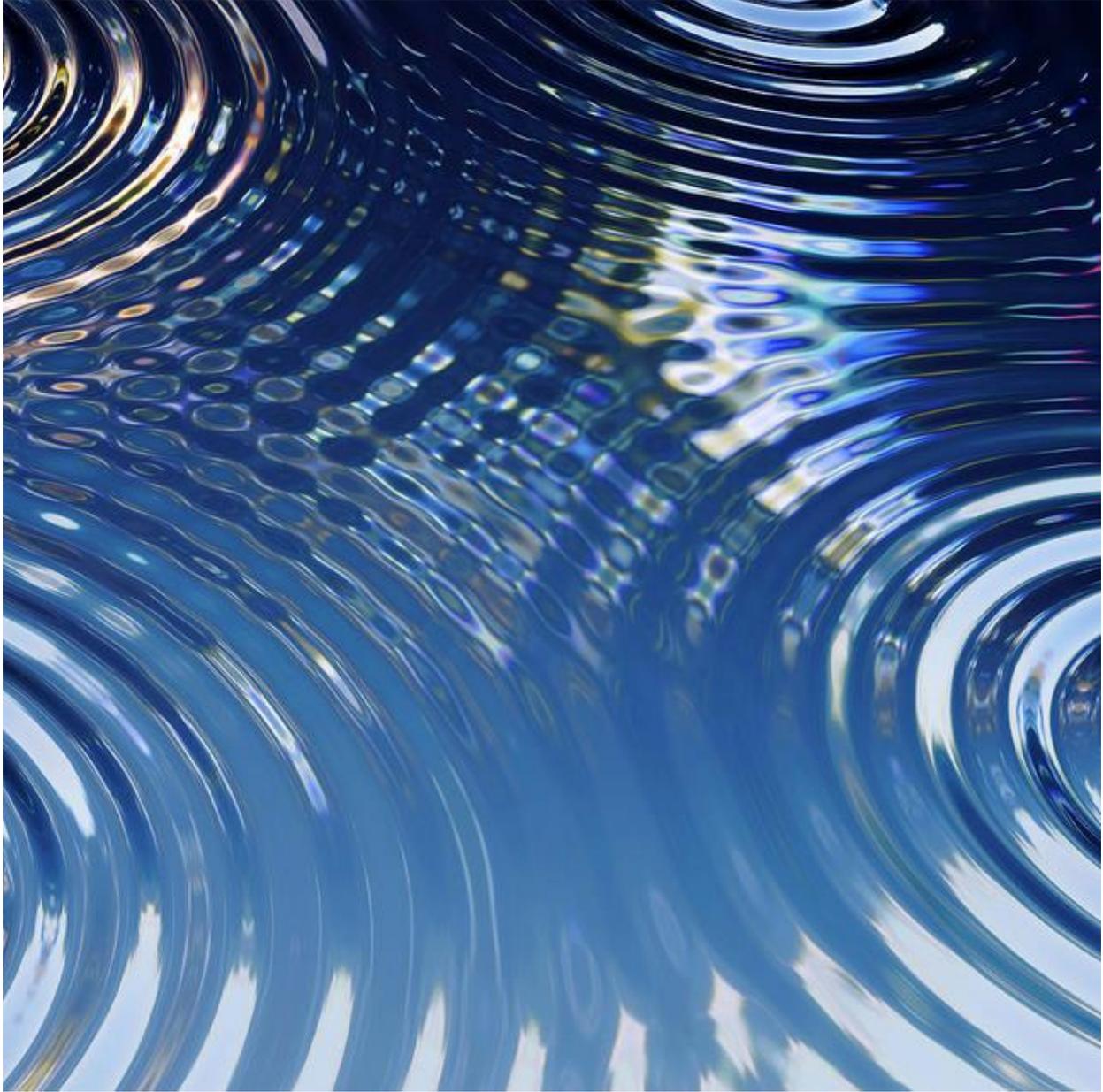


THE RIPPLE EFFECT



A novella by Peter Higgins

Chapter One

The Effect of Word Sequencing

There comes a time in ones' life when they ask the question: did my life matter? Did I leave my mark or was my life of no consequence? For Tim O'Neil, this question had recently been very much on his mind, to the point of sleeplessness and perhaps even to a degree of depression. And with the recent stem cell treatment for his rheumatoid arthritis and his current state of fragile health, it was a question of considerable importance.

No matter how hard he tried to come up with an answer, he just couldn't know.

It clung to him like a fresh canker that he couldn't help tonguing. And if he wasn't tonguing it he felt the pain of the raw open sore that refused to heal. He needed something tangible - tangible proof - to convince him of his life's worth, yet there was no way for him to get tangible proof. It bugged him to no end, especially during the quiet moments in the night when he tried to fall asleep. It was making him sleepless.

It started out like any other drive to Toronto, his pick-up truck all gassed up and with a fresh oil change. A thermos of coffee resting against his knee, O'Neil was on his way south to meet an old girlfriend from his days living in Hong Kong. It was all rather normal. O'Neil could not have foreseen the medley that was about to unfold before him on his journey.

Hitchhiking was very common on the Manitoulin Island because there wasn't any public transit, so O'Neil was rather inclined to pick up the hitchhikers at the side of the road. And so when he saw the young man standing at the edge of the road as he entered the town of Kagawong, he didn't hesitate to pull over. When he approached he saw the young man's crooked teeth when he smiled.

"How far ya going?"

"To Mindemoya. Not far."

"That's cool. Hop in."

He opened the front door and slid into the passenger seat, put his knapsack between his feet on the floor.

"Been waiting long?"

"Nah, not really. You're like the third car to pass by." He removed his gloves. "Pretty easy hitching rides here on the island." He nodded, and looked at his leather jacket, seeing the university crest.

"You go to Queen's?"

"Yep. Graduated a few years' back." The young man was very proud.

"Nice one. What did you study?" He looked at O'Neil closely for a moment.

"I'm John Hayden by the way."

"Tim O'Neil," he replied, shaking his extended hand.

"I studied philosophy actually, though some say it wasn't that practical, I still liked it."

"Sure man, I can see that. I majored in philosophy as well."

"No, really?" The young man wasn't sure whether O'Neil was joking around.

"Sure man. I graduated in 1990."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't blame you. I would be skeptical too."

The truck climbed the hill out of the town of Kagawong, past its 19th-century general store and the limestone schoolhouse, and then surpassed the speed limit as they passed the corner to the Billings Strait.

"I was in McNeil House for first year. I took my first philosophy course in Watson Hall."

He watched the smile cross the young man's face.

"You DID go to Queen's!" Immediately his demeanor relaxed. "What are the chances?"

"So what do you want philosophy to give you? I mean, how do you plan on using it?"

"Well, I want to be a creator. I don't want to be rote. I crave the creative life. That's why I'm living here on Manitoulin Island."

"How so?"

"Well it's like an artist colony here. I mean it's a very cool place to live if you want to paint or do crafts or write books or make videos."

"Yes, creativity is a biggie. One could say all other pursuits pale in comparison."

"Right, so I can see you get it. So I'm here and I'm like almost halfway through filming my first video. *Halfway!*"

O'Neil nodded.

"Well, stick at it. And make sure you finish it. You can edit it afterwards. But get it done while you're inspired."

The young man nodded, thoughtfully. Reflecting.

"It's all about sustainability. It's the first of a series of green videos designed to inspire others to 'go green.' I was inspired by this novel I read when I was in my first year in Kingston. A friend of mine told me about this website called Wordcarpenter that had all these free books for visitors to read. My friend said I would like Wordcarpenter's books. And since they were free, how should I not have a look, right? All the books are free. I mean who does that? And so I did and I read this one book at the site that had this passage that affected me in such a deep way."

For several moments O'Neil had lost focus on the road and where he was in the lane, so deep in thought he was from what the young man was saying to him.

Wordcarpenter.

“What was the passage you read?”

“You mean what was the passage I read that affected me so much to make me want to make save-the-environment videos?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it was right at the beginning of his first book *Visigoths in Tweed*, when the new guy Reid is coming into his first day at university and he passes that stretch on the highway where there are a few factories spewing black smoke into the air and the way he describes it is so, so... blatant. That there is a beautiful landscape that is blighted from his gross irresponsibility by the factory it made me see red! And then I read some more of the books at Wordcarpenter and found even more provocative passages in his novels that take place overseas, like mainly what he calls ‘Greater China.’ The pollution there! I mean this guy rode motorcycles up and down the roads all day going to his different schools where he taught English to young eager Taiwanese minds, and by the end of the day his face was covered in car exhaust. It was a theme in many of his novels.”

“Do you have an example?”

“Yes. One image that stands out in my mind was when he was riding down a side street and passed a stream that had purple water. *Purple*. I remember in the passage that he was in an industrial area where there were paint factories. But come on man, *a purple creek!*”

O’Neil had an exact picture of the stream in his mind’s eye.

Purple water. Yes.

They reached the end of the Billings Strait, passed the wind-swept century-old farm houses and the wind-scarred schoolhouse protected by a long line of bent oaks, where they began climbing Jerusalem Hill where the escarpment crosses the island coming from Mindemoya.

“So when I watch Greta Thunberg online it awakened something inside of me. It was during a time I didn’t really know what I wanted to do in my life, so it was sort of the combo of Greta Thunberg and Wordcarpenter that made me realize my purpose in life.”

“And now you’re here on Manitoulin making those videos that will inspire a whole new generation to live green.”

“Yep, exactly.”

“On YouTube?”

“Yep, on YouTube.”

O'Neil had lived a full life in his 55 years. Reckless and jam-packed full of a seize-the-day philosophy, nothing anyone said to him could have reigned him in from bursting forward onto life's stage. Like a well-bred race horse he jumped out of the gate and didn't look back for a decade, living and working and travelling to the most remote and challenging countries in the Far East.

He was determined to live his philosophy studies to the full. It wasn't just a subject to study for him; it was a way of living life.

So that's what he had done. And he was wise enough to keep a journal of his exploits, perhaps knowing somewhere in the back of his mind that at some time down the road his travels might come to illustrate the cause and effect of studying philosophy at the university level when one knows that they do not, at any cost, want to be rote by living a stagnate, ordinary life.

So he had recorded the empirical data for post-adventure analysis. And then to write it up into a palatable form so that other young philosophers could benefit from his grand experiment.

And all he needed was some time to undertake the writing up of his journals and to present them to the reading public, perhaps when the Internet matured a bit more so he could host them all on his own website. And of course all his books would be free.

But he never allowed himself to indulge in what this could potentially yield: the ripple effect of his reckless ways on the youth who followed him and found his books online.

And this young man was his first contact with someone who had been affected - all by chance.

When they reached the top of Jerusalem Hill and drove passed the water spring-fed lake at the top of the hill, they inched closer to M'Chigeeng Anishinabek Reservation.

"So since I arrived here about six months ago I've been living on pasta and tea and making notes and planning out my series of videos. Only now do I really think they are going find their own niche online to influence many people for years to come."

"That's really cool, man. Very cool."

"You know there are so many writers out there and so many of them have good stories but the writer or publisher insists on thirty bucks for their book, but once in a while there's someone who writes not for profit but to inspire others by putting his books online all laid out like a journal that is easy to read but most importantly free to read. And especially for these books this Wordcarpenter guy writes because all of them are so original and aim to inspire."

O'Neil was about to say he had never heard of this Wordcarpenter website but he couldn't, because he had created it. He was *the Wordcarpenter*.

"So did many of your friends read this Wordcarpenter guy's books?"

"Yeah, we all did. We used to read one of his books buried in the stacks at Douglas Library instead of working on an essay and every time we would agree afterwards that we had gained more than if we had stuck to the course and done our essays. There was always some sort of life-altering yield from each one of his books. Weird eh?"

"Did you ever get your essays done?"

“We did do our essays but the next day, after being inspired by this guy’s stories.”

They reached the edge of the eastern edge of the escarpment along Highway 540 and began their descent into the valley of the Ojibway. Spruce and cedar trees still had snow on the branches after the early snowfall. They descended into M’Chigeeng into the crux of the most successful native reserve in Canada.

“I’m going to Toronto today but I don’t mind giving you a lift into Mindemoya. It’s not far out of my way, and it could save you a lot of pain and suffering.”

“All right dude, I appreciate that.”

He turned south on Highway 551 to get to Mindemoya.

“So what do you know about this Wordcarpenter guy?”

“Only that he is Canadian. His bio is brief on his website. But I think this guy wants to be under the radar.”

“Incognito.”

“Exactly.”

“I suppose it’s in line with the tradition of good writers - to be off the radar.”

“A writer’s cabin in the country.”

“Yes. Exactly. He lives somewhere in Canada. I have read half his books. This guy lived all over the place and has all sorts of these crazy novels. The thing with me is that I need to be in the right mood to read any book, so I’ve read six or seven of the two dozen he’s written.” The young man stared at the Ojibway museum on his right.

“So what is it in this guy’s writing that strikes you?”

“I don’t know. I think that every individual has their own tenor and that some writers are able to hit a nerve by speaking to them on a different level - more than other authors. And Wordcarpenter, the way he writes and puts his words together, he creates such a unique and crystal clear world that it’s impossible to not get carried away and feel his truth in the soul. At least it was this way with me. I think I might have become the most passionate of all my friends at university. But hey, I’m not going to apologize for hard work.”

“Well said.”

They passed the chiefs’ lodge with all the flags flying half-mast. And then they reached the elementary school. O’Neil slowed down to the speed limit, being careful not to be pulled over in the school zone.

“I mean I think one reads a hell of a lot at school already you know,” said John Hayden, “but only those words that come from a timeless and ancient place hit home. And that’s what happened with this Wordcarpenter guy.”

His passenger's words lifted him up to a place he liked. It was as if a musical chord had been struck for the first time in his long, haggard life. He had never bothered to look back on what his books were doing to others so never experienced this sort of reverence-by-proxy before.

Rounding the corner to the water's edge and the great expanse of Lake Mindemoya, they both sat back and heard the robust crosswinds that echoed off the windshield with the seagulls and crows adding their songs to the mix. And around the next corner they entered the old town of Mindemoya.

"You can let me off at the post office, if that's okay."

"Sure man, no problem."

They drove into town in silence. Past the dentist office and the local law offices, they turned down the road to the post office where O'Neil pulled over to let the young man out.

"Thank you for the lift."

"You're welcome."

"And thank you for listening to me rambling."

"Oh no, it was cool. I remember writing that passage in Visigoths in Tweed when Reid was coming into his first day of school." The young man's eyes opened wider. "There were those factories. I only copied what I saw. And this holds for most of all I wrote so I hope my other books can inspire you more in your life."

For a second he paused, thinking again that O'Neil was joking with him, but then how would he had known about the title of the novel?

"You are." He swallowed. "You're Wordcarpenter?"

O'Neil smiled. Crooked.

"Yes."

"What are the chances?"

"Indeed."

"Well let me shake your hand for inspiring a whole generation of young readers like me." The young man looked closely at O'Neil. "I don't know if you know but you are a legend among my friends, and I'm sure a legend online to readers around the world."

For a moment O'Neil was taken back, for the first time taken out of his ironic defensive posture to the realm of sentiment.

"You're welcome young man. You're welcome." He swallowed. He dared not show the tear in his eye as the young man stepped out of the car. It meant more than he could ever say.

Chapter Three

The Past as Present

His hitchhiker had stirred something deep within his gut that had been percolating there for a decade. O'Neil had recently become restless with the notion that he hadn't done anything with his life and that his life hadn't resulted in anything of significance, especially since he had moved to the island to write more than 20 years ago. One side of his own personal debate was that he had done some things of importance within his chance of having lived a meaningful life but the other side looked around at the cedar forests and dirt roads of his immediate environment and it bespoke of a wasted life lived apart from the scrum of human activity. So the words of this young man had touched on something very much alive in him that had yet to be resolved. It was good he had six hours of driving ahead of him to get to Toronto because he could reflect on this new input from a random stranger.

Perhaps his website had had an effect on some readers out there?

Perhaps his life had had an impact on those unknown and far-off readers who lived online?

He felt the warmth of these thoughts and self-congratulated himself on giving the young man a lift into town, which made his life a little better than if he had not. And just as he was accelerating to the speed limit heading out of town he saw another hitchhiker standing at the side of the road just down from the Mindemoya Hospital.

He thought the man might be in need of transportation after getting some medical attention. So he stopped in front of the man. When the man opened the door he saw that the man was Ojibway.

"Howdy."

"Hello. Where are you going?"

"I need to get to Little Current."

"Well today is your lucky day man, hop in." The man sat himself in the passenger seat and removed his hat.

"Thank you. It's good of you."

"Well every so often I hitchhike myself. Last time I left my car at the garage and had to go into town to drive it home so hitchhiking was the easiest thing. I hate asking friends or neighbors for help, you know?"

"I know. I'm the same way. Sort of like today. My truck is in the shop but I needed to get to my lawyer's appointment today. Couldn't miss that!"

"When I saw you I thought you might have been in the hospital."

"No. I was seeing my lawyer right beside the hospital. He's new on the island."

O'Neil nodded.

"Yes, I saw the new office and new name on the sign." The name on the sign was Spanish. "Is he any good?"

“He is good. But you might say that his field of expertise is rather narrow. He specializes in Immigration and refugee cases.”

“Really? Then why would he settle here in the middle of Lake Huron so far away from Ottawa?”

“Funny you ask that because that’s what I asked him the first time I met him. He said that he felt safer here on the island than in Ecuador where he was practicing law before. Apparently if you get the COVID down there there’s really no effective treatment because the president has made the unproven mRNA vaccines mandatory and the hospital infrastructure there is so much lower than it is here.”

O’Neil thought of his time in Ecuador during the year of 2011 when he spent a year writing and learning Spanish.

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“Have you been to South America?”

“I spent a year in Ecuador. Loved it. Very friendly peeps.”

“That’s what I hear. I figure Julian Assange had to have good reason to choose Ecuador to get asylum from all the other possible countries that would’ve taken him.”

The mention of the name ‘Assange’ made O’Neil sit up.

“Do you follow Assange?”

The man, with his trimmed mustache and burgundy scarf still wrapped tightly round his neck, looked closely at him for the first time.

“I do. I follow WikiLeaks closely as well.”

Thoughts raced through his mind, his foot slow to hit the brake pedal as they entered the school zone inside the M’Chigeeng reservation.

“So are you following his court case?”

“I am. Everyday. It’s one of those stories one follows everyday across the years now. I keep my eye open for any article they write about him. It’s part of my daily morning reading regime.”

“It’s just tough to find articles that are objective about this case.”

“True. But I must admit that over the years more and more journalists and regular people have taken his side. If you remember he was at first ridiculed as a rapist hacker.”

O’Neil nodded.

“But for those of us who followed him closely we always knew those sexual assault charges were just made up by Sweden to have him extradited to the States. I mean those charges came weeks after the alleged event.”

“They were actually sexual assault allegations, not charges. Assange was never charged with any crime in Sweden.” The native nodded in thought, slowly.

“Yes, right. They made all that fuss because they just wanted to ask him some questions.”

“Yes, after they had already asked him some questions and the complaints were dropped. It was only later for some reason the assistant DA took it upon herself to re-examine the allegations and request an audience with Assange to answer some more questions.”

“Yep. And he said he was happy to talk to them but only if they came to the UK, to avoid being extradited to the States.”

“And these allegations led to him taking refuge in the embassy of Ecuador, jumping bail after his appeal failed.”

“Mm hmm,” he said as they passed the swamp where there was a Christian gravestone that stuck out from the reeds. The two of them passed by the Powwow field and the shinny rink and then the hockey arena and the Ojibway museum and cultural centre. As usual there were lots of cars parked in front of the centre.

“Ridiculous,” he blurted out, as he focused on slowing down for the right turn heading east along Highway 540. “The reasons for spending all that time in the embassy.”

“Seven years. A whole life cycle.”

“Yes.”

“Until this new guy Moreno takes over from President Correa.”

“All of it a real shame.”

“And that’s why my lawyer came here, because of the new president. They hated each other.”

“Oh yeah, why?”

“Well because my lawyer was instrumental in getting Assange Ecuadorian citizenship. He became directly involved because he can speak perfect English.”

They drove east past the police station at the bottom of the escarpment and then began climbing up the steepest grade on the whole island. The engine popped into overdrive.

“That’s cool. Significant thing that.”

“Why?” asked his newest passenger.

“Well think about it.” It exhausted O’Neil for a moment when he thought of the amount of explaining he had to do if his Ojibway friend didn’t know the full story of Julian Assange. But to his surprise he had done his homework. He knew all about Assange and his case. All he needed to do was to ask the right questions with the right words.

O'Neil leaned back in his seat and let the throaty V8 pull them up the steep incline, passed over the waterfall and then hit the wide-open view of the North Channel. No car was behind him so when he reached the apex and flat road along the top of the escarpment he relaxed and listened to his new native friend. It was true that O'Neil had taken an active interest in Julian Assange from the very beginning, and had actually written a fictional account of WikiLeaks he called PortalLeaks that he had uploaded onto his website so that anyone could read it for free, but he had never heard of any feedback from readers. He had purposely divorced himself from reading any direct feedback. Too sensitive to ignorance was the reason he gave himself. He had recently become very careful about expressing too much online in the new era of online censorship, so it had become a growing worry for him that those who knew the real story of WikiLeaks were dying out. The truth about what actually happened was becoming out of reach for the younger generation.

Let's see what this guy knows.

"By being allowed to live inside the embassy in London, what happened?"

He could see his passenger was more perched on the passenger seat, eager to express himself.

"Well, WikiLeaks happened."

"Exactly."

"He was able to finally organize all the released files into a searchable database so any end user could find what they wanted."

"Yes, and?"

"And he was able to be very active on social media by getting involved in the US elections and that old state within Spain that voted to become independent from Spain."

"Yeah, that place on the Mediterranean just south of the Pyrenees."

"Right. Catalonia. I mean look, Assange was able to work uninterrupted for seven years, totally protected and safe in the embassy with the means of becoming a significant voice in the online narrative of publishing damaging truths against nation states, such as the US and the UK. But-" His passenger looked out the window at the cedar forests along the road.

"What? What were you going to say?"

"Well," he said reluctantly. "I think his greatest point of power was right before the US elections. But nobody ever talks about it. If you remember, Assange hated Hilary Clinton and at that time, maybe five weeks before the vote was to be cast Assange wrote on Twitter that he would be publishing 10,000 emails every week for five weeks leading up to voting day. And so people read her emails. And after two weeks the FBI re-opened the case on Hilary, investigating her for breaching security protocols."

"That's exactly right man. Precisely."

"And that's when the tide changed and Trump won the election. And the Deep State were totally caught ill-prepared. And Trump's victory ushered in the age of Q and the mass red-pilling of not just the US population but of all those curious online readers around the world."

“And once you have been red-pilled it’s impossible not to see the truth; not to be red-pilled.”

“I agree. And that’s how Julian Assange was able to change the course of history, even ultimately leading up to the storming of Capitol Hill.”

They both nodded, in thought, looking ahead down the empty road in front of them.

Chapter Five

The First Cause

O’Neil reveled in the canvas of happy memories of his time in Quito during his year of indulgence and exploration in the South American capital. At that time Assange had nothing to do with Ecuador. He was just becoming involved legally with the Swedish mess a few months before he had left Canada for Quito. But when he could he would read what he could about the young Australian upstart. There was something about the degree of his rebellion that had attracted something in O’Neil to the WikiLeaks cause. He had never been one for causes but for some reason they shared the same fervor for truth as the other. And so he followed him.

The two of them descended from the escarpment and hit the strait away that lead to Honora Bay.

“So this lawyer guy in Mindemoya was the one who worked on getting Assange citizenship into Ecuador as a political refugee.”

“That’s correct. Though I’m not sure he was a political refugee.”

“I remember at the time President Correa was in a détente with the US administration. His brother had been arrested and incarcerated for cocaine charges in the US so there was a beef there.”

“Really?”

“So both of them - Correa and Assange - were like fellow outlaws in the eyes of the US.”

The native laughed. That’s when O’Neil remembered the lawyer he had met in Quito.

“You know I met a few lawyers in Quito when I lived there for a year and we talked a lot about Assange. One night we ended up talking for a long time because of these writings I had done on sheets of cardboard.”

He was puzzled and said: “What?”

“Well, when I was living in Ecuador there were so few people in Ecuador that followed the WikiLeaks story. I would chat-up people up in the pubs when I could but was always met with blank looks, ignorance and indifference. So I became frustrated. That is until I met an Ecuadorean lawyer who was keen to exchange opinions about what was unfolding with WikiLeaks.

“What had happened was I was attending a Dutch friend’s buddy’s wedding one night. The wedding was at this vast Spanish colonial villa with a pool and separate open bar, so of course I had partied in a robust manner for the night, and crestfallen when the guests began to leave.” His passenger laughed.

“But I stayed up at the bar and played music until I felt the need to write some poetry - or prose. So I cut off flaps of large cardboard boxes and found a black marker and wrote my prose. And wrote and wrote. I filled three, four and five of the foot-and-a-half by foot-and-a-half pieces of cardboard that I placed on the bar. So by the time people began waking up the next morning they found me still at the bar with these big cardboard sheets with English words written on them.

“So I read them to the guests, with as much ease as hours of drinking allows.”

“Cool.” They both stared at the road ahead as they fast approached Little Current.

“One of those guests was a lawyer for the Correa government. He was the only guy wearing a different shirt from the others still at the party the morning after.”

“‘You seriously wrote all these last night?’ he had asked. I assured him that I had written them and that when I was inspired to write poetry I tried everything in my power to facilitate it by scrounging for a pencil and paper. I told him that was why I always carried a journal with me.”

“Right.”

“So he asked me: ‘What are you going to do with them?’

“I looked at them for a moment and said: ‘I always try my best to keep anything I write so I can edit it later, but that seldom happens. I hate editing.’ So I told him: ‘You know, looking at them now in the crisp morning light, they’re too big for me to bring with me. Perhaps I could get some paper and copy them down?’ So the guy found some paper and a pen and the two of us went to the bar near the pool where I began copying the sheets. That’s when it happened.”

There was a silence, the native unsure whether he had missed something in the dialogue.

“What happened?”

“That’s when I brought up Assange.”

O’Neil braked when he met a slower car in front of him, but they were within striking distance of the town with the connecting bridge to the mainland.

“Well it was all sort of surreal, looking back at it. I mean, how was I to know his friends who also came into the bar were lawyers and that they were interested in WikiLeaks too.”

“They worked for the government you said?”

“The one guy did, the one I gave the sheets of cardboard writing to. Only later did he say he was involved in ‘granting visas.’ So we all started talking about Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, and these guys only knew what they could read in the newspapers so I told them what was really going on, as you have said, with the trumped-up accusations from Sweden and him being a serious threat to the Deep State of any country. I said it was best to have someone like that on your side, rather than not. They nodded and asked me questions, to which I answered them, each time seeing their eyes open a little more at the untarnished and untainted truth about the man and his project.

“It was just the one night, but about a year later when I read that Julian Assange had been granted amnesty at the Ecuadorean embassy that was the first thing I thought of: that night talking the lawyers.”

“Amazing.”

O’Neil slowed down as he passed the city speed limit sign, entering into the historic town of Little Current.

With a glimmer in his eye, the native man asked: “Was there anything special about this man’s face, do you remember? I mean was there a specific thing about this man’s appearance that you remember?”

For a moment O’Neil could hear the intricacies of the motor and the ease of the rubber hum of his tires in the wake of the question because he knew immediately what his passenger was referring to with the question.

“Yes, there was. His lip. He had a cleft lip.”

“I’ll be damned! That’s the guy! He’s the one who is my lawyer. And he was the one who let in Assange on behalf of the government.”

There were too many thoughts piercing through his mind at light speed. In the hectic echoes of his mind, he pulled into the parking lot of the new hotel built on the water’s edge.

“Yeah, this is good, here. Perfect.” The native put out his hand and shook it. “Good to speak with you. What a coincidence. It’s almost like it was because of you that night at the wedding that was the real reason for Ecuador giving protection to Assange. Wow. Think of the ripple effect of that.” He waved and walked towards the doors into the lobby.

O’Neil was stunned. Could his writing on cardboard pieces that night at the wedding have led to Ecuador allowing Assange to live in their London embassy for seven years? He sat and thought it out for a few moments and then noticed his cheeks were flushed. Couldn’t be he thought to himself, then: could it?

Chapter Six

Crossing to the Mainland

As he sat in his truck in the parking lot of the new hotel he realized that it might be wise to take a leak and fill up with cheap gas before leaving for the mainland. The LaCloche Mountain Range can be a treacherous drive. Let wisdom reign here. Top up and respect Mother Nature. He sat quietly with his engine still off and realized that he had failed to tell his native passenger that the sheets of cardboard prose he had composed that night had been immediately put up on the walls around the bar by the owner.

He always thought they looked great against the wood finish.

At the gas station after he had filled up and bought a coffee, he noticed a couple drinking coffee and looking around restlessly, as if they were stranded. When he looked closer he saw that it was a map they were looking at.

As he sat in his truck sipping his coffee and thinking things through he wondered if there was a possibility the Ecuadorean lawyer had chosen to live on Manitoulin Island because he had told him how

cool it was. And then he wondered whether there was a possibility that those five sheets of prose might have made it to these shores and were perhaps up on the walls of his new house on the island - in his man cave.

One just never really knew about these things.

Lost in thought, and feeling sort of tickled to think he might have had some degree of influence over Assange being given protection at the embassy and being granted citizenship, he realized that he should visit the restroom before undertaking the drive through the LaCloche Mountain Range. Once he was done when he exited the gas station he spoke to the couple with the map.

“Visiting?”

“Well, no. I mean, sort of. We just moved here, like last week so we’re scrambling a little to get things in order.”

“Nice one. It’s a good place to live. Very safe.”

They nodded.

“It is.”

They smiled awkwardly at him.

“Do don’t need a lift somewhere do you?”

“Actually we do. Our car just died so we bought one online that’s in Espanola. We’re on our way to go pick it up and drive it back here.” When O’Neil took a closer look at them he saw that they were both dressed warmly as if preparing for a long wait to find a lift.

“Right. I remember those days of first setting up here. Lots to do, that’s for sure. And virtually impossible without a vehicle.”

“Yeah, we realized that. It’s just too much money to put in to such an old car that we thought it was best to get a newer SUV that is safer on the roads here during the winter.”

“Yep, good call. Smart play.” O’Neil shook his head. “Well I’m going through Espanola so I can give you a lift if you want.”

“You will?”

“No problem.” They picked up their bag and followed him to his truck.

“Is there room? Oh, yeah. I see.” When he opened the passenger door he saw that there was a small backseat.

“Sure. Just move the stuff to the other side of the seat. It’s spacious enough I think.”

The girl took the backseat and he sat in the front seat. She looked like she was from India. He looked like a Celt.

He started the engine. They all buckled up.

"It's quite a drive through the mountains."

"We drove it a few times. It's pretty steep in places." He was a small man, like an Irish leprechaun. In his voice sounded like he knew he was embarking on a new beginning and he had made a good choice.

They hit the road and had to stop at the bridge - the only connective tissue between the mainland and the island.

"Did you know this swing bridge is the only one of its kind?"

"No, we didn't."

"Have you seen it work?"

"When we first came to the island in the late summer there were still lots of sailboats in the water so we did see some sail by here when the bridge was open."

"Pretty cool, eh?"

He nodded.

"I like the wood it's made of," she said, from the backseat.

"Yeah, me too. Old school."

"Reminds me of the British-built bridges one can still find in India from colonial times."

"Were you born there?" O'Neil was curious.

"I was born in Ottawa but my family is from Mumbai. My parents moved here. They said it was getting too dangerous with Pakistan agitating along the Line of Control."

O'Neil thought of his time he spent there up in Kashmir Valley and north of there when he was younger.

"They weren't wrong, your parents. The Line of Control is regarded as one of the world's biggest flashpoints."

The light turned green and they passed over the swing bridge, the sound of the worn, uneven wooden surface causing too much noise for conversation. Once over, the chat resumed.

"It is very dangerous," she said, agreeing.

The truck went into overdrive as he eased his foot down on the gas pedal and quickly reached the speed limit on the road heading due south to the Sudbury mainland. First they had to cross Goat Island.

"I never knew much about the Line of Control before I read this book that mentions it," said the Celt. "I remember when I was reading it online and came across this scene in this book that took place along the actual border with Pakistan I called for Sasha and so she came over and read the passage." He turned to look at his new wife. "Remember cookie?"

She smiled. "Yes, how can I forget that? It was one of the first times we ended up kissing."

He smiled. "Yes, that's what I remember too."

The truck passed along the causeway that connected to the mainland proper, where the les voyageurs passed on their way to settle the Canadian west.

“What did you learn about the Line of Control?”

The young man sat up in his seat and looked at O’Neil earnestly.

“Well it wasn’t so much what I learned about the Line of Control as it was learning that it existed at all, but when Sasha read it she recalled this story her uncle told her and her brothers one time during a family visit.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Yeah. If I can just remember it, I’d tell you, but. Sasha can you recall the story?”

“I can dear,” she said. She sat up in the backseat to the middle console and spoke. “In this book there is a scene when that main character was exploring up in the mountains of the Himalayas looking for some lost monastery or the grave of Moses or something, and he bumped into a regiment of Indian soldiers that were conducting security checks along the border with Pakistan. It was so bizarre and unique that my first instinct was that the author could’ve have just invented it from his imagination. He had to have been there to write it the way he did because it was so surreal, and so after I read it and thought about I realized that I remember a similar story told by my uncle who used to command the patrols along the Line of Control with the border of Pakistan. I remember thinking: this is the guy my uncle was talking about.”

“That’s right. And so you told me about what your uncle said.”

They has passed all the remaining limestone and had now entered the granite bedrock that defined the land around northern Ontario: The Canadian Shield. The world’s hardest rock began protruding up through the forests giving birth to an ancient mountain range.

“So what did your uncle say?” asked Tim O’Neil. There was a silence. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“My uncle told us about a time when he was commanding his platoon during a security check along the border when they ran into a foreigner who said he was looking for a historical relic related to the Bible. He was traveling with two guides and a horse so it was his guides who told him what he was doing in such a remote area of the world.”

“Remote, yes,” said O’Neil. “I would gather.”

“They all thought at first that the man was CIA,” she said, “infiltrating the area to find out who was where and who actually had control of the area. But when my uncle insisted the man was a spy his guide demanded he apologize to the man because he was a good man who had a pure heart. ‘Rubbish’ my uncle said. ‘No westerner had a pure heart.’ And besides my uncle said: ‘what was a tourist doing here in the middle of nowhere?’”

“And along one of the world’s most dangerous disputed boundaries?” added her husband.

“The man’s guide said: ‘That is what I thought, until I met this man. And I’ve been with him as his guide for a week. I do not see any bad in him.’ So my uncle stepped closer to the tall white man who seemed more interested in looking around at his Himalayan surroundings than what was transpiring with the

Indian army beside him, all sweating from the run they were on. My uncle studied the man's face and didn't see the mark of hardship or military determination that marked a man after years in the army. 'You are a tourist?' he said to the man. 'Yes,' he answered. 'I'm here looking for a lost monastery where Jesus lived during his final years, with his identical twin brother Thomas.' My uncle admitted that he didn't understand exactly what the man had said other than recognizing the words Jesus and Thomas. He knew Jesus was buried in Srinagar, only 250 miles south of where they were and where many tourists visit to see for themselves that Jesus made it to northern India after his crucifixion. And when he mentioned Thomas it comforted him because it was known among the area that Saint Thomas the disciple was martyred in the area, right around the time of Jesus's lifetime. My uncle's first impression was this man was telling the truth. That's when he commanded his men to stand down and continue their patrol. His ten men resumed their jog along the border moving away from my uncle, the foreigner and his guides."

Sasha's words had opened a set of doors within O'Neil's mind that took him far away in reliving memories of his trip to northern India and the images that remained so vibrant in his mind's eye but that had been left dormant and unseen due to inertia. There was no one around in his life to share them with.

He was lost in thought as they passed Whitefish Falls and began climbing the worn granite LaCloche Mountains that used to be the highest mountain range in the world two billion years ago.

Chapter Seven

Impartial Kindness

O'Neil wasn't sure how long it had been that Sasha had stopped telling the story of her uncle. He went far away in his memory bank seeing images long forgotten and overlooked within his own active collective memory. He remembered the Indian Colonel's pock-marked face and the intensity of his features, as if his hair and skin were on fire. He remembered taking particular time answering his translated questions and being as nonchalant and natural as he could be because it was true that he didn't have a political agenda. And what he answered was the truth.

His heart was pure and that is what the army man saw. He could see it in the man's searching eyes.

Having been a little miffed that he had been forced to take a guide with him while hiking in the Himalayas, he remembered being very thankful for having a guide because without a doubt he would have been arrested and brought back to the barracks and interrogated. As it played out, the entire encounter was all about diffusing unfounded suspicions.

"So Sasha," he continued as they climbed through the mountain range. "Why did your uncle tell you this story? I mean why did he remember it and tell you?"

"He was telling us because he wanted us to know that because of that one encounter with this man in the mountains alone with a guide and armed only with a noble purpose, that he no longer believed that the white man from the west was a war animal - a man with only an instinct to war. He learned from interacting with this man that some whites are good. Noble. Unwarlike. Unstained with politics. He said

there were those within the Indian military that believed the west wanted a nuclear war between Pakistan and India and were financing Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to match the fight in the Indian arsenal. So when this man showed him that perhaps his views of whites was skewered by the media and propaganda, he could no longer be a hawk within his border duties."

"Cool. So what happened?"

"For him it was a turning point so he started to fight for maintaining peace at all costs, much against the prevailing ethos at the time. At the time, it was right after the September 11 attacks in New York that the encounter happened. The westerner had said he had come from Hong Kong and that he had been working there for years. When my uncle looked at his passport he saw the work visa. Everything this man said was true. So you could say it sort of melted his heart a bit, took him away from being on the verge of launching nuclear bombs on Islamabad. So in my uncle's view, this man had almost singlehandedly prevented World War Three."

O'Neil gripped the wheel tighter and suppressed a smile that spread across his face.

"Wow."

"So this book I was reading," said the husband, "was the impetus for Sasha to tell me about her uncle. And after reading the whole book, each of us, we think the guy who wrote the book was the guy her uncle met and save the world from a nuclear holocaust."

"Amazing."

"It *is* amazing."

"And the author is one of the reasons we chose to move to Manitoulin Island and work from home. Because from what we could research about the author, he lives on Manitoulin Island and runs his website called Wordcarpenter. Have you heard of him?"

A strange tingling sensation curled up his arms and ribs and spine as he savored yet again another coincidence.

"Recently a guy was telling me about this writer. This Wordcarpenter."

"The book was called The Cathedral of Truth," said the young man. "It's there online if you want to read it."

They climbed the steepest mountain within the LaCloche Range passed the mining town of Willisville where it was marked as the highest point. Now they were on a swift descent into Espanola.

"And while I'm thinking about it," said Sasha, "it sort of changed the way I looked at westerners too. This character was so pure. I could really relate to him."

"Cool."

"It opened your heart to let me in, right cookie?"

Sasha blushed. "Yes dear."

For a few moments O'Neil wondered whether or not he was going to tell them that he was in fact Wordcarpenter and that he had been the guy who had had the interaction with her military uncle that happened in November, 2001, but he knew he would not. It wasn't his style. Besides, there was too much explanation involved. Best to leave it be.

They fast approached the town.

"So where would you like to be dropped off? There are quite a few car dealerships in Espanola."

"True. The Ford dealership on the main drag if you please."

"Yeah, no problem."

When he had a moment to reflect on the intricate symmetry of coincidences he concluded that they young couple should be told, if only to reaffirm their decision to build a new life on the world's largest freshwater island in the world that happened to be in the middle of the Great Lakes. The trick was though, he didn't want to be pressed into exchanging emails and staying in touch. He was a man who valued his privacy and freedom above all else. Otherwise how else could he write those books?

So just as they were pulling into the parking lot of the Ford dealership, he spoke thus: "I am the author of The Cathedral of Truth. I was the one who spoke to your uncle." The couple were silent for a moment until the young man burst out laughing.

Sasha followed.

And he didn't feel like defending himself so he let it go.

"That's funny!" he said. "Nice one," he said as he stepped out of the truck. "You're funny. But thanks so much for the lift dude. Really appreciate it."

"Good I could assist. Enjoy your new vehicle!"

They closed the truck doors gently, respectfully, as if they were still not sure O'Neil had been joking. Only later when they had some time waiting in the car dealership did they visit the Wordcarpenter website and looked at the photograph of a young Tim O'Neil and realized that he had been telling the truth. They both looked out the window where the truck had driven away.

O'Neil had always enjoyed understatement.

Chapter Eight

One Foot In, One Foot Out

Sure O'Neil was beginning to learn about the importance of his works but he couldn't justify not having issue. It had become a major failure in his life. Everything else was good and had turned out the way he wanted, except finding a wife and having children.

Major fail.

There had been some woman he still regrets leaving behind, but his travel and adventures took precedent. He could never allow anyone or anything to prevent him from following his destiny, and his destiny was always living the writer's life. He was only now realizing that his books were having a tangible effect on others. It was comforting.

But still, there was this void. He was without his own family.

These were his thoughts as the snow started to fall as he drove down the main street of Espanola, one of the ugliest towns he knew of. The paper mill on the Spanish River spewed out clouds of toxic clouds that landed on the rooftops and roads of the town, leaving a strange chemical smell everywhere.

Smelling it made his stomach rumble. That's when he decided he would stop at the Subway to get a sub.

He parked and went into the restaurant and bought a submarine. He ate it in his truck. Safe from the virus and apart from others, it was his safe zone. And his favorite sub. As he chewed his mobile phone beeped. He checked his messages and came across a name he hadn't heard of in over 40 years. He began reading:

Dear O'Neillie Bob, I have been writing you an email in my head for many years now so now that I find myself reconnected with you via Facebook now is a good time as any to write this. Let me be Frank, you changed my life. What I mean is you had a huge impact on who I became as a person because of what happened during that year of boarding school back in 1979.

O'Neil took a moment and remembered the year they both were at Trinity College School in Port Hope, in the lower school where they lived in a 12-man dormitory. He remembered the ice on the inside of the windows during the dead of winter, and the Tom Foolery that went on whenever the masters weren't present. And Nick Kerber was part of that. Or more accurately, he was there. He was a very shy and awkward kid who was picked on by the leaders of the various packs that roamed the corridors of Bouldon House back in the old days when there were only males allowed.

I think most of us would agree that one is never fully aware of the profound cause-and-effect of life events when they happen to you. It's only much later that one realizes how much that event changed them, whether for good or bad.

TCS was like that for me.

I know I was a sort of half-person back then, unsure of who I was and where I fit in among all the guys in B Dorm. Obviously that time you guys put a dead fish in my bed says a lot about how I was viewed. I remember you guys having a good laugh at that.

O'Neil's eyes widened at the memory of that day. Rainy and foggy, he and two others had gone off campus for a walk along the railway tracks towards the shores of Lake Ontario. Mile after mile they had walked while talking about all the things they were going to do when they got out of boarding school. Each boy trying to outdo the other in plan. Then they reached a pond where there were a few dead fish lying on the shore. They were big enough to be salmon that had swam upstream to lay their eggs and die. Regardless, they decided to take a fish and put it in Nick Kerber's bed just before lights out.

So that's what they did.

So excited about their special op, they created a pillow fight just before the lights went out so that Nick couldn't get into his bed while the lights were still on. Everyone in the dorm had been told of the prank except Nick, so when he finally slipped under the covers in his cot he screamed.

And the dorm had laughed.

I was an easy target. And I know that at that age the weak get hazed. That was fine. You guys weren't that rough. And looking back at it I think it was you who protected me from really getting it, from Kent Sutcliffe and Brian Sullivan. Those guys were out to hurt me. And I think a few times you steered them away to other targets to protect me because of that time I cried in front of you.

I don't think you would remember.

He did. The memory shot forth into his mind's eye like a bullet that echoed around in his brain. He recalled the time skinny, pale Nick Kerber had broken down in the classroom after such extreme hazing. There were a few boys harassing him but they all left except for me. He pleaded with me to stop. And said he couldn't help being the way he was. Something in O'Neil softened when he heard that from Kerber's mouth.

So strong it was to admit weakness, he thought, especially in a shark tank like grade eight boarding school.

O'Neil was humbled. They both walked out of the classroom and Kerber was more or less left alone for the remaining time he had left at boarding school.

I cried because I was afraid there was no hope for me against the teasing. I was too weak and I felt like I was drowning. It was too much so when you stayed in the classroom to listen to me you became the only one in my life who could protect me and stick up for me. Though in those strong currents of mischief, boys that age had to be pretty down low about it, which you were.

I don't remember being bullied again for the rest of the term.

But it was more than just that. I began to look at you as someone who had honour, who always did the right thing and who was the only one who had integrity surrounded by scallywags and cheats.

And you were.

Right before my eyes was a living example of precisely what Trinity College valued as the ideal: just, righteous, humble and someone who always stuck up for the underdog - for the small guy. What I witnessed was right out of a book. I remember you won the MVP award for the lower school hockey team, and I seem to recall you won the end-of-year math award with a score of 105%.

I tell that story to my son.

But there was more. Remember that time you had a fist fight against Lunny? Well I don't know if you knew it but you were fighting for all of us in B Dorm 'cause Lunny was the dorm bully and he had been getting on everyone's nerves and it was only you who stood up and called his bluff. Remember how we all crowded around you two as you punched and wrestled across the cots of the dorm, until you pinned him and made him give up?

Poor old Lunny never did another thing after that fight. He couldn't leave the school fast enough at the end of the term.

For me you were the guy who ticked all the boxes and who would become someone of worth. Someone important. A good man. A real gentleman. You had more insight than all of us combined it seemed like, and you managed it by treating everyone fairly.

It was true, his words. That year at boarding school in 1979 was a tough year and very intense. But he was that person described by the adult Kerber. He was just and righteous the way he fought against Lunny's tyranny. He did get the bonus question on the end-of-year math exam and was awarded the medal for top grades. He remembered getting the MVP for hockey season, something he had forgotten. But most of all he remembered the scholarship he was offered.

And how he turned it down so he could go to a high school with girls.

Big decisions indeed. For a thirteen year old. Where were his parents at the time? Divorcing.

Lost opportunities indeed.

Chapter Nine

Character Inertia

He sighed. Remembering his time at boarding school brought with it many emotions. Many memories. He thought about it often, the toughness of it and the people there, his teachers and who ran the school. Real grey men. British lords and princes. Stiff upper lips and all that. But somehow in the toughness and enforced discipline and regimen there was a rationality to it all that lent itself to self-betterment, and that was what he identified with. He could never understand those there who complained all the time about boarding school and its rigors. It was as if they had defined themselves on focusing on the negative.

To O'Neil that never was kosher.

He took advantage of the situation and flourished in its structured environment and emphasis on sports. He loved playing on the cricket team and going to chapel six mornings a week, rain or shine. And he liked his teachers. They all had their own style and technique. But there wasn't anyone who compared to Mr. Grandfield, his English teacher who was an old boy and had graduated from TCS and became a Rhodes

Scholar. He was fair and intense but the thing he could never figure out about him was why he had returned to teach at the school that had taught him after having a scholarship to Oxford University.

Why on Earth would he ever return to teach at TCS when the whole world was open to him?

O'Neil had spent long hours during grade eight trying to come up with a valid answer. And he couldn't. Ever.

He had recently heard that Mr. Grandfield had passed away at a relatively young age just after retirement. He never had the chance to thank him for being such a good teacher.

He finished eating his submarine and then decided to finish reading his message from Nick Kerber.

But the one thing I took away from you, from watching you, was the importance of a good sense of humor. That was your super power. You could unarm any thug or bully with a one liner.

You used to do it with such ease.

After the term finished and the lower school for us ended and we all went our separate ways, I became obsessed with finding my own sense of humor as a means of protecting myself.

But also, I would soon learn, as a way to relate to others.

O'Neil recalled all the laughter of that year - like a frying pan where you either laughed or burned alive. Many of the 12-year-old boys that year didn't make it through. Daniels was kicked out for smoking, and that other guy from Bermuda didn't make it through due to health reasons. But then there were those like Lunny who were defeated when they left: battered and bruised, like Prince Charles at Gordonstoun. Very formative year grade eight was.

And very dangerous to ones character if it all goes wrong.

You were what some might call 'a natural.' So by the time the end of term came you had become the de facto leader of 'B Dorm.' Everyone looked up to you for those noble qualities I mentioned before: fairness and a strong impartial sense of justice. But with your laugh and humor thrown in there, no one could not like you.

I think all of us respected you for your follow through and finesse. You taught us by the way you conducted yourself and by the guy you were.

All this might be a bit weird for you to read these words from an old classmate from grade eight boarding school, but it's the truth what I write. And I have no qualms saying it like this. Because I'm a firm believer in giving praise where praise is due. And you deserve it. Your influence on me during that year can never be understated. You showed me what it was to be a good human being and how anyone had the power themselves to construct their own identity, their own traits, by having the choice of being good or bad. You chose good. And because you chose good I found the good within me. And I've centred my life's calling around that good.

And my family feeds off that good too.

We have built a website that acts like a portal or warehouse for all humor in the world, in any language from anywhere in the world. I run jokesunited.com The biggest wholesaler of jokes uniting the world. We have 100,000 new visitors to our website every week. Millions of subscribers. We expect to reach a billion visitors next year.

And we're growing fast.

It just became a hobby of mine after Trinity to collect and write down jokes that laugh at our differences and unite us in laughter. I collected so many over the years that my wife suggested I create a website for others to tell their jokes. Week after week we received more and more jokes so now people visit our website every morning to read a joke that warms them inside.

And this was all born because of you my old friend.

Snow fell softly onto the windshield when he put the phone away and turned on the engine. How far away had he just been, thinking of the year in Port Hope over 40 years ago? It was a different age compared to today. But he was thankful to know that a seed born during that cold year in Bouldon House had taken root and given rise to something that might exert a positive force around the world and bring people closer together. He remembered the tears in Kerber's eyes in the classroom. He always thought his trait of protecting the weak was one of his most noble.

It made him wonder whether there were others so affected by his character.

Character Ten

Truckers are People Too

O'Neil turned onto the Trans-Canada Highway and headed east towards Sudbury where he would take Highway 69 and go south to Toronto. The single lane road was rough from Espanola to McKerrow all the way to Nairn Centre, pock-marked from the abuses of hard rubber and cold temperatures mixed with salt and friction. But it was a scenic drive for O'Neil because it followed the CN railway and was the route his family used to drive every summer on their way from Ontario to British Columbia when he and his siblings spent the summer with their grandmother in the Okanagan Valley.

Fine memories indeed.

It was the roughness of the landscape that he liked that was distinctly Canadian. It was not American at all because of the massive chunks of unbreakable granite that made up the bedrock left exposed by the receding glaciers over the millennia.

And he liked it because it was the closest road to the old *les voyageurs* route that was a hidden part of Canada's past that no one ever talked about anymore. The age of Pierre Radisson and Étienne Brulé

defined the course of early Canadian history - real history right there along the shores of the North Channel and the French River valley. Manifest Destiny in action.

The traffic was heavier on the main road going east to Sudbury, but the snow had stopped falling. It was a relief because driving at 100kmph when it is snowing is not a relaxing drive. He was making good time despite having picked up so many hitchhikers and even going out of his way to drop off the first guy in Mindemoya, but what a gift he had given him. A fan of his website wordcarpenter.com.

Amazing!

So he found his groove and started to think about his old girlfriend Allison that he was meeting in Toronto. An Australian, she was his girlfriend for several years when he lived and worked in Hong Kong. She was there working for some paint company as a colour specialist, a job he could never figure out.

How does anyone become a colour expert? Don't they have colour experts in Hong Kong?

Regardless, she was cool and they had a very good time taking advantage of the expat scene in Hong Kong. She played soccer at the local stadium near the tunnel to Aberdeen where O'Neil would meet her and take her to the bars in the all-night drinking areas of Wan Chai. She loved it and always felt safe with him. It was an effortless friendship between them. Their world view and sense of humor overlapped so talking was easy. There was very little labour required when they wanted to communicate with one another. It was so easy that he ended up taking it all for granted.

Allison was the biggest regret of O'Neil's life. She was truly the one that got away. He was so determined to find the time and space and freedom to write the novels he knew existed inside him that he refused to let anyone in, but over time he realized that she would have fit in nicely. Over time he realized she would've *enhanced* his life.

He tried not to think about Allison and the profound missed opportunity but at times he simply couldn't help it. He would never get that back. It's true that he had achieved his writing goals, but still there was an unmistakable void there that he felt every day if he allowed himself to.

So meeting with her in a few hours at his favourite pub in Toronto filled his stomach with butterflies.

What would he say, especially after a few drinks?

Just as he slowed down in the trucking town of Nairn Centre he had a double take at the man who stood at the side of the road just east of the gas station.

"Not another hitchhiker," he said aloud.

Without thinking he pulled the wheel to the shoulder and waited for the guy to open the passenger door. Immediately he smelled the alcohol.

Smelled like vodka. Fresh.

"I need to get to Sudbury." The man's unshaven face looked greasy.

"I'm going by Sudbury. You're in luck. Hop in." Almost before he had said 'hop in' the man was in the truck. The smell of the booze was strong.

“Nairn Centre of all places to hitchhike from,” he said, shaking his head.

“I must say I seldom see hitchhikers coming from Nairn Centre.”

“That’s what I mean.” The man pulled out a mask from his coat pocket, wrinkled and stained. “I hope you don’t want me to wear this thing.”

“As long as you don’t have a fever, then no.”

“Good because I hate wearing it.”

“Must be challenging in this day and age.”

O’Neil’s truck went into overdrive as it climbed over the blasted granite to exit the town to the long forested stretch to the outskirts of Sudbury.

“Yeah man, it’s a real pain in the ass. This ridiculousness we’re all living through right now. This *circus*.” Disdain dripped from his last word.

“It is a circus actually.”

“No shit Sherlock,” he said with some bitterness. He better watch this guy.

“It’s become a new world since 2020.” The unshaven man with the greasy face looked closely at O’Neil to see if he was being ironic.

“New World Bloody Order is what it is. Medical authoritarianism. Usurps the power of any national government anywhere in the world. The World Health Organization is controlled by a bunch of power-hungry crazies.”

“Crazies, yes.” O’Neil was careful to keep his eyes peeled in front of him. The snow had returned so he put on his windshield wipers. He half-hoped the sound of the wipers would hypnotize the man to a relaxed, Zen-like trance to avoid the inner volcano that he sensed was rumbling.

“It’s all about population control you know,” his attention now earnest and set on O’Neil. “It started in China because China’s number one long-term problem is having enough food and energy to feed its population. Do the numbers and you will see how their population went from 1.1 billion people to 1.5 billion people in just twenty years. They abandoned their one-child policy and now they can’t pay for it. They created the virus in their germ warfare factory in Wuhan. The Chinese you know aren’t the cleanest people. This is a country who for centuries fertilized their own farmer’s fields with human fertilizer. Sure they invented gunpowder but man, they got that one wrong.

“So there’s a need - a dire need - to get rid of the old, non-productive citizens on China and indeed the world. The weak, old and the sick, that’s who the coronavirus kills. Not the young and healthy, who are productive entities to the global economy. Thinning the herd they wanted to do, and to achieve it to a greater degree they had instigated this completely ludicrous law of having to wear a mask, which as you probably know weakens the immune system. Human beings are supposed to be exposed to germs to keep the immune system sharp and in shape. By breathing in trapped carbon dioxide and bacteria in a cotton mask you are hurting your respiratory system and your overall health.

“Man is not made to breath in his exhaled breath. And it causes pleurisy. Healthcare workers around the world are suffering from pleurisy - a bacterial infection of the lining of the lungs. But they’re suffocating the stories in the media.”

Carefully: “Um, when you say ‘they,’-“

“Yes, the Deep State. The power structure that Trump tried to get rid of but who are so entrenched that they assassinated him. His character anyway, and his legacy. Trump, who was not beholden to anyone or any lobby groups, was their biggest and most deadly threat. That’s why they impeached him twice and let this COVID conspiracy loose. Don’t forget that it was Trump who withdrew from the WHO because of their handling of the virus. He knew something man. He knew exactly what they did. And he even got COVID but survived nicely. He knew it was a fraud. A massive, economy-destroying fraud.”

“Yeah, I mean I’ve heard it all before online you know, on Twitter before the big crackdown and of course from Q.”

“They shut down Q too. They found 8chan’s web provider somewhere in Oregon - some Chinese dude who had no idea that one of the websites on his server was spouting out conspiracy theories. So they stopped the channel and so now Q doesn’t have a platform to communicate. Sucks man. Really sucks.”

At that point the man removed a mickey of vodka from his jacket and took a swig.

“Umm, yeah,” was all O’Neil said. The snow was coming down and there were never any RIDE programs along this stretch of road.

“It’s all right man,” said his drunk passenger.

“Yeah, okay.”

They drove in silence for a few miles, the greasy man now drinking heavily from his mickey.

Chapter Eleven

A New Global Movement

O’Neil had thought a lot about the COVID situation and had not been able to come up with anything concrete in terms of where the virus had come from and how it would change man’s daily lives for years to come. He was an open-minded guy from his earliest years so he was no different now when it came to figuring out the COVID pandemic. It was true that governments had to obey the medical authorities or risk being removed from office or thrown in jail, let alone citizens, who were currently being arrested for not wearing masks in public places. In one sense wearing a mask was the ultimate symbol of suffocating ones’ personal freedoms. Muffling them. That was not lost on him nor to the conservatives on Twitter, but what really got him was the fact that they didn’t work. They didn’t protect anyone from anything. The only thing the mask did was weaken the immune system of those who wore them. Period.

So his vodka-loving friend had a point.

They fast approached Sudbury so he thought he would let him say his piece. His full piece.

"I'm relatively unaffected by the virus since I live on Manitoulin Island and there haven't been any cases of the virus there. I can shop without the need to wear a mask, though more and more some shops are choosing to enforce the mask law."

"And they will grow, the number of these shops. Shop owners and indeed the average Joe believe the propaganda they hear on the TV. There are very few of us who can see through it all - see the *scam*. But those of us who do are now clinging together and forming our own movement. We know the scam - that hospitals in the States are paid \$39,000 per patient deemed to have died from COVID, and \$13,000 per patient diagnosed as having COVID. We know that if someone is killed in a car accident and then the dead person tests positive of 'COVID symptoms,' then they are counted as a 'COVID death' - dead *with* COVID, not dead *from* COVID. We know this because brave doctors and nurses have said as much on Twitter and YouTube before this brand new Era of Censorship started earlier this year. And now we hear in the news that the flu is down 99 percent year-on-year, which tells anyone with a brain that the vast majority of those who have 'caught COVID' really have the flu. Virtually the same symptoms. That's why the medical authorities now use 'COVID symptoms' rather than 'COVID cases,' such as 'there were 1500 people with COVID symptoms reported this week,' rather than 'there were 1500 with the COVID-19 virus.' It's a scam man. A hoax. A big Hollywood production. And yet the press doesn't state this as part of its narrative."

"For the most part they think we're sheep," said O'Neil, now enjoying his passenger's verbal diarrhea.

"Many of my friends and I have read a book that was written just as COVID was finishing its second year. This writer captured all the obvious pieces of propaganda from the media as well as studies and reports refuting these pieces of propaganda. It was an amazing stroke of good fortune that someone took the time and recorded the first flush of this big propaganda scam so that any sober and rational man can see what they contrived and how they created a global hysteria. And so there is now a movement centered around this book."

The hair on the back of O'Neil's neck stood up. His mind raced with all the possible things that could have happened to make this occur. And then he remembered: his male nurse.

Indeed O'Neil was the author who wrote the book from which this man was referring to, but due to the severe danger of what it said he had never published it. All 350,000 words of it were still safe on his hard drive and most definitely not online.

Or so he thought.

One day when he was getting his treatment for his rheumatoid arthritis in Ottawa he told his male nurse about the novel he had just finished writing the day before he was checked in to the hospital to have his stem cell transplant. His male nurse expressed interest in the novel and asked him how he was able to write it when he was so sick. He replied that it gave him discipline to write every morning during the first months of the pandemic to better pass the time before he would be allowed to resume treatment. The next day he had the same nurse - on the second day of his chemo - and his male nurse ask him if he could send him and his boyfriend a copy of the novel. Sort of in a chemo delirium O'Neil had agreed to email him a copy, which he did at the end of the day that day.

He didn't have the male nurse again until the end of the week, just before he was about to leave the hospital.

When they saw each other the male nurse gushed.

“Oh, your novel about COVID-19 was so amazing. How you captured all those headlines. And pointed out all those discrepancies between what researchers were saying versus the politicians. Really amazing. My boyfriend loved it.” O’Neil remembers not believing that his male nurse had read it all the way through from what he didn’t say about the book, but he sensed that his boyfriend had read the whole thing. Only faintly in the back of his mind did he worry that this copy might find its way into other people’s hands.

Until now.

“So this rallying point you mention about this movement,” he said, angling himself to find out how his book found its way to this man in his passenger seat.

“It’s a novel written by this guy who knew it was all a hoax so he recorded all the false headlines and recorded the scientific reports refuting what was written about COVID in the newspapers. It captured the zeitgeist that was descending upon the world over the last two years. When I read it I didn’t care who it was who wrote it. I cared that someone had taken the time to show us all what was going on because most of us were working and not really paying attention. So when I read it I knew it was all true. Jut in my gut, you know. The headlines. They were pure propaganda.”

“What was the title of the book you-”

“*The End of Times*,” he replied, without waiting for O’Neil to finish his question.

Yep, that was his.

“And where did you-”

“I found out about it from a few of my trucker friends who I think found out about it from a chat room truckers frequent. We all have read it. We all have a copy of it. In PDF format. In fact the book has created its own movement called *#TheEndOfTimes* on Twitter. Recently Twitter has started to censor the majority of our posts but we have our own website now called *TheEndOfTimes.net*. The book is free so millions of people have downloaded it. That’s where I’m going right now: to a demonstration in front of City Hall in Sudbury to demonstrate against the new legislation that requires citizens to carry a vaccine passport. It’s too far. It’s the beginning of martial law.”

“Eric Blair was right after all, eh,” he said, but the man’s face was blank. “George Orwell I mean.”

“That’s what we’re all saying. It’s Orwellian. There are demonstrations all around the globe tonight. Paris. London. Berlin. Hong Kong. Tokyo. New Delhi. People are now aware that there is a ‘Deep State.’ Q and Trump and now this book about COVID has created a crescendo and fervor that people are grabbing onto and using to justify their outrage. No one had the balls to publish anything like this book man. I’ll tell ya man, this guy is brave. Crazy to put his life in danger though. All of us truckers have taken the author in as one of our own and we are planning to cross the country to meet in Ottawa to demonstrate against the vaccine mandates. We’re going to call it the ‘Freedom Convoy.’ Maybe next month. All because this dude put him life on the line to show what it all was about - power. Politics. And deception.”

“And the author, is he-”

“No one really knows who he is. Or is he’s still alive. Some of us who spend lots of time in the chat room think he might already be dead, because the Deep State doesn’t keep these kind of guys alive for long. They’re a threat to the power structure, that’s why.”

“Aren’t you afraid the censors will take your little chat room or website offline like they did with others, like the #QAnon guys and MAGA supporters? Aren’t you worried about being identified as an outlaw who is a threat to their power just as you said?”

“Well no, frankly, because there are too many of us. I mean there are millions of us from every corner of the world. And we use *The End of Times* as our Bible. I mean look: this is the biggest crime in world history. We need to take a stand, man.”

“Wow.”

“The guy’s name is O’Neil I think. Leave to an Irishman to create something that would create a worldwide movement that would change history.”

“Yep, you’re right. Leave it to the Irish - the incognito changers of history.” Should have used an alias.

“I think I have some Irish in me,” said his greasy passenger.

“From your drinking technique it appears you do.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Oh it is, believe me, it is.”

They reached the lights of the city that could be seen through the falling snow. O’Neil was stunned as he turned off the highway and found the first bus stop for his part Irish passenger, his mickey no longer carrying any more clear liquid.

Chapter Twelve

Just a Guy at a Hong Kong Bar

He let the hitchhiker off at the bus stop where there were a few others waiting for a bus. The man with the greasy face began a conversation with one of the pedestrians he could see as he passed them by on his way back up to Highway 7, where he drove another few miles until he hit the turn off for Highway 69 going due south to the big city of Toronto. Snow was accumulating on the surface on the edges. He hoped it would stop because there were very few things more stressful than driving 110kmph along a paved surface with accumulated snow. O’Neil turned on the radio to let his mind float free after all the information he had processed from his latest passenger.

Mind boggling how a simple act of gathering and documenting the truth while patiently waiting for medical treatment could potentially reach disgruntled people in the four corners of the world.

He had had never specifically asked his gay Chinese nurse not to send it to others so technically no agreements or promises had been broken. But the exposure! His name was on it! *Fuck*. That could have

dire consequences for him in the future. A spontaneous uncalled-for audit of his taxes or some unforeseen technical glitch that might wipeout his Wordcarpenter website, or even a possible assassination crossed his mind as he descended the granite hill leaving Sudbury passed the police station to the open road of fresh construction and crisp lines he could still see under the blowing snow.

No, but the movement wasn't his fault. He hadn't planned for it to happen that way so he was not to blame. Therefore he shouldn't waste another moment worrying about the consequences of it. He could block it out of his mind as if it had never happened. He couldn't live his life in fear.

That would defeat the purpose of being an artist.

So he lifted his chin and tried to focus on the music but just as he started exploring the rock song in his mind he couldn't believe his eyes but he saw yet another hitchhiker on the side of the road. It was strategically just past the police station so it was done with some thought. This perhaps alone was enough for O'Neil to again pull over and collect another passenger.

He was beginning to think something odd was afoot on this day.

"Headin' south," said the man with the full beard. His camouflage jacket was stained with grease and oil.

"Goin' south, man," he replied, coming to a fully stop on the shoulder. "All the way to the big city."

"I'm heading to Parry Sound to see the ol' lady. It's her birthday and I haven't told her."

"Well then let's get you there man." When the bearded man smiled he showed two missing front teeth, wrinkles deep from decades of smoking and woodstoves.

"Good rig ya got here." The man scanned his truck, looking closely at the dashboard and the myriad of electronics displayed. "Gotcha a lot of computers in these here now, eh?"

"All computers now. Major pain in the ass."

His new hitchhiker let out a deep, guttural laugh. Immediately the energy in the cab lightened.

"Major pain," he said, nodding. "Looking at the good ol' days as the seventies I reckon."

"Bell-bottoms and moustaches."

Again the thunderous laughter.

"Ah lad, let me tell you about moustaches and bell-bottoms. I was that guy. Not really a hippie. They were too far out ya know, far out. Smoked too much grass and wore sandals and shit. I was more a rocker I guess you could say. Leather jacket. Had my bike. Not a Harley though. It wasn't as important to ride a Harley back then as it is now."

"What did you ride then?"

"My first bike was the last street legal two-stroke, the RD 400 from Yamaha. The most dangerous bike ever made some say." Yes, he had heard of them - the deadliest motorbike every made. Yes.

“Danger. You want danger you should ride a motorcycle in Hong Kong. No shoulders, everyone is in a rush and everything is backwards because you gotta drive on the left side of the road.” The man’s eyes opened wider. “Plenty of danger for a rider there I’ll tell you.”

“Yep. I wiped out good on her let me tell you. Boy.” He shook his head in recollection. “The wipe out changed a lot. Still have a bit of a limp from that. Damn.” The man with the bushy beard looked ahead as if reliving ancient memories.

They drove comfortably in silence for a while.

“I take it you rode in Hong Kong at some point.”

“I had a Yamaha FZR-R 400cc number.”

“FZR-R?”

“Real racing bike. Perfect for those roads. But man was it fast.”

The man chuckled and again shook his head.

“Funny you bring up Hong Kong ‘cause I was just reading a biography of a SAS guy who lived there. Or you could say he was stationed there. In Hong Kong, or just off the shores of Hong Kong proper on one of those hippie islands.”

“Lamma Island,” said O’Neil, now piqued that someone knew about Lamma Island.

The newly opened highway stretched in front of them past thick forest growing atop a thin layer over the granite *Canadian Shield*.

“Yeah, that’s it I think. Lamma Island. Yes. ‘Cause there was a Dalai Lamma Café there.”

Ah yes, the *Dalai Lamma*, where he would go for his morning coffee when he was hungover on Sundays, which he was often in those years.

“What’s this book then,” asked O’Neil, interested to explore what this man had to say about Lamma Island.

“I’m a military buff so I like to read about past wars and black ops and that kinda thing. And particularly biographies or novels about the military. I can’t help it. I just love reading about what goes on everyday under our noses that no one talks about, except those who have finished with it and want to get closure by putting their experiences down on paper. Some say it helps.”

“Closure, yes.”

“So I just finished this bio about this SAS guy who used to live in Hong Kong. This was back just after the handover, sort of during the turn of the century. So this guy, Ray, was stationed there after being selected for UK special operations right but he gets caught up in the nightlife in Hong Kong and being away from the rain of Britain. You know how that is. Being away from home so you take advantage of your free nights and hit the bar. Right. So Ray hits the bars pretty hard. Loves it. Hangs out with his fellow soldiers who are mostly all carrying on with jobs as a cover. They trained hard and drank hard and worked hard. That was the prevailing ethos with those guys in Hong Kong back then.”

“Right.” O’Neil remembered the SAS who used to hang out in the bars on Lamma and in Wan Chai. For some reason he could usually pick them out. Their chins were usually carved from wood. And they were always loitering in the bars.

“Anyway, this guy Ray picked himself out of gutter sorta speak and was then called for active duty in the Middle East. He saw some action - a lot of action - and achieved some pretty important things, but of course none of it makes the papers. Thankless job these guys have.”

“Yeah, but that’s who these guys are. They honestly don’t want any recognition. Flying below the radar is their preferred route.”

“Yes, exactly. But this guy Ray’s experience was really something. I mean what he did lead directly to the capture of Saddam Hussein. Remember they found him hiding in that hole in the ground. Well it was the intelligence that Ray was able to obtain from a previous op that lead to the Americans capturing him in that hole in the ground. It was called Operation Crichton.”

“Seriously. That was about what, 2004 or 2005.”

“2003. They hung the bastard in 2006 despite the fact Saddam insisted on being executed via firing squad. He said it was the honourable way to go as a soldier.”

O’Neil thought about the guys he had drank with in Hong Kong, the endless nights of drinking in Wan Chai where there were 24-hour bars. Some nights he would find one of the SAS guys really drunk and edging to talk about their operations. Many times he had been able to get them to talk about them, with the reassurance that he wouldn’t tell anyone.

And he didn’t. Who would he tell?”

Then he began to have an eerie feeling when he remembered that bald SAS guy in Wan Chai that night when O’Neil was on a two-day bender.

Again, for the second time that day, the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Chapter Twelve

Tavern Therapy

O’Neil had met the guy a few times at the bars before when he was engaging in a nightcap in the cafés of Lamma Island, but he had never really spoken to him. This guy was always hanging out with who O’Neil knew as SAS but this guy’s look wasn’t SAS. He was too soft around the jowls. But this one night he had found him slumped over his bar stool in the old British sailor pub called *The Old China Hand* in Wan Chai. There is a period during the 24-hour period when the bar is almost empty because there is a changeover that happens in Hong Kong. Just before the other bars in Long Kwai Fung closed the bar was empty. It was just before all the serious drinkers showed up to play the jukebox and drink throughout the night until the sun rose across Victoria Harbour.

O'Neil loved *The Old China Hand* because there were so many cool people who ended up there. And with his appetite and energy levels there was no other place he would rather be than drinking and meeting people from around the world on a late Friday night. Besides, the last ferry to Lamma Island was at 11:30pm so he was stuck on Hong Kong Island for the night whether he liked it or not. One thing resulted from this: he learned how to pace his consumption so he would not tilt his machine.

This did not always go to plan however.

But one night he bumped into his fellow Lamma Islander and incognito SAS soldier slouched over at the bar. Full of liquid courage he initiated a conversation. And to his amazement the soldier was very receptive. The bald SAS guy tried so hard to carry on a conversation and listen but his eyes kept closing. His clothes were ragged and it looked like he had been up for a week. O'Neil felt for him. He had been there before. Perhaps not that much but he had experienced exhaustion at the hands of booze before so he was gentle with the man.

They spoke about stuff, the one thing though was his openness to talk about being SAS. To his credit he never divulged anything that would be considered sensitive. He was merely proud of being a SAS soldier - to have been absconded to the Special Air Service.

It was a brotherhood and he was proud to be part of it.

That was the last time he saw the guy for six months when he saw him on the ferry one morning. He had a double take because the bald man had transformed into an athlete. His soggy jowls were gone and he had shaved all his hair instead of just having the balding top, which gave him a sleek, crisp look. And he had dropped 25 pounds easily. But it was him. When they spoke as they disembarked from the ferry the SAS dude told O'Neil that he had been getting in shape and had put down the bottle because he had some work coming up.

"So you say this guy lived in Hong Kong during the early 2000s and lived on Lamma Island, eh."

"Yeah. Wrote his autobiography just a few years ago. Great book. Really knows how to recount an op. At the end of the book he sort of does a summary of his life and said there was a time when he was living in Hong Kong that he was really out of control with the drink and the partying but that he got it all together after meeting this guy at a bar one night when he was out on one of his usual benders. This chance encounter left him seeing himself 'plain as day and just as ashamed' as he said. So he stopped the bottle and ran up and down the mountains of Lamma Island until he shed 30 pounds and was ready to go to Iraq with his unit who ended up being the critical ingredient in finding Saddam Hussein."

"Hmmm," said O'Neil, momentarily at a loss for words.

"Said it changed his life."

"Wow."

"The kid was young and full of life and when he saw what he was doing to himself - the self-abuse - his just stopped. He realized that he would be dead soon if he didn't change, and he would lose his coveted position within the SAS because there were limits there as far as his partying went."

He thought of all the SAS guys he knew in Hong Kong and knew there was an etiquette that existed - an unwritten rule - that sloppy drinking was a liability and grounds for dismissal from the team.

They drove past Kilarney National Park to the west along the eastern shores of Georgian Bay and then in no time they had passed Pointe au Barile, which was where the author John Irving lived during the summers.

"When did you read this bio?"

"Oh I just read it. Just finished it actually. I still have it."

"With you."

"Yes."

A bunch of things were running through O'Neil's mind but the dominating thing he couldn't overlook was the strange series of coincidences that were befalling him today.

"Is there a picture of the guy, the author I mean?"

"Ray."

"Yeah, Ray."

"Let me see." The bearded man rustled through his knap sack as they approached the bridge over French River with its deep granite valley of fresh water that flowed due west from Lake Nipissing where *les voyageurs* paddled from Quebec City, including the famous Pierre Radisson.

"I used to live on Lamma Island," he finally confessed. "Right around the same time as this guy."

"I gather it was a pretty good time to live there, just after the handover."

"Yeah, it was. The Chinese from Beijing still hadn't messed everything up yet. They took their time - exactly seven years to mess it all up. One life cycle. Smart they are in Beijing. But they got what they wanted, shown to the world recently with the democracy demonstrations. Hong Kong is now fully in the hands of the CCP and Beijing. They have lost their autonomy, which was precisely what they were afraid of."

"But a big windfall for the communists."

"True."

The snow that had stopped an hour before was now back with a vengeance when they passed the first sign for the Parry Sound turn off.

"Parry Sound has its own climactic zone - is in its own snow belt."

"Yes, it seems that way," said the hitchhiker still flipping through the soft cover biography. "Here he is," he said, opening it wider as he found the last page. "His name is Ray Armstrong and it says here was part of the SAS for more than eight years. He's retired from the military after more than 20 years and now lives in Herefordshire where he helps out with SAS training."

"That's cool."

"Yeah, wanna have a look at his picture - maybe you know him."

The man with the beard handed him the book open on the page with the author's write up. There he was, the bald SAS guy he had met that night at *The Old China Hand* when he was so drunk he couldn't keep his eyes open but had tried so hard. Ray! That was him!

"Do you recognize him then?"

O'Neil looked closely at the photo but was distractedly by the traffic and snow in front of him.

"Here, take the wheel for a second. I want to have a look at this photograph." Startled but then a bit honoured, the bearded man wearing camouflage took hold of the wheel as O'Neil brought the book closer to his battered eyes and had a good look.

"Yeah, I do. I knew him from Lamma Island." He handed the man back his book and took the wheel.

"Wow man! That's quite a coincidence."

"It is. It's sort of been one of those days for me."

The man put the book back into his bag.

"Though there were quite a few of those SAS guys living there. You're right. It was a sort of hippie hang out. No cars. Just walking paths. Covered with jungle. And deadly bamboo snakes."

"Deadly snakes and dangerous motorcycles, eh?" he said with a wry smile. Just then he raised his hand as they passed a sign.

"Here is my turn off, man." O'Neil signaled and drove up the ramp and let him out where he was to be picked up by his woman.

"You sure this is okay here?" he said to the man with the SAS biography.

"Yes dude. Thank you for the lift. I owe you." He waved and then disappeared into the falling darkness and snow.

O'Neil pulled out into the road and drove down the ramp to rejoin the highway heading south towards the bright lights of the big city. After he had dropped the man off in Parry Sound he felt his cheeks flushed. Never would he have thought he would have had such an impact on a guy who was so tough and well-connected. He was like a French Foreign Legionnaire. But O'Neil had left an impression. An impression that led to the capturing of Saddam Hussein!

Chapter Fourteen

Ping, Knock and Run-on

Yes it had been a strange combination of hitchhikers for the day and perhaps he had had enough, with each one having some say on the impact of his life. But there were no more hitchhikers from Parry Sound down to Toronto. The speed on the highway was too fast and the drivers too reckless, especially the closer he was to the big city. This was where accidents happened. Something about the city that made good drivers dangerous drivers and encouraged young drivers to drive in such a way to put every

other vehicle in danger, especially on snowy road at night. So O'Neil was as cautious as he could be but still adhered to a robust speed so he could make his meeting with Allison at the Royal York Hotel at 8:30pm.

He ruminated about all those endless night he had lived in the bars not just in Hong Kong but in Manilla and Taipei and Tokyo as well. O'Neil had spent so much time hanging out in pubs that it had almost become like a school in its own right for him, where he came into contact with the real people who inhabited the world. It was a classroom where drink loosened the tongue and brought people together in anonymous harmony where friendships were quickly made and then forgotten. His decade of living and working overseas had yielded so many special times that it was natural that he had lost track of them. That night with SAS Ray was a great example of that - meeting and talking with another drunkard at the all-night bar. But he had never imagined the potential impact these interactions might have caused over the long term.

It made him wonder about many other peoples he had met over the years.

And yet so plain his current life seemed in contrast to this expat existence overseas when young and fearless, free of health issues and unbound by anyone and anything except showing up on time and doing your job well, which he was always able to do.

He had a very good alarm clock.

He was coming to realize that the real crime of his present life was not to write down his exploits for others to enjoy before he forget them all, and an era was lost forever. That would be his biggest sin.

When he went for long walks on the island people he had met in bars would randomly pop into his head and he would clearly see how they had left an impact on his life, so why was he surprised that it went the other way? Those interactions and images were as clear today as they were the moment they happened, and these experiences lived on in vivid colour within the cinema of his mind. He was one of the lucky ones to live a lifestyle that allowed him to relive and enjoy them, like how a cow chews his cud.

His flushed cheeks remained as he mulled over his past life and present, and how they fed off each other like a snake eating its own tail. He was unafraid of his past because he had been a just man who had conducted his life according to a moral compass that treated each person he met fairly and with respect. He had very few skeletons in his closet so he was always very open to relive those 'moments of greatness' he had had whether they had been witnessed by others or not.

But they had all been witness by God.

He had lived them and that was what mattered most. He didn't need a witness. He and God were the witnesses of his life. And that was enough for O'Neil. He knew. He had those nuggets of empirical data he could recall any time in the day. But now with a greater sense of the ripple effect of his past actions coming so clear into perspective, he now had potentially greater *reflection fervor* than before. But that was okay because he had worked hard and taken a lot of risks and had sacrificed much to be in his position. Unmarried and childless at 55 was not the best place to be but he owned his own house and had written nearly two dozen novels and was a comfortable landlord that could live without working and write full time.

Not many could say that, especially in this new age of COVID.

But still, he had no issue and there were more and more times recently that he yearned for a partner to share his life with, which made him think more and more about Allison. It was true she was the one who got away but he could not forget the reasons why he had broken it off with her. But if he was honest these were immature and reasons that had proven to be unimportant. It was true he might have missed it there, but then would he have written all those books and put them on his Wordcarpenter website for millions to read for free?

Tough to say.

He touched his cheek and felt the warmth from his emotions stirring from these thoughts. Realizing he didn't want to become too tense, he turned on the radio and fiddled with the knobs until he found a station that was English and had good reception. All the music was too new wave and the rock station had too much static so he settled on the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). Immediately he recognized the voice.

It was Frankie.

It was his voice that instantly transported him back to elementary school and the screams and yells of kickball-playing boys in the schoolyard filled in the last minutes before the start of school - sort of a boy's morning coffee before school. Faces and yells filled his mind's eye with autumn colours and pungent autumn smells from the trees, the thrill of an unfolding hockey season before them all.

"The truth of the matter is that many of today's laws are outdated and based on old beliefs proven to be wrong," said Frankie.

"Wrong how?" said the interviewer. "Morally?"

"Well perhaps, but more importantly these laws need to reflect the rational will of the population so that they serve and protect each citizen rather than hurt them. We are living in a *Brave New World* now Jeff, like it or not. We need to face the fact that this virus is here to stay. So we need laws that serve the citizenry the best it can. It's that simple."

"Can you give us an example then Frank so we can see what kind of things specifically you are talking about?" He could hear Frankie chuckle just off camera.

The unmistakable Frankie chuckle.

"Laws where new laws have created shadows on older existing laws. I'll give an example Jeff. We have a new law that orders all citizens to wear a face covering, regardless of their individual situation. It is a sweeping new law that affects every single person. This medical authoritarianism casts shadows on existing laws, in this case the law that protects each citizen from harm to health and limb by the state. It is written into our constitution. And it's basic belief that all people respect. No one can justify the state imposing laws that hurts the individual's health. The government is there to protect their constituent's health. On a philosophical level this cannot be disputed."

Frankie paused, taking a deep breath for dramatic purposes.

"So I would like the Ontario government to make sure our laws are clear, particularly for people with existing health conditions who may be adversely affected by wearing of face masks."

“I see, so for example a citizen with respiratory disease.”

“Yes, exactly. Being forced to wear a mask when it causes someone acute breathing problems such as immediate breathlessness is something that needs to be addressed in very clear wording. We need to be absolutely clear here. Some might say if someone does not wear a mask their own health is in danger. Well the truth is that these people with respiratory issues are at a higher risk than others of getting COVID and therefore have a more urgent need to protect themselves - but not at the cost of harming their health. The law actually protects these people from wearing masks but store owners and the general public are not aware of this and force these people to wear masks or not be able to buy food. The media are at fault here and the government needs to step in and protect these people with bad lungs.”

O’Neil was thinking he was right. These across-the-board face mask laws did allow the individual with legitimate health reasons not to wear a mask but the vast majority of those running businesses weren’t aware of the law. They only go off of what they hear in the media, which is that every single person - regardless of their health situation - must wear a face covering. That it’s for the sake of the community.

Frankie is right. This is not true. The constitution protects the health of its citizens, not the other way around. There needs to be something done to make it clear to all those who are in a position of power that can refuse those who cannot wear a mask for health reasons from shopping at their store or using their services. Now more than ever there is a need.

His windshield wipers wiped the big flakes off his windshield, the afternoon sky darkening at the onset of evening and snow. He felt a calm come over his chest, as if his unconscious mind had let go of a long-held stressor that had been percolating in the back of his mind. Perhaps he had long held the view that the Canadian government had not acted in his best interests for so long that he had lost faith in his government, but now, hearing the clear rationale of his old friend Frankie O’Conner gave him a renewed sense of hope and optimism. Then he remembered something he had long forgotten from his years at university. Having been housemates during their final year of undergrad, at the end of the second term Frankie was overwhelmed with end-of-term essays. He had four due on the same day but hadn’t managed to do the readings for one of them. Having been a pretty hard studier during his fourth year he was known as a pretty smart guy who was not averse to pulling an all-nighter to write an essay. So in this case his housemate Frankie O’Conner asked him if he could write one of his term papers that was due on the coming Monday. He remembered he was both flattered and ticked off, mostly because he had left it so late, but O’Neil told him the truth that he could welcome a new subject for a few days because his philosophy studies were getting him nowhere.

He said to Frankie that he would write one of his term papers for him.

So he had read the book and written a 15-pager that ended up getting him a B and the credit. Three months later he was accepted into law school and now he was changing law at the provincial level that might have a ripple effect across the country and perhaps the world.

Interesting, now that he thought of it. Again another ripple.

He remembered the Monday night of drinking they had at the campus pub where they created a makeshift party where everyone there at the Quiet Pub became rowdy and bent the laws as only one

could during the eighties. He had never regretted writing the essay for him. Philosophy of Law was interesting to O'Neil.

What surprised him was how he had never thought of it over the last 30 years - not once. It had simply slipped his mind.

But now, listening to his old friend on the CBC, he wondered about what might have happened if he had not chosen to help Frankie and if he would have been accepted into Osgood Law School, which surely was the best law school in Canada.

If he had failed his jurisprudence course it would have affected him. And if he were completely honest, O'Neil felt a good sense of pride for pulling off an academic special op for a friend. What was a shame was that they had lost touch over the years, not necessarily no longer friends but just estranged by the sheer length of time that had passed from seeing each other.

That was his fault. He had been away for years and had lost touch with many of his old friends. But it occurred to him that he was now back. So why not track him down and give him a call. Old Frankie.

Chapter Fifteen

Old Friends, New Friends

O'Neil had two realms of friends: those from his upbringing and school, and those from his time overseas and traveling. This included his friends on the island simply because he still felt like he was traveling by living in such an exotic setting. He had old and new friends, and the thing he noticed the most about old friends was how so many became incompatible over the years, particularly due to their politics. Sometimes the human animal became consumed by their politics so that anyone who did not spout their political creed at every opportunity was cast away as suspicious rebels and a threat to the power structure. Many didn't even realize that they did it. They were all-consumed. O'Neil on the other hand had always agreed with Nietzsche that economics and politics were beneath the better man and that time was better spent on walking and creating new ideas rather than politics.

O'Neil had been thankful to Nietzsche for many years, for teaching him this.

So he had spent his vibrant time on those things that mattered most that lay outside the realm of politics and economics. Sometimes it was tough but once understood and adhered to was an excellent disposition to make ones way through life's choppy waters.

This really hit home when he looked at some of his old friends, whose politics tainted them as militant despite their politics being rational and just. In fact those who clung hardest to their politics with utmost fervor because of the righteousness of their beliefs were the hardest to get along with. Perhaps because they were the toughest to get to laugh. And it saddened him to know many good hearts had been blighted by their own militancy, whether right or left.

So many martyrs, so many who remained unlearned despite precedence and history. And in Toronto there were so many because the politics was so intense. Perhaps this was why he had chosen not to get in touch with his old friend Frankie, because Frankie's politics were worn on his sleeve. It sort of got in

the way all the time between them, which was a shame because there was such a sincere and deep connection there.

The traffic was fast but the roads were wide and safe so he chose not to suppress his sudden urge to gather his mobile phone and find Frankie's phone number. He wasn't sure he had it because he had never called it, but he seemed to remember seeing it in an email thread a few Christmases ago and had copied it down like he tended to do.

And he found it. Placing the phone on the middle console and turning off the radio, he called him.

"Hello."

"Frankie!"

"Yes?"

"This is O'Neillie Bob! My God man! It has been way too long man!" He could tell Frankie was still adrenalized from his CBC interview.

"Wow. It has been ages."

"I just heard you on the radio pal. Well done."

"Yes, thank you. I suppose it all started at Queen's. Really, it did. All those late nights talking it all out."

"Strictly for rhetorical reasons and reasons of sophistry, of course."

"Of course!" He sighed. "So how are you doing these days my friend? I heard from some mutual friends you were having some health issues or something. Did I hear that correctly?"

"Yeah, you did. I had a stem cell transplant in Ottawa last year for my rheumatoid arthritis."

"That's about what I heard. Was it heavy?"

O'Neil was suddenly struck that if he ever had a chance to truly explain his treatment to anyone, it was to Frankie. Now. He was the one who would understand.

"It was pretty heavy. The treatment has a ten percent chance of death but I made it through all right. I had four days of intense chemo that destroyed my old immune system completely and then they pumped me up with my stem cells they had collected two months before to create a brand new immune system - an immune system that would lack the trigger so it wouldn't attack my joints and stuff."

"Oh, okay. I see how it works. My auntie has rheumatoid arthritis. It's an auto-immune disease whereby your immune system reacts to something - an illness or infection or something - but instead of healing it your immune system attacks its own body. Is that right?"

"Yes. And in my case with scleroderma, my immune system attacked my joints in my hands and feet and my chest wall, which included my esophagus and my lungs."

"That's pretty heavy."

“Lots of uncontrollable swallowing and hiccupping actually because my esophagus was compromised. And my oxygen levels went down to only 75 percent so I had lots of spontaneous inhalations, which was weird and scary at the same time.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means your lungs going into a survival reflex and suck in air without you controlling it. Pretty deadly when you also have pneumonia. I was pretty sick man but I made it through.”

“Jesus my friend. That’s an ordeal.”

“But it’s cool you get it because it’s actually quite topical now with COVID and these grey rules wearing masks for anyone with a respiratory disease, because my scleroderma caused me to have pulmonary fibrosis. This is when the tissue responsible for the translation of oxygen into the bloodstream is compromised with collagen.”

O’Neil heard the voices of children in the background coming from Frankie’s end of the phone.

“Otherwise known as scar tissue.”

“What is?”

“Collagen. That’s what it is: scar tissue. That’s why it hurts so much.”

“Don’t they have medication for it though?”

“In my case two and a half years ago my doctor told me to stop taking my anti-immune medication because she didn’t think I really had scleroderma, so I did. And within months my scleroderma had spread into my lungs and was causing me to swallow involuntarily and hiccup constantly and have these uncontrollable lung reflexes with in-breathing.”

“Scary stuff O’Reilly.” It had been 30 years since he had heard his university nickname.

“Indeed. So when I heard you tonight on the radio - I’m actually on Highway 400 just about to reach the 401 - I thought of the importance of what you were saying for my own case. If a store owner, for example, insisted I wear a face mask and if I didn’t I wouldn’t be able to shop for food there, and assume this is the only grocery store for 50 miles, and I tell them I have health reasons for not being able to wear a face covering, then there’s a problem. The store owner is not fully aware that if were to put on a mask my interstitial lung disease would cause me to become short of breath. And in my specific case having just gone through stem cell treatment and now only having my immune system at about 50 percent, and the fact that I had pneumonia in my lungs that was still stirring so I had to take an oral antibiotic to keep the pneumonia from replicating in my lungs, the store owner wouldn’t know how dangerous wearing a mask is for me. They just don’t know of the peril. But the law also states that those who cannot wear a mask for medical reasons are not obliged to divulge their medical state to the person imposing the mask rule.”

“Well exactly. And you used the right word there: rule. It is a guideline, not a law. But news on TV don’t make this distinction so the average store owner doesn’t know.”

“Therein lies the primary issue, and the biggest threat to my health right now. Overzealous and ignorant store owners who think wearing a mask is a law and for everyone regardless of lung health. I mean on

top of my pulmonary fibrosis the pneumonia left significant scarring and so I now have real breathing issues with every breath. Until my immune system recovers sufficiently, which will not happen until a full 12 months after the transplant, I cannot fight off any lung infection. My lungs are only healing very slowly. You see, there are cases where the law must be very clear, as you were saying tonight on the radio to millions across Canada.”

“Yes, thank you. Thank you for sharing your situation with me. I am rather humbled by your honesty and forthrightness. But seriously, I think I now have the wording for the new law we will put up for party vote. You, Tim O’Neil, really are a special dude, you know. You know that, don’t you? I mean you’re pretty damn authentic. Hard to come up with anyone else I know half as original as you.”

O’Neil felt something in his heart well up, his eyes becoming puffy with water. It had been so long since he had heard anything like that from anyone. He had chosen to live like a hermit in the country and had followed through, starving himself from human support systems and basic friendships. Everything had been put on hold for the sake of polishing his craft. He told himself he was a crazy artist, and perhaps there were elements of him that were, but who in their right mind threw away such a golden life with good friends for such voluntary hardship in isolation while mortally sick?

Chapter Sixteen

Late Beginnings

The vehicles began to drive faster the closer he was to Toronto. Reckless passing and passing-on-the-right became the norm as the crazies-who-have-never-been-in-a-crash-before drove their hearts out in their brand-spanking-new sports cars. He watched them zoom by him and grieved for the fact that all their disposable income went to expensive car payments. The Lost Generation - The Millennials. Weaned on video games. What a shame.

A knot tended to form in his gut whenever he came into the big city. He guessed it was because of the stress-free nature of living on an island so apart from the scrum.

A now more intense scrum.

He passed by Barrie and started his dramatic descent to the Lake Ontario basin, the cars all around him flailing and braking driven by drivers with heavy feet. The radio program had given way to Q107 rock’n roll station, a mark in his childhood when he was growing up in Toronto. Always dependable for some good old school rock songs, he found his groove and his ‘happy place’ despite entering the scrum. Then his mobile phone rang.

“Timmie! I have reached you. Thank God!”

He hated when people called him that.

“Ingrid, is that you?” This was his ex-girlfriend he simply never had time for. They fell for each other in a somewhat novel fashion just as he had bought a plane ticket overseas to begin a new life. He was surprised to hear her voice.

“Yes, of course hun. A little birdie whispered in my ear that you were arriving in town tonight. Is this true?”

“Yes, you heard right. Just hitting town now.”

“Well why don’t you come over tonight? I have some people here you might know and we’d love it if you came over.”

“I’m meeting someone at the Royal York at 8:30 and then maybe after that I can head over to yours.”

“That would be good. We’re having a dinner party here tonight but the number of guests is within the COVID limit. So by the time you come by some will have left and there will be space for you. How does that sound?”

“Okay. I’ll drop by. Are you still at that place on Roxbourugh?”

“I haven’t seen you in too many years hun. But I have read a few of your books you know, but we can talk about that when you get here.”

She agreed and hung up. He wasn’t sure what to think after hearing from Ingrid. She had never wronged him so he shouldn’t be close-minded about her, but man had it ever been a long time. How did she know he was coming into town? He didn’t care. What he cared about was he would be seeing some of his old friends tonight.

Chapter Seventeen

A Record Captured

O’Neil’s thoughts veered towards Ingrid and their brief, aborted affair before he left work in *Greater China* for a decade. He had always thought so much of life and particularly relationships are a function of timing, so much so one was wise to regard all developments outside of their control as fate, pure and simple. And so it had been with Ingrid - different schools and different things to do at certain times throughout their lives.

What if? It was always this with women and him. She had taken a somewhat similar path in life though she had remained in Toronto the whole time. She had gone many times to resorts in the Caribbean but nothing like what O’Neil had done. There was a similar gusto but different outlets for that gusto.

Considering his options he chose to park his car and not get a hotel room just yet, instead going to the lounge of the Royal York an hour early.

Allison had to be his focus now. He hadn't seen her in 15 years.

But the time didn't seem that long. The image of her face was still bright in his mind and their time together had an unmistakable timelessness hue to it. At times when he drank too many pots of tea images of her reverberated throughout his person - memories as clear as reality danced across his mind's eye since they both had left each other in Hong Kong. There were so many events and parties in those days that there was always an opportunity to have a laugh. It seemed like half their lives were spent taking the Lamma Island ferry to Hong Kong Island across Victoria Harbour and around the island to Aberdeen. Sharing a beer on the back deck gave them a chance to chat after their day in the office. If they were lucky they would catch the sunset hovering over the South China Sea. Apart from the nasty diesel fumes, these were great moments.

Once parked he walked down Bay Street to Union Station where he went inside the Royal York Hotel and relaxed in one of the couches in the hotel lounge. He ordered himself a beer. As he waited, he noticed one of the few tables with people were a group of Chinese executives, a woman among them. She looked at him on the couch relaxing.

Just then the woman appeared at his table.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Very sorry to interrupt you," she said, with a slight Chinese accent.

"That's quite all right. I'm just waiting for someone so you're not interrupting me at all."

There was something in the woman's face that struck him as familiar.

"I just had to say something to you. I swear I'd kill myself afterwards if I didn't." Bemused, O'Neil suspected she might have been sent over here by her friends at the table across the way.

"To be honest it's all rather a long story," she said, looking closer at him - the face and features. She was grinning as she was looking. "You look really familiar is what I should say, firstly. Let me ask, were you ever an English teacher in Taiwan?"

Something within him went out like an alarm. Here it is, he thought to himself. Here's that time when a student finds their old teacher.

"Yes, I did actually," he replied, smiling.

"And were you a teacher there in Chungli in the fall of 1997, or 98? Or around that time?"

"I was indeed."

"I thought so!" She raised her hand in a sort of victory gesture with her arm. She nodded at her colleagues at the other table.

"At what school did I teach you? There were quite a few I taught at during those years."

"FuDong High School right in Chungli. Remember? Near the river."

"Of yeah, FuDong. Crazy about basketball there. Courts all over the place. Good classrooms though. Good chalkboards. I remember that class well actually."

"I was in grade ten and you taught us English for the Fall term, and then you left before the second term began. But your classes were so inspirational. Remember that one when you took the whole class outside and sat around that tree? And everyone watched us from their classroom windows. Who is this crazy *gwailo*?"

He did remember that.

"That was one of our first classes. I liked that class." He looked at her closely.

"My name is Jennifer. Do you remember me," O'Neil always dreaded this question every time an old student asked this question.

"When you came over I said to myself your face was familiar," he said, dodging a bullet. "That was a very memorable class, with those two class clowns. One of those guys planned to become a radio announcer. That's why he was taking English."

"Steven Ho, yes. He did become an announcer as he said. He's a well-known one, too."

"He wasn't as bad as his friend, what's his name? His sidekick."

"Oh you mean Philip. Yes, he was a miscreant."

"A *miscreant*. Yes, indeed. Good word. So your English turned out pretty good, if I dare say."

Jennifer blushed.

"Yes, it did. I married a man who was from Canada so now I live here in Toronto with my husband and our two children. So I had lots of opportunity to practice my English! But seriously, if it hadn't been for you as my first real English teacher I doubt very much that I would have ended up with an English husband and living in an English-speaking country."

"And French."

"Yes! And French!" She stepped closer to him. "You were the one who inspired me to study hard and want to become fluent, so I need to say thank you to you." Her eyes well-up. They seemed to glimmer in the light. So much gratitude and warm emotion well up in them, overflowing. So genuine. A thank you longed for after many years.

"Well I'm glad you had the courage to approach me and express your gratitude."

"I always said to myself that I ever saw you in Canada I would drop what I was doing and thank you for showing me the way to English culture and humor. I swear your classes were unlike anything I had ever had. Still today I talk of them to my husband. You were a little crazy I think. You even wore those weird sandals to class!"

"My Birkenstocks."

"Yes, those ones! Crazy!"

"Yes, you could say that. I was living a pretty fast life those years in Taiwan. I blame everything on riding that motorcycle of mine. I had to stay sharp on my toes so I wasn't run over!"

“I better get back to my table. I’m out here on business.”

“What is it that you do Jennifer?”

“I am a liaison for a company here that has Chinese accounts. Because I’m fluent in Mandarin and English - the English I learned in Chungli, thanks to you.”

She put her hand to shake his, a bold gesture in this age of COVID.

“I want to shake your hand Mr. O’Neil and thank you again for changing my life. So much of what I have today is from your English class.”

“My pleasure.”

“And God bless you.”

Jennifer left him sitting on the couch in the corner as she returned to her group of executives. O’Neil enjoyed that long-delayed glow of gratitude from a past student and sipped his lager lost in memories of his early Taiwan days, 30 years old and full of energy and possibility and dreams-yet-to-reach.

And all the recklessness. So many close calls riding that motorcycle on roads that would be deemed unsafe here in Canada.

He shook his head and took another sip. Sometimes it was easy to overlook so many unique experiences in his past that it saddened him. But sometimes hidden were past vistas and fast times all blurred together in a blender of emotion. Only the intrepid could delve their toes back into the soup and not be stung by longing.

Chapter Eighteen

Lost Love

His cheeks were flushed with the onslaught of memories that had been triggered after his chance encounter with his old student from Taiwan. The endless miles he put on that motorcycle of his and all the hours he spent winging it in front of eager students of English, was mindboggling. All his lessons he read from the textbooks were without a lesson plan. Even from an early age, he had eschewed the rules and sought his own way to achieve his goals, as others chose the ordinary life. What unfolded for him was more and more of his own way so that he went farther and deeper down the rabbit hole so eventually he found himself living two lives with two sets of ethics. If he wasn’t teaching or riding his motorcycle then he was drinking at a bar, or he was reading or writing at a café drinking bottomless cups of coffee. His life was fast and for a time he wanted to be no other place.

During those years in Taiwan for the first time in his adult life he was happy.

Things were never the same after he left Taiwan after three years there. Lost were the true laissez-faire spirit of life and the unkempt wild beaches all up and down both coasts of the island. In the late nineties those days were still like the Wild West there. Very few police on the roads and not a lot of need for

proper paperwork when it came to riding a motorcycle. And the sharp mountains of Taiwan's middle gave the island depth. Riding to its mountain lagoons were the stuff of legend after drinking a bar dry.

And here was Taiwan 25 years later reaching out and shaking his hand. *Amazing.*

Just as he was enjoying these new thoughts he saw her enter, her ample blonde hair now streaked with white.

My God, he thought, she hasn't aged at all.

"Allison," he said. "Welcome to Canada." They embraced.

"Good to see you Tim, especially after such a long flight. Wow, was that long!" The smile had finer lines around the mouth - added beauty to something already beautiful.

"I have to say you look fantastic. After all these years, you look the same."

"The same, I hope not!"

"Well, more lines but more refined."

"Refined is it? Okay. Refined."

Yes, it was there again. The spark. The grin. The sparkle in the eye. That spunk. That gumption. That moxie. *That mischief.* It was a language and they shared it. Tom Foolery was always at hand. Anything was possible. All of it was on the verge of prankish silliness.

"The last time I saw you was on the wharf on Lamma when I left for Australia, remember that?"

How could he not?

"I do. Pak Kok Village."

"Yes, Pak Kok. Your safe zone from the madness."

"It was a safe zone from the madness, definitely. I liked that place. Great view."

"Somewhat remote to get to though."

"I didn't mind the 20-minute walk or the poisonous snakes that patrolled the path either."

"You were pretty insane I recall. Insane in a good way I suppose. There was a method to your madness you could say. I could see some method anyway. Maybe not all people but I could."

"That was one of the reasons I liked you so much." The blush still packed a punch in terms of red and pink hues. That was when O'Neil felt it in his heart. Damn, there it was. He took a sip of his beer to try to calm any welling nerves. He tried to recall why he had broken up with her and then remembered Catharine, the girl he had started seeing just after they had broken up. Yes, he remembered that it was Catharine that had caused the longer term separation from Allison. Then she left Hong Kong for Australia. And then came back again. And lived on Lamma Island.

Man, he had forgotten a lot. Maybe on purpose?

It made him sad that when they reconciled after Allison was out of the picture it hadn't worked out because of her roommate. A misplaced crush on her roommate had put an end to their second effort. Pretty suddenly if his memory served him correctly. After that she was gone again back to Australia.

"So you left Hong Kong because you had to be a landlord to your place in North Sydney, was that right?"

"That's right. Good memory."

"Actually not really, but I bring it up because it's ironic because now *I'm a landlord* so I know what it's like."

"Makes sense. You wanted to be a writer so becoming a landlord was a good way to make that happen."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Are you still single if I can ask?"

"I am. I have had girlfriends on Manitoulin Island but once I got my rheumatoid arthritis my relationships ended too."

"Sorry to hear that. I didn't know that about arthritis."

"It was a heavy-duty kind."

"Bummer."

"*Major bummer.*"

"But you had treatment didn't you?" she asked, her voice gentle.

"Yes, and it looks like it's cured me."

"Good news then."

"It is. It's tremendous."

"Tremendous, yes."

He noticed that she wasn't wearing any rings, which was a change from the days when he knew her in Hong Kong when her fingers were covered in rings, something he had never liked.

"Are you single?" he ventured.

"Oh, is that where the conversation is heading now is it? What I want to know is whatever happened to you and I living in Redpath and you becoming a writer? Remember that? Surely you do. That was our plan you know."

It was now time for him to blush.

"Yes, I think of that often."

"And?"

“And yes. I suppose I had to do it on my own. That way I would never be reliant on anyone else. I guess that’s why it unfolded the way it did. And perhaps because of that I was able to write down all my half-written novels and harvest my journals to create some good novels. Some of them I’m really proud of.”

“You should be. They’re really good books - the ones I have read.”

“How many have you read?”

“Most of them I think. All of them. Ten or so. I like that one that takes place in India at the end, and in Vietnam and somewhere else.”

“The Philippines.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

He smiled.

“Most of my groupies are women.”

“I’m not a groupie!” Just then their waitress arrived. For a moment, just for a moment but a very long moment, he was caught up in their very first dinner in Hong Kong when she wore her low-cut top and jean jacket. How oh how did it all go so wrong?

Chapter Nineteen

Twin Hammers

If he were completely honest he would have to admit that it was because he didn’t think she honestly was willing to go without to support his writing career because the vast majority of writers starve. He was willing to starve himself but he didn’t want her to starve. And he certainly wasn’t willing to work and take away from the time he had for his writing to make money to feed her, so there was only really one solution: to go it alone. And that’s what he did. It might’ve have been the right thing to do for his writing career but it wasn’t for his emotional life. That life had run rather dry over the years, and to see in front of him what might have been emotionally on a daily basis left his gut full of butterflies. He busied himself eating to quell the butterflies but it didn’t quell anything.

He felt jilted. Self-jilted.

He reassured himself that all was still well and that it wasn’t the end of the world but when she smiled at him and he saw her clear green eyes his resolve waned. She could disarm him just like that. How he had lost! What had he done? Opportunity cost had never been so bitter. Even sudden, forced notions of getting back together with her were shot down by the cool breath of reality that belligerently fluttered behind his ears somewhere, never shy to remind him of who he was.

She told him of her work with a painting company, the same company that she had worked with in Australia before she had left for Hong Kong more than 15 years ago. Being a colour expert had never made a lot of sense to O’Neil but it looks like she had prevailed in that department, having had the same employer almost her entire adult life. Impressive.

“Do you still have your rental in Manley?”

“No, I couldn’t hold on to it. Being a landlord ended up becoming too much for me. Besides, I wasn’t making much from the property and I know I didn’t want to live there so I sold it. Used the money to set myself up in Redpath.”

“Groovy.”

“Groovy, yes.” She laughed. “I miss that. The way you speak. But you know it comes out in the things you write so it’s not all lost.” She took a drink from her beer.

“Are you staying here tonight?”

“No, too expensive for me. Besides I have family here. My cousins live here.”

“I needed to come here to Toronto because my auntie died last week and I was in her will. Besides, I haven’t been here since I was a little girl. And I wanted to see you. So I sort of made an excuse to come despite the COVID testing and all that new stuff we all have to do to get through this pandemic. Tiring though.”

“It is tiring.”

“But worth it. I am thrilled to see my cousins again. She will be coming to pick me up here when we’re done dinner.”

He surveyed their plates and saw that they were most definitely finished.

“In fact they should be here any minute.”

“They?”

Just then three people entered the lounge, a woman the same height with the same hair as Allison and two boys that were in their early teens. The way they walked was the first thing he noticed about them, and then obviously that they were identical twins.

“Is this?”

“Hi Mom!” they both said as they stopped behind her and stared at O’Neil. The strangest feeling came over him as if he were looking at his own image when he was a kid. Both of the young boys looked just like his own twin brother when he was 13.

“These two are mine,” said Allison. “And they are yours too.”

“Sorry?” he said, absent-mindedly. But then he knew. He simply knew.

“Ralfie, Monty, this is your father. Remember he didn’t know you two existed until this very moment so be gentle with him.” They both ran to him and hugged him. The both had waited so long to meet their father they couldn’t help it. It was like a damn had burst.

“What!” He hugged them back in a state of shock. They were definitely his he could tell from the shape of the head and the glint in the eye, and the unmistakable look of mischief.

“Allison you could’ve warned me!”

“Ah, no. I don’t think you deserved it.”

“Ralfie and Monty. Well, I can understand Ralfie,” he said, making Allison laughed out loud. “But Monty, where did that come from?”

“It’s his nickname. His real name is James, after my father. Ralfie’s real name is Timothy, named after his father. You.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I debated it. For years. But there was just never the right opportunity. You were so far away. And then for years I didn’t know how to get a hold of you. Soon years had passed and then it became more a question of why would I. Maybe that was wrong, and if I was then please forgive me.” She grabbed his forearm and his boys watched him carefully. “Remember I was 40. And when I discovered I was pregnant I knew I wanted to have the baby. I just didn’t expect twins!” O’Neil was speechless. “And I always loved you so having your babies seemed like a good idea.”

“Yes, I understand. I do. I’m just so happy you brought them here to meet me.”

Chapter Twenty

A Long-overdue Loose End

O’Neil was stunned after Allison and his boys had left the Royal York. They had made plans to see each other before they flew out of Toronto in a few days so he had some time to let the whole thing settle in. Never could he have foreseen this. There were perhaps a night or two he and Allison had spent together right around the time she had left for Australia, but he had never thought about it. It was true he had thought of her a lot - the most of all his old girlfriends.

Flabbergasted, O’Neil made his way in a taxi over to Ingrid’s place aware he was a bit late but hopeful she would still be hosting. On an otherwise quiet road, he saw all the lights on in the main room through the bay window.

“Hello good looking,” she said, pulling him close and giving him a kiss. “Oops, I suppose I should keep my social distancing. Arrest me!” Laughing she grabbed his arm and pulled him inside.

The living room was crowded with opened gifts and empty wine bottles, the music loud playing ABBA, an Ingrid favourite.

“We’re just at the moment when the ABBA comes out and we have to boogie a little bit.”

“Yes, I see,” he said, trying to suppress his smile. His twin sons were very much on his mind.

“Would you like some red or white?”

“I like my Pinot Noir. Have some?”

“Yes, it’s over here.” She retrieved a wine glass and filled it with Pinot.

"Splendid. Here's to new surprises."

"New surprises, okay. Sounds good." They drank together in the kitchen apart from the other guests.

"So why do you live so far away sweetie? We miss you here."

"I miss you too, *sometimes*."

"Sometimes?" She laughed.

"I mean I'm up there to write down all my adventures I had when I lived overseas while I can still remember them." Images from a past trip to Vietnam and Cambodia flashed through his mind, the motorcycle, the old French prison and the blown-up mansions along the sea in a ghost town of the old French from the Indochina days. Lost vistas of the past. Impossible to write them all down.

"But it's so cold there, colder than Reykjavik actually," she said. "I looked it up."

"It's good though. That's when I write - during the winter months when all I have to do is tend to the woodstove and drink pots of tea. But despite the cold, there is so much freshwater around that the birds fly around at minus 10 Celsius. It's sort of like Canada's little piece of Africa. So many wild animals. So much undisturbed nature."

She shook her head. "Still crazy after all these years."

"Yep. And extremist with a purpose."

"Well whenever you need a place to stay when you do come into Toronto to visit you just let me know so you can stay here. No point in paying for a hotel. I like having you here. We ran out of time last time."

"Indeed we did." She led him into the living room where there were several couples. One woman approached him from the couch.

"I'm a friend of Ingrid's," she said offering her hand. "I'm Molly."

"Love that name, Molly. One of my favs, if you please."

"I please." She looked at O'Neil closer. "So I have visited your website and read some of your books, particularly that one that takes place in Burma. What's the title?"

"Prophecy Seekers."

"Yes, that's it. Loved it. Couldn't believe what I read, especially when you discovered George Orwell's old house and police barracks from when he lived there."

"Yes, that was pretty cool."

"Not a lot of people know he became an imperial policeman for the British during the 20s because of his anti-imperialist writings of his later life."

"Yes, sort of ironic in a way."

"It is, but it's an arc in life that is as old as salt. A writer begins with one thought about life but ends up seeing the world the opposite way at the end of his life. Full circle. Broad arc."

“Yes, a rather impressive arc. I can see that. He was pretty hardcore, Eric was.”

“Yes, he was. Shame about his throat injury.”

“Yes, it was.” O’Neil was impressed she knew about the bullet Orwell took through the neck during the Spanish Civil War that left him with a whisper for the rest of his life. Not many knew about it.

“And he had been warned not to stand up by his fellow officers because he was so tall and there were snipers aiming their rifles at the trenches.”

“A shame.”

Piqued by her knowledge of one of his favourite authors, he asked her about his tattoo.

“Did you ever read that Orwell had a hand tattoo when he was an officer in Burma?”

“No.”

“Yeah, he had a tattoo inked on his hands that the locals believed would protect him from bad luck and evil spirits. But imagine this guy, a graduate from Eton College returning to British society with two hand tattoos! He had little circles drawn around his knuckles. When I was there I saw several men with lots of strange writings and symbols inked on their arms and chests. The gusto he had man!”

“There’s something in your writings that I can see in Orwell’s too. You both use your geography as part of the story. Burma particularly because you tracked down his trail. I was enthralled. Really. I’m so glad you came here tonight because I wanted to meet you for some time now. I kept asking Ingrid when you were coming into town for a visit.”

“Well then, it’s good to meet you too.”

“I did want to ask you if you have literary representation yet?”

“I do not, no.”

“You need an agent for your works to find a wider market.”

“True, but it’s tough finding an agent these days.”

“Is it. I didn’t know that. Well then maybe today is your lucky day.”

Lucky day indeed. It’s been a day reckoning!

“It has been quite a day, yes.”

“Well from what I have read from what’s posted on your website I am interested in representing you because I think your stories would translate well on the screen and particularly into audiobooks. What would you say to that?”

O’Neil had operated in a void for so many years he had just assumed he would never find representation. He knew he and his works would benefit from an agent but he had accepted just to have his novels available for free on his website because it had always been about having people read his words. Never about money. So now, hearing Molly’s words he wanted to jump. In fact he had to calm himself from losing control.

“That would be groovy,” was all he could say.

His day had finally ended. It was a day of action and receiving actions started years ago - ripple effects that had been driven by his character. The inertia of self-imposed isolation can be dangerous to one's self-perception, but he knew he was still destined to continue to remain apart. The thing is that most never know the real ripple effect of their lives. Never. Except maybe in the afterlife.

Epilogue

So much happened that day that O'Neil remembered a quote he had once read: 'A day is the epitome of a year.' It slipped O'Neil's mind as to who it was, but it was true: some days packed a punch. All in a day. After that day in November all those years ago, what he learned about his life that day continued to ripple before him as the years passed.

But by far the biggest ripple from that day of reckoning was meeting his twin sons Ralfie and Monty. He couldn't help himself but he became determined to be the best Dad he could, taking three months off every year to live with them in Redpath during the Canadian winters. He was very aware of the lost years that he could never have back so he doubled down on what he had left and was determined more than anything to become a part of their lives, especially during those formative years from 15 to 25. And so he did, finding a house he rented every year near the main beach downtown in Redpath where he would invite his sons to stay over in the spare bedroom with bunkbeds.

And they did. They visited. And they all came to know each other. Soon they were old enough to share a beer or two, just like he had done with his father 50 years before. To Allison he could never be more grateful for introducing his sons to him after so many years of dormant communication.

And what made it all possible was his newfound wealth from the work Molly did as his agent. Ingrid had really pulled through that night by introducing her to him so that O'Neil could finally have literary representation. And so many of his stories were sold. Many became favourites of viewers but he remained apart from it all, just knowing that people were being inspired by his words. He saw the income keep coming, which gave him the freedom to spend more time in Australia and traveling to other new countries. But it was all different for him the second time around. Gone was the reckless fervor, replaced by a new calm wisdom and slow enjoyment of the moment, particularly after all the medical treatment he had received over the years. Quite simply he was thankful to have more time to live.

Before he had left that morning he was a shell of a man, but after that day when he caught a glimpse of how his life had affected others, everything changed for him. Some nights he grieved alone for all those who never have their day of reckoning and who live out their lives without the knowledge of their aggregate impact. He was one of the lucky ones. He had had his day of reckoning.

THE END