

# DRAGGING THE RIVER



# I

I avoid a panhandling drunk as I approach a dirty white brick hotel on the northwest corner of Dundas E. and Jarvis. The name of the Warwick glows in pink and green neon within flashing electric bulbs over the sidewalk, and again on the back of the building inside a framework of twinkling lights above the words, "Rooms, Showers, TV, Free Parking." The letter *e* of 'hotel' is a small window.

By the side door it advertises: "No Cover, No Minimum Appearing Now, Strip Show, Girls, Nude Strip, Rooms \$7.00 Per Person," and in a flourish of purple and white, "Strippers Revue."

In the smoky downstairs lounge men sit along a bar behind which naked women are painted on mirrors above the bottles. I pass the stage and continue down the far aisle to an empty table where I order a beer and scan the prostitutes assembled by the wall near the exit. An overhead light emphasizes the absolute placidity of a blonde staring at her drink. In a fluctuating society one thing seems consistent: the migratory return every night of the same nondescript women to their particular chairs.

How do they make their money? Once in a while I see men talking to them, but most seem rooted, except for the occasional piss, for thousands of stagnant hours. Just stirring and sipping. Can one pierce their barren expressions and move them to ecstasy, or are their pussies leather, their clits calloused?

"How's your hammer hanging, honey?" a voice bellows. "Yeah, *you*, baby!" I look over to see Brandy with his microphone poised in the spotlight. There is a drum roll, cymbals, organ music. When some men yell back, he fluffs his blonde wig and bats heavy lashes. "Hey, you mothers—how the hell are you?" The laughter

and cheering doesn't impress him, however. He is a large, sequined portrait of scorn. His red lip curls dramatically. "Yeah, well, who the fuck *cares*?" A man gets up to say something with his glass in hand, gesturing to his crotch. "Jesus," Brandy snorts, "you couldn't get laid in a whorehouse." Snapping his fingers and tapping his foot, he launches into a rough and tumble "Hello, Dolly."

I drink my beer as I watch this middle-aged drag queen in his flowered dress and high heels, wondering how he feels to have reached what seems the pinnacle of his career before such an undistinguished audience. When he finishes his song he introduces the first dancer of the set. "Come on, you fuckers! The more you clap, the more Kitty'll take off for you!"

Always willing to support an underdog, I join the mild applause for this plain, thirty-something-year-old with teased hair. Is she actually bored stiff or merely defensive, perpetuating a cycle of unpopularity?

During the next break I decide to talk to that blonde near the back. Before I can sit down she asks me if I want to go out? "I don't know yet," I answer, pulling up a chair. "How much?"

"Fifty dollars."

"I only have twenty-five."

"Sorry."

I've never approached a whore before, and am more or less just making conversation with the natives. Perhaps a little levity is required. "I thought I might get a discount before the rush."

She smiles, barely. "It doesn't work that way."

The next day I go to my job at a publisher's warehouse in Don Mills on the northeast side of the city. There are modern factories, depots, offices, low-rise buildings with landscaped lawns. I'm lost in canyons of books as I push a wooden cart on the side of which my name is printed in magic marker on bright red tape. I have a pencil and some papers listing in computerized type the merchandise I'm required to select from the shelves and place in my wagon. I check them off as I move from aisle to aisle.

When my task is complete I transfer the books from my cart to a long table with my signed order, then take another form out

of the box and push my wagon to the first row on either side of the warehouse, depending on the percentage of hard covers or paperbacks specified on the list, and begin another journey.

A number of my coworkers are women of East Indian-Guyanese background who talk secretly among themselves. The supervisor of the hard cover section is a fastidious introvert in his early forties named Peter: a mathematics graduate and astronomy enthusiast surviving in quiet desperation between the books and stars. I listen to his gossip and the hushed resentments he has towards his hefty, overbearing cousin Walter, the warehouse manager.

There are other losers in their twenties like me in the paperback department, a black guy named Sam works the scales, and grizzled old Hank, a boozier from the Maritimes, runs shipping and receiving.

Since dropping out of university I haven't managed to get my foot in the door of anything in the way of a career, and have just been drifting. It's August, 1980. Originally I was thinking of this as an indirect route into the editorial department, but discovered that the main offices are in the UK, and opportunities here are limited.

In the late afternoon heat I join the rush hour crowd on the bus, and head home to the Hotel Isabella: a dark, neo-Victorian structure on Sherbourne just south of Bloor, with turrets and a relatively hip if seedy reputation due in part to the punk bar in the basement and the Cameo blues room upstairs. Across the street, east to Parliament, is a concentration of slummy high-rises known as St. Jamestown.

Picking up a newspaper and submarine sandwich, I go upstairs. People have written bad poetry on the walls, and scrawled such things as "Carol & Dean" in ball-point pen where I've taped up handbills for local bands and other items collected during my travels, such as "Max's Kansas City, NYC," and "Redlight Theatre Presents *Strange Games*." There's an early photo of John Lennon in Hamburg on the back of the pink closet door. My underwear and socks are visible in the top drawer of the bureau, since the board fell off and now stands propped against the radiator. There's no light switch in the bathroom; one has to unscrew the bulb by hand.

I read the paper on my bed and while away some time with an old atlas. Turning to China, I examine that vast pink terrain inscribed with cities, towns and rivers. Then I go to the next page, inspecting a purple Thailand, an orange Laos, a green North and South Vietnam, a yellow Cambodia, and daydream about such exotic locales before realizing that they're probably still gutted by war.

Cut across and scan Australia, Borneo and New Guinea. The distance between points is gauged in broken red lines which intersect with white longitude and latitude stripes. Why, there's Tahiti. The southern chunk of planet is sprinkled with thousands of islands, any one of which may have harboured shipwreck survivors, escaped convicts, buried treasure, cannibals, missionaries and leper colonies.

I search for a place to which I could escape among the infinite array of paradises, charted like so many stars in the universe. Pondering their names, nationalities and geographical qualifications, I check the symbols on the scale beneath to discover that many of these locations are occupied by "Administrative Centres," presumably a euphemism for military installations. I can picture rowing a boat to shore moments before my world disappears in a flash of nuclear light.

Starbuck Island is a British-American possession south of the equator about 6 degrees latitude, 156 degrees longitude west of Greenwich, if I'm not mistaken. I look up a map of the world to see if it merits classification. Spotting it among the constellation of Line Islands, I wonder if my minute particle of jungle remains untouched with white sands, balmy breezes, angelfish about the coral. Maybe it's a radar station, an ugly heap of rocks marred by graffiti and sea gull shit.

My tattoos may also suggest the exoticism of the south seas and beyond: a palm tree, blue and purple Saturn, a bottle of whiskey, pink and black dice, crescent moon, multicoloured serpent, a woman's head in profile with golden, cascading hair.

"I Want To Hold Your Hand" comes on the radio, and I turn up the volume. The Beatles were once my greatest heroes and their songs embody my culture, my fucking roots. Lennon said he

always needed a drug to survive, which suggests that an artist's awareness is both his gift and affliction, in that it might grant him access to difficult ports but also renders him vulnerable to the necessary means of escape.

Lying on my back, I look at the web that crosses my room a foot beneath the ceiling, linking sprinkler pipes along opposite walls. It's a curiosity I wouldn't any more destroy than a delicate artifact. There is no spider. The longevity of this singular thread is remarkable considering that two housekeepers who visit me on Fridays also leave it intact. They scrub my bathroom, vacuum, take out the garbage, change sheets and towels, yet the line continues to run silvery by the glow of the light bulb.

## 2

I go back to the Warwick's lounge with Sean Cochrane. Despite the disquieting nature of his intense blue eyes and the greasiness of a snake coiling around a knife below his rolled-up sleeve, he is soft-spoken and has the self-possession to sublimate his occasional moodiness. His brother, on the other hand, is serving time in Kingston Penitentiary for beating someone to death.

We're sitting a few tables back from centre stage, watching the first of a stripper's three dances. Nothing has come off yet. The plan is to pick up a couple of prostitutes, a route he's apparently taken before.

"I was walking through Kensington Market today," he says, turning to me, "and I saw two cats fucking in an alley. I always thought they were more private about that kind of thing."

"I once saw two cats fucking in the middle of a party."

"Well, these two were on their sides, and it looked strange."

He raises a cigarette between two nicotined fingers and tosses his thin blond hair. Exhaling, he gives me a faint smile. "Twenty minutes later, I walked by again and saw the girl cat still lying there. I went over to look, and all these flies were buzzing around her."

"What, she was dead?"

"Yeah, the whole time."

I'd met him years earlier through a mutual friend, but I guess we've become better acquainted in recent times through speed. He's taken one or two junk cures and since drifted back to his first love, crystal meth, which I far prefer to heroin myself. I don't have any sympathy for junkies who deliberately had to work their way through countless boring and often nauseating highs to develop a habit. As far as I'm concerned, scag is more an image to

be cultivated than a pleasure in itself. On one hand it's been suggested that junk is only really enjoyable after you become addicted, then every hit is a ray of sunshine. On the other, that the good times end once you've acquired that monkey, at which point it simply becomes painkiller. I only indulge when there's nothing better to do.

"A friend of mine broke up with his girlfriend yesterday," he says. "This lesbian punk with purple hair who was into S&M. She worked in a brickyard in the Don Valley."

I take a sip of beer, waiting for the rest of it.

"She said he was her first man. She just wanted to see what a guy would be like. She used to get him to smack her around with a billy club while she was tied to the bed, and was already bruised all over when he met her. Lester would have to beat the piss out of her just to get her in the mood, which began to make him nervous. You know, he was afraid he was accidentally going to kill her and get arrested as some freak."

Cochrane laughs as he reaches for his bottle. "How could he explain a naked woman tied to his bed that he beat to death with a fucking club?"

During the next break a bearded black guy about thirty-eight overhears us discussing the whores from the next table. He leans over and says, "You want a girl, eh? M'have a nice white chick. Me used to pay but now it's free. Even if she workin', she stop an' come with me." His teeth flash in a broad grin. "Me can grind an' grind for an hour if me want." He takes a small tube from his pocket and hands it to me. "The white mon needs help, so I len' you dis."

"What is it, saltpeter?"

"Yeah, mon, desensitizin' cream. It make me las' over two hours." He nods at a woman sitting a few tables away. "See that chick over there? Me screw an' screw her til she pass out. It nine inches long."

Cochrane is amused, and suggests that he prove it.

"Sure mon, in the washroom later. She tell me to stop, she say to me, 'I can't take it, I'll give you your money back. You must be West Indian.' Dem charge so much, me must get m'money's

worth. But me say, 'Forget it.' After twenty-five, dem wrung out, dem can't las'."

The guy pauses and looks around. He's wearing a colourful shirt and a couple of medallions. "One time me come upon a black chick in dis place and she say, 'You a cop?' 'No,' I tell her. 'How much?' So she say, 'Fifty dollars.' Me warn her, 'Make it twenty, dahlin', or you get busted.' She say, 'Okay.'"

He puts the tube back in his pocket. "I'll ask dat hooker how much she charge tonight."

Before we can answer, he gets up and goes over to the brunette whom he fucked unconscious. As soon as he sits down, however, she tells him something and he stands up again. When he comes back, he looks nonplused. "Before I can open m'mouth, she say she not interested."

A little later we drink up and say good-bye. I walk down the dimly lit right aisle towards the back, where the same slim blonde I talked to couple of nights earlier is sitting in the corner. She looks at me without expression and asks, "Do you want to go out?"

I take the chair opposite her. "Yeah. A friend and myself thought we'd get a room together with you and your girlfriend over there, if that's okay with you."

She looks across the tables to Cochrane and the other blonde. "Um, yeah, I guess so, if it's okay with her."

They come over, and we discuss the plan. It seems the prostitutes working this bar use a different hotel a few blocks north, so they ask us to decide on a name under which to register. This way they can call for the room number after we check in, then catch a cab to meet us.

We take his white '67 Mustang up Jarvis. It's usually a fairly congested street with alternating lanes at peak hours, but is now comparatively quiet. There are very few stores, just buildings and the odd hotel or rooming house. We pass some dolled-up action at Gerrard where hookers are strutting and posing at each corner of the intersection. Outside Harvey's hamburger joint three of them hustle southbound traffic.

Sean turns east onto Carlton and drives to Larry's Hideaway, a run-down Cabbagetown dive not far from the fabled greenhouse

and petty crime of Allan's Gardens. There are some bushes, trash and overgrown weeds by the fire escape. Old handbills and posters are plastered across the wall and nearby light standards for punk and new wave bands like The Fleshtones and Teenage Head, who play in the hotel bar.

Sean and I pay for a double at the front desk, then go down the first floor hallway, passing people wandering in and out of parties. We have a small room with smudged white walls, two beds, and a lavatory with an open door connecting us to the vacant next suite. A few minutes later, the women call to let us know that they're on their way.

When they arrive, mine tries to establish order by suggesting that we get the money out of the way. Standing there in the hard light in her minidress and heels, I see she's at least ten years older than me, a weather-beaten thirty-five or so with bleached hair and powdered pockmarks. Not bad looking, but under different circumstances I wouldn't have glanced at her twice, let alone paid her. Cochrane's whore is a little nicer. Bigger boned, but less worn. Maybe I didn't fully appreciate the equalizing power of money, that I could have aspired to someone prettier and not merely sympathetic. Ironically, after we all undress, I realize that any bond I felt was misplaced when she walks over to the sink and announces, edgy and authoritative, that it's wash-up time. Then with a marked lack of interest she soaps and dries off my flaccid prick. Cochrane seems no more aroused by the indifference of his girl.

Afterwards, on the beds, they suck us erect and roll onto their backs, drawing us on top. Mine discourages any reciprocal caressing, but I don't want to lose my mood by arguing about it, so I do what's required. The other one dampens my friend's ardour by suggesting that he just be quiet and enjoy himself. Perhaps it's against union rules to let tricks become overly familiar, since it may not be sanitary or profitable to be spoken to, kissed or aroused oneself. They keep their heads turned, avoiding superfluous contact. When we more or less ejaculate at the same time, the other prostitute declares it a photo finish, and informs us that one guy will usually come first and then watch the other one.

Pulling on my pants, I comment that I've never spent a faster fifty bucks. My hooker retorts that you get what you pay for, but I probably could have got myself off for free with more spirit.