

# Old Man, Park Bench

Lee Chamberlain

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This edition is a symbol of Zviane's generous commitment to literature and the arts, a commitment of time, truth, and tenacity in support of an Old Man's dream.

A copy of this edition is in the  
library of the Thomas Moore Institute.

Old Man, Park Bench

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An Old Man  
tells a difficult story  
of a lifetime of consequences  
that follow the malign seduction  
of an adolescent girl. A story of the deep  
desire for justice and revenge. A story of love.

Adjusted Facts, Basic Truths, Remembered Fictions



...dedicated to Jennifer with love...  
there is no better moral compass  
than my daughter whose insight  
and wisdom, pointing as they do  
unerringly to what is right and  
good, are far more penetrating than  
a thrust spear.

*'If you're already in your eighties  
when you decide to be a writer, you'd  
be wise to write short books, quickly.'*

Lee Chamberlain



# 1

**I**n Dante Park, if you're an Old Man, having a place on a bench is better than not having a place on a bench; much, much better. The alternative, going to ground sort of, is damnably difficult for older bones and buttocks, and fraught with the possibilities for disaster let alone the sheer comedic possibilities involved in getting back up.

That said, not all benches are equal. The Old Man has a favorite. He's tried them all through the last few years. His preferred bench on the face of it has no apparent redeeming virtue that would place it above the other twenty-one benches there. Neither too fine nor too rough for its surroundings, the bench the Old Man prefers is no different in design, or colour, or materials from any other of Dante

Park's benches. They are identical benches with backs, all of thick slats bolted to iron legs and struts; slats painted grey-brown, legs painted standard-black.

But the Old Man's bench has the best spot of all in the grand design, positioned as it is to allow him to see the plinth topped by the bronze bust of Dante himself and at the same time to see much, even most, of the comings and goings of people with their accoutrements. So, plagued as it is with anonymity, with insignificance, mere utility, immutability, the redeeming virtue of this bench is its perspective, its point of view not only of the here and now in Dante Park, but in the sights it seems to conjure up for the Old Man when, sitting there, he closes his eyes to see the faces and hear the voices of those he hasn't seen or heard in too-long a time. Here is where he was sitting when this or that happened, or didn't happen: small and quiet groups here after funeral services in the church across the street; larger and louder groups of well-wishers after wedding ceremonies there; couples as close as close can be and whispering hopes and intentions; parents and their children in various displays of comportment; adolescents posing and posturing for attention from each other; people tending to their dogs; gulls



scavenging early, ahead of the dangers that arrive with crowds.

And through it all, every day, throughout the seasons, come what may, the bench stands its ground, stays put, doesn't budge an inch, just like the Old Man himself on important issues: 'What's fair and what isn't?' and 'What am I going do about it?'

## 2

**I**t is more obvious these days that the Old Man is in fact an old man if not an elderly man: white hair, disparate fashion, park bench, mid-afternoon. But many of his memories are young. At age ten, five years after the end of WW2, he opened his father's wooden trunk. His father had let himself out of the military a few years earlier, and here were his belongings: sets of uniforms, boot brushes, button brushes, a Sam-Brown belt, an officer's cap, and other stuff such as military manuals, the obligatory swagger stick, brass insignia and some other odds and ends.

At age ten the boy who is now the Old Man had a morning paper route. Winters were a serious time for paper-boys. The early morning hours like 4.30 a.m. were the coldest part of

the day. But the newspapers had to be folded for delivery, a nearly impossible task wearing winter gloves let alone thick woolen mitts. So, when he opened the trunk, Oh! what a find: his father's military great-coat, very long, 24 oz. Melton cloth, a high collar that held its shape even when turned completely up, and a double-breasted body with more than enough brass buttons to hold the coat tight against a winter wind or the throes of violence on the battlefield. On his ten-year-old body the sleeves came down well past his finger tips and the collar completely covered his ears. The hem was at his ankles.

He wore the great-coat every winter morning for years as he walked his route in the dark cold. He could reach into his bag, grab a paper, fold it with his bare hands, drop it at the doorstep and retreat into the great-coat's sleeves where his hands, ungloved, would stay warm. It was wonderful. And as practical as it was, the great-coat, the soldier's coat, was something more. It was the muse that surrounded him as he trudged alone before dawn, full of the drama of wartime with scenes of battlefields in Winter, rifle fire, distant engines roaring, approaching.

And then there were the military manuals. He picked each one up, gave each one a ruffle, and put it back into the trunk. The last manual

though, marked Restricted, stopped him cold. There, in photographs, were piles of naked corpses in great rough pits, emaciated bodies tossed every which way in uneven layers filling the ragged depths to nearly ground level with skin-and-bone skeletons. Where faces showed, sunken eyes were open, staring out at the abysmal array. He looked away. He turned the page away. As he dared look at the page following, there were the living corpses soon to be thrown onto the heaps of the dead. At age ten he had never seen such stark misery, such profound horror. He didn't tell a soul what he had seen until many, many years later when, in conversation with a friend, he told her about the people in those photographs, and he wept at the telling. He wept for the living and the dead back then, and for his parents who had since died of old age, and for his youngest daughter who died so young, and for all the other deep sadness that comes with simply living a life.

It occurred to him several months later, after repurposing his father's great-coat from warming-the-brave-soldier-delivering-death to warming-the-morning-paper-boy-delivering-papers, that he would have to re-visit and re-open his father's wooden trunk. He would not return to the horrors depicted there in the thick military manual, but instead, this time,

he would feel under the woolen blanket on the bottom of the trunk to see what it was that mounded the blanket a bit at its centre. There was some sort of outline there. But he had closed the trunk so abruptly back then that he didn't think to look further. It was thrilling now to move aside the other stuff, lift the corner of the blanket, and gape wide-eyed at an object made of old metal, a bit rusted, that didn't quite make sense: a sort of blade at one end and a flange with a jagged edge at the other, all of a piece more than twelve inches long, maybe fifteen inches in all.

It seemed at first glance to be a knife blade but the haft, the part of the piece that was not the blade, was not a proper handle either. It was rough, naked metal with several ragged-edged holes all in a row and nothing to protect the hand that would try to hold it; very difficult to use as it was. So, he was curious of course. In ordinary circumstances his curiosity could be annoying. But now it was ridiculous. What? Who? How? all urgent questions in a much slower era of hand-sorted, hand-delivered mail, slow-going-surface-transit, hard-wired immobile-phones, heavy-bound encyclopedias, and thankfully, museums. If you had questions back then, you had to go to where the answers might be found. He walked to the museum

the next day after school. He was directed to the third floor where a young woman seemed actually happy to see him, a kid carrying a parcel, something wrapped in canvas and tied with twine.

The two of them went to a quiet room and stood at a work-bench where she opened the parcel and looked at the piece without touching it until she turned it over to see the other side. She was a member of the museum's expert staff, and he was all ears.

'This is not a blade' she said definitely. 'This is a point, but not a dagger-point. It is a spear-point, a spear-head. It has a double-edged point like a dagger, but it doesn't have a dagger's handle. This point needs to be fitted to a shaft maybe five or six feet long, shaped for gripping, thrusting, or possibly throwing.' She demonstrated each of these alternatives as she spoke, gripping an imaginary shaft, thrusting at an imaginary enemy, and throwing an imaginary javelin. 'The holes allow for pegs or wires to hold the point firmly in place at the end of a wooden shaft for example. The blade is not heavy enough to be a lance or narrow enough to be much good as a javelin. It's definitely a thrusting point made of very sturdy metal. Look at the length of it. It's a little over seven inches, and the haft is eight.' Without realising it the

boy had held his breath during much of her entire explanation, and now he exhaled loudly which seemed to please her to no end. She said 'Let's go to the second floor.' She guided him to a diorama there where, behind the enclosing glass there is a life-sized and realistic depiction of an indigenous man in hide pants and moccasins standing at the water's edge holding a spear with a long, sharp stone point. In the distance, up the shoreline, there is a large bear wading and watching for fish. But on the man's spear are three large fish pierced through and hanging over his shoulder. 'The spear made a difference in hunting and fishing' she said 'and made a difference in fighting as well. We have a spear-head from six-thousand years ago found here' she said pointing to a nearby valley on a large local map. 'And there are other stone spear-heads from thousands of years before that. A person with a spear back then could present a formidable defense to would-be enemies. A spear sort of evens things up because a larger enemy, either animal or human, could still be nicked, or cut, or pierced by a smaller defender that otherwise might not stand a chance up close. It goes a long way toward reducing the imbalance of might is right. A spear evens the field.' She added that the spear was to be found everywhere in the world, in most every society,

a universally valued tool all in all for a better chance at having a better life.

So, with all the young woman's information about the spear-head in mind, it was a matter of delighted awe for the boy, now eleven years of age, that he had been given a jack-knife for his birthday. A jack-knife was 'du rigueur' back then. A boy was a boy if the boy had a knife, a folding knife he could carry in his pocket. He could show it to other boys, and to girls. He could whittle. He could make a whistle. He could cut the twine holding together the bundle of papers for his morning route. It was obvious that a boy needed a jack-knife to do a lot of things. And if you were this particular boy, you could fashion a shaft for a spear. You could whittle a place on the shaft for a perfect grip. You could shave one end of the shaft to a tapered point and then notch the point deeply enough to hold a spear-head.

The only problem is that back then, for all practical purposes, he did not have a spear-head. He had one, but he didn't have one, at least not one he could admit to having. He had taken the spear-head from his father's trunk without asking, so that was the end of it. Until now. With his own old father long-passed, and in this era of his own old age, the Old Man with his pocket-knife, his long-simmered



sense of fairness and justice, and his name Tyr, pronounced t-i-e-r, this Old Man is making a spear. The boy Tyr had never asked his father how he had come to have this spear-head, or why he had brought it home, or why it had lain useless in the bottom of the soldier's trunk. Be that as it may, the Old Man Tyr is making a spear. And there's a point to it.

### 3

The Old Man is at home. He's sitting with his wife. Although she seldom goes outside, here she is visiting the deck that occupies much of their little back yard. High-fenced and heavily-vined, the backyard is Norah's retreat, a way for her to feel the open air, see the sky blue or gray, and view again the thickly flowered garden and the four tightly grouped trees that fill the rest of their back yard, all this without having to interact with another soul save for her husband and their daughter who lives with her own family near by. The trees, a cedar, a fir, a pine, and a spruce, all not much more than tree-lings nine years ago, are making their presence felt now, two of them tall enough to attract the sparrows that inhabit the interstices of the back yard's vines.

The birds are used to being around Norah's near-motionless presence sitting in a cushioned, upright, wrought-iron chair in the shade of an overarching umbrella. She loves the display of flowers, perennials all: peonies, begonias, echinacea, delphinium, roses, balloons, ferns, fancy grasses in clumps, honey-suckle, day lily, deep-purple clematis, and a thorny bush the Old Man hasn't yet been able to identify; some tulips and small blue wildflowers are there only briefly in the Spring.

In Summer out on the deck, on the warmest days, she enjoys a cooling drink: hot water with lemon or sips of the Old Man's pale ale. The birds drink from a couple of shallow clay pots on a table of thickly woven wire. On the driest days the Old Man offers their small dog fresh water from a cup that he holds for him while he drinks. The Old Man replenishes water for the birds from time to time, or when Norah reminds him, and reminds him again, and again even after he has just filled the clay pots, again.

Today is a still-warm early-Fall-day and Norah loves it. The dog lolls across from her, his head precariously over the edge of the cushion on the heavy wrought-iron settee. Near her there are hanging plants and potted plants. The Old Man is tending to the watering, weeding and dead-heading. Norah watches or dozes

sitting-up but slumped precariously forward and to the right, her body's response to the tiniest damage done by an almost imperceptible stroke suffered several years ago that now exaggerates her depression and psychosis which are themselves the results of psychological harms done to her during her adolescence, harms that were severe enough to become what neuroscientists call 'adult morbidities' because of their long-term health complications, She wakes when something needs to be seen or heard, and then falls away again into 'sleep'. She alerts to visitors too, to her daughter for example, or her daughter's oldest friends.

The vines enclose them on three sides and today the Old Man and Norah are enjoying their full effect., a patchwork of green, red, yellow, orange, bronze, and here and there a bright red splotch, all of this against a myriad of muted shades of purple rising to heights of ten and twelve feet all around. Norah is happy that no one can see into her sanctuary; no public view, no social interaction. She remains outside until the Old Man, her man Tyr, calls her in to have dinner and then to watch the evening news.

After a brief clean-up of dishes, and feeding the dog, he selects the film on The Women's Channel. There is an endless supply of these

romance genre films. He has found one that his wife might enjoy; a straight-line plot with an A-then-B-then-C series of events wherein the two hetero principals find true love: The film will build to the suspenseful last minute: will he and she or won't he and she get together? The Old Man and his wife want them to of course, and know very well that they will, and yet they still worry that they might not. But then, at the last moment, the omg moment, yes, they will!

A film like this in the evening has been a good something-to-do at least once a week for some many months now, and has become more than once a week more recently. It's what works, so it becomes part of the Old Man's routine activities along with the more usual list for bed-time and breakfast-time, medications and meals, showering and shampooing, chatting and chores. Norah depends on him hour-to-hour, day-by-day. She used to read. but she forgets the story line now by the time she places her book-mark after reading a chapter. A few months ago they went over how to solve a basic sudoku, but she is unable to follow the process anymore. She finds it difficult to talk with anyone by phone except for her daughter, and of course for her girlfriend of more than fifty years, and for Tyr. His purpose these days, as it has been for some years now, is to

take care of Norah here at home in order to forestall committing her to someone else's care somewhere else where she might be vulnerable and unloved, a patient or a client instead of a wife and mother and grandmother and friend. So, the Old Man cares for his wife and takes care of things including the housekeeping which he tends to accomplish in guilty spurts of activity rather than daily, orderly housekeeping routines.

It's all doable although aggravating sometimes when he would rather have a wonderful conversation, or read a good book, or write for a while undisturbed. But Norah suddenly and assuredly misses him and comes to see what's keeping him and stands nearby, waiting for him. So, he makes her laugh and pays close attention to her until she is happy, and sits and dozes again.

The plot of the film they're watching this evening catches the Old Man off guard. The lead female's 'first love' shows up, an existential threat to all who want her to get together with her 'new love' without any 'first love' interference. The big problem for the Old Man is the supposed common knowledge that a person 'never forgets' a first love. The Old Man's nature is to take such assumed wisdom with a grain of salt, so he's inclined to get an

up-to-date perspective. He'll check this out in the morning because right now Norah and their dog Spirit are asleep on the couch and ought to head to bed. Tyr wakes her, wakes the dog asleep beside her, does the dog's final outing after pulling down the pull-down bed for those two, and then performs his own ablutions and heads to his bed in the room on the other side of the hall. On another night he might have mulled over some memories and musings about the common knowledge around 'first love', but earlier this day he had done his forty minutes of floor exercises and a forty-minute bike ride, some of it full out, some of it up steep streets. He's tired now. It's all good. He's asleep in moments.

## 4

The next morning, he wakes up to a fast-flowing stream of consciousness, thoughts about this and that and about 'first love'. He won't get back to sleep because he's slept six and a half hours, and because his mind on its own, it seems, has revisited the 'first love' issue in the film yesterday evening. His own experience with this issue didn't happen in time for his high-school prom night. He was in his second year at university when he found himself staring at a bright-eyed, peaches-and-cream-complexioned, curly-haired, first-year student who at that moment was getting everything sorted out. She smiled at Tyr and welcomed his attention. The two were immediately in sync and, soon after, in love. Before the year was over events and



practicalities had interfered. The young woman's father became worried as his daughter grew more and more serious about her young man. He was skeptical about the young man's possibilities. It seemed that he was appalled at the young man's actual-factual poverty, and at the young man's apparent-complete lack of connections and privilege. The young man had been ignoring these realities. The young woman's father one evening cross-examined her as she convalesced from a broken bone in her upper back requiring a body-cast from waist to neck. She had fallen from her horse. Father let his concern get the better of him. His relentless questioning ran out of control to outright brow-beating that earned him more than he expected. Yes, she wept, she had slept with the young man: she loved him after all! On the night of what became the young man's last visit with his young woman, the father stood in a darkened corner room with the window open to the flag-stone path and as the young man walked past he hissed 'Piss Off' with a deadly finality. As the young man drove away in the car he had borrowed, along the cul-de-sac that meandered past a dozen fine homes spread here and there across the forested hill, he was hailed by one of the nearer neighbours, a woman who owned a furniture store in the heart of the city. He stopped as she smiled and beckoned to him.

He rolled down the window to her approach, and she struck him in the face, catching him on the cheek-bone and the temple; no real damage done. But the message was clear: stay away from my darling young neighbour because you are unacceptable, in fact you are shit. Later, the young man Tyr learned that the darling young neighbour had been 'hidden' from him at other homes in the community, and then soon after had been shipped-off to a university on the Coast. He had taken such care with her. She had surprised him when she arranged their first intimacy. He had asked her if she had thought this over, and just before the moment of no-going-back he had asked her if she was sure, and she was. It was his first time too, at age twenty-one. Intimacy done beautifully. First Love?

Some many months later the young man Tyr sees a young woman he knows he's seen years before. She was a school-girl across a crowded high-school hallway. They were moving in lines in opposite directions. He had been startled back then at her appearance, the look of her, her eyes, and her down-to-earth acknowledgement of his seeing her; not flirting, not coy, not smiling. Instead, she had offered a serious expression of welcome and warmth and, without uttering a word, she seemed to

say 'Why aren't we together?' He remembers the moment, such a brief moment, so clearly now. He had been struck by her intensity. He had tried to find her later that day back then, between last class and football practice, with no luck. He had searched the following day as well, in vain and in agony, and again the next day in despair. But he didn't have her name. And he didn't know anyone who might have known her. She was simply gone, lost to him. Until now. It has been seven years, but here she is with a group of young women in this noisy bar. So, he is suddenly excited, astonished in fact, and nearly speechless. They have just passed each other in a crowded aisle between busy tables, she looking to her right and talking with friends as she heads to the washroom, and he on her left, unseen, on his way out of the bar and heading home. He finds his voice and, pointing back up the aisle, asks one of the women standing at the edge of the group who 'she' is. 'Oh, that's Norah' the young woman replies 'We're from the hospital. We've just completed our second year. We're celebrating.'

He is celebrating too. He is ecstatic. He knows her name and he knows where to find her. Norah and Tyr meet the following day. There is an immediate and lovely sense and sensation of easy warmth, the fitting familiarity

Old Man, Park Bench

of old friends, as if those seven years ago they had actually met and become friends who got to know each other well. So, there sprang up from that intense and momentary connection seven years before, from the sense of loss and anguish he had felt way back then when he was a boy desperate to find her, an urgency now for catch-up conversation, a need for togetherness, and a hunger for intimacies delayed. No time to waste. 'We can't let that happen again'. Tyr's 'First Love'!

## 5

A year later, by early Fall, eight weeks before their wedding, the lovers were seeing each other every day. So, she went to see him at his parents' home directly after her shift at the hospital. They talked about her day and his day, the usual stuff and then the unusual stuff. Norah had had a death on her hospital ward. Tyr had had a visitor, a messenger, at home. He had listened to the visitor's message as they stood together on the front lawn. It had been a short visit, just a few minutes.

'Who?' she asked.

'So-and-so's friend, his messenger.'

She was silent. Dumbstruck. Dreading the likely consequences.

They were walking. They had turned down the avenue toward the long, graveled dead-end: no cars, no trucks, no homes, a couple of shabby acres of weed-fields, a couple of corrugated metal sheds. They were alone. There were silences in their drama and awkward pauses in their soundtrack, the sounds of the city echoing off the metal walls of the sheds and underscored by the crunch of gravel at their feet. They hadn't had any trouble between themselves until this moment, this new reality, this interference. Hard for both of them. Their minutes felt drawn, their shared presence painful. They were dreading the possibilities.

'He came to warn me. He said I shouldn't marry you. He said you belong to So-and-so. He said So-and-so owns you. He says you'll always go to So-and-so anytime he calls.'

She was silent, speechless.

'He said you went crazy at a party at a cottage up-river; you were screaming wildly at So-and-so, sort of ballistic. Your friends took you away.'

She was silent, expressionless.

'I had worried that there would be someone else in your life before me, someone else first. But I hadn't thought I'd know him, and his reputation.'

She was silent. Not even a sigh. Please Tyr, she wished.

‘There was someone else before me?’ he asked.

‘There was another person I went out with.’ she said.

‘Some one you slept with?’ he asked.

She was silent, despairing. Let it go, she begged.

‘I mean a person you went to bed with?’

‘I stopped seeing him before I met you.’ She held her breath.

He was disheartened. He wept quietly at this loss. It was a hard realisation. In the 1950s and ‘60s, in his milieu of school and sport and family and culture, he had worried that he would be too late to find his partner, that every girl would be taken. And now here it was come true in a way; hopes crushed. The dream back then, the expectation, the hope of every older boy and younger man back then, was that his girl would be his alone, first and always, a pure love. Some of them had gone to great lengths to have their dream come true.

The two had stopped talking. They had stopped walking. They were just standing there. After a while he said: ‘I slept with someone before I met you. I understand it: fair is fair.’

If it's alright for me, it's alright for you. That's the way it has to be. The past is the past.' He was stout-hearted. He knew what was fair. He loved her. She was silent. She breathed in. She breathed a long breath out. So-and-so's spiteful interference by messenger and malice hadn't worked. It seemed to her that So-and-so was desperate, that he needed her after all, that he really wanted her back. And it seemed to her that Tyr loved her. She and Tyr married in November, in Montreal.

Norah graduated and got a job. Tyr graduated. They moved to the big city. Tyr got a job and Norah did too. They started their family. They bought a home. They had a daughter in '68 and she was wonderful. On their daughter's first birthday, Norah took her 'back home' because she wanted to show her one-year-old to her mother, but also, because she had had a call from So-and-so. She hadn't told Tyr. Soon after Norah's return from her trip 'back home' she shocked Tyr with sudden sharp accusations of cheating. Her criticism was awash with jealous paranoia and flooded with suspicion and mistrust. It took a while to settle it all out. It was an awful time for them. But they managed it, worked through it, for many months. And then life was good again.

Some years later, as he is walking down their



street in their subdivision, trying to round-up his two daughters for supper-time, Tyr is called by name by a woman walking toward him. She is very good looking. She is smiling. Her greeting is warm, heartfelt. Tyr greets Dana warmly in return. Both are surprised at this suddenly-out-of-nowhere meeting. Each is happy to see the other. It takes them a few moments to orient themselves in this unexpected togetherness: 'We were...and then ...so ... after that we... and that's when... and now... same street.' Tyr and Dana had dated a couple of times, about eighteen years ago, before each had met and married someone else.

And now here they are walking toward her house. After a few minutes catching-up she says plain and simple 'I didn't sleep with him.' Tyr is at once startled at her candor and happy that she is telling him her story. She doesn't say who it was she didn't sleep with. She knows Tyr will know. He does of course. He hadn't known she had dated So-and-so. He wonders if she wants to set herself apart from the other adolescents back then who So-and-so had managed to manipulate into sexual relationships. And maybe too she is showing Tyr that she is at least different from Norah in that regard. So, this is Dana playing a part in the larger drama that's unfolding for Tyr as she speaks. She

explains that when she wouldn't sleep with the guy, he right away bought her a ring that looked like an engagement ring, expecting that this would entitle him to sex. She was sixteen then. Norah had been a year younger. She was a high-school cheerleader then. Norah had been a cheerleader. She was an adolescent with juvenile thoughts and emotions of love and commitment and happiness just like Norah had been. So-and-so was a later-twenties adult with a plan: naked young female, tits and ass, blowjobs maybe, intercourse definitely. His emotions were lust and self-indulgence. He was his own man with his own early-twenties girlfriend already, more his age. Dana didn't know all that about him, but she gave him back the ring because she hadn't trusted him to follow through with marriage. She had heard things about him. Norah hadn't heard anything about him except that her father had given him permission to date her. Tyr realizes that Dana probably knows about Norah and So-and-so, maybe even knows Norah from back then, and is now here on their street, an up-close witness to the history that Norah and also Tyr would rather not have to remember. If Dana's sudden appearance is at all upsetting to Nora, Tyr doesn't see it. But it does in fact stir Norah. She and Dana are now neighbours meeting and talking after all those years. They commiserate

with each other maybe, console each other maybe, about ever having had anything to do with So-and-so. Tyr doesn't know nor does he ask.

But Norah explains who Dana is to another neighbour, a young woman who frequents Norah and Tyr's home, baby-sits their two girls, and is herself unhappy with her own husband and her lack of family, lack of children. She listens to Norah's recollections about her adolescent relationship with So-and-so, and notes that Norah had returned to see him again in '69 upon her visit to show her mother her baby daughter. She tells Tyr about Norah's apparent betrayal. Tyr is stung to hear of it. He checks with Norah right away. She is so shocked by his knowing that she collapses, is admitted to hospital and is seen there by the resident Psychiatrist. Tyr is sad for Norah's continuing trouble and pain. But he cannot tolerate her betrayal. And he is outraged that she tells such private and confidential matters to a neighbour. She is released from the hospital a few days later after a meeting with Tyr in the Psychiatrist's office. The Psychiatrist had asked a single question to which Tyr had answered no. There could be no reconciliation. He is deeply wounded by Norah and by her determination to not explain the nature of her visit with

So-and-so back then. He cannot look at her. He is dazed. He cannot understand her dishonesty, that she would risk everything for a visit with So-and-so. He speaks to her presence when he has to communicate, but he cannot look at her. They separate soon after. They divorce a year later.

Years after, when Tyr and Norah had got back together after their many years apart, and when Norah's state of mind would from time-to-time drift back into that corrosive jealousy, Tyr would listen to her tirade because he knew she needed him to just be there, and because afterward, after each episode, in an almost inaudible voice, she would offer him a further explanation of her visit with So-and-so. Tyr can recall several of these whispers offered out-of-the-blue, out of context, almost in passing, over the years: 'I had a better figure by then.' 'I wanted to show him what he was missing.' 'I had a better complexion by then.' 'I just put my clothes back on.' 'He was sort of stupid.' 'My father gave him permission to date me.' Norah didn't want to discuss any of these comments. She was reframing her way-back-then betrayal of Tyr. He could understand her doing this now. She had been in So-and-so's thrall for three and a half years, a long-enough time back then to be overwhelmed

by such a malign seduction, a dominating man with such a wilful lust, such an upsetting force, such an abusive selfishness, at her vulnerable age.

And it was even now still taking its toll. How difficult it must have been for Norah to see herself in a good light. Tyr's sense of the situation from the beginning had been to point to Norah's successes in her work, to urge her to follow-up on post-graduate education, to take pride in her mothering of their two girls, to feel the respect of her peers, her professors, her bosses, and neighbours in their community who clearly enjoyed knowing her. It seemed that it would take all of this and more to push back on the self-doubt and the pernicious downness that Norah continued to feel as a result of her prolonged involvement with the man So-and-so.

Tyr sees that various studies of female adolescents who have had a sexual relationship with an older male, clearly too-old, older than the current law allows for example, show a loss of self-esteem together with a tendency toward depression compared to female adolescents who don't experience such a relationship: in-person interviews revealed that the female adolescents who did have such a relationship show a pattern of regret and concern that, while a

sexual relationship was not forced on them, was not violent, it was in effect 'involuntary', resulting from the girls trying to suit the expectations of their older partners or submitting to their older partners criticism or weathering the various sorts of psychological pressures their older partners put on them. None of this is a good thing in the short term, and in the long term there is the onslaught of the 'adult morbidities' that eventually have their difficult health effects, both physical and mental.

Tyr sees that the downward pressure in such relationships, and their duration in the period of adolescence in which there is such vulnerability to stress, often leads to what is known as 'allostatic load', the fact that psychosocial stress can over-load an adolescent with impacts leading to health hazards such as longer-term cardiovascular disease, the chronic condition of obesity, and mental health conditions such as psychosis. The victims of 'too-old' relationships, and the parents and families of such victims, seldom realize the connection between such adolescent trauma and the later-in-life consequences. The victims of such trauma seldom want to make any connections to later-in-life consequences. They really just want to forget how it all started.

## 6

**N**ew Day. Early Morning. Old Man. Park Bench. Tyr's thinking back to how and when he began to set a direction on this matter of such cold consternation to him these days. At this age for example, how would he explain that he's making a spear. At more than eighty-one years of age, how does he answer the obvious question 'Why are you making a spear Old Man?' He can't tell anyone about his plan. He's alone with it, the entire thing. And now, in this early morning in The Park, he casts his mind back to six years ago. He's seventy-five years old. He's on his way to work with some of his U.S. clients.

He's rolling south in Michigan. I-75 runs way south to Florida, all the way down to the outskirts of Miami. Tempting. He has crossed

the bridge at Windsor, in the dark, just after six on a frozen morning. The guy at the border has looked at the work permit stapled into Tyr's passport, asked him where he'll be working, and waved him through. A wind from the West gusts hard across the freeway, exaggerates the cold, and shudders his Jeep. Late November. He's soon in Ohio, passes through Toledo, and rolls on. Some time later he realizes he's been driving the freeway on auto-pilot for who knows how long, thinking about things he doesn't want to think about but none-the-less have come to mind up and out of his difficult memories: hard recollections of things he's done that he can't undo, and things that he has suffered done to him, things he lives with. He figures he himself has to turn his thoughts more toward things that need doing-onto -others to even up or balance out the pain that he and those he loves... his wife, his oldest daughter... have suffered and continue to suffer still.

He follows the off-ramp to State 33 west and soon finds the town where he will consult to the senior team in a manufacturing plant operating under a federal contract. He has signed a secrecy agreement. This bit of secrecy is easy, nothing personal, all about technical stuff he doesn't deal with. His project is to help the senior team improve itself which means



trying to surface some secrets, some issues, that have hampered the team's effectiveness. Not easy doing for anyone. Same with secrets and issues of his own. So, he's there for three days and then travels east to another town for another three days. Then he goes south-south-east to West Virginia, and then on south to Georgia. He puts in a lot of hours over a lot of miles on a five-week loop. But right now, he's outward bound and has a lot of lone time: freeways, motels, think time. Sometimes as he rolls-on he finds some relief listening to NPR out of Detroit, listening to jazz-insider Ed Love providing a steady stream of soothing, smoothing music. When it's over though, Tyr is right back into his thoughts, and now he fears he is caught-up again in his grinding anger about those things he has suffered done to him, but more so, done to those he loves. He's decided that he won't just live with those things anymore, that he has to hurt the guy who had interfered so callously in Norah's life so many years ago. His memories of that interference have sprung-up more vividly these lonely-on-the-road days, so vividly that they have coloured his thoughts a deep, dark red. That's how he sees this whole thing now. It's the colour of his quest, his revenge, blackened red. Like dried blood.

So, he figures that just hurting this guy, ‘This Fucking Guy’ he says out loud to himself after many silent hours as he rolls on and on, just hurting this guy isn’t going to be enough. He figures maybe it has to be something more than hurting. Maybe it has to be life-ending. Well, right away he sees he’s in trouble with this ‘blackened red revenge’ way of thinking: this life-ending blackened red revenge is way, way too emotional, and he can’t be emotional if he wants to come out of this whole thing free and clear. And yet, he wants to make this whole revenge thing even sweeter by living on while this So-and-so guy knows with his every dying breath that he is suffering his end while Tyr lives on, and that this is Tyr’s revenge, and also that it is a measure of justice for Norah and for the family as a whole. So-and-so has to know he’s being held to account. It’s what’s fair.

As he rolls through the hours on the road thinking about ‘life-ending’, he figures he should take another look at the elemental facts that have provoked his deep dismay, and he grits his teeth just to think about it. So-and-so was a twenty-four-year-old employed man when he set up his relationship with Norah, only fifteen years old, a high-school-student trying to sort through the confusions of adolescence, trying to find where she might fit into the

world as she saw it. And then he ‘played’ her for three-and-a-half years, at the beginning to overwhelm her and then later to keep his hold on her. His duplicities with other adolescent girls throughout the latter year-and-a-half of the relationship seemed to be taunts to demean Norah. So, the ill effects of this uneven, unfair relationship, bound from the beginning to be harmful, became even more grave as time went on and actually became sickeningly painful in their after-effects continuing for decades, to the present, following the end of the relationship. It seemed a matter of spite and maybe misogyny when So-and-so, himself having married and become a father, tried to interfere in Norah’s life once more, a second time in other words, when she herself had been married for five years and had just begun her family. With all that in mind as he rolls through the miles, Tyr nods silent assent to himself: he realizes that he absolutely feels right about ‘life-ending’ for So-and-so. It’s fair.

He knows that many if not most people would say ‘Give it up Old Man. It’s not only dangerous, it’s criminal! And anyway, it was all such a long time ago.’ He has said as much to himself and yet he can’t give it up. And no one is actually telling him to give it up, because no one else knows about all this. Also, he has

done what he can to broaden his thinking to the point where he has considered the right and wrong of it in some considerable detail. He has concluded that the people who should have been protecting Norah during her adolescence failed her time and again, people such as her parents, her friends, her teachers, her community, and finally, the legislators who bear responsibility for the law in these matters. The legislators, almost entirely male members of the federal parliament, had allowed the 'age of consent' law to remain unchanged, sadly out of date, since the 1880s, and their new law in 2008 was too late by more than four decades to protect Norah from men like So-and-so. Had the law been changed before 1959, So-and-so's sexual relations with Norah would have been criminal, punishable. Such a law would have deterred So-and-so. With this level of failure, some level of recompense is justifiable in order to balance the justice denied to her. For Tyr it's clear that the perpetrator So-and-so has to pay, has to be held to account not only for his damaging psychological and sexual assault on Norah but for his maintaining such an assault for three-and-a-half years, motivated by his male sexual gluttony and by whatever other malign joy he found in the situation.

With all this thinking about life-ending

revenge, Tyr further taps his 'fairness' penchant in order to consider the possibility of some sort of alternative. He realizes that what's furthest from his mind in this regard is forgiveness. He knows he is not ever going to say 'I will not punish So-and-so.' There are some psychologists who argue for forgiveness as a way of foregoing the ill effects of taking revenge, in particular, the traumatic impacts on the health of the avenger. There are other psychologists who argue in the same way but cite the great religions as their authority: from the Christian point of view for example 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' But neither of these lines of thought are persuasive with Tyr. He is still healthy at his age, touch wood, and he has never been religious. He considers some other arguments too, institutional justice and social civility for example, and yet he is not persuaded because what he is feeling is the universal, primal need to take revenge for the very best of reasons: So-and-so's behaviour, although not against the law at that time, ignored the spirit of the law, and was truly morally wrong in his behaviour in many different ways, and So-and-so himself knew it and kept it all a secret because he knew he would be judged. And yet he persisted in it for three-and-a-half years. And then five year's later he tried it again. So, when there is no

protection, and no punishment, and no justice through the institutions that should have been taking care of Norah, and no guilt or shame or apology, or recompense from So-and-so, then some outside-the-system punishment by some outside-the-system person is justified. Agreed, it would be illegal. But Tyr sees himself as the person most rightfully positioned to see justice done, and sees his motivation as ordained by his own ethical code, his moral obligation born of the failures of all those others to understand and honor their own moral obligations to the adolescent girl Norah.

So here he is now, six years later, on his bench in Dante Park, reminiscing and understanding his urge to action, his determination to bring life-ending revenge to So-and-so. It's as old as the hills, this desire for revenge. It's right up there along with the other fifteen 'universal desires' posited by Reis' extraordinary study some fifteen years earlier, human desires such as finding acceptance, experiencing romance, having family, earning honour, satisfying hunger, achieving tranquility, and so on. And too, Tyr knows from the research by neuroscientists that the desire for revenge is felt like the deep-gut impetus not of mere hunger but of starvation. There is brain activity in the left pre-frontal cortex that prepares a person to

take the action necessary to satisfy the desire for revenge. Of course, a person can and does deal with all sorts of trivial instances of unfairness without needing to avenge them. Even a person like Tyr, with a 'thing' for fairness in every-day-life-and-living, can let go of almost all of these mundane or commonplace minutiae that they deem unfair. 'That's not fair' is spoken in every language in the world, every day, every hour, every minute, every second. But it's the big stuff, maybe the once in a life time egregious transgression, that simply cannot be ignored or forgiven. Tyr knows that this is what he's been feeling for a long time now: the unrelenting desire for revenge. He has ignored it for too long. It is, in effect, in his DNA: an increasing determination to do something about this persistent and possibly ruinous desire for revenge. For now though, he needs to lighten-up, to get his head out of this harsh space. So, he says to himself 'It's quite an ex-spear-ience' and then he groans at his old-style humour, and laughs at his own wild quest.

7

**N**ext Day. Park Bench. Lot's going on: a lot of people, a lot of dogs. The Old Man is surprised at the almost-a-crowd now milling about. It's an exciting confusion. He thinks 'OK, there's a gaggle of geese, a gather of gulls, a murder of crows.... but, what do I call this many people? With this many dogs?' He sees that the whole scene has suddenly been inundated with the confluence of streams of people floating into The Park towed by, and in some cases tugged by, their canines. So, he muses 'A panic of people? A dither of dogs?' The people with small ones are worrying and hurrying to avoid the people with big ones, not so much about the probability of barks, but about the possibility of bites and blood if any of the big dogs are brutes. The sudden noise,



the shocking cacophony of growls and shrieks, can be frightening to people who don't yet know about the sounds of canine violence. He recalls his own dismay some months ago, in the Spring, in this Park, when an otherwise stately Saint Bernard bared his teeth in an ugly display of vicious disdain for a Russel with longish hair and a too-heavy, stumpy body.

But then as suddenly as it had started the snarl of traffic is over, people and dogs gone. So now, in this calm-again park this morning, the Old Man's thoughts turn back to ponder the term 'A Murder of Crows.' It's a curious idea' he tells himself. A flock of sheep. A field of cattle. A herd of horses. But, A Murder of Crows? They are of course known to gather 'round wherever the pickings are good. They stand brazenly and stubbornly in the road while they pick away at eyes and other parts of road kill. Over the course of centuries of history crows have gathered 'round the public gallows, a place of murder, and for centuries before and since, they have hopped around here and there on the battlefield's fallen and faced the dead. 'Maybe it's their black beaks, their black feathers, their black eyes, their black talons, their black tongues and their happy acceptance of the dead as dinner, that explain 'A Murder of Crows'' the Old Man says to himself. He

mightn't have thought about crows at all if he hadn't noticed a few days ago that the several crows, five or maybe six, who used to eye the pickings from their high prospects along the edges of the roof of the church opposite The Park, are absent, apparently completely gone this year. He hasn't seen a single one. It's as though the Church, Madonna della Difesa, has shrugged them off, worried about their raptorous size, their noisy caws, and their effect on the attitudes of the more elderly parishioners

Not one to just accept the obvious answer to this curious absence of crows ---way too many pandemic people day and night in this small park--- he looks things up. He finds no evidence that crows have a penchant for murder. Crows will plunder eggs from other birds' nests, but their motivation is hunger. They are omnivorous and dine on what's dead as a matter of diet, for example other dead birds, or dead squirrels, all of them killed by cats who hunt in The Park. The Old Man decides that the science about crows tops the folklore. So, crows will gather around the dead body of one of their own and appear to observe and emphasize the death as a life lesson: fear death. So, crows don't just fly away. They confront the death of one of their own. To ordinary people it might seem that crows attribute the death of one of their own

to murder by any one of a number of enemies, from predators to just plain haters, and so they mourn the murder. A murder of crows? But it's more than that. Crows can actually recognize and remember and teach other crows to recognize the face of the person who does them harm. They remember the face for years, and they fear it. That's crow wisdom about murder and death and fear. It's their nature.

The Old Man remembers he himself gathering 'round to mourn a death, a human death. And he remembers a face from long ago, the face of a person who had done harm to one of the Old Man's own, collateral damage, but deadly harm. He has remembered the face for years. He has seen the likeness a few times over those years. He has seen that face in his mind's eye many times as he travelled lonely roads to get to his work here and there across the border in many of the States there. He wonders if crows not only remember the faces of those who do them harm, but hate those faces too. He doubts that crows seek justice or revenge for the harms they suffer. The Old Man has known for a long time that such crow behaviour won't work for him. Not in this lifetime. He thinks about the harm done by the guy whose face he still remembers, and he ponders the way toward justice, and he feels the depth of

his desire for revenge. There will be no formal justice. But the matter of revenge is another thing, something else entirely: one's own spirit feeling one's ill will toward a malicious other, a harmful other. It is animus and impetus and evolution and nature.

The Old Man is on balance satisfied with his life. He has had such enjoyment in so many ways for so many years. And yet, in thinking about some matters of his life still unfinished, he feels the psychological imperative for revenge, and he has come to see a way forward with an old man's sudden sense of urgency. He may have to run some risk because at his age he could simply, suddenly, run out of time.

## 8

**I**t's another very fine day in Dante Park, one of several in a sequence of daily improvements in the weather to balance-out the many shitty days preceding, days that were wind-whipped and wet-cold when they should have been the lovelier, milder days of Spring.

On this fine day the Old Man meets a woman as they stand in a take-out line, he about six feet behind her, waiting for a point of pizza. He has spoken to the back of her, repeating his words so that she turns to see who is speaking, and to whom. She replies and they laugh together, some gallows humour, funny words across the official pandemic distance, trying to be safe behind their masks. She comments about everyone urging everyone else these days to 'stay safe' as they part company, and then

reminds him that the longer version, pre-pandemic and pre-texting too, was ‘I hope you’ll be safe and sound’, meaning by way of connotation in this period of isolation and quarantine ‘be safe, stay sane’. The two of them, pizza points in hand, still safely and soundly distancing, walk a diagonal line through the empty intersection to The Park kitty-corner to the Italian restaurant The Napoletana. Famous. They lay claim to the opposite ends of a bench and, with their masks under their chins, sit and eat their pizza-slices, bantering between bites. They don’t talk about the weather. Instead, they acknowledge the bust of Dante presiding over this little park: ‘Dante degli Alighieri’, the poet famous for his Divine Comedy and its Inferno, and for his idealised and unconsummated love of Beatrice. There, under Dante’s noble gaze, the two strangers continue their conversation amid a benign melee of talkers, gabbers, singers, shouters, squealing kids, and bocce players some of whom are loudly contesting the lay of a ball.

‘I’m an old guy’ he says to her ‘and I’m happy to have you to talk to, if you don’t mind’. Instead of responding to his words of appeal she simply continues the conversation. No need to offer-up flattery or look for sympathy. No bullshit, no manipulation.

She asks ‘Did Dante keep his distance from Beatrice as a matter of principal or out of fear of rejection I wonder?’

The old guy replies ‘Or out of concern for family maybe, not wanting to do harm, the kind of lasting damage that can follow separation and divorce. Like, Dante was worried about Gemma and the kids.’

Pause. Pivot. She turns more toward him and asks ‘What did you do for a living, or what are you still doing for a living?’

‘Until five years ago’ he replies ‘I was an independent management consultant.’ He stops. She looks at him. She seems to be waiting for more, an explanation maybe, so he adds ‘I showed managers how to optimise the performance efforts of their workers.’ But she’s clearly waiting for more so he goes on. ‘I consulted mostly in the manufacturing sector, mostly in the U.S., and I worked alone, for about twenty years. Before that I had held a couple of senior positions, one in the public sector and one in the private sector, in labour relations and then in management development.’ He stops. He feels he’s talking way too much.

‘So, you have a background in psychology then?’ she asks.

‘Philosophy.’ he says.

‘So, how did you go from Philosophy to a career that seems to require some significant grounding in Psychology?’ she asks, and then ends her question with a smile, quizzical. She seems more than just curious or puzzled. She seems intrigued. Or skeptical.

He explains: ‘In my early fifties I studied with a group of PhDs, seasoned consultants, and I earned a Master’s degree. I went out on my own soon after that, like solo, consulting. It was absolutely exactly what I wanted to do. It still is.’ He asks ‘How about you?’

‘Like you I studied one thing, literature, and pursued another, psychology. I became a Neuropsychologist. It was absolutely exactly what I wanted to do.’ She grinned and added ‘It still is.’

‘So, would Dante have been right to worry about his kids if he had left Gemma for Beatrice?’

‘I think so.’ she replied. ‘The evidence is overwhelming. The potential for trauma is high, and the impacts can be and often are really serious for children. And are often long lasting. And there wasn’t a lot of child counselling back then. Still isn’t enough even today.’

‘What makes the potential for a child’s trauma more likely, or more serious?’ he asks.



The age of the child, the nature of the child's relationship with the parents before and after the break-up, the character or personality of the child, the degree of dislocation, for example the loss of friends and familiar territory if the household is moved. So, are you thinking of someone in particular?' she asks 'because your focus is different right now. Serious. You're not just making conversation at this point.'

He doesn't know how to respond for a moment, so there's a pause, and then he says 'I don't think I should burden you with my thoughts about this. And I don't have an appointment.' he adds brightly, hoping to lighten-up the conversation.

She stands and says 'Well I do have an appointment, and I'll be late if I don't leave now. If you want though you can look for me here next week, same day, same time. You could buy me pizza. We could talk.' There is a warmth to her words, and to her smile, and to her strength.

'Same stuff on your pizza?' he asks.

'Bien sur.' she confirms and smiles and walks away to her appointment, her rendezvous, or her liaison. He realizes that he doesn't know her name.

The Old Man is at first happy with her invitation to carry on with their discussion. But a moment later he's not happy after all, not at all. He realizes that he has begun a conversation that is, as they say, fraught with the potential for disaster. She has read his reality in a split second. She has seen him get a different sort of serious: 'You're not just making conversation at this point.' It shook him to realise that even now it is still so obvious. It was all so long ago. What will the Neuropsychologist think of him? How could he tell her the story, the whole story? He can't tell her of his intention, that's for sure. He stays put and perplexed on his end of the bench, and realizes then that he has been so absorbed in his conversation that he hasn't been aware of the goings-on around him. Park. Pandemonium. Pandemic.

## 9

**I**t's a couple of days later and he's still worrying about what he might say to the Neuropsychologist, and about how he might say it, and even about how and where he should begin the story? It troubles him to talk about all of this because it means he has to talk about Norah behind her back, about her part in their breakup. It's not something Norah has ever wanted anyone else to know about. She hasn't wanted Tyr to know about it, Tyr especially. At least not the details. And the one time she slipped-up and confided in a neighbour had had a devastating outcome. So, it's complicated. And it's hard.

It was a long time ago, only four years into their seventeen-year marriage as Tyr recalls the hard details yet again. Norah had just

returned home from a week-long visit with her parents. She had wanted them to see their grand-daughter, now one year old. But, with her return home from that visit, Tyr right away suffered a sudden onslaught of accusations of affairs with women friends, women neighbours, women shoppers walking in the aisles in grocery stores, drugstores, and elsewhere, and women at Tyr's work. He was shocked at first, so, in that first instance his reaction was a sort of giddiness. But immediately it was obvious that Norah was serious and desperate and persistent. He asked her to tell one of the psychiatrists she worked with as a nurse on the Psychiatric Ward at the hospital. She would not. Instead, she would immediately turn their sex into tortured, confusing tests of love and loyalty. There were sleepless nights. There were calls to him at his work. But Tyr talked with her, and kept on talking with her, about all of it, for hours sometimes, night-after-night, day-after-day, month-after-month for a couple of years until eventually and haltingly things got back to normal. No further accusations. A second daughter. Life was good. The years rolled by filled with work and family and friends and progress and success.

And deception. After the initial many months of the onslaught, when Norah's

accusations were at their peak, and then continuing during the gradual lessening of this difficult and trying period, Tyr had turned to other open arms for gratification. He had in his student years handled all those years of stressful tension in academics and in competitive athletics in high-school and university, alone, on his own, through sexual release, by taking care of himself, solo. But in his late twenties and through his thirties he would turn in this instance instead to women who were happy to have sex with him, made themselves available to him. No accusations, no crushing sadness. It was his way of getting through the several years of adversity with Norah and her jealousy so chronic that it consumed her and threatened her family. These were hook-ups, arrangements for sexual satisfaction without accusations, without corrosive jealousy. They were not lovers' trysts or romantic liaisons. They were happy relief. And they became a habit that was difficult to break. It was the classic archetype of the self-fulfilling prophecy, predictable in the circumstances. And he had to care for himself if he was going to be able to care for Norah.

One of the other outcomes of this upset in their lives was Tyr's attempt to understand what it was that had prompted Norah to express her jealousy so aggressively and viciously and

so suddenly out of the blue so to speak. He worried that it could happen again because, he concluded, her crippling jealousy was a direct outcome of the abuse she had suffered during her three-and-a-half-year, adolescent, 'first love' relationship with So-and-so. The evidence for Tyr was that she had been irreparably harmed. And now it had affected her family. The man So-and-so had damaged Norah emotionally, psychologically. Her corrosive, chronic jealousy was the evident and apparently painful and enduring result. Tyr didn't for one moment consider that Norah's visit to her parents had also been a visit with So-and-so. But it was. And it was the trigger for her explosive and bewildering assault on Tyr the moment she arrived home. It was just a matter of weeks to their fifth wedding anniversary. It was also a matter of Norah's emotions running out-of-control, reeling from irrationality, beyond her ability to manage her behaviour, and beyond her capacity for many, many months following to find her equilibrium and her togetherness with Tyr; talking their way through to a level of contentment, and confidence, and rest. She knew though how terribly she had betrayed him.

# 10

**T**he Old Man has stood in line for pizza today as he had promised last week, and has claimed a park bench for himself, he at one end and a pizza box at the other, a surrogate for the Neuropsychologist. He waits not exactly patiently, and is not at all disappointed. She joins him within a minute or two of his waiting. Of course, he has actually been waiting all week.

‘Hi.’ she says. ‘We have another perfect day. How are you?’ Her presence is exhilarating, stimulating, something.

‘I feel good’ he says ‘and it is again a perfect day. Are you hungry yet?’ He points to the pizza box as he lifts it away to make room for her to sit. He pulls back the lid when she nods, and she takes a slice.

‘You remembered, mushrooms and olives’ and, through her smile she adds ‘Looks delicious thank you. By the way, I got to my appointment on time last week. How were things here after I left?’

He considers her question for a split second: How were things here in The Park or how were things here in his head? He figures he’ll talk about The Park. ‘The place actually got busier, crazier, louder. The bocce boys were insanely into their game. I got out of the way, went home shortly after you left. I’m not sure how the man in bronze up there can listen to all that all day, every day, morning, noon and night. I’ll be happier here when this level of Covid-crowding is over, if it’s ever over.’

She listens and eats while he talks and she now has a mouthful of pizza just as he stops. She gestures, he sees, and so he talks some more. He says ‘In ordinary times the brides from weddings at the Church there would have their wedding photos taken here in front of the pergolas.’ He points to one and then the other and adds ‘The vines and trees are great back-drops.’

Her mouth ready to speak, she says ‘I can picture this on a quieter day. It could be lovely.’

He agrees with her, stops talking, and returns to his pizza almost forgotten in his hand.



‘Sooooooo’, she says, ‘these wedding scenes you mentioned are sort of the beginning of the sort of events that sort of led us to where we sort of were last week. We were talking about the impacts of divorce on children.’

He figures this is an accurate if not an elegant segue, so he has to decide in the moment what to say or what to do in reply. He leans forward on the bench, forearms on his knees, looking down at nothing, and tells her just a bit of his story. ‘My wife and I separated when our two girls were thirteen and nine. We had been married seventeen years. It was sudden, It was shocking to all of us. Our daughters moved with their mother into the city, nearer her work. I lived on my own in a rented motel apartment further out. We had sold our home.’ Then he stops to wrestle with his emotions, staring at nothing for a moment, until he looks up and turns to her directly and says ‘It’s a long story you know, and I don’t even know your name.’

‘I’m Soleme’ she says. ‘My name is Soleme,’ and then she spells out ‘So-lem’ and adds the silent ‘e’.

‘I’m Tyr’ he says and then, because he’s been through this many, many, many times before because it sounds like the tear in tearful, he spells it out ‘T-y-r’. But then right away he continues his story like it can’t wait to be told,

or like he can't wait to tell it, or like he can't wait to tell this Neuropsychologist, or like he can't wait to tell this woman, his friend. He says 'We were divorced a year after separating. But although we had then both met and married new partners, we both found ourselves available again after seventeen years apart. We took the opportunity to travel together to the West Coast to our eldest daughter's wedding. It was like we had never been apart of course. We eventually got married again, and we eventually moved here to be close to our daughter and her family. So, here I am in Montreal, in Dante Park, living not very far away. My wife is at home. She stays home as a matter of choice you could say. She doesn't feel up to socializing. While I am Norah's husband, I am also her caregiver. She is experiencing dementia. Also, she is on medications that keep her relatively free from depression and psychosis. She suffered an almost imperceptible stroke a few years ago and this is the main reason for her self-confinement. A little more than four years ago my daughter and I took her to an ER and they admitted her to the psychiatric ward. I brought her home as soon as she was discharged, and here we are. You know, Soleme, I realize that you understand Norah's present condition completely, and in a more nuanced way than I can begin to describe. I can tell you that I don't talk about

this with anyone. Norah wouldn't want me to. You may appreciate this particular irony though: Norah loved psychiatric nursing, did post-graduate studies in psychiatric counselling, worked in a prestigious clinic in Toronto, and later for many years managed a large group of street level counsellors operating in a complex inner-city setting. Her department handled a very large group of out-patient adults.'

Soleme nods, acknowledging the irony. 'It's always a risk at any level of work in mental health, from care to counselling to research, that you end up on the other end of the whole complicated process.' With that she stops. She wants Tyr to continue if he wishes; good to talk about it, get it out.

'I can tell you that the thing that eventually brought Norah and I together again happened here in Montreal.' he says right away. 'It was a terrible thing. I get an early morning call from the Police on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1995, telling me that our youngest daughter has died. I'm on the road immediately; six hours to Montreal. Norah and her husband are already on their way. Our oldest daughter and her partner are already in flight from the West Coast to their home in Montreal.

'In the event of a death, there are certain next steps you know. We meet at the morgue.

We're told the cause of death: 'suicide'. We view the body through a window and confirm that this is our daughter, aged 23, the fourth member of this family. We arrange for transportation of the body to a funeral home the next day and we view the body directly in a casket, say our goodbyes, and release the body for cremation. The following day we receive the ashes in containers, and go home. I remember it all. And I will never forget saying our goodbyes. It was a wretched moment.'

Soleme acknowledges the situation, nodding with her eyes down-cast to reflect the Old Man's still evident despair now more than twenty-five years later. He says 'I can never forget it. I recall it from time to time. It just comes to me, the three of us standing there together, close to each other. We're looking down at her. We are looking at her hair carefully brushed, her face freshly washed. She's in a rough-cut, pine-wood box. It's basic, plain, simple. I see a pink water-colour stain forming beneath her. It's a sad looking thing. It's from the autopsy you know. There's no mercy in that procedure. They're long investigative cuts. They're only loosely sutured. They're hidden by the white sheet. They're leaking. The three of us are clinging tightly to each other now.

'I whisper', you know, 'We can touch her'

and we do. The three of us lean down further so our hands can feel her cool forehead. We lean down again further to kiss her eyelids and her cheeks. I whisper 'We can talk to her.' But we cannot. We try. But we cannot. We weep instead, and with our weeping comes the awful grimacing and silent wailing of our utter despair because we see that here is the ending of her life. We see that we can never have her with us again. She will not be with us when we wake-up tomorrow. We will never see her again.

'After a while, after we have stood helpless over her in silence, we find our voices. We whisper 'I love you. Goodbye Darling. Goodbye.' There are others at the edge of the room watching us, the four of us, and maybe wondering about the absence of prayer or liturgy or ritual. But I can only tell you that, in that moment, we are stung by the sharp awareness that we hear only silence in reply to our goodbyes. And in the next moment we begin this entirely futile sadness we have to bear. Were going to carry all this in our aching hearts until our own endings, you know. We see that when this day is done, we have to face the truth that for all of our tomorrows we will be without her. In the morning we go back to that same room, the room of our anguish, and each of us takes away an urn of her ashes for our keeping, for the rest of our lives.'

‘When I left Montreal later that day, I drove to the Capital, where I had been raised. I had dinner in a restaurant in By-Ward Market Square where my father as a boy had sold vegetables from his horse-drawn wagon. I was feeling a lonely nostalgia and a miserable sadness. But, the food was excellent. The crowd was boisterous. I was looking around at the tables near me, catching bits of conversations, and seeing families and other arrangements of people: groups, couples, and individuals. At a table much further away, in a small group of people, was a young woman. I was startled at the sight of her. She was clearly enjoying herself, excited by the conversation. There was a lot of traffic as servers brought food and drink to various tables, so my view of the young woman was not only distant in this large room, but it was interrupted several times too. With each renewed view of her I became more excited, more elated, more joyous. I was smiling, ready to join the young woman there at her table. I stood up to walk across the room to her. She would be happy to see me. ‘Would you care for a sip of Chambord sir?’ my server asked. I told him that I would, and then I slowly sat down, because the group across the room was up and leaving, and because I could see that my youngest daughter was not among them after all.

‘I have to tell you Soleme that five days later, the evening of January 1, I stood in the bar on the second floor of the Windsor Hotel in Americus, Georgia, and talked with the head of a local manufacturing operation there. I explained how I would start the next morning with the group I’d be consulting to, and what I wanted hm to say when he introduced me. It was that work at that moment, the long drive there, the performance pressure, the focus it required, that helped me stay functional. But about two weeks later, back home from the U.S., in a corporate headquarters building north of Toronto, I began a two-day session with a group of new hires, all of them young women in their early twenties, each with hair carefully brushed and face freshly washed. I was introduced by the executive whose responsibility they were. I stood and looked at them and began speaking to them. But almost immediately they were obviously ill at ease and I had to stop because I realized why they were having difficulty with me: my words were spilling out so quickly that they were simply gibberish. I apologized, and I went home because no-where in that room with all its brightness, with all the plans for all those futures, could I see my youngest daughter. ‘I have continued for years to have those intermittent moments of despair, for years along thousands of miles of highways and now for

years, through so many hours of remembering on this park bench of mine, here in Dante Park. I'm happy to have you to talk to, Soleme.

He continues. 'Our youngest daughter was only nine years old when Norah and I separated and ten years old a year later when we divorced. The consequences of our breakup played out for our daughter over the next thirteen years. The truth as I see it is that the pain of the loss of family as she had known it, the sharp wounds of that loss, the scars of those wounds, were more than she could bear. For almost all of those years I lived in other cities. I was not present enough. I did not keep in touch enough. It was in fits and starts. I showed up at Gabrielle Roy School to hear her singing in her school choir, in Toronto you know. I sat directly in her line of sight about six or seven rows from the front, and now I can't remember if she saw me, or if we met afterward. The choir sang Jerusalem. I believe I could hear her alto voice. I cannot hear that song now without despairing. I listen to it from time to time. I visited her and saw her motorcycle and took her out for Indian food in little India. I saw her another time and noticed a bruise above her right eye and a scab on her cheek. She didn't want to talk about it. I loaded a trailer with her belongings and moved her here to Montreal. She had rented



an apartment on St. Denis a couple of blocks north of Laurier. I took her to New York, New York, to see and hear rap performed live; we went by train and had some border difficulty: an older man with a much younger woman, his daughter? We saw the concert that same evening. She slept through the next morning while I went to see the Frick Collection of art there in Manhattan. On another visit to see her in Montreal, I played conga drums live on stage with her band, the steady conga riff in a song titled 'White Lines', here in a hall on St Laurent. I visited her in the Fall of '95 after a kitchen fire in her apartment in The Plateau. I bought her boyfriend a new pair of glasses. He had lost his in the fire. I talked with her by phone a couple of times after that. And then it was Christmas. 1995..... I'm sorry Soleme. I'm so teary-eyed sensitive about this, so many years later.

'It is a completely understandable sadness' she says, 'closer to the surface than we think when we allow ourselves to remember. I understand.'

After a breath and a sigh, Tyr continues 'There is no substitute for family life is there Soleme? Eating meals together, waiting to use the bathroom, getting ready for school and work, homework stuff, clean-up stuff, weekend

stuff, and relationship stuff. I wasn't there. I should have been. I did not know what my daughters were doing day-to-day. I could not offer them meaningful support. I missed most opportunities to offer or challenge them with my point of view. I missed opportunities to cajole, commiserate, counsel. I should have been there with them. I believe that my absence weighed heavily on my youngest daughter's view of life and living. She missed the things that a father's presence provides.'

Soleme slips in between breaths in an instant: 'She missed your maleness, your mind, your moods, and all the other things you've mentioned and, more than that, she missed the security of the relationship of parents, and the confidence of seeing herself in her mother and in you, her father, and all the development that comes with whatever wisdom you had to offer, whatever she thought might be there to help her make her way. It was a huge loss for her I'm certain. A huge loss, bien sur!

Tyr nods, looks away, pauses, breathes.....

'Tyr, Tyr' she says, 'There is something else in all of this, under all your sadness and despair for your wife and your family, and So-and-so's ugly guilt. There is something else. I know So-and-so deserves serious punishment. You

have it all laid out. I get it. And then there is this something else in your story. So-and-so has offended you. He has slighted you when it comes to Norah, and didn't think about the possible impacts on other areas of your life, or he did but didn't care. He probably blamed you for taking Norah away out of his aura, because he had always been able to bring her back until you came into her life. You ruined his scheme after all, and shook his ego. So yes, you are looking for justice for Norah, and for your youngest daughter's suicide, but you are also looking for revenge for yourself. You see it all as fair: justice and revenge through punishment. It's long over-due isn't it? And here you are, this Old Man as you put it, thinking about what to do. After all these years?' Soleme slowly stands, then sits down again. 'I have to go. I'm not late yet, but I will be if I stay. I made my rendezvous for later this time. Will we meet next week, or sooner?' she asks.

'Next week is good.' he says. 'Will we meet here again? I am taking so much of your time.'

Soleme stands, smiles, nods. 'See you here, next week, or the Café, the Conca d'Oro, if its raining.' And she's gone.

# 11

**O**ld Man. Park Bench. Apparently Calm. Apparently Alert. Actually Anxious. So, he's surprised that it's a week later already, and surprised when Soleme is suddenly right there in front of him, handing him a box of pizza to hold while she organizes herself to sit down at the other end of the bench. She's ready right away and so is he. The box is open to her reach. She takes a slice, looks up, smiles, and says 'Hey! Where were we?'

She knows exactly where they were of course because she had been concerned, maybe intrigued, when he had had that moment of revealed emotion. He'd had to pause. He'd been talking about a family breaking apart when parents separated; evidently his very own family. And here she is now, ready to listen to

him when she doesn't have to listen at all. She doesn't have to be here. But, here she is. To listen.

'I've been thinking about what else to tell you. I don't want to burden you' he says 'because, it's a long story. I need you to understand it, and I need you to understand me.' He pauses, and then he asks her 'Is this okay, Soleme?' She turns her hands out in a gesture that looks like 'Let's get started', and he begins.

'We're here in Montreal, my wife and I, to visit the Expo67 pavilions, and the path we're walking on takes us right to the Indians of Canada Pavilion. At that time in our lives neither of us had, to our knowledge, seen an Indian person in person. So, we are excited to walk up and into the display area. We find ourselves in line to see 'indigenous artisans' at work. We move along together until I fall behind because I'm watching a guy shaping a face on a totem pole. When I get back into line I can see another guy up ahead fitting bark to a canoe frame and then another person doing something else, I can't see what. But, further ahead I can see my wife and I'm surprised then, startled really, to see this beautiful moment as it happens: each of the artisans looks up and ever-so-slightly nods to Norah, only Norah, there in the long, deep line of all

those people watching them work. She smiles at them and nods to them in return, a reflex, natural you might say. She's still smiling as the line moves ahead and away and we soon exit into the sunlight. I catch up to her and right away she says 'Did you see them? They were really friendly.' I'm enjoying her delight, and I'm excited to point out the obvious, realizing even as I speak to her that she hasn't had time to fully process what had just happened to her. 'They were way more than friendly,' I say 'they were welcoming you as one of their own, like a sister.' She's still smiling, but her smile takes on a curious twist, and she furrows her eyebrows at me: 'What are you saying Tyr?' We're near a bench. We sit down. We're quiet for a moment. 'I'm saying I think you have to talk to your mom. The people there in that Pavilion are real Indian people, tribal people, and they nodded to you because they see who you really are.'

'The bench we're on is in the shade. We just sit there for a while, quiet, settling into the situation, waiting for the next thought. And then Norah tells me about this weird experience she had when she was fourteen years old. She was with her girlfriends at a bus-stop on a corner near their high-school. They're standing there waiting, going home their separate ways, and they're still all yakking. A man gets off a bus

and approaches them. But he speaks directly to Norah and asks ‘How are you today?’ Then he asks her if she is on her way home and does she have a good family and are her parents good to her, and does she have any siblings there at home. The other girls move off to the side to carry-on their own conversations. Although Norah feels strange about the situation, it’s all out in the open, and the man’s words and demeanor show genuine concern and nothing else otherwise peculiar. She reassures him that she has good parents, a younger brother, and almost everything she wants. He says ‘Maybe you don’t realise why I’m asking. But sometimes parents may not be good to the children they adopt.’ Norah is taken aback and tells him she is not adopted and also that he is completely wrong. He says ‘I’ve lived with your people up the valley there for quite a while.’ And then he walks away but says over his shoulder ‘You’re adopted.’ She gets home and tells her parents about her bus-stop conversation. They see she’s not worried. Nonetheless, they take care to reassure her so that she has no second thoughts. Her mom tells her about giving birth to her, about how the pregnancy was fine although a bit uncomfortable toward the end. She describes going to the hospital, how the doctors and nurses were good to her, and how Norah looked when she was born. They show

Norah pictures. That was the end of it. No talk of adoption. No talk of Indians either.

‘So, here on a bench on Ile Notre-dame, Norah looks at me. I look at her. I raise my eyebrows. She says ‘The man was wrong. But I think he was sort of right too. These people think I’m one of them. I think my mother is one of them. I think she’s an Indian, a Canadian Indian, like, a native Canadian. I’ll tell her about today’s surprise. I’m going to ask her about her own mother, my grandmother. She lived on a small farm near a small town south and west of us. I was young when we went out there. She showed me how to make a tiny doll out of straw, and a tiny canoe out of bark. It all makes sense now.

‘So, Norah and her mother talk all about her grandparents born in the late 1800s, both of them Mohawk, she from Oka for sure, and he from St. Regis she thinks. They had a small acreage, a horse and wagon, a big garden and a family that included several sons, brothers to Norah’s mother. There were nephews and nieces too, and Norah new them all. But she hadn’t known they were Indian. Norah’s father had known this all along of course. Norah’s mother had told him right from the beginning when she knew he was getting serious about her. And now, when Norah is in the midst of



coming to grips with this new take on who she really is, her father tells her not to tell people about it because it may confuse them and even push some of them away from her and her family. Norah sees that her father had set the rules for her mother around this whole matter of her heritage. He may have been worried that the truth might cost him socially, and might cost him some business too. She sees that her mother couldn't talk about the man at the bus-stop almost ten years ago. And she sees that none of her mother's family had been invited to Norah's wedding three years ago here in Montreal, not that far from Oka. She sees as well that she was not able to inform me, or warn me maybe, that I was marrying a young woman from the Jewish community, but also a woman of mixed heritage too. Part Indian.

'She also sees that she herself really isn't Jewish because her mother is not of Jewish descent and, as a result, her non-Jewish mother cannot bestow Jewishness on her offspring, neither Norah nor her brother; the line of Jewish heritage has already been severed. And she begins to understand some other aspects of her life and living; especially her feeling of being both in and out of the community. When she turned twelve and began to feel more aware of herself, she had wondered why the mother

of her friend across the street always avoided having her into his house, although he was often in young Norah's house, playing with her there. There were other, similar instances. And at age 13 she was transferred from an academic high-school to a 'practical' high-school because she appeared to have a problem with 'her numbers' said one of her teachers, and her parents simply agreed. And at age 14 there was, at her community's School where she was enrolled in extra-curricular religious learning, the man who held her and kissed her hair and cheek and hugged her and eventually began touching her, but who gave it up when she threatened him. And at age 15 there was the senior male counselor at Summer Camp who tracked her down on one of the paths through the campground's forest and tried to get her to the ground but failed, awkward in his lust, leaving himself open to kicks and scratches, and she escaped. And there was the fact that no one in her local community's clergy would officiate at her marriage in 1964 when she was 20. So, she was married in Montreal, and here was her husband Tyr to prove it. He had visited with a Rabbi here in Montreal, learned to say the Shema, renounced his Christian upbringing, satisfied the Rabbi, thank you Mammon, that he was worthy of marriage to the young Jewish woman Norah, and so it was done.

‘And then she sees all the other things. It seems to her now that some or many in her community had known all along that she was ‘Indian’. But she hadn’t known, until Expo 67, on the occasion of the beautiful greeting given to her so quietly and so generously by the indigenous artisans in their own Pavilion, the Indians of Canada Pavilion. And too, she sees that when she was fifteen and her father allowed a twenty-four-year-old man to ‘date’ her, her father himself had imagined that she would not find a Jewish husband in his community, and so he should look out for other opportunities for her. But it was not an accidental arrangement she sees now: the twenty-four-year-old man, not Jewish, turned out to be a friend or acquaintance of the senior male counsellor from the Summer Camp, the guy who had first attempted sexual violence toward Norah. What must he have said about Norah to his friend, the man who had since then asked her father for permission to ‘date’ her? Norah realises now that she has been at a devastating disadvantage for years, the years when she was seen through the lens of demeaning prejudice that allowed her to be victimized, a young woman that was fair-game because she was somehow less worthy, maybe ‘easier’ than other girls and women, an Indian girl you wouldn’t introduce to your parents. What a terrible nonsense

imposed on an unsuspecting Norah, and what a good excuse for a grown man who wouldn't have to feel guilty about how he mistreated her, a 'squaw', in those days. And then the final insight: her father's Friday evenings, after shots with the boys, rye liquor neat, the violence he often did to his wife, and to his son who tried to defend her, Norah's mother.'

Sitting here in The Park I know I've said a mouthful. I have told my Neuropsychologist a long story. So, I stop, but I am caught up for a moment in quite an obvious question, and so I pause. I say nothing for some moments while I wonder why I hadn't known earlier, much, much earlier in our relationship, that Norah was, in part, Indian, a First Nations descendant. I am startled by my own mind's eye recalling the features of Norah's eyes when I first saw her, and revealed again in her graduation portrait, clearly showing the epicanthal folds in her eye's inner corners. They were beautiful. And I had never wondered about them. And they gradually gave way to time and change and were a less obvious trait.

'You're a good listener Soleme.' I tell her. She has listened so attentively, meeting my eyes when I was emphasising something. She seemed to reflect key moments in the story as

it unfolded. She says 'It's OK. You have me on tenterhooks. But I've got to go or I'll be too late by a lot. Will you tell me about the twenty-four-year-old when we talk next week?' She is already on the move. But she stops. She turns back to me. She says 'The teacher and the counsellor were both assailants. Those were assaults, sexual assaults. Her father's violence toward her mother makes three. They were all shits. Three real shits. They shouldn't have got away with it. They didn't, did they? Let's meet at the Café if it's raining.'

## 12

The question Soleme has asked as she leaves him to attend her appointment is sharply resonant for the Old Man. ‘They didn’t, did they?’ Of course, of course they did. It’s the late 50’s and early 60s. Both the religion teacher and the Summer Camp counsellor got away with ‘it’, that is, were never held to account for their albeit failed attempts at sex with Norah. She didn’t tell anyone. And Norah’s mother had never complained about her husband’s violence, so he too got away with ‘it’. What’s worse though is that So-and-so got away free and clear with a whole lot more. And did a whole lot more damage. During the years of Norah’s adolescence, with out-of-date age of consent laws, predators like So-and-so were free to have a consensual sexual relationship with an

adolescent as young as fourteen. He was free and clear under the law as long as 15-year-old Norah accepted his advances. So, he got her agreement. In today's terminology it was 'involuntary' sexual relations, so, not forced, but not honestly consensual, not opposed, not desired, an accommodation, not illegal. So of course, of course he got away with it. Her father had approved of his dating Norah. As well, she was at that time in her adolescence when she was looking for where she could 'fit in' given her confused sense of place in her community. Also, the older adolescent boys attending the Summer Camp and the religion and language School seem likely to have been warned away from dating Norah because of her mixed status. And also, her transfer from an academic high-school to a more 'practical' high-school had shaken her confidence in herself, and she needed some success around the whole 'confidence issue'. And the reality for her, face to face with the man So-and-so, was that he was handsome, athletic, fashion conscious, and showed a flattering appreciation for her looks, including her figure and her role as a high-school cheer-leader. And he had a car. It was really just a matter of time, after enough attention to her and enough discussion with her about what a proper relationship with him should entail, that she would accommodate him sexually.

It was a time when she could feel sexual and curious and ready for a sense of interpersonal fulfillment. But it was a malign seduction. This was not an adolescent-to-adolescent experiment between a couple of high-schoolers who would break-up at the end of the term or at the end of the school year. It was in effect an abuse. This was an adult male with a strategy to satisfy his greedy lust for a really good-looking, really fresh-young, never-been -touched piece of ass. It was as plain and simple as that to any aware observer. And, inherent in that strategy was the abuse of interpersonal power, the establishment of male dominance and the complete rejection of the spirit of the law to protect adolescents. A generally known rule around all this back then was ‘the rule of a half plus seven’: a man should not have a sexual relationship with a person younger than half his age plus seven years. At his age of 24 years, So-and-so’s appropriate partner would have to be at least 19. So-and-so operated entirely outside of these boundaries though, and managed to make it work for him for three-and-a half years with Norah and with other adolescents for some years before, during and after Norah. And for Norah it became an emotional disaster that, to this day, has had no end, burdened as she assuredly is now with what Neuropsychologists call ‘adult morbidities’, the adult harms that result from



adolescent psychological trauma that she feels now in her late seventies and has felt for all the years in between.

In the time of Norah's adolescence there was no 'Me Too' movement with its audacity and morality and social communication platforms and strength and leadership. There were some individual adult women here and there who expressed their concerns back then with what they saw as a somewhat common arrangement of 14 and 15-year-old girls having sex with men in their twenties in relationships that were plainly destructive and harmful to those girls. But there was no broad social movement that could amplify those concerns. There was much left unsaid about all sorts of issues back then including this sort of male behaviour. It was handled quietly, if it was handled at all. Hush-hush. There were few if any public discussions of sexual assaults on adolescent girls. What made the news back then were the successfully prosecuted crimes of violent rape when victims had been hospitalized, or had died from injuries or had been murdered outright. The quiet rapes, with no apparent physical injuries and no apparent mental injuries, seldom became police matters. So, the many incidents of involuntary sexual relations between men in their twenties and

minors, for example adolescents like Norah who had reached the age of consent, were hardly ever, were very rarely ever, discovered and discussed. So, no one really thought about the seductive strategies of men in their twenties or older. On the other-hand if they were found-out, if such a relationship became known, there might be some comments about 'cradle-robbing' or other criticism. There was however no significant outcry or condemnation. There was little social support for those adolescents, few if any vigilantes, and none you would hear of. The twenty-year-olds were smart enough to keep their too-young girls under wraps; never seen in public, or at movies, in restaurants, at parties or on picnics or the like, and never introduced to the men's parents or social groups. They were one-on-one hidden relationships that happened in the back seats of cars, in beds in motels, on sofas in homes, on the grass in parks in evenings or at night. Furtive. Unequal. Usurious. Duplicitous. Harmful in the short-term and the long-term too, but not to the men involved, not to the hunters in this old and miserable chase, just their quarry, the much-too-young females in the passing social herd, cut-out of the crowd, hunted down, carefully caught, to be stripped naked, sexually used, and eventually emotionally devastated.

Tyr will have to tell Soleme something about all of this. He wants to know where she stands on the idea of a serious come-uppance for one such hunter in particular, now an old man, So-and-so, whose behaviour way back then is still affecting Norah here and now. He has not been held to account for that. And another outcome of his greedy-needy interference in Norah's life is the collateral damage to Norah's family, specifically, the break-up with Tyr, and the subsequent and resulting loss of their youngest daughter. So, there's really no way Tyr will back away from his intent at this point, which means that he has to tell her about the spear, which means that he might seem to her bizarre or foolish or childish. He figures he should start at the beginning, report his truth, explain his thinking, and let the chips fall where they may.

# 13

**I**t's still a couple of days before Soleme's next visit with the Old Man on his Park Bench, or at the Café if it's raining. He sees that he himself is filled with anticipation. Or maybe something more. He feels a compelling interest in her. He figures that here is a person with intelligence, empathy, and maturity, with accreditation as a Neuropsychologist and with an apparent grasp of the arts and letters that shape liberal ethics and social civility. She has, too, an attitude that manifests hope for the future, and a determination to help others move in that direction whenever and wherever possible. Also, she seems to have a practical perspective around what's possible and what isn't. He really wants her to understand his point about So-and-so's guilt, and his point

about the spear. What will she think about that? He's looking for her approval. It would be wonderful, although not essential, to have her on his side.

At this point, Tyr's mind independently pivots to an entirely different but entirely predictable perspective of his own. He's suddenly wondering if her practical perspective about what's possible runs as far as her having a relationship with an older man or, let's face it, a man who is in plain fact old already. He thinks that she has been in a relationship, maybe only one, and is imagining the possibility of one more. He knows that he is obviously not at all a good long-term prospect. But short term is good he figures. Then, he reminds himself that every evening he puts Norah to bed after making sure she has had her meds and has brushed her teeth and has peed. He cleans off her bare feet just before she gets under the sheet. He places the blankets as she prefers, asks her if she's ready, tells her goodnight, tells her guardian dog Spirit goodnight, wishes her a good sleep and closes off the light after making certain that the door is ajar to just the right angle. The finale of this ritual is his own bedtime. Who else is going to do any of that if Tyr isn't around when he should be? He tells himself to get real about

having a sex life again. And then he keeps on thinking about it.

He realizes that Soleme doesn't know how old he is. His looks are deceiving; still athletic, no belly, some back-bacon, but not much, no stoop in his posture, and lots of hair on his old head. And, so far so good, he still has his wits about him. She may have made some estimates, some guesses, but she doesn't really know that he is eighty-one plus. He realizes that maybe none of this stuff is even on her mind. He figures she figures he's late sixties. Tyr can't guess her age at all except to see her as at least middle-aged. All that aside, he knows that some significant part of his interest is no doubt premised on the unhappy fact that he hasn't had a sex partner for years. He had decided on celibacy eight or nine years ago when Norah had begun to show some early signs of physical difficulty, physical pain actually, from severe irritation of her inner workings, especially delicate linings. So, his best interests were completely at odds with her best interests, and there was no medical fix. That was the end of it. In more normal circumstances there might have been some workable solution to their interpersonal intimacy problems. But Norah's circumstances are not normal. Thinking about it now, he is

surprised that so much time has passed since then. He figures ‘Hey! It’s been a while.’

He drags his mind back to the matter first at hand; having Soleme on his side. The issue will finally come down to her thoughts on revenge. If she takes a religious stance on this, her answer will include the admonition *Thou Shall Not Kill*, or at the very least the advice to *Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto You*. He sees her as more secular in her attitude though, ready to look at realities, ready to consider each situation on ‘the merits’ as they say. He figures she is more likely to favour a ‘Humanist’ rather than a ‘Theist’ point of view in no small part because Neuropsychologists are science-oriented in their studies, their learning and their calling. For example, their world-view likely includes *evolution* as opposed to *creation* and so they would look at the evidence for ‘revenge’ as an evolved penchant. Soleme would see that most people are motivated to seek revenge against a transgressor, and that this desire for revenge has been part of human biology from very early on. It’s part of human culture everywhere, found in any justice system that takes the task of revenge away from the individual and gives it to society in order to avoid the chaos that would otherwise reign. Tyr understands and agrees with this

when the system works as it should, allowing for the unevenness in how justice is meted out. But when the system fails, what's to be done?

In earlier times in human history, when laws began to be written down and organized, codified law about retaliation provided that a victim should be entitled to punish the victimizer to an extent equal to the victim's suffering. The big religions had rules like 'an eye for an eye' in the Old Testament. The New Testament told victims to 'turn the other cheek' and in doing so leave law and retaliation to the Lord and His wrath. For all sorts of reasons, none of that works for Tyr. The main reason though is that he is looking to win justice from an unrepentant victimizer, as in 'I did nothing wrong, but if I did do something wrong it wasn't against the law, and I did nothing that other guys my age wouldn't have done if they had had the balls and the brains and the attributes necessary to pull it off. I had it all. I must have done more than half a dozen back then. Screwed myself silly. No one else I knew back then came even close to the amount of ass I got, and I knew a lot of people. I still know a lot of people. I'm fine. And that's all there is to it. So, screw-off!' Is this then the moment for forgiveness? Is this the moment to turn the other cheek and ask 'Well then would you like to



meet my adolescent niece?’ Is this the moment to ignore the fact that the victimiser in this particular case hung on to one particular piece of ‘adolescent ass’ for three and a half years? Should the avenger consider the level of the victimiser’s malice in his attempt to prevent the girl’s eventual marriage? Should the avenger in this case weigh or not weigh the fact that the victimiser interfered a second time with the three-and-a-half-years of ‘adolescent ass’ five years later? Should the avenger dismiss the idea that the collateral damage from that second interference included a family break-up and a daughter’s suicide? In this light the thought of forgiveness is hopelessly naïve, with nothing to recommend it except the notion that through forgiveness the avenger might avoid some negative health and well-being impacts that often follow the act of vengeance. It is uncertain whether the studies that predict such negative impacts on avengers took into consideration the long-term consequences of an avenger’s feelings of sickening guilt for ‘giving up’ on a quest that would honour those on whose behalf he desires revenge, those in this case who can’t themselves take revenge. It’s clear that Tyr’s quest is coming from a deep sense of what’s fair and a deep sense of personal responsibility in this matter. He already feels that he has delayed enough. He would see any further delay as

dithering. For his own sake let alone the more significant sakes of the victims in all this, he must take action. He can't not get revenge. He will not forgive. He has to face the risk.

Add to this the failure of every-federal-parliament-after-federal-parliament between 1892 and 2008 to up-date the age of consent laws in order to protect adolescent females, and add also the many failures of parents, teachers, counsellors, friends, and community to protect an adolescent girl from a grown male, a predator, and there is plainly a massive injustice done to Norah. Finally, it is a simple truth that So-and-so made an obvious and fatal mistake in his preoccupation with staying within the letter of the law, the criminal code, but not within the mean of morality, the moral code, that female adolescence deserves. He forgot that someone else might be affected by his duplicitous and malicious behaviour toward Norah, someone else who would take time to consider the entire matter, take time to decide the extent of the wrong and decide the time and place of the penalty, the come-uppance, the punishment, the retaliation. Tyr.

And that's where the spear becomes an issue in this situation. For Tyr, taking 'life-ending' revenge on So-and-so will mean violence, and for many people, maybe most, violence is simply

and finally unacceptable. At the same time, there is the historically and hysterically popular appeal of stories of violent revenge in literature and the arts, including theater and film and now pop-culture video games. So, there is this substantial emotional dissonance, this love-hate yes-no thing, around violence. Some of this attitude of two-faces toward violence seems premised on gun violence in particular, especially deadly rifles with mass murder magazines of designer ammunition that cuts particularly damaging swathes through human bodies. The other ways of doing violence, the other weapons of choice, seem not to warrant the same level of protest, likely because they constitute one-at-a-time violence events. With this in mind, Tyr figures that in this case, this remarkable case against So-and-so, he would win grudging acceptance of violence-by-spear. But also, given this level of social cognitive dissonance, the means of meting-out justice becomes debatable. The matter of justice, or revenge, under the jurisdiction of the official justice system only, is less monolithically certain, more nuanced, in the midst of massive social cognitive dissonance. It is more possible, plausible, for the individual actor in a real-life scenario, to weigh the elements of the situation and to decide whether the potential consequences for a person taking revenge on his own

are worth it. Tyr believes that in this case, this awful case, a majority of society would side with him, would see the right in it, not that any of that would matter to officials. All the more reason then to explain the matter of the spear to answer the question: 'Why use a spear as the weapon of justice?'

But here's the thing. Like any other profound and enduring human urge, in this case Tyr's need for revenge against the victimizer, the spear has been around forever, from what we might call the beginning, something like almost half-a-million- years of human existence. So, the two go hand-in-hand so to speak; people and spears. Tyr's familiarity with spears began in his childhood. In the several acres of bush and bracken near Tyr's childhood home, where he and his friends played, it was natural for them as youngsters to pick-up sticks of a length long enough to be a spear...all this before ever seeing a movie or a video or anything else that would have prompted their imitation. It was just a natural thing for a kid in a bush on the fringe of the city by a riverside to do. And in Tyr's case, at age eleven, he finds the spear-point in his father's wooden trunk and get's a lesson at the museum about the utility and general goodness of the spear in the success of humans on this earth as hunters and defenders

and as justice-seekers. Eventually, in his school-studies of various histories and societies and pantheons and myths, over and over again Tyr notices the spear is always there: Gods and Goddesses with spears to protect others, actual historical heroes with spears to defend against aggressors, all kinds of spears, from thrusting spears to throwing spears, and the giant spears, the lances, all used in the pursuit of justice or other good works. In the film *The Last Duel* the duelers begin their violence with very large spears called lances. The winner wins God's approval for his cause which, in that case in that film, was the honour of his wife. Tyr's spear, the spear he has made by his own hand, is a thrusting spear to be gripped with two hands and pushed forcefully into his opponent in order to pierce and penetrate, in this case, Norah's victimizer, So-and-so. The process puts Tyr face-to-face with him. In fact, it is Tyr's determination to place the spear upright between himself and So-and-so, gripped by the both of them with both hands. This puts Tyr at some considerable risk, potentially disastrous. It is his test of commitment to both the rightness and the fairness of his conduct. It's as fair as he can be, more so actually, because So-and-so is a larger man than Tyr. Crazy? Or confident? And, where will Soleme stand on all this?

## 14

Soleme joins Tyr on rue Dante, half a block from The Park. He has just bought empanadas at the Conca d'Oro, and stepped out onto the street, lunch in hand, and she appears just like that. There she is. They walk to their bench, eat their warm turnovers, drink their warm coffee, and then right away get into it. She's been waiting to hear about 'the twenty-four-year-old' and about 'the three shits' and whether they got away with it. Tyr tells her the stories without embellishment. She gets the picture. It's all frustrating for her. She too has a clear mind around what's fair and what's not. So, Tyr thinks that maybe its time to take this thing to some next level, whatever that is. As usual, his story is 'ad lib', so he just starts talking.

‘Our man Dante Alighieri’ he says, as he points again to the bronze bust atop the plinth, ‘creates the Divine Comedy, imagines the Inferno, and gives us a recital of the various punishments warranted by various sinners, sinners that is who have died and are now serving their eternal after-life in Hell instead of Heaven. Dante invents punishments unique to each type of sin, to be meted-out by God’s appointees in Hell. It’s all laid-out from his Christian perspective. But if you aren’t impressed with the ‘sinner’ concept Soleme, you can simply see these as punishments tailored for specific behaviours that are wrong or immoral in western society, any secular society, and maybe even universally. So, the proper justice for seducers, says Dante, is an eternity of unrelenting whipping by devils. In his view though, what’s worse than Seduction is Betrayal, and so the proper justice for that sin is to be placed in an odd and difficult pose, presumably painful, and then to be completely encased in the ice of a frozen lake in the penultimate lowest level of Hell. Each unique punishment is what Dante calls a ‘contrapasso’, a punishment that is equal to and fitting to a particular sin, and is therefore ‘proper’ justice.

Soleme raises her hand to pause Tyr’s account of Dante’s “contrapasso” justice. ‘Is

Norah's twenty-four-year-old So-and-so sinner still alive, still walking around?' she asks.

'Yes, he is. He would be in his eighties now,' Tyr replies.

'So, he isn't suffering any of Dante's eternal after-life punishment, at least not yet.'

'That's it. That's exactly the point Soleme. He has never had to atone, never had to face a single moment of justice. He hasn't had a single MeToo moment because he's not a star, not big news, and no-one has outed him for his ugly behaviour. There are so many like him. He has some local popularity because of business opportunities he got by marrying his wife's money, but he's no big deal otherwise. The local paper might put his picture with his obituary on the sports page, but that would be it. He won't have to face a public reckoning unless I take issue with him out loud, and that would bring embarrassment to Norah and to Dana and possibly to his other five or six or more victims.

'What are you going to do about it Tyr?

'I'm going to hurry him along to Alighieri's poetic version of the after-life.'

Silence. And then 'How are you going to do that Tyr?' Soleme asks quietly. She waits for his answer.



‘Maybe I don’t know how I’m going to do that, Soleme. Maybe I don’t even know whether I’m going to do anything. I don’t want to drag you into this. It’s best if you can honestly say you don’t know what I may have in mind.’

‘I already know what you have in mind Tyr. I’m just asking you how you’re going to get it done.’

‘I’ve made a spear. I’ll find him alone. I’ll let him have his chance to take it away from me, but he won’t be able to do that. And then I’ll end his life.’

‘And you are the person to do this?’

‘Well, the law isn’t going to do it, remember. He wasn’t breaking the law because the law was out of date by decades. What we have here is a guy who broke the moral code and did a lot of damage as a consequence. And I’m the guy who knows this, from my own experience with all this, from the things Norah has told me, and from the things that others have told me. I think I’m the person who is rightly placed. I’m best positioned to deliver his come-uppance. He has done terrible harm to Norah, and to our family, and to me personally. He tried to prevent her marriage to me, and then interfered again five-years later. He was offensive, malicious, vindictive and stupid in the process. Do you see? He actually tried to stop me from marrying

Norah. I have to end it all for him and he has to know why. I'll tell him face-to-face and I'll tell him that once he's out of the way, dead and gone, I'm naming him and telling the story, so maybe other men will think twice about their urges for adolescent girls. That will go some way toward making his death look more like justice and less like revenge. And it will have more deterrent effect, Soleme. I would like to think that I'll be accomplishing at least that much with his death.

'I understand your arguments Tyr. I'm not going to challenge you on your decision to seek justice and revenge. When I ask "Are you the person to do this?" I have two issues. What will you do with your feelings of guilt if you succeed? And, can you say with certainty that you will not be killed with your own spear?'

'If I'm successful Soleme, I will be guilty, but I won't feel guilty. I have been over this with myself time and time again. On the matter of certainty though, all I can say is that I am very fit, and have the explosive ability to take the spear at the outset, and to run So-and-so through with it.'

'I admire your confidence Tyr. And I understand your determination. And I can see that you are fit. But you need more than that to act with certainty in the situation you have in

mind.’ She pauses then, and is in thought for a moment, and then surprises Tyr absolutely. ‘I have to ask you Tyr: Were you ever acquainted with Kwai Chang Caine?’

Tyr is truly caught-up, astonished. He is speechless. The conversation has in an instant gone from serious concern to off-the-wall nostalgia. It’s all in a split second. He raises his eyebrows and exclaims ‘Whew, you’re taking me back what, about maybe 50 years? Were you even borne then? You’re talking about Caine!’

Soleme’s delighted, he’s delighted. ‘So, you know him then. Good! I was seventeen years old. I watched Caine from the very first episode because I had been taking classes in Kung Fu for years. I practiced furiously. I practised a lot. I was very disciplined. I was very good.

‘Well, I was in my early thirties then.’ Tyr confesses ‘And I have to say that I admired what he was doing. I was avid. I watched every episode for three years. Caine was fighting for justice for others. And he was protecting those who needed help against the odds. And, very important to me now, he was not above revenge.’

‘You may recall that he was a monk,’ she said, and then she whispered, conspiring, from the back of her hand: ‘He was a trained Shaolin Monk.’

‘Yeah. Damn, I liked the mystery of all that. And I was very disciplined too: watched every episode. But I was doing other essential things in my life then. I had my work, and I was teaching some college courses, so I didn’t have time to even consider martial arts.’

‘I only mention it to say that Kung Fu, if you have fully mastered it, has techniques for using a spear. I didn’t get that far. But I know that using a spear would take skill, a lot of practice. And you have said already that So-and-so is a bigger man.’

‘You’re right Soleme of course, and I am worried about that. I know I have to have a way of handling the first moments of that action. There could be some cursing and swearing and grunting and groaning. But, once I have taken the spear from his grasp, it will all be over very quickly.’

Are you also aware that a spear is an illegal weapon Tyr, even if it’s only used to threaten someone, let alone kill someone?

‘I am, Soleme. It’s all part of the risk.’

‘Tyr, I wanted you to hear my concerns. Because I am very worried about all of this. I don’t want you lost to us too soon.’

He felt her hands grip his forearm with strength, an expression of her worry. He was

listening intently. And then he realized she was gone. Just disappeared.

# 15

**O**ld Man. Park Bench. A sunny day. Early Spring. But it's a different bench, different park, different city. The Capital. He's alert, not dozing. He's reading a book, not just idling. From time to time he stops to look around. Then he's doing a sudoku. And looking around. And then a cross-word. And looking around. He's done all this a couple of times over the past couple of weeks. He's seen enough. He knows the lay of the land now, and the habitual whereabouts of So-and-so. He walks out of and away from the meandering park and its densely treed and vined gazebos and pergolas hidden here and there. He walks to his bicycle in a parking lot beside the tennis courts at the edge of the enclave. He rides to his car about a mile away, leaves his bicycle locked

there, and drives his car to his motel on the east side.

He returns the next day. The man So-and-so is sitting in his usual place in a heavily vined pergola on a quiet spur off the main path in the long and winding and groomed park that runs end-to-end for almost a kilometre through this enclave of very large, very elegant homes secreted away behind berms planted with tall designer grasses, thick specimen hedges and a myriad of thick blue spruces with lower limbs sweeping down to the grass still brown from Winter. The Old Man has just entered the pergola, taken-up a position on the bench opposite So-and-so, and removed a long, narrow canvas bag with a leather strap from over his shoulder. He leans the bag against the front of his bench to one side. The bag is tied-off at the top end with a leather lace. A net protrudes through the loosely wrapped top of the bag, one of several items within. It looks like fishing gear, nothing illegal. With his position sorted-out, he looks up and nods to So-and-so, being civil you might say. There is no acknowledgement from So-and-so, just a suspicious glance, sort of proprietary: a why-are-you-here-in-my-neck-of-the-woods sneer. He has spread himself expansively over the park bench, arms resting out to the sides along the

back of the bench, legs crossed in front at the ankles, all confident and at ease. The Old Man, expecting neither the sneer nor the incivility, looks at him, looks-him-over actually, carefully, because he hasn't seen So-and-so up close for a long, long time, nearly sixty years. And then So-and-so is suddenly not at all at ease, not with such an obvious looking-over by this stranger. The Old Man has been wondering for a while just what it would be like to see this guy again, and now he finds himself smiling. Of course, So-and-so, already beginning to feel ill at ease with merely the Old Man's presence, is now upset with this smiling old guy right across from him under his otherwise peaceful pergola. The Old Man opens his newspaper and begins to read. So-and-so is irked, offended by what he sees as the Old Man's disrespect. He wants him to go away.

It's So-and-so who begins the conversation, without courtesies. 'You're not from around here. You don't live in this neighbourhood.' His tone of voice is testy.

The Old Man looks over the top of his newspaper and gives So-and-so a little raise of his eyebrows and a small shrug of his shoulders, a non-verbal but not unpleasant 'So?' Impertinent maybe. And then he goes



back to his reading, an article on the MeToo movement.

So-and-so, not at all satisfied with such a response, in fact clearly miffed by it, demands sternly 'Where are you from?'

The Old Man takes a few moments to finish the sentence he's reading, and then lowers his newspaper to say 'I'm from Montreal.'

'So, why are you here?' So-and-so is simmering.

'I'm visiting my brother.' the Old Man replies and then raises his newspaper and continues reading.

'Does your brother live here in this neighbourhood.' So-and-so asks gruffly.

'No.' the Old Man replies from behind his newspaper. 'He lives uptown.'

'Then what are you doing here in this neighbourhood?' asks So-and-so with still more attitude, and then with an angry eye on the Old Man's long, narrow canvas bag.'

'Well, it's beautiful here, isn't it?' the Old Man replies.

So-and-so can't disagree with the Old Man, but neither is he satisfied with his answer, so he is even more angry and frustrated with this Old Man and his damned canvas bag. He lifts his

arms from along the back of the bench and leans forward toward the Old Man and sort of scowls and growls ‘What’s in that bag? What have got in there?’

The Old Man stares at So-and-so for a moment, lowers his newspaper, and slowly reaches for the bag. He slips open the leather lace at the top, looks over at So-and-so, pauses, and then just returns to his reading.

So-and-so, suddenly furious, growls again, harder, louder, angrier: ‘What’s in the goddamned bag?’ his jaw set, his chin jutted, his eyes glaring.

The Old Man, lowering and slowly folding his newspaper, says ‘Well, I have a spear in this bag.’

So-and-so, startled, pulls himself fully and quickly back on his bench. ‘A spear?’ he sputters, his voice louder, full of alarm. ‘Why? What the fuck is wrong with you? You can’t have a spear here!’

‘I made it myself.’ The Old Man says quietly.

So-and-so continues to rage. ‘Why would you make a spear for Christ’s sake? Why would you carry around a spear? Why would you bring it here?’

The Old Man answers softly but clearly ‘I

brought this spear here because I am seeking justice for my wife, for my family, and for myself. And I am seeking revenge.

So-and-so's rage hardens his voice to a hiss. 'You're a crazy son-of-a-bitch. Why would you need a spear to seek justice? Why would you bring a spear here? What's all this revenge about?' He is glaring at the Old Man, enraged with him, teeth gritted, face reddened.

'It's about this conversation we're having right now.' The Old Man says. 'You and I should have had this conversation many, many years ago. But you didn't show up.'

'What are you talking about? I don't understand what you're talking about?' So-and-so is taken-a-back, confused, maybe muddled.

'You sent your errand-boy, your ass-kissing buddy, to do the talking.'

'Who are you going-on about? What errand-boy? Who the hell are you?' In his rage, So-and-so is almost purple.

'You sent your errand-boy to tell me not to marry Norah because you owned her.'

'Norah? Norah?'

'If you had come to me yourself back then, come to me in person, instead of sending along your proxy, I'd have told you that Norah and I were getting married.'

‘Norah? Oh! Yeah! Yes! Norah. OK, Norah..... and you? You?’ So-and-so is beginning to understand his situation, beginning to realize who Tyr is, beginning to protest Tyr’s point of view. He says sharply ‘That was all a long time ago. It’s too long ago to talk about it now. You can’t talk about that after all these years. We were very young.’

‘Nora was very young. But you, Asshole, were a grown man.’ says Tyr quietly.

‘There was no law against it, God-damn you.’ So-and-so is agonizing.

‘If I cared about the law in this situation I wouldn’t be here.’ Tyr is speaking evenly, matter-of-factly. ‘The problem for you right now is that you, despicable you, at age twenty-four, knew you were absolutely wrong to be having sex with a fifteen-year-old girl; girls actually. I know about the others.’

‘There was no law against it.’ he said brazenly, confidently. ‘No law. No law! Do you hear me?’

‘You knew what you were doing. You kept the whole shitty thing a secret until she left you. She left you when she found you with another naked teenager in bed in that cottage up-river. After that, everyone there with you knew what you were doing.’

‘There was no law against it.’ he said angrily, and sort of panicky.

‘I don’t know why you didn’t come to me directly.’ Tyr says, speaking softly. ‘It would have saved you a lot of trouble. I’d have told you right then that Norah and I were getting married and that if you ever interfered with Norah again I would kill you.’

So-and-so is shocked and shaking.

‘It would have been a gentlemen’s agreement. But you were fearful or foolish or inconsiderate or spiteful or just stupid enough to think that no one else would care enough to do something about what you had done to Norah. So, here I am. I care enough. And I’m here to see you dead.

So-and-so is stricken and trembling.

‘You have a chance to take this spear from me though. I’ll stand this spear between us. You can get a grip on it. You can.....’ But Tyr let’s his words trail off. He sees that So-and-so is in some kind of difficulty, in sudden distress, no longer composed, but instead in physical and emotional disarray.’

In fact, So-and-so is stunned, caught and confused between his waning fury and withering fluster as he grasps his situation: the man on the bench across from him has a

serious point of grievance with him, and he has a spear. So-and-so wants to feel righteous and angry and confident but instead feels fearful and feint and helpless. The Old Man reaches into the long, narrow canvas bag, grips the spear-head and lets the canvas slide down to the base of the shaft. So-and-so sees the spear-head sharpened on both sides to a piercing point. He wants to object. But he can't find his voice. He's feeling strange. Something's going on. He's whimpering. Something's really wrong, something awful and painful. The arteries to his brain and his heart are in fact in the process of bursting, betraying his earlier anger and bravado.

Tyr, silent now, observes So-and-so. He sees that he in one moment is in pain and then in the next moment in agony. So-and-so finds himself merely muttering, and then gibbering, and then speechless, utterly. He had wanted to argue yet again that he hadn't broken any laws. But instead, his purple rage pales and he sags to one side, his face drooping, one arm falling useless, his now pallid face contorting into an inaudible scream and his eyes, once focused on the spear, now standing fixed on nothing, simply staring straight ahead. The armpits of his shirt darken, awash with a profusion of sweat. The crotch of his pants stains, soaked with his urine.

He sits soggy and sagging and slumping. His feet twitch once, twice, and then his entire body droops, lifeless.

Old Man. Park Bench. Dead Guy. Tyr's intention to offer So-and-so the opportunity to take the spear from him is now beside the point, so he puts the spear back in the canvas bag. He looks across again to the other bench at the dead So-and-so. He has seen this sort of dying before, more than thirty-five years ago. He watched his father collapse after jumping-up for joy as his team kicked a field goal to win the game. But So-and-so's dying wasn't as neat or as tidy or as innocent as Tyr's father's dying. On his father's lower lip had been some spital, evidence of the loud Hurray! his father was shouting just as he fell dead; he had, however splayed the legs and splintered the cherry-wood top of the coffee table beneath him as he fell like a stone to the floor. Tyr had wiped away the spital, and looked closely at his father's face. It had been serene, as though in a gentle sleep. His father had been an honorable man.

Tyr sits quietly across from So-and-so's remains. The Old Man is feeling his own emotions in a slow-moving maelstrom of sensations: a sense of gotcha, of reckoning, of revenge, of justice, of fulfillment, of 'finally!' Tyr has watched So-and-so in his last

desperate moments, ruing his lust, his loss, his failure, his conceit, his stupidity. He has watched So-and-so realize that the Old Man Tyr sitting across from him is a living witness to his miserable and terrified departure. Tyr picks-up the canvas bag, ties the top, puts the leather strap over his shoulder, turns, takes up his newspaper and takes his leave. He turns back for a moment though. He speaks quietly and sadly to So-and-so's remains 'You did a lot of harm, Asshole.'



# 16

**O**ld Man. Park Bench. Nothing Yet. He's been home for a day. He's been checking internet news sights for any information on the death of a locally prominent elderly male in a park in an upscale suburban enclave in the west end of the Capital. There's been nothing. He wonders again if no news is good news, or bad. He has reviewed the entire scenario from start to finish. He is gratified that in a manner of speaking he has ended So-and-so's life with a simple telling of a true story without hyperbole and without even raising his voice. As Tyr sees it, So-and-so has died from the fear that erupted with his sudden realization that he has been caught-out finally and fatally for his wanton and immoral trespass against Norah, and the other adolescents all

those years ago. So-and-so hadn't been smart enough to contemplate the risk inherent in his scheme of malign seduction back then. And here he is now with this shocking confrontation with the Old Man and his spear. So-and-so has died from the massive emotional reaction that left him frozen in fear, a burst artery pouring blood into his brain, turning his grey matter red, maybe blackened red, the colour of the Old Man's revenge.

The Old Man is so far relieved not because he has dodged the risk posed by his intention to offer So-and-so a grip on the spear right from the beginning, but because at his age he wants to avoid a prison term, and because he knows that his vigilantism is not only wrong but criminal too. Otherwise though, he is happy to have avoided the display of violence because every instance of violence contributes to a general acceptance of violence as a given approach to settling differences, so all sorts of men 'out there' take it as a level of permission to visit domestic violence on partners or children for example. Also, he didn't want to be remembered as a killer if he could help it.

He knows that there are levels of violence, and he has managed to avoid this worst sort, murder. But he remembers his four years of varsity football, four years of organized and

refereed violence. He realizes that many people cannot fully imagine the shocking force of focused and ferocious violence that happens on the football field. And he had both his varsity letter and the scars and long-term pain to prove it. To this day he is not completely sure why he put himself into that melee, into that many games, over that many seasons. Before those years of violence, in the final days of his final year at high-school, there had been the strike-back when Tyr's friend had been thrown to the ground and stomped unconscious by a construction worker who had taken offence at something some student had said. Tyr, angered when he found his friend unconscious and bloodied, abandoned common sense and shouted down the couple of city blocks that the man had put between himself and the scene of his bit of brutality. Looking back at the shouting young man Tyr, smaller and slighter than the other he had already beaten, the worker decided to double down; he came roaring back up the street. As he approached Tyr, he began to run hard at him and run over him so he could give him a stomping too. Tyr dropped to one knee, as he had been trained to do playing high-school football, and sent the charging man flying over to crash on the sidewalk behind him. When Tyr turned, the man was getting to his feet, a little wobbly, and was advancing slowly

now. Tyr was frightened by the thickness of the man and cautioned himself to avoid the man's grasp. Tyr's attack was instant and extremely fast partly because his own fear had alerted him, focused him acutely, and partly because his short-twitch muscle-fibre was inherently fast, just his nature, a given, nothing to brag about. He smashed several fisted punches into the man's face, breaking his nose and closing an eye. In just a few seconds the man was breathing in and spitting out his own blood and could not defend himself. The gathering crowd saw the end of it and walked away. So did Tyr. There were sirens. Tyr and his friend hobbled down the lane behind stores and offices and were gone into the night. Several days later, on the bus, Tyr recognized the man and witnessed the harm of his encounter: the bandage across a broken nose, the closed-eye, the torn cheek on the man's purpled face. Tyr felt fairness and remorse, and then the confusion of his emotional dissonance. But here and now with this whole thing on the bench in the park with So-and-so, there's no dissonance. No remorse. Death by story.

# 17

**O**ld Man. Park Bench. Still waiting. Still nothing yet from the Capital, no news. So, he settles down to enjoy this bright day. In the Spring, in Dante Park, just after those first days of sun sufficient to melt Winter's snows and warm peoples' bones, the scent of the exposed soil hovers and hints at the fecal carelessness of people with dogs. In truth the air is tainted with the wreak of dogs' doings. If the sun is persistent, the warming rays very quickly dry-up the enlivened lumps and the air in The Park soon turns to its' Spring-like loveliness. The Old Man, observing from his bench, worries about the lady who, seduced by Sol's sudden generosity of tiny hints of heat, has already unfolded her blanket over the merest of green shoots and plopped down and stretched

herself out, her every movement, every shift and turn, smearing the blanket's underside. Where her body takes the weight of her positioning, her buttocks for example, and also one elbow, her blanket is mashed further downward into the dampness just below the superficial dryness of the surface of the dirt so that a few minutes later she begins to feel the discomfort of the cold wetness rising through her clothing into her gluteal crease. Behind her, her sharper elbow more penetrating than her roundness and unfortunately more precariously placed on the blanket, now shows a dung-coloured patch through the sleeve of her white blouse. Oh my! She's up-and-gone in another minute. When she had first entered The Park and spread her blanket, the Old Man had had no time to offer a warning. But still, he is unhappy that he had failed her. On the other-hand he feels no guilt although he himself brings his small dog here many times each day. He is meticulous about his little guy's toilette; no one, no child especially, would end-up sticky with or smelling of his dog's shit.

Today, in The Park, as he awaits news from The Capital, he resorts to his daily default strategy for filling the in-between moments of his day with related memories. The Old Man gets to recalling that throughout his childhood

he had lived with a heightened awareness of shit, animal shit for example: dogs of course, but horses too. The more obvious instances of animal dung, daily underfoot throughout his old neighbourhood, were the apple-sized balls dropped in the street by horses. Only a block away from the Old Man's family home back then was an industrial bakery that delivered bread throughout the city by way of horse-drawn wagons, and in Winter, horse-drawn sleighs. At the end of each day the bakery's herd stood tethered to the block-long railing that ran the length of the bakery building. A man named Lenny took the horses two-at-a-time a block away to the barn for feeding, watering, cleaning and sleeping. The near-by residential streets were always littered with what we children called horse-balls. The dung in Winter got mixed-in with the snow and ended-up in snow-banks when the streets were plowed. In the bitterest days of the Winter fresh piles of horse-balls steamed, and then froze large and round and hard and served as pucks during games of road-hockey. When there were end-of-day delays in unhitching the horses, they would stand and wait in place until their turn. Some of them would leave piles of manure there, horse-balls, lying loose on the pavement until traffic came by and mashed the crap into crepes. The dung in Summer was flushed down

the sewers by rain, and by street-cleaning, and eventually drained away in the storm-sewer pipes that emptied into the river a few blocks away where the neighbourhood boys, young Tyr included, swam bare-butt through June and July. What you don't know!

Around age eight Tyr was sent to a boys-only summer-camp, a bare-bones, tents-only, straw-tick-for-sleeping sort of camp. He spent several Summers there. There were privies there, outhouses they called them; rough-hewn sheds with a few holes in a smooth plank to accommodate several bums at a time, with no separating partitions. There were steps up to the doorless openings at each end of the edifice. The new kids were the one's who had to learn to check for toilet -paper before moving themselves. To forget was to have to partially stand and then waddle, pants down, to get close enough to reach for the nearest roll of paper and then waddle back, hoping that you wouldn't drop the roll, or anything else, while waddling. It was never a pretty sight. The goal, where privies were involved, was to get in and out as quickly and as cleanly as you could while watching for moths, or spiders, or wasps. And no one lingered.

Anyway, today in the early Spring, after the lady lying too-soon on her blanket had quickly



taken her leave, the Old Man lets himself meander through these memories of animal manure and human excrement because such mere recalling often turns him to other reflections on matters related. Today is no exception. Among his various meanderings now he wonders if, when So-and-so's body was found on a park bench under a pergola, in a meandering park in the Capital's westerly end, with sweat-marks under the arms of his shirt and urine staining the crotch of his pants, the first-responders had to hold their noses at the stench of a mess of his feces as they lifted the body onto the gurney to cart it off to the morgue. In the Old Man's view it is a proper ending for So-and-so that the only remaining mark at the place of his fearful death is the mere whiff of his stink on an obscure park bench, a fitting end for an Asshole.

As the Old Man reconsiders this last reflection on the matter, he feels a little embarrassed about even having such a sullied thought. But then he concludes the matter with this consideration: So-and-so should never have got himself onto the wrong side of this Old Man, should never have got himself so unforgiven.

# 18

Same day. Same bench. But, a change of perspective. The Old Man leans into some happier or at least more proper recollections. He recalls that his relationship with Norah had started long before they had ever seen each other across the hall at school. Norah and Tyr had grown up in The Capital, she in Sandy Hill and he in Ottawa East, two areas of the city side by side but separated by a busy arterial road running along parallel to several lines of rails; two lines running a short distance to Union Station downtown and one running to the west across the city and then ultimately up The Valley to small towns there. When they were children, the road and rail-tracks, not to mention some chain-link fencing, effectively barred travel between their separate areas of

the city. So, in the beginning, when they were young, Tyr and Norah lived in different worlds. On Norah's side, many, many blocks away, was a park with a large gazebo and benches and gardens and lawns with a path alongside the river, and huge shade trees: elms, and willows at the water's edge, and homes that faced the park from across the surrounding streets. On Tyr's side, right next to the impassible rails-and-road barrier, were several sites that were industrial or governmental: a tar-storage plant, a large lot for the storage of military vehicles, an active municipal garbage dump, and the still-functioning great structures of the gasworks that for years had supplied coal-gas to homes throughout the city by-way-of underground pipes. As a boy, with some of the other boys in the neighbourhood there, but more often alone, Tyr made-believe the gasworks were a battleground: an enormous above-ground holding-tank the size of a wide seven-story building, another cavernous building that would hold the great stories-high piles of coal, and a very large building that housed the ovens that cooked the coal. All of it had become run-down: rusted metal, broken glass, spald brick all scattered over large areas of coal that had been crushed and spread to provide a solid surface between the buildings for work vehicles. It hardly took any imagination at all to see the

few remaining employees there as ‘the enemy’ all around: a boy-soldier would have to crawl and duck and dash and sneak here and there to position himself to kill the Nazis with the magic of a wooden rifle. Norah knew nothing of this part of Tyr’s world, neither the imaginary terror and bravery of it, nor the mundane fact that it was a place of coal-black dust that colored a boy’s clothes, shoes, skin and hair. It was glorious.

Tyr’s area sided on the same river as Norah’s area, but upstream, above the black bridge that carried the rail traffic across The Rideau east-south out of the city. So, for years before ever seeing each other in high school, they had shared the river: she loved watching the sharp sparkling rapids from the Minto Bridges; he loved the flat deep water at the swimming hole about a hundred yards from his home through the bush at the bottom end of the street. She had waded in the shallow rapids with her mother. He had swum naked in the river’s cool depths. And they had shared too the night sounds of the railroad roundhouse that squatted in the space at the fork of the rail-lines, between the lines toward the station and the line to the west. In the roundhouse, day and night, were long heavy iron-and-steel steam engines that would hook up to freight-trains or passenger trains

and take them to their far-away destinations.... Montreal or Toronto or beyond. The engines in there were always ready or getting ready to do their work, their fires always glowing, dampened down at night so that in the quiet darkness over the city a boy or girl awake in a bedroom with a screened-window open to the night air could hear the sounds of the great boilers breathing and sometimes panting in their own heat, waiting for work in the very early morning. Norah and Tyr were listening to those resting giants alone, together. And they would discover all this when they met and talked and held each other all for the first time, all those years later. And they were delighted.

To get to high-school, Norah crossed the canal by way of the Laurier Bridge. Tyr crossed the canal by way of the Pretoria Bridge upstream. The canal and too the river flowed into The Valley below, the canal by way of the locks, and the river by way of the falls, Les Rideaux, The Curtain Falls. The waters of the canal and the river swelled the already larger river there in The Valley beneath. In Summer a storm would sometimes follow The Valley from its headwaters, whipping the wide waters to white-caps and hastening the river downstream with a stiff wind from the west-north-west that roiled the river surface until The Falls just above

Old Man, Park Bench

The Chaudiere Bridge pulled the choppy waves into a cauldron of thrashing cataracts and sent them catapulting head-over-heels tumbling way below the Hill, and The Chateau Laurier, and then on eastward toward Oka, and toward L'Ile du Montreal, and then to Montreal where Norah and Tyr were married the first time, married after all, and then married again, after all.

# 19

**T**here's no time for the park bench this morning. The Old Man is on floor-mats and weight-machines exercising arms, legs, and all the rest. He's into various exertions in various positions to retain his strength and maintain his power. The goal at his age is to stay mobile; keep moving, keep from falling, keep fit, be a competent adult person and look like one. Move like you have a purpose. It isn't easy at more than eighty. But it's worth it. He can still do what needs doing. It's a couple of mornings after his face-to-face with So-and-so, and he's working out.

He wears outfits to the gym: blue, black, grey, with accents of red or blue or white; shorts, tanks, sometimes long-sleeves, leg-warmers from just below the knee down to his ankles.

He had played as a boy on many sports teams which is why, when he goes to the gym, he still feels like wearing something akin to team colours, and going through the process of dressing for the game, getting suited up, getting into uniform. It's his habit. The leg warmers still turn a few heads when new people notice them for the first time, but that's nothing.

As he swiped his gym card this morning, the Old Man had said hi to the young woman at the counter. She said she was going to her graduation dance this evening. He wished her a good time and then wondered about what it might be like to go to a graduation dance these days what with the wild moves in the current panoply of dance styles. Is there still the jive or the hop? Then he remembers the graduation dance in his final year, and the problem: no proper pants. What to do?

After the war, both of his mother's brothers had come home despite their crazy experiences at sea taking care of their ship's engines during repeated crossings of the North Atlantic in Corvette ships trying to protect kilometers-long convoys under attack by U-boats. The Corvettes were made of marine plywood that splintered into clouds of hard, pointy shards when they were struck by torpedoes. The brothers had the scars to prove it. They



both had had boats blown out from under them, twice, and treaded water in the freezing ocean until they were found amongst the debris between the deep waves. They were both small and wiry and looked handsome in their dress-white uniforms and gob hats. Their white pants were perfectly creased and the effect of that -up and-down crease was to lengthen their look, a good thing for smaller guys. A pair of those pants somehow ended-up in his own father's trunk along with his uniforms, on top of the blanket that covered the spear-point on the very bottom. The white pants had waited there all those years until Tyr was desperate for pants for the dance. Trunk open. Pants out. Twenty-nine-inch waist. Thirty-inch inseam. Perfect crease. He was surprised to find that they were thick wool, really thick. The dance was late June. But when you have nothing else, thick white wool pants are good even if the dance floor is equatorial. He danced. He forgot that the bell-bottoms might be conspicuous. No one said anything if they were, not even his date. Or did he have a date that night? He can't remember her if he did. He remembers being itchy though, but happy.

And, he remembers another pair of pants. It was a time when his mother, almost always of feint heart, got up her courage and took

him downtown to purchase a new and proper pair of pants to wear when the boy's choir was singing in front of audiences. He couldn't wear pants off the rack: narrow the waist, shorten the legs. The pants he was wearing were noticeably worn: ragged cuffs, frayed knees. The clerk, a youngish man with a tape hanging on his shoulders began the measuring: first the waist, then the out-seam, and then the in-seam that ran from just slightly resting on the boy's shoe to just below his crotch. Clerks did this all the time without incident, but not this time because the noticeably worn pants were worn unnoticeably as well. The seam in the crotch had in fact come unstitched and fallen open. The boy hadn't noticed. He was a kid, busy trying to have fun, and anyway, he was sort of used to having his clothes hang on by a thread. However, in this instance, his terribly holey under-ware allowed his scrotum to hang loosely through into his pants just where the inseam of his pants had come unstitched and fallen open. As the clerk held the tip of the tape to about where the inseam should be, the boy's testicles were dangling down naked and did a little dance on the back of the clerk's hand. He muttered a small sound of muted surprise, and said not a word. Neither did the boy. No one wanted to cause a problem for anyone,

especially his mother who he knew would be blamed. No harm done.

Anyway, today, when the Old Man has finished his floor exercises, he retreats to the men's change room and all its stuff: lockers, benches, sauna, shower stalls, weight scales, and the complaints and conversations about aches and pains and losses and gains, politics and people, and other matters, like this morning's news. There had been a death two days ago; a prominent older man in The Capital. He had died of natural causes, some fatal combination of corporeal events, while enjoying an outing in the park near his home. He was found by neighbours.

In the locker room there are comments like 'you never know when your number is up' and 'just when you think everything is going along just fine' and 'there but for the grace of God'..., and other similar remarks. But the Old Man Tyr poses another possibility to the others there: 'Maybe the old guy was a victim of his own unrelenting fear of all the young girls he had harmed in his life because he was a selfish and conceited putz with a callous lust for female adolescent ass.' The group in the locker room goes quiet for a moment, pauses for a moment, a full stop actually, and then the guys start laughing, and then they keep on

laughing hysterically because what Tyr had said was funny, and because one of them had then said ‘Wow, that’s deep man’ in good beat-nick jargon, and because they all realised that all of them right then and there were a bunch of old guys each with white hair, wrinkled skin, and lots and lots of natural causes. It was the sort of gallows humour you might hear from an old man in a park on a bench, waiting.

On his way home, Tyr’s focus shifts to Norah. He’ll be home before she is worried about where he is, and just in time to make sure she has taken her morning meds. She’ll ask how his workout went. He’ll tell her who he saw there. She’ll say she doesn’t remember them. He won’t trouble her with the news about the prominent man now dead. She will ask him later if he’s going to the gym today. He’ll say maybe.

## 20

He has waited for her today, their usual day, to no avail. Old Man. Park Bench. And then it occurs to him that he has been stupid, or worse careless, about something this important to him. ‘We didn’t arrange our rendezvous. ‘Shit! Shit!’ he says to himself harshly, about himself, blaming himself. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ She had taken hold of his arm as she was leaving. She had gripped his arm tightly, and then disappeared, gone into the ether it seemed. ‘I don’t want you lost to us too soon.’ she had said in a moment of worry about the possibility of a fatal failure in his confrontation with So-and-so. He asks himself the obvious question now. ‘Who is us?’ He wonders who she could have meant. He considers some possibilities that come quickly

to mind. But then in another moment, in a sudden insight into his situation, he quietly asks 'Who else could it be? Except Soleme and me. We are us.'

The Old Man looks around. There's no one nearby. He wonders if he's been talking out loud to Soleme when he should have been directing his conversation inward. What about those long stories he has told her as they sat together at opposite ends of the bench those several days over those many weeks. And had he alone eaten all that pizza? But as near as he can tell he hasn't let himself get caught out. He's always been aware of his actual, factual, surroundings, people and all. He's had lots of conversations with those who frequent The Park and those who visit on their way wherever. And no one has been looking at him strangely, or avoiding him. So, it's all OK, it seems. And maybe she'll come back some time. And in the meantime, if he is caught talking to himself, he can explain that Spirit likes to hear him yakking away. He's a good dog. 'Bon chien.'

With all this in mind, this feeling of being alone after all, this feeling of resignation really, the Old Man sits quietly, starkly aware of himself, fearful that he has been talking to himself, talking too much within himself, and so at some level has begun to slip away from

being fully present in the world. Is this it then, the beginning of his little-by-little departure from reality?

‘Hey!’ she says. ‘I don’t have my usual rendezvous today, and we didn’t arrange anything, but I had to see you, see how you are.’

Tyr is absolutely still, stiffened, stuck, stunned. He is looking down, and downcast. He’s been thinking hard about this very thing, too much inside himself, and then here she is, talking to him? He can’t look up.

‘Knock, Knock Old Man. You in there?’ She’s playful. Or mocking?

He’s still for a moment more, and then he’s teary-eyed because he knows its really her. He stands. He turns toward her as she steps toward him, about to poke him, to get his full-on attention. He opens his arms to her and holds her for a moment. She sees his teary eyes, and she hugs him to her.

‘I’m here Soleme.’ He says over her shoulder. They are still holding on. ‘And I’m so happy you’re here with me.’ They sit down side by side without distancing, and turn to talk to each other quietly.

‘So-and-so is dead. It seems that I talked him to death.’

‘There was no violence then?’

‘None at all. I sat across from him. He started the conversation, unfriendly from the beginning even though I was at that point a stranger to him. And then he got surly. And then he got worried about the long, skinny bag I had with me. It got to a point where I simply told him what was happening and why. He argued that it was too long ago to talk about that stuff. He argued that there was no law against it any way. I showed him what was in the bag, and I guess he realized that his situation was serious. He was about to protest, but his body failed him right then and there and he died where he sat. I watched him die. And then I walked away.’

‘Did it make the news?’

‘A couple of days later. There was an obituary. A guy at the gym told all of us ‘old fellas’ in the change-room about it, part of the usual conversation we would have after we’ve worked out.’ Tyr tells her all of it, including the “full of natural causes part” and she laughs, and she’s happy for him, and for herself.

Then, he says to Soleme ‘I want you to know how deeply I felt about this thing with So-and-so, how right I felt about it. It may seem silly, but it’s real. I had my feelings for Norah early on, you know. I was 17 when we saw each other for the first time, in the hallway at school, for just the briefest of moments. Two years



before that, in 1954, there was a really popular pop-culture song that summed-up the heartfelt hopes of the older boys and younger men of my era. I wasn't quite yet one of the older boys, but I knew the song really, really well:

“Every time I look at you, something is on my mind. If you'd do what I want you to, Baby we'd be so fine.”

Back then those words were out there on the air-waves for months and months and then for years and years after. They were the accepted male sentiment on this thing about finding a first and foremost and forever love. The words were short-term sublime and long-term subliminal: they became an unconscious but moving mantra of my absolute desire:

“If you would tell me I'm the only one that you love, Life would be a dream sweetheart, Sh-boom, Sh-boom.”

In that year, 1954, I was 14 years old, singing tenor in a popular high-school acapella quartet sounding like the Four Aces, the Ames Brothers, The Crew Cuts and the like back then. We had a following in the Capital. We sang at the Chateau Laurier and many, many other significant events and venues over several years. In 1994 we were called back to sing at the school's 125<sup>th</sup> (or so) anniversary. As we began to sing to a very large audience still seated

after dinner in the Grand Ballroom, hundreds rose from their chairs and streamed onto the dance floor at the foot of the stage. They were slow-dancing and swaying to the first few songs, and then they burst into jive as the four of us sang our encore: Sh-boom! It was the sound of a resounding nostalgia that swept across the audience, pulling many more onto the dance floor. As we left the stage, and the applause was loud in our ears, I was stricken by the depth of my sense of loss of my girls and Norah. I felt then that someday So-and-so was going to be a dead-man, but that, in the meantime, I would try to put a broken dream back together again. It would take a while to get that done, and it would take the death of my youngest daughter in 1995 to start me along the long path of thinking and deciding what to do.'

Soleme has listened to his every word, listened between his words, and to the timber of his voice as he tries to explain his innermost self. He speaks softly, with a breathiness that elicits her empathy and her concern. She nods in understanding, and nods her affirmation. She grips his arm firmly, confirming her support and conveying her feelings as well. She knows she has feelings for him. Her very profession, her credentials as a neuropsychologist, had required significant self-assessment.

She doesn't just fall in love. She finds her way into it. So today she knows she is finding her way. 'Gotta go now. See you soon. A week today? Here. Same time. Same bench. The Café if its raining.'

## 21

The Old Man sits at the edge of the room near the window, his usual place. The window is open, raised a little bit above its sill. A slight, slow press of fresh air encircles him as he sits and waits. The room is a small out-of-the-way space through an open archway off to the side of the main area for visitors. It seems to get less attention from the cleaners, but Norah prefers it. Some old chairs are stacked in one corner. On the window sill, a tiny bouquet of pastel plastic petals sits alone, its colours muted under layers of institutional dust.

He watches Norah sitting across from him alone on her sofa. She is leaning slightly forward and to the right. He always worries she might fall. Her eyes are closed and her features nearly hidden behind silvery strands of hair. He visits

with her many afternoons. He usually wakes her just about this time and, to her never-ending surprize, has some little thing to give her: a lemon drop, a mint chicklet, a smooth stone, a tiny bloom, a thin dime, or some other little sundry made significant simply by the giving.

The Old Man Tyr is not one to forget such ritual. But this time he does. He has hurried in order not to be late, and so he has to do without. Distraught, he stands to take the few steps that will carry him gift-less to her. As he stands, he feels a tug on his shirt sleeve at the elbow. He has brushed against the pastel petals. And as Norah awakens to his kiss she smiles, delighted, and then laughs as Tyr proffers the pastel bouquet and prompts her to say ‘Oh, Darling. You shouldn’t have.’

## Old Man, Park Bench

# Acknowledgements

The Thomas Moore Institute's creative writing group in 2020, under the title *The Secret Lives of Objects*, was instrumental in my decision to write this little book. Chapters 1, 2, and 8 all began with impromptu writing exercises. The rest followed from a five-point plan-outline assignment. The facilitators were Emmy Huot and Matthew Rettino. The members were these writers, these inspirers: Joan, Heather, Christina, and Gisele.

The sculpture 'Lost In Thought' by Laliberte, at the MMFA, suggested 'Soleme'. An article about the psychology of forgiveness prompted Tyr's determination to not forgive. A published-article by Janine Benedet, (Prof., Allard School of Law, UBC) titled *The Age of Innocence, A Cautious Defence of the Age of Consent* etc., seemed to line up with the idea that the Federal Parliament should again raise the age of consent law in order to more fully protect adolescents.

# Author's Comment

This novella is a work of fiction founded in stories told and events experienced over a period of more than fifty years. It is a tale that could be told by many, many individuals impacted by such realities and fictions as described here.

It is my belief that adolescent girls are morally entitled to more protection than is currently provided by legislation and by the operations of the institutions involved; the latter must be more assertive, even aggressive, in publicising and applying the law. Those who might or actually do act criminally in this regard must be warned and, where-warranted, must be punished. It is a test of whether legislators really do or do not care about young women. In the current milieu, legislators are still failing.

The personal long-term harm to adolescent females caught-up in such malign seduction as described in this book is enough to warrant an ongoing and effective administration sufficient to deter and/or punish perpetrators. Anything less is an injustice to womankind and to all who care for them but are constrained from any acts of retribution.



A secondary but significant reason for such a warrant is the long-term health care costs of the ‘adult morbidities’ experienced by victims often in their elder years. To my knowledge, there is no data available to deny these assertions. In other-words, the extent of the problem and the cost of the problem to society could be and very likely is considerable. No one can honestly say not.

And yet another reason for this warrant of an ongoing and effective administration of age of consent laws is the prospect of vigilantism. The more we become aware of the ‘malign seduction’ of adolescents and the failure to adequately make use of the law, or adequately sustain the law, the greater likelihood there is of individuals agonizing over the failure of justice and the need ‘to do’ something about it. It is a more plausible future in an age of internet ‘apps/games’ where vigilantism moves from the virtual to the actual option when justice is delayed or worse denied to those who in fact deserve justice.

Another (but not the last) reason for more effective administration of age of consent laws becoming more necessary is that, as there is more and more immigration, or as there are more and more citizens living in or near poverty, there are more and more criminal individuals

or groups using various versions of malign seduction as the source of their conscripts into the business of 'trafficking' young women.

I should think that the story told here might be found as well in the gay world where adolescent males might suffer malign seduction by males of an inappropriate age. But, I haven't heard any such stories, nor have I asked about the probabilities.

Lee Chamberlain