



16 stories for ages 18+

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A CIRCLE OF FIREFLIES

By

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Acknowledgements

In the Mi'kmaq tradition  
Circles represent Native families,  
strength and perseverance, lasting and forever.

In the Natural world  
Fireflies are the embodiment of clarity,  
pointing the way to a life of friendship and fulfillment.

This book-collection of  
Short stories is dedicated to all those who seek.

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“This is a story of personal renewal. It is a reminder that children of Second World War veterans were also casualties and memories of their returned fathers often bring pain. But life goes on when understanding is allowed.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## AFTER THE TEARS

Dear Dad,

I remember feelings of sadness mixed with memory burning inside my chest after your sudden death in Toronto April 26, 1999.

You never thought you would make it to 80, chum. But you did, in spite of a lung cancer operation more than four years before. Love carried you right to the end. It meant being married fifty-eight years to your wife Mildred, my mother. And you left behind five children, twelve grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

You, Adelard Donat Provencher joined the RCAF as a Leading Aircraftman Can.R154453 February 12, 1942. You joined hundreds of thousands of young Canadians in a great cause. “I fought for your freedom,” you told me when I visited you in the hospital after your lung operation in 1995.

I’m glad you survived that extra four years. It gave me a chance to get to know you a little better, and ask forgiveness for not visiting you more often. I didn’t know much about you when I was growing up. It was the same for a lot of kids whose fathers returned from the war. Forty World War 2 veterans settled in the veteran’s town site in Rouyn, Quebec. Since many men came back with so much hurting, all the children became part of one large family.

After your release from Active Service September 21, 1945 mom said you were a changed man. It was many years before you were able to tell me a little about the horrors of war. You had been assigned to British Intelligence working with our Bomber squadrons, in London, England.

“Terrible memories,” you said filled your thoughts, especially during the Blitz on London, where so many died. You told me it was heartbreaking to see photo results from allied raids launched against the foe. Worrying about casualties on both sides must have torn you up inside.

In fact, after all the years I knew you dad, you really didn’t want to speak about the war. Perhaps that’s why you had a hard time, sharing your feelings. You kept too much inside, like so many veterans who were more comfortable turning to the Canadian Legion for understanding.

I didn’t make it to the November 11 Remembrance ceremonies in 1999. You missed out on the parade, and the dwindling ranks of old veterans marching to the beat of drums held by young military cadets. And you missed seeing the wreaths placed by dignitaries, surviving widows, and gray-haired vets.

Imagine, there was a two-minute wave of silence that year, from coast to coast. A poll taken indicated 87% of Canadians would observe November 11 ceremonies across this great country. I could not be one of them, since you were not able to participate.

I remember just sitting in my living room in Truro, Nova Scotia. And thinking about you as I watched your smile from a picture hanging over the fireplace mantle. On November 11, 1999 there was only you and I in the room, father and oldest son.

I wanted to spend some time alone with the father I love. And to remember-

Like the time you took me fishing when few had a fishing rod. We tied our 25 lb. test line to a rock held firmly under one foot. Then we flung the balance of the line along with a metal lure

into the water before pulling it back, hand over hand. Of course, my knot let go causing lure and line to travel to the center of the lake. I was eight and you weren't even angry.

Remember the day we went to Moose Bay Beach? You were so happy to see your family enjoying themselves. Sand, and sparkling water helped you forget difficult memories of three years and seven months away at war. And my dog Prince ate our pile of bologna sandwiches that day.

As a teenager I was very angry with you. I questioned your caring about our family when you often had to go away to find work. Mining names like Kerr-Addison, Chibougamou, Seven Islands and Malartic were places stretched throughout northern Ontario and Quebec. Love was your lifeline to us dad, through your paycheck. It kept us going, by paying the rent, and buying food and clothes. I found out much later when I grew up and became a man, how many sacrifices you made.

Mom told me after the funeral, you were invited a couple of years before to a supper in Toronto. And you didn't go. You were supposed to receive a special award from when you participated in the war. It was just like you dad, never one to brag. It was nothing you probably thought, simply doing your duty.

Well, I disagree dad. You're one special guy to me. You're my dad and I still love you so much. I know you're here beside me, right now. And I know you'll be with me, and my wife year after year.

We did go to the Remembrance ceremonies the following year, to place a wreath with your name on it, because you were our hero. And we missed you so much. My wife, Esther and I laid that wreath in your honor, dad. On Nov. 11, 2000 in Truro, NS.

It seemed like everyone in town was there. And my tears fell in the grass. When they evaporated, I know they met yours halfway. It was really a very special day for me dad.

As I think of you this moment, I can still see your smile and hear your laughter in the room.

And I miss you.

“Divorce can bring confusion and great loss into lives of children. In this story Kenny thinks his newly developed position is threatened when mom makes serious plans. And growing up is really sharing someone he loves.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## A MOTHER’S SON

"Marry James?" Kenny looked around the room, dazed, feeling nasty. As he waited for an answer his mother seemed to stumble for something to say. She raised her hands in confusion, something she always did when she was nervous.

It was just the other day he reminded her, dad had left three years ago. He often thought of mom getting married again, but not to James?

What would she say now that her little secret plans were out in the open? Would she even answer him? He kept his eyes steady, a little sad at his mother's discomfort. Maybe this wasn't the right time to ask why. But, he had to know. "MOMMM," an impatient whine dragged on his tongue.

"Well Kenny, you know James has been coming around more often lately...and yes, it has been seriously discussed..."

"I knew it! I just knew it!" he exploded. "You didn't even ask how I might feel?" Without giving his mother a chance to respond Kenny grabbed his schoolbooks and rushed out of the room heading upstairs. A steady drumming of foot-thuds pounded each wooden step with an adolescent message. "I'm upset!" they seemed to say. Soon echoes of his feet attack in the stairwell faded away. How could she think about marrying again? What's wrong with her? "Gee whiz, mom."



Slumping on his bed, Kenny thought of his ex-dad who had been gone since the winter the boy turned nine. "My leaving has nothing to do with you. I'll always love you," dad said at the time. Then he stepped out of his life, like a fading ghost. There were times Kenny cried like a baby over something he knew was missing in his life.

He kicked off his sneakers and bent to peel off his socks. Lying on his back, arms tucked under his head, he scanned the room carefully. His eyes took in the pennant from Halifax and pictures of he and mom. And there was one of him and his buddy Troy from Boy Scout Summer Camp last year. They all stared at him like sunlight reflecting from a rocky bluff.

Kenny suddenly sat up, placed his feet on the cool floor then walked slowly to the window. He was sure this had to be the best view in Sheldon, a village of 200 people near Truro, Nova Scotia. His two-story white vinyl sided house sat high on a hill overlooking the highway. From here he felt like an eagle settled in his nest watching the world move along.

A collection of old homes were interspersed with newly designed brick ones, with camping trailers and newly painted houses forming a trail of civilization straddling both sides of Highway 104. They were like salt particles sprinkled at random.

Soon the stars seemed brighter, luminous eyes keeping the boy company. Shielding his eyes helped pinpoint the Big Dipper, or 'Ursa Major' as he learned in school. "Tough growing up," Kenny suddenly said aloud. He figured he was acting silly but things seemed much simpler when he was younger.

He enjoyed staring out the window at night, elbows on the windowsill, chin cradled in his hands. There was a time when he dreamt of being an astronomer or 'star-gazer' as chums at school teased. Everything seemed so peaceful up there.

Now his brow furrowed in thought, remembering his neighbor Larry who took him fishing last Saturday. He would make a super, great dad. Too bad he's already married with grown up kids of his own. "So I'll probably end up getting stuck with someone like James," Kenny sighed. It wouldn't be so bad if James didn't have to work all the time. He never took him anywhere. And he's so strict. Kenny continued to look out the window as his mind raced along on a merry-go-round of memories.

Tiredly he made his way back to bed and flung himself down. He was too sleepy to even climb under the sheets and pull up his covers. His mind re-lived events from last Saturday when Larry took him fishing. It had been a perfect day. "This is really neat," Kenny remembering saying, eyes dancing with excitement. Kenny really liked Larry.

The first time they had met was last year when Kenny began a paper route. Kenny had marched up the front steps, bold as a Knight of the Round Table. "Would you like to take the Truro Daily News? he had asked. "I guarantee good service. How about it?"

"Call me Larry," the man answered, "unless your parents object."

"That's cool. My mom won't mind. She's divorced and she lets me make lots of decisions."

Since then he had met Larry's wife and even had a tour of their big old house that used to be a church manse. Imagine the place was over 140 years old. Then he learned to play chess with Larry and came over to the house a number of times to help pile wood and mow the grass. Soon it was like a second home.

Larry didn't pay money for chores. "Instead I'll be glad to take you hiking or even go on a fishing trip," he had said. That suited Kenny just fine.

Now his dreaming relived that awesome trip last weekend to Economy Lake, ten miles north of Bass River village. His sleepy eyes gave in to the comfortable images. His body settled back in bed...

"Do you remember what I told you Kenny?" Larry had said. "About the different parts of the canoe?" He knew Kenny liked to be tested on his knowledge.

"Yes, the sides are called gunnels."

"And the front?"

"The bow."

"And the back?"

"Stern."

"Right." Kenny knew Larry was proud of him. He really appreciated it when someone took time to teach him things.

Fishing rods were loaded, food packs carefully placed in the center of the canoe, life jackets worn. They had waded barefoot from the shore, and carried the boat to a depth of several feet, so as not to unnecessarily scratch its fiberglass hull.

Kenny stretched then turned on his side. His memories were like a movie reel. The best part was yet to come.

While Larry held the canoe, Kenny gingerly placed his cold feet inside, one at a time then sat down in the bow. As Larry seated himself in the stern, Kenny said quickly, "OK dad, let's go." He quickly glanced back to see if Larry noticed what slipped from his tongue.

His adult friend must have missed it. Kenny hadn't said it on purpose. It sort of sneaked out. "OK dad," he repeated under his breath. Sounded really nice, he thought to himself. He turned around from the bow and looked back. He noticed Larry's peaked hat, with the perch fish on its

front. Red vest, blue shirt, worn jeans and bare feet completed the picture. Larry's paddle was ready for action. His eyes seemed at peace and they were always full of laughter.

Kenny wished James were more like Larry.

"What's up Kenny? Why are you looking at me so seriously?" Larry had said, chuckling.

Kenny remembered turning away quickly, heart pounding. "Nothing. I'm ready...that's all." But it wasn't all. He missed having a dad, and he was glad his face was turned away as moisture gathered on his cheeks. He wasn't crying, not really. He felt like a traitor for even pretending Larry was his dad. But then it must be okay, the sky didn't explode or anything. To himself he did say softly once again, "OK dad, I'm ready now. Let's go." And he felt good inside as his paddle dipped into the water...

. .

Kenny jerked awake in his room as he heard his squeaky doorknob. Through half-closed eyelids he watched mom step in. Kenny pretended to be asleep, one arm flung out. His fingers were open as if waiting for a handshake from someone.

As his mom crossed the creaking floor, he carefully controlled his breathing. He felt her eyes travel from his toes, lanky legs, and thinly stretched frame to his blond head. She puffed air softly on his closed eyelids, testing to see if he was really asleep. It tickled, but somehow he calmed his reflexes. He wanted to reach out and hug her for being so mean a while before.

He could hear her retrieving a blanket from the closet then placing it over him. Somehow he was able to breathe out heavily allowing some of his tension escape. The sound drifted as if from a far-away planet.

Before falling asleep he made a promise. Tomorrow he would tell mom how much he loved her. And somehow find a way to like James better.

“Some stories are tragic, yet within the pain of loss comes something special that gives meaning back to life. In this abandoned farm comes visitation from the elements, and area families still remember the fire.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## SILHOUETTES AT DUSK

Beyond the last wagon road that winds its way through these hills is a well-constructed log home. Whispers of wind know the way. And it easily creates a path between branches of tall poplar trees.

During Autumn-time these slim trunks quiver with leaves that tinkle gently as bells. Blue Jays continue their raucous sounds, seeking the highest elevation in what they feel is a private domain.

Heavy-laden Spruce provides a natural fence for privacy as they surround a large pond, back of the cabin. Listening closely, sounds burp, splash and climb slowly into a bright, starry-eyed sky.

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But this is not Autumn-time, nor does a faint breath of wind tap gently on anyone's forehead. At this moment Winter-outdoors is a rage of stinging snow. And whitened cheeks feel the slap of its chill.

Grand Papa was using his last reserve of strength to keep the sleigh on its earlier tracks. Heading up the hill to receive the remnants of cut wood came too easily. At that time the snow was mere inches deep and the pace of his horses was a surge of power, knowing the right pressure to secure proper footing.

Now on the return journey, piles of snow formed layers like blankets on the slippery trail. And normally sure-footedness scrambled on new icy ridges.

“Mon Dieu,” Grand Papa wheezed. “Dis weather not so nice, eh, mes enfants?” Many years ago, this man now weathered from the hardships of living in an isolated cabin, came from Northern Quebec. Two visits to this land called Nouvelle Ecosse convinced him to move.

“It is so nice here, Mon Cherie,” he had said so many years before to his wife who sat beside him on the wagon. “And cheap too. Dere is dis hill with some room for a pasture, for hay and some cows. And also, a fine woods where we can cut our trees for noting. They can be lasting forever.”

And so they came to live here, on the promise of a comfortable log cabin, with a view of the valley.

But he was getting old. And living so far from everyone was like living on another planet, no matter how peaceful it was. His shoulder ached from another bout of arthritis.

His wife of forty-three years kept him healthy most of the time. Good food, especially pea soup and the love of these young children kept his spirits high. And taught him how to be patient once again.

“No time for temper,” his wife had admonished him when the cow did not produce enough milk. Or when a coyote would get at their chickens.

His dear woman always had a way. She could turn his head in a moment with a stern look, or a smile. “The children,” she said, bringing him back to the present. “They are very cold. Watch the tracks. Our horses are having a most difficult time.”

‘Harry’ was a strawberry Roan and ‘Kit’, a race trotter that was saved from the Glue Factory. They were gifts from their English neighbors, for two brave people with the courage to take in their grandchildren. Their horse “Monsieur” was able to spend his last days in a peaceful state.

Grand Mama had insisted the children come to live with them. The grandparents knew the hearts of these two children who needed space to roam. And indeed there was ample land for them to grow up. Soon, Grand Papa was able to teach the boy the ways of a small farm in the woods.

Even Monique learned valuable lessons. Grand Mama was able to teach her grand daughter the advantages of cooking in a fine kitchen.

Snow was persistent in its flood of snowflakes upon the four people.

Grand Mama cuddled beside her husband. "This cold weather is hard on my bones," she murmured, reaching wide to wrap two loving arms around her grandchildren.

"How much longer, Grand Mama?" Monique asked feebly. She was a slender young girl of nine. Her flowing blond hair hid under the hood of her jacket. She could not wait to finish baking her surprise. Cookies for everyone would bring many smiles tonight.

Henri was eleven and very much the stronger of the two. He proved it often as he hiked on trails that were like patterns of thread within this hilly country. Back in Quebec, his name was pronounced 'Ah-Ri.'

But his friends here called him "Henry."

The children had been living with their grandparents ever since their own parents died of Tuberculosis two years ago, in Ville Marie, Quebec. After the sadness and much talking it was decided they would live with their Grand Papa and Grand Mama.

"The fresh air would be good for 'les enfants,'" Grand Papa had said at the time.

It was good the children were bundled up in heavy coats and scarves. The wind was determined to give them a jolt and drop icicle-chills down their warm backs.

“Welcome to a winter storm, in the woods of Nova Scotia!” came as a sudden shout of exuberance from Henri. It was a true message that spoke of the changing weather conditions in this part of the province.

Their log cabin was a quarter of a mile from the nearest neighbor, and almost in the center of their seventy-five acre property. The building was still sturdy after all these years. Everyone knew the Quebec heater would soon be red with heat, and they could relax in its warmth.

Their wet clothes would be hung close to the heat, and perhaps Ah-Ri would have a game of checkers with Grand Papa.

The trees near their home had grown together in bunches and provided for their cooking and heating needs many years ago. First, the log home was built, then the barn and afterwards a shelter for the collected wood.

And the sounds of an axe chopping became a familiar noise as it echoed against the hills.

At first, deer would linger as they investigated the new presence in their once quiet woods. Often a raccoon or bear watched from the shelter of a favorite tree. And before long, the wildlife accepted this family as new neighbors and no longer treated as intruders.

“Finally,” Monique said as the horses stamped noisily in front of their wood shelter. Everyone shook off layers of snow, scrambled from the wagon and began to help stack its precious cargo. Inactive bodies finally had a chance to warm up through busy movement.

The ways of the woods was not easy and all had to do their share.

Ah-Ri as usual tried to move faster and carry more than his young arms should attempt.

“Wait, my little one,” Grand Papa said. “We are four here, and you must let us share in dis task.”

Before long the horses were unhitched, placed in their stalls and provided with fresh water and hay. The family quickly raced for the cabin, each carrying a load of wood.



Yes, tonight they should be very warm. “I am going to load the heater so we will soon be like burnt toast,” Grand Papa promised. He knew everyone had similar thoughts.

The evening progressed through various stages. From excitement over Monique’s snack of sugar cookies, and Grand Mama’s very hot chocolate, to ghost stories at bedtime.

And soon, Grand Papa’s snoring signaled it was time for everyone to also be sleeping. It didn’t take long for everyone to shut tired eyes and begin their dreams.

Sometime during the night, Henry awakened. Right now he didn’t really care about how anyone pronounced his name. Something was wrong. And his boyish senses were fully alert. He smelled something. It was smoke.

And not far away, he heard a crackling. Was that fire he wondered?

In school he learned one should not sit up during any smoke danger, but roll off the bed. This he did, except he forgot he was on the top bunk. And he hit the floor with enough noise to wake everyone up. Outside, the dog was barking.

Henry covered his mouth as he tried to shake his sister awake. Monique was not moving at first, until he slapped her face. “Why did you do that, Ah-Ri?” she asked, as tears rolled down her cheeks. Henry didn’t wish to make her cry. But, it was getting very hot in here.

Where were his grandparents? After the loud crash he made, they should be close by. The children were choking as they crawled across the floor, fumbling into furniture. They moved slowly into the next room, finally able to feel Grand Papa and Grand Mama’s faces.

But they were not moving.

Nothing the children did could get a sound from their much-loved surrogate parents. Then Monique and Ah-Ri tried desperately to drag them from the bed.

At first it was so dark in the room, but suddenly a flash of red advanced towards them. Henry knew he and Monique must get out, and very quickly, too. He pulled her close to him, and flung her onto his back like a sack of flour, surprised at his strength.

Then he knelt for a brief moment before trying to run with his dear sister through the wall of flame. If only...he thought as he suddenly felt like a piece of burnt toast.

From her window in the barn, the milking cow watched the cabin turn from a dark cloud of anger, to bright yellow. Somehow she knew never again would she feel the sure hands of her master, as her rich milk spilled into the waiting bucket.

After barking with sore lungs, the dog now went seeking help. Somehow he knew he would never again hear the laughter of the children.

. . .

And the years passed. No one ever desired to build a new home on the site of that completely burned out cabin. Only the stone foundation remained. It was left as a sanctuary for the four victims who had lost their lives one night on a hill, close by a peaceful pond.

Whispers of conversation soon traveled throughout the valley, about the family that lived alone on a lonely road climbing Onslow Mountain. It was said the fire was able to consume only the outside bodies of those four people.

But their spirits were very much alive in the night, especially when families were restless in sleep. Sad memories lingered for a long while.

The tale of tragedy became a song sung by children at school, through nursery rhymes and skipping rope talk.

“Ah-Ri and Monique,” they said. “One, two, three and four. Fire! Fire! Please, don’t burn me any more.”

But each night for many seasons, when the sun went down there was a different message. It came as a flock of geese landed in the fallow field of distant memories. This old farm became a regular part of their journey.

It was a place of safe haven, with shelter from trees, grown thicker over the years. And the sweet taste of water from the pond always provided a precious drink from those long flights.

Trout swam darkly beneath the water, lily pads took root along the shore and frogs continued their artful bellowing. Even loons sometimes rested upon the tiny surface, remembering something so vague as humans who once listened from their porch to their eerie calls in the night.

And the deer were regular visitors to this vacant land, drawn to the aroma of fresh apples. No one desired to purchase the acreage, thus allowing the house remains to collapse in disrepair, until all that was left was the outline of a stone foundation.

Sturdy Dandelions filled in most of the vacant spots. And St. Anne's lace grew in clusters on the north side, where the small porch used to be.

From a distance, other pairs of eyes watched the growth of four trees, as they sprouted from within the ancient foundation. At first they were only tiny shoots, but each season brought moisture, sunshine and stubborn growth.

One evening a child noticed something different, during a hike with his own grandparents. "Look," he had said. "There are four trees, all together."

Yes, they had grown from young trees now reaching up from the sadness that once was. And families later agreed each tree must represent the humans lost one terrible night, so long ago.

From a distance at dusk, silhouettes from two tall spruce trees can now easily be seen. There is one large sapling for Grand Papa and another for Grand Mama.

The other two are more like one, in the form of an apple tree with its trunk growing in two directions. You could almost see the stronger branch supporting the smaller of the two. It reminds us so of the boy who tried to help his sister to safety one terrible night.

Now each family member is a memory, and never forgotten.

“Having someone to talk to and confide in is precious for a young child. In this case, grandpa does very little talking, but lots of listening. And this one-way conversation seems to alleviate David’s concerns about his dad.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## MY DADDY'S A PREACHER

Sometimes I get lonely. And when I do, I talk to my Grandpa. Like right now.

He just lives on the other side of my street. He's on my paper route.

That’s where I have eighteen customers.

Sometimes he gives me a tip. A great big tip. Two dollars. I call that a really super tip.

Today I feel down in the dumps. That's a pretty big thought for me, David. I'm eight now, grandpa.

But I'll be nine next March. Let me see, that's oh, uh...nine more months. See, I can figure things out.

I'm pretty good in math too. My mother said I should be a banker, like my uncle Larry.

But I think that might be pretty boring. Besides I hate wearing a tie. I know my daddy hates wearing a tie.

Maybe that's why he became a Preacher. He wears a white collar instead. He really likes talking to everyone. I mean grownups.

Does that make sense, Grandpa?

I know 'cause he talks to all the adults who go to his church.

He's pretty busy. But I still love him though.

Sometimes when I lie in my bed in my favorite PJ's, I cry. I'm not really a baby but I wish my daddy would talk to me, Grandpa.

Like you do.

I know maybe you think I'm not a good boy. But I am. I help out ... well sometimes.

Me, and my brother Todd, we fight a lot. It's not really my fault. He keeps punching me on the shoulder. It hurts too.

Todd is thirteen. He's really strong.

When we fight, my daddy goes to work at church. He says he has lots to do. I think he might be scared to lose his temper.

Then Todd does his ... you know ... his punching bag thing. Except, I'm the punching bag. I wish he would stop.

Maybe he will when I grow up. Hey, maybe I'll be really tall. Even be bigger than him.

Do you think so, Grandpa?

But I won't beat him up. My daddy says fighting is not nice. And I love my daddy.

Guess what, Grandpa? It's okay if I sit right beside you, hey? I really like to talk to someone. And you give good advice.

When I leave here, well ... what should I do Grandpa? About Todd hitting me.

Not go into his room? But I only go in once or twice a week. And I don't take anything. Only look around.

Don't go in even once? And he won't hit me anymore? I think I'll try that.

Guess what, Grandpa? My mom went away to visit her mother. You know already?

She lives really far away. I think its a hundred thousand miles. It's only two hundred? Is that a lot?

That's how far it is from Truro to Canso-town? Oh, that's far.

Anyway, my daddy is the cook when she's gone. And guess what? He's not really a good cook. No, not really.

But I still eat the food.

He makes burned pancakes. Even the juice is lumpy. But I drink it. Do you think I can tell my daddy that, Grandpa?

Would he be mad if I said, daddy you're not a very good cook? I bet he would laugh.

He wouldn't?

Hey, sometimes I wish I could tell him some things. But I think he would get even madder.

Like, my daddy preaches too long.

I sit and I listen. And I listen and then I wish he would stop. He talks for a whole half hour. That's too long.

It's not?

Some ministers preach for a whole hour? Then he must preach at least an hour too.

Do you think one day I can talk to my daddy like I talk to you, Grandpa?

Good. I can't wait.

Sometimes I wish my daddy would take me fishing, just the two of us.

And Todd could stay home and cook.

I have to go and finish my papers now, Grandpa. And thanks. You give good advice.

What's for supper? Probably some more burnt pancakes.

Why do I eat them?

That's easy, because I love my daddy.

“The Narrator recalls with fondness, a dear friend. Many years before, they were both posted to different functions, in Moosonee, Ontario. After a sudden and terrible accident, the Narrator draws strength from Al’s spirit.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## GOODBYE, AL

Memory lingers like an earwig, lurking in some dark corner of my mind. I can’t seem to forget you Al, not even after all these years.

*Remember Al...long years ago? You and your wife, Jo-Anne stood with me in this wind. In a few hours our flight from Toronto’s Malton Airport would hurl us northwards to Moosonee, on James Bay.*

In my memory I still see you in a parka, with tufts of blond hair sticking out. And your cherubic face with a smile that could melt any problem.

We waited for our journey to begin, a five hundred mile plane ride to Timmins, then a car trip to Cochrane, followed by a seven-hour rail ride into bush country.

You were fresh from Ranger school in Dorset, Ontario and Forestry Technicians were in great demand. So you applied for a position with the Ontario Government and were accepted.

“Larry,” you said, “Cochrane, North Bay and Kapuskasing are calling me. I’ve never been there before. And I want to see it all.”

Not only that Al, the hunting and fishing opportunities really hooked you. “I want to knock off some of those Canada geese,” you said.



You, your wife and I became close friends a few weeks before at a government services meeting on University Avenue. I had been selected as the new Social Assistance Officer for the same area.

We were happy to be working together, though in different capacities.

Some said Moosonee was an isolated collection of tents and small homes about 200 miles north of Cochrane by rail. It was an unorganized village comprised of muskeg and fierce wind.

All it had to boast about was an RCAF radar station and about 500 Cree natives.

New development was sweeping across the western part of James Bay. And we were determined to be a part of it.

*Remember how it all began, Al?*

*Saturday morning awakened everyone as October's angry wind rushed in thunderous claps down the Moose River. And small craft bumped noisily against wooden docks.*

*Community spirit meant hurrying from warm homes into a muddy main street. Fighting sheets of sleet and rain working our way to the docks was a chore.*

*A dozen Rupert House canoes were already sunk or half filled with water, and created an awful mess. After straightening them out, we headed to our own homes for a little rest.*

*A short while later my landlord's 16-foot Peterborough outboard had broken loose, then blown up-river where pounding waves threatened to sink it.*

*Dressed in a rain suit you were gulping coffee along with Tom, our Postmaster friend, when I barged into your home at 8 AM.*

"Al! Quick! Can you help me get Patterson's boat? It might smash up against the shore. We have to do something."

I could see your wife Jo-Anne had given up trying to sleep with all this commotion. Although anxiously awaiting the birth of your first child, she was preparing breakfast. "Want to join us Larry?" she asked.

With you Al, there was no hesitation as you shouted, "Sure, let's go. We'll eat later, hon." You were a real friend and didn't waste time making a decision. We charged into the cold drizzle, barely able to speak, our faces like a wet blanket.

"I see it," you said, as your binoculars placed the boat a quarter of a mile away. You always were a man of few words.

"It would be stupid to go after it in this storm," Tom said.

We all agreed, watching the boat settle firmly on the far shore. Al, you were almost psychic when you said, "Falling in that water this time of year...well, you wouldn't last too long."

It was a shivering thought, looking at those foamy waves.

Before heading back we fastened down three other boats. And moved eight drums of gasoline from the shifting, twisting dock. Then dragged onto shore, a Rupert House Canoe half filled with water.

Bone tired, we returned to the aroma of bacon and eggs.

"I hope you guys have a good appetite!" Jo-Anne cheerfully shouted as we rushed the table.

"With lots of toast and coffee," we added.

Our conversation turned to hunting. "This is supposed to be my day to patrol the water around Ellis Island," you said.

"Two Native Cree Assistant Forest Rangers use a cabin there, and checked the area regularly for poachers. But it's their day off."

This is one of the great resting grounds for Canada's and Blue Geese on the western side of James Bay. The island is actually comprised of a series of mud flats with very little foliage growing on its surface. It made an excellent Game Preserve for thousands of geese, allowing them to rest from nearby heavily hunted territories.

But, you couldn't wait until the weather safely permitted a Ranger patrol. Even though you understood the dangers of storm and tides, you wanted to make sure everyone was fine.

Stretches of water from Moosonee to James Bay appear placid. And great rifts of sand dunes can be seen at low tide. However, when the tide returns, the water is replenished with increasing swiftness.

. . .

On Tuesday you returned from patrol. "All hunters and guides accounted for, Larry," you said.

In spite of downed tents and ruined provisions, morale at various hunting camps was excellent. A warm sun that afternoon cheered everyone up.

Wednesday morning reminded me there were only three days to go before our own hunting trip. You and Tom had promised me a goose-hunting expedition I'd never forget, since I had never fired at one.

Al, I remember looking out my office window that day. You and Tom were passing by, a large goose hanging from the crook of your arm.

"Hey! Don't forget. I want one too!" I shouted through my window.

"Right," you answered. "We went out for an hour this morning and got just the one. Nice, eh?"

You waved the blue goose back and forth Al, its long neck flopping limply. You gave me that famous grin of yours. It was a trademark I got to know from the many nights of chess we played.

"You'll get your turn Larry," you said, heading up the street to the Post Office.

A busy afternoon at the Social Services Administration Office seemed to pass quickly. I was about to leave the building, when three Native trappers came looking for you. They were to be re-assigned new areas, since you were in charge of trapping for the District.

After phoning around I found out from the Deputy-Chief Ranger you had been called away unexpectedly to replace a sick ranger on Ellis Island. You were expected back this evening and he said they'd be contacted.

I assured them if they missed the plane they could take the next flight out three days later. In the meantime the Social Services Department could provide them with board and lodging, if needed.

Al, you always said I should be caring. Just like you, eh?

Thursday began with a beautiful sunshiny morning lasting until approximately 11 AM. Tom's phone call shocked me.

"Larry! Al didn't come back from patrol last night! And his empty boat was found beached on Turtle Island this morning."

"Cripes," I said. "That's ten miles downstream from Ellis Island."

"Lands and Forests have two aircraft searching for him. They're putting together a land rescue team this afternoon. Hey Larry, you still there?"

Al, I was at a loss for words. My first thoughts were of Jo-Anne and the baby on the way.

"Don't worry," Tom continued. "You know Al. He's one of the best outdoorsmen in this part of the country. I'm sure he's OK."

Words finally came. "Where are you?" I asked.

"At the Post Office," Tom answered. "How about dropping over to Bill's Snack Bar? See if there's any more news."

"Okay!" I said. "Give me five minutes!" By the time I arrived, about fifteen people were crowded inside the ten-seat restaurant. And the Deputy-Chief Ranger was there.

"Quiet!" he shouted. "Listen here!" Thumping his fist on the table got everyone's attention. "As far as we know, Al's alright. Two more helicopters are making a sweep. Several boats are also searching the shoreline for any tracks. If we need more help we'll contact some of you."

A few minutes later he was pushing open the door.

Tom and I went over to see our friend Corporal Pete. He was in charge of the Ontario Provincial Police Detachment for the District. We filled coffee cups and sat quietly in his office.

"You know some of the details by now," Pete began. "Al was expected back last evening. His patrol duties at Ellis Island ended at four in the afternoon. One of the Assistant Rangers said Al wanted to try and knock off a few geese around Turtle Island, before returning home.

"He sure loved hunting," Pete added.

The rest of us nodded numbly.

Pete continued, "There was no further word until Mr. Sackenay discovered Al's Rupert House canoe beached on the shore. He towed the canoe to the main dock exactly as he found it. In it was a pair of mitts, half a box of 12 gauge shells and 30 feet of coiled rope in the bow. Only Al's shotgun was missing."

We listened to every detail, shaking our heads, trying to make sense of these facts.

"Something the others don't know," Pete said quietly. "Fellows, the throttle on Al's 10 horsepower motor was at the 'Slow' position. And there were 5 gallons of gas in the tank. I'm afraid for Al," he said, bowing his head.

Tom and I sat in silence, the full impact of his words settling like a dark cloud. Did our friend fall from his boat holding onto his prized shotgun? If so, the cold waters of the Moose River claimed another life.

Anyone tumbling fully clothed into the frigid water meant certain death. Al, you had voiced the same thoughts yourself just three days before.

That night, friends and neighbors came silently, to see Jo-Anne. They tried to provide comfort and hope.

Each lead, no matter how improbable was immediately investigated. Al, many persons believed you landed on one of the mud flats nearby. Then somehow lost your boat to the tide.

Possibly you were laying hurt somewhere, a victim of your own carelessness. That would have placed you in severe danger of Hypothermia. Temperatures the same night you went missing had dropped to freezing.

The third and fourth day of your disappearance was a very sad occasion in the community. It was noticeable in the way knots of people huddled quietly together on street corners.

Jo-Anne, expecting her baby any day, still felt you would somehow make it back. Unfortunately, Lands and Forests' officials had to face facts.

Your father and brother even came up from Buffalo, New York to be part of the search. Hour after hour they flew out in a rented helicopter scanning each tiny mud flat. Every pass over a slight ridge of land was accompanied with a silent prayer.

Then when hope was dashed without any sight of you, tears followed.

Al, your friends shared a terrible loss in the spirit of the Community. As a member of the Lion's Club, you often bragged about your love of the area and its people. We felt so lost. Our pal was missing.

Five days of fruitless searching meant everyone had to accept the fact you were gone. Even Jo-Anne had come full circle accepting this terrible tragedy. She decided to sell everything and return to the United States.

JoAnne left one afternoon by aircraft to Timmins and was the mother of a baby boy, a Canadian now, Al. He was meant to be a part of this great country. And I know you're really proud of that.

But she'll never forget Moosonee. Wherever she goes she'll remember this North Country, and the taste of James Bay salt in her mouth. In her dreams she'll hear the purr of an outboard, possibly yours, patrolling downstream.

She'll remember turkey shoot competitions and late nights at the Lions Club, making plans to help the natives. And memories of those long hour-waits for your return from Ranger patrol.

She'll even smile about hunting trips she went on. And watching you shake with boy-eagerness, finger squeezing the trigger of your pump action; another Canada goose for the table.

The little graveyard, filled with sleeping children is out of sight in the Native Village. Remember how you worried about those young kids growing up, Al? And if their frame shacks, or tents, were warm enough in the cold winter? And whether they were able to eat regular meals, without electricity?

There were many times you and Jo-Anne looked after foster kids. You wished they could stay longer when it was time to return them home. I know you looked forward to having your own child one day.

And now you have a son, my friend a Canadian son.

They've built modern houses in Moosonee, Al. An Educational Center along with new sewage lines for the village.

Ontario Housing has replaced all tents, and most of the remaining shacks. Imagine, Native families can now turn on taps for purified running water and warm electricity. Even indoor toilets have been installed.

Tourists continue to visit in large numbers by the Polar Bear Express train. They want to see the kind of country you helped develop, Al. Some of your old friends are here, waiting to help those outsiders who won't feel left out for very long.

. . .

I remember the day they found your body Al. It was two weeks after Jo-Anne left Moosonee. A Cree Native gathering firewood at Ellis Island saw you stretched out beside a log, as if you were asleep.

He told everyone you had a smile on your face.

The doctor said it was ironic. You must have passed away your last hours about a mile from where two Rangers slept in a warm cabin.

You must have fallen out of your boat, swam to shore and died that same night from exposure. Only your hip-waders were missing. Taking them off in your desperate situation must have drained your energy as you swam to shore.



Your body was shipped out three day's later to be buried in your hometown. Some of your friends were glad you were going back to familiar surroundings.

*But I know better, Al.*

*You're still out there somewhere, squinting your sharp eyes, trying to make out the number of Canada's in that V-formation.*

*They're coming in low over the flats. Follow them, Al. Keep your head down. Don't make any sudden movement. Hold your breath. Lift and slowly sight along the barrel.*

*That's the stuff.*

*Take the leader out. And the rest will keep coming round and around, until you've bagged your limit.*

*So long Al, they're all yours.*

“The past sometimes gets embellished, especially when childhood fears express themselves later in life. In this case my emotions could easily come from the memory of many, since those times still abound at night.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## NO MORE BOGEYMAN

When I was a child a skittering mouse made me fearful. The sight of this creature chasing his shadow across the lit up section of my bedroom floor was unnerving.

How dare he interrupt my sleepy-time?

But, I was fascinated at his boldness, although tired from my boyhood imagination before supper. As a member of the Knights of the Round Table, slaying three dragons brought on a special need for rest.

Tomorrow I had duties to fulfill on behalf of King Arthur. My trusty wooden sword remained by my side under the covers, though splinters threatened to pierce my thigh.

And this little creature had the audacity to interrupt my solitude?

I leaned further over the edge of bed catching every movement. And the wee creature was daring enough to pause and check if he had an audience. Yes, brave, fearless me. Then he would rush back and forth until getting bored of entertaining a cheering section of one.

Without further adieu this scrabbling creature disappeared into the night.

By now I had leaned so far over the edge of bed observing his antics I began a slide to the floor. Desperately I clutched my blankets trying to prevent any further descent. I easily envisaged my well-designed face getting mashed. And ending up looking like a flat-mugged Pekinese dog.

Perish the thought of even rubbing away the shine or having blood spilled on mom's newly waxed floor. Whew, was my relief when a boy's fearful journey to destruction was halted.

Except now I faced a significant threat to my young life. I was looking directly into the doom of darkness that lurked under my bed. There was no light to distinguish friend or foe. And yet I knew the monster in my dreams resided there, often growling its presence during the night.

We had an unspoken treaty I would remain above and not disturb his lordship below. I was certain those glowing eyes did not belong to a misplaced teddy bear. By this time I was terror-stricken and leaped out of bed. My bare feet hit the floor in a race to find mom and dad before something began chewing on bones that belonged to me.

Forgotten were my sword, and the boldness of a young knight. Only escape was on my mind. Just to be away from that awful silhouette of darkness which certainly was mere inches from my left heel.

"MOM! DAD!" I screamed.

Many years later there is a sequel to that thumping-heart escape. It begins each morning as I arise and prepare to shave. My breath quickens as I face another monster, this time in the mirror.

And it's me.

“There are lasting impressions on young Brendan’s mind as he flinches from any harsh word. It reminds him too much of physical abuse taking place at home. Yet that’s where he wants to be, home with mom and dad.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## A CIRCLE OF FIREFLIES

When grandpa goes hiking in the woods, he usually brings me. Today was my first overnight camping trip.

"Will you be afraid?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Grandpa, I'm almost eight years old now."

He gave me a great big hug.

My mom and dad couldn't come. "They still have things to talk about," he said. "Maybe, only for a little while longer."

It's almost a whole month now since I went to live with my grandpa. "Do you think mom and dad and me will live together again?" I asked.

Grandpa took a long time to answer. "Yes," he finally said.

I looked up at the moon. It wasn't smiling. I think it was sad like me.

"Stop worrying so much, Brendan," grandpa said. "You're just a little boy."

"But I can't stop thinking about them," I said back. "I want them to be happy again. And me too."

"Come here," grandpa said. "I have to tell you something." When my dad called me, I ran very quickly. He used to slap me lots of times, if I was too slow. Not my grandpa though. He loves me.

"You might hear a lot of noises in the woods tonight," grandpa whispered. "This is where the animals live. Nighttime is when they walk around. Like when you and I go hiking."

"But, I'm not afraid when I'm with you, grandpa."

Then it was time to set up our dome tent. I helped push bamboo poles through the right places. "Please don't stand on the tent walls. If you get a hole in the side, rain will come in," grandpa said.

After it was finished, the dome tent was higher than me.

"Grandpa. Are we going to make a fire now?"

"Don't you think it's kind of late? You must be tired."

"No. I want to see the fireflies."

"I don't think they're around this time of year."

Sometimes I have to be patient with grandpa, like right now. "Let's still have a fire. Please."

"Okay, a small one. For a short while anyway," he said.

"Thank you grandpa," I said back.

"First, we put our sleeping bags in the tent. And then a big blanket placed on top to keep us extra warm. Right?" grandpa asked.

"Yes grandpa," I said. I even brought my 'Star Wars' pillow. Grandpa had a really huge pillow.

"Are you warm enough, Brendan? I could get you a sweater if you're cold."

"Yes, please."

"Don't you ever say no once in a while?" When grandpa's voice growls like a lion, it makes me shiver. It sounds like my dad's voice when I used to do something wrong.

"I'm sorry Brendan," grandpa said. "Did I frighten you?"

"Yes," I said with a sad voice.

"I'm sorry. Help me get some firewood, okay."

"Yup."

A noise came from the trees beside the lake.

"What's up doc?" I asked.

"Too many cartoons," grandpa said. "Listen, it might be a deer."

It was a deer, with antlers. "Will he hurt us?" I asked.

"No," grandpa said, "he's eating apples from that tree."

Then I moved and it ran away.

Now the sky was getting dark.

"Are you sleepy?" grandpa asked.

"No. I have to see the fireflies first," I said.

"Well, I'm not going to argue with you," grandpa said.

"Let's make a campfire, now. Please."

"Okay," he finally said.

The flames were like dancing fingers. They made shapes above the fire, and chased away the darkness.

I was warm with my hooded jacket. And my gloves and baseball cap helped. "Grandpa, watch. The fireflies are coming. You'll see."

He didn't believe me, until I saw one. "Look!"

He did.

"Look! Look!" More came.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"Right there. Look at the circles they make." Another one zinged by.

"Brendan? Are those bits of fire your fireflies?" grandpa asked.

"Yes," I said.

"They're just bits of wood burning," grandpa said.

"Not," I said back.

"Why do you think they're fireflies?"

"Because they light up the sky."

Then grandpa brought me close beside him. He put his arm around my shoulders.

"They're just bits of wood and fire," he said. Then they disappear into nothing."

"No! No!" I said. "They fly around and around trying to make family circles."

"Who told you that?" grandpa quietly asked.

"My dad did. He made a campfire last year at the lake. He said the fireflies make a circle, like a family holding hands."

Then I looked down and whispered, "So everyone can be together."

Grandpa got really quiet. He collected more wood and built up the fire until it burned even more brightly.

By now the stars were like Christmas lights in the sky. I think they wanted to be like the fireflies too.

An owl hooted on the other side of the small lake. His funny sounds came scooting across the water.

It was awesome.

Then grandpa sat close beside me. Together we watched our fire burn until the tall flames fell down. When the wind blew on them I saw the fireflies come again.

They spit and hissed and danced.

They flew around in all directions. Some of them began to make huge circles. Some made little ones.

I made a wish for my mom and dad. I wanted us to be a family again.

"Will you give your dad another chance?" Grandpa's words came out of the darkness. "I mean, if he doesn't hit you anymore?"

I knew the answer right away. "Yes," I said.

Then my grandpa and me stayed up late, talking.

We watched the fireflies making lots of family circles.



“Hiding in a box somehow preserves the past as Paul reminisces about everything being different in his busy home. Mom and dad seem so busy these days, and sis is gone away. But, he thinks about his own changes.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## BOY IN A BOX

It was easy to hide from the early morning sun. All Paul had to do was pull down the shade. Instead, he decided to leave his bedroom and go downstairs to his sister's.

Paul moved quietly from the bed, taking his blanket and pillow. Bare feet dashed quickly before cold toes made him change his mind.

He was silent as a deer because he didn't want to wake up Sheeba. Her bark was known to disturb the neighbors, almost a block away. And Paul wasn't a magician. But he knew Mom and Dad would be upset, him getting up too early on Saturday.

At least Jo-Ann couldn't complain about him using her room. Sis started college in PEI, a few weeks ago. Not having her around was a real pain though. Paul checked over some family pictures she had hung up. Three seashells dangled on beads from another wall.

He remembered when she made those a couple of years ago. That was when everyone in the family helped build this room. He was still a little kid then, about eight.

Her bed was filled with leftover clothes. Paul guessed they couldn't be fitted in her suitcases. Imagine, not even in three of them.

Where to place his tired head? Another hour of snoozing would do it. He noticed there wasn't even room on her bed to stretch out. Mom and dad said they might have to stop feeding him.

His legs were making him so tall.

Then Paul spotted the answer to his sleeping problem. In the corner of the bedroom were two large empty boxes. Not needed, they had been left behind. That was the way he felt, since Sis left, alone and forgotten.

Dad was always working on his woodpile. Then taking one load at a time to Truro for sale. And mom was busy with the Arts and Craft club in their Village of Bass River.

No one seems to notice me anymore, Paul thought. But then, mom and dad must be feeling a little sad too, since Jo-Ann left.

The sun shone through the basement window, making sleep impossible. Paul turned off the bedroom light switch. But, it was still too bright. Suddenly a solution presented itself.

He placed the largest box on the only uncluttered part of the bed. Then he climbed in, taking his blanket and pillow inside. Reaching up, Paul pulled the cardboard box flaps behind him.

Now there was no shining sun to worry about. Nor any parents to wonder where he was. He could remain in the dark box as long as he needed.

At first it was quite uncomfortable. That was resolved by getting some of Jo-Ann's sweaters. Using them as a mattress helped matters. Smelling perfume from her clothes made it seem like she was nearby.

Mom was probably lying in bed. And wondering about all the work she had to do, today. And dad was maybe thinking of wood to sell so he can pay off more bills.

His father had little spare time left to spend with Paul.

"I bet a whole stack of peanut butter cookies, nobody's even thinking about me," he said into the darkness.

Then he heard a loud "meow." It was 'Sport', his cat. Of course, the ball of fur would have to join him. Either that or wake the whole house up. "Get in you," Paul said, happy for the company.

Sport's purring was almost as loud as a motorboat. If only dad had bought the boat and ten horsepower uncle Richard wanted to sell. Think of the fishing they could do on Lake Mattatall.

Paul patted his cat's head. He wasn't feeling so lonesome anymore.

He and Sis used to have barrels of fun together. And they spent a lot of moments talking to each other. Mom and dad never forgot the time he hit Jo-Ann on the shoulder.

That made her really angry.

She deserved it for pinching him, even if she meant a lot to Paul. When mom and dad weren't around, Sis listened to his problems. He told her about bullies at school. Even failing his tests when he forgot to study.

Sometimes he cried. And she held him the way mom did when Paul was just a little kid.

He remembered their trampoline.

Dad bought it when Paul was nine. He was a lot smaller then. Sort of a little squirt kids liked to pick on. Mom and dad almost fainted once. It was when Paul and Sis were doing really high jumps and back flips.

That's a fact. He could almost hear his sister still laughing. She has such a nice smile, just like moms. Both their eyes twinkle just like his cat.

Paul wondered if mom was up yet. The box was beginning to feel a bit cramped. But, he was able to jiggle around and almost turn himself into a tire. It was more like a caterpillar's cocoon.

During Health classes he learned about babies. And how they lay in a 'fetal' position, inside their mothers. Was he acting like a child again?

He knew he wasn't a baby needing special attention. Paul was just a boy growing up, with his own developing needs.

So what if Jo-Ann wanted to move away? He knew she had to if she wanted to get a good education. If only Prince Edward Island wasn't so far away. He wished she had gone to Bible Hill's Agriculture College instead.

Then visiting each other was only an hour by car.

He laughed about the times he ran downstairs and pounded on Jo-Ann's door. Sis would scream, "Buzz off Paul!!" He used to come in anyway and throw her covers all over.

They laughed and jumped on the bed, using it as an indoor trampoline.

After they got older, that kind of fun ended. Sis needed to be by herself, to have her privacy. Just like he needed some privacy right now.

He knew growing up was hard to do. But, he missed those fun things they did together. Paul sure hoped dad was getting up soon.

It wasn't that Paul didn't like his own room. It was a great place. He had a nice library and good clothes. Even models of cars and tractors his parents gave him.

Now he wanted a baseball glove to celebrate his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Would Jo-Ann be able to make it to his party next week? Paul would give her the largest piece of cake, if she did.

Just then, he heard a commotion. It must be 'Sheeba'. Or his parents might be getting up. Paul turned on his back and kicked open the box.

"Surprise! Surprise!" echoed from two people he loved most in the whole world.

"Mom! Dad! How long have you been here?" Paul asked.

"Only a few minutes son. We figured you would be down here. We miss her too, you know." And as if he knew Paul's thoughts, dad added, "We haven't forgotten you, you know."

Mom also knew how to make the sun shine in Paul's eyes. She asked, "How about your favorite breakfast? Blueberry pancakes!"

And dad put the icing on the cake. "Want to learn how to drive a 430 John Deere Loader-Crawler? After breakfast, of course."

Paul's answered both questions with two jumping twirls. His sister's bed almost bent in two. "Got to go now, Jo-Ann!" he yelled.

Then he raced mom and dad up the stairs.

“Too often situations can occur which take a busy person completely by surprise. Such is this story, a fictionalized account of what actually happened to my sister. Even in a school, such an incident is possible.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## ASSAULT

Working Sunday evening was Bonita's usual custom, a chance to plan ahead for classroom activities. Her last School inspector said she was well organized. Putting a lot of thought into lesson plans paid off.

She was a trusting person. But her husband worried about her being alone in the evening at school.

“Nothing could happen in this little town,” she assured him. Grade six students were quite demanding. And taxed her creative talents to come up with something new each day.

A sound, something out of the ordinary caught her ear and held it. No, it was really nothing, just a light tapping a cautious sound. Not quite sure if it might be noticed. Like a downy woodpecker bullying a weathered tree.

The tapping continued.

She left her classroom, turned on the hall lights and slipped down the deserted corridor. Robot-like-lockers lining the hallway flanked her.

"Hello, what do you want?" She spoke through the front door, hesitant not quite sure if she should fling it open. She was tempted to invite the night's freshness in. It might overcome the stale air she breathed this past hour.

The shadow through the glazed door was about her height.

"Please. Can you help?" A distressed voice with a touch of panic in its tone, responded from the other side of the glass.

"It's late and the school is closed," she called back. Glancing at her watch she noted 7:10 PM. A fact she'd remember over and over in her conversation with the police later this night.

"I am not sure of the correct night but I am in the Karate Club. I am a student here, in your son's class. In Andre's class," a teenaged voice said.

Opening the door a little she noted the young man's dark hair and heavy set. He was around eighteen years of age and maybe 180 lbs. Not bad looking either, she thought.

She was trusting, and why not? This Ontario town was a friendly place and the young man said he knew her son. What should she do? She wondered. Her heart said to open the door, but?

"Is anyone else here yet? I just signed up for this course and I don't want to miss my training." The young man sounded genuine enough.

"There's no one else here," she said rather crossly. "I'm preparing lessons for my class. Karate on Sunday night, really?"

"You're here. Maybe I'm wrong. Could be another night. Thank you. Merci."

As the young man turned to go she felt a chill. Something was not quite right. She dismissed the strange feeling and quickly slammed the door, making her questions retreat.

"Mommy, you imagine things," her daughter always admonished. She returned to her lesson preparation after turning off the hall lights. Her concentration broken, she thought of the young man. Those eyes held deeper meanings. Here goes my imagination again, she thought.

Another tapping, this time louder. More like someone banging on the same door. "What now?" she muttered as she purposefully retraced her steps flicking on hallway lights as she went.

The same voice apologized. "I am sorry to bother you again Madame, but I have to get something in the gym ... my equipment. Should be washed or something like that before school tomorrow."

She could sense the excitement in his voice. His physical energy seemed to tumble out as she hesitated before opening the door again.

"Please, Madame."

As she opened the door slightly, she noticed his eyes nervously flicking from side to side. What's he really looking for? She wondered. "Why do you have to go to the gym?"

She suddenly came to a decision. "I can't let you in. School's closed and you can't come in. Now why don't you leave me alone, I have work to do."

Her quick outburst took him by surprise.

"I am sorry, I should not bother you. I come back tomorrow and get my things." His English was laced with a soft French Canadian accent.

Back to the classroom she strode, smacking off the lights with an angry determination. She was anxious to get back to her work plans, finish them and get home. These interruptions were ridiculous.

Yes indeed, her husband wasn't pleased with her Sunday evenings alone. Why not? It was her chance to catch up on lesson plans and besides he needed his peaceful moments, too. It was part of their pact.

Home was for the family. Any work to be done was for the office. There had to be a separation. Simple enough, there was work and then family. There just had to be a compartment for both.



Maybe a coffee would help relax her. Her mother always felt she was high strung. And mom was right. Suppressing a quiet giggle she filled the water urn. Then doled out coffee grounds into the filter and set the burner to 'on' as she poured water into Mr. Coffee. Should she just head home? She mused.

"Oh no. Not again!" she shouted at the walls. New tapping repeated every five seconds, "Tap-Tap-Tap" then a pause and "Tap-Tap-Tap" again.

She hurried angrily down the hall, smashing the light switch on. "Ouch that hurt." She swept along, new pumps stomping a nasty message on the polished floor. Rushing at the door she demanded loudly, "You again?"

"Yes, it's me," A puppy dog whimper answered.

"Who is this?"

"MEEE." There was a pleading now.

"I mean your name. What's your name?"

"Claude."

"Claude WHO??" she screamed.

"Pardon?"

"For goodness sakes Claude, what do you want? I can't get anything done. Why are you bothering me? Please go away." Fear chilled her voice. Anxious gestures added emphasis to her statements.

"I promise I will not bother you again."

"Good! Then goodnight!" she answered.

"Wait!!"

"What now?"

"Wait a minute. Please Madame."

"For what?" She was curious about what it was going to be this time. Listening to his whimpering tone was very aggravating. It was sort of a 'get-on-your-nerves kind of voice.'

"What is it?" She bit at a nail. So hard to be civil in a moment like this, she thought. He was being an absolute pain. How could he expect anything else from her?

"I need to use the phone."

"What for?"

"To phone my parents. To come get me."

"Don't they know you're here?"

"Oui. But only in two hours are they coming for me. After Karate and there..."

Finishing his sentence, she shouted aloud "...doesn't seem to be any tonight! We've been through all this before. What can I do to make you happy so you'll leave me alone?"

"I will phone at the drug store, Madame. Please ... let me have a quarter. I have no change."

Maybe she should have listened to her inner voice. Or even to her husband and their various discussions about the night and strangers. And what could happen suddenly and unexpectedly.

But she didn't.

"If I give you a quarter, will you finally leave me alone?"

"Yes, Madame. Thank you."

Against her better judgment she opened the front door slightly, looking him over as he stood there. His coat was wide open, a little silly for this time of year. A blue turtleneck sweater hugged his lean neck.

She noticed his hands were in his pockets. He had on new running shoes and faded jeans. A typical teenager dressed for a cold November evening. Some sarcasm here, she thought.

Fumbling in her purse she found two quarters. Fingering them firmly, she reached out to him. A mistake. Her flash of warning came too late, too late. The door pulled open, and he quickly knocked her aside. This stranger she never knew was now inside, with no one around.

An attractive lady teacher had reached out into the night. What have I done? She thought numbly.

His arm smacked off the lights, grabbed her around the stomach and pulled her inside. Taken completely by surprise, her voice couldn't even raise a whisper of an alarm.

He closed the door with a firm slam, then turned and punched her in the face. The blow glanced off her cheek, stunning her. This can't be happening. "No! No!" she now screamed. But no one was around.

One hand grabbed a handful of hair, the other punching her back and shoulder, again and again. Spinning her around, he slapped her hard. The sting made a nasty sound in the quiet room.

"That will teach you. Being so mean to me!" he snarled.

She could hardly believe his rage. His face was puffed in anger, fists clenching and unclenching. She looked away, eyes searching for a weapon.

Her brain refused to admit to this situation. It happened so quickly. An innocent offer of help was now turned into fear and chaos. She was throbbing all over from his pounding.

It was difficult have will to keep standing. Don't fall. Stay on your feet. Tuck your head in. Protect your face, she told herself. Put your fists up. Don't start crying. Around and around went her spinning thoughts.

Another hard slap to her cheek brought her back to reality. This was real. Not a movie, nor a TV program. This was happening right now. Her beautiful strong son wasn't here to look after her. And her husband wasn't aware his wife was methodically being beaten up.

It was happening right inside a darkened school hallway.

Do something. Think. Think. Gathering her wits she opened one eye, surprised to be able to do so. She noticed the young man didn't even look old enough to shave. He had smooth skin, short hair. Why was he doing this? He's neat looking. Not grubby like some drug addict, she thought.

Gathering her survival instincts she pushed back. Hands grabbed at the air, wind milling her arms, keeping her head up. And pushing. Pushing.

This act of defiance surprised him. He thought she would simply scream or go into shock. He couldn't believe she hadn't fainted.

He pulled out a knife, "I know you Madame Bisson."

How did he know her name? Oh, that was mean. That hurt. She had contributed so much to this town. Why was this happening? She managed to suppress her sobs. Her eyes widened as she stared at the knife.

Think, girl. Your life may be in danger.

The assailant just stood there, uncertainty on his young face. A mole on the right side of his cheek twitched nervously.

The reality of the knife reminded her of the seriousness of the situation.

It looked about six inches long, a hunting knife of sorts. She saw his face was flushed. Her heart hammered as they watched each other, the owl and the rabbit. She knew which one she was this very moment.

Don't run. Stare him down. She felt the situation was extremely tense. Anything could happen. At least he wasn't moving towards her. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. Her voice was taut. Did it sound frightened?

"You were mean to me."

"I helped you."

"You didn't let me get my Karate suit."

"I explained why." Keep talking. Keep him talking, she said to herself.

She rambled on and explained about working with the school children. How much she loved her family and about the town and her spare time interests. It was a one-way non-stop conversation.

And he listened. A little confused but interested. After staring at her for a while he said.

"Take off all your clothes."

"I will not! Look, if you want to rob me, or the school, do it! I have \$11.00 in my purse. Take it! That's all I have. Do what you want but don't touch me again. I mean it!" She glared at him.

He looked at her carefully, realizing she meant it. She wasn't even afraid of him, even though he had a knife. He didn't mean this to happen.

The young man seemed to be in a trance. This lady who did him no real harm suddenly seemed so far away. Her voice became an echo. This was crazy. What made him do it?

"I go to your school. In the same class with your son, Madame Bisson, I am sorry. Please forgive me. I am sorry. " A few moments later he was gone. Just like that.

She heard his running steps, then the slam of the front door. He left her there with her head pounding and her bruises aching. She heard a car screech by on the street.

Limping slightly, one hand to her cheek, she went through the front door, to the first house, a rectory. The priest almost fainted at the sight of her. He stared at first.

She had one eye swollen, cheek and mouth badly puffed and clothes torn. Her eyes blazed from a furious anger.

"Call-Call the police!" She stammered, looking fearfully behind her as evening silhouettes blanketed the town.

And he did.

“When young Buck gets separated from his mother in the woods, hunters and coyotes try to capture him. Instinct and quick hooves carry him over deadfalls, and across creeks. Will ancient trails lead him back to mom?”

...Richard L. Provencher

## SHADOW DANCER

Morning mist provided a silent wake-up call. Dew lay like a wet blanket on mother deer and young buck.

Each drew warmth from the other. Young buck shook off the moisture and stared ahead. He was anxious for his morning snack of young shoots.

It was hard to penetrate the fog with his stare. Then both deer rose to their full and beautiful stance. Their shades of brown color blended in with the willows.

A stretch of thick pine provided a screen for extra protection.

Yellowed leaves acted as a carpet of comfort. October dampness softened their pointed steps. In various places patchy snow provided a puff of white.

Mother deer and young buck walked slowly along an ancient trail. Familiar trees were their guideposts.

Ahead lay an open space. It resembled a field, but instead was a clear cutting. It looked like something had taken a huge bite out of the forest. There was also no warning of any danger.

The sun acted as a warm breath upon mother and son.

Suddenly as mother deer stepped into the open, an explosion of sound broke the silence. It was followed by another loud rush of air. Young buck stood still as an icicle hanging from a cave entrance.

Fearful images of hunters swirled in mother deer's brain.

Instinct swung her head quickly to the side. Young buck was shoved into the protection of the forest. Like a ballet dancer, her mighty sprints burst across the clearing.

She made a half circle using brush as cover. Then detoured back into the woods away from her son. Graceful movements drew her human pursuers like a magnet.

More explosions followed. Thankfully, all bullets missed.

Young buck lay where he had fallen. His last view of mother was her rising and falling white tail. It waved goodbye for now.

His child-like stare saw his mother as a shadow. Then she disappeared into the safety of the woods. Young buck watched and listened. And the forest became still again.

Then bolder sounds reached his ears. Branches were being moved aside. Other snapping noises headed in his direction.

There was a-crashing and a-running. Perhaps some other animal decided this area was getting too dangerous.

Young buck lay motionless as a tree. His ears followed the strange chatter. It was not the "rat-a-tat-tat" of a downy woodpecker. Nor was it the piping sound of a chickadee.

He sensed danger, with a capital "D."

Young buck's nose picked up man's strange scent. For the first time in his life, young buck felt fear.

Suddenly he lost all desire for food. Browsing on bark and twigs no longer interested him. Where was his mother?

Nature was part of his makeup. He was not just skin, bones and heart. He inherited patience and caution. And saved his life for a second time.

He detected new danger.



Wary movements became shadows moving through the woods. Sounds headed slowly in the direction his mother had gone.

Young buck stood shakily. The commotion finally left this section of the forest. His ears were now on full alert. They were tuned in to hear even a mosquito's buzzing.

Nervous bubbles of air were blown through his lips. It sent a frantic message to his mother. "I'm coming," were thoughts on a current of wind.

His tongue licked at moisture in the air. The sun was evaporating the balance of dawn's signature.

Young buck headed in the direction his mother took.

After seven months of life, his curved hooves were strong. They were attached to long slender legs. Each foot followed closely, in a straight line.

Young buck's natural senses led him down a familiar trail. He brushed noiselessly against a poplar. There were few left in the area.

Beavers felled many for a dam. It was over the next ridge, where young buck headed.

Water and lush grass was waiting. Young buck's lean body loped forward, in a symphony of movement.

He was determined to flush fear from his brain.

Close by, trained ears picked up young buck's silent strides. A hungry mother coyote drank in his "wild" scent. A vision of freshly chewed meat looked good on her menu.

The coyote tensed as her body inched forward. Not far behind, three more of her shaggy family followed. They awaited her signal to attack. Fifty feet separated them from their prey.

Young buck stopped suddenly. He was afraid to turn. His ears flew frightfully to a full stretch. Hearing was turned up to full attention.

His right eye was a deep pool of black. It bulged nervously. Then he spotted something coming quickly as a runaway train. A coyote was rushing in swiftly on his right side.

Instant full ignition allowed young buck a sprint for survival. His body went from camouflage and stillness to soaring. And escape.

Snapping teeth leaped for his flanks. A “Whoosh” of air propelled him forward, faster.

The chase was on.

At times, these meat-hungry coyotes crisscrossed young buck's flight path. They often paused in wonder. His fleetness surprised them.

With determination the coyotes followed his trail. Tongues lolled and empty bellies ached for a meal. This was a harvest year for the pack. Growing pups demanded much food.

Except this was not to be an easy victory. Young buck was healthy and eager to find his mother. His fear was left behind. And he led his attackers on a hard fought chase.

Young buck was able to follow worn trails. And forest retreats carefully selected by his forefathers. Now, powerful legs allowed him to run easily. His racing rhythm was meant to cover miles of territory.

Fallen clumps of brush tested his sprinting. Like his mother, young Buck's white tail bobbed up and down. "Can't catch me," it said. He had an appointment to fulfill.

Majestic leaps across narrow brooks annoyed his pursuers.

Short-legged coyotes could not keep pace with this jumping machine. Their heavyset bodies slung low to the ground. And their hindrance was added to by stands of raspberry bushes and deadfall.

Tired paws barely scrambled for a toehold. They wearily scampered up each rising ridge. After an hour's chase hanging tongues were very dry. And squinting eyes no longer saw their intended victim.

Nor did they care, anymore.

Young buck had simply disappeared...

. . .

Evening shadows acted as a blanket. It ended a celebration of dusk's last sunny fling. Maturing eyes managed to pierce the darkening sky.

Young buck was no longer afraid.

He had passed his bravery test with flying hooves. Those sneaky coyotes were far behind. They had been left in a merge of confusing trails.

In headlong flight, he traveled speeds up to 40 mph. Young buck had rested often to listen. Instinct brought him to this destination place. It was inbred in his young heart.

A sheltered sanctuary saluted him.

He sniffed the air carefully. Then he heard a familiar blowing sound. It saturated young buck with a familiar scent.

A son moved forward slowly in strength and love. Mother was calling.

She waited patiently for young buck. What tales they could whisper to each other. Later, they would relax in the coolness of this evening.

Young buck stepped forward from the shadows. He had a surprise for mother. His first set of antlers protruded as short spikes.

It was a proud moment.

Diamond-like stars gathered, in his honor. Their winking was approval for his bravery.

The stillness of the forest formed a garland of peace. And protection. It surrounded this special place.

Young buck was home.

“Some say Angels are apparitions. Others contend imaginations provide trickery, or even assail the senses with images that taint reality. As I grow through this life, I know there are Angels. And guess where they may be?”

...Richard L. Provencher

## STROLLING THROUGH PARADISE

Walking in Truro, Nova Scotia is more like meeting a feast of personalities; Angels are definitely around us. And they come in the form of laughter and smiles from people often missed as they gather in little towns such as this.

As others rush to work, Angels in Paradise are often missed. A slower pace would bring them into view. When confronted, Angels are often labeled the ‘walking wounded’ of society.

Since my own encounter with a serious illness, causing slowness in my daily walk, more meaningful moments have been drawn to my attention. And these very Angels have enriched my spirit.

It was my joy to discover Ralph, a man of darker skin and whiter teeth than mine, who hailed me on the street. Since our many conversations, it is now “Hello Richard,” instead of simply “Hey.” His red baseball cap continues to attract my attention, and I no longer wonder why so many deliberately stop and chat with the man.

He is a dispenser of wisdom, unused to foul language, cheerful in spite of weather conditions and moves from one selected corner of the street to other stations. His eager shuffle captures my admiration.

Then there is Hank. He saunters along, window-washing pole slung over his shoulder, pail of water in the other hand. Are his blue-painted running shoes a giveaway to his eccentricity? I can attest to the fact he is perfectly sane.

This man has a closet full of creative urges. He works away in the lateness of each night. When most of us are sound asleep, he's preparing his theme for next day's journey downtown.

And he carries himself with aged pride. No one knows much about his past; where he worked, if he had a family or how old he really is. Merry eyes belie the cracks of skin across his face.

Now everyone notices him when adorned in his latest creation, green painted hat a sash of green across his chest, green pants and similar colored running shoes. "Haven't figured out how to carve a shillelagh yet," he proudly boasts.

There goes Greg, stilt-like in his walk, as he maneuvers his tall frame around crowds of urgency.

Beginning quite early he walks the streets of Truro, like some guardian of the town. Arm and leg movements visibly strained due to his car accident some twenty years before.

But that was then, and this is now. Once I too hurried on by with a wave and an admonition about the weather. Now I can barely keep up to that walking wonder. Limbs stretch forward each day, dispensing a will to overcome his limitations. And I feel privileged to inhale his cheerfulness, his vigor.

Then there's Dave, hat pressed tightly to his forehead. Can't afford to lose it in the wind, since his steps are slow in the event of needed chase. Some wrongly state he is a 'challenged' person, unable to contribute much to society. So wrong are those statements of confused thinking.

I see him as a painting on a canvas. His colors are a never-ending smile. When he fixes his gaze in one's direction, you can sense the depth of peace within his heart. And I seek to absorb that contentment. The steady movement of his broom across the asphalt, dust pan in hand at MacQuarries parking lot, is a fixture upon the scene, valuable as any cherished antique.

Watch carefully, as his wife nearby has only eyes for her man. And inside her breast is her own bucket of love, ready to be shared.

Each of these angels, are monitors during my daily walk. Yes, once I too hurried on by, off to some important destination, eyes focused on my wristwatch, not wishing to be delayed. So busy, and more concerned was I for a meeting, coming up sooner than a coffee break.

Each day is the same for so many hurried persons; their bustle in life, worrying and heading gosh knows where.

Some destinations call to them as a mother loon anxious for her baby chicks. And when they arrive, perhaps continue on with unfulfilled lives.

Sadly, amid another day, some unknowingly have passed through Paradise. Not realizing that love, caring and blessings from nearby Angels are waiting to be dispensed. All it takes is a moment of hesitation, a glance, perhaps a pause.

Stop, listen and watch. And I am so thankful I am now able.

“When I grew up in northern Quebec, mining men and boys had to be tough, not prone to crying. But I discovered that is a falsehood. Tears are normal, especially when it’s dad, and you’re on a journey to his funeral.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## THE HEALER

The telephone call came from mom 7 PM. April 26, 1999. Actually it was her neighbor, Mrs. Good Person who asked, “Is this Richard, the son of Ed and Millie? Yes? I’m afraid I have some bad news for you. Here’s your mother.”

“Dickie? Your father passed away suddenly tonight, a massive heart attack. It was so fast. I can’t believe it. He’s gone.”

And then the crying began.

Thoughts and feelings swirled through my brain. It was four years ago since seeing you, dad. At the time you had been operated on for lung cancer. “He should be as good as new,” the doctor said, trying to be cheerful after the hardship we had gone through.

You had survived eight days in the Intensive Care wing. Usually a patient was out of danger in six, and relocated within the hospital. Or, they were dead. You survived being on life support on two occasions after the removal of one third of your lung.

“He’ll have no second wind,” the doctor stated at the time.

I remember that hush in the room at home in Nova Scotia, where close friends had gathered. They shared my concerns upon hearing you had undergone a lung cancer operation. A hurried decision had been made, arrangements completed and soon the plane was taking off from Halifax airport.



My prayer was, “Dear God, please don’t let dad die before I get there. I have things to say to him.” And my prayers were answered.

I now had the mission statement from St. Joseph’s Hospital in my grasp. “Caring hands” was the best part. Four years ago, you looked like the recipient of many hands. A twinkle sparked in your eyes briefly, then the doctor was gone to share some news to others waiting, on behalf of their own kin.

I remember the Family Room held ten or twelve people. Most had been crying for a loved one in the Intensive Care unit. Except for a couple of teenaged children. They shuffled nervous feet, unsure of what to say or do.

As I stepped through the doorway, my sister came out. Susan held a handkerchief to her face. After a brief hug, I went in to see you, dad. The other patients could barely lift their eyes as I walked past.

You had tubes coming out of tubes. “He’s on Life Support,” they said. You looked old, much older than 76. Still so young, I thought. I knelt and said a prayer. Later you would challenge me with, “I suppose you came all this way to save my soul.”

I didn’t know what to say at the time. If I had been quick enough on the draw, I would have answered, “Of course. I sure didn’t travel 1,500 miles by plane for nothing. And certainly not to see you die,” I would have added.

“The farthest dad ever walked was from his apartment to the liquor store down the block,” we used to joke.

At St. Joseph’s hospital in Toronto, most patients aren’t aware of the hundreds of thousands of cars whizzing by a short distance away. One of the busiest highways in Canada propels vehicles forward, almost like out-of-control kites.

But, inside the hospital most people don't seem to care about the traffic. Their concerns are about getting well, walking home, and returning to family. Some had working shifts waiting for them, and children to care for.

It was a dream for many patients to climb down from the hospital bed. Then sit at their own dinner table with family. Maybe even have a glass of water, wine, pizza, or salad. Anything. Just to be away from the medicine, needles, and pain.

And all those white-smocked people coming into the room and staring. Many would bend towards the patient and whisper concerned thoughts. After leaving, the patient was left wondering how long the healing would take.

A few family members were on their knees in the corner, praying. I joined them with my own lips moving silently. It was like being a child again. Many years ago, I did this very thing. On my knees in the classroom, facing the back of my wooden chair.

My bony knees always hurt. A priest once told us, "Pain and hardship brings you closer to God."

The first time I had a confrontation with you dad, I was three. At the time we were living on Taschereau Street in Rouyn, Quebec. Even at that age, I realized one has to be quiet on wooden sidewalks. Mr. Rubick owned the apartment house we lived in. And chasing noisy children was not on his list of favorite things to do.

Thankfully, we lived upstairs at the back, out of his sight.

One day when I was older, I let a kitten drop from the second story onto the grass below. It was a stupid thing. Thankfully, the pussycat was not hurt. I never forgot that moment of pain when I rushed downstairs to check on the cat. By the time I got there, she was gone. Since then, I

have always taken excellent care of my cats. It's as if I had to make up for that mean moment in my life. I was eight at the time.

How do I remember that incident, dad? Not long after, I had a birthday cake party. I still have the picture and count eight candles.

Back to age three. Once again I wandered off down the street via the wooden sidewalk. I was always on the go. And my growing legs became bolder and wanted to see over the next hill.

And I still have this child-like curiosity today.

Except, at that young time in my life, it was a "No-No" to head to Osisko Lake, situated in the center of our town. I was enthralled by the sound of engines. Otters and Beavers constantly landed and took off for parts unknown. My soul wanted to be part of their excitement.

Years later, I had the pleasure of travelling all around James Bay by Beaver aircraft. And its destination was totally at my command.

When I stood watching the activity on Lake Osisko, it sent sparks up and down my t-shirt and short pants. Then the back hairs from my head stood straight up. I dared to turn around and saw you coming with a willow branch to 'beat my stubbornness off.' I must have blanked out due to the results of that visitation. For some strange reason I remember no further details about the incident.

I remember doing a lot of praying all my young life. Everyone told me I was going to grow up, be an altar boy, then join the priesthood. I did neither. But, I never stopped praying for your recovery.

That time four years ago, my prayers covered me like a blanket as I traveled to Toronto. If only this blanket of precious memories could be kept intact and wrapped around your coffin, if you didn't make it by the time I arrived.

I was lucky to be able to mooch a ride with dear friends. Actually they felt sorry about my sadness. It's not the most pleasant news to hear your dad has died. So many thoughts kept churning in my mind, and words about some love still left for my father, left unsaid after all these years.

Yet, glad to have made peace with you in Toronto. It's as if the prayers I had brought then all the way from Nova Scotia stirred your soul. You had recuperated enough in the week I was there to be released shortly after I caught a plane home.

If only ... those words, left in a corner of my mind had been spoken. "I forgive you, dad," just a short phrase. I know you would have loved to hear not just the quiet closing of my mind to your ranting in the past, but my quiet whisper of forgiveness as I stood over your hospital bed.

As I watch through the car window, thoughts of your funeral occupy my mind. Why is it we don't visit often enough when someone is still alive? Somehow I must make an effort to visit my siblings, scattered from Toronto to Vancouver.

My friend's car takes us through Fredericton, NB. It's a lovely city, with trees of white birch surrounding many beautiful homes, and secluded back porches. An Irving Big Stop whizzes by, city of Salisbury too then another truck resting place. Some drivers are snoozing, others playing in the games room.

Instead of prowling the highways like those men of steel-eyed resolve, I'm on my way to dad's funeral. With friends who kindly changed their travel plans, leaving a day earlier for Toronto. Imagine just for me, and for my dad. We're going to be together again, one more time.

My spirit is numb as the countryside blurs along. My eyes glaze over, torn between memory, scenery and tears. Trees flip by, acreage stretching far into the next ridge. My mind flips through a journey of recollections, progressing from childhood forward.

As I breathe, I can still smell the pizza we ate a little while ago at Pizza Delight. 10 toppings. I had my usual ample share. Licking my lips, the aroma still covered me like mist.

Edmunston sprawls beside the highway outside my window, like an alley cat snug across several hills. Houses are sprinkled in random bunches, shingles scented with colored patterns. Mismatched shingles remind the owners where rain used to penetrate into rooms below.

Someone must have had to duck between raindrops.

A friend perhaps, someone without much knowledge in matching properly, was kind enough to volunteer the job. In any case, the act is done and the rain now redirected across the roof, to rusting eaves troughs.

Notre Dame de Lac this time of year is like a breath of icy surface. Its Bays are finger-shapes spreading in five directions. One of them is an outline similar to Moose Bay Beach, from my childhood in North-Western Quebec.

Dressed up patches of white lay in lazy clumps, aside the highway.

Leaving New Brunswick, the sun splits the mountain from sky. It pierces eyes, distracts vision, and slowly creeps into hiding as our highway dips into the next valley.

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I'm like you, dad. I care. I hurt. I cry. Remember that time mom and I went looking for you? It was Payday at the mine and you weren't home in time for supper, for two straight days. Looking for you meant that a boy of twelve had to be a man and take his worried mom from bar to bar.

Gambling and booze loved your precious paychecks. And yours was a favored feast. I found you sitting at the table in a back room, cards on the table with a stack of loose paper money in the center. My young hand shot forward and grabbed a bunch of bills.

“Take your hands off that kid,” a boozy voice said at the time. You just sat there, bleary eyed, proud of your boy. You knew I was only a kid but gutsy, making his move, because the time presented itself. That attitude often helped me in my quest for future employment years into the future.

“Mom’s outside in the foyer waiting, dad,” I said at the time.

No movement, just sadness in your eyes. No money left in your pocket, and five kids and a wife needing more than words of love. As I grew up into the world I felt that same helplessness mom felt, knowing there was going to be little to eat for a few days.

I remember this young boy, me, retreating to the front of the Sports Taverne, weaving between tables of empty glasses, stale air and go-go dancers wearing hardly a thing. My eyes flicked around, right and left, a tightness growing between my legs. I wasn’t supposed to like coming in here, but I did.

Mom was waiting. Unescorted ladies couldn’t enter the Sports Taverne, but male kids like me could. It was confusing.

We drove into the Province of Quebec at 8 pm; 7 pm Truro, Nova Scotia time. Greeted by purple streaks, pastel strands of cloudy wisps, silver and gold wrestling for space. It was a nice welcome for a return to my home province.

As darkness descended, rumbles of wheels followed. Trees mashed together in darkness, only their tops bathed in rays of descending sun, reluctant to leave this world. House lights lit up like flames from jack-lanterns, directing us to Riviere Du Loup. Hills as sleepy lions humped along the shore followed our car’s movement as it sped along on rubbery steps.

The man in the moon seems sad. He must have looked into my soul. Truck trains, two 52-foot trailers, full loads attached to a semi roared alongside. Trees whizzed by, water flashed

silvery reflections, and the sky tumbled into a sleepy stillness as late farmers completed plowing their fields.

Bedroom lights peek between blinds, peering from windows. It's as if a ranch is tired and now shutting down after a hard day on the range.

You enjoyed reading Zane Grey westerns. So did I. I always wanted to be a cowboy, ever since I was around eight. I remember running around in the snow after opening up my neat Christmas present, cap guns blazing. I wanted to be the hero, the brave one capturing villains.

And rescuing helpless damsels, waiting for someone like me. I was so young and innocent at the time.

And as I grew older, much of that bravado left me. Life's bruises stuck like shades of brown skin. You kept telling me how tough the world could be, especially after you climbed back home after the Second World War.

Dear dad, so much to remember. My head feels like a cliché. Burnt fields outside my window appear as darker patches within a spreading quilt. A car begins to race ahead on a road parallel to ours. Front and sidelights challenging. Wants to play -- now going ahead.

It's just like you, isn't it dad? I know it is. Always telling me I can do better. Sometimes I can't move fast enough to keep up. Guess I'm not supposed to get ahead of myself. And I know you'll be there waiting for me this time.

No nagging, no complaining and giving me no chance to sulk and run off into the woods where my respite always waited, by some bank alongside a wilderness lake.

I can see where Levis Ultramar oil storage tanks are followed by the Quebec City Museum of Civilization; then Travelodge Motel. Signs and more Signs appear. From Quebec City,

buildings of glass are trim bricked footsteps of light adorning the highway, pointing the way to Toronto.

The eastern sky is a sliver of silver, peek-a-boo eyes of orange on the horizon. Residential developments arise as splayed models of architecture. Hewett Caterpillars are in rows of yellow, sleek tools of construction.

My transformation from wimp to overbearing at times began as a six year old. In frustration over some silly disagreement, I tried to punch a boy in the schoolyard, missed and hit the cement wall instead. Pain and shame accompanied my hurting in class. I remember the taste of blood on my knuckles, upturned edges of skin raw, causing me to wince.

Even now I can still make out the scars on three knuckles of my right hand.

Billboards are colors of information- CAP SANTE one reads. My tears begin to fall; recollections of our few times together fade as our car continues on Highway 40 Ouest. A black sky hovers overhead, surrounds us like a piecrust. Moving forward, onward, a metronome in my head, while in the background of our car, a song. "God is Good."

Waves of geese are squadrons of newness, a journey of their return. And they remind me of the wonderful year I spent in James Bay. I wasn't lonely at all, with the Moose River breeze confronting me as I stood on the shore looking across towards the Federal Reserve.

I know you were proud of me dad, going all that way up north to work with the Cree Natives. And it helped me grow up quite a bit. More signs begin to show up, as we get closer to our destination.

TROIS RIVIERES 35

MONTREAL 205

Fleur de Lis are painted on the side of a wood shed. Separation used to be such a big thing



among the people when I lived in Rouyn. Now it's mostly the politicians trying to figure out who will be King of the glorious hilltop.

We turn off on Highway 40 Ouest to Montreal. Wood chip piles waiting for usage like us, wanting to be useful, and piled higher than a rockslide.

BAR COUNTRY is another billboard of information.

Steeple from churches rise boldly among the lesser buildings, as a mother hen surrounded by baby chicks.

8:30 am traffic now begins to pick up. Cars of all sizes, makes, colors are hurrying. Why? The flow of civilization is the first sign of human activity. (If only, you could do as it says in the Bible, dad. "Arise and come forth," Jesus said to Lazarus). I wish you were here right now, talking with me, instead of just listening to my ramblings.

Lawnmowers cough all over the boulevard, a man picks up refuse on the side of the road, and I close my eyes. It's two days now that dad has died. And I continue on my way.

RUE SHERBROOKE, ST JEAN BAPTISTE billboards.

I remember that lit up cross on the hillside. It's been about twenty years since I climbed those steps to St. Joseph's Oratory. And remember Brother Andre and his saintly ways.

Long lines of traffic match acres of oil refineries on either side of our highway. Montreal roads seem to be covered in endless rows of slow, then faster vehicles. I'm pleased that my driver knows the way. The condition of my mind wouldn't allow me to concentrate on driving.

40 OUEST

CORNALL 59

OTTAWA-HULL

TORONTO 490

BRIDGE TO USA

TORONTO 360

Construction continues on our overpass, more developments to maneuver around. Kemp

Park Playground is a collection of swings, wired up baseball backstop and grass.

Remember dad? When we played ‘scrub-baseball’ with the neighbors? Everyone used the empty lot beside the Veteran’s town-site in Rouyn, Quebec. Boys, mothers, sisters and fathers of all ages, shapes and sizes.

I could barely swing the bat properly then. I’m better now. I almost got a homerun when I played on my wife’s Montreal bank team in Sarnia, Ontario. In fact our team won the championship. It was so exhausting, that I never played since.

Highway 401 now seems to separate at Kingston. Did driving fools cause this? It’s such an expense to prevent careless ones from smashing into one another. We stopped and ate at Arby’s in Brockville.

I remember flying in a Cessna with a friend way back in 1968. We drove speedily from Toronto to Brockville to pick up a plane and practice landings. The ground below was like squares of color. I was the navigator trying to find highways on a road map.

Imagine, me? I used to be so shy, the kid with google-eye glasses. The bullies used to chase other ‘four-eyes’ like me. And here I was telling my friend where to fly his plane. Wow, I was the Navigator.

TRENTON 19

TORONTO 154

Trenton Air Cadet memories remind me of my first summer camp in 1955, an LAC at 13. And the second time there at age nineteen I was a Pilot Officer. There were six of us in charge of about 400 kids, under the supervision of adult officers, of course. What a summer that was. And I know that page is still fresh in my heart. I know you were proud of me.

PETERBOROUGH

At Haliburton Scout Camp nearby, I was a Composite scout leader for two summers. You were surprised that I would drive 400 miles on a Honda 50, with a top speed of 30 mph. And I drove all that distance including every secondary road imaginable. It was a great experience for me.

Learning to organize canoe trips and work with a team to help 32 kids from the Toronto area enjoy a summer of bugs and trees. And lake water where new swimmers learned a thing or two. And that small motorcycle my best friend Steve loaned me in 1964 sure came in handy? Yes dad, family and friends sure make life worthwhile.

It's now 3pm.

OSHAWA 17

TORONTO 72

Remember the Cub camp I went to, and my old girl friend in Oshawa? "About time you got interested in girls," you said at the time. I wonder where she is now.

TORONTO 57

Traffic is now picking up, all heading for the big city.

AJAX 67,000

I remember the population was 10,000 in 1965.

SHEPHERD/KINGSTON RD

Now we're driving on the outskirts of the big city. I'm always amazed at how such a large gathering of cars and trucks can pour into Toronto and even find a place to park. Imagine, the sign says TORONTO 2,260,000 pop (now amalgamated). There was a lot of hullabaloo about how it would be more efficient if all the surrounding towns and cities joined together for the sake of efficiency. Well, time will tell.

CTV, and other huge business towers are like tall trees over the residential areas. Cars are approaching as an army on the move on our left, the other side of a never ending-cement road divider.

‘NEW EXPRESS TOLL HIGHWAY’ is an interesting message.

AVENUE ROAD signals its approach. Remember the summer job I had in Toronto as an Air Cadet? I was learning about Orenda engines, ugh. You knew I hated grease and oil. But I wanted to do anything to get away to the big city.

KEELE ST/BARRIE

WESTON RD

The signs keep marking our way. They’re like some link to my destination, to your side. Even though we won’t speak again, I look forward to seeing you once more dad. Sadly though it will be to see you lay in your coffin.

Memories of an orange cat haunt me. It was run over right in front of my eyes at the intersection of Weston and Dundas Streets. And I really like cats.

Cars shimmer in sun’s reflection on overpasses. Remember your accident in Toronto, the year after our whole family moved there? You followed that car into the yellow light, the fellow stopping suddenly. It was the last time you drove after that fine and suspension.

I believe you now dad, it wasn’t your fault. After all these years of driving I now understand how easily it could happen.

AIRPORT sign.

My driver-friend says we’re now 1,710 km from Truro, NS.

TERMINAL 2 - NEW PARKING (Large Garage) This was certainly a surprise that a whole new area was needed for incoming planes. You didn’t like to travel by plane much, dad. But I

did. I guess it was because of my enjoyment of six years in the Air Cadets.

Then we drive from HWY 427 to QUEENSWAY to STEPHEN DRIVE.

I get out at the apartment where you lived for 30 years. Did you have really good memories living there those years dad? It was where your sudden and massive heart attack took place. I'm glad mom was there. I hope my wife is with me at the end. She and I are also very close.

By my side, forever and always, she is.

At the apartment your personal effects are well marked. Hatboxes with dark fedoras, scarves, gloves, paper bunched up in boots barely used. Papers in drawers are tidy and organized. Shirts out of style, pointy collars, some with large wings like old friends.

Pills in your desk drawer masked the silent death that was lurking at your door. You had some heart problems not even known to mom. Arthrotec- 1 tab by mouth every 4 hr (personal note marked painful). Idarac- 1 tab every 4 hr. or when required. (pain is a note scribbled on your RX bottle).

This is not really the end of my journey, dad. Yes my car trip is over. Now I'm here with the family; your sons and three daughters giving solace to Mom. Her pain is now my pain, our pain. We're sorting your memories and also getting ready for the funeral.

Your oldest son made it. And he's grown up, not only on the outside dad, but also on the inside.

Yes, I made it dad. And I'm here for you.

“Each of us have some story about their favorite pets. They not only provide companionship but a high degree of loyalty and love that is unconditional. And the following memories remind me of my dear cats.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## CATS I HAVE KNOWN

A dictionary definition of *cat*, states, “a small flesh-eating animal, often kept as a household pet...” I prefer the definition of *friend*, “a person bound to another by affection, esteem, and intimacy.

And JC, a member of our family for almost eighteen years easily related to those words. Our dear black and white had our affection, our esteem and intimacy lasting forever.

She is surely roaming a field right now, in the cat hereafter.

At the age of eight, I learned how useful cats were. My father garnered mine wood for a modest price, and accompanying this furnace-burning material was a harvest of mice. They scurried around our basement in plentiful supply. “Do something. Somebody, please,” my mother intoned.

A solution presented itself, as I noticed a small army of strays in our neighborhood. One at a time, I introduced at least six cats to our home. In a short while screeching from the fleeing victims, was in full crescendo.

Opening the basement window later, allowed a flight of fur into the full view of day. That was the end of our mice problem.

And no further mine wood was purchased.

Whiskers, a one-fanged abandoned cat hung around our home for a few years. He was a brute in the evening hours, but allowed my young sister to dress him in doll clothes. She merrily chatted, pushing the huge cat around in her baby carriage.

I began to discover the caring these felines had for humans.

Louise, my all-white cat helped this bachelor take better notice of a lovely lady. Esther, who became my wife, was not really fond of cats at first. But she was the only lady friend who received the gift of four padded feet jumping into her lap, each visit.

After a tragic accident with a car fan belt, Louise departed from this world. I am sure a special place was reserved for such a loving friend.

Fluffy joined our family after our visit to the SPCA. Her bushy hair, and calico colors made it easy to name her. She followed us everywhere in our walks around the neighborhood. And this little bundle of colored fur had the habit of chasing after the largest dogs that seemed to tolerate her.

She loved to lie tightly against my side each night, fearing to let me out of sight. And as she approached ten years with us, her health began to fail. We decided to get her a sister.

Another visit to the SPCA brought me into contact with JC, who repeatedly pawed at the cage door. She sensed her allotted time in care had run out.

We named her JC, after the Jayco trailer we purchased the same day. Now Fluffy and JC thoroughly enjoyed each other's company and then accompanied us in our moving to Pictou.

Unfortunately, Fluffy passed away a short time after our arrival and her remains are in the rich red soil of Nova Scotia.

Due to a strange neighborhood, JC was lost for several days. But her remarkable cat-chatter earned overnight attention from a couple nearby.

Then we settled in our home in the country near Truro, JC was in her glory. Three acres of woods were explored, trees to scratch, and mice available in our earthen basement.

My niece gave us a Christmas gift. “Boots was really a friend for Fluffy,” she said. He was a one-year gray, and the first male we had. Both cats became inseparable. They played as mother and child.

One day, JC came crying to the house, and led us back to where Boots was fearfully swaying with the wind, 30 feet high in a tree.

Unfortunately Boots was run over by a car. It was a sad time for everyone, but more so for JC. In fact, she often lay on her adopted child’s grave, located between two huge maples in our back yard. She truly lamented the loss of her companion.

When it came JC’S turn to go to sleep, we were most saddened. Our friend had lived almost twenty years, mostly with our family. We had shared so much in the great adventure of growing older together.

And years later, we still miss her so.



“This is a story of survival, and pits a determined hunter against the elusive snowshoe rabbit. Both have a purpose, one to capture his manhood, and the other merely to survive. Through trials each wins.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## THE HUNTED

Snowshoe prints were hasty in their scampering ahead of the hunter. Its steps left behind were similar to breaths of pressure upon the surface of newly fallen snow.

Powerful back legs pushed down, gaining purchase in the layered softness, then leaps of fearful jumps.

Silently and without pause, the relentless pursuer followed. A pair of weathered pinewood Algonquin-style snowshoes shaped like a pear, created its own impressions one careful thrust at a time.

Except in this case, dark shadows were ominous as they remained within their craters.

An exposed branch hid beneath the crusty covering, a reminder from last night's drop in temperature. Then it scraped free from bondage and whip-lashed backwards, announcing itself with a loud crack in the crisp stillness of the morning.

“What the...?” was a loud question of exhaled anger from the man. His recoiling movement interrupted the reverie of a bushy-tailed red squirrel, as he lost his balance and fell heavily into a growing collection of willow trees.

Without hesitation the white, furry ball took this as an opportunity to scamper into the security of the nearest pine tree. His twitching body chattered an anxious message of “Intruder Invasion” in this forgotten part of the forest.

At least, until this enemy of the lair came along.

The task of following newly laid rabbit prints in the snow had begun early this morning. It was almost an obsession for the man, an act of perseverance in tracking down the owner of these fleeing tracks.

The trail had proven more challenging than first imagined. As if it was simply a game, the lone rabbit bulldozed its way under a stand of scratchy raspberry bushes, then overlapping branches of green. And again, as if to taunt his tormentor, twitched his tail in derision and dropped some brown samples for him to ponder.

The animal's prints led the pursuing man through a harvest of hardwood. It had grown over some twenty years, and was more like a family as the trunks and spreading branches gathered ever closer in clusters.

Hearing the continuing pursuit, the rabbit raced across an open expanse of beaver meadow and downwards into the darkness of a ravine. Sunshine had little chance to penetrate clumps of brush, and fallen trees.

It was here where the prey rested, hiding within the mask of sounds from a trickling stream. Animal breath steamed, nostrils quivered and his little heart 'jack hammered,' seemingly loud enough to be heard beyond the ridge he had just left.

Was it too much to hope the "shush" of water provide a blanket of respite? Was it possible to cloak shivering sounds of fear as the animal trembled in the deep woods?

Natural expressions from Nature's Book of Menus brought the pursued back to reality.

A hurried crunching from the chase was like a sudden summer thunderstorm in the quietness of this crisp morning. The hunter's approaching form sent new tremors racing through the tiny white body.

Ears strained for a return to earlier moments, when it had felt safe nibbling quietly on young twigs.

Slender branches whipsawed noisily from the man's movements as he plowed through their midst. Willowy limbs wiggled free from their icicle connections to the snowy surfaces.

Another restful pause allowed the capture of a second wind of energy. In that short period of time, the forest scene was able to provide a sense of awe for both hunter and hunted. It encouraged one last opportunity to remind them of nature's beauty, before the main menu of the journey was completed.

The fierceness of this hunting trip was determined by scowls tumbling through the hunter's thought patterns. He tried to shy away from remembering he missed his quarry last time out.

Perhaps this was the same elusive foe. The man had carefully reviewed his topographical maps, determining where all the ravines might lead. No longer would he wander aimlessly seeking his foe. Today, he was better prepared.

A hot bolt of determination decided it was time to push away the scenic beauty. Nature was adorned in its fullness. It was time to re-focus and take control of the situation, to force a new direction and logic into the equation of this hunt.

The man's leathery mitt patiently pushed aside a collection of pesky willow branches, allowing a full panorama of the dense woods. One more kick at the can, so to speak. The view introduced a winding stretch of forest, from Balsam and Scotch trees, to Poplar stragglers.

Tamarack and others not yet named in the hunter's repertoire of knowledge, seized space aside the hillside.

Each squinting glance from the veteran hunter followed a slash of white. It was as if a huge paintbrush had placed a swipe of white to offset the ribbons of green.

Scattered birch, proud with aged memories reached high into the sky. Reflecting sun blinked across bleached and shredding birch skin.

A brown shade moved boldly across the hunter's view, gracefully stepping into a cove of trees. The suddenness of the deer's foray aroused an interest in the hunter. He was tempted to retrace his steps and return to his station wagon. Back there was a .30.30 caliber rifle, just the right answer for that haughty buck.

But then, that adventure was for another time. The hunter surmised he already spent much time and energy on the set of rabbit tracks before him.

The sight of the majestic buck, however, now prodded certain memories. On many occasions such as this, he and his father now returned to the good earth, had spent seasons in the woods.

Perhaps it was wise to take some time to enjoy the view, and to reflect on those past adventures.

The man selected an ideal campfire spot under a large blue-tipped spruce. It was fitting to share space with this treasure of the forest.

He scraped away a circle of snow right to the ground, and placed a foundation of wood in preparation for smaller bits of wood. The man's experience during camping adventures with his dad had taught him the right types of wood to select.

Tepee style was the best and quickest method of placing the wood in order to create the quickest start. Before long, his bare hands were warming to the fire. Curling flame produced a wood scent that reached deep into his heart, and provoked a child-like sobbing.

“Always make a little fire, when you go on an outing,” his father had said so often. “It helps you think, and remember things.”

The man looked down at his weathered hands. They had been through much. He thought of his wife back home, and the four children who depended on him. They understood his need to get away on his own like this. They went on trips together, but on occasion it was necessary to be by alone.

He reflected on the death of his father several years before. And how painful it had been traveling from Nova Scotia to Toronto to attend the funeral. “A massive heart attack,” mom had said over the phone.

Death was so final, he thought to himself. And now here he was pitting his hunting skills against a worthwhile foe in the presence of a veteran jackrabbit.

The man was proud of his wood lore, and his prowess at tracking his prey. Determination and patience was the key. And yet, this flavor of raising a cold-barreled weapon of death sometimes made him reflect on his reasons for the hunt.

Beneath this salient of the forest, he was definitely the intruder. And as he mellowed through life, he did question why he had this need to shoot down deer, partridge...and rabbits. Was it an insatiable desire to overpower, to prove man’s dominance over nature? The questions were revealing and really had no place in this adventure. Or, did they?

The fire was now a gray mass of smoking embers. And the man raised himself to renew the hunt. Except, it was not so important now to capture the flesh of the rabbit. He knew the animal was nearby, filling his nostrils with the wood smoke, waiting and wondering what the pursuer was going to do.

He checked his weapon to make sure snow did not enter the barrel, then loaded it and

put the safety on. Snowshoes on he turned and began to follow the last seen tracks.

Not far away was a collection of deadfall, with a scattering of brush hiding a potential target. The man approached in a steady rhythm, with each snowshoe lifting, easing forward.

Finally, the rabbit could stand the emotion of strain no longer. He made his presence know with an explosion of movement. And bolted from his shadowy hideout.

Its quick burst of bounding came as a desperate last-ditch effort to shake off this stubborn hunter-predator.

The man was waiting for this precise moment. After all the stalking through the woods, a patient pursuing of his worthy foe, it now ran before him.

The scene before him had been replayed many times in the past. With his father on similar hunting trips he had felt the exhilaration of success. And at the same time often wondered about the level of fear from the victim.

However, the man knew the daring dash for freedom would be much too late. Just as quickly, a .22 Cooney repeater could be raised upwards in one swift and fluid motion. The super accuracy of the hunter's skills was fashioned from long hours of practice, firing at tin cans and bottles.

He knew an energized "POW! POW!" impatient from inactivity, would create an echo of mutated sounds. And they would reverberate with a satisfied sigh throughout the valley.

A shudder of shock, old as painful memories, would then thud into tender flesh. A second fierce intrusion could easily discover an entrance between valleys of bone.

Hunter and hunted had finally met; one prepared to shoot, one accepting his fate. The script was a replay of intensity, captured from ancient tales of the Hunt. Planning and stalking were now completed chapters.

The human's heart hammered with excitement, exhaling satisfaction arising from an inward cheer. Only then at that precise moment was the slender instrument of death and destruction lowered.

A satisfied smile crept slowly across the hunter's face.

Less than a hundred feet away a jackrabbit panted with exhaustion. It did not lay on its side, crimson and thrashing in anguish. This veteran of many seasons would not face a loss of his future. Time to a creature of the woodlands is measured in seasons.

And he would not be removed from starry nights on a myriad of trails alive with dancing moonbeams.

Nor would blood gush from a fatal head shot, staining the whiteness in an area of final rest. There would be no wounds to spread its stain like a red blanket. Purity and nobleness upon the white landscape was now replaced by the finality of hostile cessation.

High above, a crow's "Caw-Caw" signaled the declaration of truce between man and beast. The feathered creature no longer considered departure to a more tranquil valley. The serendipity of this morning continued to develop within the awesome stillness of a proud forest.

Victory shouts did not hasten from the man's grizzled throat. And there was gladness in the finality of the moment. With a lighter heart the man realized chasing wild creatures through the forest no longer was a reason for his manhood.

Respect for this creature of the forest was necessary. The man was certain that his action was really an acknowledgement of success. And he knew his father would understand. No longer the hunter, the man lowered his rifle, bullet unspent, a smile spreading beneath the tears in his eyes.

“This one’s for you, dad,” he managed to say.

Uttered softly at first, but with determination, other words were barely heard by the rabbit awaiting his sentence. The hunter’s shout now lifted above the silence in the morning’s crisp air, “Dad! I love YOUUU!” was an echo of remembrance that traveled back and forth from ridge to ridge.

The rabbit was unsure of the momentum of the moment. He was surprised to be alive and not twitching in the form of a dying animal.

"And I miss you," was an exclamation of solemn escape from the man’s chapped lips. It signaled the end of today’s hunt.

The man turned. And left the jackrabbit to live further lives in the domain of his inheritance.



“Unfortunately in the distant past single moms had a most difficult time. It was considered a blemish on the family if a child was born out of wedlock. Yet that same child was never forgotten in mom’s mind. And much loved.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## LOVE YA, MOM

Early morning sun shone in Laura's eyes. Its warmth across her face was an invitation to another day. Through the window she watched clouds drift across a blue landscape.

She stretched, long arms grabbing at the air. Fingers clenched and unclenched. Then she twisted around and stepped onto the cold morning floor. After locating her housecoat and slippers she made her way to a spare room, used as an office.

Then Laura settled comfortably in a favorite chair. She noticed the clutter and dust and pushed all unnecessary junk away with a bold sweep of her arm. Crash went the book laying precariously on the edge. "Sorry, Dr. Spock." But then, he was old hat now. In fact she heard him on TV apologizing for his first book, and he vowed to correct his advice on raising children.

She pulled out the drawer, selected a clean sheet and using an aggressive flourish, began to write...

Dear mom,

It's been so difficult all these years. I'm thirty and scared silly. It hasn't been easy raising a child alone. Someday I'll tell Brett he has another brother.

Edward is a living breathing part of me out there somewhere. I regret that I adopted him out when I was very young and foolish. Maybe he's just down the street, or on the other side of town. In another city or country.

A part of me keeps hearing, "Where are you, mommy?" All I can answer is, "I still love you, Eddie my son." Brett has to know.

You said you would support me when I picked the time. I can't hold back much longer. I'm going to say something, soon.

Edward is on my mind so much lately.

I just don't know what to do...

Laura stopped suddenly. Then pushed away her writing materials got up and walked down the hall. She peeked around the bedroom door, silent in her slippers.

Her son Brett was still a-sleep, blankets pulled tightly to his chin. Eight years old with fair complexion and shiny brown hair. Deep thoughts seemed to have etched across his brow.

He stirred at the sudden stillness in the room, scratching at his chest. He was a small built engine of energy but the doctor said not to worry. "He'll spurt suddenly."

"Then you won't be the smallest kid in your class any longer," she said at the time.

*He is quality material*, Laura thought to herself.

She padded over to the bed taking him in with her gaze, feasting on his morning stretches. His youth, his vitality gave her a lift.

"Mom, morning already?" Half-closed eyes looked up.

"Yes dear."

"Why's the sun so early?" Brett stifled a yawn, blinking from the beam of light striking his right eye.

"It's fifteen minutes after seven," his mom said raising an eyebrow. "Hurry up chum, or I'll be late for work."

"YOWIE! That time already! Guess I got to get up." He reluctantly pulled back the covers. Then his eyes became fully alert, dreams pushed away as fading memories.

"Not right this minute, hon." Laura joined her son with a quick spring onto the bed, jostling him, tickling his feet.

"Stop! Stop! What are you doing? HEYY MOMM!"

"Just loving you, hon." A warm embrace smothered his shoulders. She kissed his forehead then stood up quickly before he protested any further.

"Okay you. Out of bed. Quick! Quick! We have to wash, dress, eat and I don't want to be late."

"Why not?" He threw her an impish grin, feet pedaling the air.

"Cause your granny will think I'm spoiling you, that's why not." Their cat Boots almost got trampled as mother and son chased each other around the house.

Pulling out of the driveway at 8:30 AM, allowed Laura ample time to bring Brett to school. She paused barely long enough to give him a quick hug in front of the Parade Elementary School.

Then she was off to work at the grocery store.

Mr. Harvey the school principal watched through the Venetian blinds. He was a little bored waiting for classes to begin. He saw the quick embrace in the car before Brett got out, then his goodbye wave.

*Nice kid*, he thought to himself. Well mannered, good looking and healthy as can be.

Everyone thought for sure he'd have difficulty being an only child in a one-parent family. It must still be rough on him with his dad leaving home a couple of years ago.

*Hard to figure out*, he thought to himself. Mrs. Weatherbee was a 'looker' and a good person. Any man would be proud of such a lady. Anyone it seems, except her husband Ron. He had it made. Or did he? Gossip said he drank too much and even beat his wife before he lit out. Apparently Laura never let it get her down. She was too proud.

*Oh well*, he thought, *time to get ready. School's about to start...*

Brett hurried to his class moments before the bell rang. He gave one quick glance at his over boots hoping they would still be there at recess.

Mom was very unhappy when his last pair went missing last week. Maybe someone else needed them more than he did. Now his name was printed in inky letters on the inside of each boot.

He saw Mrs. Sullivan's stern look as he entered his grade three class. Brett melted into his seat.

"Mrs. Weatherbee? How are you this morning? Laura! HELLOOO!"

Laura looked up, awakened from her thoughts. "Phew. I must have been daydreaming," she called out. It was Lee Archibald, parked alongside. She quickly got out of the car returning a smile at her boss.

They didn't have much time to tarry since customers were starting to line up at Archibald's Grocery. His father owned the store for twenty-two years before passing it on to his son, Lee.

"Laura, you seem pre-occupied this morning. Perhaps I should give you a penny for your thoughts. Or is it a quarter nowadays?" He was a tall man, and determined to run a mile each morning before work.

"Thanks Lee, you always were a generous man. And I believe it's up to a LOONIE now."

The day sped by and Laura managed to be her usual efficient and cheerful self as head cashier. This is what she loved, getting out and being with people.

The day passed speedily.

She had always wanted to work, but Ron didn't like the idea. "Just to get out of the house, once in a while," Laura had said so often. "A part-time job would also help with the bills."

"I don't think it's necessary for my wife to work. I won't have it," he used to rant on.

Endless discussions on the matter got nowhere and their debts mounted. How could she convince him that everything was starting to come apart? Ron didn't trust her to be out of the house. Ever since she confessed to having a child out of wedlock several years before they were married. She mistakenly thought he would be forgiving.

Laura had gone to live with her mother until Edward was born and sadly gave him up for adoption. She couldn't dream of raising him on her own. She wanted him to have a better chance with someone else. It seemed like the right choice at the time.

He was a beautiful child, her first. Sparkling blue eyes and his happy smile remained with her all these years. The hardest part was the day Laura kissed her Edward good-bye. Legal papers were finally signed and now it came to a painful conclusion. It was such a difficult time for her. "Good-bye baby, good-bye Edward. I'll always love you."

Then he was gone.

There were many times over the years when she worried about her young son. Wondering how he was coming along. Wondering whose name he had. And even where he was. She always

hoped the family that adopted him would never change his first name. She wanted him to at least have that gift from herself.

Things were never the same again between her and Ron. His drinking started shortly after Laura told him about Edward being born. He had even lost interest in his own son, Brett.

She saw the danger signals and vowed she would never give her second child up to anyone. Not for any reason. Never, never again, even if it meant just the two of them alone against the world. And now they were.

Not really against the world but just trying to make ends meet on her modest salary.

At least they had each other.

She had a good position and she counted her lucky stars the job came along when it did. She had much to be thankful for. Morning's rush of customers brought her back to the present.

Edward sat on the snow bank staring thoughtfully at the children racing around during recess.

He wondered how many in the schoolyard were like him, adopted. It was a strange feeling, living in someone else's home. Away from your own mom and dad.

He once overheard his Children's Aid worker say he was a 'difficult child.' Why? Edward had wondered at the time.

He seemed healthy enough even though he was small for his age. And his baby blue eyes peeked through long lashes. *They made him so lovable.* At least that's what girls in his class said about him. Yet, his innocent looking features could be quite deceiving. *Good thing they don't know how angry he felt inside.*

Edward thought about the four foster homes he had lived in. Also there were two other adopting families who had given up on him. He couldn't forget the beatings either, at one of his foster homes.

The Children's Aid worker was an older person, experienced in working with 'hard-to-place' children. She had said, "I've finally found the right couple for you Edward."

His new family had three children of their own; all older. This time it just had to work out. And it did for a while. He was nine years old when he went to live with his new family, the Lapointes.

At first they were just another pair of faces but Edward was loved. For the first time in a long while, he felt comfortable. He was finally at peace with himself. Except when he thought about his real mom, it felt like there was an empty space inside. He wondered where she was right now.

He knew there was a place for him in this world. If only somehow he could stop his lying and stealing. Or else, the Lapointes might give up on him, too. But it wasn't easy getting rid of old habits.

He tried so hard to stop taking money from his brother and sister's piggy banks. How did he expect to get anything for Christmas the way he was behaving? There were many family discussions to help him out.

Poor school habits had cost him two failed school years. Now Edward was going on thirteen and only in grade six. He was getting bored with the young kids in his class. Something had to happen, soon.

The recess bell rang, interrupting his rambling thoughts. He had a court date tomorrow afternoon. This would be his third appearance for theft charges. Judge Templeton told him he'd just better not come back with further problems.

"I hope they don't send me away," Edward said quietly to himself.

Moistened eyes looked up at the sky. Only the blowing wind and snowflakes falling on December's whitened ground heard him. It should have been a relaxing moment. But it wasn't.

"Oh mom. Where are you? I miss you." He knew his new mom was a very nice person but he needed his real mom right now. Tears streamed down his face as he closed his eyes. Edward needed to feel her arms around him right now. Did he let both moms down?

His hair re-arranged itself in the wind, jacket open wide in spite of the coolness. Young fists balled up with worry.

The recess bell rang and everyone started back to classes. Edward wiped the moisture from his eyes. At first, he didn't notice a younger boy watching him.

"Hi," the young voice said. "I'm Brett. Is something wrong?"



“New family dynamics may challenge old customs, yet there will never be a replacement for mothers. Whether, human, furry or feathered, mothers are distinctive. And never, will their role as guardians of the family cease.”

...Richard L. Provencher

## IN MOTHERS WE TRUST

From my living room, I see bird feeders on my balcony, with provisions for a variety of beaks. Adventurous ones discover this private hideaway, nestled beneath towering maples.

Three birch trees with shredding bark provide a colorful backdrop of contrast.

In the name of love, a magical interlude soon takes place. A sparrow seeks out the sunflower seeds. Feet scrabble for a purchase of space on the feeder.

It must be a mother. How do I know? She begins feeding another smaller sized version, of herself.

The smaller sparrow is patient on the porch railing, mouth wide open.

Then mother swoops down, sticks her beak inside dropping her cargo. This luxurious moment between mother and child is a scene I view with overwhelmed eyes, a feast of pleasure.

This is a link of love, between mother and child. The act of caring outside my window is no different than that between humans. I watch the mother sparrow go from feeder to feathered child at least six times.

The older bird has opened up the shells saving only the soft and delicious inside seeds. Finally, the baby's appetite is abated. And mother is off to other chores.

In a few moments, this tiny bird escapes into another adventure.

So it is too, with human children who depend on their mothers for nurturing. And in spite of difficult hardships, strength from within their hearts allows each to carry on.

I know of one such mother whose child is in need of Total Care. Her little boy has never known the feel of grass on bare knees. Nor has he felt the slap of a ball in a First Baseman's mitt.

But, he adores her with his fixed stare, eyes absorbing this dear mother.

She proudly pushes her son around in his wheel chair, singing and carrying on a one-way conversation. "See my Brad," she relates to any passerby. "He enjoys going for a ride on such a sunny day."

And somewhere within his pattern of thought, the little boy sometimes manages to grunt an affirmative.

Yes indeed, there is joy amongst the pain of life.

Another mother approached me one day to write a children's story for her boy who was petrified about going to the hospital. You see, he was facing a life-threatening operation and didn't know if it was okay for a ten-year old boy to cry.

She wanted to assure her son that mother's love was beside him all the way.

In my short story, I had the brave lad get up early, although with trepidation, and soon he was checked into his hospital room. Unknown to Bryant, a surprise birthday party took place before his operation.

It was then, in my story, the boy asked his mom if it was okay to cry. Except these were tears of happiness, to know mom cared enough for him to invite friends for such a party.

Both mother and child enjoyed the story.

Mothers love their children. And whether it is a lady sparrow, or a mother with concerns for the health of her little one, nothing can sever these perpetual ties.

Even in death, there is a gladness of spirit. Where even little ones are elevated to the highest degree of love in a mother's heart.

Such was the case with another friend. A son's life was lost in a tragic accident. An unfortunate slide down a hill and crashing into the car's grill ended the bright hope of life for nine-year old Ashley.

The absence of this young life in the mosaic of his family was devastating. Yet spirits were not crushed. A filament of love continued to sparkle within mother's bosom.

A little poem relates the active presence of that child in her spirit. And it is pasted within his mother's heart. The piece of paper reads:

"SON, You're a star so bright, you're a shining in the night. You're golden pride with silver, and lace. I know your place. You're now the child in my dreams. You're my Prince at peace."

Each night she reads those written words, wipes away gathering tears, then tucks the letter under her pillow.

And sleep mingles with a mother's love for her child.

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