

1.

The Photograph

Foyers des Pionniers
Hearst, Northern Ontario
March 2022

There's something mighty empowering about reaching old age and still being able to piss people off. Take the staff here at the home. One glimpse of me reaching for my parka of a cold January morning and they're all over me. Just last month the director marched into my room to read the Riot Act: "This roaming nonsense has got to stop, Mr. Martin," she said. "No more wandering around out there on your own. Our job is to keep you safe. Lose a toe to frostbite and heads will roll. Mine included. You wouldn't want to get me fired now, would you?"

I get it, but I have to occupy myself, somehow. Basket weaving and chair exercises just don't cut it. Not for me.

Fortunately, the doctor's on my side. God, how I love that young woman. Besides, when I sneak out, it's only to my little bush place on the river, upstream from the home, not a trek to Thunder House Falls on the Missinaibi. I've got a hidey-hole in a clump of black spruce up there that's become my special retreat. Sadly, none of the inmates here at the home seem keen on

joining me. They're either too fond of their creature comforts, or too intimidated to break out. All of which makes it my own private moose yard.

Lately I've resorted to hiding my parka and boots in Sonny's closet. Sonny's my neighbour, four rooms down the hall. He's English, like me, which is probably why they put us close to each other. Frankly, I don't give a damn what his mother tongue happens to be, because we're not exactly bosom pals. What's important is that he's closer to the exit than me. From his room I can jump into my winter duds and be out of the building before you can say "Jack Robinson." By the time they discover me missing, I'm long gone. Worries me though that they're threatening to alarm the side doors in our wing. That would kill me.

The flaw in my arrangement with Sonny is that I have to see him so often. Not that he's that bad, or would ever blow the whistle on me. It's just that he's not my kind of person. He used to be, but old age has whittled his moods down to two—bitchy or melancholic. I never know which it'll be when I cross his doorstep. Of the two I'll take bitchy, a mood I can respond to with a few barbs of my own. Melancholy stirs up dark memories best left untouched. Too much of it leaves me ugly for days.

Yesterday they caught me on the way out the door. I kicked up a fuss, but mostly for show. Secretly I wasn't disappointed considering the blizzard that was brewing. Today the plan is to break out early while the girls on the floor are busy, and Sonny is still groggy from sleep. I'll be in and out of his room in a flash.

The instant I crossed his doorstep I knew I was in trouble. The old bugger was sitting there waiting. "Well, well," he said from his swivel chair next to the window, "look who just blew in." I tried to ignore him by heading straight to his closet. "Making a run for it early, are we?" he continued, all folksy-like.

Avoiding eye contact, I slid open the closet door and reached for the Habitant pea soup box where I hid my outdoor clothes. "Jesu Marie," I said, looking down. Not unexpectedly, Sonny's dirty underwear and socks lay atop the box; another one of his jokes that have long ceased to be humorous.

"Hoping to spot raven in the moose yard," I said. "This time of year, they shelter there overnight. Gotta get there early, though. No time to waste." Head down and tugging at the velcro on my boots, I didn't notice him get up from the chair. When I straightened, there he was, smack-dab in the middle of my getaway path clutching a photograph that someone had thought enough of to enlarge. He stood, legs splayed, holding it at eye level to be sure I couldn't miss it.

"See that LCBO box down there," he said, motioning with his chin to the box he'd pulled out from under the bed. I nodded. "Photographs. My niece's grandson brought them by yesterday. Figure you'd want to see them; especially, this one." He pumped the picture back and forth in front of me, like he was performing one of those calisthenic exercises they try to con us seniors into.

"Doubt that," I replied, ignoring the picture and fiddling with the zipper on my parka.

“Stop being so goddamned ornery, R.J.”

“Come on, Sonny, don’t do this. How many times do I have to spell it out? Photographs, old letters, souvenirs—none of that stuff works on me. Leaves me glum. Sometimes for days.”

“Jesus, R.J., you are a cold one.”

“Trying to keep looking forward, that’s all. There’s too much living in the past going on around here; like we’re about to fall off our perches, or something. When are you gonna get it through that thick skull of yours that this boy isn’t working on his obit.” Immediately I regretted the tone; Sonny had lost his wife not that long back. Besides, he still had his faculties, unlike many in this place, and might be good company, if I could get him to live in the present. By himself, he was free to let his memories take him wherever. I just wasn’t going down that road with him.

“For Christ’s sake,” he said. “Just take a peek. It’s not gonna kill ya.”

Short of pushing him aside it was unavoidable. I unzipped and pulled out my glasses, sure as hell I’d be gazing at the faces of long-gone friends. Guys I missed so much I’d stopped going to hangouts we’d once shared.

“Come on,” he insisted, wobbling the picture at me. “Just give me the name of the pretty girl in the front row—the one wearing the CGIT uniform. Being older than me I thought you’d recognize her.”

I followed his finger to the girl in question. I knew her alright; I'd even dated her. Now, looking at her face seventy years on, I realized just how pretty she was. "Hilka Rasinpera," I said, a pang reverberating through my gut.

But it wasn't only Hilka's face that had my pulse racing. It was the picture itself. I figured it to be circa 1950, and in it a crowd was gathered in a small clearing beside a lake. They're holding song books, which fits, because it's probably one of the grade-eight school picnics they used to have every spring. In the foreground is a dock with a rock to the right and a weed bed to the left. No sand beach here—this is Northern Ontario, muskeg territory. Higher up in the background are a cabin and a shed, both log. Behind that, a thick, dark wall of boreal forest.

If I were to guess, I'd say the photo was taken with one of those three-dollar, Brownie Hawkeye cameras. Cheap device or not, this snap is so sharp that not only do I recognize each and every face, but also the expressions on them. Faces so familiar they're almost family. Which is astounding, because if you showed me a picture of the nursing staff here at the residence, I'd be hard pressed to come up with more than a handful of names. But this photograph, seven decades old, has me looking at them in virtual real time. Suddenly, I'm Einstein, with names, loves, hates, friends, enemies, and idiosyncrasies scrolling across my mind, like formulae on the physicist's blackboard. From the kids sitting cross-legged in the front, past the parents, to the old folks in the back, I could recite chapter and verse on the real person behind each face—flirters, lusters, no-nonsensers, drinkers, gamblers, liberals, conservatives, war-damaged. Gossip and intrigue were coming at me so fast I could even distinguish the voices.

I'm not sure how long I stared at the picture, but when I finally raised my head, it was to the gotcha grin on Sonny's beaming face. "Told you this was a grabber," he said.

More than a grabber, I thought, but wasn't about to admit it, lest he take it for weakness. Instinct told me to run, and I might have, if not for the faces of four, strange men standing at the back of the crowd. Decked out in suits, ties, and broad-brimmed fedoras, they looked like they'd taken a wrong turn en route to a funeral and wound up at a school picnic. As to age, I'd put one in his early twenties, two mid-thirties, and the last, close to seventy. To a man, the leathered faces and world-weary eyes, spoke of lives that had not been easy. They're trying to smile but the lips won't turn up, as if out of practice. They're too well dressed to be town drunks invited to the school picnic by the well-meaning church minister who's also there. "My God!" I said, "it's them."

I'd never intended for Sonny to hear this. But with the shock of seeing the four strangers together in a picture, the words had just slipped out. He stared at me, all questions.

"Them who?" he asked.

"Who took this picture?" I replied, in an attempt to deflect.

Sonny shrugged. "No idea. It was just one of many in the box."

My mind was racing. I'd been told that there was a picture of these four guys, but after years of searching I'd never uncovered a copy. I'd ask, and people would hunt through old snapshots, then come up empty—as if by some mysterious force the photograph had been culled from the family collection.

“When you say, ‘them,’” Sonny pressed, “who’re you talking about? There’s gotta be forty people in the picture.”

Reluctantly, I pointed to the four strangers. “Those guys,” I said.

Sonny frowned. “What about ‘em. DPs if you ask me.”

“Don’t call them that!” I snapped.

Sonny took a step back. “Why not? That’s what they probably were. I mean, look at ‘em, talk about out of place.”

“Maybe, but you make it sound like they were trash. You know nothing about them, or what they might have lived through. Back then, there were lots of men like this around—single guys with history, but no family, or friends, to pass on their stories.”

“Stories! Ha! Come on, R.J., half of them were rubbydubs who wound up hanging themselves down at the bridge. These four, what did they do that’s got you so worked up?” I shrugged and tugged at the zipper on my parka, but Sonny wasn’t about to quit. “Shit-a-Goddamn, R.J., you got my curiosity up. Don’t you dare clam up on me now.” He must have noticed my hesitation because he took a step closer.

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Best keep it in the box, so to speak.”

“My God, that’s weak. Since when has R.J. Martin, ex-reporter for the *Timmins Daily Press*, ever kept his mouth shut about anything?”

I took a deep breath. Once again, I was letting my impatience with Sonny get the best of me. Which wasn't fair, because all he'd done was parrot the, "dirty DP", attitude prevalent back in the day—one I'd shared myself, until I got to know several bush-bound mavericks while working in my dad's store. For the main, they were lost souls—trappers, prospectors—hiding out in the bush and barely scraping by. I'd talk to them. Sometimes they talked back. They never divulged much, but here and there I detected hints of experiences past, sometimes hair-raising ones. I never got more, because when they died, their stories died with them. Once gone, the lasting memory most folk carried was of scruffy, stinky, nebulous figures, who showed up briefly, only to slink back to their hidey holes in the bush on the first train out of town.

I plunked myself down on a chair, debating how much to tell him. "When I was a kid," I finally began, "about the same time this picture was taken, something very hush-hush took place."

Sonny leaned forward with a grin. "Yeah? What?"

"Never quite sure, until decades on. Oh, at the time, I dug hard to get to the bottom of it, but the adults, Mom and Dad included, took pains never to discuss it in the presence of, 'the little guy with the big ears.' All I ever got were hushed voices and the odd word. I recall, sitting in the chair at Joe Charles' barber shop, with the usual gaggle of men chattering away. On this occasion they're casting furtive glances in my direction and talking in whispers, but not low enough for me to miss words like 'DP', and 'police', and 'murder.'"

"And?" Sonny asked, rolling his hand in encouragement.

“And nothing. That’s it. After a while I gave up and forgot about it. It wasn’t until forty years on while sifting through some of Dad’s papers that it all came flooding back. There it was, a file entitled, ‘Affidavit on the Sami Aalto Case, by O. Schneider, witnessed by Harvey Martin.’ Turns out, Otto Schneider—he’s the older one of the four guys in the photograph—left a handwritten document for Dad to witness and keep in his safe.”

“So, you finally got your answer?”

“Christ, if only. Oh, I found out what took place, alright—names, timelines, how the men happened to come together, details on their final days—but not what counted most.”

Sonny frowned. “Jeez, RJ, sounds to me like you got chapter and verse. What could possibly be missing?”

“The important part, that’s what—the why of it. Sure, I knew who did what to whom, but not why. For that I had to dig. It bugged me so much I couldn’t stop picking at it. And, yes, I admit, as a reporter, I saw a good story in it. Spent years piecing it all together, and when I finally did, I walked away. Gotten too close to it. They’d become family. You don’t go writing up secret stuff on family.”

“If that’s the case, why are you so gobsmacked by this one picture?”

I picked it up and pointed to the four men. “See the guy next to Otto, the one that looks like he just got pulled through a knot-hole backwards?”

Sonny examined the picture. “If you ask me, they all look the same—like they’d just been freed from one of those concentration camps.”

“That’s Sami Aalto. Until today, I’d never seen his picture, but I know it’s him. The others I recognize from photos their families shared with me.”

Sonny took the photograph and examined it closely. “So, who are these guys?”

“Two Finns, one German, and one German-Canadian.”

“All, dare I say, DPs?”

“Nope. Otto had his papers. He lived in a log cabin south of Jogues and about a mile east of the Algoma Central tracks.” I looked at Sonny, expecting him to gloat for being correct about the other three being DPs, but he didn’t. Perhaps, with his curiosity running high, he didn’t want to risk not getting the whole story. I looked out the window. The moose yard beckoned, but with heavy snow falling, and with the wind slamming it against the window, I found myself settling in. “How’s your history?” I asked.

“Try me.”

“The Winter War and the Continuation War? Mean anything?”

Sonny shrugged. “*Nada.*”

“Finland. World War II. That’s where it begins. But it ends right here in Hearst.”

Sonny went to the cupboard and came back with an enormous box of cookies.

“You sure you want to hear this?” I asked. “It’s kinda convoluted.”

“I got the cookies out, didn’t I?”