

# **Giants of The North**

**By**

**Wayne Ray**

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## WAR DREAM

"Ryan! Ryan!" Philip Acker's grade three legs ran as fast as they could carry him screaming his older brother's name, to the school yard where his twelve-year-old brother was taking his time going home at the end of a long hot day in grade six.

"Ryan! Come with me, I found somethin' in the attic at home!" He was jumping with excitement. "You gotta come home now, you gotta ..."

"Slow down, Phili" Ryan interrupted, "You're talkin' too fast. Whadja find?"

"It's a recorder, like the one dad gave you last Christmas, 'member, only bigger and lots of tapes all in a great big box and ..."

"Phili hold it, we've been up in the attic hundreds of times and never found anything, if you're lying to me I'll punch ..."

"No, No!, I'm telling the truth" Philip jumped back and put his hands up to protect his face.

The boys ran down Roywood Avenue to their semidetached house and up the stairs into the attic faster than you could say, 'school's out for summer!' Moving aside an old blanket and a flag from on top of a khaki colored trunk, Ryan turned his head in amazement at his little brother.

"Holy Cow, Phili, how in the world did you get this old trunk open? It must have five locks on it! Wow!"

Philip puffed out his small chest in pride and said, "I was exploring up here and I found some old keys, I tried 'em and they fit so I opened it." He pushed the lid farther back so they could see everything.

"Do you know what will happen if Mom catches us up here with this? We'll get walloped like last week when we wrapped old man Dunford's cat in masking tape!"

"Yea, Ryan, maybe we should lock it back up and ..."

"No, no you ninny, we just have to be quiet and not get caught!"

"Oh?...Ohh!"

"Yea, Phili, so let's get it all set up, see if it works and see what's on these tapes but we'll really have to be quiet or we'll never see another..."

*"Beautiful day, January the fourth nineteen forty-four. I spent New Years with Phillips, Laywell, Warrington, as well as the nurses from the 168th Hospital. Phillips was drunk so we carried him back to camp and put him to bed, but on the way out he took the wrong hat and coat. He got the best deal and the nurses got us! January the second, it rained all day so we had classes inside the castle, the easy life of Wolf-Wolf is really getting me down."*

"What's a wolf-wolf, Ryan?"

"I don't know, just listen."

*"January the third, laid floors to extra huts and just found out one of my men burned down his tent by washing his clothes in gasoline, or petrol as they say over here in England, and then hung them over the stove to dry! Went to the hospital again with Laywell to pick up the nurses, my date slipped and I fell on top of her and put her in a hospital bed. Laywell did the same thing, only after he took her home!"*

"Hey, Phili, this little one is over, get me another one."

"Ok, here's one that says . uh ..Kor..Korea, that right Ryan, Korea?"

"Yea, I..."

"Boys? Boys? Are you upstairs?" Their mother's shrill voice scared the devil out of them. They put everything away and rushed quietly into Ryan's room.

"Boys, are you upstairs? Suppers ready, get down here right now and wash up, your fathers come home for supper early tonight."

Supper could not pass fast enough for them. They gulped down their meat loaf and potatoes but had to wait until everyone was finished before leaving. As they got up from the table, Philip broke the silence.

"Mom?" he said.

"What Philip?"

"Mom, were you ever a nurse?"

"No. Why?"

"O nuthin', just wondering. Me and Ryan are goin' upstairs to play, ok?"

"All right, but don't make too much noise, you two."

"Ok, Mom," they said as they raced up stairs and waited to make sure no one else came up behind them before entering the attic and putting on a new tape.

*"November twenty-seventh, nineteen fifty-two, Thanksgiving Day, here in AnYang, Korea. It's really a shame that you people out there listening to this tape can't see what's going on. None of you could possibly, regardless of what you have read or heard, understand the suffering of these people. To give you an example; if, in the U.S.A. it became a law that every man would be forced to bring his family to Korea for six months, to live as these people do and then return to the States, realizing that the first time he violated any law he would be sent back to Korea for life, the U.S.A. would be a utopia and none of us would do anything to make us be forced to return to this place because there's no place more like Hell than this Korean War."*

Ryan turned off that tape, rewound it and reached for one that was in the same group they were listening to earlier. This one wasn't that interesting to them. Their father, before he was their father, continued.

*"April sixteenth, I preached at church services today, twelfth chapter of Romans and the fifty first Psalm, that's an experience I'll never forget. Hardest job I've ever tackled. We had to go to Aulton Park yesterday for a parade, got our regimental colors and of course those luscious nurses were there. When we got back home, I finished the third chapter of my novel and went to bed. No one will ever remember us but O God do we ever remember we."*

"Hey I didn't know daddy wrote a book? Guess we'll hafta look for it later huh?"

"Will you stop talking, ok?"

"Ok. Ryan."

*"Extra troops came unexpectedly and everything went wrong. I had to borrow money for the party, so I left work at three and the party was at seven, Meyers picked up sixteen nurses, the land army found out and wanted to come, no soap, no music, no passes, can I do this, can I do that and a Million other things ... it's a good things we're behind Patton instead of in front of him! I managed to hook up electricity, stole a phonograph, my room was a coat room, no one danced, the English hated our food, beer, coke, candy, and kisses, lots of kisses, and everywhere whores and kneelers. I was too busy, no fun at all*

*being in charge. April seventeenth, went to the Boars Inn in Knutsford. One girl there was worth the effort and while I tried to be nice to some police, some S.O.B. grabbed her and took off. I wanted to go back inside but there were too many whores so I went home."*

The two-inch tape finished and Ryan started to put everything away. "We'd better get going, Phili, it's getting late and I'm tired. Dad sure had lotsa fun in the war, eh Phili?" Philip thought to himself as they walked into their rooms 'If mommy wasn't a nurse then maybe she was one of them others, a whore, whatever that means'.

"Good night Ryan."

"Goodnight Phili."

The next few days went by quickly for Ryan and Philip because of the tapes, photographs and other memorabilia which were to be found in each exploration of the trunk. Some things were still puzzling them, such as the dice which kept coming up snake eyes on the dusty floor and several books about the war that their father had written.

The thing that puzzled them the most was that on the tapes, which covered Europe, Korea and the Philippines from 1944 - 1952, their father was the loudest and most talkative man they had ever heard. Their father now, was quiet and basically peaceful, and it was their mother who was loud and could take two hours to tell you that she didn't like people who talked a lot!

Ryan's questions about the war itself were answered and discussed in his history class at school the rest of the week. On his way home on Friday all he could think about was the war, what his father did and what Mr. McKenzie had taught him in class. He shot old ladies, threw hand grenades at passing cars, bombed dogs and cats and just as they were about to capture him in the debris-filled streets he ran into the house an hour late.

"Where have you been?" His mother yelled, "Hurry and wash up and change those filthy clothes. Your father's home and it's supper time." Ryan tossed a grenade into the kitchen as he walked up the stairs to change and wash up before supper. Their German shepherd Eric, followed him up the stairs. The cat was sleeping on the piano.

"Hey Dad, where's Phili?"

"He's eating supper over at Nick's."

"Dad? Was Mom in the war in Europe?"

"No, she was still over here in North America at the time and we weren't married then," his father said as they walked into the dining room and sat down at their respective seats.

"When you were in the war, did you fight a lot, did you kill anyone? What was it like, and..."

"Ryan!" his mother butted in as she came out of the kitchen (untouched by the blast of the grenade, the cat was unhurt too), "Why do you want to know so much about your father and the war?"

"Oh..uh..well, we've been studying about it in history class this week and..."

"Well, that's enough talking at the table." She said.

"You listen to your mother now and eat, enough said." Supper finished just as Philip came in from next door and both boys went into the attic as they had been doing everyday this week. When they had opened the trunk Philip had an excited look on his face.

"Hey Ryan!"

"Yea whadja find, another tape? I thought we were finished."

"No, here's one wrapped in newspaper. What's it read?"

"Hey Philip, it's about D-day, you know, what I told you about yesterday after school."

"I bet it's really important, put it on!" demanded Philip, thumping his foot on the attic floor. Reeled and ready, Ryan turned on the machine and turned up the sound to hear it better.

*"May fourteenth, nineteen forty four, we took over three Welsh camps at Cardiff to prepare for seventeen thousand men of the Second Infantry to stay in and prepare for the coming invasion. I can't talk much about it, have to keep these to a minimum. May the twentieth, today while we were repairing the railway, we lost four men blown to bits by a mine. It was a great loss. However, we caught a female spy this evening and shaved all her hair off and painted her thighs with bright red paint and her breasts blue. June the third, for the past few weeks the men have been getting ready and impatient. At two a.m. the Third Infantry left and at four a.m. the Second Infantry left. June the fifth, I had to alert the mess cooks that they might be returning. They've been on board for two days, damn storm has upset plans, found a poem on the latrine wall by one of our invaders:*

*Time and footsteps pass us by,  
and in the darkness, a cry.  
Remember us,  
you who pass here by,  
where we now lie.  
Say a soft serene prayer,  
remember us always,  
until like us,  
you are there.*

*June the sixth, D-day is here! A day late but she hit. Everything is going well. They don't give up too easily. Fate kept me from the fun of being in it so I issued ammunition and guns and we fired rounds towards Germany and..."*

"What's going on up here? I thought I heard noises!" demanded their father as he rushed into the attic and across the floor to the two frightened boys. "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"We were afraid you'd get angry, you're always busy and never talk to us and Mom's always yelling at us that you are always tired."

"Don't spank us!" Demanded Philip.

"I guess you're right. I really haven't been spending enough time with the both of you."

The boys began to put the tapes and things back into the trunk as their father stood staring at the flag of his patriotism, lost in a forgotten world. When they had finished cleaning up, he knelt beside them as they sat on the trunk.

"I know it's getting late, but tomorrow is Saturday and since you seem to be interested in the war and such, would you like to hear what really went on during that time? There's a lot more than those tapes and pictures tell" They sat there in the cluttered attic under the dim light, together for the first time since Ryan could remember, and the room was filled with one massive war dream.

## SUMMER OF '64

Their summers had been fairly normal ones. You know the usual, being shipped off to camp Pascobac in New Brunswick, riding bicycles around the neighbourhood, playing baseball at Maryvale Park or marbles, climbing trees and building forts. Let us digress on one point; when it came to building forts and club houses, they lived by the modified golden rule of 'Thou shalt not steal'. They added: just borrow it for a while and try and remember to return it later!

This summer would be different. Ryan Acker and his brother Philip were going to go with their parents all the way to Alabama in the United States to visit their grandparents. Ryan had passed grade six with high marks and was going to junior high in September at Riverdale High School and Philip was starting grade three and the best reason to go was that their mother was going to have a baby in December and only the family knew. It would be a real surprise to all their relatives. It was to Mrs. Acker!

This would be Ryan's second airplane trip. He was too young to really remember the first flight since he was only three and a half at the time his father retired from the army and they moved from the American air force base at Stephenville, Newfoundland to Toronto, Ontario in 1955. Capt. Acker had been stationed there after the Korean War to build part of the new Trans-Canada Highway for the Canadian government.

Every kid on the street wanted to go with them to this Alabama. It seemed so far away on the maps and no one could visualize fifteen hundred miles except that it was twelve thousand times around the school track someone had said, after doing some fast math on the sidewalk with a magic marker. Everyone wanted Ryan and Philip to bring back a piece of Alabama.

On the day of departure, everything was checked, packed and repacked when Philip put his pet frog in one of the suitcases, and the family dog and cat was put in a kennel. The trip to the airport was fun for the boys and the flight on the Trans Canada Airlines plane seemed one of the greatest things that could happen in their entire lives.

Seeing North America stretch out below them, high above the fruited plain, finding highways and small towns, hidden lakes and rivers. Watching mountains turn into hills and valleys, huge cities with roads going everywhere and nowhere. Their mother spent most of the four-hour trip telling the lady next to her what it was like when she flew Eastern as a stewardess and how on one of her flights they had the first triplets to fly etc., etc., etc., although the thought of having another baby kept her quiet at first!

When the plane landed in Atlanta, Georgia, they were all picked up by Uncle Otis and Aunt Fannie Lovelace, whom they had never met before and who mesmerized them with their southern drawl as they talked to Mr. and Mrs. Acker for the entire eighty mile trip from Atlanta to Lineville Alabama. It was on this short trip that an exciting piece of news hit Ryan's ears. Uncle Otis pulled up to a stop sign in Ashland, looked for traffic, and just before pulling ahead, said to his brother-in-law.

"Yor daddy an' momma sold theya orange grove in Florida last' week and have moved right next door ta our momma an' daddy," He said looking at Mrs. Acker this time.

Well, Ryan's eyes grew big as a Lowney's cherry and a smile came across his face so wide it could have touched his ears when he heard that both of his grandparents were now living next door to each other! The Acker s knew they were selling but were surprised that they had moved right next door. This news would save them a trip to Florida to see the Reverend, Ryan heard them say, and he wanted to swing on the palm trees his father told him about. But it was probably

just as well since he had also told them that snakes lived in the flower beds as well as under the house!

Lineville, like most of the towns and villages in Clay County, grew older but never grew up. The population was two thousand, two hundred years ago, and it would be that two hundred years from now. The stores and businesses just kept getting passed down from generation to generation and seldom changed names. The sidewalks were still segregated and it had its colored town, with no name, on the outskirts.

The main street was only about thirty stores long on both sides from the post office past the city hall to the rail yard with its castle-like water tower. There were only about two or three times when the main street was deserted; after seven o'clock except on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when the theatre was showing pictures and whenever the highschool had a football game. The whole town was deserted then and all the bleachers were filled for every game!

The football field was at the end of the street the Reverend Acker and the Lovelace s lived on, between the town graveyard, the highschool and Mr. Everett Lynn's house. Mr Lynn owned the local grocery store, the Piggley Wiggley, and his twelve-year-old son, Mitchell, was the same age as Ryan. Mitchell had been the first to spot the Georgia car that evening, a boy about his age and his family, driving past him as he stood on the high school graveyard corner, then pull into the driveway of Mr. Cotney Lovelace, who let him spend many hot Saturday afternoons sipping coke at his International Harvester shop. Mitchell raced home and told everyone there about what he had just seen.

The first week was a blur to Ryan and Philip, sleeping every other night at each grandparents, visiting relatives, lots and lots of relatives, touring the countryside and spending a whole day at their parent's first farm. The driving everywhere was driving them crazy! And the southern cooking was too much to take. Philip nicknamed the first week "meals on wheels".

Saturday morning rolled by but Ryan refused to go anywhere, even outside the house. His parents left without him, going next door for breakfast at the Reverend Acker's house with Philip. The two houses weren't right next to each other. There were two vacant lots in between used as a vegetable garden for both families as well as small animal pens over at the Acker s. This would be a day of rest, or so he thought

Ryan stood on an old orange crate, blindfolded, hands tied behind his back, barefoot. The noonday sun beat down through the weather worn shed beside the "witch s house" and he could feel the stripes of heat on his body as he stood silent. He could hear the eight other boys in the room breathing. Eight boys who had earlier come over to his grandma's house to see who was visiting from Ontario. They had wanted him to come out and play with them on the other side of the street at an old dilapidated house in a pecan grove. Ryan was glad to see so many boys around his own age, even if they did talk funny! He stood in the heat, sweat pouring off his face. He heard two boys get up off of the floor and start hammering some nails into a piece of wood.

"Make sure the nails go in all the way," Said one of the older boys. It was Mitchell Lynn. He put his hand on Ryan's shoulder, Ryan stiffened. Mitchell moved around in front of him. "In order for you to be able to be our friend and play with us", He drawled, "you have to pass this one test, Ryan Acker!"

"What. What s that?" His knees were shaking like a leaf.

"Hus y'all", Mitchell said to the rest of the boys, he turned back to Ryan. "What you have to do is very simple, jus' jump over this board fulla nails we're layin' down in front of ya, an' ifn ya misses well..."



The two boys, Buddy and Jim (also known as Worm), finished hammering in the nails and placed it on the ground in front of the orange crate, nails up! Everyone grew quiet. Mitchell nodded his head and Buddy and Jimmy stood back. Fred, Jim's brother, and the Barton twins, Jon and John, untied his hands and feet. The last two boys, Scott and Claxton Runyan started thumping sticks on the dirt floor of the shed.

Ryan couldn't tell where they had put the board. They had lain it down so softly. Fred Medlock turned him around three times and everyone was chanting ..go..go..go.. in unison. Ryan took a deep breath of dusty air and closed his eyes, lifted his heels and sprang with all his might, throwing his arms and legs as far out in front of him as he could, for what seemed an eternity before landing in a bucket of fresh cow manure, which Mitchell had moved under his feet as he jumped. It was covered with plastic to hide the smell. Ryan took off the blindfold, smiled at what he saw, to the screams of laughter and various adjectives related to the smell emulating from the bucket and his legs!

## SQUEAKING NOISES

"Gramma, Gramma" Ryan screamed as he ran onto the old wooden dirty-white porch, slammed the screen door behind him and dashed into the large southern kitchen. "Gramma there's a girl out front and she won't speak to me," he panted, "she's waving her hands all over the place and making squeaking noises. What's wrong with her, Gramma?"

"Now don't worry yourself son. It's probably just Dinah from up the road," said Ryan's grandmother. She wiped her hands on the apron she wore on most mornings.

"But Gramma, what's wrong, why can't she say anything? Why is she throwing her hands all over for?" Ryan couldn't understand what was happening and he began to cry, burying his head in his grandmothers lap as she sat cutting Okra and splitting Yams for lunch. The screen door opened again and Dinah Scherette walked across the screened-in porch floor and through the living room of the Reverend Acker's home and into the kitchen just as bewildered and as perplexed as Ryan was. Mrs Acker raised his head from her lap and wiped the tears from Ryan's eyes with her blue flowered apron.

"Ryan," said his grandmother, pointing and the thirteen-year-old girl who had entered the room, "this is Dinah Scherette. She's one of the deaf children in your grandpa's church. She was talking to you with her hands because deaf people use sign language to talk."

"She's deaf? You mean she can't hear me talk to her?" This was something totally new to Ryan. He couldn't understand how this could happen to anyone especially someone his own age. "How do I talk to her?" He said trying not to look at the girl while he spoke to his grandmother. Mrs. Acker looked at Dinah and signed hello and told her what she and Ryan were talking about.

Ryan watched his grandmother's fingers and hands moving swiftly about her face and body and he watched the girl was do the same with her hands. They carried on like this for a few minutes until Dinah knew what was going on. She walked over to Ryan and in little audible nasal squeaks said "I Dinah," placing her flat and open palm on her chest and making the sign for the letter D. She then reached out and took Ryan's hand, flattened his fingers and placed it on his chest and then crossed his first and middle fingers forming the letter R and said "I Ryan."

"He fast learn," she signed to Mrs Acker, "I we go walk I tell him more," Dinah said with her fingers.

"Are you feeling better now, Ryan? Dinah says you are a fast learner and she wants you to go outside to play and she will teach you to speak her language. If you are going to be here for the rest of the summer, you might as well learn to talk to all your neighbours."

"Yes gramma, I'm better now," he said, "tell her I'll go outside with her."

"Well now, honey-child, why don't you tell her yourself."

Ryan did what his grandmother told him. He hooked his two index fingers together and then interchanged them, pointed at Dinah, himself and the side door then cupped his hands towards his face and lowered them to chest height and then put his palm on his chest making a small circle to say "friends you and I go outside now, please." He was learning fast. It seemed to come easy to him and Dinah gave him a smile he would probably remember for the rest of his life. Well at least for the rest of the summer.

Ryan and Dinah went outside into the Lineville Alabama sunshine and headed for the highschool down the street about two blocks and sat on the swings. Ryan found out that she could read lips and even though she couldn't hear it, her speaking voice was quite understandable. Dinah handed him a folded up piece of paper on which were the alphabet

symbols for sign language. He sat for about ten minutes going over the signs and had them memorized in no time at all. Dinah tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention.

"It easy all signs are what you see all day," she spoke and signed at the same time. "What this?" She put her index finger on her other wrist.

"Watch," said Ryan.

"No. Time dummy," she put her index finger to her head and circled it around, laughing. "What this?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Love."

"Right." Dinah gave the sign for OK which everyone uses.

"What this?" She put her fingers in her mouth and then cupped them and brought them up to her lips then put her cupped hand under her chin and dropped it to her stomach. Ryan had to think about this one. All the signs were simple except the last one, and then it seemed so logical.

"Food, glass of water, throat to stomach. Food and drink, hunger."

"That Ok," said Dinah, "say in a sentence."

"Let's eat. I m hungry?"

"Right," she said, and pushed Ryan off of the swing, signing to him to follow her. They ran down the dusty road all the way into town and stopped at the drug store. Dinah had arrived a few minutes before Ryan did and had already ordered a burger, fries and a coke for both of them. She looked at him, huffing and puffing as he came in the door and sat beside her on a stool. He shook his head and took out his wallet to show her he didn't have any money. "That Ok," she signed and pointed to the man behind the counter serving customers, " man he my father no pay money."

They sat and ate their burgers and drank their cokes and then headed back to his grandfather's house for lunch. Ryan felt that he had learned more in the hour he had spent with his new friend than he had since the beginning of the summer. A whole new world had been opened up to him and he was going to make the most of it starting right now. As they headed up the street to the house, Ryan did something he thought he would never do, he slid his hand into her hand and smiled a smile that needs no sign language.

## KICK THE CAN

Summers in any Alabama town were not worth talking about as far as most of the older citizens were concerned. Why, any kid walking down the streets of such well known towns as Weedowee, Ashland or Wadley could tell you that everyone and I do mean everyone, even the dawgs, was sittin' in de shade or sippin' on a coke.

Lineville, named after the county line, not the railway line, was no different. Most of the women folk stayed at home and most of the older men sat in the shade at Mr. Lovelace's International Harvester shop until the sun started to shine on them and then they would all move across the street to Joe Pollack's garage and sit in the shade until the sun set. With the kids of the town it was a different story. They didn't seem to be bothered by the daily heat and could be found down at the new city swimming pool. The younger ones went swimming and the older boys went looking at the 'southern belles'. The only drawback to this was, if you had eyes on someone's special girl, you could find your shoes and pants in a bucket filled with a mixture of Coca-Cola and chlorine! That concoction was enough to make Swiss cheese out of anything.

Afternoons were the longest and the coolest part of the day. The Barton twins, Jon and John, took Philip Acker under their wings since they weren't much older than he was. They stayed over at the Bartons or up the street at the Reverend Acker's most of each day. The rest of the group of eight plus Ryan stayed together and the south side of Lineville would never be the same for the last week of his vacation. Two days earlier, after church or 'Sunday go ta meeting' time, Mitchell Lynn, Buddy Riley, Fred and 'Worm' caught and killed a six-foot snake in the graveyard, tied a fishing line around its head and every time a car went by they would pull the snake across the road. Most folks going home from church didn't notice it but Mrs Moss, who ran over it did. She came to a screeching stop, backed over the snake and ran over it again. She did this three or four times until she thought it was dead. When 'Worm' pulled the head of the snake, which was all that was left, across the street, the lady gave a scream you could hear all the way to Talladega, turned the car around and hit it again before it could be pulled to the other side!

The other boys, Ryan, Philip and their cousins, Scott and Claxton Runyan and the twins were over at Reverend Acker's that Sunday, running around the screened-in sun porch and all throughout the house chasing some bats that must have come down from the third floor attic. The Runyans had come over for Sunday lunch and in the south when you come for lunch you usually stay all day. It could also have been because Mrs. Acker made the best pecan pie, carrot cake and iced tea in the whole county!

One day later (Monday, for those people who don't think of summer as one long weekend) after the usual trek to the swimming pool. All ten boys went over to Fred and Jim Medlock's house for a game of kick the can. This is a game where an empty can is placed in an appropriate spot, usually the front of the house, one person is 'it' and the rest hide around the outside of the house. The 'it' person has to find you and run back around to the front of the house and kick the can before you do. If he does, then you have to help catch the others and if he doesn't, then you get to hide again.

The game went on until late in the evening and two things happened before they were all called next door to the Lovelace's for ice tea and watermelon. It was the last game and Fred was 'it'. Fred was also barefoot and someone, (they didn't find out who until years later) had filled the can with water before Fred came around the corner and kicked it, breaking his big dirty toe! The other thing that happened was not quite as painful. Ryan had hidden in the back of an old pickup

truck at the end of the yard to hide in and an unfamiliar kid, jumped over the side of the truck and landed right beside him. The only pain was in his heart, again.

"Hi ya'll", she said, "I'm Fred's sista, Anne. Welcome to Lineville!"

Well, the game was over because of the water in the can and all the children were sitting around Granny Lovelace's living room gulping down iced tea and eating watermelon when Mr. Acker walked in from the side porch and joined them. Coming home after all these years was the adrenalin that he needed to make him feel young again. When he had been told about Fred's toe hitting the can of water, he roared with laughter!

"I guess you re not so lucky?" He said finally.

"No suh", said the fifteen-year-old, "at least it's not broken off."

"I've had similar predicaments but I guess I've been lucky all my life", said Mr. Acker. "When I was younger, I was lucky to be alive! Why, my Ma and Pa started worrying about me getting killed when I was three years old. Pa bought me a tricycle then and I made a race track out of our front porch. The porch went around the house on three sides and one day I went around the corner too fast and ran right over the edge and broke my leg!

"Ah bet it hurt mor'n my foot!" laughed Fred.

"Just a scotia bit more but I'm not finished yet. Pa was always getting me something to ride or play on that Ma didn't like. She said he was goin'ta get me killed. Course Pa didn't pay too much attention to her and went right ahead and got me most of the things he wanted too. When I was Philip's age, about six or seven, he got me one of them little bicycles like some of you boys have. Then the neighbours said I was goin' to kill myself. Once I even tried to jump a pig that ran across the road in front of me and I broke two ribs doin' that!" He sucked on his cigarette and coughed.

"Didn't you have any brothers or sisters Mr. Acker?" One of the boys asked.

"No, I was born weighing fourteen pounds and Pa said that was equal to two kids! Now, as I was saying, Ma gave the bike away and when I was eight. Pa bought me a five gait horse. I rode him to school every day and by the time I reached home in the evening all the old sisters along the road had called home to tell Ma I had passed their house like a flying devil!

I accidentally got even with the woman who caused me the most trouble. Dan was the horse's name and he must have known how much trouble she was causing me because he had a hairline crack in his right rear hoof and as I ran him past her house, which was about one hundred feet from the road, he chose that exact moment to lose the lower part of that hoof. It sailed right over her head as she sat on the front porch and went through one of her plate glass windows. I didn't think I would like to see my next birthday, which by the way was on Valentine's Day. I've always been a real sweetheart!"

When the laughter died down, Mrs. Acker gathered up all the plates and everyone went outside and said good night to each other. Most lived on the same street as the Acker's and Lovelace's but Mitchell and Buddy had the farthest to go. They waved goodbye as they crossed at the end of the street and faded into the shadows of the graveyard.

## PEPER'S COVE

The twenty-four foot converted tuna dory ploughed through rows of four foot waves, which lashed against its keel and rolled the boat close to the ominous cliffs. Strong salt sea winds pelted the four men as they hung on to the small vessel which had just left the Newfoundland harbour of St. John's.

The engine, pushed to its utmost, heaved the boat around the jagged cliffs and went into a small rock-filled cove. Four faces relaxed, four tense bodies rested and the big black Labrador stuck his head out of the cabin. The water was calm, the boat was calm and the air in the cove was calm ...

"My son, by geez! De engine, she stops!" yelled the freckle-faced Newfie at the wheel. The Lab sank back into the cabin and the door slammed shut. "Drop the anchor, Ryan," screamed the captain, "we're driftin' towards the rocks! Ivan, see if yee kin start the ol' diesel and hurry my son!"

Ivan jumped down beside the engine. The dog was sick on the rug. The captain grabbed the slippery wheel. Kevin ran to the bow and heaved the anchor into the sea.

"Lard tunderin' geezuz, bye," bellowed the captain, as he saw Kevin and Ryan heave the anchor, "yee fergot to tie dee anchor, der's no rope to it!"

Ryan took an oar in his hands and yelled, "We're heading for the rocks! Get that engine going!" Chug .. sputter ... Chug .. achug .. sputter .. chuga .. chuga ... the engine started and lurched forward, throwing the four men over the side and into the briny deep. They scrambled to shore in time to see the boat heading towards the wooden pier, with the big black Lab grinning over the stern, only to be flipped head over tail into the water as the dory hit the dock! Families and friends were already out on the side of the cove with blankets and Screech to warm them up and the Lab had to be hauled out with a fishing net.

"That give me some fright eh, Ryan?"

The question went right by him. He was too cold and wet to talk. He was just thankful he'd made it through the day, this being his last in St. John's Newfoundland before setting out for the west coast of the island and then off to visit his brother, Philip, in Key West, Florida.

He had been lucky getting a ride all the way from Toronto to St. John's with one truck driver, but somehow having to listen to the same two tapes of Hank Snow and Johnny Cash for the whole trip was too much to bear. It was enough to tum a cowboy off Country and Western music forever!

Ryan called his brother on the phone to let him know he was on his way. He loaded up his pack and said goodbye to everyone as he headed off to the bus station. When he boarded the bus to Corner Brook, it was full and he had to stand for five hours until the first passengers were let off at Deer Lake.

Upon his arrival in the town of Stephenville, he found out that his plane was early and was leaving one half hour after he had arrived and he was unable to visit the town where his father was stationed with the military in the early '50's.

## LISA

The news of the tornado broke through the air like a shotgun blast as the small group of men

sat fumbling with their coffee cups at a roadside stand in Orlando, Florida, after visiting Walt Disney World. Hurricane news was fairly ordinary but tornadoes were usually confined to places farther inland. This one was clearly different. The radio said that it had destroyed an entire house-trailer community and Philip Acker's home was in one of them. They couldn't get back fast enough!

Ryan, Philip and two of his friends from Eagle Mountain, Tennessee, jumped into Philip's camper van and headed for the Keys. Philip had left home following a series of heated arguments with his parents, about the three-foot length of his hair, smoking, and a myriad of other things which seemed trivial to him at the time because he looked the same as all of his friends. Actually, his parents had lost their tolerance and kicked him out. Philip had moved from Toronto to Florida just over a year ago and seemed to be doing quite well in the construction industry. Ryan was in college and hadn't had a chance to talk to his brother until this trip during summer holidays.

The five-hundred-mile drive from Orlando to the Keys did not take as long as the trip coming up; the news, however, was not as fast. The radio kept giving damage and death reports but would never say which trailer park had been hit.

It was nighttime when they arrived at Deni Key and drove into the park. The tornado had jumped over the trailers in their neighbourhood and totally demolished the adjacent one. Over there, not even a streetlight was left standing and boats from the marina were strewn everywhere. When they got out of the big van, they could see people on the other side of the canal which separated the two parks, walking around in shock. Nothing had moved on their side of the canal, not even the shells and starfish drying on the table in the back yard! Ryan even found a letter to him, from Jamaica, leaning against the mail box, completely undisturbed. Ryan, Philip and his two 'hippie' friends unloaded the van, a converted milk truck, and went into the trailer to rest from the trip.

The next morning they were all up early and walked over to the wreckage to help with the clean up. By the end of the week, most of the important work had been accomplished. Lights and water were restored, temporary shelters had been built and food and clothing were pouring in from the main town, Key West. Most of the looters had been arrested or shot by the police.

"I have to leave tomorrow afternoon for Jamaica, Phil. I wrote to a friend from college who lives there and told him that I'd be coming to visit you and he sent me a return ticket last week and to go and visit him. He also threatened my life if I didn't pay back the sixty dollars when school starts in September!"

"Well man, it's been really super having' ya down hea in the deep south", Philip said with his adopted drawl. He lit up and slid back into the wicker chair. "It's been a real gas rappin' with ya, Ry. I'll give ya a lift in the mornin'."

"Uh...thanks, Phil." Philip drifted off and Ryan got up and went for a walk to get some fresh air. His brother had really changed over the past couple of years, he thought, He had become someone to be with but not really to talk to. He seemed to be merely passing through life. 'We were together but not really close and it really hurts not to be that way', Ryan said to himself as he sat on the dock. The ten summers he and his brother had spent in Alabama passed through his mind. As everyone grew older they had simply drifted apart. Mitchell and Buddy went off to law school; Mr. Medlock died and Fred and 'Worm' took over the hardware store; Dinah got married. It just wasn't the same going home anymore. His thoughts and dreams passed into sleep. John and Glenn found Ryan on their way home from town, asleep on the edge of the dock, and took him home. At noon the next day, the Piper Indian took off from Key West Airport for Kingston,

Jamaica.

The airport was not crowded and only ten people were going on the fifteen seat Indian. 'No wonder it was so cheap', Ryan said to himself as he waved goodbye to his brother, boarded the plane and buckled in. The weather was beautiful and the plane took off with no problems. The land and people grew smaller and the deep blue sky got bigger as Ryan drifted off into sleep, lulled by the engine's rhythmic purr. He was awakened abruptly when a hand moved across his waist and undid his seat belt. "We've been in the air for half an hour. I'm Lisa. I'm sorry I woke you, and I hate seat belts." She extended a slender hand. He took it in his. He was wide awake now.

"Thanks," he managed. "I'm Ryan. I didn't realize I was so tired. Where are you going?" he asked. She was still holding his hand.

"I'm visiting an aunt and uncle in the Beverly Hills section of Kingston for a few weeks." She smiled a long smile, released his hand and leaned towards him, "What about you?"

"I'm visiting a friend from college whose parents live in Ocho Rios on the north coast...You're very pretty, Lisa, and I like your dress. It really suits you", he said after a long pause. Impulsively he took her hand back and kissed it, she blushed.

"Where do you go to college, Ryan? You don't sound like an American." Lisa said.

"In St. Catharines, up in Ontario. I'm from Toronto, but ..."

"I'm from Toronto too!" she said excitedly. "Isn't that a hoot?!"  
He smiled.

"It's a small world. Welcome to Jamaica," she said. Ryan put his arm around her and their lips met. The plane landed. They walked across the tarmac arm-in-arm. "Do you have any place to stay, Ryan?"

He opened the terminal door for her. "No, I don't. I was going to go all the way to Ocho Rios, until I met you". He squeezed her shoulder gently.

"Well, I can't exactly ask my aunt and uncle to let you stay over at their place. They don't know you at all".

"I've got a way around that," he said as they picked out their luggage from the racks. "They'll know I'm half way all right or you wouldn't be getting off the plane with me and since we're both from Toronto they might think we know each other already, right?"

"Right!"

Lisa's Uncle Bill and Aunt Anne met them at the Custom's desk and they all walked out to the car, at the front of the airport lounge.

"Do you know any youth hostel or hotel I could stay at for the night, before I hitchhike up to the north coast?"

"No, no, my boy. Wouldn't hear of it? Especially from a fellow Canadian!" Her Uncle Bill threw Ryan's pack and Lisa's suitcase in the trunk of the car. "You can stay with us for a few days and phone your friend to tell him you're here, if that's all right with Lisa, of course."

"That's just fine with me" she smiled at Ryan and took his hand in hers. "That's just fine". Her uncle drove home. The next day woke him with the bite of a mosquito, which had buzzed into room and under his sheets. Pulling the covers aside, Ryan crawled out of the bed and stood before the open screened window overlooking the tropical hills of Kingston. It was really different seeing giant palm trees instead of pine trees. He closed the bamboo shades on his nakedness as the key hole shower in the next room was turned off. He put on his blue-jean cut-offs and his Kino sandals and walked down the hallway to admire the mountaintop view of



the harbour from the living room.

"We all talked so late last night I thought you would sleep all day". Lisa's afternoon voice made Ryan turn his gaze from one spectacular view to another. Lisa had just stepped out of the shower and into a well-filled baby blue bikini before Ryan came in. "My aunt and uncle asked me to show you around when you woke up. I'm afraid it's a bit too late for that now but I've fixed something to eat if you're hungry". It was his eyes that were hungry. Ryan walked over to the adjoining kitchen and sat down at the glass table.

"How could anything get cold in this weather?" he laughed. "Breakfast at four in the afternoon is not exactly 'early to bed and early to rise' but vacation is vacation!"

"When you're finished, come on up to the roof and catch the sunset. I want to work on my tan before the sun goes down anyway," she said and grabbed a blanket.

Ryan finished as quickly as he could and walked up the stairs to the fourth floor roof garden to join her. The sun bathed them in its warming light until it could stay above the ocean no longer. As it went down, they walked to the edge of the roof to watch its red glow. He held her in his arms.

"I have to leave tomorrow. I'll call you in Toronto in a few weeks," he said softly and kissed her.

"Do you have to leave so soon?" she ran her hands down his bronzed back. "I want you to stay." She pulled the string to her swim suit and it fell to the ground as she pressed her full body against his. The sun set into the harbor, the moon rose silently over the mountains and the wind cried while they lay under the stars. The warm summer night captured their sighs and silence.

## VISSEN OP DE BRUG

Someone stood at the front door of the house where I was staying the summer of 1971 while working in Holland. Without my glasses at eleven thirty at night it was hard to see who it was by the top of his head from my third floor attic bedroom window. The voice was in a whisper and I could not make out if it was in Dutch or English. I leaned out the window to look directly down at the front door and saw that there were two people, Mr Vroogtman and another man.

The landlord pointed up to my room. All I could see of him while he was in the doorway were his arms and he pointed to his wristwatch. He extended his hand to the other man at the doorstep to say goodbye and he took a white envelope from the other man who then walked into the unfamiliar European night.

I was kneeling at the window, resting my arms on the sill, when I heard the door slam shut. The quiet night was ruptured by the sound of its closing. The man looked up from beneath the streetlight. I could see clearly then, the name of a community college in St. Catharines, Ontario on his dark-green leather jacket and realized immediately it was Peter Kurbogevic that had come calling so far away from home. He was still looking up at my window so I raised my hand and said loudly "Peter, have you got somewhere to stay? I'll be right down." He raised his hand in the air and said everything was all right and he would see me the next day. He turned and walked off into the short summer night.

I was up and dressed at six o'clock in the morning and bicycled the five miles to the warehouse of VanSchooten en Sonen, bulb distributors in the town of Linnaeushoff. I had gotten the job only by chance when I went home one weekend to Toronto at the end of my second year at college. The bulb salesman, who now owns the company, was visiting the local garden center where I was working and offered me the job. I just happened to be standing near him while he was talking to the manager of the place about renewing his order for the following year and said I would be interested in working for him. The job paid the equivalent of about one dollar an hour Canadian but how many chances does one get to work in Europe? The work at the warehouse was mostly menial counting, cleaning, sorting, storing and shipping some of the two million or more tulips, crocuses, hyacinth and other bulbs that the VanSchooten Company export to North America each year.

Only a few of the twenty-six people employed there could speak English, so it was hard at first understanding what they were saying. Because most of the orders were the same, I could understand many of the Dutch words quite well after the first week. At first I learned to swear fluently in Dutch before learning the proper language.

The hard work paid off in one respect. I had lost almost thirty pounds since starting work here a month ago. Bicycling back and forth the ten miles every day helped too. I noticed during my stay that the dependence on bicycles in Holland was more than astounding. There were more of them than cars! Separate smaller roads for bicycles ran beside each main highway plus a separate road for pedestrians. No bikes or mopeds were allowed on the highway or on the pedestrian walkway and everything ran smoothly.

This was the last day for this work week. We were let out at noon on Fridays because we worked ten-hour days during the rest of the week. My mind had not been working too hard since my friend had come to my house the previous night. My landlord handed me an envelope this morning at breakfast and told me that a friend of mine had come to visit but that was all I knew and I hadn't even opened the envelope yet.

When the whistle blew at noon, we all lined up at the pay desk and picked up our money which was paid in cash on a weekly basis. I had planned to go camping with two of my co-workers, Leni and her twin brother Jim. When I told them my friend Peter was here, they said they would go on without me.

I picked up my pay, jumped on my bike, kissed Leni goodbye and headed for the town of Hillegom. I rode about three quarters of the way before I saw him. He was walking towards me in the bicycle path! I could see people on mopeds and on bikes shaking their fists at him and he was shooting the finger back at them. He must have gone back to the house and been sent hoofing all the way to Linnaeishoff!

The closer I got, the worse he looked. The last time I had ever seen Peter look so messy was at the Warwick Hotel on Jarvis Street in Toronto when a stripper poured a beer over his head for pulling her negligee off after she had finished a dance and was walking past our table. He was facing away from me yelling something in Polish at a Dutchman who was yelling back at him. I rode up to him and screamed some vile name at him in my new language, and with a slap on the back knocked him to the ground. He jumped up ready to kill whoever had done this foul deed.

"You stupid dike-hopper!" he screamed, "I'll, what the..Hello..Ryan!?" Peter Kurbogetic stopped short of dropping his best friend with one blow. "What the Hell did you do that for? I've just about had it up to here with these cheese heads and their damn bikes! Don't they know where they're goin'?"

"I didn't mean to knock you over", I said as I helped him brush the dust off his leather jacket. "This is a separate roadway - the pedestrian walkway is up there," I said, pointing to the narrow strip of asphalt running beside the graveyard fence. "Let's get up there and walk back to the house before we get run over. You were already a mess before I knocked you down. What happened?"

"Well, after I left last night I thought I had a place to stay but I couldn't get in so I went over to what I thought was a small park and went to sleep. It ended up being the levee around a canal. I woke up early when some son-of-a-bitch wino tried to push me into the water. I guess he tried to roll me and didn't find a thing on me. It was when I reached for my jacket that I slipped and fell into the canal. Man. They really stink!"

"Where did you put all your money?" I asked as we crossed the highway and headed up to my street to the house.

"I may be Polish but I'm not as dumb as that wino thought I was! Where's the envelope I gave your landlord last night? I put everything in there before I even got to your place".

"It's still up in my room," I said "I haven't even opened it yet. When we get to my house I want you to go upstairs and get cleaned up. I've got some clothes that might fit you".

"Thanks Ry' but I've got stuff in my pack. Your landlord took it for me. It's already up in your room. I dropped by an hour ago when I went back to your place and talked to the people you're staying with. I had an easier time getting out of Soviet Poland than I have had trying to find you and get some peace and quiet around here!"

We finally reached the house and Peter went upstairs to take a bath and change while I helped my landlady, Mrs. Vroogtman, get some lunch ready. She was the aunt of the salesman who got me the job and she gave me the room rent free just to have someone around when her husband worked the occasional night shift. They had no children. Peter was taking a long time in the bath so I went upstairs to see what was keeping him.

I could hear mumbling and grumbling and a few words in Polish that were not in the dictionary so I opened the bathroom door and when I looked in I saw him in the tub, holding onto

his left leg trying to pull his big toe out of the faucet! "How in the world did you do that?"

"I was resting in the water and then my head slipped under and my legs shot up and ... well don't just stand there laughing, help me out dammit!"

I reached over and turned on the tap, the water pressure blew his toe out. I turned to leave. When I opened the door and looked back to tell him that lunch was ready he was hopping around like a wounded rabbit. "You want me to kiss it and make it feel better?" I said in an unsympathetic tone. The bar of soap he threw at me missed. I closed the door and went downstairs to wash up in the other bathroom. "We're leaving on the next train to Amsterdam so hurry up." I yelled up the stairs. Peter came down in a few minutes and we left right after a lunch of soup and cheese.

The trains in Holland are all electric. No noise, no pollution and the fares are not too bad either. The distance from Hillegom to Amsterdam is only about twenty-one kilometres with one stop at the town of Haarlem (where Jim and Leni and I spend most of our weekends bar-hopping). Peter and I, at least, didn't look like tourists. Tourists usually stand out in a crowd. Americans in Bermuda shorts were the loudest dressed and most talkative of all the visitors to Europe. They, like the Japanese tourists, were loaded down with cameras and binoculars.

Peter and I didn't talk too much on the train, for we were too busy watching the tourists trying to talk Dutch to the natives. You could always tell a tourist on his first trip because he would always be sitting or standing right out in the open counting his money or sharing it with members of his family, a very unwise thing to do in a crowded train or anywhere for that matter. We decided to go and get something to drink after getting off the train.

Directly in front of the station sat an enormous fountain which was the hub of life for hundreds of young people who just mill about or sit on the numerous steps and play music and sing songs and recite poetry. The sight of the fountain and the sweet aroma of marijuana smoke in the air attracted people by the hundreds. Across from the fountain on the east side of the canal stands the Kabul, a derelict warehouse full of beds available to the weary traveller for pennies a night. Peter and I crossed the bridge that led to the Kabul and found a sidewalk café on an uncrowded side street a few blocks away. It was an older part of the city, with narrow streets of cobblestone and two-storey houses with large bay windows.

"Four Heineken," Peter told the waitress as we sat down at the table nearest the street. A small white metal fence ran along beside the outer tables. "How was your trip over? I wrote your mom and dad and they told me where you were staying."

"Well Peter, you left for Poland long before I got the job offer and the least you could have done was write me a card or letter. You were gone almost three weeks before I started my trip." The beers came. The waitress lifted up the edge of her short dirty skirt and wiped off the glasses, exposing her panty less inner thighs. She winked at Peter and then walked away. "I didn't think those types of girls wandered out of the red light district!" Peter laughed, watching her petite frame wiggle away into the café. "Nice legs though." He turned back to his beers.

"This is the red light district," I said, smiling and finishing off my first beer.

"Uh...I think wed better split, Ry'. I was gettin' interested in her but I don't have my shots and I just saw her scratching where the sun doesn t shine! It's a good thing we didn't drink out of the glasses, she might have just given us the gift that keeps on giving."

"Yea, old whores never die, they just smell that way, there must be nicer girls around than that," I said as I swung my jacket on and stepped over the fence with my long legs and on to the sidewalk. Peter jumped over and we walked to the Kabul to get a place for the night. The late

summer evening was falling slowly on the city and the cool canal air filled the streets. One by one the street lights and the red lights came on as we walked back towards the centre of Amsterdam.

The Kabul, as I mentioned earlier, was a five-storey warehouse backed up against the canal that flows beside the train station. There are three floors for men and two floors for women. The sleeping arrangements left something to be desired. If you are lucky, you might find a single bed or a dirty cot. None of the beds are in rows. It's a jumbled mess of blankets and mattresses and bodies. It also depended on the season of the year. Amsterdam in early summer was in the full tourist season and generally teeming with the young vagabonds from around the world. The Kabul was packed the whole summer.

Peter and I were lucky in several respects that night. First, although the men's section was full to overflowing, there were some spaces in one of the women's sections, which was all right with us. Second, a young girl from Paris, whom we had met on the way to the Kabul, offered to let us share her double bed for the weekend.

The morning sun through an uncurtained window woke us from our 'menage a trois.' I sat up in the sweaty bed to look around at an almost empty room. We had stayed up most of the night touching and kissing and loving her and had slept through most of the morning. Many of the others had gone about their sightseeing and there were only five or six couples left asleep or waking as we were. Peter lay in Marie-Hellene's arms, his head cradled on her breasts. I shook him awake and we dressed. When we were ready to go, we covered her up with the sheet and left a note telling her when we would be back.

We weren't in the mood for a continental breakfast. It was almost noon anyway. From the Kabul we walked over the canal and past the fountain, which was still full of people but not as lively as the previous night. We made our way up the Klootzstrasse (one of the main streets) and into a restaurant, where we ordered a large steak for each of us, as well as some more beer. The restaurant was built on two different levels and held about fifty tables. It was in a deep blue velvet wallpaper.

"Were you in Poland all this time or what? You never did really say." I sipped on the beer before the food came.

"Yeah, and what a drag it was gettin' in. Those damn commies were everywhere. I went in through Germany and was questioned for two hours as to where the Hell I was going, who I was seeing...it was just a bunch of bureaucratic bullshit! I stayed with my aunt and uncle from my mother's side of the family, in a little town on the western border, called Lecinski."

"How is your mom, anyway?"

"She's taking Dad's death a little better now. My sister Jean is still at home to help out, though. I'll say you said hello in my next letter."

"Tell her Lisa and I will come and see her when I get back, ok?"

"Ok. She'll like that. Speaking of Lisa, are you going to tell her about sleeping with Marie-Hellene? You are getting married to her you know?"

"Umm.. You're not my mother ... Did you have much trouble getting out of Poland?" The waitress picked up the empty beers as she set our steaks down in front of us. It didn't take long for us to start into them.

"The same crap as before, except they put me through a strip search for drugs. One son of a Red stuck his finger up my ass hole looking for drugs so I blew a giant fart that cleared the whole room out. They couldn't wait for me to get across the border after that."

"You always were a crude person," I said, finishing my meal. "I wish I could have been there to see the look on their...."

"Ryan...Ryan Acker?" interrupted a familiar voice. "I Thought I recognized you! How have you been?" She got up from her table and joined us. Peter was bewildered. She looked vaguely familiar but I didn't know anyone in Holland who spoke English that well. "You remember the train ride across the northern part of France on your way to a job you were going to here in Holland, don't you? You saved our lives, remember?" Heads were beginning to turn our way and stare at this girl, whose whispers could be heard twenty feet away!

"He?" Peter pointed at me. "He saved your life? I don't believe it at all!"

"Joan!" I blurted, as the incident, which I'd temporarily forgotten, came back to me. She reached under the table and took my hand and squeezed it.

"He really did! If Ryan hadn't stepped in when those three Frenchmen started putting their hands all over us in the train, I don't know what my girlfriend and I would have done. We were really scared!"

"All I did was stand up and take my Bowie knife out of my pack and put it in my belt."

"Yeah, but they were half your size and you should have seen the looks on their faces when they saw all six foot six of you stand up!" She let go of my hand and laid it on my leg. She looked at Peter. "He even said we should all spend the night together to make us feel more secure. We found a room with a nice double bed in a little town called Boucher. Wasn't that gallant of Ryan?"

"Ryan did all that! My, my!" Peter said sarcastically, kicking me under the table and smiling at the same time as he extended his hand to the tanned young woman sitting across from him. "I'm Peter Kurbogetic. Ry and I go to college together in Ontario."

"Joan Peacock," she responded. "My girlfriend and I are nursing students at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. Listen, I wish we could stay and chat, but we've got to catch the next train to Paris to get our plane connection home. It really was a coincidence, seeing you here just as we were leaving!" Her friend came over and Joan got up to leave and gave both of us a big kiss. Her girlfriend stood expressionless, just as she'd been the night we all slept together in that little room.

"Write to me when you get back to Canada." Joan's voice boomed as they walked up to the counter to pay their dinner bill. Peter and I sat there staring at them as they left. It had all happened so fast. We finished our meal and Peter looked up from his plate.

"Well, if you can't get a girl, get a nurse, eh?" Peter laughed. "I suppose you're not going to tell me you didn't make love to at least one of them, are you Ryan?" We left our money on the table and stood up to leave. "Speaking of nurses, I thought Lisa had you under her spell? Why all the secrecy from your best friend?"

"Take off, eh!" She's not moving in with me until September, so why can't...and what about last night? I didn't see you thinking about your girlfriend when the three of us were..."

"Ok, Ryan, you win and I hope you haven't been sleeping with my girl. Let's get out of here. I've got to cash some traveller's cheques and get some cancer sticks before I have a nicotine fit."

"Of course not." I said, clearing my throat and turning quickly away from the restaurant. We took a long afternoon ride on one of the canal tours and then a short bus ride to the north coast to swim in the ocean. When we arrived back in Amsterdam in the early evening, we walked from the bus depot over to the central fountain to listen to the people and the music. We saw Marie-Hellene again; she was sitting in a corner talking in French and holding hands with

another man.

Peter suggested that we had better go back to my place since it didn't look like we had any place to sleep tonight. We picked up our stuff at the Kabul and headed back to the train station. Marie-Hellene blew us a kiss as we passed her and her new friend or old friend, we didn't know which, and I guess it didn't matter. He was facing away and did not see her goodbye kiss to us. I waved an unsympathetic goodbye. Peter told me later that he was jealous and had spread salt under the sheets of the double bed when we picked up our gear...cruel, but typical of Peter. The train almost left without us.

The flat green countryside passed before us as we sat across from each other in the seats nearest the window. Rows of windmills and canals stretched out under the setting sun. I had pulled out a deck of playing cards from my coat pocket and we were half way through a game of crazy-eights when the electric train began to slow down for a construction zone. I was facing the front of the train and could see that it was a bridge being repaired. It must have been important or they wouldn't have had people working on the weekend and especially at night. We were delayed for about twenty minutes while the train stopped about three hundred yards from the bridge.

Peter noticed it first: the sound of laughter on the mostly Dutch-filled train. I stood up and looked to the front of the slow-moving car. Row by row everyone had begun to look out my side and began giggling and laughing as the train moved ahead. A smile crossed my face as I sat down and looked up the tracks and at Peter's perplexed face.

"What's so funny, Ry?" Peter questioned.

"There's a 'no fishing' sign, in Dutch, on the other side of the bridge."

"So?"

"Well, it's been changed from 'Vissen Op de Brug is Verboden' by someone to 'Pissen Op de Brug...!'"

The train pulled into the station at Hillegom by nine and we were asleep by ten. There was a note from Leni beside the phone and a care package from my parents beside the bedroom door which would have to wait until morning to be opened. It would probably be clothing because that's all they seemed to think I ever needed.

## TIME WOUNDS ALL HEALS

"I have some things to tell you that might fill in the gaps in our lives, but first the good news! I've formed my own construction company here in Key West, and since it's at the end of Interstate #1 I've called it The End Of The Road Construction Company. I've just landed a three million-dollar renovation contract, gutting and rebuilding the old Casa Marina Hotel and I get to keep everything that's taken out. I'm gonna buy some more land and build a motel with all the leftovers and run it myself. By the way man, before I forget, I will be coming up to Toronto in a week or two for a contractor s conference at the Inn on the Park. I was wondering if I could stay with you and Lisa? I know mom and dad don't want me over at their place. I'd like to patch things up though, but I won't cut my hair, it's down to my ass now. I've almost knocked my drug habit, just a few joints now and then, man. Oh yea, and I've met a really nice girl from out of state and I plan on getting married soon."

Ryan put the letter down on his desk and ran his hands through his ear-length black hair. His coffee was cold so he went downstairs to the kitchen to plug in the kettle. It had been four and a half years since he had visited his brother, Philip. Ryan had resented the seventies drug culture that had swept his brother up in it. The only thing that seemed to have helped Philip out of all of this was his self-centered and egotistical personality which had left him in a state of semi-mellow. A dozen projects on the go, seldom brought to fruition. Ryan was not impressed with this new venture of his brothers but as long as Philip was happy that was all that mattered right now.

The kettle was ready and Ryan went back upstairs to finish the letter and work on his latest assignment for the Toronto Star where he'd been New Voices editor for the past two years. Philip seemed to be reaching out for that closeness they had in their youth, both for his brother and his sister, Taran. Their sister was still in high school and hadn't shown any noticeable interest in either of her two brothers. The only thing the Acker children had in common was their size. Ryan was six feet, six inches, Philip was six foot four and Taran was five feet, eleven inches tall. The 'giants of the north' as they were nicknamed by their friends and relatives in their parents home town of Ashland, Alabama. He took a sip of the coffee and sat down at his cluttered desk to finish the letter.

"Well Ry, since you are the writer and historian in the family, I thought you would like to know a few things that I recently found out from some of our relatives in Alabama and Georgia when I was there last year. One of the things I noticed as we grew up was our parent s paranoia with holidays. Mom was born on July the fourth, Dad was born on Valentines Day and you were born on V.J. Day and so on, right. Most of the other holidays seem to be death days, if you sit and think about it, man. Grandpa Acker passed away on Christmas Day a few years ago and both of our mother's parents, the Lovelace s, died together last New Years Eve, other relatives have died on Easter and Halloween, so you get my drift Ry.

Now, I know you are sitting there saying to yourself that I was born on Mother's Day in '56. I hope you are sitting down and promise me you'll never bring this up at home 'cause mom has always hidden her feelings and she doesn't realize I found this out. Time wounds all heals, you know."

"I promise," Ryan found himself saying out loud. He took another sip from the cup. He leaned back in the chair, took a deep breath and continued reading.

"I was one of un identical twins. The other one died a few days later from blood clots in the



brain. What a bummer! When I heard that I got right off drugs man. I realized how lucky I was to be alive and to do the things I wanted to do, but I stopped cold turkey, man!"

Ryan dropped the letter to his lap. His heart pounding was the only sound that could be heard in the house. His mind went blank for a long time. He now realized why his mother had cried on that day. It was not tears of joy for the gifts she received but the fine tears that accumulate in the eyes of God. The death of a child is always the greatest loss. He looked down at the letter.

"I was also talking to a ninety-four-year-old aunt of ours on the Lovelace side of the family and she told me that when her father was a little boy before the Civil War, he saw his father screw some of the slave girls on the plantation and saw them give birth to mulatto children! She has kept records of whom these children married and their children who would be our parent's age now and she will send them to you if you write her. They are related, even if they are Negroes. Oh Ry, in order to show you how I felt when I was younger, I am enclosing a letter I wrote our parents when you were working in Holland. It was the day I ran away from home. I feel one hundred times better than I did then. I'm a new man and I'm in love. I want you to be the best man at my wedding, like I was at yours. There are other secrets to tell you but they can wait until I see you again. Take it easy, your brother, Philip."

Ryan put the letter down on the desk and reached inside the envelope, pulling out two pieces of yellowed paper. He had seen his brother change a lot during his school years in Toronto. He didn't like the way things were going with him but being away at college in St. Catharines, he couldn't do much about it. Ryan began to read the old letter.

"As I sit here in the darkness of my room, contemplating the events that have shaped my life, I feel in a remote sort of way, a small, but unique, depression sweeping my whole being. Sadness fills my heart like a raging tide. I have had a much fuller life than an average young man in the sense of my experiences. I have felt what some men never feel. I feel that something very important should be happening in my life but I am just a block of stone. I now realize I no longer, want, out of life. I know not what I need. I am not truly happy as a teenager should be and I am plagued with feelings. I would rather be without these deep feelings. I feel I am actually being betrayed by a person cold and calculating with utterly selfish reactions and who is careless and apathetic in all things not directly related to me. I am a very selfish and self-centered person and although I have been known to do things for people I care for, I care for so few. I am not ashamed of my so called individuality. I also feel I enjoy it when some female person is hurt or jealous about or because of me, for I am constantly needing nourishment for my pride. When you find this letter, Mom and Dad, I will be gone. Your offspring, Philip Acker.

Ryan put the letter down on the desk but he found his eyes glued to it, to part of his brother's life that he hadn't known existed. The strength of youthful conviction was so strong, so powerful that it leapt off those two pages like some literary giant he had never seen. If Philip has continued writing like this then Ryan would have new fodder for the literary trough of his New Voices column. Now was a good time for him and his brother to get to know each other again. He sat up straight in the chair like his mother had always told him to do and put the second letter back in the envelope and looked at the postmark. It had been mailed from Key West a week earlier, which could only mean that Philip should be here soon. Ryan, letter in hand, went downstairs to the kitchen and dumped the contents of the coffee cup into the stainless steel sink. Philip was on his mind when the phone rang. It was his father.

"Ryan, Oh dear God," he blurted, "Ryan, I hope you are sitting down because I have something terrible to tell you. I...I was going to come over in the car to tell you in person, but you

will understand why I didn't when I finish." Ryan sat down in the leather chair and squeezed the arm rest tightly with his hand upon hearing his father's words. "...and that's the whole story as strange as it is to believe. Your brother, Philip, died instantly and painlessly when the oxygen cut off and they had no air left in the small plane." Ryan could hardly make out his father's words over the telephone. "The plane, was on automatic pilot and flew for a couple of hours until it ran out of gas and crashed into Lake Ontario about three hours ago and the police have just come by..." the phone was silent.

"Dad! Are you still there? I'll be right over..." Ryan, stunned by the sudden news, ran out the door, jumped into his jeep and drove towards his parent s house. He sped up as the streetlight turned from green to yellow but not fast enough to reach the other side of the intersection as the yellow turned to red and the traffic entered the lane he was in. Lisa Acker pulled her VW Rabbit into the driveway of their first home a half hour after her husband had left and found the house unlocked, the door open and the phone off the hook, dangling beside the chair and a piece of yellow writing paper.