**Wood Smoke**

**Week 5 Assignment**

**By Colin Foulkes**

It was the cold that finally forced Charlie out of bed, the cold and a full bladder. He’d had trouble getting to sleep; the sound of sirens and heavy engines from a nearby street had lasted late into the night. Another garage fire, not unusual in this neighbourhood, especially over this last summer, but everyone had thought they’d stop now that fall had arrived. During the night the cold had disturbed him a few times, and, though he knew he should get up, to either to close the window or to find an extra blanket, he’d been too tired, too lazy and instead he’d adjusted the thin summer-weight comforter around him, and eventually drifted off to sleep.

Feeling more awake after a long, hot shower and a shave, Charlie threw on an old jacket, picked up a bag of old clothes for the goodwill shop and headed for the door. He lived on the top floor of a large house in Wolseley, long since converted into three good-sized apartments; all original oak trim, plaster cornices, draughty windows and creaking floors. He locked his apartment and walked down the narrow twisting stairs, taking care to step near the edge to avoid the worst of the creaks.

The streets were quiet. The cool, thick mist, filled with the smell of wood smoke, absorbing most of the early morning sounds; he could just make out the faint hiss of tires on wet road as cars passed down Westminster. The covering of damp leaves muffled his footsteps and he walked the streets like a ghost. His morning circuit, not a fixed route, but a two or three mile loop through the neighbourhood ending at the coffee shop at the bottom of his own street. Today, across Westminster, up Canora and through the park, empty now, the flowerbeds cleaned out and dug over. Then along Portage to the small strip mall where the drop-off bin for the goodwill sat, the handle to the swing door wet and cold, as he opened it and dropped in his bag. He rubbed his hands dry on the outside of his jacket and walked on, with a more comfortable gait now that he could swing both arms.

The light from the coffee-shop window lit the mist with a welcoming glow, bringing a smile to Charlie’s face, as he pushed open the door, and heard the jangle of the string of bells hanging above it’s frame.

“Morning, Charlie,” said the woman behind the counter, “your usual?”

“Yes please, Sandy,” he said, taking a look around the room; it contained about ten tables of different shapes and sizes, with a similarly odd mix of chairs, each painted in bright pastel shades; and along one wall, built-in bookshelves filled with used books; and in the far corner, to one side of the front window, a padded bench with an old coffee table in front of it, Charlie’s favourite spot.

“Thanks, Sandy,” he said, and, taking his coffee and toasted bagel, he weaved his way over to the corner.

‘Morning gorgeous! Large, English breakfast, please. Morning all! Hi Charlie!”

Charlie smiled; Frank had arrived. There goes the peace and quiet, he thought, as he settled into the corner of the bench, and waited for his friend to join him. Charlie couldn’t remember having such a good friend, certainly not since high school, and it continued to amaze him, that now, edging into his sixties, he would have one again. Especially one like Frank; where Charlie was quiet and contemplative, Frank was, well, loud; loud and impulsive.

“Another fire down your street, I see,” said Frank.

“Next street over, I think, maybe two, though it was too foggy to see much this morning.”

“Bastard kids.”

“Probably. We need some snow to keep them indoors.”

“So, you ready for this afternoon? Two days, I reckon, no more than three and cash in hand. Beauty.”

Charlie laughed. Since they’d first met, Frank had been picking up odd jobs; window-cleaning, small renovations, yard work, painting; and Charlie had been roped in, not unwillingly, on many of them; and if it was one thing that brought a sparkle to Frank’s eye, it was getting paid in cash. Charlie new that this was pure theatre; Frank had long ago admitted that he had more money than he needed, a good pension after twenty-five years in the navy and more as a civil servant; but what he had even more of was spare time, and Frank needed to fill his time with activity, anything physical. So he’d take on odd jobs, often from old people, needy people even some small charities, but really anyone he deemed as worthy; and he’d barter hard, starting at a reasonably low price, and working down, and ending with a final reduction for cash. This afternoon we were painting the basement hall of St. Martin’s, where they ran a food and clothing bank Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

“You done with your plate, Charlie?” said Sandy, as she lifted it with one hand and wiped down the table with a damp cloth.

“Thanks, Sandy.”

“I hear, the police were down your way early this morning.”

“Really? The fire, I guess.”

“No - drugs, at least, that’s what Jean, over at the bakery, said. Lots of police cars, streets blocked off, they were still there when she went to work this morning; yellow tape, the works.”

“It’s the wild west out your way,” said Frank, who lived no more than three blocks away, “pretty much since you arrived, hey, Charlie? Is there something we should know?” He said with a wink.

“That’s right Frank. Say ‘lo to my leetle fliend,” I said. We watch as Sandy weaves her way through the tables back to the counter.

“She fancies you, you know.” Said Frank.

“Right.” I said, drawing the word out, watching as Sandy prepares a new pot of coffee.

“No, really, I mean it.”

“And what makes you think that, Frank?”

“Well, for starters, she didn’t take my plate.”

The basement hall of St. Martin’s sounded grander than it was. A room maybe fifty feet by thirty, with a long hatch in the far wall covered in a grey metal shutter, leading to the kitchen area. Frank and Charlie had finished washing down the walls and were busy laying drop cloths along the base of one long wall. The other side of the room had a long line of folding tables and a couple of older ladies were busy sorting and folding freshly cleaned clothes into piles, for the clothes bank.

“Would you gentlemen like a cup of coffee?” One of them called over from the sorting. “Only, we’re ready for a bit of a break.”

“That’s nice of you, yes please.” Said Frank.

“Yes, thanks.” Said Charlie.

“Hi, I’m Charlie, this is Frank.” Said Charlie as they entered the kitchen.

“I’m Mary, that’s Freda” said the shorter of the two women, while her friend prepared the coffee. “I’ll just see if I can find some cookies,” and she crossed the room and entered a small pantry.

“So, do you live locally?” said Freda, taking a seat at the table, the coffee maker slowly burbling on the counter.

“Yes, I’m on Walnut, Frank lives on Canora,” said Charlie, “and you?”

“Yes, we’re local too,” she said. “So you had some excitement last night. Big drug dealer arrested, that’s what the radio said, anyway.”

“What’s that Freda?” Mary had returned and was placing a plate of cookies on the table.

“I was just talking about that drug dealer, arrested on Chestnut. Charlie and Frank live just a few streets away. Strange story isn’t it?”

“Really strange.” She sat and reached for a cookie. “They say someone started a big fire in the front yard of the house and when the fire fighters and police arrived, they needed to break in to clear the house while they fought the fire. And they found all kinds of drugs.”

“Good thing, too.” Said Frank with an unusual venom. “Bastards should be strung up. Pretty strange coincidence though, don’t you think? Someone starting a fire at the house of a drug dealer, I’ll bet those kids are crapping their pants this morning.”

“Could have been a rival,” said Charlie, “maybe not kids after all.”

“Well, we’ve got to get back and finish the new drop-offs.” Said Mary.

“Yeah, we’d better slap some paint on the walls.”

Back in the hall, Charlie and Frank started painting the long wall; Charlie doing the edges with a brush, Frank covering the rest with a roller, a comfortable routine, listening to the quiet chatter of the ladies at the sorting table as they lifted half a dozen bags of clothes onto the sorting table, throwing dirty clothes in a pile for washing, others, worn beyond repair, went straight into the garbage. Charlie looked over and saw his own bag, deposited that morning on the table, handles tied in a tight knot; as he watched, Mary ripped it open, took a quick sniff, wrinkled her nose, and threw the lot into the laundry pile.

Charlie imagined he could smell the wood smoke from the clothes, drifting across the room.