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A CHILD OF PRINCE RUPERT

My father was a bootlegger and, for a short time, a jailbird. My mother ran a successful taxi business, also for a short time. Both were alcoholics.

Their only child was born in Vancouver on November 8, 1938. When war was declared less than a year later, my father took his small family up the coast to Prince Rupert, where he found work in the suddenly busy shipyards. That job ended when a steel crate fell on his foot, severing two toes. There was no such thing as workers' compensation in those years, but the accident bestowed an unexpected benefit: His disability gave him an automatic deferment from military service.

My father soon launched himself into the more lucrative career of bootlegging. As a schoolboy, I boosted my popularity by supplying friends with premium Crown Royal bags—dark-purple velvet pouches with gold braided drawstrings—to carry their marble collections. No cheap whisky for my dad. Unfortunately, like many a good salesman, he was too fond of his own product; otherwise, we might have followed the example of the Bronfmans, who grew rich in the same trade.

Dad was smart enough; he and his buddies just drank the profits.

Murray Oliver was a handsome, good-natured man who impressed others with an easy charm and a sharp intelligence. An old beach photo shows him to be short and muscular, built like an athlete and with wavy dark hair. In his own world he was respected, and other men would approach him for advice or ask him to mediate disputes. He was twenty-five years older than my mother, Elizabeth Easton. Nevertheless they moved in together.

My mother was a lively brunette, short and slim but busty. She was one of four sisters, none of whom could be described as a great beauty, but she possessed a biting wit that did not spare those she regarded as fools, alongside an abiding empathy for those worse off than herself. Certainly, she was up for adventure. It's likely my father took us to Rupert not only for work but also to elude the law. He and an accomplice had been charged and convicted of fraud after trying to use counterfeit liquor rationing cards. There was no jail sentence, but the authorities were aware of his habits.

My grandparents are largely a mystery to me, all dead before I was born and rarely spoken of except in cryptic tones. Both families had emigrated from Scotland, the Olivers to Ontario, where my grandfather, Thomas, established a hardware store in Coppercliff, now a suburb of Sudbury, and the Eastons to Winnipeg, the birthplace of my mother. Her father, William Easton, eked out a living as a bill collector during the Depression. Trying to extract money from people who had none was no doubt soul wrenching. One day in Saskatoon, William walked into the path of an oncoming freight train. The family was scandalized when the local paper called it suicide.

Letters from William Easton to his four daughters survived him, poignant and loving messages mailed from small Prairie towns across his collection territory. Scribbled in dusty rail cars or crummy hotel rooms, they offer thoughtful moral advice on marriage and behaviour, yet they also carry a whiff of gathering gloom, a hint of chronic depression. Like thousands of impoverished Prairie women, his widow, Isabel, moved to the West Coast. There she opened a small bookstore in North Vancouver, but the family survived on the meagre earnings of her oldest son, David. All of the Eastons seemed to have a touch of melancholy. Dog-eared photos portray Isabel as a hard-faced woman gazing sternly at the photographer, the very picture of Scottish Presbyterian rigidity. Still, she wrote hopeful poetry despite a life of disappointment and privation.

The Ontario Olivers likewise went bust in the Depression and migrated to the West Coast. How my parents met or courted was never revealed to me. Whenever I asked my mother for details later on, she would feign memory loss or develop the vapours, and I could never raise the topic with my father.

Prince Rupert was still a frontier town when we landed there, originally the western terminus of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway and the end of the line for Chinese rail workers whose children grew up to own the city's laundries, grocery stores, and popular eateries. Rupert boasts one of the world's best natural harbours, and the nineteenth-century rail baron and financier Charles M. Hayes intended that it should become the pre-eminent seaport on the West Coast. That dream died when Hayes went down with the *Titanic*, although Prince Rupert eventually came into its own as a port and staging centre.

As in many small northern communities of that era, classes and neighbourhoods were sharply divided. From their homes on Upper Third Avenue, a white-skinned elite controlled the town. They operated the law offices and banking institutions, the jewellery and ladies' wear stores, the movie theatres and car dealerships. Together, they attended meetings of the Chamber of Commerce, the Odd Fellows, and the Loyal Order of the Moose. Occasionally there were scandals, such as when a respected doctor ran off with a teenaged patient, or two Third Avenue merchants swapped wives and offspring. The gentry inhabited a separate world and did not mix much with the denizens of Lower Third Avenue—working white families, the Chinese, and the natives—except to sell them things and profit from their sweat.

The majority of Rupert's citizens lived by their own rules and worked at jobs full of risk to life and limb. Fishing and logging claimed victims every season, but bar fights and street brawls were equally lethal. A house without a gun was a rarity.

Natives occupied the lowest ranks in Rupert's caste system. At the Capital Theatre movie house and at most churches, natives were permitted to sit only in specially designated seats, the worst in the house at the Capital. That no one recognized this practice as blatant segregation did not make it excusable, even though many of the natives felt ownership in having their own seating and did not want to sit with white people anyway.

My family's own lot was humble. We lived on the second floor of a seedy apartment building, above a strip of Italian grocery stores and a dry cleaning establishment. A long staircase with a skylight at the top led to our one-room apartment. I played on the landing under the skylight until the day I accidentally

tumbled down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. The bruises don't linger in memory, but my mother's cry of anguish has stayed with me. The apartment came with an icebox and wood stove, and my parents soon bought a gramophone.

Rain was the background music of my childhood. Situated on the edge of lush Pacific rainforest with mountains at its back, Prince Rupert endured what seemed a continuous downpour, lifting occasionally to a drizzle. We wore gumboots year-round and joked of being born with webbed feet. Our famous high school basketball team was named "the Rainmakers." The rainfall could last for months on end, provoking depression and even suicide, not to mention natural disaster. I recall being woken one morning by a great roar. The rain had lashed down in such torrents that a whole section of mountainside above the town gave way, burying half a dozen citizens in a tomb of mud and splintered timber.

By 1944, our town of nine thousand souls had become a colony of America, transformed by the presence of some fifteen thousand American troops stationed in our midst. Most were with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, working on the construction of the Alaska Highway; others were infantrymen on their way to combat in the Pacific. The war was never far from our minds, and there were moments of genuine fright. House lights had to be turned off and blackout curtains drawn during periodic air raid warnings. No sliver of illumination was allowed while civilian monitors checked the residential streets, banging on the doors if the blackout order was violated. After Pearl Harbor, a Japanese invasion of the West Coast was expected at any time.

In this hothouse environment, everyone lived for the

moment. If life might be short, it had better be fast, and few relationships survived the ride. My earliest memories are of drunken verbal bouts between my parents, shouts of "chippy" and "whore," followed by the sounds of shattering glass, physical struggles, and cries of pain. The hostilities ceased when I called out, begging my parents to stop, but the battle resumed the moment they thought I was asleep again. I remember countless late-night parties, punctuated with the high-pitched laughter of women and the roars of inebriated men. In my sleeping place in an alcove off the living room, I played with stacks of American military caps tossed carelessly on my bed.

Then, the year I started elementary school, my mother vanished from my life as if in a puff of smoke. A photo dated 1945 shows her embracing a square-jawed man named Cliff Dahl. The courts gave custody to my father, a ruling that was almost unprecedented in those days. Either the judge concluded Mom was an unfit parent for reasons I can only guess at, or my father cruelly deceived her. One of their friends later told me that my father had lied about the date of the custody hearing. The loss of her only child—temporarily, as it turned out—plunged my mother into a prolonged depression, the first of many that would plague her as she grew older.

My father had won sole responsibility for my care, but it proved to be a burden that was far beyond him. His "work" kept him out nights or on the road, and however well-meaning, he was not temperamentally suited to child rearing. He solved the problem by shopping me around as a boarder to various households, all strangers in need of extra dollars. Before being paraded in front of these prospective foster parents, I was dressed up in a blue double-breasted jacket and lectured sternly about making a

favourable impression. Some families rejected me with a sweep of the hand, even while I sat there trying to be as appealing as possible. *Nope, not our type.* Or, *he talks a lot, doesn't he*? At other addresses we made the decision ourselves, Dad marching me out while whispering that the people were assholes.

On some level these painful rebukes and the implicit rejection by my father must have registered. They added to the sting of my mother's unexplained departure, instilling a profound insecurity that would surface eventually. Until a refuge could be found for me, I was without any semblance of a normal home life. No hovering grandparents, no close connections with aunts, uncles, or cousins, no siblings for companionship or comfort. At the time, however, these experiences seemed perfectly normal to me, hardly damaging to my psyche or self-esteem. I felt no loneliness and in fact revelled in the novelty of my circumstances.

I knew kids from large close-knit families but I considered their well-disciplined lives a predictable bore. Rupert's Lower Third was my playground, and in times of my father's absence, I lived more like a child of the streets than a middle-class schoolboy. On one occasion, I lost the quarter Dad had given me for a school lunch. I had no qualms about begging from a passing tourist rather than go hungry. I was left to look after myself, at least until Dad came home well after midnight.

Evenings were spent walking a familiar circuit, often in casual search of my father, which meant traipsing up and down Third Avenue and into its seedy beer joints. I had to jump up to catch a glimpse through the oval-shaped windows of the swinging doors and into the smoky haze. The pungent odour of stale beer and wet cigarette butts tossed outside still lingers in my nostrils. My habit was to ask an entering patron to call out

for Murray Oliver. If Murray did not emerge, it was on to the next watering hole until I tracked him down. He wasn't always pleased to be so summoned.

When the war ended in 1945, all the soldiers left and the town's kids played in empty barracks and gun emplacements until the government demolished them. We collected army badges and parts of uniforms—hats were big trade items. I found a small pistol that I happily assumed some other boy had lost. It had reddish grips and made a satisfying click when I pulled the trigger. Why it would not ignite the paper caps we bought for our other toy guns, I could never figure out, but I was crushed when some alert adult took it away, recognizing it for the real thing.

The war was over, but hard drinking and hard living still characterized the community. Rupert thrived in the postwar boom, providing every resource an expanding nation required. As well as benefiting from the fish and lumber harvest, the city was at the centre of recently discovered gold, silver, and copper deposits and could ship all these riches to market by sea or rail. The population swelled to twice its wartime number as fast-buck artists, speculators, and job seekers poured in. They contributed to a volatile mix of hardrock miners and fishermen, steel-handed loggers, cannery workers, and sailors on shore leave. White skins barely outnumbered a population of Tsimshian Indians and Canadian-born Chinese and Japanese.

This made for a colourful streetscape, especially on Saturday nights. Hundreds of people elbowed one another along the four blocks of Lower Third Avenue as they walked past dingy saloons, greasy-spoon restaurants, illicit gambling joints, and private "clubs" like the Moose Lodge and the Freemasons'. The

narrow main drag was bordered by dozens of such enterprises, all housed in tight-fitting wood-frame buildings.

As a crowded seaport, Rupert was a smaller and more northerly version of Marseilles and attracted equally eccentric characters. There was one-legged Dominic, owner of the steam bath. He never wore anything but a black suit, the right leg pinned up at the hip. Every Christmas for High Mass, he bought a new black suit, along with a fresh pair of long underwear. Having one leg, he pointed out, saved in shoe leather. The Italian shoe repairman made and maintained Dominic's single custom boot.

Ricardo the Hook had lost a hand in the war. I was an appreciative audience for the repertoire of tricks he performed with a mean-looking, curved steel appendage, always sporting a speared cigarette. Twenty-Dollar Dolly White had launched her business during the war years. She bought a dilapidated row house and imported a collection of young ladies from Vancouver. Nearby, in the short alley that became famous locally as "The Line," Dolly's own refurbished establishment was known as the "White House," an elegant stopping place for American officers. A model of the stereotypical hooker with a heart of gold, she took an interest in my welfare and was always a reassuring presence.

Then there was Eric, the railway conductor, who for years juggled two fiancées living at opposite ends of his run from Rupert to Prince George. The arrangement fell apart when fate brought the two women together in a coach car. Comparing notes on the men they expected to marry, they discovered they were betrothed to the same fellow. Eric was horrified to see the two women step off the train together and, in unison, throw

their engagement rings at him. Eric spent hours on his knees trying to retrieve the diamonds from a snowdrift.

My habitual route took me through an underpass below street level where a dank cellar housed the "Dungeon," a pool hall where men played for money and the local sharks emptied the pockets of out-of-towners. Popeye, who ran the nearby cigar store, always welcomed me with a free soft drink.

There really is no such thing as the "common people," but I suppose that is how these uncommon individuals could be described. They were the companions of my daily life in those years, and I was treated like one of them—always with kindness and never abuse. Strangers could be generous and caring, it seemed, while those closer to home couldn't always be trusted.

A dog bite eventually brought about another sharp detour in my life. At the age of eight, I was attacked while playing with a group of chums. Nearly sixty years later I still have the scars on my arm. The family who owned the dog was very concerned, and probably fearful that my father might bring a lawsuit. Evidently some kind of a deal was struck, because soon after I found myself moving in with the dog's owners, "Brick" and Mabel Skinner. I stayed with them for four years, the dog and I maintaining an uneasy truce.

The Skinners lived in a one-bedroom house on Borden Street, perched at the end of a long steep pathway on the side of the mountain. Here was family life at last, but theirs was a loveless house without much happiness. It was understood that my place in it was temporary.

Brick was a fire plug of a man and, fittingly, the fire chief down at the government docks. He was gruff and sometimes short-tempered, but not mean-spirited. His wife, Mabel, who

was rigid, unyielding, and without a trace of compassion, became my tormentor. They had an adopted son my age, Jimmy, a cheerful kid who squinted badly through wire-rimmed glasses. It angered Mabel that Jimmy always seemed to be led by me, and she never stopped reminding me that Jimmy would one day be a success while I would never amount to anything. I recall one hurtful rebuff at bedtime when I forgot myself and called her "Mommy." For that slip I was sharply reprimanded. I had a real mother, Mabel told me, but she was an immoral woman who had left me behind.

Life with the Skinners was not all bad. Jimmy and I shared the makeshift attic bedroom with a boarder, an elderly man whom I knew as Frank Redman. While puffing on a long pipe that was never out of his mouth except for its ritual daily cleaning, Frank held me spellbound with romantic stories of life in the Old West. All his tales, he assured me, were based on personal experience of the lawless frontier. He claimed to have been a Montana cowboy during the 1880s, forced to flee across the border after shooting someone in a fight over a horse. His accounts of cattle drives, cowboys and Indians, and the rugged independence of the lone man on horseback—possibly lifted from Zane Grey dime novels—enthralled me and set my imagination free amidst clouds of Ogden's Fine Cut Tobacco. After the guilty excitement of women's lingerie, my favourite pages in the Eaton's catalogue were those devoted to saddles, chaps, and firearms.

I fantasized about being anyone else, anywhere else: a secret agent, a benevolent dictator, a gun-toting frontiersman living the free life on the plains with a faithful horse my only companion. It was lights out at seven o'clock, but in that attic and under the covers by flashlight, I read any book I could find or borrow.

Later, lying in the dark at my end of the attic beside the lone window, I always looked for the North Star, comforted by its constancy in a life that so far had been quite unpredictable.

Books and reading were welcome escapes, although an astute teacher had discerned a vision problem. I confessed to her that I could not read the blackboard, and glasses were prescribed. When the optician diagnosed crossed eyes, Mabel took me to Vancouver for the necessary surgery. The day after, Dad surprised me in the hospital room with my first pair of cowboy boots.

Brick had a cousin named Bill Bickle who owned a cattle ranch at a place called Grassy Plains near Burns Lake, British Columbia, a spot long since drowned by a hydro project. I spent glorious summers there with the welcoming Bickle family, who kindly assigned me my own horse, Lazy Dick. I rode the dusty country roads into town to pick up goods at the general store and was thrilled one day to be photographed by an American tourist who mistook me for a genuine ranch hand.

Ranch life held a few rude surprises, though. One morning I watched Bickle shoot a steer, then cut a hole in its side with a knife to bleed it. The steer fell on its front knees while yelping dogs lapped up the blood. This was my first experience of violent death and the episode became the stuff of nightmares for weeks afterwards. Surely this was nothing Gene Autry or Roy Rogers would ever be part of.

Growing up under the roofs of strangers imparted some inescapable lessons. Too soon perhaps, I learned to judge people with cold logic, by their actions rather than their words. I guarded my own emotions carefully, even while drawing out the feelings and motives of others. Engaging with those who controlled my fate, carefully fitting in with a minimum of fuss, became a

survival technique. At the same time, I formed a conviction that every person must look out for himself before all else.

Despite a growing independent streak, I longed for my father's occasional visits. These were increasingly rare as Dad looked to expand his booze trade into new markets, but they were frequently memorable. Thanks to liquor rationing in Canada during the war, I spent many an hour standing in line at the government outlet, holding a place for Dad. In Alaska, however, booze was unlimited. Ketchican, the nearest Alaskan port to Rupert, was a wide-open town in what was then wilderness territory. It had its own red light district of tiny shacks, bars, and bordellos built on jetties out over the harbour. And its resources were only a few hours away from Rupert in the beefed-up fishing boat Murray had purchased. He made the dash across treacherous and unpredictable waters at night to load up with American spirits, then returned to Rupert where he sold the booze at a markup of 100 percent.

The risk was worth it and business was good. Murray bought one of the first and most expensive cars to come off the assembly lines after the war, a black Ford Monarch. He turned the four-door limo into a rolling liquor store, delivering the boat's haul in style and acquiring a taxi licence for cover. It was illegal to sell liquor anywhere but out of a government store and seriously illegal to do so after the government store had closed. But this only made Murray more inventive; occasionally, I was pressed into service as his accomplice. If he was on a run to sell a few bottles and spotted a police car, I hid the goods in my sweater or up the legs of my pants. If we had a passenger, the instructions were to pass the bottles to the kid when the bulls pulled us over.

Murray was popular with the natives because he offered them the chance to take booze home like everyone else. He also charged them a lower markup, rather than gouge them after hours. His largesse inevitably cut into the profits of local bar owners and the liquor tax revenues of the government. While Dad had no doubt paid off most of the local officials, the heat became too much and they reluctantly charged him with bootlegging. He served six months at Okalla Penitentiary in New Westminster, and as the son of a con, I suffered the merciless taunts of my classmates.

The first visit after his release, he was more sharply dressed than I had ever seen him, looking handsome in a double-breasted grey pinstripe suit made to measure in the prison tailor shop. Dad wasted not a minute in establishing a new business, a crap and poker game that operated out of the bridal suite, such as it was, in the St. Elmo Hotel. He was a lifelong gambler whose advice to me about the sport was a familiar saw: There is a sucker in every game and if you can't see who it is, get up and leave.

Though boarding with others, I was allowed to spend the night with Dad from time to time, closeted in the hotel suite's bedroom but listening to the action. Amid the fragrance of cigar smoke and beer was the vague thrill that something illicit, possibly even a little dangerous, was going on. The players were seated at a circular table covered in green cloth, tall stacks of bills and poker chips resting neatly by their hands. But it was the revolver beside the dealer that mesmerized me. Designed to protect the house and discourage local toughs who might be tempted to knock over the bank, it had a large steel-blue frame with the brand name "Colt" emblazoned on the pistol grip.

There was a lanyard ring on the butt and a flap-top holster with sheepskin lining, which I was allowed to wear during visits. The gun was always loaded except when I was given it to handle. The shiny bullets slid smoothly out of the six chambers. I felt utterly privileged.

The day a boy got his first gun was the bush country's equivalent of a bar mitzvah. My eleven-year-old's pride was immense when Dad took me to Joe Scott's hardware store to buy a Cooey single-shot .22 rifle. I hardly took a breath as I lifted it out of its shipping carton. The opportunities for father-and-son bonding were few in Prince Rupert and tended to centre on fishing or hunting. We had the accoutrements of neither, but we intended to share the experience. In the wilds of the city dump, Dad with his Colt .45 and I with my new rifle used the rats for target practice.

After these all-too-fleeting outings, I was returned to the Skinners. Early on, I was aware of Mabel's penchant for physical punishment. This included bare bottom spanking with one of those thick straps men used to sharpen their straight razors. For whatever reasons, I became her frequent target.

One day some infraction led to a strapping that left my buttocks and the backs of my legs covered in large red welts. By this time, I was allowed to see my mother on rare occasions, and one of her visits came shortly after the beating at Mabel's hands. Mom was horrified at the sight of broken skin and raised welts. There was a great uproar when she came to the Skinners' house a few days later and physically pulled me out of there for good. She did not have custodial rights, but she no doubt used the episode to leverage a concession from my father. I found myself moved into the basement apartment she shared in town with

Cliff Dahl. For the first time, I experienced a relatively peaceful and even loving environment.

Mom and Cliff made a good team; she was a naturally savvy entrepreneur and he was a local sports hero. They started their own taxi business and made a great success of it, being the first in the north to install portable radios in their cars. These technological miracles were almost as amazing as the X-ray fluoroscope machines used in shoe stores to ensure a perfect fit. People summoned the cabs just to hear the driver talking to his dispatcher or to another cabbie—right there in the car while it was moving, by God! The radio also saved gas, since drivers did not have to return to the taxi stand for the details of their next fare.

In addition to being the business manager, Mom herself was a driver and worked a full eight-hour shift, six days a week. Sitting in the front seat beside her at all times was her beloved dog, Winger, an imposing Chesapeake Bay retriever. He was big and powerful, weighed as much as a small man, and was fiercely protective of Mom. Winger would have taken the arm off anyone who tried to manhandle his mistress. It never happened.

Still, the long hours and constant fatigue took a toll on Mom's health. A year or so after I moved in, whispers in the dark told me something was wrong. Mom had contracted tuberculosis, a disease that haunted that era and caused the deaths of millions. She had to go away to one of the many sanatoriums in the B.C. interior for a year or more of convalescence. Cliff had no interest in single parenting, so I was on my own again. Mom never spoke of this to me, but her anguish must have been extreme. Back I went into the homes of strangers, with my largely absent father sending monthly cheques to cover my room and board. I would

live with five different families between the ages of seven and fourteen.

For a time I stayed with a newly married Jewish couple in their one-bedroom apartment. I slept on the living room couch. They were a cheerful twosome and I was learning to adapt to almost any arrangement, but three was a crowd, especially at night. Many times I tried not to listen to their intimate conversation and lovemaking, but adolescent curiosity made it impossible not to. I could hardly blame them when, with great sensitivity, they told me I would have to leave.

After another round of interviews, I landed in the home of Ken and Dorothy Laird. Theirs was a simple, uncomplicated household with lots of laughter, and I was treated with the same kindness as the two children of the house. I shared a room with their son, Alan, who was my age and became my close companion.

The Lairds were a deeply religious couple who lived their Christian faith. Twice a week they attended an evangelical church and, though never pressured, I usually went with them. The services were exuberant affairs, full of gospel singing, shouted prayers, and exhortations from the preacher. This was much more entertaining than those Salvation Army gatherings favoured by the Skinners, where the congregation seemed to carry the weight of suffering mankind on their shoulders. The Lairds were true believers who badly wanted me to share their religious rapture, but I could not do it. To me and, I suspect, to their obedient son, Alan, it was just great theatre.

One notable night a famous saver of souls visited as guest preacher. I studied his performance with genuine attention and admiration. He had perfect timing, hitting the congregation for

cash precisely when the sermon reached its emotional peak. The greater was the spiritual ecstasy, the larger the pile in the collection plate. Another would-be Billy Graham was a faith healer. The Lairds brought me to the altar, hoping to secure a cure for my poor eyesight. The spirit did not enter, unfortunately, despite healing hands on my eyes and fervent shouts from the crowd. I felt obliged to feign better vision so the Lairds would not feel they had failed me. The family did their best to rescue me from a sinful life generally, but I was not persuaded. Too much untried temptation lay ahead, and I was willing also to give the devil a chance to convert me.

My chief joy on Sundays were the evenings, when we were allowed to gather around the radio, Coca-Cola bottles in hand, and listen to the golden age of pre-television radio. We heard shows from the CBC and the American networks, with all the big stars of the day in comedy, drama, and music. I could not get enough of Red Skelton, Jack Benny, the Gang Busters serial, Wayne and Shuster, or the great CBC radio dramas. The earnings from a paper route bought me an ancient crystal set that gave me private and exclusive access to the radio waves. Often I fell asleep with the earphones in place.

I memorized the scripts of the famous announcers, studied their phrasing and delivery, and imitated their voices. My mirror was the audience to which I delivered my lines, my microphone a banana. Once again, I fantasized about a life and an identity far from reality, whether at the radio mike, before the movie camera, or behind the reporter's typewriter. The ability to create a world with words and pictures and to tell whatever story I wanted was something I knew I had to learn.

Mom eventually returned from the "san" and we were

together again. The taxi business had faltered without Mom's management skills, but she soon had the enterprise back on its feet, with a brand new fleet of cars. She and Cliff bought their first home together up on Summit Avenue, a nice part of town. They were now able to live Rupert's version of the high life: baseball games, curling bonspiels, frequent parties, and hard drinking. Apart from receiving occasional support cheques, Mom had no contact with my father.

My high school years are a blur, a jumble of memories of oddball teachers and cruel student pranks, a few of which almost certainly contributed to the suicide of one hapless instructor. A recent immigrant unfamiliar with North American products, he was the victim of chocolate-flavoured Ex-Lax disguised as candy and the target of waterguns filled with indelible ink. These stunts could not have helped him cope with the depression from which he clearly suffered.

Although I was academically undistinguished, an English teacher nonetheless encouraged me to write, and the study of history seemed to come naturally. I found myself penning a column for the school paper and gravitating to student politics.

My closest school chum was Art Helin, the son of a hereditary chief of the Tsimshian people, one of the largest Aboriginal nations on the north B.C. coast. That lineage made Art a prince of the tribe and he looked the part. Tall and athletic, he had the striking good looks that lead anthropologists to make a connection between the Aboriginals of the B.C. coast and those of Hawaii and the Polynesian islands. He could perform great feats of strength and was an outstanding star of the Rainmakers the year they won a provincial championship.

I was a skinny kid with too quick a tongue for my own good,

always in trouble for taking verbal shots at individuals I did not like, among them a notorious town bully. He waited for me in an alley after a movie one night, but he did not spot Art trailing behind. Art brought him down with a punch that was pure poetry in motion.

Art may have saved my life on that occasion; certainly he saved my career in television on another. At a drunken house party one evening, a guest told me I should send my "dirty Indian friend" home. I punched him in the nose hard enough to cause some bleeding, then headed for the door at a run. He brought me down about a block from the house. I was on my back staring up at a huge fist cocked and ready to rearrange my facial bones when Art caught my assailant with a flying tackle just as the hammer was about to descend.

Art was no dumb jock; he had a quick, intelligent wit that made him a favourite of my mother. Mom had a generous nature, but in the case of Art, she did an extraordinary thing for those times of casual racism. When Art was left homeless for a period after his parents moved to a reserve with no school, Mom insisted he move in with us. He stayed for a year.

While still in high school, I joined the Canadian navy reserve, hoping to train as a gunner. My vision tested too poor and they made me a cook instead. I served my years before the mast washing dishes, and one summer I was assigned to a rustbucket Department of Transport lighthouse tender. The *Alexander Mackenzie* was the last of the government's coal-fired ships. The men who worked the furnaces looked as if they were playing blackface roles in vaudeville. Even after they had washed up for meals, they wore on their faces a permanent mask of coal dust embedded in their pores.

The crew represented the bottom of the quasi-military maritime barrel. Our job was the maintenance of navigation aids, buoys, and bells, as well as re-supply and repair of lighthouses along the rugged north coast. On more than one occasion, our captain had to go ashore on some godforsaken island to mediate disputes between the families living there, resorting to the ultimate threat of no more cigarette or booze deliveries unless matters were resolved.

Captain Androsov seemed an escapee from the pages of a novel by Joseph Conrad. A Bulgarian who had served as an officer in the Russian navy of the czar, he had fought against the Bolsheviks in the 1917 revolution. There could be no doubt of his worthiness as a ship's commander, but he was a forbidding character and completely paranoid. The Cold War was in full force, and he believed his fierce opposition to the Communists made him a target of Soviet spies. They might assassinate him, if only they could discover where Prince Rupert was.

With the rank of third cook, my domain was the ship's galley. I reported to the genial and massive chief cook, Mr. Green. He took great pleasure in exploiting my inexperience. When I swabbed the officers' mess, I discovered he had given me salt water, which dried the next day into a dirty brown scum. When I delivered boiled breakfast eggs to the captain's cabin, they proved to be thoroughly rotten. The smell hung in the air for days, but an investigation of the incident was inconclusive.

The rest of the ship's crew could have served central casting as cutthroat pirates. Some were barely reformed criminals, none had finished high school, and a few were illiterate. We slept in open crew quarters in the ship's forecastle. My second night at sea, I awoke to a hand creeping through the bunk toward my

genitals. Still half asleep, I came out of the narrow bed swinging and was never bothered again.

It seemed to me most of the ship's company were destined for wasted, hopeless lives. Yet no one had to tell them they would go nowhere without an education. They wanted to learn, but either they were too proud to admit it or had no idea where to start. Seeing stacks of reading material in my bunk, they dubbed me "the Professor." I spent long nights answering questions about literature and history, subjects I knew little of, although more than they.

Strangely enough, I loved the sea time and had no doubt I could rise to the officer ranks one day. I was making almost two hundred dollars a month, more than I had ever possessed in my life. This certainly beat going back to school for grade twelve, so at the end of the season I lied about my age and signed on for a full year. I had not figured on my mother's views on this idea. When the school principal called to report my failure to appear in class, Mom's reaction was swift and decisive. She hopped in her taxi, tore down to the *Alexander Mackenzie*, and made straight for the captain's quarters. The poor skipper was cornered by a harridan accusing him of everything from kidnapping to the exploitation of child labour. He invited me to ship out. It was back to high school and Mom's apartment for me.

There were compensations. Cliff, though somewhat distant, became an important and positive influence on my life. He was a skilled hunter and shooter, a physically imposing man and a superb athlete, tough but not mean. His quiet-spoken manner was reassuring, never threatening, and he personified the art of power in reserve—whether physical or intellectual.

Dad, meanwhile, had returned to Vancouver. Although our exchange of letters was sporadic, the move was apparently a good one for him. In the spring of my final year of high school, he wrote that I should expect a graduation present. Soon after, a CPR shipping agent called to tell me they were unloading an item for me. It was a 1954 Ford Meteor, used but a beauty. I was class president that year, and although a complete lack of interest in maths and science cost me my high school matriculation, the car was not reclaimed.

Those few years spent with me at home, with her business prospering and her relationship with Cliff apparently solid, were the happiest of Mom's life. She and I almost believed the worst was behind us.