

Stray cat on the Montreal Main:

My flat in the fenced compound of the girls' school in Tanzania, where I worked in 1980-'81, was positioned between the residences of two orders of teaching nuns. One night, taunted by a peculiar memory, I put down my lesson plan ledger and scrawled out the following piece:

1

Waiting for the Ottawa orientation for this Tanzania placement in the first week of last January, I found myself at loose ends in Montreal.

I arrived by Via Rail on New Year's Day, after cutting short an edgy visit with boyhood buddies in Halifax. I first took a bus from Windsor Station out to Pointe-Claire where a loyal college friend and her husband lived. They had unfailingly offered their hospitality in all my comings and goings though Montreal over several years. Yet now that the older of their two boys was in kindergarten, I would have preferred sparing them the awkwardness of a strange man sleeping on the sofa.

Bearing in mind Benjamin Franklin's advice (*'after three days fish and visitors begin to stink'*) the dilemma was to compromise conscience with my tight budget. I thereby decided to lessen the odour by breaking up the stay in Pointe-Claire with an interlude in a cheap hotel downtown.

I budgeted for no more than \$20 which was still above the cost of seamy hotel rooms in Vancouver I had known. I cannot deny an attraction to the *noir* ambiance of such hotels—provided they are vermin-free.

When I asked my friend about downtown neighborhood which combined ambience with cheap hostelry, she suggested Boulevard St. Laurent although she warned that it was *"colourful but dodgy—especially at night."*

I particularly remembered Boulevard St. Laurent—AKA "the Main"—as the setting of L. Cohen's masterpiece of literary erotica, *'Beautiful Losers'*... So along with killing time on my limited budget, I had an opportunity to indulge in an old fascination.

So it was, that after my third night on the sofa at Pointe-Claire, I took the commuter train to Windsor Station. After passing through the underground of Place Villes Marie, I pulled down my black toque and bent into the icy blast whistling down Rue Ste. Catherine. It was already dark before I reached the intersection of Boulevard St. Laurent. A few blocks further on, I found a sign for *chambres* above a suitably shabby doorway. Clad only in my Vancouver-weather raincoat over a sports jacket, I did not want to go any further. Inside the dimly lit entrance, in fractured French, I asked the desk clerk behind the wicket for the cheapest room.

For \$18 I got an overheated and windowless cell. Too late, I discovered that it reeked of charred wood. In lying back on the saggy mattress, it was plain that it would be impossible to spend the entire night in that suffocating cubicle. Within a listless hour trying to write in my journal, I was back out at in the dark bitter cold, looking for a warm refuge with breathable air. Just two blocks north on the opposite side of the boulevard, I found a *taverne*.

The place was half-empty but pleasantly warm. In the dim light, I made my way to a table across from a girl with dark-auburn hair sitting alone. She was holding an unlit cigarette staring into space, but turned and smiled as I sat down.

“You have a light?” She asked, eyebrows slightly arching above dark eyes.

“Sorry, I don’t smoke.” Amused to be so easily identified as English, I smiled back.

In the friendly exchange that followed she introduced herself as Brandee, an exotic dancer, off duty. She said she was originally from Timmons, Ontario, and spoke both English and French with equal fluency. Dressed in short *faux* fur jacket, tight blue jeans and pumps with bare ankles, she was scarcely better dressed for a Montreal winter than was I.

I told her that I was from British Columbia but was leaving Canada in a few days to teach in a high school in Africa.

“Africa?” her eyes widened, “Wow, you’re really getting away from here!”

After I joined her at her table and signaled the waiter for beer, she told me about the rough life of a stripper, especially working bars in northern Quebec and Ontario. There were sleazy managers, bartenders and waiters demanding their cuts from her tips; obnoxious drunks and of course—the constant come-ons.

“I’ve seen them all,” she looked at her nails, “All the jerks you can imagine!”

After nearly an hour and over two more rounds, I had gathered that she probably did opportunistic hooking on the side but was not hustling that night. Whether it was due to the Africa story or the empty sleeve, I sensed her curiosity in meeting someone a little different. The assumption that she did not regard me as a prospective John was both reassuring— and a little flattering.

After another beer, she stood up, tall and slim, buttoning her jacket. “I’ve gotta go see a friend,” she said in her Franco-Ontarian accent. “You want to come along?”

“Sure.”

As we picked our way through the icy streets, she tugged down her jacket which barely covered her midriff.

A few blocks down we entered a stairwell leading down to a bar. Inside the heavy door, we were blasted by cigarette smoke and canned jazz blaring from bad speakers. I followed her through the dodgy-looking crowd (mostly male) to a table at the back.

Sitting there was a burly middle-aged man with beard and shaven head. Arms on the table, he seemed to be holding court with two underlings. He chuckled as we approached. The two younger men at the table slightly smirked when he drew Brandee in for a long kiss.

“Who’s the guy?” the bald man asked in heavily accented English as she broke away.

“My friend who’s going to Africa.”

“Africa?” He shouted above the din. “What to Christ for are ya goin’ to Africa?”

“He’s a teacher,” said Brandee, lighting a cigarette.

Mugging a scowl, the heavyset man reached out as if to arm wrestle. At that moment I saw the crutches behind his chair. Spread on the stool beside him was his empty pant leg. Nodding towards his stump, he grabbed my hand in a crushing handshake.

“You scared of me?” he growled.

“Not at all,” I said.

“You should be scared of me,” he said, thick eyebrows arching.

“Really?”

Looking me straight in the eyes, he tightened his grip. “Hey, we’re brothers—right, chief?”

“Right,” I said, suddenly feeling a desire to embrace whatever other surprises were in store for the rest of the night.

The shaven headed man then turned his attention back to the two younger men at the table. Speaking in French, he seemed to be venting anger at them. The one with a pocked face nervously chewed gum and the other nodded deferentially.

After a few minutes looking silently around, Brandee leaned close to the ear of her one-legged friend. As she whispered something, he nodded and puffed his cigarette.

“Ok, Ok,” he said, “*c’est va.*”

She gave him a peck on the cheek and stood up. “OK, let’s go, now,” she said brightly to me.

Brandee’s friend gave a wave as we made our way to the door. “Hey, brother,” he boomed, “you have good time with those black girls, OK?”

2

As we buttoned jackets and braced for the cold, I asked whether she’s like to go back to the *taverne* for another beer.

“Naw, I’m tired. I have a doctor’s appointment in the morning. So where again did you say you’re staying?”

I told her again the name of the hotel and how my room reeked of fire-damage. “If I had a nicer place,” I said shivering, “I would invite you back to watch TV.”

“Hey, you don’t have to stay in that dump!” she said, “You can stay at my place. At least you can breathe.”

In friendly dog mode, I nodded assent.

Thus, we walked a few blocks in the bitter cold, east of the Boulevard. From the dark doorways of a faded brick building, we walked up three flights of stairs and down a musty hallway to the door of her studio apartment. She unlocked the door, emitting the smell of kitty litter.

“Here kitty,” she called.

A black cat appeared in the doorway of the inner room.

“You can take off your jacket,” she said, removing hers. She tossed it into the corner of the bare wooden floor where a blue metal trunk and an open duffle bag were piled with clothing.

I put my blue raincoat, jacket and shoulder bag behind the sofa which, along with a pole lamp, was the only furniture in the room.

The attached kitchen was just as bare. There was a sink, a shelf on the wall with a few utensils— but no table or refrigerator. I stood in the kitchen doorway while Brandee heaved open the window above the radiator. From the ledge outside, she pulled in a carton of milk.

“Lucky it’s not too cold tonight,” she said, squeezing out the slushy contents before slopping some of the milky ice into the saucer on the floor. With tail snaking, the kitty nosed forward.

“You sure you don’t want to go out and get some food?” I asked, feeling hungry.

“No, I’m just *really* tired!” Brandee yawned, holding her head. She kicked off her pumps and peeled off her jeans. She did not remove her blouse. With one hand over the crotch of black panties, she shook up the red coverlet draped over the back of the sofa. Falling back on the cushion, she draped the padded blanket over her lap and dug in her purse for a cigarette.

Not knowing whether the expectation was for me to sleep beside her or on the floor, I asked. “Where would you like me to lie down?”

“O, we can share the blanket,” she said, curling legs. “No problem.”

Minutes later, with the light out, I lay squeezed at her back. So close to a warm body, it was impossible to resist giving her a caress.

“Just wait,” she murmured, “just wait until the morning.”

“Whatever you want, Brandee,” I whispered, “But anytime tonight— if there’s anything at all you need— just tell me, OK?”

With a ‘tsk’ in the dark she suddenly rolled up to sitting position. “Can you turn on the light?”

I leaned over and switched on the pole lamp.

“There’s one thing…”

“Yes?” My chest thumped in the anticipation of some exotic request.

Eyes half closed, she leaned behind the sofa for her purse. Coughing, she upended it on the bare wooden floor, scattering make up, tampons and cigarettes. She shooed the cat that leaped into the midst of it and grabbed a rolling medicine vial.

“There a drugstore down the block that’s open twenty-four hours a day,” she said, holding up the vial. Could you go and try to get this filled? You can just say you are in pain and it’s too late to see a doctor for a prescription.”

I gritted teeth. “Brandee, I don’t speak enough French to do that. It wouldn’t work. But honestly If there’s anything else—”

“Forget it,” she said lying back down with a sigh. “Don’t wake me, OK?”

“Don’t worry,” I mumbled. I switched off the light, and curled back on the sofa. She arched the hollow of her back away from me, with blanket held tight. With the

evaporation of desire came a lonely consolation. At least I was spared the torments of wondering upon arrival in Tanzania just what a reckless hookup in Montreal might have incubated...

I turned around, my back still touching her back. The room was overheated with the radiator hissing. Before long, Brandee was softly snoring and the crazy cat jumping from my chest to my face. It repeated that several times through the night— always when I was on the verge of dozing.

Finally, grey filtered in from the half-opened kitchen doorway. Out the bare window, a brick wall was vaguely discernible. Brandee, with a few rattling coughs, slept on. I rolled up and felt on the floor for my pants. After dressing, I sat on the edge of the sofa trying not to disturb her. I quietly took my notebook and pen out of my bag, wondering how I might occupy myself until she woke.

Before long, she stirred.

“What time is it?” Fortunately, she remembered that she was not alone.

I took my wristwatch from my bag. “It’s 8:15. How did you sleep?”

“Omigod,” she sat up arms around knees. “My doctor’s appointment at 9:30!” Holding blanket over her she pulled on her jeans.

“There’s still time to get breakfast together,” I ventured.

“I don’t feel like eating anything.” Looking pale, she reached for her cigarettes.

“I’ll be right back.”

While she went to the bathroom in the hallway, I glanced into the open trunk in the corner. Stuffed among blouses and pants was a sequined costume and what appeared to be a wilted pink feather boa— forlornly confirming her trade.

Back from the bathroom, she looked even paler.

I was about to ask her what she was doing after her appointment but remembered I had told her I was leaving for Ottawa in the afternoon. Heading to the refuge of an Anglo neighbourhood in Pointe-Claire did not seem to fit my story.

“Well,” I said, “I’d better get back to the hotel to pick up my bag.”

“You know how to get back to the Main?”

“I can find my way.”

“I need to stop at a *depanneur* before the appointment. We can go down together.”

“Sure.”

She put on her short jacket and I put on my raincoat and toque. At the bottom of the stairs, before we stepped out into the bitter cold morning, she accepted my light kiss on the lips.

“Have a good time in Africa,” she said.

Without a backwards glance she picked her way down the icy sidewalk and crossed the street. Rushing along behind a line of parked delivery vans, she disappeared forever.

Ad. Note:

Ten months later, under my dim light bulb here at Weru-Weru, I recall the reaction of my friend in Pointe-Claire the morning after when she asked me how I spent that night on the Main: “*That sounds dangerous,*” she tsked, “*you should be more careful!*”

Who was it that should have been more careful: the stripper tired of fending off “all the jerks you can imagine” or the stranger in a raincoat who caught her eye from an adjoining *taverne* table?

I would like to think that in her weariness of hooting and salivating men— she sensed a rare opportunity to spend a few hours with one who seemed to be listening... I’d like to imagine that we were a couple of *beaux perdants* whose fleeting connection seems poignant only because it was so unlikely...

Still, from 10,000 kilometers distance, I wonder what she is doing tonight. Is she lap-dancing in a bar in some ugly mining town? What is she taking for her pain?

She has probably long forgotten the guy who snuggled on her sofa the winter night before he said he was off to teach in Africa. A year in her world is probably longer than 10 in this cloister.

Still I wonder how she trusted me enough to take me home. What was she *really* animated by?

I look up again at the light bulb that casts a swaying shadow on the bare wall. Maybe it was just that Brandee— if that was her real name— was once a little girl who liked to bring home strays...

1980, November, Weru-Weru, Tanzania (from hard cover black journal with blue border, transcribed 2015)