

Chapter 6

JOURNEYS THROUGH BOOKLAND

I CAN'T REMEMBER rain that first summer in the city. It must have come since through July and August everything stayed green. But if it fell, I don't remember seeking shelter when I slept or swilling coffee all day long inside a doughnut shop.

In September all that changed. As if in anger at itself for having let Toronto slip unpunished through the summer, the temperature dropped by ten degrees. Winds set in, corralling rain ahead of them. For three straight days the streets and sidewalks sombered to an oily grey and sizzled under vengeful showers. Storm clouds hid the CN Tower. Veils of water lashed the glass of office buildings, pelted rooves, and crushed the summer blossoms out of city-planted gardens.

There was no escape—no awning broad enough, no doorway deep enough to cower from the downpour or outwit the crafty winds. The reality of shelter finally hit me. Anomalous or harbinger, the change in weather ripped the scrim off summer. Behind it lay the chill of fall and winter's unforgiving freeze.



I owe the rain.

The first day found me pacing, caged, the Eaton Centre's

glasses-in length, hoping for the sky to clear. When by dark it hadn't, I hopped a turnstile and rode two stops up to Fran's. Hours crawled by, broken up by cups of coffee and enough requests for food to keep my waitress happy. Sallow and hard-faced, she banished others to the elements when change they'd cadged outside the doors could not be stretched beyond a Coke or pot of tea.

By one a.m. I had to choose between a sleepless night at Fran's or finding cover out-of-doors. I paid my bill, aware that in one day my wallet, formerly half full, was suddenly half empty. I rode the subway to High Park and climbed the rafters of a picnic shelter. There I slept—contorted, damp, but mostly unmolested by the weather—until dawn or something like it woke me up.

My Sun Salute that morning greeted only water dripping off the shelter roof. More pulled and stretched than limber, I squelched through High Park to a doughnut shop near Keele and ordered coffee and a cruller. Neither brightened up the day. If anything they dimmed it down because I had to break another twenty.

I couldn't face a second day of shopping mall confinement. The endless no-choice sameness made a prison of a city that, till then, had offered only roving space and freedom. Almost nowhere was I welcome to spend time unless I wanted to spend money. Galleries were out, even if I had the interest. So were the museums. Ditto restaurants, except to eat. Boredom and security patrols ruled out the Bay Street Terminal. I could have subways back and forth from Kennedy to Kipling, but rattling through tunnels would have felt like prison, too.

I owe the rain.

It led me to a haven.



In the time it took to get to Yonge and Bloor, the weather popped some steroids. Beefed up, it loosed a strong-arm torrent aided by a pugilistic wind. I summoned courage in a stairway at the back of Hudson's Bay, then sprinted through the downpour to the one place

I could spend the day, not money. All day, any day. Shelter from the street, cover from the rain, warmth in winter, cool in summer . . .

Underneath the colonnade around the Metro Library, I peeled off my T-shirt, wrung it out, and worked it on again. It clung like wet Saran Wrap to my skin. I shrugged into my knapsack and headed for the doors.

I'd passed the library a dozen times or more, when the spirit moved me north instead of south on Yonge. I'd registered the huge red-brick facade, expansive as a dam, without feeling any pull to go inside. The building looked shut in upon itself—solid, weighty and indifferent to passers-by. The colonnade around the bottom with its plate-glass view inside did nothing to invite. A bank tower had more warmth.

But through the doors the world turned inside out, or so it seemed. Mass turned into weightlessness, solidity to air. The building was a shell enclosing space. Lots and lots of space, six unobstructed storeys' worth. A crystal elevator glided up to balconies, not floors. Trailing plants glowed green in light so perfectly diffuse I couldn't see my shadow. The blond wood of the catalogues looked warm to touch, like desert sand.

Most intriguing, just inside, a sculpted beachscape tempted eyes to scan horizons far beyond the walls.



For the next four years, I'd sail past those walls on a bookland odyssey whose every destination was a starting point. Ray Bradbury would lead to Bierce and Poe. Poe would lead to Locke. Locke would snarl me in philosophy but take me on a twisted path to Browning. Browning caught me up in painters, then brought me back to Byron, Keats, and Shelley. From there to Blake and on to Frijhof Capra, where *The Tao of Physics* led to the *I Ching* and Jung. On and on, back and forth, fiction to phrenology, mystery to medicine, botany to bobsleds. Any time I had no place to go, any time I needed an escape, any time *too-poor-too-tired-too-hungry* I

had refuge, hushed and cosseted, where people trawled the stacks or asked librarians for help—but mutedly, like a movie with the sound turned down.



I found an empty table and claimed it with my knapsack. A woman shelving books pointed me toward the periodicals. I came back with the *Toronto Star*, the *Sun*, and *Eye* spindled onto reading poles. Damp and cold but warming up, I spread them open to the classifieds.

The rain beat on outside. My clothes and sneakers dried and started giving off an earthy smell. My eyes went down the columns: Apartments, Jobs, Careers, Rooms. I begged a pencil, circling anything that looked promising. The checkout desk was happy to make change. I started making calls.

“Hydro not included.”

“The job’s already taken.”

“Do you have your licence?”

“No fridge, no stove.”

“The subway out to Kennedy, then take the 105 to Lawrence

...”

“Nine-fifty, first and last.”

“Minimum wage.”

“Are you bondable?”

“Key deposit.”

“Uniform not provided.”

“In by ten, no exceptions.”

“Two evenings a week.”

“Twelve-hundred, first and last.”

I took the papers back. My eyes felt gritty so I visited the wash-room and splashed water on my face. Afterwards I peed while an older man with glasses eyed me from two urinals away. I flushed and left as he began to stroke himself.

I took the silent crystal elevator to the topmost floor. The bal-

cony arrangement let me watch the people down below. Their movements looked rehearsed. I could almost see the lines connecting them in something like a dance. Almost, but not quite. A crowd of people didn't tell as clear a story as the individuals debarking off a streetcar outside Fran's.

My back grew tired. I straightened up and rubbed the muscles underneath the waistband of my jeans.

An empty carrel beckoned in the stacks. I took a thick book from the shelves and cracked it wide, then in the study booth's high-sided privacy put down my head and slept.



Someone touched my shoulder. I stirred and raised my head. The library had shrunk. Brightly-coloured spines filled metal shelves along the walls. I was curled up in an orange plastic chair. A book was open on my lap. Tarmac, fencing, and a not-yet-planted field stretched out beyond the windows.

"Here, you might like this."

A kindly voice. An understanding look. A perfume happy with the smell of lilacs.

The school librarian, Miss Kelly, handed me a book. *The Forgotten Door*, by Alexander Key. The cover had no picture, just shades of blue and green, like northern lights. I closed the one I'd dozed off over. *Norse Mythology in Tale and Pictures*. A glossy, full-page Thor with cartoon lightening bolts went back to being memory pressed flat by printed words.

Miss Kelly vanished.

And re-appeared. The field outside was tall with corn.

"When you need to get away." She smiled and gave me *Dandelion Wine*. "Bradbury is good at night, by flashlight, when the others are asleep."

A year, a second passed.

"Are they teasing you at home again?" Miss Kelly touched a knuckle to my cheek. "I'll have Mr. Johnson call and see if we can

put a stop to it.”

Then I was outside the Mt. Hope Public School. A banner hung across the entrance: *Home of the Mustangs*. The schoolyard was empty but I knew, inside, pupils squirmed at desks and raised their hands while teachers taught and scratched out blackboard sums.

I started for the village on a cracking sidewalk overhung with maple trees. There, across the road, was Mrs. Oldfield's. She taught grade seven and was rumoured to be strict. There was Harris Electric with its fading signs for Philco-Ford and Westinghouse. There the Glanbrook Township Fire Department with yellow trucks outside.

I reached an intersection with a four-way flasher. Straight ahead, the old feed Co-op. Left and right, Homestead Drive, shaded by catalpa trees and chestnuts. I turned left, setting off for home...

...and got woken by another hand. The old man from the washroom.

“I wouldn't do that here,” he winked. “They'll throw you out for sleeping.” His voice was soft. A filigree of tenderness wound through his rueful sexual desire.

“Thanks.”

He walked away, but part of him—an afterglow—stayed behind to counsel, offer help and fall in love.

The dream stayed with me through the afternoon. The memories were real; no quixotic dream mutations marred their flow or placement. At closing time, I took them from the library and carried them the drenched blocks down to Fran's, where, over fish and chips and lemon pie, I walked them through again.

Homestead Drive...

A squat, brick building with a faded barber pole. A Quonset curling rink. A machine shop and a church. A doctor's house—clapboard, white, with shutters painted black. A town hall with a park out back: swings and whirligigs, a hot-dog stand, a tufty softball diamond, baked at noon but gold and green near sundown.

Nothing stirred. No vehicles crept up the road. No breezes shook the willows, oaks or Manitoba maples. I could almost *see* the

smell of distant cow dung, taste the zinc in a cicada's whine, hear the bell-tone cool of summer shade.

A dip in Homestead Drive, spilling houses down to Highway 6. The smell of apricots from someone's backyard tree. A quarter-mile gap giving out on unploughed fields.

Ahead, another church, four-square with a belfry. Across the highway, hemmed by pines, a narrow property and long, long driveway rising to a farmhouse nearly hidden from the road: steep peaked wings, flaking gables, sagging porch. Around the back, a rusting Massey-Ferguson and Chevy up on blocks. A rotting barn, its doors pulled wide, exhaling smells of sawdust, oil and gasoline.

Someone in the restaurant lit up a cigarette. I didn't see the match get struck. I only caught the flare, which seemed to spread across my eyes. The pines beside the driveway faded, leached by yellow flame. The vision started melting like a jammed frame in a film projector. First the laneway vanished, then the rusting tractor, then the paraplegic Chevy. The yellow light grew white, burning off the house and weedy lawn in front of it. The barn remained, then angry orange filled the dim interior. Flames licked up the splitting wood. A wave of heat crashed over me. A vice clamped round my head. Smithy hammers clattered in my skull. Red-hot needles pierced my eyes. A savage poker stabbed me in the guts, evacuating breath and, in an instant pure with white-hot pain, all knowledge of myself.



“You okay?”

Strong hands gripped my shoulders. A foul smell filled my nose.

“Can you hear me?”

My eyes slid open. A dove-grey Stetson tilted inches from my face. Rain dripped off the brim. Blue eyes, blue as midnight, studied me from underneath. My eyelids fell again.

“Hey, you—don't do that.” Cool fingers raised my chin. “Stay with me.”

I struggled to look up. I'd made it from the restaurant and

slumped against a wall. The brick had scraped a raw patch on my spine.

“You on anything? E? Meth?”

I tried to answer, but my throat was full of phlegm. I coughed and shook my head.

Cowboy held my chin a moment longer.

“You need help?”

I wasn't sure. The rain was bringing me around but I felt empty, weak, not certain I could stand.

Cowboy waited.

“I think I'll be okay,” I finally got out.

He took my hand and pulled me up. My jeans were heavy, sodden on my legs with a squishy warmth around my buttocks. I leaned against him for support.

Cowboy grimaced.

“You don't smell so good.”

“I shit myself.”

“Can you stand on your own?”

I straightened up, fearing any second that the white-hot pain would strike again. Cowboy tensed, ready if I fell. Nothing happened. I moved my head from side to side.

“I'm okay, I think.”

College Street was empty of pedestrians. Intermittent cars sloshed by. A streetcar stopped. Nobody got off.

“Can I get you to a hospital?”

Police, do-gooders, social agencies. . .

My face must have reflected how I felt.

“Don't like 'em much myself,” he offered. “What happened in there?”

“I don't know. I was remembering something and—.” No, I didn't want to go there. I started shivering. “How did I get out here?”

“I was in the booth behind you when you started acting funny. I thought you were stoned. Guess not. Something you ate?”

I shrugged helplessly.

“I left some money on the table for your bill.”

“I can pay you back.” I looked around. “My knapsack. It’s inside. It’s got my wallet.”

“I’ll get it for you.” He walked away then turned around. “You okay alone?”

I nodded, teeth chattering.

When he came out again, he kept the knapsack and his distance.

“You got a change of clothes in here?”

“Not really.”

“Gonna have to do something about that. You live around here?”

“I don’t have a place.”

“I’m over on Jarvis. Can you make it that far?”

“I think so.”

“I got some jeans might fit.” He looked me up and down. “Bit tight, though. Mind if I walk ahead? You just plain stink. My name’s Pete, by the way.”

“David.”

“We’ll skip the handshake. Least ways, till you’re clean.”

He slung the knapsack on one shoulder and set off. Even hunched against the downpour, he swaggered slightly.

By the time we got to Jarvis, I’d stopped shivering. The warmth inside my pants was oozing up around my scrotum. I longed to rip my jeans off there and then and let the hard rain wash me clean.

Cowboy—Pete—turned at a rooming house and beckoned me behind. In a backyard hemmed by sumacs, he uncoiled a garden hose.

“Strip.”

I bent over and untied my sneakers, then dropped my jeans and underwear and peeled off my T-shirt. He neither looked away nor flinched from what he saw.

“Turn around.”

The water from the hose was even colder than the rain. It hit me like a spray of needles, playing back and forth across my buttocks, down the crack and finally my legs. Pete ordered me to face him,

then hit me with the spray again, aiming carefully around my pubes.

“Okay, come on.”

He unlocked a side door and went down a flight of stairs. A grimy runner stretched between a bedroom on the left and a bare room on the right. A kitchenette was tucked beneath the steps.

“Bathroom’s that way,” he said, pointing to the empty room. “Take a shower. Use my towel. It’s the only one.”

The shower was a metal stall with wooden slats above the drain. Rust scabs pocked the sides, and the wood grew slimy when the water hit it. A bar of Ivory still with its name sat in a scummy wire dish. I soaped myself all over, even scrubbing at my hair, then rinsed and sudsed again. The pressure from the shower head was strong, melting kinks and knots I didn’t know I had. Weak with gratitude, I sank down on the slats and stayed that way until the water started to run cool.

The single towel smelled sweet, like drying grass. I wrapped it round my waist and wondered why when there was nothing left to hide from the man who’d hosed me down.

Pete was in the bedroom in a change of clothes, his Stetson drying on the wall. His hair—light brown and short—still bore the imprint of the hat. The room was small with not much furniture: a mattress on the floor, a fruit crate on its side with scattered change and condoms, a dresser painted white.

He was on the mattress, picking a guitar and humming out of tune. He stopped when I came in.

“I got your sneakers from outside. The rest is in the trash. Hope you don’t mind. No laundry facilities here.”

He put the guitar aside and rummaged through the dresser without getting off the bed.

“You got underwear and shit?” he asked. “Scuse the choice of words.”

“In my bag.”

“You’ll have to spread it out to dry. Here, try these.”

He handed me a pair of jeans exactly like the ones he’d just thrown out. I took them with my knapsack to the empty room. I

had to double-roll the cuffs, but at least I could fit into them.

“Okay,” he said appraisingly when I came back, “that’s that. Now, get some sleep. I don’t know what happened back there at Fran’s, but whatever it was, you look fried.”

He hoisted his guitar, turned off the lights, and left. I peeled off my borrowed jeans and lay down on my back. After several minutes, I edged closer to the wall and pulled the sheets and blanket over me. I hadn’t slept with covers in four months.

In the dark, the sound of Cowboy strumming his guitar was like a lullaby.

Some time later, I became aware of him undressing. By the faint light from the basement window I could see that he was hard. He slid under the sheets, his back to me, as far away as possible. The effort not to turn and touch me, make me hard like him, stopped his breath. His heart was beating fast; I could feel it through the mattress. If I’d moved, done anything to grant permission, he’d have given in.

Instead, we lay in stillness, far across the bed.

“Pete?” I said.

“What?”

“Can I call you Cowboy? Instead of Pete?”

He didn’t answer right away. Yellow oblongs from the headlights of a car slid round the walls. He breathed, letting go of something he’d been holding in since getting into bed.

“Sure. Why not?” A different kind of giving in. “Everybody else does.”