



John Harris / LOCAL INITIATIVES

Vicki is sleeping off a night shift. I am in the Sears Cafeteria drinking coffee and writing. I just did the grocery shopping. Cheryl is at the High School. Wesley is on a field trip to the skating rink. He is having a change.

I bought a book in the meat department. They have a sale bin there. It's a biography of Dorothy L. Sayers. I had a look at it while my coffee was cooling. Dorothy was an energetic lady all her life. A chainsmoker. She was quietly eccentric and religious and did church work. Never a dull moment. She got fatter and fatter and finally she had a heart attack. She was in the middle of her translation of the *Paradiso*. She was at the bottom of the stairs. Her body couldn't take the weight of her accomplishments.

My accomplishments evaporate like gasoline. For the tenth year in a row I scored "mildly interesting" in my teaching evaluations. Ten percent of my students thought I was "very good." Ten percent thought I was a jerk. This seems reasonable to me. However, compared to forty thousand instructors across the continent, I'm in

the bottom ten percentile. Maybe English is not a popular course. Maybe the Americans are better teachers. Maybe the computer fucked up. The Union is investigating.

Meanwhile, I teach for fifteen hours a week, sit in the office for five but nobody comes. I carry my writing and marking in a shoulder bag. I do five papers in the Chuckwagon at Pine World, five in the Simon Fraser Hotel coffee shop, a few more at home. When I run out of papers I work on a story. On Tuesday morning I do the shopping. On Wednesday I take the kids to piano practice. I buy a paper and sit in the car with the engine running. On Saturday morning I take the kids to the pool, sit in the bleachers and watch them do laps.

It's important to have things to do and places to go. Sears is good because it is big and varied. You can spend a couple of hours here, maybe three if you have lunch. Right now it is thirty below outside. Snow is blowing in from Dawson Creek, piling up. The city has run through its budget for clearing snow and trucking it out onto river ice. No one knows if the city will keep trucking or not. Meanwhile the garden tractors are lined up in the mall. The dummies are wearing bikinis.

There is a problem with heavy boots and coats. If I were a businessman, I would cater to this. You could make a fortune checking coats and galoshes. Better, you could rent conveyances so people could push their coats, boots, kids, and purchases around. People don't like things taken away from them. The heating system could break down. There could be a fire. The Russians could come thundering over the North Pole, spreading death and communism.

The bush is always there, around the edges of everyone's eyes, empty, a promise. Once it covered this town thick and silent. It was pushed back to make room, converted into heat, canoes, forts, buildings, roads. In Sears, there are pictures that document this procedure, scenes from the town's historical past. They are a testimony to progress. The fort is built, the Indians are offered better land somewhere, anywhere, the tents give way to wood frame buildings, the railway comes and takes the men to War, the old wooden buildings burn down and are replaced by brick. The eye seeks out the bush, fringing the cutbanks, in the sloughs along the river, carpeting the sleeping hills to the north.

The Russians plan everything first, in five-year increments, and then they do it. Winter and space congeal them. They believe in mind over materialism. This is what makes them so dangerous. They start with essentials — fur coats and vodka. The fur is genuine and the vodka is ninety-eight proof and they give them away for nothing. Everyone gets a couple pounds of meat every week and lots of cheap Black Sea oil. Their only danger is falling asleep outside and freezing to death. Russian streets are long and empty. Everything is locked up at five o'clock. Boredom is a significant factor. It is unlikely that any amount of planning will solve this problem.

We prefer to improve whatever happens to be around. There are obvious similarities between Simon Fraser's fort and the Sears "Spruce Centre Mall." You can see similarities between Simon Fraser, whose portrait hangs over the salad bar, and the latest manager who is close to the cash register. There are further pictures with captions like "Fraser Prepares to Explore the River that Bears His Name" and "Danger!" The first shows the Fort, a pallisade enclosing three log cabins. A field of stumps separates the Fort from the bush. In the foreground, men are knee-deep in the river loading two canoes. The second picture shows a man in buckskin holding onto an overturned canoe as it slips into the rapids. You assume that this is not Simon Fraser.

Nowadays, there isn't much danger in working for the Bay, except maybe unemployment. They have a store in the downtown area. It is as big as Sears and has a nice cafeteria in the basement but the suburbs are moving further and further out and the people with money don't come downtown to shop. City Council made a deal with the Bay for a big complex in the downtown area. They put up six square blocks of property that they agreed to buy from themselves. They circulated pictures of cities with rotten cores. They devised a plan for a development that would bring Eatons in and introduce over a million square feet of retail space into the downtown. There was a model in City Hall with free coffee.

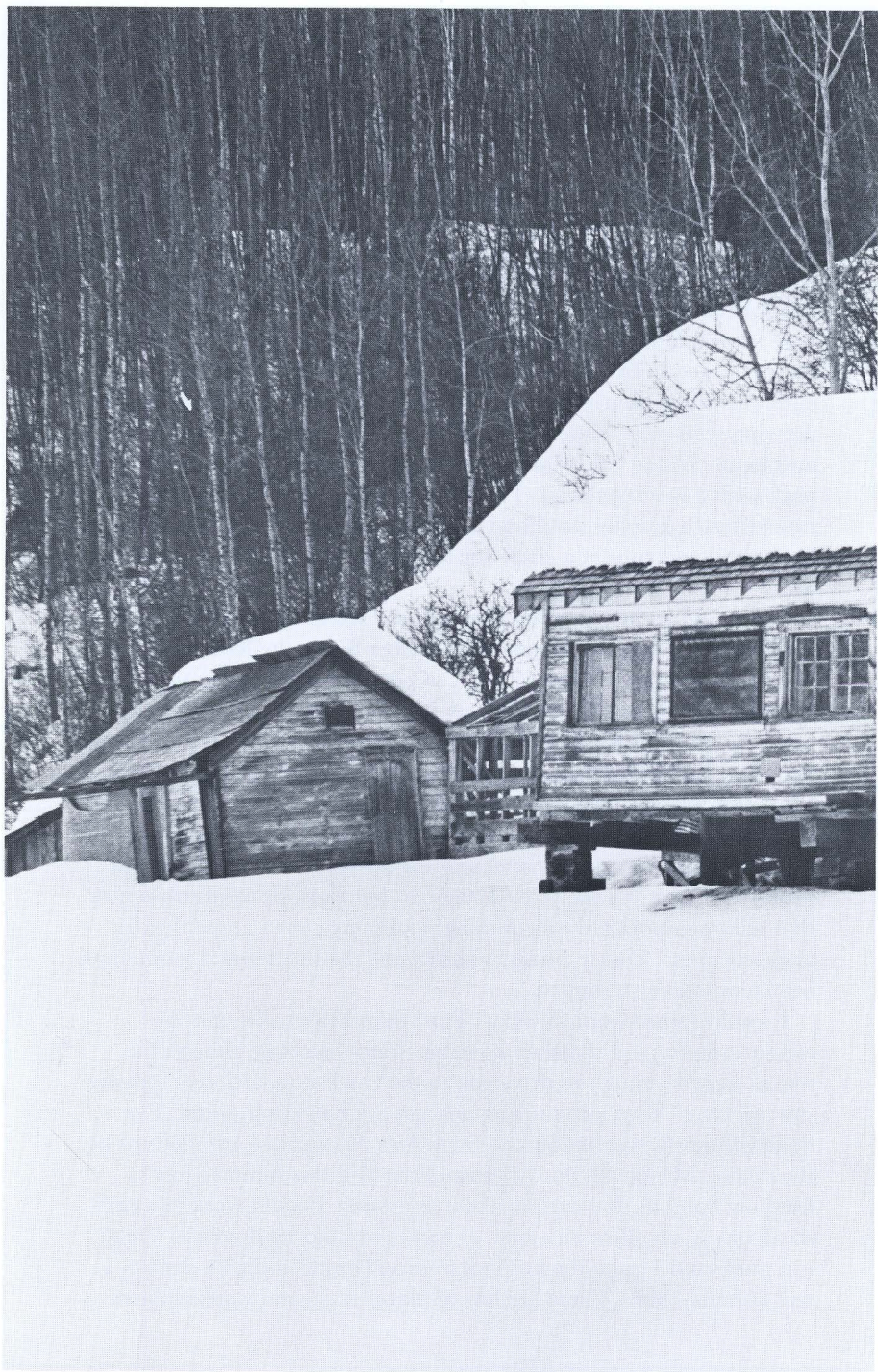
People weren't impressed. Sears and Woodward's fought back with their own expansion plans and free coffee. Free enterprise was at stake. Besides, the old town has a certain charm. It is not locked up at night. The wooden hotels have strippers and rock bands from Richmond, White Rock, and Seattle. The Chinese cafes stay open for as long as you can nurse a coffee. There are second-hand stores, basement karate dojos, billiard parlours, and local art shops. Of course there are a lot of drunks around, scavenging beer and pop

bottles, fighting, asking for handouts, and freezing to death in doorways on winter nights.

Most of city council went down on that one. Personally, I wasn't sympathetic to the idea myself. I miss the past. The bush has a tendency to seed itself in my head, take root and grow. In Sears I always sit under a picture of the town taken some time in the Thirties, halfway between "Danger" and a color photo of Spruce Centre. I feel more at home there. There are no highrises in the downtown, one for each bank. There are no pulp mills, with concrete silos and steel towers, along the river. There are only a couple of cars on the street, parked in front of the hardware store. You can still see the cutbanks along the river. There are empty lots between the buildings, growing wild roses, Indian paint brush, mint, camomile, buttercups and lupin. Where City Hall is now there is a small triangular-shaped park with a war memorial. The picture is bloated and grainy, but I can still see a lady by the Hotel on the wooden sidewalk. The sidewalk is elevated and runs in a circle for ten blocks through the downtown area.

She could go into the Bay, Ray's Ford, Manning's Men's Wear, Rosie's Ice Cream, the Dandy-Pole Barber Shop, the Ritz Cafe, Interior Hardware, Ming's Cafe, T. Cake and Son Bakery, the Windsor Hotel, and Smith Billiard. No doubt there are many more places around the north side of the boardwalk, away from the camera. Someday I should do some research on this in the new library, write a local history book. I've never been in the library, but it's an impressive building. It's got skylights, underground parking, and a wrap-around patio with planters. It was a victory for the forces of liberalism and professionalism. It's the second stage in the plans for a culture centre that will incorporate the swimming pool (stage one) and a theatre and new arena. Due to budget constraints, the theatre and arena have been temporarily scrapped.

I would rather work for Ray's Ford than Fraser. I'm not the adventurous type. I'd rather work for Sears than Ray, though the musak here is enough to drive you to the truck stop. If I ever lose my job teaching I'll go into nursing and get a job in the hospital. I've done Cardio-Resuscitation and St. John's Ambulance, all paid for by the school. Maybe I'll do Industrial First-Aid this summer just to keep my hand in. If I can't make it as a nurse I could work in a mill, sit all day in an office on a bale of band-aids and read novels. Vicki is a nurse and I go to the hospital to drop her off and pick her up. I feel at home there. There are lots of places to go and smoke, places



to rest and talk, chairs by the windows where the hallways end, roll-away room partitions parked in the halls, forgotten coffee urns, stacks of old *Time* magazines, underground tunnels where the change rooms, cafeteria, laundry and furnace rooms are.

The people look interesting. I'm past forty, wonder about getting old, am bored by the future. I like the kids at school but have trouble identifying. Patients are rich or poor, young or old, male or female, famous or infamous; it's all fiction. They are struggling with their bodies and improvements get less and less likely. The hospital keeps their valuables in a safe. Their names are written in chalk above their beds. Some are in their last room, going down their last hall, through their last door. The cemetery is out west, on the bank high over the winding river, facing south into the weather.

Vicki works in the "Sunset Lodge" addition. She says she likes it. Colorful surroundings. Flowers. The town is still growing so there's not much chance of layoff. We can walk from our place. The girls are a real team. They have lots of parties and don't mind tossing back the brew. They hit the bar regularly and we hear about all the acts working their way north to the Arctic Circle and jobs on the oil rigs.

Last year they entered the Mardi Gras sno-golf contest. They decorated a snowmobile like an ambulance and put on crash helmets with red crosses and smacked purple tennis balls around the golf course. They took first prize. They got their pictures in the paper and brought in lots of contributions for macrame on the ward. After that the snow started to melt. It was spring thaw. It was a miracle. The d.j.'s were phoning at 6 and 8 a.m. They got free tickets to Reno and judged a male stripper contest.

Never say die. Some of them have been working for fifteen years. I'm cracking after ten. Actually in the past two years I've done sweet fuck all. Nobody seems to notice but I'm losing my nerve. The lesson plans I give to the Dean are a mess. My outcomes don't match up with my objectives. Nothing is typed. Last year I didn't even do the three novels on the curriculum — *Johnny Get Your Gun*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and some other piece of Fenimore Cooper bullshit about Louis Riel. I hate it when white people write about Indians. I gave them Conrad instead. Mostly, I talked about myself.

Last week I started shouting at the Principal. He says that the bottom ten percentile is no good. He has to account to the public. He wants me to write a report. I told him that was his job. Do your fucking job I told him. That was a mistake. If I get fired funds would be low. There would be no music lessons and no orthodontic work. No talent and no beauty. There would be no university education. No class and no money. Of course I could get three months' severance pay, do some real writing. Three months to get famous, finish up my novel and the articles I'm supposed to be working on. We could stretch it, sell the house, move to the country, eat the bark off trees.

When I finish my coffee I have to go home and then go teach a class and then I get Cheryl and take her to the dentist. She has braces and an appliance over her head that looks like a horse's harness. She hates it. We tell her if she wears it for a couple years she'll be beautiful. She wants to be beautiful now. The only time she takes it off is when she eats or plays the flute. She plays flute tonight in the school concert band. We're all going. Vicki will be awake and Steve my youngest brother will come over and maybe my other brother and his wife and Peter who is her oldest kid by a previous marriage and one of my best friends. He is in town for a few days, buying supplies. Maybe we'll have coffee after and Cheryl will go to bed with her head full of praise and in harness again.

Both the kids play instruments. This makes me proud and I try to follow along in Book One Toronto Conservatory with Mozart and Shostakovich. Sometimes I fantasize that I'm playing piano in the bar at the Vacation Inn. The Inn has only been around for a few years but is already on the skids. It's a good place to go if you want it quiet. It was going to be hooked up to the Bay development and provide convention facilities, shops, three movies, two cafes, and a lounge. Somebody jumped the economic gun. One cafe is shut down and the other is a pancake franchise. The movies are doing ok but the shops are all empty, brown paper over the windows. They keep the building open because of new coal development in the north. Someday the place will be full of bureaucrats and Japanese businessmen.

In my fantasy I have a Tequila sitting on a napkin at the end of the keyboard and I have a little box with slips of paper for requests. A big party comes in and the hostess tells me that some guy named Don has just been promoted to Assistant Manager at Saveco. He likes Tony Bennett. I make a speech telling about Don and his promotion and I give a toast that gets rid of the third Tequila for the night. I do "I

Left My Heart in San Francisco.” I wonder what it would be like to work for Don.

Peter plays piano and sometimes he works the bars when the bush closes for the summer. Seven years ago he was my student. I don't know what happened to him in high school but his writing was awful. His essays were pieces of scrap paper that he pulled out of his pocket in crumpled balls and flattened out on my desk. I knew he was smart but I couldn't prove it. I couldn't read his work. One day I made him sit in my office and print his essay out on clean paper, double-spaced. This is part of my job and I wish I could get famous and quit. The school is considering diagnostic testing and remedial courses with self-instructional modules on grammar, spelling, and logic. This would certainly take care of Peter and his problems. I went over his essay. There were brilliant flashes of insight but it still didn't make sense. He admitted it was crap. He admitted he didn't know a complete sentence from Adam. I said nobody does but you learn to pretend. He said he couldn't pretend. He said he wanted to write poetry. I gave him a “B” and told him not to take any more English courses.

He quit college and moved to McBride, out in the country with all the middle-aged hippies who sold soybean cafes in Berkeley and bought Canadian land. His closest neighbour repairs pianos, organs, nickelodeons, and pinball machines, eats a pound of granola in the morning and goes like a camel all day. I admire this. I love the country. In the country you can really feel at home, but it takes a long time. If you know what color of dirt you need for a garden, if you can read the battles of trees in their green circles of light, if you can think like an animal, then you have finally found yourself. You can go out gradually to where the dirt roads end and the trails start and the abandoned trapper's cabins sit in their closing circles of trees. In the city humility gets you nowhere. You have to invent your own work, turn the sun on and off, love like a sniper, work like a machine.

I've got literary projects coming out of my ass. A journal back east wants an issue on northern prose and a chapter for their literary history of Canada. Another wants reviews. I want stories. Maybe I'll get famous but it isn't easy. I've got problems. The Principal wants me to work on my lessons. I can't sit at a desk anymore. I write at the kitchen table while the kids are eating. I write in laundromats. Long ago I loved libraries but I gave that up. Mainly, I work in cafes. I'm drinking too much coffee. I'm wired all the time. How can I write an



article if I can't stay in the library? How can I write a novel when I'm always on the move?

On weekends when I get time I drive out of town, park the car and hike into the bush as far as I can go in the time I have. I carry boots, snowshoes, and granola bars in the trunk of the car. There are logging roads everywhere. Years ago I never went out there unless I was hunting. I didn't feel at home without a rifle. But you never see any animals. You can walk in safety, day and night. They know where you are. They have their own trails, beaten paths in snow or worn in clay, marked on the exposed roots of trees. Hollows in the snow under pine, burrows, landmarks, tools of our trade. They cross our trails only occasionally and with great care. I can tell tracks of coyote, moose, rabbit, raccoon, bear. If you walk far enough on any road you come to a millsite. First there's cellar holes, bleached planks, car bodies in the willows. Then there's the sawdust heap, turned into black humus, the foundations of a mill and planer, cedar piles driven into the gravel down below the frost line, sometimes a black burner, rusted out and shot full of holes. The whole country around here was cleared but you'd hardly know it now, twenty years later. The pine and spruce are thick and pungent. In another twenty years, maybe, the loggers will be back, mills and towns going up.

Sometimes you meet people out there. Last autumn I met the president of the snowmobile club, out on his Honda XL 125 checking the trails, a Swede saw tied onto the back fender. He told me that his club leases two hundred square miles of land off the government for a dollar a year. Wilderness is cheap. I wondered if I was supposed to be there. He gave me a shot of rye. "You come a long way, walking," he said.

Somehow, I cleared the time for myself, pushed the people out. Can't seem to focus on anything much except a few stories and poems that soak up all ambition except to leave things the way they are. Vickie and the kids and I face our separate lives, duties to one another sliding away. The kids go to school and learn how to go up and down hallways, responding to buzzers and bells. Vicki takes her vaseline from room to room, rolling the patients over and soothing bedsores, massaging muscles, checking charts, talking. I push carts up and down the shopping centre aisles, fill the fridge, walk to work and back, mark papers, drive the kids to lessons. I walk Vicki to work in the

early morning along the silent streets, snow-swept in winter, fragrant in summer. I walk her back at night. We hit the bars and lounges downtown, have a cafe lunch on her days off. I take my shoulder bag of papers and books off to the cafes.

This is my third refill. The lady who clears tables is starting to wonder. If I leave I'm ok; the day is sorted out. I wish the story was sorted out. Dorothy Sayers always had a project. Her list of works is impressive. She knew how things went. She ignored her fat. She puffed her cigarette. These are minor concerns. Of course they can kill you but that is always in the future. Meanwhile, you can work. I can't do that. I don't smoke or gain weight. If I did, I'd have something to write about. If I get another coffee I'll be happy for another hour. I'll think of something. Somebody will come in, say something.

I'm going in a circle, one leg longer than the other. I'd like to find the centre and stop. I like to watch the trees grow back.

