

A feckless youth aged 21, I landed in Canada on 8 September 1974, intending to stay for no more than a year. I thought that by coming here I could postpone having to face the problem of what to do with myself for the rest of my life. Having arrived, I quickly came to believe I'd made a terrible mistake. Fifty-odd years later, I'm still here. So, what happened?

Coming to Canada: 1974-75

As 1974 dawned, I realised that my undergraduate education would soon be coming to an end. I'd soon have to start thinking about what I planned to do with the rest of my life. In February of that year I spotted a flyer on the noticeboard in the English Department at Royal Holloway College advertising a MA degree in English at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Tutorial Assistantships (TAs) were available to cover expenses. The Scottish name of the university sounded familiar, though I probably confused it with McGill, the only Canadian university that most people in the UK had heard of. As for Hamilton, I had to look that up in an atlas, and found that it was a medium-sized city on Lake Ontario, not far from Toronto. Though I'd no desire to enter graduate school, I mailed off a request for an application. I'd always wanted to explore North America and Hamilton seemed a good location from which to do so. McMaster sent me an application form by return, which stated I'd need an upper second-class degree to qualify as a TA. I filled it out and sent it back. I heard nothing further from McMaster and by the late summer I'd forgotten all about the application.

The BA degree at Royal Holloway (a constituent college of the University of London) was awarded on the basis of ten final exams of three hours each, written over five days. Nothing else that I'd done over the previous three years counted. In my last term I abstained from plays and other extra-curricular activities and buckled down to prepare for finals. At the same time I started to apply for any job that seemed appealing. From the many instant rejections I quickly realised that a BA (Hons.) in English Language and Literature was no passport to prosperity. As I'd had almost a year's experience working as a hospital porter, I applied for a job in hospital administration, though I couldn't work up much enthusiasm for the prospect and almost certainly turned up for interview inappropriately dressed. I was rejected. Then I was interviewed for and accepted a position with GO, short for Graduate Opportunities, who published a periodical full of job advertisements intended for university graduates. But this position involved selling advertising space to potential employers; it was in *sales*, and I didn't want to think of myself as a *salesman*. So when GO contacted me rather crossly to find out why I hadn't turned up for work, I pretended I'd never received their acceptance letter and was exploring other options. I'd applied to a number of publishers, but only one was interested enough to write back: Newman Books of Poland Street in Soho. Pornographers, no doubt.

We sat finals in the Royal Holloway Picture Gallery, where Edwin Landseer's canvas *Man Proposes, God Disposes* had pride of place. It's an Arctic fantasy showing a pair of polar bears

rampaging over the remains of the lost Franklin Expedition. By long tradition this painting was veiled during finals lest it bring bad luck to the examinees. I wasn't confident that I'd even pass finals, as my exam track record was poor and I knew that I had not given myself enough time to revise the whole of English literature from *Beowulf* to Coventry Patmore. But in the event I gained an upper second-class degree from the University of London, which didn't sound too bad. And then as nothing better had materialized, I went to the interview in Soho and discovered that Newman Books published only one, entirely unpornographic book: an annual directory of the UK food trades. Old Mr. Newman, the head of the firm, explained that my job involved updating, with a 2B pencil and a ruler, the entries in his directory. Did I know standard proofreader's symbols? (I didn't, but said I did.) Was I aware that I would be expected to wear a suit to work? (I supposed that could be arranged.) Well, this was at least editing, not *sales*, and Newman Books' location was colourful: two minutes from Berwick Street market in the heart of Soho. I moved into a house on Hendon Lane, N3, shared with some other students (our landlord was a Turk), bought a season ticket on the Underground from Finchley Central to Tottenham Court Road, and began life as a commuting subeditor at Newman Books at a salary of £1,400 per annum.

By the last week in August, I'd earned a week's vacation. With my girlfriend Amanda I rented a car and drove to Wales, where it rained a lot. We stayed in B & Bs and got on quite well. Amanda had been suffering from a serious infatuation with a man whom everyone except for Amanda immediately identified as gay. By the end of our Wales trip she seemed to be getting over him. Back in N3, for the first time in my life a telegram arrived for me: ring my mother at once! Our house didn't yet have a phone, as in those days it took months for a new one to be connected, so a telegram was the only way my mother could contact me in a hurry. Fearing some family disaster, I ran to the nearest phone box. My mother read out a letter to me dated 21 August that had been forwarded by Royal Holloway to my parents' address. I had been awarded a place in the MA in English program at McMaster and a one-year Tutorial Assistantship worth \$3,950. (This now seems a derisory sum but it was more than what I was earning at Newman Books.) The Chair of the McMaster English Department apologized for the long delay: my application had been placed in the "deferred category." The letter went on to inform me that if I wished to take up this award, I should procure a Canadian student visa valid for one year and present myself in Hamilton by 8 September at the latest, the date the fall term officially began. That was in just over a week's time.

Given that I had a permanent job, pleasant accommodation in London, and a relationship with Amanda that was developing in a mutually agreeable way, it may seem odd that I immediately determined to seize this offshore opportunity with its ridiculously tight deadline. But I wasn't thinking rationally; I was acting on gut instinct. All I knew was, I needed to get a Canadian student visa ASAP. A couple of years earlier, as a British citizen I could have strolled into Canada while immigration officers tugged their forelocks, and taken any course or job I pleased. But the rise of Canadian nationalism meant that I had to get a student visa like all the other riffraff from

the British Commonwealth and Overseas Territories. Next day I went to the Canadian High Commission at Macdonald House in Grosvenor Square, showed them the letter from McMaster, and requested a student visa. I was told politely that the process would take at least six weeks and I would be required to pass a medical examination.

Thinking on my feet, I asked if it was possible to get a student visa *immediately* that was valid for *less* than a full year and *didn't* require a medical.

Yes, it was ... possible.

How about one valid for, say, 364 days?

Er, yes, technically one could be issued for that length of time ...

... In that case, that's what I want. And I'll pay you in cash.

My passport was stamped with a Canadian student visa valid until 31 August 1975.

That was only 357 days, but I didn't make an issue of it.

Armed with my visa, I went into Newman Books next day and said I'd be leaving at the end of the week. Old Mr. Newman told me gruffly that according to our contract he required at least one month's notice. I told him that I was unexpectedly going to Canada and if he let me leave immediately, that is, right then and there, I'd forgo my August paycheck. He shrugged in a way that confirmed to me that I had the whip hand in the situation. I'd spent much of my time at Newman Books trying to stave off boredom by surreptitiously learning to touch type with the help of a Teach Yourself Guide. My sudden departure would mean that I'd never learn that essential skill. In those days only girls were taught touch typing in school, as they would need it when serving as secretaries. Who could have predicted back then how the personal computer would transform the workplace and its gender roles? Or that food trades directories would one day appear only in digital form, where they'd be perpetually and painlessly updated without the need of 2B pencils, rulers, and proofreading symbols?

My next task was to get a one-way flight to Toronto, whatever the cost. I called Air Canada from the nearest phone box and was told that there were no seats available for at least a week. I breathlessly explained that I needed to be in Hamilton by 8 September. The agent promised to let me know if there was a cancellation. How could she contact me? Well, she couldn't, but if I could be sure of speaking specifically to her, I'd phone this number at exactly this time each day. Next day I called her at the appointed time and she told me there was now one seat available from Heathrow to Toronto on 8 September itself. Fate, or whatever you want to call it, was apparently on my side. I overdrew my bank account to buy the plane ticket, gave a week's notice to my landlord, paid what I owed him in advance, and told my parents I was going to Canada. My mother, for reasons I didn't work out till much later, seemed delighted. By the time I'd said farewell to friends and housemates and told Amanda that she'd have to come over to see me at Christmas, it was already 8 September.

When I got to Heathrow I found that my flight had been delayed by at least five hours due to engine trouble. Using my new super-powers I persuaded the Air Canada desk to transfer me to a British Airways flight that left only five minutes after the original departure time. It was on an ancient Boeing 707 with appalling British catering and not even a film to while away the eight hours. However, I had a window seat for this, my first Transatlantic flight, and I was excited to watch us cross the coast of Newfoundland and then follow the St. Lawrence River all the way to where it emerged from Lake Ontario. We landed at Toronto International Airport, as it was then, and deplaned into a cramped circular terminal building, where I flashed my passport and student visa. I was in Canada, and thanks to the time difference it was only three hours after I'd left Heathrow.

How did you get to Hamilton from Toronto Airport? By public transport (no, *transit*), you had to get a bus into central (no, *downtown*) Toronto and then another one out again. That didn't seem very practical. On the other hand, you could get a taxi direct (very expensive) or share a limo (more reasonable) with half a dozen other passengers, some of whom would be dropped off en route. I shared a limo. When we got on to the motorway (no, *highway*) I noticed that the signage was green, not blue, and exit signs just gave the name of a road, not the place the road went to. Many of these roads were called Lines. I knew we were running along the shore of Lake Ontario, but only once did I catch a glimpse of it on the left. Much of the landscape consisted of lowrise buildings and weedy plots, with the occasional motel at major junctions where the limo would stop to let out a passenger. After an hour or so of this, I saw a city skyline and what seemed a line of hills behind it. It was a hot day and the air was getting murkier. A blue sign indicated we were entering Hamilton (pop. 303,000). The highway swerved and we sped past a small, beautiful lake bordered by forest on the right, while a gothic tower loomed on our left. Soon we were heading down a broad, straight, one-way street with five lanes of traffic; this seemed very North American. Five minutes later we pulled up in front of a large downtown hotel, the Royal Connaught. The only remaining passenger, I stepped out of the limo into a steam bath.

Now, how to get to McMaster University? The limo driver told me there was a bus across the street, but with my bags I'd best take a taxi, it's not far. Ten minutes later, I was there. Mac looked like an American university campus in the movies. There were a couple of stone buildings resembling Oxford colleges, students were playing Frisbee on the lawns or just lying around on the grass. Two girls were throwing a baseball to one another, each wearing a big leather glove on her left hand. I'd never seen girls who could throw so hard; the ball made an audible thwack each time it hit a glove. I found the desk where new postgraduate (no, just *grad*) students were welcomed. I could stay in an emergency dorm on campus for a maximum of two nights, after that I'd have to find my own accommodation. Only a couple of weeks earlier I'd have been thrown into a helpless panic by this news, but not any more. I had got myself this far on my own initiative, seemingly by sheer force of will. So, where do I find accommodation listings? Well, you're kinda late as term begins tomorrow, but check out that

notice board or, better still, the want ads in the *Spec*. (That is, the *Hamilton Spectator*, the indispensable local newspaper.)

After talking with other recently arrived grad students in the emergency dorm, I expected to pay about \$125 per month plus utilities for a bedsit (no, *studio apartment*) near campus. I had no idea how much I'd be earning, but figured \$125 would take a sizable chunk out of it. So when next day I saw an ad in the *Spec* for a room at \$80 per month I thought I'd better check it out, though I was warned by those *au fait* with Hamilton that the address was in the notorious East End, far from campus. I had already mastered pay phones by making several abortive calls to landlords (*too late, Buddy, it's taken*) and now took my first bus ride on the quaintly misnamed Hamilton Street Railway. It turned out to be a sublet, one room in a house rented by Ben and Jerry, an "out" gay couple who cohabited with two magnificent Afghan hounds, a pair of Persian cats, and a cockatoo. The house was a detached three-storey in red brick, with a gable front and steps up to a porch under a triangular pediment supported by white tapered columns. It was a typical Lower City dwelling that a steelworker and his wife might once have raised their family in, but now, slightly run down, was rented out by the nonresident owner. I recognised a deal when I saw one. I'd have my own bedroom, the run of the rest of the house, meals were included, and I could use the laundry facilities, TV, and stereo. Sanford Avenue South looked salubrious enough and there was a bus along Delaware Avenue half a block away that took about thirty minutes to get to campus.

I found out about my income shortly thereafter. I'd be paid \$276 per month, my tuition fees having been already deducted. My student visa did not allow me to take any form of gainful employment other than the TA. Still, after paying \$80 rent, I'd have almost \$200 per month to live on. Or so I thought. But then McMaster suddenly and without an explanation changed its tune. Even though we foreign visa students would be earning well below the income tax threshold, the University would deduct income tax monthly from our paycheck ... and then rebate it to us as a lump sum in April! Thus I'd have only about \$120 per month to live on until the April windfall. This arrangement made little sense, but we visa students were in no position to argue with the powers that be. And back then a resourceful single person, such as I was quickly becoming, could just about survive on \$4 per day.

In my letter to my parents in October I wrote: "the grant McMaster pay to their teaching assistants is the most generous on the N. American continent ... which is presumably because the huge steel companies located in Hamilton try to remedy their desecration of the environment and atmosphere by pumping huge amounts of money into the university and the city." Indeed, the McMaster campus made Royal Holloway seem positively squalid by comparison. Mac's buildings were solidly built and many were connected by passages so you didn't have to go outside in winter. Student facilities were excellent. There was a good library. There was a theatre well fitted out for dramatic productions. There was a gym with squash courts. The signature building, McMaster Medical Centre, a teaching hospital, was as enormous

as the Royal Holloway Founder's Building on the A30, though in a very different architectural style. It was a 1960s Brutalist edifice, grey concrete and exposed metal ductwork on the exterior, psychedelic decor inside. And while the air in Hamilton's East End smelled strongly of sulphur from the nearby steelworks, at the University on the western edge of the city the atmosphere was fresher thanks to the prevailing wind.

My hosts Ben and Jerry, so very far from being typical blue-collar Hamiltonians, were kind to me, and I appreciated having a "home" to go to, rather than just a lonely living space, during my first four months in Canada. They were at first a little cautious around me when they realised that I wasn't gay, while at the same time slightly bewildered that their overt orientation and lifestyle didn't seem to put me off. (I was far from homophobic, but I wasn't as free of anti-gay prejudice as I liked to think, as I'd later discover to my chagrin.) I didn't share many meals with them, as I soon found myself a member of the circle of displaced persons who haunted the Phoenix, the grad pub on campus. I do remember going once with my hosts to assist with their monthly food shopping at a supermarket on Main Street. The bill for their very full cart came to over \$80, a sum that staggered me.

Still, though I acclimatized to Hamilton fairly quickly, I felt that I had made a serious mistake in coming to Canada. I had no desire for an academic career; my relationship with Amanda had just starting to blossom; I had left London, the greatest city in the world, for a filthy industrial town; I had wanted to see North America, but soon gathered that this would be a tall order on my monthly pittance; when I returned to the UK in a year's time I would have lost valuable time in establishing myself in a career in London. Still, as well as resourcefulness, I was learning pragmatism and resilience. I would try to make the best of whatever opportunities McMaster might present. After all, I was in Canada for only 357 days.

The MA in English program at Mac supposedly took one year to complete. I'd need to take three graduate courses that each lasted two semesters, and then in the spring and summer I'd write and orally defend a thesis on a subject of my own choosing. There were 35 MA students including myself newly enrolled in the program, and we were a diverse bunch: half a dozen from the UK, a similar number from the US, several from the Caribbean, the rest from all over Canada. There were more than thirty faculty members in the English department, and in 1974-75 they offered an array of sixteen grad courses from Old English through to the Canadian Novel. The least popular course (Wordsworth) had only four students, the most popular (the Contemporary Novel) had 22, including myself. Once we had picked a thesis topic, we were assigned a member of faculty as supervisor. I chose to write my thesis on Sylvia Plath, and was assigned Prof. Z, who seemed hard to track down. It turned out that he lived in Toronto and appeared reluctantly at Mac on just two days a week, and only for the time it took to park his car, lecture his undergraduates, and walk back to the parking lot. Eventually I managed to buttonhole him. I explained who I was and that I wanted to write on Plath's imagery. "I don't

know much about these British poets,” he replied. We never met again, though he would ultimately take credit as my MA supervisor.

In the meantime, we grad students earned our keep as TAs. Whatever activity “tutorial assistance” had originally designated had long been forgotten. What we TAs did was meet with a group of about twenty first-year undergrads twice a week and lead a “seminar,” namely, a class discussion fifty minutes long about the works of literature the students were being lectured on by the faculty member in charge of the introductory course. We TAs would also set and mark essays on these texts, and even mark final exams. In other words, English profs at Mac would lecture to a class of sixty to eighty undergrads twice a week, and we TAs would do everything else. Unlike at Royal Holloway where everything depended on finals, Mac students were continuously assessed, so that we TAs actually determined the students’ final grades.

Inexperienced as we TAs all were, we were thrown into undergrad teaching at the deep end so that profs could devote themselves to scholarship (in the case of the half a dozen who were scholars), to golf, to the cultivation of orchids, to propping up the bar at the faculty club, and to a host of other pastimes. We TAs were expected to attend the profs’ lectures so that we would know what they had said about the works being studied, but I rarely did. I was flying by the seat of my pants, but I managed, not very far into the first semester, to lead my fresh-faced undergrads in an interesting discussion of Robert Browning’s poem “My Last Duchess” even though I was nursing a giant hangover. I realised that as long as I cultivated my authoritative-sounding English accent and stayed one step ahead of the freshers, I’d have no problem “teaching” them. After all, I was three or four years older than them and had a BA (Hons.) degree from the University of London.

I began my theatrical career at Mac within a few weeks of arriving. The play was Archibald MacLeish’s *J.B.* (1958), a once-admired verse drama in which the eponymous businessman is a latter-day biblical Job, who loses everything but retains his faith in God and is ultimately “rewarded” by being reunited with his wife. The play had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1959, and was supposed to have initiated a national debate in the USA about why bad things (cancer, atomic bombs, the Holocaust) happen to good people. Nowadays it reads like an awkward attempt to wriggle out of the existential predicament portrayed in *Waiting for Godot*. Borrowing heavily from Beckett’s play, *J.B.* is framed by a debate between two clownish figures representing God and the Devil. I played one of Job’s Comforters who appear near the end of the play. We Comforters stole the show, at least according to the *Spec* reviewer. The play itself left me cold: if my five children had all been killed in horrible ways, I’d lost all my money and possessions, and my body was covered with weeping sores, the last thing I’d be clinging to would be faith in an omnipotent deity. Still, being in any sort of play was just what I needed at that time. While I was hardly in *J.B.*’s abject position, as a lonely new immigrant I had little to keep me anchored. As a cast member, I became, albeit briefly, part of a community, as close and dependent on each other as kin.

I also made new friendships. The most important was with Ted, a PhD student in the Philosophy Department. Ted was from a small town in West Virginia not far from Washington, DC, and was the only fellow student I knew who had a car, a four-door Ford Fairlane with WV plates. Ted had come to Canada to avoid the draft, though the US government's authority to induct him had ended the previous summer. Not trusting the Canadian climate, he wore long underwear all year round and had a wonderfully jaundiced view of Hamilton. To Ted, all the local males were called Gord and all the females Marg and they spent their time drinking stubby bottles of Moose Piss and watching hockey. Ted was very well adjusted for a philosopher, even if he was a fan of Oswald "Decline of the West" Spengler. It was as well he had a car, as Mac didn't have the resources to run a PhD program in Philosophy on its own and Ted had to drive miles to the University of Guelph for half his courses.

Ted and I drove to Toronto early in September to check out the local metropolis. He parked somewhere along the lakeshore and we took the ferry over to the Islands from which there were views of the then not very imposing skyline. This was before the CN Tower and the Eaton Centre had been built, and to me Toronto seemed very dull and provincial compared to London. However, there were a few good, cheap, ethnic restaurants, including a small Chinatown on Dundas Street behind the bus terminal, and a Greek place with an authentic taverna feel at Yonge and Dundas where you went into the kitchen to choose your dishes, as in Greece itself. Hamilton had no restaurants worthy of the name aside from a schnitzel-and-wurst place called the Black Forest Inn where there were always queues round the block to get in.

Soon I felt comfortable pouring out my anguished expat soul to Ted in the Phoenix and he would listen, sympathize, and buy me another bottle of Moose Piss. I was drinking Molson Golden at that time, a preference based on the pleasing assonance of the beer's name and its colourful label, two golden lions rampant against a blue background. In fact, all Canadian beer came in identical stubby bottles and tasted exactly the same, and its only boast was that it was slightly more alcoholic than its US counterpart. When I told Ted that I wanted to see the USA in spite of its 4% beer, he suggested that we drive down to New York City before Christmas. He had a couple of West Virginian friends who'd recently moved to Manhattan and would probably not mind if we crashed on their floor for a few nights. I thought this was a brilliant idea, but reminded him that I was expecting Amanda to come over from England to see me. No problem, said Ted, there's plenty of room in the car.

So, with Ted at the wheel and Amanda and me in the back seat, we set out early one morning in mid-December for New York City. Ted wanted to avoid the New York Thruway as it was a toll road, so we went south from Buffalo then cut east across New York State on Highway 6. At a small town called Chester only twenty miles west of the Hudson we pulled off the highway to fill up with gas. As we were heading back up the ramp to 6, we heard a police siren right behind

us, and Ted, muttering to himself, pulled onto the shoulder. Immediately we were surrounded: a police car behind, a pickup truck ahead, an unmarked saloon at our side. A fat, bald, sweating man emerged from the pickup and pointed a shotgun at our windshield. A younger man dressed in green military fatigues and holding a pistol entered our car on the front passenger side and aimed his gun at Ted's head. Amanda and I were speechless and frozen but too bewildered to be properly scared. Ted seemed to be taking it in his stride, as though this sort of thing happened to him all the time. The pistol-toter snapped to Ted, "Follow that car!" The police car had pulled ahead of us, then did a U-turn, and we followed it back into Chester.

We were taken under heavily armed guard to the Chester police station, where the chief asked us to produce some ID. When Amanda and I handed over our British passports and answered questions in our English accents, the atmosphere suddenly became much less hostile. I dared ask, "What exactly are we supposed to have done?"

There was a long pause, then the chief answered, "You ran a red light."

Ted protested that there weren't any red lights anywhere near where we'd been.

"Well," said the chief, "If you wanna contest the charge, you can all come back here next week with your attorneys."

"What do you advise?"

"Plead guilty."

We were brought before the town justice in his shopfront court, and Ted pled guilty to running a red light and was given a caution. He promised sincerely never to do it again, and we were free to go.

"So, would you mind telling us what just went on here?"

Our police escorts explained. Two men and a woman in a car with out-of-state plates had gone into a bank in the next town and robbed it, armed with a grenade. There had been witnesses.

The three of us and our vehicle had answered to their description.

Much later, we realised that we had been very lucky. The nervous small-town cops had acted with restraint, and not simply riddled us with bullets on the spot as in *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Welcome to the USA!

The rest of the trip was memorable for a different reason. We crossed the Hudson on the Tappan Zee Bridge and from the centre of its giant span there was a glimpse downriver of the distant towers of Manhattan. I felt a surge of excitement that I'd never yet felt in Canada: we were going to *New York*! Once in Manhattan, Ted got lost, and we found ourselves driving through the centre of Harlem (which didn't look half as scary as reports would have it) and then all the way down Lexington Avenue to our destination, East 78th Street on the Upper East Side. To the amusement of Amanda and me, Ted simply could not accept that our hosts, good old boys from West Virginia, were now an openly gay couple living in the big city.

On this trip I met on American soil for the first time my only US relative, my unmarried middle-aged second cousin Gertrude, who had once visited us in Manchester. She lived in Brooklyn, worked as an executive secretary for a Manhattan catering company, and was pleased to see me. She wanted to show me her place, but there wasn't really time. I promised to see her again in the spring. Having little cash, I don't think we did much more than wander the streets, though I remember visiting Central Park Zoo at dusk. Even so, New York was wonderful, exceeding all my expectations. In spite of apocalyptic media reports of crime and social disintegration, its streets seemed no more dangerous than London's, or Hamilton's for that matter. My father wrote that in light of our arrest at gunpoint he didn't see how that I could claim that New York was safe. He couldn't fathom that the incident had occurred in a small town in upstate New York, not in Manhattan, and that we were the ones presumed to be dangerous criminals.

Our travel was not done that Christmas. Amanda had a school friend who lived in Montreal and who'd invited her to visit, so that's where we went over New Year. Montreal, Canada's historical metropolis, was still the biggest city in the country at that time, and by far the most interesting. Toronto, which would soon usurp its pre-eminence, seemed bland and charmless by comparison. Amanda's friend lived with her older boyfriend in a duplex apartment near Jarry Park. He, though an anglophone, had been under police observation as a Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) sympathiser during the October Crisis four years earlier. This recent, radical history, the sinuous outdoor staircases and streetfront balconies of Little Italy and the Plateau, and the excellent French cuisine, all made Montreal seem quite exotic. I can't say I fell in love with it as I had with New York, but it became my favourite city in Canada ... and it still is.

But all was not well between Amanda and me by the end of her Christmas visit. While she had managed to overcome her infatuation, I was now struggling with one of my own, the most intense of my life. The object of my desire was a fellow MA student, who had come over from England with her new husband, enrolled in the same program. I had been strongly attracted to Mrs. A. the moment I first saw her and gradually realised that she was interested in me. We developed clandestine ways of meeting one another, and surreptitiousness added spice to our liaison. For her, our affair was chiefly a way of registering dissatisfaction with her marriage. Her husband was a colourless and inexpressive Oxford graduate, the kind of man who should never marry a beauty. As for me, I was smitten, thought her the most desirable creature I'd ever seen, and told her so repeatedly. She was naturally flattered.

My tumultuous feelings for Mrs. A. were amplified by my displaced situation. I started to write poems to her, chiefly sonnets, into which I first poured and then compressed my unruly emotions. She loved this sort of romantic attention. Our relationship cannot have gone unnoticed: our "secret" meetings took place chiefly on the fairly small Mac campus where we must have been frequently observed and gossiped about. I feel sure her husband knew what was afoot, but he kept a stoic, or possibly a politic, silence. I suspect that he was as disillusioned

with their marriage as she was. (Their union did not last much beyond their return to England the following summer.) She and I managed to consummate our affair a handful of times, though I found intimate contact with her oddly disappointing: nothing we did in bed could match my fevered fantasies. When she arrived for that December visit, Amanda immediately realised something was amiss with me, and I told her as much of the story as I dared. When she met the object of my affection, Amanda probably felt that she could not compete. Our relationship cooled rapidly from that point.

On 1 January 1975 I moved from the flamboyant Sanford menage to a ground floor apartment in a run-down duplex on Grant Avenue, only three blocks to the west. My gay hosts had gotten into a dispute with their landlord about their taste in wallpaper. Things had been said that could not be unsaid, and they decided they had to move as soon as possible. It would be into a smaller living space, and this meant having to dispose of some of their menagerie, including myself. I was grateful to them for having eased my transition into expatriation, but it would be no disaster to have an affordable place of my own, even if it didn't come with so many benefits. Well, I wasn't exactly on my own. To cut costs, I shared the apartment, in another of those detached Edwardian brick houses that would be worth millions today if they weren't in Hamilton's East End, with a fellow MA student. Steve, from Knutsford, Cheshire, was an Oxford graduate, and, as I wrote to my parents, that meant he was unable to perform any practical domestic duty more complicated than setting his breakfast bacon on fire. So I did the housework and in exchange Steve didn't object when I started holding regular parties. Our apartment could easily hold fifty people.

And now I began to think about staying in Canada. As my visa depended on my being a full-time student and had to be renewed annually, I'd need to get into the PhD program. Then I could postpone career decisions for four more years. Why, after all my complaints about Hamilton as a city and McMaster as an academic institution, did I want to stay? The answer is not clear to me even now, and may well have been ultimately based on the same instinct that brought me to Canada in the first place. My obsession with Mrs. A. had become stronger, and I realised that this meant that my relationship with Amanda was over. My English friends were increasingly pessimistic about life in the UK, where unemployment was rapidly rising and industrial disputes were ruining the economy. They were also starting to move out of London. Wally, my best friend at university, was struggling to make a living in Bristol. Shortly after arriving in Canada, I'd had the offer of a job in market research at Granada TV, a top media company. I'd asked them to hold it for a year. But in the worsening economic situation, Granada cancelled their graduate intake in 1975.

On top of that, I was starting to find graduate work absorbing. It was a liberation for me to be graded on what I had done over the whole course rather than just on a final exam at the end of it. In the Contemporary Novel, I enjoyed an early short novel by Thomas Pynchon. My final paper, disregarding the prof's instruction to write on the assigned texts, was a lengthy

structural analysis of Pynchon's latest work, *Gravity's Rainbow*, a complex epic novel about World War II rocket scientists that I believed to be a work of genius. I had become almost as equally engaged by Shelley's neglected late poem, "The Triumph of Life," in my course devoted to that poet and Keats. And though I thought little of the languid prof who taught the Studies in Romanticism course, my mind was expanded by the diverse readings he had chosen: Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, not a daffodil or nightingale in sight.

When I'd moved into the Grant Avenue apartment, I found a slender paperback left by the previous tenant. It was a selection of the poems of Emily Dickinson in the Laurel series. I knew nothing of Dickinson beyond the mention of her name as a female counterpart to Robert Frost in the Simon and Garfunkel song "The Dangling Conversation." I started to flip through the book and quickly became entranced:

Title divine, is mine.
The Wife without
the Sign —
Acute Degree
Conferred on Me —
Empress of Calvary —
Royal, all but the
Crown —
Betrothed, without
the Swoon
God gives us Women —

A female poet who, long before Sylvia Plath, refused to be reduced to an ancillary feminine role! The self-styled "Empress of Calvary," indeed! And all those dashes ... she would not even be bound by conventional punctuation! My "discovery" of Emily Dickinson would be fateful.

I was also now in demand as an actor. In March 1975 I played Siro, a cunning servant, in *Mandragola* (1524), a satirical comedy by that devious Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli. It was mounted in the Robinson Theatre as part of a McMaster symposium to commemorate Michelangelo's 500th birthday on 6 March. Live theatre was important at Mac in those days, and Hamilton's large Italian community financially supported the lavish production, which preceded the professional revival of *Mandragola* on Broadway in 1977. And the play was just one event in *A Night with the Medici* that included Renaissance music and dance and was overseen by Nathalie Donnet Emmett, doyenne of all things theatrical on campus. The symposium, which included a talk by the Vatican's Director General of Pontifical Monuments about the recent hammer attack on Michelangelo's *Pietà*, was important enough to be reported at length in the *New York Times*. Then, more prosaically, in April I was called in at short notice to play Bob, the lead in Peter Shaffer's one-act *The Private Ear* (1962) at Dundas Little Theatre, marking the beginning of my lengthy involvement with this admirable institution.

So, by spring 1975 I'd started to feel at home in Hamilton and to think seriously about continuing grad studies. I enjoyed teaching my seminar classes as they involved performance, and performing was what I did reasonably well. But on 29 April my plans received a serious blow when I received a memo indicating that my final grades in two of my MA courses were both second-class. Entry to the PhD program required at least two first-class grades. Then, three days later, I received better news: my second-class grade in the Contemporary Novel, in which I'd exerted myself as never before over *Gravity's Rainbow*, had been changed to a first. The prof, a ditherer with a kind nature, had belatedly decided that my term paper, though not on a specified topic, was nevertheless exceptional. But that still left me with two second-class grades, as my Romanticism prof, sensing my contempt for him personally, had taken his end-of-term revenge.

Still, something was amiss: all my papers in the Keats and Shelley course were A grades. I went to the prof doing my best not to seem in a huff, and asked her to explain. She confirmed that my work had been first class, couldn't explain the second-class grade, and said that she'd look into it. On 20 May I received another memo indicating that my grade in her class had been upped to a first. (Weeks later I received a written apology from the School of Graduate Studies for the "completely inexcusable" circumstances behind the original lower grade, though, as was typical of Mac, with no further explanation of these circumstances.) I was officially confirmed as PhD-worthy. Once again, I had found that I could intervene in my fate and change it for the better. Trivial though this business of grades now seems, this was the crucial moment in which my future as an academic was determined. Had I meekly accepted the grade in the Keats and Shelley course, I'd have returned to England that August and may well have ended up spot-welding in Staines, like one of my Royal Holloway chums.

So, by the end of my first 357 days in Canada I was on the academic track, though it would take me several more years to accept that I was destined to become a professor. I wrote my MA thesis on Sylvia Plath, all 164 pages of it, over the summer of 1975 with the informal assistance of two profs who were well aware of the uselessness of my official supervisor. I was the only one of the MA students in my year to continue into McMaster's PhD in English program. My roommate Steve failed to get into that program and switched to history in order to stay in Canada. My emotional life was bound up with a woman whose ardour did not match my own, was married to someone else, and who returned to England that summer. It had never been truly on with Mrs. A., and now it was over. Yet my confidence had been boosted by the fact that I had survived, even thrived, alone in a far country ... even though, as a Brit, I could call myself an expat rather than what I actually was, a lowly temporary migrant unable to take a paying job and tolerated only so long as I remained in good academic standing. I resented this situation, and this was one of the reasons why it took me so long to think of myself as Canadian. I didn't become a citizen until 2005. But by the summer of 1975 my future was set. In Canada.