

True North

Bruce Russell

PASSPORT

Whenever he closed his eyes, he could see it. This black inverted bowl with sparks of fire . . . a night so cold, he could feel it in his bowels. The convex firmament was there above him like his own cranium. He carried this memory with him always and everywhere, like a passport.

IDENTITY

They hardly exist anymore, nearly extinct: these tall, thin, stiff, tidy, quiet, well groomed gentlemen. Like defrocked priests who still have something of "the Cloth" about them, they have a regimental air. Perhaps no one could absolutely come home from Dieppe or Vimy Ridge. Indeed, they always seemed to never really be completely present, at least for long. Short attention spans: a tendency to drift. They all wore mustaches, had very good posture, if a slight tendency to stoop their heads, and dressed very carefully. In the world they were honest and a trifle conservative, regardless of their politics. Fair play. Hard work. Charitable. They loved their families, but never really seemed to know them. Their children thought them kind and dull. Their wives were either very independent or very disappointed. The independent ones, some so independent that they had never married them, had careers and causes,

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or simply tea parties and card games, or religion. The disappointed ones were shadows, and sometimes widows and, they could have religion too. All these adults were Canadians, the only Canadians there ever were. I don't think children can be Canadians. It takes a lot of winters to chill a human being enough to make a Canadian. In those days Canadians could be French or English or Scottish or Lithuanian or any thing else. Being Canadian was a noble calling, if a faint one. Canada required a lot of concentration because it existed in the future.

It is possible that there are some Canadians of my generation. I think I might have met some, although they are still too young for it to be certain. But I very much doubt if there could be any younger ones. That future the Canadians were waiting for has passed.

NERVES OF STEEL

They had a plan to draw a country. Steel lines through empty space, branching, intersecting like nerves. Along the rails they would draw its bounty to market. The ore, the timber, the furs and fish and animal flesh. It was a dream. And to build the rails they offered pieces of this new land. They brought poor foreigners and left them along the tracks in the vast expanse. With no shelter but huts of sod, the survivors of the long frozen winters became Canadians. In time they too built cities and they had commerce there. And the new Canadians dreamed and learned their place.

DOMINION DAY

July 1, 1957. They all knew their place in the reception line at the Lieutenant Governor's Dominion Day Garden Party: the servants, court clerks, deputy ministers, assistant prosecutors, the coadjuter bishop, the vice rector, the aides de camp, all the way along to the provincial representative of Her Majesty, the Queen. They all knew their places, knew exactly where they stood. The band played and the dahlias bloomed and everyone said, as they ate the cucumber sandwiches, that they were having almost as grand a time as if they were at Buckingham Palace itself.

CANADIAN CLUB

Unlike other businessmen who liked paintings of nudes, they had always preferred landscapes. For generations they had sent out artists to capture the essence of virgin nature. These strip-mine operators, ravishers of forests, and despoilers of the sea found stimulation in the tranquility of voluptuous hills and wet valleys. Sitting behind their desks, they would stare at the paintings which stirred the very essence of their desire.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

July 1, 1967. One hundred years had passed. From coast to coast fireworks exploded against the black sky. They had taught the children to sing special songs and everyone was very proud. Swimming pools opened: sport centers, municipal museums, playhouses. Maple trees were planted and rose gardens had been laid out in the shape of the crown. And like a diamond, a splendid fair glistened on the islands in the great river for all the world to see. They came from everywhere to see the dream come true. In a quiet neighborhood on the shore, a mail box exploded.

NATURAL HISTORY

Along the water courses, at the edges of the vast lakes, and in the estuaries of the mighty river live the fur animals. In families, they paddle and play in the clear, fresh Canadian waters. In summer, the little ones frolic on the banks, mindless of their future. Under the ice and snow of winter they snuggle, heedless of danger, with their parents and cousins and aunts and uncles. Fur animals have large families, they have to. Fur animals rarely have grandparents. Fur animals don't live long in Canada. Perhaps this is a sentimental history, but only to the sentimental reader.

December 1980. The horses pulled the great civic catafalque up to the front of the vast stone basilica. It was very cold, carved of pine with urns and drapes painted black, and brass lanterns polished bright. The regiments drew up to attention and the pallbearers lifted the heavy bronze casket containing the body of the late Prime Minister and placed it in the ancient hearse. The solemn mass had been sung by the Cardinal before the assembled representatives of all the governments and all the political parties, and the family and friends of the late Prime Minister. He had led his province through what they called a quiet revolution. And now they all stood around in the snow and watched in silence. In all a thousand of them standing there. And they all wore coats and hats made of the small fur animals, a million little skins.

THE MAPLE LEAF FOREVER

The winter was melting away. From tree to dead tree, little pipes punctured the limbs. Like an infernal intravenous they had drained the sap and now the poisoned snow was dripping from rusty holes in the abandoned buckets which still hung on the nails which pierced the sides of the trees.

LAST JUDGEMENT

The ice was breaking up on the great river. Vast chunks floated out to sea. On one stood a crowd who had come down onto its frozen surface to watch the northern lights. At the moment the ice had cracked, suddenly their fur coats and hats came alive. The little animals whose skins they wore arose from the dead. With their tiny claws, they jumped off their heads and scampered down their backs. The doomed crowd stood there shivering, surrounded by hungry little beasts with very sharp teeth.

RED DEER

February 1990. Like an art class perspective lesson, the steel rails diminished towards the horizons. The transcontinental trains sped past each other. Each carried envoys racing to negotiate an impossible constitutional compromise. Between the tracks lay a vast pile of bones. He had climbed up on it to watch the trains pass for the last time. Instead he closed his eyes and listened to the whistles fade away in the winter night.

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