

one

From Port Alberni, there are two roads. To the right, a paved road leads to the hippie driftwood shacks of Tofino. To the left, a dirt road disappears into dense forest. This is the road to Bamfield—sixty miles strewn with beer cans, mufflers, hubcaps, and odd bits of clothing. Deep potholes, washouts, exhaust-snorting oversized logging trucks, and countless unsigned side roads put those who dare journey to this fishing village in danger. But they come, those that seek end-of-the-road places.

Having survived the Bamfield road, newcomers find themselves on the Jonsson Machine Shop dock, facing Bamfield Inlet. Here, they can buy candy and gas and fishing gear, and get their tires fixed. Katrin, the village matriarch and postmistress, works behind the counter and she may jaw with them a bit.

Nearby are the village café, the community hall, the volunteer fire department, and the Bamfield Marine Station. But a boardwalk—lined with tidy clapboard houses, the post office and general store, the lifesaving station, and Packers, the residence of transient young people—suggesting an earlier time, draws their attention across the narrow inlet to west Bamfield, on Mills Peninsula.

The August morning sun had warmed the gray boardwalk for over two hours before the first young Bamfielders left their houses and wandered—scratching and stretching and assessing the prospects of the new day—to their favourite hangout in front of the Bamfield General Store. Here, they waited for opportunities to run errands for the storekeeper in exchange for beer and cigarettes or helping summer residents haul luggage up from the government float for highly valued cash. Mostly, these hippies, locally referred to as transient young people, are accepted by the old-timers, many who are vets or war brides, all who are conservative.

“Hey, Spike. You seen Gaz?”

Spike drank deeply then passed his near-empty beer to his buddy.

“Nope. That cop was here. Maybe he’s lying low.”

Mr. Meadows, tidy as a tick, unlatched the door to the Bamfield General Store and dumped his morning compost on the rocky shore. The half-rotten produce spattered on the beach and Bamfield’s famous shit-hawks came soaring and squawking out of God-only-knows-where. Thomas, a battle-torn cat, watched as the gray-and-white gulls threatened each other and gulped their morning meal. An immature bird, not yet graced with the white mantle of adulthood, buried its head inside a pink grapefruit rind. Thomas laid his tattered ears back and pounced, clenching his teeth deep into the bird’s neck, next to the base of the skull. He gave a sharp shake. A shortened *squawk* and a death flutter of wings alerted the other birds, who glided a short distance to safety and forgetfulness.

The spectators gave a cheer as Thomas exited with his morning meal. A tossed beer can, the remains of a shared breakfast, rattled down the beach. Mr. Meadows slapped his slopbucket against the boardwalk handrail, dislodging a peach peel, tugged his bowtie, and returned to his shop.

The morning carnage now completed, attentions shifted to a male, one William Charles, locally known as Gaz, as he made his way down the boardwalk to the government dock. He appeared

strong and thoughtful. He was known as the person to go to if you had a problem: personal, philosophic, or of the real physical world. His stooped posture, the result of premature arthritis he claimed he inherited from his mother, gave one the feeling he wouldn't be around for long.

"Hey, Gaz! Need some help on the plantation?"

The object of this question, a slight but solid male, whose twenty-four-year-old body suggested an older age, set down his five-gallon bucket filled with galvanized chain and shackles, rotated his shoulders to ease their strain, and looked up at his friends as they leaned over the store's handrail.

"I'll be working on a dive shed over there."

He gestured across the inlet at the cluster of labs and residences surrounding the fortress-like old Cable Station building that made up the Bamfield Marine Station. This dive shed job was to raise cash, honest money, for his first love—a cedar palace, his dream of an Ed Ricketts Lodge. The idea of using drug money on his new home, his original creation, repulsed Gaz.

The men above nodded in approval. 'Over there' implied a desired world, but one they were unwilling to work for: lectures by inspired teachers in soft-lighted halls with starry-eyed co-eds and the wonders of marine biology: colourful sea slugs, spiny urchins and gliding starfish, tiny sculpins and gigantic whales, critters of sand and mud and rock.

Gaz lifted his bucket and walked to the ramp leading down to the government float. He hesitated at the top—the tide was low and the ramp was steep. He glanced at the tide-exposed rocks below where he spied a blood-star. The starfish waved the tips of its arms in the air as if praying for the return of its aquatic blanket. Gaz advanced one foot to the steel grating. He always felt uneasy when stepping from the solid boardwalk to the tethered ramp.

Carefully, he stepped onto the bird-shit slimy float, his cowboy boots threatening to rocket out from under him.

With a white blur and a gull's *screech*, the blood-star was yanked from its watery home.

Of course, his fourteen-foot aluminum boat needed bailing—the rivets fastening the hull's metal sheets wept. He knelt on the boat's stern seat and dipped a coffee tin into the bottom of the boat. Tin after tin, he dumped the bilge water into the inlet. As his boat lightened, the surrounding sea took on an oily sheen.

A shadow fell across the boat. He looked up into the face of a red-headed, green-eyed young woman. She wore brand-new yellow Helly Hansen foul-weather gear and shiny black gumboots. Her hands rested on her hips, thrusting her elbows out like the wings of an eagle defending its nest. She glared at Gaz from under perfect bangs.

"You're polluting the sea."

He knew what he was doing was wrong but somehow failed to relate it to the world's great oil spills. He shrugged and nodded at the mess in the bottom of his boat, as if to ask 'What would you do?'

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. I'm looking for a lift to the Marine Station."

He tipped his cowboy hat.

"Folks call me Gaz. Pleased to be at your service."

"Thank you," she said.

"Hop in."

He swept the mid-seat clear, gestured for her to sit, and yarded on the starter rope. The Mercury outboard motor coughed and he slammed the choke in and pulled a second time. The engine roared, belching blue-gray exhaust. He turned back to see her hand extended, waiting for assistance. He wiped his hand on his faded plaid jacket and reached up to help her in. He knew the boardwalk crowd was taking this all in, waiting for a gaffe. All of a sudden he felt hot and clumsy, and the need to get away.

"May I have a lifejacket?"

He reached into the bottom of the boat and extracted his only lifevest.

“Really, it’s only a hundred yards across. I’ll take special care, ma’am.”

“It’s Heidi, Gaz. My name is Heidi. Now please hand me the vest. It’s station policy.”

He cringed as she pulled on the dirty jacket and zipped it up. Once she was settled, he put the engine in gear. The boat lurched forward, then sideways against the float, threatening to dump them into the sea. He had failed to untie her.

Heidi landed among the greasy tools in the bottom of the boat. She struggled to pull herself up but everything was slippery. Finally, seated again, she wiped her hand across her brow and laughed.

“*Whoopee!* What a way to start the day.”

Struggling to untie the tightened knot, Gaz turned his face away from her. Above, the seagull with a half-swallowed blood-star dangling from its mouth shrieked in unison with the hoots from the boardwalk loiterers. A slash with a rusty fish knife cut the rope and the boat drifted free.

“Sorry about that.”

“No problem, Gaz. And I do appreciate the lift.”

Once tied up at the station float, she removed the vest, exposing greasy smudges on her foul-weather jacket that matched her already oiled pants.

“Shit, I guess I’m in Bamfield now. No longer the city virgin.”

Gaz, raised a Dutch Reform Protestant, had always been shy around girls. He wanted her to stay and talk but instead he tightened up.

“I have to go to work now, sorry about the grease.” Then as an afterthought, “Maybe I could make it up to you, a tour of the islands, Miss...?”

“I don’t go by ‘Miss,’ Mr. Gaz of Bamfield. Just call me Heidi, Heidi as in yodel.”

She brushed back her bangs, smearing more grease on her forehead.

“I’ll be very busy. Our six-week program is total immersion. I’m studying mollusks.” She hesitated, laughed. “Total immersion, that’s right out of the station brochure. Guess it sounds silly, but yes, a tour would be nice. I’ll be on the station float after supper.”

Gaz had his work cut out for him. He had to pour cement for a platform to support his dive-float ramp. The tide allowed only three hours for this task. And his boat needed scrubbing, as did he. His mind sorted through the pile of clothes in his room back at Packers. He had no idea what to wear. At least he knew about mollusks.

His robin-egg blue cowboy shirt with pearl snaps hung in the steam over the tub. Gaz soaked and plied grit from beneath his fingernails as *Dark Side of the Moon* echoed through the rundown building. Occasionally he sipped from the bottle of Molson Canadian that rested coolly on his hairless chest. He filled his mind with visions of abalone, oyster, and mussel anatomy—anything not to dwell on her green eyes and red hair and grease smudges and her even white teeth. But there were no freckles.

There should be freckles, he thought.

Spike barged into the bathroom.

“Word’s out. Gaz’s in love.”

He glared at his friend, co-philosopher, and all too often co-dope tripper. He nodded at the case of beer on the floor. Spike declined as he pulled up an overturned bucket, squatted, and sought the joint resting behind his ear.

Gaz shuddered as he spied Boris perched on Spike’s shoulder. No matter how many times he encountered the tarantula, it always startled him. He recalled Mr. Meadows telling him how Spike had found Boris in a crate of bananas.

Spike looked at Gaz and shook his head. He reached up and caressed his spider.

“You should be more afraid of that redhead than Boris. Love’s a dangerous state. Not one to be entered lightly.”

He took a deep drag and passed the joint.

“Finish your cedar palace before you go wooing. That’s the way it should be.”

Gaz thought Spike old and wise for his twenty years. He was a good worker—summer resident widows, their husbands busy making money in the big city, frequently singled him out for odd jobs. Of course, they were influenced by his swimmer’s physique, bleached curly hair, and pale blue eyes. The work mostly got done but productive stints were often interrupted by periods of marijuana-induced stupor or a beer binge.

“That cop was around yesterday. He’s always asking about you. Where are you, what are you doing—shit like that.”

“Spike, that’s Lafarge’s job. Forget it.”

Silence followed as deep inhales were taken and held.

“Gaz, consider goldfish in a bowl.”

He shared Spike’s dislike of confining any creature. But this reference to goldfish seemed hazy—did he mean love was a trap or was Spike just ranting? Most of his friend’s ideas about love were weird. This son of a French immigrant mother struggled, like Gaz, with passed-down Old World values. He was more comfortable with cold-blooded critters than with women.

As the water drained from the tub, Gaz stood and rinsed off under the overhead shower. He was a good-looking man but for his stooped posture: mostly hairless with no flab; well-defined buttocks, calves, and forearms; an attractive foreskinned penis; and long sensual fingers and toes—a hunched-over Michelangelo’s David. Bruises, scrapes, and numerous little scars decorated his body, showing a young life spent battling nature: bushwhacking rainforest undergrowth, hauling barnacle-covered rocks, splitting timbers.

As he stepped from the tub, he caught Spike staring at him.

“What are you looking at, you silly bugger? Hand me that towel.”

He dried with the grayish towel, raked his fingers through his

brown hair, and pulled on his ratty blue terrycloth bathrobe and cowboy hat. He was clean for his date.

“Big S, let’s go to the deck.”

He scooped up the remainder of the case of Molson and headed through the front room to the second-storey veranda. Spike, with Boris clinging to his collar, followed Gaz’s wet footprints across the linoleum and out the French doors. They settled on a car seat, barely one-foot high, and spied the Marine Station across the inlet.

On this rare evening, free of the rain and fog that usually bathed Bamfield, the warm summer air carried the scent of the sea. Bats, migratory residents of the Packers’ attic, blindly and silently sought flying insects among the overhanging cedar boughs. Frogs, inhabiting a nearby ditch, croaked.

Laughter drifted across the water from the station as the students wandered off after dinner. Spike stood and leaned against the handrail.

“Nobody believed Carl Hubbs’ deepwater fishes,” he said. “Some thought he was seeing things, sort of hallucinating...maybe the great depth.” Absentmindedly, he stroked Boris. “Those suckers have mouths bigger than their bodies and strange tentacles, dangling beacons of blue light—a pure blue spot in a black universe.”

Gaz took the offered roach, inhaled, and blew a little cloud over Boris. He enjoyed these discussions with Spike.

“And they’re small. Those monsters are only a few inches long.”

Spike became glum.

“It would be nice to drift in a weightless, lightless world, just waiting for your next meal. No hassles.”

“Don’t you mean no sex like your goldfish in a bowl? And what if you were the next meal? Game over.”

Spike plopped down on the car seat.

“Isn’t sex just another way of being devoured? Gaz, I was never happier than when I was studying fishes. Maybe someday I’ll return. The professor said he could help me get back into university.”

Gaz cracked open another beer for his friend.

“Be careful, Spike. When the professor gets loaded, he’s like a candle in the wind. One moment he’s bright, the next he flickers and his light turns to smoke. Besides, you can’t go back. Only forward. Now tell me about this book you’re writing.”

Spike resettled on the car seat, sucked on his beer, and tucked the stoned Boris away for the night in his shirt pocket.

“Not now.”

Gaz pulled his robe tight, leaned back, letting his hat slip over his eyes.

“I’ve decided to add a great stained-glass window to my cedar palace, depicting some marine scene. Perhaps a kelp forest. It’d be placed to capture the late afternoon light. As the sun moved westward, we’d see the marine world awaken and then slowly dim into darkness.”

“And how are you going to pay for this, my friend?”

“Dutch thriftiness, Spike. That’s the key.”

“Don’t you mean your marijuana plantations? That’s dirty money and deadly territory, man. And your so-called buddy, Blay, he’ll screw you, believe me.”

Gaz didn’t feel good about dealing grass. The stuff eased his arthritic pain but it was expensive. At first, he and his Native chum, Ben, had started a small forest plantation. Then Blay arrived, nagging Gaz to let him help on the secret dope plots. The operation got bigger. Now there was money and responsibility and guilt. But so far he had resisted using dope money on his cedar palace.

“Shut up, Spike. Let’s walk through my palace and check out the details.”

The stars grew more intense with the deepening darkness and the lights ‘over there’ went out. Gaz couldn’t remember if he had seen a shadowy figure on the float opposite. He did recall the moon shadows and his deflating moodiness and his drug-leadened limbs and how he had wanted to be with her but could not.

Downstairs in the vacated chandlery, widow Highsmith waited for the salmon trollers to return from fishing offshore. Fishing hadn't been good that summer. This forced the fleet further out to sea where there was no shelter should a storm arise. But these lost souls would fish, as they always did, and then return with few salmon in their holds. They would bitch to each other, make lewd comments to the widow, buy their stores, and set sail again.

Highsmith wanted to scream at the boy upstairs. He was stupid messing around with drugs. He should listen to his conscience—he knew better. Not that her generation hadn't got caught up in rum-running. But somehow that seemed different, more innocent. These young people, she thought, were missing life. We worked hard and played hard and died young. We weren't afraid to follow our hearts. He should have gone to that redhead. But she couldn't scream at him. It wasn't easy being dead.

The next morning, Gaz felt worse for wear, but not more than on most mornings. He followed the usual drill: a bacon-fat sandwich, instant coffee with condensed milk in hot tap water, a token tooth-brushing—he had good teeth but they were stained from cigarette smoke—and a nod to the riff-raff on the boardwalk.

“Hey, Gaz. Get any?”

Gaz, feigning ignorance, looked in his bucket and shrugged.

He bailed the now-clean boat, wishing she would come along and ask for a ride. As he motored across the inlet, he allowed himself to give way to fantasy—they would lazily cross the harbour, she exposing her arms and face to the morning sun as he described his plans for the day's construction. Her baggy clothes no longer held mysteries from him and he cherished her every curve and mole. The promise of their future together seemed scary, but they knew they could carve out a good life: she would farm mussels and

he would design and build rough timber houses. In time, there would be babies.

For the next few weeks, he threw himself into the dive-float project. He followed the plan burned deep in his brain, rarely referring to sketches on various envelopes, napkins, and newspaper margins. He moved slowly, methodically. A pencil behind one ear, a cigarette behind the other, his carpenter's belt laden with nails, hammer, and measuring tape, he squatted, tipped his hat back, and sighted along some timber, seeking perfection. Within his private universe, the dive float and connecting ramp grew from chainsawed planks he had cut on the beach from drift logs and bits of connecting iron put together at the Jonsson Machine Shop. Soon, the station would have a base for its scuba operations.

At night, he tended smashed fingernails, gashes, scratches, and the occasional puncture wound. And just before turning in, he would soak in the old tub, puff on a fat joint, his hat low on his forehead, and be swept away with tunes by Arlo Guthrie, particularly "Running Down the Road". And, as his aches eased and the smells of creosote and beach mud lifted from his body, he thought of her.

Occasionally, he saw the redheaded girl. She would smile and wave as though nothing had happened. As though she had never been stood up. As though he was just anybody, nobody. Like the local albino seal that he often caught staring at him—listless, blasé, unseeing.