

WAYNE TEMPLETON

A LONG WAY HOME

HE WAS GOING TO BE LATE. Walking northwest to Sackville, he was constantly losing his purpose as he slowed to admire the abundance of heritage houses he didn't usually see on his northward walk downtown. Century-old dwellings, lovingly refurbished, freshly painted in grey-blue, coral, khaki, mustard-yellow, with contrasting door and window trim. They were almost exclusively Georgian cubes, some with tiny dormers, three or four in a row, others with Mansard roofs, tall, stately, standing formally as if on parade, some on tree-lined avenues. Each more desirable than its neighbour, and all new to him, for when he had lived on the Cape, he had almost never visited Halifax and certainly, so far as he could recall, had never visited the South End.

He pulled his iPhone from his pocket as he approached his destination. 10:16. Tolerably late, he hoped. The CBC studios, crouched at the left foot of the Citadel, were housed in a two-storey grey building with rounded corners. In the small lobby a receptionist sat in a corner behind a raised ledge. Giving her his name, he apologized for being late. She checked her computer, assured him that in fact his interviewer was even later, and led him down a narrow hallway to a room at the back, a room dominated by a burnished oval dining-room table, its place settings a series of microphones and headsets. Two men were already in attendance, sitting at opposite ends of the table, trying, rather adversarially, not to scrutinize each other as they preoccupied themselves with their Blackberries. The receptionist introduced them, and he promptly forgot their names, though not who they represented. Both were eager young dot.com entrepreneurs dressed in the young contemporary version of business attire: black jeans, dress shirts untucked, indifferent sports jackets.

Almost immediately, a woman in her forties with thick, wavy dark-brown hair and sparkling eyes rushed in, clutching two or three folders. Stephanie, she said, and asked if the three had been introduced. Two nodded desultorily, and she proceeded to explain that the interview, to be

broadcast on her afternoon show, involved the prospect of Halifax (finally) being permitted to enter the modern technological world, this a result not just of the rise of dot.com upstarts but, most dramatically, of Walrus Corp opening a branch office here. Walrus Corp operated on or very near the cutting edge of IT.

Quickly explaining the ground rules and ensuring that they had their headsets on properly, she spoke to an engineer, now visible through a glass window sitting in an even smaller room stacked with electronic gear. They each spoke into their mics, sound levels were set, and Stephanie began, introducing the episode and her three interviewees, then turned to him.

“Jack Cunningham, I’ll start with you if I may. As the regional director of the new Halifax branch of Walrus Corp, you are, I’m happy to inform everyone, back home, right? You’re from here.”

Momentarily caught off guard, Jack cleared his throat, then grinned abashedly as the engineer grimaced. “Well, actually, I’m from Cape Breton Island, and although it’s a short distance across the bridge to the town where I was born, it is a long way home.”

His response surprised them both, although Stephanie the professional recovered more quickly.

“Well, okay,” she laughed. “But Halifax is your new home, and here you will be doing what, exactly? By that I mean, can you explain to our listeners what Walrus Corp does and why they’ve decided to start doing it here, in Halifax?”

Hesitating briefly as he shifted from momentary reverie to the task at hand, Jack smiled.

“Yes, a good question.” He looked at the ceiling, then leaned forward slightly, eying the microphone.

“Walrus Corp is a leading fixture—perhaps the leading fixture—in the IT community today.” One of the scruffy men beside him snickered softly. Turning, Jack smiled, his condescension matching the other’s incredulity.

“As many of your listeners no doubt know, information technology—IT—involves the acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of information by electro-technological means. This has become of increasingly vital importance in recent years. As Internet activity of all kinds has increased exponentially, there has been a concomitant need to manage the production of this activity. And, through judicial decision-making on the part of senior management, Walrus Corp has become the preeminent clearing house, if you will, of all this. Today Walrus Corp is to IT what Google is to search engines.

“As to Halifax,” he continued, shrugging, “Walrus Corp is always looking for new opportunities, and right now Halifax, with its proximity to the Eastern Seaboard, looks promising.”

“You mean you’re interested in what the Americans are up to?”

Jack smiled. “We’re interested in everything,” he said.

Walking down Sackville Street to work, he couldn’t help questioning his response to the interviewer’s first question, about being home again. He had expressed a position he had not known he possessed, or even believed. But it was perhaps true, yes? He entered a coffee shop, ordered a cappuccino, and stared out the window as he contemplated its implications.

He had grown up on a farm in central Cape Breton Island, in the Middle River district just north of Bras d’Or Lake. A remote area of a remote island whose isolated inhabitants had more in common with their Scottish, Irish and French ancestors than with the Mainlanders a short distance across the Causeway to the south. There was a Scottish family who, like most others, had retained Gaelic as a part of their daily language. Their customs and traditions and terminology all seemed natural and even universal. Or so Jack had thought, growing up. Actually, he had never consciously thought about it, but instead assumed, or presumed, that everyone spoke a bit of Gaelic, ate oatcakes and were fanatic about step dancing. That everyone gathered on a Saturday evening for a rousing céilidh in someone’s kitchen. How else could a lad be expected to meet a lass, if not out back, in the dark, as the fiddles sang and the whisky flowed indoors.

He’d met a lass at a céilidh: Nellie McLeod was her name. Her family lived on the south coast—fishermen—as remote as Mainlanders usually, but it turned out there was a family connection. Her father and his mother were cousins. They’d never socialized until one day his Granny heard from someone back home that they were there. Nellie, a second cousin, which was okay, was as sweet as backwoods pie: long, slender, freckled, with red pigtailed and impish eyes. She loved mocking him at first: he a clumsy, shy farm boy. He never quite figured out where her comparative worldliness came from. She wasn’t much of a reader, and she sure wasn’t going to become a cosmopolite listening to the local radio station.

The mockery seemed a test, which, somehow, he evidently passed, for by the end of that first summer she was taking him seriously. She seemed to appreciate his shy ways: a relief from the testosterone-driven fishermen’s lads back home. They met often, once her dad and his mum had been reunited,

as it were. And soon enough he was making his own way down to her place, or more appealingly, to a common rendezvous, for she seemed to think their farm was the epitome of boredom, and he viewed the louts of her village with a mixture of revulsion and fear. And by the time they were attending high school in Coxheath, they were on their way to being inseparable.

On summer evenings they'd spend long hours together on the beaches: Mabou, Whaler's Cove, Morrison, Ingonish, Inverness, Point Michael, Black Brook: they explored them all, although Inverness became their favourite. It was there that they first pledged their love. Jack smiled at the quaintness of the expression. They had discovered sex.

He ordered another coffee and phoned the office, still in chaos from delays in furniture delivery and the hiring and training of staff, explaining that he would not be in for a while. Instead, he climbed the Citadel, rising in front of him. It was a short stroll up the gentle slope, but at the top he was surprised at the expanse of the view. Looking north, across the Harbour, he could see Dartmouth and beyond that, a rolling expanse leading, he knew, to the Cape.

When he turned seventeen, his father more or less gave him the old pickup, rarely used, and so long as his chores were completed, he and Nellie could do what they wanted. This was when they first began exploring the island, which may as well have been a part of Greece, so little of it did they know. Exotic hidden beaches, not twenty minutes away, that they hadn't known existed. Long stretches of sand curving gently around small bays, bordered by grassy knolls, and, invariably, around the corners of these outcroppings they'd find hidden bays, tiny, with house-sized patches of sand, beyond the farthest reaches of other strollers: there, beneath pale yellow moons, they'd live brief moments of unspeakable delight.

And they talked, endlessly. Usually about what the future might hold. For Jack the immediate future was not so mysterious, for he intended to enroll at the University of Toronto and study computer science. The two of them, the university and the program, seemed to embrace a world as far from this one as possible, as modern as this was stifled by history and tradition, as cosmopolitan as this was hermetic, even monastic. Nellie did not share this dream; in fact, she rather pointedly opposed it. Why do you want to go to Toronto, she would ask. What's wrong with Dalhousie? No, no, the U of T computer science program was immeasurably superior. And besides, don't you want to leave this place? No, she did not. He couldn't wait.

Remembering those evenings, Jack could not now recall why their parents, particularly his strict Calvinist father, were so lenient. Yes, they were seventeen, but ... Perhaps it had something to do with disappearing fish stock and drought and the other hardships of daily life on the island that had tired them sufficiently that they no longer had the strength to oversee the antics of adolescents. Perhaps it was trust, though he doubted that. His father particularly could trust no one, for everyone was a sinner, and most all of them were greater sinners than he, and thus suspect, for who knew what might ensue when the Devil moved them.

No, his father had probably thought, "Let him get her pregnant, and then they'll settle down and start life in earnest." Such a commitment would keep the prodigal son from wandering, which would have been more than sufficient reward for whatever the consequences of premarital sex and pregnancy might do to affect the good standings of the families. That would be short-lived. Such was the habitual lack of conventionality that marked Mr. Cunningham, kept him apart. It was something he worked at. He believed in being unconventional; it was a legacy inherited, he said, from Christ Himself. Keep the Devil guessing—that was our only hope for salvation.

All his father demanded—of himself, of anybody—was simplicity of living, by which he meant directness and honesty, and an unceasing devotion to Christ. And simplicity was embraced, could only be embraced, within the rural life. He loathed cities, urbanites, Culture with a capital C, and all the other trappings of the cosmopolitan lifestyle. Fortunately for him, the hordes of city folk, mostly American, mostly university age, who had adopted Cape Breton Island as their own personal summer playground, almost never ventured into the interior. But he knew they were there; he could feel them, as others could feel a storm coming.

Jack never mentioned his future plans to his parents, and they rarely brought up the subject. Why was that? Weren't parents always curious, at the very least, and much more often quite solicitous, even demanding—the latter engendered by the feeling that they knew better than their offspring what would be best. And from that, fishermen usually had fishing in mind, while farmers felt the agricultural life was the most promising. But his parents' farm was too small to require an adult assistant. So maybe they had been planning to win the lottery and buy him his own farm. He still found their silence perplexing. But this was academic now, for near the end of Grade 12, as he busied himself with application forms, aided by teachers eager to see an island boy get ahead in the world, he could not contain himself any further.

I'm off to Toronto in the fall, he blurted out over supper one evening in late spring. I'm going to go to the University there, get me a good degree, a well-paying job, make something of myself. His father was silently outraged, to the point of beginning to turn red in the face, while his mother looked anxious as she watched her husband. But the storm passed overhead as silent as hawks, and for three months he had the near unbearable experience of waiting as if for lightening to strike, or a tsunami to hit. And there was little solace from Nellie, who tearfully tried to dissuade him. He began to suspect that she and his parents were in communication, and that his father believed the best strategy would involve love not emanating from parents but from someone of far greater significance, someone who could withhold favours the absence of which no adolescent boy could endure.

But he endured, and busied himself with last-minute preparations for his exodus, with the help of a young teacher only recently graduated from the U of T herself, a woman who helped him choose a college and courses, and gave him advice about professors to seek or avoid, places to go for help or sympathy or brief respites from the grind of academic life. And when finally he announced that the following morning he would be departing, his father stood, like Moses, and asked him softly if this was his final decision, and when he nodded, Mr. Cunningham said: Well then, if you are determined to kneel at the feet of Mammon rather than at the feet of Christ, I think it best that you do not bother darkening the doorway of this house ever again. Go, and may the Lord have mercy on your soul. And he walked from the room, and Mrs. Cunningham pleaded silently with Jack to reconsider, but he was his father's son, and he too walked from the room and the following morning from the house, and he had never gone back, nor even written. In fact, he did not actually know for sure if his parents still lived. And until now he had not cared.

A brisk wind arose, and the air chilled. Jack buttoned his coat and walked to a bench on the lee side of the hill.

His mother had written once, but in his newfound immaturity he had held her to be in the camp of the enemy and he had not bothered to respond, choosing instead to continue to immerse himself as completely as possible in the world of the university and, even more energetically, the world of Toronto. He was going to become a Torontonion, as similar in speech and dress and habit as if he had been Yorkville born and bred.

The college he had chosen had as its residence a small two-storey brick building, more intimate than the towering Wordsworth College residence,

and far more in keeping with his humble background than the Gothic edifices of Trinity and Victoria Colleges. When he was shown to his room, he was introduced to a young woman from Sydney, Australia, named Judith, who was grateful for company, having felt like an exile in her solitude. They agreed to keep secret their eager-beaver status, and commiserated further after he informed her that the town nearest him was also Sydney. But it was to him an uncomfortable commiseration, for he couldn't help notice that their broad accents were sure to mark them as a pair of immigrants, if not a hillbilly duo.

The other residents were nice, very nice, in part because they too were from away, as a Torontonians might but of course never would say. They didn't notice, or certainly didn't remark on, his and Judith's foreign ways and broad accents, because theirs differed only in degree. He wanted to meet and interact with real Torontonians, and he began to do just that as he became acquainted with his classmates. It was an auspicious beginning to what would become a protracted period of assimilation, for he soon understood that beyond the thin veil of quasi-familiarity gleaned from the use of computers, they knew no more than he of how these devices worked, how they were programmed, what binary really meant. It was a foreign language, and they were all tourists.

Soon, however, all went awry, as it became painfully evident that he was, well, different. Suspiciously so, it seemed. Seated at the bar one Friday afternoon, he turned to a fellow Comp Sci student and asked: "Jeet yet?" and when he clarified the question with a mention of supper, the native stood and explained rather haughtily that he already had dinner plans for later that evening. It was dinner, then, was it? And, Jack noted, it was not a meal taken at five o'clock. Nor was the slightly ratty piece of furniture in his residence lobby a "chesterfield" (that was a cigarette brand, wasn't it?). One didn't desire a backwoods or maple syrup pie, any more than one expressed a hankering for pig's knuckles, cod, or a flat of beer. One didn't wearily refer to the library as a *taigh-obrach*, one didn't express disagreement with the phrase "like fun," one didn't call the miserly lad down the hall a scivey. One didn't even call him a lad. And one tried one's damndest to refrain from adding "eh" to the ends of sentences.

But it was the accent more than vocabulary that most irked Jack. A lad was not in Toronto a "by"; that was a term of farewell. It was "boy," and "Have you eaten?" and "When is your (not 'wenjer') English class?" The elision, which was as much a part of him as his hair, the broadness of the Gaelic vowels, the lilt, which he actually liked, that must be purged. It didn't matter that he found the Toronto accent flat like griddle cakes, and undemonstra-

tive to the point of sounding clinically depressed. No matter; if he was to assimilate, to get the job he wanted, he must change. When in Toronto ...

His fellow residents began to call him Mr. Snobby. All, that is, except Judith, who gracefully granted him his desire to distance himself from her and her equally broad accent and unconventional ways, which included, not supper at five, but tea, a term for the evening meal only his Granny and her generation ever used back home. But let them call him what they wanted; he only smiled to himself. Their approbation was a small price to pay for the transformation he was undertaking, and negligible compared to the outright ostracization that was brewing out there on campus. He couldn't afford that, and so with a diligence that was a part of his nature he gave himself elocution lessons, listening and repeating the native pronunciations, and enunciation, and learning their eloquence, not only in speech but manner and habit and custom. No more céilidhs for him, no fiddles, no Rankins. It was violins and Beethoven and Coltrane from now on. And dinners with lobster and veal and salads composed of wisps of unidentifiable greenery.

He was also grateful that he had never discussed with Nellie the possibility of her moving here, or even visiting. The rough sea-chapped skin, the unkempt explosion of red hair, the even thicker accent, even the name. McLeod. My God. It reeked of Highland buffoonery. Cunningham, on the other hand, seemed for most to be a proper English name or, even better, a Canadian name. No one associated it with oat eaters.

As the sea breeze ripened, and the temperature dropped a degree or two further, Jack gave up his perch on the Citadel, but decided to go home. He could work at his own unpacking while his staff sorted out the office. His South End condo, within easy walking distance of his downtown workplace, the Harbour, the Citadel, was the uppermost of a triplex on a quiet tree-lined street, nestled among the houses he so loved. Nestled and rather inconspicuous, he thought, for its design mirrored its century-old neighbours, to the point of having actual wooden siding. It had hardwood floors, a balcony, a fireplace, a delightful little kitchen, with brushed steel refrigerator and gas stove, granite counters with contrasting splash tiles behind them, and an engaging view of the garden. One of the bedrooms was becoming a study, the centerpiece of which was his large oak desk and chair. He had ordered new black leather furniture for the living room, and a white tufted Berber carpet for contrast.

Pouring himself a small glass of Lagavulin, Jack pulled out a dining room chair, and stared out the window at the Harbour again as he sipped his Scotch. He had missed the ocean, although he had not really become aware

of this until he had moved back. Back to the Maritimes, that is. Lake Ontario had never been a substitute; there was something about the majesty of the ocean and even though the Harbour was rather placid compared to the open Atlantic, more lake than ocean in appearance, there was that invigorating brine, the smell of salt and iodine, that stirred his blood. It felt good; it was visceral, like the drink in hand, which actually embodied the sea, possessed a noticeable trace of it. He hadn't realized this either: the Scotch he had come to love over all other drinks contained in it, like a lingering childhood memory, a trace of the essence that had helped form him.

He hadn't realized that until now. He hadn't realized a lot until now, until he had been asked that question out of left field this morning about being home again. Was it true, what he'd said in reply: essentially that he could not go home again, not because, as Thomas Wolfe had argued, home is as much an historical artifact as it is a geographical place, but because he had changed, had become a foreigner, someone from away, someone with virtually nothing in common with the folks back home except a dim memory of a vastly different life he'd experienced a lifetime ago. But now, as he smelled the brine, and reveled in the houses of the south peninsula, and thought of fish and chips for the first time in a decade, he was beginning to realize that he was no more a Torontonionian at heart that he could be a Caper anymore. He'd never really been anything like a Toronto native, not really. He'd played the part, given, he thought, a rather convincing performance, on stage for the whole of the ten years he'd lived there. His saving grace was his work. He was good at it, and no one there gave a shit about where he was from and what he ate and when. And he had applied himself zealously, risen within the ranks of Walrus Corp, and had little time for socializing, for eating the right food with the correct utensils chosen at the appropriate times while engaging in trivial exchanges of *bons mots* with a sprinkling of sexual innuendo and a touch of the dagger added between the entrée and the brandy and pastries. And what did he have to show for such a dynamic and long-lasting performance? Regional directorship of one of the most successful IT corporations in the world, and bachelorhood, for while even outside work the men tended to find a good ol' by who could handle his drink rather well a satisfactory kind of chap, the women, thin and steely-eyed and as ambitious as any two men, clearly found him boorish, or at least boorishly unconnected. Lacking a pedigree, he was as interesting to them as an oncologist. Maybe, at about fifty or so, if any was unattached still, and the boor had buckets of money, they would have reassessed him, but by then he may very well have drank himself to death. He had sought this promotion, to what was held by his col-

leagues as a prestigious preferment in exile, like being made head honcho in Siberia. Again unconsciously—and it was becoming unavoidably clear that most of his life’s decisions, or at least the recent ones, had been made unconsciously—he had wanted this position, in this town, and would have fought for it had anyone else been even remotely interested. No one had, and neither had anyone quite understood why he was so keen. My God, they had argued. You’re good, Cunningham; be patient, old man, and you’ll catch a bigger fish than Hell-ee-fax. Just think: Manhattan, Hong Kong, Frankfurt, I’d imagine pretty much anywhere you want. This is suicide. You’ll disappear; we’ll never hear from you again. It’ll be like those old spies in *Le Carré*. You’ll never come in from the cold once you exile yourself to that place. He had heard them, had listened politely, but not only did he not respond, he couldn’t quite understand what they were saying. He didn’t believe it and it rang in his ears like Cockney.

But still, what had he gained? He was betwixt and between, a part of neither Toronto nor here. Well, that was not completely true. He could become a part of Halifax, easily and very successfully. He was Maritime-born and Toronto-trained. He was both; he was everything upward-bound Haligonians wanted, represented everything to which they aspired, for unlike some, it seemed to him that the people here had a strong desire to add to, not replace, that which they intrinsically were. But while he’d surprised himself in saying he was a long way from home, that was where he wanted to reconnect. Not become, but reinstate that missing, rejected part of himself. He’d chopped his left leg off to get to Toronto, and now he wanted to sew it back on. Which was as impossible metaphorically as it was anatomically. But he wanted to return, to visit, from curiosity, yes, but as well to attempt to regain something of his roots, for he felt rootless, without a culture, a sailor floating above the sea, smelling it but not touching it. Or more aptly, perhaps, he’d left the ocean, and had only a painting of it. You couldn’t swim in a painting.

And he wondered about Nellie, whom he had discarded, mistakenly, at the time, and again, unconsciously. She was probably married, likely to a fisherman, had a half-dozen kids. His fault. Had he persuaded her to accompany him to Toronto, they’d have assimilated together—to a degree—while retaining the best of their Cape Breton Gaelic roots. They’d have been an island in the middle of Toronto. And if she had remained adamant about not going, had he been completely selfish in refusing to consider Dalhousie?

Near his place, a few blocks to the east, on the water overlooking Georges Island, Jack had discovered the Farmer’s Market. On Saturdays he

began visiting it, having lunch, fish and chips, perhaps, with a pint of Garrison's Black IPA, then strolling about, selecting vegetables and fruits and fish so fresh it was still moving, pastries, coffee beans. It was a paradise for a foodie. As well, he liked the bustle of the place, the laughter and buzz of conversations, the gentle nudging of relaxed people sidling past each other in crowded places, the bonhomie. This, combined with an invigorating mixture of smells: apples, carrots, flowers of various kinds, and behind them the faint, ubiquitous taste of brine.

One day, as he stopped to admire a particularly fragrant flower, he was surprised to hear a voice behind him. The voice of a woman.

"Jack?" she asked, tentatively. "Jack Cunningham?"

He turned. It was Nellie. An older Nellie, with smooth skin, make up expertly applied, an elegant hair cut. Big-city clothes: a long pleated skirt, high leather boots, an expensive coat. Two young boys accompanied her, each carrying an instrument case. One obviously contained a violin, the other, by its size, a cello.

"Nellie!" he said rather loudly. "Nellie McLeod." The boys looked up at their mother, inquisitively. Clearly McLeod was no longer her surname.

She reached forward, as if to pat his arm. Awkwardly, they shook hands.

"You live here?" he asked.

"Yes. And you?"

Jack nodded. "I had no idea," he said. "So how did—?"

"How did a Caper girl escape?" She laughed, then, noticing his discomfort, lay her hand upon his arm.

"You know how the posh kids from the States would come slumming in the summer?"

He nodded.

"Hanging out in the café. The 'cafe'," she repeated parenthetically, this time rhyming it with chafe. "Well, Halifax kids started doing the same, and one day I met the most charming medical student."

"A medical student. So you're married to a doctor."

"You're surprised."

"Well ... yes, insofar as I hadn't known. And so these are your bairns."

"Yes, my bairns. Only in Halifax we call them children. People here seem to think a bairn is where you keep cattle."

They both laughed, looking at each other, then turning away. One of the boys reached up, speaking softly into Nellie's ear.

"Ah, yes," she said. "Duty calls." She hesitated, then held out her hand.

“Jack,” she said. “It’s been lovely. We’ll have to have you over one day. You and your ...”

Jack shook his head. “Just me.”

“Ah, yes. See you,” she added as the boys tugged at her. She waved, and the crowd engulfed them. Jack stood for a moment, then realized he did not know her married name. But she could call him. He’d be in the new telephone book, although when it would come out he did not know.

A man bumped into him as he stood in the centre of the narrow aisle. “Sorry,” Jack said, then turned and walked towards the exit.