

The first thing you need to keep in mind if you're going to write a novel about the 1950s, which began in 1951 and ended in 1962, is the multitude of stuff that hasn't happened yet. I mean no Sixties (1963-73), no Seventies (1974-79), no Eighties (1980-1992). We're sitting in The Georgia, and as far as the mini goes we're *tabulae rasae*. John, Paul, George are in Hamburg but we're in the cellar in Vancouver – and what is Vancouver? An overgrown small town, more wood than brick, more brick than concrete, the laws are so blue we can't be sitting there on a Sunday, and unless we've found a female over twenty-one to get us into the Ladies & Escorts side of the beer parlour, to meet other females, why, we're sitting in a space that's strictly men only. The expectation is frontier town, words like rugged and twofisted float, definitely not MCP or MADD. Mind you we're college eggheads, and other such are present, but some of the patrons are loggers or off the boats or psychos from Saskatchewan seeking a new love or an old grudge to be settled by punching some egghead and they're getting drunk fast. Though, being Canadian, even this rough trade has training in a certain mild-mannered benevolence, but only up to a point. You have to remember that they're not packing guns, and, seeing it's The Georgia, probably not carrying knives, either. But they're not without prejudices and they're paying taxes to keep us in school doing fuck all while they're bustin' their butts – and tonight they're getting *drunk*. We want to joke intelligently and sing our silly songs of sophomore humour so we have to negotiate the terrain, it isn't goddammit ours alone. Sooner or later some chump will ask to join our table and he won't be taking no for an answer. Sooner or later he'll want to argue in a language game we're not playing. The table is crowded with glasses full of beer because one can only order up to two glasses at a time

so naturally everyone does. Then there are splashes of colour: the glasses of tomato juice. Sooner or later, but for sure, someone is going to knock one of these glasses over. It's 1961, two more years to go till the sixties begin, no-one has stopped smoking so the air is blue with fumes. We're smoking Chesterfields, Black Cats, Buckingham's, Cameos, Craven As, Players, Export As, Marlboros, you name it if you're fifty or over: never without a lit one. And what are we saying?

Before we say what we think we were saying we have to remember that it sounded utterly different then than those same words and phrases do today because today they willy nilly refer to major public or minor personal events of the past thirty-five years. Listening to us talk, talking back then, is like listening to a foreign tongue. It's akin to Pound's difficulty writing in American slang from the 1890s and the 1900s, in the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s – moving further and further away from its currency. After all, we're persons, and that's strictly an architectural affair. You live there a while and then the big iron ball comes through the wall and you move to someplace else. There I sit, never having smoked a joint. Haven't dropped acid. Jerussi hasn't invented the pill yet. I haven't met Jack Spicer. I haven't raised a kid. I eat without forethought. In fact I only eat when the person or persons I'm with eat; in that way I'm completely undifferentiated, a member of the herd. They shut down the beer parlour for an hour at 6:30, the other people at the table either go home for dinner or to Hudson's Bay Company where there's a snack bar or somesuch, eat, return for the evening's stint. If someone takes me home for dinner, I go, I maybe eat. Or I go to HBC and do eat. I have no notion what I'm eating. Eat, someone says. You'll be able to drink longer and not get so drunk. So I eat.

I never noticed stuff like that. There's a whole lot of stuff I simply don't notice, back then. I don't monitor my own behavior very closely. Well, I haven't had psychotherapy yet, I know I have problems of that order but I believe they make

me who I am, and although it's evident even to me at times that that's a pretty desperate configuration of drives and impulses, I'm witlessly attached to my momentum and its baffles, wouldn't trade 'em whatever the offer or the cost. And ghoddamit I'm right, McGee.

So what is it I do notice? What you say, how you say it, how your face looks as you say it, things you do with your body because of what gets said. The power of the spoken word. And how our speech rings the bells of reference... Movies, books, people we know, want to know more of. And wordplay, slips, puns, or a word I can only guess the meaning of from its context. Sex – still a bigger mystery than the irreducible-minimum mystery it must ever be.

Peeking into the Ladies and Escorts side at the beauty and allure gathered there, boozing and smoking just like us guys. The people I know like movies where the hero triumphs over unbearable obstacles then fucks up and is killed. I don't know about you but I expect to die shortly. And don't let's forget we all expect to die shortly, atomized by The Bomb. The Cuban Crisis hasn't occurred to demonstrate that maybe It won't get detonated. No, the hourglass cloud has already been inverted, the sand is trickling quickly down. Drink, get drunk, have fun, get laid. Yet that's oddly only a partial imperative. Meanwhile, also, read books, wrangle over ideas, obey many of the laws we could probably get away with breaking, beads on a cultural string drawn pointlessly on. We worry about grades, finals, though I don't recall much worry about careers. I'm already an elementary school teacher anyway; somehow I had it together enough (definitely an anachronism there) to cause that to happen. At the same time I expect to be famous. I'm marking time till that happens. Actually I'm driven, writing through my hangovers, bad stuff about characters with fashionable hangups, weird poems about people turned to stone on the beach.

I would really like to do a lot of fucking. Being young can't have changed in some respects. So in that way, too, no longer young, it's impossible to inhabit that person sitting

across the table with you. That I gets hardons two, three times a day, without apparent provocation. No wonder the gals look so glamorous. You college fellas are attractive too, though I hasten to add, etc. Some of you are thoroughly middleclass in training and I like your assurance, you expect, expect to be bright, intellectual, well-read. We give the middleclass a lot of flak, squares, dullsville, all that, no doubt this general dismissal can find many points of application, but the middleclass, being such, made you the way you are and I think it's wonderful. From time to time, as a college intellectual who's loads of fun, I get to see inside your houses (your parents' houses) and I like it there. It's tedium to you but exotic to me. And you're all exotic, just about everyone in this pub is exotic, simply by my being here with you – and simply by my being drunk.

But too, simply by your being Canadian. Because I'm British. And that's one more fact to remember, the aura of being British in Vancouver back then. Power. British voices on CBC. Brits permeating the theatre. You're either for 'em or agin 'em. The guy who has joined us at our table either wants to tell me about how great the Limeys were to him in the war, or he wants to smash my face in for being one of the oppressor race. Or he wants to get my goat until I smash *him*. Pick up a bottle and crack it over his thick skull. *Then* the shit will hit. Cece won't be standin' for any of that. Shit, Cece won't be puttin' up with anyone standing for anything: you have to drink sitting down. No singing, either – though we do.

So – Brits, the English in particular – voices modulated but loud, speaking out – saying how it should be done. Showing the rest the reasonable way. And then the Ozzies. Escaping my fellowcunts, I seek out the Ozzies. There's a hotel, the Gifford, in the West End, where a couple of lads from Melbin take me to dinner one day when the pub shuts. Everyone in the below-street-level restaurant must be Ozzie. Everyone knows everyone. They've met in a score of cities strung round the world. Here, they meet again. A bread fight commences – they know how to have fun. The women are just

like guys. Easy come, easy go. Now that I've seen southern California, Ozzies don't strike me as so distinctive. But they were the first people I met who lived in their bodies that way.

But there's a plot to be planted here, if a novel's to be written. Three of us are walking a long way to our various basement suites, having no car, and a good thing too! The only people I know with cars are my sister, who lives almost in Burnaby, Eduardo Viejo Pink-Meadow-Pink, the Anglo-Portuguese-Canadian strawberry farmer from Saanich, who might have been along tonight in his classic 1934 Oldsmobile, but isn't, was probably singing something dainty, even ecclesiastical, in some well-connected mansion on the Endowment Lands, Fee McMannic, who drives a Morris Minor or a vw Bug, some vehicle, anyway, that causes his knees to touch his chin when he's behind the wheel, and who we understand on this particular evening was porking Iowa's finest, the sexually perspicacious Mary Beth "Thanks for the Mammaries" Hansen, and last but not least, driving a sobriquet bestowed upon him by Sally Hillcoot, Tommy Pavlow, aka Barfly, aka Tommy P, so that one might, in referring to the exploits of the drunkest drunk at the latest Hillcoot party, not get him confused with Tommy Deadwood, the Shakespearean, who, once Pavlow had been taken into the circle, became known as Tommy D. Tommy P had been known to D (second in the alphabet that constitutes our four protagonists) years back in Gopher Hole, Alberta, and D was the only one of our trio who was likely to wonder where Tommy was at this moment, or to come up with guesses as accurate as (a) boosting booze from (1) a neighbor (2) the LCB, (b) reading *Voyage au bout de nuit* while sucking on a six pack and mistaking a streetlight for the moon, (c) driving said car with an impressive deliberation into a concrete lamp standard.

We three – this three, G, D and M – are more than halfway across the Burrard Street Bridge. D was looking out to sea, and to see the few lights still burning behind the drawn drapes of the West End's tallest building, the Hotel Sylvia, just

now heaving into view. Heaving, and having so heaved, had hoveled. And D was turning back to speak to his companions, G (Delsing, the poet) and M. When there was the most almighty white flash.

Yes, that's what they behold, that's it, it is the most Gigantic White Flash. G sees it first, because of his exceptional peripheral vision. Then D and M together see it too. It lights up the whole sky north behind the mountains. It lights up the West End – not a collection of high-rises at this time, remember. Three, four-storey wooden houses. But they don't burst into flame, although that glare looks hot. White hot.

“¡Shock wave next!” G says. (G has spent time in Mexico).

“It's pleasant to recall that there's nothing one can do about it,” M puts in. “It's neither seemly nor comfortable to curl up into a tight ball on a city sidewalk at midnight.”

D says nothing. He's having *deja vu*. Trying to recall what comes next. But nothing more occurs. So they walk on. They pass by Sick's Brewery. And on its blank walls they see some letters – as though burned into the stone. Hieroglyphs. D has a pen, G has a wrinkled envelope. And says so.

“¡Hey you guys, I have a wrinkled antelope we can use!” he tells them. They copy down the symbols. M clicks his tongue impatiently.

“It probably says something like ‘You only have 24 hours to live.’”

They put away the envelope, stumble ahead. They discuss this strange event, strange twin events, no doubt. They say pretty much what anyone would say, within the constraints of what we know of these three – precious little, from a reader's point of view. They allow as how it might have been a group hallucination – but M takes out the envelope and there's the hieroglyphs.

“¡Careful with that wrinkled antelope, M!” G chortles. He always clowns when terrified.

They point out to each other that there is no necessary connection between flash and wall-writing.

By now they have reached the region where the likes of

them get to live. They're wired but tired, so say g'night in front of the basement suite of G. His gangly form, much like Buddy Holly's, vanishes between the camellia bushes.

"Astounding," comments M, "How calmly he took that."

"I expect we're in shock," D offers cheerfully.

"Did it occur to you that we might all be dead?"

A pause. Then, "If so, it's distressingly like being alive... I've got to piss," and D whips it out and pisses on the wall of G's landlord.

"This could just be the illusion of pissing," M says, joining him.

In those days G was always looking for the writing on the wall, and he usually connected it with death. He was in his twenties somehow and expected to die when he was twenty nine, dramatically and without pain. Like a movie or the Old Testament, at a distance, completely alone, his friends or the people who went to classes with him telling each other later that they should have been at his bedside, but now here he was at the side of the bed, trying to get up, a hangover without romance holding him down. But he does get up, finds a Black Cat cigarette on the backless wooden chair beside the bed, sits, white bare feet on the cakey jeans on the dirty brown carpet on the basement concrete floor. It is the late 1950s, Jack Kerouac is as glamorous as his name, ACK ACK ACK the reverberation through G's head. Oh to be in Vancouver, so much more romantic than to be in the air force on the prairie, end of the runway, aluminum jets taking off in groups of four all night and he not hearing a thing till his Newfy roommate wakes him to get to the mess in the last minute before it is closed, get coffee, tastes like the metal it is kept in, eat some bananas, good for the ulcer, 19 years old has an ulcer. More romantic than working in the "plant" in Lawrence in the Okanagan no one has ever heard of, deep winter, counting bolts with frozen fingers. Always wants to be on the road, and Greyhounds it from time to time, smoking in the back seats, holding the newspaper upside down because that is funny, sucking on the rye whiskey or if you are really unlucky some underage Okanagan Indian guy, has some lemon gin, doesn't matter. And he never did find out whether you are supposed to mix something with lemon gin, or is the lemon something mixed already. Lemon Hart is so pretty, and the lemon gin is sweet, but the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat.

G was trying to get D to eat last night. Eat, eat, he said,

you might wish you had later on. What? Like midnight, says D, no like say 1985, says G. We won't live that long says D, and they both agree. What are you going to do, get shot, die in a fiery crash, puke blood and die at a hundred and eight pounds? I am going to be shot by a jealous common law husband, says M. Then he doesn't say anything in any language other than Horse for the next hour. D goes to the can and doesn't come back, we suspect him of having slipped into the Ladies and Escorts side, give him another fifteen minutes. Maybe some guy in a plaid shirt banged his head against the porcelain in the can. I will go and see, volunteers M, and off he goes. This is eleven p.m., you are in your twenties but you have to have a leak every half hour. But you are drinking a glass every fifteen minutes. Building tissue. Building a past to look back at fondly, not a narcotic in sight. Beer was still pretty romantic.

Right after the air force he had taken Trombone into the Devonshire and bought him a Zombie, something he had learned from the nurses in Quebec. Now that too was effete. As far as G was concerned these college types were effete, especially the ones who had ridden in any car driven by someone in a fraternity, especially all the Christophers and Anthonys from England. He was in love with a Wendy from England, but he had no idea where she was. She had never been in The Georgia, upstairs or down.

He was sitting on the side of the bed, a narrow iron thing, really a kind of cot, with a thin mattress on it, with a dirty sheet on the mattress. Last year he had lived in a place where the landlady changed the sheets every week, whether there were stains on them or not. Now he was living two blocks from a laundromat, good place for love, and fifty blocks from his landlady, in a basement under a lot of other people living in wallpapered rooms that contained the smell of leaking stove gas. What was that flash in the sky last night? Did the military, their military or ours, who, have some secret installation behind the north shore mountains? The prime minister, a three piece suit lawyer with a bad haircut, from the

prairies, was ready to start an election campaign, his platform to keep U.S. nuclear weapons out of Canada. In the air force a few years ago G knew casually that there were nuclear weapons already sitting under a tin roof on Vancouver Island. What was that flash in the sky? G had seen northern lights, he had *heard* northern lights. He had been *north* of the northern lights. He was not even a patriotic Canadian yet, but he knew from northern lights. M was born in the North West Territories – he was probably born in a flash and coil of northern lights. Those weren't the northern lights last night. They were not a mass hallucination, they hadn't had a Zombie all night. Twenty-five trolley buses came loose from their connections all at once within five blocks of Stanley Park?

The worst kind of explosion is a silent explosion. He started to stand up. He pitched forward, landed on the elbow that was flexed as he reached toward his mouth for his Black Cat. Fell on his elbow and his other wrist on the painted concrete floor. The floor was a kind of dark purplish red dirt colour, it looked like plasticene gorged with very old blood. He got up and found his piss jar. This was an old marmalade jar he pissed into, then carried to the laundry drain in the floor, where he poured it down. Either the smell went away in an hour or one got used to living there with the smell of piss in the laundry drain. He imagined D in his mansion up the hill, sipping French coffee, D draped in a silk dressing gown, gazing out the window through a well-managed headache at the black squirrels. In G's seventeen years in the Okanagan he had never seen a squirrel. They scampered in England and in boys' books, and in leaf-strewn yards in weary old colonialist Vancouver.

We have been, unwillingly perhaps, looking at this skinny nearsighted person for fifteen minutes or so, and we have strewn a number of pages, depending on the impecuniosity of the publisher, and have not heard much about what these people are studying. They, each of them in his own way, think of what they are supposed to study as impedimenta, or as

necessary weight, something to encumber oneself with as the price of pursuing fame at a west coast Canadian university, the best there is in the immediate area, totally unknown in, say, Rottinghurst. G could not shake the impression that his friends were getting a lot more sex than he was, and that they knew a lot more than he did. M could, for instance, speak pages of *Antony & Cleopatra*. He would often do such a thing, loudly, in the basement of The Georgia.

“Shut up and sit down,” Cece would suggest.

We would concur, mainly to indicate to Cece that we could control this person, M, the bearded humanization of all our worst impulses. Our Canadian libido. Years later we would have waxed comic about our rights, about the terrible cost of puritanism, about M’s stifled talent. As it was we did not want to be cast out of the bar. We wanted to be romantic, till about eight p.m. After that we just wanted our friends to save our seat in case some thin logger might want to drag it over to his table.

“What the hell was that?” asked some thin logger.

“Dwight D. Eisenhower, you dolt,” said M.

We indicated to the logger and his eleven friends that this was a local matter, an academic matter. G felt as if he had a special seat and a special problem. He thought that he had not yet been assimilated into the society represented by these effete college kids. He was never a logger, but he knew how to feel like them, that these phonies with their dramatic scarves and foreign beards needed a Leckie in the upper jaw from time to time.

A reader might be excused for thinking that this narrator, one among a number, was planning to asseverate about university syllabus, about courses, about Psychology 101. I imagine the grown up D looking at this chapter and considering it too linear already, the author not dead but still filled with the apprehension that the reader might be alive in the middle of the 21st century, wiping his eyes over the beauty of these fifties youth, sleeping in their overcoats, eating spaghetti with warmed Campbell’s tomato soup poured over

top, piss poured down the drain. There's a sandwich in every glass, some would-be literatus had said last night, before being banished to the stairwell, the worst place to drink in The Georgia.

Peripheral vision: D would never have heard of Lou Boudreau, but even though Lou Boudreau had been a young playing manager of the Cleveland Indians, and beaten his boyhood Red Sox in the playoff, G liked Lou Boudreau. They said that he wouldn't have been such a good ballplayer if he hadn't had amazing peripheral vision. G can hear M scoffing in Horse right now, that idiot G and his baseball, harrumph. He would actually say "harrumph" in those days, like the equally American Major Hoople, equally American as Lou Boudreau was American; M would say harrumph rather than harrumphing harrumph, in the way that people who had read more strangers than they had heard them say, say things such as "Oh Pshaw!" Baseball and the comics, when G listened to lonely Okanagan radio stations from D's California back in the forties (we do get to go back to the forties when we were not three people on a too-narrow bridge ready to fall with the heat and blast into False Creek, we get to go back to the forties when G for instance would listen to the sixty four dollar question and hope that the category would be the comics). In case you are bored enough to be interested, G can still remember Denny Dimwit's going-to-school, ambling-through-the-wildflowers-to-school song:

Ah, 'tis spring,
De boid is on de wing.
Dat's absoid,
Everybody's hoid,
De wing is on de boid.

In fact, G was probably singing it quite loudly outside the pub that night. He was frankly too scared to sing inside the pub, too scared to rise with a glass of beer in his hand, too timid to stand plaintively at the door of the Ladies & Escorts side,

because not only did he think himself too inconsequential in their lives for the coeds inside to welcome, but he included them in the legion of the effete. Instead, he would intone in an almost-singing voice: "Scram gravy ain't wavy." Boid boid, kid from the Okanagan with what he presumes is a Brooklyn accent, don't even know the layout of Gotham, don't know Brooklyn's on the end of Long Island, don't even know that KerouACK lives farther up Long Island with his fat mother, writing books fast with a hangover, romance gone long ago.

Vancouver is not an overgrown small town to this kid, G, going to get famous. He was in Montreal in the air force, his ears sticking out, a virgin in a pink teeshirt because he is colourblind, catching shit for that from the Phys Ed corporal, scared again, abashed is the best word. This guy is abashed as his friends from England and the big Vancouver city are suave. They know what Swedish movies mean, they have been to a fraternity party, they have read Schopenhauer, they know what is meant by non-U, and he had a sneaking horror that he was non-U as U can get. He was in the big city, and he expected to see big flashes in the sky and not know what they meant. He did not know how to use a transfer on the bus for the first six months he was in town. D had snuck free onto the subway in London. M knew how to get into the knickers of rich girls. G didn't even know what knickers were. Is this an exaggeration? Was The Georgia really a little bit of an Olde English Pub?

G lit another cigarette and remembered the flash he had seen behind him and then beside him and then in front of him when he turned. Then he took a deep drag on the cigarette and as he went to pull it from his mouth it stuck to his lips, and his fingers slid down to the business end, to be burned and initiated into a day long pain that alternated for attention with the pain behind the bone of his forehead. He remembered the strange writing on the walls, walls that have still these decades later not fallen, hieroglyphs, fifties space ship writing, fingers long passed on, fingers free forever of pain. Flash and glyph. He looked for the crinkled envelope. It

was not in or under any of his clothes. It was not on any of the lamentable furniture, it was not in the mud outside. He came back inside and put on his pants and shirt and white silk scarf. D must have the envelope. If not D, M would have it. It might be in the gutter, marked by tire tracks, at the curve of street next to the brewery. He put on his shoes.

Retracing their precipitate steps of the night before, he kept his eyes to the ground. His glasses were smeared badly but he was afraid he would drop them on the sidewalk if he tried to wipe them. He saw five crinkled envelopes between his grotto and the home of Sick's Lager or was it Molson's already. People were dropping envelopes all the time, apparently, addresses gone with the wind and rain, gone in a flash. One of the envelopes looked just like his and his heart leaped and so did his stomach as he bent over to pick it up. It did have handscrawling on it. The words, though, were in simple French, and this is what they were:

Les gestes et les mouvements sont rendus
pénibles par la pluie (porter un carton à
gâteaux, traîner un cabas à roulettes, marcher
en tenant un enfant par la main).

Pretty tentative. So he walked until he arrived at the near end of the bridge to the beer belt. There was a scaffold where the night before there had been only the wash of reflected light. There were three men on the scaffold, and they were not drunken students, not avatars. They were serious people in Bapco outfits, white coveralls and hats. They were painting the wall of the brewery, vandals with brushes. They were nearly finished their thoughtless task, wiping creamy yellow paint where last night's interstellar graffiti was now almost totally unreadable.

Oh yeah, like last night it was readable.

Last night he could not have read a flashcard held by a grinning grade one teacher.

Last night none of the three of them could have read the card called TO-DAY.

Drinking in The Georgia meant letting a wonderful warm buzz accumulate near the floor until it rose gradually up over your elbows, came over your table and up your arms and crawled up over your ears, leaving you honking happily in a brown sea of possibility and friendliness. Maybe even romance, either finding or losing the mysterious M. Likely enough, though, it would just be suds and song, something from the shiny tin Reddi-Hot oven behind the bar, then off hiking and babbling across the bridge with those old standbys, rudeboys, and walkhomewiths, D and G. Nothing special had happened to M this night in The Georgia, nothing except something on the bridge that looked like it might be the beginning of the end of the world seen at a very slight distance.

In M's night of dreams, two episodes clamoured with special resonance. The first was a hockey forum, The Forum (Vancouver? Montreal?), more likely the Kerrisdale Arena or just a generic hockey forum. Dreams won't quibble; they want to flow. It was between periods, and it was most likely Montreal and Toronto, the NHL teams whose games he heard on the radio in the forties when he was half asleep nearing nine o'clock bedtime, not yet asleep, not dreaming. In this dream there was a star with an unpronounceable and unspellable Czech or Hungarian surname. The star played for M's team, which meant, surely, the Canadiens. The prospect was to see this star lead his team back onto the ice from the tunnel leading to the dressing room. The star, then his teammates would burst from this darkness to subdued or racketing cheers, depending on whether the game was at home or away. M had the impression that the Canadiens were in their red road sweaters, the same red sweater that he himself wore for ankle-wobbling hockey on the pond behind his house.

Yet somehow it was not to the Canadiens' tunnel that M directed his attention, but to that of the visiting team. For it was realized, as in dreams things are ever only realized, never spoken, only announced by ghostly presences, realizers, announcers of the psychic world where pictures, words, plans, feelings, and philosophies are all one thing, that this was to be the final game ever in the NHL of Syl Apps, the legendary centre of the Maple Leafs. He was, it seemed, retiring, and at the height of his career. That was the only way M, who followed hockey but very slenderly, knew Apps, who'd finished his pro career in the forties, so it was natural that in his dream Apps would be at the top of his powers and fame. The arena was filled with expectancy and drama that M felt pushing down on his shoulders and neck; in fact he felt almost that he shared the pressure of these moments with the great Apps himself, felt that most intimate bond of fervid fandom. M understood that he was extraordinarily lucky to be present, and to be seated directly across the ice, opposite the tunnel, three or four rows up. He stared into the darkness of the tunnel and saw only men in dark pants and light shirts.

Then Apps skated out, with strong thrusts, but loose and easy. He dipped his shoulder to the left (he was carrying his stick on that side, M perhaps making Apps, of whom he'd seen few photographs, a southpaw). His face was pale and he shared with Mandrake the Magician and with Rip Kirby that single curling lick of black hair up and back over his probably brilliantined pate, and his blue eyes were down. There was just the slightest modest little grin of acknowledgment to the cheers. He knew that this was a great moment of adulation, one in which he was more a privileged participant than he was the subject of the commotion. Apps skated off in a businesslike way, and after a pause, the other team members spilled from the tunnel.

The mind's film did a quick fade here, and there was a feeling of conclusion and finish. It was a satisfying episode, rare in dreams, where too often he'd found he could hardly hook one vivid moment to the next one.

Later in that session of sweet silent unthinking came the flash, fully as sudden and vivid as it had been in actuality. The three of them were about in the middle of the bridge, and the flash threw light over the shoulders of the mountains and on parts of the city, casting the BC Electric building, for one, into monstrous silhouette. M, D, and G registered the event, but so did a fourth presence, though that presence seemed to be no definite person. This fourth was alarmed, and he spread alarm or he wanted to spread alarm. He at any rate wanted the three friends to take full and concerned note of the phenomenon, and not to try to shrug it off. "If you try to ignore this," the fourth presence said, "you will put yourselves, and everyone else, in even more danger than we are in from the nuclear blast itself." M was impressed by this statement, and suspected it to be a truth delivered from a moral realm frighteningly beyond his comprehension or his alteration. He felt silly and unhappy, and he knew that the message of light and menace was meant for him more than for any other person in the city.

Next day, though, there he was, pubbound again, this time in the passenger seat, ripped and squamous, of the Hillman convertible of the Gallant and Evil McMannic, Lord in Languishment of the Liquor Control Board, student sempiternal, lout, lothario, and honest lover. Teacher-in-training and actor in reserve. Unreserved bad actor and champion mocker.

"Fee!" cried M. "Last night they tried to blow me and D and G off the Burrard Bridge with an atomic bomb detonated somewhere up beyond and behind Lynn Valley! And then they projected Assyrian – ancient Assyrian, mind you – gibberish on the wall of the Capilano brewery! D thinks that it's a message of doom!"

A giggling gurgle from McMannic. Followed by a snorting, aspirated laugh which somehow fed on itself as a source of humour, a condensation or distillation of humour, a turbo version of standard humour whereby McMannic indicated that yes, the world is turning out to be just as funny as he

thought it was. Or that the world is turning out to be even more richly ridiculous than he thought it was.

“Not Assyrians, M!” he shouts. “It’s the tribes of Israel! They’re after our young D, all in an unholy lather to get him, grind him up, bones and cartilage! They know him,” Fee continued more quietly, “for an enemy of the hook-nosed race, for a Church-of-England man.” At this point McMannic turned from Hastings into Carrall Street and pretty much transported a man in a khaki gabardine overcoat carrying a bottle-shaped bag the same colour into a nicer world. But not quite. McMannic’s head spun in his neck-socket as he darted back over his shoulder a glance of savagely businesslike and curt inquiry. The effect, with the narrowed eyes and the long face and the hair swept back behind the ears in a sort of side-pompadour, was of an osprey or a kingfisher checking for prey. Then McMannic directed at M a more human glance.

“Now look here, M,” he hissed in one of his many patented stagy voices, “we’ve all got to face up to some ugly truths. And I know more than I’ve hitherto let on in these matters.” The stagey utterance was not really conscious, but purely habitual. McMannic simply found words too pallid without quotation marks around them. G did this too, but less obviously, and perhaps there was a hint of quotation in the speech of all M’s friends.

McMannic continued, “The fact is I’ve made a little sortie past the brewery already this A.M., and I caught sight of these curious characters. They were not made by Christian hand, M! Nor did he who grasps the curved steel of Islam inscribe the fateful sign! It is the fell forces of Judah that we have to thank for this work! Who do ya think,” he croaked a little lower and softer, “ordered those letters plastered over, anyway?”

Interpretation of the letters on the brewery wall continued in the West Hotel beer parlour, Ladies and Escorts section. McMannic was not the only one of M’s acquaintance to see the words that morning, and not the craziest to interpret them. Janey the Red and Bora Dora were hostages to their presence on the ladies’ side of the pub, or rather all were

invited in there so that jangling Janey, grinding away in her monstrous monotone, could give her conspiracy theories. She also conducted some small hand operations. She kept her beer hand raised, though she seldom drank. The forefinger of her left hand went up the back of the beer glass like a small spine, and there seemed to be something important about to be found in that glass, though that important thing was never her mouth. With her other hand she smoked, though no more often than she sipped her beer. Her Salem menthol was kept in her fingers, it seemed, for the sake of the growing of an ever-threatening ash which it inexorably produced, an ash as long and grey and deadly and maddening and stupid as her mishmush Marxist diatribe. Her other job, given to either hand as available, was to plink or plonk on the table one or several fingers to emphasize... well, not emphasize. Accent, a little counter-strike, to keep attention and ears to the revolving grindstone drone of her theories. It's all goofy. And the goofier it is the more Janey seems pleased with it. She has heard all about the white flash in the night, and she knows who is behind it, who is in front of it, who is trying to cover it up, and where in the U.S. it is being financed from. She knows who and how the connections are in the Bennett government, where the nuclear device was triggered from (a mile-deep mineshaft near Shalalth). She knows the end of all endeavours (insurrection, planned, pieced, plotted, plausible) and the origin of species (Our kind comes with twisted brain/ Thus subterfuge it must contain. Saith Jane.)

M huddles briefly with the redoubtable Peaches Dobell, a sometimes partner in verse, and they compose lines to celebrate the recent independence of Ceylon, which has become Sri Lanka:

A Sestina for Sri Lanka

The sestina began
Uncomfortably dark
about Sri Lanka, green

and slow, the water
idling away
and red at the finish

How to finish
something so dark,
so far away,
disappearing like water
although it began
so new, so green.

The lizards in the grass are green
and bring poisons from far away
poisons to make a complete finish,
a throat gurgling in the dark,
seeking air, as when the world began,
and finding only water.

The solution is water,
where we all began,
millennia ago and away
where the world was green
from start to finish
and the water shone light on the dark

But it was all water in the dark.
Dark was always fighting green,
ever since we came across the water
from Sri Lanka where it perhaps began
with no thought ever of a finish
in bird-filled waters far away.

How shall we fare away?
In a world that is no more green,
in Sri Lanka, where the world grows dark?
Away across the water?
Knowing how the dark will finish,

remembering how the green began.

In a corner of the Men's side of the West, hidden but audible, someone is softly warping "Sinner Man" on a mouth organ:

Oh, sinner man
Where you gonna run to
All on that day?

Larry Koerner, boy pornographer, sits in another corner on the Men's side. He too can be heard but not seen. He is planning and boasting about making another movie, a further exploration of middle-class liberal *angst*. He learned this word in a creative writing class, and he learned to underline it. In truth, though, he's German enough, an Afrikaaner, so he might use it plain. He doesn't do anything plain, though; it's all fancy for this boy except for the actual work with the camera, which Larry uses as a blunt instrument. His second movie will be an unholy compound of gritty realism (raining city streets, a boy actor wearing what looks like G's Air Force trench coat – probably borrowed from G; it was always too short for him anyway – cigarette in the corner of the mouth, James Dean hardly cold in his grave), sentimentality (simulated sex, tears on the girl's face), and social meaning (tears on the boy's face). Like his first movie.

Run to the sun
Sun won't you hide me?
Sun won't you hide me
All on that day?