



*Gorden Schweers*

# REASSESSMENT

*Arnold was a superlative hunter...*

# 1

The Invitation was open, stuffed amongst a bundle of overdue bills that Arnold had laid aside and forgotten.

One letter from the *Revenue Bureau* accused him of supplying his government with false tax information. There was not one but several letters from the auditors, each official transcript advising him he had a limited time to reply. First a month; then two weeks; and with the final notice, the review board politely drew his attention to the fact his appeal was in arrears. As of October 1<sup>st</sup> compounding interest charges would be accumulating on his overdue payments.

Arnold had strong misgivings about the origin of the audit. It had nothing to do with *an impartial sampling of tax payers* as described on Page 1 of the *General Tax Guide*. Furthermore, on the same page, the *Guide* stated that the Bureau retained the legal right to investigate each filed return, searching back *a maximum of seven years* for the threads of false information. Each return had to be identified on the upper right corner with its correct social insurance number. With a Christian name (but no number) the government could not trace and then tax the *Arnold Mathew Knoflers* of the nation. In that respect, he could remember living with the assumption that the nine digits tacked on to his name at birth entitled him to universal medical care and the protection of his civil liberties. However a shift was un-

der way. Editorials dissecting newly crafted legislation warned of a transformation in the social metabolism. Arnold was convinced that the affluent society was becoming a meaner tougher place to live and play.

Challenging the audit in the conventional manner would be foolhardy. After considering his options, he was placing all of his bets on a long shot: The Invitation to his School Reunion was his link to the forensic audit. Except that instead of going back a mere seven years, his alumna was flipping the pages of his life back four decades to the time when he and his old nemesis were infatuated with the same young woman.

*Class of '68 Reunion* was printed on embossed white parchment with gold lettering. His name *Arnold Knofler* was stencilled neatly at the top of the invitation. Those responsible for arranging the reunion were intent on personalizing the event. At the very bottom to the left of an email address was *RSVP. Reply as soon as possible*. A mailing date of 19'09'08 was stamped on the outside of the envelope.

Forty years had vanished since he was handed his diploma along with fifty-two other graduates.

## 2

1968: The Chinese *Year of the Monkey*. Sitting in the audit-

orium, wearing caps and gowns that smelled of mothballs, Arnold and his two friends were thoroughly bored by the series of salutations from the teachers and their pet valedictorians. Graduation for them was nothing more than a rite of passage to a drinking binge once all the superfluous speeches were over.

Of the three boys, Gregor Whitfield, was the most careful who he kept as friends. He was interspersing the speeches from the podium with his own sarcastic jibes, passing his whispered remarks across to Tommy Gunnel, a wiry Irish boy on his way to a professional career in boxing. The sports columns described the young Gunnel as “*another Peter Maher*” who could “*throw punches with the persistence of a jack hammer.*”

Arnold was wedged between his two friends. His role was not as another mastiff like Gunnel but as a spaniel who had surrendered his independence of thought and action. Pre-meditated and brazen, Gregor Whitfield ran their clique. Even so, none of the boys should have been allowed to attend the ceremony and graduate. Whitfield surmised the school system didn't have the balls to hold him back another year. His assumption was that *old owl eyes* was too chicken shit to fail him, along with Tommy the Punching Bag and that spineless dunce, Arnie the Sniffer.

In fact once their report cards were on the desk of the school principal, Mr. Rawley held an emergency staff meeting to discuss the situation. All three of the trouble makers

would be repeating Grade 12 and poisoning the school atmosphere for another year. Mr. Rawley had argued with the biology teacher, Hinda Gitsane, regarding his strategy to change the final grades on the boys' cards. She refused to allow the D grades she had given to Knofler and Gunnel to be changed to passing grades of C. She had stormed out of the room, rather than acquiesce. Flustered, Rawley told the others that though this was the toughest decision he was to make as their principal, he had a school to run, the welfare of hundreds of other pupils was at stake. As teaching professionals, they needed to stand by the school's motto *Pro Bono Omnium* (For the Good of All). It was in the best interest of the school if they divested themselves of those three little bastards with this opportunity. As the principal, he carefully falsified all three cards. For Arnold, he wrote – diplomatically:

*It is noted that Mr. Knofler has been absent for 25 school days. We congratulate him on the recovery from his illness.*

For Tommy Gunnel, after changing the boy's four D grades to three Cs and one B, Mr. Rawley searched around for some less than truthful yet tactful comment. He regarded the boy's career choice to be an apt example of the axiom from Thomas Hobbes' pen that life for most was *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short*. But he found it in his heart to write: *We wish our student Thomas Gunnel every success as a professional boxer. Roseville High will follow his inspirational choice of a career with great interest..*

And then came the card and comments for the ringleader – Gregory James Whitfield. Every time Whitfield was on the carpet facing reprimands, he bluffed his remorse. Rawley knew the type. These types of young adults he regarded as dangerous vipers. They were, above all, narcissistic. As born manipulators, they preyed upon dupes like the Knoflers of the school to keep themselves amused. Rawley’s written summary for Whitfield was the hardest of the three, a challenge to his professionalism as an educator. Yet he had no authority to fail the boy on the basis of his opinion. Rather than a diploma the boy deserved prison time in Brandon Lake. Instead Rawley wrote:

*Mr. Whitfield has contributed engaging discussion points on every topic in Roseville for the last several years. Though his marks are not exceptional, his talents lie in organizational matters. We look forward to his career in the field of criminal law.*

### 3

The auditorium was decorated for the graduation ceremony with coils of streamers and hundreds of tinsel balloons filled with helium. The balloons clung to the upper ceiling with strings dangling from their puckered ends. Down on the floor of the auditorium, every student who was to receive a

diploma that evening embraced the myth they would soon be adults and free for the first time in their lives. Each was to be summoned in alphabetical order to the podium where Mr. Rawley handed them their certificates, along with a salient and often humorous observation on their achievements and/or characters. Behind the students, an auditorium of parents and relatives watched the proceedings, applauding each awarded diploma.

After ten students had received their diplomas, the list moved on to those whose last names started with the letter G. Though the boys were at full attention when Patina Fitzpatrick glided across the stage, Gregor whispered to Tommy, “You’re up next, killer” allowing the prize fighter to prepare himself for the walk up the stairs and then across the stage to where Mr. Rawley was waiting with a scroll in his hand. You had to admire the old patriarch; he had a very good memory for his students and their aspirations. When he handed Tommy his diploma, he put his hand on his shoulder and told the assembly, “What we have here is the next Mohamed Ali”. A roar of laughter and applause filled the auditorium. Tommy was of course neither black nor a butterfly in boxing shorts, and to make the whole matter more amusing Tommy had a mop of bright red hair and freckles that left him looking as if he had the measles. The old man was charismatic and living up to everyone’s expectations. Tommy left the stage like a knucklehead, with a big grin on his face.

Fourteen names preceded the call for Arnold to come to

the podium. Instead of applause, Arnold would receive a final put-down from the school system. Handing him his diploma, Mr. Rawley - with eyebrows that grew across his entire face from one eye to the next like a grey hedge - said “*Do you really think you deserve this?*” Instead of cheers, laughter and light applause followed Arnold off of the stage. Disappointed for the last time, Arnold fought the temptation to throw his diploma in to the nearest trash can. His parents hadn’t even bothered to attend the ceremony. When he took his place back with his friends, Gunnel choked with laughter when Whitfield whispered, “Welcome back, *Mr. Failure.*” Finally it was Gregor’s turn to go on to the stage for his diploma. His name with a W made him the last student of the night. Laughter broke out in the auditorium when Gregor pulled off his final prank. Before mounting the stage, he slipped off his patent leather shoes. Holding them high in one hand, he tip toed across to the podium, signalling to the audience with a finger on his lips that they should keep as quiet as possible. Gregor’s intent was to steal the thunder from the old gizzard. He might have succeeded had not Mr. Rawley shouted in to the microphone, “*Educare, educatus: We have apparently inspired this one comedian more than we can scarcely imagine!*” The audience, parents and students, rose to their feet applauding. It wasn’t clear whether the applause was for the entire ceremony or solely for Gregor’s comic performance.

# 4

A chaperoned dance followed the ceremony. Various parties were planned afterwards at the homes of the most popular girls but the three boys were not invited. None of the young women wanted trouble in their parents' homes. So the boys gate crashed several functions before ending up at the Schoolgate party late in the evening. After midnight, they slipped out the back door and stood in a circle in a dark alley. Music from the house stereo increased in decibels each time the back door was opened and closed. Passing a bottle of *Tennessee Lightning* whiskey between them, Gregor insisted they make a pact never to look back with rose colored glasses to their sour times in Roseville and (above all) never again set foot in any god damn institution. Their teachers were clowns, hypocrites. Arnold guzzled down the fire water directly from the bottle while his two blood brothers sang the dirge of Jim Morrison's song *The End: This is the end, beautiful friend, the end / the end of laughter and soft lies...* Twelve years of school were over forever. It was impossible to roll back the stone of time, for the three to admit they preferred *a dozen years of boredom* to the uncertainty of what lay ahead in their next passage. After sucking down the last of the insipid fire, Tommy punched with a right and then a left at the open palm offered by Gregor who chanted, "One, two, three, four / Watch our deadly Tommy score."

Arnold was disorientated. The shapes of the world blurred in his vision. He was on his way to becoming unstable, a drunk falling over his own feet like the outcasts he watched when wandering alone in the slums. For a moment he turned, hearing his father's voice all over again. The flawed report card he had been forced to carry home last week for his parents' signatures was the spark that ignited his father's anger. Arnold, his only child and son, was the target. Smelling of cheap beer and cigarettes, his father seized the opportunity to make an issue of his son's recorded absence from school. His mother had pushed the card over to her husband at the dinner table and indicated the truancy red lettered on the front cover. Yelling at Arnold such that his voice could be heard outside the house on the sidewalk, Knofler Sr. wanted to know where the hell his son had been for the *twenty five days* he had missed school for the year. His father was standing at the dinner table, shouting, "*Just where the hell were you? Didn't I raise you to be better than this?*"

Arnold had looked away, humiliated by his decision to snub the ring of a school bell as if one of Pavlov's dogs. The ash tray in front of his mother was full of wasted butts. She said nothing while her husband directed his rage at the boy. On the floor of the factory, Knofler Sr. was a nobody, passed over year after year for a promotion. But in his house he was the despotic king of the castle. He was shouting that Arnold hadn't been honest with them, "*Your mother and I have giv-*

*en you every opportunity to make something of yourself! Just look at this!*” he said, shaking the report card in his face. “*Are you such a big shot you don’t have to be in school? Where were you? Where the hell were you?*” Arnold said in his own defence, “I passed any ways.” But his father shouted back, “*Not if I would have had anything to say about it.*”

But the issue of truancy was of small consequence. Knofler Sr. needed only the slightest excuse to throw his son up against a wall – or out of the house once and for all. Infuriated by the repercussions of his own vices, he savoured the animosity handed to him by his son’s lame performance. With the reprimand over, Arnold took his windbreaker off the hook and left the house for a long walk. As far as he was concerned, the school system had betrayed him since the First Grade. On that first day, he had walked in to the class room and sat down at a desk only to be reprimanded that “those desks” were on the girl’s side of the room. “*Unless you want to be a girl?*” Miss Freon had said, so that the whole class laughed at him.

Twelve years later they were still laughing at his expense. It was written right down on his report card along with the absence tally: A hand written comment by his Industrial Arts teacher to the effect that *Arnold does not apply himself*. The boy felt doubly slighted since woodworking was his only enjoyable class.

However, three weeks was a long time to spend wander-

ing around the down town streets where the cheap hotels and pawn shops encircled the edges of the business district with its glass elevators and valet parking. At 17, Arnold was bewildered by the amount of crime he was witnessing on the daytime streets at the intersection of Main and Hastings. Those most destitute were at the mercy of drug pushers and the police. All day long, a river of traffic raced through the East End. On their way to corporate offices, the captains of industry saw nothing outside the tinted windows of their Lincoln Continentals. Even the independent newspapers were unwilling to admit there was a crisis in the core of the city. It was left to a few sociologists in academic journals to discuss the virus of greed that was infecting all aspects of the civilized world. From their perspective, the plague on the streets was a product of the New World Order, a jungle where sociopaths did exceptional well for themselves. It would take Arnold forty years (coinciding with the *Derivatives Scandal* and the 2008 Stock Market Crash) before he was convinced he had the right to challenge that impropriety.

## 5

T.S. Eliot remarked famously that *April was the cruellest month*. For many of the graduates, that month was June. In the eyes of the world, the students were now young men and

women. Unemployment for many was a legacy. Arnold Knofler had no ambitions ahead of himself and no shining path to a secure future in a family run business. Yet for a few of the graduates, the opportunities for recognition and careers were unlimited. In the same graduating class, Patina Fitzpatrick had been a protégé from childhood, first in ballet and then in contemporary and jazz dance. Just before graduation, her academy had been approached by one of the entertainment syndicates serving the troops overseas. Word passed around the school that she was scheduled to leave a week after her eighteenth birthday in July, dancing to live bands on platforms raised above tens of thousands of young Americans drafted to engage in a war in Southeast Asia.

*On the airport tarmac, waiting with a few of the other young women from the academy, Patina had turned and told her mother, a month after graduation: I've missed my last period.*

## 6

Arnold had just turned 58. Both of his parents had passed away. His son and daughter refused to have anything to do with him. Ironically the invitation to the school reunion was his only connection to the past and to the future. Patina's illegitimate son, Aaron Fitzpatrick, had turned 39 last Febru-

ary and from what Arnold had been told, he was unemployed and down on his luck. So too, for that matter, was Arnold. In 1994, he had returned to the city after working underground at *Excalibur*, the famous gold mine. Buying a small unit of apartments in the east side, only a few miles from his old school, Arnold had quietly continued with his photography and woodworking hobbies, living off the rent of his tenants. One of England's bards wrote that *Life is what happens to you when you are making other plans*: Arnold wasn't intending on other plans when Betty Lynn announced her intention to sue for a divorce. Against his expectations, Arnold was forced back in to the labour market at 55.

The sudden change might have brought him down with a heart attack but instead it turned into a strange benediction. Waiting in line in *Manpower*, he could only guess what Betty Lynn had told his friends and enemies about his private affairs and secrets. It would only have been a guess on her part since he had kept his mouth shut.

Given the service of an agent with *Manpower*, he refused several jobs before choosing to be retrained as a city bus driver. It was another long shot. He was put on the worst route in the city but it was his homecoming. Even if *Lady Luck* had tossed him a poor hand, Knofler was surprised to be back amongst the people and streets he had wandered through on those weeks he was absent from Roseville. Only now he was sitting behind the wheel of a bus packed with rush hour passengers.

The windshield was his giant time glass that someone had forgotten to invert. Maneuvering the bus from one red light to the next, Knofler as a city employee bore witness to the hapless migration of the human race. Nothing had changed. Perhaps it was even worse than he remembered. The wealthiest were chauffeured in their limousines past addicts who were loitering between soup kitchens and homeless shelters. A few young women as beautiful as Patina passed in sleek cars, their *Lady Clairol* swaths of hair splayed across their shoulders. Through the exhaust and concrete, the bus route crawled through the downtown congestion, slowly finding its way clear of rush hour.

After two years behind the wheel, on his last stop at a red light before the city limits became working class residential, his bus eased itself to the edge of double lines at an intersection. Knofler was on his throne, his foot lightly touching the brake pedal, waiting for the traffic light to change. As if in slow motion, he saw instead his old school champion, Tommy Gunnel, walk in front of the bus. The vanquished warrior was blind to the fact he was being appraised, limping slowly past the prism of the bus window while at the same moment living a transparent life. Repeated blows to his face had broken the fighter's nose and, when he turned his face away, his ear had been flattened, disfigured to the shape of a question mark. Knofler recognized his old friend by his hispid red hair and rusty beard. But his athletic stance had fallen in to disuse, the legacy of alcohol abuse.

*Well, thought Knofler not without some pity, my own fate has not been so unkind – at least not this far. Then the light turned to green and Knofler began to be haunted by his conscience all over again:*

*At seventeen, Patina danced with superb co-ordination, tossing her swath of blond hair around as if on fire. Twirling like some goddess of antiquity, that image remained with him whether he was pushing drills down the face of a rock fissure, driving bus at rush hour, or holding a deep breath with the feathered vanes of a hunting arrow pressed to the side of his face.*

*Everything, he reassured himself, will be settled in a few weeks.*

## 7

After another afternoon shift, Arnold went back to his apartment and rummaged through the letter stack, though doubting *The Invitation* was still there. His initial response to the *RSVP* was a non-committal enquiry. The woman on the receiving side of his email asked if he intended to attend the reunion on December 5<sup>th</sup> (Friday night) and December 6<sup>th</sup>, signing her correspondence as *Yours Truly - Kate Sumato*. She and the others making the arrangements needed to know how many of the '68 *Class* were willing to attend.

The reunion, she informed Arnold, was divided in to two parts. The first night the students would meet together without their spouses; the second night a dinner & dance was planned in the same Roseville auditorium. *Do you intend to participate? Will you be coming with your partner on the second night? How many people should we anticipate? PS. The cost of the dinner is \$65 per person. Please make your cheque payable in advance to the address given at the bottom of your invitation. Yours Truly – Kate Sumato.*

Arnold could not remember a student named *Sumato* in any of his classes. This woman talked as if she respected him and wanted to meet again. He was suspicious, unable to decipher the motive behind her questions. Could he afford to get involved in a new relationship? But he came home from driving the next evening and forwarded another email to her Inbox. *Betty Lynn and I divorced a decade ago, he wrote candidly. Does it matter that I will be alone on the second night? Which of my classes were you in? Your name doesn't ring a bell. Yours respectfully – Arnold M. Knofler.*

The mysterious lady had not replied in several days. Arnold waited impatiently, leaving his computer running until late at night, checking his Inbox the first and last thing each day. After the second day, he searched the web. A series of impossible connections came up with her last name which translated to mean *stylish* in English. However his '68 year book was still in storage with his boxes of old books. After searching for an hour, he found the blue leather-bound cov-

ers buried in amongst other binders. *Why*, he castigated himself, *do I hold on to these old albums?*

Betty Lynn and their grown children, Pam and Luke, were openly hostile and wanted nothing to do with him or their family past. First his marriage - and then his filial ties - dissolved when he refused in court to be crippled with support payments. Yet, rummaging around the basement storage locker, he was still holding on to all of their photographs as if *nothing* had changed. *Everything* has changed. He crawled out of the cramped room, carrying the year book in one hand and the flash light in the other. The locker was unheated, the concrete walls cracked and damp. The small plywood box containing his *Rainy Day Fund* was tucked away safely in one corner.

In his kitchen, his hands were sweating as he opened up the *Roseville Year Book – 1968*. Patina's graduation pictures would be in the same book. With the invitation, his infatuation was burning all over again. Sitting alone with a tumbler of whiskey, he admitted there wasn't a moment's difference between himself and the derelict boxer he had seen staggering across the street a week earlier. At the table, under a single 60 watt bulb, Arnold flipped through the stained pages. Her Caucasian features and long hair would appear many times on the glossy pages as a photogenic young woman. When he did locate her picture, Arnold got up and poured his tumbler down the sink. He could never forget the night of their graduation. He was thoroughly intoxicated

when Patina had approached him at the Schoolgate party, handing him the orchid of her affection on a silver platter.

Flipping through all of the student's names, pictures and biographies, as he had surmised no *Sumato* existed. The request was for \$65 *in advance*. This smelled like those requests on the internet for an advance deposit: *Arnold M. Knofler! You've just won \$1,000,000. Please submit your credit card number as soon as possible so this transaction can be completed from the Bank of Mogadishu.*

Without waiting for a reply, he curtly informed Ms. Sumato that he could not find her name listed in the old year book. *Can you explain further?* Within the hour, this Kate person replied. Her maiden name was Kathy Huntley and she had been with him in Mr. Cheval's French class. She had married a Japanese surgeon and lived in Japan for twenty-three years, taking her husband's name Sumato as her own. They had raised an adopted girl in the resort town of Beppu but when her husband died, she had returned to Vancouver. She proudly wrote that she had two grandchildren in Japan. But was he going to attend? Could she count on his attendance? Already the committee had forty positive responses.

Before replying, Arnold flipped back through the year book. Above the school picture of Kathy Huntley was a photograph of Patina Fitzpatrick. Arnold reacted when he saw that face again, as if the expression in her eyes was still alive. He was more determined than ever to go through with his plan. Emailing his affirmative response to Kate Sumato

(nee Huntley) Arnold wrote, *Yes!* He'd be attending both the first gathering and then (alone) the dinner & dance. He imagined himself dancing with all of the young women from back in 1968 when he was too inhibited to ask girls like Patina and Kathy Huntley to dance at school functions. After mailing off his payment for \$65, Kate Sumato responded with – *We'll see you there!*

## 8

With the decision final, Knofler went on a strict diet, hoping he could slim down to the weight he had once carried when he quit working in the mine. One night a week, he took dancing lessons with the Murray Studios where he watched mirrors reflecting images of a portly man with little musical co-ordination.

During the same two months, the *Reunion Committee (RC)* kept a list of anonymous recipients informed by emails of the preparations. For the first night on December 5<sup>th</sup> a slide show was planned. *Please send us updated photos of your experiences, triumphs, family, travels, or anything of consequence. We will match these up with your year book photographs.* Also the Committee requested that each graduate please submit *a short bio* of their experiences during the last forty years. *What have you been doing with yourself*

*once our wonderful Principal (the late) Mr. Albert Rawley handed you your diploma? Please tell us all in less than 500 words. We'd love to catch up with you and your successes and accomplishments. What special memories can you share of your years at Roseville High? Richard Leech – can you remember the valedictorian speech you gave us all in '68? Can we have a repeat? Yes it would be great to hear it all over again! What do you say, Richard? Yours – RC / Roseville.*

*Special Memories?* Arnold drove his assigned bus route, wondering why the bridge across the last forty years had collapsed, leaving a black hole in its place. His years of working underground with *Excalibur* had forced him to forfeit a credible narrative. He had to decide. Was he half archer/half horse (a Sagittarius at birth) – or another Isaac in a lion pit? Only the reunion could supply that answer. Yet the mental uncertainty left him making mistakes at work. His passengers on the bus route drew his attention to his errors, some of them in angry tempers. His mind was no longer on the consecutive steps of his bus route. Rather it was flipping through the images and situations of the past, his thoughts pacing back and forth in a small enclosure.

The bus company continued putting him behind the steering wheel for long shifts. The weekend crowds were the worst. The last run at midnight was crammed with offensive drunks. Coming out of semi-retirement, he was now solely responsible for hauling freight loads of people crammed in

shoulder to shoulder safely to their next destination.

His father had been dead for a dozen years and yet he could still hear him shouting, *Where the hell was Mr. Failure? Where were you?*

One mistake, touching the brakes too hard, and Arnold would be held responsible. Still the question lingered: What *Special Memories* did he have? His list of personal achievements came off sounding like failures. His biggest regret was the night he let Patina slip through his fingers like quick silver.

## 9

After they had sucked down the last drops of *the Tennessee Lightning*, Knofler and his two friends had gone back in to the dance, down in to the den with its low ceiling. Music was amplified from all sides of the room. The grads at the party were throwing themselves around in wild gyrations, keeping time to the electronics of The Cream, Hendrix, and The Who. A few of the young women wore party masks. Arnold fell in to arms of an old sofa, unable to move as the room spun in circles and the mad crowd danced like those left behind by Moses. With no warning, Patina slipped on to his lap. Her buttocks pressed down lightly on his legs. Leaning against him with the smell of mountain flowers, she

teased him by scratching the top of his head with her sharp nails.

“You’ve been drinking again,” she complained. “I asked you not to drink!”

“I can't stand hit,” he heard himself say in response.

She drew a few strands of her hair across his face, smiling down at him, such as Judith would have done with Holofernes.

“Does Mr. Knofler love me?” she teased in a falsetto voice.

Surprisingly, with no warning, he heard himself say: “It’s more zan luv. When I zee you daunce, it’s like you’ve just for me, no vun zelse.”

“But that is love,” she said, smiling at him. As in a dream, she added : “That was so unkind of Mr. Rawley to say that to you, right in front of the whole assembly!”

“I hate 'im,” he confessed.

“Please don’t, Arnold. Lots of men stare at me but you’re the only one with such intensity in your eyes. It’s wonderful.” She slid off of his lap and stood near him, holding his hand in hers, begging him to get up and dance with her. But the Tennessee moonshine pushed him back down with both its hands. Gregor Whitfield moved beside Patina, pawing her lower back. He looked down at Arnold and said in contempt:

“You’re drunk, boy!”

“Vy aren’t vu?” Arnold slurred, unable to deal with the fact he had been duped in to getting intoxicated. Blood

brother Gregor was sober and agile.

“Let’s dance,” Gregor insisted, knowing Patina lived to dance. A second later, the two of them slipped in to the flow of the music, moving with a beautiful rhythm, male and female, across the room between the other dancers. Patina leapt like a flamingo through the notes and tempo of the songs. Once she managed to look back at Arnold but he was so drunk her head divided in to several faces. Gregor flipped her around, spinning her in a circle. She raised her small feet in a fast rhythm, a trained artist responding to the organic surge of music flooding like water over rock. Soon, the couple was obscured by the other dancers. Arnold was distracted.

In another part of the room, an intoxicated Tommy Gunnel was involved in a fight with several strangers. His lethal threats were useless, a fighter whose hair had been shaved not by Delilah but by a friend called Whitfield with a bottle of whiskey. Schoolgate’s older brother had seen Tommy steal some cutlery from the food table, slipping it in to his pocket. They used the theft as a pretext to assault the intruder. Assisted by several others, the brother put Tommy in a headlock, and was dragging him out of the room, pursued by several others. Arnold tried to get up and defend his friend but the commands to his legs and arms were ignored. Tommy’s voice could be heard screaming threats behind the music. In a few minutes, the fighters returned to the room, laughing amongst themselves.

Arnold was powerless. He wanted to appeal to their camaraderie as students. They had agreed: *Blood brothers protect one another*. In amongst the masked dancers, Arnold glimpsed Gregor moving in a circle around Patina, dancing on the other side of the room with his hands flaying the air. The sofa held Arnold in its tight grip. It was obvious - for the first time - there was no such thing as loyalty after graduation. The last few years at school had been a convenient excuse. Their General, Gregor Whitfield, didn't give a damn what happened to his old foot soldiers, discarding them like so much fodder. As for Tommy, his real career had commenced. His diploma was not in math or history but in losing fights.

The party was over, the dancers vanished. The air in the rumpus room was stale. Instead of standing on his feet Arnold was sprawled on the floor. He vaguely remembered animals on hind legs dancing madly around him. Dozens of masked deities had been leaping over him, staring down in mock concern. Someone had tossed him a blanket. The room was empty, the grey light of dawn framing the windows. Arnold's headache was a cylinder being beaten by a pipe. The vomit he had spilled on himself had congealed.

Pieces of the last 24 hours slowly came back together. He was convinced Patina was responsible for giving him the blanket and heard her voice whisper from the previous evening. He listened more carefully. Her lilting voice was drifting through an open door in the room adjacent the party room.

Now Gregor's voice overlay Patina's, his conversation inaudible and yet firm. *They've been together the entire night.* Arnold crawled back in to the sofa and listened to the disembodied voices. Patina breathed rapidly several times, followed by a soft cry. *It's over. That bastard has gotten what he wanted more than anything else!* Arnold crawled out of the room to the sunshine and the taste of a summer morning. He'd be sick again on the walk back home.

## 10

After driving city bus all day, Arnold found the Year Book laying open on the kitchen table, pushed aside by other demands on his time. After a dinner of leftovers from his fridge, he returned to the book and its memories, first only once or twice and then in an obsessive manner. He had located Patina's picture and the write-up that was next to it, as a graduating student. The Grad Book read:

*Patina is one of those special gals who will do very well for herself. As we all know, she can dance circles around Amalia Aguilar and will one day become famous, either as an actress or a brain surgeon. Her plans in the future include dancing tours in exotic countries like Vietnam and marrying a rich Italian count. We wish her well in all her dreams and goals.*

After forty years, Arnold read each comment with the bitter taste of hindsight.

First, there was *Her Dancing*. And next, *The Tour to Vietnam*. And the part about, *her dreams and plans!* Arnold's memory was in prison, sitting alone in his tiny two room apartment: *Why didn't the fools tell the truth! Wasn't it bloody well obvious back then or was he the only one forced to accept the truth?*

## 11

*HER DANCING:* There was the night forty two years earlier when they had watched Patina perform in front of an auditorium of parents. Once a year, some of the students of Roseville volunteered to become the entertainers on Talent Night. Gregor had showed up outside the school with a package of Export A. The three boys lined up in the dark, choking as they tried to inhale for the first time. The ember of the cigarette floated around like a firefly as they passed it amongst themselves. Overhead, a halo of light circled the street lamps in the grey drizzle. The wet roofs of a hundred cars parked in the soccer field resembled the backs of an army of beetles. Tommy choked, saying:

“I shouldn't smoke this shit. It ruins my wind.”

Exhaling on pursed lips, Gregor floated out a ring of

smoke. He tossed out a comment for the others:

“Looks like ‘Sammy the Magic Sax Man’ will be playing again this year.”

The two others laughed. Sammy Burnstein’s amateur performance was always a good source of amusement. Tommy said:

“We should boo that pussy off the stage before he even gets on!”

“You heard what Mr. Leer said at the rally last week: Students on the bleachers: Chairs for parents and invited guests. Anyone caught making a disturbance gets their asses kicked.”

“What’s wrong with that? They’d suspend me for a week and I could spend the time at the gym!”

His friends exchanged a glance that confirmed their estimation of Tommy’s intelligence.

Gregor did the thinking for each of them:

“Best behave tonight. Patina with the nice legs might show up later in the evening,” he said. “What do you think, *Mathew Arnold*? Is it worth hanging around to watch her toss her derrière around on stage?”

“No,” replied Arnold. The hot smoke caught him in his throat and he choked.

Gregor twisted off the end of the cigarette, putting the stub in his jacket. “Let’s go in, before all the seats are taken up.”

Once inside the hallway, the boys stood in a line up of

people who were filing in the open doors of the auditorium. Many of the parents talked amongst themselves and addressed the teachers as old friends, the guardians of their children's academic aspirations. Past open double doors, the gymnasium had been transformed in to a theatre. Rows of metal chairs had been placed in two sections facing the elevated platform of the stage where the curtains were drawn. Gym bleachers rose in a dozen tiers on the wall of the auditorium opposite the stage. At the entrance, stacks of programs printed with *Roseville Talent Night '66* were being handed out by the school jocks. Standing on either side of the doorway, they wore their sweaters with the school crest **RH** embossed on one pocket in large bright letters as their badges of achievement.

“Hey Gregor,” said one of the jocks at the door, “Good to see you. Still washing dishes for a living?”

Gregor snubbed the program that had been offered to him.

“The poor boy's had his feelings hurt,” called the other senior who was handing out programs from the opposite side of the doorway. Behind Gregor, Tommy stepped forward in his leather jacket, intending to drift the athlete in the face. But a teacher intervened and Gregor cautioned:

“Cool it.”

Once they were far enough away from the doorway, Gregor gave new instructions to his body guard and enforcer:

“Nail that bugger later, okay!”

“Sure thing,” agreed Tommy, whose fists were trained weapons. He’d watch for his opportunity to catch up with the other boy off of the school grounds.

“Let’s get up to the top bleacher,” said Gregor. They’d be far enough away from the teachers if Tommy really did start cat calls, calling attention to themselves as with many times before at assembly.

“Guys, I got a program,” said Arnold. They sat back on the bleachers, side by side, observing the flow of students and adults in to the auditorium. Arnold scanned the throng, looking for a glimpse of Patina with her slim body and firm back.

“Whoa, look at this one,” said Tommy, reading the schedule for the evening of amateur entertainment. He pointed halfway down the front page:

“You won’t believe this: it says Fitzpatrick is going to do a number called “Dance of the Fairy!”

Gregor took great pleasure in seeing the confused expression in Arnold’s eyes. Every time Patina was mentioned, his lovesick friend had a reaction that was similar to getting tragic news after opening up a telegram. It was obvious *Arnold the Knot Head* had lost the battle with his puppy love for the blonde *Monroe*. As far as Whitfield was concerned, the Knoflers of the world were pathetic losers. Whenever Patina gave a speech in class, boys like Knofler thought her voice was *beautiful*. And when she danced, even at the school

functions, Arnold acted as if he was under a hypnotic spell. Gregor shared nothing of that depth of passion. Instead, he was as cool and premeditated as a fox in a fable. Intent on torturing *Romeo* as much as he could, Gregor said:

“This should be something else. I saw our little protégé dancing at *The Kulani* a few weeks ago.”

“What, washing dishes?” laughed Tommy.

“Don’t get smart, eh,” Gregor cautioned. “Sure I was washing dishes but that doesn’t mean we don’t hear what’s going on in the main banquet hall. News travels fast in a kitchen.”

The other boys listened patiently, watching the crowds pass but wanting to hear more of his account. Gregor could exaggerate as much as he wanted.

“Well, the head chef, Jerry Lindale, comes in to the kitchen and tells the second chef, ‘You won’t believe the little numbers that are the floor show now. They’d make Lazarus get back up again.’ Us guys pushing racks of dirty dishes through that undersized car washer took notice - like right away! Some crazy things could take place after the banquets were over and the floor cleared for the orchestra. So we stuffed the machine full with a few racks, and went out in to the hallway to see for ourselves.”

“Ah, that’s crap and you know it. They’d never let staff-in-hair-nets out to watch what was going on in a banquet hall!”

“You’re right, killer boy. We went to the door that opened

to the hall alcove. It's a tiny room with controls for the chandeliers and the PA system. There's a one way mirror on one wall, so we can look in but they can't see us. So – we see Patina and the other girl, Rita, from the academy doing this hula number on each side of the banquet room. They were in grass skirts, bare feet, and not much else.”

Gregor smirked, smug with his lust, as if still watching Patina dancing in front of hundreds of intoxicated strangers.

“What for?” asked Arnold.

“What do you mean, what for? Are you stupid or what? For money! The bar had been open for two hours already, and in walk two babes in grass skirts to dance in front of everyone! Patina and Rita were there in bare feet, moving their hands in those gestures that the hula girls use to tell a story about their virginity and what-have-you,” Gregor leered. He continued:

“So Patina is out there, throwing her hips around and dancing in circles. What-a-performance! But the men in the back can't get a good enough eye full. You know what they do? They climbed on the clean tables and stared down at her.” Gregor finished by laughing at the fascination of voyeurs who allow themselves to be enslaved by their own vice.

“I guess it pays to wash dishes once in awhile,” said Arnold.

Gregor grinned back, impervious to his contempt. Washing pots and pushing racks of dirty dishes through a machine

of hot steaming water was hard work. But money gives people status and power. On the other hand, a sleight from a creep like Knofler was not forgivable. It might take him a week or a lifetime but Gregor would ensure he got even.

The lights dimmed in the auditorium. The emcee took the stage in a disc of light where the long curtains came together. He greeted the guests in the auditorium as old friends and assured them that the talent of the Roseville students would provide them with an unforgettable evening. Then the curtains were drawn aside and the school choir under the direction of the Maria Latino sang several moving songs. One was Stevie Wonder's popular AM radio song, *Sunny*, done in a capella harmonies with the girls taking one part, and the boys the next; then the entire choir singing the polyphonic chorus together. Once finished, the parents gave them an ovation and called for an encore! Next, Sammy Burnstein waddled on to centre stage with his saxophone. Since his last performance, he had heard John Coltrane playing wild off-tune keys, and now Sammy tried to imitate his great idol. It went badly for him however, appearing as if he was off key and out of breath by his own lack of skill as a musician. Tommy sat in the bleachers, tossing his head back in silent laughter. Gregor plugged his ears with both fingers. Arnold pushed his head between his legs, shaking with laughter. From the bottom of the bleachers, Mr. Baker approached the three students. Before he had a second foot on the bottom step, they resumed being passive and respectful. The audi-

ence applauded politely when the performance ended.

Finally the curtain opened on Patina's dancing routine. The stage was flooded with overhead pools of lavender and green lights, followed by a burst of red. Two small girls from the academy took places on each side of the stage, waving streamers in either hand that changed colour with the change in light from the lamps. Shafts of colour flowed out towards the assembly as the music of Debussy drifted like an innuendo across the auditorium. Gregor whispered sarcastically, "That was great," even before Patina had made an appearance. From the wings, an arthropod crawled in to the centre stage, covered in a green shell back. The larva humped its shoulders and spine, crawling to where the light blended back from crimson to chartreuse. The shape took the centre of the stage and slowly, casting off her carapace, a young woman's body emerged in a body suit. Standing to her full height, Patina tossed her hair free with a twist of her neck, raising herself up from the floor on the end of her toes with the poise of a ballerina. Spontaneous applause and whistles came from the adults when she tossed one of her legs high in the air, doing her most renowned movement. Now on her toes, she turned gracefully in a circle and with the end of her foot, tossed the cocoon aside: she was unabashed, an athlete revelling in the strength and purity of the metamorphosis. The overhead lights flowed over the stage and filled the dark auditorium like the refraction of light from the surface of a tropical lagoon. At the same moment an assembly of other

dancers took their places as sun flowers surrounding the stage. In a few entrancing seconds, wings opened from under the Patina's arms. Facing the audience, she raised her arms slowly, at the same moment spreading wings of gossamer from her hips to her wrists. Her costume of sequins captured the colours of the rainbow. Spontaneous applause rippled through the audience. To the call of trumpets, she leapt and whirled across the stage, her arms thrown out from her body, mimicking the momentum of flight. Attracted to each sleeping flower head, acting now as a fairy queen, she awakened each flower upon contact with their pollinator. Patina whirled to the next flower; and then the next. Soon the stage was saturated in blue waves of light. The sun flowers did an ecstatic dance across the back of the stage before joining up in a chorus, twisting their torsos and petals in unison to the stampede of musical notes. Though just amateur school girls, in the swirls of coloured lights they were able to present themselves as the amazons on the earth. The curtains pulled slowly over the stage. The audience was on its feet, whistling and shouting its approval and admiration of the illusion. Bravo! they called, Bravo! From the bleachers, the chant went up – Patina! Patina! Patina!

Her performance was outstanding. Just when she was struggling to free herself from the cocoon at first, Gregor had whispered to Arnold, “Why doesn't she just take it all off!” Looking at the stage, Arnold surrendered to the vulgar impulse to see his *Juliet* naked on the stage. In the next in-

stant he despised the suggestion. His love for the poise of his classmate had taken gentle hold of him in the lower grades, its growth as gradual and organic as the arrival of spring. Gregor noticed the changes in his classmate and reached out to subvert and crush those changes.

The audience was stunned by her performance. Patina's dexterity from years of training was flawless. She might just as well have walked across the stage, composed and uncompromising, and still she would have received acclaim from the men and boys in the audience. Instead, she trained and danced, focusing all of her energy towards the synergy of the natural world. Before she was done, Gregor whispered to the two others once again, "Take it off! Take it all off!"

Arnold was quiet but furious. His friend Gregor was cold blooded. Everything he touched was reduced to vulgarity and conflict. In their gym class, their instructor had been reprimanded by Mr. Rawley for assaulting one of the students. Arnold remembered the excuse the gym teacher used, that *Competition is the essence of life*. The statement meant that the aesthetics of beauty and art were an inconvenience and deserving of ridicule. Tough guys ruled a tough world by force. Arnold was about to end his servility to the group by getting up and leaving but the audience stifled his reaction with an ovation. In any case Gregor would never have allowed a geek kid like Arnold to pull away from their unholy trinity without a fight. He'd put the other boy Tommy to use for that purpose if necessary. Arnold let his frustration

subside. The moment would have to wait – or more likely might never arrive. On all sides, the audience shouted *Bravo!* That was beautiful. *Bravo!* Next to him, Tommy had placed his two fingers between his lips and was whistling in a high pitch.

## 12

*Dancing tours in exotic countries like Vietnam.* By the time Patina's dancing company was approached for female entertainers to be attached to venues like *The Robert Espirit Show*, the war in Vietnam was in serious trouble. Troup strength had been increased by the request from General Westmoreland from 200,000 to 500,000 draftees:

*Westmoreland's speech on April 28<sup>th</sup> 1967 to Congress was interrupted by 19 standing ovations. He advocated an increase in the number of troops and the bombing of North Vietnam on a daily basis in order to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion. One in every ten of the young Americans drafted would be killed in the resulting catastrophe.*

Patina's company in Vancouver was suggested as a source of dancers. Young Canadian women were known to be less politically astute and less likely to express critical opinions to the media on their return from Saigon. The dancing company approached their students and received a

bundle of applications, including one from Patina who turned 18 on July 10<sup>th</sup> of the same year. She was the most obvious candidate but the company had the choice of a dozen young dancing students. The tour was to last for two weeks. Transportation was on military aircraft flying from San Diego. Flights from Vancouver to San Diego were pre-paid for all of the young dancers. At the boarding gate, her mother had said, “Just dance as well as you can and we’ll deal with the changes when and if they come about.” Patina had nodded and with tears in her eyes, said goodbye to her parents. With the door to the jet sealed, the aircraft lifted its tapered nose off the tarmac on schedule. The passengers watched out of the windows as the city with its grid work of streets came in view through the tilted port holes; and then they were in the clouds, racing towards the southern part of California. Patina was so overwhelmed with excitement that she told the stewardess that she was on her way to dance in Vietnam. The woman looked at her and said, “Delightful”:

*Daniel Ellsberg had released the confidential Pentagon Papers in 1966. The papers detailed the truth behind the war in Vietnam. As a nation, Vietnam had been fighting to assert its independence for at least 1000 years. The tiny country tapering along the China Sea had fought to establish its freedom from China to the north; and more recently from their French imperialists from 1850 to 1954. After the decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu, the French sued for peace*

*with the Geneva Agreement. Vietnam was assured of a free election and a united country by the terms of the peace agreement. America had bankrolled the French but was not a party to the war and therefore had no hand in the final treaty. Dissatisfied by the terms, unwilling to allow the establishment of a country under the unified leadership of Ho Chi Minh, they took the position that the treaty had called for the separation of Vietnam into a north and south division (much like Korea). Francis Cardinal Spellman, of the archdiocese in New York, came in contact with a Catholic from Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem. Speaking from a pulpit with enormous power, he called on his government to wage Christ's war against the Vietcong and the people of North Vietnam. In expounding his patriotism, he was called "the Bob Hope of the Clergy" in America. He used his power in the Catholic Church in the same way as the grand inquisitor Dominican Tomas de Torquemada had been instrumental in the Spanish Inquisition of 1483.*

*The US government installed Cardinal Spellman's friend Ngo Dinh Diem as the de facto ruler of South Vietnam. Only a tiny percentage of the country was Catholic from the colonial days of the French occupation. Diem used the power invested in him from US patronage to disrupt and attack the Buddhist majority. The politics of the nation were slipping into a state of chaos under US intervention.*

Upon arrival in San Diego, Patina and the three others who

had also signed contracts were billeted with specially chosen families with ties to the military. Their homes were lavish and they drove sleek cars with air conditioning and power steering. Patina's host and hostess told her at dinner, "We have to defeat those communists in Vietnam or they will be over here fighting us in Los Angeles and Chicago." Patina looked around their home and wondered how it was possible that people with so much wealth could be usurped by a handful of peasants labouring in rice paddies.

*The Pentagon Papers revealed that Ho Chi Minh was a pragmatic nationalist. He had done everything possible to avoid the wholesale destruction of his country by the unbridled facets of the US war machine, but was deliberately frustrated at every negotiation with Diem and the US military. The Pentagon was convinced of its infallible power and had no need to listen to reason or compromise. They would defeat the Viet Minh (South Vietnam) and the Viet Cong (North Vietnam) where the French had failed. Falsifying the historical facts to the American people, US military required only one excuse for destroying the tiny nation. They were defeating the spread of communism. It was accepted by many levels of Americans that before they failed in their war with the Vietnamese people, they would simply 'nuke' the entire nation off the face of the earth. The Viet Cong could not win under these conditions.*

Once in the air, on a huge military transport, the girls were thrilled to be a part of the entertainers heading over to Saigon. After takeoff, the huge transport wheeled in the air higher and higher above San Diego to gain altitude. Patina stared out of the window, perplexed at the sight beneath the aircraft. Some type of a city was spreading like a grey disease across a flat valley. She looked across to one of the veterans of the flight and was told, "That's Tijuana you're looking at." As soon as the plane levelled off at 35,000 feet, the entire entertainment company began to practice. Patina and her friends were given headsets with the music they would dance to on stage recorded on cassettes. Routines were set up to accompany the music and the girls were encouraged to dance in unison to some degree, even though they were to dance on opposite sides of the stage. Every aspect of the show was timed and rehearsed, even the jokes and banter between the entertainers on the stage. During a short break, a man in a military uniform shouted out a speech in which he reminded everyone that they were not to drink the water, even ice cubes could be contaminated. They were warned they were going in to a war torn country. Keep your curtains drawn in the hotel and stay away from windows. Snipers were a real threat. The hotel in Saigon, The Brink, had recently been demolished by a terrorist bomb but their accommodation, The Carrabelle, was heavily guarded and safe. The Lieutenant finished his speech by thanking everyone for coming across from the States to boost the

morale of the young men fighting for democracy, for freedom, and for America.

Patina was introduced to famous singers and comedians. When she told them she was a Canadian from Vancouver, everyone on board made a big deal about her being different, and gushed with enthusiasm that she was so natural, and didn't speak with any accent. Meanwhile the huge transport rolled like thunder across the ocean to Honolulu, where it refueled and then regained the clouds, travelling across the seas to refuel at Wake Island and then Guam, before a final safe landing in Saigon. Between rehearsals, people around her on the plane played cards, slept, or read books. A few practiced on guitars and sang together. Patina started the diary her mother had given her for her birthday. It was blank when she started but soon filled up with dates, descriptions, and opinions of her own. She found it unbelievable that just the previous month she had been a senior in Roseville. Now she was on her way to a career as a show girl, with some of the most famous entertainers in America.

*Starting in 1965, America had decided to change tactics with the recalcitrant nation. For the next 3 years, they would drop 40 plane loads of bombs daily on North Vietnamese targets, attempting to break the resolve of the regime, and bring the country to its shattered knees. The war intensified due to the fact that the whole nation (not just the north) was against the invasion of the US on their soil. The enemy was*

*everywhere.*

*The intense concerted bombing campaign was called 'The My Lai from the Sky'.*

Back in Vancouver, Arnold was aware that Patina was flying half way around the world. Still in love with her, he was convinced she would never look back again. Once free of Roseville, she would have her choice of the young men she met in the entertainment field. Women such as she married and divorced many times during their professional careers. Denied love in his parent's home, he refused to forget her and move on with his own life. She was to become his unrequited business, a debt he could never repay. A few days later, the *Vancouver Sun* carried a picture of an American helicopter flying over the Mekong Delta. Jungle stretched below the photograph. A young Viet Cong soldier with his hands tied behind his back was photographed falling to his death thousands of feet below the helicopter. The caption in the paper described that the Americans had come up with a novel way of extracting information from their prisoners of war: Either they talked or were thrown to their deaths.

*The philosopher, Bertrand Russel, called the war "a barbaric aggressive war of conquest".*

*On March 16<sup>th</sup> 1968 a battalion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry surrounded an area called My Lai in South Vietnam. The hamlet contained only women and young children. The infantry marched the Vietnamese peasants at gun point to nearby*

*ditches and murdered 500 of them. General William Westmoreland claimed publically that 128 Viet Cong and 22 civilians had been killed. He described the massacre as an “outstanding job” by his troops in clearing out the Viet Cong.*

It was early in the morning when the transporter arrived on the tarmac in Saigon. The passengers and crew were overjoyed to be back on the ground and safe. Patina walked out, attracting attention with her blonde hair and athletic figure. Sergeant Browning was assigned to drive them to the compound where the following days of entertainment would be held. Patina was asked to sit in the front seat of the jeep. Her friends and others sat in the back, on benches that were on each side over the wheel wells. The jeep moved through the overcrowded city, past temples with arching corners and gold colored entrances. Patina was distracted by the orange robes of a few monks on the streets, their heads shaved.

*On 11 June 1963, responding to repression of the Buddhist religion by the Catholic Diem regime, a monk by the name of Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death on the streets of Saigon. Sitting in a lotus position, his death was filmed; and the horrific protest against injustice viewed around the world. The sister-in-law of Diem, Madame Nhu, as the First Lady of South Vietnam dismissed the protest as “a barbecue”.*

*On November 1<sup>st</sup> 1963, Diem and his brother Nhu were assassinated by their own generals. They had done everything to antagonize every level of Vietnamese society, from seizing lands to arresting monks and destroying pagodas. As a consequence of their assassination, Vietnam fell deeper in to chaos and dissolution.*

The streets of Saigon were filled with every level of social disorder. Patina watched on all sides of the jeep as they worked their way through the streets. Sergeant Browning told her, “All of this would be unnecessary, this whole mess, if the Chinese would just go away! Until that happens, we are stuck here, for better or worse.

*Agent Orange was sprayed as a powerful carcinogenic herbicide over 4.5 million acres of fertile land and jungle in Vietnam from 1961 to 1972. The intention was to destroy the forest cover concealing the enemy, and to destroy the food supply of the peasants, who were suspected of feeding the Viet Cong. Agent Orange contains a dioxin which is known to cause a range of serious health problems from cancer to birth defects in children and type 2-diabetes. Vietnam was saturated with over 19 million gallons of the deadly and long lasting defoliant.*

Patina was fascinated by the throng of populace who pushed through the streets of Saigon. Some of the young women

wore long gowns with slits up the side, and pants of silk under sarongs of bright colors. Others covered their heads with straw helmets that looked like conical domes. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of small motor scooters raced through the streets. The French had left their influence on the architecture of the city. Armored vehicles passed too, and soldiers in green khakis and top laced boots guarded the streets, packing weapons and armed with belts of ammunition slung across their chests. The panic and chaos caused by a large scale modern war against an indigenous nation of Indochina was everywhere. Patina stood holding on to the windshield of the jeep, peering over it with her hair flowing in the humid tropical air. The jeep slowed at one point near where an elderly Vietnamese man in rags and with no legs was crawling along the highway, searching for some means of survival and food.

*On April 04<sup>th</sup> 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated by a sniper on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He had decried poverty in America by stating “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defence than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” He described how Vietnam was “one of history’s most cruel and senseless wars” and that his country was “on the wrong side of a world revolution.”*

*Two months later, on June 05<sup>th</sup> 1968 Senator Robert F.*

*Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles while campaigning to replace LBJ as the President of United States.*

*Saigon and 154 other targets were attacked by the 80,000 Viet Cong, starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1968. The death toll amongst the American soldiers reached its highest level with 16,592 casualties in 1968. Escalation on the part of the Pentagon was met with a suicidal wave of fighters in the streets of Vietnam. Three weeks after the first Tet offensive, Congress in Washington DC drafted another 48,000 young Americans, intent on throwing their lives away in a war that was genocidal in nature. For the most part, the draftees came from the poorer classes of Americans and created a new class of draft resisters in the colleges. Race riots spread across America. The cost of the war to Americans was staggering: 10 billion dollars in 1969 and 15 billion in 1970. In one of his rare interviews with an American journalist, Ho Chi Minh asked tersely, "Is your Statue of Liberty still standing?" General Westmoreland went before Congress, insisting that the war could be won: The military just needed more men and resources. Nuclear warheads were always a possibility.*

*Pictures from the news media during the Tet offensive shocked the world. Holding a Smith & Wesson to the head of a young Vietnamese boy, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan shot and killed Nguyen Van Lem in cold blood in reprisal for the Tet offensive. After a truce was reached with the Vietnamese*

*in 1973, General Loan left the country, opening a pizza parlor in Washington DC. The treaty was identical to the one that the French had signed in 1953 after their defeat at Diem Ben Fu. Vietnam was once again a unified nation.*

Patina danced for the 25,000 troops stationed at Long Binh. She was in a cage to one side of the stage, like an entertainer in night clubs. A line up of famous movie stars shared the stage with Robert Espirit's satirical jokes. Wes Smith and his band *The Swingers* played the upbeat music that the beautiful people on stage danced to while thousands of displaced young Americans cheered and laughed at the jokes. Camera crews with the USO panned the soldiers, sending back images to the major networks in America of young men enjoying the armed forces life, whistling at the women, and taking pictures with their Kodiak cameras: America was young, healthy, and dedicated to a victory over the VC. The medium was war and the message was the propaganda that their fighting boys were in good spirits. Images were inserted in the news reels of the implacable power of the US air force.

At one point during the entertainment, the centre stage microphone drew attention to Patina's dancing. With the tempo of the band music at its peak, she preformed her famous movement of kicking up one leg for as far as she could reach while balancing on the toes of another foot. Her long hair tumbled down her back. Espirit could not help but no-

tice and said, in reference to her leg kick, “That’s what you guys are fighting for, right!” Thousands of cheers and applause followed the comment.

*Concerned with the treatment of the Vietnamese people, Tom Glenn wrote to his General Abrams (who had replaced Westmoreland). He described the ongoing and brutal treatment of the people of Vietnam, which he had witnessed. He wrote:*

*It would indeed be terrible to find it necessary to believe that an American soldier that harbours such racial intolerance and disregard for justice and human feeling is a prototype of all American national character; yet the frequency of such soldiers lends credulity to such beliefs....*

Over and over, for hours each day and in different locations around South Vietnam, the floor show was presented to huge crowds. The attention and notoriety would have affected Patina, and changed her outlook and personality, but for the fear and suspicion that she was pregnant. The shows with famous entertainers and witty comedians helped her put the future aside. As a woman, she loved the attention of the thousands of lonely young Americans who wolf whistled her beauty and agility. There were times too when she tried to push the envelope and be as provocative as possible while dancing. Exhibitionism was her tease and all in good fun.

In the tropical sun and downpours, Patina’s fair complexion broke out in blisters. On stage, she was far enough away

from the soldiers for none to notice. Those who did come in contact with her were homesick for the girl friends they had been forced to leave behind. Whenever they had the chance, the soldiers showed her pictures of their girl friends, claiming that she looked just like them. Patina tried not to laugh as she looked at the pictures. Then, the tour was over. The danger was over too, and she looked out of the transport's porthole, as the Asian mainland slipped away under the clouds, with tears in her eyes. One of the other women performers who sat across from her asked, "You okay, honey?" But she didn't know. The tour had been an enormous success. She should have been very proud of her part and effort. Instead, declining the bottle of champagne that was being passed around with paper cups, she acknowledged the empty space that had taken over her life. What had happened around her, the destruction and instability of Saigon, was the world in to which her child would enter. She was filled with sorrow both for her child and for the young men left behind who lived in a world where men tortured and killed other men. The civilian population of peasants was caught in the brutal centre of the war. One of the comedians came to her, after she had calmed down and the plane had levelled off on auto pilot, and asked:

"Do you want to go up to the front and be with the pilots?"

Patina shook her head. The noise of the aircraft made shouting mandatory but she was too tired to try. On the trip

in, she would have enjoyed the experience of sitting on one or both of the pilot's knees while the plane rolled through the azure of the upper stratosphere. It was all in good fun. Somehow, she had matured. The man stood over her for a longer time, hoping she would change her mind but she shook her head again, and looked out of the window. One and then both of the dancers sitting in the same four seats with her left for the front of the plane. Patina fell asleep. When she awoke, darkness was slowly filling the sky. She glimpsed the sun through an opposite porthole, looking so distant it seemed to have retreated to the farthest end of the solar system. The other girls had not yet returned.

Vancouver International. Her jet from San Diego touched down late in the morning. At the gate, her parents were waiting for her with some roses but she felt disappointed instead. She had to get in touch with Gregor Whitfield.

## 13

Several attempts to locate the father of her child failed. *Damn you*, she said, putting down the phone after several tries. But they lived in a small circumference around the Roosevelt district, within miles of each other. Persisting, Patina came across Gregor when he was waiting with change in his hand at one of the bus stops. He looked at her with an

amused expression, noting a face that was swollen and blistered. Then he looked away, checking the change that was in his hand and pocket. She waited until he was willing to look at her. She finally said to him:

“I have your child, Gregor. From that night after graduation.”

“I don’t remember any night after grad,” he said nonchalantly, tossing his head to one side as if looking for the approach of the city bus. Her mouth dropped in disbelief. Before she could say anything more, a red MGB wheeled past them on the highway, driving in the opposite direction. Two of Gregor’s friends in the open cockpit turned their heads when he waived at them with his arm. The sports car pulled off to the curb and waited as Gregor made several leaps across the road. He climbed on to the back trunk, slipping his feet under the chrome roll bar. The coward who had insinuated himself in to her life sat on the trunk of a car and yelled, “*Yahoo, Yahoo, Go – Go - Go...*” She and the child she was carrying had been abandoned. Gregor was racing away, towards his life as a chartered accountant, gaining access to the money of other people for a career.

Patina stood watching with a few tears until a city bus came to the stop and cut off her view. She turned away and the bus rolled on again, leaving her standing alone on the sidewalk. Life had just slammed a door shut in her face. Already pressures were being put on her to give her son up for adoption. Now she had no choice left but to go through

her pregnancy alone, with no husband. People talked about *free love* but it wasn't free when an unwanted child became involved. Turning away, she had a few blocks to walk back to her parents' home. It seemed as if the three months ahead of her were hundreds of miles away.

Patina didn't realize she wasn't alone on the street. Arnold Knofler had been walking in the opposite direction on the other sidewalk, on his way to a part time job at a local garage. When he got closer to Gregor at the bus stop, he intended to call to him, and perhaps even cross the street. The opportunity changed when Patina appeared at the same bus stop and began to talk to Gregor. She was wearing a blue maternity dress and seemed, from a distance, to be shaped like a gourd with her upper body planted in to a larger rotund base. Even from a distance she was still beautiful but in a different way than Arnold remembered in school. As if invisible, he watched from behind another bus kiosk. Patina had been intense, exchanging a few words with Gregor. Arnold imagined the exact words of what she had said to him: *You are the father of my child*. And he could likewise imagine Gregor's arrogant response – *Who says so! Go to hell!* - then watched him hailing a ride and bolting away.

Arnold had every reason to despise such a person. Other people were important to Gregor only so far as he could use them for his own benefit. He would do very well for himself. It was a matter of hubris that he should abandon a pregnant woman to the wolves. Patina walked away alone while

Arnold was watching from across the street.

Every time her memory returned, Arnold remembered that same situation over and over as if watching a rerun movie. Remonstrating, he said to himself he should have had the courage to run after her at that moment and fall to his knees, begging her, "Please - marry me, please."

People most surely would laugh at such an intervention. So Arnold continued walking to his job at the gas station rather than catching up with Patina when she needed him the most. He didn't want to be late for work. Walking away, he consoled himself - *It's not my responsibility. Why should I take on the mess that Gregor made?* The answer to that was simple. *Love is simple* (Virginia Woolf). Arnold was in love with a woman that Gregor wasn't.

Though he arrived in time for work, the reek of the gasoline affected him as never before, and he had to ask to leave, after throwing up in the public washroom. The affair wasn't settled. Two months later, Arnold was walking to church on a Sunday when he met Patina for the last time. She was round and pale, labouring with the extra weight she was carrying at her waist. When she saw him, she stared as if knowing he understood the circumstances that had brought her to this deserted shore. Arnold said nothing back to her. Again, he failed. Mr. Rawley was prescient after all.

The expression in her blue eyes said – *Why don't you ask me to marry you, Arnold? Are you afraid I just might say -*  
*Yes*

Arnold thought defensively - *Damn it, it's not my kid, it's Gregor's!*

*Gregor doesn't want anything to do with my child. If you have any backbone, Aaron could be our son...*

*I'm just a kid, Arnold argued in self defence. I don't even have a steady job. How can I afford to have a wife and new baby?*

*Just admit you love me and nothing else will matter. I'll be yours for the rest of eternity if you let me.*

Arnold shook his head. The bells from Our Lady of Sorrows church were ringing in the distance. If he didn't hurry, he'd be late for Sunday mass. Weeks later, Patina gave birth to a boy whom she called Aaron Fitzpatrick, after her grandfather. Five months later, she was involved in a fatal accident. One of her friends at the bank had suggested she go to a party with a friend. Patina agreed, leaving her son with her parents for one night. Like all the young men in her life, her companion had gotten intoxicated at the party. On the way back he totalled his father's Mustang. Patina's picture was in *The Vancouver Sun*, showing the beautiful face of a young woman with a newborn child at her breast. Arnold tried to avoid the funeral but it passed him anyways as he was pumping gas at the garage. Following the black hearse, in another car, her mother was holding Aaron in a white blanket.

# 14

Once Arnold informed Kate Sumato he would attend the Reunion, she emailed back, asking him to write up a short bio of his life after graduation. Arnold had sent her back a polite refusal, saying that his life had been rather dull – but she insisted, saying – *Perhaps to you it seems dull, but the rest of us would be fascinated. Yes, Arnold, please do reconsider.* A few days later, Arnold sat down and tried to fill in the empty space of the last four decades. He began:

*I was the one who betrayed Patina when she needed me the most.....* but he erased that comment and continued:

*After graduation, I floundered around for several years, looking for a decent job. Then one day, I can't remember if it was in the paper or I heard it by word of mouth, I learned they were looking for workers for a new gold mine that had opened up in the northwest corner of the province....*

Actually he had been in *Manpower*, searching the postings for any job when he came across the reference to jobs at a new mine site. It offered room and board, but meant living in a camp at the end of an inlet where no community existed. The place was surrounded by forests and mountains that blocked out the sun until late in the afternoon. Winter came

quickly to the area. The miners were asked to toil down a long horizontal tunnel, following a vein of gold that had compressed under the weight of millions of tons of sedimentary rock and thin tundra.

Before leaving Vancouver, the company asked for a written commitment from the new workers to stay for a year in the camp. Thereafter, every six months the employee would be flown to the nearest out port for a vacation. That first flight up to the mine was unnerving but Arnold wanted the money. After glimpsing islands and mountains through the clouds, Arnold landed aboard the turboprop at a small coastal city. He watched out of the port hole on the plane as it spun round to land from the north. Deep sea ships were anchored in the harbour, waiting for shipments of grain, coal, and logs. Then the plane tilted its wings and the city was replaced by the rigid backs of the coastal mountain range. Arnold had come to the very ends of the earth. But he was going to find out that he couldn't get far enough away for anything to change. The landing gear flopped down from beneath the wings. *FASTEN SEAT BELTS* flashed in orange letters above each seat. The tarmac raced like a grey river past his window. Then they were back on the ground, the sound of the propellers dropping off as the plane lost acceleration: *Just admit you love me and nothing else will matter. I'll be yours for the rest of eternity if you'll let me.*

Arnold's short bio continued:

*I took a big chance to go mining, underground. It*

*seemed, all things considered, my last option...*

The mine had been opened for less than a year. Living in the camp was boring. At first they had no TV and the food was poor quality. People kept to themselves. The camp workforce was made up of a dozen different nationalities. Then the vein of gold they had been following like a compressed wafer through hard rock turned and followed a steep vertical decent. The owners sent in geologists who predicted that it would be too expensive to follow the thread of precious metal down hundreds of feet. The camp was put on notice that it would fold in a few weeks. Core samples showed that the gold vein had petered out. But the price of gold was leaping upwards on a monthly basis. The company took an enormous gamble and drove a pit down vertically, searching after those last few ounces – only to discover that the vein had made a sharp ascent. It was once again in greater concentration, travelling on a horizontal seam, on the same schist as the original discovery but two hundred meters further down the shaft. The mine was declared the most important discovery in the history of the country. Arnold continued with his story:

*At first I wanted to come back to Vancouver and continue with my life here. But a short vacation showed me that my life in the city was over, once and for all. I went back to the mine, taking a small float plane from Seal Cove Base to the camp. Once every six months we were allowed a few weeks of vacation. At one point, I chose not to return for two years.*

*In my spare time, I began to make recurve bows. The surrounding areas had mountain sheep, deer, elk and grizzly bears. I hunted all of them at one time or another, using the bows I had made myself...*

The reason Arnold chose not to take a vacation had little to do with his hunting skills. Rather, he had become somewhat ingenious. He was, in fact, stealing gold from the mine. As has been pointed out in *Das Kapital*: *Nobody makes any money working for The Man*. To address the discrepancy, Arnold devised a foolproof system of pilfering small amounts of gold from the underground deposits. The company had set up metal detectors, ensuring that none of the miners were stealing who came off shift with their empty lunch buckets. At times, the management raided the bunk houses, looking for pilfered stashes of their precious mineral. Only a few miners were ever apprehended. Arnold was not one of those who were careless. As one anonymous ‘pick and shovel grunt’ out of a hundred, he did his job and kept to himself. But the longer he stayed underground, the more he was visited by resentments. First it was directed towards himself; and his father; and then Mr. Rawley; and finally against the shareholders of the mining company. Stealing became the perfect antidote and his technique was unique. Metal detectors located the gold hidden in coveralls but his steel toed safety boots protected any chunks of soft metal from detection. Once a week, Arnold slipped off his boots in the lavatory and inserted a nugget between his toes, moving

past the detectors later in the evening with the sullen look of a tired miner. In his living quarters, he found a ledge behind the ventilation ducting where he stored his contraband.

But he found getting just a few ounces up from the mine was tediously slow. He went looking for other possibilities. The ideal accomplice became a large two stage compressor. Twice a month, it was sent back to the surface for maintenance. On Fridays, the compressor sat idle for the weekend until it was serviced the following week and sent back down the shaft. The time delay would allow Arnold the opportunity to retrieve the rocks he had stashed under the padded air intakes when the compressors were underground. But the Shops were off limits for the miners. To gain access to his gold, Arnold came up with his next excuse. On one trip back from Vancouver, he shipped in a supply of tropical hardwood and maple, along with several target bales of hay. When the Shipper/Receivers at the mine asked him what the wood was for, Arnold told them he was intending to take down big game in the surrounding mountains with the bows he would make himself. It was an amusing alibi. Everyone who heard his story laughed but rumours spread quickly in a camp. A week later he approached the superintendent for permission to work in the Shops. He'd need a clean bench to laminate up his bows. The superintendent, Jim Hutton, said:

“I heard you were wanting to do something like that.”

“Sure, well, it's just a small space and the guys in the Shops don't seem to mind.”

So he gained access to the Shops. His woodworking skills from Roseville High guided his first attempts. The wood came in eight foot lengths and had to be molded to the proper thickness, length, and smooth curve. Apparently pre-occupied with the table saws and planers, it was a simple matter for Arnold to flip open the air filters on the compressors when no one was around and remove his treasures.

To his surprise, the first of his hand crafted bows turned out as a work of art. After stringing it up, he returned to the superintendent and presented it to Hutton as a gift. It was a carefully premeditated gesture on his part. The hobby meant he could loiter around the Shops at any time without arousing suspicion. And the amount of gold he could safely bring to the surface increased from ounces to several pounds. In the same time period, his skill in making bows reached the point where he'd destroy a new product if it wasn't up to his expectations, like a musical instrument that failed to deliver the finest of pitch. His next step was to take his best creation out in to the field and actually use it for hunting. He had no interest in hunting but for the sake of appearances had to be consistent.

## 15

The gold mine was on the north side of the inlet. On the

south, a logging camp had left a web of roads intact after abandoning the area years earlier. The washed out logging roads provided an interconnecting series of arteries that snaked miles back in to the mountains from the inlet.

*The work was hard in the mine but rewarding in other ways. After several years, the company gave me an award for the most productive worker on their team...*

In late September, the camp tender cut through the choppy seas and dropped him off at the old logging site. It was his first hunt. The boat crew passed jokes that they'd come back for *Davey Crockett* and the grizzly bear he had taken down with one of his fancy arrows.

An hour later, walking up the incline of an old road, Arnold was startled by the silhouette of a mature buck. The animal paused above him like a reproduction of a wildlife masterpiece. Arnold drew a shaft from his quiver and pulled it back with 75 pounds of draw, shaking with the tension. An instant later, the arrow flew towards his target with perfect trajectory. The animal spun around in a circle and fled behind the rise. It was gone, like a mirage, on the wind. Panting heavily, with some absurd song playing over and over in his mind, he thought at first he had only imagined the whole scenario until he found a splash of blood on some leaves; then a short distance further down the road, the dead buck lying on his side. Arnold put his bow and quiver aside, and stood trembling, holding on to the smooth hard rack of antler that the buck had grown for six successive runts.

At first he just sat next to the dead animal, not knowing what to do. He had deliberately taken away the animal's beautiful life. With confused expectations, he paged through the small manual on hunting he carried. Following instructions, he laid the deer on its back over a stump and opened up the stomach cavity, spilling out its steaming organs. Nodules of winter fat clung to the inner ribs of the carcass. The intact liver was laid aside for later. Once finished, he stood up and took a deep breath. The wilderness was as quiet as the wind. Overhead a flock of geese honked as they flew south for winter in a long 'V' formation high above the mountains. The alpine air was clean and sweet. Below the ridge, a long valley stretched open like a green carpet towards the next range of moraines and islands of clouds. Arnold was convinced he had passed through this area generations earlier. His Bowie knife and both his hands were covered in blood. Leaning against a stump, the handmade bow was amazing, the artifice of antiquity and silence. Hunting on foot, this strange journey had tossed him backwards in time. School taught him about the migration in 1492 but his hunting put him in touch with the first migration on to the continent. Some 40,000 years earlier, nomads crossed from west to east on Beringia, the Bering Sea land bridge. Arnold was the progeny of not one but both migrations. As a hunter, he was walking in the footsteps of those who had painted prehistoric herds on the walls of caves in Altamira and Lascaux. But as one of the modern tribe of homo sapi-

ens, Arnold took great pride in knowing how to pilfer deposits of gold and not get caught. *Nobody makes any money working for the man.*

It was a mile back to the rotting dock. The deer was too awkward to carry so he made up a travois and dragged it downhill, determined to take the carcass back to camp intact. By the time the tender arrived it was dark and Arnold flashed a light for his pickup. The two men in the camp tender were impressed by the size of the deer he had taken down on his first attempt with a flimsy homemade bow. Back in camp, his kill caused a sensation in the bunk house and Arnold received several orders for more bows. One of the immigrants who had been a meat cutter volunteered to show him how to skin and butcher the animal which they strung up by its hind legs behind the cook house. The old man told him, pointing his butcher knife to the back legs, “These here’er scent glands. Yu gotta take these off virst ting, or they’ll taint zah meat. Otherwise, thize a fine kill. Beginners luock – as day say.” Arnold watched as the other man dissected the naked carcass at each of its joints, and laid the large chunks of meat on a tray. The head cook from the kitchen came out and collected the fresh meat for Arnold’s *red* crew.

“What can I give you for your help?” Arnold asked the meat cutter.

The man indicated the bundle that was lying on the ground near them.

“I’ll take zat hide, if yu don’t mind,” the immigrant

replied. He pointed at the trophy head of the buck with its great rack of antlers. It was propped against the kitchen veranda with glazed eyes and a tongue hanging stiff between small ivory teeth. “Wat yu to do with zat head, huh?”

“I never thought about it,” Arnold confessed.

“Vell, I’m going out aund take to zat taxidermer fella on za ‘ellow Head. He’ll do za good job. Cost yu lots of muneey, of course,” he said with a sly look.

The cook came out from the kitchen, wiping his hands clean, and said, “We have a walk-in cooler. I can keep it stored there until Gerry takes it out in a week.”

Everyone in the camp seemed willing to help him in any way possible. Then at the next meal, they served Arnold and Hutton the marinated liver from the deer, while the rest of the workers enjoyed venison stew.

“Are you going out again, next shift change?” asked the pilot of the camp tender, over the meal.

Arnold hadn’t thought of going hunting again. It was just a ruse, even making the bows. He had proved his point, but nodded affirmatively. His first kill had been a complete fluke.

“Good,” said the pilot. “I’ll take you out. This is great stew.”

Back in his bunk, Arnold struggled to keep everything in proper focus. The purpose of making bows was solely to gain access to the compressors. Hunting had been his excuse to continue making bows so he could hang around the

Shops. Laughing, he realized how much his ruse had taken on its own personality. But the adrenalin from hunting was indisputable. He went back again, before the snows of winter blocked off his access to the higher elevations. This time a three year old came within range, and he again took the animal down with a long shot and determination. The buck bolted from the shock but Arnold waited, confident he would find its forked tracks. Everything about hunting was instinctual. It was in a man's genes not in any manual or book. Many of the animals in the area had never seen a human predator and were taken by surprise, even curiosity, when a two legged intruder in camouflage appeared near their feeding areas.

## 16

During the winter, Arnold continued to pilfer chunks of gold from *Excalibur* and make more bows. He considered not stealing but the price of the precious metal was doubling almost weekly. The temptation was enormous. His addiction demanded he keep hunting. Thinking ahead, even in summer the higher elevations with their logging roads could only be reached after crossing that wide valley. It called for an all terrain vehicle, an ATV. Flipping through a catalogue in the bunk house lounge, he ordered one from a Honda dealership

for shipment to the camp, along with a small trailer to carry back his dead game. Still the ATV was just another tool. The best opportunities came from honing his human senses in the field. Nothing in the mountains was predictable. With his next trip, dismounting his ATV in a fog that reduced his range to less than sixty feet, he entered an area that was filled with hundreds of cobwebs. The webs hung like lace shawls, covering a large area of the regrowth. Using flagging tape to ensure he would not get lost, Arnold was tying one marker to a small bush when at the edge of his field of vision the outline of the largest deer he had ever imagined came in focus. A five knot wind was blowing but he was downwind.

He stood staring in to the fog, attempting to discern the shape. The great creature raised its head. It was a bull elk, a wapiti, huge by comparison to any animal he had hunted previously. Arnold dared not move. On the outer edge of the fog, the rest of the harem was milling about, their outlines barely discernable. Perhaps there were three or four; and perhaps behind those, deeper in the fog, another four more in the same herd. Arnold lowered himself slowly to the ground, crawling forward with his bow held before his face. Finding a logging stump as a hunting blind, Arnold rose up slowly, convinced the elk would scatter the moment he took his eyes away. The bull elk had not moved but several others had retreated in to the shadows of the fog. The herd was tense. The bull had raised his lip to the wind, trying to catch the scent of the human intruder. It was time to load his bow. Arnold

slumped behind the stump and mated an arrow to the crotch of his bow. A few seconds later, inhaling as deeply as possible, he drew the arrow back towards his face. Wheeling towards his target, he released the arrow at the largest target of his hunting career. The arrow raced fifty feet, passing through the vital areas of the elk. The bull bellowed in pain and fell to his knees with the impact. The rest of the herd panicked, charging off in all directions in to the fog.

Arnold rolled back against the stump and waited, trying to catch his short breath. Perhaps five or more minutes passed. Finally he dared to look back at the bull. Still on his knees, the elk was immobilized and in shock, refusing to tumble down to the ground. Arnold crouched behind the stump, uncertain as he waited. If he was foolhardy enough to approach, the bull might rear up and charge his assailant. *Why did I think I could take down such a large animal, and with a stupid arrow anyways? No one will know if I just crawl away.* Sweat ran down the sides of his face and from under his arms. Pushing aside his fears, he finally crawled on all fours towards his wounded quarry. When separated by less than ten feet, Arnold rose up in a hunched shape, wielding his Bowie knife. The elk regarded him through clouded eyes. Dead, and yet kneeling as if in final homage to his creator. Arnold first touched the velvet on his antlers to ensure he was not dreaming and then with a push, the elk tumbled to the ground, a torrent of thick blood rushing from his mouth and nostrils and lungs.

Arnold had to decide what to do with such a huge carcass. Foremost he wanted the trophy head for the canteen and the skin to give to Hutton who had asked for such a favor. His ATV was parked as close as possible but the headlights barely penetrated the fog. The low cloud intensified the darkness. He had gotten out most of the elk, including one hind quarter but the rest would have to wait until the next day. On his last trip back to the carcass with a flashlight in one hand, he was startled to find a young elk cow standing over the dead animal, sniffing her lost companion. She stood in fear, staring at the beam of light before prancing away. *Strange*, thought Arnold, *how even these animals have an attachment to each other*. It was too dark to do any more butchering. He'd return in the morning for the rest of the carcass.

Back at the logging camp for the night, he built an open fire and slept in one of the derelict buildings with the severed head of the elk propped up, staring at the sparks racing up into the night sky. At first light, he mounted his ATV, driving back for the rest of his prize. The guys back in the camp would be very impressed with his latest kill. Within a quarter mile of the site, Arnold braked and stopped. Standing on the pegs of his Honda, he balked at the sight in the distance: a pair of silver tips were tearing asunder the remains of his bull elk. One of the grizzlies picked up his scent and rose above the carcass, standing with her arms hanging limp at her sides and her nose testing the wind. Even at such a

distance, she had detected the foul smell of his human sweat and fear. Arnold fell back in to the saddle of his machine. Something had grabbed him by the throat so he could not breathe. Slowly the great sow dropped back down to the carcass. She could run him down if she decided to deal with him. Arnold wheeled his ATV around and drove back to the camp. He had the elk head with its great candelabra of antler, the hide, and some of the meat. The rest belonged to the mountains and would stay there.

## 17

The next stage of his plan was to slip the gold off of the premises and dispose of it on the black market in Vancouver. Arnold discovered how premeditated he could be when it came to bluffing his way past the *chained lions* that guarded the gold mine for its shareholders. He had never fully appreciated the depth of his own criminal aptitude. After two years, he was faced with the daunting challenge of transporting *16 pounds 7 ounces of contraband gold* out of the remote mountains and down to the city. On his first trip out, he carried a suitcase with a false bottom and old work boots with false heels he had fabricated in the Shops. Every possible item he could carry out as luggage and still be used as a hiding vault was employed. Carefully, he refused to allow any-

one but himself to lift his luggage when he left the camp. When the plane skimmed its pontoons across the water to the floats at Seal Cove Base, Arnold was smug with confidence. Though he had purchased his plane ticket through the logging camp office, from Digby Island all the way down to Vancouver International, he actually had a car waiting in storage near the seaplane base. Large airports had x-ray machines. Driving not flying was the only alternative. After a few days on the Yellow Head, he'd be back down in Vancouver, his stash of gold safely in the trunk of his SUV. He was so assured of himself that he picked up a hitchhiker near the turnoff to Port Edward, and dropped him off in downtown Prince George. It was good to have a new conversation once in awhile.

*I spent almost twenty years underground, working loyally and faithfully, for the company and their shareholders. In spite of the danger, I was to discover that mining gets in a man's blood....*

Next came the difficulty of unloading his contraband on the black market without getting involved in organized crime. Once in Vancouver, Arnold cruised around the dealers in precious metals, some of them seedy characters who kept a small magnifying glass on hand to peer at pawned diamonds and silverware. After conversing with several and leaving again, he came across a dealer who was sharp enough to come to the right conclusion. Arnold had asked a few questions about the fluctuating price of different metals,

dropping the hint that he worked at *Excalibur*. The dealer made eye contact. Soon enough Fredrick Pollard said, “Let's go back in to my office and discuss this, okay?” And with the door closed, Arnold found a kindred spirit. He would supply the dealer with the gold, taking an 18% cut on the market value on the day he delivered his gold. They stood and shook hands: *A man is only as good as his word*. Pollard hesitated and then suggested, “Perhaps it would be best for you not to return here again, on a regular basis.” Arnold was suspicious. “Alright,” he ventured, “where do you suggest?” The dealer was only being careful for the both of them. If apprehended, they could face a prison sentence of fifteen to twenty years behind bars. For their own sake they had to be very cautious. “Fine with me,” said Arnold. “Where would you prefer to meet?”

The dealer thought about his routine when not working, and came up with a list of places where the gold could be safely exchanged. The second shipment was 10.8 pounds and handed over to the dealer in the park. They both watched the swans on the lagoon for some time afterwards, and then Arnold returned to his mining job. He had set up a new bank account and was elated when he saw that he was on his way to amassing a small fortune. The money was in there in plain numerals, listed in his bank book on the *Deposit* side – with nothing on the *Debit* side. The payoff was that Arnold did not have to account for a cent of it to the tax department. He kissed his open bank book. He could waste his entire life un-

derground and still never come close to making the same amount of money.

*During the years I worked in the mine, we filled up a foreign ship each month at the dock in the inlet opposite the mine site. The gold ore was taken offshore and refined at distant ports, making our nation one of the most lucrative in the export of the precious metal. Only Peru was able to surpass us.*

At one point, the RCMP arrived and were convinced that the amount of gold showing up on the black market came from this particular mine. The miners were questioned one at a time. Arnold was entirely transparent with the officers, shaking his head slowly, insisting it was nearly impossible for any gold to leave the mine. The metal detectors had been in place since the start of the mining operation. “Have you any clue as to who might be stealing from the mine?” the officers had asked him. Arnold thought for a long time in silence, looking at the floor, then said: “We work underground. That does something to a man. I hope I’m not wrong but I don’t think there’s a shyster in our whole crew. Not a single man’s dishonest. I can vouch for that.” He smiled earnestly at his two interrogators.

“I understand you hunt with the bows you make on site here?” asked one of the officers.

Arnold shifted uneasily.

“Ah, yes – I do a little hunting. It’s just a hobby.”

“Those heads in the mess hall are yours, correct?”

Arnold answered affirmatively.

“Jim Hutton has a bow hanging in his office. He said it was one of the one’s you made. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Arnold knew that if he was connected to a polygraph, it would be registering a series of sharp changes.

“Where do you make your bows?” one of them asked.

“During my spare time, here, at the mine,” he said in an innocent tone..

”Even the elk head – you took that down with one of your bows?”

“It was just luck, really...”

The officers exchanged a glance and then the younger of the two said, “I wonder if you could make one for my son?”

“But of course,” replied Arnold, entirely relieved.

“How much?” asked the officer.

The question was another trap. So Arnold said:

“Well, I have to make a small profit after I pay for the wood and so on.”

“Jim Hutton said you gave it to him as a gift.”

“Sure. He’s a great guy. But I wasn’t married in those days.”

“Where’s your wife work?” one of them asked.

Arnold noticed that they took turns asking him questions, like Siamese twins.

“She’s a house wife. We have two kids and with me hardly ever home, someone has to keep an eye on everything.”

“Mind if we talk to her?”

“Not at all,” he replied.

After a pause, the young officer again asked how much one of his bows would sell for.

“It’ll be reasonable,” Arnold said, settling the matter to their satisfaction.

The officers closed off the interview. Arnold had another order for a bow to fill for the officer. Without being aware of it, they had provided him with the excuse he needed to send up another shipment of gold from the bottom of the mine. “I’ll mail the bow to you when it’s done,” he assured the officer.

Closing off the paperwork for their investigation, the officers made a notation it was likely that *Arnold Knofler* was the culprit though that was only their professional opinion.

## 18

The last kill in the mountains coincided with the final closure of the mine. Arnold was to discover that his hunting had nothing to do with Darwin’s *Natural Selection*. Rather it involved going out in to the environment looking for the strongest and healthiest of the species in order to eradicate them. It was a lesson he would need for his own personal survival. The process came acutely in focus when he arrived

at the end of one successful hunt and was loitering on a ridge overlooking an adjoining valley to the southwest. The azure of the Pacific was visible over the summit of a distant peninsula. At the open shore of the next valley stood a bay which the logging camp had once used as a sorting ground. Roads for logging trucks fanned across the valley like the lines in the palm of a weather beaten hand. A storm had passed. Warm updrafts from the inlet were uncoiling strands of mist from the valley floor. A spur of gravel road ended on this pinnacle, the terrain falling off in a steep drop.

Standing alone, dressed in his rain and hunting gear, Arnold was on the razor edge of another change in his perspective. His hunting trip had been productive, the carcasses of several large bucks hung from their hind legs on a rack at the old logging camp. The vista in this new part of the mountains was like partaking in a sacrament. *Some religions (I think it's called something like pantheism) Arnold thought venerate nature - and with good reason.* His hunting was over for the season. A bare mantle of granite on the summit allowed him to recline and smoke his pipe. In another eighteen hours he'd be back down in the mine tunnel. The mists rose and danced around his pavilion of mountains and forest. An instant later he scrambled back to his feet, peering across the valley.

In the distance on the other side of the valley *a man in a white robe* moved against the base of a dark wall of rock. The mist blocked his view for a few moments but he spotted

the same motion once more. *This is impossible!* He hurried back to his parked ATV and returned with binoculars. Fixed on the same area, he strained until the focus merged in one clear image. It was real – he saw it again. On the far wall of the valley the regal shaman of the wilderness, a Rocky Mountain goat in a robe of pure white, was scaling his way along a vertical ascent. With the sighting, Arnold was seized by his next obsession. He would take down that regal beast if it took him the rest of his life.

Riding back to the abandoned camp and storing his ATV in an old building, Arnold was picked up at dusk in the usual place. Though his next shift underground started early the next morning, he was jubilant, acting as if he had been *born again*. On the way back, the crew glanced at him a few times, wondering what he was up to now. Arnold was standing out on the open deck in the rain, peering back at the mountains. He could imagine the look in that *Ancient One's Eyes* when he found his fate staring down at him from behind a carbon fiber arrow with a cyclone broad head and a taut bow string.

It would take a winter of persistence to research the habits of mountain goats. *The kill* called for an investment in specialized equipment to repel down the face of a steep cliff. For once, the hunt would be done on the prey's own terms with the predator clinging like an insect to the side of the same cliff. Logging roads made access to the area possible. Several hundred feet of quality climbing rope would allow a

decent from the ridge. As *Grandfather* picked his nimble way up vertical faces of rock, Arnold intended to abseil down from the summit. Dedicated research on the habits and behaviour of mountain goats said his plan was dangerous but viable, his *kill* a certainty.

Every spare hour he had at his disposal was spent at the base of the cliff, peering up with a telescope on a tripod. Next he invested in a camera with a powerful lens which he attached to the end of his telescope, taking blowups of every crack and crevice on that wall. The most likely route was followed and marked with pins. Slowly the map of the wall became more complex. *Grandfather* was watched over several seasons. Near a ledge with a few shrubs and grasses, the wall had seepage of some minerals that had discoloured the rocks with an oxide stain. Once on the ledge, the ram would rest for a day or so, and then climb the last precarious distance on a sheer drop to get at the seepage. Balancing like an acrobat, at times with his legs splayed well apart, *Grandfather* spent an hour licking the deposits. Arnold watched and photographed him from the bottom of the valley. Satiated, the goat would slowly climb back on to the ledge, recuperate for a day, and then make his way again to the summit.

During the following winter, the mountain goat would apparently move amongst the blocks of mountains in search of food and shelter from hurricane force winds. Arnold's plan was simple and scientific. He'd repel to the ledge at the right moment and wait for the return of *Grandfather* after his

precarious transit to the mineral deposit. A razor sharp broad head would interrupt any return by the goat to the ledge and safety.

Practice was imperative. Arnold found a wall behind the mine site and taught himself how to repel down the face of the rock. Over and over, he learned the techniques used by professionals to trapeze over and down vertical drops, braking their decent by feeding out the friction of a thin line of rope. Hanging against granite, his stiff climbing boots clinging to fractures of rock, Arnold taught himself the art of hammering in pitons between crevices. On the end of the piton, a carbineer and a lanyard were clicked in which would allow him the use of both hands while suspended by a chest harness. Going back hunting again for another season, he moved his camp over to the adjacent valley and kept a close watch on the wall from the floor of the valley.

Timing was the critical factor. Once a white dot was sighted moving down along the horizontally stacked rocks and ledges, Arnold had to race up to the ridge on his ATV and prepare to drop down to the ledge. The whole endeavour should take less than an hour. *Grandfather* would rest on the ledge for a short period and then move off to the mineral seepage. It was in October when everything fell in to place. A white dot was sighted picking his way down towards the ledge. Arnold tossed off the unnecessary equipment from his ATV and trailer, loaded up his climbing gear, and raced to the top of the ridge. With the rope looped around an out-

cropping, Arnold began the long two hundred and twelve foot drop to the ledge. The rope was marked with different colours. It would tell him as he repelled down the open vertical fall when he was half way to the ledge; near the ledge by 100 feet; and then within visual sight of a safe footing. Arnold swung around and paused when he was on the last marker. *Grandfather* had vacated the ledge. This was ideal. Arnold imagined the ram stepping gingerly from one tiny outcropping to the next, on his way to the licking area. But the ledge had a grade when he landed as quietly as possible. From the floor of the valley, the small outcropping appeared to be perfectly flat. Instead it slopped off as if inviting its trespassers to slip and fall hundreds more feet to the base of the cliff. In one corner, an eyrie had been recently abandoned. Arnold took his bearings. The sound made by hammering pitons in to rock would alert *Grandfather* of an intruder. Arnold decided to tie himself off on his climbing rope, moving about with one foot planted more securely on the downward slope. Dry eagle scat discoloured the ledge. Pieces of wool lay scattered on the rocks. Arnold collected a handful, inhaling the scent of his prey before slipping it in to his pocket. Soon enough he'd have the whole animal at his disposal.

Arnold prepared his bow and the arrows in the holder attached to the side of his leather bound handle. It took the ram longer; two hours for his circuit before returning to the ledge. Arnold had watched his pattern many times and from

his first sighting had dreamed of this face to face encounter. An hour passed. Beyond a certain time, it was not practical to remain on the ledge since it meant climbing back up the wall in the darkness. Arnold was crouched and half asleep, sitting resting with his arms on his knees and his head resting on his arms. A sound alerted him. A shard had fallen from the cliff, making an impact as it continued falling hundreds of feet. *Grandfather* was returning. Arnold tensed. He loaded an arrow by its notch. To his right by less than thirty feet, a rectangular head with a pure white goatee and ebony horns was the staring at him from the wall as it curved out from a narrow crevasse. Minutes passed. Hunter and the hunted made eye contact. Arnold inhaled the cold air as he pulled back his bow with maximum concentration. The broadhead raced like a bullet, flying with the sound of *Phoo...* within an inch of the regal forehead. Arnold had missed! *Grandfather* was perplexed, wondering what had passed his eyes in a flash. Arnold saw the goat bat his ears in wonder. *Grandfather* brayed, sensing the destructive instinct of his intruder. There was little time to reconsider. *Carrying through on a kill is the essence of hunting.* Arnold reloaded and made a second attempt. This broad head caught the creature in his exposed neck and sent him bounding off of the rock with a choke of intense pain. His death groan echoed across the valley as he hurtled end over end down the face of the cliff. Arnold leaned over the ledge, watching in shock as the animal made impact on the moraine and

continued to fall, rolling over and over in a mass of hamburger and blood.

Arnold was alone again. All the time he waited on the ledge, the proximity of *Grandfather* was tactile. His cry of death lasted but a few seconds as he fell; it would stick with Arnold for many years. Disgusted, calling himself a foul name, Arnold threw his hunting equipment off the ledge. The bow and his clip of arrows spiralled after its latest victim. *I'll be yours for the rest of eternity if you let me.* Arnold was trapped. Looking above, he was faced with an arduous ascent up the face of the cliff. The fear of starving to death or dying of hyperthermia was an issue. A long frail thread of rope dangled down the face of the cliff. The ascent it offered seemed not a few hundred feet but miles. In a panic, Arnold put his feet in the stirrups of his ascenders, and began climbing up the summit, one step at a time. His arms and legs were soon numb with the effort. As he stared upwards, the summit formed a hard edge and the sky was drained of its sunlight. He had to keep moving upwards, one step, one movement at a time.

Soaked in perspiration, hyperthermia became an issue. He dared not stop for fear of his body refusing to move again. Finally the last few feet were gained and Arnold scrambled over the top, feeling as if a dozen hands were pulling him to safety. The ATV was sitting in the darkness where he had left it. Still in his stirrups, Arnold fell on his back and lay on the firm ground, wondering if he could ever

get to his feet again. An hour passed. When he opened his eyes, the night sky was saturated with stars. Overhead, the Milky Way stretched across the arc of earth's sky with 400 billion stars glittering back from infinity. *Will I one day pay for the lives of other creatures I killed while alive? Does my life have a purpose? Why can't I forget her?*

## 19

On his next vacation, Arnold hauled out another nine pounds of his contraband. During his lunch break in the mine, he'd pick around the rocks for the best specimens. Some of the gold was embedded in other rocks but Pollard had assured him that was of little consequence. Back again in Vancouver, he followed the instructions for his next delivery. This time the drop off point was the trunk of a car parked at the wedding of Pollard's son. The two of them rarely appeared together. Even if the police would have put Knofler under surveillance, he'd come off looking as clean as a whistle. The conspirators took few chances. Emails didn't exist yet. The price of an ounce of gold had tripled and both Pollard and Knofler had irrepressible good humour.

*The mine lost the tail of the dragon twenty years after I started working. We went to work only to be pulled in to the mess hall and told that the mine would shut down in three*

*weeks. We were to get our things together and prepare to leave the place by barge, as an army would in retreat. Here I was in my early forties and once again out of work.*

Leaving by barge allowed Arnold to crate up the last 24 pounds 2 ounces of gold – stashing most of it in his ATV trailer and the rest inside his trophy heads. A biting wind rushed down the inlet but Arnold looked back at the mine for one last time. He smiled, remembering the old pact they had made that night about Roseville – *Never look back with rose coloured glasses.* The difference now, decades after their first oath, was that he was damn proud of himself for beating the system. He was returning to the city of his origin a modestly wealthy man: *You can't make any money...*

*With my wages as a miner, I invested in a small apartment block on East Hastings. I lived in one apartment and as the landlord cared for the other fifteen units. My wife, Betty Lynn, and I had two wonderful children in a private school by then...*

Arnold tried to give Pollard a final bonus of \$25,000 but the elderly man declined, saying that the 18% he had charged for his services was enough. Actually, he conceded to Arnold as a friend, several times the gold had sold at a higher price than the stock exchange quote, and he had pocketed that difference. They both laughed when Pollard said with feigned sincerity, *“As you may well appreciate: There's no honour amongst thieves.”* On the other hand, Arnold made sure he would have the last laugh. Each time he

delivered more bullion to the black market, he laid aside a few of the best specimens. The price was outstanding yet continued to climb each year. The plan was to sell everything he had except for about twenty pounds which he kept to himself. The price Pollard had paid started at \$166 an ounce and climbed up to \$633 within five short years. Arnold referred to his stash in the storage locker as his *Rainy Day Fund*. One day it would be *worth its weight in gold*, he told himself with a subdued laugh at the pun.

But Arnold was satisfied with Pollard and his part in the arrangement. The following month, after looking over the real estate market, Arnold paid cash for an apartment complex. His wife had asked him later in their marriage how he had managed to save up enough money for the apartment block but Arnold had always avoided the truth. Still, she was no fool.

*My wife Betty Lynn divorced me with no warning and with no explanation. Our divorce cost me \$35,000 in lawyer fees but I avoided alimony and child support payments. Still I lost my apartment complex and took on a new job as a city bus driver. I look back at my days at Roseville as the best of my life.*

Arnold thought perhaps he was being too candid with his bio. But he sent it anyways. Kate Huntley returned his email later that day, saying that she found his experiences fascinating and with an apology for the loss of his wife and family. She even wrote in sympathy, “It must have broken your

heart.”

*Perhaps, thought Arnold. We'll see after the Reunion.*

## 20

*December 2008:* Arnold was getting ready for the Reunion when a news item flashed on his portable TV in the kitchen. It showed a fly over view of *Excalibur Gold Mine*. The tailings pond containing millions of tons of lethal heavy metals like mercury and arsenic had broken open. The pictures on the TV showed some 25 million cubic meters of brown effluent discolouring the pristine waters in the inlet. Even though the mine had been abandoned a decade earlier, the effect of their mining operation on the ecology of the area was irreparable. Politicians and their spin doctors were coming on the TV, offering explanations and well rehearsed excuses. The news commentators spoke of the disaster in comparison to Chernobyl and Fukushima. Arnold watched a small part of the news cast and then flipped it off. He didn't want to be late for the reception.

Outside of Roseville, Arnold took one last deep breath before entering the school like some prodigal son. Instead of young men and women, the auditorium was awash in bald heads and grey hair. But it was no different in his life. He had always overeaten at the bunkhouse. The greasy food was free. Still, for the Reunion, he had on his best clothes, and was ready to dance if really necessary after taking all of

those Murray lessons. Looking over the room, at the old women who had once been his exuberant class mates, he missed not finding Patina (even as an old dame) standing amongst the matrons. Even after four decades, he couldn't stop loving her free spirit. If she would have lived, he imagined her running her own academy, training another generation of young women.

The Committee had set up round tables near the stage. Knofler was directed to one table where he sat down in a circle of total strangers. Each had been given a personalized name tag but even the names meant nothing to Arnold – as no doubt did his own. One of the women suggested they introduce themselves. A 1968 year book was at each table and it was passed around, the graduates pointing out their pictures to the others around the table. The woman with a corsage to his right remembered the antics of the *three hoodlums* (of which Knofler was one) whom she confused with the sociopathic criminals in *Clockwork Orange*. Someone at the table tried to change the subject. But not before Knofler guessed that she was the Schoolgate girl. She had changed her last name to Taylor at marriage. The women were more secretive than the men, Knofler surmised, with their new last names, as if everything in their past was erased. The events of his four years in high school slowly returned to him in the context of the people at this table. One stranger from across the table tried to guess that they had been in the same electronics class, but Arnold told him he was being generous

with an estimation of his intelligence. A polite laugh passed around the table.

“Just what do you do, then?” asked one of the women with the name tag *Rita East*. The game of ascribing status to people based on their professional credentials (or lack of them) had commenced.

“I drive bus,” said Arnold. “As if it’s any of your business.”

“Is that all?” interjected the man opposite to Arnold, responding to his rude tone.

“Before then I was an embezzler.”

“Any jail time?” asked the Ms. East

“No,” laughed Arnold, “I was too good.”

“So good,” said another at the table, “that you’re now a bus driver.”

Everyone at the table laughed amongst themselves. Arnold was back amongst the same crowd of snobs whom he had sought always to avoid. The emcee and his assistant, an officious plump woman, took the podium. The speeches started all over again, as if forty years had not changed a single second of time. Arnold sat hunched over at the table, listening intently but with a lifetime of experience at his disposal. None at his table, he surmised, had ever hung by a hair’s thread on the side of a cliff, waiting for a regal white goat to confront his own death. If he would have suggested such a comparison, one of the men at the table would have said, “Neither do we want to either!” and the others would

have laughed, while Rita East would have commented, “*Tarzan of the Apes...*”

The emcee was a tall man with grey temples, the type who went through wives like used cars. He introduced himself as Dr. Joseph Smothers. One of the women at Arnold’s table volunteered that the esteemed doctor had started the Children’s Hospital, and all the heads at his table turned to take a closer look at the man with outstanding lifetime credentials. The speaker hanging near Dr. Smothers was assertive, sharing one microphone between the two of them. Arnold was somewhat fascinated by his own change in perceptions since 1968. No matter what the people around him boasted of their lives and accomplishments, he wanted to scrape off the exteriors and take a good hard look at their real characters, not the fairy tales they presented in public. Overhead, the basket ball hoops and backstops for dunking baskets had been pulled up towards the ceiling on pulleys and ropes. The bleachers were still in place, worn smooth by thousands of new students passing through the institution since 1968. Dr. Smothers was reading off a list of all the students in the reunion graduating class who had gone on to outstanding professional careers. *Is he suggesting*, thought Arnold, *that the rest of us are deadbeats?* Finally he growled at the speaker, “Try some humility, will you!” But the women at his table went, *Tut, Tut*, and others who had overheard his remark looked over at their table with disdain. Then Arnold felt badly that he had lost his temper. Perhaps he was

still jealous of the accomplishments of others when he had been denied the same opportunities: *Not if I would have had anything to say about it.* But life had been good by any standard though he couldn't help disparaging the caste system that was still in operation at Roseville.

His failure soon after graduation was the betrayal of Patina when she was pregnant. Arnold sat in the auditorium, regretting not asking her to marry him, even if it would never have lasted. Forty years later, he had learned – *Nothing* lasts, so why not give it your best effort? When he was down in the mine, his mind was recycling his regrets. And now, back at his old school reunion, he wanted to be back in the mountains once again, feeling like a Neanderthal with a bow in his hand.

The commentators read out a few of the biographies that the grads had submitted. On an overhead screen, their pictures were flashed followed by updated photos of family groups around Christmas trees. Arnold was staring down at the table, bored with the whole event. But after a few more bios were read, Arnold's came up on the screen. He leaned back in his chair, dismayed to see his life exposed to the entire auditorium. They were reading from the *Bio* he had emailed to Kate Sumato. The emcee read out his name and his comments, saying that he had gone to work in "*one of the largest gold mine discoveries in the history of Canada*". An aerial picture of the defunct *Excalibur Mine* was displayed on the front screen, including the tailings pond that

had recently burst open. Arnold felt personally responsible for the disaster. His bio was read as each picture was changed, showing the history of the mine along with his tenure. They even had a picture of him (after showing his graduation photo) being presented with a plaque from management, Mr. Roth and Mr. Hutton, for his outstanding dedication. Arnold was clad in his mining gear in one photo and looked rugged and manly. In another picture, he was seen kneeling with his bow next to the trophy buck he had taken down in 1986. He had sent that picture in to one of the Outdoor Adventure magazines for a contest but somehow the Reunion Committee had tracked it down.

The audio visual presentation was completely unexpected. The people at his table turned and smiled at him with approval. Arnold wanted to crawl under the table. It was over soon enough and the slide show continued with other bios. Several of the young women in his graduating class were shown in succession, their faces changing from petite young women to determined business types as they rode the wave of feminism up to successful careers. Their accomplishments received a spattering of polite applause. One graduate in particular related how she had married a doctor and they had worked all over Africa and Asia, creating a foundation to heal curable diseases. People looked around the room at the same time, trying to recognize the woman with her selfless dedication.

An open mike was made available at the end of the

presentation. Brad Lynch took the microphone and drew the graduates' attention to the fact that most of their old teachers had passed away. He went through a list, reminding them of the special things each teacher was known to have done for his students. It was obvious Lynch was himself now a teacher.

Following a few more speakers, the honourable Richard Leech took the microphone. He reminded the assembly that he was the one who had given an outstanding speech as their valedictorian back in 1968. He went on to remind the auditorium that he was their Member of Parliament (MP) in Ottawa for West Van. An election was coming up in eight more months. With that in mind, he brought it to the attention of his electors that he had sponsored the *Private Members Bill* to proscribe *Universal Health Care* in Canada. A cold silence followed his comment except from Dr. Smothers who rose to his feet and clapped enthusiastically. Leech continued, pointing out that one of the other graduates in their same class had volunteered to become his next campaign manager. The man was seated on the far side of the auditorium and rose in his chair to a round of polite applause. Leech finished off his second valediction by reading out the address of the web site where tax free contributions could be made to his re-election campaign.

The next segment of the ceremony was stuck in a time warp. Images of the past flashed again and again on the screen. Faces of young friends appeared and disappeared,

doing school work as groups; dressed in gym outfits; swimming in pools with white caps on their heads. The presentation seemed intent on reminding each graduate of the wonderful opportunities they had shared as students at Roseville. At any moment, Arnold half expected the Reunion Committee to flash a picture of Patina standing in the street, begging Gregor Whitfield to marry her and claim his child. But instead another image of Mr. Rawley flashed on the screen from the projector. *Do you really think you deserve this diploma?* Arnold looked away in disgust.

Finally the first night of their Reunion was over. Walking home alone in the dark, Arnold was suspicious that *Patina Fitzpatrick* was never even mentioned. None of her contributions were listed. The omission had been deliberate. The picture windows of the homes on the street flashed incessantly with the colours of wide screen TVs. Before going back in to his apartment, Arnold noticed the trunk of a telephone pole standing on the outer edge of the darkness. More than anything, he wished for a quiver of arrows on his back and a bow in his hand so he could drive one arrowhead after another at that target.

## 21

Arnold made certain that he was not posted to drive city bus

on the Saturday night the Dinner & Dance were scheduled. Just before leaving, dressed in a new suit with a white silk scarf hanging from his neck, Arnold went back down to his storage locker. The *Rainy Day Fund* box was in the corner. His best hunting bow felt light and strong. Then he called a taxi cab to ensure he would be at the auditorium on time. But when he walked in, he was affronted. *They've got to be kidding!* On the stage the band for the evening was assembling their speakers and connections. In solid black lettering *The Sammy Burnstein Quartet* was stencilled across the face of the bass drum. For some bizarre reason, the Reunion Committee had decided to focus entirely on an evening devoted to the 1968 era of British music, specifically *The Beatles*. On stage, Sammy's golden saxophone was sitting in a cradle to one side of the musicians. On the curtain back drop behind the band a glittering poster was strung up as BEATLEMANIA 1968. The Reunion Committee was apparently stuck in the quagmire of the past, intent on force feeding it all back again to the graduates and their partners. Just to make the evening all that more ridiculous, the band members were four elderly men dressed up in the costumes of the early Beatles, with tight matching suits, black velvet cummerbunds, and Nehru collars. For special effect, the group had picked out matching Beatle wigs which they were wearing on stage. Arnold shook his head in disbelief.

Within forty-five minutes, fifty couples filled the auditorium. After standing around with a drink in his hand

and not talking to anyone, Arnold searched for an empty place at a table and found one that was farthest from the stage. His heart was accelerating but he told himself, *This has to be done – for criss sake - just calm down!*

A candle vase was set up in the centre of the table around a spray of holly. Each table had places for eight servings and chairs dedicated to each place setting. Arnold tossed his coat over one chair, claiming it for his property for the rest of the evening. Several of the women arrived wearing long gowns and had stoles wrapped around their shoulders. The men at their sides were distinguished and responded to the needs of their companions, politely taking off their stoles and putting them aside. Arnold sat in his corner table and watched, his eyes moving ceaselessly over the couples who were arriving. The previous night it was assumed they were all graduates from the same class but tonight, with the partners included, it was confusing whether the woman or the man - or both - had been at Roseville in '68. It didn't matter that much in any case. A few short speeches were made while the meal was served quickly and efficiently by a catering group. The bar opened after the first course was served. Arnold got up and took his first and most decisive step for the rest of the evening.

The bar was located at the far side of the dance floor, in the alcove nearest a door that led down a hallway to the men's washroom. Arnold's seat was farthest from the bar. To get there, he'd have to weave his way either through the

tables, or across the dance floor, for the rest of the evening. Once at the bar, he made small talk to the bar tender, and then, carefully slipped him a \$50 bill. The bar tender looked up in surprise.

“I have a serious drinking problem,” Arnold confided. “I’ll drink two screw drivers – 50/50 vodka and orange juice – and after that do me a favour and give me only orange juice.” Arnold flashed him another bill with the wink of an eye.

“You’ve got a deal,” the bar tender said.

That was settled. Carrying his screwdriver back through the tables, everyone in the room noticed that their hard rock miner was already hitting the sauce. The liquor loosened him up a little. Over dinner he proposed a loud toast to all the men and women from Roseville who had come “out of the closet”.

“I don’t think so,” said the woman on his left at the table.

“You have something against gay people?” Arnold demanded, feigning shock. “That can only mean one thing – you are repressing rather than admitting your real nature.”

“I have five kids,” she snapped back. “I think I know what my orientation is without – as you say – coming out of any stupid closet.”

“Don’t encourage him,” one of the men said from across the table, as though he worked with alcoholics on a regular basis.

“Don’t encourage me,” Arnold repeated, shaking his fin-

ger at the man who was peeved with the discussion. One minute at a time, the meal was getting ruined by the loud drunk who had inserted himself in to the reunion. Arnold got up to get another drink from the bar.

“Who is he?” asked the wife of a graduate at the table.

“A jerk,” said one of the graduates.

“Remember those three hoodlums who were always in trouble. If I’m not mistaken, he was one of them,” one woman volunteered, leaning across the table so as to speak with a whisper.

“Quiet, he’s coming back.”

The bar tender had poured a glass of *Minute Maid* for the recovering alcoholic, leaving out the Russian vodka as instructed. To the others in the auditorium, it looked like it was hard liquor. Arnold quaffed down half the glass in the middle of the dance floor and let out a loud *Auhhh* as if fully refreshed. Richard Leech MP came over to the table and asked:

“Everything okay here, folks?”

“Was before you arrived,” Arnold said as he slipped back in to his chair.

“I think you’ve had enough, buddy,” Leech replied, looking around the table.

“A politician telling *Me* I’ve had enough, that’s a good one.”

Leech studied the faces of the people near the drunk, trying to assess the situation. Arnold got his attention back

when he said:

“I hear you’re saving up for a tax deductible sex change.”

Leech bristled, ready to fire back a salvo, but one of the women found the comment hilarious and burst out laughing. She didn’t like drunks either but politicians even less. The man who was always on a voting campaign decided his best tactic was to withdraw.

Before dessert was served, and a few speeches delivered from the head table, Arnold was seen going to the bar for his third or fourth high ball. People at the table where he sat were alarmed at the amount of hard liquor he was consuming early in the evening but he deflected their concerns, saying: “Don’t worry – ‘tis high roller can handle ‘is booze!” He sucked down the last drop of his *Minute Maid* and went back for another drink.

One of the women at the table said to her companion, “Let’s move.”

“Don’t you have a partner?” another asked Arnold. Perhaps the empty place setting next to his own belonged to his wife.

“Yes, I have a partner but he couldn’t make it.” Arnold roared with his joke. A moment later he asked the same woman:

“Do you know what the words of the world’s biggest curse are? They’re: “*I now pronounce you man and wife.*”

“You should have brought your partner, you know. Male

or female, it wouldn't have mattered to any of us," one of the women at the table said. She had a young complexion but under it all was tough-as-nails. Arnold thought her suggestion was good, if at his expense, and laughed loudly.

After the tables were cleaned, the emcee announced that the *The Sam Burnstein Quartet* would commence playing for several hours and promised the graduates and their partners they would have a splendid evening of nostalgia. The lights were dimmed and the band began to play on the stage. Their harmony was surprisingly good, and the music well arranged. They started, singing in to several microphones:

*Eight days a week is all I need to show I care...ain't got nothing but love dear, eight days a week...*

Couples began to fill up the dance floor. There was a lineup at the bar as the evening continued. Arnold got up again and made his way across the room to the bar, doing the twist with his white scarf wrapped around his bottom. His antics were mildly funny. It appeared to anyone counting that this was his 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> high ball. Twenty couples were on the dance floor and more joined, dancing in each other's arms. Arnold staggered around them, dancing without a partner but still enjoying himself. The band ended the last song and started another one of the Beatles' great hits:

*You'll never know how much I really love you / You'll never know how much I really care / Listen – do you want to know a secret? I'm in love with you, ohhhh - ohhhh; yeah I'm in love with you...*

Arnold carried what was left of his drink across the room and sat down in his corner. The centre piece on the table was reflecting his face as a furrowed mask with red accents. He wasn't drunk and had to remind himself of that fact several times. At one point in the next dance, a woman came up to him, insisting he get up and dance with her. Arnold refused. In her professional life, she was a social worker. Male alcoholics were a danger to themselves and others. "You're drinking too much," she told him. "Get off your ass and dance!" "No," Arnold snapped back at her. She looked at him, noting that he was indeed still sober. This man was up to something.

One song flowed in to the next and another one after that. When the band began a Lennon original, Arnold sang along in a loud off key voice:

*I'm a loser and I lost someone who's near to me / I'm a loser and I'm not what I appear to be....*

As far as the rest of the graduates were concerned there was an obnoxious drunk in the auditorium. Trouble was coming. Arnold got up again and weaved himself across the dance floor as if he was thoroughly intoxicated, thrashing his arms in the air and singing along with the band:

*Say you don't need no diamond rings/ and I'll be satisfied. Tell me that you want the kind of things that money just can't buy...Yeah, I don't care too much for money / Money can't buy me love...*

Once at the bar, he ordered his next orange juice and

stood there pretending to be a maestro, conducting the musicians. People on the dance floor turned their backs on him. Out in the hallway, several men from the Reunion Committee gathered together to decide what to do with the drunken fool who was ruining the Reunion for everyone else. The men gathered in a circle in the empty hallway while the music played in the distance. MP Leech was another one of those never forgot an insult.

“It’s time to throw that loud mouth out on his ear,” he informed the other RC members.

The others agreed. Leech’s campaign manager advised against making a scene. He said:

“Leave this one to me. I’ll bounce him outside and he won’t come back in again, you can be assured of that.”

“Just like that?” asked Brad Lynch. “That fool is pretty drunk if you ask me.”

“It’s okay, Brad. If I need any help, you’ll be the first to know.” The bouncer in a pinstripe suit envisioned taking Arnold by the scruff of his neck and tossing him out the door, while the rest of the graduates cheered his decisiveness.

Near the bar, Arnold was dancing an Irish jig with one of his hands thrown above his head. The bar tender was highly amused in an otherwise slow and dull evening. At the doors of the auditorium, the committee members had returned from their conference in the hallway. As a group, they were watching Arnold carefully. Trouble was coming. Arnold put

the next stage of his plan in to motion. Turning, he entered the door to the men's room and went down the hallway to use the facilities. The music from the band followed him down the hallway:

*Lend me your ears and I'll sing you as song / and I'll try not to sing out of key.../I get high / I get by with a little help from my friends...Do you need anybody? I just need someone to love....*

He had his head down, washing his hands in the sink when the committee member stepped in to the public lavatory and said:

“How's the old drunk doing, Knofler?”

Without changing his posture, Arnold said:

“Congratulations, Gregor.”

To dry his wet hands, Arnold pulled a few towlettes from the pile that was stacked next to the sink. Very slowly, while wiping his hands, he turned and faced his old nemesis.

“What would that be for, from a bum like you?”

“For your appointment to the *Revenue Bureau*. I saw your picture in the business section of *The Sun*.”

“Huh! Highly unlikely you read the business section.”

“Sure I do,” Arnold countered calmly. “It lets me keep up with the fluctuating price of precious metals.”

Whitfield smiled back at him. His assumption, along with the things Betty Lynn had told him during the divorce and the old RCMP investigation, was correct. They'd audit the shit out of this monkey until he was trapped and behind bars.

While talking, Arnold rolled up the wet paper towelettes in a tight ball and tossed it across the room, in to the waste basket that was to the left of the door. The ball landed perfectly in the basket. In an instant Whitfield realized that Knolfer was *not* intoxicated. From being the predator, Whitfield was suddenly in some type of a trap. His first impulse was to bolt out of the door but with the slightest shift in his stance, Arnold challenged his response. The physical exchange between them was so slight not even a surveillance camera could have detected the nuance. Arnold was a superlative hunter. With his flight blocked, Whitfield was left with a fight.

“Aaron is not doing very well these days,” Arnold continued.

“Aaron? Aaron who? I don’t know any Aaron,” Whitfield replied with an ambiguous expression.

“Your son,” replied Arnold. “The boy you had with Patina Fitzpatrick, remember?”

Whitfield crossed his arms at his chest. A mask of anonymous emotion covered his face.

“You’ve been underground too long,” he said with a psychiatric flair.

“No,” said Arnold. A moment later, MP Leech and Brad Lynch came to the door of the washroom, to check on Gregor. They looked at Arnold but he stared back at them with a dead serious expression. Gregor told them he could handle this alone. They were hesitant but withdrew back to

the auditorium. Arnold and Whitfield stood staring at one another in the washroom. A strong infusion of dopamine flooded Arnold's brain cells. He imagined himself pulling back a bowstring and taking aim at the vital organs of another primate.

“I think it's time that Aaron found out who his real father is.”

Gregor shook his head in fake empathy.

“You're a fool, Knofler.”

“They didn't have DNA sampling back in '68 but they do now,” Arnold said with a smile.

Whitfield's eyes darted involuntarily to one side for a split second.

“A good lawyer is worth his weight in gold,” Arnold continued. “Think of what it would do to your career as a ladder climber if the papers found out you have an illegitimate son. Patina was 17 when you got her pregnant. The facts could do irreparable damage to your career.”

Arnold envisioned himself dressed in camouflage, waiting in a tree outside of the Whitfield estate.

“Are you trying to blackmail me, Knofler? Is that your game?”

“I'm just trying to meet you on your own terms, as you might well appreciate. Here's two suggestions. First, you set up a trust fund for your son. It could be anonymous of course. But it's the only decent thing to do, considering what you did.”

Whitfield swore at him, still denying his involvement.

“And the second item is this little gem.”

Pulling out a copy his *Notice of Reassessment* from his coat pocket, Arnold showed it to Whitfield. No explanation was required since the audit had originated with Whitfield the moment he took over his new position as the auditor general with the *Revenue Bureau*. Arnold folded the *Notice* three times and walked across the room, presenting it by one corner. Whitfield refused to touch it.

“You’re going to take care of this for me, correct?”

Whitfield was livid. They were standing face to face, within striking distance.

“Where’d you get the money for that apartment block, Knofler? We know you’re up to something.”

Arnold slipped the piece of paper in to the breast pocket of the successful bureaucrat, and patted him gently on the side of the face for old time’s sake. Whitfield smelled of private tennis and golf club memberships, and Viagra.

“It’ll be in your best interests to settle these two issues. I’ve included the information about Aaron on the back of the *Reassessment*, just to make the week ahead of you that much easier.”

Several seconds passed. Arnold withdrew, stepping slowly away. Back in the auditorium, the dancers were moving around the floor like electrically agitated planarians. It was time to get his coat and leave the reunion. He was walking back to his seat when a voice called to him, “Arnold!”

He turned and did not at first locate the source but again the voice called “Arnold!” over the sound of the music. A woman in a wheel chair came rolling up to him, asking, “Aren’t you Arnold Knofler?” He looked down at the woman, nodding his head affirmatively, but still confused as to who she was and what she wanted.

“I’m Kate Sumato,” she said.

Still he did not understand. “Kathy Huntley,” she reiterated. “We were corresponding about the Reunion. I’m so glad that you came.”

Too much had happened to him already. He was unable to connect with the fact that the woman he had been emailing was in a wheel chair. She understood his confusion and explained:

“We were in an accident. My husband was killed but at least I’m still alive.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to - stare – it’s just a – surprise. I expected someone different.”

“Did you like the slide show I made up of your career at the mine?” she asked.

“That was you?”

“Yes. Was it alright?”

“Well. Yes. Fine. I didn’t consider it worth showing to people.”

She smiled at him from the chair. Her long hair was tied in a series of coils around her head. She was obviously well cultured. The band was harmonizing like a barbershop quar-

tet:

*Here comes the sun...and I say its alright. Little darling, it seems like years since its been here....*

Suddenly Kate suggested, “Would you like to dance?”

Arnold didn't know how to deflect her offer. Kate wheeled her chair around and rolled on to the outer periphery of the dance floor. But the song had ended. The dancers cheered, applauding the musicians. Immediately they started another Beatles original:

*Roll over Beethoven, dig these rhythm and blues: she's dancing like a spinning top / got a crazy partner / Gotta see them reel and rock....Roll over Beethoven...*

Kate swung her chair around on its wheels and rolled it around on the floor. Arnold hadn't ever danced with a woman in a wheelchair before but he followed the music in any case. At one point, Sammy Burnstein rushed over and grabbed his saxophone. The notes bounced off the ceiling of the auditorium and saturated the dancers. Kate began to jump around in her seat, at times moving the wheels from side to side with the tempo of the music. Standing above and near her, Arnold tossed himself around like a spasmodic amateur, acting out a pantomime to the words of the song. After one set of harmonies, the band overlaid those with a series of musical connections and improvisations from the organ, drums, and saxophone. The whole auditorium seemed to be moving, the floor a live membrane under the weight of so many jubilant feet. Somehow, Kate and Arnold had grav-

itated to the centre of the dance floor and the other dancers opened up to allow them space. Arnold grabbed the handles on the wheel chair, and spun Kate in a circle. She laughed, clapping her hands over her head. There was no turning back from their duet. The other dancers stopped dancing and formed a circle around Kate and her escort. They clapped in time with the music, applauding the woman in her wheel chair as she turned it from side to side. Arnold jumped in the air a few times, landing on one leg and then springing back up. He was ridiculous but thoroughly enjoying himself and his new friend. The music ended and the dancers cheered wildly. The lead musician announced that next song was to be the last of the evening.

The old gentleman at the microphone began to sing the John Lennon classic - *Imagine*. It was a perfect choice. Rather than dance, the mob of aging seniors drew closer to the stage, voicing their aspirations for a world that had failed millions of times to stop its violence and plunder. A paunchy Sammy Burnstein with sweat running down the side of his face crooned in to the microphone:

*Imagine there's no heaven....No Hell below us...Imagine there's no countries...Nothing to kill or die for....*

The lights came back on in the auditorium. The tired faces of the *Graduates of 1968* came in stark focus. There was no place to hide from the dramatic changes of the last four decades. Dying was a natural and normal process. Arnold sang along with the rest of the dancers. Sammy ac-

accompanied them on his golden saxophone. Kate reached up and took his hand in her own and sang along with the others:

*Imagine there's no possessions...No need for greed and hunger...a brotherhood of man...Imagine all the people sharing all the world....*

Just as they raised their voices in unison, Arnold glimpsed from the corner of his eye his old nemesis on the outer edge of the dance floor. Gregor Whitfield was scowling at the whole assembly. But against the dark fabric of his suit, the *Notice of Reassessment* was protruding where Arnold had left it. Falling to one knee at Kate's side, Arnold finished off a perfect evening, singing with the rest of the disillusioned optimists:

*You may say I'm a dreamer/but I'm not the only one/I hope someday you'll join me/and the world will live as one...*

The evening was over. The Reunion had been fantastic, from start to finish. Arnold went to get his coat but when he returned, Kate was with the people who had brought her to the Reunion in their van. She said to him, "You have my email address."

Arnold smiled and said, "Yes, and you have mine."

It looked like Arnold would be cashing in his *Rainy Day Fund* sooner than he imagined.

THE END

