way," he concluded, "I've got a couple of weeks holiday. Maybe I could come over for a visit."

That same afternoon I headed off to Toronto, planning to meet Gordon the following day at Pearson airport.

Sightseeing: I saw the CN Tower.

The novelty of shiny office buildings and litter free streets soon wore off. There was absolutely nothing to do in Canada's biggest city.

Canadian Bacon

Evening fell with a clang.

I unexpectedly found myself in the Acting R US theatre. A bowdlerised version of Caesar was boldly going where no Caesar had gone before.

CAESAR Let me have persons about me that are pleasantly plump. Sleek headed persons, and such as sleep a-nights. Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much and spends too little. Dangerous are such persons for our noble economy and our noble peace.

ANTHONY Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous; He's a noble Torontonionian, and well given.

CAESAR Then thou art welcome to him. Would he were more pleasantly plump. Would he were a woman. I should like him better for being a woman.

ANTHONY A thought most pleasant.

CAESAR And plump!

Caesar—who in this particular production was himself a woman—finally confronts a gathering of senators—who are a mix of horses and harp seals—admits to his ambition and is sent to retirement in Florida. The action continues:

ANTHONY Friends, Torontonians, Countrymen, lend me your fears.

And then:

CINLESS Briefly, which sayeth not wearing briefs; but shortly, which neither sayeth wearing shorts; but to the point, I dwell

by the Capital. Hull, a town forever loyal to the notions of unity and equality and the specialness of Quebec. Truly, my name is Cinless.

FIRST PLEBEIAN Metaphorically tear him to pieces. Truly, punish him without causing veritable physical injury, he's a conspirator.

THIRD PLEBEIAN Your name, sir madam, truly.

CINLESS Truly, I am Cinless the poet.

FOURTH PLEBEIAN Metaphorically tear him for his bad verses.

CINLESS My verses are good. I write of this fine country from shining sea to shining sea to shining sea. The Governor General dost read my writes.

It was truly a dramatic moment when the final curtain tumbled to the floor.

The Canadian Radio-television and telecommunications Commission insists that broadcasters play a precise quota of Canadian songs between the American songs Canadians really want to hear; and show a precise proportion of Canadian programmes between the American programmes Canadians really want to watch. Draconian enough, those were the heady days of cultural liberalism. And then came along Sheila Hopps, the minister of Canadian heritage. The pre-Hoppsian era excluded magazines, films and theatre from the list of controlled substances. An oversight bordering on blindness. Matters were rectified— which has nothing to do with the Canadian rectum.

Yea, but there was a loophole. If, for example, Seagram, the Canadian alcohol and entertainment conglomerate, were to purchase Poly-Gram, the Dutch owned music and film distributor, scores of movies would, overnight, become Canadian. *Mary Poppins* and *Julius Caesar*, much to the astonishment of Julie Andrews and John Gielgud, both become Canadian citizens—so to speak. Eric Clapton, discovering his long lost father was a Canadian suddenly became a Canadian himself and a wave of Cream songs washes over the nationally pure airwaves. Oh, and *Babe* becomes Canadian bacon.

One Foot in the Grove

The next morning I was up early and sauntered down Front Street. My rendezvous with Gordon wasn't until 2.

And then, look, an 8 a.m. queue outside one of those shiny office buildings. Bohemians in suits climbed from quilted sleeping bags. Concert goers? No no no. TV producers! Similar scenes were unfolding in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary, Vancouver and so on. TV producers were applying for their slice of a 200 million dollar cake, the Canada Television and Cable Production Fund, cooked up by Sheila Hopps and dished out on a first come first served basis. Heads of the Canadian TV industry waiting for the nine o'clock opening like beggars at a soup kitchen. One fellow clutching two brown envelopes, grant applications for a documentary on funerals for the Life network, and a docu-drama on futurists for the History Channel. In front, a flamboyant—and some might say flaming—woman clutched a grant application for a new CBC comedy series tentatively entitled *One Foot in the Grove*, a light-hearted look at life in rural Canada. One fellow conspicuous by his absence was Mr Hamstring. Mr Hamstring had written to *The Globular Mail* denouncing the whole scheme.

"I'm embarrassed for us all. The merit of a project means nothing. They're treating us as if we were in a deli buying meat." This seemed to me an unusual analogy, especially since people in the deli actually pay for their meat, where as this

motley crew were lining up for handouts. I wonder what kind of films Mr. Hamstring makes with such precarious communication skills. In any case, Mr. Hamstring receives *his* free money from the National Film Board.

In Tents and Purposes

Still scrutinising this remarkable sight, I barely noticed when Aaqib suddenly appeared from around a twisted corner, his Quamees fluttering in the gentle breeze like a fair weather cloud.

"Aaqib."

"Harry." He shook my hand limply.

"What are you doing here?"

"I 'ave to go see me uncle Bob."

"Can I come?"

"It's not a good idea. 'e's shy of strangers."

"Then you'd better introduce me."

We arrived a Kennedy subway station to the sound of Beethoven's third piano concerto. The plonking of the keys and the bowing of the violins echoed through the sizzling tunnels like a heavenly broadcast in the bowels of hell.

"Now, that's culture," I said, marvelling at such civilised refinement.

"Actually, it's a bloody weapon," Aaqib told me.

"What's that then?"

"The music. They've been 'aving a problem 'ere with loiterers and vagabonds and figure a bit a Beethoven, Bach an' Brahms will annoy people enough to move 'em along."

"It's a remarkable country, this Canada of yours."

Uncle Bob lived in a nice suburban house with a suggestively picturesque garden of purple loosestrife, yellow lady's-slipper and a bed of velvety goldenrod nestled with western minniebush. We were greeted at the door by a woman.

"Uncle Bob, this is Harry."

"Well, my sweet darling, it's a pleasure, I'm sure," said uncle Bob.

We shook hands with all the certainty of a Christian politician heading a gay parade. I looked to Aaqib for some explanation but he was too busy removing lint from his sleeve.

In we went.

"Sit yourselves down," uncle Bob said with his woman's voice. "Drink?"

"Sure, coffee will do." Uncle Bob agreed that coffee would do, though he only had tea.

"You look confused," uncle Bob said with a womanising smile.

"Confused?" I stuttered. "Not in the least." Uncle Bob gave me a luscious lip smile and then strutted off to make the tea. After a few minutes he or she returned, served the drinks and began:

"I can see, you curious little fellow, you're wondering why Aaqib calls me uncle when I seem to be an aunt. Well, my darling boy, I'll explain--"

"Uncle Bob, there's really no need," Aaqib begged, still removing the lint. "This is just a nice social visit."

"Tsk, tsk, don't be silly. The truth's the truth, Aaqib. Really, it's one lesson you should try to learn.

"You see, my sweet naughty man," uncle Bob turned his or her fluttering eyes back in my direction, crossing his or her legs and revealing the top of his or her stocking, "I was born in Pakistan and I was a bonny little girl. Our side of the family was Christian. My father was a great reader of English literature and he called me Charleen after the heroin in *Far From the Madding Crowd*—"

"I think she was called Bathsheba."

"Well, *of course she was* you wicked fellow. Only Bathsheba in the Urdu language sounds like a word that means 'elephant lady who does naughty things with elephant boys when the darkness falls and has great trouble getting up again.' So, that's why he called me Beth, after the heroine of a different name in Charles Dicken's great novel."

"I think it was written by Thomas Hardy."

"Well, *of course it was* you cheeky cheeky man. Only Thomas Hardy in Urdu sounds like 'ornate statue with a manly protrudance used by wicked young girls when the lights are out and refuse to come back in.' So, I was born a nice Christian and I was, as you naughty English people say, a full-fledged filly. From a very early age my parents realised I had a penchant for climbing trees and playing cricket. Such boyish things would have posed no real dilemma, except that there were no trees where we lived and the other children used me as the wickets.

"So time passed by and I grew up with the increasing certainty that I was a male in a female's body. When I moved to Canada much much later, I had a sex change, paid for by the darling Canadian Government. And thus, aunt Beth became uncle Bob. And then, much much later, I realised that my early infatuation with masculinity was actually nothing more than a repressed desire to get my hands in a man's trousers."

"Uncle Bob," Aaqib remonstrated, still collecting lint.

"Oh, tsk tsk tsk, don't be such a prude Aaqib. The truth. *Remember the truth.*

"So I changed my mind and changed back to my original sex— notwithstanding the beard, of course."

"It's very becoming," I smiled.

"Well, thank you, you naughty little boy. Unfortunately, such a taciturn bent was viewed with displeasure by our family, including Aaqib, of course, even though he comes from the atheist side—

"Muslim!" Aaqib jumped in, using his lint collection to break his fall.

"Tsk, tsk, Aaqib, you were raised an orthodox atheist. If you're father could here you now—God rest his soul. Tsk, such blasphemy."

"Your father's dead? You never told me," I said, turning to Aaqib and his lint collection.

"Oh," Aaqib said with as much enthusiasm as clarity.

"He's the only person I know who died of brain cancer," uncle Bob said.

"Brain cancer? How did he get that?"

"It's terrible. He gave up smoking but couldn't stop thinking about cigarettes.

"So where was I? Oh yes, the displeasure of the family. So, when I reverted back to my original gender, they continued to call me uncle Bob as a form of nominal punishment."

The door opened and in came a tall dark manly man with lumberjack muscles and beaver hunter eyes.

"Shall I do the introductions?" Uncle Bob asked with a smile and a lick of his or her lips.

"Oh," Aaqib said, beginning to weave a blanket from his lint collection. The man came forward with a certain and confident stride.

"Harry, this is Aaqib's aunt Sally."

"Charmed," I said, gripping his or her hand.

I looked at uncle Bob. Uncle Bob looked at me. I looked at Aaqib. Aaqib looked at aunt Sally. Aunt Sally looked at Uncle Bob. Uncle Bob looked at his watch.

"I'm going camping this afternoon," he said. "I'm a strong believer in camping—for all intents and purposes."

An Interesting Twist

"Are you a Canadian yet?" Gordon asked.

"Ah? Oh, no, I've been busy."

"Your loss, buckeroo. Your loss."

We walked in silence to the car rental desk in the airport.

"So what shall we do?"

"Well, actually, I wouldn't mind visiting a friend"

"Sure, buckeroo, sure."

Gordon had rented a minivan and Booksville was coming up fast. I explained about Barney Brightly and his barmy collection of shipping papers.

It was strange to be back at the house after so long—only something had changed: Barney was looking like death warmed up. The atmosphere seemed heavy with the smoke of family conflict.

"What's wrong?"

"Old Nick phoned the fire marshal's office a few weeks ago," Barney said.

"Your brother? Was there a fire?"

"No, he *wants* a fire. He wants the fire department to burn my collection. He said it's a fire hazard."

"That's an interesting twist," Gordon said.

"It's twisted. He just wants to get at me. Anyway, they had a hearing last week, only I couldn't go because dad was in hospital, dying."

"Oh," I said.

"He died."

"I'm sorry."

"Old Nick went to the hearing while I sat in the hospital, watching him die. It was terrible. I'm really scared. They said my collection's a fire hazard and I have to remove it from the basement. It's *my* basement. I'm the only one that uses it. And the stuff won't even burn."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean stacks of paper won't burn. You could put a torch to one and nothing would happen."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Well, appeal the decision."

"I have."

No Smoke Without Fire

It was like a breath of fresh air when we finally made off.

"Let's get as far away from Ontario as possible," I said. "This place is a mad house."

Only when we arrived in Montreal did I realise that one madhouse was much like another in a suburb the size of Canada.

We drove passed a bunch of boarded-up shops and abandoned apartment buildings. Montreal's economy was far from booming: everywhere were signs—all in French, *bien sur*—of recession.

We sat in my old haunt, Coffee R Us, the local newspapers ablaze with reports of the premier, Lucien Butcher—a chameleon in politics much like a dog in heat, a hole in one or a stitch in time—who was out on the campaign trail somewhere in the US, fanning the rhetorical flames of political stability like a strong wind in a forest fire.

"Quebec is utterly bilingual and democratic," Butcher said, handing out fireproof English pamphlets that would be against the law back home. "The state has no place in the living rooms of the nation, and people can speak as much English as they want in their own living rooms. There is no restriction. Also, every election sees our ballot boxes stuffed. That's how bilingual and democratic we are. And a sovereign Quebec would be even more bilingual and democratic. A sovereign Quebec would be utterly, utterly bilingual and democratic."

Unfortunately, the premier was pursued on his tour by the leader of the Equality Party, who handed out his own flaming pamphlets and attempted to light the premier's blue touch paper in a manner reminiscent of Guy Fawkes. The premier was not amused:

"He's using free speech," the premier commented, referring to Mr. Fawkes. "Sometimes, if you use it too much, you can wear it out. *Our* extremists are much more reasonable. Quebecers should be less tolerant of people who criticise the province abroad." It was not that Butcher had an uncanny knack of speaking in sound bites, but rather that his thinking capacity and the short sentence maintained an intimate friendship. On the other hand, Mr. Fawkes, the leader of the equality party, was lost for words. Fortunately, the words he'd lost were all French and his English vocabulary remained untouched. The fiery rhetoric continued on both sides until all incendiary statements went up in smoke and nothing remained.

A Flopping Disappointment

We booked in at the Youth Hostel, welcomed warmly by Catherine Wheel who was spinning at the novelty of a repeat visit. And then, as the sun sank towards Oratoire Saint Joseph, with a couple of cans of beer, we strolled in a near-by park.

That evening, that summer evening, that splendid summer evening with the temperature hovering at twenty-four centigrade, low and behold was a football game being played on a miniature pitch with miniature goals. Several things were remarkable.

Both teams were clad in fashionable kits, the creases on their shirts and shorts as defined as sidelines. Socks featured double elastic and were guaranteed droop-proof. Yea, this was no meeting of school teams but a carefully organised match under the guidance of the Canadian Amateur Soccer Association. The truly remarkable thing though was the age of the players: besides a three year old veteran, all the others were two and a bit. These toddlers had barely mastered walking, let alone the subtleties of the offside rule. The whole thing had every appearance of an absurd circus act, a game of midget football with the ring master playing referee.

One toddler reached the ball, which came up almost to his neck, and flopped it with his tiny booty. The ball trickled forward a few inches and twenty-two toddlers all raced in pursuit. Most of them fell over their own feet. A girl wearing bows in her hair that matched her kit—yes, this was a mixed

match—managed to reach the ball, pick it up and carry it over to show her mother, who was jumping up and down shouting, “Kick it.” And then the whistle blew for half time.

As the toddlers chewed on teething biscuits, or sucked milk from rubber titted baby-bottles, with one even chowing down on his mothers nipple, coaches explained tactics, offered pep talks and used dubious words to describe the atrociousness of the play thus far.

“What are you, a bunch of namby-pamby babies?”

Nappies were changed and the second half kicked off.

The ball, after several errors of timing and trajectory, was eventually flopped from the centre spot. The pack pursued. One of the well-kitted toddlers missed his flop and fell over the ball; another gave it a flop, but the fallen toddler’s head lie in the way. The head bounced about a bit, but the ball remained in place. Successive floppings saw a good deal of head bouncing, though no actual ball movement. And then, the veteran came from a different angle and actually managed a flop. Unfortunately, he flopped the still bouncing head. He tried again: this time the ball shot across the pitch sideways. Twenty-one toddlers—the head was still suffering from after-bounce—raced and tumbled in a pack remarkable for its integrity. The veteran, who truly had master walking though was still uncertain about running, was the first one there and gave the ball another flop with his booty. Again the pack pursued. All this movement was fine in itself, spectacular even, except for its horizontal bias: rather than

heading towards the goal—any goal—they were closing in on the sideline. The veteran, clearly a leader amongst toddlers, flopped again and the ball crossed the line. And yet the pursuit continued off into the car park, with the referee blowing his whistle and the parents shaking their heads in frustration.

“They should take the game more seriously.”

“They need to learn the rules properly.”

“It’s the coach. He’s not strict enough with them.”

“But they look lovely in their little outfits.”

“This isn’t a flopping fashion show.”

“I’m flopping disappointed.”

The Application

The following morning, we were lounging around in our hostel room sipping coffee from a vending machine.

"I think I'll rent a flat."

"In Montreal?"

"Yea. If I want to apply for citizenship, I'll need an address."

"You're finally going to do the deed?"

"Indeed."

"Well done!"

"The deed will be done."

We looked in the newspaper and headed out to Notre-Dame-de-Grace, a leafy suburb with too many trees.

First on the list was a basement in a semi-detached house. I rang the bell and nothing happened. We walked around to the back garden where a woman was examining foliage. She looked up.

"Oh, hello, you can help me?"

"Sure," I said.

"Ya. Gut boys." We walked into the garden. "Now you," she said to Gordon, "you take two garbage bags out to side walk. Ya? Ya, ya. They are heavy—the boy next door has been pruning all morning. Das is gut." Gordon staggered off with his burden. "Now you, you can just take this saw, and climb up this ladder, ya? go on, and now cut das finglepicker branch, the big one, ya, das is right."

It was clear from her accent that she was Germanic with a strong protestant work ethic: she believed other people should do the work. She was the housewife equivalent of a German industrialist. We were the equivalent of the illegal Turkish workforce. The garden was the equivalent of a factory with a leaky roof. The finglepicker was the equivalent of a widget. There was a good deal of equality there, and yet we were still doing all the work.

I uprooted an old bush. I mowed the lawn. Finally, when I thought all the work was done, I set about building a duck pond with an ornamental fountain in the middle. I finally told the frauline that we were there to see the apartment.

"Oh, gut, you want to apply for apartment. Ya boys, follow me," she said.

"You have job?"

"I was a Postman for a while, but quit to become a stand up comedian."

"Gut. I like for to make funny."

"Unfortunately, I had problems delivering the punch lines on time."

"Too bad."

"Now I'm a gardener," I said.

The flat was furnished in the same way that a pig sty is not.

"Very cheap," she told us. "Of course, you can help me out ya? just a few chores sometimes, you know."

"Maybe you could re-slate the roof," Gordon suggested.

"Ya, ein gut idea," she agreed.

"You know," Gordon said as we drove away, the keys sitting uncomfortably in my pocket, "you should apply yourself to staying in her good books. She's the landlady from hell."

"Consider me applied," I said.

Back in town, disguised now as Robin Hood, I applied for Canadian citizenship.

Pigs

"I've been thinking," I began.

"Did it hurt?"

"Only from the neck up. Any way, I was thinking it'd be nice to hit the east coast."

"What if it hits back?"

"I've used that joke already—in reference to a hard shoulder."

"Sorry."

"I want to visit the Maritimes, then I'll have the complete collection."

"There's no trading allowed," he said.

"I know."

It's strange, the North American Free Trade Agreement brought together Mexico, the States and Canada; but if you want to sell a bag of pork scratchings made in Ontario to a pork scratchings eater in Quebec, well you may as well forget it.

"Each province has the freedom to restrict the freedom of every other province. It's the Canadian version of self-determination."

"And they are very determined. Any way, how about it?"

"The Maritimes?"

"Yea."

"As long as you're not expecting to go fishing."

"Why's that then?"

"Well, firstly, I hate fishing. Secondly, there're no fish left."

"Where are they all?"

"Eaten."

"How can you eat *all* the fish?"

"You just keep on chewing."

"So?"

"What?"

"So what?"

"So what what?"

"Maritimes?"

"Sure, buckeroo, sure," Gordon agreed.

The Champlain Bridge pulled itself out from under us and quite soon the Maritimes were zooming our way.

I turned on the car radio: CBC Radio Two.

"I can hardly remember a time," snorted a female presenter, "when I was not aware of Rimski-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*. As a five-year-old, I was enchanted by—"

I switched to CBC Radio One.

"According to a GALLUP poll," another female presenter, this time with the voice of a strangled chicken, "conducted in April and May 1995 in 18 countries, representing more than 60 percent of the world's population, Canadians are among the most satisfied people in the world. What do you think" Yea, a phone in show. Silence. No one phoned. They were too satisfied to bother. More silence.

"Well, that seems to be that." Even more silence. "You know, a friend of mine can hardly remember a time when she was not aware of Rimski-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*. What do *you* think about golden cockerels?"

One caller said they reminded him of pigs.

As Far As Who Knows Where

Cap-Pelé, New Brunswick, a village straddling the Northumberland Strait, where we stopped off for a break. I was passing a few minutes reading Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. Strangely, we were at that very moment sitting on a bench beside a white stone Angel mounted upon a baby blue cement base. The Angel was strategically placed half way between the towns two places of worship: the local church and an Irving petrol station.

An elderly though robust fellow, silver grey hair and sleeves rolled up: "I wouldn't be sitting there if I was you." A faint Acadian twang in his voice.

"Why's that then?" I asked.

"All hell's gonna be let loose here in a few minutes. "

"Why's that then?"

"Because of de baby blue paint."

He sat himself down on the steps leading to the statue, thrust out his hand and shook with the virulence of a twenty year old lumberjack. "My name's Emile," he said. Introductions over—my dislocated shoulder shoved back in its socket, my tennis elbow now hardly able to handle a game of ping-pong—the old fellow began his strange tale with a simple: "This is my angel—although not everyone would agree."

"Are you a priest?" Gordon asked.

"No, I just take care of de angel. You see, in 1947—"

"Gordon Bennett," Gordon Bennett said with great melodrama, "Do we have to go back that far?"

"Oh, oui. In 1948, de driver of a Studebaker pickup who'd 'ad one too many was going around de corner over dere, it was wet and rainy outside, and he slid out of control into de angel.

"Were the police called out?"

"Oui. 'e was given a careless driving ticket. 'e fought it in court and lost. It was 'is word against de angel's."

"I suppose it was."

"Broke 'er to pieces, 'e did. De priest started a collection to 'ave 'er fixed, but 'e could only raise five dollars. Mind you, five dollars back den was a lot of money. Not like now. So the priest went to my uncle, who was also called Emile, and was famous for t'rowing big money into de collection plate. My uncle Emile 'ired a stone smith to fix de Angel and den 'e 'anded 'im a four 'undred dollar bill. Now four 'undred dollars back den—" he whistled a nose dive whistle "—well, you get de idea. My uncle Emile spoke to de priest—" he whistled another nose dive whistle "—well, you know priests. So dey struck a deal: de reverent gave de Angel to my uncle Emile—he was a very irreverent reverent—and my uncle Emile promised to never move 'er from 'ere and to take good care of 'er. And 'e kept his part for tirty years. So 'e was getting on a bit and calls me up and says will I be de new caretaker. It was just between 'im and me and I made dat promise. When 'e died all de udders in de family gets de money and I gets de Angel. For de last eighteen years

I've painted 'er and retouched 'er where she was cracking up and I never asked nobody for a cent. Now 'ere comes de bad part, cos last fall I was talking to my broder and he says to me I should do a paint job, and so I covered up de white on de base wiv dis nice baby blue and den I painted dese two flower boxes de same nice baby blue."

"It looks nice," I offered.

"Ah, dat's what *you* say. You peoples from Pakistan like de multi-colours."

"I'm from Yorkshire," I said.

"I was talking about your friend," he said, nodding at Gordon.

"De tout façon, maybe it was a bit much for everybody else. *Baby blue*. It's a nice colour. But people started making fun of de colour. Some of dem even were embarrassed. So we 'ad a town hall meeting and de mayor says I 'ave tirty days to move de statue or change de baby. And den I say dat de deal wiv de old priest says de statue can never be moved. And den dey all want proof about de deal, even dough me and my uncle were only ever de two to take care of 'er and no one cares until I paint de baby blue. So now de new priest says dat de deal never 'appened and dat she belongs to de church and de mayor says she is on town property and dat proves she belongs to de town. —Oh oh, here dey come." He whistled his nose dive whistle.

We followed the old man's baby blue eyes and saw a public works truck sneaking up the street, coming to a halt in front of the statue. Not only did four baby blue collar workers exit the

van, but they were joined by the mayor—who pulled up in his baby blue Mercedes—a motley crew of councillors, a reporter from the local paper and the new Parish priest. This gathering quickly achieved sufficient gravity to pull in concerned passers-by as well as a homeless dog called Rex.

“This place’s getting as full as a fairy’s phone book,” Gordon said.

Supervised by the superintendent of public works, the workmen proceeded to paint the flower boxes—containing a nice arrangement of black henbane, blue cardinalflower and purple locoweed—their original white.

“Fair play,” Emile whispered secretively, leaning into my ear until only his feet were visible, “de flower boxes belong to de town.” Expectation hung in the air like paint fumes as the workmen worked their leisurely work. And then they were done. A collective holding of breaths momentarily allowed the earth more oxygen, providing far off John Wiggan an extra gasp of thin air and thus succeeding in his first attempt to mount Mount Everest barefoot. Meanwhile, the workmen, paint pots in hand, moved slowly, deliberately, conspicuously and fatefully towards the base of the Angel. Brushes were dipped.

“The Angel belongs to me,” Emile said, standing bravely and somewhat ludicrously. “You have no right to overwhelm de baby blue paint.”

“The Angel belongs to the Church!” the new parish priest preached.

"The Angel belongs to the town!" the mayor insisted.

"The Angel belongs to God!" barked Rex the dog with undeniable enthusiasm and great melodrama.

The grey paint was slopped onto the statue's base. The crowd surged forward. Rex was accidentally kicked. Several drops of grey paint splashed onto the great Canadian soil, sinking downwards, flowing unseen into a subterranean river and spreading as far as who knows where.

A Couple of North American Coots

After a twelve-hours onboard a ferry, we accidentally found Newfoundland had floated next to us. There was an abandoned look to the empty wasted space. No, not quite abandoned: more like undiscovered. Newfoundland looked like it had never actually been found. And yet it was this precise barrenness which offered a sense of sublimity. Keats, in the rocky barrenness of the Lake District:

What astonishes me more than anything is the tone, the colouring, the slate, the stone, the moss, the rock-weed; or, if I may so say, the intellect, the countenance of such places. The space, the magnitude of mountains and waterfalls are well imagined before one sees them; but this countenance or intellectual tone must surpass every imagination and defy any remembrance.

We approached the cognomenally challenged Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, where birds, humpback and minke whales, cruising icebergs, all frolicked in the bright afternoon drizzle. And it seemed like a million bird watchers and whale watchers and iceberg watchers all watched on—though of course there were actually only eleven. Now, I've never been much of a bird watcher myself, though I was once something of a pigeon fancier.

A couple of North American coots⁶ strutted their stuff, prancing, twittering to each other—withstanding that there twitterings had the unmistakable timbre of snorts. Anyway, as the small group turned their attention towards a Red-necked Grebe⁷, the twosome concerned themselves with mightier issues. Virginia Rail⁸ and her husband Whimbrel:⁹

“It feels like winter, Whimbrel. Honestly, how do these people live here?” Indeed, out in the Atlantic a storm was brewing like tea in a China shop and heavy rain began to fall off shore—also like tea in a China shop.

“It’s not so bad.”

“Don’t be an oaf, Whimbrel. Just look at the goose-pimples on my arms.”

“What’s that there?” Whimbrel asked.

“Where?”

“Ten o’clock, swimming. I think it’s a Red-necked Grebe.” He peered through his pocket binoculars. “Yes. It’s a Red-necked Grebe.”

“Have we got a Red-necked Grebe?” Virginia asked, grabbing and tugging the binoculars, which, unfortunately, were still attached to the now red-necked Wimbrel.

⁶*Fulica americana*.

⁷*Podiceps griseigena*.

⁸*Rallus limicola*.

⁹*Numenius phaeopus*.

"I'm not sure." Whimbrel brought out his bird-spotting book, flicked through the alphabetical pages to G. "Yes, we've got it ticked off."

"I thought so. It's not particularly rare, now, is it. What more can I say? Tch."

"Look, two o'clock, flying" Whimbrel twisted his neck skywards where a bird flapped its wings. "Oh, it's only a Ruddy Duck,¹⁰" he cursed.

"Typical," Virginia tutted again.

"Oooh, look, ten to nine, flying," Whimbrel spotted.

"Chuck Will's Widow."¹¹ (He died young, but it was a lovely funeral.)

"Shall I take a photograph?" Virginia asked. "We don't have a Chuck Will's Widow."

"I know, I'm ticking it off now."

"No, I don't think I shall. The feathers seem a bit ruffled."

Finally, Virginia and Whimbrel, tired of seeing birds they'd already got, wandered off up the meandering path, sitting on a bench by a lookout point.

"Look at Mrs. What's-her-name, down there," Whimbrel said, spying through his pocket telescope at their tour group.

"What's she doing this time?"

"Well, she pretending to watch the birds, but its obvious she's flirting with Mr. who-ever-he-is."

¹⁰Oxyura jamaicensis.

¹¹ Caprimulgus carolinensis.

"Beyond doubt."

"In any case, there are only a few Terns out there at the moment."

"We've got Terns."

"Well really, *who* hasn't?"

"The Caspian Tern."¹²

"The Royal Tern."¹³

"The Sandwich Tern."¹⁴

"The Common Tern."¹⁵

It seemed things were taking a turn for the worst.

"You know, Whimbrel, we really shouldn't be here now. The itinerary clearly states that we leave here at two-thirty and it's already a quarter to three."

"Flying?"

"What?"

"Swimming?"

"Quarter to three. Flying or swimming?"

"I'm not talking about birds. I said we should have left here ages ago."

"Oh-oh."

"And we didn't have lunch until one-thirty."

"Flying?"

¹²Sterna caspia.

¹³ Sterna maxima.

¹⁴Sterna sandvicensis.

¹⁵Sterna hirundo.

"What?"

"Swimming?"

"What?"

"One-thirty. Flying or swimming?"

"I'm talking about lunch, you blasted fool." Whimbrel, quite clearly, was hen-pecked.

"And the fries were awful."

"Very limp."

"Far too limp."

"I've never seen fries so limp. Still, Newfoundland. What do you expect?"

Virginia tutted and shook her head.

"And when will we see a Eurasian Wigeon¹⁶? This really isn't good enough. Five days and still no Eurasian Wigeon."

"Ha! Knowing that lot, they'd rather see a North American Pigeon."

"Need I say more?" Virginia tutted.

That evening we decided to camp on a nearby beech. We sat watching the spectacular sun set, the sky three shades of pink, two shades of gold with a matching bow tie and braces. And then, all of a sudden, the peace and quite came to a crashing stop and the sun seemed to halt its downward progress.

"Too bad!"

"Oh, yes, too bad."

¹⁶Anas penelope.

I looked around and saw Virginia and Whimbrel standing there and actually talking at us.

"It was much better last night."

"We were here last night and it was much much nicer."

"This is a very middling sunset."

"Very middling."

They defiled the dusk like a Catholic priests out to net a few vampire bats.

A Government Project

After our two week tour of places maritime, we returned to Montreal and drove immediately to Mirabel airport for Gordon's homeward flight.

It was the emptiness of the sky that first caught our attention: there was—withstanding a flock of gulls—a singular lack of air traffic. The hangers were hanging about in outrageous unemployment. The only thing taxiing on the runway was a taxi. The modern terminal was spotless, well-maintained, efficient, air conditioned and completely empty.

"Is this Mirabel airport?" Gordon asked a security guard busy reading Elliot J Feldman's, *The Politics of Canadian Airport Development: Lessons for Federalism*.

"Sure is," he said, surprised by our sudden presence.

"Where's the Air Canada desk?"

"There ain't one."

"I have a ticket with Air Canada to Calgary."

"Not from 'ere you don't."

"What do you mean?"

"The place is closed down. Everything goes from Dorval airport nowadays."

"G'darn, this is turning into a right old gutzer," Gordon said.

"What do you mean, 'closed down'?" I asked.

"Dorval's five clicks from downtown. Mirabel's forty-five. No one wants to come all the way out here."

Mirabel, a government project, was built at great expense to provide Montreal with a modern spacious airport. Empty seemed about as spacious as you could get.

The Test

After seeing Gordon off from down and dirty downtown Dorval, I arrived at my basement hovel to discover a letter addressed to Robin Hood. I was invited to a citizenship exam in three days time. Enclosed was an eighty-page booklet of Canadian facts.

Some Canadian Facts

- Canada is the 2nd largest country in the world by land. Canada is the first largest country by air.
- Land Use: arable land: 5% ; permanent crops: 0%.
- 42% of Canadian land is actually water. 10% of Canadian water is actually land. 60% of Canadian air is smoke. 10% of Canadian smoke is mirrors.
- Popular Sports in Canada: Ice Hockey, cross-country and alpine swimming.
- Principle Natural Resource: wood.
- Composition of Canadian Population: 92% wood.
- 16.8 million Canadians have a mother tongue of English; 6.5 million have a mother tongue of French (many Canadians have another mother tongue, though interviewers couldn't understand what they were saying).
- 56.6 per cent of Canadians live in cities and towns while 23.4 per cent live in rural areas. 20% live in Florida.
- Historically, 98% of Canadians are dead.

· In 1994, 341,863 people moved within the country. The rest of the population remained stationary, though several were perceived to twitch.

· Every year, Canada gives hundreds of thousands of immigrants and refugees the opportunity to turn their lives around—and some are still dizzy from the spinning.

The morning of the exam, I studied the booklet cover to cover, glancing at some of the inside pages as well. Besides all those nice factoids, there were nice drawings of Indians hunting bison, busily men hauling in a catch of what looked like pacific gold fish, smiling suits with little men inside standing outside tall sky scrapers, beavers, elk, a cat and a dog. The whole thing was so politically correct, every he was slashed with a she; First Nation people were awarded double pluralisation and became peoples; the English and French laboured with 28 other nationalities, all listed, to build modern Canada. The history of the flag was unfolded and flapped in the heady winds of national glory. Canada was a classless wonderland of diverse cultures and geography, apparently devoid of religion, where everyone loved winter. The booklet was subtitled *Cloud Cuckoo Land*.

I admit I was nervous when I sat down with a room full of keen immigrants all eager to become un-kickoutable Canadians. You see, landed immigrants can be exported back home if they do something naughty. The exam sheets were handed out and placed upside down on the desks.

A woman wearing a wig stood up: "For those of you who pass the test—" Hey, just a minute: *pass* the test? No one told me I had to *pass* the test. I was only told I had to *take* the test. Things were looking bad. "—which is 60% correct or over, there will be a special citizenship ceremony next week. In celebration of Canada's 50th citizenship anniversary, the media will be present and you will be asked to sign a press release. Are there any questions?" And then she said the same thing all over again in French. This was a remarkable performance, notwithstanding the fact that hardly any one there spoke either English or French.

"You have thirty minutes. Vous avez quarant-cinq minutes." Papers were overturned, pens were readied and the Canadianhood hold-up began. Yea, we were like a bunch of bandits ready to answer our way into Canada's deep pockets. Thank God I was Robin Hood.

I glanced at the first few questions:

What is Canada's political system?

- a) Dictatorship.
- b) Theocracy
- c) A constitutional monarchy and a federal state with a democratic parliament.

What is a principle obligation of Canadian citizenship?

- a) Purchasing a house.
- b) Challenging the constitution.
- c) Upholding the laws of the land and respecting the freedom of others.

What is the Capital of Canada?

- a) Bombay.
- b) Hong Kong.
- c) Ottawa.

I was incredulous. Looking around, everyone was busy taking the whole thing seriously, puzzling over a, b or c, circling one, scratching it out and circling another, scratching it out and circling the last, scratching it out and moving on to the next question.

"Please keep your eyes down," the wigged woman said to me, and then she said the same thing all over again in French. Keep my eyes down? I needed lessons in scratching my head and scratching things out? Well, really, only thirty minutes to answer ten taxing question. I set to work and handed in my sheet 52 seconds later to the wigged woman who frowned at what she clearly saw as swaggering rapidity smacking of national disrespect. "What, you think Canada is such an *easy* country?" her eyes seemed to ask. "Yes," my nostrils seemed to answer. "Oh, you're from England are you?" she mumbled with her buttocks. "Just as I thought. Disrespectful bastards," she exclaimed with her ankle joint. "Fuck you," I retorted with my cock.

And so I walked towards the door.

"I'm sorry sir, you can't leave until the rest have finished." And then she said the same thing all over again in French.

"Pardon?" I asked. She said the same thing to me all over again. And then she said the same thing all over again in French.

I sat down and eyed the other bandits with hostility. The minutes clicked by and still pens scribbled in and out. After twenty Canadian minutes had passed,—which, as the crow flies, is a good forty-five anywhere else—and still no solitary bandit had finished his banditry, the wigged woman picked up a gold fountain pen and began to mark hostile ticks beside my answers. 1, 2, 3 . . . I watched her hateful hand ticking away, 7, 8, 9— and then, yes, a pause, a victorious grin as she glanced my way, and a deliberate and leisurely cross. The pleasure dripped from her face like perspiration. The cocky bastard got the last question wrong.

"You can go," she said. "You'll receive confirmation of the ceremony in the mail. I recalled the last question as I left the other bandits to the employment:

Canada's head of state is:

- a) Wayne Gretsky.
- b) Winnie the Pooh.
- c) The Queen.

I admit, I wrote Winnie the Pooh.

Chinless Poodles

The next day, by chance, I met Bertram Woodhouse, the history student, at the Coffee R Us. I'd just finished reading a newspaper article on influence peddling that seemed to mention bicycles far too often.

"So what's new?" I asked

"Well, I'm thinking of going abroad," he said with a suggestive wink. "I'm thinking of going to England and finishing my doctorate there."

"Why's that then?"

"Let me show you something." He rooted in his school bag. "I do the odd bit of work correcting papers, mostly undergrad—and you expect them to be bad—but I just got a batch from a masters' class. Here, check this one out." Bertram daintily handed me a few sheets of paper, nicely bound in an expensive duo-tang with an absurdly transparent cover.

The Globular Village

There are many examples in my daily life that prove that I am a citizen of a globular village.

World is small. Every where you go there are something to remain you that we are not alone in the world. We are living in a communication villge. Saying hello by e-mail or internet to somebody in Bresil or Congo take a seconde and is as good as a handshake. If you want to read the last news from Indonesia, you can do it. You can

watch a movie with Schwartzinger on the Chinless T.V .

The distance in our time dosent exist nomore. You can take air plant at night to go to see Pavaroty in Room and have breakfast in Picadillo on tomorrow morning. Also you can find anything on your breakfast's table from around the world; for example, chocolat or butter or Chinless poodles.

We are not very different from each others. We watch the seam movie. We read the seam newspaper or magazine. Forthe more we eat the seam lunch. Our world is small. Racism is over. No bodies body are called "fogs" any more.

At this point I gave up. "It's scary stuff. But what's it got to do with moving to England?"

"Well, honey, how can I stay in a country with such high standards of sub-mediocrity? And it's not only academic. I was watching the news the other day: there was a story about "Flamingo" dancing in Seville.

Of course, I was hardly listening. I was suddenly feeling famished and had a craving for Chinless poodles.

Talk Back

The frauline said I could borrow an old black and white TV "to keep you company." I'd just finished painting the outside woodwork and built a wall in her garden, a replica of the Great Wall of China though without the same tourist traffic.

I watched the news. Amazingly there was a story about Willy Nillie. Apparently he'd sailed on a raft from Vancouver to China. Once there he was quickly arrested by the secret police for knoodling oodles of noodles and selling them to poodles for rubles. He was expected back in Canada imminently, though there was concern that he'd hijacked the plane and demanded it took him to Disneyland.

And then "CTV Talk Back." Now this was a curious kind of DIY TV: a curious series of coin operated video cameras, set up in shopping centres across the country, allowed typical Canadians the chance to pop in their cash and spout off. The best spoutings appeared on TV. This week's topic: political correctness.

Typical Canadian #1:

"I think political correctness is an important thing; cos if politicians think something that's not right, well it will be a mistake, maybe for the whole country. So it's important for politicians to be correct."

Typical Canadian #2:

"Political correctness is bad. We should be able to say anything we want to politicians. After all, it's tax payers who pay their pay, so we should be able to tell them what we want."

Typical Canadian #3:

"This is about this week's question, political correctness. I think it's a good idea. Politicians should know what they're doing and if they don't, they should be fired."

Typical Canadian #4:

"The problem is we need smarter politicians."

The Language Police

I never had a pet. I never wanted a pet. I prefer to eat animals rather than strike up a conversation with them. So when I walked past *Animals R Us* I was hardly inclined to step through the opened doorway and buy a gerbil. It was a sauntering gait, that gait of mine, but something was amiss: the fellow behind the counter was howling away like a howler monkey. Humanitarianism beckoned me in.

"Are you all right?"

"No," the fellow answered, looking up, surprised and yet comforted by my unexpected presence."

"What's happened?"

"They've taken Polly."

"Who?"

"The Language Police. They received a complaint from someone. I think it was this old French woman who comes in here sometimes."

"Why do you think it was her?"

"She keeps cats."

"Oh."

"What kind of complaint could she make?"

"Well, Polly talks to everyone when they come in. He says, 'Hello,' and 'show me your knickers,' and 'give me a kiss.'"

"And they thought it was obscene?"

"No, no, nothing like that. It's because he says it all in English." The Language Police, a dedicated group of men and women, patrol the streets of Montreal and ensure that no innocent passer-by is accosted by a non-French language. They are zealous, ruthless and-by and large-brainless. "They said anyone who greets customers must be bi-lingual. I tried to teach him French but he could never conjugate the verbs. Now look." He pointed at an empty cage on the counter. "They've taken him away and locked him up. He won't last a week behind bars," he said. "Poor Polly. Pretty Polly. Polly's a good boy."

Real Magic

I strolled through the centre of town. The city's fifteenth summer festival was underway. Once again I bumped into the infinitely bumpable Bertram and we wandered around, stopping to watch a street performer twisting balloons into very humorous shapes.

"I'm big on balloons," I said.

And then there was a clown doing some very hilarious clowning about.

"I'm big on clowns," I said.

There was a giant inflated slug flying about on the end of ropes that was really very comical to watch.

"I'm big on slugs," I said.

There was a very talented and jocular fellow walking on stilts.

"I'm big on stilts," I said.

There was also a magic show where a pigeon was transformed into a piglet. Now that kind of magic is unusual to see. Bird becoming mammal is usually a very slow process that requires a keen eye to spot.

The Citizen Ship Citizenship

Finally, I bid farewell to Bertram who daintily shook me by the hand—thank god.

Actually, I was on my leisurely way to the citizenship ceremony, circumnavigating a great Canadian hole that would soon provide the foundation for a 75 million dollar mega library—a sort of government monument with doors. The citizenship ceremony was to be held on a ship owned by the government on behalf of citizens: a citizen ship citizenship ceremony manned by the media.

HMS Bounty had a long and profitable, honourable and deniable history. She had plied the waters of the great Saint Lawrence Seaway on at least two occasions, once plieing as far as Rimuski before the Captain's unfortunate mutiny. Presently she was tied in Lachine marina.

I arrived early and sat on deck, sipping on some complimentary champagne, lounging back, watching the clear blue sky. Sipping: a cloud on the horizon, moving slowly, woefully slowly, towards the citizen ship citizenship ceremony. Sip, sip, it slowly, woefully slowly, came over. Even from a distance, its remarkable quality led my eyes to watch and woefully see: believe it or not, the cloud had every appearance of a flock of flying pigs; and not so much in that usual cloud formation way: "Yes, look, there, can't you see it? There's a head, and there, if you half close one eye and sit on your head, look. . . ." No, none of

that hocus-pocus. This was a cloud with a photo-realistic flying pigs look. The woefully slow pigs slowly—and woefully, I might add—flew towards my champagne sipping, eye watching self. Oh, woefully. There were twelve slow pigs flying up there, nay floating, like smoke riding a wave of mirrors, big ones, small ones, all with generous snouts for rooting the root and nodding the nod. Noddy nod, I was about to take a photo of the photo-realistic pigs, prevented only by a lack of camera and insufficiency of film. Oh, to have a friend to share this peculiar moment—or pen a poem.

Flying Pigs

There once were 12 pigs well penned

With skyward thoughts to ascend.

As the farmer filled their trough

The bloody bunch took off

And in a recent interview the pigs admitted it was purely a
flight of fancy and their ways they would surely amend.

They were almost overhead. Suddenly the wigged woman wearing
a wooden smile yapped the yap and said the ceremony was about to
begin and would we all go below deck.

Skyles, I sat with the gathering of banditti, thinking only
of the woefully slow flying pigs, waiting for the whole damn
thing to get going and be over so I could get going and watch
them fly. The media were gathered around. I put on my bravest
smile. I took it off again: it was far too brave: I'd scared
away a camerawoman and a man from the *Gazette*. Even the
ceremonial guard seemed edgy.

The wigged woman stood up and for the next ten minutes
described the schedule of the ceremony. Why *describe* the
schedule when you can just get on and *do* the schedule? Oh, to be
outside watching the flying pigs. After that, a quartet played
maritime music in the key of C. Oh woe. Oh woefully. Oh woefully
slow flying pigs. Where art thou now? The mayor of Lachine stood
up and told us about the history of Lachine and why HMS Bounty
was now prestigiously berthed in the marina. I forget the

details of the thirty-minute speech. I was thinking woefully of the pigs. The whole thing had been going on now for almost an hour and I figured the end was in sight. Next, Sheila Hopps, the minister of Canadian Heritage and brew master took the microphone. The ceremonial guard made her give it back and she began her speech with a look of tremendous chagrin. Now, if you've ever seen a look of chagrin, you know it ain't a pretty sight. The brew master began to speechify on the Canadian mosaic. Now, a busy brew master was she. Accordingly, and notwithstanding withstanding notwithstandings, Sheila Hopps had sensibly decided to prepare no special brew for this gathering of banditti and instead simply read out loud—and yes, she did move her lips—the preamble to the 1985 *An Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada*:

Preamble

WHEREAS the Constitution of Canada provides . . .

AND WHEREAS the Constitution of Canada recognises the importance of preserving and enhancing the multicultural heritage of Canadians;

AND WHEREAS the Constitution of Canada recognises rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada;

AND WHEREAS the Constitution of Canada and the Official Languages Act . . .

AND WHEREAS

AND WHEREAS

AND WHEREAS

AND WHEREAS

NOW, THEREFORE, Her Majesty, This Act may be cited as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

Now whereas I'd rather be out watching—I admit in a woefully woe sort of way—that woefully slow flock of flying pigs, therefore WOULD YOU SHUT YOUR BREWMASTER MOUTH AND LET'S GET THIS THING OVER, HER MAJESTY, CONSIDER THIS A FORMAL REQUEST.

Oh woe. Oh woefully. Oh woefully slow flying pigs. The ceremony is surely done. Surely the banditti can be let loose to join the rest of the banditti.

Next, the Minister of Promises came forward. He promised promises.

“And now, banditti and bandittie, before the final presentation of your certificates of citizenship on this fine and historic citizen ship, I would ask you all to stand and swear allegiance to the head of state: the Queen of England!” Sure, let this foreign banditti swear at THE QUEEN; but wasn't I from England? Are not all Englishmen born and bred swearing at THE QUEEN? There was such outrageous sincerity in the banditti's pronunciation of the oath, whilst I alone mimed the words, mouthed the words without saying an actual word.

Thank God it was over: I mean, the woeful pigs were woefully flying slowly away as I didn't speak.

“And now,” said the Minister of Promises, “I would ask you to shake hands with your new fellow Canadian citizens.”

My hands were in my pockets, firmly in my pockets— notwithstanding the fact that I was wearing shorts and actually had no pockets. I refused to shake the shake. Only then, from the corner of my generally cornerless eye, I noticed an oriental fellow smiling the smile, so happy to be Canadian and keen as old yoghurt to shake someone's hand. Reluctantly I turned and shook the shook. It was the least I could do FOR THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND.

Oh woe is me. And then, yea, yea and yea, the Minister of Promises actually began to read out the mysterious sounding names of the banditti there gathered; and one by one they went forward and snatched those little Canadian Citizenship Cards on the citizen ship in the citizenship ceremony. I confess, I was so busy thinking of the flying pigs that the Minister of Promises had read out the name Robin Hood—and yes, he moved his lips—three times before I realised he was talking about me, aka Harry, aka —.

Like a hooded impostor transplanted from Sherwood Forest,¹⁷ I walked the gauntlet of VIPs, shaking hands like Shake Hand, the

¹⁷Actually, during the days—and even weeks—of Robin Hood, Sherwood Forest went as far as Yorkshire, with a short break half way there to feed the horses. Robin Hood was actually a Yorkshire man and the grave of Little John can presently be found close to the coastal hamlet of Robin Hood's Bay. Little John was a big fellow and the tomb extends to the suburbs of Bridlington.

Saudi Arabian immigrant just in front of me, until I came to the Minister of Promises.

"Congratulation," he said.

"And Celebration," I answered.

"I promise you a life of prosperity," the Minister of Promises promised.

"I promise *you* I'll do my best," I answered.

There it was, in my sweaty grasping grasp, a tiny card with a tinier photo: I was a Canadian. Well, Robin Hood was a Canadian; but since I'd stolen his name, and since the resemblance was striking, it all amounted to the same thing. Now I could get out and observe the woefully slow flying pigs.

"This way, sir," the wigged women said, preventing my imminent escape and forcing me to follow the path of least resistance. Oh, and the look: she'd been listening and frowned at what she clearly saw as swaggering Cliff Richardian allusion smacking of national disrespect.

I followed the path: more VIPs and then a group of little girls who, one by one, offered me gifts.

The Gifts

A tiny maple sapling in a plastic bag, like goldfish, notwithstanding the gills.

A copy of the Canadian Constitution, printed on 50% cotton bond paper worth half its weight in cotton.

A Potpourri of smelly leaves and flower heads.

A piece of wood.

A phial of smoke.

A collection of mirrors.

A photograph of Canada taken from a hot air balloon.

Oh yea, now was the time for the great Canadian escape: with my gifty gifty gifts I sneaked, snuk, snucked towards the door.

"I'm sorry sir," said the wigged woman with a smile, "you have to wait until the end of the ceremony."

I sat down and listened to a gathering of chilliwacks singing a song about Canada from shining coast to coast to coast. And then they danced a song about Canada with some very fancy footwork.

After the headiness of the first fine weather days of his picturesque tour, Keats wrote an account of a country-dance, concluding: "This is what I like better than scenery." Well, so much for Keats.

"And now, banditti and bandittie," said the mayor of China, "I would like to ask you all to sign the honorary Golden Book of the Ville de Lachine."

The Golden Book be damned: the queue that formed passed along side the EXIT. Even the QUEEN OF ENGLAND would understand my haste to leave. Thinking only of flying pigs, I made my move, pushed open the door and, pig-like, flew upwards towards the steps.

"Sir, sir, sir!" came a voice from behind. I knew the game was up: I knew the wiggled woman had spotted my flight and was ready to clip my wings. I turned around ready to go back and sign the Golden Book and submit myself to whatever other humiliation the Canadian government had in mind. I turned:

"Sir, you dropped one of your gifts," said a little girl clutching a tiny maple sapling in a plastic bag.

So, there I was, back out on deck, gazing upward with not a flying pig in sight. Smog levels had increased during the ceremony and the air now was virtually opaque. It was all like a dream. I walked down the gangplank, into a near-by park and set fire to the Canadian Constitution. The smoke from the flames mixed with the smog. Slowly, woefully slowly, I went on my way.

Writing by Numbers

Bertram had postponed his move to England and had gone on holiday for a month, touring the great museums of Europe with day trips to several libraries. Montreal was beginning, once again, to seem like a lonely place. So, one night, with the moon hidden by a cloud of flying pigs, woefully flying pigs, woefully slow flying pigs, I made the great Canadian escape, farewell fine frauline, farewell furnished hovel, farewell farewell.

"Hi, Aaqib," I said.

"Hi Harry," he nodded recognition.

"My name's not Harry any more."

"It never was."

I fished in my pocket and tossed over my Canadian ID.

"My name's Robin from now on."

"*Robin Hood.*" Half-Joe laughed. "Now *dat* an identity. Course, you always be on de run."

"I'd rather run than walk," I said.

"So now you want to apply for de free money?"

"If it's free . . ."

"You want Canada Council money?"

"What else?"

"Oh, mon, dere a ton of free money places. Dis Canada, remember?"

"I remember."

"You need to write somet'ink wiv de proper amending formula. Now, if you coming from a nice t'ird world place, de Carribbean, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Australia—you know, t'ings very straightforward. Den you do like me and talk about de old country and de new country and dey give you de cash no question ask. Too bad you come from England mon, dat kind of et'nicity no good."

"So, what should I do?"

"You go et'nic wiv good t'ick spreading of marmalade, or you go pure Canada wiv dollop of maple syrup. Hold on mon, I come, I come wiv de idea. You make de narrator—de guy who tell de story—you make *him* from England, but he live in de Canada. Dey like dat. It make 'em feel good about de Canada. Next, you say ten times ten of de Canada place—lay on t'ick. Dey love see de name of Canada place in print, de name of Canada town: it make's dem place seem real. You understandin' all dis?"

"I think I can wrap my brains around it."

"Well, wrap you brain round dis: lay on t'ick wid de immigrant stuff. T'row in ten times ten of de immigrant character, have dem all over de place. Dey like dat. See, mon, de normal white folk hate de immigrant, but de intellectual and de liberal intellectual and de intellectual liberal liberal and de liberal intellectual liberal at de Council special, well, dey all marry de immigrant, so dey love de coloured folk in black ink. You understandin' all dis? Next, you keep de chapter very short, cos de intellectual and de liberal intellectual and de intellectual

liberal liberal and de liberal intellectual liberal ain't too smart. Dey like walk some, talk some and den have dem good damn rest. And de novel too, t'in, very t'in. Too many pages make dem tired before dem gun go bang. You understandin' all dis? Now, remember, dis de novel. But first you write de "proposal," and you make sure dey can catch dem stuff in de proposal. Next, you show why you needin' money to write de t'ing. Research de word you need. Research and expense de word. Next come de magic money, from t'in air. Abracadabra de word."

The Muslim Family

Meanwhile, Aaqib had almost found the archetype he'd sought ever since coming to smoky Canada: the Choudhery family, living in an everyday house in Caledonia. One day I forced myself along for the ride.

"I'm looking for a new job, by the way," Aaqib said as we walked down the garden path.

"Why's that then?"

"It's a matter of conscience. As a Muslim I don't feel it's right to work for a producer of alcohol."

"They only grow grapes," I said.

"Still."

"The Japanese love it," I pointed out.

"What you have to understand is that Canadian multiculturalism allows people to live according to their religious principles."

"What about that Sikh fellow in Vancouver, last week, murdered by four skinheads?"

"Well, *Sikhs* . . ." he said.

We were greeted by Muhammad Ramzan, mid-forties, wearing a white cotton haji cap and a grey loose shilwar kamiz over his baggy blue trousers.

"That's a nice accent you have there," Muhammad said. "Are you also being from Pakistan?"

"Yorkshire," I told him.

Muhammad had eleven children and sixteen grandchildren. All the males were called Muhammad. All the females were called Honzagool. Mohammad rarely spoke to any of his children, so any similarity in their names was incidental.

His father, also called Muhammad, only spoke to offer religious instruction, which generally was non-individual specific. Thus, he could say: "So, Muhammad, Honzagool, 'no burdened soul shall bear the burden of another'." Any confusion that existed was therefore existential rather than individual. His custom was to beat one of the children with a pointed stick to provide rhythm for reading the Koran. This usually took care of the existential element. Forty-seven members of this extended family lived in the house, with two toilets and a hole in the roof. When I asked Muhammad if life was better in Canada than in Pakistan, he answered:

"Certainly. In Pakistan we were having only one toilet."

"And no hole in the roof," his father, Muhammad, added.

Twelve of the grandchildren were running around the kitchen, hall, living room, bathroom, staircase, bedrooms and closets. Muhammad placed several small carpets on the living room floor and called the family to prayer. All the females donned headscarves and the whole family became suddenly quiet. Five times a day there is quiet in the house. Aaqib joined them, while I sat in the kitchen sipping tea. With all that religion going on, I figured the least I could do was read my future in

the leaves. I seemed to have no future. Either that, or they used tea bags.

"Too many girls are going to school," Muhammad told me later. "Girls should be staying home and learn taking care of the house and family. In Pakistan, only sixty percent of females are literate."

"That's remarkable," I said.

"Remarkable? When I was a child, there were hardly any."

"The good old days," I sympathised.

"Teaching culture and religion to my children and grandchildren and great grandchildren is the most important thing to give them true information."

"Well, this is the *information* age," I agreed. "And you can't beat a bit of *true* information."

"When Honzagool was six years old," he pointed to show me which Honzagool he meant, "she was engaged to Ali. The arranged marriage is a long Pakistani tradition. They have a very good marriage. Very happy."

"Where *is* Ali?" I asked, looking for this arranged husband.

"He lives in Pakistan."

"Most people in Canada only see a very narrow view of our narrow views," one of the Muhammads explained. "They watch the TV and the stereotype Pakistani is all they see. Look around you, this is what a *real* Pakistani family is like."

I dared not look. I averted my eyes. I thought of THE QUEEN.

There was one Honzagool not wearing the conservative dress, revealing a startling degree of ankle and a bit of wrist. She was the white sheep of the family.

"The way my father translates Islam is not the way I translate it," she told me during a brief sexual exchange in the kitchen.

"Maybe you should both get a bilingual dictionary," I suggested, as she pushed herself against my manhood.

Estrangement

Even though I was again living in Aaqib's chicken shed, we were now worlds apart. Breakfast would pass in general and perhaps pious silence and then he'd leave Half-Joe and myself to while away a while or two.

"I make up dem new jokes for de book," Half-Joe said.

"Go on then."

"What de only t'ing worse dan find dead baby in garbage bag?"

"What?"

"Find dead baby in seven garbage bag! Ha! Get it?"

"It's touching."

"Here anoder: What de servant say to de Persian Princess when she ask for a date?"

"What?"

"You have to see de Sultana about dat! Ha! Get it?"

"So how many jokes have you got now?"

"Four."

"It's coming along then."

Closing Down Sale

Even Vinetown's daily paper was ablaze with the Nanavut news. The Northwest Territories was in the process of division, with the new half to be called Nenavut. The place, believe it or not, is a quarter of Canada's landmass. 25,000 people live there, spread out like margarine on soup kitchen toast. A kilo of spuds costing 50 cents in any normal place is nearly four dollars. The Feds will pay 22,000 dollars a year to subsidise every man, woman, child and husky.

The North has more suicides than whale blubber: not that there's much whale blubber any more. Two years ago a party of natives went out to revive an age-old tradition: hunting the bowhead. They hit one with fifty rifle shots and two dozen exploding harpoons. The poor beast sank to the bottom and floated to the shore two days later half rotten.

They have thirteen months of winter every year.

My idea is close the place down; bring all the Eskimos down south; give them all new houses and new mini-vans and large screen TVs and a life time supply of soap stone; give every man woman and child—with a bit more for the huskies—14,000 dollars a year to live on. It will save the government a fortune and they can have a big Great White North closing down sale.

The Letter of the Law

I was fatigued and gasping for air. I took a coach to Booksville to see my old chum, Barney.

A court date had been set to determine the fate of his paper collection, with his brother, Old Nick, claiming it was a fire hazard. The day before the proceedings, we set up a video camera and tried to set fire to his stacks with a Bunsen burner. It was, in Canadian terms, a piece of filmmaking history.

The court day arrived.

So we showed the video we made. It hardly seemed to set the judge's imagination alight: he seemed suspicious of high tech video trickery, as if we'd hired an anonymous magician who'd brought his own mirrors though cunningly left the smoke at home.

"Your lordship highness sir," Barney bumbled along, "I think I have a solution. I'll make all the piles of paper twice as high so there'll only be half as many."

"Mr. Brightly, we'll have none of your insanity here. This is a court of law and we will proceed according to the letter of the law." He walloped the desk with his gavel causing a potted plant—actually a potted golden-trumpet—to become unpotted.

"Indeed, your magnificence, I too share your alphabetic interest. Perhaps, with all due respect, the mighty tower of words that constitutes our great Canadian legal system is even more of a fire hazard than my stacks."

"Mr. Brightly, you are dangerously close to contempt."

"Your majesty, I would suggest that my contempt is characterised by the greatest respect. If it pleases your highness, I have another solution. I guarantee, in black and white, I'll sign any paper you want, to reduce my collection by 90% very soon, within a few weeks. I've been in contact with an American collector and we've settled on a many thousand-dollar price figure, even though it's worth far more. Your judgship, you must understand this is not a pile of rubbish."

"Several piles," interrupted his judgship.

"Point of order your highness! Point of order!"

"Mr. Brightly, I'm the one who decides on points of order."

"In that case, your lordiness, you are leading the witness."

"There is no witness."

"Several piles, then, several piles. I give in to the greater wisdom of your wisdomness." Barney brought out exhibit A and B, samples of his collection, a rare report on the Titanic and an old magazine entitled *Maritime Shipping News and Digest*. "They are valuable documents. I've spent my whole life collecting these records."

"That's true," his wisdomness answered, examining instead a background report, "it does say here that you've never had a job."

"I have a job, you haughtiness. I'm an antiquarian. It's a calling, sir. Over thirty years I've worked on my collection and I've never had any trouble. My livelihood and my lifelong

passion is being taken away from me, and nobody cares about my opinion."

"We care about your opinion, Mr. Brightly, that's why you are allowed to speak."

"Your headiness, may I point out that in your very own office there is more paper than in my entire collection."

"The point is taken," his headiness answered, though he failed to mention that it was taken to the cleaners.

"Your hungriness, I would like to call my brother to the stand."

"It's an unusual name."

"No, your notwithstandingness, I mean I would like to question, cross-question and re-question him."

"Very well. Old Nick, old chum, take the stand please," the judge said with a touch of Florida.

"Are you Nick Brightly," Barney asked his brother.

"I don't know."

"Are you the brother of the accused?" Barney asked his brother.

"I don't recall."

"Do you recall a discussion with a certain judge earlier this morning, over coffee and muffins?"

"Contempt!" cried the judge."

"Overruled," said Barney.

"I don't know," stated Old Nick.

"Do you recall that same judge mentioning that if you were forced into a deposition and preferred to avoid the truth, all you'd had to say was, "I don't know. I don't recall"?

"Contempt!" cried the judge."

"Overruled," said Barney.

"I don't know. I don't recall," stated Old Nick.

"Is that very judge sitting here in this courtroom?"

"I don't know!" cried the judge.

"Overruled," stated Old Nick.

"Contempt," mentioned Barney. "Now, Old Nick, do you know or recall anything?"

"I recall hearing our mother telling you to get rid of your rubbish from the basement. I recall another time when I overheard the same thing."

"So the first time you heard our mother stating that she didn't want my collection in the house. And then second time, when you were overhearing the same conversation, would have been after the first time?"

"I don't know."

"Pardon?"

"I don't recall. Maybe the second time was after the first, or maybe it was before the first and the first was really the second. I don't know. I don't recall."

"Nick Brightly, is this your first time in a court of law?"

"I don't know."

"Do you recall standing in this very room last year, before this very judge, accused of stealing half of our neighbour's back-yard with intent to export the land to Florida?"

"I don't know."

"Where is this line of questioning leading, Mr. Brightly?" the judge asked.

"I don't know. I don't recall," Old Nick answered.

"Not you," the judge clarified.

"I am attempting to establish the criminality of the witness."

"Mr. Brightly, you are the one accused, not your brother."

"Your haphazardness, this is civil hearing. Nobody is accused."

"Oh, indeed, indeed, continue," his courtliness dribbled.

"In that case I would like to offer up exhibit 2.1.3. Mr. Brightly, according to the plan of our back-yard and our neighbour's back yard, is the south boundary of the north half of the Southeast quarter of the Northwest quarter the same line as the north boundary of the south half of the Southeast quarter of the Northwest quarter?"

"No."

"In that case, is the north boundary of the east third of the Southwest tenth of the Northeast fourteenth the same line as the north boundary of the south bit of the Southeast chunk of the Northwest portion."

"Yes."

"Exactly, your tardiness. I have no further questions."

"Mr. Brightly, we are here to discuss your collection of used newspaper."

"I apologise, your frothiness. Nick Brightly, does the house in question belong to our mother?"

"I don't know."

"Do the documents in question belong to me?"

"I don't recall."

"Your notwithstandingness, I hereby question my brother's legal standing. You are aware, oh mightyness, that he walks with a limp."

"Yes."

"So you agree he has no legal standing in this issue."

"No. I agree that he walks with a limp. I will bare this in mind during my deliberations."

"Your honour," Old Nick stood up, "I have here a testimony stating our mother's desire to see the destruction of the stacks."

"Your goodness-graciousness, I know nothing of this so-called testimony; though I would mention that our mother is older now than she's ever been and has a tendency to agree with the last thing she just heard. I have here a previous affidavit in which she says, and I quote, 'The papers have been in my home for ten years. I fail to see the urgency. After all, it is *my* home.' I would suggest that the court ask her herself, in person."

"Is your mother here?"

"No, your goodnessness. Nick would not let her come."

"Very well, Mr. Brightly, if you have no further arguments, we will adjourn while I consider my verdict."

Barney and I went for lunch.

"I'd like a ham sandwich for my friend," I said to the waitress.

"I'm sorry sir, we don't do exchanges."

Barney realised things seemed unpromising and was on the verge of tears.

"Ham's a good meat," I cheered.

"It's true, though the animal is unclean."

"It's true: the ham's not the cleanest animal in the world."

Canada, Where the Measure of Culture is Metric

Sooner or later we were back in the courtroom.

"They can't stay in the house," Judge Dyson said. "Your collection is to be seized and destroyed no later than fifteen days from now. Furthermore, you are prohibited from collecting more than a single cubic metre of paper."

I sat there, next to Barney, thinking this "cubic metre" thing was particularly good. I wondered how many cubic metres of Shakespeare they have at the not too distant University of Toronto. I particularly liked Plato's six cubic centimetres on *The Republic*. And then there are all those cubic metres by Dickens. By Dickens, Barney was prohibited from owning even the complete works of a single author. It was certainly a strange way of measuring literature: this is a fine cubic metre of the world's finest literature—you can measure it for yourself. Canada, where the measure of culture is metric, where history is not so much valued beyond measure as measured beyond value. Barney staggered from court, clutching his few scraps of yellowing evidence, his brother walking ahead with a philistine swank of victory.

"I'm scared," Barney said to me, with those big beaming eyes like World War Two search-lights discovering a flock of buzz-bombs over head. Private book collections go up in smoke. Television reports announce a direct hit. I suppose the new world is always way ahead of the old.

Meanwhile, two blocks from the courthouse, Mr. Swivelspoon, in his secluded basement, sits surrounded by his collection of string. He has gathered string from the world over, travelling as far as Argentina for that special and rare piece of twisted twine; England for a particularly fun funicle; to Filmore for filament. And Mr. Swivelspoon is an expert and collector not merely of fibre but most particularly knotted fibre. The humble knot, a delicate art form, the origami of string, where beauty and utility are intricately intertwined. Well, poor Mr. Swivelspoon: his days are numbered, soon Judge Dyson will hammer the gavel and sentence another hoarder to the severest punishment sanctioned by law. His string and knotted string will be burned. Later, boy scouts who have mastered the art of knotting will also be burned. Dogs tied to trees will be burned. Legislation outlawing lace. But Judge, I was crossing my fingers for luck. Lop them off I say! Lop them off.

Substantial Abuse

Back at the chicken shed.

Following Half-Joe Hack's advice and using Gordon Bennett's address, I finally filled in triplicate an application form. In my cover letter the lesson learned from Judge Dyson's cubism verdict was put to good use: "According to the submitted outline," I wrote, "the projected novel will total approximately four cubic centimetres." Admittedly, this was an after thought; as it turned out, it was not so much the outline that impressed them as the estimated size. Half-Joe was right: most Canadian novels were indeed overly thick, averaging six to seven cubic centimetres, and this bulkiness was seen in certain quarters as substantial abuse.

The Great Canadian Novel

One early October day, with scores of Canada's seniors—3-2 after extra time—planning to fly off to Florida for the winter, I telephoned Gordon Bennett. Unbelievable news: a letter had finally come flopping through his letterbox. Hey presto: my application had been accepted. I was granted twelve thousand loonies to write my loony novel. I put down the phone and stood, surrounded by a whirling mirage, realising I actually *could* get a drink at the oasis. Not only that—it was beer. John Labatte's Classic, actually. A tasty brew, though slightly heady.

Expectations were great: Gordon expected me to arrive in Billabong Louise within days; Half Joe expected me to stay several months; I expected a ripping yarn written faster than a flash in the pan; and Aaqib expected me to return the pan as soon as I had done with it.

And so I climbed on a plane heading for Calgary.

Probabilities and Impossibilities

I showed Gordon Bennett my new ID.

"Well, it looks ridgie-didge," he said.

And now we have clearly reached the crux of the matter. I am known only, I suppose, as the author of "the great Canadian novel." By now you see all the smoke and mirrors involved.

The game plan of the novel was already done: I'd take no chances, no prisoners and very few coffee breaks. This was my big chance to have a readership. I decided upon an Olympian concept of literary composite, by which I mean: steal stuff with a proven track record. Still, it was one thing to steal stuff, another to maintain, in the composite, the high standard of mediocrity that Canadian literature has come to know.

My plan then was such a concentration of mediocrity that the sum of its parts would equal the hypotenuse of the plot. Structurally, it would be a travel novel like *The Clockmaker*, with the autobiographical immediacy and personability of *Roughing it in the Bush*. The ironic voice so beloved by reviewers was actually pure sarcasm and borrowed heavily from *Duddy Kravitz*. The development of Canadian space and time was, of course, a truncated and abbreviated copy of *Wacousta*. The ceaseless wind imagery blew in from *As for Me and My House*. The frequent lapses into farce I took from *Lunatic Villas*, extending drawing room drama into national narrative. The narrative self-awareness—which I wrote without even noticing—was a direct copy

of *The Stone Angel*, as was the actual stone angel scene, which academics have mused over ever since. (The suggestion that the angel served as a symbol for the narrator's stony Puritanism with that so called etymological proof is entirely wrong. I simply needed a prop upon which the narrator could rest his back while he went on about purity.) The epigraph from Swift's "A Modest Proposal" was an idea I stole from *A Handmaid's Tale*, as was the hand in chapter four. The idea that everyone was somewhere else came from somewhere else: *The mountain and the Valley*. The colour green I took from Anne's gables in PEI. And, of course, all those layers of imagery that have caused such debate in ivory towers, well, I confess, it was all smoke and mirrors, allowing the possibility of meaning without bothering to actually provide any and thereby creating profundity. So, any way, I sat down at the desk in Sleepy Hollow Cabin, a few flakes of snow falling outside, covering the yellowing gas plant and narcissus, my trusty computer at my finger tips, and typed the first line of an impossible novel written by an impossible writer in a country that was clearly impossible.

The Mountaineer

The winter days were short and the writing was long.

It was January. Snow at Billabong Louise was ten feet deep and required boots. I was still only two thirds through the book, writing at a snowshoe pace of three pages a day, give or take the odd day. Despite Gordon's frequent visits, I was going snow crazy.

In an act of pure desperation, I flew to Toronto and then to Vine Town. The chicken shed seemed particularly strange surrounded by whiteness. I pushed open the door. Aaqib was conspicuous by his absence, as was Half-Joe Hack. Sitting there by the stove, dressed in typical scarecrow garb, was Molly Coddle.

"Jesus, Molly Coddle," I said, "what the hell are you doing here."

"—" she said.

"I'm not called — any more. I'm called Harry, I mean Robin. I'm called Robin Hood over here."

"Okay," she said with canny wit.

"I live here."

"You live here?"

"I wound up taking Aaqib's job."

"You wound up taking Aaqib's job?"

"It's quite nice."

"It's quite nice?"

"Yeah."

"Where's he gone?" I asked, feeling dizzy.

"He moved over to Waterloo. He got a job working in an aviary, raising tropical birds. They breed parrots that speak French for Quebec, Française for the Maritimes, Irish for Newfoundland and Cantonese for BC. "

"What about the prairie provinces."

"The parrots for the prairies don't speak. Oh, and they have parrots that speak Double Dutch for Ottawa and parrots who speak with forked tongue for the native peoples."

"And where's Half-Joe Hack?"

"He's gone back to Barbados to write a novel about Canada."

"Jesus."

"He's still in heaven."

This was the closest Molly Coddle ever came to making a joke. I took off my hat in utter respect. Actually, I was feeling so respectful I took off my coat, gloves and boots as well.

"I came here looking for you," she said.

I began to explore her body like a mountaineer, carefully, deliberately, as if all history was watching, waiting for me to plant my flag pole.

Tyranny Loves Company

It was midwinter. It was midwinter and I arrived at the scene of the crime with all hell letting loose. Two burly Metro Toronto policemen were manhandling Barney from his house, one black the other white. He was handcuffed and struggling and shouting, his chrome glasses with their thick lenses pushed around his head, as if he were looking aside for some tenth hour rescue. It was already noon. Madness ruled and it was, to make matters worse, the rule of law. Justice was being done and it was doing Barney.

"Don't you understand? Some of that stuff's valuable." Of course, to Barney it was all precious.

"We gave you a chance—" the white police officer began—

"—and you blew it," the black police officer concluded.

"I don't want any of those grubby gorillas going through my stuff."

And then they locked him in the back of a police car. This I found odd. He was not under arrest yet forcibly confined; an assault, surely, on his human rights. And then, I remembered this was Canada and the notwithstanding clause had probably kicked in. Barney spotted me as I made my way over.

"Stop them," his mouth worded, though the words were silent, overruled by the sound of a tractor, now carting load after load of his collection from the door of the house to an awaiting line of lorries. I ran over to the police.

"You can't do this," a said, famously.

"He had his chance."

"He blew it."

"Look at him, this is killing him. It's *his* property." Barney, face against the window, screwed up and distorted, tears dripping down like rain from the inside out.

There was no point. It seemed like law and order and a victory for civilisation. It seemed like Barney was a madman.

It was over. The lorries had gone, the tractor taken away, the director of public works, workmen, fire chief and two merry firemen, municipal lawyer, two rabid dogs and finally the black and white policemen had all left the scene. Barney sat crumpled and silent on the curb, exhausted from two hours of due process.

"There's nothing left. It's all over."

I put my arm around his threadbare shoulder, knowing there was no comfort I could offer.

"What happened?"

"They came this morning. A friend was with me and they agreed to let me transfer the stacks into his pick-up and store them in a warehouse a fellow antiquarian had offered me. There was even a reporter here."

"What about your lawyer."

"She was here. We started transferring the stacks and everything seemed fine—well, as fine as you could expect. The work crews went away, my lawyer went away, the reporter went

away. So we carried on with the job. And then, once my lawyer and the reporter went away, this Julie Raptor woman shows up."

"Who's she?"

"A law clerk with the municipality. She had this fire prevention chief hanging around, who ordered the immediate seizure of my collection. And then the whole lot of them turn up again, minus my lawyer and the reporter, of course."

Barney stopped talking and dusted away some invisible dust from his well-stained trousers. There was dead silence in the street.

"There's no use in us standing around here wasting taxpayers' money. We've just gotta do it. End of story.' That's what she said. Can you believe it? The whole thing is out of the Dark Ages. The entire antiquarian trade is being destroyed, page-by-page. One day there'll be nothing left except these bird-brained-pig-headed bureaucrats, feathering their nests. You can kiss dedicated scholarship good-bye." He blew a kiss to the wind, which blew it back into his face like a farewell gesture from the aery elements. "You just can't do this, especially in an information era."

"Eras come and go."

"I know. I'll tell you what though, how many people were here today?"

"Ten?"

"Including the truck drivers there were twenty-one. Now don't you think that's a bit much? Does it really take twenty-one

people to take care of a simple infringement of a municipal by-law? Of course it doesn't. It all comes down to the old adage.

"Which one?"

"Tyranny loves company."

"I thought it was misery."

"Well, I wasn't too happy about it."

Barney's stacks were taken to the recycling depot, reshaped into 24 rolls of toilet paper and sold in a dollar store for two dollars. The toilet paper was used by Judge Dyson and Julie Raptor and subsequently flushed out to sea. A school of squid accidentally ate the toilet paper and, dizzy from the pollution, were easily caught by a Taiwanese trawler. The squid were exported to Canada and served to Judge Dyson and Julie Raptor who were in a Chinese restaurant celebrating the imprisonment of a stamp collector whose collection was deemed unsanitary: the collector himself admitted that all the stamps had been previously licked. The toilet paper pollution had rendered the squid poisonous. Judge Dyson and Julie Raptor became seriously ill. They took a cruise to the Bahamas to recuperate. The ship sank. Barney read the news report in *The Shipping News* and clipped the column.

Fifty-one metre-high stacks of "printed material" had been reduced to the permissible cubic metre. Barney, in a reckless act of defiance, added the clipping to his pile.

The Motley Crew

I flew back to Calgary, tucking into a fair old feast at twenty thousand feet. At twenty thousand feet, that vast emptiness commonly known as Canada fleets by unnoticed.

It was a hard and soul-destroying job, that writing by numbers.

"You still popping those pills, mate?" Gordon Bennett asked me one afternoon.

"It's only Saint John's Wort. It's homeopathic."

"I know all about it, buckeroo. It's a weed. Weeds can cause serious side-effects."

"Like what?"

"Like preventing healthy growth. And Saint John's Wort can increase photosensitivity."

"Well, that's okay: I'm not planning on having my picture taken."

And then, some day, some time, some how, it was all done: the first draft was done. With penciltree pushing through the patchy spring snow cover, I decided to employ some highly modern and technical editing strategy: of course, I refer to the "focus group."

They were all there: Aaqib, Half-Joe Hack, Molly Coddle, Barney Brightly, Catherine Wheel from the Montreal Youth Hostel, Bertram Woodhouse, Willy Nillie-back from China-uncle Bob and aunt Sally, Jack Knife-still planning a new adventure and fine-

tuning his catalogue of equipment which now included the feather of a bald eagle—Virginia and Whimbrel Rail—who had spotted the bald eagle—Al Fresco, Holly, and, of course, Gordon Bennett. It was like the final scene in an Agatha Christie classic and I had a sneaky feeling it was me who done it.

“I know you’ve all read the manuscript, and thanks for the effort. I’ve made a list of some of the things I’d like to discuss. Here we are, right: paper stock, type face, and the general feel of the manuscript. I’m not sure what any of that means, but I read in *Publishing for Dummies* that they’re very important, so you’ll have to help me on that. In terms of content, I want to know if we can reach a consensus on plot: that’s the story thing. Is it simple-minded enough without betraying itself as the dunce of the class? How about the characters? Are there too many or too few. I could easily get rid of some of them or throw a few more in. And what about the characterisation: that’s how I show the characters to the reader. Do they all seem like real people? Are they too real? Are they not real enough? How about the ending? Did it make you happy? Were you happy about being happy, or sad about being happy? Were you happy about being happy about being happy? Did it make you sad? Were you happy about being sad or sad about being sad? Were you happy about being sad about being sad? How could the ending be improved? If it came much closer to the beginning, for example, would that be better? What do you think

about the title *Stranger than Fiction*? Can you think of something grabbier?"

Of course, I knew my motley focus group would offer meaningless ill-considered opinions on subjects they knew nothing about. After all, they had the artistic intelligence of a flock of geese and all the delicacy of flying pigs. I knew they were all there to look and sound smart to everybody else and they'd be doing a whole lot of flapping to prove the point. And yet, with every North American television production now pre-tested by focus groups, I figured how far could I go wrong? The whole point was to end up with a decent *product*, and in this case what was sauce for the goose was gravy for the pork. Indeed, only recently the great Canadian government spent \$54,000 to find out how people felt about a new Canada Day logo. Also, recently, a famous Canadian composer modified his latest symphony after a focus group found his string arpeggios in the second movement too broken chordish and the largo movement too solemn and slow sounding. Was it really so wrong, then, to associate myself with the methodology of such high fliers?

In fact, because of that meeting, several remarkable—and some even noticeable—changes were made. Firstly, the protagonist was originally a man, not a woman. I just changed all the *hims* into *hers* and that took care of that. What appeared in the published version as the ending was originally the beginning, the beginning was the middle and the middle was the ending. The character with the limp originally had a lisp. The main theme

was the promise, and not the promiscuity, of life. The most important change I made though—and all thanks to the focus group—was the *wording*.

I sent off the manuscript to a literary agent mentioning, of course, the Canada grant that had made the whole thing impossible. He posted the thing to Canada Publishing—a subsidiary of the Canadian Government with a tattoo-like trademark—and there was nothing to do then but wait.

In early August, after covering 642 horizontal and vertical miles in sometimes cold wet conditions with sometimes poor food and indifferent accommodation, after suffering a fortnight from a cold and sore throat, Keats abandoned the tour and left his friend to continue alone. Once and for all he had abandoned his search of the Picturesque.

And how went my search of the picaresque? Well, as the crow flies, pretty amazingly when you consider I had a false identity, was best mates with an Australian fugitive, had just written a Frankensteinian novel grafted together with stolen bits, lived illegally in a mountain cabin and was, in fact, dead. I had become the rougiest greatest picaresque scoundrel of all time.

It was only a few days—as the crow flies—to publication when I realised, with horror, that the crow, all along, was a flying pig and that I'd eaten its snout in a pig snout pie less than an hour ago.