

The Great Canadian Novel

by

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He began to putter about the apartment rearranging with great care the chair at the head of the dining table, moving the unused ashtray to the sideboard, straightening the pictures -- particularly the B.C. Binning which always hung a little askew as though the artist's ghost disliked perfect symmetry. Then he felt very tired and sat down in his favorite easy chair. He was glad that he had an hour before the guests arrived at 3:00 PM. This afternoon, he reminded himself, was to be the most important in his entire life -- and he must husband all his strength to rise to the occasion. He could leave the puttering to Ronald Erfurt who was due in half an hour. After all, the reception was Ronald's idea.

More than ever he had the feeling that he was growing very old -- though he was only 88 -- seven years short of the date predicted for his death. Strange that he had never for a moment doubted that woman's date. What a god-awful dump she lived in -- he remembered the smell of it -- the smell of rotting lace if you can imagine that. She came to the door shawled -- he expected that, too -- a mousy creature. Normally he would never have dreamt of going to a fortune teller. But he was forty-five and his life had not come to anything. That should not have been the case, because from early childhood he'd had such a

strong sense of destiny -- the sense that he was going to do something really important in his life. More than a sense, it was a certainty -- yet here he was in his middle age, having drunk far too much Cutty Sark, stumbling into a musty den to hear what this shabby little creature was going to say about his future. He would not forgive Jack Hamilton for this -- Hamilton had put him up to it. "I'll bet you a fiver you won't do it, Tom. A fiver. I'm serious. It's because I like you, old sot, and she's really great -- impressive is the word. Told me the whole story right down to the jockstrap I'd wear to the grave. Jesus. Here's her address. Now go, old chap. She'll give you a future that'll straighten you out, I guarantee it." He wondered what the fortune teller had told Hamilton -- whatever it was hadn't done much to straighten that lad out. Maybe she told Jack he was going to die of alcoholic poisoning within the month, and who'd be surprised? In any case, that afternoon, alone in the bar, he'd got too far into the sauce, and now he was sitting at a lace covered dining table beside this mothly shawl covering a totally plain $4\frac{1}{2}$ foot woman. She said absolutely nothing, only grasped his hand and unfolded it, to stare at his flattened palm.

"Well, am I going on a journey, or not," he rasped finally.

"Not that I can see."

"That's good, I hate travelling."

He wondered at her concentration. She continued to look intently into his hand as though she were studying the Dead Sea Scrolls.

"What's this going to cost me anyway?" He was a fool to have forgotten that.

"Ten dollars."

"For you to hold my hand?"

She corrected him indifferently: "To read it."

"I can think of better things to read."

She spoke suddenly: "Why are you selling insurance?"

"Why not?" Pretty clever, he thought -- old Hamilton had told her.

"Mr. Hamilton told me some things about you," she nodded.

He decided that she was quite clever.

"It says here that you're a writer, that's why I asked."

He did not remember ever telling Hamilton that. Hamilton was for drinking. He had told no one that --except his wife many years ago.

The little shawl moved. "Are you?"

"A writer? --Well...in a way!" And then he decided that this had gone far enough. "Actually, I'm not -- I haven't written a thing intwenty years. And I don't want to."

She looked puzzled. "The hand says clearly that you're a writer."

"Nonsense. Where'd you get that from anyway." He felt rattled.

She looked at him calmly. "Your hand."

He felt outraged and took his hand away.

"It's bloody nonsense. Why don't you give me some useful information? For instance, how about many -- am I coming into a lot of money?"

"No," she said.

He knew that anyway. "Will I marry again?" He knew the answer to that, too.

"No."

"How long will I live -- till I'm seventy?" Answering his own question: "Not bloody likely."

"Oh yes."

"Come on, now. Eighty?"

"More than eighty."

"I'm in terrible shape. You can see that. Fat and gray at forty-five. Arteries as hard as iron. How could I live to eighty?"

"You'll be living at ninety."

He laughed hoarsely. "You see? --it's utter drivel. Any doctor could tell you."

After a moment she said, "You will live to see ninety-five years of age."

"That's a curse, Madam, not a prediction! You're hexing me."

"I have nothing to do with it," she said.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll be getting out of here."

He paid her the ten and left. But he did not forget her, nor what she said. The truth was that he believed her. He did not know how or why she conveyed such conviction, but she did. She knew her business. She was a pro.

The fact was that only his wife was aware that secretly he had always wanted to be a writer. When he was young, he had written constantly --poems, plays, stories. One evening he told her his ambition. He wanted to write a novel -- a great one."

"The great Canadian novel," she said flatly.

"Sure. Why not? It has to be written, doesn't it, sooner or later?"

"Why? Maybe there'll never be a single great novel."

"Oh yes --there has to be. In America, it was Moby Dick. In Russia --War and Peace. In France -- Madam Bovary. The great ones set the bench-mark."

"I see," she said, not really listening.

He never mentioned his aspiration again, and after his first few rejection slips, stopped writing. That was when he was in his twenties. When the marriage broke up he was forty-three and his life had pretty well gone down the tube. His wife had taken their two children to live with her, he'd lost his job, he was drinking heavily, and his health was

deteriorating rapidly. What more does a man need? A bullet through the head? Ninety-five! That had to be some joke. Wait till he got to Hamilton. Hamilton was going to pay for this -- ten dollars to be exact.

The old man looked at his watch. 2:25. Ronald should be here anytime now. He felt that for some reason he should be getting up but couldn't think why. Besides, he was too tired.

That fortune teller, he thought ruefully -- she changed my life. Well, not right away. He hadn't started writing seriously until he was nearing sixty. He had to straighten out his life first, and by the time he stopped twisting and turning, he was just about finished. One morning he woke up in a ditch -- a ten foot deep Delta ditch full of green slime. Later he could not understand why he hadn't drowned. In any case, exposure should have killed him. Already he'd survived a car accident, a beating up in a Gastown bar -- and now this. He could see that the fortune teller was going to win.

Well, if she was going to win --so be it. She hadn't straightened him out as Hamilton, God bless his brutish departed soul, had said she would with her damned prediction. Instead, she'd ironed him out. Flat. He had no interest in anything anymore -- not even drinking. It was all a bloody bore. For days he sat watching the rain run down his apartment windows, and afterwards the light

glimmer on the same windowpanes when the sun shone for what seemed an equal number of days. At last he picked up a book and began to read. It was Flaubert's story -- Herodias. When he finished it, he started to write -- poems, plays, stories. The rhythm of his life changed. He lived to write, but having to live, got a job as a night-clerk in a drug store. Stories, plays, poems. When he was fifty-one he wrote a bad novel -- an historical thing centred on the Second Riel Rebellion. One of the minor Canadiana publishers picked it up and sold a few hundred copies. At fifty-four, he finished a second novel. Not quite as bad as the first, it was about the drug cult and what happened between the sexes as a result of the drug cult. But he knew very little about the drug cult, and had almost forgotten what happens between the sexes. The novel failed. In fact it was never published, since the Canadiana label could not be attached.

For two years after the failure of his second novel, he drank. One long terrible drunk, it took him down deep, far beyond human reach, like the bottom of the Mariana Rift in the Pacific. Yes, he was a writer as the fortune teller said -- he had stories, poems, plays, novels to prove it. But they were all bad. He perceived a variation of the Tithonus trick. Give the man eternal life but forget to add youth. Tell him he's a writer but omit to add that he's a third-rate writer. You go on and you go on

living and writing and none of it is any good. Maybe he was doomed to write as he was doomed to live -- for miraculously, as they said at the hospital after they picked him off a skidroad sidewalk, he survived the Mariana Rift. He began to hate the fortune teller.

His daughter, Sue, who had learned a little compassion in the intervening years since the family breakup, took him to her and her husband Pete's home. He slept in a white room and there were white roses outside the window. Sue's husband was a successful young executive and seemed rather to like him though he could not fathom why. In any case, he began to improve, was soon moving about, going for walks, listening to Pete, who was a Roman Catholic and Conservative, talk about politics and religion. When he was well enough to live on his own, Pete got him another job at the drug store, running the Post Office, and Sue found him a nice little apartment.

Soon he began to write again. But he was a different man and therefore a different writer. It wasn't that he had changed in any obvious way, but from the place where he had gone no one can return unchanged -- no more than a piece of clay contracted under pressure for a very long time can withstand gradually metamorphosing into rock. This was what his novel was about -- the change, the metamorphosis of a human being, the implosion of meaning that happens at the depths. It was a novel that was also a history,

a biography, a tract for the times. At that level there is no myth, no allegory, no fiction -- only the inner reality. He had recognized this "reality" in some west coast Indian masks at a museum once -- "so expressive" an art teacher was telling her class. Yes, he said to himself, but expressive of what -- not of anything we know. Oedipus Rex is not expressive of anything we know, nor King Lear, nor Cezanne's Mont St. Victoire. They strike out beyond any emotion whatever, and present the artifact of being. He finished the work in seven months and knew that he was through as a writer. There was nothing more for him to say.

The door was ringing and the old man rose to answer. It was Ronald Erfurt, smiling as usual.

"We've had a very good day, Thomas," Ronald said entering and taking everything in at a glance. "Two excellent reviews -- I've got copies for you to read -- and we have an offer for the movie rights -- a good one too. And finally..."

"When are the caterers coming?"

"Don't worry, Thomas -- the caterers and bartender will be here very shortly, and they'll bring everything with them. Flowers will be delivered, too."

"What kind of flowers?"

"I believe they're roses -- white roses."

"I don't like white roses."

"Now Thomas --they take the mustiness out of the air."

"This air is not musty."

"It's not musty, then. Anyway the way things are breaking, you won't be living here much longer. I've got a place in mind that will really please you. It's overlooking the lagoon -- you'll have half the floor to yourself --and a built-in maid service,too. How do you like that?"

"You're crazy as hell --what would a maid do in my place --iron my grave-clothes?"

Ronald laughed easily. "Okay, fine --live how you want --whoops, there's the door --they're on time."

The woman caterer bustled in followed by a tall thin butler type who would serve the drinks.

"Now,Thomas," Ronald said,returning, "some pretty important people are going to be here. For example, Earl Russell --you've heard of him -- New York Times fiction editor and Colley Smart --from the New Yorker --and Pearl Janos, the so-called Dowager Empress of the literary scene in San Fran -- and several more. I'll introduce all of them to you, of course. Just remember the theme we're riding on --this is Canada's Century. At last the Canadian novel has come of age, and so has the Canadian novelist."

"At 88 I sure as hell hope I'm of age," the old man croaked.

Ronald ignored the remark.

"The interesting thing is that the Americans are

buying this concept --they want to be in on it. They want Canada to be interesting, not just that dull gray place to the north of them. Trudeau almost caught their attention --now it's the writers who are going to turn them on. You wanted to say something?"

"I've forgotten what I wanted to say. It couldn't have been important."

"And don't worry about their reaction to your age, Thomas. We're going to turn that negative into a plus. Remember the last years of Mark Twain ? He was an angry, bitter, truthful old man, and that's when he got to be really exciting. Well, you're at that stage now. Give 'em the rough salt, Thomas --rub it in hard. In other words just be yourself as only you can be."

"I think I'll just sit down."

"That's the door now --it'll be the florists. That's right, Thomas --you just rest yourself and save your strength. You've got a great moment of triumph dead ahead."

The old man settled back in his chair feeling faintly sick. How did he ever get mixed up with Ronal E. Erfurt? Apparently Ronald had picked up that rotten novel about the Second Riel Rebellion, and decided he could make something of the author. So one afternoon Ronald had visited him and offered to act as his agent -- it was as simple as that. Well, not quite. The truth is that Ronald

amused him. The young man was such a transparent charlatan --so completely typical of his type, that as in collecting stamps or pressed plants, you don't let a perfect specimen go. But now he was tired of Ronald Erfurt and his games. Ronald's still-to-be-written publicity sheet had already been read by the old man. "Up from Skidroad, and standing by the edge of his grave, the angry old man of the Far North speaks out to all Americans in a startling new novel that strips away all illusions Americans have ever had about Canada. This novel tells of a Canada that has chosen to go its own way. With complete technological capability, Canada seals its border zone with radioactive waste, and turns its face to the Mediterranean of the North --the Arctic Sea -- there to trade by means of giant underwater submarines with its new trading partner -- the Soviet Union. You think this can't be done? The political ground is being prepared now --the technology is nearing completion. Read this book by Thomas Raynor and the crises of the Far and Middle East will seem like Sunday picnics swept away by this cold wind from the north. Don't read if you can't stand shivering." So he was the Ancient Mariner with the glittering eye brought in to frighten the wedding guests. Americans love to be frightened and outraged, Ronald kept saying. Ever since Viet Nam and Watergate, they're a nation of masochists.

When the guests started to arrive the old man remained in his chair because Ronald insisted that the guests were to be presented to the author in a way that befitted his age and dignity. Among the first was Sandra Wells, the novelist from Eastern Canada.

"I can't say that I've read your book yet, but I like the jacket," she said coolly.

"I like your jacket, too," he said, eyeing the sheepskin she wore. "But I think the contents would be more interesting."

She laughed unhappily and moved off to introduce herself to Max Holden, a New York publisher.

Others were kinder. Hans Kubrick, for example. Hans was a former literary agent turned movie critic.

"My God, Mr. Raynor," he said without emphasis. "That book.... its implications frightening." He spoke like that -- in pieces. But Ronald beamed.

Edward Morrison, a political scientist and writer from the University of Toronto, agreed.

"The book is frightening and powerful because it is not only possible, but plausible."

He seemed to like the word "plausible" because he repeated it several times. Perhaps it had some special meaning for him.

Jeremy Gray, publisher of the book, hovered uncertainly on the fringes of conversation, listening anxiously.

But after three drinks his attitude changed and he thrust his broad boy's face close to the old man's.

"They're all discussing it," he whispered hoarsely, "and they're interested. I think this book is going to make money." He said "money" with a pout as though he could weep with joy at the thought of it. "Oh Abe!" He had caught the eye of someone passing behind the old man's chair. "Come over here, please. I want you to meet our author. Thomas, Abe Green. Let me tell you about Abe Green..." He was holding Abe Green by the arm and bubbling over him. "This man, Thomas, is Mr. Book himself --isn't that so, Abe, isn't that so?" Abe Green's look of sour resignation never changed. "Anf Abe..." He was patting Abe's arm with each word, "is the most important book seller in the entire country. In my opinion. Not that he doesn't have competitors, Thomas. Not that you don't have competitors, eh, Abe? Heh, heh. But effective? This man is effective, Thomas, believe me --deadly. And it's this man who is agoin' to carry your book as a feature item in every store he owns. Hey, Abe?"

Abe's expression was still one of grudging suspension of belief. "Yeah, yeah --sure, sure..." He was obviously anxious to get away. "Glad to meet ya, Tommy. If the book is good she sells, if she sells the book is good. Right?" He made a sombre sweep of his hand to indicate the summing up. "Now I gotta get my little girl a drink or she won't

come home with me. You know how it is, Tommy. Maybe you don't get the hots no more, huh? At your age? There's a story there --how to have sex at ninety....make a fortune..."

He drifted off, with Jeremy still mercifully holding onto him and whispering in his ear.

"What are you thinking about," asked a sweet young voice to his left.

He tried to turn, but saw little more than a tumble of hair and black eyes.

"I was trying to think of the story of the man who was turned to stone. I think it's possible."

"Is the party doing that to you?"

"Among other things."

"Yes?"

"Well, actually, just the first three chapters."

"How many were there --I've forgotten."

"I think fourteen."

"There should have been only three."

"Why three?"

"Good question."

"You don't like your own book --that everyone's making such a fuss about?"

"No."

"Neither did I."

He looked carefully into her eyes. "Hold my hand."

"Sure."

"What's your name?"

"Sylvia."

"Thank you for coming whoever you are. I have written one good book, Sylvia. It's a very important book. Help me up. I'm going to show it to you."

He led her through the crowd, past the disapproving grimace of Ronald, down the short hall to his tiny den. He switched on the light and shut the door.

"Now --open the desk."

It was a roll-top desk and she opened it with difficulty.

"That's it," he said, pointing at the bulky manuscript inside. "I haven't used this desk since I wrote it."

"But..." she said, puzzled, "what's all this about the other book then?"

"It's nothing. I was talked into writing it by my agent --after I'd finished this one. I wrote the other out of vengeance and for the joke."

"I don't understand."

"He couldn't relate to this book --nor could the others. They're all looking for commercial value."

"That's how the world runs, doesn't it?"

He stared at her. "That's how it doesn't run."

"Well, then," She paused. "If it's as good as you say it is -- I think you should tell them. Right now. Tell them what you think --that they're promoting the wrong book -- and why."

He sat down on the desk chair.

"It won't do any good. They've got hold of what they think is the great Canadian novel. I've always wanted to write it, but that isn't it. This one is. But they won't accept it. It's too real, and they don't want reality."

She thought for a moment. "I don't know how we can get along without it," she said.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"Since we're into don't-knows, I don't know why you're at this party."

"I came with Tad Owen --he's a film actor. They're considering him for the lead in the film version of your book."

"Will you get me a drink, Sylvia? Two ounces of J&B will do. It'll be just enough to get me through my speech."

"You're going to tell them the truth?"

"What truth I can muster, and with your help."

"What help can I give?"

"You carry the book."

She looked at him and smiled. "I'll be right back," she said, and went out the door.

The old man stared at the manuscript in front of him. His wife used to say that he was self-destructive and that was why he would never amount to anything. Now he was about

to destroy his one chance to amount to something -- his one chance to achieve recognition, at least, if not fame. She was right, back then. That was what he had wanted, and yet kept destroying. But after he had come back from the Mariana depths this last time what did they mean -- these wisps called fame and fortune and recognition? His writing days were over, but he had a few words to say. Then he would wait and see if the woman in the shawl had been right.
