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SUNSHINE '89

David O'Connor

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SUNSHINE '89

By

David O'Connor

B.A. English, Dalhousie University, 1990-94
M.A. Performance & Text, Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts/King's College,
2000-02

Dissertation

Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Masters of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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Abstract:

Sunshine '89 is a coming-of-age-novel, set in Canada in 1989, this creative work explores the travel of a young adoptee from a remote outpost to the bourgeois center of the country in order to pursue a life in the theatre. What ensues is a mentor-apprentice story exploring art, race, sexuality, performance, aging, dementia, alcoholism, politics, Canada, and other theme. Above all, a page-turner and picaresque romp meant to entertain and challenge.

SUNSHINE '89

by David Morgan O'Connor



SUNSHINE '89

**For my Brother, Jon
(16/02/70—10/10/17)
who taught me to play and fight.**

**For my Father,
who taught me to listen and love.**

**I have thoughts that are fed by the sun:
The things which I see
Are welcome to me,
Welcome every one –**

William Wordsworth

Dear Reader,

Please when possible listen to the songs mentioned as you read.

Think about the ones you came to love and why...

Thoughts fleet, friends miles away,

family held or lost by thread,

tooth, needle, nail, and song.

Sing with Sunshine...

It is a simple song.

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First and foremost, thanks to my family and loved ones, for continually support and patience.

There would be no Sunshine with the support, permission, storytelling, and 25+ years of friendship with Ryan Goode. ACT V is liberally lifted from his early 90s emails. A brave and inspiring man, thinker, father, chef, bon-vivant, and pal.

Thanks to: Dan Mueller, for pulling me out of the slush pile, keeping me image-inspired, and, for, every, single, comma. Sarah Townsend, for her ceaseless passion for literature and ideas, and for guiding me through Ulysses with fresh eyes. Andy Bouelle, for proving that a coming-of-age novel can still move hearts. Mark Sundeen, for direct questions, solid advice, and for instilling a new respect for American long-form non-fiction. Greg Moss, for Denver, and keeping the back-burner-playwriting pilot flame alive.

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Thanks to: my co-hort(s), BMR, my fellow-work-shoppers, Charlie Wormhoudt for the creative cover image, and especially Monica Sanchez, for being the greatest roommate and New Mexican on the planet.

Thank you, readers.

*“... sad to say I must be on my way
so buy me beer and whiskey 'cause I'm going far away (far away)
I'd like to think of me returning when I can
To the greatest little... program and to all see you when we can...”*

The Pogues

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PREFACE

I believe a work of art should stand on its own merit. The code to enjoying or understanding should be woven into the content. When truth is found in fiction, it's usually between the lines. Truth arrives with a sublime emotional connection mostly residing in subtext, rarely in explanation. Regardless, I'll try to explain what I tried to do in *Sunshine '89*.

A WALK THROUGH FIVE ACTS:

On the surface, I tried to write a romp. A simple page-turner picaresque, naturally episodic, yet following the bildungsroman structure. I wanted to write a going-down-the-road story, which could arguable be considered a genre in Canada's Maritimes. Sunshine migrates from working-class fishing village to the bourgeois epicentre of Upper-Canada's richest arts festival. The Stratford Festival is equivalent to the NHL in Canadian lore, a symbol of "making it" equivalent to Hollywood and wealth.

Act I begins with Sunshine gathering his savings, selling his bicycle and a traditional farewell party. I tried to juxtapose the external beauty of the small village with the internal fears of small mindedness. Not judging, and hopefully balancing the homophobia and racism that were more prevalent in that period and location. I tried to show how big dreams provoke ridicule. I tried to show Sunshine's backstory and motivation to leave. I tried to illustrate outsider-phobia from an insiders point of view. Laced with racist homophobia and protective concern, I hoped to give the impression of an naïve hero setting off against difficult odds.. I introduced Douglas O'Droole and Sunshine's yearnings.

Along the TransCanada, Sunshine receives a sexual and racial awakening. As soon as he says good-bye to his mother, he is addressed in Urdu and Punjabi which he has never heard before. He is called a Sikh and another man's son. On the mainland, he is robbed by an 80s prom-couple and exposed to perversion by an old man in a bus station toilet. He is kissed and seduced by a trio of collegiate hippies. He is introduced to feminism (Monique), nationalism (the AWOL-Navy Seal), separatism (Uncle Guy), the apathy and bias of authority (the police), the civil rights movement (Kareem-Aziz), and tragedy (Laid). I hope by laying the scenes side-by-side to build a comic education long before his apprenticeship to long lost cousin begins.

In Act III, although outwardly continuing on the bildungsroman-path which originally entailed fitting into society and finding a vocation and maturity, the structure begins to derail. From the late night donut store scene, Sunshine subtly slides into the role of O'Droole's caretaker, rather than student. He cleans, drives, cooks, and ignores endless insults. This decision was organic and twofold. 1) The structure of their relationship began to mirror King Lear and the Fool so I reinforced that parallel as much as possible. And 2) I wanted to illustrate Canada's transition from a mono-culture (British-facing, Anglo-protestant, Upper-Canadian) to a culture that consciously pursues strength in multi-cultural inclusion. Of course, this is not a clear-cut transition, and often policy and reality are distant cousins. Personally, I (and my generation, if they cared to notice), lived through a strong and powerful shift in cultural awareness and national identity throughout the 80s and 90s while travelling Canada

extensively.¹ I'm proud of this shift, and although not complete, believe it is the only path for toward global peace. Acceptance and open-dialogue are key to national happiness. Subconsciously, a major impetus for choosing 1989 and constructing Sunshine as an optimist was to combat the current global trend of divisive politics. Yet, it is no coincidence that Sunshine leaves Canada for New York on the last page. Contradicting action and belief creates hypocrisy and hopefully three dimensional characters.

In Act III, I tried to set the stage for Douglas O'Droole's demise. Sunshine attends his last great performance as Lear. Douglas is a chronic alcoholic, suffering from early dementia, unbearable egotistic, and only capable of real emotion while performing. The boundary between actor as off-stage personality and onstage artist has evaporated. On another level, I wanted to show O'Droole's self-awareness as cautionary tale. Outwardly, O'Droole presents a hell-raising bon-vivant, deep down he is aware his professional days are numbered and he cannot continue his carry-on. By denying Sunshine his identity, Douglas wants Sunshine to not follow in his foot-steps, rather become a fully-rounded human and a slave to attention and applause. The letter, the sword, the fire, the self-destruction, I hope turn plot points that illuminate subconscious intentions while turning pages. Douglas is trying to communicate an idea he barely understands himself.

¹ My political views are almost identical to the current Prime Minister, poster-boy for inclusion, Justin Trudeau. We attended the same liberal arts college a few years apart, studying under many of the same thinkers.

Much of Act IV, digests Act III in dialogue. On the surface, the cabin scenes resemble *The Karate Kid* meets *Withnail & I*,² yet underscored by an exchange of roles. Sunshine puts Douglas to bed, feeds him, saves him from Antoine, the chainsaw-wielding-cuckold-Quebecois-separatist. Sunshine pulls him out of the lake and saves his life. Simultaneously, Sunshine is maturing, growing, and understanding the danger of the “tapeworm.”³ For weeks, I debated whether Douglas needed to die or not. He was a joyful character to write, perhaps a symbol of my love/hate relationship with the theatre. After his death, a door opens for Sunshine to pursue his true goal of finding his roots.

Act V, the epistles from Dhaka, are based off a childhood friend’s emails from the early 90s. My friend, a war-baby, faced many challenges when searching for his roots. The journey changed him profoundly. I want the letters to act as denouement, but also open Sunshine up to a world beyond the obsessive and insular dramas of building a career as an actor. By ending with an acceptance letter to a school in New York, I left the door open for a sequel, *Sunshine '99*, a life off-Broadway, and nodded, not so-subtly, to Stephan Daedalus’ self-imposed exile. I’m not aligning Montreal in 1989 to pre-WWI Dublin, but both cultures (colonies?) were (are) outward looking, and international “success,” in London, New York, L.A. or Paris, is a pre-requisite to local “success” and opportunity.

SUNSHINE AS CHARACTER:

² A British cult classic, 1987, directed by Bruce Robinson, about two actors that leave Camden Town to a country farm “by mistake.”

³ I lifted the metaphor from Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Letters to A Young Novelist*.

By making Sunshine an eternal optimist, my own particular version of Voltaire's *Candide*, I believe I am attempting to offer hope or at least a text to open dialogue for today's readers. I tried to capture the transition from a "simpler" time, that of payphones, collect calls, letters, radio, and reading the newspaper in public to the advent of a more "complex" time of cell phones, instant messaging, streaming video, and daily school shootings. On the other hand, I worry that Sunshine is more symbol than three dimensional character. The default setting of hope-vessel, say a reactor rather than an actor, can slip into passivity.

Yet, I hope Sunshine's transformation is clear through his action. Starting with the decision to hitchhike after losing his savings, instead of calling home for help, up until sticking the hammer in Antoine's thigh, even the decision to leave Canada for Bangladesh and eventually New York, should reflect his inner and outer maturation. The transition from local stock-boy to global traveller is essential to my thesis.

Perhaps the culmination is just before Douglas's accident, the story's turning point, when Sunshine tells his hero where to go. Clearly, he has taken the reins of his own destiny and grown out of the meek, insular dreamer to an adventurer capable of decision.

In early drafts, the contagious tendency to slip into first person from Sunshine's point-of-view rendered the narrative indecipherable. I wanted to inhabit Sunshine completely. To see what he saw, but eventually the view was too limiting to tackle the scope and the themes I wanted to encompass.

Regardless of failure, the impulse of sliding into first person helped build the world and narrative voice.

I NEVER INTENDED TO BE FLANN O'BRIEN:

In the last two weeks, three readers who I hold in high regard, have mentioned Flann O'Brien work when discussing prose style. I found the comments a great compliment, although I haven't read O'Brien for at least twenty-five years. I wonder if our prose styles are formed long before we are, through childhood and teenage reading, through our teachers and parents and educational epoch. I remember Lady Bird books and Sister Loretta Mary (Hawk-Eye) who had no trouble using the a ruler on the back of six-year old's hand. I remember Ms. Miotto, my grade eight teacher, crying when I claimed fervently that I hated Alice Munroe (too young? Too close to home? I've since changed). I remember reading Homer's *Iliad* on a three-day bus ride from Toronto to the Yukon and thinking I had discovered fire. I remember teaching British and American spelling to pilots in Qatar wondering if I had forgot Canadian and Irish spelling. Prose style is linked to culture, the bricks of story-telling. I'm also aware that great flourish can tire the reader and interrupt the narrative, breaking John Gardner's concept of novel as dream. I'm aware that my prose style is both my greatest strength and weakness. In this draft, on both the sentence level and narrative point-of-view, I employed a technique I learned as an actor. It is better to over-act in rehearsal, than to under-act in performance. So when faced with a choice, I went big, took risks, explored, leaned toward the side of poetry and

song, so as to have a space for pause, subtlety, reflection, fine-tuning, in later drafts. Let's analyse an example, on page 7, I wrote:

Scrawny and brown, Sunshine O'Droole, dying to leave this Canadian outpost built off lobster pot hauling and potato-farmer sweat, clocked the minutes which ticked from 3:36 to 3:37.

A less risker choice might be:

Sunshine O'Droole was scrawny and brown. He could not wait to leave North Rustico, a town built off lobster fishing and hard-working potatoes farming. He watched the clock tick from 3:36 to 3:37 in the back room of Phil's grocery store.

One sentence versus three. 28 words versus 41. The latter might be clearer, but which is more fun? Over and over again, I tried to delete pronouns, prepositions, substitute proper verbs for phrasal verbs, and slide images in illusion where adjectives would work fine. Once again, I employed another rule I learned as an actor: if I am bored, then so is the audience. Although I'm aware that this style can translate as self-serving, extraneous, even masturbatory, I'm not against pulled back and toning down to serve the plot.

Like Paul Betty's *The Sellout* or Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* or anything by Spike Mulligan or Kurt Vonnegut, I want the humor to seem like a flippant back-hands, while landing with the force of head-butts. The challenge is that when a joke is indicated, the humor is lost. The fear of being offensive or political incorrect is also a danger. Pulled-punches are rarely funny.

I never set out to write like Flann O'Brien but I'm thrilled with the comparison. I enjoy reading Colin Barrett, Kevin Barry, Mike McCormack, Benedict Kiely, and Aidan Higgins—all deeply steeped in Joycean word-play. Regardless, I can understand why their styles can be inaccessible to wider

reading audiences. I hope and believe, after another few passes through *Sunshine '89*, I can meld the prose style intrinsically to the story as well as Ian McEwan, Yann Martel, Patrick DeWitt, Michael Ondaatje and Colum McCann.

One important insight that I have come to realize while writing at this length, an insight I could not have learned through writing short stories or poetry, is that my prose style, like my personality, lacks consistency, discipline, and patience. Three essential elements I intend to employ in revision.

NEXT STEPS FOR *SUNSHINE '89*:

The plan is to re-read (again) aloud from start to finish focusing on cadence, tone and rhythm. I want to give Dharma a better entrance. Perhaps a scene after Douglas' death. I want Hope to have more weight. I'm going to look at the Act V letters again and layer in more depth and insight. I going to search for continuity and loose ends. I want to deepen some of the characterization secondary players into three dimensional characters. The discovery of where the narrator intrudes in the narrative must be sanded down and polished. Then, with fingers-crossed, send *Sunshine '89* to market.

AN MFA IN NUMBERS:

For the last few months, I've been trying to find a word for missing things before they are gone. Pre-nostalgia? I've also been trying to write a poem, "An MFA in Numbers," but reflection is not my forte, and blowing my own horn feels gross.

I'm not a numbers and list guy. The unformed poem, maybe an essay one day,
includes:

850 000 words written
2022 titles read, yes, I've been tracking.
Published: 74 poems
9 short stories
3 essays
6 writer interviews
59 reviews
6 interviews
23 blog posts
1258 submissions.
Taught: 288 students
Taken: 16+ creative writing workshops
Attended: 6 conferences
Drafts written: 2 plays as actor
1 TV pilot, 300+ poems.
Visited or returned to: 23 cities.
Saved \$6000 off stipend
Made: 3 close friends.
a slew of writing contacts
Held: 3 editorial positions

Regret:

not dancing flamenco all nine terms
not awaking earlier consistently
not swimming more
not flipping a tiny home
not publishing a chapbook
not finishing a draft of Sunshine before x-mas break.

I wish I'd know Albuquerque and what an MFA was, ten years ago.

You can see where this is going. And why it is not and will probably never be a poem, an essay perhaps, one day. Regardless of output, this quantitative analysis fills me with gratitude. I'm a fervent convert to the MFA system. Giving time and community to writers and artists is essential to cultural survival. To detractors and complainers, I'd like to share my daily mantra, "At least I'm not digging coal." Personally, when I try to compile my thoughts and experiences

over the last three years, I'm proud and happy regardless of my academic, artistic and publishing future. Thinking back to my pre-MFA existence, I was living in a favela in Rio de Janeiro, pulling pints in a scuzzy Irish pub, and now I'm closer to mastering the skills to understand past experiences and truly share.

E.L. Doctorow once said:

Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead.

I'm a much better driver now and still driving.

I'm not a fan of prefaces or forewords. I tend to read them afterwards, so please proceed directly into the fray... or as Booker-nominated Mohsin Hamid said in Woodward Hall,

“The novel should contain all the reader needs.”

{ACT I}

“Sunshine, to the till. Sunshine, the till. Now!” Maeve McGoo microphone barked through Phil McCann’s Everyday Feed & Fill Emporium & More, three kilometers south of North Rustico, a natural harbour, not much else, west-gulf-facing, on the eastern shore of Prince Edward Island, Canada, 1989. Population 700, soon to be 699.

Sunshine flashed his un-used, over-studied, villain’s grin, holstered his price-gun, and bounded down aisle three full of Vim, vigour, stain-killer, and bleach. Oysters applauded undersea.

North Rustico dips into a crucifix. If driving north, a seasonal antique shop sits sentinel on the right, a gas station divides the road dead ahead to the left, bastion of forgiveness, St. Patrick’s Catholic Church. Winterized homes and too many summer cottages to count sprawl off the main strip awaiting the advent of June when town swells to 10 000 merry-holiday-makers. In summer, parades float past soft ice cream stands, beer halls explode with the odd brawl on long celebratory weekends. The street fills with teeny-bopping Halifax-hussies, yummy mummies pushing prams, and wobbly fishermen, who’d sleep with your daughter or sister as easily as nod good-morning.

Scrawny and brown, Sunshine O’Droole, dying to leave this Canadian outpost built off lobster pot hauling and potato-farmer sweat, clocked the minutes which ticked from 3:36 to 3:37. Born 18 years and 36 minutes ago, or so he’d been told, Sunshine had spent the glorious day in Phil’s backroom price-gunning

cornflakes and canned tuna, counting the remaining moments of this dead-end-after-school job. The event of leaving felt worthy of a gymnastic flourish, say cartwheels three times, but he contained the splashy urge.

Hurricane Hugo was just a twinkle in a Cape Verdean shoal. The summer of 1989 would wreak havoc on North America and the growth of Sunshine's heart and soul.

Maeve and Widow Stebbins stacked coins on the checkout counter.

"What can I do you fine ladies for on this splendiferous springtide afternoon tide?" Sunshine smiled. "Mrs. Stebbins, how are we today? Tank full?"

"Fine Sunshine, just dandy, isn't it is your birthday?" Her hand shook shutting her purse.

"Hey Birthday Blackie, mind bagging? Still got a couple hours on the clock, eh."

"For you, my minion Maeve, anything. Darling, sweetness."

Maeve also dreamed of leaving North Rustico but didn't believe her dreams and didn't know how or why or when or where all the fear came from and never would. Maeve McGoo would become proudly pregnant at the end of the summer and a single-mother at twenty, two colourful seasons later almost to the day, in February 1990, bringing the population of North Rustico back to an even 700.

"What're you now, Sunshine?" Mrs. Stebbins asked, knowing full well. The whole town knew ages and birthdays.

“Eighteen. Elegant eighteen. Adroit eighteen. Adult and legal. I can vote and join a war.” He threw double pistols with his hands.

“And go to adult prison,” Maeve added.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have your whole life all splayed out in front you again? We sure are going to miss you around here, Sunshine. When’s the big day?” Mrs. Stebbins asked.

“I’m on the 6am bus, bright or cloudy or rainy, tomorrow morning. 15 hours and 15 minutes and counting. Start spreading the news...” Sunshine slipped into a side-mouthed Frank Sinatra. Mrs. Stebbins, a wild one in her youth, grabbed the thread, “I’m leaving today, I want to be a part of it...”

The eighty-eight-year-old and the eighteen-year-old sang, interlocked elbows, and side-stepped. Mrs. Stebbins shuffled her well-trod heels as Sunshine bagged her milk-bags and butter-bricks and eggs-trays and salted-ham and muffin-box and sardines-tins and Saltines and instant coffee jars and cans and cans of baked beans. For Mrs. Stebbins’s generation, food came in a can.

“That’s \$13.74, Mrs. S.,” Maeve said curtly, happy to destroy the melody.

“Thank-you Maeve. Did you deduct the coupon discounts?”

“I did. Always do. No need to ask, ever, eh.”

Maeve unforced her false smile and stared down her Hibernian nose at this ridiculous kid singing while bagging groceries. Her tiny-town hive-mind ricocheted envy and fear. This little orphaned-prick from afar. Sunshine’s joy often provoked jealous frustration. Maeve never understood her hatred for him

and wouldn't until 23 years later when her son left for college and her Syrian marine biologist husband left her for a happier woman.

"You have a good day, Mrs. Stebbins. Don't do anything I wouldn't," Maeve said. The widow shouldered her purse. Sunshine propped the front door open with the shopping cart. Mrs. Stebbins shambled into the parking lot. Her sandy 1972 Mercedes, a masterpiece of Teutonic craftsmanship awaited, ready to purr like a kitten. Mrs. Stebbins handed Sunshine the keys, who fumbled with the trunk-lock, then loaded the paper bags meticulously. He closed the lid delicately with a baby finger.

"Voila! You sure you're okay getting them out, Mrs. S? I can ride over at six and give you a hand unloading."

"Hush now, Sunshine, I've been wrestling this trunk long before you were a glint in your father's eye." Sunshine straightened his spine. A can plopped onto the spare tire.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Sunshine. Would you mind helping take my big fat foot out of my mouth?"

Little was known of Sunshine's biological father, except that he was a Pakistan soldier who'd raped a 15-year-old Bengali girl who'd slipped a nameless infant wrapped in yesterday's newspaper under the Canadian Mennonite mission gate in Dhaka eighteen years earlier. The rest was a series of bureaucratic adoption forms filled by the charitable and loving ink of Dharma O'Droole, a flower-powered blond hippie who wanted to save the world and was volunteering at the orphanage, having just graduating teacher's college.

Sunshine's father remained a villainous twirling moustache, an unpunished atrocity, and Sunshine's birth: a gross unsolved mystery. His birth mother a weeping teenager, beautiful and bloody, victim and enigma.

"No worries, Mrs. S.. Water off a salted cod's back. All that really had nothing to do with me, you know. I'm proud to be adopted. I won the lotto."

"You sound like Candide. The eternal optimist. Did Voltaire write that? Or was it Hugo? Anywho, I wish I had your attitude when I was your age. I was all sour-puss. Stuck-up. Listen Sunshine, I've got a little something for you." Her convulsing fingers spidered into her purse. Sunshine expected his normal dollar tip, extremely generous by Island standards. Many folks, especially the elders, could not afford to tip on P.E.I., unless whispering to a boat-less fisherman where the Bluefin Tuna were nibbling mattered. Mrs. Stebbins produced an unsealed envelope.

"For the road, for your birthday, for being my Sunshine!" She pressed the bill-fat envelope to Sunshine's chest. Thumbing under the flap, he saw a stack of clean 20s, two 50s and a \$100 bill.

"Wowsers. Mrs. Stebbins, I can't take this much. Far too much."

"What'll I do with it? Drink Blue Nun till the roosters return to roost? How many Home Shopping Club sprees can an antiquated woman handle? I've got all I need and more. Just bought a three carat teardrop pendant, at retail. You keep it."

"It's too much money."

“Sunshine, consider it an investment. You’re going to be a superstar. The next great O’Droole, an actor for the ages. I’m just getting in early, buying a front row seat and a six-course cognac-soaked post-show supper. When you’re playing Romeo on that Stratford Festival stage, I’m flying first-class, box-seats, the royal treatment, rose-petal covered cushions and champagne at intermission. Consider this a deposit on your future success. Sunshine, I’m not taking it back. I’ll throw it in the bay if you don’t take it, feed it to the lobsters. No, I’ll give it to Maeve...”

“Fine.”

“No buts, only major thank-yous and minor kisses.”

“Thank-you so much, Mrs. Stebbins.” She spread her arms wide and stepped towards Sunshine, who hugged her warmly, delicately, like a mover fitting a crystal chandelier into a crypt. Hug turned hold. Mrs. Stebbins stood close with her ear on Sunshine’s heart, listening for a melody only she could hear. Eventually, he stepped awkwardly away and opened the driver’s seat door. She arranged herself majestically on a cushion-throne behind the wheel and lit the ignition. Baritone cylinders hacked a diesel cough before subsiding into calm hum. Mrs. Stebbins rolled down the window. “Sunshine, promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Always wear a rain coat.”

“Pardon?”

“A prophylactic.”

“Huh?”

“You know, a jimmy, a lamb-skin, a rubber, root-suit, sheath, papa-stopper, wear one, whenever you change the oil.” She revved the engine, reversed blind and wildly into the parking-lot. The front fender tipped the empty shopping trolley ass-over-tea-kettle onto the gravel. Mrs. Stebbins drifted into the empty road and called out the window, “Trust me Sunshine. You’ll save yourself a lot of pain and itching by always using the appropriate accoutrement.”

“Will do, Mrs. S.. Thanks. You take care now.”

Her widow’s encouragement floated like good-bye waves dotting the wake from a ship’s stern never to return. He saluted the car’s rear bumper and rectified Phil’s shopping cart. Mrs. Stebbins had a heavy gas-foot and no children. Sunshine looked into the envelope. Besides \$320 dollars, there was a handwritten card:

Just keep that smile on and
everyone will love ya! You’ll be
great, I just know it. Here’s a
little something for the voyage //Love Mrs. S.// xox

Sunshine stuffed the envelop into his back pocket and pushed the wobbling trolley through Phil McCann’s shop door. Not a customer in sight. Phil was probably downing stubbies or guzzling neat ryes at Captain Shrimp’s Rod and Gun Room across the road. Barstool floundering between gloom and misery.

“I saw what she gave you,” Maeve said.

“Huh?”

“A stash. Give me half or I’ll tell the whole island you’re giving it to her. Giving her service. Filling her old hole. Pandering.”

“Pandering? And I’d care. Fuck off, Maeve. No one believes what comes out of your pie-hole.”

“I’ll tell Phil you looted the till.”

“You know why I’m leaving here?” Sunshine asked.

“Like I care.”

“Cause of people like you.” Sunshine handed her a twenty.

“More. Come on, softy.” Maeve leered at the envelope.

“Bag your face.” Sunshine jammed the trolley into the stack.

“You’re a fool, Shoe-shiner. A bloody nincompoop. You’re gonna get molested and mugged in Toronto. You’ll be back home before you even get there. You’ll be back here crying for your job back on Monday morning, with a sore ass and your soft prick dragging between your legs, if you got one. Sucking your thumb. You’ll be covered in AIDS. Welts all over Paki-pecker. Your problem is you think you’re better than everyone else. You’ll see. I give you forty-eight hours in the city before you break down bawling like a tit. You won’t even get off the island before you’re robbed and fucked and crying for your hippy mommy. Fag!”

Maeve spread her apron like a peacock and shoved the twenty into her hip pocket.

“Thanks for your support, Maeve. I’ll remember that. You’re Mega-rad.”

“You don’t need support, you need a head-shrink. Fruitcake.” She Windexed the counter with zeal. Maeve’s default setting was Windex. Sunshine returned to price-gunning cereal.

At 4:45, the Canadian Dry truck arrived. Sunshine unloaded the chinking crates. He filled the flatbed high with the empties and watched the truck wobble down the road out of town. The last load. At closing time, Phil McCann, proprietor, sauntered through the front door, drunk as a weasel, sloshing a Styrofoam cup of god knows what all over the freshly mopped floors. He pressed up against Maeve as he seized the day's cash drawer. She gave him a weak shoulder, almost knocking him off his feet. Weaving toward the office, Phil tripped on nothing and landed hard on his elbow, saving his Styrofoam cupped fuel, allowing the cash to scatter down aisle two as if propelled by a leaf-blower. Phil rolled over and leaned against the jumbo chips bags.

"Guess I got a little too happy at happy hour," he giggled, rubbed his elbow and took a swig. He sat on the floor, imitating a toddler, as Maeve and Sunshine collected his bills and coins. Between Lays and Doritos and cheese dips, he counted out their weekly wages, 26 hours at \$3.75, into two tiny stacks, right down to the nickel, right there on the freshly mopped floor.

"There youse go, all settled up for the weeky, eh. You can sign later."

"Thanks Phil. You know it's my last day, right?" Sunshine said.

"So it be. Bet you'll be back." He curled into fetal position. Chin on bicep.

"You okay locking up, Phil?" Maeve asked.

"Just dandy, Mandy."

"Want me to call anyone for you?" Maeve asked. Phil replied with a burp and closed his eyes, drink full in hand, not a drop spilt, money unwanted on the shop floor. Phil snored at the demons he'd have to face one day and Sunshine

was relieved to not have to be around to witness that battle. Maeve locked the front doors and turned out the main lights. Dozing Phil might have been a corpse under the freezer fluorescents awaiting ignoble burial. Sunshine had already mounted his bicycle by the loading dock when Maeve rattled her keys.

“Hey Moon-shiner, if you don’t cough up more of that stud dough, I’m gonna tell Captain Phil you robbed him blind...spiked his drinkie-poo with a Good-Night-Cinderella.”

“Put a sock in it, Maeve. Send a postcard to Toronto and tell me how that works out, if you even know how.” Sunshine stepped on a pedal.

“You’re a pooffer. Moonshiner wack-job, dickslap. Fudge-packing Sambo!”

“Have a glorious life, Maeve. You grody slut. May we never meet again.”

“Fairy. Butt-dyke! Toilet-trader! See you on Monday, Brownie!”

Sunshine knew he’d miss the sea. He pedaled his Bully Bashguard BMX down Church Hill Road, past the lobster traps and trawlers and fishermen’s shacks. Past summer manors preparing to open for bed & breakfasts. Mr. McCurly pressure washed his porch with glee. Dr. Joyce repainted the name *Usurper* in green on his Sea Dancer, a bright red 32 foot oak hull, his ray of hope. Pete McGinnis skill-sawed plank. Nets and cages stacked like a neat rampart. Father Mulligan’s white Pontiac sat lonely in the church lot, vast, newly-paved, spotless, as if awaiting crawling penitents who would never repent. Spray-painted clouds dotted the May 18th sky blotting out the slight white sun. Shadows waltzed across hyper-green lawns and freshly shingled roofs. Fat Joe waved his cigarette from his dory pattering out to bay. The old fisheries stood low and

closed and dirty, holding tight for city speculators who'd eventually line the whole main street with condos and time-shares and strip malls, measuring progress in cement poured. The Maple Leaf flapped strong above the Fisherman's Wharf: The Island's Longest Salad Bar; Lobster Suppers, Souvenirs, Gifts, Socks, Underwear, Batteries, Stationary, Yarn and More...! North Rustico was so picturesque its image was used as the TV station's closing anthem as it wished the country a patriotic good-night. Canada really was this safe and quaint. Sweet dreams one and all. Turn the TV off now. Some CBC programmer in Toronto snickered sarcastically. A Fredericton couple had bought the Kavanagh mansion and were gutting the insides. Folks said they had applied for yet another B&B license. The demolition crew slept in tents in the backyard and didn't speak a lick of English or French. A Blue Jay paced the center-line of the empty road. Drunk-test? Hey Buddy, can you walk home? Spare a Loonie? Maybe home was where he was going and had never been before. Home, a hat-stand. Sunshine stood on the pedals and sang. "Show me the way to the next whiskey bar, oh don't ask why, oh don't ask why for if..." Up the Parkway shoulder, through the conifer tunnel that hid the seacoast. Just before Doyle's Cove, at the Cape Road turn, he spotted Normy trotting down his lane. Sunshine sat to decelerate. "This is the end, my beautiful friend, the end. Normy."

"Hey Sunshine. How's she hanging?"

"Splendid Normy. Got the money?"

"Yep. You sure you want to do this?"

"Yep."

“250, as agreed. How’s she running?”

“Not a whimper, oiled, chain and seat-post greased. Fresh front tube, new back-foot-pegs, all yours, if you got the money.” Sunshine caressed the seat, a final pet.

“Listen Sunshine, if you ever want her back, I’ll just charge you double.”

“You’re a generous guy, Normy.”

“Aim to please. Good luck on the mainland, Hose-wad. Don’t drop the soap.”

“Real card, Norm.”

“Bet them lisp-ing-thespi-ans would just love to get their spunk-stained mittens on your brown-assed virginity.”

“You’re the lowest common denominator, Norm.”

“Whatever that means.” Normy shrugged. Sunshine counted the money, stuffed the bills into Mrs. Stebbins’s envelope and into his pocket.

“On that note, Normy, I’ll say adieu, adieu to you and you and you, adieu.”

“Freak.” Normy threw a leg over the crossbar and rode away. Sunshine watched his first purchase with his own money become Normy’s. No attachments. Things own us, we don’t own things. Sunshine walked the sea path for three kilometers, then ducked down to the beach to view his last glorious Island sunset.

“Nothing more to do but go home and say good-bye.” Sunshine said to the surf.

The wind rose salt to sting the eyes. He’d be back one day.

“This Atlantic, my religion, my God,” Sunshine proclaimed in earnest to the ebbing tide: Quebec, Labrador, Newfoundland, Greenland. Youth anxious for exodus. He turned his back and took the red dunes towards the only home he’d ever known.

The O’Droole home, now Dharma’s, a simple 1940s post-war Beech-built, A-frame, erected by Bernard O’Droole, a Kerryman turned local milk-slash-mailman after deciding to never cross The Atlantic again, had a yellow two-horse stable turned granny-cottage on the seaside. Dharma installed plumbing and electricity with the idea of renting to summer folk, but never advertised. Over the years, Sunshine had claimed the space, first as a play-pen blizzard of Lego and Play-dough stained Tonka trunks, then a pre-adolescent Rock and Roll den complete with pot-and-barrel drum kit pounded daily after school,, keeping the seagulls at bay. Now, set-stills and headshots of actors and actresses wallpapered the interior rafter to baseboard. In Sunshine’s converted rehearsal-cave hung an old leather punching bag salvaged from Boom Barn Fitness which closed when owner, Martin O’Shea, dodged the Scotiabank debt-collectors and moved to Calgary to work the oil fields. Sunshine attached homemade pillow-arms and legs to the bag. Drew a crude Errol Flynn’s pencil-stache, complete with side-smirk, topped with coonskin cap. It made a worthy opponent for fencing practice. A full length mirror, found leaning against the Salvation Army dumpster, and painstakingly carried twelve kilometers, stood behind a cozy cabaret stage constructed from hand-sawed pallets screwed into potato crates. The stench of fish still emanated from the repurposed wood.

Dharma's Honda Civic sat in the lane, but no mother. Maybe she'd taken Barney, their black Labrador Retriever, down to the beach for a walk. As only child, and adopted, even Sunshine knew his mother was not looking forward to his departure. She had been as sulky and silent as her super-positive demeanor would allow, ever since he'd confessed his plan to strut the Stratford stage reciting the bard. She became down-right sullen the day he returned with the bus ticket to Toronto. Didn't speak to him for two days. A first in their relationship. Sunshine compensated by being extra helpful, doing more chores than normal. He raked, planted, shoveled, and dug madly, even finished the winter-canning un-prompted. Unintentionally rubbing the forthcoming sadness and longing in her face. He'd caught her crying twice alone in the unlit kitchen. Sunshine, as worried as an eighteen-year-old could be, knew if he didn't try his luck now, he never would. Dharma was still young, healthy, intelligent, the finest-catch on the bay. He wanted romance for her but the horizon was not promising. She could easily come and visit, maybe even move to Ontario, even though she'd said she would never leave the island. After teacher's college in Cape Breton, and her Bengali volunteer adventure, the highlight of her travelling-career had been a trip to New York to see Elton John at Carnegie Hall and *Phantom of The Opera* on Broadway. Besides the obligatory annual chaperoning on school trips to Fredericton or Halifax, she hated leaving home. The day she won the county raffle, an all-inclusive week for two in Cancun, she donated the grand prize back to the school so they could re-raffle and use the savings to buy more band instruments and uniforms. "Why do I need to see Cancun? Don't Cancuners

come to us every summer?” True, people came from everywhere to eat lobster and collect shells, but the leaving-what-you-know-to-discover-what-you-didn’t-virus had relinquished Dharma and latched onto young Sunshine like gum on a buskins. Dharma’s practical heart always conquered her hippie head.

Sunshine opened the unlocked door to his thespian-boy-cave, relieved himself and took the lid off the back of the toilet. A manila envelope in a zip-lock bag duct taped to the porcelain held his \$1346 savings. He added Mrs. Stebbins’s investment, his bike-sale money and Phil’s begrudged final salary. \$2039.50, over two fucking grand. He put the bills back into the manila envelope, re-zip-locked, re-duct-taped, and refitted the toilet lid. Shoving a Fine Young Cannibals cassette into the boom-box connected to a car battery that sat on the wooden milk crate beside the bed, “She Drives Me Crazy” filled the room. Mirror-facing, Sunshine launched into his daily regime of facial expressions: big face, little face, the lips, the teeth, the back of the tongue. Left eyebrow up, right eyebrow down, right eyebrow up, left eyebrow down. Tongue out, eyes center, left, right, circle and repeat, other direction. Tongue paint the inside of your mouth. Your tongue is your dagger. Rotate the neck through the full range of motions, shoulder shrugs, finger flicks. Having once read that the flick of a baby-finger could conclude a story stronger than a canon ball, close a trunk forever, erupt a volcano, a symphony. Special attention was paid to finger knuckles. Sunshine swiveled hips and knees, ankles and toes. Dropped to hands and catwalked the room, sensing his spinal flow. Into push-up, sit-up, hand-stand, chin-up. Then the important work—finding the stillness of center. He dug his toes

into the carpet, feeling the plywood beneath, rocked his heels, and pushed his full body weight to the inner and outer foot edges. Bent knees directly over ankles, he swung his hips slightly forward and back to the music, finding that in-between space where nothing cracked or locked. He pumped his diaphragm hard into his palm, confirming elastic vigilance and active billow. Blank yourself to allow the breeze of story to enter the actor's empty vessel. He shrugged shoulders, bounced then pushed his chin back, which straightened his neck. The final step to finding center, which he had learned from a TV documentary about ballerinas, was visualization. He pulled a clump of hair from the crown of his head and mimed knotting it to a dangling string attached to God in heaven. He checked the mirror for perfect alignment, closed his eyes and whispered, "Feel thy center, know thy center, be thy center." Eyes closed, he stepped his right leg forward into a slow-motion lunge to grab the hilt of his sword. A sword his grandfather had worn in the 1916 Uprising against British Rule, the birth of a republic. A sword Dharma had given him on his 16th birthday, not to own, but to care for as custodian. He pulled the sparkling-clean-razor-sharp blade towards his face. Stepped back into center, and focused on the still blade resting attentively millimeters from the tip of his nose. Ready as he'd ever be. The Fine Young Cannibals cassette automatically flipped to side B. Sea wind rattled the shutters in a second of divine transition. Sunshine *Butohed*.

He'd first discovered this Japanese slow-motion protest dance on TV Quebec. A clip of Sankai Juku presenting "Egg Stands Out of Curiosity" at the Theatre de la Ville in Paris, sparked his curiosity, spurring him to the local public

library to order all the *Butoh* books and video cassettes in the National Library System. They arrived from Saskatoon, Etobicoke, St. John's, even a VHS from Vancouver. Sunshine felt special getting calls from the librarian, who was a chronic gossip and told whoever would listen that Sunshine was clinically disturbed and the pied-piper of a pirating-ring of Thai pornography. When called to the principal's office and forced to explain what he was studying and why, Sunshine realized he had to leave the island to patch the holes in his dreams.

"Why and what are these deliveries... these tapes... this graphic...this paraphernalia this... this STUFF!" Principal Blight, frothing at the mouth, pounded his desk. Instant coffee spilt from "The World's Greatest Teacher" mug, a gift from his wife twenty-two years earlier.

"It's art, sir," Sunshine said.

"Art! ART! ART! Art? Al McInnis's hip check is art. Gretzky standing behind the net with the puck is art! Norman Rockwell is art!" A cheer slid under the office window from the road-hockey game in the recess yard. An argument over whether the goal was legitimate erupted. Boy banter, sticks slapped posts, venomous insults, punch-threats.

"THIS MAN HAS NOTHING ON!" Principal Blight jabbed his stubby index finger into a black and white photo of a Japanese dancer covered in loin cloth and white body paint. Exquisite light caught by camera, a powdered-face of pain abridged all the world's injustice. The photo had been taken on the exact opposite side of the planet.

"He's wearing as much as Christ on the Cross, sir," Sunshine said,

unwittingly tossing fuel on Blight's fire.

“CHRIST!!!”

“He's wearing as much as a wrestler, sir.”

“Christ. Al. Mighty. Why can't you just be normal, Sunshine? I'm afraid I'm going to have to involve your mother in this... this... this perversity. Disgraceful.”

A life on stage, a jobber, a star, batoning the theatrical-chalice to the next generation of story-tellers. Sunshine stood at center practicing his ice-breath, fire-breath, circling his eyes over the pictures pasted to his walls: Peter O'Toole, Richard Harris, Richard Burton, Paul Neman, Montgomery Cliff, James Dean, Marlon Brando, Errol Flynn, Donald O'Connor, Sean Connery, Gene Hackman, James Stewart, Fred Astaire, Gary Oldman, Daniel Day Lewis, John Gielgud, Sir Laurence Olivier, Dustin Hoffmann, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, William Shatner, Michael Caine, Kirk Douglas, Brian Bedford, Colm Feore, Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, Meryl Streep, Grace Kelly, Sissy Spacek, Julie Christie... and of course, the god of all gods, the paragon of spectacle, the cousin he had yet to meet: Douglas O'Droole. Monthly, Sunshine combed the library's old newspapers and magazines with a clandestine razor blade looking for the next addition to his altar. Not easy deciding who went on the wall. Induction into the personal hall of fame was never unanimous and getting trusty information about theatre and dance and film and culture and art in North Rustico was no cakewalk. On Prince Edward Island, in 1989, local wisdom revolved around trapping tourists and lobsters. Grand ideas needed grand places.

Sunshine, sword blade between eyes, focused on his idols, ones he had

never met. Yet planned to meet. Hope, a powerful propeller. He bent his knees and rotated, focused on ankle, hip, ribcage twist. "After vulnerability, flexibility is the actor's second best weapon," he whispered in his deepest coming-to-theatres-this-summer voice-over. The Fine Young Cannibals ejected themselves. Sunshine slugged from a water jug and jammed *Purple Rain* into his ghetto-blaster and cranked the volume full. He dueled the punching bag. Normally, he kept the sword sheathed to preserve the bag, or stopped just short of puncture, an exercise in restraint, but today, his 18th birthday, was his final duel. He'd never need or see this bag again. He could cut loose. Sunshine slashed and dug and rooted and slit. He pricked out eyes and batted homeruns, backhand-doubled handers tangoed with feathery wake-up pokes. Sand poured to the floor. On final attack, just below Errol's swirling mustache, Sunshine severed the leather bag, threw down the sword and pounded the spilt-sand with his fist, spreading it all over the carpet. Sunshine delivered his final line with slow motion John Wayne roundhouse punches.

"YOU KILLED MY FATHER! NOW PREPARE TO DIE! BUT WAIT, THERE IS SOMETHING I MUST TELL YOU. I AM NOT LEFT-HANDED!" He channeled all fury into a Vincent Price cackle unleashing a war baby's full wrath on the now useless punching bag. From the door, Sunshine's mother, Dharma O'Droole stood thinking, what have I done to create this madness? Genetics? She watched her son slash and bludgeon, a sand eddy, tornado amuck, dog burying daily duty. Prince's "When Doves Cry" blared. Screams rolled down the trail out to sea, reverberating plankton. Unwitting fishermen returning with the

day's catch would hear and imagine abattoir slaughter. She had never seen Sunshine so untethered, such blind almost erotic passion. As Prince crescendoed, Sunshine dropped to his knees and mimed a heart-stopping howl to the heavens. Dharma caught his tear-filled face in the mirror. He flipped his grip on her father's sword, tip to the floor, and committed *hari-kari* to the final drum-beat. Sunshine fell *Butoh*-style facedown onto sand-strewn floor. Agonic, his death-rattle snaked, reaching for that final line, a lover's hand, just out of reach, no exeunt, the missed life-boat. "Maybe I'm just like my father, too cold. Maybe I'm just like my mother, she's never satisfied. Why do we scream at each other? This is what it sounds like when Dove's cry..." Dharma ran across the room to her son. Bloodless sword blade quivering in time to the final ascending synthesized notes—palm in tornado, corner-flag wind-flapping on a football field, doffed feather cap. Hilt hidden by Sunshine's shoulder, the shiny metal anchored in his armpit. Dharma didn't know whether to applaud or call an ambulance.

Sunshine rolled over and smiled. "Mother, I'm merely acting." He popped to his feet and sheathed the sword. "Went a touch over the top, sorry. I saw you in the mirror and turned melodramatic."

"You scared the wits out of me," Dharma said, eyeing the sand. Sunshine bobbed his neck to Prince's "1999." He grabbed his mother's wrist and twirled.

"Come on Mom, swing it!"

"Tonight we're gonna party like it's 1999," they sang.

"Sunshine, I'm going to miss you."

"Mom, this is a time for celebration. Don't be baby blue." Their spin

slowed.

“Promise to clean up that sand before you go?”

“Aye-aye, Capitano.” Sunshine heel-clicked and saluted.

“Dinner’s ready.”

“The Last Supper,” Sunshine declared in his best Richard Burton.

“You don’t need to rub my nose in it. Just come up to the house, okay?”

“Mom, you know I love you and I’ll miss you and you can always come visit. You’ll fly out for Christmas. Once I get all set up, we can spend New Year’s Eve at the top of the CN tower, or skate along The Avon, wine-tasting in Niagara or all of it! I’ll be home between jobs and I’ll send my private jet for you on opening nights...”

“Sunshine, you’re a regular barrel of giggles.” I’ve smothered him, she thought, I’ve coddled him. He’s too naïve for this world, delusional, especially for the theatre-world and Toronto—he’ll be stabbed and beaten.

“Mom, don’t overthink. Worst case scenario, Douglas O’Droole tells me to bugger off and I hop a bus home and start at Phil’s again. I’m not afraid of shame.”

“Are you still going to apply to The National Theatre School?”

“If nothing better comes along. The auditions aren’t till January.”

“You know I’ll always be here for you no matter what happens.”

“I know. And me for you. Curtain and scene.” Sunshine bowed.

“You and me against the world, eh Sunshine?” Dharma mimed an air heart. Sunshine lifted the sword.

“Every blade has two edges. He who wounds with one, wounds himself with the other. Should I bring it?”

“Douglas might want to see it. I don’t think he has. Supper awaits, my liege.” Dharma blew a camp kiss and closed the door. Sunshine flopped on the bed, last supper, last night. The bus ticket sat on the night stand:

Charlottetown—Toronto, 1 Yorkdale Road, 33 hours and 45 minutes, a night or two in Ye Olde Hog Town and onto Stratford. Fear welled, the mantra assuaged: won the lottery at birth, all else is gravy...swirled hope to dizzy. Will they let me on the bus with the sword? Perhaps do the whole trip in costume? Leotards and codpiece, puffed sleeves, dangling cuffs, doff my hat to he who doth cross my path. Sunshine considered a last wank, under the watchful eyes of Julie Christie embracing Peter O’Toole, but could never decide who was more alluring. No, restraint. He’d have the whole night. Clean the sand later. In towel and smile, he examined the mirror. “Eleven hours to decampment and embarkation, and counting, Captain.” Sunshine said and saluted himself in the mirror. His reflection, the only audience. His monkey-mind screeched and peeled bananas. At 18, peace is a pipe-dream.

Sunshine flip-flopped through the damp shin-high grass to the house his adopted grandfather built. Stars called him names. Thou crusty botch of nature! Thou mammering doghearted maggot-pie! Thou frothy clapper-clawed scullion! “Douglas, my cousin,” Sunshine whispered, “I am coming to absorb everything you know. I am the next generation, you can live again through me, master.” Surf at full pound. Sunshine jigged a two-step and bowed to the low north star. Porch

lights shone on empty lawn. Odd, Dharma never wasted electricity. The tick-tick-tick of a car motor came up the trail that led from bush onto the concession road. A Ford Taurus passed the front lane, dowsed the headlights and reversed into the sea trail mouth. Five passengers alighted, shushed each other, then just as his mother came out the backdoor, ducked behind a fat elm.

“Mom, you see that? Someone’s casing the house.”

“I just took the roast out. Hope you brought an appetite.”

“Should I check it out? Call the cops or someone?”

“Naw, couple of lost tourists going up the trail to star-gaze, ” Dharma said, ushering her son by triceps up the backstairs. Reaching the screen-door handle, Dharma took Sunshine’s face in both hands, kissed his forehead, and pulled the old oak door ajar. The kitchen was dark. His mother slipped out of contact. Sunshine stood as if in the wings of his high-school auditorium awaiting a cue, he knew, could feel the anxious exhales, inhales, dark, human, alive. A reveling pause before flicking light switch, hold it, keep it, pure suspense, memorize this sense-memory to recall forever. SURPRISE! Applause, cheers, a rowdy off-tune, “for he’s a jolly good fellow” as beer cans popped opened. Detached voices shouted. Where’s the cake? Roast first! Sunshine cut the roast! Give the boy a drink. Get the plates. Turn up that music! Dharma cranked the soundtrack to Footloose. Sunshine gave and took hugs. Normy handed Sunshine a bottle of 50 Ale and punched him hard on the shoulder, “You’re not leaving till you’re well ploughed boyo. I want you up-chucking on the bus. Multi-coloured yawnin at the way to Moncton!”

“Thanks Normy, always looking out for me, eh.”

Mr. McMurtry pulled Sunshine into a head-lock and rubbed his knuckles across his thick black hair, “Guess we’re losing our little Bengaler-Bollywoodi to the big smoke. Only touch of color on the island, and ya gotta run off and be among your own, eh. You’ll be importing carpets and spices in no time, eh.”

“What are you talking about, Mr. McMurtry?” Dharma said.

“No harm meant, honey. Just calling the kettle what she be...”

“This kettle’s a pooffer,” Maeve chimed from the sofa.

“Maeve, what’re you doing here?”

“Free beer,” she held up the proof. “Guess your momma don’t know how close we really are.” She winked, “plus when you come back on Monday, I’m gonna rub everything said here tonight in your shame-sucking sneezer.”

“You got a pen and paper?” Sunshine asked.

“What for?” Maeve asked, and burped.

“Better take notes, cause you got a head like a sieve,” Sunshine gulped beer and spun to find Normy’s 15 year-old sister, Gloria, aiming a video camera in his face.

“Gloria, turn that off.”

“Got something to say? Say it to the lens. Wait, let me focus, okay. Now Sunshine, how does it feel to be leaving North Rustico?” Sunshine looked straight into the lens. “Golden.” He delivered a studied toothy matinee-idol smirk. Pete McGinnis, smelling like salted cod crossed behind Sunshine and pinched his ass, with a whisper, “One for the road, boyo!” Sunshine swatted his hand and

howled. Gloria shoved the camera closer.

“Sunshine, what advice would you give a young movie-maker?”

“Read a lot. Shoot a lot. Don’t listen to anyone but your betters.” Gloria jumped up and down, unable to contain her delight, footage ruined. Sunshine and Gloria were close, maybe best friends, which made Normy jealous and his parents wary. Their friendship was mostly conducted in secret, on the beach, in the woods, some nights Gloria would sneak into Sunshine’s lair. The attraction mutual, but not sexual. Gloria’s jury was still out on boys. She’d yet to feel the full force of puberty which had passed through her body leaving a plump shine and yearning glow. Mostly they talked about movies and shared magazines and cassettes. To save money, when either rented a movie from town, they’d be kind and rewind and trade to let the other watch it before returning the tape to the shop. They also shared a mutual love for books. Not a book passed through their hands that didn’t pass through the other’s. They spent hours critiquing character and scene. Out of all the people in North Rustico, Sunshine would miss Gloria most. When Sunshine showed Gloria the bus ticket a few weeks earlier she broke and said, “That means we’re never going to marry.”

“Gloria, you know that was never an option.”

“A girl can dream.”

“We’re artistic kindred spirits. Not paramours. That goes way deeper than teenage make-out partners.”

“I know but it’s slim pickings on P.E.I.”

“In four years, when you’re 18, you can join me. I’ll be established by then,

trust me, I'll launch you. Just write as many scripts as you can between now and then."

Father Mulligan blessed Sunshine in the living-room, hand on head, the other clenching a beer. "My job is to keep you out of hell, so get the hell out of here!" The party laughed and the good father whispered, "You'll be fine Sunshine. You're a good boy. You've a good head on your shoulders. You've a good heart in your chest. Remember you can always return and it's never too late to join our team. The seminary. I can put in a good word. An intelligent, good-looking boy like you would go far. Many thespians have turned to god after failing on the stage. Saint Augustine! Rumor has it Pope JP was treading the boards when the Nazis took Gdansk. It's all the same in the end... boys like you are our future... beautiful healthy young men like you..."

"Thanks Father Mulligan, I'll keep that in mind."

Dr. Joyce's new younger-model wife from Vermont picked chords on an acoustic guitar. The party sung farewell songs, sad-to-say-I-must-be-on-my-way-so-buy-me-beer-and-whiskey-cause-I'm-going-far-away tunes that had stained coffin-ship-tickets with tears for centuries. Prince Edward Island was no stranger to young men and women going west to the cities to find work. Halifax. Montreal. Toronto. Calgary. Vancouver. Return was rare. The successful would revisit ten years later to buy a cottage or deal with a deceased parent's home. The not-so-successful would disappear down the urban rabbit hole into booze and rooming houses or correctional facilities. "Going down the road" was the term for this ever-westward emigration. Over-regulation and over-fishing and taxes and lack

of respect for the lifestyle had been dwindling the fisheries for decades, not as dramatically as Newfoundland, but a slow leak. Every season five less boats set traps. Or a foreign-owned conglomerates would purchase fishing licenses and local families would be cut out of the catch or turned into pliable clock-punching employees. Sure, the islanders fought 'progress' but they knew they'd never win and perhaps preferred to lose. The island felt better empty. Sunshine had attended farewell ceilidhs before, but never as protagonist, never center-circle, always radius. His mood shifted wildly from nervous to grateful to reckless to fuck-you too, to pre-regret, to deep sorrow, a rainbow swirl in a teacup, a character in self-production. Plus, he'd never got pounded in front of his mother before. In fact, he'd never really taken to alcohol, at least not like the majority of the island's teenagers, who could drink twenty-four beers on an afternoon between school's end and supper without stagger or vomit. Sunshine liked wine-coolers but took great pains, by using gimmicky mugs and slushy cups from the gas-station, to hide his sweet-tooth. Being adopted, brown, and raised by a single hippy mother whose bleeding heart was trying to save the education system were strikes enough against him. Adding wine coolers, was as good as coming out of the closet on an Easter Sunday in church clothes. Sunshine liked girls, but he'd never had the chance to test. He was also not closing any doors but deep urges confused. Sunshine's sexuality was sitting on a fence waiting for a push in either direction. From reading, he knew he was not 100% gay. So many writers had described the appetites and emotions that arrive long before puberty, on the other hand, most of the boys and girls his age at school had at

least fondled and kissed if not done the whole hog. If forced, to tick a box, Sunshine would go for other, neutral, undecided, if there was such a box. He was not looking forward to picking a team. He preferred to watch. When Sunshine masturbated, which was rare, especially at his age, he'd start by staring at the actors and actresses plastered to his wall. Then his eyes would close and the sea would appear. Turning primal, the images would blend into shadows and blobs, as when staring at the sun with closed-eyes for too long. There was no one to talk to about this as he knew the whole town lived for gossip. Gloria was too young, too inexperienced. Sunshine figured he'd figure it all out in the city where he'd be anonymous and meet people with similar confusion. When his mother tried to approach the subject, usually after a joint or two, late on a weekend night, after some didactic B-movie, she was supportive and loving. So lovey-dovey, Sunshine wanted to puke. He wanted information, not a hug, and his mother only gave comfort, not facts.

Phil McCann snored on the sofa, but when the singing got loud he went to his truck, which he shouldn't have driven. Two years later, Phil would do time in prison for drinking and driving after slamming a touring cyclist into a tree in broad daylight. He returned with a tin-whistle. Normy retrieved a tool box from the shed and began beating a low base with a hammer and a fast cymbal with a screwdriver. Maeve handed out spoons. Cynthia McMaster, a local fiddler, who was home between international tours with a repudiated step-dancing troupe, Mari-timer-a-rama, arrived and elevated the music to a serious and magnificent level. Close to midnight, the house was elbow to elbow. Vehicles lined the road.

A few dozen high-schoolers passed schwag around an improvised bonfire on the front lawn. Seeds popped, stems ruptured rolling papers, they didn't care. Sunshine's farewell ceilidh would be talked about all summer, might even enter the North Rustico folk annals if Sunshine did what he said he would. Dharma never left the kitchen dance floor and broke her own rule of smoking in the house. Sunshine got wobbly and huggy and tearful. Everyone he passed dropped warning or splinter of advice or lucky charm in his ear. Some he heard, some would haunt later, some fell onto the beer soaked carpet: You're gonna be a big star, Sunshine. Adventure is no weight to carry boyo. Pansy, you're gonna bend like a pretzel. Sure will miss you, buddy. Sold your bike yet? Don't let them rob you. Carry a knife on the bus. We love you and always will. You'll be on welfare in two-days. An actor, eh, what restaurant? My buddy's got a house painting crew in Oshawa if you need a job. Or Sudbury. Don't let them change you. Stay hungry, stay humble, brother. Here, Sunshine, smoke this. Hey, Sunshine, would ya take this package to my cousin in Ottawa? Better to be a big fish on a little island, than a guppy gutted upstream. You need to start working out, eh, won't get on the TV without guns, you need big fucking pipes to get on the old idiot box, boyo, feel my pipes. Feel them. Sunshine made the rounds deflecting and smiling.

The music slumped around three when Cynthia took her fiddle home. Normy, who'd been keeping the bass spry, skedaddled with Miss McGuire, twice his age with a reputation to match. In a fit of drunken frustration, Phil McCann threw his tin whistle in the fire. Then in a fit of remorse, pulled the whistle out

without prongs and burnt his mouth and hands trying to restart a tune. His burnt flesh smelt like bacon. Then he threw the instrument back into the fire again and would have continued on repeat had Father Mulligan not pulled him out the door and driven him home. Dr. Joyce and his wife argued over who would drive and their insults leaked that he had performed an illegal abortion on her sixteen years earlier. She left her guitar on the sofa. The high-schoolers remained. High as kites, they played footsy and stole kisses around the dwindling yard fire, all brag and buzz, tires spinning in hypothetical slush. Sunshine leaned against the fridge remembering a TV-interview with Harold Pinter on Beckett and hopelessness in *Waiting for Godot*. Gloria came over and took Sunshine's hand.

"I need to speak to you." She stood on her tippy-toes to whisper in his ear.

"Can't it wait?"

"You're leaving in three hours and I'm leaving now." Gloria led him out the back door onto the lawn.

"I got something for you, but I think we should share a first kiss first. A real one with tongue and all." She put her hands to her hips, mime of nag.

"A kiss? Gloria, come on, not now. You're 14... I'm old enough..."

"Pretend you're acting, whatever, a scene in a movie. You're going to like my gift." She smiled, ran her fingers through his hair.

"Fine," putting his hand on Gloria's lower back, as if ushering a blind elder across an angry street.

"Make it count," she said, "close your eyes and feel. Pretend I'm the one you want, Sunshine." They kissed, weird on both sides. "Here, I made this.

Romeo and Juliette, Othello, a whole bunch.” She handed him a box of cassettes.

“A mixed-tape anthology? That’s so girly.”

“No dickweed, it’s fucking King Lear. You can listen on the bus.”

“Really you shouldn’t have, my dear,” Sunshine tried his Clark Gable.

“Sunshine, one day you’re going to grow up and figure out you like girls and you’ll come crawling back to me on your hands and knees. When I’m older, age won’t mean a thing, and you’ll never find a woman like me. Fuck, maybe someone will have weaseled into my heart first. Men are so fucking dumb.”

“Gloria.”

“Sunshine, you are going to get so fucking lost.”

“I hope so.”

“Then this is good-bye. Good luck,” she said, turning and crossing the wet lawn.

“It’s see you later not good-bye, Gloria?”

Under spinning island sky, Sunshine knew the right thing would be go back into the house and say his good-nights, fare-the-wells, adieu, ciao crackers, sayonara peanut-mind- suckers-afraid-of-adventure, but he was too drunk. The unforgiving Atlantic pounded Prince Edward Island. Empty lobster traps performed trapeze stunts underwater to the regal sound of dolphin applause. Wind filled his face with hair. Sunshine dropped his fly to urinate into the waving grass. His territory no longer. The road called his name, There’s a voice that keeps on calling me, where I go, is where I want to be... every stop I make I

meet a new friend... Sunshine cracked a wide grin, tiny giggles grew into insane belly-laughs. He slipped his cold hands to diaphragm to feel the pump, then stumbled, still singing to bed.

Two and half hours later, Dharma, from bed's edge, handed him a steaming coffee mug. He leaned the pillows against the wall and wiggled to sitting. The cup warmed his hands.

"Have you packed?" she asked.

"Pretty much." The room a mess, sand still covered the carpet. "Thanks for waking me."

"I was going to let you sleep and miss the bus, but, you know... Get showered. I've got eggs and toast on the go. We should leave soon." Her voice cracked.

"Mom, thanks for the shindig last night. Hell of a send-off."

"One for the books. You deserve good memories of this place. Hope you aren't too hung-over."

"I'll survive. Have you slept?"

"I hope you're doing the right thing."

"Nothing can stop me."

"But do you think you will be happy if all your dreams come true?"

"I hope so. Do you?"

"As long as you're helping others. Joy comes through service. If you always feel you're helping others, even if you aren't, then you can be happy."

"Do you think Douglas is happy?"

“I have no idea, son. It’s been so long. But success is not always happiness.”

“I bet he is. I bet he’s perma-grinning. The whole world’s at his feet. He can do whatever he wants.”

“Can he?”

“At least on stage.”

“And life?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Shower.”

Too foggy to worry, Sunshine finished stuffing his backpack. He shoved his Walkman and Gloria’s cassette in the top pouch and decided to strap the sword to the side like ski-poles. He wondered if he should wrap it in a garbage bag. He showered and brushed his teeth, forgetting to pack soap or shampoo or a hairbrush. Crossing the lawn, Barney, his nine-year-old retriever, bounded forward, put two paws on Sunshine’s chest.

“Hey Barney, wanna come with?” The dog barked twice. “I thought so.” Sunshine ruffled his ears. Rubbed his tail bone. Caressed the droopy-eyed dog’s chin.

“Look after her for me, will ya?” He said with a last hug, heart strings plucking a elegy. Barney would disappear three winters later in a blizzard. Fat Joe, a lobsterman, mentioned to Dharma that he had passed a black furry shaped thing with floppy ears in the sea while dropping traps but Barney’s corpse was never claimed. Shouldering the bag, he went to the house, ate a warm

breakfast and they drove to the Charlottetown bus station with the radio news bridging their opposing meanderings: a violent stand-off in Tiananmen Square. Al Gore introducing a \$1.6 billion to The U.S. Senate to create a “data super-information-highway.” The tracking of medical-waste turns law. Pete Rose busted for betting. Nothing about Canada on the Canadian news. Out the window on the empty road the wind pushed an empty beer can into the car’s path. The front right tire flattened the tin.

“Hope that didn’t come from our party,” Dharma said.

“Doubt it, too far.”

After thirty minutes, Charlottetown appeared, sad and small. The sun just above the horizon, a solitary truck pulled into an Esso station. Traffic lights all green, and Dharma, as always, kept just below the speed-limit. A paperboy pedaled his front-basket-stack down the opposite side of the road.

“We’ve time for a donut.”

“Thanks Mom, I’m full. Just drop me off please. I’ll be okay.” Sunshine felt cruel. Just doing what you want, hurts other people, even though it shouldn’t. The Maritime Coach Station also sold trucks. Fords lined in formation as if protecting a fort, prices painted on windshields, sparkling clean, as if to show the bus passengers what you could have if you stayed and worked hard and saved your money. You could drive one of these beasts through the forest and not sit on the dirty sweat-soaked seats of public transit.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t want to fly.”

“I want to see the country. Mom, I’ve told you a thousand times.”

“From a bus window.”

“We need to respect distance. I’ll be fine. Got books, batteries, fruit, water, plus we stop like every two hours. I’ll be fine, Mom.” Sunshine opened the passenger door.

“Wait,” Dharma held Sunshine’s wrist, “I’ll stay with you till the bus leaves.”

“Let’s just keep the drama for the stage, Mom.”

“Take this,” she handed him an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Emergency funds.”

“Mom, I got this.” He tried to push the envelope back into her hand, but she insisted. He tried to leave it on the seat. He looked at the envelope, not wanting his mother’s money, but he just might need it.

“And this.” She handed him another envelope.

“What’s this?”

“A letter for Douglas.”

“What does it say?”

“It’s for him. Not really private. An introduction of sorts. Some context. To jar his memory.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just an introduction. He might not remember me. He’s a big star now, meets lots of people. I’ve heard he drinks a lot. It just says who you are and thanks him, more or less.”

“Very old school, Mom.”

“He’ll like it. You’ll be like some Greek messenger or something”

“Geez Mom.”

“Like Pheidippides who ran from Marathon”

“Except it’s 1830 clicks, not 26.2.”

“And you’re not running.”

Sunshine stepped out of his mother’s car. Dharma ran around the front and hugged her only son. She lifted him off his feet with difficulty and held him tight. She kissed his forehead, “I’m not going to cry. Call when you arrive in Toronto. Call anytime. Call collect, day or night. Call. Remember you can always come home. I love you and I’m proud of you no matter what. You’re going to be great no matter what happens. Be happy each day. I love you, Sunshine.” He stepped out of the hug and looked to the ground. Sunshine fought the tears by swallowed. He’d read you couldn’t cry with an open throat. Save it for the stage, boyo. He blinked, forced a yawn, and turned to the bus. Dharma took two steps after him and spanked his butt twice.

“Mom”

“Get on the bus, ya ham!”

“Thanks for the lift, Mom.”

“Go Sunshine and shine! I love you!”

“And everything else, Mom” Sunshine threw faux-kisses and trotted towards the boarding bus.

The driver, a small dark man, Sunshine’s possible doppelganger thirty years down the road, if futures could be reflected in a mirrors, if he got nothing he

wanted, took his ticket. Sunshine had never seen anyone of his color and build in person before. TV, yes, but touchable, never.

“Sukhamano?” the driver said, reading Sunshine’s ticket.

“Pardon me?”

“Mikka nandri?” The driver looked Sunshine up and down.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Where are you from?”

“Here, sir.”

“My sincerest apologies, I thought you were Chakmas? Punjabi?”

“No sir. I’m an islander. A spud.”

“End of the line?” the driver asked.

“Pardon?”

“Destination Toronto?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, stow your bag, third compartment there, good man. My back’s not what it used to be.” The driver rubbed his hip and shook his head slowly.

“Shame you lost your mother tongue,” he said climbing the bus-steps.

“Never knew my mother... tongue, sir.”

{ACT II}

The diesel engine pattered and farted. Sunshine took the window seat directly above his bag, put his handbag on the floor and pressed his forehead against the window. Last minute cars pulled into the parking lot. A fresh pebble of chewed gum pressed below the window on the rail caught his attention. The tiniest acts of vandalism, so rebellious in nature, so fickle. Another pink rock of mutiny stuck to the seat in front directly at eye-level, this one couldn't be missed, true insurgence. A solitary assassin giving the middle finger to the system that can neither catch nor support the masses? The driver closed the baggage doors below, entered the terminal, spoke to a chubby white man with an official hat, took a friendly punch on the shoulder, signed a clipboard, and marched head down to the puffing dragon in berth awaiting the open road. Sunshine and bus both bursting to cross the Northumberland straight to set wheel and foot on mainland, abandon island, be elsewhere. The driver walked down the aisle counting the heads. He opened the toilet door, checking for stowaways or toilet paper, returned, and perched lightly on the pilot's chair. Tooting the horn twice happy, he belched the warm bus into gear and took a wide sweep into the empty lane. Dharma pulled her sweater tight across her chest, hair wild with wind, a truly beautiful soul, Sunshine thought, funny these thoughts we have while leaving, as if a fog had risen and importance revealed. His mother raised her arm to wipe her eye then waved. Sunshine put his open palm to the window, got to his feet to look behind above the seatbacks, but Dharma was gone. Sunshine too. It's all gone now.

Sunshine leaned his head forward to rest on the seat. Eyes closed, emotions are colors for canvas, one day, the palate will be a rainbow he thought as he bus chugged over the island. Awaiting to cross the unforgiving straight at the shortest point, the Albegweit passage, Micmac for cradle, oh cradle me, on the mammoth *MV John Grey Hamilton*, solid iron, Quebec-built, pointed into the livid sea. Train-cars loaded carefully, family vehicles returning from vacationland, trucks loaded to the gills with potatoes, cement-sand, cereal-grain, lettuce for New York burgers, tinned mussels in brine, salted cod, water-tanked lobsters, iced oysters, and dried shit mountains to fertilize Montana, Wyoming, Hawaii. Don't they have their own? Sunshine was just another product leaving the island to be consumed and spread and never returned, from hungry countryside to gluttonous city, a one-way ticket. The bus crept onto the ferry ramp and parked in the dank hull. The driver's voice droned over the speakers, "Please return in 70 minutes, 70 minutes. When you see the port in Caribou, please come take your seat. Captain Kale's Commissary starts alcohol service in 25 minutes, enough time to down a few refreshments before the highway in Nova Scotia." The thought of booze made Sunshine dry heave. He needed something fried.

The bus aisle teetered with ship hull. Sunshine stepped onto the keel parking lot. He ascended the staircase to the forecastle and followed the promenade deck to the bow. The bay white capped yet inviting. *The John Grey Hamilton* blasted its baritone farewell, vibrated and pulled away from The Big Red Mud, lines coiled, dripping after toss, sturdy engine engaged, thunderous, a rumble. Bounced in the morning light, New Brunswick to starboard, Nova Scotia

to port, Newfoundland calling long-distance from the horizon. He am John Cabot goddamn and he'd claim these lands for Cross and Queen. Sunshine mind-voice yelled into the wind. Heavy spray misted his face, shutting his eyes, he embraced ship-rock and salt-water. When a double wave dipped the vessel his belly filled with giddy freedom. The bus driver was standing at the rail a few feet over trying to light a cigarette. He squatted and turned his back to the wind, unzipped, and lit-up inside his jacket. He stood and turned to face the open sea exhaling proud relief cigarette-cherry lambent. The driver nodded an offer.

"No thank you. Never smoked."

"Don't start. Horrible, expensive habit." The driver flicked ash sternwards.

"What were those languages?"

"Malayalam. Tamil. I was a linguist before I came to Canada."

"Where did you come from?"

"New Delhi. I'm Amitav Desai," the driver extended his hand and they shook.

"I'm Sunshine O'Droole."

"Sunshine?"

"Yeah, my mother's a hippy. She said she saw my smile and knew my name."

"Better than Moonbeam."

"Or Eclipse."

"Or Apple-bottom. Or Banana-ass." The wind took the laugh they shared.

"Are you're parents from India?"

“No, I was adopted. From Dhaka.”

“When?”

“1972.”

“A war baby.” Amitav stared to sea.

“What?”

“Operation Searchlight. They came and raped all the women. They turned the university students into sex-slaves. They looted and burnt and executed randomly. A black stain on history, humans are the most dangerous animal. I remember it well. I’ sorry, people love spreading bad stories. We love destroying innocence.”

“I don’t know much about that.”

“You should. You will. One day you’ll want to find out where you come from. Who you come from, all adoptees eventually search for their roots. It’s natural.”

A pod of whales surfaced where the bay joined the open sea.

“Look!” Sunshine pointed, happy to change the subject.

“Yes, they’re always here at this time. Clockwork, as if to guide the ferry.”

Amitav threw the cigarette into the sea.

“I need coffee. Would you like a cuppa Mr. Sunshine?”

“Sure, Mr. Desai.”

They walked down the slick deck. The pod submerged. The door was heavy. Past the tilting seating area, blue plastic, almost empty. An older couple sat side-by-side holding hands and gazing through a port-hole unblinking as if

watching their youth float past. A toddler kicked a tennis ball up and down the aisle, mother nowhere in sight. A hunched punk-rocker laminated a joint in saliva. A miniature woman with blue hair sat on a stool behind the concession stand, a normal kitchen fridge, coffee maker, toaster and rack of Smarties and chips. The woman and Amitav small talked as she poured coffee into two small Styrofoam cups. She took a bag of milk from the fridge. With two hands, she dappled two white spots, turning the black coffee brown.

“Sugar?”

“I’m sweet enough, Viv,” Amitav said.

“Your son want sugar?”

“He’s sweet enough too, Viv. Sugar’ll kill you.”

“I’m not his son,” Sunshine said to the woman.

“What’s that sonny?” Viv cupped her ear, leaning closer on the counter.

“Thank you very much.”

“Such a polite young thing. So handsome too. I bet the girlies are stalking you. You you should be proud, Mr. Singh.” She reached to rub Sunshine’s head, but a rogue wave forced her arm to grip the counter. Stability.

“I am. Very much so, thanks Viv. See you tomorrow.”

“If I live that long.”

“You’re as strong as a sea-gale, Viv. You’ve a full life ahead of you.”

“Maybe on another planet,” she cackled.

“Like Newfoundland!” Amitav and Viv belly-laughed. They took the steaming cups and climbed a flight of iron stairs. They stepped over a chain that

held a sign: CREW ONLY. A few feet above, the captain peered out the ship's windshield. Amitav waved. The Captain gave two mock salutes. Amitav squatted and lit another cigarette inside his jacket.

"The view's better up here," he said, confirming the obvious.

"That woman called you Singh," Sunshine said.

"Oh Viv, she always does. I've told her a thousand times. Guess all us brown guys are a Singh to her. White people call people what they think they are even if they are not. They still call the indigenous Indians. You're not in India, Mr. Columbus. Well, I'll call you that anyway. Mr. Hudson, this is not India. That's okay, but do you mind if I call you Indian. Is this the tropics? Do you see any sacred cattle? Do you smell Masala?"

"She thought I was your son..."

"Well, you could be."

Amitav looked into Sunshine eyes a beat too long, then burst out laughing, spilling half his coffee down his uniform.

"Just joking, trying to joke. I've never been to war, thank Vishnu. Hope I didn't overstep there, Sunshine."

"No, it's fine." A flock of seagulls swooped and cackled.

"I couldn't be. I moved to Canada in '68. I was your age. Had an uncle in Fredericton with a gas station. Learned to fix cars, then he moved to Mississauga. Got my bus license. Been gravy ever since, a fine job, if you don't think too much. Why Toronto?"

"Actually, I'm going to Stratford."

“The festival? The bard’s playpen?”

“Yep.”

“School?”

“You could say that. I’m going to be an apprentice.”

“Carpentry?”

“No, the stage. I’m going to be an actor.”

“A fine aspiration for the foolish.”

“It’s my calling.”

“I’ve never seen an actor in this county our color.”

“I’ll be the first.”

“Well, good luck to you then.” Before Sunshine could say thank you, The Captain appeared on deck. Amitav entered a conversation which couldn’t be heard in the wind, just the odd guffaw, a pat on the shoulder, a handshake. The Captain opened the door and went down the metal stairs.

“Well, Sunshine, better get back to the bus. I wish you well.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Desai.”

“I’ll see you on the TV, Sunshine.”

“You will, one day.”

“You’ll be the next King of Kensington, when he walks down the street, he smiles at everyone, everyone that he meets, calls him the Bollywood king of the Kensington! The CBC liberals will eat you up like caramel!”

Mr. Amitav shook Sunshine’s hand and followed the Captain down the stairs into the gallery. He’d never thought of it that way before. Never talked to a

real Indian before. Didn't even have an accent. Sunshine wondered for the first time if his skin will be an asset or liability. Is there an us and them? Either way, The *John Grey Hamilton's* horn blasted. Caribou, Nova Scotia, Canada's mainland. "Get on the bus west, boyo." Sunshine sang descending to the ship's bowels and found his seat. Ship rocking brought drowse. Sunshine's eyes closed before the bus alighted the ferry and barreled northwestward down The TransCanada Highway sliding down Canada's trachea, The Maritimes.

Sunshine slept through New Glasgow, Westville, Alma, past Mt. Thom, Manganese Mines, Bible Hill and opened his eyes for a moment while passengers boarded in Truro, the hub of Nova Scotia. A couple took the pair of empty seats across the aisle from Sunshine. The man, with serious mullet, wore a baby-blue tuxedo over a yellow neon bow-tie, vest, and cummerbund. The woman, in low-cut sparkling red prom-dress, sharp white heels, had eye-liner running down her cheeks over her pancaked acne. Perfectly cast for a ghoulish rock-video rendition of Chris de Burgh's *Lady in Red* sung at the wrong speed. Outfits and couple both looked worn and rented as if escaping a prison wedding. When Sunshine looked over, the man wiggled his tongue lewdly, raised his eyebrows suggestively, and gave a Nazi salute twice, "Heil! Heil!" The woman flared her yellow teeth and cackled. The man sat and covered his lap with his jacket. The woman's hand slid under. Sunshine rested his head against the window and watched the infinite forest blur. The man moaned, mouth open, eyes closed, mask of pleasure. The woman caught Sunshine looking, raised a ribald eyebrows and pushed her balled-up tongue into her cheek. She whispered

something into the man's ear, who opened his eyes abruptly.

“Peeping Paki, eh?” the man said across the aisle. Sunshine turned to the window.

“Hey kid, she'll jack you off for sixty bucks. You want some? She's got mojo lips. You'll blow your chocolate in a jiffy. ”

Sunshine pretended he hadn't heard. Trees and trees and trees, Canada, more forest than air. Why not learn tree names? Had he once and forgotten? Were they important? Sunshine self-noted: learn the names of trees and flowers. Study nature. Human and plant. Christmas. Maple. Pine. Was that a birch? Daffodil? Daisy? My university. Sunshine pulled an apple and his Sony Walkman from his handbag. He looked at the tapes with Gloria's curly handwriting: For Sunshine, when there are only clouds. The labels were shorthand: R&J, Ricky III, K. Lear, Titus, 12th Nit. Cymbal. Hank 5. She'd put time into the recording. He bit the apple promising to send a postcard when safely installed under Douglas' instructional wing. There were more cars on the Truro—Amherst stretch than he'd ever seen on the island, except perhaps during summer holiday-rush. He counted a car a minute. Trucks were few and far between. Sunshine curled his legs under hips and let his destination dance in his dreams. Arrival, a red carpet, a rehearsal room, a fatherly hug from O'Droole. Dreams he'd had since he could remember, perhaps since playing Ben The Green Boy in the grade-two Christmas pageant. Not remembering the plot, only the intense focus of standing under the gym stage lights before the whole school and all the parents awaiting his next word. Would the line come? Their laughter and applause and all the

attention after the show gave him a sense of belonging. Joy incarnate. Folks, even his own mother, gave him preferential treatment. He was no longer the little brown adopted charity-case, but a funny little green creature that could sing and dance and time a joke. War baby, my ass, he loathed his birth-story. How did they know he wasn't a love child? Romeo and Juliette's unplanned seed that lived? After that, every single project in class became about the stage or film. In Geography, he drew a massive map containing pinpricks for every professional theatre in North America, from San Diego to Labrador. In Math, he graphed the length of plays and movies over the decades, concluded that they were shortening. Shakespeare's audience wanted 3-5 hours of blood, sperm and phlegm, yes they could eat and throw rotten lemons at the actors, cop an illicit fondle, giggle at a codpiece-clutch. Now, Hollywood blockbusters were on average 116 minutes, just enough time to down two bucket of butter-laced popcorn, which were also increasing in price and volume. In physics, he dissected film projectors, calculating revolution speed and hertz consumed. Normy helped rig sheets between trees in summers. They showed movies on the library lawn, selling popcorn, a quarter a bag, fund-raising for props and sets for the theatre club's latest farce. The librarian, Ms. Miotto, an arts buff, would call Sunshine out of class down to the library whenever a new book or videotape arrived. She collected the weekly reviews from local, national, and even international newspapers and magazines, cutting them out with a patient hand and slipping them into file-folders for Sunshine and future students to read. Often, she would just call him into her office and chat. They analyzed TV show

plots and characters. Deep down, Ms. Miotto believed Sunshine would someday be a great writer, not actor. She believed his skin would never thicken enough to deal with the back-stage antics and off-stage politics. Plus, the Canadian casting powers were far too white and focused on a British aesthetic to ever give a shot to a Canadian like Sunshine. She'd gone to drama school in Halifax and enjoyed a few professional roles, but always knew she'd be a teacher and a mother first. She'd acted for joy, not money. Her ambitions were simple and she was happy to inspire others, running the annual Christmas and Spring shows and helping with summer-stock. Students like Sunshine fulfilled her, gave her hope.

More TransCanada: Londonderry, Jersey, Osford Junction, Stanley, Brookdale, Fort Lawrence, Aula, British Settlement, Sackville—had they ever made sacks? Money ate into his thoughts. His hard-earned savings, Mrs. Stebbins's endowment and his mother's gift. He took out the letter she had written for Douglas and held it to the window. Small blue ink-scrawl. The temptation to open was intense, but he put it back into the inside pocket of his jacket. He took out the envelopes and counted. The prom-fugitives, Sid and Nancy, were asleep with their chins pegged to their chests. No one could see Sunshine counting his \$2449. He shoved a twenty into his pocket for lunch and slipped the bill stack back into the white envelope containing the most money he'd ever imagined in his life into his hand bag. He put his head back to rest, foot on bag, closed his eyes to allow a swirl of pride and nerves to form a slight grin on his lips as the bus pulled into Amherst. Hockey rink. Donut store. Red light green. Cop shop. School. High School. Church. MacDonald's. Wendy's. Burger

King. Chains and chains. Sobey's. Irving's. Families that ran the East. They weren't allowed off the bus in Amherst, because Sackville, the first stop in New Brunswick was only 15 minutes down the road. The bus didn't even get on the TransCanada but side-roaded. Sunshine wanted Canada. If he'd taken a plane, he'd be there by now, busing into Stratford already. Knocking on Douglas's door.

In Sackville, they had twenty minutes. Amitav lit up before he was even down the bus steps. Sunshine stood in New Brunswick for the first time, was it warmer? No different than anywhere else really. He watched cars pass the station. Passengers opened the station doors for each other. They shuffled in and out buying candy and coffee and using the toilet just in case. The Lounge lizards, Sid and Nancy stayed on the bus. Sunshine could see them pacing up the aisle to the toilet and back, like busy squirrels, cheeks full of nuts, leaping and frolicking in a school yard, too much sugar from the trash can, feral, unleashed. Gross. Sunshine stretched in the parking lot, walked around the building twice and returned to his seat.

"Master starting and stopping, the rest is easy." Sunshine murmured to himself.

The bus pulled back onto Moncton highway. New passengers, a native boy, no taller than a tree-stump kicked the back of Sunshine's seat. Sunshine moved from the window to the aisle, a few kilometers later, so did the boy, climbing all over the mother and punting like a game-saver. The mother tried to mollify the child, to hold the child's bionic limbs in hers, but the little bugger bucked like a

bronco. Sunshine turned and kneeled on the seat, his head above the little boy. Sunshine met his pout.

“I spy with my little eye something that is brown.” The boy stared at Sunshine, a moment of silence, then the boy smiled and said. “You!”

“Your turn,” Sunshine said.

“I spy something that is green,” the boy said.

“The trees? The hill? That car?”

“No.”

“The grass? Your mother’s jacket? Her necklace?”

“No.”

The boy extracted a booger with his baby finger. He held it up to Sunshine proudly, then shoved it in his mouth. His mother smothered the boy into a hug. Sunshine turned around and slid over to the window seat. The boy copied and kicked again. Sunshine looked over, perhaps for sympathy, but Sid and Nancy, the cracked-out-prom-royalty, were gone.

The Moncton Station was empty as the fine May sun crossed noon. Sunshine walked around the parking lot, then into the shop for water and a Mars bar. Amitav signed a clipboard. Shared a joke with another driver, took another shoulder punch. The new driver inspected the bus tires. Amitav disappeared through a fire-door labeled “EMPLOY ONLY.” Abbreviation or typo? Sunshine mused down a recently mopped linoleum hall to the bathroom. Three sinks, two stalls and four urinals, all spotless, but the energy was askew. Dharma had taught Sunshine to read energy from an early age, a hippie-trick. A man, maybe

sixty-five, bald in matching tweed, elbow-patched, stood facing the blank white tiled wall using the urinal closest to the sink. Sunshine unzipped over the farthest urinal, a polite distance away. During the relieving stream, Sunshine's periphery caught an odd jerking movement, more than a finishing shake, an antagonistic repetitive tug. He stared at the tile knowing but not wanting to know what the man was doing. He'd just ignore him. Finish his business. Return to the bus. Mind his own business. Be on his way. Sunshine's inner voice machine-gunned. The man moaned and mumbled. Called for attention, with a hip swivel to show Sunshine his purple erection. Jesus, Sunshine thought, would this piss never end? Couldn't do anything till it's over. He could piss on him, but then the perv would see his and get what he wanted. What does a man like this want? Sunshine zipped.

"Do you like it?" the man said, tongue tip on lips.

"Pardon?" Sunshine said to the wall. The man took two steps closer, still stroking, audibly exhaling desperation.

"Look at it."

Sunshine turned his neck and looked into the old man's yellow eyes. Neon yellow. Vampire thirst. Sunshine didn't want to look down but eye contact felt weird. The man tilted his head back, sucked his cheeks in, gathered a mouthful of saliva. Before Sunshine could move the old man leaned forward and let the saliva dribble slowly out his mouth and onto his erection. The old man's hands massaged the saliva into penis. Sunshine felt his own penis hardening.

"You want to suck it? I know you do. I can pay you."

"I'm pissing here. Leave me alone," Sunshine said. Vexed.

“I know you want to. Come on, just touch it.” The man reached for Sunshine, his yellow eyes ravenous on Sunshine’s groin.

“Let me touch you. I suck for free. Use me.”

The man’s hand reached for Sunshine’s jean button. Sunshine slapped the old man’s hand away hard. He open palmed the old man’s face and dispatched a solid straight arm to the chest. The sink counter caught the deviant’s lower back. As he struggled not to fall, ejaculate spurted onto the man’s trousers. Sullied tiles. A cleric’s collar rolled across the floor.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” the old man groaned, deflating, sinking to his knees, then curling into a fetal position. Sunshine thought about hoofing his head.

“Fucking perv. I’m calling the cops.”

He rushed down the empty hall, not a uniform in sight. A dyed-blond woman with too much eye-liner sat blowing chewing-gum bubbles, painting her fingernails behind the ticket counter.

“There’s an old man jerking off on the men’s room,” Sunshine said, vexed.

“Afternoon. Can I help you?” she said without a glance.

“I’m sorry but this old guy, just... I’m a little... there’s a pervert in the men’s room!”

“And.”

“There’s an old fucking perv jerking off in the jon right now!”

“Waddy want me to do about it?”

“Call security. Cops. Do something. What if a child walks in there?”

“You’re in a bus station.”

“And?”

“Just saying.”

“I bet that’s Father Sassoon,” said an obese baritone in a John Deer cap and shit- stained work boots from a nearby bench.

“What? You want me to call the cops?”

The woman gave Sunshine the most exhausted sigh in the world. She pointed her nail-brush over her shoulder. “You on that bus?”

“Yes.”

“It’s leaving.” As if magically commanded, the new driver boarded the bus and fired the engine. “If you wait for the cops, you won’t be on that bus.”

“You need to do something about that pervert. A kid could go in there and get molested.”

“You are a kid.”

“I mean a little kid,” Sunshine said, passing the counter, out the glass door toward the rumbling bus. The image of the old man’s wrinkled penis ejaculating would be forever stamped in his memory. This would never happen on the island, Sunshine thought. Some things can’t be unseen.

At the bus stairs, the new driver asked for a ticket.

“It’s in my bag. Can I go get it?”

“You should keep it on you at all times,” the new driver said. “Get it and show me.”

The new driver was a pot-bellied angry white-man, under thirty, with a wispy moustache, already resigned to bitterness. When Sunshine got to his seat, his bag was gone. He looked under the seats, in the rack above, under and above the seats behind and in front again and again.

“What are you looking for?” asked a passenger.

“My bag. It’s gone, my jacket, my ticket, my savings, my bag...”

The world spun. Sunshine gripped the bus-seat. He swore at his own idiocy, innocence, trust. Maeve and all the others were right. A fool. The driver came down the aisle. Sunshine couldn’t hear a word. The driver laid a firm hand on his shoulder. Sunshine remembered the old perv in the bathroom. He pushed the driver’s forearm with his own. The driver, no doubt had seen this shtick before and believed none of it. He slid Sunshine into an arm-bar and frog-marched him out the door and onto the parking lot tarmac.

“No ticket, no ride, kid. And don’t ever touch a driver.”

“I’ve been robbed,” Sunshine said. Uncontrollable tears blurred his vision.

“Yeah. Sure. We all have. Not my business, kid. You got ten seconds to produce a ticket because my business is getting this bus down the road.”

The counter girl had joined the new driver and traded information. Sunshine lay on the lot, staring back at the other passengers through the bus window. A woman exited the bus and gesticulated to the driver and the counter-woman. “It was that couple in formal-wear. I saw them. That brazen, crass couple. They got off in Sackville. I saw.”

“Guess I’ll have to call the cops now,” said the counter woman, with another tremendous sigh. Sunshine watched the driver open the bottom compartment and root through the baggage.

“Hey Darkie, this yours?” He pitched Sunshine’s backpack onto the tarmac. The sword clanked. “What you toting in there? An ax?”

The bus left Sunshine sitting by his backpack. Sunshine’s first impulse was to impale and castrate the toilet-perv with his sword. He stood and simmered until a cop cruiser pulled into the lot. An understanding of what was happening slowly became clearer as Sunshine sat in a backroom of the bus station talking to two Moncton constables.

“So you left all your belongings on the bus, eh.” The older, taller cop asked.

“No. Just my money, Walkman, food, and ticket. My handbag and jacket.”

“You carry a purse?”

“I just went to get water and use the toilet.”

“And that’s when the perpetrator sexually assaulted you?”

“Yeah, he jerked off...”

“And you’d like to press charges? Can you describe him?”

“He was bald and old. Elbow patches. He had a collar.”

“A collar?”

“Yeah, like a priest. I just want my money back.”

“From the kissing couple, who were sitting beside you, eh.”

“It had to be them. Can’t you get their names off the tickets or something?”

“Officers are complying on it. You claim you had over 2000 dollars in your jacket?”

“2249.00”

“How come a small fry like you was carrying so much money?”

“Small fry? I already told you. I’m moving to Ontario. They got off in Sackville.”

“Ontario, eh. Going down the road, eh. Who?”

“The couple.”

“You were robbed outside our precinct? Another vicinity.”

“I was robbed.”

“You got someone we can call? Your mother? Can anyone collude your story?”

“What?”

“You got a mother?”

“She’s in PEI. She’ll worry.”

“Maybe she should worry. You want to press charges?”

The conversation, as usual, with authority figures who select what they hear, circled and stuttered. The officers got frustrated with Sunshine’s vague responses. Sunshine just wanted a quiet place to think. The only place he could not go was home, the only quiet place he knew.

“Is that a sword?” The younger, shorter officer asked.

“Yes, my grandfather’s.”

“You’re travelling across the country with a illegal weapon.”

“I’m an actor, sir. It’s a prop.”

“Is that a prohibited personal apparatus?” the younger cop asked the older.

“Boyo, that’s a cutlass.” They unwrapped the sword and tested the sharpness with their thumbnails. Sunshine felt guilty and ridiculous.

“Nifty blade, kid.”

“It was my grandfather’s. He gave it to my mother who gave it to me. Now, I’m bringing it to my cousin in Stafford. It’s an antique, a decoration, the family heirloom, from 1916.”

“Is that Gaelic script?” asked the older cop.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to press charges?” the younger barked.

“Will it help get my stuff back?”

“We’re talking about the old man, the venereal assault. I think we should confiscate the sword,” the younger cop said to the older.

“I need my money.” Sunshine stood.

“Don’t we all. We’ll investigate that claim.”

“I think we better move this fiesta party down to the station. We got a black kid with a cutlass loose in the province.” The older cop took his radio off his belt.

“Should I search him for drugs?”

After a search and two more hours of evasive interrogation, the police offered Sunshine a ride to the airport, or a return bus ticket to the ferry. He refused both.

“I’m going west.”

He’d never spoken to cops before and hoped to never again. Left alone, Sunshine counted his pocket-money, \$18.85. He went back to the counter to ask ticket prices. The evening-shift woman was also painting her nails. After monosyllabic grunts, Sunshine understood he had enough to get to Edmondson, not even Quebec, and then he’d be completely penniless and hungry. He stared at the payphone for a long time and fought tears with forced yawns. A quick collect call to momma and she’d be there in the morning. He’d go back to stacking groceries, the laughing-stock of North Rustico, wouldn’t even miss a shift. Phil wouldn’t even remember he’d quit. Maeve would rub his nose in shit. Better starve to death in the New Brunswick woods than face that jealous heiffer. “Fuck this. Fuck’em all, I’m gonna hitch,” Sunshine said to the counter woman, who glanced up from her wet pink nails and shrugged.

Shouldering his bag, which now felt incredibly light, he crossed the bus lot and marched along a road with six lanes and no cars nor signs. A grocery store, a gas station, squat office buildings few and far between. The streets left and right led to large stand-alone residences. The road narrowed to two lanes. A traffic island lined with Canadian flags flapped in the wind. Sunshine followed a road named Sunshine Drive, asked a cyclist at a red light directions to The TransCanada.

“Ooooooh, boyo. You’re headed the right way kid, but she’s a ways. 10-15 clicks.”

The theft, the cops, the toilet-pervert, the apathy, formed an ever-hardening shell around Sunshine. He passed Pizza Huts, MacDonald's, Tim Horton's, Wendy's, Sobeys, Loblaw's, Irving Stations, Mac's Milk, Car dealerships of every brand, and the roads grew emptier and greener and the green Maple-Leaf sign that led to The TransCanada became easier to follow. Night descended. Trucks rumbled. No way to wave a ride down in the dark. The weak sun slipped below the tree line. Cars and trucks and RVs and motorcycles rode into the forest-wind. A raging un-crossable river. Sunshine walked west, which was actually north, but the sign said Quebec. Allons y! Sunshine repeated to the shoulder gravel, keeping to the ditch, walking to exhaustion. Traffic thinned. When his legs were too heavy to lift, he sat down on his backpack in the woods. Seconds later, curled on the damp spring leaves he fell asleep, come bear or hunter or snake, although rare so close to the highway, nothing stirred Sunshine until first light which like a switch flipped on the forest. Parched and full of piss, Sunshine relieved himself against a nameless tree. A family of snails traversed a mossy log. He cursed himself as a fucking amateur for not bringing water. If he was going to cross the county hitch-hiking on 18\$, he'd need to reassess his strategy, supplies, security. No driver would pick up a hitcher visibly carrying a sword. Canteen, at least a bottle, dry food, matches, batteries for the Walkman, which, he'd forgotten, was gone. The warming sunlight shimmered hope until he stood with swollen throbbled feet. Tomorrow, he'd take his shoes off before sleep, if he take them off now he'd never get them back on and no one will pick up a barefoot hitcher with a sword. Out of the woods onto the gravel

shoulder, thumb out, smile-forced, an 18-wheeler's horn blasted. A postman waved. An empty school bus driver saluted, every single vehicle decelerated and rubber-necked but no one stopped. Sunshine walked backwards and hitched. O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention, A kingdom for a stage, princes to act. And monarchs to behold the swelling scene! Then should the warlike Harry, like himself...

Cars zoomed and whistled. Sunshine walked forwards and backwards west till the morning felt a gift, the open road freedom. He rearranged his backpack to fit the sword, so only the handle could be seen. Drivers would think he carried an umbrella. Dewy weeds brushed his shins. Unintentionally, he kicked a pebble onto the highway, which shot back a low bullet. Traffic non-stop, horns broke his monologue. A large service station appeared in the distance. Sunshine decided to splurge. Pre-lunch and post-breakfast lull, the waitress, a plump woman with a dyed-blond bob and brown skirt who'd seen more shit than necessary, gave Sunshine a menu and told him to sit wherever he wanted. He chose a booth by the window and ordered a coffee and steak and eggs for \$3.99. He went to the bathroom and washed his face and arms and hands. He changed his socks and returned to the steaming food. The waitress refilled his coffee and asked if he wanted more toast.

"Many trucks stop here?" Sunshine asked, 100% grin.

"At night mostly, some get gas. Normally they stop after midnight. Why?" She felt the desperation under Sunshine's mask. She thought of her own son, miles away. "Are you okay?"

“Fine, never better. And you?”

“I saw you walking alone along the road.”

“I was robbed. Now I’m hitching.”

“Oh honey, tell me what happened.”

Her name was Nora and she sat down in the booth across from Sunshine, held his hand and listened to his story. Sunshine felt like a beggar, but there was no one else and Nora opened her heart and generous ear. She’d lost a child to crack.

“Listen Sunny-boy, I’m off in an hour. Just sit tight. We’ll figure this out. Together. It’s not right for a boy your age to be hitching alone on this highway.”

“I’m eighteen.”

“Exactly. And green as the Spring dew.”

She re-filled his cup and brought a third plate of toast. Sunshine mopped the plate, went to the bathroom again, and was resting his head in his forearms on the table when Nora returned with a thin man in a red Canadians ball cap, toothpick bobbing in his tightly-sealed mouth.

“Hey, Sunshine, this here’s Stan,” Nora said.

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

“Didn’t say he was a refugee,” Stan said to Nora. A flat line monotone, as dry as a prairie wheat field, the sound on the machine before you died.

“He’s driving to Fredericton. He’ll give you a lift and leave you in a good spot for another ride. I’ve known Stan 15 years. Bit rough around the edges but he’s alright.”

Stan slapped Nora ass. She didn't like it, but took it. She took a lot for tips. She took a lot to survive. One day, she hoped, ass-slapping would be punishable by law.

"Super. Thanks Nora. Thanks Stan," Sunshine said.

"You a fag?" Stan held Sunshine's shoulder firm.

"Pardon?"

"Stan behave," Nora said with an ear flick.

"Can't be too careful in this neck of the woods. You ready, Gandhi?"

"Born ready, Stan. Just got to settle my tab," Sunshine said, rising to his feet and shouldering his pack.

"Sunshine, this one's on the house. You need it more than the house does. Just stop in next time you pass through and let me know how things are going," Nora said. Stan rattled his truck keys.

"Thank you so much, Nora. This world needs more Noras." She pulled him into her bosom perfumed with bacon and eggs. She kissed his cheek and ruffled his hair.

"Make sure you call you're mother when you get settled, okay?"

"I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"My boy never call me. Not even on Mother's day. Even on the day he..."

Stan, already out the door, climbed into a truck pulling a trailer of new Pick-ups.

“...Go. Don’t keep the Stan-man waiting,” Nora said, with another half pat half rub into Sunshine’s thick black hair. Sunshine gave her his brightest smile and bolted across the parking lot and climbed into Stan’s truck. They rumbled northwest in the late-morning sun.

Two hours and six words later, Stan pulled into another service station on the far side of Fredericton. Not a talker, but country music aficionado. He played Dolly Parton, Clint Black, George Strait. Alabama cassettes littered the dashboard. Changing tapes was the extent of their interaction.

“I’m headed Maine way. This load goes to Vanceboro. You’re best bet is to stay on this old main-vein.”

“Thanks so much, Stan.”

“Just ask folk at the pumps. Give’em your sob story. You can make Quebec by dawn if you’re lucky. I’ll put a word out on the CB.”

“Thanks, Stan.”

“For a Paki poofter, you got a horse-shoe rammed up your ass, kid. Best of luck. Just keep your nose real clean, kid.”

Stan jammed the truck into gear. Sunshine slammed the door and crossed another service station parking lot. Stan tooted. Sunshine waved. Later that night, Stan would demolish a royal buck who’d stepped into the highway, mesmerized by the headlights. Buck blood would cover the shattered windshield. Stan would keep on trucking.

The first fifteen people he asked at the pump said no. Too full, not going far, or just plain freaked out by a stranger actually addressing them. Sunshine

went to the toilet and brushed his teeth and washed his face. Where the service station exit met the highway, he hitched for three hours without success. Walking back to the gas pumps a violet VW van with two canoes strapped to the roof veered slowly in his direction and stopped. The passenger window rolled down. Pot fumes rose. A golden skinned young woman with wild curly auburn hair held back with a white bandana smiled and stared silently at Sunshine.

“Dude, you lost?” called the driver, a bean-pole white kid in a feathered Mohawk held together by an Andre Agassi sweatband.

“No. I’m hitching to Toronto,” Sunshine smiled.

“DUUUUDE! Get in, brother, we’re going to Grand-Falls for a little R and R. We’ll get you that far anyway dude, if you’re copacetic.” The man bounced with enthusiasm. The side door slid open and Sunshine stepped into hippie nirvana. The curly-headed girl in the front seat turned, and extended her arm.

“I’m Asha.”

Her smile, wide and permanent, when Sunshine shook her hand and she wouldn’t let go. She ran her fingers tips down Sunshine’s forearm three times, peered deeply into his eyes.

“You’ve survived a dramatic ordeal. Welcome, I am happy you are among us now,” she said seriously, then burst into giggles.

“I’m Hope,” said the girl beside him on the back bench. She held her arms out wide as if praying to the heavens, eyes closed, face to roof. In baggy overalls, nothing else, her blonde dreadlocks held back by heart-shaped purple sunglasses.

“You have glory energy. In a past life you were a great warrior. A magnificent lover. You spawned armies of offspring.” She slid close.

“Thank you, Hope. You got cool hair,” Sunshine said, causing another eruption of giggles. He’d only seen dreadlocks on Bob Marley posters and Whoopi Goldberg in *Jumpin Jack Flash*, never on a white woman.

“White girl do da dreads real fine, mon!” Asha said, in a singsong Rastaman, then relit a cob-pipe. Hope threw her arms around Sunshine and pulled him into two minute hug.

“I think we have found our fourth wheel.” said Hope. “Celestial balance. Divine symmetry.”

“Our fourth musketeer, I’m Andrew,” said the driver, taking the pipe, “Hold the wheel, babe. Do you paddle dude?”

Talk flew as easy as birds migrating. Sunshine watched the road. Hope petted his thigh. Patchouli and garlic aroma mixed with tobacco and marijuana, Hope puffed the pipe. Asha opened a cigar box and rolled another joint while Andrew petted her thigh.

Bob Dylan rasped, “Early one morning the sun was rising and I was laying in bed...” Asha handed Hope the joint, who licked it meticulously.

“Why do you do that?” Sunshine asked.

“She’s a fellatio virtuoso!” Asha said.

“Shut it!” Hope kicked the passenger seat.

“Hey, I’m rolling here!”

“It burns slower with salvia. Evener.” Andrew explained. He felt important expounding, after a major pot-head phase, which extinguished five years memory, he’d receive a Ph.D. in Classics from Lakehead University. He’d spend the next twenty years adjuncting around the country, never making the big-leagues, never receiving a tenure offer, never publishing his Great Canadian novel, never marrying. At age 55, exhausted from rejection, he’d drive the same van into the Yukon and hang himself from a Douglas Fur with hemp rope. No note. His body found 18 months later by a girl-scout troop earning their survival badges. This graduation excursion with Asha, Hope, and the hitcher was his zenith. This exact moment, the pinnacle of his life, nothing would ever get any better.

“Deviant! He’s not even legal. Hope’s a cradle-snatcher!”

“Ladies, be civil,” Andrew said, cranked up Van Morrison’s, *Have I Told You Lately That I Love You*. Hope handed Sunshine the joint. Having grown up with a pot-head mom, he’d tried weed, but hated the dopy scatterings of being high. Sunshine preferred sharp to blurry, but going with the flow was a skill an actor needed to master. What if he were cast as a stoner? Sunshine inhaled, coughed, and the van suffused with laughter, even his own. Andrew rolled down the window and conducted a symphony with fluid hand-waves, articulate finger-flicks and Stevie Wonder head rolls. Hope blew smoke rings into Sunshine’s ear. Asha began massaging her calves which were propped on the dashboard, as alluring as butter to a baked-potato. They communed with random titters.

“Dude, what’s your name?” Andrew asked, eyes in the mirror.

“Sunshine.” A forty foot wave of laughter almost swept the van off the highway.

“No way,” Hope said.

“Far out,” Asha added. “You must have a cool mom. Can I be her?”

“Her name is Moonbeam Om Om Ashanti,” Sunshine said, feeling the weed.

“Really?” Asha asked.

“Nooooooooo.” Andrew yelled.

“Dude, you lying?” Hope asked, pulling on his neck.

“Yep. Her name is Dharma.” A laughter-Tsunami pounded the van’s inner sanctum . Sunshine and his new friends laughed at his mother, a first and strange emotion.

“No way.”

“Far out.”

“This is good shit.”

“She must be way hip,” Hope said as the van passed a sign for Bear Island.

Clear as a MuchMusic video, Sunshine fast-forwarded through a mental montage of his mother peeling carrots, doing yoga, sipping tea, driving in the rain through a green filtered lens. The fuzzy images superimposed on the trees—Canada from coast to coast, leaves and lakes and rivers. Sunshine envisioned the scene of one day telling his mother about the robbery, the cops—Starsky and Hutch, hitching, Nora playing good-Samaritan and silent Stan trucking into

eternity before this happy hippy trio confirmed her world view was correct: The world is essentially good, not all greedy and desperate, but good and giving and fair. Hope's fingers massaged the back of his neck. Asha opened a Tupperware box and offered him a brownie.

"Gremlin?" Asha's smile melted snow.

"What?"

"They're brownies, but Asha calls them Gremlins. Real yummy." Hope popped one in her mouth. Having eaten nothing since the diner, Sunshine took the biggest.

"Have two," Asha said, and he did.

"Why Toronto?" Andrew asked.

"Actually Stratford, I have a cousin there. Douglas..."

"... O'Droole?" The trio asked in unison.

"No way!"

"He's a God!"

"Douglas O'Fucking Droole!"

"Yep. He's my cousin. Never met him yet."

"That dude is awesome!"

"He's like Canada's greatest actor. EVER!"

"I grew up in Waterloo," Andrew said, "Stratford's cool, if you like swans and thespians. White bread with bread. Lot's of tourists, lot's of work. The Mecca of Canada's bourgeois. But that cat O'Droole rocks."

“Yeah?” Sunshine wanted to hear more but was afraid his curiosity would be uncool.

“Where you from?” Asha asked.

“North Rustico, P.E.I.”

“No, originally?” Andrew asked.

“My mother found me wrapped in a newspaper outside an orphanage in Dhaka.”

“Really?”

“That’s what she told me. I believe her.”

“That’s like David Copperfield shit.”

“Oliver Twist dude!”

“Kim!”

“Who?”

“Kipling. From the Jungle Book. Kim meets that Dali Lama dude. And boom, gets all colonized, like you know. Like you and your cousin, Douglas O’Droole. He’ll be your Tibetan Lama! You’re on the plot to enlightenment, dude.” A beaver waddled into the van’s path. Andrew swerved into the oncoming lane with a yell, then rectified, “dude, that was close.” The Beatles’ *Here Come The Sun* came over the stereo.

“A perfect song at the perfect time is a sign. Make a wish.” Asha said before cranking the volume.

“Been travelling long?” Hope asked, her fingers moving under Sunshine’s shirt to his shoulder skin, her side-breast visible.

“Two days.”

“Aren’t you hot. I think you’d look better shirtless.” Her fingers released buttons.

“Take. It. Off. Dude!” Andrew hollered.

“Yeah, Sunshine, loosen up.” Asha added.

Kilometers and songs floated the afternoon away, Sunshine told his robbery story and explained the decision to hitch. They listened and congratulated him on bravery.

“Not many have the huevos to hitch anymore, dude,” Andrew said. The VW pattered north past Strong Corner. Asha was from Toronto, Hope Montreal. They had all just graduated from Dalhousie University in Halifax and were spending a few weeks driving around the Maritimes canoeing before going off to jobs they didn’t want. Tree-planting. Lifeguarding. Camp counseling. Twenty-three years later, Asha would become the first female premier of Ontario. Hope would bare nine children and become the wealthiest pot-farmer east of BC.

“Let’s go to Bath! I’m tired of this thunderous freeway. Let’s bathe in Bath!” Andrew said pulling onto an exit ramp. They all cheered, not a care in the world.

“But... I gotta get to...” Sunshine tried to articulate, a slow body-buzz crept up his extremities turning his brain mushy.

“Don’t worry Sunshine, we’ll get to Grand-Falls by sundown. Or somewhere closer to Toronto than here. You’ll get back on the big freeway fighting east before long,” Andrew said. Not another vehicle in sight. A nuclear family of deer stood on the road in front of them. Andrew killed the engine and

glided to a halt. Asha jumped out the passenger door with a 35mm F3 Nikon. She got alarmingly close. The mother deer raised her head and leered into Asha's lens, a great diva posing for a headshot. Silence amplified by the THC, engulfed the deer and travelers. Andrew, Sunshine and Hope stood by the front of the van and watched the Great Northern communion. Asha's long skinny legs unraveled from tiny jean shorts, her bare toes-knuckles turned white gripping the gravel road, her baggy tie-dyed t-shirt, the complete spectrum of color, a rainbow, fell off one shoulder. Sunshine had never been this close to such beauty but couldn't decide if it was Asha, the deer, the weed or the whole damned province. The engine of a low Cessna hummed and appeared only a few feet from the tops of the trees. Crop-dusting? Fire-fighting? An errant joy-rider gone Kamikaze? The baby deer following their mother's first leap. They popcorned through the thick woods. The plane engine faded.

"They're so fast," Hope whispered.

"And silent," Sunshine added.

"Did you get them?" Andrew asked Asha.

"I'll never understand how people can hunt. Barbarians. How can anyone shoot such beauty?" Asha said to no one in particular.

"If you're starving, okay, but not for sport," Andrew said starting the van.

"Maybe in the dead of winter, when there is not a plant to forage. But I hear ya." Hope said.

"I'll never understand hunters, never. If I ever get any power, I ban hunting"

As if the deer had cast a spell over the van, they drove in silence, even without music, windows down, as if combing the forest for more wildlife. Finally, Andrew broke the silence by asking for another joint. Asha handed Hope the cigar box. Hope placed a copy of Homer's *The Iliad* across her lap and mulched the fat buds into roll-able sprinkle.

"Look at the crystals." She held a bud close to Sunshine's eye, who nodded.

"I don't know what kind of timeline you got dude, but you're welcome to camp with us tonight. We got room, you can sleep in the van. Your call."

"Stay Sunshine, stay," Asha said. Hope was in her own world rolling.

"You don't mind?"

"We got tons of food."

"Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," Sunshine said, his best Humphrey Bogart, and the all four laughed again, high and happy, heading deeper into the wood, toward the northern edge of New Brunswick.

Somewhere south of Grand-Falls, Sunshine and Hope gathered kindling. Asha and Andrew set up a tent. The Saint-John's River roared. The sky drizzled. White clouds descended lowering the fog to head-height.

"It's like *Wuthering Heights* out here," Hope said.

"Keep off The Moors. Stick to the roads!" Sunshine said.

"I vote we go back to The Slaughtered Lamb!" Hope said.

"American Werewolf in London!"

“A movie buff. I like that,” Hope said. Arms full of twigs, biceps taunt.

“Sunshine, do you think I’m pretty?” she asked.

“Gorgeous.”

“Prettier than Asha?”

“You’re both beautiful. Are her and Andrew together?”

“Well, hard to say. We’re a kinda a trio.”

“A trio?”

“Hetro-monogamy is such a limiting belief system. Feudal. Christian-based.”

“You mean, you all sleep together?”

“When we can, but I think Andrew loves her more. Polyamory can be so complicated.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“How old are you?”

“18 and two days.”

“Jailbait.”

“I’m legal. Just a touch inexperienced.”

“Ever been with a girl?”

“No.”

“Ever been with two girls?”

“No.”

“Ever been with a boy?”

“No.”

“Ever been with two girls and a boy?”

“No.”

“Or not yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think Andrew is attractive?”

“We better get back and start the fire before the rain gets...”

“Do you?”

“He’s pretty cool, but, yeah. I mean, I don’t know.”

“Yeah, let’s get the fire started.” She skipped ahead like a little girl, dying to tell a secret. From that second, every gesture, word, glance from any of them had two or three different meanings. They dipped carrots in hummus and passed around a jug of Carlo Rossi, which tasted like carbonated grape juice. Four hungry minds watched four tin-foil balls filled with potatoes and vegetables and tofu bubble in the crackling fire. Ripe pine smoke tickled nostril hairs. The sky low and wet but not yet raining. Talk turned giddy and Andrew asked, “If you were on death row, what would your last meal be?”

“There’s no capitol punishment in Canada,” Asha said, poking the fire with a stick.

“Do they still do that?” asked Hope.

“What?”

“Give them last meals?”

“Just pretend you are falsely imprisoned in Louisiana.” Andrew cracked open a Moosehead.

“You mean black?” Asha said.

“Blacker than you?” Hope pointed to Asha.

“I’m lighter than Sunshine,” Asha said. “I’m a Jew-maican.” She punched Hope’s shoulder, eyes baiting Sunshine.

“What’s that?” he asked, denting his beer can with his thumb, a trick he’d learned from Phil at the grocery store to know whose was whose. Never lose the can you opened, Phil would slur.

“Half and half. My mother is Jewish and my father was from Kingston. She produced his first record back in the day.”

“Are they still together?” Sunshine asked.

“No, he died in a boating accident, but they were divorced by then. I never knew him.” She stared into the fire. “What are you?”

“Canadian. Adopted from Bangladesh.”

“Cool,” Hope said.

“Okay, I want to know what everyone’s last meal would be. Put your orders in. The hangman’s coming.” Andrew prodded the tinfoil balls with a long knife.

“Pizza Margarita with anchovies from Napoli and then a bagel from Ben’s with lox and capers,” Hope said.

“Bacon blue cheese burger with poutine and 15 pints of beer,” Andrew said.

“Smoked eel ramen noodles with green peppers and sake,” Asha said.

“Gross”

“Sunshine?” Andrew dragged their dinners from the ash with the knife.

“I think, just apples and cheese.”

“A classic.”

“What kind of cheese?” Hope asked.

“Neon orange cheddar.”

“That shit?”

“Yep. I’m a simple guy.” Sunshine said, burning his fingers on hot foil, then pressed them against the cold can silently.

“I like simple,” Hope said, “Anyone want a fork?”

“Let’s use our hands,” Asha said, and they all ate.

After dinner, more pot brownies made the rounds and they built the fire up. Andrew plucked *Hotel California*, *Stairway to Heaven*, and *American Pie* on a banjo.

“Someone should write a song called Canadian Pie.”

“But we have no war to glorify.”

“War of 1812. Dude!”

“That’s why the art in this country’s inferior. Minimal conflict. Nothing on the line. If you’re insane, addicted, homeless, unemployed, whatever the government will toss you a bone.”

“To be deemed successful in Canada you have to make it commercially in the U.S. and then you’re not Canadian anymore.” Hope threw another branch on the fire, punctuating the insight.

“I’ll take peace to great art any day,” Asha said.

Hope lay her head on Asha's lap. Asha groomed each individual dread. The river rushed and whistled. The sky lit up like a city Sunshine had never seen before.

"What's in those brownies? I feel like my head's a funhouse mirror," Sunshine said.

"Moroccan *kif*. Straight from a Hal-i-fax o-cean-lin-er." Andrew strummed, as lyric, added, "My buddy works in customs. Moonlights as dealer. That's a good title. Dealer Moonlighting? Dealing in the Moonlight?"

"The Moorish warriors used *kif* before going into war. That's how they conquered Europe," Asha said, "or so *The Song of Roland* says."

"All I feel is bliss," Hope said, put her hands around Asha's neck and pulled her into a slow kiss. Andrew and Sunshine looked at each other.

"Nothing feels real." Sunshine waved his arm at the firmament.

"I'm gonna drain the weasel. Sunshine, wanna join?" Andrew walked toward the river. Asha and Hope whispered into each other's ear, kissed again. Sunshine took his beer and followed Andrew into the dark. White river foam reflected the wane moonlight. Andrew stood on the river's edge arching urine into the rushing water. When finished, he lit another joint.

"Pretty nice spot here, dude," Andrew said.

"Yeah. Thanks for picking me up, really thanks."

"Can't you see what's going on?"

"What?"

"Do I have to spell it out? Can't you see it?"

“I’m pretty high.”

“Ever been kissed by a man before?”

“No.”

Andrew stepped close and grabbed the back of Sunshine’s head and kissed him hard on the mouth, tongue pressing tongue.

“Now you have.” Andrew stood back and smiled, puffed his joint. The river water carved the rocks.

“I feel like a Moor ready for battle,” Andrew said. “Every shotgun kissed a man?”

“What’s that?”

“Shot. Gun.” Andrew flipped the joint-cherry into his mouth. Wedged the matchbook filter between his teeth. Grabbed Sunshine with both hands on each side of the skull and pulled his mouth close while exhaling pot smoke into Sunshine’s gaping kisser. After a long exhale, afraid of burning his tongue, Andrew removed the joint and kissed Sunshine again, harder, raking gums and teeth, both hands controlling Sunshine’s head. A full-blown movie kiss. Andrew slid a hand down and held Sunshine in his hand.

“He likes it.”

“Andrew...please...”

“Don’t worry kid, just toying. You like this. I can tell. This is mutual. Your dick is really hard. You just don’t know it yet. We’ll bring each other off later. Let’s go back to the fire and see what or who’s going down.” Andrew glided toward the

fire. Sunshine undressed and stepped into the cold Saint John's River. At knee height, the current almost took him away. Nothing as life affirming as a good night skinny dip.

No one was at the fire when Sunshine returned. He added another log and stood close to the flames to dry. The van wiggled. Back and forth, side to side, Sunshine finally understood Pete McGinnis' bumper sticker, "If the Van's a 'Rocking, Don't Come a' Knockin!" Sunshine could hear their hums and muffles, nothing decipherable. Was this just the weed and kif-cakes and beer? Bolts of laughter. Fantasy? "Will I awake in North Rustico?" Sunshine whispered, squatting close to the fire. For the first time in his life imagined his conception.

Shantytown shack. Corrugated iron, bricks formed from sewer sand, late at night. Many huts have been torched. No, monsoon, water rising. His father, no that is not what he is, the sperm-carrier, no, the soldier, breaks off from his platoon. No, he's not on duty. He has been drinking in a bar and sees a light, maybe high on opiates, poppy-leaf, kicks in the door. He's been watching this girl for days. No. His mother, Sunshine's biological mother, that girl, this girl, a girl walking home from school, belt around books, middle-class, school uniform, a soldier truck drives past, his father, no, this soldier, sees the backside of his mother... No, her legs... jumps out of the slow moving truck. Joking to comrades, "going to drop the kids off at the pool" and they all laugh that evil man-group-laugh. Is he spawned from that evil man? Is evil genetic? They laugh and laugh, stripped of individual-self, just soldier. He walks after his mother, maybe the whole platoon stopped the truck when they saw her, a gaggle of school girls,

a chase. Hens a scatter. No one would let a daughter walk home alone in wartime. No, his mother is hanging sheets on a line. She sees lust dripping from the soldier's yellow eyes and runs. He chases her down an alley, tackles and pushes her face into the monsoon mud, pulls her bottom into the air, cuts off her undergarments with a bayonet... an animal. No. No. No. She is sixteen, no fourteen, no twelve. The trucks surround the school. First male-teachers are shot, would there be any men at school during war, or his mother? No. She's a nurse at the hospital, pulled into a closet...an enemy soldier who she had just nursed back to health... fuck never, were they all our fathers? Is what he had in him also in Sunshine?

“Sunshine, Sunshine, come to the van. It's cold,” Hope said.

“What?”

“Come to the van.”

Hope finds his hand and leads him to the van. The door opens to strong human stench; weed, patchouli, semen, sweat, citrus, smoke. pinecone. Asha and Andrew spoon naked half-covered by a ratty sleeping bag. Hope unbuttons Sunshine's shirt, pants, slips off her overalls. When both are peeled naked, she says,

“Go on, lie down.”

“Where?”

“The mattress. Where else? With us.”

“Where?”

Hope maneuvers Sunshine by the shoulders with a tiny push he went onto all fours behind sleeping Asha. Hope pushed Sunshine's chest to Asha's back and pulled a blanket over them. Four spoons in a drawer. A double-decker Reverse Oreo. Vanilla wafers. Toffee filling. For the first time in his life, Sunshine felt two female breasts flattened against his shoulder blades. He listened to their breathing and tried to imitate, careful not to press his erection into Asha, but unsuccessful. She cupped him gently in her hand. Hope's weight dropped onto Sunshine, warm and happy, too afraid to move.

New Brunswick dawn, a symphony of woodwinds, the morning movements of bodies waking, dressing, leaving the van, dressing, giggling, yawning, Sunshine slipping from morning back to dream to sleep. Crackling fire, roof scratches, cough-cough, feet snapping twigs. A heavy friendly pound on the van's metal body, bump bumpidty bump bump.

"Up and at'em Sunshine. Coffee's hot. River's running. Let's fucking raft, dude!" Andrew whistling. Surprised to be naked, beer and brownie-groggy, Sunshine replayed the film in his head that told him where he was and how he got there and smiled. Scrambling to dress, he rolled out of the van, pissed in the river and received three warm hippy hugs and four sweet cheek pecks. Hot coffee by the fire doe-eyed. Did university make everything so lovey-dovey? Or just these three? They were a generous trio.

"How'd you sleep Sunshine?" Hope asked.

"God I love that name," Asha smiled, "it blares glory." She was writing in a leather bound notebook.

“Like a baby,” Sunshine said and burst into the day’s first giggle.

“You have a contagious smile, Sunshine,” Hope said, looking up from a cup of dry cereal.

“I’d like to bottle it and sell it.”

“Listen dude, I need a favor. Can you drive?” Andrew packed a pipe.

“Sure.”

“We’re gonna canoe today, so we need a van shuttler.”

“That why you picked me up.”

“Double edged sword, dude. We’ll drive up river and get in the canoes, then you come back here and park the van and be on you’re way, or stay. And raft after lunch. Your call. Copacetic? Want some weed for the road?”

“No need, thanks. I’m happy to drive. You guys have been so... so friendly.”

Asha and Hope splintered into hysterics.

“I’m just going to flag the river, so we know where to stop and then we’re off, okay?” He never stopped moving. Sunshine sat by the fire. Hope sat beside him, put an arm around him and said, “You were curled up by the fire last night, remember?”

“Little hazy, but thanks for coming to get me.”

“Did you enjoy the van?”

“Yes, I’ve never...”

“A little late to the party. But stay tonight. I want to take your virginity properly.”

Asha giggled and wrote faster in her notebook. Hope handed Sunshine an orange.

“Hope, I’m not a…” She put a finger to his lips.

“Nothing to be ashamed of.” She pinched his cheeks and planted a puckering kiss on his forehead, stood and said, “Let’s shoot these tubular rapids!”

“Gnarly! Righteous sister!” Asha yelled in Valley-girl-speak. Hope shook the hang-ten sign in her face.

“I’m psyched. Let’s motor!” Andrew called out the van window.

“Stay tonight Sunshine, you know you want to…” Hope wiggled her hips and stuck out her tongue. Sunshine downed his coffee and followed her to the van.

They drove 23 kilometers up river along a dirt road. Sunshine sat on the passenger seat while Andrew lectured on the idiosyncrasies of the van.

“My father bought it new when he was my age off some American draft dodgers for a dime and a Guthrie song. They were on their last legs and trying to get ship tickets to France. As a Grad student, he and my mom drove it to Chile and back. They were real adventurers. See dude, from second to third, you gotta hold the clutch longer than logically expected or she’ll catch. Make sure you keep the accelerator too. When they got as close to the South Pole as they could, they just turned around and drove home. When they got back to Ontario, I was born. I was conceived on that mattress in Panama.”

“Grody to the max!” Hope yelled.

“Like, gag me with a spoon!” Asha echoed.

“We took it all over the place as a kid. Tobermory. Banff. Yellowknife. Labrador. Grand Canyon. After dropping me off in Halifax, my Pops just handed me the keys. ‘Here, Andy, she’s yours, look after her.’ I lived in her since last winter to save money. Just showered at the gym or at Asha’s. If the engine cuts out for some reason, just put her in neutral and turn the key twice fast. She’ll kick over again. I guess what I am saying, dude, is that, I know you’re a good dude and all, kindness of strangers and all, but you were ripped off and well maybe, I guess, I’m saying, dude, if you even think of leaving us high and dry, I’ll find you and bite your face off like a pit-bull.”

“Andy!” Asha said.

“I’d never...”

“I know, Sunshine, but it’s a lot of trust... Dude, this van is my whole life. My parents christened her Rociante. After Don Quixote’s horse.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be in camp when you get there. Trust me.”

“I am. Case closed. Sorry, I had to say it. Forewarning over. Hope, spin one up.” He tossed the cigar box over his shoulder and pulled the van into a trail mouth. The canoes were off the roof and portaged down to the river before Sunshine and the girls had opened the doors. Andrew strapped a cooler in one and secured helmets and lifejackets to both. The four of them sat on a boulder watching the river curl, passing a good-bye joint.

“Thanks again. Dude, just leave the keys in the glove box. I got the spare. And you know you are more than welcome to stay again tonight. You can canoe this afternoon, if you want.”

“Thanks, guys. Seriously.”

“You know the way back?”

“Sure, don’t worry.”

“Stay. Sunshine, stay,” Hope said, as their canoe entered the river.

Sunshine helped push Andrew’s canoe off the bank. They waved their paddles and Sunshine watched the current take them.

The camp was easy to find and Rociante a pleasure to drive. Putting the keys in the glove box, Sunshine found a map. The campsite was circled and there were notes along the river. Andrew had done his homework. Sunshine was half a baby finger from The TransCanada, a walkable distance but not close and not a single vehicle had passed since their arrival. He put the map back in the glove box and found a pencil and wrote on the map:

Thank you guys, but Stratford is calling my name. There’s a voice
that keeps on calling me, where I go, is where I want to be, maybe
tomorrow... hope to see youse down the road,
(your littlest hobo!) Sunshine. xox

He placed the map on the cigar box. The weed flickered temptation but Sunshine knew better. He’d never remember your lines. He’d hate to be a one-note wonder forever: Christian Slater, Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicolson. Weed kills ambition. Stunts emotional intelligence. He’d be sharp, knife sharp, knife sharpener-sharp. Sword sharp. The gravel road under his feet felt good.

At the stroke of midnight, after another beer and brownie bacchanal, underscored by owl-hoots, Andrew would impregnate Asha while Hope slept by the fire. Eight weeks later, at the Cabbagetown Woman’s Clinic in Toronto, the

unnamed embryo would be terminated. Andrew paid. Both cried. They never told Hope. Three days after the operation, they went their separate ways and never spoke again. Still, during that happy week, after graduation, canoeing those wild spring rivers, they never drifted apart.

After a two-hour trudge, gravel turned pavement, Sunshine sat on his pack under a tree and listened to the insects. A engine hum, tires echoing, a pick-up stopped.

“Where you headed, boy?” an old man asked, cigarette dangling from lips.

“Toronto, sir.”

“Good fucking luck. Won’t take you that far, but I’ll take you to highway.”

He jerked a thumb to the flat-bed. Sunshine put a foot on the tire and almost landed on a German Shepherd. The high decibel bark centimeters from Sunshine’s face didn’t stop for the 30 minutes. The truck stopped and the man pointed out the window.

“I’m going right, you’re going left. Such is life, eh. Just over that hill there, you’ll find the on-ramp.” Before Sunshine could get parallel to the window to say thank you. The old truck and man and the barking dog were gone. More trucks and trucks and cars and motorcycles and classical monologues. No Stratford or Bust sign. No water. Going down the road. He prayed to be saved from the Maritime. From rural idiocy. Young and dumb and full of cum and ready for the city! The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool, Sunshine sang. A fire-engine red minivan barreled toward Sunshine, forcing him to dive into the ditch. The driver slammed his brakes and slid through the gravel

shoulder into the grass stopping millimeters before a fat spruce trunk. Rage astir from death's proximity, Sunshine stomped down the shoulder to the passenger window. Eyes closed, the driver's head rested on the steering-wheel. Heart attack? Seizure? The CBC blared something about unification, something about a German wall falling, something about the end of a cold war. The engine spluttered. The driver awoke and wrestled the seat belt. Sunshine pulled the handle.

"What the hell you trying to do!"

"I'm Laird. Laird Brodsky. Get in."

"You trying to kill me?"

"You a... you a... you a... you a wanna lift?" Laird kept licking his lips.

Sunshine slid the side door open. Half a case of crushed beer cans littered on the minivan floor. He set his bag on the seat and climbed into the empty passenger seat. The radio cranked. Students have now occupied Tiananmen Square in Beijing for the 9th day protesting for the pro-democracy movement in China. The total number now exceeds 45,000 and conditions are worsening. The Government in China is considering ways to quell the protesters after the military has stated they will not attack the protesters. The Chinese Government has assured a peaceful discontinuation of the manifestation. Human Rights watchdogs are not so sure.

"Wobbly pop?" Laird said, pulling onto the highway. The can between his legs had wet his khakis. US President George Bush claims that the Panama elections were just and democratic.

“Mind turning it down?” Sunshine reached for the volume knob. An 18 wheeler’s horn blasted loud and close. The cow-filled trailer wailed past taking the driver’s side mirror.

“Whoopsie-daisy. Where’d that heifer come outta?” Laird said, swerving across the highway onto the other shoulder like a water-skier crossing the truck’s wake.

“Coulda woulda shoulda been ugly. What’s you’re name, boy?”

Sunshine put his hand on the door handle and was looking over his shoulder to see if the lane was clear for escape. The Calgary Flames tied the series at two games last night in The Forum, in a hard-hitting 4-2 score of The Stanley Cup final. Lanny McDonald hinted at comeback saying “It’s not over till the fat lady sings. I’m getting up there and not coming home empty handed. Laird stopped the mini-van.

“Can you drive?” he slurred.

“Sure, want me to drive?”

“That’s why I stopped. Kiddie. I’m a little... a little... a little zonked.”

Laird tried to stand and fell onto the floor between the seats, where he stayed. Sunshine hopped over to the drivers seat, fastened his seatbelt and adjusted the rear-view mirror.

“Where’re you headed?” Sunshine asked.

“Forward Ho!” Laird said, and passed out on the floor.

Sunshine double checked the traffic and crossed into the westbound TransCanada slow lane. He set the cruise control at 100 km/h, and searched for

music on the radio. Laird snored like a Shanghaied sailor. Sunshine opened the window to kill the stank of beer and urine and made arm-waves in the wind as Chaka Khan sang *I feel for you*.

After the Edmundston Golf and Country Club, the sign for Quebec shone. He pulled Laird's pant leg. Laird rolled over, farted and scooted deeper under the backseat to resume snoring. Less than a quarter tank of gas. Sunshine felt proud to be driving on the TransCanada for the first time. The radio stations quaked ducky French between pop songs. Milli Vanilli blamed it on the rain. The Fine Young Cannibals were driven crazy and Bon Jovi was there for him. Window down, Sunshine perma-grinned into Notre-dame-du-lac till the gas-empty light blinked. He pulled into a station, nudged Laird with his toe, no sign of consciousness. He checked the glove box, searching for a wallet he could use to fill the tank. Instead he found a thick hospital folder. The first form was a Mortician's Application for Burial for Yvonne Margaret Brodsky, June 24th 1940—May 18th 1989. 11:59pm. Close to fifty, Laird's wife? Was that yesterday? Laird's bender explained. Other forms: operation reports, chemo receipts, x-rays of some cloudy lungs, life insurance forms. Another file, older, tattered, jammed into the back and held together with a dirty brown elastic. A death certificate: Mary Margaret Brodsky February 16th, 1970—May 18th 1986, 2:36am. Dead On Arrival, collapsed cranium, traffic incident, police investigation in progress. Driving while Under the Influence suspected. Three years earlier, also Sunshine's birthday, must have been his daughter, then the wife, poor guy, same date. He scanned the forms for an address. 1905 Maplewood Drive, Truro, Nova

Scotia. Probably out of the hospital in a daze onto the highway in the wrong direction and just kept going. Bought beer and drove. Sunshine weighed his options and decided to leave poor Laird where he lay. For the second time that day, threw the keys in a glove box, grabbed his bag off the back seat, wished Laird luck, who answered with a snore. Laird's minivan would not move for another eighteen hours. He'd buy more beer check into a motel and miss his own wife's funeral. Laird Brodsky never went back to work. He died of exposure six booze-soaked years later in the remote woods of Cape Breton after falling asleep in a snowstorm. The coroner reported there was no sign of struggle, no foul play, no pain.

Twenty minutes later, Sunshine was in a black corvette with New Hampshire plates. LIVE FREE OR DIE. Breaking the sound barrier gunning toward Quebec city.

"You carrying, kid?"

"Pardon?"

"Weapons?"

"No, sir."

"Let me know now, if I find out later I won't be happy. There'll be ramifications. Lies bring ramifications, you know?" The man's tattooed bicep jammed the gearshift into fifth. He opened the flap of his shirt to reveal a handgun tucked into his belt. What would this man would think if he saw his sword.

"No sir, no weapons on me."

“You like coke?”

“Pardon?”

“Coke? Bolivian marching powder, you know snow? Blow. Pearl. Snort. Nose candy. The shit crack siphoned from.”

“Never tried, sir.”

“Fuckin maybe today is your lucky fuckin day.” The man opened the glove box and placed a large bag of white powder on his knee. This is the day of glove boxes, Sunshine thought. He pulled a serrated hunting knife from his black boot and filled the tip. He brought the white powder to his nose and snorted. The whole time steering with his left forearm.

“Heeeee—haw! You got good country up here, boy. Good road. I heard Montreal’s got the best hookers this side of Bangkok. Bang cock! Gonna drop this snow off in Ormond. Hell’s fucking Angels always buy my shit. You a wet back? You speaky ingles? How far is Manitoba? Up here’s all right field to me and no ones hitting any fly balls my fucking way. Is Ormond in Manitoba? You speaky ingles?”

Trucks passed as if standing still. Fence posts strobed.

“Yes.”

“Just crossed the border. Fuckin bo-zos.”

“With a gun and coke?”

“I do what I want, boy. I’m a fucking Navy Seal, kid. Was. I.D’s still good. Just showed that old military John Hancock-dick to anyone and they drop to their knees and suck it. You suck dick? Just testing. Everyone sucking US dick!

Bush's dick. Reagan's dick. You want your dick sucked, kid, join the US military. Hear they spraying apples with Alar causin cancer in kids? You wanna? I said, do you wanna, boy?"

"Never though about it, sir."

"Good. Don't. I just fucking quit. I'm AWOL. Fuck them."

"Really?"

"You fucking calling me a fucking liar, kid?"

"No, sir."

"I mean fuck them. Did I say fuck them? What about that lady, that Central Park Jogger lady, those coons done and raped? You a coon?" The man accelerated. The needle was in miles per hour and wobbling around 160. "Let's see what this little cunt has under her dress." The man's knee pumped the accelerator and the Corvette eased forward and back, other vehicles whipping past.

"Fucking want me to slow down?"

"Maybe."

"You suck dick, boy?"

"No sir."

"Fucking bang any hookers in Montreal?"

"No sir. Never been there before."

"Fucking pansy?"

"No sir."

“Fucking supposed to be in Miami yesterday. Suppose to be on a plane to La-tino Am-er-i-co, kid. Undercover shit. Gun shipment. Uncle Fucking Sammy got me selling Kalashnikovs to spics, but fuck that shit.” His mood shifted radically, the car revved in neutral.

“Fucking got any cigarettes? I need a smoke.”

“No sir, I don’t smoke.”

“Fucking weed?”

“No sir.”

“What good are you?”

The man shook his head for far too long. There was no music. He pulled the Corvette abruptly to the shoulder.

“Really, what good are you? Fucking out of my car.”

“Here?” Sunshine’s bag caught in the seatbelt.

“You want a lead brownie?” The man pinched Sunshine’s ass.

“Thank-you for the ride, sir.”

“Cocksucker. Fucking Fed. They tracking you. I know, fucking satellites.

The Feds built you to track me. You’re a fucking Omnibot.” The Corvette wheels shot gravel all over Sunshine and his bag. Dust filled his eyes. He felt lucky to be out of the car even if in the middle of nowhere.

Minutes later a blue Honda Civic pulled to the shoulder and Sunshine tried his school book French, which was unintelligible even to himself. The driver was a stylish middle-aged woman, a Quebecois Jackie Kennedy version of his mother, Dharma.

“Oh my, I thought you were one of my students,” she said, “that’s why I stopped.”

“What do you teach?”

“At the moment, I teach Human Behavior and The Psychologist of Management at L’Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal. ”

“Are you going to Montreal?”

“Not tonight. I’m staying with my uncle near Trois-Riviere. I’ll take you that far anyway, if you wish.”

“Do I ever! Great, thanks. I’m Sunshine.”

“Ensoleillement?”

“Pardon.”

“Your name in French. A literal translation. I do that. That’s how I remember things. I’m Monique.”

“Cool, never heard it that way before. En-soleille-ment. Enchanté ”

“Where’re you going?” She asked and Sunshine told his story starting with the robbery and ending with his dream of playing The Dane at Stratford’s Royal Festival Hall. It felt good to talk to someone that actually seemed to listen and care like his mother. Monique LaFleur was finishing her Ph.D. in Psychology at McGill. She listed a mouthful of other degrees and shook Sunshine’s hand firmly.

“I’m a perfectionist. That is my major fault, what’s yours?” Monique asked. She drove calmly. A Glenn Gould cassette played Bach’s Goldberg Variations on the stereo. The car felt like the safe womb of a therapist’s office. Even his seat

was set at almost full recline. Clouds floated past and for the first time since the bus, Sunshine let his guard down.

“I don’t know. Never thought that way.”

“Well think now, or don’t think. Just say whatever pops into your head.”

“I’m a chronic dreamer.” Sunshine spotted a herd of dairy cows and imagined leading them across a stage in some far off future performance. Say a marionette production of the Pied Piper of Hamelin at the Galway Arts Festival thirty years in 2019. “Has there ever been a herd of cows live on stage? Imagine the smell. Talk about up-staging, no one would hear a word?” He asked without thinking.

“Escusez-moi?”

“See, I’m always dreaming. The hypothetical feels realer than right now.”

“How so? Tell me some of your dreams?” Monique asked.

“I don’t know. I see myself living in the third person, like a character in a film.”

“I think that’s pretty common. We all do at times. Especially, the religious. Perhaps a tool of your future trade.”

“Do you ever feel like you are a character in a film?”

“Sure, sometimes. Don’t we all?”

“Like right now there is a helicopter filming our progress and we’re mic-ed and the car is on a trailer and any second a voice will come out of the radio and say cut, start again, take it from, ‘Where are you going?’”

“Not quite that vivid.”

“Well, I do, all the time. For everything I feel or do, I feel there is another me standing outside watching, observing, cataloguing, judging for effect, for future use.”

“You feel a duality?”

“Exactly.”

“Interesting. Tell me Sunshine, how is your relationship with your parents?”

“Hey, you going to charge me for this?” They laughed. Sunshine was serious but could see how it was funny.

“I’m sorry, my nature, I guess, like you with acting, I’m always analyzing. Can’t stop. It’s my passion, and my job, thank god. So I’m lucky. If you want to talk about something silly, we can. Anything but hockey.”

“Hockey’s not silly?”

“No, too brutal. Base emotion. Men punching men in the face, not my thing.”

“I’m not really a fan either. I like the facial expressions of the players and fans.”

They drove in silence. A pause between songs.

“I’m adopted,” Sunshine said, wanting to keep Monique happy.

“Really, from where?”

“I’m told Dhaka, Bangladesh. My biological mother was raped by a Pakistani soldier during the war and she abandoned me at a mission sponsored by Canadian Mennonites and my mother was over there volunteering and

studying yoga and began to look after me and became attached and brought me back to P.E.I after loads of paperwork and bribing officials. That's what I was told, anyway. Are you French?"

"Quebecois, oui. Did your mother ever marry?"

"Nope, didn't even date as far as I know."

"No masculine figure in the home?"

"Just me."

"I imagine you are close to your mother?"

"Super-close."

"Your best friend?"

"You could say that."

"What an interesting case. I imagine you're a feminist."

"A what?"

"A feminist. You believe everyone is equal. Women and men are equal and deserve equality. Your mother could do what any man could."

"Sure, doesn't everyone? I mean not when it comes to brute strength, but everything else. My Mom is super-smart. She's read everything."

"Mon Candide!"

"Can you elaborate, doctor?"

"I could, but I'd have to charge you." They both laughed again. The Honda Civic overtook a slow school bus. A farm dog tied to a yard tree gnawed its chain. A young child on a bicycle pedaled down a dry creek.

"Do you think about your biological parents much?"

“Not really, but a bit.”

“Normally at your age, adoptees often go in search of their biological parents.”

“Not this adoptee. I’m having enough trouble getting to Stratford.”

“You’ll get there. You’ll be there tomorrow or the next day.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re almost halfway.” Monique ejected the Glenn Gould and inserted Paganini. The violin caprice went well with Quebec’s rolling farmland.

“How did you get into psychology?”

“In high school, my parents divorced. At eighteen my lover was twice my age, almost forty. She used to give me books, made me keep a dream journal...”

“She?”

“Yes, I love women.”

“Wowsers.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No.”

“But?”

“I’ve just never heard that... I mean, I’ve never even thought about that. I never knew a woman could... I mean no one has ever told me that a woman and a woman can be...”

“Lovers?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now that someone has?”

“Cool.”

“Cool?”

“I think I need to think about it a bit before I open my mouth again.”

“Well, you’re talking to an expert if you have any questions.”

“Can you have kids? I mean, make them? Together?”

“We could adopt. Or insemination. But I’m single now.” Monique laughed and beat her thumb against the steering wheel in time to the caprice. “After reading Jung and Freud, I knew I wanted to do what I am doing. Have you thought about university?”

“I promised my mother I would, if things don’t work out. I’ll audition for NTS in January, if nothing pans out at Stratford.”

“NTS?”

“The National Theatre School.”

“In Montreal? On Saint-Denis?”

“Less than 2% of applicants get accepted, but if I did, I’d go. If not, maybe I’d try New York. The Big Apple.”

“You seem to have the drive.”

“They say that’s more than half the battle.”

“Who says?”

“Actors. The big ones.”

“Who’s your favorite?”

“Douglas O’Droole.”

“He’s phenomenal. I saw his Hamlet.”

“Live?”

“Yes, gave me a whole new perspective.”

“Rad.”

“Well, for once, maybe the only time in my life, while watching a play, I stopped thinking about anything, about the production, the actors, the lights, the costumes, the words, history. I saw Hamlet as a indecision incarnate. Like a spirit-symbol, an archetype of an idea, not even human, all of us, but non of us. A living walking moral dilemma and how easy a decision can drive one crazy. I can say I entered a dream state. After, I felt more empathy for my patients, my students, even self-empathy, if that’s a word. I treat myself better now. I’ve been very fortunate in life, my parents were attentive, even spoiled me, my biggest challenges have always come from having too much choice. Like a princess, like Hamlet, given everything and then when the time to act comes, all that arises is self-doubt. I feel that every day and that is what O’Droole gave me, in what? Two-three hours and a couple of soliloquies? I had a complete vision into the human inner psyche. He infiltrated my ego and gave me an understanding of a communal consciousness. It changed my view of the world. At least once a day, I think, thank god I’m now Hamlet. I don’t know how O’Droole does it night after night, must take a toll. I’ll never forget that moment, like a first memory.”

“Wow, deep.”

“I laughed. I cried. It was better than Cats!” Monique dropped into a vocal-fry, “like you know...like it was just like, so gnarly, like so radical, like so awesome dudette!”

“I bet you’re a good teacher. I’d like to be in your class.”

“I try.”

“Do your students talk like that?”

“No Duh! What’s your beef?”

“Do they?”

“Not really. But sometimes. Are you hungry? I’m starved.”

“Moi aussi!”

“Tres bien, mon cher. Let’s see if my uncle can find another place at the table.”

“Don’t go to any trouble on my account.”

“Maybe you can stay the night. Would you like that?”

“Better than a ditch, if it’s not any trouble.”

“Shouldn’t be. I wish I had a phone right now. You know in a few years, we’ll all be carrying phones everywhere all the time. I could just call my uncle and say anything, anytime. Aló Tonton Guy? What would you like on your pizza?”

“No way.”

“Mark my words.”

Monique’s Honda Civic pulled off the TransCanada, then off a smaller highway onto a gravel concession road. She rolled down the windows and the stench of cow manure filled the car.

“This is the true smell of Quebec.”

“P.E.I too.”

“Maybe all of Canada.”

“Not B.C.”

“Have you been there?”

“A couple times. The promised land. Except for all the hippie-Nazis. Those folks that are so far left, they’ve fallen off the tolerant spectrum. Because their way is obviously the right way and there is no other right way.”

“Do they really hate the French?”

“No, but like Americans, they don’t even know we exist. Too busy munching granola and buying out-back ski gear. There’s the house.” Monique pointed to a stout stone structure with two chimneys and bright red shingled roof. The Saint Lawrence river flowed blue and strong behind the lawn. An old man came out the front door as they turned into the lane. He took the steps slowly. A yappy gang of Basset hounds surrounded the car.

“I hope you like dogs. Tonton Guy breeds them.”

Monique kissed her uncle several times on each cheek and the dogs jumped and howled. Monique introduced Uncle Guy to Sunshine, who could not understand a word the old man said. As Monique translated, Sunshine smiled and said, “merci, merci, merci.” There was enough dinner and a spare room. Nothing would not be a problem. Perhaps he could help with a few chores and Uncle Guy took Monique by the shoulder and led her up the porch steps and into the kitchen. Sunshine followed a few feet behind wishing he had his bicycle or could stay in the yard or go back to hitching, but he was in the middle of nowhere again and it was getting dark. He longed for a city.

In the kitchen, sherry was poured and Uncle Guy and Monique sat at the kitchen table talking in rapid-fire Quebecois. Sunshine stood by the sink. When the first glass was empty, Uncle Guy stood up, startled that Sunshine was in the room. He volleyed questions to Monique, ah Le hitcher. Uncle Guy was ancient.

“Are you sure you don’t mind doing a chore or two?” Monique asked.

“Got to earn my keep,” Sunshine said. “Not adding much to the conversation.”

“Sorry for all the French, but you know, we haven’t seen each other in a long time. Guy never got any English, never went to school. You know, I’ve never heard a English word come out of his mouth. I used to spend my summers here.” Monique went back to French with her Uncle.

At a tall wood pile a few hundred yards from the house, Uncle Guy spoke over the yapping dogs. The task was clear, stack the wood neatly under the roof by the back door to dry. Uncle Guy slapped Sunshine on the back hard and friendly and went back into the house. Sunshine took off his jacket and relayed the wood from lawn pile to organized house stack, while the sun set. Sunshine found a rhythm and remembered Phil’s shop, loading the deliveries, stacking the selves, taking out the trash. The peace of manual repetitive labor, when the body knows the score the mind can wonder and Sunshine wondered where the mind went after 300 hundred performances of the same show, the cues, the lines, the blocking, the choreography must all go automatic. Was having the mind present essential or even possible? Sir John Gielgud, said he used to think about his grocery list while soliloquizing. Monique and her uncle had taken him off the road

and given him shelter, more generous souls. Sunshine felt he could spend years if not the rest of his life there by the majestic Saint Lawrence stacking firewood, but he was called into a delicious rabbit stew with good table red wine. The table talk was still French so Sunshine contributed little, *merci merci merci, lapin*. Monique translated for a while then got tired or deeply involved in the stew. At one point Sunshine thought he saw a tear drip down her cheek, but he kept quiet. Uncle Guy stood up and switched on the hockey game. Sunshine cleared the table and helped Monique with the dishes while the anthem played. Sunshine fell asleep on the sofa before the end of the first period, before the Calgary Flames took the game.

At some point, someone threw a blanket over Sunshine, then there was the smell of coffee and the blue light of dawn scratching at the windows. Uncle Guy poured Sunshine a thermos and gestured for him to follow. They went out the back door. Uncle Guy gave him a thumbs up and a wink while passing the stacked wood. Sunshine felt proud. The dew soaked grass was shin-tall. At the back of the property, overlooking the Saint Lawrence River, Uncle Guy set his coffee on a fence post and lit a cigarette.

“C’est magnifique! N’est pas?” He swept his hand across the horizon, as if offering a gourmand roast to a hungry dinner-guest, then made the sign of the cross and knelt. Sunshine spotted the white wooden cross beside the fence post and knelt. Uncle Guy took his cap in one hand and mumbled faint French prayers. An ocean liner trudged with the tide toward the Atlantic. Abruptly, Uncle Guy donned his cap, brushed his hands and pulled Sunshine into a hug.

“Allez avec Dieu mon jeune fils, et que tous vos rêves se réalisent,” he stepped out of the hug and patted Sunshine’s cheek.

“Merci,” Sunshine said, having no other word available.

“Et maintenant, travaillons, allons-y!” Uncle Guy strode towards the barn, which Sunshine had thought was the neighbor’s because it was so far from the house. Sunshine trotted behind the old man and helped as much as he could with the chores. Scattering hay for the horses. Pouring feed into cow troughs. Filling the water tanks. Shoveling pig shit into a vat. Uncle Guy gave instructions by whistling. His vast repertoire was bell-clear. They scooped chicken feed and filled a bucket with eggs. Uncle Guy sang all the way back to the house. Monique looked out the window to see them best friends, or a happy father-son duo. Bread rose in the over. Breakfast was slow and generous. Uncle Guy went into the cellar for some hyper-smelly cheese, hand-pressed apple juice, fried eggs, warm butter, real pig-skin ham, grilled garden tomatoes with fresh basil and enough coffee to kick-start a dead horse. When Monique started cleaning the table, Uncle Guy called *non non non* and it was clear they were avoiding a good-bye.

“If you want to shower. Now’s the time.”

“Oh yeah, I could use one.”

“Yes, you could.” She pinched her nose and waved her hand at the wrist.

“I’m sorry.”

“Just joking, you’ve on the road and the barn.” Monique said and passed the car keys across the table. Sunshine went out to the car and got clean clothes.

When he closed the bathroom door, he could hear Uncle Guy and Monique raising their voices. An argument yes, but full of dramatic pleading. The water was strong and hot and the clean clothes felt like rebirth. When he exited the bathroom, he looked out the window and Uncle Guy was giving Monique a serious piece of his old Quebec mind, finger pointing and poking her shoulder hard. Monique stared at the ground crying, a scolded child. Sunshine came down the porch and stowed his bag in the back seat.

“Everything okay?” Sunshine asked. Uncle Guy gave him a gruff hug and a firm cheek pat. Sunshine got in the passenger seat. Monique gave Uncle Guy a quick peck on the cheek and started the car. Reversing out the lane she couldn’t hold back the tears. Uncle Guy turned without waving and went back into his house.

“You okay?” Sunshine asked.

“Sorry. It’s just... he does this every time. He wants me to stay.”

“For the day?”

“No forever. I love him, but he uses guilt to show his love. And he’s afraid of dying alone, aren’t we all? He lives in another century. Said he had a nightmare, something bad was going to happen to me. Said he saw a man with a gun. Uncle Tonton has a melodramatic streak.”

“Why does he want you to stay?”

“Because I’m a woman. He says it’s my job to look after the family. His wife committed suicide, 10 years ago, after their daughter was raped and killed by a psycho on parole. Right here on the property. I’ve told him to move, but he

won't. The farm's all he knows, born and raised, his whole life. He wouldn't survive anywhere else, especially in the city."

"So there is nothing you can do."

"That's not what he thinks."

"But you have your own life..."

"He wants me to stay here and bake bread every morning and mourn, and I just can't. I'd love to but I'm not a nurse. I just can't do that. Life is too short... Do you like Chopin?" Monique rubbed the tears from her cheeks with her knuckles and shoved a CD into the slot. The piano came in loud as she turned onto the highway. Tall green grass and trees, so damned green it felt like a planet called Spring. Monique blew her nose hard and became another woman. A professional ready for work, no longer the niece-in-mourning, no longer vulnerable, but tough and friendly and positive. They drove in silence for the length of the CD. The houses got closer together. The farms smaller, more gas stations, no borders between townships, suburbs and factories, rural turned urban and traffic became faster and more erratic.

"Do you think it's easier to get a lift on this side of the city?"

"I have an idea." Monique said, nothing more.

"What?"

"It's a karmic surprise."

This woman knew things but it was clear she was thinking something through and didn't want to talk. Montreal appeared and Sunshine couldn't decide if it was bigger or smaller than expected. It wasn't like Toronto, which had the CN

tower and the lakefront and had been plastered all over the TV, or Ottawa with the parliament buildings, or Vancouver with the mountains as backdrop. His first time seeing Montreal, or any city at all. The lanes widened and traffic got dense. There'd be no way to hitch-hike here. Nowhere to stand, nowhere stop. Chopin's piano was still cranked, Monique ground her jaw.

"Let me show you the old town."

"Don't you have class?"

"We have time."

They crossed a wide bridge and the city lay below. The Honda Civic cruised over cobblestones, past squat limestone buildings older than anything Sunshine had ever seen. A horse-pulled carriage carried tourists snapping photos of a decadent hotel with battalions of flags. A model couple drank coffee on a terrace as if on the cover of a honeymoon magazine. Monique drove into the modern part of the city, through skyscrapers tunnels and pulled into a loading alley.

"Wait here. Don't let anyone tow me," she said and disappeared through a revolving glass door. Sunshine sat in the car, piano blaring, more people than he'd ever seen running and walking left and right. Monique returned and opened the passenger door.

"No one tried to tow you," Sunshine said.

"Here." Monique handed him a ticket. "Take it."

"What's this?"

“A ticket to Toronto. I can’t have you standing on the side of the road all day. What if you get hit? I’ll die of guilt. You’ve got lines to learn, dances to dance, songs to memorize, spears to carry. Stars to understudy. Take it. You have to meet your uncle.”

“Cousin. But I can’t. I don’t...”

“Sunshine, you need to learn when to shut up and say thank you.”

“Monique, how much was it?”

“Much less than what I get paid to lecture about stuff I love.”

“But? Give me your address, so I can pay you back.”

“It’s a gift, not a loan. I want to feel good about myself. I want good karma.”

“Give me your address anyway. I’ll keep you posted, send you tickets, love letters, whatever, something.” Sunshine smiled, but he was serious. Monique laughed, opened the glove box and scribbled her phone number onto the first page of a book. Sunshine wrestled his bag from the back seat. Monique hugged him tightly and slipped the book into his hand.

“What’s this?”

“The Second Sex. Simone de Beauvoir. Promise me two things?”

“Sure.”

“Read this cover to cover and never stop being the gentleman you are.”

“Done. How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world!”

“*A Midsummer Night’s Dream?*”

“Nope. *Merchant of Venice*. Merci pour tout!”

“Now, get moving. Your bus leaves in ten. Ten minutes to curtain, Mr. O’Droole.”

“Monique, you’re a goddess!”

“Sunshine?”

“Yes?”

“Just follow your dream and don’t get side tracked, okay?”

“Oui oui Madame.”

“Non, mademoiselle! Call me when you come to Montreal. I’ll show you around, feed you well. I’ve a sofa with your name on it. Allez! Allez mon petit chou!”

“Au revoir, Monique, merci!”

Sunshine went through the revolving glass door, crossed the main hall and found his gate. The old Greyhound again, he’d be in Hog town before dinner. He’d never see Monique again.

Sunshine stowed his bag, sword-hilt wrapped in a T-shirt, and sat behind the driver, who was eating a bagel with lox. The smoked-salmon grease sparkled in his mammoth moustache, a transistor radio played Jacque Brel’s *Ne Me Quitte Pas*. The bus filled quick, the only empty seat was beside Sunshine. The driver counted heads, started the engine, closed the door, then opened it again for the last passenger, a huge black man behind horn-rimmed glasses, in a black suit with a red fez and bowtie.

“Nice to sit by a brother,” the man held his hand out to shake. “Kareem Aziz. Salaam-Alaikum” The hand was big enough to crush a bear’s skull like a grape. “No, Rosa Parks problems up in the Great White. Front of the bus, huh brother?”

“Rosa Parks?”

“You don’t know Rosa. You know Jim?”

“Jim?”

“Jim Crow?”

“Man, you Canadian brothers live on another planet. And it ain’t Liberia.”

“Liberia?”

“Ever hear of the Right to Return Movement?”

“No.”

“Well the white man brought us here in chains and it’s our right to go home if we should so please and they gotta pay for that. Flights. Reparations and repatriation! I’m speaking at a rally for us brothers in Toronto tomorrow night. You should come. Spoke last night here. Mostly Haitians. And they don’t seem to want to go anywhere but stewed chicken in cornmeal. Last Saturday, spoke in Africville in Halifax, at the Seaview United Baptist Church, know it?”

“I’m from P.E.I.?”

“P.E.I.? Got any brothers there?”

“No, no brothers.” Montreal faded into highway. Sunshine vowed to return. He wished he’d had time and money to walk the city, find a bicycle, visit The

National Theatre School, see the old town, poutine, try a bagel. Thank Monique properly.

“I’m not the first, you know. Marcus Garvey spoke in Cape Breton back in the day. He delivered the speech that inspired Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song*, know it? You don’t seem interested in history and facts.” Kareem said.

“We never studied American History in school.”

“American? This is world history, brother. Trans-national history. The colonizers just construct stories and laws to keep us brothers down. Jailed. Slaving away for the Wall Street-devils. Fighting their wars. Building their railways. Picking their cotton. Letting our blood at the slaughter house altar of petty Capitalism. Garvey said a people without a knowledge of their origins, history and culture is like a tree without roots. Brother, you got some serious learning ahead on the road to freedom. Seems like you know nothing about your own history.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m more about the future.”

“Your future is gonna be shoveling shit for the white man, begging for table scraps, if you don’t figure out the facts now. Black and white. Everything is racial. Everything is political. If you don’t know how people see you, you can’t see yourself. If you don’t stand for something you will fall for anything. Malcolm said that.”

“Malcolm?”

“You live under a rock, boy? The future belongs to those who prepare for it today. Another one of Malcolm’s. Malcolm X? You know him?”

“No.”

“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds.” Kareem sang loud enough for the driver to glance in the mirror.

“I know Bob Marley.”

“Nation of Islam?”

“Pardon?”

“You ain’t no, brother. I can’t even talk to you.”

WELCOME TO ONTARIO, the sign, all blue and white, French and English, made Sunshine smile. Kareem knocked his fists together three times, put them under his armpits, leaned back and closed his eyes. He regulated his breathing, bearish inhales through the nose, motionless. Sunshine watched the signs. Ottawa, Bainsville, Lancaster, Cornwall, Brockville, Wolfe Island, Kingston, Simcoe, Loyalist, Nappanee, Shannonville, a ferry to the US, Belleville, Trenton, Cobourg, Bowmansville, Oshawa, Ajax, Pickering, Scarborough and onto The Don Valley Parkway. Sunshine wished he had his Walkman and Gloria’s tapes. Kareem slept placid as a frozen pond. The silent hours in proximity stirred a feeling of warmth in Sunshine for his neighbour.

“Hey, Kareem, we’re in Toronto.” Sunshine pointed out the windshield at the CN tower. “Have you been here before?”

“A thousand times. I’m from Detroit.”

“You got friends here?”

“Loads. I help build the mosque. Got a wife near Jane and Finch. Listen brother, sorry about being so snappy earlier, but you got to learn. Come to the rally tomorrow.”

“I can’t. I’m going through to Stratford tonight.” They were the first passengers off the bus. The station bustled. They shouldered their bags.

“Brother, wait. Here. Read this.” Kareem rooted into his briefcase. He handed Sunshine a stack of photocopies bound in three rings: *The Marcus Garvey and Universal negro Improvement Association Papers*.

“African for Africans. Brother, until you understand your past, you’ll never go forward. Find your roots, boy. Study. Act. Follow Farrakhan. Follow Muhammad. Best of luck. My number’s on the back, if you want to join the cause.”

“Gee, thanks. Kareem.” Sunshine extended a hand. Kareem extended a fist. With a belly-laugh, he pulled Sunshine into a bear-hug.

“Take this too.” Kareem pinned a red, green, and black flag on Sunshine’s shirt. “A race without a flag, is a race with no pride. My poor Brother, you got so much to learn.”

Dundas Street all Chinese restaurants and streetcar clanks. Sunshine was starving but afraid to spend any money. Walking around the block, four separate men asked, “Hey buddy, spare a buck, a dime, a dollar, or ten?” He wanted to see the lake. Center Island. The Eaton’s Center. Castle Loma, but Sunshine

knew so little about the city, any city. He returned to the bus station ticket counter.

“How much is a one-way ticket to Stratford?”

“Eighteen twenty-nine.”

“When is the next bus?”

“Tomorrow. Six am”

“Nothing tonight?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Why would I lie, kid?”

“I need to get to Stratford.”

“I need to win the lottery and find a good wife.”

Sunshine stepped away from the counter. Passengers came and went, everyone knew where they were going and why they were waiting. What if Douglas O’Droole tells him to fuck off? Worry, so close to the finish line, was getting the best of him.

“You need to get to Stratford tonight?” asked a Sikh in a security guard uniform.

“Yeah.”

“Try Union Station. Trains run late.”

“Where?”

“Just follow Bay down to the lake, head toward the tower. Across from The Royal York Hotel, ask anyone. About a twenty minutes. Or take the subway.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Cheer up, you’ll get there.”

Victoria Day, summer’s herald, the year’s most hopeful holiday, was fully swinging into its Monday night denouement. A banner announced Police Week. Another: SHOPSYS!! YOU WANNA A DOG OR YOU WANNA TALK? Sunshine wanted both and got neither. He approached the hotdog vendor.

“Excuse me, which way is Bay Street?” The vendor pointed, lips sealed.

“The lake?” The vendor nodded and pointed harder. Maybe the guy didn’t speak English. Maybe that’s the way things were here, in the big city.

Union Station’s sun-blasted concourse echoed announcements and high-heel clops. Full trains arrived, sunburnt city-folk happy and tired from a weekend of opening cottages or drinking too much beer while pretending to fish. Water-ski rashes and hangovers faded. The trains leaving were empty. The ticket was 21.75. Sunshine was down to 16 dollars. How long could a kid last on sixteen dollars? He found the track and got on without a ticket. He took a window seat facing backwards with the hopes of seeing the lake and the CN Tower and the new Skydome construction. Look back or ahead? A serious choice, not to be taken lightly, ask Kareem. The lakeshore was full of joggers and cyclers and yachts. Exhibition place, Ontario Place, some old fort, then suburbia. Etobicoke, Mississauga, Oakville, signs for Hamilton, Guelph, splashes of green, cow-dotted fields, gas stations and farms and then the 401 disappeared and shin-high corn

and turnip tops appeared and Sunshine knew, from years of studying the map, he was close, so damned close, to his final destination. He craned his neck and caught the sign for a dot of a town called Shakespeare. Who named these places? One day he'd take a photograph and autograph it with Douglas and the family sword in front of the town sign and send it home to his mother, Mrs. Stebbins, maybe Monique. Fuck, even Maeve and Normy, rub their noses in his success. He wondered how and what Gloria might be doing, but the past all flashed and was gone into the back of a church and a graveyard of rusted tractors. The train slowed and whistled and Sunshine was the only passenger to alight that night in Stratford, Ontario, on May 24th, 170 years after Queen Victoria's birth. No conductor asked to punch a ticket. Luck and Optimism were paddling Sunshine's canoe.

{ACT III}

Sunshine had no idea how to find the festival and there was no one to ask. An invisible storm cloud shot hail. Lightning blasted his shoulders, his neck, his crown. This storm was above him only. Being so close to his aspiration, a distant adopted cousin he'd never met, filled him with fear, a deep, crazy, irrational fear that he'd never felt before and could never describe. Parched, each step felt his last, like O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia* crossing the Sahara after days licking sand. An icepick stabbed his heart. He took Shakespeare Street onto Falstaff onto Milton and ended up slouched against a tennis court fence in a residential park. All those happy homes, tricycles and swimming pools, straight fences with blooming daffodils, streamers danced on a wire, wiggling plastic, a faded rainbow shard from a street party or winter fair. The train rumbled out of town. A grain elevator stood silent in the distance. Sunshine passed Front and Bay and Wells and Trinity and turned left on Romeo Street. At Highway 8, he came to a permanently closed carwash, a restaurant—windows covered in soap scribbles. At Dairy Queen, he asked the window-woman for directions to The Festival. She pointed down the street.

“The Royal Theatre is right on Queen. The Avon's downtown. The Patterson's by the rink.” she said. Had she winked?

Too tired to ask for water, Sunshine passed a Petro-Canada station and more red brick houses. As Queen Street got smaller, the houses got more

colossal, lush, wealthier with more Canadian flags fluttering in the evening breeze. On the right, the houses stopped and an endless green park opened up and for the first time in his life, Sunshine heard a real, not recorded, live, trumpeting fanfare.

The Royal Festival Hall blasted light like a candle-lit cathedral cake at The Good Lord's homecoming. Waist-high lamps lined the walkway, glowing flowers, groomed colors pumped spring-night aroma up Sunshine's nostrils. The periphery felt like an evacuation zone with an air of recent urgent exodus, bubbles still rising in abandoned drinks. A house-manager smoked a cigarette, a bartender shouldered a case of beer across the full parking lot, a middle-aged couple kissed then hurried through the glass doors. The Festival Theatre was build like an immense king's crown, structured like circus-big-top but cement, with twelve, maybe more, perfectly under-lit peaks. Pulling the glass door open with a shaky hand, Sunshine caught his own reflection, more Lucky from *Waiting for Godot* than Romeo. Even returning from exile, Romeo looked better. The lobby sparkled. A gaggle of elderly ushers stuffed programs. Three suited white men whispered in heated conversation. Bartenders stocked fridges. Sunshine darted for the inner door. He crossed the lobby. He should have stashed his backpack and sword. Hobos can't afford Stratford. Reaching the second glass door, one of the suited men called after him.

"May I help you, sir?"

"I'd like to see...I'd like to..." Sunshine stuttered.

"Ticket please."

“I just hitched from P.E.I?”

“Ticket please?” The suit was flanked by two more, ready for action.

“Is the box office...”

“Closed.”

“Is there any way I can see the end of the show?”

“Not unless you have a ticket, sir.”

“My cousin is Douglas O’Droole.” They pretended not to hear. “My cousin is Douglas O’Droole.” Sunshine blurted loud enough for ushers to stop stuffing programs. The bartenders stilled bottles.

“Please refrain from raising your voice, sir. A performance is in progress.”

“I’ve come a long way. I want to see my cousin.” Sunshine said, mad. The house-manager led Sunshine by the elbow to the box office counter.

“Is Mr. O’Droole expecting you?”

“No, he doesn’t know me, but I’m... My mother wrote a letter. ”

“Has he left you a comp?”

“A comp?”

“A ticket? Your name? Anything?”

“No. But I have our family sword.”

“Sir, my advice to you would be for you to wait by the stage door and speak to Mr. O’Droole directly after the performance,” he looked at his watch, “he’ll be out in exactly 71 minutes. I’m afraid I cannot assist you any further.” The man walked across the lobby and joined the other suited men. They opened the glass door and watched Sunshine from the inner sanctum. Embarrassed, looking

from exit to entrance to exit, unsure of his next step, Sunshine went to the fountain and drank heartily, then exited the building. Outside he circled his Mecca counter-clockwise. A technician smoked by the stage door. Before Sunshine could approach, the technician pocketed his extinguished cigarette butt and disappeared through the stage door. Sunshine followed the grass and caught a glimpse of some costumed actors smoking on a balcony. That must be Cordelia, perhaps Regan. He tried to find an open fire exit. No doors were open. Sunshine returned to the front entrance and sat on a bench. The suited men watched him furtively through a window. Sunshine could hear the thunderous sound effects slipped under the doors and out the crown's ventilation. Must be the heath scene, out on the moors, Lear—Douglas going mad, only a couple of meters away. Beware of The Moors at night, boyo. The glass doors opened and an angry old white man in a badly cut baby-blue blazer over a yellow shirt tucked into belted khaki slacks, deck-shoes, and a gaudy Calgary Flames tie, muttering under his breath, "...don't get the point of this bull-cock baloney. Old prick in tights yelling away, fucking strobelights...I can yell if you want? I CAN YELL TOO. I'M MISSING THE FUCKING GAME. I'm missing the game." A woman roughly the same age in a blue evening gown followed him, cheeks redder than strawberries.

"Frank, where're you going?" the woman asked.

"I'm not getting stuck in this traffic. I'm going home."

"But we have to see the end. Don't you want to see what's going to happen?"

"They all die. Fuck'em."

“Frank, we paid good money for these seats. I want to see...”

“I want to see the game. I’m going home. You do what you want to. I want to watch the game. The Flames are so close.”

“Frank!” the woman yelled. The man stopped walking, turned and approached the woman with a raised open hand. Sunshine was sure he was going to clobber her. The woman looked at Sunshine and then the man looked at Sunshine, a witness. The man grabbed the woman by the wrist and pulled her close. The man spat invective into the woman’s ear. Sunshine couldn’t hear the words but he watched the woman’s body deflate. The man threw her wrist down and marched across the grass. The woman inhaled sharply through her nose three times, stood stock still, a thousand years of oppression, subservience, divine patience. She dropped her head to her chest and followed the man slowly, so slow, to the gallows, across the lawn, not even bothered to lift her dragging gown. Sunshine watched her. Just as she left the theater light, into the off-stage wings forever, under the shade of a grand chestnut tree, returning to the icy prison of her marriage, her program slipped out of her hand onto the lawn. A glove, Cinderella’s shoe, a lover’s note? Token of unintended hope for future generations? Sunshine stood and ran after her. He picked up the program and called after the woman, who neither turned nor slowed her pace. While resuming his spot on the bench to read the bios of the minor players, a ticket stub fluttered onto the cement. Sunshine picked it up without a second thought, stashed his backpack behind the well-groomed hedge behind the bench and made for the

theatre front door. The house-manager and his suited white assistants crossed the lobby to keep the confrontation close to the outer doors.

“I have a ticket,” Sunshine said and held the stub up for the manager to see.

“That’s not yours, you didn’t buy it.”

“A kind couple gave it to me, my liege. Please, just let me see the last scene. Please. I’ve come a long way. I’ll beg, if I have to.” Sunshine kneeled.

“Our policy, sir, is to not... my liege, my ass.”

“I’ll be quiet as a door-mouse. Not a peep. I’ve hitched from P.E.I.. Mr. O’Droole really is my cousin, you’ll see. It’s my first visit to Stratford, please.” The authorities conferred in rapid glances. One of the assistants shrugged and the house-manager said, “George, stay with him and use the usher seats at the back of the house.”

“Yes sir.”

“And you, young man, do not disturb the performance, all right?”

“Promise. Thank you, sir.”

“I’m sticking my neck out for you boy,” the manager said. Did he lick his lips? “Go on now, or you’ll miss the last entrance.” Sunshine followed assistant house manager George into the Royal Festival Hall Theatre.

Sunshine’s eyes adjusted to the clash of swords. On stage Edgar stabbed Edmund, and he fell to the floor. George pointed to a seat in the last row. Sunshine sat on the edge of the seat gulping down the lighting and drinking dramatic tension. A pin could be heard dropping between the actor’s lines. The

live-text accelerated his heart. King Lear was all about heart. Goneril's exit. Soldiers follows. A long speech. A Knight entered with a bloody sword. What means that bloody knife? Tis hot, it smokes. It came even from the heart of—oh, she's dead. Enter Kent. Nay, send in time! Run, run, O run! May the gods defend her. Enter Lear. Time stopped on Earth.

An off-stage howl, a lion butchered, the deep squeal and shallow rattle of eminent death, long pain-filled breaths filled the theater from stage to downstairs toilet. Invisible magic sparkles of history, emotion, love, entered the lungs of each audience-member Sunshine's eyes blurred as Douglas O'Droole, the man, the legend, the unknown cousin, entered carrying a waif of a woman in a white gown. He staggered barefoot bawling, an unrestrained child in full weep, the culminated history of all the world's tears in one sound, this moment. Shaking, wobbling, and oh you are men of stone! Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so that heaven's vaults should crack. She's gone forever. Lear sits slow and lays his daughter's body across his lap. Lend me a looking glass...Is this the promised end? Stage lights dimmed, focused on O'Droole and his nightly death on center stage. The audience breathed in unison, with Lear, same time, same length, even George the house manager wiped his cheek. O'Droole's hands and voice, magical and precise. He registered the ultimate death-bed regret, dropped his sanity and picking it up as easily as a hat. His hair, long and grey and false, scraggly beard, dirty moustache. The homeless men from the bus station, at the soup-kitchens, an image to haunt infinity. He knows not what he says... my poor fool is hanged. Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at

all? A finger goes to Cordelia's lips, death pattered into seizure white repeating the word never... Do you see this...O, O, O, O. O'Droole's head flopped back and the King is dead. Stone cold dead. For the night. The finely sharpened sword back in sheath. The audience exhaled, relief, a sob heard, and the wrap-up, a flurry, as if all the souls in the room and the world were sucked up through the crown of the theatre out into the Ontario sky and infinite universe. The weight of this sad time we must obey. Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most. We that are young. Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

Edgar turned to Kent. Like lovers before a kiss, or soldiers after killing. He slowly placed his hand on the man's shoulder and the lights faded to black. Resolution? Condolence? Brotherly support? Flutter of lust? Ask Douglas. The theatre was silent for an eternity then applause erupted. Sunshine, first on his feet, stepped into the aisle. His body involuntarily urging to run toward the stage, a child after an ice cream truck on a summer evening. George placed his hand on his shoulder. They shared a tear-filled smile. Condolence? Brotherly support? Edgar and Kent? The house-lights came up and the minor actors skipped onto the stage for curtain call. Was it still called curtain call if there is no curtain? The audience screamed. Actors smiled in gratitude. The catharsis of curtain call was almost better than the performance. Several cast bowed before Douglas O'Droole, a landing-star, took center stage because he owned it. The roof levitated, the top of a boiling lobster pot, steam dying to escape. O'Droole, elbow bent, threw his hand to heaven, then as if deflated, from the toil of the gesture,

drops his hand, as if spotting a wonderful feather on the stage floor, but atlas, it was unattainable, so he brushed his knuckle to his ankle in a graceful low waist bow. In the same beat, he came up opening the opposite arm to include the cast, the audience, the technicians, and all the wonders of the subconscious world. The cast skipped backstage like school girls to recess, and O'Droole took another solo-bow, hands on knees, coy, alone, mocking tired, smiling like a blissed out drug fiend. There were six ovations. Then, following tradition, touching back to the medieval-troubadour, all available emotion ran through O'Droole's body and face as he gave his I-am-so-blessed-and-really-don't-deserve-all-this-divine-noise-but-love-it-and-thank-you-but-at-the-same-time-don't-really-give-a-damn-about-this-or-anything-bow and the final smile, and skated magically off the stage for the night.

Exhausted, Sunshine fell into his seat and watched the theatre empty. Blue-haired ladies by the busload from an old age home walked shoulder-to-shoulder with local-middle-aged-middle-classed couples that looked as if they had used a pressure-sprayer to gussy up for the square-dance, made for the exits. The crowd, a cross-section of rural Ontario, Sunshine O'Droole, adopted Bengali, conceived in war, the lone skin of brown. No one stared, but he was noticed. The elderly ushers collected discarded programs, dusted seats and swept candy-wrappers from aisles. An electrician took the stage with a ladder and changed a bulb. A stage-manager with a head-set around his neck led four young actors, all male, onto the stage and discussed fight blocking. The stage-manager asked them to take steps forward and backwards, a shoulder twist

here, the foot should fall exactly there. They all shook hands and walked off stage. George, the house-manager's assistant asked, "How'd you enjoy Act Five?"

"Mesmerizing."

"Well, it's over. Till tomorrow."

"A dream come true, thank-you."

"If you want to catch O'Droole, you'd better shake a leg. He's usually first out the door. Might even be gone by now. If you miss him, he might be holding court at Finnegan's."

"Finnegan's?"

"The local thespian watering hole on Main."

"Thank you."

"Next time, get a ticket and watch the whole thing. It get's better every time. The guy's a genius."

"Shakespeare?"

"No, O'Droole. Especially sober."

"Sober? Was he sober tonight?"

"You never know. Seemed to remember his lines."

"Does he forget?"

"Sometimes he jumps a cue or a line here or there. Normally, they can reel him back into scene. During previews, he came on as Cyrano de Bergerac."

"You mean the costume?"

“Yep and the character. Said he did it to keep the cast on their toes, but I think he gets confused, too into it, you know what I mean. Plus he’s old, older than he looks.”

“I guess.”

“A real genius, but also a bloody maniac.”

“How so?”

“Put it this way, if others pulled the shit he did, they’d be long gone. Perhaps in prison. The festival, the press, the town, everyone gives him a long leash. He puts bums on seats. The audience worships him. Genius is a gold mine.”

“How?”

“Ask yourself, kid. He’s your cousin, right? I’m bringing this ship to port, locking up and all. Go out the side door, please.”

At the stage door actors shared cigarettes with friends. The crowd fell silent every time the door opened with the tension of who-will-it-be until a cast member of minor recognition relaxed into light applause, arms spread for hugs while programs were thrust forward for autographs. A few performers, perhaps technicians, slipped through the crowd without fanfare to the bicycle rack with furtive glances at the public while unlocking and pedaling lightless into the night. Why did performers act like thieves? Scurrying away as if stealing fine art from a museum at night, painting rolled up in their pant leg. Could there be something criminal in pretending to be another?

When Douglas O'Droole exited, the crowd went berserk. In one hand a fat bottle of Cava, the other around a striking young woman, both had the appearance of props. The victor returned from battle. The cup is ours. Teenagers tugged his sleeve. Old women puckered their lips for kisses. O'Droole shook hands, patted backs, gave a cheek, and greeted old friends but never stopped forward motion toward the black car that idled beyond the crowd. O'Droole, as much the master at stage-center as stage-door, perpetual professional, cut the laughs and applause with dismissive back flicks of the hand, as if brushing mosquitos off a sleeve. Sunshine slipped between the black car and the crowd. The driver opened the back door, pinning Sunshine between the passenger's seat and the driver's immense backside. The young woman slid into the backseat with an erotic thigh flash. O'Droole turned to the crowd, bottle held high in salute.

"Champagne for my real friends, and real pain for my sham friends! Good night and thank you. As always, my eternal gratitude to one and all. Goodnight to one and all. I bid goodnight!"

The mouth of the bottle flipped upside down to meet his own. Frothy sparkle spilled down his chin and neck. The crowd frenzied, chanting, encore encore encore. Sunshine reached into the car. "Douglas! Douglas! Douglas? I'm your cousin!" Sunshine yelled. The driver stepped between Sunshine's arm and O'Droole pressing him tight against the polished black metal. Sunshine wiggled. O'Droole kissed the woman in the backseat.

"Douglas, I am your cousin from P.E.I.. Dharma's son."

"Isn't that lovely," he called, side mouthed.

“Douglas, I’m your cousin!” The crowd smothered the car.

“Move along, eh,” the driver whispered in Sunshine’s ear, sliding his arm around his shoulder into his armpit for leverage. O’Droole looked at Sunshine for the first time. A dark pip-squeak, un-showered, emotion, homeless, possibly insane.

“Isn’t that grand! Did you enjoy the spectacle?” O’Droole’s toe left the sidewalk.

“Terrific! Magic! Douglas, our grandmothers were sisters in Cork...”

“Uncanny, my boy, uncanny, have a splendiferous evening...” O’Droole pulled the back door hard catching Sunshine’s baby finger.

“FUCK!”

Sunshine crumpled against the car, face contorting against back window. Inside O’Droole threw a randy leg over the woman’s and went deep for another kiss. Tongue flapping for tongue. If filming, a director would have hollered cut and racked focus onto Sunshine’s blood spurting out the finger and smearing the window. The driver nonchalantly opened the back door, freed Sunshine’s lacerated finger, and closed the door properly.

“Kid, you need to be more careful.”

The car accelerated smoothly towards the river. As the crowd dissipated, a wizen woman handed Sunshine a handkerchief and told him to hold his hand above his heart. She claimed to be a retired nurse and asked if he wanted a ride to the hospital. Sunshine’s couldn’t respond.

“He’s losing a lot of blood.”

“I think he’s in shock.”

“Call an ambulance.”

“Oh you’ll be alright, kid. Just walk it off.”

“Yeah, walk it off.”

Sunshine tried to stay erect, to hold the blurry carousel but the world tilted and accelerated. His inner most voice whispered, “playing with the big boys now,” as he crumpled to the pavement unconscious.

In the emergency room, Sunshine awoke to the no-nonsense face of a stout white woman in doctor’s garb stitching his baby finger.

“My bag, where is my bag?” Sunshine asked.

“Just keep calm, young man. Don’t move. Almost finished here.”

“My sword...”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Drink? Nothing.”

“You taking the drugs?”

“No mam.”

“Call me Dr. Chelegalstein. What possessed you to stick your finger in Douglas O’Droole’s car door?”

“I...I’m...” Sunshine looked at his finger. Thick black threads below the knuckle. Sunshine could not feel his hand, just an egg-sized throbbing behind his left ear. He put his free hand to the welt.

“You banged your head pretty hard when you fainted. I don’t think it’s a concussion, but you never know. I could only administer local anesthetic. Does this hurt?” She caressed his baby finger knuckle.

“YES”

“And this.” She pressed the tip of his ring finger.

“Yes, but less.”

“Some breaks in there alright. After I clean this up, we’ll get you an x-ray and see what needs to be done. Do you play the piano?”

“No”

“Good. Got to look on the bright side of life.” The doctor tied a knot and dressed the fingers. “At least the bleeding has stopped.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ll be fine, but that hand won’t have full movement for a few months. You’ll get full movement back, eventually. You’re young.” Dr. Chelegalstein taped the gauze and left the room. Sunshine drifted in and out of sleep. Orange juice. A hard boiled egg and toast. An x-ray. Torch light flashed into his eyes, more sleep. His fingers were taped to metal rods. His hand was plastered past the wrist to mid-forearm. At 4am, they asked him if wanted to go home. Was there was someone to call? No. He couldn’t call Dharma now. Jesus, she was probably worried to death already.

“Thank-you. I’m staying close. I’ll walk,” Sunshine said. The nurse shrugged, handed him a pile of forms and an oversized envelope.

“Go see your family doctor for a check-up in a week.”

“Thank you. And goodnight.”

“You mean good morning.” The doors slid open. Sunshine walked down the emergency ramp into the quiet Stratford dawn. Cambria, St Vincent, Centre, David, John, Daly, Wolsey, Hibernia, Caledonia, Charles, Mornington, Church, Erie, York, Church again. So Upper-fucking-Canada. On Waterloo and Ontario he found a Tim Horton’s donut store. The town, a coma, not a soul for directions, the only movement a paperboy on a bicycle swerving to a Walkman, singing A-ha off-tune into morning’s first hour. Sunshine used his left hand to get into his right pocket, twisting his jeans almost down to his thigh. He still had 13 dollars. But his bag, his sword. He’d check later, after coffee and chili, that’s what this pilgrim needed, a good think, a good sit down, supper, god bless Tim Horton, the hockey great, dead-by-car at aged 44, never scored in his last season. Franchised his way to national icon.

Tim’s was empty and smelt strong of fresh coffee. Half the morning’s donuts glistened sat on the shelf behind the counter, warm sugary short-term tenants. For a split second, Sunshine thought going behind the counter and helping himself. Maybe something from the till, which was the same one Maeve plugged away on at Phil’s. No boyo, Karma. Karma Karma Chameleon, you come and go, what comes around goes around. Sunshine saw Phil pouring gin into a two liter Mountain Dew bottle. Maeve filing her nails and scowling into the ocean air. Lobster boats tooted their coming home song... Kissing like a bandit stealing time underneath a sycamore tree... Cupid by the hour sends Valentines to my sweet lover and me... Terence Trent D’Arby’s ditty jarred Sunshine into the

present. On the third line... slowly, but surely your appetite is more than I knew... He bobbed his knee a lá Elvis, and by the fourth line, sweetly, softly I'm falling in love with you... He spun slowly on his heels. When the chorus erupted, Sunshine evaporated into Trent's well-rehearsed choreography.

Wish me love a wishing well to kiss and tell;
a wishing well of butterfly tears.
Wish me love a wishing well to kiss and tell.
A wishing well of crocodile tears sing.

Another spin, knee straight up and out, let the ankle dangle, snap it home, sharp left, hard right and moon-walk. Five, six, seven, and triangle plant, went the little choreographer in Sunshine's head. A girl, his age with a heavy tray of creampuffs, erupted into giggle from the kitchen door. Sunshine froze her with a feral look, forest deer fear. Stan hitting the breaks. Asha shuttering her F-stop. The donut-girl looked at the door. He looked at the door. They were alone. They shared a mischievous grin. The girl bobbed her head a little left, nudged right and on quickly, loudly I wanna hear those sugar bells ring... They broke into animated lip-sync. The catchy whistle chorus kicked. She slid the cream puffs into the wall rack and mirrored Sunshine's shoulder popping robot. Hips kept time against the counter. They traded moves while the lyrics echoed around the empty shop. On the song's final high-pitched screech, which they both entered unabashedly as if their lives depended on being in-tune, Sunshine slid his heels across the freshly mopped floor and dropped into a hurdler's stretch. The Wishing Well song terminated in pure mutual yelp. Retracting heels, he popped smoothly back to full height and they shared a double 360 while enjoying their

hair. Sunshine stepped to the counter. The girl, whose nametag read Shelley, pulled a serious face.

“Welcome to Timmy’s. How may I help you?” They bent at waist and howled with glee. Shelley straightened, first to attempt composure and tried again, but the giggles had hold and wouldn’t let go.

“I’d like a double... double...”

“Oh shit!” Shelley put her finger in the air and ran into the kitchen. “Oh fuck me! Not again. I burnt the blue-fucking-berry crullers!”

Sunshine heard water running, more swearing, pots slamming. Stevie Wonder’s harmonica opened, *That’s What Friend’s Are For*. Diane Warwick’s syrupy shrill filled the donut shop with vocal butter.

“One sec, sorry,” Shelley called from the kitchen.

“No rush.” More banging, a fridge door slammed, an oven tray clambered to the floor. Baked dough aroma.

“Hey, do you need any help back there?” Sunshine called. Shelley returned with a rack of double glazed chocolate.

“You’re not from around here.” More statement than question, thrown over a shoulder.

“Whys? Cause I’s black? Get me some watermelon woman and suck the seeds out!” Sunshine channeled his best Eddie Murphy.

“No, cause you can dance.” They laughed. “Coffee?”

“Yes, a small please.”

“Anything to eat?”

“Any chili left?”

“No, last pot went after Last Call. Drunks love chili. I can make you an omelet.”

“Kinda on a budget.”

“You’re bleeding,” Shelley said, raising an eyebrow to his bandaged fingers. Blood seeped through the gauze. “You okay?”

“Rough night. Got my hand caught in a car door.”

“O’Droole’s? You’re the one. I heard about that.”

“You did?”

“Strafford’s a fucking sewing-circle gossip mill, specially anything festival. I could write a book from what I hear making the donuts. Night-shift at Timmy’s. The inside scoop. Where the thespians unmask. Maybe I could sell my stories to The Star or ET Weekly or something.”

“The National Inquirer.”

“Bollywood Star imitates Michael Jackson in Local Donut Hole with Bloody Fingers, photos on page 3.”

“I’d read it.”

“Oh shit, the croissants! Not fucking again.” Shelley ran back into the kitchen. More banging and swearing and trays slapping counters. An obese man in a John Deer cap opened the bell-chiming door, his jeans barely held up by barn twine, work-books covered in pungent pig-shit. Shelley returned with a tray of hot-crossed cinnamon raisin buns.

“Morning Morris.”

“Shel.”

“Usual?”

“Don’t forget salt. Yesterday you forgot the salt. I like my salt.”

“On it, Morris.” Sunshine stepped away from the counter. The brick shithouse of a human nodded slightly in Sunshine’s direction, crossed his arms after pulling down the rim of his cap. Shelley poured two large to-go cups of coffee. Handed one to Sunshine, who sat at a table, the other to Morris, who stood in the center of the shop as if anchoring the world. He counted coins and placed exact change beside the till. Shelley scurried into the kitchen, turned the radio to the CBC. An organ cranked Bach. The John Deer giant turned to Sunshine, blowing his coffee cool, both hands on his cup, and stared.

“Warm out,” the man said, more to the floor than Sunshine.

“Yes, it is,” Sunshine said.

“Coffee’s hot.”

“It is.”

A jarring thud came from the street. Two tail-lights moved down the road and a bundle of newspapers lay in the parking lot.

“News,” Morris said.

“Yep, hot off the press.”

“That’s what they say.” He snorted, set his mass a jiggle. “You a Festival fairy?”

“Pardon?”

“All’s going to hell in a hand-basket. All of this. All of you. Poofers and refugees getting rich off the sweat of the farmer. Soon science will have youse breeding on my tax dollar. I see it coming. Men will marry men and the world will end. Babylon.”

Shelley came out of the kitchen, paper bagged a large aluminum lump, added serviette, salt and pepper pouches, a plastic fork. She handed Morris the bag of food.

“You put salt on?”

“I did. And there’s extra in the bag.”

“Shel.” He readjusted the beak of his cap and plodded for the door. “Make my words, youse all gonna catch a disease from African monkeys and die. Sodomy breaks the laws of nature. Same buggering same throws the world off-balance. I said it first and I said it here.” The door chimed. Morris waddled past the front window and hoisted his bulk with laborious strain.

“That’s Morris, force of nature, prophet of doom. Don’t worry about him. He’s bitter and lonely. Never known love. Not even from his mother.”

“Do the locals like The Festival?”

“Some do, some don’t. Most can’t afford a ticket and resent the government funding. But the tourism keeps the shops afloat.”

“Do you go?”

“When I get a comp. The Festival folk are pretty friendly, when they drop their pomp and circumstance helmets.”

Shelley retreated to the kitchen, and retuned the radio to AM rock. If you don't know me by now, came over the speakers. She returned and placed two sunny-side-up eggs, two strips of bacon, two tomato slices on two melting slices of Kraft processed cheese—all neon orange and bubbly, on the table in front of Sunshine.

“The Morris special, but he takes eight.”

“Eight what?”

“Eggs. And everything else. The man's a trough. I'll give you the dancer's discount. Don't worry, eat up. You look like you could use a meal. And a shower.” She went outside and returned with the newspapers. Sunshine attacked the meal. Shelley hummed to the music absent-mindedly while opening the bundle.

“Looks like The Flames took The Stanley in Montreal.” she held up the front page. Toothless Lanny McDonald, red-bearded and bushy eye-browed, caught by camera in full bellow. A pirate claiming booty.

“He looks like a grizzle bear,” she said.

“A Viking on pillage.”

“One happy man. Imagine the joy of your life's dream coming true?”

“I can.”

“What?”

“Imagine it.”

“Did you watch the game?” Shelley asked.

“I was at the Festival. King Lear. Beats hockey any day.”

“Depends on the fights.” Shelley tossed the paper onto Sunshine’s table and returned to baking. The donuts smelt like fried perfume. Sunshine read the headlines: Linda Gray’s last appearance on *Dallas*. China declared martial law. Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* premiered. Gorbachev elected. Danish parliament allows same-sex marriages. Last graffiti covered subway car retired in New York. Mike Tyson got a speeding ticket. Hurricane in Bangladesh killed 500.

Two tire squeals, Sunshine lifted head from the news. Shelley was brewing tanks of reserve coffee for the 8am. She’d be ready, a ex-girl scout. Headlights reamed a direct path to the donut store window. Hedge be damned. The car, vintage and sporty, screeched to a halt on the cement pylon to inches from the window. Headlights projected spotlights. The driver’s door flung open, but no foot stepped out. A police siren crescendo-ed from a distance. The red lights enlarged and reflected off the white body of the 1962 Volvo P1800 Coupe. Sunshine knew very little about cars, but he knew The Saint, Simon Templar, drove this exact model as Douglas O’Droole, or visa versa. He’d seen it in a magazine.

“Looks like hell’s about to be raised,” Shelley said.

“Is he drunk?”

“Never seen him sober. Hell-raiser par excellence. Canada’s all-time greatest booze hound. O’Droole’s a demon.”

“He comes here a lot?”

“Sometimes, when blotto, when he doesn’t want the night to end. Or the day to begin.” O’Droole stepped out of the car and fell flat onto his face. A tall,

fashion-model-esque woman stepped out of the passenger seat, the stage door beauty, glamorous in black skirt, heels, sheer semi-transparent blouse, bend over to grab O'Droole's hand.

"Now, that éclair has quite a derriere," Shelley said. O'Droole popped to his feet, grabbed the woman's wrist and began to salsa. After a second spin, he pinned her onto the hood and smothered her with playful kisses, hands running up and down her body like a pickpocket. She ducked under his arm and made for the donut store door. O'Droole butt-checked the driver's door closed, clicked his heels trice and high-stepped soldier marched after her. The police car pulled into the lot and shut off the siren.

"Here comes Act Six," Shelly said, getting behind the counter.

"I would like the finest wines available to humanity and I would like them now! Here!" O'Droole commanded in received pronunciation, "And my good lady, I'd like a bowl of your finest Texanican-Mexan chili por favor, and she, my comely companion, would like a dozen oysters draped in salmon Carpaccio, sprinkled with golden truffle-snowflakes, please, my good dear. Tout suite."

"Mr. O'Droole, how good to see you again." Shelley smiled.

"My dearest baker," O'Droole wavered on his feet, and looked around as if searching for a lost line. His hand slammed the counter, hiding his vertigo with dramatic bluster.

"Honey, got any chili left?" the woman asked.

"Afraid not, sold out. Sorry. Just donuts and breakfast eats."

"That's disappointing. I was craving, Douglas!" the woman whined.

“Yes, my darling ball of fire and how shall I be of service to you and your desires?” O’Droole said, as if coming in late for a cue, the mind miles away.

“Shall we concoct more?”

“Chili?” Shelly asked.

“Whatever my love desires, the skies must open and deliver,” O’Droole said, winking, sliding into a conspiratorial elbow-lean on the counter. His chin rested on his palm into a blatant flirt complete with melodramatic eye-lash flickers, as if Shelley were the only woman that existed in the world.

“That would take a few hours, Mr. O’Droole”

“Hours! I demand to have some fine wine! And a roasted wild boar poste haste! Herald!” O’Droole searched for a non-existent audience with a mocking side-glance of faux-confusion. His chin slid unintentionally off his palm, coming dangerously close to smacking the counter. He swiveled, inhaled to fully erect and paced the shop. Sunshine dazzled, but afraid, felt he should be carrying a spear or a pillow with a crown, or a message from a foreign prince.

“O’Droole, I’ve got ya this time.” A policeman’s voice came loud from the door. O’Droole turned to Shelley and pleaded.

“Fine wine, please my good dear, more fine wine. Get this o-ce-ffer a cup.”

“Mr. O’Droole, you know we don’t have a liquor license,” Shelley said.

“Lick her? Lick her? I hardly know her. Just a drop, my love. To wet the whistle?”

“O’Droole, you were operating that motor vehicle.” The policeman stepped towards the actor and pointed at the Volvo coupe.

“Blood, you starveling, you elf-skin, you dried neat's tongue, you bull's pizzle, you stock-fish! O for breath to utter what is like thee! You tailor's-yard, you sheath, you bowcase; you vile standing-tuck! Take you me for a sponge?”

O'Droole rolled up his sleeves and shuffling his feet like a boxer.

“Don't start this again, O'Droole. Just come calmly out to the cruiser and I'll submit you to a breath-alyzer.”

“Submit? SUBMIT! Never! I am Napper Tandy!” He Irish step-danced around the donut shop tables singing, “If I were a rich man, diddle diddle didle didle dum...”

“Douglas, they don't have anything I want,” said the woman.

“...All day long I'd paddle piddy poodle pong... if I were a wealthy...”

“I'm tired of you, O'Droole. You're a menace to society.”

“...there'd be one long staircase, just going up, and one even longer coming down... and one more leading no where, just for show!” O'Droole's volume rose to operatic acme.

“Come with me, O'Droole. Make it easy on yourself.” The policeman's hand went to his truncheon.

“... the most important men in town would come to fawn on me... idle diddle dye-dye diddle...” O'Droole slipped into Anthony Quinn's Zorba dance and the cop lost his composure.

“O'DROOLE!”

“I have so much to tell you. I never loved a man more than you.” O'Droole extended his arm inviting the officer to dance.

“Alright, that’s it.” The cop twisted O’Droole’s wrist behind his back. Sunshine said firmly, “I was driving.” He stood and for a second felt 25 years old.

“...and I’d discuss the holy books seven hours every day...” As O’Droole crooned, Sunshine slipped the car keys from the counter into his hand. O’Droole had dumped them before his dance.

“Yes, officer. I was behind Mr. O’Droole’s wheel. I’m his driver. Release him.”

“You don’t look old enough to drive kid. Got ID?” Sunshine extracted his driver’s license from his wallet and handed to the officer, who reluctantly released O’Droole’s arm.

“What do we have here? P.E.I, eh? Sunshine O’Droole? Sounds like a popsicle. You related to this fool?”

“I’m his cousin. I’m the fool. He’s the king.”

“I can still arrest you for reckless.”

“So be it,” Sunshine extended his wrists to be cuffed.

“I’d rather chop this hand off at a blow, and with the other fling it at thy face, thou mis-shapen dick!” O’Droole hissed. The woman was trying to order from Shelley, who watched Sunshine confront authority with reverence.

“Shelley, did you see who was driving?”

“That kid,” she said, busying herself with the woman’s order.

“I know you’re lying. You’re all fucking lying. I’m just trying to keep you people safe. Just doing my job. O’Droole’s gonna kill somebody some night and

it won't be a surprise and I'll take fucking the blame. O'Droole you're a fucking shit-disturber. ”

“I kill every night and die a thousand deaths.”

“You're not on stage now, buddy. So clam the fuck up.” The cop returned Sunshine's license, his face contorted in a spastic hissy fit. To hide his disgrace, the policeman turned his back and walked toward the door.

“I got my eye on you, kid. If he gets behind the wheel in this state again, I'm going to bring down the full wrath of the law, down on him, down on you, including you Shelley, and down on you too Miss Jodie Foster. For lying. Perjury. Obstructing justice!”

“Best of luck, officer,” the woman said sweetly. Her cordial tone made the jab razor-sharp.

“O'DROOLE! NOT. ON. MY. WATCH.”

“Thank you for your sincere concern, my engut,” O'Droole saluted.

“You're a fucking clown O'Droole.”

“That I am, my good sir, and a well-paid professional ludic at that. I prefer the term Harlequino. Perhaps now aging into Pantalone, although I do venture to endow the commedia dell'arte tradition into The Bard. Isn't there a cat up a tree somewhere? Now piddle off.”

For a breath, it looked as if the cop was going to un-holster his sidearm and go postal. He put his thumb and forefinger to his temples and ran his palm several times down his face. He left the shop. O'Droole, the woman, Shelley, and Sunshine watched the police cruiser leave the parking lot in silence. The officer

squealed onto the empty road and gunned the engine with bravado. O'Droole turned to Shelley giggling.

"My dear, our fine wine?"

"You really push the envelope, Mr. O'Droole."

"Signed, sealed, and delivered. Beggars can't be choosers. Choosers don't beg. Two of your most monstrously caffeinated beverages, my dear, and whatever this young lad desires, well done my buck." O'Droole nodded toward Sunshine, "What news from Flanders, my liege?"

"Mr. O'Droole, I was at the stage door."

"You and my Aunt Bittie's Bulldog."

"I'm your cousin."

"Oh, yes. I see the physical resemblance. The Shir Lankan branch of our stock, n'est pas?"

"Dougjie, I saw this kid at the theatre. He's homeless. You shut the door on his finger," said the woman, devouring a pink glazed maple donut hole.

"I did no such thing. Megan, my one true love, the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, are of imagination all compact. How easy is a bush supposed a bear!"

"You did. I saw the blood. Check out his hand."

"I came from P.E.I. to meet you. My mother's name is Dharma."

"Dharma from P.E.I.? Intriguing. "

"You used to summer together. North Rustico? I want to be an actor."

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet

oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart... You are black.” O’Droole drifted to the center of the donut shop, each gesture fully rehearsed, self-hypnotized. Alone in public, privately lost in text.

“Dougie, put a sock in it. Show’s over. The kid’s talking to you,” Megan said.

“I go, and it is done; the bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell.” O’Droole’s sorrow stripped naked, fully revealed. Shelley and Sunshine felt sympathy and dizzy, as O’Droole waivered between inebriation and play, tragedy and comedy, man and thespian. To end the confusion, O’Droole crossed the donut store and pulled Megan into a kiss.

“Let’s get going. I’ve understudy blocking in three hours,” the woman said, leading O’Droole to the door.

“Mr. O’Droole, your tab,” Shelley said.

“Yes, my dear. But the comfort is, you shall be called to no more payments. Fear no more tavern-bills, which are often the sadness of parting, as the procuring of mirth. You come in flint for want of meat, depart reeling with too much drink, sorry that you have paid too much, and sorry that you are paid too much...”

“Dougie, come on!” Megan stood in the open door.

“... purse and brain both empty. The brain the heavier for being too light, the purse too light, being drawn of heaviness, of this contradiction you shall now

be quit. Keep the ducats, buy a cat. Treat it well.” He threw a twenty on the counter.

“Thank you, Mr. O’Droole.”

“Generosity is my middle initial,” O’Droole said, taking Shelley’s hand, dropping to one knee, chin on counter. He kissed her middle knuckle.

“Mr. O’Droole, you really shouldn’t drive. That cop might be waiting.”

Sunshine dangled the keys.

“Never a truer utterance. My liege, would you be so good as to lead the way.” O’Droole put his hand heavily on Sunshine’s shoulder, as if lame and blind, pure Lear.

“Thank you,” Sunshine said to Shelley, who smiled.

“Have a good day,” she said, lacing the irony with baking sugar. The woman sat on O’Droole’s lap in the passenger seat.

“That’s what laps are for, keep smiling...” O’Droole sang, as they pattered the residential roads of Stratford, only once getting up to third gear. The Volvo was fabulous and tricky, like the owner.

“I bought it with my first commercial check. I was the voice of Bell Telephone, straight out of drama school,” O’Droole told Sunshine in between snippets and quotes and babble. The man never stopped. Megan, the woman, fell silent, except for the odd direction, left here, next right, keep straight, reverse into the driveway. She seemed exhausted of O’Droole and stage-life.

O’Droole’s house, a grand Victorian with shaggy lawn, in need of paint, lit up like a spaceship, screen door ajar, Megan helped O’Droole stumble up the

porch stairs. He tried to carry her over the threshold but she squirmed away. They navigated to the second. Lights flipped on and off like a stage thunderstorm. O'Droole sang and then fell silent as if a volume dial had been turned. An ignored baby's cry. Pipes gushed water. Sunshine stood on the lawn, wondering what to do with the cars keys. He locked the Volvo doors and ascended the porch steps to enter Douglas O'Droole's lair. Setting the keys on the kitchen island, he beheld the chaos. Empty bottles, full ashtrays, flies circled bananas rotting in a bowl, moldy bread on egg-stained plates, newspapers and paperbacks and scripts stacked on every surface. Some half-hearted moans came down the stairs, "Dougie! NO! Not now!" Sunshine turned off the porch light and sat on the sofa. He picked up the closest paperback: *My Wicked Wicked Ways; the bare facts just as Flynn himself dared to reveal them. This and only this book includes them.* The font was saucy, the name, ERROR FLYNN, filled the cover. Sunshine fell asleep on before finishing the first line.

"Who, may I ask, are you?" O'Droole, naked, un-plunged French Press in hand.

"I'm Sunshine, you're cousin."

"Megan, a scallywag has infiltrated our breeding nest!" he called upstairs, and retreated behind the kitchen island, unashamed, unaware. A robin chirped. Shower amplified down the stairs. O'Droole stared at Sunshine, while slowly plunging the French Press forcing the grounds into sludge.

"What, may I ask, do you want?" O'Droole's deadpan baritone echoed off the bay windows. A diamond-cutting voice that could push any plot forward,

garner trust for any product, his natural center-pitch, a divine gift, consciously curated over decades. The thin white curtains stirred in May wind. The door bell rang. A thump on the porch.

“Would you, my boy, be so kind?” O’Droole chinned toward the front door. Sunshine stood and left the room. Stratford spring. Daffodils dancing, puff-clouds streaming through the aqua-blue sky, sun ablare, hedges hedging, the world abloom. He bent down and picked up a bundle of mail including three newspapers and returned to the kitchen. Megan, in a baggy white sweater and dancers tights, sipped coffee, nibbled on cheese, beamed ingénue allure. O’Droole rummaged the cupboards in an open royal blue robe.

“Mail.”

“On the sofa, good boy. With yesterday’s,” O’Droole called over his shoulder.

“Would you like some coffee?” Megan asked.

“Yes, please.”

“Pass *The Star* to the star, would you?” O’Droole said.

Sunshine handed *The Toronto Star* to Megan. O’Droole guffawed in mock jealousy. Sunshine deposited the rest of the mail and news on the sofa where he’d slept. Megan shuffled to the entertainment section, allowing the other sections to tumble to the floor. O’Droole pulled a bottle of Sambuca from behind a shelf of bowls. He twisted the top off, smelt the liquor and lifted the bottle to his lips.

“Oh Dougie, really? This early? At least, use a glass,” Megan said, eyes on the newspaper. O’Droole inhaled deeply through his nose, closed his eyes and proclaimed, “I love the smell of aniseed in the morning! I am glad I was up so late, for that’s the reason I was up so early.”

“You should lay off a bit today, after last night, plus we’ve got the matinee.”

“Hair of the dog, my dear. Inspiration is 100 per cent perspiration and I want my pores lubricating my ducts. Virtuosity requires oiled strings, my dear.”

“Right, that’s me,” Megan said, gathering her essentials into a mammoth purse. “Dougie, can I take Pegasus? Mine has a flat.”

“No, the plebs will gossip.”

“Don’t be a loon. Everyone knows. No one cares. Your life’s a billboard.”

“Wrong, my dear. Everyone cares and no one knows. My life is a constantly threading needle. And my life is MY life. Foul whisperings are abroad. Unnatural deeds. Do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets. More needs she the divine than the physician. You may not take my velocipede. My steed will be of use in the hunt this post-noon. You have two exceedingly seductive shanks. Use them.”

“You’re such a dolt.”

“Don’t forget ego-centric, my dear.”

“Odiferous flap-mouth!” She said going out the door.

“As tedious as a tired horse, a railing wife, my vassal. Yet a nymph. Not even a canoodle.”

O'Droole whistled. In one hand, he took the French Press, the bottle of Sambuca and the entertainment section, in the other a saucered-coffee cup, which clinked musically on the smooth glide up the stairs. Just before disappearing to the second floor, he bent at the waist, and called, "You! Boy!"

"Yes, Mr. O'Droole."

"Boil six eggs. Then use the door. Exeunt stage left."

The man knew how to make an exit. Sunshine's finger throbbed. He found a kettle and lit the stove. He found eggs in the fridge. The phone rang. After nine rings it was clear O'Droole would not answer. The phone stopped then started again. Sunshine picked it up.

"Hello. O'Droole residence."

"Douglas please?"

"I'm afraid he's indisposed," Sunshine said, happy to sound so formal.

"Who's this? I know he's there."

"I'm his cousin."

"Oh."

"May I take a message?"

"Tell him Jack called. Jack Birnbaum and it's more than urgent. He needed than yesterday."

"Does he have your number?"

"I fucking hope so. I'm his agent. I need to talk to him now. I bet he's on the shitter with a bottle of booze and *The Star*. Just hand him the phone kid, come on..."

“I’ll let him know you rang, Jack. Have a good day.”

“Listen kid, it’s super important...” Sunshine hung up the phone. The eggs wiggled in boil. He went halfway up the stairs.

“Mr. O’Droole, your agent, Jack called. Says it’s super urgent.” The message was met with a animalistic howl. Lear finding Cordelia’s corpse, but lower in volume, less controlled, followed by footfalls. O’Droole stormed past Sunshine down the stairs flapping his hands over his head as if killing a swam of black flies. A passing elbow brushed Sunshine’s shoulder, seemingly violent, but feather soft. O’Droole in clean white briefs nothing more, stood in the middle of the kitchen and extended his arm and finger to Sunshine who stood frozen halfway down the stairs, a bolt from Jupiter.

“These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Never interfere with communique. EV-ER.”

Inhaling to dramatic-calm, O’Droole crossed the kitchen floor and in one powerful swoop, ripped the phone from the wall. Cable, jack and handset crashed to the floor. He pulled a wooden meat mallet from a drawer and shattered the telephone housing in three evenly-timed whacks. He tossed the mallet casually on the tiled floor, scowled cinematically at Sunshine for a beat too long, then crossed his eyes and smiled falsely, asking, in a soprano cockney, “Are the eggs ready, mate? Are the eggs ready yet, treacle?”

“I think they need a few more minutes, sir.” Sunshine said, coming down the stairs to tend the pot.

“Bring them up, if you may, when they’re so inclined,” O’Droole said, mounting the stairs, three per stride, as if nothing had happened. End of scene.

Sunshine swept the phone-shards into a dustpan and found the garbage, which wasn’t under the sink, but a barrel outside the backdoor. Another phone rang from the hall. Sunshine found the hall phone and turned off the ringer. He spooned the boiled eggs onto a bowl and climbed the stairs again.

“Mr. O’Droole, your eggs are boiled,” he called.

“Forsake them at the stair masthead and evaporate, you nematode!”

Sunshine straightened the kitchen; washed dirty dishes, disposed of packaging and paper napkins, moistened a rag and wiped the counters. With a metal sponge, he scoured the coffee pot, removed rotten grapes, putrid milk, and mold covered liver-pate from the fridge, which was old enough to shave. He wiped and wiped and straightened. Cleaned pans, recycled empty bottles, organized the liquor into the cupboard above the stove. After an hour, Sunshine attacked the living room. He filled three buckets of ash from the fire place, stacked the newspapers in chronological order, piled books and loose sheets of script. How many scripts arrived a day? Did he read any? How did chose his roles? Sunshine windexed the windows and glass-picture frames, remembering cranky Maeve in the blue liquid. O’Droole with Pierre Trudeau. O’Droole with Glenn Gould. O’Droole held horizontal by a line of mini-skirted chorus girls. O’Droole in black and white hunched over Ophelia. O’Droole pointing a bayonet at the camera as a WWI officer. O’Droole, Richard Burton, and Richard Harris pushing a keg in an iced wheelbarrow. Sunshine swept the floor. He was beating

the coffee-table rug outside when O'Droole slid down the banister in jeans and clean white t-shirt, a pantomime of youth.

"Off to play the Dane's dead daddio! Tally-ho," he sang, darting around the room.

"Hamlet today?" Sunshine asked, broom in hand.

"Yes. No. Maybe. And then it started like a guilty thing. Upon a fearful summons. I have heard, The cock, my cock! That is the trumpet to the morn. No. I will not play The Dane again or I'll decide when I get there." O'Droole eyed his house as if he had never been there before. "Aren't we all always playing The Dane?" He asked not expecting an answer. Then pointed a finger, "Have you poached my sunglasses, boy?"

"Sunglasses?"

"Yes, those dark circular lenses you place on your nose to protect your eyes so no one can see where you're looking or if you are even looking anywhere at all. Those wonderful inventions that hide breast-ogles, keister-gawks, psychotic cogitation, epiphanic-flashes." O'Droole opened and slammed drawers, peered into cupboards, accelerating his pace. "Those fantastically expensive optical utensils that make me feel like James Dean about to bone a vestal orifice. Where are they?"

"Mr. Droole, I haven't see them. Are they in your car?" O'Droole stared deeply into Sunshine's face. His thoughts clearly subtitled, but in an unknown language. Senility? Sunshine thought, then smiled, his best defense mechanism.

"Who are you?" O'Droole asked earnestly.

“I’m Sunshine.” His smile widened.

“You have marvelous teeth, young man.”

“Sunshine O’Droole, your cousin. Don’t you remember last night?”

“Impossible.”

“What?”

“You are not my cousin. You are a black boy. I am not a black man. Not that I mind, but there is no genetic communion between us. Tell the service to send another maid next time. A seasoned domestic with more curves and less English.”

“But...I’m adopted...”

“You have done a lovely job, my boy. Now tally-ho, on your horse, much obliged.”

Sunshine followed O’Droole out the front door and stood on the porch watching his idol, who he feared was clinically insane, or at least a forgetfully alcoholic. The man was nuts. Sunshine could see O’Droole rooting through the Volvo. He pulled a sun-flap and the glasses fell onto the driveway. O’Droole pulled his upper body out of the car window and put on his sunglasses. He stood still for a second, then dropped to his knees, threw his fists into the blue sky and screamed, “THIS IS THE GREATEST DAY OF THE YEAR!” He crumbled into a ball in the driveway and trembled as if crying. A neighbor closed a window hard. O’Droole reached back into the car and the sunglasses fell off his face. He pulled out a mickey of whiskey and tilted the bottle to his lips. Sunshine counted a six-ounce-guzzle. O’Droole tossed the empty bottle onto the lawn, picked up his

sunglasses, and coughed his ways over to the side of the house and into the garage. In a beat, he was wheeling a black 1920s Schwinn Dutch cruiser down the driveway. He grinned at Sunshine on the porch and burped. “All warmed up! Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, But he'll remember, with advantages, what feats he did that day. Then shall our names. Familiar in his mouth as household words—”

“Break a leg, sir!”

“Remain, but give me your ass.” O’Droole licked his lips and villain-laughed.

“Pardon?”

“You heard. I say what I mean and mean what I say.” Another lewd wink, tongue a dangle.

Puzzled, half-afraid, Sunshine had no idea if O’Droole was quoting some crude prison-drama, running lines from some lost scene or unconsciously laying down the law, which were always his wants. Challenge? Shock-factor? Actor-joke? Sunshine gave a feeble thumbs-up, the other hand still on the broom-shaft, and watched his adopted-cousin, his only hope, Canada’s greatest hell-raiser and thespian, Douglas O’Droole wobble his squeaky bicycle down the clean empty Stratford street to perform a matinee.

“Peter piper picked a pack of—Chaka Khan Chaka Khan everybody Chaka Khan—a pack of peppered pipers—the lips the teeth the tip of the tongue—Karma Karma Karma Chameleon you come and go, you come and gooooo....” O’Droole’s mental snippets filled the street in his wake.

Sunshine swept the ground floor, vacuumed, swept again, then mopped—which again reminded him of Phil’s grocery store. A nightmare from which he’d never awake? He sat on the porch waiting for the floor to dry. Genius was the flipped coin of insanity. Booze, his self-medication. Helped him into character, don the public-face, must be super-isolating, always using your emotions as canvas. Is Douglas pretending not know who I am? What can he remember? Shower. Get bag. Call Dharma. Sunshine’s mind ricocheted.

“Collect call, please. North Rustico, P.E.I. 9-0-2-3-6-8-9-3-0-0. Thank-you.” Heart thumping, tears welling, yawn boy yawn, steady now, don’t let the desperation seep... cucumber clam boyo...

“Yes, thank-you. Sunshine O’Droole for Dharma O’Droole. Yes, Sunshine. Uh-hu. Dar-ma. You got it.” Each ring a timpani gong.

“Sunshine?”

“Mom!”

“Jesus Christ, I’m gonna kill you! I was almost about to ring the police. Why didn’t you...”

“Everything’s great, mom. I’m calling from Douglas’s line.”

“I was worried sick, why didn’t you...”

“I’m fine, mom. Everything’s fine. Sorry I didn’t call earlier, but I couldn’t... I didn’t have time...I...”

“Was the bus okay?”

“Fine, slept the whole way.” He’d tell her another day.

“And Douglas, is he friendly?”

“He’s at the theatre now.”

“Is he drinking as much as people say?”

“He likes his drink, but he’s a gentleman.”

“Are you drinking?”

“Not much, mom. Everything is great. Stratford’s really pretty. A picture book...”

“Has he read my letter yet?”

“No, I haven’t given it to him yet. I’ll do it later today. He’s awfully busy.”

“Let me know what he says...”

“Listen, mom, I gotta go. Going down to watch the matinee. This must be costing a fortune...” Dharma pried a few more “fines” and “greats” even a flat “wonderful” out of her only son. He promised to call weekly, and broke down like a hungry baby after hanging up the phone. Such a fucking liar but what could he do? She’d just worry herself sick. She’d just want him to come home and do what? Be there. Be there. Be here. Sunshine closed O’Droole’s front door and wondered if he could find The Royal Festival Hall.

The bag was not behind the hedge nor under the bench outside the theatre. Sunshine retraced his steps, lapped the building. He sat on the bench and stared at the theatre door. Buses of senior citizens unloaded. Administrative staff crossed from bookstore to stage door with Bard-themed ceramic cups of coffee. Orange school buses dribbled yelling and pushing students onto the lawn. A teen-aged boy in overalls grabbed a classmates’ breast. The girl, svelte and ruddy, wobbling in heels, shining like a silver doily in her new dress, punted the

boy between the legs. The boy keeled onto the lawn holding his nuts She pressed her heel into his groin.. The bygone teenage mating dance. A teacher scolded an innocent bystander. A slick city coach unloaded a cabal of private school boys, blue blazers buttoned, black dress shoes shined, cowlicks greased to one-side. They bubbled teenage violence under status quo varnish. Born-bullies, privileged barons, confident and innocent of the world's pain. These were the bankers and politicians and professors of the future and they knew it and would be disappointed if they didn't run the world as expected. A quartet splintered off from the group, gathered around the teacher handing out the tickets. Kids argued over sitting beside each other and common ticket trades-turned into histrionic squabbles. A microcosm of The Bay Street Stock Market. Sunshine had never seen so much self-confidence together in one place before.

“Hey Buddy, can we use this bench?”

“Sure,” Sunshine said, sliding to one end.

“No, like all of it.”

The boy's jaw was square and his suit tight across the chest, biceps bulged. His hair was blond and curly, eyes sea-blue. Sunshine, and the rest of the world were taken by his beauty. His three musketeers, flanked his shoulders, nodded and mimicked his words. “Yeah all of it, move it along, buddy. We need the bench.”

“What's this? Act one of The Karate Kid?” Sunshine stood.

“This kid's a card,” said the Adonis smirking. “We're expropriating this bench in the name of Upper Ontario College. Sorry Chief. Treaty's in the mail.”

Two of the kids sat down at the far end of the bench and began rolling joints under their blazers-flaps. The other two stood over Sunshine.

“Come on, Paki. Move along. Make it easy on yourself. The border is that way.” The boy cracked his knuckles. The other boy had cauliflowered-ears and looked as if he bench-pressed Camaros. All the students getting off the bus were white, except one black boy, who stood alone near the entrance reading Goethe’s *The Sufferings of Young Werther*. The two boys lifted Sunshine off the bench and tossed him into to the flower bed. The joint rollers giggled. Sunshine scrambled to his feet, more surprised than angry. His baby finger throbbed.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“You’re cruising for a bruising. Let’s give the Pak-eye a black-eye.” The cauliflower-eared boy said and Adonis laughed, “Yeah, fuck off back to where you came from.”

“P.E.I?”

“Hey, it’s Bud the Paki from the big red mud...”

“You guys are a cliché.” Sunshine wished his sword was under the bench. He imagined their self-confidence evaporating as he unsheathed the blade. He imagined them scrambling across the lawn yelping for help.

“Is there a problem here?” It was George, the house manager, the one who had shown Sunshine to his seat the night before.

“Nothing we can’t handle ourselves, Senor,” Adonis said, all cocky and sure.

“Good morning, Mr. O’Droole,” George said cheerily. “Did you find your cousin last night?”

“O’Droole?” a boy on the bench said.

“This guy is an O’Droole?” another said.

“In fact, I did. We had a grand reunion. Thanks George. Did you happen to find my bag last night?”

“I didn’t. But come with me and we’ll check lost and found.” George stepped between the boys and ushered Sunshine with a professional wave of his hand.

“Were those UOC boys picking on you?” he asked.

“Did you see my backpack? I left it behind that bench under the hedge. It’s got all my stuff.”

“Last year they threw pennies at the actors. We had to stop the production and eject several, right beasts. Privilege breeds brutes.”

“My bag, it was under the hedge.”

“I heard them call you a racial slur,” he put a hand on Sunshine’s shoulder, “shall I report it to their headmaster?”

“I’m okay, thanks. But my bag, my things?”

“I’ll check lost and found. Do you have a comp for the matinee?”

“I don’t know. Douglas didn’t say anything about one.”

“So you met him?”

“I slept on his chesterfield.”

“How was he?”

“What do you mean?”

“Extremely or just very drunk?”

“Sorry?”

“It’s a professional question. I just want to know how long the show will run. When he’s really hung-over, he gives the abridged version, knocks 10 minutes off, especially if school kids are in the house.”

“I can’t really say. He was animated, to say the least. No hangover.”

“Still drunk? So he’ll add text from other plays, which drives management mad. Let me call Lost and Found. Come this way.”

Sunshine followed the house-manager across the lobby into a tiny office behind the box office. George separated a key from a crowded ring, “Look at all this responsibility.” He held a hundred keys. “Almost need two hands to lift them. Took me a year to figure out what was for what. When I was your age, I wanted to be an actor. I have a Masters in Text and Performance. Now look at me. Assistant house-manager. Sit.”

“Beats digging coal.”

“Glass half full, huh?”

“Always.”

George flicked switches and turned knobs. Six black and white monitors blinked to life. A stage hand swept the stage. Actors warmed up in track pants and Walk-mans. In the lobby, a bartender brewed coffee. Ushers stuffed programs. A small queue outside the box office. The stagedoor had a couple

smokers dressed in black chatting calmly. The lawn and gardens were filling with seniors and students. Buses pulled away. George put down the phone.

“Nothing was turned in, but if it was near the bench, you should ask maintenance.”

“Think they might have it?”

“Won’t hurt to ask.” He put his finger to a corner of the monitor. “See this building here. Go round back after curtain, right now, they’ll be puttering about looking busy. Once the show starts they play cards. No mowing allowed when plays are in progress. Talk to Duey, the head grounds-keeper. Be-gawds, I better get those doors open or they’ll break down the glass. The barbarians have breeched the moats!” George scowled at his wrist-watch. “I have to do everything around here,” he said, and bolted from the room. Sunshine watched the lobby fill. The ticket-rippers took their places by the inner doors. A ritual. Kids pushed seniors, who retaliated sharply with canes. The matinee crowds were wolves in sheep’s wool. Lamb dressed as mutton.

Sunshine crossed the lawn to fanfare. Late-comers trotted uphill. Buses parked by the river, swans sailed silently. A few drivers had gathered over a thermos, shared cigarettes. Sunshine caught a glimpse of the four UOC boy’s uniformed backs crossing the park headed towards town passing a joint. He peered in the bookshop window. A middle-aged woman price-gunned books. He wondered how many beers old Phil had put down already. Mrs. Stebbins would have to load her own groceries. Would Normy have his job?

Outside the maintenance shed, as George predicted, five men in blue coveralls stood in a circle smoking, holding coffee cups. They stopped talking when Sunshine rounded the corner.

“Good afternoon, may I speak with Duey?” Sunshine said, smiling.

“Speaking. What can I do you for?” A white man, pushing sixty, with an Elvis-quiff and the presence of a spare pencil, approached. The other men dispersed into the shed like school boys avoiding the truant officer.

“I was wondering if you found a bag under the hedge last night. Near the main entrance by the big flower bed? A backpack.”

“Who’s asking?”

“The house-manager George said you might have seen it, did you?”

“Maybe. I’ll ask my colleagues.” Duey stepped inside the shed. He returned with another lit cigarette.

“Describe the bag.”

“Well, there was a sword in it, if you looked.”

“Was it red?”

“No, black. My name was on the tag.”

“And what would your name be?”

“Sunshine O’Droole.” There was laughter from the shed. Duey broke into a toothy grin, “Yeah, we found it. Once we saw the tag, we figured old Douglas was stealing props to hock. He’s done stupider things, but he hands out 30-year old Scotch like Santa Claus at Christmas. We back him up when we can, better man than most of the uptight ponces around here. You his?”

“Sorry?”

“You his kid?”

“Cousin.”

“Don’t look like it.”

“Where’s my bag?”

“Petey stashed it in O’Droole’s dressing-room.”

Duey threw his cigarette into a paint bucket by the shed door, “Talk to Master Douglas. Out of our hands now, kid. And we never saw it if anyone asks.”

“All my things were...”

“Sorry kid. We thought it was his. Go ask him.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Glad to be of service, Sunshine.” Duey laughed and the men inside the shed echoed like a school boy locker room. Sunshine turned and headed back to the theatre. There was nothing more to be done until the curtain fell.

He returned to Douglas’s house for lack of anything better to do. Sunshine sat on the porch steps for a while, then went into the garage. Trash, a rake, a shovel, a sledge-hammer, a saw, a push-mower, a hammock. He pulled the mower cord and the engine started. Without a thought, he mowed the front and back lawn. He found two hooks between two trees and hung the hammock. He raked the grass clippings into a pile on an overgrown fire-pit by the back fence. Good compost. He found a hose, sprayed the front and back porch and swept them clean. Could use varnish. He scrubbed the rusty barbecue, hosed again. With hand-sheers, he leveled the hedges. With the shovel, he bordered

the flower-beds and tree-trunks, turned worm-rich soil. Not North Rustico red, this was Ontario. Farm-belt black, could grow a sweet tomato but not a good potato. He was digging the weeds out from between the patio stones when Douglas pedaled into the driveway. O'Droole abandoned the bike on the lawn like a hungry six-year old itching for a grilled-cheese sandwich. He mounted the porch steps without a word. Straight through the front door and up the stairs, *The Goldberg Variations* cranked from the stereo. The shower ran. Sunshine finished the patio-stone borders, took a proud look at the spring landscape, returned the shovel, organized the trash, a quick sweep of the garage and went to the kitchen to drink from the tap. Nothing had changed. The room sparkled, except four shot-glasses with clear liquid aligned the counter, de-shelled hard-boiled egg sealed each dose. Sunshine could smell the aniseed. On the sofa, he picked a script out of the pile, *Beautiful Dreamers*. A note scrawled on the cover in red pen read: Rip Torn signed on. Sheila's in. Local shoot. I'd throw money at it for a %. Look at Dr. Maurice. It's a good role. Read it! Hug, Jack.

Sunshine dozed off on page six.

"Ain't me gots a coon on me sofa?" O'Droole twanged in a Southern accent. Sunshine stood. Outside the sun was lower, swallows sang evening, a blue jay sat on the porch rail peeping.

"Douglas, I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep." Sunshine rubbed his eyes.

"And you are.... Are you the gardener?"

"No, I'm your cousin."

"And I am The Princess of Siam."

“Did you read the letter my mother sent?”

“I certainly did not. What letter?”

“Duey said you have my bag in your dressing room?”

“Duey?”

“From maintenance.”

“With the Elvis hair?”

“Yes.”

“A flesh-monger, a fool, and coward. A drunk and liar, not to be trusted.

He’d mount your sister and steal you slippers for a farthing.”

“The bag has my sword in it.”

“Sword?”

“Yes, our grandfather’s sword.”

“Pray, do tell.”

“Our grandfather, Bernard O’Droole, 5th Regiment, was a doctor in World War I. He served in North Africa. Also fought in the 1916 Uprising. My mother, your first cousin, Dharma, gave it to me to keep safe. It’s the only thing I care about. It’s in my bag.”

“I have no idea what you are waffling on about. You, minion, are too saucy. I live in the present, nowhere else. Do not slander your mother’s womb.”

“Please Mr. O’Droole... I’m serious.”

“I have a performance that needs execution. When I return I expect to perceive no proof of your evacuation.”

“Please...”

“I know thy name against the bruising stones. I live on stage, this, all of this, mere ether. Thou mad mustachio purple-hued maltworms!”

“Do you have my bag?”

“I have no time for your riddles. Thou wimpled clay-brained fustilarian! I have no time and want nothing of yours. Thou loggerheaded malmsey-nosed lewdster!

Now seriously, fuck royally away.”

O’Droole grabbed his crotch and jerked his scrotum three times as if adjusting a prickly codpiece, then leg-straight high-stepped Nazi saluted to the front door. He pirouetted twice, planted his feet, stuck his thumb in his teeth and shot three vile thumb-flicks at Sunshine, before mounting his bicycle and gliding down the lane. Defiant, Sunshine took a Labatt’s Blue from the fridge and sat on the squeaky porch swing swigging. A lone swan waddled down the sidewalk, defecated, and continued regally away, unhurried, toward the theatre. The phone rang. Sunshine counted twelve rings. Megan appeared on the corner, black tights, hair pulled into tight bun, baggy wool sweater off one shoulder. She was closer to his age than Douglas’s. Her dance training radiated, iron-rod posture, feet turned out like a duck. She turned in the lane, lost in thought, eyes down as if looking for quarters for a parking meter, went through the garage and into the house. The screen door flapped. Megan sat, barefoot, no sweater, in a black dancers black one-piece leotard. She stretched her long celebrated legs on the porch wood. She opened a lemon with a knife and squeezed slow drops into a tall glass of water. The phone rang again.

“I’m not getting it,” Megan said. They looked at each other, listening to the phone ring until it stopped. “No news is good news, right? Your name is Sunshine, right?”

“Yep. Did you have rehearsal?”

“Where is he?”

“Douglas? He came back, called me some names, told me to leave, and rode away on his bike.” Megan preformed a back-bridge.

“Not good. I’ve never seen him on such a rip. He’s barely hanging on. Are you really his cousin?”

“Yeah, honest. He’s my mother’s first cousin. They spent summers together in P.E.I after our families came over from Cork.”

“You don’t look very Irish.” Megan downed the water and lifted into a shoulder stand. “You look Indian.”

“I was adopted. From Bangladesh. I know more about Ireland than Asia.”

“You’re Canadian.”

“Completely. And you?”

“My mother’s a Russian Jew and my father’s Swedish but I was born in Ottawa.” She let her feet fall onto the floor into a back-bend. The perfect scalene triangle.

“Is that yoga?”

“No, just working out the kinks. He’s losing it, you know.”

“Douglas? Losing what?”

“His mind. It’s not just the booze, that’s a cover-up. I believe there’s a medical problem. He won’t see a doctor. The festival rumor-mill is conspiring. Nasty talk.”

“Medical?”

“Pre-mature Alzheimer’s. Parkinson’s. Lou Gehrig’s. Dementia. Something’s rotten in his noggin.”

“How do you know?”

“I sleep with him. It’s been almost six months. He mumbles. Forgets things. He’s in total reckless self-destruction mode. Some of the old hams say he hasn’t been like this since he played Romeo on acid. In his late 20s, it was all about Ken Kesey and Timothy Leary. After reading Carlos Castaneda, Dougie believed himself a shaman. His muse for Puck was Jimmy Hendrix. Major hallucinogens, till some Special K put him in the hospital. Missed a few performances. He quit the psychedelics because he realized the stage is a better drug. Plus the parts were getting bigger, more text, more headspace required. Now his diet is Sambuca and pot. But his body can’t take it, he’s getting up there. The AD has called a board meeting to discuss ramifications.”

“AD?”

“Artistic Director. After the swans, Douglas is the biggest draw. He puts bums on seats. His voice is a natural resource. People rely on him to show up on time and say his lines. They’ve already asked me to try and keep him sober. Good fucking luck I told them. I don’t know how it’s going to end, but the end has begun, and it won’t be pretty. I care deeply for him. But I’m not Florence fucking

Nightingale. Though, I'd love to play her in a movie." She guzzled more lemon water, put her soles together, let her knees flap apart onto the porch, and made tiny pelvic rotations. Her hands pressed her lilac crest.

"Are those dancer's stretches?"

"I call this one the lusty cobbler. I'm releasing my pelvic floor. Want to help? I'm stiff as a plank."

"Sure. I'd love to learn some."

"Okay, come kneel behind me. That's it, press your upper thighs into my shoulder blades. Okay, slowly place your weight down. Push forward, slow-ly. Put your hands on my ankles. Good, keep pressing. Good, here we go. Good, give me all your weight." Megan folded in half. When her forehead rested on the floor between her knees, she released a deep primordial moan which stirred Sunshine's youth. The pulsation between Sunshine's legs pressed into Megan's spine.

"Whoa Nelly! What news from Elsinore? Is there summer in the low countries?" Megan's laughter shook her whole trunk. Her loose neck rotated the dead-weight of her skull.

"Sorry. Sorry! I just, I'm sorry, Megan." His face beamed red, not knowing where to look or how to move or what to do, he stood and looked over the lawn.

"Don't worry, Sunshine. You're a virgin, huh?" Megan asked, chin on knee.

"Yeah."

"Nothing to be ashamed of. Don't be embarrassed. You didn't do anything wrong. It's normal, healthy. And it's not the first member of parliament I've had

pressing into me while I stretch. Kid, erections happen. At dance school, the guys, even the gay guys could never control them.”

“Where did you learn to dance?”

“La Scala, Milan.”

“Really?”

Megan inhaled deeply, her spine straightened, her arm extended as if presenting a rose to Sunshine. On exhale, she collapsed, the whole movement underscored with a melodic hum coming from deep in her own world. Sunshine was hypnotized by the grace of the gest.

“Megan, can you teach me to move like you?”

“I’ll show you a few moves,” she laughed like a little girl who had just realized she could swim.

“Megan!” A shout from the sidewalk. “Megan, dearie, is that you there? Megan.” Megan curled to her feet.

“Harry, how are you?” Megan waved at the stout middle-aged man in John Lennon glasses, oil-stained jeans and a black and gold Guinness t-shirt.

“He’s at it again. Some hockey galoot from Lucan is going to shatter his jaw,” Harry said, shaking his head from the bottom of the porch steps. “He’s real lit for a Wednesday afternoon. Is there a show tonight?” Harry asked.

“Lear.” Megan went into the house, screen door flapped urgently. The man extended his hand to shake. “Harry Finnegan.”

“Sunshine O’Droole.” They shook.

“O’Droole?”

“I’m Mr. O’Droole’s cousin.”

“Blackest Irishman I’ve ever seen.” Harry’s laugh turned to wheeze.

Megan, in sweater and running shoes, took Sunshine’s wrist and they descended the steps. Harry kept pace, “I didn’t know he was already three sheets to the wind when he... I only served him two pints. No shorts. But he’s got a flask. I can never tell with Douglas. Halfway through the second, he starts chatting to this young thing, a Blondie farm girl grazing on a burger. The boyfriend comes in. O’Droole buys them a round. There’s a table of Warriors. They know the boyfriend, goon-like, all waiting for lunch. I didn’t see what Douglas did. I’m in the back flipping burgers. I heard shouting and know it’s coming. Douglas is so feckin ornery these days. I asked him to leave, in his ear like, twice like. Then he kicked off! Megan, you know how to handle him, you’d diffuse any situation...

“So much for my beauty nap,” Megan said.

The trio reached the main street and Harry Finnegan’s Public House. Megan pulled the door open. Harry stepped forward. “No violence and no police. My license is under revision this month, any incident might...” Megan brushed past Harry’s hairy arm.

“I’m so fucking tired of this shit. It’s like dating a three year old...” Megan said as she pulled open the inner door, still holding Sunshine’s wrist. “Stay close,”

Douglas O’Droole was behind the bar with a bottle of Jameson whiskey in one hand and a long fruit-cutting knife in the other. In the crook of his elbow, in a stage head-lock, was the buxom farm-girl. She didn’t look afraid, but she didn’t

look comfortable. O'Droole licked her cheek, then whispered something in her ear. He swept the knife toward the bar, which the young hockey players were trying to climb.

“Jesus, he’s in full Petuchio mode,” Megan said.

“Who?”

“Taming of The Shrew.” Megan pinched Sunshine’s cheeks with her hand and leaned close. “Distract the goons. I’ll diffuse Dougie. We need to get him out the door without the girl. He can’t miss curtain.”

“Peace, sirrah! Tis now no time to vent our love...” Megan said, dipping under the bar flap. Harry guarded the door, a spear-carrying servant. No spectator would approach. Megan caught Sunshine’s eyes and nodded her head toward the goons.

“Hey guys... he’s just playing...”

“Who the fuck are you?” the angriest said.

“That’s Douglas O’Droole. He’s harmless. Merely rehearsing.”

“I don’t care if it’s Marlon fucking Brando. Nobody disrespects my girl. This fuckity fuck has a date with my fist.”

O’Droole stuttered as if he had lost his lines or forgotten his role, his mind-cogs clearly turning in the bar-mirror. His next gest evaded him. No objective to guide him through the scene. One of the goons squared up to Sunshine.

“Be patient, gentlemen. I choose her for myself. If she and I be pleased, what’s that to you? 'Tis bargain'd 'twixt us twain, being alone. That she shall still be curst in company...” O’Droole delivered the lines slowly to the goons.

“Douglas, I’m playing Kate. That’s Bianca,” Megan stage whispered, “Take me, Douglas. Let’s go back to the top of the scene. Three, two and one.”

“But here she comes, and now, speak. Good morrow, Kate; for that’s your name, I hear.” O’Droole released the farm-girl, who didn’t move.

“Well, have you heard, but something hard of hearing: They call me Katharina that do talk of me.” Megan took her hair down. All eyes on the bar believed her transformation into the shrew. O’Droole set the knife on the chopping board and stepped into the scene.

“You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate. And bonny Kate and sometimes Kate the curst. But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom...” slick and wooing, O’Droole recited.

“Fuck this shit.” The largest goon hopped over the bar and grabbed his girlfriend. The other face palmed Sunshine onto his ass. Megan and O’Droole climbed onto the bar top and attacked each other with text. The girlfriend and boyfriend yelled at each other. Sunshine lay on the floor. Harry opened the door. The two scenes mirrored each other; Megan and O’Droole throwing rehearsed play-curses, and the goon and his girl throwing real curses. The back-up goons ignored Sunshine, mesmerized by real drama matching stage-acting. Megan jumped off the bar, “A witty mother! Witless else her son.”

“Am I not wise?” O’Droole commanded.

“Truth be told, Dougie, you’re losing it.” Megan dropping character stirred O’Droole’s rage to frenzy.

“Marry, so I mean, sweet Katharina, in thy bed. And therefore, setting all this chat aside. Thus in plain terms, your father hath consented. That you shall be my wife, your dowry 'greed on, And, Will you, nill you, I will marry you. Now, Kate, I am a husband for your turn...” O’Droole leapt off the bar, cornered Megan against the wall in a booth and suffocated her with licks. She had no chance, he was everywhere, an octopus flinging tentacles, pent with love and frustration. A long life of performance technique unleashed without a concern for audience or fellow-actor. O’Droole had lost that 10% of mind space that actors keep and need to return to themselves, to not fall off the stage, to stand in the light, to not exchange the blanks for bullets. O’Droole was a storm-trooper with a flame-thrower and a bottle of whiskey ready to ignite.

“We will have rings and things and fine array. And kiss me, Kate, we will be married on Sunday.”

He threw Megan over her shoulder and carried her out of the pub. The goons looked to Sunshine, who looked to Harry, who looked to the farm girl, who took a beat. “All the World’s a stage, eh. Next round on the house.” Tension dissipated. Harry clapped and the goons simmered, “Alright lad, on the house. What’ll it be?”

Sunshine was hauled up by a hockey-hand and given apologies and beer. The boyfriend goon was trying to explain that he was just trying to protect his girlfriend. Harry turned up the jukebox. Well I guess it would be nice, if I could touch your body. I know not everybody, has got a body like you, came George

Michael's simple tenor. Wham. Sunshine sipped his free beer, wondering if he had just witnessed O'Droole's last show. Harry refilled Sunshine glass.

"Sorry Harry, I'm a bit low on funds."

"Forget it, kiddo. I'll put it O'Droole's tab. He'll never notice. He never checks." Harry handed Sunshine a bar rag. "Wipe off that blood moustache. Bad for business. Scare the clients." Sunshine tongued his upper lip and looked in the bar mirror. His baby finger throbbed as he cleaned his bloody nose. A horn tooted from the street and the hockey goons downed their beers and jostled out the door hardily slapping Sunshine on the back, as if he was a rookie who had just scored. The jukebox played Billy Ocean's Get Outta My Dreams, Get Into My Car, then silence.

"That big galoot just got drafted by The Sabers. Not too smart, but makes lafrate's slap-shot look a peewee. Fists like meat-hooks. He would've shattered Douglas's jar like a flower vase."

"Is he always like that?"

"Douglas? I've never seen him so discombobulated. Sure, he's mad as a hatter, a gas-man, but he's been on a rip for the last few months. People are talking. I've known Douglas O'Droole since I opened, 33 years come December. He was just a sword-carrier in a cod-piece. Just off the shamrock ship, green as a spring-meadow, Douglas has been good to me. Great for business. People come to watch him hold court. You can't bottle craic. But I've never seen him this unraveled, even going through the divorce, even after all that Hollywood schlock. Bad reviews, broken hearts, Douglas never lost where he was like that before.

I've seen him up and down, but never his sanity so tenuous like. He's a bow-string frayed to snapping. To tell you the truth kiddo, I'm worried for the man. I consider Douglas a good friend, clearly my best customer, but I just don't know how to help. The Festival and this pub will be bugged if O'Droole stops shaking his money maker. We'll all be out money. I've cut him off before, and barred him and tossed him out on his ass. Truth be told, I'm afraid for him. I feel I'm losing a brother."

The bar phone rang. Harry walked slowly down the length of the bar, "Finnegan's Public House..." Whitesnake's "Here I go Again" skulked low out of the jukebox. 'Cause I know what it means. To walk along the lonely street of dreams. An' I've made up my mind. I ain't wasting no more time...

"That was Megan, she needs some help on the homefront. The banshees still have him."

"Pardon?"

"He's still raging. Can't snap out of the scene. They've got curtain call in an hour. The show must go on, eh."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks for the beer."

"Tell O'Droole that Jameson's bottle is going on his tab," Harry said, dipping Sunshine's glass in the sink.

"Will do."

"And kiddo, watch O'Droole. He's off the rails, on a suicide mission."

"Will do, Harry. Cheers."

“Are you even old enough to drink? Shit.” Harry shook his head at the closed door. Bruce Hornsby sang, and some things will never change. That’s just the way it is.

That’s just the way it is, it is, it is, it is.

Pre-show traffic lined the main street. After two late afternoon beers, Sunshine felt mellow trotting in the waning sun towards his idol and cousin who he hoped could be helped.

“Thank God you’re here,” Megan said shouldering her purse from the kitchen island. “I need to sign-in at the stage-door in eleven minutes. If I’m late, I’ll be fined, maybe even fired. The understudies are pounding at the door. Ruthless! It’s my third late this month. They can’t fire Dougie, but he can’t miss curtain. I’ll tell them he’s filming or has dysentery or something. No later than 7:45 or they’ll unleash the hounds.”

“Where is he?”

“Naked in the tub. Make sure he knows he’s Lear. Not Cyrano or Richard or Glenn fucking Gould. Throw some lines at him. Play the fool. Our working script is on the bedside table. Get solid food into him. Do whatever it takes to get him to the church on time, alright Sunshine?”

“Got it.”

“Stratford is counting on you.”

“He’ll be there.”

“Ciao Bello.”

“Break a leg,” Sunshine called. Megan took a double-take, as if seeing Sunshine for the first time. The clock displayed 6:21. Sunshine crept up the stairs. Bathroom door ajar, O’Droole slept in foetal position in the dry tub curled around the empty Jameson’s bottle, snoring, drooling, naked. The phone rang. Sunshine let it. The phone rang again. Sunshine looked into O’Droole’s bedroom. Sheets were tangled on the floor, mattress half off the bed-frame, strewn books, coffee-stained Lear script under dirty underwear. O’Droole’s bedroom and mind, total ransack, a first-year college dorm room installation piece. Windows open, curtains flapped in the May wind, an envelope of clean fifty-dollar notes sat on the counter beside a two rings. Sunshine thought about the money he’d made and lost. Avoiding temptation, he returned to the kitchen. He placed a pot of water to boil. The phone rang again. He answered the call.

“O’Droole residence.”

“Jack, Jack Birnbaum. Where is he?”

“Mr. O’Droole is indisposed.”

“He hasn’t signed in again. The Stage manager just called. Where the fuck is he?”

“I’m afraid Mr. O’Droole has a bad case of...”

“Drunk off his ass. Listen kid, don’t pussy-foot me. I’ve know Dougie since before your father penetrated your mother. Genius has a price, a mental toll. Something odd is burrowing into Dougie. Hopefully just a tapeworm but I’ve been getting calls. The Festival’s lawyers are sending letters. He’s no longer untouchable. Do you know how many people rely on him for bread and butter?”

“No, Mr. Birnbaum. I don’t”

“Do. Not. Fuck. Me. Kid. Get O’Droole on the phone. NOW.”

“I can’t..”

“Where is he?”

“In the tub.”

“Conscious?”

“No.”

“Listen kid, just promise me you’ll get him on stage on time. A cancelled show is fucking expensive. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” Jack released a primal scream. Sunshine held the receiver away from his ear.

“Fuck this. I’m coming down.”

“Mr. Birnbaum, I’ll get him to the theatre on time, I promise.”

“Good. Good, kid. I’ll see you after curtain. Tell Douglas to enjoy his next shit, cause I’m coming to rip him a new one.”

The line died. 7:03. Sunshine jammed some frozen bread into the toaster. No eggs. The egg carton was ripped into shreds, scattered by the fridge. He loaded the coffee maker, pressed ON, and returned to the bathroom, where O’Droole still drooled, naked.

“Mr. O’Droole? Mr. O’Droole? Good sir? My liege? Douglas?” Here goes nothing. Sunshine turned on the shower. Cold water blasted white skin. Expecting a lashing, Sunshine backed to the door. O’Droole’s forearm lazily covered his eyes and he yawned.

“Mr. O’Droole, we have to get to the theatre. It’s past seven. MR. O’DROOLE!” Slowly uncoiling from the bottle, O’Droole opened his eyes.

“Who. Are. You?” O’Droole stared at Sunshine.

“Really?” Sunshine said more to himself, but aloud.

“Would you like to taste the paragon of animals?”

O’Droole’s eyes flickered down to his semi-erect penis. He twisted the empty bottle open took a stage swig. He placed the cap on his penis head.

“Look a sailor!” He said in a childlike voice and slipped into maniacal giggles. Sunshine turned off the shower and retreated to the door. He tossed a dirty towel from the floor to an unresponsive Douglas. From under the draped towel, Douglas warmed his majestic voice, up and down the musical scale, repeating happily, “We two alone will sing like birds in the cage. When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down, and ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies...” At least he’s doing Lear, Sunshine thought buttering toast.

The drama subsided until they arrived at the stage door. O’Droole, too wobbly for a bicycle, they walked, shoulder to shoulder, O’Droole singing unevenly, running lines, seemingly happy or at least on automatic pilot but when they turned the corner into the stage-door driveway, he stopped and put his hand on Sunshine’s shoulder. “I don’t want to go in there.”

“But Mr. O’Droole...”

“Every molecule of my heart and soul are bellowing into the infinite fires of hell not to enter that blasted door. I am whore. Consummate harlot. Strumpet. I

have whored my love for years and have nothing left. I am empty and shallow and cold. Puppet and prostitute. I hate my every bone and all theatre and everything I have ever done with my time on this heavenly orb. I am a sorry sight, an improbable fiction. I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought, and with old woes new wail my dear time's waste. I am fucker of mother. I am going to put a bullet in my head. No, shower with the radio. Or drugs. Buckets and barrels of horse tranquilizers. Concoct a Tranq-elixer and quaff myself out of my senses. I would give all my fame for a pot of dope-laced ale, for I am falser than vows made in wine. I will spike myself into oblivion. No. I will plan my own demise proper exactitudes. You will never see me again, young man. Did you know you have captivating eyes?"

"No, sir."

"They really are quite splendid. Your eyes."

"Thank you, sir."

"Have you ever thought about TV commercials? They are casting your shade now. Hue are the next generation. The next great Canadian poster-boy will be your tinct. Make money while the sun shines, Sunshine. Employ your toothsome youth."

"I prefer the theatre."

"Flagellant. I must introduce you to Jack, my agent. He'd sign you, then bugger you, then take all your money and leave your corpse for the vultures to sup on your stilled heart in a traffic jam on the Queen's Way to hell. I'm serious. I'm not fucking going in that door."

“But Mr. O’Droole, you are the greatest actor alive.”

“No, my page. I am a fraud.”

“No you’re not. You change lives. People drive for hours, days to see you perform. You bring Shakespeare to life. You allow others to see their lives with divinity. You give complete visions into the human inner psyche. You infiltrates egos and give understanding to communal consciousness. You change world views, daily. You show the best and the worst of the human soul every single night, every time you step on the stage. You are a soldier for tradition and an avant-garde rebel. Like Atlas, you carry the cultural world on your back. You are essential for the survival of the next generation. The world loves you and needs you. Mr. O’Droole, you are a genius, the closest thing to a god on earth.”

“Well... maybe, one last turn.”

“Mr. O’Droole, please perform tonight. Humanity hinges on your every word. Every pause and jest. We need you. The audience would die without you, curl up and expire. Just one last night give us a show?”

“Put that way. This all, all this, seems honorable. Well delivered, my page,” O’Droole stared at the Royal Festival Hall, the river Avon, the finely trimmed grass and trumpeting daffodils. O’Droole placed a paternal hand on Sunshine’s shoulder, thumb pressing into clavicle.

“What is your name, boy?”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Sunshine, sir. Sunshine O’Droole.”

“Join me. Join me tonight.”

“On stage?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. No, backstage. My dressing room... O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention. A kingdom for a stage, princes to act, And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!”

O’Droole interlaced his fingers with Sunshine’s and they skipped through the stage door. The time 7:55. When the stage door keeper saw Douglas, it was as if the whole building sighed with relief. She called the Stage Manager who gave the five minute call. Hair, Make-up, Wigs and Costumes ushered O’Droole down the hall working while they walked. Sunshine trailed absorbing the smallest details. Backstage a flutter, yes the show would go on, and on, again. Voices warmed, muscles stretched, two men kissed against a piano, lights and microphones checked, the audience’s coughs and shuffles hummed through the monitors, a Flamenco guitar strummed. Megan popped her head out a door in full Regan regalia.

“Is he sober? Can he talk? Can he walk? How bad is he?”

“He seems okay, wobbly, but okay.”

“Good, you’re a good boy.” She gave him a lipsticky peck on the cheek.

“Megan, is he depressed?”

“No, just dramatic. Lunar. Lear. Lunatico. You’ll understand one day. Let’s try to keep him sober tonight, okay?”

“Whatever you need, and Megan, break a leg.”

Sunshine smiled into the dressing room, glimpsed actresses in various states of dress and stretch. He'd lost the O'Droole entourage, but the frenetic energy pulled him down the backstage hall. A muscular woman in short-hair and tattoos, headset and clip-board, stood in the dressing room door and gave O'Droole hell.

"I'm calling the union. Lawyers will solve this. I'm done. See, O'Droole, what am I doing? I'm washing my hands! You've done this night after night with no regard or respect. You have a serious problem. You're a sociopath. The board is getting a full report. I cannot work with this level of unprofessionalism..."

O'Droole listened calmly, a school boy accustomed to scold. He stood, Christ-like, allowing costume, beard, make-up, and wig to be applied. The crew scurried, cussing and complaining, a chorus of insults, bathing O'Droole in calming joy, as if he were ascending to another plane of consciousness. As belt and final laces were tied, beard-powdered and wig knotted, in the most soothing of smooth voices, Douglas offered, "My dears, I am extremely sorry and embarrassed for my behavior today. The last wish in my will is to not hinder your work, please forgive me. I am eternally grateful to work with such a creative and exuberant team of professionals. I am humbled, honored and beg your forgiveness."

Pope-like, O'Droole distributed kisses to the tops of heads and proffered cheeks and long-lasting hugs and deep watery eye-stares, double hand-holds. O'Droole's two hands petting their one, around the room twice. A mist of peace and forgiveness circled the room like bargain-bin air-freshener, at the door

O'Droole turned, "I am truly sorry. I promise with all my heart this will never happen again." He gave a clandestine wink to Sunshine and followed the stage manager down the wings toward the stage, heel-clicking left and right like a spry fresh-faced Fred Astaire. The crew ran behind him, fussing over last second adjustments. Actors and musicians bolted to places. Herald. Trumpets. Fanfare. House lights blinked and faded.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to The Festival Stage. Please no photographs or smoking—Now please enjoy *The Tragedy of King Lear*."

An weary electrician struggled past the door where Sunshine stood. Under the weight of two heavy stage lights, he stopped and said, "The guy's a twat. A beautiful twat. A genius of a prat but what can we do?" He puckered his geriatric lips, stuck out his jaw and shrugged before shuffling down the corridor.

O'Droole's dressing room was a sty. Sunshine looked in the mirror. He needed a shave, but he'd made it. Only a few feet from stage center, in Douglas The Great's dressing room. He spotted his backpack on the floor behind the door. No sword. He stuck his hand in the pocket where he had slipped his mother's letter. Gone. Had Douglas read it? Where the fuck was sword? The monitor played O'Droole playing Lear, "Nothing will come of nothing, speak again." Cordelia's faint reply, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth: I love your majesty according to my bond, no more no less."

Sunshine could hear O'Droole listening through the monitor. No letter. No sword. He pulled clean socks, underwear, and a shirt from his bag. Lear called the King of France and Burgundy and chopped up his kingdom, falling for Megan's sweet-

talking sycophantical verse. Lear banished his loyalist daughter, with invective and spittle but left juice in the tank for Act five. "Away by Jupiter, this shall not be revoked." Sharp violins ended the scene. Sunshine lathered. Pound of hot water. Was there anything better than a hot shower? A horse-like urine stream filled the toilet bowl. The shower curtain pulled back violently.

"What Ho! A naked Moor in my bathhouse! What dost thou profess?"

O'Droole cried in full Lear. Megan's soprano came through the monitor as Goneril. "By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour he flashes into one gross crime or other, that sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it..." Sunshine covered himself with the towel. O'Droole leaned over the toilet retched, gurgled tap water, threw his head back, Adam's apple bounced. Two strides later, O'Droole dropped to all-fours and reached under the dressing room sofa.

"Dinner Ho! Dinner!" He unscrewed a silver flask and tilted the contents into his mouth. Assuaged, he rolled onto his back and begins pulling his knees to his chest.

"Mr. O'Droole, do you have my sword?"

"Who are you and what do you want? Why are you in my chamber?" a husky whisper.

"Stop fucking with me. Did you read the letter from my mother?"

Sunshine's voice cracked. "Please Mr. O'Droole, do you have my sword?"

"Your sword?"

"Yes."

"You mean my Grandfather's sword?"

“My mother gave it to me. Her father gave it to her.”

“Clotpoll. Mongrel. Why came not the slave back to me when I called him? Miscreant, eat my dead vomit!” O’Droole rolled to his feet, took another hit off the flask, tossed it empty onto the floor and bolted out the door. Megan’s voice echoing through the tinny speaker.

“You see how full of changes his age is... but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them...” Sunshine sat on O’Droole’s dressing chair. A book, *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris, lay spine-broken face down among the tubes and bottles and brushes and pencils and high-lighters. A naked man, woman, and child stood facing away from the camera on the book cover. Three white hippy bottoms. A typed letter fell to the floor:

April 1st 1989

RE: Urgent

Dear Mr. D. O’Droole,

In regards to the CTC scan and the MOCA test executed on March 17th, I am writing to inform you we have discovered an over-abundance of small blood clots causing continual vessel ischemic changes, in other words, you have a progressive disease which indicates early signs of dementia.

We ask that you please call the office to set up a further appointment as soon as possible. Please come with a family member to discuss our course of treatment. Exercise, healthy eating and avoiding intoxicates are the crucial first steps to prolonging your mental capacity, REFRAIN from imbibing in alcohol of any sort immediately.

Sincerely,

Dr. P. Wasserstein

Sunshine spotted the dictionary being used as the sofa's fourth leg. He lifted the sofa and slid the flask into the book's place.

De-ment-ia: A chronic or persistent disorder of the mental processes caused by brain disease or injury and marked by memory disorders, personality changes, and impaired reasoning. Late 18th century: from Latin, from demens, dement-out of one's mind. Demons. Demente.

Lear will be his last role. Sunshine lay on the sofa and listened to O'Droole argue the Fool. Did Megan know? Did Jack? Art imitated life, or was it visa versa? "Whereof I know you are fraught and put away. These dispositions, that of late transform you from what you rightly are."

"Who is it that can tell me who I am?" Lear pleaded.

The fool knew... Lear's shadow. The newspapers would have a heyday. Megan's lines came fast and furious. "As you are old and reverend, you should be wise. Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires. Men so disordered, so deboshed and bold, that this our court, infected with their manners, shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust make it more like a tavern or a brothel than a graced palace." O'Droole's counter attack came masterfullt, almost sarcastic.

"Life and death! I am ashamed that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus!"

O'Droole ripped the door open. "Booze. I demand booze. You there, Moor, have you replenished my stock?" An accusatory finger extended close to Sunshine's nose.

"I didn't get any, Mr. O'Droole"

“You must find some, I implore, before Act III. Run, child. Run! Run as if your birth depended upon it. You have four minutes.” O’Droole grabbed Sunshine by the back of the neck and pushed him out the door. “I won’t go on without inspiration...”

O’Droole’s rant followed him down the hall. The front of house bar? Another actor? Megan? Stage door? Where’s the Liquor store? Finnegan’s? The doctor’s note said no booze. That was 6 weeks ago. A blue-haired woman, sentinel between back and front of house, sat on a chair reading under a blue light.

“I need to go to the bar for Mr. O’Droole.”

“Strictly forbidden. No alcohol backstage, ever. It would mean my job, do you work here?” she whispered. Persnickety incarnate, she had heard it all before.

“But Mr. O’Droole is having a melt-down. He says he won’t go on for Act IV without booze. He is maniacal, ma’am. I’ll be right back, two seconds”

“Mr. O’Droole is continually melting down. He’s an artist. No. No, and no. If you go out that door, you are not coming back. Not on my watch.” She returned to Robertson Davies *Bred in The Bone*. Sunshine shuffled in the wing mentally scrolling options.

“Megan, Megan,” Sunshine whispered as bolted down the hall guzzling water.

“Douglas is fucking all my cues. I’m going to strangle his numb-nuts. What are you doing here?”

“He says he won’t do Act IV without any booze.”

“He always says that.”

“I think he means it.”

“Follow me. Regan’s a Newf. We can syphon some Screech off her.” Her dressing room was a flower shop. Not a speck of dust, props aligned, shoes organized by color, all clothing hung. From a translucent glass bottle beside the mirror she poured a mug of clear liquid that smelled of turpentine and herring.

“You know Sunshine, you’re a handsome gent,” she held the mug close and stepped closer. Her free hand slipped down Sunshine’s spine. She made smooching sounds.

“It’s Goneril. Being in character gets me so fucking horny.” She ran her fingers through his hair and pressed the mug into his chest. Their hands met around the cup. Megan leaned into a stage kiss. Sunshine stuttered, unsure of what was happening with no idea what to do.

“Was that your first kiss ever?” she giggled.

“No. I’ve kissed people before.”

“People. Plural?”

“Yeah.”

“There is something I want to take from you.”

“Pardon?”

“Your virginity.” Megan’s head flew back in cackle. A pythoness. “Tell that decrepit old fuck to stop jumping on my lines or I will punish him later. Do you think I’d make a good Lady Macbeth?”

“Megan, do know if Douglas has been to the doctor lately?”

“Perhaps in a few years. I’d hawk my daughters ass for that role.”

“Is he seeing a doctor?”

“I don’t know. That’s my cue, gotta run, honey-buns.” She pinched Sunshine’s buttock and ran for the stage. Shivering and curled on the dressing room floor, somewhere between weep and giggle, O’Droole extended his hand to the mug.

“Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, Rain!” he took the mug and drank heartily. He popped to his feet and swiveled his hips like James Brown.

“You’re hired my boy, a god’s-send. Which scene is this?” O’Droole cocked an ear to the speaker.

“Megan told me to tell you not to...”

“That foul whore is dragging the show into slow-motion. A poxy-hammed, tender-loin. Acting not on the line but between them. If her visage wasn’t so perfect, I’d have her bound and whipped with a riding-crop...” Three hard knocks on the door came.

“Mr. O’Droole, places please, places for the heath,” a firm voice called from the hall.

“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!...” O’Droole screamed down the hall toward the stage. In character or out was impossible to discern. Sunshine spent the rest of the performance on the sofa listening to O’Droole weep and rage and rumble at all the injustices of the world. Every word that left his mouth as believable as history itself.

The audience thundered at curtain call. No matter what any critic said, there was not a dry eye in the house. Even the coldest Canadian farmer could feel his heart-strings strummed. The post-show hustle began, a celebratory-dance involving fawning fans, hedonic sycophants, and highly-strung technicians thrilled to be clocking-out. Sunshine sat on the sofa as O'Droole shed King Lear. Crown and beard discarded on make-up table. A wet towel scrubbed the stage paint off. Wig tossed onto floor, robe abandoned with a shrug. O'Droole's ass as white as a full-moon in spring. The audience's chat and shouts disappeared as the monitors were disconnected. The stage-managers voice, "Good game tonight gang. Fight call tomorrow is 6:00. General at 6:30. Union reps please report to canteen. Remember there's a post-show chat for cast and crew tomorrow, post-show! Understudies for Troilus and Cressida have an Italian at 4pm. That's it folks, get some rest, well done."

O'Droole howled from the shower an off-tune version of Biz Markie's girl you, you got what I need, but you say he's just a friend. And you say he's just a friend, oh baby...YOU! You got what I need... Nasal sheep's bleats replaced the lyrics he didn't know. The dresser collected costumes for laundry. The wig-woman combed and straightened. The headset and clip board woman dropped off letters. The stage-door keeper delivered flowers and a box clanking with bottles. Cast members popped in the door, smiling at Sunshine, nodded and disappeared after hearing the spray of the shower. O'Droole, naked except for towel, muttering lyrics and snippets, did push-ups on the carpet, so remarkably skinny and strong. Had he ever been in the sun? His body didn't look a day over

fifty. Yet he was pushing seventy, pushing up, push up... Sunshine counted, 35, 36, 37... O'Droole rolled onto his back and threw his feet over his shoulders, naked ass spread wide into the air, towel a belt around the small of his back. Was he trying to suck his own...? Jesus. After a few stretchy breaths, O'Droole rolled to his feet. "That whore fucked slow on every cue," O'Droole said to Sunshine through the mirror. "Did you not hear it?"

"Who?"

"Who fucking else? Are you deaf? Abortive elf! Sponge. You could putter a Zamboni through her pauses between the lines. Fucking slow-motion-Lear...Oh looky lucky looky, my bounty has arrived." He pulled a champagne bottle from the box, removed the wax foil, untwisted the muselet with his teeth and pointed the cork at Sunshine.

"Three. Two. And..." With a palm heel to the punt, the cork shot across the room and bounced off the wall. O'Droole poured the bubbles into his mouth. Champagne ran down his throat and chest, over his hands and onto the floor. He licked his wrists and forearms. He mocked fellatio on the bottle neck.

"Ambrosial ovule! Jack!! You old ruttish fen-sucked flirt-gill!"

"Douglas!"

Jack Birnbaum, stubby, chubby, blue-suited with large thick glasses resting on the bulb of his nose, stepped into the room and hugged O'Droole, who'd stepped into jeans and a clean white t-shirt. They stepped back and looked at each other. They patted each other's cheeks and shoulders and guts and pulled into another hug like two Greek sailors home from battle.

“Jack, saucy elf-skinned coxcomb! Far too long!”

“If you’d pick up the fucking phone once a year, I’d...”

“Did you catch the show?”

“Last act. Nice death.”

“Grief’s a real killer. Have you heard anything from the Pacino thingy?”

“Green light, last I heard. Meryl’s signed. They just need a director and more money. We need to talk Douglas. We have much to discuss, and who is this?” Jack turned to Sunshine. O’Droole pressed a glass of bubbly into his agent’s hand.

“Is he not yours? Some affirmative-action intern from the local school is my guess.” O’Droole stepped into Converse Chucks and pulling on a stained tailed tuxedo jacket. He peered deep to the mirror and massaged his cheeks and temples.

“Sunshine O’Droole, Mr. Birnbaum. At your service, I’m Mr. O’Droole’s cousin from P.E.I. My mother and Mr. O’Droole used to...”

“You are as a candle, the better burnt out,” O’Droole said, over his shoulder.

“I believe we spoke on the phone. Sunshine, is it?” Jack stepped forward and they shook hands.

“Yes, I’m sorry I wasn’t more helpful but...”

“I know how it is, kid. You staying with Dougie?”

“I’m trying to break into the business, sir. I am Mr. O’Droole’s apprentice.”

“Apprentice, my ass. Here boy, help me carry my cock, you rank sweat of an enseamed bed. You nasty brownish sty. Come on sup pundenda!” O’Droole writhed his hips like Mick Jagger and guzzled from the bottle.

“Dougie, be polite. Keep it PG.” Jack refilled his glass. “This is the next generation, better to make friends than enemies. They’ll be signing the checks while you and I are getting our bed-pans changed.”

“I find the ass in compound with the major part of your syllables.” O’Droole jumped into a boxers stance. Jack mimed drawing a saber. Megan appeared at the door in a red summer dress and white silk shawl. She hung on the door frame.

“YOU KILLED MY FATHER. NOW PREPARE TO DIE. BUT WAIT, THERE IS SOMETHING I MUST TELL YOU. I AM NOT LEFT-HANDED!” O’Droole charged Megan. They yelled and jumped around the room mime-dueling. On the second lap, Megan mime-unsheathed a dagger and ran it through O’Droole’s stomach. She wrestled him onto the sofa for the death scene. They ended the scene kissing. Jack and Sunshine watched O’Droole’s hands advance under her dress. Megan fought for her honor and won. Megan restrained his arms and they rolled onto the floor. Jack turned to Sunshine.

“Have you been here long?”

“No, just got here, actually.”

“Kid, can I enlist you?” Jack whispered.

“Pardon?”

“Listen kid, I’m going to need your help. Very soon.”

“Whatever I can do, I’m here to learn and help Mr. O’Droole.”

“Sometimes to help someone, you have to control them.”

Megan had her knees on O’Droole’s shoulders, who was trying to lift her dress with his chin. She played paddy-cake forcing O’Droole’s hands to slap his own face. Their grunts and giggles attracted a crowd at the door.

“Kick his ass, Meg!” The actress who played Regan beat O’Droole with flowers.

“Give him some of his own medicine, Goneril!” The actor plating the fool popped open another bottle of bubbly. “Torture the king!!” The crowd at the door cheered, raiding the champagne. Jack pulled Sunshine close to the bathroom sink.

“Kid, O’Droole needs help. We need to get him to a safe place and he’s not going to come easy. Can I count on you?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Mr. Birnbaum. But whatever is best for Mr. O’Droole is best for me.”

“Sunshine, right? O’Droole has no idea what is best for him anymore and that’s the problem. Look.” O’Droole had bucked Megan. He was barking like a dog pretending to mount her leg. Megan feigned horror and pain. The crowd at the door were falling to the floor in hysterics. The actor who played the fool jumped into the fray and pretended to hump O’Droole’s leg while O’Droole humped Megan’s. The trio crescendoed and tumbled onto the floor in a tangle of giggles and applause.

“I mean, all actors are insane, but O’Droole’s breaking new territory. He’s clinically unbalanced. Have I got your word, kid?” Jack said, sliding an arm across Sunshine’s back and pulling on his far shoulder. Jack’s belly pressed Sunshine against the sink.

“Mr. Birnbaum, I’ll do what’s best for Mr. O’Droole, sir.”

“Call me Jack, kiddo.”

“On that you have my word.” Sunshine stepped out of Jack’s embrace. Jack rubbed Sunshine’s brown hair. The gaggle of actors were singing The Violent Femme’s latest ditty, Why can’t I get just one fuck... day after day... They clapped in a circle around Megan. The fool mock flamenco danced. O’Droole, off to the side, was hitting a pipe with Kent. More champagne popped with cheers. Smoothly, Jack crossed the room, whispered in O’Droole’s ear and they slipped out the door together a bottle in each hand.

Stragglers crowded the stage-door long after O’Droole had left. Elvis has left the building, cracked a rutabaga baron to prized daughter. One small fan, maybe seven years old, thrust a program and pen at Sunshine, “Autograph please?” The girl’s mother intercepted the pen and program.

“He’s not an actor. He wasn’t on stage, honey. Did you see anyone like him on stage? Do great actors carry big backpacks? All the stars are gone.”

“Why is he brown, mummy?” the girls asked, innocent.

“He might work backstage. Maybe an electrician. He wasn’t on stage, honey.” The led her child away. No one had ever spoken about Sunshine in the third person within earshot before, not in North Rustico. Cast and crew nodded

as they passed, only bicycles were unlocked, not conversation. Sunshine shouldered his bag and walked slowly away from the theatre in no particular direction. The Stratford streets were silent.

The donut shop was half-empty. Or half-full? Sunshine smiled at the thought, always smile, keep smiling. Mrs. Stebbins knew. He ordered a coffee and a small bowl of chili from a skinny pimply-faced boy his age. Extravagance. He thought about asking if they were hiring? Remember what Errol Flynn used to do when he was down to his last penny? He'd walk into the finest hotel in town and order the most expensive whiskey and strike up a conversation with a person on the stool beside him. Never let anyone know you are down. Keep up pretense at all costs. Chat, smile, enjoy the chili, find a fine hotel, but was no Flynn, and he'd lost your sword, his power. Hope was his power, he thought.

"One small chili for Mr. P.E.I. O'Droole, fresh as can be." Shelley set the steaming bowl on the table. The hot perfume of baked-beans and ground-beef and cheap Tabasco flickered optimism up Sunshine's nose.

"Shelley, how's it going?"

"Pretty good, I guess. Halfway through a double shift. You still chauffeuring King Lear around?"

"You could say that. No arrests. No more severed fingers."

"I hear The Festival is letting him go."

"What?"

"You haven't heard?"

"No, what?"

“Well, it’s a rumor, really. I don’t see how they can. He’s the only thing anyone talks about. He’s what they all come to see, but I heard... I’m a professional eavesdropper, you know...”

“What did you hear?”

“The Artistic Director, the GM and the Head of the Stage Manager’s Union were in last nights, pretty lubricated you could say, and they were yelling like cats and dogs and I got the feeling that’d decided to give him the sack. Maybe it was all just drunken donut talk.”

“First I’ve heard.”

“Horse’s mouth, eh?”

“Maybe.”

“He has been on quite a rip lately.”

“You mean he wasn’t always so insane?”

“It comes and goes. I’ve had some good sober talks with him. He’s got a big heart, when he listens, you feel like you are the only person in the world.”

“Well, we haven’t got that close yet.”

“But you’re family.”

“He doesn’t seem to care. Or believe. Maybe cause I’m adopted.”

“Doubt it. Maybe because he’s drunk. Well, I hope they don’t give him the sack. There’ll be nothing to talk about. Good to see you. Dig in there while it’s hot. Made it myself, eh.” She handed him a spoon from her apron. She rested her hand between Sunshine’s shoulders for a second, then pressed him forward a little toward the steaming bowl. Sunshine thought about Gloria, he should at

least write her something. Is part of going after what you wanted taking and not giving? Did you have to arrive at what you wanted before you could give back? Sunshine spooned slowly, thoughts a whirl. A flashing police cruiser, siren cranked, accelerated down the main street. Instantaneously, the town's fire alarm wailed. Three male-customers got up from their meals in unison and ran to their trucks. They peeled out of the parking lot. Three minutes later, two fire-trucks, siren's blaring, gunned down main street. A stream of cars and trucks followed. Sunshine overheard a octogenarian and his wife at the next table.

"I'm going, Mary."

"You are not. They retired you from the volunteer fire department, remember?"

"Just cause I failed the physical don't mean I can't help. I seen more fires than anyone on the truck, goddammit. Most of them don't even hook the hoses up right. It's all about pressure."

"You'll just be in the way."

"I can't sit here stuffing my hole with donuts while town burns down. You coming?" The woman packed their food. The husband went out the door and was already honking the horn and revving his engine by the time she paid. The donut-shop phone rang. The pimply-faced boy's mouth dropped to his chest. Specimen of shock. He put the receiver to his chest and yelled to Shelley in the kitchen.

"Holy fuck-oly, the fucking Festival is burning down!"

The donut shop emptied like a sinking ship. Sunshine looked at Shelley who mouthed "GO!" By the time Sunshine got to the fire, most of the town had

assembled. Flames shot from under crowned-roof. Firemen shouted directions. Firetrucks blinked, ladders extended, buckets raised, hoses blasted water at the black smoke. Uniformed police and farmers in jeans shattered windows and doors. Sunshine approached the closest fire truck. "How can I help?" he asked the fireman who seemed to be in charge. The fireman looked Sunshine up and down. "Stay back, we got this. Keep people away." The crowd inched closer and closer as if needing the warmth, the excitement of real tragedy. A hand grabbed Sunshine's elbow, "Have you seen Douglas?" Jack asked, red-faced, sweating.

"I thought he left with you."

"We were drinking at Finnegan's. I told him The Festival has cancelled his contract. Effective immediately. He said he was going to the toilet and never came back."

"Jesus. Did you check his house?"

"Wasn't there. Have you seen Megan?"

"No. Not since the dressing room."

"I'm fucking worried..."

"But he'd never..."

"He's losing his mind, kid. We need to find him."

"He loves The Festival. He'd never..."

"Not on purpose, no. But he was pretty stewed when I told him... I'd never seen such suppressed rage before. He took the news stone faced. Not even on stage. Let's check the house, come on." As Sunshine followed Jack across the

great festival lawn, they caught sight of a naked man darting through the tree line swinging a sword in circles over his head, a retreat from battle.

“Jack... is that him?” Sunshine pointed.

“Fuck me, we need to get to him before anyone else...”

“Is that?”

“Run, boy. Run like the wind. Catch him. Hide him. Get him indoors. Run!”

Sunshine sprinted ahead, across the lawn and down the center of Romeo Street. O’Droole was fast for his age but Sunshine gained ground. O’Droole, naked, sword in hand, was pulling on his car door as Sunshine came into the lane.

“Mr. O’Droole!”

“Arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the palace! False justicer! Why hast thou let her 'scape?” O’Droole stepped away from the locked car and into a battle stance, sword aloft. Right foot and elbow forward, knees flexing, blade reflecting street-light at eye-level.

“Mr. O’Droole, it’s me Sunshine. Let’s go.”

“Thou hast nor youth, nor age, But as it were an after-dinner's sleep dreaming on both. One step and disembowel. I must.”

“Let’s go inside for a drink. I’m your friend. I’m family. I’m an O’Droole too. Put the sword down, Douglas.” Sunshine stepped calmly into striking range.

“I’ll spurn thine eyes like balls before me! I’ll unhair thy head! Thou shalt be whipped with wire and stewed in brine, smarting in lingering pickle!” O’Droole swung the sword. Sunshine ducked and ran around to the other side of the car. O’Droole climbed onto the hood.

“Peace, ye fat guts!” Jack called from the end of the lane, puffing. Red-faced, bloated, heart-attack on the horizon.

“Here is a dear true industrious friend, Sir Jack, speak blunt, new lighted from his horse. O teach me how I should forget to think. Jack!” O’Droole jumped off the car, throwing the sword onto the front lawn and pulled Jack into a hug, as if he’d not see him for years. Jack soothed and patted O’Droole.

“Come, let’s away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds in the cage: When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down. And ask of thee forgiveness, so we’ll live. And pray, and sing... come, Jack, come.”

Jack and O’Droole ascended the porch. Did Had Douglas really torched the theatre? Sunshine still smelt the fire, which threw light down the street. Most of the houses had their lights. Shouts and commands could be heard in the distance. Wouldn’t be long before the cops come with questions. If someone saw him, he’d be done. Motive and booze alone were enough for any jury to convict him. The press would go nuts right into the Canadian history books. Jack’s voice, firm and hypnotic, carried from the living room. O’Droole was quiet, except the odd puppyish whimper. Sunshine stepped into the front hall to see O’Droole lying on the chesterfield, wrapped in a blanket, head on a pillow in Jack’s lap. Jack’s hand methodically petting O’Droole’s wisps of grey hair. Seeing Sunshine, Jack’s raised eyebrow pointed to the kitchen as his left index finger rose to his lips. Jack’s left hand continued petting O’Droole to sleep with the aid of a low lullabied Sunrise Sunset from *Fiddler on the Roof*. How peaceful Mr. O’Droole looked, a sleeping child. Repose. Unfurled. Fetal. Finally, at peace, the first time sunshine

had seen him calm since arriving. He hoped they'd put the fire out without much damage. Sunshine watched from the upstairs window as the smoke rose outside, flames still brightened the sky, pyres for sacrificed divinities. He gives every thing and nothing remained for himself. We fill and empty each day. Sunshine mind would not turn off.

Still dark, but threatening morn, Sunshine felt Megan's hand on his cheek. Eyes damp with sympathy, she placed a kiss on his forehead.

"Sunshine, Sunshine, wake up. We need you. You're on."

"Megan? Is everything okay?"

"No. Nothing is okay." She smelt of wine and cigarettes, her voice dopey. She'd not slept. "Douglas is packed in the car."

"Pardon?"

"You're taking him to Jack's cabin in Quebec."

"Quebec?"

"Yes, somewhere near Mont Tremblant."

"Me?"

"Who else? I can't leave. If I leave now, I'll be black-balled for life. I've worked my whole life to get this far. Douglas would do the same."

"Do what?"

"He doesn't love me. He only loves attention. The spotlight. He loves my body, my youth, parts of my mind, but mostly my body."

"What do I need to do?"

“Just drive. Follow Jack, he’ll explain everything. But you need to move now. Just get in the car and follow Jack.”

“Who?”

“Wake up, Sunshine!” Megan slapped his cheek. “We need you. Douglas, your cousin, needs you to get him the fuck out of Dodge. Your bag’s in the car and we’ve packed a cooler and things for Douglas. I put your sword in the trunk. Just drive and keep driving and try to keep Dougie sober. Follow Jack’s directions and don’t think too much, Easy peasey, right? You’ll be fine. Dougie needs to dry out. You’ll be back in a few months. Who know what’s going to happen to the Festival after the fire...” Out the window, the smoke was thin, a rising wisp. The Volvo P1800 sputtered in the driveway. O’Droole mummified in blankets, reclined in the back seat, eyes closed, chin on shoulder drooling. Beside the gearbox were bags and a cooler, the radio cooed Glenn Gould who humming away under Bach’s exact notes. A Jewish family’s pre-Nazi evacuation in disguise of a fishing trip. Jack stepped out of a four-door Mercedes sedan, engine running and walked over to Sunshine. They shook hands.

“Good to see you enlisted, kiddo,” Jack patted his shoulder.

“I said I’d do what I could...”

“You can drive, right, kid? Listen, just keep behind me, a couple car-lengths, and don’t loose me. Don’t speed and change lanes when I do. We’re both full of gas.”

“Where we going?”

“First, my office. Young and Bloor. Get the keys to the cabin and you’ll need cash. Then Nirvana, for fresh air. This old goat,” Jack nodded at O’Droole, “needs a mental and physical transfusion. I slipped him some happy pills. He’ll be out till Tuesday. If he wakes up, there are six spiked lagers in the cooler. Listen Kiddo, everything is going to be A-Okay. We just need to retreat and regroup. I’ll put together a legal team and some witnesses. You’ll back my story, right?”

“Pardon?”

“We’ll give Dougie an alibi. Maybe you were in the jax with him at Finnegan’s? His tiny black boy toy. They’d believe that.”

“I was at the donut store eating chili.”

“Well, figure all that out later. If the cops pull us over, we’re taking him to hospital. If he wakes up, which he won’t, just water or the bottles from the cooler. And don’t drink one yourself, you got a long drive ahead. Here, back-ups.”

Jack handed Sunshine two bottles of pills.

“What are these?”

“Barbiturates and Benzedrine. Don’t mix them up and don’t mix them. The blue Barbys are for Dougie. They put you out. The white Bennys are for you. They keep you up. You never know. Keep in them separate pockets. I’m right in front, just flash the high beams twice if you need something, and kid, don’t rear-end me. Vamos?”

Sunshine and Jack got in the drivers seats. Megan stood on the porch wrapped in a blanket, smoking, sad, one arm raised melo-dramatically to wave. Jack made a slow left on Romeo and Sunshine followed. Forty minutes later, the

sun came up as they drove smoothly just a sliver over the speed-limit, east-bound, Toronto-direction on the 401. Traffic polite, safe and sound, all Canadian, while the greatest actor of a generation slept like a bump on a log, unemployed, addicted, and wanted by the law for arson.

Toronto's rush hour awakened as they entered a garage just below Young and Bloor, 33 Charles Street West, The Manulife building. Sunshine parked the white Volvo beside Jack's black Mercedes.

"You drive like a star, kiddo. Tubular as a cucumber. Can you dig it, Youngblood?" Jack said locking his doors. "How's sleeping beauty?" he asked.

"Didn't stir. Buckets of drool."

"He's going to have a serious hangover, serious dry-mouth, serious shock when he does stir. Let's not waste anytime. Cash. Coffee. A map, and you can hit the road in a jiffy, kiddo. I'd like you two in Quebec before the evening news." They took the elevator to the 33rd floor. Jack's office looked over the city skyline. The CN Tower, the lake, downtown, City Hall, street cars a-clank-clank-clanking all reflecting, the May morning sun.

"Nice digs, Mr. Birnbaum," Sunshine said, forehead against the floor to ceiling window, looking straight down at the sidewalk. A pair of window-cleaners in jean-jackets over neon-cover-alls were rigging up a platform.

"Better be, kiddo. I pay out the schnoz." Jack opened desk-drawers then a safe. He pulled a road atlas from a shelf. He sat at his desk and wrote. "Hey, kiddo, you know how to make coffee? Machine's in the hall." Sunshine rooted

around, found filters and grounds and filled the machine with water. He examined the walls of headshots, movie posters, and playbills as the coffee percolated. He'd stepped one step closer to the life he wanted. He remembered his bedroom. Would Jack ever induct him? Just last week he was bagging groceries with a bitch for a drunk. Now he was making coffee for the top agent in Canada in a downtown Toronto office. Was that O'Droole and Elizabeth Taylor? He was making it, Sunshine thought. Jack came out with a fat manila envelope.

"Mr. Birnbaum, you certainly represent some famous talent, maybe one day you could..."

"Crème-de-la-Canadian-crème, kiddo. Not an actor worth their salt in this city that hasn't graced my doors for better or for worse."

"Did you do *Going Down The Road*?" Sunshine asked, staring at the poster.

"Kiddo, I put the whole package together. From script to parking permits. Confirmed my place in the universe. Everything on that wall went through my pocket."

"You did *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*?"

"Yeah, Richler and Dreyfuss broke my balls, had to re-mortgage. Listen kid..."

"Holy Shit! *Phobia* by John Huston! And *Tribute* with Jack Lemmon!"

"Yeah, lost my knickers on both. Ok kid, I'd love to pow-wow all day, but we got a time bomb sleeping in that Volvo. When Douglas wakes up, he's going to be a bear with a toothache and he better be out of Ontario, far from any cop

shop or donut shop or phone. I don't know if he lit the fire. But you saw him and I saw him running. Either way the press is going to have a field-day. His exodus will be suspect, sure. But the Festival might believe he left before the fire, after they gave him the sack. If anyone else saw him, he's done. Here's the plan, kiddo." Jack took his coffee and spread the road atlas on the office kitchen table.

"Back up Young, onto the 401 East, EAST, okay? Don't stop for anything until you get past Ottawa and into Quebec. Six hours or so. Fill up on gas, eat in the car. Try and feed Dougie another happy pill. 401 to 416 North. It's all written down here in case you forget. In Gatineau, yeah the big cake, get on the 5 to the 105 north, always north, kiddo. If you get lost, just keep going north. Here's the key to my cabin... here's a picture so you don't get the wrong one... There's a canoe, a dock, hammocks, barrels of books, probably some frozen venison in the freezer. No phone. No heat. Keep the fire lit. Don't let Dougie into town. Get supplies while he's sleeping. No visitors. Full lock down. Call anytime, day or night." Jack handed Sunshine a photo and scrawled his number large across the road atlas. "No one should find you. Got that? Guy's dépanneur is a few clicks south has a pay phone. You can get the essentials there. Clean the woodstove before you light it. Last year, I torched a coon corpse. Smelt like a skunk. Don't let Dougie into town on any circumstance. Lotta big mouths in small towns."

"Dépanneur?"

"A frog deli. A shop, but they sell booze. Don't let Dougie in Guy's. Get your milk and bread and beans and juice, you know. No newspapers. We need to isolate Douglas. Get him sober. You know his fire inside, just remember he's a

national treasure. I've never met a more gifted man. A blessing and a curse, he can't keep all that fire inside, the genius slips out, boils over, a double-edged sword, right? Whatever he does, don't take it personally."

"Does he even know who I am?"

"He does, kiddo. I've heard him speak of your mother, his hippie cousin, but practical things do slip his mind. The booze, you know."

"Is that why they fired him?"

"Never say that again. He's taken a sabbatical for health complications. Say he's still on the books. Say they just suggested he took some time off for personal reasons."

"Jack, I need to know the truth."

"Basically, come back sober or don't come back at all. The modern-theatre has no room for hell-raisers anymore. Yuppification. Too many mouths to feed all depending on old Dougie. They get nervous when he arrives late, performs three-sheets to the wind, up-tight unions. The younger crowd want him out to free up the good roles. More politics at The Festival than Parliament Hill and Douglas has never played the political game well. Kinda a blunt instrument, you know. At some point in time, he's pissed everyone he knows off. He always makes up for it, of course, or tries, but sometimes he forgets, or the apology fails. Pricks love grudges. Mark my words, Douglas O'Droole is a good man, but sometime he plays the wrong role."

"On stage?"

“No off. The moment sweeps him away. Treat him like a five year old. No sharp objects and no sugar.”

“I thought they let him go because of the dementia.”

“Dementia?”

“I saw a doctor’s note in his dressing room.”

“Dementia!”

“Yeah, the note said he’s coming down with mild dementia.”

“My mother died with dementia.” Jack froze.

“The note didn’t seem... But...” Jack’s knees folded. Sunshine tried to catch him on the crumple. Jack released a painful paw-just-stepped-on-trap squeal. His hands went to his head as he writhed on floor hyperventilating, hysterical. A sober version of Douglas declaring the greatness of the day on his lawn after finding his sunglasses. Even in youth, Jack Birnbaum could not have been a good actor, too self-conscious.

“I can’t can’t can’t, not Dougie, no God, not my Douglas. The world can not see Douglas O’Droole with dementia, NO! no no....not Dougie.” A grown man so openly surrendering to emotion mesmerized Sunshine. He knelt beside Jack, putting one hand on his shoulder and another behind his bald head to steadying the fit. Protection.

“Jack, Jack, Jack?”

“I don’t like to be touched,” Jack spat venom, slipping into cold anger. “Get your dirty hands off me.” Jack spun into sitting, pushed his back against the glass wall, pulled his knees to his chest and stared deadpan at the cityscape. Sunshine

backed away, and after what felt like a decade, sipped his tepid coffee. The phone rang and remained unanswered. It wasn't until they heard the keys of the first employee rattling against the front office glass door, that Jack sprung to his feet, gathered the envelope and map. He pulled Sunshine into his private office.

"Who else saw the doctor's note?" Jack's voice cut glass and echoed beyond the window out over the city.

"I don't know. It was on his desk, open like, not hidden. In a book, *The Naked Ape*."

"When was it dated?"

"April something."

"Do you think Megan knows?"

"I don't know, Mr. Birnbaum."

"Okay, kid. I'll deal with it. Glad you told me."

"I thought you knew. I thought that's why The Festival let him go."

"No."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. But keep your fucking pie-hole shut, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"I mean, don't even talk to Douglas about it. NO ONE. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, where are you going?"

"North to Gatineau. To your cabin. 401 to 416 to 105. Near Guy's Dépanneur."

“Here.” Jack pushed two bill-stuffed envelopes across the desk. “Call me if you run out. I’ll set up a line of credit at Guy’s Dépanneur.” Sunshine remembered Mrs. Stebbins, the bus theft, Sid and Nancy, the hitch, the money Normy paid for his BMX, his mother’s generosity... he needed to call home.

“Just keep him sober, eating healthy. Force-feed him if you have to, and lots of exercise, hiking, canoeing, chop wood. Also mental shit, chess, crosswords. The library is well stocked. Might be booze there already, dump it. Swim with him, kiddo. He loves the lake. Have a good summer. You’re going to be isolated with Canada’s greatest and most-charming mind, so enjoy, write a book! But be careful, kid. I’ll try and come up next week and see how things are going. Call anytime. Now get going. Go!”

“Thank you, Mr. Birnbaum, I’ll look after Douglas, sir.”

“Kid, just get him sober and keep him alive. Don’t let him under your skin too deep. Detox will bring out the evil spirits. Exorcism. Whatever he says, is about himself, not you, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” Sunshine reached for the door knob. Jack’s chair swivelled.

“Sunshine?”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure the note said dementia?”

“Yes, a mild cognitive impairment, which could become dementia. Early-stages.”

“At least the note is probably gone.”

“Gone.”

“Burnt to ash. Call to let me know when you’ve arrived.”

“Will do, Jack. Thank-you.

{ACT IV}

Driving up the 105 North, through the Gatineau River basin, past Lac-Poisson-Blanc. Ottawa, a speck of dust on the rear-view mirror, Quebec blossomed. O'Droole, stirring from comatose, blanket-wrapped, crooned a la Chet Baker. "I got sunshine on a cloudy day. When it's cold outside, I got the month of May..."

"Mr. O'Droole, are you awake?"

"Where are we splunkering to?"

"Jack's cabin. Quebec."

"*La Belle Province!* Any Single Malt handy?"

Sunshine reached into the cooler and passed a bottle to O'Droole, who popped the cap off with the seatbelt buckle and emptied the Barby spiked lager with a head tilt. "Mother's milk! The Working Man's friend!" O'Droole stopped singing, turned his head to the window and fell silent.

"Mr. O'Droole, do you remember yesterday night?" The answer a snore. They traversed covered bridges, mostly paint chipped red, dilapidated, narrow as theatre-wings. Black flies bounced off the windscreen. Sunlight refracted in the rushing roadside streams, green as the spring awakening of Celtic mythology. Sunshine felt the warm glow of escape and pride. He was saving his idol from prison. They passed Blue Sea, Niger Rapids, Maniwaki, Zec Pontiac, Montcerf, Le Flash and drove into Reserve Faunique Le Verendrye. The road became single-lane bridges crossing large bodies of water. Every car had a canoe lashed to the roof or pulled aluminum fishing boats with portly outboard motors. There

are two types of people in Big Eddy. Sunshine's road-weary mind translated Grand-Remous and thought, those who paddled and those who sailed. Those who got their rocks off with the wail of a two-stroke engine. Polluters with chain-saw, snowmobile, dirt-bike, go-karts, weed-whacker, lawn-mower, anything loud. The exhaust of burning diesel an aphrodisiac. And the sailors, paddlers, shearers, sticklers, hikers, hoers, ax-handlers, who ate fresh and fought for recycling. Birkenstocks. Cranberry granola. Carob. He pulled into a Shell station in a village without a name. Three houses, a bulldozer for sale on the lawn—A VENDRE, a post-office—Canadian flag flapping erect in the wind, a cemetery of rusted motorhomes, a pick-up truck with Toi-Ture-Expert painted on the side. A torture expert, Sunshine smirked at his own mistranslation. The only vehicle in the expansive lot. He filled the Volvo's tank and inside ordered breakfast.

“Petit déjeuner pour déjeuner, mon petit chum.” The robust woman with a sunburnt face and stained apron placed bacon, sausage, three sunny-sided eggs, a mountain of brown beans and six slices of butter-oozing toast on Sunshine's table.

“Oui. Merci.” Sunshine's French was school-book, Tarzan.

“Quelque chose de plus?”

“Parlez Anglais?”

“Oui.” Her nametag read Celine.

“Is Guy's Dépanneur close?”

“Oui. Tout près. Twenty minutes north. Third left. Je suis sa femme.”

“You're Guy's wife?”

“Oui. Wife of Guy. Et Monsieur O’Droole, il veut quelque chose a manger?”

“O’Droole?”

“Oui, la voiture! O’Droole’s car, non? You two go to La Cabine de Monsieur Jacque, non?” The only other customer, a buff workhorse in a ball cap pulled low over a greasy moustache, stopped eating to listen. A deer’s ears pricked in the woods across the road from the pumps.

“He’s sleeping in ze car? Dormir?” Celine inquired.

“Osti! Last time that car come here, Décâliser tout!! J'm'en calice! But was like riot. Big fuck riot! Cul! Une grosse fete. Big big big party. Debauché! Merde!” The man wiped the yellow egg yoke from his plate with his last bit of toast. “Oui. That man. That car. Very very connu here. Fameux! Celebre! Fameous, non? Fuck him that fuck. Go fuck back off to On-ta-rio.” The man’s hate, as pungent as fresh cow shit.

“O’Droole back? Tabernak!” She shimmied behind the counter.

“When was the last time he was here?” Sunshine asked.

“Seven, maybe more. Twelve year,” Celine said.

“Plus! Fifteen avec précision. But the story, like yesterday.” Celine smiled wide. The man burped and stood. Balled his serviette and threw money on the table in disgust. “Last time, he fuck all, fuck, fuck, and more fuck. Torrieu! Décâliser tout!! J'm'en calice. You Anglais only take take take. Not welcome in Quebec. The day we separate the world happy. Putain! ”

“I was at the fete. Was my first night with Guy, crimpuff!” Celine took the man’s dirty plate and coffee mug into the kitchen.

The chime echoed, then silence. Sunshine built a sandwich with his eggs and bacon and toast. The man crossed the vast lot, started his Toi-Ture-Expert truck, pattered up beside the Volvo resting by the pump, leaned out his open window and looked at Douglas sleeping. Abruptly, a vehement horn blast filled the Quebec sky. The man spat into the Volvo back window. Released his horn and shot gravel all over the car, covering Douglas in dust from the spinning back wheels.

“What was that? Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

“Welcome to Quebec, mon ami! Benevenue.”

“Pardon?”

“Maybe Jack devoir money. Owe, non? Or Monsieur O’Droole make the love with Julie, wife of Antoine. Sister of Guy. Maybe the two.”

“That guy’s called Antoine?”

“Antoine the roofer, oui. Toiture is roofing, non?”

“He hates O’Droole?”

“Semble si, non. Seem yes, non?”

“Dangerous?”

“Comment dire? The dog make the noise with more force than the biting, not with the teeth.”

“His bark is worse than his bite?”

“Exactement. Eggs good?”

“Just what the doctor ordered.”

“Le docteur?”

“Non, an expression. Should I be worried about Antoine?”

“Monsieur O’Droole sick? Malade?”

“No. No. Just sleeping. Dormir.”

“Monsieur eat? Manger? Á Emporter? Take-away? Same petit déjeuner, comme ça, like that, for you, as him, d’accord?”

“Okay. D’accord.” Sunshine mixed his beans with his potatoes and shoveled them in his mouth hoping the grease would assuage the foreboding. Celine returned with a well-wrapped breakfast for O’Droole. Sunshine paid for the gas and food with Jack’s cash.

“Je suis joyeux! Monsieur O’Droole retour! He back! I am happy!”

“When he wakes up, I’m sure he will be happy too. Sorry, but, je suis désolé, but can I ask you a favor? Une faveur?”

“Quoi? Tell me.”

“Top secret.” Sunshine put his index finger to his lips. “Can you be sssshhhhh? Tell no one. Secret, okay? Mr. O’Droole needs to rest. No people can know he is here. Garde le secret?”

“Because of the fire?” she asked. Sunshine grabbed a Mars bar from the counter, anything to change the subject, anything to control the panic.

“How much is this?”

“A cause de feu? Le theatre a brule!” She said, “Theatre all burn! Was him, non?” Sunshine unwrapped the milk chocolate.

“What fire?” he asked.

“A la radio! Non-stop. Fire. Fire. Feu! Festival! Stratford fire. O’Droole. Big big news. Étonne-moi!”

He asked to use the phone and Celine pointed out the front door. Sunshine ran to the car for Jack’s number, fished a quarter out of his jeans and rounded the building. He found the phone by the toilets and punched the numbers fast.

“Jack, Jack Birnbaum, please. Sunshine O’Droole. Yes Sunshine, it’s urgent.” He tapped his toe seven times on a pebble. A wild pheasant strutted across the highway. A Maple trunk cracked.

“Mr. Pacino! How nice to hear from you again. I’m so glad you’ve...”

“Jack, they know. They know Douglas’ car. They know about the fire. I just stopped for gas near the cabin and they know everything already...”

“Al, listen, listen Al. I can’t really talk right now. I have some important official guests in my office at the moment asking some serious questions. Just follow the script and I’ll keep you posted. This production will green-light, trust me. Al, I’m so glad you’re onboard...”

“Jack!”

“... just keep learning your lines, Al. We’ll be in production before September... gotta run... I’ll see you this weekend.” Jack hung up. The dial tone sounded like a time bomb.

“You forgot Monsieur O’Droole’s petit déjeuner.” Celine stood a few feet away, arm extended with the take-away, a cover for her eavesdropping.

“Merci. Merci. How much is the Mars bar?” Sunshine rooted for change.

“C’est pour moi!”

“Pardon?”

“Sur la maison, n’est pas? On the house! We see you soon. I am happy Monsieur has returned.”

“Merci. Thank-you. Remember our secret?”

“Bien sur! Top Secret! I tell no one. Mouth shut! Bouche fermée!” She sewed her lips with her fingers. Sunshine crossed the lot and started the car. Celine stood outside her store waving. Sunshine could already see her mouth flapping, hear her neighborly phone calls, feel her back-handed joys at the chance to gossip. He wondered if there was a word for the evil rapture people felt before they spilt the beans.

The fleshy purple fingers of dusk reached through the pines as the Volvo pulled into Jack’s cabin lane. Sunshine cut the engine. He checked the map and photo, certain he’d found their intended refuge. A rustic A-frame, with a wrap-around porch snugly built at the base of a thickly wooded hill overlooking a silent lake. Jack’s hide-away was the paradigm of Canadian cottage. The Volvo engine clicked to rest, a black squirrel chased a white squirrel across the front deck, a welcoming prologue. Pine trees brushed needles as if against a snare drums. A flake of birch bark floated onto the windshield. Sunshine remembered the scattered scripts in Douglas’ dressing room, his littered bedroom and covering the sofa. Refuse of genius. Behind the cabin, the lake reflected red alder pods. Blackberries budded along the path to the front door. The breeze in

the pinecones, a fanfare. Sunshine stuffed the map and photo and money into the glove box. Arrival gave great relief, pure tranquility. A bolt of anxiety spurred the thought that Douglas had perhaps stopped breathing. Foreboding jabbed Sunshine's heart. Barbiturate overdose? He reached over the seat and rooted under the blankets for a piece of flesh. Pale, cold, still. Had Jack accidentally double-dosed the beer? Sunshine found Douglas's wrist. His pulse was a distant bugle returning after decades of battle. As Douglas snuggled his forehead against the backseat armrest, his left hand curled, baby-like, around Sunshine's hand. The two sat in this timberland cathedral for a score of exhales holding hands. Sunshine wondered if his father had ever held another man's hand.

The key worked and the front door opened. Sunshine switched on the electricity. No dead coon in the woodstove. Other than mice droppings and dust, the cabin was clean and functional. A stout brick fireplace supported the back wall. The kitchen had a spectacular lake view. Two tiny bedrooms supported a master-suite loft. The main space had a festive round table built for cards and hot dinners. Books insulated the walls. Sunshine plugged in the fridge, which rattled then hummed. The cupboards were well-stocked with glasses, plates and mugs. Half a dozen cans of beans and corn, a bag of rice had been opened and strewn by rodents. Sunshine emptied a half-full bottle of Canadian Club Rye down the sink drain. An empty peach schnapps bottle, sediment of ant corpses, hidden among the cleaning supplies made him wonder if Phil's liver had exploded yet and should he lock away the bleach and Varsol? Would Douglas sniff glue? Guzzle thinner? He lit the wood stove with a long cobwebbed match and

cleaned. While dumping the dustpan off the front porch, he spotted the Volvo doors flung ajar, blankets strewn along the forest floor as if instant flight were the only survival option. Sunshine followed the trail and clothes to the dock. He spotted, one Chuck—two, Douglas' shoes, his white t-shirt—balled, jean—legs inside out, the final breadcrumb, an abandoned pair of O'Droole's underwear—red Y-front Fruit of The Looms. Too concerned to gather his ward's discarded apparel, he shielded his eyes against the low sun and scanned the lake's surface from the mossy dock. On the far side of the lake, the sun sank below the tree tops, strobe-lighting purplish beams through the trunks. Not another dwelling in view. Flawless forest. In lake-center, Douglas O'Droole stood naked on the gunwales of a canoe. Silhouette akimbo, a super-hero sizing-up battle. Voyager envisioning conquest for God and gold, with canoe for Queen—one motionless legendary beast. Douglas O'Droole would always and had always found, as if by divine magnate, the perfect light. Mesmerized by the performance, was it a performance if the actor believed there was no audience? Sunshine plopped onto the dock, eager for insight. He took off his shoes and socks and dipped his feet in the icy May water. No one could predict the scene's next turn. O'Droole, focused as a tight-rope walker between towers, rocked the keel slowly, building momentum. Ripples ruffled the placid lake. Raven caws pierced the sky. O'Droole echoed a deep belly hum off the forest wall as the canoe teetered closer and closer to tipping. His left foot moved nimbly from gunwale to bow seat. His right foot found canoe yoke, left foot on back seat, another step and a 180 degree turn to stand centered and tall on the bow deck, an Olympian's final

inhale before a gold medal feat. The canoe's stern lifted into the air. Raising his arms slowly until his palms met above his head, a cocked arrow in loaded a bow. Rocket awaiting launch. O'Droole's arms lowered abruptly and—one, two, three, four, he strode the length of the canoe and dove, as graceful as Greg Louganis off the stern, into the lake. Sunshine gave O'Droole's agility a standing ovation, but there was no one to hear. His cheers floated across the water. Had Douglas plunged into the afterlife? Submerged into underworld? Found a door on the lak floor? Orpheus? Why didn't he surface? If he'd banged his skull on a rock, would the blood be seen? Did blood float? Sunshine looked around for another canoe, an inner-tube, a life-jacket, any rescue prop. Just as Sunshine's worry peaked into Jesus-I-Better-Call-Someone-where-is-the-closest-phone, O'Droole surfaced into a perfect butterfly stroke. His arms swung forward and swept the water back. His mouth inhaled a reverse scream. A dolphin, a ray-fish, exemplar of flawless motion. O'Droole climbed the dock ladder, naked and dripping.

“Sunshine! My son, my long lost brother, my love! I am re-born! What lost paradise is this?”

“Jack's Cabin.”

O'Droole slopped down the dock and pulled him into a soaking bear hug. Sunshine was overjoyed that Douglas had used his name. His skin was cold, but the hug was long and tight.

“Did you get it? Do you need another take?” O'Droole whispered.

“Pardon?”

“What are we shooting next?”

“Mr. O’Droole, we’re at Jack’s cottage. For some R and R.”

“Thou lumpish half-faced hugger-mugger! Where’s my trailer? I demand blankets and whisky. Buckets of Bushmills!”

“Douglas?”

“Herr Director!” O’Droole stood at attention and saluted. His nudity eluded him. He fought cold shivers with deep nasal inhales. O’Droole awaited instructions.

“Let’s go talk by the fire,” Sunshine said.

“What’s the next set-up? Has Mr. Torn on set yet? I’d like to discuss action with the continuity girl. Was that Act IV, scene iii?”

“Douglas, what do you remember?”

“Maltworm! Mark my words, *Beautiful Dreamers* will be nominated for a fucking Oscar or I am not Douglas O’Droole! You have less than zero vision.” Royal arrogance regained, he walked up the path toward the cabin. The day’s last beam of sunlight reflected off his old, skinny, white ass. Sunshine wondered how they would ever find the canoe. Up the path, Sunshine gathered O’Droole’s clothes. He unloaded the bags, the sword, the cooler, Celine’s take-away, and locked the Volvo doors. O’Droole sat by the fire wrapped in a blanket guzzling Jack’s Barby-laced beer. One bottle lay empty on the floor. O’Droole drained another into his thrown back head. Sunshine put O’Droole’s bag in the loft, his own in the smaller room, and transferred the food from the cooler to the fridge. O’Droole snorted and coughed, the second empty beer bottle rolled across the wood floor.

“Not with a bang, but a whimper. Shuffle off this mortal death. The world is now my oyster,” O’Droole mumbled, attempting to raise an arm to point, but exhaustion and barbiturates had taken all his strength. Sunshine helped him up the stairs and into bed. A scene an audience might’ve found both comic and lewd.

“Woe, destruction, ruin, and decay. The worst is death, and death will...” O’Droole blacked out before completion. Sunshine found a towel and dried his damp grey wisps, tucked extra blanks under the mattress and filled the stove with firewood. After exploring the bookshelves, he pulled the chesterfield close to the stove and fell asleep under a blanket before finishing the first page of *An Actor Prepares* by Constantine Stanislavski. A northern hawk-owl landed on the window sill and listened to the young and old dream.

A forest critter symphony before a mid-morning sun awoke Sunshine slowly. The drive had been long. O’Droole and the Volvo were gone. Sunshine ran the emotional gamut. Rage. Frustration. Worry. Disappointment. Apathy. Anger. Fuck it. He brewed coffee and took the mug down to the dock. Spotting the canoe on the south shore, he stripped naked and swam, the cold water improved his head. Retrieving the canoe was not easy without a paddle, but soon he was dry and dressed, sitting on the front porch postulating as to where Douglas had gone. To booze, no doubt. He trotted the twelve kilometers to Guy’s Dépanneur.

“Guy? Are you Guy?”

“Bien Sur.”

“I’m Sunshine. O’Droole’s...”

“Ah oui! Celine recounted to me. Monsieur Jack called...”

“Have you seen Mr. O’Droole?”

“Enchanté. Comment ca va?”

“Have you seen O’Droole?”

“Ah oui, he came in the car. Very early. Happy to see him.”

“Did he buy booze?”

“Of course. Bien sur. Beaucoup. Beaucoup. Many many many many bottles. Trunk full.”

“Didn’t Jack tell you not to sell him booze?”

“Non. Jack gave the credit. No such restrictions.”

“Fuck.”

“Excuse-moi?”

“Sorry, just... what time?”

“Early. He waited while I opened...”

“Which direction did he drive?” Guy pointed. Sunshine left the shop. He paced the parking lot, looked up and down the human-less road. Ash. Spruce. Maple. Pine. Jays. Geese. Grouse. Duck. Cuckoo. He shoved a quarter in Guy’s pay phone.

“Jack Birnbaum, please. Sunshine O’Droole. Sure. I love holding.”

“Sunshine, kiddo. How’s the patient? Sorry about the code yesterday, was sitting with O.P.P.’s finest detectives. They’re bringing in the Mounties. The Federales. There’s no warrant yet. But Douglas is top of the list. Got a team of

ambulance-chasers on retainer. Megan and Harry will testify. With your word and mine, we should clear him beyond suspicion. I hope to come up with Megan on Sunday. We'll have a pow-wow and straighten out the alibis."

"He's gone. He took the car. Got booze from Guy."

"Where are you?"

"At Guy's."

"How's he mentally?"

"Sedated most of yesterday. He could be anywhere, doing anything."

Antoine, the angry roofer, pulled into the lot. Sunshine slipped parallel to the phone, out of sight. Antoine walked across the lot with a chain-saw.

"Jack, what happened last time Douglas was up here?"

"Oh shit. Forgot about that. Long story, kid. Long time ago. Do the locals know he's there?"

"They knew before we did. That Volvo isn't exactly incognito and Douglas is anything but clandestine. What did he do last time?"

"Kid, you just got to keep him in the cabin. Tie him to the bedpost. Drug him."

"I can't find him."

"You must. Before the cops do." A chainsaw's roar filled the air. Guy exited his shop followed by Antoine revving the saw. In the parking lot, Guy hollered in rapid-fire Quebecois, hands up—the international language for don't shoot. Sunshine hung up the phone and slithered around the corner of the shop. The chainsaw's wail rattled his ear drums. More yelling. He climbed into the

dumpster. The saw fell silent. The rapid stream of French vitriol sounded like a duck caught in a wood-chipper. Antoine's truck fired up and peeled murderously out of Guy's lot. A raven cawed. Guy's shop door bell rang. Sunshine watched an army of ants parade toward the dumpster's hinge. He lifted the lid to a clear coast. Stifling the urge to skedaddle into the woods and never return, become a backwoodsman, a moose whisperer, a brewer of choke-cherry wine, a forager of catnip, a sapper of Maple, deer hunter, squirrel skinner, connoisseur of smoke-signals, Sunshine returned to the payphone. Coinless, he dialed zero.

"0-9-0-2-3-6-8-9-3-0-0. Collect call for Dharma. Sunshine speaking. No. No I am not pranking. Please put the call through, it's urgent. O'Droole. Thanks." He listened to his mother accept the call.

"Mom."

"Where are you? I'm going to kill you. Did you forget your own number?"

"I'm fine, Mom. I'm in Quebec with Douglas. We're on set..."

"I heard about the fire. Were you there?"

"I saw it."

"Oh my good god! The news said this morning they are looking for Douglas. They said he's missing."

"Just a publicity stunt. He's alright. He's working on set. Got some big names. Mickey Rourke. Mia Farrow. Cher. Got to keep it hush-hush. On the down low, you know."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

“Are you eating?”

“Like a king. The on-set buffets are five-star. Yesterday I tried bran muffins with sun-dried tomatoes. Yummy. And all the M&Ms on set are red, only red.”

“Is Douglas treating you well?”

“Like a prince. I’m his amanuensis.”

“Nice word. What does it mean?”

“Yeah, he’s pretty fancy. Something between valet and chauffeur.”

“Is he drinking?”

“Yeah. No. Not much. Sometimes. Mostly at night, with the other stars.”

“Are you?”

“Not much.” A logging truck barreled down the road. Dust clouds swirled. A chipmunk, cheeks full jumped off Guy’s roof onto the ice machine. “How’s Gloria?”

“Haven’t see her.”

“And Barney?”

“Eating like a horse. Sleeping in your bed when I let him.”

“Any news?”

“The band’s raising money to go to Vancouver next year.”

“Mom, I really miss you. I love you.”

“Are you okay? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah.”

“You sound...”

“Jesus, can’t I just say I love you when I feel like it?”

“Of course, Sunny. And I love you too.”

“Gotta go. Call ya soon. Douglas needs me.”

“Sunshine, you be careful. You know you can always come home.”

Sunshine pinched the meat between his forefinger and thumb hard to stop the oncoming deluge of emotion. He bit his tongue, then forced his mouth open into yawn-position, which felt more like a silent scream and had the intended effect of blocking the tears. His diaphragm pushed sobs towards his heart. He wrapped the coil-cord around his forearm and pounded the handset into the hook.

“Arrete! Stop! Stop!” Guy yelled, coming out the shop door. “First Antoine, avec la tronçonnese, now you! Fuck this day! Fuck you! You fuck my phone I fuck you!” Guy frothed. Sunshine crumpled. Guy checked the phone for damage. Sunshine hid his tears.

“I’m sorry. Je suis désolé.”

“Pas de probleme. No damage. But baise-moi, Antoine wants to kill Monsieur Douglas. Oui, on the warpath. Celine say Julie and Douglas got gas together in Le Volvo. Antoine want vengeance like crazy. Fou!”

“Where’s he go?”

“He almost cut me to merde! Le connard!” Guy shook his head as if saying all this shit and it’s not even lunchtime yet. The chipmunk scurried after Sunshine for six kilometers anxious not to miss the next scene but abandoned pursuit after whiffing the scent of a raccoon. She climbed a white willow and feasted on her nut. That midnight a great-horned owl had her for lunch.

Although Sunshine had no watch, the sun had moved and he'd shattered his personal record for running twelve kilometers, on his second ever attempt. Dehydrated and sweaty, he passed the Volvo in the cabin lane. Nina Simone's urgent chant "Sinnerman, where you gonna run to?" came from the cabin stereo filling the woods and echoing around the lake. A voluminous redhead in a crop-top, with mega-hair sprayed up and out, danced with Douglas on the porch. O'Droole moved free and happy, wearing only cut-off jeans. His muscle definition, inconceivable for his age. The two jumped and squatted and twirled between pulls off a Rye bottle. A wood-paneled Ford Fairmont station-wagon was parked behind the Volvo, a neon orange Ford Pinto in front. O'Droole and the redhead danced bull and matador with a red windbreaker as Nina sang "Lord wait, oh Lord, Lord, Lord..." A couple in matching acid-washed Jordache jeans and Kiss concert t-shirts staggered out the cabin door, sloshing cups in hand. They went down the lake path trying to bite each other's neck. French laughter flew out the flopping cabin door.

"My prodigal son-shine has returned!" Douglas yelled between songs, sweeping his arm to include the age-old forest. "Sunshine, meet Julie. An old old old, very good friend," Douglas said and stepped into a handstand.

"Bienvenue a la fete! Monsiour Soliel!!!" Julie laid four kisses on Sunshine's cheeks and smothered him in her mass. "New friends are now old friends! C'est le Printemps!"

"Spring, yes. Douglas, I need to talk to you. It's urgent."

“Hell is empty. All the devils are here! Exit, pursued by bear.” Douglas twisted a la Chubby Checker, pulled heartily off the bottle. Julie mimicked and Sunshine made for the faucet. The cold Quebec water soothed his throat. He drank till his belly gurgled. He splashed his face, relieved that Douglas had returned, upset that he was alighting into another demon-filled-booze-binge, and edgy over Antoine’s vendetta. A Quebecois cuckold with a chain-saw would certainly liven up the shin-dig. Sunshine closed the faucet and scanned the cabin. Two plaid covered men in lumberjack toques, straight out of central-casting, held hands while playing cards at the table. Go Fish. Their wild beards reached their belly-buttons. Hirsute trappers. A teenager girl in a rainbow stripped sweater sat cross-legged on the floor and strummed an acoustic guitar. Sunshine sensed movement in the loft. A Grisly-bear like man in a janitor’s uniform slept on the sofa. Screams and splashes came from the lake. The fridge stocked with white wine and beer opened and closed. A smoldering whiff of barbeque climbed his nostrils. Where was the morning’s silence? Was Douglas Dionysus? Or did the bacchanal stalk him? In a divine vision of disbelief, a familiar figure entered the cabin from the back door.

“Sunshine!”

“Hope?”

“Oh blessed Shiva! When O’Droole stopped to pick me up, I just knew I’d see you again! SUNSHINE!!!” In Hope’s warm arms, Sunshine had the acute insight into the smallness of the world. Gloria. Nora. Dharma. Even Maeve. Absolutely Monique.

“We are all interconnected,” she whispered, and swung her arm around his neck and hopped. They bounced a clumsy waltz around the kitchen. James Brown’s “Poppa’s Got a Brand New Bag” came over the stereo. Their re-connected joy spread through the cabin like a laughing gas leak. The lumber-jacks, the folk-guitar girl, Quebec’s forest queens, Douglas and Julie, Hope and Sunshine were doing the mash-potato, the jerk, the fly, the monkey, the jump-back-jack, the twist-just-like-this, the boomerang, and the see-you-alligator all over Jack’s hideaway that weekday May afternoon in the last year of the decade. 1990 would arrive in seven months like a sledge hammer and there would be a lot of refugees.

“Let’s go puff a doobie.” Hope interlocked Sunshine’s arm. They cavorted toward the dock as James Brown screamed, “I got mine! Don’t worry about his! Right on, right on. Get on Up! Shake your money maker...”

“I can’t believe we’re here.” Hope lit the joint and added, “Together.”

“Who’d a thunk it?”

“I’m head councilor at Camp Tekakwitha, two lakes over. Today’s my day off, campers check-in tomorrow. Was walking to Guy’s to buy some beer, minding my business, communing with the forest nymphs and all a sudden Douglas pulls up in that... that car? Like a scene in a movie. I get in and here I am, like a magic-carpet. Half expected you to be in the backseat.”

“Normally, I drive him.”

“He’s an animal. A maniac. A hurricane of fun.”

“He has his moments. How’d the river-running go?”

“Best week of my life. Feels like years ago. Asha and Andrew dropped me off and went to Toronto. I assume you got to Stratford, Holy Vishnu! They had that fire!”

Sunshine caught Hope up. They chatted and filled in holes, smoked three joints, ate two hash-brownies and polished off a bottle of wine each.

“You know there was something we never got to do in New Brunswick?” She brushed a white cottonwood pod off his thigh.

“Pardon.” Sunshine watched a raven skim the lake, anything to avoid the fear butterflying up from his diaphragm. He was afraid to speak because he knew his voice would crack. With her baby finger, she slid her overall straps off her shoulder and stood slowly. She pulled her tie-die t-shirt over her dreadlocks and stepped out of her panties.

“Is it deep enough to dive here?” she asked. Clothes pooled at her feet. Sunshine had never seen a vagina before, except in Normy’s father’s stack of Playboys and couldn’t help but stare.

“Do you like what you see?” Hope asked, grinning, knowing the answer.

“I... I... You’re extremely beautiful, Hope.”

“So should we do that thing we never did in New Brunswick?” Hope placed her toes on the edge of the dock. She peered at the lake bottom, spun slowly twice. Sunshine couldn’t believe how delineated her tan-lines were for spring. Her ass was a strawberry dipped in yogurt. Hope spread her arms to Jesus-on-the-cross-pose.

“Should we?” She called over her shoulder.

“What?”

“Skinny dip!” She flipped into the lake with a howl. She surfaced with a hoot. “Get in! It’s freezing!” Sunshine stepped out his jeans and cannon-balled off the dock.

“There’s no salt!” Sunshine called upon surfacing.

“What?”

“The water’s fresh. So clean. So calm. So cold.”

“Toto, I got a feeling we isn’t in P.E.I anymore. Race you to the other side.” They front-crawled side by side. At lake-center, Sunshine stopped racing and searched for Hope, who was a hundred meters behind treading water.

“You okay?” he called.

“Yeah, but I’m too stoned to race. Keep going. I’m gonna get towels.” He watched her breast stroke, head above water to the dock ladder. She walked up the trail to the cabin naked. Weed, booze and a virgin’s lusty confusion propelled Sunshine into a furious front-crawl across the lake and back. Near the dock he floated on his back to catch his breath. Hope returned wrapped in a towel, with two burgers and two bottles of beer. Too shy to climb the ladder naked, he floated under the dock.

“I got food.” She called from the dock’s edge. “Sunshine?”

“Under here.”

“Are you looking up between the cracks?”

“No.” He climbed the ladder onto the dock naked. Hope faked throwing the towel.

“Wait,” she said. “Just stand still. You got your look. Now, I get mine, turn around slowly. Put your arms out like I did.”

“Hope, give me the towel,” he said going from shy blush into almost annoyance.

“No. Stand there. Feel the sun on your skin. You know Sunshine...”

“Hope, give me the towel.”

“...You have a perfect body, really. I mean, perfect.” Like a cloud evaporated to reveal the sun, his shame vanished.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“You like what you see?” His blood stirred below, with a stiffening, all the shame returned. Hope giggled and threw him the towel.

“Eat your burger, Handsome.”

“Hope, do you like my color?”

“Yes. It’s perfect.”

“Do you like me because of my color?”

“No. Yes. No. I don’t know. Do you like my color?”

“Yeah, but everyone’s your color.”

“That’s a crock of shit. You need to travel more.” She handed him the burger. They ate silently, happy. A flutter of invisible fairy-hands had woven them closer. Hope rested her head on Sunshine’s thigh, closed her eyes and felt the sun.

“How’s the party up there?” Sunshine asked.

“After I got the burgers, Douglas pissed on the barbeque, could barely aim. Everyone else was playing cards. Julie’s passed out nude in the tub. I think the party is descending into the cursed valley of the dead. Might be another round tonight, I guess. How long are you staying here?” Lionel Richie’s “Hello, is it me you’re looking for” came abruptly over the stereo. They giggled.

“Douglas won’t let the party die without a fight.”

“And in my dreams I’ve kissed your lips a thousand times.” They sang laughing.

“Have you seen this video?” Sunshine asked.

“Yeah, some teacher is mack-daddy on a blind student. And then she sculpts him! Total cheese. But kinda creepy too. Hey, can you roll?”

“No.”

“Let me teach you.” She rolled over and retrieved an Altoid’s tin from her overalls. A breeze brought a chill and the lesson ended before it began interrupted by wail of a chain saw.

“Shit!” Sunshine jumped into his jeans and ran toward the cabin. Antoine’s roofing truck was jammed solid into the front porch.

“POURQUOI CONNARD MA FEMME NUE DAN LA BAIN!!” Sunshine knew the words “naked” “wife” and ‘tub.” Antoine starring in the role as vengeful husband needed no subtitles. The chain saw rev shook the cabin. O’Droole came out the front door naked, wielding the sword.

“Crisse de câlce de tabarnak d’osti de sacrament de trou vierge! I cut you like pig!” Antoine chased O’Droole twice around the cabin. O’Droole was too

frightened to mock. On the third lap, O'Droole stopped running and stood his ground. Chain-saw and sword took turns cutting the air. The two men took a step closer after each miss. Without thinking twice, Sunshine picked up a Titanium Stiletto Claw Hammer from Antoine's open toolbox in the bed of his truck, walked calmly up the porch stairs, approached Antoine's backside and sank the claw into his thigh. Antoine emitted a bear's howl and reached for his thigh with the saw. He fell onto his shoulder and sliced into his own shin. Blood sprayed O'Droole and splatted the deck. The chainsaw skittered across the porch like a squirrel and came to rest in a dirt pile. Antoine writhed in pain on the deck. The party-goers filed shamefully out the cabin to witness. O'Droole picked up a full Rye bottle off the front window sill, took a swig, walked over to stand above Antoine.

"When the hurly-burly's done, the battle's lost and won." He poured the alcohol into the half-severed shin. Antoine screamed. The lumberjacks restrained O'Droole. Julie came out the front door in a blanket. Took in the scene, attempted to scratch Douglas' eyes out.

"QUOI? QUOI? QUOI? MON DIEU! QUOI!" she yelled among other things.

"I was simply disinfecting the wound, my dear." O'Droole extended his arm slowly, dramatically, and pointed an accusatory index finger at Sunshine. "He inflicted the serious damage."

"Right," Sunshine said, becoming someone he'd never been before. "Right. You two, wrap that leg now, and get him to the hospital." He commanded the lumberjacks. "You," he pointed to Julie, "get dressed, take that truck away

and never come back. You were never here, comprenez? I don't care how fucking drunk you are. Go. And you," he pointed to Douglas, "PUT SOME FUCKING CLOTHES ON AND GO TO YOUR ROOM! Everyone else fuck off and don't come back, ever. Allez! Quittez! Leave! Now! GET THE FUCK OUT!" The fatter lumberjack took off his plaid shirt and tied Antoine's leg. They lifted him into the Pinto with the acoustic guitar girl. The stationwagon filled. Julie returned from the cabin dressed, too ashamed to make eye contact. She reversed Antoine's truck up the lane after the Pinto and followed the stationwagon off the property. O'Droole stood on his mark with bottle and sword.

"One pain is cured by another. Catch some new infection in your eye and the poison of the old one will die. Pain pays the income of each precious..."

"SHUT YOUR FUCKING PIE HOLE, O'DROOLE." Sunshine walked over and took the sword and bottle. O'Droole shrank. His face filled with confusion.

"Do we need another take? I'm war-weary."

"Mr. O'Droole, I gave you your direction. Do you remember them or do I need to re-cast?"

"Never. I'll get dressed and go to my room now. It's just, just," O'Droole spoke like a six-year old, uncontrollable, unwanted, real tears dripped down his cheek, "it's... just, I don't know where my room is. I don't know who I am or where to go."

"The loft. Take the stairs beside the fireplace. Go to sleep." O'Droole took three stabs at finding the door handle. He looked dull-witted, decrepit. The door shut delicately.

Hope slow clapped from the lane.

“Wow, Herr Director. That was epic.”

“He’s losing the plot.”

“Do you want me to go too?”

“No.” A black fox crawled out from under the Volvo, yawned, seemed to smirk, and darted into the forest. Sunlight flickered off the front window.

“Surreal,” Hope said.

“Do you remember that thing you said you wanted to take from me in New Brunswick?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I believe it’s ready to be taken.” Wordlessly, Hope ascended the porch stairs. They enlaced fingers. Hope had no trouble with the door. She led Sunshine through the cabin littered with party waste into the small bedroom. Steady and mute, they undressed each other.

“You have one job.”

“Pardon”

“Relax.”

“I can do that.”

“No. Two jobs actually. Don’t come till I do.”

“And if I do?”

“Then we’ll have to try again.” She palmed his forehead and fell backwards onto the bed.

Hope rolled onto to Sunshine and kissed his eyes open as Common Loons serenaded the lake.

“I have to go to the camp. Like now, before the campers start rolling in.”

“Want a ride?”

Hope showered while Sunshine made coffee. She smoked a breakfast joint as the Volvo skirted lakes and floated over hills. Sunshine declined. Sunday morning church bells soundtracked the camp. She pecked his cheek hard and opened the door.

“I’m off every Saturday all summer if you’re around.”

“Should be, at least for awhile.” She pulled a camp brochure out of here purse. “Number’s on the back. Come pick me up, next Saturday around noonish.”

“Hope... last night was really...”

“No need to put words on it.”

“You’re right. Thank you...”

“No need to thank me either. I’m happy. You’re happy. We make each other happy. Don’t think it to death. A plus tard, mon ami.” She closed the car door and walked toward a cluster of cabins. Sunshine reversed out the camp lane, an irremovable smile plastered across his cheeks. Feeling stronger than ever before, he rolled down the car window and bellowed with Bono on the radio. “Like the hot needs the sun. Like honey on her tongue. Like the muzzle of a gun. Like oxygen. I need your love.” Sunshine gunned the Volvo faster than anything he’d ever driven without fear before.

The cabin was a sty. O'Droole's blankets littered the stairs. If you asked Douglas to pass the salt, he'd hand you pepper, Sunshine thought. The man would not and could not follow logic, only emotion, only action, only wants and needs, a slave to drama. Through the kitchen window, Sunshine glimpsed O'Droole paddling the canoe across the lake. At least he's on the property. At least he's clothed. Does he ever get hangovers? Sunshine straightened the cabin. Put the redeemable empties in the beer crate. Wiped surfaces. Stacked cards. Filled three trash cans. Place his sword bedside. Warmed coffee and made two grilled cheese sandwiches. He took the trail to the dock and sat in the morning sun as O'Droole canoed. After several lake crossings, O'Droole paddled smoothly over to the dock.

"Get in."

"I made you a cheese sandwich."

"Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter. You Banbury cheese! I said get in." Sunshine stepped into the canoe. He sat facing Douglas, who paddled into the center of the lake.

"Listen Sunshine, I know who you are and what you want. I'm not mad. I shun the way of madness. I remember your mother well. Dharma. A beautiful creature. We used to ride bicycles together. Fish for minnows and smelt. I read her letter. You are here to learn my craft, correct?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready for lesson one?"

"Yes."

“Don’t do what I have done. Don’t tread the boards. Don’t waste your life feeding the tapeworm.”

“Tapeworm?”

“My son, I’ve swallowed a tapeworm, not voluntary, but indeed the parasite is inside me and always will be and all I do is feed it. Not me, not Douglas the snotty-nosed boy who loved to sing, but this masquerading shell I have become. I’m empty. The tapeworm has taken over.” He slapped the water with the paddle. A beaver swam under the hull. “Is there anything other than acting that you can do with your life?”

“I don’t know. It’s all I ever thought of doing.”

“If there is, you must. Accounting. Lawyering. Medicine. Even writing. Journalism. The constant search for an audience is a debilitating purgatory. I can’t even get my dick hard without adding some cock-eyed snippet of text. Do you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been rude to you to protect you.”

“Pardon.”

“You are my cousin, my family. Dharma’s son.”

“I am.”

“Thank you for yesterday. I thought that cuckold with the chainsaw was going to...”

“You shouldn’t fuck other people’s spouses.”

“I know, but the tapeworm...”

“Bullshit.”

“Sometimes the line between cut and action get blurred. Sometimes I’m watching myself do something and I know it’s wrong and not a scene, but I need to continue watching myself to see how things will end. I’ve done it all my life. I know it’s wrong and I hate the tapeworm I have become. But now we are one and I’m nothing without it. ”

“Do you know what you are going to do before you do it?”

“Never. Do you?”

“Usually.”

“Light seeking light, doth light of light beguile. So ere you find where light in darkness lies, your light grows dark by losing of your eyes. See? FUCK!” With two hands he smacked the paddle hard enough against the gunwales to draw splinters. “I don’t want to be quoting some chintzy walk-on from Love’s Labour’s Lost twenty-fucking-six years ago! Fuck me.”

“But it’s not two-bit. It’s poetry. It’s the best writing we have.”

“I’d rather be John fucking Wayne. At least he knew who he was.”

“He wasn’t an actor. He was a celebrity. A personality.”

“Better.”

“He never transformed. He never became anything other than himself. A Hollywood clown. A name nothing more. Sure he got rich, but he never fed any tapeworm. He just fed himself.”

“Why do you want to become someone else?”

“It’s fun. I guess.”

“Bullshit. That is not an answer. Playing a psychopath is not fun. A corrupt politician. A demented old patriarch? A racist manipulator? You play Iago for six months every single night and tell me how fucking fun that is!”

“But isn’t the playing part fun?”

“Not if you don’t know you’re playing.”

“You mean you lose it?”

“Lesson two. Remember this one. There is no audience. There is no camera. You want to act a scene? The scene is real life. There is no fourth wall, no screen, no lights, no fucking ushers and ice-cream sellers. Everything is real.”

“Is this a scene?”

“Lesson three. Stand on the rails.”

“Pardon.”

“I won’t ask twice. Get up there. Stand up straight on the edge of this hull and don’t fall.”

“But you’ll rock the boat and throw me in.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. You’re here to learn, right? Do what I say and not as I do. Come on, up.” Sunshine stood on the canoe seat. He spread his legs, bent his knees, and balanced on the gunwales. “Now walk to the bow and back.” Sunshine followed O’Droole’s direction. “Here.” O’Droole handed him the paddle. “Now play me yesterday. Start with the breath. How were my hips? My elbow? What did you see in my face? Use the paddle as I used the sword.” Sunshine channeled what he remembered from O’Droole in the duel. “Not bad, but not believable yet.” O’Droole rocked the canoe. “There we go, come on!” Sunshine

teetered into real fear just before tumbling into the cold lake. “Again!” O’Droole commanded. Sunshine climbed into the canoe and resumed balancing on the gunwales and swinging the paddle. He kept fear in his face and body.

“Let’s add some text.”

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet...” O’Droole rocked the canoe violently. Sunshine tumbled into the lake.

“Not fucking Romeo, worst role ever written. Learn Tybal. Or Mercutio. Start with a sonnet.”

“I don’t know any,” he said, climbing back into the canoe and resuming his blocking.

“Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed, when not to be receives reproach of being and the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed not by our feelings but by other’s seeing. That’s the line. One breath. Fill up those lungs and keep repeating till you fall or die.” Sunshine repeated the line and swung the paddle while balancing on the canoe edges. O’Droole rocked with all his might. After eight dunks, Sunshine sang the text with venom and rocked the canoe with his own force. O’Droole applauded.

“Now, do it naked.”

“Pardon.”

“It’s a simple direction.”

“Why?”

“Wrong question.”

“But...”

“Exterminate shame. Humiliation hinders. The director says get naked, what do you do?”

“Get naked, I guess.”

“Don’t guess. Strip. Before they re-cast.” Sunshine dropped his soaked t-shirt and shorts into the canoe. He swung the paddle and repeated the sonnet opening until the lines and movement came not out of him but through him. He rocked and screamed and wielded and wagged until reality and the canoe toppled. Douglas surfaced with a glorious howl.

“That’s it lad, that’s it, my handsome young bootstrapper! You’ve got some spark in you. Now bring the canoe home. Not bad, for a first class. Double double toil and trouble! I’ve got to speak to a horse about a Rye bottle.” He front-crawled toward the dock. Exhausted, Sunshine half-paddled, half-pulled the submerged canoe after him.

May passed to June as July hid on the horizon. Hope visited Saturdays nights. Sunshine believed himself in love. Antoine and Julie never returned. Celine and Guy delivered groceries, became friends. Douglas’ drinking decreased mostly to watery beer. Hope taught Sunshine to bake pot brownies. Douglas mellowed and glowed. Sunshine watered down any open liquor bottle smuggled into the cabin. Jack visited with three lawyers. Signed papers. Megan

didn't. The Festival had rented a big top circus tent and continued performances while the theatre underwent restoration. Refunds were against their religion, the show must go on, people must be paid, hotels and restaurants had to stay open. The actor who'd played the fool played Lear to horrific reviews. No one could occupy Douglas O'Droole's codpiece. His buskins lay empty, never to be properly filled, yet no invitations to return to the stage arrived. Sunshine and Douglas settled into a domestic routine. O'Droole, the retired factory worker, Sunshine, the young eager-to-please-mail-away bride. He cooked, cleaned, chopped wood, lit the fires, served drinks, removed the trash and kept hunger at bay. Douglas sunbathed, swam, sang, canoed, or lounged in a hammock reading. Each morning and afternoon, O'Droole tutored Sunshine. Handstands, tongue twisters, diction exercises, tree-climbing, pull-ups, dance steps, stage fighting, reading aloud, and the daily exam of balancing on a bucking canoe. Sunshine found an empty notebook on Jack's shelf and scribbled the nuggets of wisdom O'Droole dropped like lucky coins into a newly-constructed gushing fountain.

“Control is what produces the illusion of freedom.”

“Only a fool tells everything.”

“Always keep a secret”

“Of course you are right. But I am right too.”

“There cannot be art without terror.”

“When I was your age, I was so horny I'd fuck a light socket and send it flowers in the morning.”

“There is no reason to ever have the same thought twice, unless you like that thought.”

“Swing is a state of arrival.”

“Wear the text like a sock.”

“The answer is in the question. So listen, listen, then listen better.”

“Stand up straight and don’t bump into the furniture.”

There were arguments and bizarre moments that defied logic. After a particularly reaffirming sunset of chopping wood, Sunshine entered the cabin to find O’Droole dressed as a lady of the night, performing a lip-syncing burlesque to The Kink’s Lola, “girls will be boys, and boys will be girls, it’s a mixed-up, muddled-up, shook-up world...Lola!” Sunshine still wondered where O’Droole got the red cocktail dress and make-up. The performance ended with O’Droole repeating ad infinitum, “Gender is a social construct. In thirty years, the binary code will be replaced by a rainbow.” Sunshine fell asleep with O’Droole pounding on his locked door, yelling, “Come to me, my young god. I demand to have some human flesh. I need the touch of human skin!” The next morning, Sunshine buried the pot-brownies in the compost pile. Another night, O’Droole chased Sunshine around the property reciting the complete works of Robert Service in a Glaswegian accent. The evening ended with Sunshine winning 21 consecutive arm-wrestles and Douglas weeping on the floor, chanting, “I am a very foolish fond old man.” One morning Sunshine awoke to grunting and chopping, Douglas attempting to timber an ancient Birch tree in order to carve his own canoe. Sunshine distracted him with a bowl of hard bowled eggs. By the time O’Droole

had finished peeling the shells, he had forgotten the axe and trunk. Shenanigans aside, heart-felt conversations also erupted unexpectedly.

“I think you should go home.” O’Droole said one still afternoon while sunning on the dock. Sunshine was memorizing a sonnet.

“North Rustico?”

“No. How can tyrants safely govern home, unless abroad they purchase great alliance?”

“Not sure I understand, Douglas.”

“My son, if you don’t know where you’re from, you’ll never know where to go.”

“I know where I’m from.”

“You need to know your birth mother.”

“Pardon.”

“Let us go now, you and I, to Dhaka. I’ve never seen The East! Four hours from this thought, we can board a flight. Dorval to Delhi. Allons-y?”

“Dharma’s my mother.”

“I know, but aren’t you curious?”

“Of course, but...”

“But, but, but, you are all buts. Carpe diem, mon fils. You will never be a great thespian until you face what boils your blood.” Indignant, Sunshine dove off the dock and swam underwater as long as he could. O’Droole was not an easy ward.

“Maybe she’s a Bollywood diva by now... At least find her for the medical records. You might make a happy Muslim!” Douglas yelled. His center-pitch echoed over the lake.

Sunshine floated on his back. “Fuck off.”

“Maybe she wants to meet you.”

“She was raped.”

“How do you know?”

“I was conceived in violence,” Sunshine whispered and submerged. A trout school flickered past. He emerged and floated, eyes-closed, sun blazing his outer eyelids, a kaleidoscope of fleshy reds and oranges, the words, “maybe one day” formed in his head as if planted by a foreign force. Dharma’s old mantra “Dhaka was just like Venice” reoccurred. “Would she wear a sari? Would she look like me? Would the tea taste good and how could we talk and be?” Where do these ditties come from? Sunshine swam until his mind settled. All blank, fresh water, deep breath, deltoid.

July 1st Canada Day arrived with a torrential rainstorm. The sky pressure-washed the forest from the kitchen window. No hope of the sun’s appearance. Douglas downed a wordless coffee. He’d been relatively sober for a week. His mood swings had stilled. He’d retreated inward, kept mostly silent. Peeling masks. Days turned rote.

“Can you make use of a spinach omelet, nuncle?” Sunshine asked, cracking eggs into a bowl.

“The egg as crown, as kingdom, fragile and all, bald-pate, is total bunk. Some onanistic academic concoction.”

“Why—after I have cut the egg in the middle and eaten up the meat—the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown in the middle, and gavest away both parts, thou borest thy...”

“Can it. No fool. Not today. The bard’s on sabbatical. I’m hunting turtles. Turtle soup for lunch.” O’Droole went out the cabin door and down the lake path. Shirtless, shoeless, no acknowledgement of downpour, graceful and determined, he paddle into the lake center alone and perform his gunwale-kata, balancing like a tai chi master. Sunshine sliced garlic, diced onions, sautéed spinach, and watched O’Droole in the rain from the kitchen window. When Sunshine poured the raw eggs and vegetables into the hot buttered cast-iron pan, O’Droole’s right leg kicked high to chin-level, his left toes lost grip on the canoe edge, and the back of his skull bounced hard off the bow deck. Blood spurted. The canoe capsized. Sunshine felt an atmospheric change. A Snowshoe Hare darted along the lakeshore. The words “Lepus Americanus” slipped out of Sunshine’s mouth. The toppled green hull bobbed. He cut the stove gas and sprinted out the door, down the porch and off the dock with shoes, shirt and a universe of panic. At the canoe, no Douglas. The rain had stirred the mud. The water opaque. Sunshine dove deep, blind, swinging his legs and arms wide trying to cover as much water as each breath would allow. On the third dive, he spotted a trail of blood, a black streamer in a brown broth. He found an elbow and pulled with all his might. Headlocking Douglas, he kicked over to the semi-submerged canoe, propped

O'Droole's skinny frame on to the hull, and pushed his ear to his mouth. No breath. "Fuck you, Douglas. You're not going like this," Sunshine said, as he brought a solid fist down firm three times on his cousin's heart. Nothing. He gripped the bobbing hull with his knees and maneuvered closer to Douglas's mouth. Gripping his nose, Sunshine forced three strong exhales into Douglas. Blood turned the water burgundy like an overturned bucket of paint. The rain pounded, Sunshine administered another round of mouth to mouth. Nothing. With all his youthful strength, he pinned Douglas to the slick hull and palmed the center of O'Droole's chest. The canoe tipped and Douglas coughed when he hit the water. Sunshine dove under the canoe, came up behind, wrapped an arm under his armpit, around his neck and sidestroked for shore. Sunshine lay him on the muddy bank beside the dock. Breathing hard, coughing occasionally in semi-consciousness, O'Droole was bleeding like a butchered pig. His neck looked like rubber, spine contorted. "JESUS!!! I NEED FUCKING HELP! HELP!" Sunshine screamed across the lake. A gaggle of Canadian Geese took flight. Sunshine delicately placed his wet shirt under O'Droole's bleeding skull. He looked to the sky for instruction.

"Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell? Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." Why these lines now? Without thinking, Sunshine picked Douglas up, as delicately as possible, the same way O'Droole carried Cordelia's corpse on stage in Act V, and made for the car. While laying him in the back seat, O'Droole regained consciousness for a second. "You see me here, you gods, a poor old man as full of grief as age, wretched in both! Sunshine,

bring the sword, we'll need it for battle. And a bottle." Sunshine got the keys to the Volvo from the kitchen table, placed the sword on the backseat floor, and reversed up the lane, pedal to the metal. Blood pooled on the white upholstery. He murmured a distant prayer.

"I am a very foolish fond old man... I fear I am not in my perfect mind."

"Douglas, be still. Save your energy." Peeling into Guy's parking lot, he almost took out the pay phone. Sunshine dialed 911.

"I need an ambulance. It's an extreme emergency! My cousin's head is bleeding bad! Guy's Dépanneur. Yes! Yes. Please come quick!" Guy had come out of his shop and was looking in the Volvo's back window, when Douglas seized. Froth exited the mouth. Shaking and bouncing epileptically, O'Droole eyes rolled back, his arm slapped the front seat involuntarily.

"Mon Dieu!" Guy yelled. "You call ze ambulance?"

"Yes. He hit his head..."

"How long?"

"They didn't say. Fuck."

"Allez! Get in back. VITE VITE! Hold him!" Sunshine climbed into the backseat and held Douglas as he squirmed and bucked. Guy slammed the door, took the wheel, and had the car at top speed in seconds. Jacques Villeneuve. The ambulance siren could be heard, for what seemed like hours, before they saw it. Guy stopped the car perpendicular across the road, and laid hard on the horn. The ambulance stopped. Douglas was transferred efficiently to the ambulance, which pulled a donut and sired north. Guy and Sunshine stood on the empty

road beside the huffing Volvo. Guy reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack Du Maurier Fine Cut Blend, lit one, gave it to Sunshine, who smoked the first and only cigarette of his life. Guy lit his own and said nonchalantly, “We follow, non?”

Buckingham Hospital was a three hour drive south and perhaps the ugliest building in North America. Squat, red-bricked, windowless, façade of health, but more gateway to death, Guy chain-smoked the whole drive. Sunshine remained silent. They stopped for gas. Guy called Celine and told her to close his shop. Sunshine called Jack.

“Keep the press at bay. Tell no one. I’ll fly to Montreal and rent a car.” He promised. O’Droole had arrived alive, been sutured and was under going scans when Sunshine got to the hospital counter.

“Are you next of kin?” asked a nurse.

“I don’t know. I’m his cousin.”

“Family. So what happened?”

Sunshine told her what he knew. He described Douglas’ seizure. The nurse ran off with the information and told Sunshine to wait. After two hours pacing the empty emergency, he found a Tim Horton’s Coffee Shop three kilometers east of the hospital and ordered a coffee and two apple fritters. Guy stayed in the waiting room by the payphone. Sunshine opened the newspaper.

GUNMAN KILLS 14 WOMAN AND HIMSELF

A young man with a rifle killed 14 women and wounded 12 other people today in a shooting rampage at the L’Ecole Polytechnique, University of Montreal engineering school, then

shot himself to death, the police said. The police said the gunman had singled out the women as his targets, beginning the assault in the cafeteria of the university's engineering building, where he killed three women. The Montreal Police Director, Claude St.-Laurent, said the gunman, wearing hunting attire, then rushed into a crowded classroom on the second floor and yelled in French, "You're all a bunch of feminists!" before he started shooting.

The gunman prowled the halls, killing four more women in the corridor of the third floor. He continued up to the fourth and fifth floors, shooting and wounding both men and women. The police said he then returned to the third floor and killed himself.

The police said the gunman was a French-speaking male but he was not further identified. Officials said that one police officer called to the scene found his daughter was among the dead. Mr. St.-Laurent at one point told reporters the police were looking for two accomplices but said later he was mistaken and that the man had acted alone. One male student said a bullet passed by his leg and he brought his hands up in a pleading gesture. The gunman left him alone. "He was clearly gunning for the women," the student said.

Monique. L'Ecole Polytechnique. He pictured the book she had given him with her number and address, *The Second Sex*, on the bedside table in the cabin. He had not started reading it yet. When Hope had rolled a joint on it, she commented, "Wow, an intellectual. You've got serious potential, eh?" Sunshine dialed information from the payphone above the stack of newspapers.

"Monique Lafleur please, yes Montreal. What? Sixty-six Monique Lafleurs? No, I'm sorry, I don't have a street address. Wait, do you have a number for Guy Lafleur near Trois-Rivières? No, it's not a prank, it's an emergency. Yes, near

Nicolet. Sure. Okay. One second.” Sunshine asked the counter man for a pen and scribbled a phone number on the newspaper. He dialed Monique’s uncle.

“Tonton Guy? Je suis Sunshine. Le’ hitcher.” He could hear breathing but no words. “Tonton? Monique? Elle est okay? Tonton?”

“Non,” and an old broken voice as cold and dead as winter whispered, “elle est morte.” The line beeped and died. Sunshine hung up the receiver. Monique’s light extinguished. He remembered the ex-navy seal with the coke and the pistol in the black corvette, a devil. Men like him all over the world driving around going insane, rabid wolves, trained-killing machines, right-and-wrong exterminated upon enlistment, loaded to the gills with weaponry, centuries of attack-techniques rolled into balls of uncontrollable fire with zero emotional intelligence, seasoned psychopaths, natural sociopaths, and the most beautiful and generous woman, perhaps a saint, at least to Sunshine, Monique, and thirteen other women, were gone. Holes in the sky. He couldn’t eat. He tried reading the newspaper article again, halfway through he stood and said, “Cut! Let’s start this scene again. Take two.” The whole donut shop watched him leave. Sunshine inhaled, plastered the fakest smile ever on his face, pulled the door open with gusto and walked toward the hospital. The shop watched awe-struck. The new beat a low bass drum in his veins. This horror could not be changed. Sunshine could not change anything. He stood in the center of the busied road in town. Cars honked and swerved.

“Ca va? Hey mec, you okay?” the donut shop counter-man asked. Sunshine stared lost into his confused face. There was no script. The man ushered him out of the line of traffic.

“Can we do another take? Take three. Go back and start all over?” Sunshine sat on the grassy roadside shoulder and stared into the sun, open-eyed. Cars passed. Trucks passed. Ravens lined the telephone wire. Sunshine tried to focus on his spine, on breathing, on keeping perfectly erect, on finding his center, but he drifted into an purgatorial blur. The ravens cawed. The electricity-poles droned. Notes on scales, the score of a dirge. Time evaporated. Minutes turned centuries. Sunshine was a grandfather, generations scrolled like pages of a photo album, his soul transmogrified into an elephant frolicking in the Ganjas, a moose giving birth on an iceberg, an albatross chained to a bank. Ants crawled over his shoe. He picked a single blade of grass and bisected it in slow-motion with his thumb-nails into two.

“Sunshine! Sunshine! What the fuck are you doing?” Jack called from a rolled down rental car window. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Douglas is calling for you. Get in. Hey kiddo, are you okay?” Wordlessly, Sunshine got into the passenger’s seat. Jack drove toward the hospital speaking a mile a minute. The words ricocheted around the car interior, indecipherable shapes, meanings popped like corn. In the hospital parking lot, Jack cut the engine and put a hand on the back of Sunshine’s neck.

“What’s wrong, kid?”

“Monique’s dead.”

“Who’s Monique?”

“Exactly.” Sunshine said, robotically.

“Douglas is asking for you. He’s over excited, gibbering on about the sword. The doctor says it’s touch and go. Hey Sunshine, you okay? Can you handle this... you look pale.”

“This too shall pass. This too shall pass. This too...” Sunshine repeated walking across the parking lot, unlocking the Volvo, retrieving the sword. He entered the hospital’s emergency entrance. A huddle of cops and reporters ignored him. Feeling the silent power of purpose, a novel sensation, he crossed the waiting-room, strode straight past triage down the hall, glimpsing the minor and major tragedies behind each curtain. Beeps and tears and prayers and electronic engines pumping life and death accompanied his resolution. In the stairwell before opening the door to the second floor, he found his center, composed himself, like a virgin actor in the wings awaiting an opening night entrance. The next few steps could make or break a career.

In the third room on the left, Douglas lay heavy-breathing, eyes closed, washed and bald, with clean white sheets up to his chin. Sunshine counted the stiches which started eight centimeters above his ear and train-tracked down to Douglas’s skull base. When the count crested sixty, Sunshine wondered if the number of stiches would match Douglas’s age. Before finishing, Douglas blinked several times and opened his eyes.

“We all begin and end in hospital beds. Sunshine, my liege, my sunny son!”

“My king.” Sunshine knelt and presented the sword. Blade flat, hilt extended towards Douglas, who took a few beats to enter the scene. He struggles to free his left arm from the tucked sheet, then weakly gripped the sword. He raised the blade dramatically, feeble, he inhaled, and touched the shiny metal on each of Sunshine’s shoulders.

“A loyal and true knight, if I ever...” Before he could finish the line, he laughed hard and long. His bones rattled like a box of matches. His right arm rose to his head.

“It hurts to laugh. Thank you, Sunshine. I might need this where I’m going.” He cut the air twice with the blade. Still gripping the hilt, he lay the sword parallel to his legs in the bed above the sheet. The veins in his forearm pulsed magnificently. Douglas closed his eyes, a sliver of his spirit rose visibly through the ceiling. Sunshine put his hand on Douglas’s. They held the hilt together.

“Douglas, is there anything you want? Anything I can do for you?”

“Your hands are cold.”

“So are yours!” Douglas gave a weak laugh. Sunshine kept his hand on Douglas’s.

“Are you hungry? Do you want a radio or something? I can read to you.”

“My boy, I want to thank you for saving my life, at least what’s left of it. Thank you. You’ve been very good to me. I remember everything. I’m watching our movie in my mind now. No more acting. The curtain on my last turn has been called.”

“Don’t be fatalistic. You’ll be back on stage in no time.”

“My brain is air. I can feel it. A rising balloon. My words are helium.”

Jack entered the room with a doctor.

“Dougie, you’re awake! How ya feeling? This is Doctor Ali, he’ll make you ship shape again, back on your feet in no time. We still got that Pacino project and *Beautiful Dreamers* starts in three weeks. You’ve banged your head before.” O’Droole flashed a faint grin, forgiving, fraternal, authentic. A contract between cads.

“Jack, later.” Sunshine said.

“Ah, the old ham’s just fishing for sympathy. I smells a come-back.” Doctor Ali circumvented the bed. He checked the sutures, read his clipboard, wrote notes. Like all good physicians, he examined his patient from the right.

“Mr. O’Droole, I’d like you to open your eyes, please.” For the first time in his long life, Douglas followed doctor’s orders. Dr. Ali shone a penlight into O’Droole’s pupils. He held up fingers. Douglas counted them correctly.

“Mr. O’Droole, you’ve had a nasty fall. Will you tell me what you remember?”

“Butterflying Hades. The peal of sirens. The buttocks curve of that Samaritan nurse.”

“Why do you have a sword?”

“For luck,” Sunshine interjected.

“We just might need it. We have a decision to make. The scans show you have a subdural hematoma.”

“English please, Doc,” Jack interrupted.

“When you fell and hit your head you suffered a subdural hemorrhage, which formed a hematoma which is a collection of blood accumulating between the skull bone and the brain. This increases pressure. Presently, the bleeding has slowed and is sub-acute. If the bleeding continues the pressure will increase. With your age, your history with alcohol intake, and the seizure before admittance, plus we must take into consideration your dementia, all serious indicators to the outcome. Mr. O’Droole, the outcome as to your morbidity and even mortality are uncertain.” Doctor Ali wiggled his toes inside his black loafers and adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses.

“I do not have dementia,” O’Droole snarled.

“What’s the treatment?” Jack asked.

“Excuse me, are you family?”

“I’m his agent. His oldest friend. How ya gonna fix this, Doc?”

“Mr. O’Droole, we can wait and see what happens. Watch and wait. Monitor. The hematoma may reabsorb and reduce in size. Or we go in, explore and relieve. Evacuate the clot and tie off the bleeder. This surgery is not a trapeze in the park. The risk is high.”

“Give us the odds, Doc. A percentage,” Jack said.

“Explore my brain?” Douglas whispered and faintly chuckled, “Glorious proposal.”

“I must reiterate, the risks are high.” Doctor Ali said.

“Toss a number out, Doc.” Jack clapped his hands together once, rubbed his palms as if making a deal was possible.

“Can be as much as 20% poor income in this case.”

“Sunshine, please go to the car and bring me all the papers from the glove box?”

“Sure.” Sunshine sprinted down the stairs, out the fire exit.

“Doctor Ali, I’ve never been much ‘to wait and see.’ Prefer to grab the proverbial bull’s horns. Regardless to my abhorrence to reversion to cliché, the fucking show must go on. I think you’d better drain me as dry as parchment. Sleep shall neither night or day. Shall he dwindle peak and pine? Kill the pigs, good doctor. Explore and relieve, away! Sirrah!”

“Dougie, are you sure? Why don’t we sleep on it? Give it a few hours?”

“Mr. O’Droole, I think you’ve made a wise choice.

“Jack, thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.”

“I think you’re rushing things, Dougie”

“Always have, always will. Jack you’re a good man and friend. Always have been, always will be. A drum! A drum! Macbeth doth come.” Sunshine returned and set a fat folder on the bed side table. “Doctor, what do you need to proceed?” O’Droole asked.

“There’re forms to sign. Do you have a next of kin? Someone to make your decisions if you lapse into a coma.”

“This lad here. My minion. My counter-jumping sun.” O’Droole pointed the sword weakly in Sunshine’s direction.

“Nurse Roy will be in shortly to prepare you. We’ll operate within the hour.” Through the sheets, Doctor Ali gripped Douglas’ big toe for a millisecond and left

the room. A snowy owl yawned. A sea of blue flag irises bloomed. The province of Quebec sighed. The entire medical profession scratched their heads. Jack's canoe sunk to the bottom of the lake.

"Dougie, I think you are making a rash..." Jack said, too loud for the moment.

"Hold thy tongue. I'll devil-porter no more. Sunshine, give me a quill and the green slip for the Volvo from the folder." Jack gave Douglas his Montblanc fountain pen. A pen that had produced eighty-nine movies. Sunshine gave the ownership form to O'Droole, who autographed with feeble flourish.

"Write your full name in there now, my son. My Volvo is yours. Jack, I want you to witness this, if I don't come out the other side, whatever side that may be, I proclaim Sunshine O'Droole, my sole heir and executor to do what he wills with my land and kingdom and memory."

"Dougie, now is not the time for melodramatic. You had a bump on the head. You'll be fine."

"I'm old, Jack." O'Droole struggled into sitting. He pointed the sword to the ceiling. "No pomp and circumstance. No pageantry. Cremation and a song, song 'The Wild Rover,' scatter my ashes in the Avon. A feast for swans. Megan can stay in the house for as long as she needs. Down a few libations at Harry's. No monologues or soliloquies at the wake. Sonnets are acceptable, accordion and tin whistle, but nothing somber. Not a word of death, only a celebration of life. I want out on my terms. Sunshine, do you hear me?"

“Yes, Douglas.” His voice cracked. He wiped his eyes. Jack sat and put his head in his hands.

“And Sunshine, no religion. Do you hear me? No priest. No friars. No church bells. The devil can cite scripture for his own purpose.”

“Can you follow direction?”

“I can.”

“Here is my journey’s end, here is my butt. And very sea-marked my utmost sail.”

“Dougie, stop this is bullshit. You’re going to fucking pull through.”

“Jack, come here. Upon thy cheek, I lay this zealous kiss, as a seal the indenture of my love.” O’Droole released the sword and put both hands on the side of Jack’s head. He kissed his agent and old friend delicately on the lips. Jack grimaced and pulled away.

“No, Dougie. I’m not saying good-bye. You’re chewing the scenery. You’re pulling a Reagan. Fuck the Gipper. I’ll see you in a couple of hours. I’ll bring you a bottle of Bushmills. You fucking schlemiel.” Jack pinched O’Droole’s cheek, rubbed his bald head, and left the room quickly to hide the tidal flow of emotion rising through his body.

“Excuse-moi, s’il vous plait quitter la chambre.” Nurse Roy said with a Haitian lilt from the door.

“Une seconde, ma belle,” Douglas responded with perfect pronunciation. She left O’Droole and Sunshine alone. “Sunshine, I want you to promise me one thing.”

“Yes?”

“I want you to go to Dhaka and find your biological mother.”

“Pardon.”

“Not for you. For her. Imagine the joy she’ll feel when she sees what a work of a man came from the pain of her horror. You’re gorgeous, strong, open-hearted, a ray of light, a sharp breeze of intellect. Take the journey, my son. I never got to travel when I was young, too busy sucking my own dick. Trying to make a name. The tapeworm got me because I never knew myself. Trust me, go find her, hug her, thank her. Then you can do whatever you want, promise?”

“Yes.”

“Sell the car. Take the money and go. D’accord?”

“If you say so.”

“No. Promise.”

“I promise.”

“You may not understand now, but you will. Now, give me a kiss.” As Sunshine rested his lips on Douglas O’Droole’s forehead, Nurse Roy, an anesthesiologist, and two attendants entered the room with a gurney. They shuffled and busied. Sunshine named the raindrops pelting the window as a distant sun peaked from behind a storm cloud on the bleak horizon. Fuck Quebec’s beauty in late summer he concluded. The threat of a rainbow. The epitome of eternal contradiction faced daily.

“Hey Sunshine,” Douglas called from the gurney rolling out the door, “Do you think they’ll let me take the sword?”

“I hope so.” Their eyes locked. O’Droole threw Sunshine an unrequited grin. O’Droole’s giggles and murmurs faded in the hall as the anesthetic took hold. The final sound was the elevator door closing. Two hours later, on July 1st, 1989, at 11:23pm, Douglas O’Droole, Canada’s finest actor ever, went to perform for his maker.

{ACT V}

Singapore, September 1st, 1989.

Dear Dharma,

Singapore Airlines Rocks! Each seat has a continuous supply of movies and video games. Super hi-tech! As I write, I'm drinking a Tiger beer and feasting on a bowl of fish head soup, the smells and sounds, wow, the market. This is Asia! I'm nervous and excited. Good-bye Western World! So much has and will happen!

I want to thank you for sending all the documents to Montreal. It was easy getting my passport and visa and flight. So many weird emotions were running through my feeble disorganized brain. Also, thank you for understanding my quest. I just want to repeat in writing what I said on the phone. YOU ARE AND WILL ALWAYS BE MY ONE AND ONLY (TRUE!) MOTHER AND I LOVE YOU TO THE END OF THE PLANET! Said. That's all I wanted to say, mom, and I love you. I'll call you when I get settled in Dhaka, maybe even before this arrives.

Kisses and lobsters and love,
Your, Sunshine.

P.S. I still think about Barney. Send me a picture of the grave when you can. XoX.

Dear Hope,
1989

Dhaka, September 26th,

I hope this finds you well, Hope (sorry, bad joke, had to). How are things in Whistler? Any powder? Have you found a job and pad and all? Any new boyfriends? Don't worry, I'm not jealous. Nostalgic, maybe, but you taught me so much and I'm not really into older lovers anyway (sorry, another bad joke).

Things here are crazy. The pollution everywhere. Two-stroke engine smoke going up my nose and into my brain and rotting my thoughts. The initial culture shock has passed and I'm starting to wonder what I'm doing. I've found out so much, like I'm not the only war-baby, in fact, I found an organization that helps mothers and orphans reunite. I visited the orphanage where I lived the first few weeks of my life. The Mennonite mission where Dharma worked closed like 10 years ago. It's a sweat shop now, scarves. I found out my first name was Badal. Couldn't get the last name, but got a village name—Moubadi. So you can call me

Badal Moubadi! (joke, no I'm not smoking, no weed here, too dangerous, more about that later). I'm planning a trip there soon. It's a two day boats journey. But the search for information has not been easy, with the language barrier and no one really wants to talk about the past. Most civil records, actually most everything, was destroyed in the flood two years ago, 2000 people died, over 40% of the country was underwater. I don't know how they do it, reconstruct, recover, recuperate, I'm proud to be from such a resilient blood line. But my head is so damned Western. My genes are Bengali, but my brain is Canadian.

Get this, two days ago, I went to a tourist café, kinda a shitty place and expensive (15cents for soup!!), it's where NGO workers and expats hang out, I went to hear some native English, listen to some rock (they have a old jukebox), maybe make a friend. Anyway, I was sitting down reading Kipling's "Kim" (Have you read it? What a fucking book! Feels like my surreal-bio) and I saw this white woman in a sari drinking tea. I was wearing this traditional Punjabi get-up I bought and I said "Hello, where are you from?" She waved her hand in my face, "Na! Na! Na!" Which translates to get out of my face beggar. She thought I was just another local hassler. Anyway, like two hours later, I entered a used bookshop, they have titles in English, and she was there. I smiled and said hello again and she went off in Bengali, jez, a tirade and I couldn't understand a word of it. I said, "I'm Sunshine, I'm Canadian." She just walked away. The bookseller came over and told me, eventually, in English to stop following women and to stop pretending to not speak Bengali. After the anger passed, I went into the market to shop for food and it was the first time I really felt completely alone in my life. More than hitching, more than Douglas's funeral, more than Monique's death, more than when we said so-long, I feel I'm barricaded against the Bengalis and barricaded against the West. It'll pass, but I'm going through much hurt and confusion.

September 29th

Sorry, I didn't send the letter but there was a Hartal and I couldn't so I'll send them both together. What is a Hartal? I hear your sweet voice asking. A Hartal is a general strike. And what does that mean? I hear your voice rise into Valley Girl! (bah!) Hartal means the city shuts down, no one leaves the house, right now I can hear bombs going off, I'm just beginning to understand the political forces here, but basically inequality and corruption force honest workers and dishonest authority figures into a dead lock and BOOM, there goes another. These are homemade nail bombs. Sometime it sounds like pebbles are being thrown against the window, at first it freaked me out, but my roommates say it happens every month or so and they treat it like we did snow-days. I'm going to curl up with Kim and watch the spiders spin webs. They build fantastic structures everyday, the rain destroys them, then they do it again. Maybe a microcosm for the whole culture? I guess they keep the flies and mosquitos away.

Anyway Hope, miss you and yeah...well. I want to say I'll love you forever, but that feels melodramatic, but you were my first, so I will remember you forever and isn't that almost as good? When I think back to our beautiful nights together, I have no words. I want to thank you but that feels creepy. I just want to share what I'm going through and hope you're well, Hope. (Sorry, did it again.)

Cumbana (kiss) and cucumbers,
Yours, Sunshine.

Dear Dharma,

Dhaka, October

27th, 1989

Do you remember when I was real young and used to ask, "Mommy, why am I brown and you are white?" and you used to explain, pull out that album with the photos and maps, you were so well prepared. You explained it well and well being told I was from Bangladesh was one thing, understanding what this means is another.

I don't know what's going on. I'm shaking as I write this. But two things happened. Two nights ago, I was walking home in the rain from a first meeting with this NGO director. She'd offered me a ride, but I decided to walk, stupid. I'm minding my own business and this rickshaw pulls up, one driver, three kids about my age in the back. They surrounded me and showed me a gun. A pistol. Could have even been a toy for all I know. They laughed in my face and shoved me around and made me strip down to my boxers. I couldn't understand a word they said. Fine, I got mugged, no biggie. I walked home and knocked on my own door and my roommates let me in and gave me hugs. I lost like 60 bucks, my keys, my address book and my passport. I'm fine. Then yesterday, I went to The Canadian Embassy, got in line (massive) waited for like three hours, finally got to the soldier on the door and he didn't speak English. I said "ami Kandiyana" in Bengali, I said a lot of things I'm not proud of, I kicked up a serious stink, what a scene, jez. Eventually, a manager who spoke English came over because I wasn't letting anyone pass and he told me with a big old smile that I needed to go to the police and get a report. Both fuckers wouldn't believe me and that hurt way more than the mugging. I went to the closest police station, guess what? No one could understand me. I went home and cried to my roommate and we went back to the police station. He translated my story and we had to fucking pay for the report, bribe them to do their job. This morning, bright and early I went back to the embassy, waited two hours, the same soldier was working and wouldn't let me in, I was arguing with the manager when a white lady came out the door and I called to her. She came over and I asked her to stay as witness. A citizen

not being allowed in his own embassy. I'm going to fucking press charges. Anyway, she got me in the door to the desk and I filled out the forms, gonna cost like 200 bucks and well in eight weeks I should get a new passport. What really jacks me off more than anything is that no one would believe me. Sorry for the rant, I feel better, and how are you?

The poverty and pollution is really getting to me. I could use one of you hot dinners.

Another tidbit I found out last week, in 1972 during the war, 3 million dies and 250 000 women were raped. Welcome home!

Did you keep a diary when you were here?
I'm feeling pretty confused these day, but I'm okay. Going to Moubadi next week. For Halloween! I think I go disguised as a Bengali! Wish me luck. I love you and miss you.

Your Sun.

PS. I've enclosed some pictures of rugs, numbers on the back. As you know the textile here are mind-blowing. Which one do you like best? Pick one.

Dear Hope,
1989

Moubadi, November 4th,

Yesterday, I didn't meet my mother. Nope, mission unaccomplished. She's dead or doesn't want to meet me or whatever.

Can you imagine 130 million people living in New Brunswick? Well, that's Bangladesh. I'm going bonkers.

Just had some chicken. Delicious! No, I Didn't have to kill it myself. Maybe I'll be able to concentrate now. Ramadan is coming. Getting real cold at night, almost 0. I miss hot water. I got a pager! I shave out of a bucket. Pet spiders. I speak their language. I'm going nuttier than Douglas ever was. I miss us. Catch some powder for me. I am the luckiest and most desperate man in the world.

I'm writing on a boat, hope you can read this, I'm bobbing around.

I trust all is well in The West

Badal

PS. Ever think about coming to visit?

Dear Mom,

November 7th, 1989

Just got back from the orphanage in Moubadi. The sisters and nurses there remember you well, they send their wishes. I did what you told me no to do, I got my hopes up and you were right my birth mother is no where to be found. Records gone. No one wanted to talk about it. Although my hopes were slashed and burned, maybe flooded is a better word, I believe the trip was a success for this one moment:

I was standing on the orphanage roof in the rain. Just before dinner looking over the swamped corrugated roofs watching a family pole down a road, a father, a mother, and like six kids. It was just before dinner and a few of the kids there were playing with me. (I spend three days playing and answering question—the kids had the most magnificent eyes!) And this one girl, maybe four jumps up into my arms, she starts pulling my hair all playfully and babbling away and something, I guess emotion hit me like a freighter. “Why me? Why me? Why me and not her?” I wanted to take me with her, take them all. There’s room and food for all of them in P.E.I.. Then this line came to me, “so much rain for such a small sky,” I don’t know where it came from, maybe something I read a Jack’s Cabin or something Douglas blurted drunk, or maybe it was mine, an original, anyway I started teaching it to the little girl in my arms and repeating it and a rainbow came out over Moubadi and we both started to cry together not really in sadness but together, a real and serious thing. I felt like I had finally dropped my mask and understood and so did the girl. We cried on the roof in the mist watching a rainbow. You chose me. You took me out of that poverty and pollution and I’ll never understand the politics or love behind why me and not her, I know that we are one. You and her and me. Your love, maternal love, I guess my paternal or fraternal love, and action, especially ACTION, is the only force on the planet that can defeat war and rape and corruption and pollution and hate. The gift you gave me, I can give back and that is how death and decay and selfishness is defeated. Well, that’s my two taka (about 24 cents) and I know it know. I know it like I know your hugs, like I knew Douglas’ gruff advice, like the kindness of strangers on a lonely road. I know that love like the pain my poor birth mother endured, like a bird singing on a sunny morning. I’m getting lyrical now, but I also know that the evil in that soldier that spread all that pain is not in me and never will be. Now, I know.

On a lighter note, I applied to The National Theatre School in Montreal for an audition to enter next year. I’m looking for flights and plan to be back in Canada by mid-January. I’m also applying to The American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York (plan B) and maybe McGill or Dalhousie (plan C) perhaps for environmental science, we need to stop polluting this planet! I guess I’ve come to the realization of how little I know and how much I have to learn and education is never-ending, a goal must actively pursue, no use stewing in the conflicts of the past and lying in bed blue all day (which I did for the last two days, but I think it was a break through, plus I’ve got really f-ing bad diarrhea.) and well, I’m coming home. Also, could you ask Pete McGinnis if he’s got any spots on his

lobster boat for the season, I need to amass some cash (and I'm not going back to Phil's shop, no way) but I need to fill the coffers for the next journey, which I pray is Montreal.

Gonna spend the day writing letters and picking monologues and I know I've laid a lot of info on you but in summation, I love you and thank you and big hug from swampy Dhaka.

Love, your Sun, always.

PS. I've named the spider in my room, Barney II. They are the same color after all.

Dear Jack,
1989

Dhaka, December 21st,

Happy Hanukkah and all! I want to thank you for the recommendations letter you sent on my behalf. I'll be in Toronto in four weeks, for the AMDA audition. Can we meet up and have lunch?

I've picked my monologues, Tom from *Glass Menagerie*, "I didn't go to the moon," and *Hamlet* "Now, might I do it pat..."

(Do you think I'm stupid for picking classics? I still have time to change them)

Tell Megan she can stay in the house as long as she wants, just cover the bills, Douglas' last wishes, but she know this, doesn't she? Maybe I'll go and see her if I have time.

Thanks for everything. Can't wait to see you. Keep fit and happy.

Best, Sunshine

O'Droole



Gloria! This is me in 15 years! Be home soon. Take the red-carpet to the dry-cleaners. Put the champagne on ice. I'm getting you a portable disc-man in Singapore, so don't buy one. Cumbana, yr Shiner!!

March 31st, 1990
5030 St Denis, Montreal, Quebec
Canada, H2J 2L8

Dear Sunshine O'Droole,

We regret to inform you that unfortunately you have not been accepted to the National Theatre School class of 1994. Although we were extremely impressed with your audition and callback, there were over 4000 applicants for 8 vacancies. We were also extremely impressed with your letter of purpose. We suggest that you apply again, perhaps after a Bachelor's degree. Please consider this personal letter encouragement and continue to pursue your passion.

Sincerely,

J. Miller,
NTS Director

May 18th,

1990

2109 Broadway, NYC,

10023

Dear Sunshine O'Droole,

Congratulations! We would like to offer you a full tuition scholarship for fall of 1990. Please accept in writing by May 31st. Also, see the attached letter for relevant details. You will be responsible for your living costs and accommodation. Feel free to call during office hours to discuss this offer.

We look forward to speaking with you and hope that you join our academy.

Sincerely,

Philip Burton
President & Artistic Director
800-367-7908