

he really did not know why he must do that or this. He pouted, he pleaded: "Miss," he called her, as if she were a teacher or a nurse, someone to look after him, look out for him. All her worry had crumpled her long fingers into fists, all her blood had withdrawn to the stamping wrist

and the blue vein convulsing in her throat. She had to swallow screams, she couldn't let out what it meant to her to have him and yet have not. He stroked a parsley leaf and called it "soap." Kneel, scratched at patio stones to plant a spoon. "Potato," he looked at her and said. She had to sit, her hand on her heart, her overflowing heart that skipped, but still beat on. He sat beside her, took her hand in his and put it to his lips. And bit, and her hand was wax, wanting the pain in it.

Waiting for the Strike

by Tony Fabijanic

He invented a rainbow but lightning struck it
shattered it into the lake lap of a mountain
—Earle Birney, "Bushed"

The lag was four minutes. Blue clouds rolled overhead and sparked angrily on their way east as he lay panting on the ground. The wood was split and charred and smoking. He'd run from under the oak tree in the meadow to the woods' edge, had seen the strike hit and heard the crash, so loud it seemed the whole sky had collapsed through the current. He checked his watch.

His suspicions had started three months ago. Then out Malignant Cove way two weeks past he realized he'd have to risk a rest somewhere in the open away from houses and prying eyes. He'd just driven the ground rod into the earth of Jack Macewen's back yard and stood fifty yards away on the sloping gravel driveway loading the copper cable spool onto the box of his used Ford, when a bolt roared out of the sky. The jag which tore the thick afternoon air out of low hearing and menacing clouds seemed to have veered from the spot where he kneeled, and seemed to have travelled horizontally to the copper flew point. Or so he thought, seeing it at the edge of his vision.

Macewen ran out of the house. "What the hell...?" He turned around wildly then saw his hired man looking at the sky. "Shit, just in time too." Macewen took a few steps back to see better. "Sounded like a train, b'yi!"

He didn't answer. A metal taste filled his mouth as he looked at the flue, a taste that began before the strike. It was ever so slightly like blood, though he knew that was impossible.

"Look here Miner," said Macewen coming forward. "I want to pay you extra, show my appreciation."

"Won't say no," he answered. The rod had withstood the force well and he felt proud of his work. He deserved the money.

"Put something aside and get out of that shack of yours in the bush."

"I'll take that into consideration."

"You're too goddamn stiff. Go out some time."

He took the money and left.

Three more contracts awaited him around the county. But he couldn't tackle them

yet. He'd searched for the right messages in the sky and had driven to the meadow in South Side Harbour. He'd waited. After an hour he thought he mistread the conditions. The ceiling climbed and the heft of static drag he gauged by cloud movements and colour lightened. He was ready to leave.

But then like a mist across a field, sourceless and insidious, the taste rose in the back of his mouth. He waited to be sure. It grew stronger and more acrid and he recognized it as the taste from before.

Now he lay in the trees as blue clouds rolled towards the sea and rain splattered through the leaves. He got his breath back, stepped into the field and examined the tree's shards. The black mark faced the road. A tremor went through him because that was the side where he'd been standing. Now he knew the strike was meant for him.

At first he felt hunted. In bed he stared at the ceiling planks of his one-room shack and waited for the bolt to kill him. He listened for rain and thunder, expecting the metal taste to fill his mouth. Sleep turned on him.

The three copper rods he installed on the roof were comforting, but only inside where he ate and slept. Work forced him out into the country and among people, down the town's main street and to the post office, garage and train station where he did the necessary chores of the job - filing statements with his Ontario supplier, loading the truck's tank and picking up equipment packed in wooden crates. Then he moved quickly, sullen, checking low clouds which threatened lightning. Although an annoyance, his responsibility for the lives around him made him proud too, even though he thought no one deserved his sacrifice or would ever know about it. What had they ever done for him anyway? Everything he had he owed to hard work, not to them. Times had been tough (with shame he remembered the days of miserable meals), but not once had anyone offered help. He neither expected nor wanted money but some small offering they could afford out of their work: corn, say, that sonofabitch Moody ground every fall to meat; a solitary salmon from the hundreds Jim Macpherson dragged in mornings when he saw him working there part-time. These men knew him, enough to nod when they passed on Main Street. They knew his station. He felt righteous thinking about their indifference.

But he still felt sentenced for his past and for his life. He took stock on a ledger in his mind:

- he'd never married, never felt pleasure in people's company. Maybe he was supposed to change his ways.
- he kept a still, under cover behind his place. The last few Decembers he'd fired it up until the coastal traffic petered out. He kept up some connections, driving now and again to the docks at dawn with demi-johns of apple hooch. While he had to eat in those days, now he expected to live off his new respectable trade.
- and there were things from boyhood. He remembered killing dwarf frogs

around the marsh behind his family's house, impaling them on pine branches and watching them die. But he'd long ago repented for the sins of youth, and anyway no man was accountable for everything.

Nothing else seriously weighed his conscience. In his dealing he got more polite and took to speaking the right public niceties. But he knew deep down they sounded arch and weren't honest. No fear about his own death or about the violence of a lightning strike could socialize him.

Two months passed and the skies spared him. As summer turned to fall, the sun shone out of the blue like a friendly eye. When it rained he sensed no threat in the patterns of the clouds. Stepping outside didn't load him down with anxiety as if every minute of every day had to be lived on his back, staring upwards.

He finished the three contracts and drove in search of more. From the pamphlets H.R. Stott and Co. had sent he knew that tall isolated structures were most vulnerable to lightning. There were enough churches and chapels in town and around the county to earn him a living for a year or longer.

He stopped at St. Anne's in Georgetown, a big white wooden building that overlooked the sea. A dilapidated shed stood beside it. He recognized it as the sort of shelter men folk had used once to tie their horses and to chat while their wives congregated inside the church. As a boy he'd stayed with his father. He remembered seeing steam rise from the flanks of the horses in the winter, seeing them paw the ground and toss their heads because they were up on the bit. Across the years the smell came back to him. He recalled the talk about crops and machinery and such; he would stand silently against the wall, sole of one foot against it, half listening to the conversation, mind drifting. Once in a while one of the men would ask him something and he would answer with a timid "yes sir" or "no sir." When it was time his father touched him gently on the shoulder and they would leave. So today he stepped out of his truck with a feeling of comfort and familiarity.

The priest spoke to him on the front steps. An overweight man with a big voice, a face shaped like a pie and thin strands of hair combed back over his pink head, he assessed his visitor casually while he listened. His eyes left the thin serious stubbled face with its yellow teeth and travelled to the muddy boots and back.

Finally, he said, "This church hardly needs intervention. We keep our house in order, sir." Then he added, "But I haven't seen you in our congregation. I trust I will soon."

"I'll try to make it," he answered.

"Yes, see that you do." The voice was stiff but conciliatory, extending an invitation. "Good day, Father," he said, touching the rim of his fedora and turning abruptly back to the truck.

His face burned as he drove on. Though the meeting was hardly antagonistic, his

anger grew. He felt scolded like a kid, humbled by the priest's condescension. He could guess the man's thoughts.

Days went by, and he retreated into all the physical minutiae of his trade. He set to work on a farm house in St. Andrews. Straddling the roof as he joined flue base to brick, seeing the owner below watching him and the country around from up high, made him forget the encounter with Father Connally. Worry lifted from him like a crow off a roof.

The social niceties he'd practiced over summer in answer to a fear of Godly retribution fell away in importance, and he went back to the gruff distance that was natural.

Then fall slid into winter. He covered the roof with pine branches, hunkered down with The MacNeil Annuals and the hooks and bright threads, drank hot toddies flavoured by maple syrup, ate beans and molasses and watched snow swell around his shack. The road was cleared for logging trucks rattling down from the hills to Teasdale's Mill and so he drove off, shovel in back, to find odd clearing jobs in town or country.

Winter fought off spring for two months until sunshine poured over the snow and rain washed it slowly away and the creeks grew swollen and clouds hung low for days on end. He was hired at the Georgetown fishery as crate stacker and mender of nets and lobster traps. He went out once more in search of jobs. By then the fear which had receded over winter into the back corners of his mind where he put things or where they went on their own, didn't haunt him as before. He was free.

The 37 dollars he quoted to the priest in Ponquette was higher than his normal rate. Churches had money, he'd decided, and besides, the roof's steep slant was tricky. As soon as he got the job he began considering how to make the ascent without breaking his neck.

The next afternoon he returned with six wooden footsteps he'd built at home and, beginning from a ladder that reached to the eaves, nailed in the steps one at a time. In fifteen minutes he was on top. Once there he undid the satchel slung at his side which contained copper rods, clips, screws, a hammer and screwdriver. It made him proud to think that no one else in the county could do this job or even visualize how to go about it.

He was soon lost in his work. He didn't notice the stately black Buick roll to a stop in front of the church. Later he heard men talking and when he looked down, saw Father Connally and the priest facing his direction. Miner went back to work, not bothering to follow the car when it drove off.

When he arrived early next morning to hook up the cables, the priest called him inside and told him that funds were unexpectedly low and that he would have to remove the rods he'd installed yesterday, but that he would still be paid ten dollars for his troubles.

"Please, take this," the man said, giving him the money, "and my sincere apologies."

He took the offered bill and went outside. His mood was grim as he entered the last rod, his anger only partly gone by the time he came home and lay on his cot. What did matter that he didn't ask the priest up front? He was sure it was Connally who'd cost him the job. For some reason the priest had taken a disliking to him, had tried to influence his colleague, probably stopping just for that reason. Maybe someone had reported he was working in Ponquette. Was he being watched, he wondered?

The next few days, his suspicions got worse. People smiled knowingly when he walked by, their gazes haunting him. But unable to live on air, he depended on these locals for his livelihood. No longer worried about a punitive strike from heaven, he thought only of their control over his life, and wondered how long he could go on. By then it was summer. New life flowered everywhere except in his heart.

A road opened for him one August afternoon when two RCMP officers showed up. The first knocked on his door while the second walked into the woods. The three of them stood around the still, then the officer who'd found it spoke up. He was a big man with a round face and thin hair greased into place by Bryll Cream.

"People can buy hooch that won't poison them downtown. Evidently you aren't aware of that sir. Take it apart, Bill."

The other man gave the contraption a kick, and carried the stove and a few segments of copper pipe back to the car.

"We don't like impounding a man's things, but when they're a public hazard and illegal to boot, we have no choice," the large policeman said. He wrote something on a pad.

"Look," he went on, handing him a piece of paper, "what are you doing out here? Unless you're a communist, and I'm sure you're not, you should join the rest of civilization."

"I'll take that into consideration," he answered seriously.

"You do that."

He watched the patrol car drive away, then sat on the mossy ground beside the remains of his still. The loss of the stove was upsetting as the fine. But the affront itself angered him most. They'd walked right into the trees as if told what to look for and where. It had been six months since Miner had driven to the docks at dawn, but none of those faces belonged to a betrayer. Only one Judas floated out of the darkness of his thoughts and sharpened to a lasting clarity; only one had meddled with him. There was no doubt now.

The feeling that afternoon didn't die over the next few weeks. It stayed alive and started eating him inside, softly fretful at first then sharper with time. At night it grew worse. For stretches, the pain came and went like the steady successions of waves on a beach. At first he thought that drink had finally caught up with him. But he knew he'd always handled it. Others in his shoes would have given in long before, but he knew he was made of stronger stuff.

Olsen's Voyage

by John Sigurd Gudmundsson

He tried to work. But for days on end he only puttered around his shack, fixing the roof and chopping wood as a sort of therapy. He cleaned the Ford's block, only to discover it was running 34 heads. The papers the guy had given him listed the make as a '37. Recognizing this lie made him stop and rock onto his back and stare at the sky. The sky, he realized, hadn't lied to him yet.

Then a worry came over him when he thought of knocking on people's doors to solicit more contracts, when he thought of their first seeing him. He knew it had always been there in some less stated way, this apprehension, because he'd always blown at the fringes of human society like a leaf in a gale and knew he showed it. Everything about him showed it. He could sense their mockery. But he'd always taken it and turned it back against them as a form of protection. This was his contempt.

Now he sensed his energy was waning and he blamed its loss on Connally himself. It wasn't the threat of hunger or destitution or competition for his monopoly that pushed him, but the threat to his formerly grounded psyche.

So he started watching the sky again. He waited for the taste to come, almost willing it back so he could end it all. The fall was rainy, clouds hanging so low over the hills they were fog. The conditions seemed preparatory for an unleashing of the sky's anger.

It took weeks for the night cloud pack to slide over the coast, for the dark hues and sparks and crackling to draw his attention. He was lucky for once, parked a hundred yards away the moment the faint taste of metal touched his palate. He got out on the road and ran into the middle of the lot. Both house and church door were open and he shouted as loud as he could.

"Father Connally!"

Luck held because the priest poked his head out of the church, then came out on the steps. He hesitated before descending, walking over and standing in front of his visitor.

"Yes, what is it?" The voice sounded formal, but not unfriendly.

He didn't notice. Metal was bitter in his mouth as he looked at the priest's round face. So little time remained yet he felt no fear, indeed, felt more a kind of elation singing through his blood like a liquor double the proof of his. In the dilation of the moment, seconds slowed and his nerves seemed exposed and electric to the world around. All things came alive to him — the wind and rain drops on his face, the trees shivering and the sea heaving like an immense lung, the angle of the crow's flight above, the pulse of the world in all its complexity. The lag was only four minutes, but he felt more alive than ever before. In the waiting there was suddenly laughter.

"Yes, what is it?" Father Connally repeated.

He never answered. He turned and ran in the direction of the truck, seeing the door slightly open as he'd left it, waiting for him.

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The man behind the counter hands over the parcel. Olsen takes the box and gently runs his thumb along the edge.

"Is it all there?" Olsen asks.

"Yep, all there"

"Mind if I open it?"

"Whatever turns your crank, it's your package. Just don't make no mess."

Olsen removes a small toothpick from his pocket, licks both ends, and runs it along the spine of the box. Slowly he peels back the wrapping paper where it is split, folding it neatly. Then he takes the toothpick and slices through the yellowed tape securing the lid, burying his hands into the opened box, hoisting a soft camel suitcase into the light. With both thumbs he presses the clasps, opening it, and peeks inside.

"All there?" asks the man behind the counter.

Olsen leaves the storage shop with his suitcase, and walks south. He trudges through the filth, past empty buildings and unlit streets. It is raining, gently.

"Hey Ollie, what you got in the suitcase?" a passerby asks, snickering "A million bucks maybe? Wanna lend me a couple hundred gees?"

Olsen says nothing and continues walking, laughter fading behind him. He walks carefully, ever mindful of the people sleeping in his path. When he turns the corner at the old hotel a group of men are sitting in the doorway.

"Wharya know, Ollie's going on a trip" one of the men says.

"Hey whereya going Ollie, Hawaiii?" asks a second one.

"Fjiji?" asks another, chuckling.

"Africa maybe?" asks a third, laughing.

Olsen says nothing, quickening his pace. Behind him, shouts of "China!" "India!" "The North Pole!" and laughter that seems louder and louder with each place name. But this too eventually fades.

He arrives at his apartment building just as the rain picks up. Stepping over broken glass and soggy cigarette butts he opens the front door. Inside, a waft of sour milk greets him. And smoke, the stale odor of cigarette smoke. But he hides his dismay. Taking a deep breath he begins the ascent up the stairs. Six floors. A climb made more difficult with the addition of the suitcase. His one free hand grabs hold of the dangling arm rail as he climbs. Finally, after countless rests to catch his breath, Olsen arrives at his apartment door. He puts down the suitcase and feels for the key hanging around his neck. With a twist and a push the door creaks open. This time a dif-