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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

I'm Not From Here, I Just Live Here:  
Rural-Academic Conflict in English Studies

BY

Randal Smathers



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and  
Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta  
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*I'm not from here  
but people tell me  
it's not like it used to be  
they say I should've been here  
back about ten years  
before it got ruined by people like me*

*we can't help it  
we just keep moving  
it's been that way since long ago  
since the stone age, chasing the great herds  
we mostly go where we have to go*

*--James McMurtry*

## Abstract

This thesis is an exercise in exploring boundaries. In form, it is a work of non-fiction, yet it is based largely on my family's oral tradition, most of which is at least unverifiable, if not fictionalized. The work is also designed to be read either as individual, thematically-linked essays, or as a larger paper which presents a cohesive, although incomplete, narrative.

The content moves between genres. The primary genre is biography, with autobiography, excerpts of family stories, and literary criticism woven in. The central issue explored is the difference between my family's background of rural poverty, and my privileged position as a graduate student.

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## Introduction

My Dad likes to work on genealogy. A few years ago, he rented a computer and bought a program called *Family Tree Maker*, so he could record the family's entire known history on floppy disk. I have a copy of the program now, passed on to me as the family Bible will eventually be. In all honesty, I would rather have Mom's piano than every Bible in the world. I will get back to the Bible later, and the piano, but the computer program serves as a good introduction to our family.

Like most programs, it's easy to personalize, so my printout from it grandly announces "Ancestors of Randal Boyd Smathers" across the top of the first page. A box on the left side has my name, followed by my birthdate and birthplace

December 14, 1960  
Pouce Coupe, B.C.



Two lines lead from my space on the page back a generation to my parents' boxes, and then more lines to my grandparents', then over the page to more boxes, and so on. There is little that seems remarkable here for a western Canadian family, just a slow, sporadic movement from the East over the generations:

--my mother, Claudia Schobert, born in the same hospital I was

--her mother, Thora Morse, born in Palmer, Saskatchewan

--her mother born in Iowa and her father in  
Minnesota

--his father changed the family name from  
Masse when he moved from Quebec

--five  
generations distant  
from France

--(the  
matrilineal march goes back to one John Rogers, born in England in 1605, who emigrated to the New World at about the time of the *Mayflower*, and whose family settled in and around Tauton, Massachusetts for five generations before Roxanna Makepeace was born in Freedom, New York, in 1820, and the move West resumed).

--my mother's father, Charlie Schobert, was born in  
Minnesota, the son

--of a younger son

--of a German brewer and innkeeper.

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--my father, Terence Smathers, born across the Alberta border from Dawson Creek, in Bay Tree

--his mother, Olive McRann, born in Saskatchewan

--her mother from a branch of the Secord family of Ontario (our brush with Canadian history--we're probably distantly related to Laura somehow)

--her father also from Ontario; the son of

--James McRann, born in Cork County, Ireland, 1826.

Finally, the most relentless wanderers of all, my father's father's family, the Smathers; each generation from different places:

--B.C. and Alberta

--preceded by Idaho and Oregon

--preceded by Indiana, Iowa and Missouri

--preceded by Kentucky, Scotland

--and parts unknown

My own interest in genealogy is slim, compared to my father's. I am much more interested in the stories behind the people than their names, or their birth or death dates. That interest in the stories is part of why I am writing this. The stories themselves are another reason; I loved sitting with my Granddad Smathers while he told and retold stories of growing up in the bush, or of playing baseball and hockey, of favourite horses or dogs, hunts and dances.

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Those stories are fading now, as the generation they belonged to fades as well. Robert Kroetsch has said that, to understand the West, you have to listen to the stories in beer parlours:

The trick is just this: to hear a pub. To look at the interior of a prairie pub is merely a pleasure; to listen is to recover our story, is to dwell at the centre again ("Moment" 30).

But in the right house, the kitchen table works just as well.

The stories of moving West are common enough--*The Grapes of Wrath* is perhaps the most famous example--but most of them are of a rags-to-riches, *East of Eden* variety, of a well-to-do family's humble beginnings. My own family tree contains such a story: my mother's family. Grandma and Grandpa Schobert sold eggs as well as milk and honey from their farm in the Peace River country; all the children--three girls, then a boy--raised there have gone on to raise solid, middle-class families of their own. This is not a surprise to anyone who visited the Schobert farm. Heading north from Dawson Creek, past the little villages of Rolla and North Rolla, you arrive at a tiny cluster of buildings --a rural school and a store and post office--called Doe River, then turn right, and go on a few miles, and there was the Schobert place. You couldn't miss it--there was a big white plywood sign out front proclaiming the Schobert

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Apiary: Honey for Sale. Up the long drive, past the chicken house; the bee-house itself, with honey storage, off to the left, next to the little house belonging to Uncle Joe and Aunt Loyce (actually great-uncle and great-aunt, grandpa's brother and grandma's sister); right at the big concrete machine shop, left before the barn, then finally up to Grandma and Grandpa's house, set up above the road with a rock retaining wall and front lawn.

Inside was no less impressive: a pool table in the basement, a huge kitchen with modern appliances, a lift so Grandma wouldn't have to walk up and down stairs with the laundry, a television when they were not all that common on farms, a television as far back as I can remember (I saw Neil Armstrong land on the moon on that T.V.), the big upright piano that Mom has now--solid red mahogany, so heavy that it takes six men to push it up a ramp, purchased for the girls to learn music on from a travelling preacher who got tired of carting it around the country in a wagon, painted with ugly black enamel until Grandma decided to strip it down and see what was underneath. And every inch of the house continually spotless, so a six-year-old boy was afraid to touch things for fear of breaking them, except the toys that were always hidden away somewhere: a croquinole board, checkers, a Barrel of Monkeys, an Etch-a-Sketch, some wooden blocks and plastic rings, colouring books and

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crayons, and downstairs the pool table and Uncle Lyonel's twist hockey game with players from all six N.H.L. teams.

Grannie and Granddad Smathers' place was completely different--different enough that a child could sense the fact that, after a fifteen-mile drive from Doe River, this was a new world. To begin with, you didn't have the same sense of having reached a destination when you arrived at the Smathers' homestead. Instead of a long drive to a big house, you could see Grannie and Granddad's place from the highway, an unremarkable farmhouse that you had to turn off the road to get to, set in front of a barn, pigpen, and corral. Everything seemed dirty, small. Grannie was not a good housekeeper; perhaps raising four boys and only one girl was part of it, but not all, I think. Similarly, Mom tells me that Granddad, while a hard worker, was "not good with money." I suppose that poverty doesn't make it easier to keep a nice house. Dad tells that, during the building of the Alaska Highway (Al-Can then, but Canada seems to have been dropped--another situation where the end of a road seems more important than the place you reach by turning off the highway?) the Army would not let its officers eat at the Smathers' household as they worked nearby, for health reasons. Dad also mentions that some enlisted men (including, I suspect, some good ol' boys) enjoyed the family's hospitality.

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The easy way to explain that side of the family is indeed to reach into American lore; to the Appalachians, to the hillbillies. Dad's genealogical research eventually led him to something called *The World Book of Smatherses*, put out by a publisher in the States who apparently does these books for clans of all types. *The World Book of Smatherses* confirmed what we had already suspected: the largest concentration of the surname in North America, if not the world, is in North Carolina. We suspected this from a trip taken in the sixties, through the South, by a great-uncle of mine--John Calvin Smathers, Granddad's brother, from the Idaho part of the clan. He was in some small town in the hills of North Carolina and went into a store. The storekeeper, who had never seen Uncle John, greeted him with "Well, Smathers, haven't seen you in ages." Thinning red hair, sharp noses and chins appear not to be recessive genes in the family.

Why this connection would come as a surprise to anyone in the family, I don't know. Dirt-poor, fond of hunting and fishing, barter, music, storytelling, and with a sense of family as blood relations, as *kin*. The only thing lacking from the hillbilly family stereotype was the location (and apparently the incest). Those characteristics defined the family in Granddad's generation, and to a lesser extent my father's (a change for which I credit largely my mother and

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one or two of my aunts). More importantly, such habits were not unusual for the time and place the clan occupied (mostly rural Idaho and farms in the Peace Riv. country of B.C. and Alberta). As my generation arrived, however, the bonds began to loosen, and my father, his sister and brothers gradually drifted away from the bush in varying degrees. One uncle is a heavy duty mechanic in Red Deer; another drives every variety of heavy equipment known, around Kamloops; my aunt married a hardware salesman and later retired to Creston; my immediate family moved around a lot, primarily in small towns in B.C.. Most of my cousins have a reasonable level of schooling (high school, some tech schools, one--the last of our generation--attending Emily Carr art school in Victoria, working on computer animation). But one pure hillbilly strain remains: Uncle Glen and Aunt Edna's family. I will conclude this history with their story, because it is the story of the family as I remember it, growing up, before my mother and various aunts did their good works. It is where we come from, much more than any dot on a map.

These essays began as a work of frustration. I have always considered myself a small-town boy, close to my family and our rural traditions. As such, I also viewed myself as being different, outside of the academic mainstream. My father has a grade eight education, my mother grade twelve. One uncle, on my mother's side, completed a

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teaching diploma after taking a program at Vermilion Agricultural College, but otherwise, my generation is the first in our family to go on to post-secondary education, and I am the first to receive a Bachelor's degree. My frustration began when I started taking English courses at the 400-level. I often found myself in discussions over texts in which a variety of feminist or post-colonial theories would be expressed. The way these theories were commonly used--whether the authority cited was Edward Said, Julia Kristeva, or a deconstructionist like Michel Foucault seemed not to matter--was to treat the experience of white, North American males as both hegemonic and privileged. Briefly (and here I am generalizing a set of class debates over two or three years), these discussions would focus on a difference between western (male-dominated, logocentric) society and an "other," be it a gender or racial difference. Those who were "other" were victims of discrimination, while whites, especially white males, were automatically part of the centre, the hegemony, the privileged. This view was at odds with my personal experience, and that of most of my family. We come from what is often called a working-class background. I am uncomfortable with class labels, as Western Canadian society is much less stratified than the European ones class theory arose from: nineteenth-century England and Germany in particular. The term we would more likely use for



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ourselves is "poor." The degree of poverty has varied from generation to generation and family to family, but my ancestors have never been wealthy. In order to treat North American culture as a hegemony, one has to ignore the constraints of poverty on large portions of the supposedly "privileged" mainstream, just as gender has placed different constraints on women (and, I would argue, some men).

I am not arguing that discrimination against women and minorities does not exist, or denying that in some situations being a white male has helped me or my white male relatives. Neither am I attempting to outline a "victim position"; I tend to find most such texts self-defeatist to the point of being offensive. Nor am I trying to outline a comparative position of oppression. Undoubtedly there are many, even within western Canada, whose disadvantages are far more severe than even my poorest cousin's. What I found frustrating is that in many of our seminars, a classmate, trying to promote the validity of the "marginalized other," seemed to be ignoring the fact that they were marginalizing the experiences of other groups to do so. They did this by treating western society as a privileged whole, thus ignoring those who were already on the margins of that society by virtue of something *other than* race or gender. In my family's case this was class, but religion and language also serve as points of differentiation and/or

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discrimination. What I am trying to do, therefore, is to present, without nostalgia or self-pity, an account of what I perceive as defining moments in the lives of three generations of my family in this country.

I want, I suppose, to capture our family history in a way neither Dad's computer program nor the Smathers family Bible does. The Bible I refer to is an ancient thing, a heavy, illustrated tome, rebound now in leather, with room inside the back cover for recording a family tree. To someone who does not know us, the presence of that Bible, with a few generations of kin carefully recorded, would probably seem to be a sign of a devout family. We are not, since my grandfather's generation, a particularly religious family. The book obscures more facts than that, as well. It is odd that in a family where books have been relatively unimportant, a Bible would have been one of the few recognized heirlooms we have passed down. Ultimately, the Bible, with its truncated genealogy, seems able to define our family within a belief system and a family tree. As I mentioned at the outset, however, my interest is not in those forms, but in the stories of the people behind those lists of names. In those stories we define ourselves as unique; we define ourselves outside of the traditional narratives of the Bible and the family tree. For that reason, I try here to maintain the voices by which I know my

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own past. The words I set down are not *my* words in the tradition of authorial ownership over the text. Instead, they are my family's words--the stories and reminiscences by which my generation has understood its past. I find myself at the point where the community in which these stories replicated themselves is ending. Our family is spread out across too much land to get together often. We are, for the first time, too disparate to share the common experiences that allowed telling of the stories without lengthy explanations. Even when we do get together, we spend our time in small talk instead of retelling the old stories. We are, in short, making the transition from an oral to a written culture in terms of our history, and I want to write some of the family's stories in order to preserve them.

More even than a desire to preserve, however, I find myself returning to my traditions to understand myself. As I reached my thirties--I am now thirty-two--I began to find ways that I was like my father, instead of different from him. Indeed, for most of my life, all I have heard is how like my mother I am. We are both nervous, thin, frail-boned people, we both draw and paint, we share minor ailments (bad circulation, for example), and so on; whereas my sister and my father are both stable, physically-solid people, unable to draw stick-men, and immune to minor annoyances like cold feet and numb fingers. Then one day my girlfriend told me

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that she did not understand how people thought I was like my mother, and the next time I looked in the mirror, I saw my father's face: a high forehead with a few lines across it; eyebrows just threatening to go bushy; even, pale eyes, with a hint of humour around the edges; a knobby nose; and going a little pouchy around the mouth. It has been there since, and I have spent the interim trying to find out how I became a Smathers overnight, after twenty-nine years of being a mis-named Schobert. The process has been one of finding points of similarity and difference between my life and my father's, from our childhoods on. An unforeseen side effect has been that I have discovered how forces outside our family have shaped our experiences and our development. Again, the process has been finding points of similarity and difference; what makes us a typical western Canadian family and what makes us unique. These essays are an attempt to sketch some of these points, both within my family and without.

The language in these stories is a reflection of my desire to equate where I am--as a graduate student, writing a Master's thesis--with my past. I am making a conscious attempt to synthesize the plain speech of my grandfather with the syntax of the university, to blend the story form I learned by listening with the essay form I have been taught.

Such stories must by definition be selective. No author

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can represent a totality, and I have tried to identify what I am leaving out as well as what I am putting into these pages. Although I had an idea of what I hoped to do when I started the project, I have discovered some constraints in the writing. I have discovered that I am most confident speaking of the experiences of my father, grandfather, and male cousins, due no doubt to my gender, but also due to the personalities involved. My father is, and his father was, a great talker. Much of what I know of our family history comes from them in the form of their stories, simply because they loved to tell them. Finally, current trends have made me wary of voice appropriation, a concern I find more compelling with non-fiction than with fiction. I distrust my ability to accurately represent the experience of frontier women to the point that I hesitate to put their lives on paper in a document which claims to be non-fiction. I do not know enough about the female experience to try to reach across the gender gap as well as a generation or two and authoritatively tell my grandmothers' stories. Without excluding women from the story altogether, I concentrate on the men in the family. Hopefully one of the women will take up their stories in the future.

Along with the constraints I have found has come a curious set of freedoms. Most of my research has involved talking with family members, and sharing my first drafts of

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this project with them. The response has been most gratifying, and in some cases has altered the project. Most significant in this regard is the time my father spent recording three hours of reminiscences on cassette tape. Given such a wealth of material, the project began to turn itself from a work born of frustration into an attempt to improve communication between the halves of my world. Talking about this project with peers and professors, I have begun to realize that there are many others who are like me in their concern for a way of life and a group of people disappearing into the background of the Canadian social fabric. The accumulated weight of reading and processing two thousand years of Literature made me distrust the importance of my own history; working on this project has made me believe in the importance of every family's history. However, during the writing process, the project also became more of a social text than a literary one; concern over how rural westerners are portrayed in "works of art" is no longer central to my work. Instead, the stories themselves have taken priority. I write them now with the hope they will be read as valid in their own right, not merely as a criticism of literature.

I have also experienced a personal change from writing this. I have shared many childhood memories with my family, partly as a way of verifying my facts as I wrote. Responses

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I got led to new questions, and I filled in many gaps in my knowledge: stories where I had a name wrong, had transposed events between two places, and so on. One might expect this to have increased my confidence in my memory, as I verified most of the impressions I had gathered as a child. In fact, just the opposite has happened. My memory of my childhood, of how my family was growing up, is now a composite memory. One example best serves to demonstrate. My sister tells me I was beaten with a strap by my uncle Glen when I was nine-- something I had unconsciously blocked out. Having been told, I remember the incident, or seem to, but not clearly. Am I now remembering, or simply recreating how I think it must have been? Similar slippages have occurred at almost every step of the project, and I find I must go back and verify facts that I once knew. Minute details have been corrected, but they throw off the long-held memories I have and make them seem entirely false.

Because of the tremendous power of the written word, the problem gets worse when I re-read what I have written. That which is in print becomes clearer in my mind, while details I have left out--as unimportant to this particular narrative, although equally true--begin to fade without the confirmation of ink on paper. I first encountered the power of print over memory during research for a different project. I was in the library researching a paper on the

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west coast natives of British Columbia, when I came across a book on the Hazelton tribe, *The Gitksan Potlatch*, by John W. Adams. The author thanked a man I had never heard of, R.G.Cooper, and gave his title as "Indian Agent in Hazelton" (viii) for most of the years we had lived there. However, I remembered going to school with the Indian Agent's son, Ronnie Carson, and being taught by the Agent's wife, Rose Carson. Although I had been good friends with Ronnie for the three and a half years I attended school in Hazelton, the power of print is such that until I asked my parents to verify my memory, I assumed that it was my recollection that was faulty and not the research for the book. Now, trying to capture facts in print, I am concerned that what I do not get on the page will not survive another generation of retelling, that the story will lose its nuances. Ironically, a project that began in part because I did not find an accurate telling of my family's story in western Canada now continually threatens to collapse under the weight of unverifiable memory.



## Chapter One

### The Sporting Life

When I think of my Granddad Smathers, I think of a man made smallish by age, bow-legged, bald, fingers gnarled, covered with liverish spots and freckles. He wore western clothes: shirts with little opal snaps, jeans, tooled leather belts with silver buckles, and to dress up he wore a bolo tie. He had an amazing vitality about him; into his seventies, he would do one-legged squat-thrusts as a parlour trick, then challenge his grandchildren to match him. I also think of a family man, entirely devoted to his wife. In his last years he would often tearfully confide that he hoped to die first, because he didn't know what he would do without Grannie. I think mostly, though, of a sportsman and a storyteller. He would fix his listener with watery blue eyes--he wore glasses, but removed them to talk better face-to-face--and lean in as if about to whisper a confidence when he told me a story. During pauses, he would stop and chew the inside of his lip, behind a scar where a cancer had been removed--the spot where he held his pipe in his youth, I'm told. Growing up I knew almost as a mantra that he was a catcher in baseball and a goalie in hockey, and so I became the same. His stories, like his last catcher's mitt, are mine now. For years I have heard his words passed down by both him and my father until I can no longer tell exactly where one generation ends and another begins. I knew, as far back as I can remember, that there was something special in

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the stories I heard whenever we went to visit our grandparents, but especially the ones from Granddad Smathers. He had a knack of telling just the right kind of stories: not too many names of faceless great-aunts or uncles to confuse a listening child; and all of the stories about a past strange enough to seem exotic to the listener, although prosaic, no doubt, to the teller.

Some of the stories are baseball tales: who got whom out, when, and how. A favourite had Granddad overthrowing second twice in one game, then insisting the diamond was not laid out on the square. He was sure that second was two or three feet too close to home, and after measuring, he was proven correct. Most of the stories are about a way of life now long past, however, and are of interest as much for the description of that way of life as they are of interest as sports stories. That way of life involved the experience of homesteading new land--new to whites, at any rate--of a time without cars, telephones, or electricity.

"I didn't have a mask of course, but I used to put Eaton's catalogues inside my pants for shin pads and hold them in place with sealer rings, topped with heavy wool socks that Mom made for me and the boys."

I know just the socks he means. Grannie made me a pair, too, when I was old enough, of raw wool, carded and spun by hand. They were too bulky and hot to wear except for when

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you had to endure long days outdoors in the coldest or wettest weather, and when they got wet they felt like they weighed five pounds each and smelled of sheep. I seldom wore them, so I gave them back to Dad to keep. One pair has gone into the Kamloops museum as an example of frontier handicrafts.

My father tells how Granddad asked the neighbours and young fellows in the district if they would come and help clear a piece of land for a ball field. "They did and Dad was true to his word. As long as we were there, there was never a crop grown on that piece of land. It was known to everybody as the ball diamond. There were times when several hundred people would show up at our place. Every Sunday people would come from all over the local districts to play ball. Then after the ball game people would sit around and have a picnic. One time we had a new minister come in to the Boundary United Church--it was right on the Alberta-B.C. border-- and he got after Dad for having these Sunday deals because he wasn't getting enough congregation at the church. So Dad finally made a deal that he would only let the guys come and play ball one Sunday and then miss one. The church only met every second week, so the minister agreed that would be great, and Dad told the guys there would be no ball on church Sundays. It must have been fifteen or twenty showed up anyways the next 'church' Sunday, and the next

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Sunday it was double, and pretty soon it was back to the regular. Dad told the minister that since he couldn't get them in for church, Dad wouldn't stop them anymore from coming to our place and playing ball."

When winter arrived, "the guys at the community again got together. They sawed some lumber and brought the lumber in, and put up fenceposts and two-by-fours and then nailed one-by-tens or one-by-eights up and made a regulation-sized skating rink. And got a water pump that would work on the back of a Ferguson tractor and some water hose and pumped the water from over at the dugout to the skating rink. The boys would take turns on the end of the hose and spray the water on to build up the ice and make our skating surface. The tractor had to be chained to trees to make sure it would not fall through the dugout ice when the water was pumped out from under it. To keep the hose from freezing, it was stored underwater in the dugout itself, one end held just under the surface by a forked stick. When we wanted water we would just chop around the stick and could then pull the hose out and spray the skating rink."

The Bay Tree hockey team were all related: Granddad in goal; Terry, Glen, and Lloyd (my father and oldest uncles) with Gordon and Roy McRann (from Grannie's side of the family) out front. The same players formed the core of the baseball team, with neighbours like Cliff and Larry Logey

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added on--the names still fresh in my mind although I haven't seen them in a quarter-century, and didn't know them then.

I got started fairly late in sports because there were no organized teams in Hazelton, and we moved around after that. It was not until I was twelve and we moved to Armstrong that I began sports out of school. As I mentioned earlier, I was a goalie in hockey and a catcher in baseball, just like my Granddad. I did not set out to follow him, but he gave me a catcher's mitt, so when I went out for the team, I was tried behind the plate. Once I started there, I did try to emulate him and the stories I had heard. Granddad only saw me catch one game. I remember throwing out a base-stealer at second from my knees that game, because I had heard that he always did, rather than getting out of his crouch. It was the only time I tried it, and it was a foolish play because I didn't have the arm strength to throw out runners from my knees unless I got lucky. The coach asked me what I thought I was up to when I got back to the dugout, and I didn't tell him why I did it; I just said I wouldn't try it again, and never did. Granddad told me after the game that he used to throw "fellows" out like that, and I didn't remind him how often I had heard the stories, or tell him that was why I tried it. There are some things boys can't explain to either coaches or grandfathers. Similarly,

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in hockey, I started playing goal more or less by chance, but once there, I wanted to stay in goal partially because of Granddad. I also played goal for my Dad's hockey team for three or four years, which is a memory we both hold dear, and his love of sport is one thing which we still share. It was mainly by proving that I could "take it" in sports that I overcame the difficulties of being a shy, classroom overachiever in a small, clique-filled school, although it took more than a year or two. I fared less well in proving myself by sports within the family.

Every male in my family before my generation has been a hunter, by necessity if not always preference. Most of my male cousins hunt, out of preference. Skill with a rifle in the bush has always been a benchmark (if not *the* benchmark) of manhood in the family. By all accounts, my father's youngest brother, Douglas, is one of the great hunters of our time. Since his youth, he has had the uncanny knack of walking into a stretch of bush country, finding animals there, and shooting them dead. He has regularly walked up to resting moose or deer in the bush, an almost unheard-of skill. Not fifty years ago, at least in the west, that ability would have been of great use. In his youth, Doug, like his father and brother, would hunt to feed the family, but it has become less necessary, more expensive, and riskier to do so, as fewer and fewer hunters grow up in the

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bush as they did a generation ago. Finally, about five years ago, Doug decided he had killed enough animals, and hung up his guns. His choice is not one that everyone in the family understands, I am sure, but I think I do--although I have never succeeded in killing so much as a grouse during a hunt.

I had the privilege of hunting with Doug and my father once, when I was about twelve. It was very much my initiation into hunting, in which I failed miserably: a fact the family did not let me forget for several years, as the story went into general circulation during "get-togethers."

The three of us went into the hill country south of Kamloops, where Douglas lives, to a place called Martin Mountain. He had been working in the bush there, logging, and had kept an eye out for good locations and animal sign, so that once hunting season started, he was confident where to find deer.

We went up in the fall, just after the first snow-- ideal time for hunting because tracking is easy, and with the leaves off the trees, the visibility is better, but it does make for cold camping. We went up one night and set up camp, planning to hunt the next day. In the morning, our sleeping bags were covered with rime, as the moisture from our breath had frozen overnight. After breakfast, I was given a .22 calibre rifle, with instructions not to shoot

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anything unless I had to (in addition to never having hunted before, I didn't have a license), and we set off in the truck. We drove to a place where the road cut through a stand of trees. There were fresh deer tracks in the snow, headed uphill. Doug dropped Dad and me off, saying that the road cut back above us, and that we were to follow the tracks, either catching the deer or forcing them uphill. He would drive up above, find a spot, and wait for the deer to come out in front of us, if that's what happened.

I felt like Davey Crockett, tracking those deer through the icy woods. Dad was well off to one side of me when I stumbled onto a place where the deer had obviously been resting, leaving sign clear even to my inexperienced eyes: places where the snow had melted under their bodies, the grass and leaves matted down in oval contours; little piles of faeces; cropped twigs; and a maze of tracks. A good hunter would have passed the place and made a sweep first to one side and then the other, until he found the deer trail leading away uphill and followed it. I was not a good hunter. I followed the intricate windings of deer at rest--tracks leading from a bed to a pile of droppings to a place where the grass poking through the light snow had been eaten to another bed--but making almost no progress uphill. When I finally caught a track headed away, I was so intent on following the prints that I did not notice that I was



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blundering into a small marsh. When I was late coming out onto the top road, Dad and Doug came down to find me ankle-deep in stagnant ice-water, stoically following Bambi's footprints to the inch. A few hours later, having not seen a deer, I melted my polyester socks into the campfire while trying to dry them out--Grannie having not yet made the woollen ones for her grandsons. I received both a quiet lecture on the importance of taking care of your feet when in the bush, and the unstated knowledge that my uncle considered me a hopeless Mama's boy.

The next day, in borrowed socks, I stayed with Dad, as it was our turn to wait for Douglas to drive the deer towards us. We sat deadly still on one ridge for an hour or more, waiting and watching for the deer to come out of the bush below us. Douglas finally emerged instead, and we told him that no deer had gone past--to his surprise, as he had been sure he was driving a few ahead of him. We went downhill together and found tracks, but to this day I would swear that Dad and I had been vigilant at our post.

Later that day, Dad and I came over a ridge and surprised a buck. He watched us as Dad levered back the bolt on his rifle--keeping the chamber empty and the bolt halfway back allows the hunter complete safety, as the gun cannot be fired until the bolt is drawn back far enough to allow a shell into the chamber, at which point the bolt is pushed

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forward and locked, and the gun can then be fired. This time Dad pulled too far, and the bullet snapped out of the gun as if it was an empty cartridge. The double click of the action was enough to spook the deer, and in two great leaps, he was over the next ridge and gone forever.

The hunt ended a failure, and I don't really feel sorry for that--I expect that I would have been sorry to see the deer killed, and sorrier to have shot one myself--but I was prepared to shoot a deer, partly out of a desire to prove myself, but also because I understood that in order to eat meat, someone has to kill animals. When I was growing up I accepted hunting as part of life. Granddad passed down his bird gun, a .410-calibre shotgun, to me, as well as his catcher's mitt. The .410 was stolen several years ago--I am not sure why, as it was quite old-fashioned, and the bolt was not with the gun, making it entirely useless. Nonetheless, it is gone, and although I am sorry to have had it pass out of my hands, I do not mourn its loss the way I would if I were ever to lose my catcher's mitt. This might be because I never achieved even the modest success with the gun that I did with the glove, but it is not the entire reason, I think. Hunting for sport--or food--is unfashionable in university, and certainly in the semi-vegetarian restaurant where I work, so I do not hunt, or talk about it often. I do, however, eat meat. Somehow it is

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considered less barbaric to let someone else do your killing for you. I live with this contradiction, although I am aware of it.

*Granddad did not pass out of our lives quickly, but slipped slowly into senility. Two strokes weakened him physically only a little, but the second one gradually robbed him of his mind. Towards the end, he had to be institutionalized, as he had slipped back through the years to the point where he no longer recognized the woman he had grown old with, and on one occasion was frustrated to the point of tears by not being able to understand who the people were on television, or how they had gotten into that little box in his front room. It would be a nice nostalgia to think of Granddad living in sweet and gentle memories, but he grew up in a hard place and time. One revelation that came out was that in Granddad's youth, his father--a man, by all accounts, of immense rages--"spanked" Granddad with a shovel; there were others, including fighting off a homosexual assault in a trail cabin, and less dramatic ones of hunger and poverty. For Granddad, betrayed by his memories and bewildered by the strange world around him, death could not come too soon.*

The homestead fell out of family hands not long after Granddad retired. One of my uncles took it over for a few years, but he decided it was too much work, or too expensive

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or time consuming, or all of the above, and he sold it. Granddad left few special possessions when he died--most notably for me, his catcher's mitt; for others, some wood carvings--but I still have his words. It is odd that something so fleeting as speech can survive when material things fail or disappear, but it is through the legacy of those words that I understand where our family came from and how we got to be the way we are. I sat and listened to the old stories with much love in Granddad's last years, knowing without thinking about it how special they were, and feel fortunate now to know and repeat them.

## Chapter Two

### The Working Life

My father's story is the story of his working life. He was born in 1936, and his is the generation of transition from farm to town, from traditional values to the modern world. My grandparents' world changed faster than they could keep up with, and their world became the past during their lifetimes. When their generation retired from the family farms, only a tiny percentage of the next generation took their places. The repercussions from this urbanization of western Canada have been only partially felt, less understood, and even less adjusted to.

Both of my parents, on the other hand, have been forced to adapt to technologies undreamed of in their youth in order to cope with the modern world. Again, this experience is not unusual for their generation. Mom has had to learn how to use computers in order to move with her librarian's job from the age of card catalogues and due stamps to that of on-line catalogues and electronic checking-out. In some ways, I expect, this has been more difficult for her than for Dad, because she is not as technically-minded as he is. In other ways, though, the adjustment has exacted a terrible toll on my father, as the evolving world has challenged his sense of self-worth in profound and disturbing ways.

Dad has always measured his value as a person in traditional terms: his job, his family, and to a lesser extent, his community. I began to realize how closely these

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three are intertwined only recently, when he told me of his childhood in more detail than I had heard before. In winter, he and his next-younger brother had the job of hitching one of the horses to a snow dredge, called a "fresno," and dragging snow to an outdoor heater, where it was melted for use as house water. His description of the first step in the process caught my ear, as it is one of few of his reminiscences I had not heard. "One of us would hold the collar under the horse's neck, and the other one would climb up the side of the stall, get on the horse's back, and do up the cinches that held the collar," he said, and I tried to picture the process. I had a hard time, until I asked him how old he was. I expected his chores to have started about when mine did: at thirteen or so, after "childhood" was over. I was shocked to hear that he could not clearly remember a time when he was not expected to work on the farm; he thinks he started harnessing and driving a horse to haul snow at five or six. I had not imagined such small boys doing the job; I'm not sure I can even now.

Nor am I sure why I am so surprised by this information. It is of a piece with what I have known for years about the rest of my father's working life. He went to work in a logging camp at the age of thirteen, having just finished grade eight; the money he made went to help support his family. After that, he worked in a grain elevator and as

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a hardware salesman in Dawson Creek. Then there was a job in Fairview, Alberta, moving cattle and driving truck for the Peace River Livestock Co-op. My first memories of Dad come from the Co-op. At four, I was allowed to "help" him at work. My job was to run the completed purchase slips from the auction ring to the general office. For this, I was paid twenty-five cents a day, and scrounged an almost-unlimited supply of Grape Crushes from the office staff (in addition to the one I was "allowed" to have by Dad). My other memory of Dad from this time is from a delivery trip; we stopped at the Grimshaw Hotel cafe and had veal cutlets (Dad always had veal cutlets).

Soon after, we moved to Hazelton, B.C., to a cattle ranch. The Shegunia ranch was owned by Dewey Sherar, an American who ran the quality control for a Thiacol plant in Utah that manufactured napalm and rocket fuel. The Shegunia was one of the most hopeless cattle operations on the continent, I'm sure, as the location created all manner of extra problems. The ranch was sixteen hundred acres covered with rocky fields, brush piles--field-long rows of trees knocked down to clear the ranchland from virgin forest--large chunks of the forest itself, barbed wire fences, rivers, and animals (in an average year, two hundred and fifty head of cattle, one hundred sheep, various dogs and cats, two horses, and a billy goat named Sweet William). The

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brush piles were impossible to burn in the wet climate of the north coast of B.C.--Hazelton is "ninety miles from tide," at Terrace, where the last vestiges of the Skeena's estuary fade--although Dad tried every year. Every year he also waged a running battle with the local wildlife: bears one year, wolves the next, a golden eagle another. Lambs and calves were the favourite targets of most of the predators, although one year three wolves got into a pen of grown sheep and mutilated most of them. Dad had to kill twenty-three hamstrung or partially-gutted animals, and to this day bristles at the mention of Farley Mowat or *Never Cry Wolf*.

The wildlife was such a problem because the ranch was carved out of the edge of the wilderness. The only thing past the ranch on the road that ran through it was a native village, abandoned after a smallpox epidemic decades before. The isolation also created problems keeping staff. We moved to Hazelton to join my Uncle Tom and Aunt Shirley (mother's sister), who were running the ranch. Shortly afterwards, they decided that the meagre wages were not enough reason to stay, and moved on. They were followed by a succession of families, none of whom stayed long. Dewey and his family would visit every summer for a few months. After Tom and Shirley left, Dad was given the title of ranch manager and the sole responsibility for the place (reasonable enough, given that Dad was often the only paid employee of the



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ranch), at the wage of four hundred dollars per month--well below the poverty line in 1968.

In addition to that small wage, we received room and board, which consisted of a modest three-bedroom house perched on a small hill and one side of beef per year, which Mom and Dad butchered on the kitchen table. Dewey was notoriously cheap, and refused to allow Dad to butcher prime cattle, which were instead sold at auction, so it was cause for a small celebration any time a logging truck driver stopped in to report that he had hit a young, and therefore tender, cow that had wandered onto the road. Dad also hunted in the fall, often adding a moose to our diet, and fished for salmon and steelhead in the river which ran through the property. We also raised "pet" rabbits, the offspring of which Mom and Dad always "gave away." It was not until some time later that we children discovered the true nature of our table chicken (and also solved the mystery of why the local butcher always seemed to sell us birds without wings). Mom also gardened, canned, and baked prodigiously, sewed many of our clothes, and cut the family's hair. As a result of our parents' hard work, we were poor but not destitute. Most of our schoolmates were in similar financial situations, so I never learned to differentiate people in terms of class the way a city child, exposed to children from more varied social backgrounds, might.

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Still, the five years at Hazelton seem idyllic in many ways. Despite its isolation--or perhaps because of it--the ranch was a splendid place for a boy to grow up. The landscape was beautiful. The Shegunia was hemmed in on all sides by mountains, and the Skeena River ran past just beyond the fields in front of the house. Wilderness lay--literally--just over the crest of the hill that started beside our driveway, and went uninterrupted past the Yukon border. However, the toll on my parents grew to be too much. The problems we had getting and keeping help meant that Dad often had to go through lambing and calving season (more or less simultaneous) without a hired hand. Mom helped as much as she could, but she was already raising two children and looking after the house. Twenty-hour days were not uncommon for both my parents, and I can remember long evenings with Mom trying to occupy two children without television, keeping supper hot for Dad, watching the window to see if he was coming in from the barns, and trying not to let us see that she was worried about him. She was probably also getting some mending or ironing done "while she wasn't busy." Finally, during the school Christmas vacation of 1969, we moved to Kamloops.

Kamloops is an unlovely city, occupying the valley bottom where the railroad and highway cross the Thompson River. Unlike Hazelton, where green life started at our feet

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and ran up the hills until it faded into the purple-blue of distant mountains, Kamloops is semi-arid; sparse pines and dried grasses barely screen the rocks they rest on. To eyes accustomed to the north coast rain forest, the sharp shoulders of rocky hills protruding through the snow seemed harsh and unwelcoming. These first impressions soon began to fade, however, as our new life held great promise.

Dad had gone into partnership with his father and two of his brothers, who had already begun running a small logging operation. Dad began as a chokerman; he ran the towing cables, or chokers, from a skidder--the modern replacement for the teams of horses used in Granddad's day--around the fallen trees, so they could be pulled from the bush to the log deck for loading. One uncle and my grandfather ran the skidders, while the other supervised, selected the trees to be cut, and looked after the machinery. Granddad retired soon after we arrived, and Dad took over as skidder operator. A skidder is about the size of a Caterpillar tractor but with large tires instead of tracks, and it is hinged so that it pivots in the middle. This combination allows the vehicle to cover difficult terrain even with a load on--typically about six logs, depending on size, terrain, and the skill of the driver. In many respects, Dad had returned to the first job he had had at thirteen. There were differences: Dad had begun his paid

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working life driving a team of horses to pull logs to the headsaw, but horse teams had already been phased out by Cats for skidding outside the millyard. By 1970, Cats were as obsolete as horses for the job, replaced by the more agile skidders, but old-fashioned touches remained. For instance, Mom used to make a "Cub Scout" lunch: raw hamburger, potato, carrot, and onion, wrapped in cabbage leaves, then tinfoil. Dad would put the lunch on the skidder's engine manifold, and by lunchtime the food would be cooked through, and Dad could have a hot meal.

The lumber market was good, and my parents bought a house in a village called Raleigh, just out of Kamloops. It was the first house my parents had owned, instead of rented, and we got it at a good price because of its poor location: the Yellowhead highway ran past the front yard, the CNR tracks past the back.

I remember getting my first hockey stick that winter, and being allowed to practise shooting a soft rubber ball down the hallway. The few marks I left were more a matter of pride than a problem--they were our walls to do with as we would. I also remember being terribly unhappy in Raleigh school. In Hazelton I had been something of an oddity (most of the native children were from logging or fishing families; most of the white children were from families with "town" jobs) but I had found a small group of friends early

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on and we stuck very close together. Moving to Raleigh was my first experience at changing schools and I was not prepared for things to be so different. Having lived in an isolated spot I had not learned the social skills that let children adapt to new situations. I expected to walk into a new school and pick up a set of new friends just like the ones I had left behind. Of course, this did not happen. I was also a good student, and had been accepted as such in Hazelton. As the new kid in Raleigh, my getting top marks was considered to be "show-offy" behaviour. Unable to adapt, I lived the solitary life of a farm boy in town.

It was not long before my distress was echoed in our family situation. In the space of a few weeks, the lumber industry, hyper-sensitive to the American housing market that bought most of the timber produced, went bust. As the stockpiles of uncut logs grew around the mills, our income stopped altogether. Although similar problems ran through the whole community, our family, having just moved, was without the savings that let resource communities survive bad markets. Mortgage payments became an excruciating load, but the housing market had crashed with the local economy, and the house became unsaleable. Welfare was out of the question; pogeys wasn't. Unhappily, unemployment insurance was based not on need but on previous income earned. We got a percentage of Dad's wage, which had already shrunk below

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the poverty line. A percentage of a subsistence wage--by definition--is not enough.

*The incident I remember most strongly from Raleigh was going to the fridge one night after supper for an evening snack, and finding only a loaf of sliced bread and a jar of Cheese Whiz. My complaint was familiar enough, even in times of plenty: "Mommmy! there's nothing to eat." This time, however, Mom started to cry and tried to apologize for not having enough food in the fridge. I had always known that we couldn't afford everything other children had, but for the first time in my life, I realized that we were poor. It was also the first time in his life that my father had been unable to provide enough food for his family. Smathers Brothers Logging sold some of its few assets--the equipment it worked with--or lost it to the bank, piece by piece. We went on as best we could.*

*I remember the ominous sense of waiting for a break, of knowing that Dad's hard work was not enough this time. I also remember the day a few months later when Jack Wright from British Columbia Artificial Insemination arrived to offer Dad a job breeding cows--a skill he had learned at the ranch. The relief in our home was almost instantaneous, but it followed a moment of disbelief. It seemed impossibly good luck.*

Artificial insemination (AI) for cattle was a

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relatively new concept in 1970. A couple of years earlier, Dewey Sherar had been unhappy with the number of calves the bulls on the ranch were producing, so he had sent Dad to Utah for a course in AI. That course, plus Dad's experience at the ranch, made him into one of the very few trained AI technicians in the province, which explained why he was hired. Despite that, the job offer still retains an element of the miraculous when I think back on it, and Jack Wright's name was always mentioned with a certain ineffable tone of respect by my parents, even years after he had hired Dad.

We were also lucky to get out of Kamloops, as breeding cows is a lot less dangerous work than logging. The constants in a business like logging are not that you will have a job tomorrow or the next day. The constants are hard work and danger. Chokermen and skidder operators are always at risk of a cable slipping or snapping, sending a hundred pounds of steel whipping one way or the other. Dad cut through his boot one day when a chainsaw slipped, but the chain stalled just short of taking off his foot; after we left, a faller with the company was killed when the tree he had cut caught on a snag, which in turn fell on him; another broke his back in a similar accident. As the easily-accessible terrain close to mills is logged (and thus the distance between good logging country and the mill increases), the cost of hauling the wood to the saw goes up.

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Economic pressure to log steeper hills close to town makes them viable sites for logging. Of course, as the terrain gets worse so does the danger. More skidders roll. Some men walk away from those accidents (Cousin Bob has rolled a skidder or two), but some don't. Even those who avoid accident and injury have had to adjust to continual change in the logging industry. A lot of the men laid off during any given "bust" cycle are not replaced during the next "boom," as used to happen. Fallers and buckers (the men who cut off the branches to make the logs easier to move) are becoming obsolete now, except in cases of particularly difficult terrain. Enormous machines called "snippers" are used for most logging operations. A snipper falls and bucks the tree in one operation. Skidders and loaders are also increasing in power and size, so fewer men can move more logs every year. In retrospect, I think we were all glad to put Kamloops behind us.

Not that we were out of financial trouble that easily. We had to move to the lower mainland for the B.C.A.I. job, but the bad real estate market meant we still could not sell the house. Instead, we traded it with my Uncle Glen for his house trailer--at a substantial loss. Worse, Glen did not make the payments to uphold his end of the bargain, and court actions were begun in order to seize the trailer. Glen then came to where we were living in Langley and demanded



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his trailer back--we could have the "god-damned house."

*I remember the two of them--Dad and his brother-- shouting at each other in our driveway, one of the few times I ever saw my father completely lose his temper. The argument ended only when my mother collapsed on the kitchen floor, her nerves unable to take the combined stress of the possible loss of our home with its inevitable sudden return of terrible poverty, the violence of the argument, and the shame of having our situation aired in the worst, most public way, in front of our neighbours and friends of a few short months. My sister, at about thirteen years of age, took over the situation--getting Dad inside to look after Mom, thus ending the fight, and then taking care of her little brother for the rest of the day. I bounced back quickly--children are amazingly resilient at times--but it was a long time before Mom was over the shock of those years.*

The AI job eventually turned into a middle-management one. After only eighteen months, Dad was promoted to manage the branch office in Armstrong, in the north Okanagan, and we moved again--a short stay in Vernon before we could get settled in Armstrong--for the last time as a family. My parents are still in Armstrong, but my father is not with the same company any longer. That story was the second crisis of his working life.

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In 1985, after Dad had been with B.C.A.I. for fourteen years, he was fired and the Armstrong office phased out. Officially, the reason was a company downsizing--that flat, corporate euphemism that hides so much suffering. The company was probably happy that Dad accepted their severance package without too much fuss, although it seemed a little meagre for someone with so much seniority. The company also did not encourage Dad to relocate to the main office in Langley (although after thirteen years in Armstrong, my parents would not have moved anyway). In truth, Dad's work had started to slide a little. He became unwilling to go out of his way to help the farmers (many of whom were also on the board of directors), who had demanded and received service better than that which the main office supplied. He became moody and listless, and his weight ballooned. A sharp eye could have spotted these as warning signs of diabetes. Unfortunately, no one ever thought of Dad as ill--he was one of those permanently-healthy people who even seem to manage to avoid the flu when it goes around. It was not until after his job disappeared that the diagnosis was made, but by then it was too late.

After almost a decade and a half with the same company, Dad was suddenly unemployed. Everyone who knew him agreed that something would come along soon: he was--and is--a good man; active in local sports as participant, fundraiser,

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referee, and coach; Past Grand Master of the local Masonic Lodge; volunteer at the museum and elsewhere; a pillar of the community. Unfortunately, at fifty, he was also considered "old." Too old for many companies, usually looking for a younger man for a management position; over-qualified for many others, who found him suitable for a management position when he was applying for a job at a parts counter or a service desk in a garage. He took a course in business computing at the local college--you have to know about computers to compete in the modern work force --but to no avail. Almost all of Dad's life had involved working with animals, but the North Okanagan is dairy country, and modern dairies have automated milking parlours, tractors, and every other machine possible to reduce the need for manual labour, so the best he could do was a part-time job in an auction market. Dad got his Class One driver's license, to enable him to drive semis, and picked up an on-again, off-again job driving for an independent local contractor.

"Independent trucker" is a job for those with a healthy disrespect for the law, which made it a bad job for my father. Independents do not get many big contracts. Instead, they haul marginal loads. The loads are marginal because they have a low profit-margin (Dad hauled mainly car carcasses to a steel mill in Seattle, where they were melted

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down for shipment back to Japan, to be turned into more cars). The driver is expected to exceed the legal load limits (by a wider or lesser margin) so as to ensure a profit. If necessary the driver has to be ready to skirt the edges (margins) of towns in order to miss the scales and inspectors.

*I rode with my father once, on his Seattle run. The truck was old, and not in the best condition. The brakes started to fail going through the Fraser canyon, and it was a tense ride to Hope, where the road flattened out. Because he could not use the brakes very often, Dad had to shift almost continuously to control the load behind us. He looked empty, wrung out, and I wished I could drive for him for a while. Once we got to the border, near Abbotsford in the Lower Mainland, Dad couldn't afford to stop any more than was absolutely necessary, because he was on a two-day permit. Once the permit was purchased at the border, the truck was legal in the U.S. for forty-eight hours. Dad would drive to Seattle, drop off his load, drive back to Vernon, re-load, deliver a second load in Seattle, and could still--barely--make it back to Canada before his permit expired. The total distance is about sixteen hundred kilometres. The difference between the cost of one permit and two was approximately the profit margin on the two trips. Total loading and driving time was about forty*

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hours, which left eight to sleep, but only if everything went perfectly. A single breakdown, or a long night's sleep, meant Dad had to buy a second permit, and was then in trouble with the truck's owner for not doing his job right. That's a tough enough way to earn a living, but at the time Dad was also trying to learn to live with diabetes, and finding healthy, nourishing food in a truck stop is not easy. We stopped at one place coming home and had the veal cutlets (Dad always had the veal cutlets), but this time we both looked at the greasy coating on them and knew he shouldn't.

Eventually, a part-time job turned into a full-time one, and Dad is now working in a window-frame plant, cutting wood to be shipped to Germany, but I know things didn't work out the way they were supposed to. While I was growing up, Dad always told me that hard work and a good reputation were enough to ensure that a man could get ahead in the world, and I know that he honestly believed it. I like to think that at one time it may even have been true, but those beliefs failed my father, and that has been hard for him to deal with, and for me.

Working and providing for his family are the foundations that my father's entire life has been built on, since he was first sent into a logging camp at thirteen. In many ways, his personality is shaped by that early life

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experience of manual labour. For instance, he does not drink to this day, because part of his job in the logging camps was to go into the bars of Dawson Creek on payday Saturday nights and see that the drunken men from his crew left the pub in time to catch their ride back out to the work camp. More importantly, though, is that the value of hard work--the Protestant work ethic if you will--became my father's.

When he was thrown out of work in Armstrong, the business community pulled the pillars from under my father's life. Although his last year or two at B.C.A.I., while he was diabetic and undiagnosed, may have been below his usual standards, his standards are higher than most. Calls to our home before and after office hours from farmers wanting special treatment were neither unusual nor ignored. Long hours and extra days were normal. He considered it part of the job to donate time to the schools to give demonstrations (in the name of B.C.A.I.) to biology classes on the reproductive systems of cattle. Billing the company for that time was unthinkable. He has worked like that--giving extra without asking for extra--all his life, because of the myth that said if you work hard enough, are honest and fair, those you work for will reward you, and be honest and fair with you. Given his belief in them, when these ethics proved not to be the case, when his good name was not enough to get him a job, he blamed himself and not those judging him.

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We have a standing family joke--first told to us as true, but perhaps apocryphal--about an Australian who found himself quite out of place in an advanced computing course. After my father had resigned himself to being underemployed for the rest of his working life, he started to use the punchline about himself. It's not true, but the way he says it is only half-joking. It is the way the business world--his world--has seen him for much of his working life. Given the central role that his job has always played in his image of himself as working man, father and provider, it is not surprising that he might believe he is what he does. The punchline is: "I'm not too bright, but I can lift heavy things." I used to think it was funny.

## Chapter 3

### Living on the Land

I come from a migrant family. That concept is central to my understanding of who I am. However, it is too easy to discuss our family's movement over the land of western Canada without pausing to consider the terrain over which we passed or the other people who inhabited it. We have an odd relationship with this country, alternating between a fierce possessiveness and the detachment of the migrant.

The Peace country is as close to a family homeland as any place I know. The Smathers' homestead has long since been sold, although I have a few second-cousins still living in the region. On the other hand, the Schoberts have maintained tenancy in the Peace for almost eighty years. My great-uncle Mick Schobert homesteaded just north of Dawson Creek as early as 1914, at nineteen. In 1928, my grandfather Charlie Schobert and his brother Joe started their own homestead, and in 1936 my grandparents were married and Grandma moved to Doe River. They soon bought a second parcel of land, and that acreage became the farm I remember from my childhood. My mother's cousin Mervin Schobert and his wife are raising a family on that land today--the farm he, his sister, my mother and her siblings grew up on.

Mick also left a legacy of land title behind, although he was the most restless of the brothers. He moved around the district quite a bit, opening two separate homesteads. In addition to homesteading, Mick worked as a freight



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hauler, prospector, rancher, and trapper. Through the Thirties, he ran cattle and operated a market garden on the North bank of the Peace in a spot named Micky's Flats after its first occupant. In 1942, at forty-seven, he finally settled down on a piece of valley bottomland where the Alaska Highway crosses the river and established a market garden. He remained there, improving the land and market gardening, until his death in 1969. A lifelong bachelor, he willed his land to my Uncle Lyonel and Aunt Edythe, and they remain there today.

Yet change threatens even such a settled landscape. The British Columbia government has been discussing building a series of dams on the Peace for years. The Site "C" dam, just upriver from Taylor, would anchor a series of projects to generate hydroelectricity from the river. A more serious threat to the farm was the Site "E" dam, downstream from the farm, which would have flooded Lyonel and Edythe's land. The immediate danger of that passed recently, when the government released for sale the lands it had been holding to build Site "E". As Lyonel put it, "The will for building megaprojects, especially at public expense, isn't there now." The Site "C" lands, however, are still being held, so that possibility remains if the public will is altered.

The current threat of change to the district is not its first, of course. I know intellectually that the arrival of

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white settlers created a tremendous upheaval in the lives of the indigenous peoples of the Peace, but emotionally I cannot imagine a time when the scenery was not dominated by rolling farms of wheat, alfalfa, and clover. In a young country--in terms of white settlement--three generations seems like forever. Mick was amongst the first homesteaders in the Peace, and the intervening decades have transpired to make it seem as though the land was--and is--ours in an ineffable but concrete way, and that we belonged where we were.

When we moved to Hazelton that view changed, and I felt as if we were interlopers on the land. The change was occasioned largely by the fact that Hazelton is a native community; my school had about three native students for each white. For the first time in my life, I was part of a visible minority. To make matters worse, I was the son of a rancher in a logging community, and my teacher instantly dubbed me "Randy the Rancher," singling me out as unique at a time when I desperately wanted to fit in. Other children had different obstacles to overcome, of course. At the time I started school, in 1966, the K'san project was just starting among the local clans, preparatory for the Canadian centennial of 1967. There is now a large reconstruction of the original Git'Ksan village next to Old Hazelton, where the Bulkley and Skeena Rivers meet--Git'Ksan meaning "People

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of the Meeting of the Waters"--with a concurrent re-energizing of tribal language, art, and customs. But I remember hearing Indian children use the word "Indian" as a slur against their own kind, and this was a time and place when more careful terms such as "native North American" or "indigenous peoples" were unheard of: you were either Indian or white, and Indian was clearly not the thing to be.

Although I considered Hazelton to be "home" by the time we moved away, it took a long time before I was comfortable there. Part of my feeling of alienation may also have sprung from the fact that we did not own the land we lived on. The annual invasion from Utah by the Sherar family was both a reminder of that fact and an uneasy trial of both international and interracial relations. Dewey mistrusted the natives, and criticized my father for allowing them access onto the ranch to fish or hunt, although in the district this was considered common courtesy. One year, Dewey told Dad to make the natives pay for picking the wild raspberries that grew as thick as thistles in every brushpile and creekbank on the property. It was an ignorant demand: there were too many berries to be picked even with the extra hands; it was unenforceable, given the size of the ranch; and it would have been an insult to attempt to bar access to what had been native land a generation earlier. Dad refused, and that refusal caused hard feelings between

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him and Dewey.

As it was, we always got along well with our native neighbours, although many whites in the area did not. Dewey had bought the ranch from a doctor whose wife had a heart attack when she saw canoes full of natives rushing across the Skeena from the Indian village on the far bank, sure she was going to be killed. Ironically, her house was on fire, and the natives were trying to rescue her.

Unlike Dewey and the doctor's wife, my parents were fascinated by the local culture, and my sister and I were raised to treat the natives as equals. It probably helped us be more tolerant than our Uncle Tom--the uncle whose family lived on the ranch when we first arrived--is Cree. It was, however, sometimes difficult to ignore skin colour. During the annual louse infestations, for instance, native children were generally the carriers; not out of any ethnic predilection, but out of the extreme poverty that plagued many of the native families in the area. At such times, the recognition of difference was quickened, and a latent distrust of the "other" manifested itself into almost-complete division of our school into two separate parts. On the other hand, my best friend was Indian--albeit the adopted son of white school teachers--so I occupied a middle ground most of the time.

The other time the difference between cultures was most

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apparent in school was the first month or so of every school year, when many of the native children were absent. Salmon fishing out of Prince Rupert, three hundred kilometres away on the coast, was a primary source of both food and income for many of the local families. September is the best month for salmon fishing in the area, so a third, perhaps as many as a half, of the children from native families would miss a great chunk of school every year while they were with their parents at the coast. The fact that the school year could not be changed to accommodate the age-old schedule of the seasons in the area was one of the great failures of the white system to accommodate local needs. It certainly wouldn't have been a great hardship on the white students to push their vacation back a month, but bureaucracies being what they are, this never happened. Some of the teachers tried their best to use native stories and lore to integrate the curriculum, but I doubt they were all that successful. "The Huron Carol," for instance, was little more relevant to a Git'Ksan than to a white student, but we sang it every year at Christmas nonetheless.

In grade three, Mrs. Carson, the wife of the local Indian Agent, was committed to using as much Git'Ksan culture as she could in our classroom. I remember films from the NFB on the north coast legends of Raven and Thunderbird, plus stories and legends from the area. By contrast, my

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grade one teacher, Mrs. Werner (much though I loved her), was fresh off the boat from Australia, teaching in the north as a one-year, almost penal, term before she escaped south to Kamloops. The highlight of that class was not the use of local resources, but of getting the afternoon off from class the first time it snowed because Mrs. Werner had never seen snow before. We kids loved her decision, but it was less popular with those mothers who were taken by surprise by the storm, and who had not sent their children in snow clothes.

One event that stands out for me was the ceremony of installing a new chief for the local Frog clan. He was only about ten years old. His name was Chester McLean, and he was from my sister's grade. What I remember most clearly about Chester is that Cindy had a two-week crush on him at the start of every school year. The clan held a big salmon barbecue, everyone welcome, and I remember dances, complete with drums, headdresses, and something (eagle feathers?) being sprinkled over Chester's head at the culmination of the ceremony. I still associate the smell of smoked or barbecued salmon with that day in the sun, watching a ceremony I did not understand, but one that impressed me with its gravity and power.

The Git'Ksan people have just won an appeal on a land-claims trial first heard in British Columbia Supreme Court in 1991. In the case, *Delgamuukw v. The Queen*, thirty-five

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hereditary chiefs tried to claim Crown lands in the Nass and Skeena valleys as ancestral property to which they had never signed away their rights in treaty nor lost in battle. The initial decision, handed down by Mr. Justice Allen McEachern, was labelled by the plaintiffs as racist. Specific legal complaints, including McEachern's using a colonial Rhodesian court decision as part of the common-law basis for rejecting the natives' claim, may still land the case in the Supreme Court of Canada. The decision is ultimately based on two separate concepts of land. One, the government's, is that the land was communal but private property, to which the natives should have access for only traditional occupations: fishing, hunting, trapping, and so on. The chiefs claim that they were an independent nation when the British first started dealing with them, and so have right of sovereignty on any land they have not specifically sold (that is, on Crown lands). The British Columbia Court of Appeal granted control of the land stopping just short of outright ownership, and details have to be negotiated. Still, the case is an enormous victory for the Git'Ksan. I have watched the case with particular interest because about twenty percent of the Shegunia is leased Crown land, which would revert to tribal control if the Git'Ksan win their case.

It is with some regret that I say that I am glad the

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Git'Ksan won their court case. For me, Hazelton is still home in a way that Armstrong, Edmonton, and everywhere else I have lived are not. I expect I will always consider myself to be "from" there, and I know the rest of my family shares similar sentiments. We passed through and were touched by the land and its people. We can take comfort in knowing that there are ways of staying in touch with Hazelton besides ownership. For a present after my Bachelor's degree I asked for and got two beautiful pieces of north coast native art; Mom and Dad have two prints of west coast scenes on their living room wall. We have been back to visit, as well, and Dad and I plan on going salmon fishing in the next year or so. The fishing is better farther south, in Bella Cooola, but I would still rather head north and fish the Kispiox and Skeena. It would be nice to think that at some point, if I wanted, I could move back to the valley I lived in as a child. The problem is that Dewey Sherar passed through, and others like him: people who did not feel the same respect for what and who they saw there.

We tried to live as good neighbours, to learn and respect local customs, and to get along with the ancient peoples of the land around us--as best we could, given that cattle ranching is hardly an indigenous lifestyle. Unfortunately, too many people who come to a new place seek only to make it like where they came from, and if the modern



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developers and big resource companies are allowed complete access, the Shegunia Ranch will become the rule and not the exception. Technology allows us to control our environment in ways that were not possible previously. We have the power to transform even as remote and wild a land as northwestern British Columbia into an enormous timber and cattle farm if we so desire. As someone who passed through that country, I would like to see the people who have lived there for generations make decisions that determine how the land is used, or preserved, in the future.

Although it felt like home at the time, we eventually turned out to be drifters passing through Hazelton. Like our predecessors, we had moved west yet again, looking for a new start in new country. We did manage to find that vanishing frontier where the modern world meets the untouched edge of wilderness. Unlike my grandparents, however, when my parents found the frontier, it was already owned by someone else.

## Chapter Four

### The Writing Life

My academic life started badly. I graduated from high school in 1978 with plenty of advice as to which university I should attend, but without any personal goals. I drifted to the local college for a year, then to the University of Victoria. After a month in Victoria, I realized that I was not interested in my courses, so I decided to "take a year off." My working life began as Assistant Manager "Y" in charge of housewares, bedding, and draperies at the KMart near the UVic campus. I quit a few months later, deciding instead to head for the Peace country oilfields and the big money they promised. Over the next few years I was fired as Service Advisor in Fort Motors Service Department in Fort St. John, along with my boss; quit after five and a half months of a six-month camp cooking apprenticeship in the Vernon John Howard House, when a parolee threatened to kill me over a second helping of supper; was laid off from insulating houses in Kamloops, during yet another timber slump; quit as buffet cook at the Edmonton Centre Club after developing ulcers trying to please an alcoholic chef; and spent five years working as a busboy, waiter, and bartender at a Mexican restaurant in Edmonton. The reason I spent so long at Bandito's is that, for the first time in my working life, the owners treated me the way my father had always taught me employers should; they rewarded my hard work, and treated me with respect.

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In the summer of 1986, it was obvious that Jean-Pierre and Shelley were going to lose the restaurant to the bank, so I started thinking about what I would do next. My decision came down to buying a truck or going back to school. I chose the latter in part because I felt that I had let my parents and myself down by dropping out of school, and in part because I was bored tending bar. Serving drinks is depressing if you let it be; I don't like drunks much when I am sober. So I decided that if I were to go back to school, it would be to get a degree where I could make a difference, instead of just make money.

I had felt out of place in schools before--every move during childhood involved adjusting to new faces, new classmates--but those feelings were overwhelmed by my reaction to the University of Alberta. My first class was an Art History survey course, held in one of the multi-media classrooms in Education North. There were more students in that one class than in any entire school I had attended previously. There were more people on campus than in most of the towns I had grown up in. I knew not a single student on campus; my only contact was a man in Computing Services who had been a regular customer at Bandito's.

I went to the Gateway office the first day, because I had settled on journalism as the career I would pursue. A reporter's life seemed exciting, and I thought I could make

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a mark in print. I expected to be treated as just another face at the paper, as I was in my classes, but the editors were helpful and outgoing, and I spent most of my free time for the next five years in that office, culminating with a year as Editor-in-Chief. Oddly, though, the reason I found to keep going back was not the opportunity to get published, but the community I found. Here was a group of people in a scale I could recognise, and I made my friends almost exclusively from within the paper's core community of a few dozen people. Without some place on campus I could call home--some place to feel safe when the pressures of student life got to be too much--I doubt that I would have finished a single year.

Like most students, I felt more comfortable in some classes than others. Looking back, I realize that I most enjoyed classes that let me apply my own experiences to the course work: political science debates, for example, or the twenty minutes of free writing we did each week in Bruce Stovel's first-year English class. Not surprisingly, those courses became my minor and major, respectively. In later years of English courses, I found progressively fewer places where I could identify with the course content. The exceptions were primarily my writing courses. I expected that to change when I took Dick Harrison's class on western Canadian fiction--just my second "Canadian content" course.

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To my dismay, I found only one book about people or places I recognized: Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*. More disturbing, however, was Watson's treatment of central British Columbia. Although the place and the characters were recognizable to me, she had represented both in a way that was entirely alien to my experience.

Watson's book is set in the Cariboo region of British Columbia, but it displays a lack of understanding of that place to anyone who knows it. Watson has called her book "an anti-regional novel" (Grube 13), in the sense that she was trying to respond to "regional" writers like William Faulkner. I find the book an "anti-regional novel" in a more personal sense, in that Watson seems to misinterpret the landscape she writes about. Early in the book, she writes:

If a man lost the road in the land round  
William Potter's, he couldn't find his way by  
keeping to the creek bottom for the creek flowed  
this way and that at the land's whim. The earth  
fell away in hills and clefts as if it had been  
dropped carelessly on the bare floor of the world  
(22).

If a man didn't know any better, I thought when I first read the book, he's a fool. Even at thirteen, when I didn't know enough to track a deer, I knew that if you got lost you walked down the ridge above a creek, keeping the water in sight on one side. That way you could see where you were going--especially in open country like the Cariboo, where you can often see for miles from a ridgeline. Even worse

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than her attitude towards the countryside was her dismissive attitude towards the people of the Cariboo:

Even God's eye could not spy out the men lost here already, Ara thought. He had looked with mercy on the people of Nineveh though they did not know their right hand and their left. But there were not enough people here to attract his attention. The cattle were scrub cattle. The men lay like sift in the cracks of the earth (22-23).

This attitude bothered me when I first read the book, but as I researched it for a seminar presentation, I became even more uneasy.

Watson taught for two years in the Cariboo, but she was raised in New Westminster. "This place where I'd been put down as a stranger," she later described the place she taught at, "I had no idea where it was when I left by train in Vancouver, except somewhere there" ("Going to Do" 14-15). That alienation from her surroundings permeates the book. *The Double Hook* is often read as an adaptation of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and this requires that the characters be alienated from their surroundings, but I wonder if she recognized the source of her inspiration for setting another *Waste Land* in the Cariboo. To her, I expect the land did seem unreadable and alien, but to me, the real wasteland lies not in the rolling hills near Williams Lake, but in the docks and alleys of New Westminster. The idea that someone could be raised in a place and not be able to see it with more insight than the characters in *The Double*

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Hook see their homeland pulls me out of the book's fiction every time I read it, to protest. Watson has seen the Cariboo with an outsider's eyes, and passed judgement on it in her art.

More importantly, Watson has passed judgement on the people of the Cariboo. They are brutish and violent until music touches them; art is, in Watson's book, the mediating factor that allows life to be bearable:

And there was something I wanted to say: about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility--if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms. And so it was with this that the novel began ("Going to Do" 15).

Music soothes us savage Smathers, I take it. In the book, in Kip's beating, I can see my cousins being beaten, but Watson has put too much faith in the value of art as mediator, I think. In my memory, I can see my cousins being strapped viciously by their father, and I can shift my eye to the wall behind him where hang a mandolin, violin, and guitar. How can music heal, when the same hand that strikes you is the hand that shows you the chords? Watson-the-artist wants to claim a power for her work that it does not have. I agree with Kroetsch's dictum about sitting in beer parlours--even if I would have the listening done in kitchens as well--because it recognises that you have to meet and understand

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the everyday people of the west before you can judge the land and its people as a whole. The more I read of Watson, the more I question whether she understood this basic fact. I doubt that Watson understood the level of poverty that her students came from. My father studied in a schoolhouse much like the one Watson must have taught in; he came from a family rich in an oral tradition, with music and storytelling as mediating forms. Yet the smell of molasses makes him sick to this day, because one winter all his family could afford to send him to school with was molasses sandwiches. How does art compare in importance? His mother used to finish cooking meals in the dark, because she had to put the family's only coal-oil lamp on the table for guests to see at the table. If Watson had been one of the guests, would she have understood? If so, would she still value mediating forms so highly?

My seminar was a disaster. I was defending a position harshly critical of a popular book, a canonical text, and a well-crafted artwork; even Kroetsch has called it a "classic modern novel" ("The Exploding Porcupine" 59). Moreover, I was doing so on the basis of a personal reaction which I scarcely recognized at the time, let alone understood. The most important argument remains the same now as then: does the artist have a responsibility to the community she writes about? Does she at least have the responsibility to



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understand her subject before she writes about it? These are the questions at the heart not only of my reaction to Watson, but of the debate between Rudy Wiebe and W.P. Kinsella. Kinsella claims not to have studied the Hobbema Indians before setting a series of short stories among them; Wiebe has frankly criticized him for this.

As much as I dislike Watson's book, I have to side with Kinsella in the overall debate. I do not think Watson should have been restricted to writing about things she knew intimately, nor do I think Kinsella should, or any other author. On the other hand, I discovered in my seminar that we are all taught as students to reject responses outside of a set form. To respond to Watson's book, I had to do so on Watson's terms: I had to treat a distortion not as a distortion, but as an artwork; whether Watson was faithful to the people and land she set her book in was not material; whether she was faithful to the tradition of English poetry and Eliot was. This incongruity repeats and justifies the bias of Watson's portrayal. Aesthetics are more important than accuracy for Watson, and I can accept that, because it leaves open the possibility of other, more accurate portrayals. However, the response in my seminar is harder for me to accept because it disallows alternative readings.

My problem lies not with that particular seminar group and professor. Rather, the problem lies in the way English

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students are programmed to think. Literature is valued more highly than other forms of communication in the Department. We even define other styles of writing by comparing them to literature: pseudo-literature, non-literature. This arrogance makes me laugh, when I try to think of a Hunter Thompson or Annie Dillard sitting down and saying: "I think I'll write some pseudo-literature today." Just as we are taught to value literature, we are taught to value certain responses to literature. We learn a set of terms, and then insist that the only valid or useful responses to a book are those that fit the prescribed vocabulary. We thereby silence other responses. By insisting that we deal with books as aesthetic objects, we risk silencing personal, moral, emotional, and political responses to them. As English students in a class at the highest level of undergraduate courses, we did not have a way of discussing how and why I feel cheated by *The Double Hook*, or why a native reader might object to Watson's adaptation of *The Coyote* as narrator. That lack of training excludes responses motivated by class, race, gender, religion. Education becomes a method of exclusion instead of inclusion.

The value of learning to deal with personal responses to what we read is that such responses can improve our understanding of the way a certain text functions, or of the ways different readers might read the same text. An effort

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to work through my personal, non-academic response may have led our seminar to discuss issues like the Wiebe-Kinsella debate, or how Watson sets her characters against the landscape. Instead, the debate sputtered and ended with nothing resolved. Because we were not programmed to integrate personal experience and academic discourse, we treated the personal as invalid.

Oddly, the approaches to literature that I now find most inclusive are the ones I originally found the most frustrating. When I first encountered feminist and post-colonial theories, I often felt that they glossed over class inequities in defining a mainstream culture that they opposed. As I grew more comfortable working through these approaches in seminars, I found that many of my classmates shared concerns similar to mine, but from slightly different points of view. Failure to discuss class inequities was often not a matter of exclusion, but emphasis: for them, gender or race issues were more relevant or more pressing than class issues. Recognition of that, combined with the techniques that post-colonial and feminist scholarship provide for political and social readings of texts, have helped to enable and shape my response to books like *The Double Hook*. Without such techniques, I would not have been able to find the words that bridge my family background and academic discourse. As well, in studying texts from outside

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of the traditional canon and genres, feminist and post-colonial classes taught me to value my grandfather's stories not just for my personal enjoyment of them, but as part of an oral tradition of which I should be proud.

## Chapter Five

### The Closing of the Circle

In the right family, you can learn a great deal around the kitchen table. This was true for me on both my mother's and father's sides, but in different ways. The kitchen was definitely more important for me than for most of the other Smathers boys; unlike them, I was not the rough and tumble sort. I did poorly at the wrestling and boxing contests which inevitably sprang up when we got together. Some of the contests were organized, as when we visited Glen and Edna's family just after their two boys, Bob and Lee, had gotten boxing gloves, or when we three decided to test our Granddad's belief that television wrestling was a hoax. He had wrestled as a semi-pro in Idaho in his youth, and maintained that no one could escape from a proper full-Nelson. I certainly couldn't, being the runt of the litter (or at least of those who were old enough to count). At other times the sport was rougher, and it frequently degenerated into all-out fights. Bob and Lee "went at it" with a ferocity which terrified me. Despite my fear, Lee and I shared quick tempers, and would frequently get into minor scraps. Bob would inevitably step in to protect his little cousin--an excuse, I suspect, to beat up his brother more than anything else--and Lee would take a pounding. Lee, a year younger and prone to fat, could not stand up to Bob for long, although over the years he developed the ability to withstand a terrible beating before he would cry

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"uncleuncleuncle!"

Sadly, much of Lee's endurance was developed at his father's hands. Uncle Glen is, like my father, a thickly-built man. Glen is now turning fat--the last time I saw him he carried about two hundred and fifty pounds on a five-foot-ten frame--but through my childhood, he had the heavy muscles and thick frame of a manual labourer and big eater. He has the pale eyes that run in the Smathers family, but he developed a squint, perhaps from peering through the smoke from his continuous chain of cigarettes. His smokes have probably also changed his voice, which has a peculiarly ominous growl to it, and I will always remember a sick feeling in the air when he would say to one boy or the other, "Fetch my belt." Glen would fold the belt over once or twice and hit his sons with it, usually across the hands, sometimes the bare buttocks, until they cried. Occasionally one of the boys, usually Bob, would try not to cry and in such cases Glen would simply continue hitting until he got what he wanted. Years later Bob told me that Glen did not stop the abuse until Bob proved himself capable of beating up his father, and I assume the same went for Lee. Glen's daughters were not immune to the assaults, nor was Aunt Edna. It was not unusual to visit the family and find Edna or one of the children with a black eye. However, I remember the boys' beatings more clearly. I think perhaps this is

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because of the severity of the beatings, and the astonishing spectacle--to me--of the boy so instructed going to the bedroom drawer and fetching a belt to be hit with. Also, I would usually be partially to blame for whatever mischief my cousins were being whipped for, although my punishment was always milder.

I was spanked occasionally--as most children of my experience were--but never with more than a bare hand. Once I got caught fighting with Lee after numerous warnings that I was not to do so regardless of provocation. When our parents arrived to see what the fuss was, I was hitting him with a toy screwdriver, and for that Lee and I each received a spanking. Another time, Mom spanked me for pulling the tails of week-old kittens to hear them mew, and she cried as hard as I when it was over. Such punishment left no emotional or physical bruises and my sister and I were never abused the way my cousins were. I had forgotten the one exception until recently. When we were about eleven and nine, respectively, my sister and I were boarded at Glen and Edna's for a week. Cindy tells me that every night when Glen got home he strapped every child in the house on the grounds that we must have done something wrong. Now that she tells me, I can remember the incidents as if they were a bad dream, but my mind has wiped away most of the memories entirely.

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The beatings did toughen the other boys up, and by comparison they always considered me a weakling and a Mama's boy, which is where the kitchen table re-enters the discussion. During family gatherings, the group would split in two. The men would gather in the living room, and the women in the kitchen. Sometimes Granddad would tell stories, but he slept a lot. I was most often bored by the discussions of logging trucks or guns in the living room, and would wander into the kitchen; or I would be teased about being a sissy for some reason or another and flee. Edna teased me just as much in the kitchen, but always said something nice to make up for it, so I would stay there and listen to the talk. In the kitchen, Grannie Smathers was the centre of attention as she talked of family and friends; what one neighbour had done or where a second-cousin had moved to. Although I get my family history from my Granddad, I think I get much of my sense of kinship from Grannie and her kitchen table talks.

Mother's side of the family was much less male-dominated. Grandpa Schobert was more comfortable around women than men--perhaps because he and Grandma had three girls before having a son, so he was used to female company. He also helped out in the kitchen with dishes and the like, which was an oddity worthy of comment at the time. I spent many happy hours in Grandma's kitchen, and also in my



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mother's. Growing up on the ranch at Hazelton I frequently had no playmate. Cindy and I were the only children for miles around, and she went to school for two years before I did. Dad was often away in the fields most of the day, so play time was often spent hanging around the house. When Mom was too busy to stop and read with me or organize some other activity, I would help with the chores, so I got an early start on baking and cooking. Mom would give Cindy--when she was home--and me little pieces of pie dough to roll out, or let us make miniature cakes or cookies from some of her dough, and we would spend hours with her in the kitchen on baking days. I have felt at home in the kitchen ever since, to the point where I have put myself through school as a cook.

The isolation of growing up without a peer group not only started me as a cook, but also turned me into a reader at an early age. Many of the male writers from western Canada have similar stories to tell, of how they were the odd-boys-out because of their fondness for quiet pursuits. Robert Kroetsch writes:

The hired men, in turn, made no bones about telling me I was a disaster, sixteen years old and still reading books, often to be seen in the garden doing women's work when I should be out pitching bundles or working the summerfallow ("Alberta Writer" 73).

I heard Rudy Wiebe express a similar sense of being distinct

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within his home community in his Salter lectures of two years ago, and for similar reasons. Sinclair Ross, of course, was a banker, writing about the farmers he saw around him. The danger lies in our taking for granted that as writers we can cross that gap between us and the non-writers around us without a slip. We can, I believe, use their voices, but only with care not to put our words in their mouths.

Recognition of the gap between our lives as writers and our cousins' lives is profoundly important for understanding the social makeup of western Canada. I am at university, recounting the events in my youth as if they are from a past that has ceased to exist. It is too easy for those of us who have left behind the troubled parts of our pasts to pretend that those parts are no more. Yet Bob and Lee are both fathers, their sisters bot mothers. I have not lived near enough to my cousins to have spent much time with them since we have grown up--and apart--so I do not know whether what is referred to in the newspapers as the "cycle of family violence" has ended with Bob, Lee, June, and Glenda. I do know that many of the other factors which shaped their childhoods continue.

The restlessness that characterizes our history continues in that side of the family. Glen never held a job for more than a few months, maybe a year or two at best, and

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his sons are the same. One day I will talk with my parents on the phone and Bob will be in Kamloops, driving logging truck; two weeks later and he is in Chetwynd driving machinery at the Tumbler Ridge mines. Lee is much the same, and the boom-and-bust cycles that rule the resource industries rule their lives. When I was growing up, Glen, Edna and the children would show up at our place in a Lincoln Continental (one owner, like new, low mileage). Six months later we would attend a family dinner and the Lincoln would be a station wagon with 75,000 hard miles on the odometer. Trailers, guns, snowmobiles, furniture, motorcycles, boats, and houses--including our house in Raleigh--passed through their hands on borrowed time and money. Six months' hard work and seniority would disappear in layoffs or, more often, in an argument with a foreman; each new start would find an old ending.

I have always felt closer to Bob than to most of the rest of the Smathers cousins. We share the same smart mouths, and in that trait, more than anything else, I recognized that he was smart--a lot smarter than his grades ever suggested. Intelligence is not always a blessing, however. Any aptitude I showed, I was encouraged to develop by my parents, and with their support I succeeded academically. In Bob's case, being smart only meant he recognized how tough a hand he had been dealt earlier than

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his brother. It sometimes seemed as if Lee thought that things had to be the way they were, but Bob always knew better. Since he moved out of Glen's house, he has been looking for something better, but has yet to find it.

Bob travelled through Edmonton a few years ago, and looked me up. He was out of work. What he owned was in the jockey box of his pickup. I loaned him my couch without question, and he found a job driving truck for a local hauler. He was going to find a place of his own, settle down. After a couple of weeks, however, both my roommate and my landlord wanted him out of the apartment: he smoked too much, he revved his truck up too long and too hard in front of the building, our lease said there were to be two tenants. The truth is that Bob is loud, uncouth, unkempt. He is a hard man, like his father before him, and it shows in everything from the dirt under his fingernails to the way he scowls easier than he smiles. He carries himself with an inner tension and until you adjust to it, you have the feeling that he may explode into violence at any second. In truth, he has enough confidence in his own toughness to allow himself the luxury of being slow to anger. He will let the other man get the first swing in, but I have never seen him lose a fight, and I have never, ever, seen him show fear of anyone, even when he knew his father was about to beat him. He has too many rough edges to be easy to live with,

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and I expect he made the landlord nervous just being around. Regardless, Bob was quite upset when I asked him about moving into a motel or the Y for the rest of the month--about a week or ten days--and instead phoned his boss and quit. He picked up his cheque and left town the same day. Although I know he would have found a reason to move on sooner rather than later anyway, I felt for a long time as though I had let him down; if I had loaned him my couch for that extra week or two (or even stuck up for him, after all the times he stuck up for me against his brother), he would have turned his life around. Odd though it sounds, every start always seemed like a fresh start, complete with hopes and plans. Every new job has been reported via the grapevine as somehow different than those gone before. "This is it," they say, "Bob (or Glen or Lee) is really happy with his new job, and they're really looking after him good down at the mine (or plant or mill)." By sending Bob on his way, I had broken the rule that family sticks by family, and that was enough to ruin the fresh hope Edmonton had been for him.

I know that if there were still a frontier we would have seen the last of that side of the family long ago, the same as our eastern ancestors saw the last of whichever Smathers it was that first came west. Nothing in Bob's and Lee's lives has prepared them to settle down, to adjust to society or even to a stable family life. Glen has always

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felt he could settle matters with his fists; my Dad recalls that when Glen picked on his sister or younger brothers, the only way Dad could stop him was to give him a bloody nose. Given that example at home, it is too much to expect Glen's children to be able to compete in a sophisticated workplace. I recognize myself as different from my cousins, yet Bob is similar enough to me that I realize a lot of my difference is simple good fortune. Glen and Edna seem to have finally given up on the cities after years spent in and around Kamloops; they cost too much, there are too many rules, booze is too easy to come by. They have moved back to the Chetwynd area, into the woods in a travel trailer, not far from the first shack I remember them living in, next to the railroad tracks. If you've travelled here much, you have seen houses like them all over the west: ugly little places set off from any others, surrounded by cars in various states of disrepair; usually a grubby kid or two outside playing with sticks or tires, maybe a bat and ball. They are the places you go if you don't have a frontier to go to, and you come from a house by the side of the road.

## Endnote

1. The correct format for long quotations is inset, single spaced. I resist using that format for the family stories throughout these essays because it creates an artificial idea of which words are "mine" and which "belong to" my father or grandfather. The intention is for the text to represent the fact that these stories were exchanged freely down the generations to the point where I do not know which words, exactly, are "mine," nor do I wish to.

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