

Love in a Lifetime

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the life lived, seen, and told by John Wall

JOHN WALL

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HERE FOR A GOOD TIME

I'm in the passing zone now. That's what I call it. I sit sometimes and start counting the people I've known who are gone. Two hundred, easy. Just like that. It gives you a warning, you know. Nobody likes to think about it, but really, you should. Could be this is your last day. I've outlived two generations already, and I count that a gift, believe me.

I never had much school. For a long time I couldn't even read or write my own language. Funny thing — the old stuff I remember clear as anything, but ask me what I did yesterday and I've got nothing. I think I need a new brain. So this is just what I remember, the way I remember it. Some of it I've told a hundred times over. Some of it, well, I never told anybody.

I've been blessed more than I deserve, left and right. My mom and dad made me leave Paraguay when I didn't want to go, and I'll tell you, that was the best thing they ever did for me. Whatever we built here, that wasn't just me either. People think I'm so smart. If it wasn't for Grandma, none of it. You've got to have a wife who's with you all the way. Almost in front.

LOVE IN A LIFETIME

It's been a good life. I've had a lot of fun. Everything aches now, sure, but I've enjoyed it. You're here for a good time, not for a long time.

So I'll tell you what I know.

EDITORIAL NOTE

THE chapters that follow are drawn entirely from John Wall's own recollections, recorded across a series of conversations and set down here in his words.

The method was straightforward. Over many sittings, John was recorded telling the stories of his life, one leading to the next. Those recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts became the source for everything in this book. Editing has been confined to what is needed to bring spoken memory onto the page: the interviewer's questions were removed, the ordinary tangles of transcription were cleared, and the stories were arranged into a readable order. His wording has at times been shaped for clarity. What he said, and the way he says it, have been left his own. Where a story was told more than once, the fullest telling was kept.

Memory, however exact, is not a record. John's recall of dates, names, and places is remarkable; but where a detail could be checked against the historical record, it was, and where it could not, his account has been preserved as he gave it rather than

corrected or invented. Three kinds of material are kept distinct throughout: his own remembered experience, historical context confirmed from outside sources, and the connective narration that carries the reader from one story to the next. That narration introduces no fact he did not himself provide.

The aim from beginning to end has been fidelity to a single voice. This is John's account of his life, told as he tells it.

CHAPTER I

NOBODY THERE

Every life has to begin somewhere, and John's begins in a place he will never see again — a Mennonite colony in the Paraguayan Chaco, four hundred kilometres of bush from the nearest city, settled by people stubborn enough to cross an ocean rather than give up their own schools. This chapter is the ground he grew from: the heat and the caught rain, the oxen and the cotton, the six German colonies that scarcely spoke to one another.

But it opens, and closes, on a refusal. He will not go back, though they have invited him to the hundred-year reunion. It is worth reading for why. The colony he remembers modernized the very moment he left it, and nearly everyone he knew is in the ground. What follows is at once an origin story and an elegy — the fullest picture in the book of the world that made him, told by a man who knows that world no longer holds a single face that would know his.

...

A second cousin of mine put it to me straight one time, a couple of years back — he's gone now himself, passed this last Christmas. We were talking about the old place, the colony, and whether a man could ever really go home to a thing like that, and he just looked at me and said that if I ever went down to where I grew up, I would stand there and look around and not have the first clue where I was. The more I have turned that over the years, the more I think he had the right of it.

So no, I have not been back. People ask me now and again whether I'd like to fly down one more time and walk through the village, see the old farm, stand in the yard where I was a boy. I understand why they ask. But the honest answer is no. There is nothing down there to go back to, not for me. The people I knew are gone, every last one of them — passed on, or moved off, or grown so old and so changed that we would walk straight past each other in the road and never know it. I have absolutely nobody there. Nobody knows me, and I don't know anybody.

But I can tell you what it was, in the days when it was still mine. That part I remember well enough — and the part I don't remember firsthand I had from the old people, told and retold until it was as good as my own. I can tell you precisely what happened the day I left the Chaco, sixty years ago. It's the things in between that the years have worn smooth.

We were Mennonites, my people, and we had come down out of Canada — not because anybody chased us out with guns, but because they would not give up their schools and the way they meant to raise their own children. Up in Manitoba and Saskatchewan the governments had brought in new school laws around the time of the Great War — Manitoba in 1916, Saskatchewan the year after — did away with the little church

schools, made all the teaching English, put a stop to teaching the faith in school at all. And a great many of our people simply would not stand for it. They petitioned, they kept their children home, they took the fines; and when the fines turned into the threat of losing the farm and going to jail, that was the end of their patience. They had crossed an ocean once already, a generation or two back, to be left alone with their religion, and now here was the government reaching right into the schoolhouse. So they pulled up stakes and went again. Most of them — something like eight thousand — turned for Mexico. But around eighteen hundred souls set their faces toward Paraguay instead, and mine were among the ones who went south.

Now you have to be a certain kind of person to do a thing like that, and I will not pretend otherwise. I call them stubborn Mennonites, because I am a stubborn Mennonite too. And I mean it kindly, you understand, but I do mean it. You do not walk away from a good and settled country and load your family onto a boat for the bush of South America — a place you have never laid eyes on, where you do not know the language and you do not know the land and you do not know a living soul — unless there is something in you that will not bend. Stubborn is the only word for it. I come by it honest.

What drew them, what made it possible at all, was a contract. That is how it was always told to me, and I have no reason to doubt the heart of it. The way I had it from the old people, Paraguay gave us an agreement — fifty years, that we could live there free, no army, nothing, a colony completely our own with nothing to answer to the government for. No army — that was the great thing, for a people who would not take up a gun against anybody. Our own schools, our own ways, nobody set over us

telling us how to pray. To folks who had just been driven out of one country over those exact things, you can imagine what it sounded like. It sounded like the promised land.

The land itself, somebody had to pay for — I know that now, though it was not always how the story got told around me. A company down there had bought up a great stretch of the Chaco, and our people bought their piece of it off that, acre by acre, and held it as their own. It was never granted free. But the privileges, the things that mattered to a Mennonite — those they had in law, and those held.

And they made us welcome, too. I always loved this part of the telling — my dad always said it, and it was a thing all the Mennonites knew: the president of Paraguay had gone to night school and learned German so he could welcome the people in their own tongue when they came up the river. Think of that, though — the head of a whole country sitting down of an evening to learn our tongue, so a boatload of strangers could be met with words they understood. Whether it happened just exactly so, I cannot swear. But that is the story we carried, and it told us something true about how we believed we had been received.

It was no easy place to begin, though, and I would not want to leave you thinking it was. My mother and my grandmother told it to me: how the first of our people came up the river at the tail end of 1926 and were set down at the port and could go no farther — the land they had bought was a hundred kilometers back in the bush, past where the railway ended, and never surveyed. So they sat. They sat at that port the better part of a year and a half, the sickness going through them — the typhus and the dysentery. A hundred and twenty-one of them died there in the waiting, before a single village was ever founded. Around sixty families looked

at the graves and the bush and the long way still to go, turned around, and went straight back to Canada — and I have never once blamed them. The ones who stayed went the last hundred kilometers the only way there was: behind two oxen and a wagon. My mother said they dropped the families out on that big empty field with nothing, and left them to start. How they began at all is past believing.

And I should tell you what kind of country it was they had been dropped into, because it explains the rest of it. The Chaco. The old hands had a name for it before we ever softened it into home — the green hell. It is a dead-flat land, flat as a table top as far as a man can see, and about as hot a corner as there is on the whole continent. Thornforest and scrub — the hard quebracho, the palo santo, the cactus — thickets so dense in places you could not push a body through them. Half the year the sky gives you nothing, months on end, just the dust and the heat; and then it comes all at once and turns the only roads into a mud that will swallow a wagon to the axle.

And there was no good water to be had from the ground. The wells you dug came up salt. So you lived off the sky — you caught the rain and you held it and you were careful with it, because there was nothing else to have. That is the real reason that, when I was a boy, nobody had running water and nobody had electricity. It was not that we were behind the times. It was that the country did not give you those things, and you made do with what it gave.

The way we lived out there, a person nowadays would hardly credit. We were laid out in villages — Dorf, we called them — strung through the bush, twenty and thirty and forty families to a village, each on its own land, and the whole colony run by ourselves, for ourselves. We had our own people running things, our

own schools, our own taxes, our own church. The government office in Asunción may as well have been on the moon for all it touched us day to day.

And most of what we made, we made together. There was the cooperative — the Chortitzer, ours was called — and it was the thing that held the colony up. It lent a man credit to get on his feet, it took in what we grew and sold it on, it ran the store and the gin and the mill. What we grew, in my day, was cotton mostly — that was the money crop — and peanuts and sorghum; and then the things you ate yourself, the manioc and the beans and the sweet potatoes and the watermelons.

And it was our colony that did the cotton for the whole of that country round about. We had the machinery for it, the big machines, and the other colonies would bring all their cotton in to us. It got cleaned up real nice, every seed taken out of it, and then pressed into big square bales and strapped tight and shipped down to Asunción to go out on the world. We did the peanuts the same way — pressed them and made the peanut oil. So a good deal of what those neighbor colonies raised came through our hands before it ever left the Chaco. The cattle and the dairy the colony is famous for now — the milk I'm told they send all over Paraguay these days — that all came later, after my time. I went out the door just before the best of it arrived.

In school it was German — the High German, the proper written kind, the language of the books and the sermons. But at home and among ourselves, wherever you went in that colony, we spoke the Low German, the Plautdietsch — that is the tongue I grew up in. I couldn't speak the High German at all until I was about six and started school, and even then you had to learn it slow, the way a child up here learns his English at school. My teachers

were Mennonite German too, and the preaching in church was all High German. We dressed plain, we kept to ourselves, and there was no dancing nor much of anything the world would call fun. It sounds strict, and it was. But it was the whole of what we knew.

I was born on the twenty-fifth of June, 1945, in a farm village called Eggenhof, out in the Chaco — and the Chaco is a big state, a big, big state, like B.C. would be to a man up here. We were a good four hundred kilometers northwest of Asunción, the capital, away up in the bush. And the colony itself was really two pieces — an older part to the north, settled first, and a south part they started later, about the time I came along; but it was all reckoned the one colony, all of a piece. We were a long way from everything, and you felt it worst when somebody took sick. When I was born we were a good three hours from the hospital — and I use the word loosely, because there was a sort of a hospital but hardly ever a doctor in it. In time it got better. We hired doctors in from the Spanish part of the country, and I remember one, a Dr. Ketler, who had come down from Canada and stayed a number of years. And the getting around — well, when I was small, the first couple of years I can remember, the only transport my own family had was two oxen and a wagon. Our own oxen, ours to yoke. Two oxen and a wagon. You went where the oxen could carry you and not one step farther, and that was the entire size of your world.

And it wasn't only the country that kept your world small — it was our own people, too. There were other colonies out there besides ours. Ours was the Menno colony, the first one, the Canadian one, the people who'd come down out of Canada the way my folks did, and our German was so full of English words we never even thought about it. A radiator was a radiator, a transmission a transmission, gasoline was gasoline, and a pie was a pie — all of

them straight English dropped into our Low German, and we had no other word for them. The Russian-side people had their own words for the very same things. Where we said *radiator* they said *reglota*; what we called *gasoline* they called *brandschaft*; and a pie — well, they had a word of their own for that too. Same Bible, same Low German underneath it all, and still we could hardly follow one another's everyday talk.

And we mocked each other over it, the way people will. There's one my uncle used to tell. A couple of the teenage boys from the other side came up to him once and asked him, straight out, "What does *pie* mean?" And my uncle looked at them and said, "Oh, that — that's something you spread out on the ground to sleep on." Just having them on, you understand. That was the run of it. We poked at each other's talk and thought ourselves the clever ones.

Right alongside us was one of those colonies, settled a few years after ours by people who had come the other way round — out of Russia. They'd left early, that lot — most of them out by way of Germany, but some came the long way round, by way of China, of all places — and down to Paraguay in the twenties and the thirties. They called their colony Fernheim. So we kept apart. For a man from our colony to marry a girl from theirs — that was a very, very odd thing in my day. We had next to nothing to do with each other at all.

Then there was another wave, just after the war, of people who'd only just escaped out of Russia, and they founded a colony called Neuland — New Land, it means. The way it was always told, the Bolsheviks would come right onto the farms and take the men away — just take them, and the families never saw them again — so that often enough it was only the women and the lit-

tle ones who got out. Two more colonies out there came from Russian stock as well, Volendam and Friesland — and one more group came down out of Canada the way my own people had, arriving in 1948. Six big German colonies in all, when you counted them up, scattered across that country, and every one of them keeping to itself.

And it wasn't only the talk that set the colonies apart — it was the church, too. Our whole colony was the one kind, what they call Conference, and we did our baptizing by sprinkling; we had no Mennonite Brethren among us at all, not one such church. But over in the Fernheim colony they had three different churches going — a Conference one like ours, a Mennonite Brethren one, and a third that I believe was the Alliance. Same people, near enough, and they'd sorted themselves three ways over how to follow the Lord.

And we were a people apart down there, make no mistake about it — you felt it everywhere you went. We were the colonists, the gringos, and that word carried a weight the local folks never got the good of. We were a tiny handful of that country, and yet we did well — better than the people around us — and they knew it and we knew it. I remember riding the bus one time, and a policeman came down the aisle with a big gun, checking this one and that one, papers and all — and he came to me, saw I was a gringo, and passed me right by. Never said a word. That was the kind of standing we had, earned or not, and a boy notices a thing like that and files it away.

Though it cut both ways. For all that we were Canadians, with our own law and our own privileges, the country still counted us its own when it suited: once you turned sixteen you had to carry a

travel paper to go about, the same as any Paraguayan born there. So you were inside and outside at once, the whole time.

There were people on that land long before us, of course, and I want to be honest about that. The Chaco had its native peoples, a good many of them — something like nine different peoples in that country — who had lived back in the bush when no Mennonite had ever come up the river. When I was a boy I came to understand that until our people got there, those folks had been living out in the bush in tents, with next to nothing — no roofs, no houses. We brought the gospel in, the way we reckoned it, and these days there are big native churches out there, people standing on their own feet. And I remember one evening in particular. I was visiting with my uncle, sitting there in the way you did of an evening, and a native boy came and talked with us — sixteen years old, he was, and here is the thing that has never left me: he spoke Low German just like I do. Fluent as anything. A native boy, and the Plautdietsch came out of him same as it did out of me. And he asked my uncle why God had not sent the Mennonites to Paraguay a good deal sooner — so that his own mother and father might have known about Jesus. He was not bitter at us for coming; that is the thing I want you to hear. He was grieved that we had not come sooner, for his parents' sake. That question has stayed with me all my days.

There was hard history all around us, too, that a child only half understood at the time. Not long after the colonies got their start, a war came down right on top of where we were — through the first half of the 1930s, Paraguay and Bolivia went at each other over that same dry Chaco for the better part of three years, and they say it cost something near a hundred thousand lives before it was done. That was my parents' first stretch in the country, that

war. They called it the War of Thirst, on account of the dry country it was fought over. Imagine it — a people who had crossed the world precisely so they would never take up a gun against anybody, setting themselves down in the one patch of bush two armies were about to fight and die over.

I left in 1966, and looking back on it I left right on the hinge of the thing. The big highway out across the Chaco — the Transchaco, near four hundred miles of it — had only just been finished, and that road changed everything, because it let the world in. Everything that has made the colony what it is now — the power, the water in the houses, the dairy, the money — it all came in just after I had gone. So the place I carry in my head is the colony as it stood the moment before any of that arrived: the oxen, the dark houses, the caught rain. When I left, nobody had running water and nobody had electricity. Now everybody does. Everybody has a telephone and a television and air conditioning against that heat. We had none of it. None.

And it's cattle country now, all of it — that's what Paraguay turned into. There was hardly any cattle to speak of when I was there. Now there's a slaughterhouse right near the colony where I used to work, and I'm told it does a thousand head a day, and the meat goes out all over the world. Back around 1978 they said Paraguay had the best meat on the world market. Best meat there was. And I'd already been gone a dozen years by then.

And the colonies that kept so strictly apart in my day — that's gone too. The young people started getting together, and now it's all mixed in, one colony marrying into another the way nobody ever would have then, and marrying Hispanic Paraguayans besides, which simply never happened in my time. Everything out there is Spanish now; the schools teach nothing but Spanish,

though in the colonies themselves most still speak the Low German at home. It's come to be like one big colony, where once there were six that hardly said a word to each other.

And the people are gone, which is the part that shuts the door for good. I had four cousins I grew up alongside, close as anything. One died at thirty-nine of his heart; another at forty-four, the same way; a girl my own age went to bed one night with a headache and was dead by the morning. By my own reckoning, better than thirty of the people I knew down there are already in the ground. I have no uncles left, and one aunt. There is nobody.

It's a hundred years now, near enough, since the first of our people set foot in that country. And they mean to mark it — a great reunion and celebration down there next June, a hundred years. They've let me know about it. But no, I won't be going. I expect you understand by now why not.

So when they ask me would I go back, I think of all of it. The hundred and twenty-one graves at the port. The sixty families that turned around. The oxen, and the salt in the wells, and the green hell that we made into a home. And my cousin, standing in the middle of a place he helped to build and not knowing his own town. There is no one down there now who would know my face, and there is no face down there that I would know. I have absolutely nobody there. Nobody knows me, and I don't know anybody.

CHAPTER II

THE WORD I WANTED

This is where the love story begins, and it begins on a holy afternoon when two young men had run out of anything they were allowed to do. What John found that evening, on a road between two farms, would shape the whole rest of his life — though neither of them could have known it at the time.

Read it for the small hinges that turn out to carry everything: a question asked at a gate, a handful of laboured letters written with a Bible open for the spelling, and then a silence that was not what it seemed. The chapter ends in that silence, and in a young man's decision that the whole thing was finished. He was wrong about that. But he would not find out for a long time, and neither will you — not yet.

...

DOWN in the colony we kept our holidays the old way, and the big ones came in threes. Three days of Christmas, three days of Easter, three days of Pentecost. These were religious days.

It's not in the Bible anywhere, but that was how we kept them. The first day a man might see to a thing or two, but the second and the third were holy. And the rule on it was plain. If anybody worked on the second or the third day, that person would go to hell. That was the long and short of it. You kept your hands still those days, and that was all there was to it.

Which is how two young men came to have a whole holy afternoon on their hands and nothing they were permitted to do with it. By the third day of that Christmas, my friend Cornie and I had run clean out of places to go. So we did the thing we always did. We traveled together looking for girls. That evening I thought of one farm we had never tried — Rosenthal, where the Dueck family lived. I knew her brother Jake well, and he had been after me about it for the longest time: "Why don't you come out to Rosenthal, to our place, and visit?" So that is where we pointed our bicycles.

I had seen the girl before, mind you. She was a nanny for a wealthy family in Lumar Plata, the same town where I worked, and I would see her walk to the store. I knew her face, and I knew whose girl she was, but that was the whole of it. I had never stood close enough to say a word to her. Back then she was just a girl on a street to me, somebody else's daughter walking to the store, and I was nobody to her at all. But I watched for her. I will admit that much.

She came off a farm out at Rosenthal, where her family, the Duecks, made their living the way nearly everybody made it down there, out of the ground and off the animals. They were milking a bunch of cows. They had peanuts in, and cotton, and corn. A farm girl from a farm family, no different from a hundred other

girls in the colony. Except I had got it into my head to watch for her on that street. And a man does not do that over nothing.

We came in just before dark. There was a crowd of young people in the yard — Nettie, her sister, another girl from a farm down the road — and they were on the point of walking another kilometer or so to her uncle's place. It was now or it was never, the way these things are when you are nineteen and your heart is going, so I asked her, "May I walk with you?"

She let me. We left the bicycles where they stood and walked out with the rest of them into the evening, and somewhere on that road between the one farm and the other it happened to me. I walked with her, and I fell in love with her right away, and she fell in love with me. I cannot tell you what it was. It was not anything you could have written down. It was just that by the time we reached her uncle's gate I was a different man than the one who had ridden in, and I knew it.

When the evening was over and I was getting ready to head home, she said the thing I had been hoping to hear without quite knowing I was hoping for it. She said, "Are you coming back on the weekend?" That was the word I wanted.

So I came back, and the next weekend, and the one after. And it was not all smooth, either — I will not pretend it was, because that would not be honest, and there is no sense telling a thing if you are going to tidy it up. There was a stretch in there where she nearly called the whole thing off. "You almost dumped me," I have told her since, and it is the truth. But then she thought better of it. She came back, and apologized, and begged me again to come. And that was the end of the wobble. I really loved her, you know? And I guess she loved me, too. On about the third

weekend, when I was leaving, we put it into words, the way you have to eventually.

“Do you mean it?” she said.

“Yes, I do,” I told her.

“Do you mean it?”

“Yes, I do.”

And that was that. We were courting.

We carried on like that — weekend after weekend out to Rosenthal — and then the tickets came for Canada, and I fought them. I battled and battled with it. My mother and father wanted the whole family up there, and the plain truth of it was they needed what I could earn; a young man’s wage was part of the reckoning, and they were counting on mine. But I had found the girl by then, and I was not going to be pried off from her for any ticket. I told Nettie flat out, “No, I am not going.” I said it and I meant it. But the pressure came down on me and it kept coming, my mom and dad wanting me to come, and finally it got too big for me and I gave in. And here is the shame of it — I did not tell her until it was almost on top of us. About a week before I flew, that is finally when I told Nettie I was moving to Canada.

So my family made the move up to Canada. And that was a thing I would not wish on anybody. To find the one girl in the whole colony and then to be loaded onto a plane and carried five thousand miles off from her — I do not have the words for it even now, except the ones I have always used. That was a killer. Leaving her standing there in Paraguay while I went north, it felt like I broke her into bits and pieces. And my own heart, it was in bits and pieces too. That is as near as I can put it. You carry

a thing like that onto an airplane and there is nowhere to set it down.

They were awful times, those first ones up north. I have cried many times over it, I do not mind telling you. You come to a foreign country where you do not know a soul, and the best part of your life at that moment is back in Paraguay, and there is no way to reach it. You could not so much as hear her voice. There was no such thing as picking up a phone in those days, not to a place like that. All you could do was carry it.

After that all we had was the mail, and the writing was the hard part. I had had almost no schooling, so a letter to her was real work. The way a day in the field is work. I would sit down at night with the Bible open beside me and hunt through it page by page for the words I needed, spelling them out the way they were spelled there. So the letters I wrote, they were holy. They came out reading half like Scripture, I suppose, and I did not care, and neither did she. I could work all day and never tire, and a single page of writing could undo me. But I would not have given it up for anything. It was the only road left between her and me. I wrote her about six of them, maybe, one after another, and she wrote me back just the same, and for a while there was that thread between us across all that distance, thin as it was.

And then the letters stopped.

I did not think much of it at first. The mail was the mail, and South America was a long way off, and things went astray. What I did not know, and would not find out for a long time, was that my own parents had set themselves against the match. It was my mother who did the deed. A couple of Nettie's letters came, and she went to the mailbox and took them off before they ever

reached my hand. She took care of them. That is why I did not get any more letters. So I stopped hearing from her, and after a while I did what a young man does. I figured that was the end of it, and I let it be the end of it.

I was in Canada two years and two months, and once the letters quit we did not hear from each other for a long time. A young man in a new country has his hands full just keeping his feet under him. The work, the language he can barely speak, the money that has to be earned before it can be spent. A silence like that, you let it close over a thing, and after a while you stop reaching down into it. We had both given it up. I had taken up with a girlfriend here in the meantime, and she had a boyfriend down there. That is just the plain fact of it. If you had asked me in those two years, I would have told you the Paraguay chapter of my life was finished and folded shut.

I was wrong about that. But it would take a morning I did not see coming, and fifteen hundred dollars I did not have, before I found out how wrong. For now there was only the silence, and a man in Canada who had made up his mind that the girl on that road at Rosenthal belonged to a country he was never going back to.

CHAPTER III

OH LORD, WHAT AM I DOING

In the spring of 1966 the tickets came, already paid for, and John still said no. This chapter is the story of being carried, at twenty, out of the only life he knew and set down in a cold, wet country whose language he could not speak — and of how many years it took him to forgive it.

It is an immigrant's chapter, and it holds two truths that never fully reconcile. He is thankful now, deeply, that his parents made him come; he would not move back for any amount of money on earth. And still, after sixty years, he will tell you plainly that he is a foreigner in Canada and expects he always will be. Both are true at once, and he lets them stand that way. That doubleness runs quietly beneath everything that comes after.

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THE ticket was bought and paid for, and I still told them no. It came all of a sudden. The beginning of March, 1966, and a telegram arrives to say that ten tickets to Canada had been paid

for us — one for every soul in the family, my mom and dad and the eight of us kids. Just like that. Ten seats bought and settled, and the whole thing set in motion before I had any say in it at all. And the only thing I could think when I heard it was, *Oh, no. What am I going to do now?*

When my mother and father set their minds on going back to Canada, they booked my seat right along with theirs, and I did not want it. I went to my grandmother first and I told her plain: “I’m not going.” Never mind that the ticket was already paid. Tickets paid or not, I was staying. But there is no arguing with a whole family that has made up its mind, and my mom and dad put so much pressure on me to come along that in the end there was nothing for it. I went. I was twenty years old. And the worst of it was that I had a girl in Paraguay, and going meant leaving her behind. I was not the least bit excited about any of it — I was very depressed, very sad. I promised her I would come back one day, though a man promises a lot of things in this life and means every one of them at the time he says it. For a long while after, I figured that game was over and done with, and I do not think she expected to see me again any more than I expected to go back.

You would have to know where I sat in that family to understand why I dug my heels in the way I did. I was the biggest earner of the lot. I had a good job, I made the most money of anybody, and my mom and dad really depended on me for it. Every dollar I brought in I handed to them. All of it, to Mom and Dad. And I kept right on giving it to them after we got to Canada too, every dollar of it, until I was twenty-three. I never grumbled about it once. Why would I? My clothes were washed for me every day. The food was always on the table. I had nothing in this whole

world to complain about. So when the talk first turned to pulling up and moving to a country on the other side of the earth, I could not make sense of it. Why would I want to move? When a man has it that good at home, it doesn't make a bit of sense. I still can't understand people who would.

The truth of it is my parents had wanted to go back to Canada for a long time, and never once had the money for it. There was a whole stream of people doing what we were about to do — from the time I was a boy there had been families leaving the Chaco colonies and heading back north, hundreds of them out of Menno and the colonies around it, driven out by the hard living and pulled up by whatever a man could make in Canada. We were only one family in a long line of them. What made it possible for us in the end was other people. My dad had a cousin up in Clearbrook, Henry, and a friend of ours took our whole situation in hand. He went to a man named Herman Jesse, who ran a big berry farm with an accommodation house standing right on it, and he got the lot of us taken on as pickers. Nine berry pickers signed on before we ever left. That was no small thing, because Clearbrook and the country around it was built on the small fruit, the raspberries and the strawberries, and the people who'd come out from the Prairies to settle that valley had made their living that way for years. A family with that many pickers in it was worth bringing over.

But the work waiting for us at the far end did not pay for getting there. For the fare itself, our friend — Mr. Enns — went to the MCC and borrowed the whole of it. Every cent. Four thousand and ninety dollars. I have never once forgotten that figure, four thousand and ninety, and I'll tell you it was a tremendous amount of money in those days. We were going to Canada on

borrowed money, owing it to our own people, and that debt rode along with us the whole way. That was an old thing among our people, the borrowing and the working-off — it went clear back to the ones who first came over from Russia on credit and spent years paying down what they owed for the passage, a thing they carried like a weight and did not speak of with much pleasure. We were carrying on a debt our people had been carrying one way or another for forty years.

Getting out of the Chaco was a journey before the real journey ever began. There was no quick way out of where we lived. There was a road by then, the big one they had cut through the Chaco — but it was dirt the whole way, and in the wet it turned to a swamp that would swallow a truck to the axle. A cousin ran me over on his motorbike first, so that I could say my goodbye to my girl, and that goodbye was a terrible thing — one of the hardest I ever stood through. Then the bus came for us at four in the afternoon, and we travelled up through the night, right up until one o'clock in the morning, and then we came to the ferry. And there we stopped. There was no bridge to take us across — there would not be one near the city for years yet — so a man crossed that water by boat or he did not cross it at all. We had to wait there until the morning before the ferry would carry us over the river. It was a big river, that one — like the Fraser is here, that wide. So we sat through the dark by the water, the whole family and everything we were taking, waiting for the light so a boat would move us across.

From there we went on into the main city, into Asunción. I had never once laid eyes on it. There was only the one real city in the whole country, and I had grown up clear out in the colony and never seen it — and here it was, the capital, near three hun-

dred thousand people in it, with paved streets and motor cars and lights and the river port where everything in the country came and went. A Low German farm boy set down in the middle of all that. We stayed there several days. We had to wait until the Sunday, because my brother's and my sister's passports still had to be made up, and that work could only be done in the city. So we waited in Asunción until the papers were in hand.

My own papers, at least, were never any trouble. I was born in 1945 and my sister the year after, in 1946, and the two of us came into Canada as Canadians already, on Canadian passports. That was because both my mother and my father were Canadian-born themselves — my dad up in Saskatoon, my mother from south of Steinbach — and they had only gone down to Paraguay as children. My mother was two years old when her people moved south. My father was twelve. So the citizenship came down through them to the two of us, and it was settled by the registration of our births long before any of this.

Then on the Sunday it was the long way north. We left Asunción on the Sunday evening at seven o'clock and flew into Rio de Janeiro — an hour and a half, that flight is. At Rio we left again at ten, and from there we flew all night. Ten hours in the dark. We landed at eight o'clock in the morning in New York. Then on to Toronto. Around four in the afternoon we left Toronto, and at seven o'clock that evening we landed in Vancouver, clear across the whole of the country. Flying, in those days, was a thing most people never did even once in their lives — it was for the well-to-do, people who got dressed in their good clothes to do it, and here was a borrowed-money family from the Chaco strung out across the sky for the better part of a day and a night. The sixteenth

of May, nineteen sixty-six. That was the day we came. And we ended up out on a farm.

I can still lay that whole journey out in order, sixty years gone — the night drive, the ferry, the city, the Sunday, every flight and the hour it left. A man remembers a thing like that. It was the day I left the only place I had ever known.

We did not come down into a town at all, not at first. Where they took us was a big berry farm out at Bradner — Herman Jesse's place — because picking berries was the work we had been brought over to do, and there was a farmhouse on it big enough to hold all nine of us. But that whole corner of the valley was thick with our own kind of people. Clearbrook, the town my dad's cousin lived in, was four thousand souls in those days and most of them Mennonite, families that had come out from the Prairies the same as ours had come up from Paraguay, our language on the streets and in the stores. A man could land in that valley off an airplane from the other side of the world and still hear his mother tongue the minute he stepped down. That was a mercy I did not think much about at the time, but it was a mercy all the same.

We picked berries that whole first summer. Right through to the end of August we picked, until the berries were finished and gone, and there was at last something to set against the loan we owed. They called Abbotsford the raspberry capital of the country, and it was the families like ours that brought the crop in — it was Mennonite hands on those canes, year after year, the whole picking done by our own people. But I will not pretend that summer was anything but awful. All nine of us slept in the farmhouse on the place, and we had come into it knowing not one single soul, not a word of English among us, total strangers in a country that did not know us either. That is a hard thing — to go into a

foreign country when you cannot speak the language of it. It is a time I would just as soon forget forever.

That fall, once the berries were done, my folks bought a house in Clearbrook, and we came in off the farm at last.

And it took a long time to have any friends at all. That was the language, mostly — when you can't speak to a person, you can't get near him, and it holds you off from people for years. The first company we had was two other families that had come up from Paraguay same as we had. They had teenagers too, near our own ages, and so we got together with them, the few of us that could understand one another. That was the beginning of it. The church came later — later on we found our people that way too — but at the first it was just those two families and us, a little island of the old language in a country full of a language we didn't have.

When the season was over, my parents bought a house in Clearbrook. An old place. I think we paid nine thousand dollars for it, somewhere around there. It wasn't much of a house, but it was ours, and it was in Canada.

My own work after the berries was whatever I could lay my hands on. I helped a farmer frame a big chicken barn. And after that I went and worked for a chicken farmer named Hall, hauling chicken manure — the whole month of November, nineteen sixty-six, every single day of it. Here is what the work was. I would load the whole of the manure into a wheelbarrow and run it up onto an elevator, and the elevator carried it up into a big truck, and then I would drive the truck out to a field and dump it, and then come back and start the whole thing over. I just about killed myself at it, all day long. And the man I did it for knew nothing in

this world but work, work, work. At the end of a day where I had given it every last thing I had in me, he would look it over and say, "You should have done more." Every time. A whole month of that, shovelling and hauling for a boss who would not have been pleased if you'd worked yourself clean into the ground. Some welcome to a new country. It was not my favourite month.

Construction was where I finally landed, and where I stayed for good. A friend of ours in Vancouver had found a contractor — a framing man who was looking for two helpers. So my brother Ben and I took it. We started on the seventh of December, nineteen sixty-six, in Vancouver. We could not have walked into it at a better time, though I did not know it then. The whole of the Lower Mainland was throwing up houses as fast as men could frame them, cheap little wood-frame places filling up the suburbs, and a crew could always use another pair of hands.

And I will never forget that first day. Half snow and half rain, the whole day long, the both of them coming down at once. The mud was over my ankles. I stood out there in the cold and the wet and the muck, soaked through, on the first day of work in my new country, and I said to myself, *Oh Lord, what am I doing? What is this?* I swore right then and there that I would never make a career of it. Not this. Never this.

But a man does what he has to. When you come to this country and you cannot speak the language, you take what you can get — and you are glad there is anything at all for you to take. So the next morning I got up and I went back. And the morning after that, the same. I went back into the snow and the rain and the mud, day after day, and I stayed in that trade — the one I swore I'd never do.

After about a year, that first contractor quit the framing altogether. So Ben and I went to a cousin of his, John Jensen, who was looking for two carpenters. He took us both on, and he was a very nice boss too. A good man to work for, after Hall.

And that was the pattern of those first years — I bounced from one boss to the next, and it seemed like every good one had a bad one waiting on the other side of him. One of the bad ones was a man in Abbotsford named Henry Friesen, and he was another Hall. Another one who was never satisfied. I gave it a little better than a month and that was already too long. It seemed like I couldn't work hard enough for him. At the end of a day he'd stand and look it over and figure we could have done way more — and that was BS, plain BS, because we worked our butt off, every day of it. So that was one more boss cut from that same cloth. I quit.

But there was the other kind too. My father-in-law was working for a couple of fellows in Abbotsford, and they needed a carpenter real bad. So they asked would I come, and I went. And those men treated me special. Very special. Because I was an experienced carpenter by then, and they knew it — when I walked onto a job they didn't have to tell me a single thing. That is a good feeling for a man, to be wanted on a job for what he can already do. After a boss like Henry Friesen it was like coming in out of the cold. A good one and a bad one, back and forth, and every one of them teaching me a little more of the trade whether I wanted the lesson or not.

He didn't have many years left in him, my father-in-law. He died in 1972, a heart attack, and he was still a young man when it took him. He was one of the good ones to me right to the end, the man who treated me like a king, and then he was gone.

I didn't know where any of it was headed yet, standing in the mud that first December. All I knew was that I had never wanted to come, and that I had left the best of what I had behind me in Paraguay.

And I will tell it the way it was, because there is no sense dressing it up. I was bitter. For a number of years I was bitter, and I did not accept being here. Those first two years made me almost angry. I had been hauled across the world out of a life I loved into the cold and the mud and a language I could not speak, and somewhere down in me I could not forgive it. I went where my body had to go and did the work that had to be done, but the rest of me stayed back in the Chaco for a long, long time.

It took years for that to turn. But it turned. I am thankful now. Deeply thankful that my mom and dad made me come. If a man walked up to me today and offered me a million dollars to move back to Paraguay, just for the moving, I wouldn't do it. There is absolutely nothing there for me anymore. My whole family is here. Every one of them. Everybody's here. That is what changed everything. Whatever I lost in coming, I gained the people who matter to me, and you do not trade that back for any amount of money on this earth.

And yet. I will tell you the other half of it, the half that never did go away. Paraguay is still my homeland. I have been back twice, and both times the minute I stepped off that plane and the sun of Paraguay came down on me, I felt I was home. Home, in my home country, back where I belonged. I don't think a man ever loses that, no matter how long he lives somewhere else. However long you live in a place, you can still be a foreigner in it. That is how I feel. I can feel it in me. I have made my whole life in this

country and I am grateful for it, and still I am a foreigner here, and I expect I always will be.

You see it plainest in the small things. When I go and sit with the coffee guys, those fellows are all men who were born here. They grew up here. And a lot of the time I just sit and listen while they talk, because they go on about the things you talk about when you all came up in the same place — the boyhood, the old days, the things that happened around here when they were young. I don't have any of that. I haven't got those stories to put in. So I sit there, and I listen, and I enjoy them, but I don't have the things to talk about that they have.

And it comes at you in ways you don't expect. I remember crossing over on a trip once, and the customs man started right in on me in German — asking me in German where I was going, where I lived. I understood him well enough and answered him back the way you would: “Yes, sir.” And he was surprised at that. I asked him how he came to speak German, and he told me he'd been a student in Germany four years himself. That was where he'd got it. Then a little further along there was another one of them, a different customs man, and he went at me with all kinds of questions too. Finally I said to him, “Are you familiar with German Mennonites?”

And he says, “Yes — because I am one. My parents are fully German Mennonites.”

Well, there you go. And that is just the thing about it: the minute they hear you're a foreigner, they question you right away. That is what happens. I have crossed a lot of borders in my life and I know the look of it by now.

The strange part is that my own father was the very opposite of me, and over the same kind of distance. He had been thirty-nine years in Paraguay. He'd gone down there as a boy of twelve and built the whole middle of his life in that country. And when he stepped off the airplane in Toronto, the first thing he said was, "Thank God I'm back home." Home. After thirty-nine years away from it, Canada was still home to him, and he was glad in his bones to be back. And here I was, his son, who had only ever lived in Paraguay, stepping onto that same soil feeling like I'd been carried off to the ends of the earth. The same trip, the same airport, the two of us pointed exactly opposite. He was a Canadian who'd spent a long time away. I was a Paraguay boy who'd been brought to a country that was supposed to be mine.

There is one place that gives it back to me a little. Mexico. I only have to go to Mexico and I almost feel home already, because the whole of it is so much like what I knew. The environment, the people, the language, the warmth of it — even the temperature feels like Paraguay to me. I would have no trouble at all living down there. Honestly, I would love it. Some part of me is still looking for that sun the whole time, and Mexico gives me a taste of it.

CHAPTER IV

I WOULD HAVE MADE IT

Some men carry a road not taken all their lives. For John it is flying. He wanted to be a pilot from boyhood, and a boy who could not read or write was never going to become one — and yet, in his eighties, he can talk a jetliner down onto a runway by the numbers, because he taught himself on the airlines' own simulators.

This is his great passion let off its leash, and it is a pleasure to sit inside. But it is also, quietly, a chapter about limits and about a marriage. He gave up the real thing partly for the cost and partly because his wife could not bear the risk, and he counts that surrender — without a trace of bitterness — as the mark of a good marriage. Listen for the man still out at the airport fence, counting the planes, loving every bit of it from the ground.

...

I was out at the airport again the other day, just to watch the planes. Went the day before that too, and then, you know, I

went right back. I've always done it, and I don't suppose I'll ever stop. You'd think a man would get tired of it. I don't. I sit and I watch them come and go, the big ones and the little ones, and I can pretty near tell you where each one's headed and what it's up to. My great-grandson asked me not long ago.

"Do you like flying, Grandpa?"

"Love it," I told him. I love, love flying. And there I am out at the fence, proving it to him.

And I count them, too. That's a thing I do. I'll sit and count the planes coming and going, and I know just about what to expect. Vancouver, on a day like that, I'll count a dozen or so, ten, twelve of them. But I'll tell you what surprised me — Seattle's got more. Sixteen I counted one day down there, coming and going, and I never would have figured Seattle for such a big, busy place. And the Vancouver I've got on my computer, it might as well be the real thing — the whole airport laid out, all the advertising and the works. And the one here in Abbotsford, that one I get out to in person plenty. I like to be right up at the fence where I can see them.

My dream, my whole life, was to be a pilot. That's the honest truth. And I can tell you exactly the thing that stood in the way of it: I had no education. None. I couldn't read and I couldn't write, not even in my own language, never mind the English. So how is a man like that ever going to be a pilot? You can't, and that's all there is to it. But I know now — I know it for sure — that I would have made it. I had it in me. See, I've got a cousin who hasn't got much more schooling than I do, and he's flown jets for years and years; he flies a big cargo jet now for some European

outfit out of Hong Kong. He started off small, same as anybody. So it can be done. It just wasn't done by me.

It started a long way back, before any of that, back in Paraguay when I was a boy. Out there in the Chaco the only road we had was the dirt one, the Transchaco, and when the heavy rains came, well, that road was finished. They wouldn't let the buses go, sometimes for up to a week at a stretch. So if you had to travel, you went up in a plane. They'd fly the passengers out on the DC-3 — that's the big one with the propellers on each side, the same plane they used in the war, the Second World War — and they'd load about twenty of us onto it. Now those planes belonged to the government, every one of them, to the military, because the military ran the whole country in those days. Nobody owned a plane of his own. You just hired one off the government when you needed it, and that was that.

I've got books somewhere in the house that'll tell you all about a plane like that. Every airplane ever built, when it was built, how many they made of it, and even how many of them are still up there flying. That DC-3, now — I don't hold the number exact anymore, but they built somewhere around forty-eight hundred of them through that time. Forty-eight hundred. And I've always kept that sort of number in my head. Rio de Janeiro to New York, now, that's ten hours, and they put down at Caracas along the way to take on more fuel. Though they've got a plane now that'll fly you eighteen hours on the one tank — eighteen, no stopping. That's the kind of thing I keep track of.

And then, right before we came to Canada, they went and built an airport in our little town. Just a small thing then, you know, only for the little planes. But I hear now it's full of them — planes parked there all the time. There's a man I knew, he moved

back down there, and he went and bought himself his own little plane. Imagine that. From two oxen and a wagon to a man with his own airplane, and all of it inside one lifetime.

My own first time up in the air was the day we left. We took off out of Asunción on a big jet, seven o'clock in the evening, and I'll tell you, we felt like we were in a jail. That's the honest way to put it — a strange, shut-in feeling none of us had ever had before in our lives. And then they brought us some food to eat, this meat, and it looked for all the world like frog legs. Me and my brother, we sat there looking at it, and we thought, well, they're feeding us frog legs. We hadn't the first idea what it was. Then there was the first time we ever took off in the daytime — that one was a four-propeller plane, and I had the window seat. And all of a sudden it looked to me like the plane just stopped, dead still in the air. A very funny feeling, that, sitting there looking out and feeling her hang.

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I did get up in the air a good many times after that, here in Canada, when I was younger — riding along, mind you, in the passenger seat, never once at the controls. Before I was married I had a friend who had his pilot's license, and one Saturday he up and rented a plane, and off we went. We flew over to Kelowna for our lunch — going to see a builder I used to frame for here in Abbotsford. He picked us up right there at the airport, took us out, and brought us back after. Oh, I loved that. A man rents himself a plane in the morning and flies off for his lunch. What a thing.

Now my friend had a plan made up for that flight, a proper one, filed out ahead the way you're supposed to. We'd follow Highway 3 up to Princeton, and from Princeton on through Keremeos, and from there down into Penticton. That was the route on paper. But once we got up over Princeton, he changed his mind on it. Made up his mind right there in the air to cut straight across to Kelowna, the direct way, the short way — and he never told a soul. Never filed the change, never notified anybody where we'd got to. Now that's totally against the aviation rule, and it bothers me to this day. See, every leg you fly, you're supposed to let the next station know where you are. You take off out of Abbotsford headed for Hope, you tell Abbotsford that's where you're going. And the minute you make any little change to it, you've got to notify somebody. Because if we'd have gone down out there, cutting across the way he did, off the plan and nobody the wiser, why, nobody on God's green earth would have known where to look for us. We'd just be gone, gone. That's the part that stays with me.

Another time a friend of mine, a dairy farmer, rented a plane to fly up to Williams Lake after some tractor parts, and he asked me to come along, so I did. He flew, I rode. We came up as far as Spences Bridge, and it was getting awful cloudy on us, getting dark, so we decided to swing up and follow the Coquihalla on toward Merritt. You learn to read the sky on a trip like that, and I can tell you exactly where the turbulence comes from, same as any pilot would. See, when you're up over the heavy clouds, the heavy rain clouds especially, the heat comes bouncing up off them, up and down, up and down — and that's your turbulence right there. And it lifts off the hills the same way, coming into a place like Calgary from the south. Four years ago we came home from Hawaii, and we sat strapped into those seats for better than

two hours of it, the plane shaking and shaking above the storm clouds. And then all of a sudden the cloud started thinning out, less and less of it, and just like that it went smooth as anything. And I'll tell you a thing about me — I don't mind the turbulence one bit. I love it. I love going right into it.

The worst flight I ever had, though, that was another one — heavy clouds and rain, real bad weather all around, and the plane made a funny noise and it felt like she just fell out from under us and then jerked, hard. That was the worst one I ever experienced. Now people don't know how far a plane really drops when a thing like that happens. I've got a second cousin, Ed Ensen's his name, and he went and became a pilot. My dad asked him once — when it feels like you fall about a foot, how far do you really go down? And Ed told him: two hundred feet or more. More. That's how far she drops when it feels like nothing to you back in the seat.

So these days I keep my seatbelt on the whole time, always, because that's just what the pilots wish everybody would do. I've heard of it happening — the plane gives a real jerk, and some folks who weren't belted in jumped right up and hit the ceiling. Cracked their heads on it. But with your belt on, see, that can't happen to you. So I keep mine done up.

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Now here's the thing that gives me my flying, all of it. It was about 2010, and I was laid up recovering from the surgery on my foot, and the kids went and bought me a flight simulator package for the computer. A simple little one. And I thought, *well, what a waste of money* — I told them, "Why are you spending that? I haven't got a clue what to do with the thing." But I started fooling

around with it, just fooling around, you know, and the next thing I know I'm flying an ultralight on the thing, and I passed the little test it puts you through right there on the screen, and that was me started.

So then I went and bought myself a bigger package, somewhere over in Richmond, and I'll tell you, that one near fried my brain. So computerized, that thing. And the instructor, he went way too fast for me — he was fine, I suppose, for your experienced pilots, but for a fellow like me just starting, you've got to take your time, and he wouldn't, so I never even finished my hours on it. But then I had a friend, a fellow I've known thirty years who flew for his living, and he took me under his wing. A lot of mentoring, that man did. He showed me all the procedures, all the little tricks of the thing. And he's the one who first got me into a real flight simulator — the big kind, the proper kind, the kind the airlines themselves use.

That first time, that was February of 2016. My friend phones me up out of nowhere and asks what I'm doing on the twenty-fourth.

"Oh, nothing," I says.

"Write it down," he says. "It's going to be a big day."

And he wouldn't tell me one thing more than that. So comes the day, a freezing cold one with a northeast wind blowing, and they get me out on the freeway and I haven't got the faintest idea what's happening to me. And then we turn off at Lake Monroe, heading in toward the airport there — *holy moly*, I thought, *what's going on here?* I felt like I'd been kidnapped. And Grandma, it turns out, she knew the whole thing all along — she was in on it from the very start.

Well, they walk me into a full cockpit, the whole works laid out in front of me, and there's the Vancouver runways right there ahead, and it's night. My stomach about came right out of me. See, you've got to be ready for a thing like that in your mind, even a little, and I had no preparation for it, none whatsoever. And then, to top it off, the computers weren't talking to each other yet, weren't working right, so the instructor hands us a couple of tickets for our lunch and sends us off to wait. Well, I wasn't one bit hungry anymore, I'll tell you that. I sat there the whole time praying those computers wouldn't be talking by the time we got back.

But of course they were, so I strapped myself in like a pilot does, and I set my seat just the way you're supposed to — you bring it forward off the back wall and up, up until your shin is level with the dashboard. The instructor started in asking me his questions, and I could answer every last one of them. He showed me the starter buttons, one for each engine, and I fired one up, and oh, it sounded just like the real thing. That was something, I tell you.

And then it's all by the numbers, and the numbers I had cold. Taking off, see, you hold her at twenty percent — any more than that and your tail drags on you. And you want to be off the ground at a hundred and eighty knots, because past that the tires take on too much heat under all that weight, and you can blow them right out. Those tires, now — they get so hot that an hour after you've landed you still can't lay a bare hand on them. You can see them smoking. That's how hot they get, from all that weight coming down.

Coming down in a 737 you don't want to be going any faster than a hundred and forty knots, or you can snap your landing

gear clean off. That's just exactly what happened to a plane in Toronto a long while back. Came in too fast, broke the gear, and flipped right over. Nobody got killed on that one — a couple folks banged up, but they were all right. I try to be down to a hundred and thirty at least. And turning, now, you never bank her more than thirty percent, or she starts losing altitude on you.

So the instructor shows me the autopilot — three buttons, that's the whole of it — and pushes me into it, and there I am, flying along on the autopilot. And then, half by accident I'll admit it, I turned her around and brought her down and landed clean in Vancouver. The fellow looked at me and said, "Congratulations. I couldn't have done that any better myself." But you know, when I got home that day I was literally sick. Sick to my stomach over it.

"Grandma, honey," I said, "why didn't you warn me — a thing like that, I'd have got myself ready in my head a little."

No warning, nothing, just like that. It was a bit too much for the brain all at once.

I went back to the simulator, though. Sure I did. Another time, over in Richmond, the instructor set me up to take off out of Seattle, and I flew her in the simulator all the way to Vancouver, and I says to him, "Leave the landing to me, I'll bring her in." And I set her down nice, a real nice landing. And he looked over at me and said, "You can't convince me that you're not a pilot." Now that one I carry around with me. And I'll tell you honest, I believe to this day that if a big plane was ever in real trouble up there, I could go up to the front and handle her, because I know all the procedures. I do. I know them.

There's a great deal to it people never think about. See, once you come in close to the airport, the tower's got complete control of you — they're telling you constantly which way to turn, what heading to take, telling you when you're coming in too fast. You press your button, you dial in your numbers, and around she comes.

And even up on the autopilot you can't just sit back and leave her be — you've got to watch her and keep adjusting your heading for the curve of the earth. Say I'm flying to Japan: I take off out of Vancouver pointed straight west, but the plane doesn't hold straight, she wants to bend away up to the northwest, so I'm forever correcting her. Toronto's another one — I take off at nought-point-six degrees and I come in on Toronto at over a hundred and twenty, because Toronto lines up down toward California, the way he explained it to me. So I'm constantly having to go and adjust the autopilot the whole way. The only one that doesn't need it is Los Cabos over to Honolulu — that one's near enough straight west, and you don't touch a thing. And at the busy ones — Chicago, now, or New York, or Atlanta — you don't even expect to land your first time through. There's just too many planes. The one ahead of you isn't off the runway yet, so the tower waves you around, "Go around, go around," and sometimes I've had to do it twice before they'd let me down.

One time I took my son Michael into the simulator with me, over at Abbotsford. The instructor — Strucker, his name was — sits Michael down and says, "You're the co-pilot now, you sit right there beside your dad and he'll tell you what to do." See, that's the whole idea of the co-pilot — when the one pilot's busy with the flying, the other fellow takes it over so the first can do his work. And here's a thing: the slower you come in on your final approach,

the less air there is moving over her, so you lose that steady airflow, and you've just got to sit there and hold her by hand, full power, holding her steady the whole way down.

Not every day of it was a good one. There was the one session I didn't enjoy at all — the instructor there was brand new, only been at it a month, an experienced commercial fellow out of New Zealand, but he was too fast for me, just not the right teacher. He had me set up in Toronto, and I knew that airport cold. I asked him, "Which runway are we on, three-three right or three-three left?" And we ran what they call touch-and-go, where you touch your wheels down and lift straight back off, over and over. He couldn't get over it, that I knew all the numbers. See, up until about a year ago I had every runway memorized. Vancouver, now, coming in from the east, that's twenty-six left and twenty-six right; coming in from the west it's the other pair, zero right and zero left. And Calgary, from the north it's seventeen left and seventeen right, and from the south the other end of those same runways, zero-five left and zero-five right. I don't carry all that in my head anymore — the tower tells me where to go now, and once I'm down a blue guideline comes up and takes me right to the gate. But it's all timed, every bit of it, all of it. If your timing's off, that guideline isn't there for you, and you can run into real trouble out on the runway if you don't follow the pattern.

The 737 now, the Dreamliner, I fly her no trouble at all — I get her into the autopilot just fine. But there's an older plane on there I could never master. I can't ever seem to push the right button to get her into the autopilot, and once she's locked in I can't break her back out of it. I lose control of her, and down I go. Right away. I crash.

And that's just what happened to those poor fellows — those two Boeing crashes I listened to on the YouTube, the new 737 MAX, one over in Indonesia and one in Africa not long after. The plane had a system on it that read the nose wrong and kept pushing it down on them, down and down, and the pilots couldn't get the better of it, couldn't wrestle her back, and down they went, the both of them. Boeing made a big booboo there, a big one — cost them billions, all those people gone. The computer wouldn't let them back out. Same as me on that old plane.

There's one other thing on the simulator I've never been able to crack, and that's the GPS. Cannot get into it. A buddy of mine told me which button I'm supposed to push for the GPS, and I've tried it, tried it just like he said, and it doesn't work for me. There's some other trick to it I haven't figured out yet.

I learned one thing on the real simulator I never knew before, too. It's the spoilers and the engine reverse, and how they work together on the touchdown. The spoilers, those are the flaps that stand straight up on the wing. Now here's the part I didn't know until he showed me: there's just the one lever you click in a little bit beforehand, you arm it, and then the minute the wheels touch, it all happens on its own. Up come the spoilers, automatic, and the engine reverse comes on too, automatic, the both of them, all off that one lever. You don't do a thing. I never knew that till then.

And you know, even the real pilots have to go into those simulators twice a year, the whole day long, and run through every emergency procedure there is, so the airline can be sure they'll

do the right thing when the time comes. Twice a year, every year. That tells you something.

...

We went on a tour of the Boeing plant one time, and I'll never forget it. You go through real tight security to get in there — one checkpoint at the main building, and then another one before they'll even let you onto the factory floor. And no cameras allowed, none. One fellow got brave and hung back and snapped himself a picture anyway, and the tour lady, she was right onto him — went over and took his camera and all his film away from him on the spot. Just like that.

That lady, she figured me out pretty quick. She could see my whole mind was on the flying, that it's all I was thinking about the entire time. And she told me straight out, you should have come and asked us for a job — you'd have been hired on the spot, because that's exactly the kind of person Boeing's looking for, somebody whose mind is all about flying. Well, that stayed with me, I'll tell you.

And the building itself, my goodness. Ninety acres it sat on. Ninety. And it had five doors on it, a hundred and twenty-five feet wide each one, so they could open her up and move the planes out. A million lights up in that place — a million — and they threw off so much heat that in the wintertime the men worked in their short sleeves with no heating at all, the lights kept it that warm. And come summer they'd swing open all five of those big doors and let the breeze come in off the ocean, and they didn't need a lick of air conditioning either. Two things stuck with me off that line. One, they paint a whole airplane in forty minutes

— the whole thing, forty minutes in the paint building. And two, they don't put the engines on until the plane's just about ready to ship out the door, and that's on purpose — the buyer doesn't have to pay for the engines until they're hung on the plane. Isn't that something. I could've stood there all day.

...

I'll tell you why I never went past the simulator, why I never trained for the real thing. It was Grandma. If she hadn't said no, I'd have done it, no question. See, she got it into her head that if I went up as a pilot, why, it was as good as me trying to commit suicide. And I told her, "Honey, more people die down here on the ground from the drink than ever die up in the air — I won't go one minute sooner up there than I'd go right here. Why are you so afraid?" But the real thing underneath it, the truth of it, was the money. Real pilot training, that costs too much, way too much. So I let it go. And I'd put it this way, you know: it shows a good marriage, to give a thing like that up. A good marriage comes before the flying. That's how it is.

And I'll tell you something else, looking back on it now. I was very successful at what I did with my life, the framing, the building, all of it. And I don't know — I honestly don't know — if I'd have been so successful had I gone and become a pilot. Maybe I would have, maybe I wouldn't. But the life I built, the way it went, it worked out. It worked out just fine.

...

So I'm a passenger now, and I've made my peace with that, and I still love every bit of it. We've done a lot of flying down

to Mexico over the years — Puerto Vallarta the most, maybe six times, and that's my favorite of the whole lot; Los Cabos and Mazatlán three or four times each, and Cancun in there too. Cancun's the one I don't care for, I'll be honest. It's a freaking long flight for one thing, six hours out of Vancouver, and the time we went we landed smack in the middle of a thunderstorm, and it stayed windy and cold near the whole trip. My favorite airports, now? Vancouver and San Francisco, and then those Mexico ones — Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, Cancun, Mazatlán. That last one's a smaller one, quieter, not so busy, and I like that.

I've never flown the first class, mind you. It's just not affordable, way too dear. I've got a friend, John Tanraby, and he flies it down to Mexico, and he pays around three thousand dollars for that first-class seat — more than the resort costs him. Not for me, no. And my taste in it has changed anyhow as I've got older. Four hours, that's about all I want in a plane now. I always used to take the window seat, but not anymore — I'll take the aisle, where I can stretch my legs out a bit. The plane gets there just the same either way, you know, and what is there to see out the window? You're up so freaking high there's nothing to look at down there anyhow.

The airlines have changed too. I've watched Flair come up from nothing — they're into Abbotsford four or five times now, more than WestJet even. The family flew Flair out the Christmas they came to see us.

And flying with us was never a dull thing, I'll tell you. Our very first trip down to Mexico turned into a whole saga. We were meant to go Alaska down to Seattle, and there was just no plane — they made some announcement about a problem with it, and one fellow stood right up and said, "They're lying to us," and you

know, he was right. There simply weren't enough passengers to bother running it. So they put us on Delta through Portland, and there was a shuttle waiting for us, and a motel, and they gave us our choice of a breakfast or thirty dollars U.S. We took the thirty. And our Eric, now, he was seventeen or eighteen then, and he'd stayed back to play a hockey game — so after his game he had to find his own way through all that rerouting, got himself his own motel and everything, and met up with us clear down in Los Angeles. We walked onto the plane, and there he was, sitting in it. Another time, years on, we were running late — there'd been an accident on the highway, traffic stopped dead, and then we ended up in the wrong parking lot at the airport — and we missed our nine-thirty by ten minutes. Couldn't catch it. But they bumped us onto the eleven o'clock, and that one put us right in the section behind first class, where you get your drinks and all of it for free. So it worked out better than if we'd been on time, didn't it.

I've been on a real plane twice, too, where she had to break off her takeoff partway and try it all again. A thing like that, you don't forget. You're rolling and rolling, picking up your speed, and then all of a sudden she eases right off and slows herself down, and you're sitting there wondering what in the world has gone wrong now.

But mostly it's smooth, and mostly I just settle in. That's the thing of it now — I take my aisle seat, I stretch out my legs, and I let somebody else fly her. I know every bit of what's going on up front, every number, every turn the tower's calling for, and there's a kind of peace in that, riding along and knowing. I never did get to the controls of a real one. But I get to go up. And I'll tell you, from right there in that seat, I love it just the same.

CHAPTER V

I BOUGHT THE DRESS FIRST

This is the boldest thing John ever did, and he still shakes his head to tell it. Two years after the letters had stopped, he woke before dawn one morning with a certainty he could not explain, borrowed the money on a handshake, and — before he had the faintest idea whether the girl would even see him — walked into a store and bought her a wedding dress.

What follows is a gamble told with all the suspense it earns: a man flying four nights across the world not knowing what he is flying into, a lie told to his face, and a rival he never knew was standing there. He kept a back door open the entire way — a plan to slip home unseen if the answer was no. Read on to learn why he never had to use it.

...

BY that summer I had given up. That is the plain truth of it. I had not heard from her in over a year — the letters had dried right up, one by one and then nothing — and all around me my friends were pairing off and getting married, one after another,

and I would stand back from it and see, all of a sudden, what I had turned into. A loner. That was the word for it. A fellow who had quietly gone off by himself and stopped expecting anything from anybody.

And then one morning it came over me. The tenth of August, 1968, a Wednesday, five o'clock in the morning — I can give you the hour, that is how clear it was. I was up at that hour and my dad called me in to drink *mate* with him, the way we did, and I sat there at the table with the cup going around and my mind just went, all on its own, down to Paraguay. To her. I woke up and I knew, the way you know a thing that has been decided somewhere below where you do your thinking, in a place you do not have a say in: I was going back down there. Not maybe, not someday. I was going to find out for myself, with my own eyes, whether she was still to be had — and if I had to cross the whole world on borrowed money to do it, then that is what I would do. I got up from the *mate* and went into the kitchen and told my dad what I meant to do, and by noon that same day I had already bought my ticket.

There was no money for it. There never was, in those days. So I went to a man I sang with in the choir, Jack Fries, and I laid it out for him straight, no dressing on it.

“Jack,” I said, “I’d like to go down and get married and I need fifteen hundred dollars. Would you co-sign for me?”

“Sure,” he said. Just like that. A handshake and a signature, and a man’s good word standing behind mine at the bank.

There was one thing that held me up before I could go. Because I was a Canadian, I needed a visa to get into the country, and Paraguay was the only place at that time that made you have

the thing in hand before you landed — everywhere else you got it right there at the airport when you came in, but not Paraguay. So the travel agent took my passport and sent it away down to San Francisco, where there was a Paraguayan consulate, and there was nothing to do but wait on it. He sent it off on the Wednesday, and it came back to me the following Monday. That is why I could not just up and go the day I decided. I had to sit on my hands from the Wednesday to the Monday, waiting on a stamp in a book, and I flew out that Monday night the minute it was in my hand.

And then I did a thing that still makes me shake my head to tell it. Before I had so much as set foot on the airplane, before I knew one way or the other whether she would even see me, I went into a store in Clearbrook and I bought a wedding dress. A real nice one. I think I paid sixty-five dollars that time. I figured, *I think it'll fit her*, and I bought it. A grown man on borrowed money, flying off to the other end of the earth after a girl who had not written him in two years, and the first serious thing he buys is the dress she is going to wear if she says yes. You can call that foolish. I have called it that myself, many a time, and laughed about it. But the truth is I had already decided, down where the decisions get made, the same place the morning of the tenth of August had come from. Buying the dress was just me catching up to what I already knew.

I flew out that Monday night on Air Canada, lifted off from Vancouver at eleven minutes past eight, and then it was flight after flight the whole night through — Vancouver to Toronto, and Toronto on to New York, and from New York straight down to Paraguay. I flew the whole way knowing nothing. Very nervous, I was, the whole time, sitting up there in the dark with no notion in the world what I was flying into — whether she was free or

spoken for, whether she would so much as see me. Four nights I went without proper sleep by the time I came down out of the sky. I came in on a small plane and put down a good way off from where she lived, fifteen, eighteen kilometres out, and I will tell you why I set it up that way. I had given myself a back door. If I found out she was taken, I meant to turn straight around and go home and never once let on that I had been there. Nobody would ever have known I came at all.

I put up at the Mennonite Motel in Asunción, and it was no sooner than I walked in that there was a whole bunch of fellows I knew from before, and every one of them wanting to know the same thing right off — what was the reason I had come back? I kept my mouth shut. “Oh, just come to visit,” I told them, and left it at that. I did not breathe a word of the real reason to a soul. There was a woman came into my room there at that motel, too, a Lisa Fung, and she sat and asked me all kinds of questions. I thought nothing of it at the time. It was only long after that I put it together — her, and another lady back in Vancouver, a woman my own age, who just before I left had come out and given me a hint, asked me straight why on earth I was going all the way to Paraguay, and told me flat that she herself was available. I never once caught any of it. Not then. That is what being a loner does to a man — every one of those roads was standing open and I walked right past them without so much as a glance, never dreaming a single one of those women had the least interest in me.

And then, the very minute I came down out near her colony, there was a man I knew from before — a fellow who knew Nettie well, too. So I pulled him aside, quiet, and I asked him straight out.

“Do you know Nettie Dueck? Does she have a boyfriend?”

“No,” he said. “No, I don’t think so.”

And on the strength of that one word I went to her.

The whole truth of it was not so tidy, and I only pieced it together later on. In those two years of no letters, neither one of us had stood still. I’d taken up with a girl back in Canada, and she’d had a fellow of her own down there. Nobody had been sitting home pining. But there was this one thing she had kept, and had said out loud to people more than once — that she thought John would come back one day. And now here I was, come back. So I went to her.

An hour later I was standing in her farmyard, and she did not know me. She stood and she looked, and she looked again. Two years and more is a long time at that age — a person fills out, a person changes — and here I was out of nowhere, no letter, no warning, no word sent ahead, just a man standing in the yard where no man was expected. It was a big surprise to her, my turning up like that.

I did not crowd her. I told her I had come to find out whether she was still interested, and that I would stay just a couple of weeks and let her think it over. I did not tell her my ticket was good for a whole year. Now her father and I, we went back a long way — he had known me from where I used to work, and he would come around the place to visit with me, and he had thought the world of me for years. That man treated me like royalty. He always did reckon I was a king, and when I turned up in his yard out of nowhere there was nobody on this earth more pleased about it than him. The King himself, he made out, had come down to Paraguay.

And then we courted, and it went fast, the way a thing goes when it has been dammed up two years and the dam breaks. We dated three weeks, every night of them. Every night. But I will not tell you it ran all smooth in my own heart, because it did not. That first week, every single night, my mind was thrown all over the place. Maybe I should leave. Maybe I had made a mistake in coming at all. I did not feel comfortable, and I could hear it in the way she talked to me. She was not the girl I had known before. How could she be. Two years gone, and in those two years I had been out in the wide world and tasted something altogether different from Paraguay, and she had been here living her own life. We were near enough strangers, the two of us, feeling our way back to one another.

And then it was her who got out ahead of me. There was never any proposal, not a real one — one night, after those three weeks, she just up and said it: “I am ready to get married.”

And I said, “All right. Let’s do it.”

That was the whole of the proposal, right there. I had meant to give her time, the couple of weeks I’d promised, and here she had already made up her own mind. We were young, the both of us, and green as grass — by her own reckoning we scarcely knew what we were doing. I had only just turned twenty-three. I had come into the country on the twentieth, walked into their yard on the twenty-first, and on the twenty-third she turned twenty-one. A pair of kids, really. But we did it. We made it. We did it.

There was a fellow already in the picture, mind you — Walter Keller. But she had told him herself, long before I ever stepped off that plane, that when John came back he was history. And her people had made up their minds besides. Her mother and father

did not leave it to chance. John, not Walter, they told her. "John is the one you marry."

So we were to be married, except there was one more wall to get over. The church down there had a rule and it would not bend it for me or for anybody. If you were not a baptized church member, they would not marry you. Now I belonged to my church back in Canada in good standing, so there was nothing for it but to write away home for a letter that said so, and then wait for that letter to make its slow way down to us. And waiting on the mail, of all things. The mail was the very thing that had torn us apart in the first place, those letters my mother took off the box. Now here we were at the end of it, the two of us promised to each other at last, and once again everything hung on an envelope finding its way across the world. We got engaged the beginning of September, a Sunday it was, with a party for it at her mother and father's place, a whole crowd of folks invited over to mark the day. And then we had to wait until the eighteenth of October to get married, because nobody would marry us before then. It all came down to a piece of paper coming through the mail to say that I was who I said I was, and a free man, and good to marry. It came, in the end.

So there it was. I had woken up one morning with nothing but a certainty, borrowed the money on a handshake, bought the dress before I'd even seen her face, flown four nights across the world on a year-long ticket I never let her see, and landed not knowing whether she was free. And now the last envelope had come through, and we were engaged, the both of us, and the date was set. The girl who had not written me in two years was going to be my wife. I had gone back down there to find out for myself,

with my own eyes, and I had my answer. She was to be had after all. I had won her.

Now getting married and getting her home to Canada were two different mountains, and I had not thought hard enough about the second one. All through those months I got around on a motorbike. I had borrowed that fifteen hundred and come down with about five hundred of my own, that was all the money I had, the rest of it borrowed, and some of the borrowed money I put straight into a brand-new bike so the two of us could go and visit back and forth. It did the job for a while. Then in January I sold it again, and I lost some money on it in the selling — that is how those things go when you buy new and sell used, and I was in no position to be losing money on anything.

Because the truth was I owed fifteen hundred dollars, and there was no way on this earth I could pay a debt like that from Paraguay. Fifteen hundred was a lot of money down there, more than a man could dig his way out from under. So it had to be Canada. But Nettie did not want to move. Not at first. I put it to her plain — “There is no way I can pay what I owe from here” — and she turned it over a long time before, all of a sudden, she came around.

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “Let’s move on to Canada.” And the minute she said it, her mother and father decided they would come too. Soon as she was going, the whole family was going.

We got married the eighteenth of October and we stayed on until February. And then it came time to leave, and I want to tell you it was a sad thing. She had never once been on an airplane in her life, and here she was climbing on one to fly clean out of the only country she had ever known, leaving her whole family

behind her. Her father came all the way to Asunción to say his goodbye to her there. She was so close with that man. That was the hard part, watching the two of them, because I knew what he was to her.

And before we ever reached a plane there was the road. Where she lived in the colony out in the Chaco it was four hundred kilometres to the capital, to Asunción, and that ride took the better part of twelve hours. The roads were not paved then the way they are now — it is all paved now, just like here — but back then it was dirt the whole way, and bumpy, very bumpy. Twelve hours of it before we so much as saw an airport.

Then we flew all night. We lifted off from Rio de Janeiro at one o'clock in the night and flew ten hours to New York, and from New York on to Toronto, and then four hours more from Toronto out to Vancouver. New York is where we near about froze to death. I had only a light suit jacket on me, that was all I had, and she had just a sweater, and there was deep snow piled up outside. It was so cold in New York. And she was carrying our first one by then, expecting, and her feet had swelled up so bad she could not get them into her shoes — could not get them into anything at all. The way she tells it, she was near enough barefoot going through that airport, just a pair of flip-flops on her feet in the snow and the cold, because there was nothing else her feet would go into.

Toronto was where they let her into the country, and it was a short thing, quicker than you would think for all the worry I had put into it. The airline had somehow given her only a visa to land, nothing more. But we walked into the officer's office and he asked me a couple of questions — had I applied for her before, he wanted to know, and I told him I had, three times over, and

been turned away every time and told to just come and marry her. He asked, and I answered, and he said, "You're free to go." And then he turned to Nettie, very polite, very kind, and he asked her, "How do you like Canada?" And she did not know how to answer him. How could she. She had only just that minute set foot in it. He grabbed his stamp and he stamped her passport, and we went.

Her family came the following May, in 1969. By then Nettie and I were living in Vancouver, and when her people came they went straight to Abbotsford — into the very same farmhouse where my own family had lived before them. They had a big family, same as we'd had, so they needed a big house, and there it was, standing ready. We went out to see them plenty. And that July, the eighth of July, our Eric was born, so her mother and father had come in time to be here for it and to meet him after.

I will not paint it prettier than it was. When I came back with her, if I had had the money in my pocket to do it, I believe I would have turned right around and gone back to Paraguay. Nettie was not received the way she should have been by my mother and dad. And the whole picture just looked so dark to me. No money. No nothing. I could not see through it, could not for the life of me figure how the two of us were going to make it. But we hung in there. We hung in there, and we moved on.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT MATTERS IS AFTER

The wedding, when it finally came, was taken from Nettie: a hard church rule put her in her plain baptism dress instead of the pink one John had carried five thousand miles, and it grieved her the rest of her life. He never did make it right, and he does not pretend to. But from it he draws the truest thing he knows about marriage, and it gives this chapter its title. The wedding does not matter. What matters is the after.

So this is the after — the broke, unglamorous, quietly heroic early years. A pregnant girl in flip-flops in the New York snow. Forty-eight flats of raspberries picked the day before her first child came. A cupboard so bare her own brother went and bought the groceries. Listen, above all, for the thing John insists on hardest: that none of the life that followed would exist without her.

...

WE were married on the eighteenth of October, out on the farm, and the whole thing was got up by her mother and

father and the neighbours. That was how it was done down there. The bride's people planned the wedding, and the neighbourhood made the food, everybody cooking and carrying it over and setting it out together, the way the whole community pitched in for a thing like that. There was no party, mind you. There was no such thing as a wedding party in those days, not down there. There was the pastor, and there were the vows, and there were the two of us, and that was a wedding. We did not know it any other way, so we did not feel cheated of anything. That was just what a wedding was.

But there was one thing about that day that I have never been able to make right, and it broke her heart, and it stayed broken about it the rest of her life.

I had carried that dress for her all the way from Canada, the one I bought before I ever got on the airplane. It was a beautiful thing. A real nice pink one, the skirt all poofy, and when she put it on it fit her snug, because she was so slight a thing, a hundred and ten pounds and not an ounce over. Oh, she looked beautiful in it. That was the dress she was going to be married in. That was the dress she had her heart set on.

And her father said no.

"You are not wearing that," he said. "You are putting on your baptism dress."

Because that was the rule of the church down there — and it was a hard, foolish rule. Nobody could be married unless they were baptized, I have said that part, but it went further than that. You had to be married in the very dress you were baptized in. Those were the rules, and I will call them what they were. They were Pharisee rules. Every last thing was a rule with that church,

the way it was with the Pharisees, rules on top of rules and no heart left in any of them. So she put away the pink dress I had carried five thousand miles, and she stood up in her baptism dress, and the day that was supposed to be hers was taken from her by a rule. It destroyed the whole day for her. She could not even be happy. She told me, years after, that she had always dreamt of a nice wedding, and that it never happened, and then she would say, “And it’s okay.” But it was not okay. I knew it was not. A man knows when a thing has gone into his wife and stayed there.

We had the whole wedding recorded, what there was of it, and we sent the recording up to Canada. And I told my brother plain, “Do not ever erase this, do not ever get rid of it.” And he threw it in the garbage. All of it. There was nothing left. As for photographs, there were hardly any, and the few we had were terrible, the kind nobody wants to look at, because nobody had a proper camera in those days. They did not have it then the way they have it now. So there is almost nothing left of that day to hold in your hand. A bad rule, a thrown-out tape, a handful of poor photos. That is the whole record of it.

But I will tell you what I have come to think about all that, and it is the truest thing I know about getting married. The wedding does not matter. It does not. What matters is the after. What matters is what you build once the one day is over and the rest of the days start coming. That is the part nobody plans for you and nobody can take away.

So let me tell you about the after.

We had six months in Paraguay yet, the two of us, married now and on our own. I kept the job I’d always had, the good one — it was a big industrial place where all the people brought in

their cotton and their peanuts to be cleaned and made ready and shipped off out of the country. I ran a machine there that cleaned the cotton seed and got it ready for making the cotton oil. It paid well, that job. We had our own place — we rented at first, and then later we moved into her uncle's old house out on the farm, and there I think we lived for nothing at all.

And I will be honest about those first married months, because there is no sense telling it any other way. They were not very exciting. A young man marries with a certain idea in his head, that now he is the husband, and the husband is the boss, and that is simply the arrangement. And then he finds out. He finds out he is not the boss of anything. I heard a preacher say it once, years later, and it landed on me like it had been written about my own life. To be called the lord of your house, it has to be earned. You do not get it handed to you with the ring. You earn it, and the way you earn it is respect, and respect goes both directions or it does not go at all. I did not know that at twenty-three. I learned it. The cold feet I'd had back in those first dating weeks, the maybe-I-should-leave of it, had its echo here too, in the early going of being married, where more than once I was not sure I had done the right thing. But you hang in there. That is the whole secret, if there is one. You hang in there and you let the after do its work.

Then it was time to bring her home, and that was its own hard thing, because home for me meant tearing her away from everything she had. She did not want to go. I do not blame her one bit. But I sat her down and I told her the plain arithmetic of it: there was no way on this earth I could pay back what I owed from down there. Fifteen hundred dollars was a fortune in Paraguay. The debt was in Canada and the wages to kill it were in Canada, and so we had to be in Canada. And finally, all of a sudden one

day, she said it. “Yeah. Okay. Let’s go to Canada.” And once she said yes, her own mother and father made up their minds to come too, and follow along after us, once we had gone on ahead and got ourselves settled.

She had never been on an airplane in her life. And leaving was very sad for her, because she was going on ahead of them all — flying off to Canada with me that February, her whole family still standing there in Paraguay behind her. Her parents and the rest would not come until that May, a few months on. She was close with her father, closer than close, and he came all the way to Asunción to say his goodbye to her there. That was a hard thing to watch, the two of them. I knew something about it myself, what it is to be carried up into the sky away from your people.

Getting to the city was a journey in itself. From the colony out in the Chaco to the capital was four hundred kilometres, and it took us about twelve hours on the bus, because the roads then were not paved the way they are now — it was dirt the whole way, and it was rough, bumpy, every kilometre of it. And then the flying, which went all through the night. We lifted off out of Rio de Janeiro at one o’clock in the morning and flew ten hours to New York, and from New York up to Toronto, and from Toronto another four hours clear across to Vancouver.

New York is where we just about froze to death, the both of us. I had nothing on but a light suit jacket — that was the whole of my protection against it — and she had only a sweater, and we stepped out into a New York winter with the snow piled up deep all around, and it was bitter, bitter cold. We had come from the Chaco, you understand. We did not own the kind of coat a place like that asks for. And she was carrying our first child by then, six months along, and her feet had swollen up so bad she could not

get her shoes on at all. So she went through that whole airport in a pair of flip flops. Six months pregnant, a hundred and ten pounds, sick as she'd been the first three months of it, shuffling through the cold in flip flops because her feet would not fit her shoes. That is how my wife came to Canada.

The last gate was Toronto, where they let her into the country, and after all my worrying it was the smallest thing in the world. The airline had only given her some kind of a visa to land, not the full papers — I had tried three separate times to apply for her properly before we ever left, and three times they had waved me off, told me it was a lot of paperwork and money for nothing, that marrying her was the simpler road. So I had married her and brought her, and now here we were in front of the officer in Toronto. He took us into his office and he asked me a couple of questions — had I applied for her before, that sort of thing — and I answered him, and he reached over and got his stamp and stamped her passport and said, “You’re free to go.” That was it. That was the whole of it.

And the one thing he asked her, very politely, was, “How do you like Canada?”

And the poor girl did not know how to answer him. She had been in the country about five minutes. She had no idea yet whether she liked it. We brought her into Canada on the sixteenth of February.

And I would love to tell you that the hard part was behind us then. It was not. It was just getting started.

My own mother and father did not receive her well. I will not dress that up. They let her know, and they let her know plainly, that she was not welcome — and this was a girl six months preg-

nant who had just left everything she'd ever known on the far side of the world. I tell you, if I'd had the money in my pocket to do it, I'd have turned us both straight around and flown back to Paraguay. That is the honest truth of how it sat with me. The whole picture just looked dark. No money. No nothing. I could not see through it — could not see how on God's earth we were going to make it. But we hung in there. We always hung in there.

We did not stay under my parents' roof but about two weeks before we got ourselves out. We had to borrow even to do that, a hundred and fifteen dollars, borrowed, just to put down the first rent on a basement suite. From there it was a couple of months in that basement, and then off to Vancouver for seven months for the work, and then back again to Abbotsford, because that is where the work finally was and where all our people were.

The good work in Vancouver came the way most of the good things in my life came, out of nowhere, by a phone call. There was a man named Harry Jansen who I had worked alongside before, and he rang me up from Vancouver one day and said, "John, I'm looking for a carpenter — can you be in Delta tomorrow morning?"

And I said, "Hold it, hold it now. Hold it right there."

Because there was a wall in front of me before I could say yes to anything, and the wall was this: we had no car. None. Here was the work I needed, the good work, and a man asking me to stand on a job in Delta come morning, and I had no way on earth to get myself there. So the first thing I had to do was not think about the job at all. The first thing I had to do was figure out how a man with nothing gets his hands on a car by tomorrow. And somehow

I scratched it together. We did get one piece of luck setting up, I'll say that. A family that was moving back to Paraguay wanted shed of everything they owned, a whole suite of furniture for next to nothing, and the apartment along with it, so we took the lot off their hands and walked into a furnished place we could afford. I drove to Delta in my father's car to start, and once we were living out in Vancouver those bosses did me one better still — they had a work van, and they handed me the keys to it. "Pick us up in the morning," they said, "drop us off at night, and the rest of the time she's yours. Drive to Abbotsford whenever you like." That was the kind of men they were. Harry Jansen's crew. They were very, very good to me.

We had nothing and we owed everything. By the time it all stacked up — the trip, the setting up, and then a brand-new car bought on borrowed money, a Maverick — I was eight thousand dollars into the bank, and I had not one thing to show for it except a pregnant wife. We were that broke, flat broke, the kind of broke where her own brother came by, took one look, and said, "You guys have no food" — and he was right, there was nothing in the place — and he got in his car and drove to the store and bought us our groceries. That is where we were starting from.

And here is the thing I want set down, because it is the most important thing in the whole story and it is not me. If it was not for her, we would not be sitting in a house like this today. You have to have a wife who is with you all the way, and I had one. She was a worker like you have never seen — a workaholic, the real article. The day before our Eric was born she was out picking raspberries over in Abbotsford, and she picked forty-eight flats of them. Forty-eight. We were living over near Vancouver then, for the work, but the raspberries were an Abbotsford thing, and

a woman that far along, the day before her first child comes, picking forty-eight flats. And she could deal with anybody. She would get the banker himself on the telephone and go right at him over the interest — what's the rate, five and a half, and she'd come straight back with, "Sure, you're already robbing everybody else, now you want to rob us too?" I could swing a hammer. She could do all the rest of it.

And the strangest, best thing happened to her once she was here. The girl who had not wanted to come, who I'd half had to talk into it — once she got to Canada she changed, and she changed fast. She became a different woman almost overnight. Happy. Happy from the first day, near enough. If I had ever come to her later and said, "Let's go back, let's move home to Paraguay," she would have said, "No, not on your life." She loved it here. She loved it from day one. And my own mother and father, the same ones who would not make her welcome at the start — they came all the way around in the end, every inch of the way. My father, before it was over, said it straight out: that Nettie was the best daughter-in-law they had.

Her own people made it up here that May, the whole family of them, just as they'd decided to back in Paraguay the day she said yes to me. They settled right into Abbotsford — into the very farmhouse my own big family had lived in before, because they were a big family too and needed the room — and we went back and forth between us all the time after that. They got here that spring, and our boy came that summer. We were still over near Vancouver ourselves then, the two of us, on account of the work — it was the fall, the first of October, before we got ourselves back to Abbotsford for good. So Eric came to us over there, not here. He was born the eighth of July. All through the waiting, people

kept asking me what I was hoping for, a boy or a girl, and I had the only answer a man ought to have. “My wish is a healthy baby.” That was the whole of my wish.

And here is a thing that came around lately, all these years on, that I have to set down because of that pink dress. Somebody in the family got to talking about a vow renewal — that you can do such a thing, stand up again after a whole lifetime and say the words over. The picture they painted was the whole picture: a pink dress for her at last, and a backyard, and me grabbing hold of a microphone and saying my piece, and everybody there to see it. Reclaim the day, was the idea of it. Take back the moments that got taken. I sat there and I could hardly take it in. I had never once in my life thought of such a thing. Not once. All such ideas — where do people even get them. But my wife, she heard it out, and she had one word for it. “Wonderful.” That was what she said. Wonderful. There is a couple we know who went and did that very thing, renewed their own vows years down the road. I don’t know that we ever will. But I know she wanted a nice wedding once and never got it, and I know that after sixty years of the after, the idea of standing her up in a pink dress and doing it right could still put the word *wonderful* in her mouth.

That is the after. That is the part that mattered. Not the dress she did not get to wear, not the tape my brother threw out, not the photos nobody can stand to look at. The forty-eight flats of raspberries. The hundred-and-fifteen-dollar basement. The groceries her brother bought us when the cupboard was bare. The girl in the flip flops who became the happiest woman in Canada. You build it from there, out of nothing, the two of you, and one day you turn around and there is a whole life standing behind you. The wedding does not matter. What comes after is everything.

CHAPTER VII

NOBODY WANTS THE JOBS I DO

John built with his hands for more than half a century, and this is the chapter where you get to watch him work. He came up through the framing trade in the middle of a housing boom, went out on his own when his father pushed him to it, and put up better than two hundred houses he can still name from the road.

It is a chapter about craft and pride and the price a body pays — the cold, the heat, the one house that came out a full foot out of square and the lesson it burned into him for life. It wanders, the way a working life wanders, through a backhoe business and a dairy farm and a long-running quarrel with the engineers. Underneath all of it is a man who could never quite stop, and who is, even now, still taking the jobs nobody else will do.

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FOR four years I worked for other men, and then my dad pushed me out on my own.

My dad came to Canada too, same as the rest of us. Him and I, in 1971, we started off together — construction, framing, the two of us. Partners for a couple of years. And then all of a sudden I went on my own, but he still worked for me after that, right up until the work got too hard for him. So he was my boss from the very beginning, and then I was his. Funny how that turns around on a man.

There was one house we built over in Chilliwack where the whole thing turned right on its head. For those two weeks my dad was there, he lived in the trailer we'd set up, and I lived on the job site itself, in the new house we were putting up. And on that one I was his helper. His helper. After all those years of him working for me, there I was fetching and carrying for the old man again, and I didn't mind it one bit.

I'll tell you something about him I've carried my whole life. In all those years he worked alongside me, day in and day out, I do not remember the man ever once having to yell at me. Not once. The only thing he ever said to me, over and over, wasn't a rebuke at all — it was, "John, slow down. John, slow down." That's all. Because I'd work myself too hard, and he could see it. I have nothing bad to say about that man. Nothing. I never did.

The wanting to surprise him, that went back a long way before any framing. I was a boy of twelve, working in the bush, and I got the idea I'd go chop a great pile of firewood. So in two days I took the axe to it, chopped it all and hauled it out and built the loads up on the wagon — huge loads, loads you wouldn't believe a boy could pull. That's how I always liked to surprise him. It never left me.

My dad wasn't the only partner I had in those early days. Before I went out on my own for good, a fellow from Mission came up to me around 1970, '71, and said, "John, what if you and I go out framing together." So we did. We framed a house for seventeen hundred and sixty dollars, and we got a duplex right away after it. Then one day he shows up to the job with a helper along, and he'd never once talked to me about it. That set me off right there. And it got worse. There came a stretch of bitter cold, and the arrangement turned into this — I'd be out framing in the cold while he finished off inside where it was warm. I'd had enough. I quit. That was the end of that.

I could put up foundation forms faster than anybody. There was a fellow I worked with, Abe Shirley, and the two of us made a team you wouldn't believe. On that crew we'd put up forms for foundations by the kilometre, and I could beat every man there. We'd slap those forms up — bang, bang, bang, bang — and never have to say a word to each other. We just knew. That kind of thing you can't teach a man. Abe was a fine fellow and a hard worker, a Mennonite from my own church — he'd come up out of Paraguay too, same as me, only from a different colony, the one they called Fernheim. He was a good bit older than I am, and he's passed on now.

The last stretch of working for other men came through a couple of framing contractors here, George Freed and Jake Curling. I'd been up in Vancouver framing with a partner, and then he quit the framing, and there I was on a job with the thing coming apart under me. Freed and Curling needed an experienced framer, and they asked me. So I started in with them, and I worked for them a good year and better. That was the year that got me ready. After that I went on my own.

Then my dad opened the door to going out on my own for good. He was doing handyman work for a contractor over in Abbotsford, a fellow named Walter Froze, and Walter was looking for a framer. He had two houses lined up. So my dad put my name in, and Walter had just the one question for me.

“Do you know how to put a foundation in?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said.

And that was it. You’re on your way. That’s how I started off, and I never looked back.

I never really knew the man, to tell you the truth. He never once came around to the job site — it was a fellow named Fred Butt who looked after me, day to day, and Fred’s who I dealt with the whole time. After that one conversation I don’t believe I ever laid eyes on Walter Froze again. But he’s the one gave me my start, and you don’t forget that.

What scared me was not those two houses. It was what came after. Nobody knew me. I’d build the two for Walter and then — then what? But I’ll tell you, another house came lined up. And then another one after that. I was always busy. I never once had to go looking for a job, and I never advertised nothing. The work just came on its own, one after the other, and it stayed that way the whole of my life.

There was a building inspector early on who liked my framing, and he’d write it right on the slip. Job well done. Then he’d staple that slip up where everybody could see it. He told me, “That’s your advertising, John.” And I suppose it was.

I had an accountant from day one. I want you to understand why. I can’t read, I can’t write, I can’t do the math — never could

— so a man like me needs somebody minding the numbers from the very start. He minded mine, and he gave me good advice. One thing he told me was, “You don’t deal with the government. They phone you, you don’t talk to them.” So when they’d call, I’d just say, “Sorry, you’ve got the wrong number,” and hang up the phone. Sent every bit of it to the accountant. That’s how I stayed out of trouble all those years.

He kept me out of another kind of trouble too. I stayed residential on purpose. Small houses. Because if you go big, and all of a sudden somebody doesn’t pay you fifty, sixty thousand dollars — that can break your back. A man can be wiped right out. So I kept it small, and I’ll tell you something — in my whole career, everybody paid me. Every single one. Nobody ever stiffed me, not once.

Part of that was being careful who I took on. When somebody I didn’t know would call wanting a price, I’d phone up their lumber supplier before I’d commit to anything. I’d ask around a little, read between the lines. And if the supplier told me, “Well, John, if you’ve got other work, don’t bother” — then I knew already. I knew right there what kind of customer that was. You learn to hear the thing a man won’t say straight out.

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I framed a lot of houses. Over two hundred of them, plus duplexes, and a thirteen-unit condo, and a ten-unit, and a six-unit, a three-plex, a commercial building, and a motel unit. And I can still tell you exactly where every one of them stands. I know each house I built. Drive me down those streets and I’ll point them out to you.

The most fun, though, the most fun of all the building, was the little houses. What they called the BC box. Those were a pleasure. The complicated ones — those were a different story, but there was a satisfaction in them too.

The most complicated house I ever did in my life was one over in Hope. None of the other contractors would even price it. That put me right in the driver's seat, because if nobody else will touch a thing, the man who can do it sets the terms. Even Eric looked at it and said to me, "Why are you taking such a headache on like that?" And he wasn't wrong to ask. But I looked at it and figured I could do it, if the price was right — so I gave a price, and I got it. And the inside of that house had a fancy set of stairs the draftsman had drawn up, and they didn't work. They just didn't. So I sat down and drew them myself, flaring them out at the bottom the way they had to go, and that's how they got built. I did things like that more than once. A draftsman draws it on paper; somebody still has to make it stand.

There was a big addition near Chilliwack — over on Fairfield Island, the east part of the town. The house that was there was only about twelve hundred square feet, and I put roughly twenty-five hundred more onto it. That one took me and one man two months. The man was a realtor, him and his wife, and I'll tell you, very nice people. Every morning they'd serve me a coffee. You get along with people like that, and you don't forget it. They were still a younger couple then, and later on the way I heard it they adopted a couple of kids — and then, I've been told, they separated and divorced a long time back. That's how it goes.

Partway through that job the lady of the house realized she needed a second staircase. Now, the ordinary thing is you send that back to the draftsman and you wait. I told her, "Don't do

that. Every morning you come to me with your list, you show me exactly what you want, and you'll have it by the end of the day." So she paid me the ten thousand, and every morning she'd come out with her list, and I built her exactly what she asked for. I had no problem with that at all. That's the way I liked to work.

The best job I ever had — well. The owners were after me, chasing me to do it. I was busy as anything and didn't really want it, so I gave them a ridiculous price. I figured there was no way on earth they'd say yes. I was ten thousand dollars higher than the next builder. And sure enough, they wanted me anyway. On that house I made two hundred dollars an hour.

That was the house on the flood zone, right down by the river. I'd given them a price off the blueprint — regular footings, just the ordinary two-foot forms. But then the engineering came back on account of the flood zone, and now it was two-foot footings and five-foot forms. That turns a job right around. What should've been three days of form work was suddenly a whole week. So I stopped the owner cold.

"Hold up, hold up," I said. "I didn't give you a price on this."

And he was a fair man — he knew it straight off. He asked me, "How much more do you want?"

I told him: "Double it."

And he did. See, forms like that we'd have had up in a day and a half at the most, and now it was a week — so you'd better be paid for it.

I'll tell you the other side of it, because there always is one. There were houses where I made eight dollars an hour while my men made twenty-five. You read that right — eight for me,

twenty-five for them. You can only do that a couple of houses in a row before something has to give, because you cannot survive on it. But for years, that's how I worked. When the times were tough you took whatever you could get — we called that *buying a job* — and I bought job after job at a loss just to keep my men busy. That's what you do. You take care of your employees. A man with a family doesn't want to hear there's no work this month.

And once, just the one time, I built a house to sell myself, and on that one I lost three thousand dollars. Other than that I did good. I probably could've built more of them. But a framer can't do both, frame and build to sell at the same time. When you build a house to sell you have to be standing right there the whole time, minding your subtrades every minute, or it gets away from you. To make money you do one thing, and you do it good.

I kept my crew small on purpose. Normally just two of us — one experienced carpenter, one helper. That's when you make the most money. The more men you've got, the more running around there is, and you lose time straight away. I had up to four working with me one stretch, and I didn't like it one bit. Things stopped getting looked after the way I wanted them. So I stayed at two. And I'll tell you, the biggest stress of the whole business was always the men. Keeping them happy, keeping them on. You're busy as anything, every job committed weeks out, and all of a sudden one of them can't come anymore — now what? You've made the promise and you've got to cover it somehow. That'll keep a man up at night more than the weather will. For my last year and a half I had just the one man — Bob Gladhill, a retired policeman, and a good, good carpenter. He was younger than me, easy to get along with, a hard worker, and a lot of fun to have on a job.

My son-in-law Ron worked for me for years, doing the finish carpentry. A very good finisher and a good worker. The two of us kept a clean site together — that was a rule on my jobs. We didn't leave a site until it was all cleaned up. Next morning you want to walk onto a clean job. I got an A from the WCB twice for keeping it that way.

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Now, I never read a code book in my life. Not once. But I knew that code book a hundred percent — picked it all up from inspectors and from talking to other builders over the years. A few times I knew it better than the inspectors did. I was a one-man frame inspector, is what I was. When you know the code that well, know exactly what you're looking for, you can police your own framing — you don't need a man coming along to catch a thing you'd have caught yourself. The trick, when you deal with inspectors all the time, is you never pretend you know everything. That's exactly how I learned it.

I learned plenty of it the hard way, mind you. There was a roof I built where the pitch came in under what you need for shingles — it has to be four-twelve or higher to put shingles on. The inspector caught it, and then he explained the whole thing to me, because I'd never had the math. Another time I built a set of winding stairs and didn't know the treads had to turn twenty degrees. The inspector had me rip the whole thing out, and then he came back and showed me how to lay them out with a square. That's how it went. You make the mistake, somebody shows you, and you've got it for life.

I knew the code well enough to push back, too. On a foundation over in Hope, an inspector told me to fill all the tie holes. Now, I knew you only have to putty a tie hole where there's a honeycomb showing through the concrete. So I pulled out the code book and showed him. I said, "No, you've got it right here." And I didn't fill them. The man was an inspector and he didn't even know his own code.

And the code kept moving on me over the years. Used to be a header over five feet needed cripples one way, then it was doubles, and now they want three jacks on each end where a wall's carrying a load. Things changed so quick on that code book. I'm honestly glad I don't frame now — I'd have a whole lot to figure out all over again.

The money's another world too. An experienced carpenter now, I've been told, gets around eighty-five dollars an hour. Do the math on that — eighty-five an hour, forty hours a week, that comes to a hundred and seventy-six thousand a year. A hundred and seventy-six thousand. That's a lot of money for a fellow swinging a hammer. And framing alone runs about ten dollars a square foot now, so a house the size of this one — call it three thousand square feet — that's thirty thousand dollars just to stand it up. And that's straight framing. No basement finished, no deck, no gables. Everything's extra, extra, extra. It's a skill not everybody has, so I suppose they can charge for it. Same as anything — when the demand's there, you charge what you want.

That's exactly where I made my money — by not paying it. When Grandma and I built our own house, if I'd had to hand the foundation and the framing off to a contractor, it would've cost me around thirty-five thousand dollars right there. Instead I did the foundations myself, framed it myself, and Grandma and I did

all the painting on top of it. That's where the money's made — you have the ability, so you don't give it away.

I thought once or twice about laying brick instead. I learned it as a boy. Back in the colony in Paraguay, when I was young, my dad and I would be up at five in the morning, on our bicycles by six, and we'd ride about sixteen kilometres each way into the city to work — six days a week, that ride. My dad built houses in that little city, and I helped him at it, and that's where he taught me to lay brick. So it was in my hands from the very start. But the precision of it scared me off. See, when you're a framer, the roofer comes behind you and covers up all your sins — every mistake you've made, nobody will ever notice. A bricklayer doesn't get that. His mistakes show. That has to be very precise, brick does, and I knew myself well enough to leave it alone.

I'll give you proof of why. The fourth house I ever framed — only the fourth, so I was still green, and my brother Peter was on the crew with me that day. I was standing out on the street looking back at the thing, and I saw something wasn't right. I couldn't have told you what yet. I just knew. It was getting on toward two in the afternoon, the floor all laid and ready for the plywood, and I said, "Hold on now, we'd best start measuring, something's going on here." Then the walls went up, and there it was. The studs wouldn't line up. The front stud, the middle stud, they should all line up dead straight, and instead there was a difference between them like this. I measured it out. The whole house was a foot out of square. A full foot.

I was sick to my stomach. Sick. I sent the boys home — I said, "Let's pick up and go," I couldn't even look at it. That same evening I went back out to the job site to tell my brother Peter what I'd found — I had to say it out loud to somebody. That was

awful. That's the one thing from all those years I still don't like to think on. And then I went away and I figured out how to save it. Here's what I did. I made dead sure the kitchen and the dining walls were square, perfectly square, because that's where the cabinets go and that's where you'd lay your linoleum, and linoleum will show you every crooked thing in a house. That's where a man would catch the error. Everywhere else — well, in those days everybody put carpet down, wall to wall, and under carpet an out-of-square never shows itself. Nobody would ever know. So I hid it where it couldn't be seen and I made it square where it counted. That house is still standing. Nobody's ever known but me.

And I learned my lesson off that house, you can be sure. After that I never trusted my own eyes again, not for square. When you check a footing you run a big long tape corner to corner — mine read out to fifty-eight feet — and from that house on I'd hold my thumb down hard on that number at the one corner, then go the other way and make dead certain my thumb came down on the very same number at the far corner. Twice, three times I'd measure it. Every single time. It was a hard way to learn a thing, but I never made that mistake again.

The work didn't always come easy. At the end of the summer of 1974 the whole market collapsed. A lot of good men were out of work all over. But I was blessed — a fellow from Vancouver was putting up a six-plex addition over in Mission, framing and all the wood siding both, and I got that job. That one carried me and my two men clear through the winter when there was nothing else going. You don't forget a job like that.

...

There was a stretch in there I wasn't framing at all. In the summer of 1974 I bought myself a backhoe business. I financed every last penny of it through the bank — twenty-seven thousand dollars, including the money to buy the insurance. That was a lot of money in those days. And almost the minute I bought it, the company my machine had been working for went bankrupt. So there sat my machine in the yard — five hundred a month in payments, and no work for it. It sat there from October clear through to March, April. Just sat there.

When the calls finally did come, the very first job I had was the most complicated subdivision I ever did. The worst one I ever took on in my life. But I did it. And I ran that business three years. In three years I had the machine paid off in full, and I had enough money set by to go buy a brand-new one.

Then I sold it. And that was the worst thing I ever did in my life — selling it. I regret it to this day, because that business made nothing but money. I'll tell you what I didn't know, too. When you sell a business, you're supposed to sell the goodwill along with it, the customer list, all of it — and then you don't pay tax on it. I didn't know that. So I just sold the machine, and I ended up paying tax that year. Because I didn't know any better. You learn these things after.

...

The weather was the hard part. The winter was the worst of it — rain and cold every single day. I'd stand at the window every morning wondering what I'd be dealing with: rain, snow, or ice. Working up on a roof with a little snow coming down, you don't know if you'll be on the ground the next minute. And there'd be

ice on the trusses, so we'd have to scrape every bit of it off before we could do a thing. The frozen lumber was the worst — I don't know how many times we cut our hands on that ice. Ice was worse than snow, always. Once it got down to about minus ten, I'd have to put the gloves on, and you cannot produce in construction with gloves. That's when it was time to go home.

August was the worst the other way. Thirty-five degrees, all the outside walls up, and you're standing there facing that plywood like you're in an oven. By the end of the day your face was near burned right off. You needed lots of water and a break now and then. The best framing was October, or April into May. I even saw snow come the first of May once, back in 1970 — a whole lay of it one morning, gone by noon when the sun came out. I've poured footings in deep April snow.

The worst people to deal with, of everybody, were the engineers. They'd try to make a man with forty, fifty years of experience look like he knew nothing at all. They'd engineer a foundation for me — tell me how much rebar to put in this wall and that one — and the half of it, to my mind, was just plain overdone. I had it out with one of them once over a wall.

"Why am I putting all this rebar in here?" I asked him.

"Oh," he says, "so it doesn't tip over."

"Tip over which way?" I said. "The dirt slopes down on the one side, there's no pressure coming from the other — so you tell me where it's going to go and tip."

He couldn't. And I told him straight: "You don't even believe it yourself. You're only saying it so you can put a little more money in your pocket." Downright stupid, is what it was. A couple of those fellows I just told flat out where to go. "You guys don't

know nothing,” I said. And the truth is it doesn’t even start with them — it comes down from people sitting in an office back in Ottawa, trying to figure out a job they’ve never once stood on. They haven’t got a clue what’s going on out there. Customers, employees, inspectors — every one of them is a kind of stress. But the engineers were the worst, and I don’t miss them.

There was one more time I left construction, and that one wasn’t about the trade at all. It was the mid-eighties. My sister lost her husband in an accident — they were dairy farming over in Greendale — and I’d always talked about how I’d love to dairy farm someday. So when he died, she came to me and said, “John, you’ve always been interested in the dairy farm. You want to jump on the boat and come along?” And that’s what I did. I quit construction and I went and helped her with that farm for about five and a half years.

Then my sister got remarried, and that’s where it went bad. The new fellow was a drifter. He thought he knew everything and he didn’t know nothing. The kind of man who ran away from home at fourteen and was all over the place after, never could hold down a job. That’s the kind he married. And after I’d run that farm five years, he comes onto it pretending he could run the place, and he treated me like I knew nothing. Him. He didn’t know nothing.

And he was filthy, which on a dairy is the one thing you cannot be. We had a rule in that office and it was a simple one — nobody walks in with dirty boots. Nobody. And here he’d come tramping in with his boots full of manure up to here, right into the office, right past the milk tank and everything. A dirty pig is what he was.

After five months of that, I had an ulcer. Five months — that's all it took. I told Grandma, "I've got an ulcer and I know exactly what to do about it. I'm not seeing a doctor. I'm just quitting my job, right now, today." And I did. And I'll tell you, that ulcer disappeared the minute I was back in construction. Gone. The other thing I came to know about myself in those years is that I'm not an animal friend. And if you're not an animal friend, you've got no business dairy farming, none — you have to be one, you have to love them, and I didn't. So I knew that about myself, and I quit.

I stayed in construction after that, right to the end. My very last job was just before Christmas. A widow down my own street had a deck all rotted out and couldn't find a soul to fix it. She called me, and I said, "You're talking to the right guy." I fixed it all up nice and painted it nice. That was the last of it, because the surgeon told me after that: "No labour, no lifting, no nothing."

I'll tell you one thing that stays with me. I built over two hundred houses in my life, and I wanted my boys to come into the business with me — carry it on. But they'd watched me all those years. They looked at me and they said, "Dad, the way you work in that weather, outside all the time — we don't want to go through what you're going through." And what could I say to that? They weren't wrong. They'd seen exactly what it took out of a man's body, and they wanted no part of it. Different strokes, I figure. Not one of them took the trade. So all those houses, and the thing dies with me.

These days I've got no competition at all. None. Because the jobs I do, nobody wants to do them. So they phone me, and I give them a price — "This is the price, take it or leave it." And that's why I'm still at it. I have fun. I'm totally on my own, nobody tells

me what to do or how to do it. I just go and have one look at the thing, and I know it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GOOD LORD DIDN'T WANT ME YET

Three times the world set itself up to kill John, and three times he walked away. A silage wagon that pulled him in by the shoe. A plank that came down on his head and put him in a coma the doctors did not expect him to leave. A truck that never slowed at a roadwork stop on his own birthday.

He reads all three as the hand of God, and he tells them with no trace of fear. It is a short, plain chapter, and the historical appendix at the back will show you just how thin the margins really were — how real the danger, and how real the rescue. What John takes from it is simple and immovable: the Good Lord did not want him yet. Whether or not you share his reading, the survival itself is a matter of record.

...

IT was a Tuesday morning, ten o'clock, and I did something that was very stupid.

We had forty-four acres of corn to cut that fall — silage corn — and the day was just getting started. Before you put a machine like that to work you go all the way around it and you grease it, every part, so nothing seizes up on you out in the field. That was what I was doing. Going around it, looking for the grease nipples one by one. The silage wagon has a conveyor belt on the front of it and a row of beaters, and the whole front of it turns and pulls and feeds. And I leaned right over the shield to get at those nipples while the beaters were turning. I should have known better. Every man on a farm knows better. But I had high shoes on that morning, and one of those long teeth caught the shoe and pulled me right in.

Sucked me right in. That fast. I knew two other men, in those years, who got caught in a wagon the very same way, and they got demolished — dead, both of them, right away. There is no time in it. Whatever is going to happen has already happened before you understand that anything is happening at all.

What saved my life was a wire. On top of the shield there was a wire stretched across the whole works, and they call it the safety wire. The idea of it is simple: the moment anything touches that wire, the machine shuts off — beaters, conveyor, all of it stops dead. As I went in, my arm flew up and hit it. I did not throw my arm up. I had no time to think a single thought. The Lord threw it up for me, and it caught that wire, and everything stopped. But by then I was already in — up to here. One of those steel bars was sticking right into my stomach. My leg was wrapped up over my head, and this foot of mine was hanging in front of my face, right in front of my eyes. And there I stayed, upside down, for almost an hour.

I was forty-one years old. I had four kids already by then. This was my sister's dairy farm, where I worked in those years, and there I hung.

So I prayed. Hanging upside down with that bar in my stomach and my own foot in my face, there is not a lot a man can do but pray, and so that is what I did. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed. And all at once I had power. Strength came into me from somewhere it had no business coming from, and I took hold of the beater and I ripped the big shear bar loose — that heavy steel — tore it right out of there. I got myself free of the conveyor belt and I dropped down onto the ground. And then I was done. I tried to move and there was nothing left in me; I could not move at all. The tractor was still running. The whole machine was still running, right there beside me, and I lay on the ground and could not get away from it.

Here is the part I have never been able to explain to anybody. Up at the house my sister heard a voice in the kitchen. A voice, telling her she had to go right down to the barn. She had no way of knowing anything was wrong out there — no reason to come, no sound she could have heard. But she heard that voice, and all of a sudden she came down, and she found me lying on the ground with the equipment still going.

The damage was bad enough. One of those teeth had gone into my leg here and dragged it all the way down, right to the ankle, and it killed the nerves the whole way. This part of me is dead still, to this day — the nerves are all gone, I feel nothing there. Another tooth had broken my leg clean through. By the time they had me in the hospital the surgeons fully expected to take the leg off; that was the plan they went in with. But they didn't.

“We saved your leg,” the doctor told me afterward. “That’s the good news. The bad news is you won’t be walking for a long time, and you’d best not think about going back to work, not ever.”

I was over three weeks in that hospital. And three months from that day I walked into his office on my own two feet, just to let him see it.

...

The second time was twenty years on, in Rosedale.

I was putting in floor dressing in a house there, and I fell. Eight feet, straight down, onto sand. And the fall itself didn’t hurt me — landing in that sand, it didn’t bother me at all. I’d have got up and gone back to work. But there was a twelve-foot two-by-ten that came down behind me, and it caught me right in the head. The way the family has pieced it together since, that plank must have come to rest lying across me where I lay.

My helper was a good man.

“Be relaxed, John,” he kept saying to me. “Easy now, be relaxed.”

And he got on and called the paramedics. I remember the crew working over me down in that basement. And I remember one of them asking the other one, “Where are we taking him?”

And the answer came back, “The air ambulance is on the way.”

That is the last thing I heard. Eleven o’clock in the morning, and the lights went out.

They took me to Royal Columbian, down in New Westminster — which, if it had to be anywhere, was the place to be, the big trauma hospital for the whole Lower Mainland, the one with the brain surgeons right there on the grounds. At three o'clock that afternoon the doctor telephoned my Nettie at home.

"You won't talk to your husband anymore," he told her. "He's not going to make it."

That is what the man said to her, straight out. "Get ready. This is the end of it."

But it wasn't the end of it. By five o'clock that afternoon, five different groups of people had got down on their knees and prayed for me. Five groups. And the Lord answered them. At six o'clock that same evening I came around. Seven hours I was under — gone, in a coma — eleven in the morning to six at night, and then back.

The first thing out of my mouth, I asked Nettie, "Where am I?"

And she said, "You're in the hospital, John."

I couldn't get the one eye open at all. And I could not remember one single thing about what had happened to me. Not the fall, not the plank, not the basement, none of it. To this day I have no memory of any of it. It is just gone.

My cheekbone was broken. So what they did, they lifted my whole face up to set a plate in there — a steel plate and four long screws. I tell people I'm a bionic man now. I was over two weeks in the hospital that time. And the doctor — the same one who had phoned my wife to tell her I was finished — well, there I was,

looking at him. A miracle happened there. I have no other word for it, and I am not going to go looking for one.

...

The third time I was sixty-nine years old, and it was my birthday.

It was a Thursday, after lunch, and I was driving out toward White Rock to pick up my dentures. There were signs up along the road — be prepared, single lane ahead — because BC Hydro was working on a line. The road came down to the one lane. There was a van and a car in front of me, and we all came to a stop where the flagging was, the way you do, and we waited.

Behind me was a truck. A big three-ton truck. And he didn't pay attention. Never slowed, never so much as stopped. Just bang — big crash, big, big crunch. He caught me a little bit sideways, so my truck got shoved right over, and the door jammed up so I couldn't get it open. My seat snapped clean off its bolts under me. The whole back window was gone — blown right out of it. And in that first second, watching the whole thing stop dead right there at the roadwork, all I could think was, "Oh no, somebody is going to be killed here."

And I walked away from that. A man came right over to my window.

"Are you okay, sir?" And he told me, "Don't move. Don't you move until the paramedics get here."

So I sat there, and I waited for the ambulance, and I did what he said and didn't move. They took me to the hospital right away, and I was there about five hours while they did a lot of X-rays, a

whole lot of them. A bad back is all I came out with — a couple of bulged discs, and that's the whole of it.

The truck driver had to admit it to the police, right there on the spot, that it was a hundred percent his fault — a hundred percent, no argument. The paramedics figured he'd been on his phone, distracted, never saw us stopped. The poor lady in the car straight ahead of me had it the worst of anybody. My front end ended up clear up in her trunk; her car was totaled right out. She crawled out of it and said she was okay, just a scratched neck — but by the time the paramedics were through with all of us she had a terrible headache, and I don't believe she was okay at all. I still think about her.

Now here is the strange grace in the whole thing. It happened on my sixty-ninth birthday, like I said — that Thursday. The next day I went down to the insurance office to report it, and the lady there looked it all up, and she said to me, "Guess what. You're going to go shop for a brand-new truck. Because you've got replacement insurance — and it runs out tonight." One more day, and it would have been gone. So out of that whole mess — the crash, the crunch, three trucks wrecked — I came away with a new truck.

A big truck plowed into us without ever slowing, crunched my vehicle and two others besides, and I'm here, and I still can walk.

...

The world is full of ways to die, and not all of them come at you on a farm or a highway. I think sometimes about Los Angeles. We were down there one trip, staying at a motel not very far from the

airport, and the security guard for the place was walking around carrying a gun. All we wanted was to go two blocks down the road and get ourselves some dinner. Two blocks. And he said to us, "Oh no, no, no, no. You don't go. You're not safe out there at all. You cannot walk on that road, not even the two blocks to the restaurant." So we didn't go. A man with a gun told us where the edge of the safe world was, and we stayed inside it.

Three times, though, I was past the edge of it and didn't get to choose. The wagon, the plank, the truck. Three times the world set itself up to finish me, and three times here I still am to tell about it. I don't take any of the credit for that. The Good Lord didn't want me yet, that's all there is to it. He knew I had a great-grandson coming, and that I was meant to be here to spend my time with him.

CHAPTER IX

JUST AS CRAZY AS I AM

From a young couple with eight thousand dollars of debt and nothing else came, in time, a whole crowd of people — four children, and grandchildren and great-grandchildren after them. This is the warm chapter, the family chapter, and John tells it with open delight.

It carries its harder threads: a young mother who spoke not a word of English getting through her first birth by finding a doctor who spoke the old tongue; a procedure done to her that she never once understood. But mostly it is the joy of the thing, and the mischief of a man who loves a good surprise. Watch for the stunt he pulled at the airport — the one he counts among the things he is proudest of in his whole life.

...

LET me tell you what it all came to, before I tell you how it started. Two sons. Two daughters. Ten granddaughters and three grandsons, and now one great-grandson and one great-granddaughter on top of all that. And every last one of them is

just as crazy as I am. I say that and I mean it for a compliment, you understand. There is a whole crowd of people walking around in this world now because a young fellow with eight thousand dollars of debt and nothing to show for it hung in there. That is a thing to sit and think about of an evening.

But it all started with the one. It started with Eric.

He was born the eighth of July. I had the date in my head from the first and I have never let go of it. That morning we woke up and she said it plain.

“We are going to the hospital.”

And that was that, off we went, and we spent the whole day there. The whole day. Burnaby Hospital, and we were in it from the morning clear through to midnight before he finally came. And the first thing I did once he was here and I knew the two of them were all right, I got on the telephone. I phoned my parents and I phoned her parents, both sets, and I told them the same thing.

“You have got a grandson.”

That was a good telephone call to make. There is no better one.

And then the next morning I went to work.

I know how that sounds now. But you have to understand the man I was and the spot we were in. There was no use for me to hang around the hospital. She was looked after, the boy was looked after, and there was nothing for me to do there but stand around and be in the way. And the work was the work. I had to go from Vancouver out to Delta — that is where we were framing houses then, out in Delta — and that is a fair stretch to drive

every day. So I went. I put in the day. And in the evening I came back to the hospital again, the way you do. That was how it went. The baby came, and the houses still had to go up, and a man did both.

Now I will tell you something about how she even got cared for over there, because it was not a simple thing for her. This was a woman who could not speak one word of English. Not one. She had come from the other side of the world into a Vancouver hospital, and what was she going to do? Well, she found a doctor. She found a doctor right there in the hospital who spoke Low German — *Plautdietsch*, the same as we did at home — and not a word of English himself, or near enough. And that was how she got through her first baby in a brand-new country. The two of them could sit and talk in the old language, and she could understand what was wanted of her, more or less.

I say more or less, because there was one thing they did to her that she never did understand, not for the rest of her life. Sometime in the carrying of one of them she had too much fluid around the baby. Too much. So they had her come in to the hospital and they drew some of it out of her, out from around the child. She had no idea what they were going to do. A friend of hers went along with her — they took the bus, the two of them, all the way to the hospital — and the doctors did whatever it was they did, and then she got up and went home again. And to her dying day she could not have told you what happened in there. She went in, they took the fluid, she came home. No idea. That was a frightening thing, I think, when you cannot ask the question in your own tongue and you cannot follow the answer.

She was a slip of a thing through all of it. She had come to Canada six months along and weighing a hundred and ten pounds,

sick as anything those first three months, and it showed. Years and years afterward Eric came across the old photographs, the ones from back then, and he looked at his mother in them and he said to her, "Why are you so thin?" Out of the mouth of the boy she was carrying in those very pictures. She had no good answer for him except that that was how it was in those days — a young woman in a new country, worked to the bone and worried besides, and it wrote itself right onto her.

Then thirteen months later we did the whole thing over again, and that one was Eronica — Courtney's mother, my second-born. By then we had moved — we were out on Alfred Gladden Road — but we kept the same doctor, the very same one, the Low German fellow, and it was the same nurses and the same hospital both times. Burnaby Hospital, the same faces looking after her. There was something good in that, having the same people the second time, when you already knew them and they knew you.

She came on the thirty-first of October — the Halloween night, that is the one I never forget. We had woken up here in Abbotsford that morning, and we packed ourselves up and drove into Burnaby, and by early that evening she was born. And what I remember of that day, more than anything, is sitting up on the seventh floor of that hospital, sitting there by a window, and watching the little ones down below. The trick-or-treaters, running up and down the street in the dark with their costumes on. I sat by that window and watched them run while my second one was coming into the world. Halloween baby. I have never had to work hard to remember her birthday.

And with that second one there was a trouble the first one never gave us. She would not latch on. That little girl simply would not take to nursing, no matter what her mother did, and

Nettie was beside herself over it. She begged the nurses. She had her sister-in-law right there telling them, "Give her a pump, give her something, there's a way around this" — and for whatever reason they did not do it. Nothing worked in that hospital. And then the very next day they sent her home, and once she was home, in her own place, with nobody standing over her, there was no trouble at all. Not a bit. It all went good from the minute she walked in her own door. I have thought about that since. Sometimes a body just needs to be left alone to do the thing it already knows how to do.

Thirteen months apart, those two. And I will tell you, that struck me, because me and my own older sister are only eleven months apart. Eleven months. So I suppose it runs in the family, having them close like that, one right on the heels of the other. You blink and there are two of them where there was none.

Eric came on the eighth of July, and that October the first we moved back to Abbotsford, and I started in working with a couple of good men there. Good guys, both of them. They are gone now. But that was the shape the years took. A baby, then a move, then the work, then another baby, then more work. And from there the whole thing just kept on growing, year on year, until I look around now and there is the crowd I told you about.

The other two came to us in Abbotsford, both of them, and both of them by cesarean. Michelle was the third — she was born the fifth of January. And then there was Mike. Mike came on the seventeenth of December, right there just before Christmas, so we always said he was our Christmas gift. That is how I think of him still. December seventeenth, and Christmas coming right behind him — a gift, right on time. Four of them now, all told: Eric first, then Eronica, then Michelle, and Mike to close it out.

Two boys and two girls, and I would not trade a single one of them for anything this world has got.

And out of those four came the whole rest of it — the grandchildren. Thirteen of them now, ten girls and three boys, and then the little ones started arriving to them in their turn, a great-grandson and a great-granddaughter so far. A whole crowd, and every one of them a piece of my heart. But a family keeps growing another way besides, and that is by the ones who marry into it — the fellows and the girls who take a shine to one of yours and want in. And I always did like to get a good look at one of those before he was properly one of us, to find out what a fellow was made of.

There is one of those I want to tell you about in particular, and a stunt I pulled to size him up, because it is one of the things I am most pleased with myself over in my whole life. It was the year we all went to Mexico — that was 2010 — and it was meant to be the whole family going down together. And I got it in my head to do something.

Chris was not part of the family yet, not really — he was not blood, not married in, not anything official. And I figured, well, here is a way to get to know the fellow a little bit. So I went to Grandma, quiet, just the two of us, and I said, “We should maybe take Chris along too.” And then I went to Michelle and I had her book a ticket for him on the sly, because there happened to be one available, and I said, “Let’s take him.” And then I kept my mouth shut. That was the whole of the trick. I did not breathe a word of it to anybody. I wanted it kept a secret, I did not want a soul to know about it, because the whole point of the thing was the face on them at the airport. He had his suitcase hidden and the whole works, and he brought it out where the whole family

was standing, and he surprised the daylights out of every one of Courtney's family. Oh, we had them good. That was one of the best ones I ever pulled. And I figured, like I said, that is one way to get to know a young man a little bit. Bring him along where he doesn't belong yet and watch how he does. He did fine.

There is one more thing I remember out of that whole Mexico trip, and it is a small thing, but it is the one my mind goes to. There was a boat. And I remember about my foot, and being carried — carried right into the boat, out to where we were going.

Just as crazy as I am, every single one of them. That's the family I made.

CHAPTER X

IT TAKES TWO

After fifty-eight years, people ask John the secret to staying married, and he tells them there isn't one. This is the shortest chapter in the book, and one of the plainest — his unsentimental account of what it actually takes, with nothing dressed up.

It comes down to a promise made on the wedding day, that yesterday would never be allowed to follow you into today; a refusal, that he could never once have left; and a daily fight he describes without flinching. He owns his own share of the fault in it — the sharp tongue, the voice that lands as anger when no anger was meant. Read it for what it is: a working man's philosophy of marriage, earned across a lifetime rather than learned from anybody.

...

PEOPLE ask me sometimes what it takes to stay married that long. Fifty-eight years, near enough — we'll be over fifty-eight this time around. And they seem to think there must be

some big secret to it, some trick I've been keeping. There isn't. I'll tell you plain what it takes. It takes two people. That's the first thing. It takes forgiving and forgetting, and it takes listening to each other. That's all it takes. That's the whole of it.

Now, I won't sit here and tell you it was a perfect marriage. It wasn't. It was a good one. A good marriage, apart from perfect — and those are two different things. There are things I wish had been different, and I'll own that. And she could probably sit right where I'm sitting and say the very same thing about me, that there were things she'd have had another way. Well, all right. That's how it is. You take it and you move on. That's what you do.

Nobody ever explained any of this to me, you understand. Nobody counseled us about marriage, about what all it involves. And nobody counseled us about money either, which was its own trouble later. We just got married. We got married and we went to work and we figured it out as we went. Made a few mistakes, and you learn from them, and you move on. That was the method. I do wish, though, that somebody had sat me down and explained to me a little bit more what marriage is all about, and what all is involved in it. Because there's a lot involved. More than a young fellow knows.

Here's the promise we made, the two of us, on the day we were married. We made it right to each other. What happened yesterday would not come up today anymore. That was the promise. Whatever it was — it stayed in the day it happened, and it did not follow you into the next morning. And I'll tell you, I have kept that promise many a hard night. I have gone to bed very upset. Almost mad. Many nights, lying there in the dark, just about mad. And in the morning I would wake up, and it was love. Love again. That's what you choose. But you have to choose it, is the

thing. You have to practice every single day. You have to work on love every day, because Satan is right there every morning, right from the time you open your eyes, trying to find something — anything — to disturb it. He's looking for the crack. Every day he's looking. So every day you work.

And talking — you'd better talk. There have been many times I did not feel like talking to Grandma. Many times. I just didn't have it in me that day, didn't want to. But hey — if you want to make it, you better talk. That's just how it goes. You don't get to go quiet and still keep the thing. It doesn't work that way.

Now, my biggest problem, if I'm honest about it, and I'll be honest — it's my nature to talk sharp sometimes. Somehow that's just in me, to talk a little mean. And once I get going a little bit excited, once I get loud, people think I'm mad. They think I'm all worked up and angry. And a lot of times Grandma thinks I'm mad when I haven't even thought about being mad. I mean it — I haven't even had the thought cross my mind, and there she is thinking I'm boiling over. I am not mad. That's just the voice on me. But I know it lands that way, and that's my own thing to watch.

There's one thing I have never done, though, not once, and I can't for the life of me understand the men who do it. How can a man hit his wife? How? She's your best friend. She is your best friend in the whole world. You can't hit your best friend. That hitting drama — that has never, ever once been done in my house. Never. I can't even get my head around it.

I'll tell you something that people don't like to hear me say. I could have never done one thing for my family, and that's leave. I could never have left Grandma and just gone. Now don't misun-

derstand me — there were many times I felt like packing up and running. Many times. I'm not going to pretend otherwise. But you'd better start asking yourself a question when that feeling comes on you. Where do you want to run to? Where exactly are you going? It's like Peter said to Jesus — "where else should we go?" There's nowhere. There's nowhere to go. And besides that, when you leave, you do more damage to your kids and your family than to anybody else in the world. The most damage falls on them. Not on you. On them.

And here's the other piece of it that people miss. When you divorce, you think you're leaving your problem behind. You're not. You take your problem right along with you. The real problem starts once you have the divorce — that's when the trouble really gets going. Look at a lot of these homeless people you see around these days. A lot of them — those are people who came out of broken-up families. They've got nowhere to go. No support. Nobody. That's where a lot of it starts, if you follow it back far enough.

Back where I come from, in the colony, there was no such thing as divorce. No such thing. You didn't even have the word for it, hardly. It just wasn't done. Though I'll tell you, they do divorces there now too. Even there. Even in the colonies now. Times change everywhere, I guess.

There's one more thing I'll say, and it's about age and energy, and I want to say it right. My own dad was ten years older than my mom. Ten years. And when they were young, that was fine, that was nothing at all, you'd never notice it. But when they got older — well, then that's a difference. You feel those ten years then. And I've seen the same thing with Grandma's sister, who's ten or eleven years younger than her husband. When you're younger

you've got so much energy, and your partner hasn't got it anymore, and there she was still full of go when he had none left. So a big gap is a hard thing as the years come on. Ours is just a little over two years, mine and Grandma's, and that works. That's a good gap. That works fine.

But I'll tell you, even so — Grandma sometimes thinks I ought to have the same energy I had ten years ago. And I have to say to her, “now look. Look at my age. Look at how I have slaved all my life. All my life I have slaved. And now you're wondering where the energy went. Well, I don't have it.” I don't have the energy I had ten years ago, and that's the plain truth of it. I slaved it away, every bit of it, and I'd do it again. But you can't ask a man of my years for the go he had a decade back. It's just not in there anymore.

CHAPTER XI

THE HOUSES I OWNED

If the framing chapter is about building for other people, this one is about the houses that were John's own — and about the plain pleasure a self-reliant man takes in doing everything himself and handing nothing to anyone he doesn't have to.

A good deal of it is a run of standoffs with building inspectors, told with relish, in which John more than once ends up teaching the city its own code. But the heart of it is quieter: the house next door he bought with a phone call and a handshake, the tenants he could not bring himself to evict, and a lifetime's proof of a simple sum — that the money is made not by earning it, but by not paying anyone else to do what you can do with your own two hands.

...

BY the time we were done building this house, I thought I'd have a nervous breakdown. I mean that. All the fighting with the engineers and the building inspectors, all of it, by the end

I was about wrung out. And I'll tell you straight, I'm done. Done for good. I built houses my whole life for other people, and a few for myself along the way, but this last one, the one I'm sitting in now, this was the one that near finished me. It wasn't the work. The work I could do all day. It was the fighting over the work.

It started right at the footing. I had the footing engineered and laid out proper by site surveyors. Paid them nine hundred dollars to come and do it, certify the whole thing by code. Everything done right, every bit of it by the book. And then the city tells me I can't pour. I've got to wait till Monday for an inspection. Now I had everything ready to go, men and concrete and all of it. So I phoned the city hall and I got the manager, Peter.

"Peter, who's got the right to tell me I can't pour? I've done everything by code. Site surveyors, certified, the whole works," I said.

And I told him they could take that bylaw and shove it, and he knew where I meant. Next day, by noon, we had the pour approved. That's how that one went.

Then they sent a building inspector around, a fellow named Kevin, and he comes walking around my foundation with a tape measure. Now you can't do that. Once the site surveyors have certified the layout, the building inspector's got no business running around with a tape, measuring this and measuring that. That's a no-no. But he did it anyway. Walked the whole thing, measuring. So I went out and I confronted him on it, and he left. Then I phoned the department and I told them straight: "Kevin is not allowed on my property." And that was the end of Kevin.

Then there was Rudy. Rudy was the plumbing inspector, and he rejected my rough-in. You know why? The dishwasher and the

stove, where they were going to sit, I'd only marked the spots on the floor. I was prepping for a finish that came later, so I'd marked it all out, this is where everything goes. And I wasn't even there when he came around. So Rudy rejects the whole thing over that and leaves me a notice. Well. I took that notice down to the city hall, and right in front of Peter I crumpled it up in my fist, like that.

"You can give this to Rudy and he can shove it, and he knows where. I don't want to see Rudy on my property ever again," I said.

So that was two of them gone.

There was a foundation inspector, Lorne. Lorne comes up.

"John, you didn't fill your tie holes," he says.

"Lorne, I don't have to," I said.

He didn't believe me. So I got the code book out and I showed him the honeycomb rule, right there in his own book, and once I did that, nobody brought it up again. The man was a foundation inspector, standing on my own house, and I had to teach him his own code.

Take the deck railing. That one changed around 2006. For years, all the way up till then, the rule was if your sun deck was six feet off the ground, your railing had to be forty-two inches. Then they changed the whole works. Now you measure from the finished ground up to the top of the deck. Six feet, forty-two inches. Five feet or under, thirty-six. And under two feet off the ground, no railing at all. Even Peter didn't know it had changed. He's the manager, been in this business years and years, and he looked at the code.

“John, you know what, I didn’t even know that’s what it said,” he said.

So there I was, teaching the city hall their own rules.

Now I’ll tell you why I put up with all of that instead of handing it off. The way Grandma and I made our money, our whole lives, was doing everything ourselves. On our own house we never once hired a painter. Not one. I did all the finishing, she did all the painting. That’s how it always was with us.

And it adds up. It adds up to real money. Let me run it for you. The foundations, I did them all myself for eleven hundred bucks. Eleven hundred. If I’d given that off to a contractor it would’ve cost me ten thousand. The painting, the two of us did the whole house in a couple of days, and hiring that out would’ve run eighteen, twenty thousand dollars. We did it ourselves. So when it was all said and done, this house, built by hand, cost us about four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Hire out all the subtrades, every bit of it, and it’s six hundred thousand or more. That’s the difference. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars, just for doing your own work and putting up with the inspectors yourself.

Now I’ll tell you one more, and this one I have to be honest about, because honesty is the thing. The final inspection, my own upstairs. The inspector’s going around and he points out the code wants twelve-inch tile around, and I’d only put in six-inch. I didn’t know that. I’ll be honest with you, I did not know it.

“John, I’ve got the feeling you’re not going to do anything about it,” he says to me.

“You’ve got the right feeling. I won’t do a thing,” I said.

And he looked at me, and he could see I meant it. And he passed it anyway. I told him the truth, I didn't know and I'm not changing it, and he passed it. That's the way it goes sometimes when you don't try to put one over on a man.

...

Now the house next door — that's a different story, and a good one.

It'll be September first that Grandma and I have lived in this house eighteen years. And back in 2012, the neighbor wanted to sell the place right next to us. We didn't have the money for it. Didn't have a cent toward it. But I went down to the bank.

"I need three hundred thousand dollars," I said.

And the bank said, "Here it is." Just like that. A line of credit, three hundred thousand, held against our own house. Our house was good for it, so they gave it to me.

Now the owner, he wanted three hundred and fifty thousand. I said no. "I'll pay no more than three hundred." And here's the thing. I knew things about that house that he didn't know mattered. The electrical panel in there was illegal. Down in the basement the wires were hanging all over the place, just hanging everywhere. So I knew what I'd be getting into, and I knew what it was worth, and I wasn't going a dollar over three hundred.

The realtor he had was a big outfit, the one from up north with all the equipment. And in the end that realtor phoned the owner and told him to take my offer. Then he phoned me back.

"John, give me an offer so I can close him up at three hundred as it sits," he said.

“Okay. No inspection, no subject,” I said.

And I’ll tell you, there’s a big difference in what a man will go for when you come at him with no subject on it. No conditions. Cash, as it is. I knew I had the money. I’d already talked to the bank, everything was in place. When a man knows you’ll close, clean, no fooling around, that’s worth something to him. So I got it for the three hundred.

Then I put about twenty-two thousand dollars into it. I knew going in roughly what I’d spend, and that’s about where it landed. There was no bathroom downstairs, so I put a nice one in, a bathroom with a shower and all of it. Drywalled the whole thing through. Put a couple more windows in. By the time I was done, twenty-two thousand.

And that place is worth over a million dollars now. One million, right beside me here. I figure the lot alone could fetch around nine hundred thousand, just the dirt. There’s a fellow thinking about coming in and tearing it down and putting up a brand-new big one on the lot. And you know what, that wouldn’t bother me one bit. Tear it right down. Doesn’t matter to me. The land’s the land.

But the best of it wasn’t the money on paper. It was the tenants. We rented that house out and we were blessed, just blessed, with a top-quality couple. Class A1 tenants, that’s what they were. In twelve years they gave us about two hundred thousand dollars in rent. And never once a problem. Nothing. Not one thing. The house was so clean I wouldn’t even walk into it. That’s the truth. I didn’t go in their house, that’s how nice they kept it. And if something needed fixing, he just fixed it himself. Didn’t even call me. You don’t find that. You don’t find tenants like that.

We could've given them notice a long time ago, if we'd wanted to. We talked about it, even. But we couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to do it. They were so happy in there. They always told us, "John, unless you kick us out, we're not moving." And the school was right close by for their kids. So how do you put people like that out on the street? You don't. I couldn't. So they stayed, and they were good to us, and we were good to them, and that's the whole of it.

...

People ask me sometimes how many houses I lived in, and I can walk you right through them. The first one I built and lived in was on Lilac, back in 1971. Then there was one on Leburn. One on Ash. One on Walmsley. Two in Chilliwack, built them both and lived in them both. And then this one, the one I'm in now, the one that near killed me to build.

There was one I didn't build, though. The Rainbow house. That one was put up in 1972, but I bought it, I didn't build it. And we did a lot of renovating on that place. I put about ten thousand dollars into it. It had the real old casing in it, the old doors, and I ripped everything out. All the baseboard, the casing, every bit of the flooring, the whole works. And I put everything in brand new. Brand-new kitchen cabinets, the whole thing done over fresh. By the time I was through with it you wouldn't have known it was the same house.

So that's the houses. The ones I built, the ones I bought, the one next door that made us all that money and gave us those good people to look after. I built for other men my whole life, over two hundred of them. But these ones were mine. And I'll tell you, I'm

glad I'm done now. I'd do every one of these over again though.
Every one of them. It's only the fighting I'd leave behind.

CHAPTER XII

RIGHT ON TIME

At eighty-one, John lives with an aneurysm on his aorta and a major surgery ahead of him, and he faces both with a calm that unsettles the people around him. This is the chapter where his faith and his mortality meet head-on.

He calls the elders and is anointed; he believes he may already be healed, and allows, cheerfully, that he may be wrong. Along the way he counts the dead — two hundred of them, easy — and arrives at the conviction that carries him through all of it: that everybody dies right on time, not a minute early and not a minute late. Listen for how he pictures the place he is going. A framer to the last, he sees it as a room still under construction, the contractor behind on his materials.

...

I turned eighty-one this year, on the Thursday, the twenty-fifth of June. There's a lady down the way, a neighbor, and her birthday is the second of July or thereabouts, and she's the same

age as me. She was telling me she was eighty, and I said, "Well, you're eighty, so am I, I'm June the twenty-fifth." So now we call ourselves twins. A week apart, near enough, and twins. That's the kind of thing you say to each other when you get to be our age and you've still got somebody left to say it to.

There are a lot of privileges when you get old, you know. Real ones. Once you're past seventy-five you don't have to take your shoes off at the airport anymore, and they'll send you to a different screener, a separate one, just for the old folks. A couple of years back we went down to Mexico, the whole bunch of us, with Eric and Jan and them, and the fellow at the airport told me, "You can go to the different screener if you like."

"No," I said. "I'm going to stay good with my family. I'll wait in line with everybody else." But it's there if you want it. That's a privilege.

The only privilege you don't get, the one nobody hands you, is being free from the arthritis. That one you keep. And it gets worse after seventy-five, it does, it really does. These days it seems like whenever I get up in the morning, everything hurts. Everything. That's the part of getting old that's not very much fun. There was a bricklayer I knew, years ago, and he had a line about it I've never forgotten. He said before he turned fifty, all his joints were flexible except one. And after he turned fifty, all his joints were stiff except one. That's the bricklayer's line. I think of him most mornings now, getting up out of the chair.

So don't get old. That's my advice. Don't get old. Except there's the other thing, isn't there. The alternative. And I'll get to that.

...

It was about six years ago now they found out. We were drinking *mate* one morning, the way we always do, sitting there with the *mate*, and all of a sudden I thought I was having a heart attack. Just like that. I fell right over. I was very, very sick, sick in a way I'd never been, and I was sure that was it, that was my heart finally going. I still get that same attack sometimes, even now. It comes over me, and I get the water into me quick and I breathe through it, slow, a little at a time, and then it's gone again. But that first morning I didn't know what it was. I just knew I'd fallen over and I thought I was dying.

So I went to the hospital and they did all the tests. The ultrasound, the MRI, all of that. And they came back and told me it had nothing to do with my heart. Nothing at all. My heart was fine. But while they were in there looking, that's when they found this other thing. The aneurysm. On the aorta. They'd never have gone looking for it — that's the trouble with it — but there it was on the picture, and that's how they stumbled onto it.

They call it the silent killer. You have no pain, you see. None. A man can carry it around for years and never feel a thing, never have the first idea it's there, and then all of a sudden it bursts. That's what the surgeon told me. A lot of people have no idea they've got it. And when that thing bursts you have a heart attack right then, because when it goes your heart almost stops pumping

blood. That's the end of it, just like that, and most of them never knew.

So they watched mine. They've been watching it the whole six years — a specialist, and I'd go in once a year and they'd measure it. It grows slow. And then last year, in September, I went in and they measured it and it was five and a half centimeters, and they said, "That's it, it's very serious now, we have to do the surgery." The surgeon put it to me plain. "If you don't do the surgery," he said, "you won't make another two years." That's how he said it.

Now the doctors, they tell you people are born with it. He said to me, "Yours could be that you were born with it." I don't think so, myself. I disagree with them there, gently. Because I asked him, "What does a thing like this come from?" And he allowed that high blood pressure could do it, a lot of stress could do it. Well, that's what I had. I had a number of years there with very high blood pressure, terrible blood pressure, and a lot of stress with the work and the men. And the thing is, since I stopped working, since I haven't got the employees anymore, my blood pressure's been fine. Just fine. So you tell me. I think that's what created it. Not something I was born with. Something the years put there.

...

When they told me about the surgery I did what the Bible says to do. James, chapter five. It says if somebody is sick, call the elders. So that's what I did. I called the elders of the church and they came and they anointed me and they prayed over me.

It didn't come to me all at once, mind you. Back in January I read that part, James five, the elders and the anointing and the

prayer. Just read it, the way you read anything. Then a couple of weeks later I read it again. And then I started reading it more, more and more. Come March I was reading it almost every day. And all of a sudden — all of a sudden — I realized it was talking about me. That's what it was. It had been sitting there on the page the whole time and one morning it just stood up and pointed at me. That's when I could finally get myself going. Down to the church, to the pastor, to the elder, and the elder set the whole thing up.

And I'll tell you, deciding to do that was a battle. A real one. For three nights before, I could not sleep. Not at all. Satan was right there the whole time, saying to me, "Forget it, it won't happen, don't bother, none of it's real." Three nights of that. That's a battle, that is, and don't let anybody tell you different. You're lying there in the dark and the voice keeps on at you.

And the hardest part of the whole thing is that you get hardly any support. Hardly any. Even Grandma. The first thing Nettie said to me was, "You don't trust the doctors, the surgeons." As if calling the elders meant I'd given up on them. Well, sure I trust them. Three surgeries a day, those men do. They must know what they're doing. I trust them fine. The praying goes right alongside the doctors. It always did. She didn't see it that way at first. Most people didn't.

And I've seen it happen. That's the thing. I knew a fellow back in the seventies, a friend of mine, and he was already in the hospital waiting on his surgery. He called the elders, and they came and did the same thing, laid hands and anointed him. And then they went in to have a look and there was nothing wrong. Nothing. He went home and he never did have the surgery. And there's a lady, older, I don't know her myself but a friend of mine knows

her — she was supposed to have heart surgery, the very same as me, and they did this over her and she was healed. Two of them, both heart, both healed.

And then there's the cancer one, the newest one. Our senior counselor, Les Bergman, he knows a man, Henry Tricard. This man was full cancer just recently. Full of it. And his whole family came over to him, and the pastors came, and they prayed over him. And he's completely free of it now. Completely free. That's not the kind of thing Satan wants going around, I'll tell you. It's against his rules. So you hardly ever hear it from the pulpit. Nobody preaches it. And then people don't believe it, because who's ever told them? But I've heard it. I've seen it with my own two eyes.

So I feel that I am healed. I do. I feel that I could be wrong about that — I could be — so whatever. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. I still believe it every day. I believe it's a done deal. But if it isn't, it isn't, and I'll still be happy and thankful either way. I've outlived two generations already, you know. The men before me, and the men before them. I've outlived the both of them. Whatever's coming, I've already had more than my share.

...

I think about the dead a lot now. More than I used to. I still go out for coffee, mind you — there's a group of us old fellows that meets at eight o'clock in the morning, and it's a good bunch, a lot of BS going around and a good laugh. That group's a couple of years old now. But I used to have three other coffee buddies, from before, and every one of them has passed away. George Nichol, he was one from our group — prostate cancer, and he died about

a year ago. Never lasted long once they found it. Then Jake Dick, a friend of mine from my church, I used to go out with him for coffee, and he's gone. And another one, David McBig, he passed away too. All three of them. So you sit at eight o'clock with the new bunch and you laugh, and you think, well. I guess I'm next.

When I moved back and started working again with a couple of fellows in Abbotsford — good guys, both of them, real good guys to work for — well, both of them are gone now. Both of them. And once you start down that road, once you sit and really start counting up the people you've known who are gone now, in the ground now, I get to two hundred of them very easy. Two hundred people, easy, and still going. There was a whole churchful from the old days — a lot of people came out of that church in those days, and they're all gone now. All of them. A family of boys I knew, four boys from Paraguay — all of them gone. You sit and you count and it just keeps going.

It gives me a warning, is what it does. You don't think about it, most days. You don't. But really, we should think about it more than we do. Could this be our last day? That's the question. Could this be the one. You go around not asking it, and you shouldn't.

I had a second cousin, Blinkev — he had heart trouble. The doctors gave him pills to take for it, and he never took them. Not one. After he was gone they found them all hidden away in a drawer in the washroom, the whole lot of them, never touched. He had what they call heart congestion — water on the heart, all this water building up on it. And he did nothing about it, no exercise, nothing. He was out golfing one day, and he got up to the second hole, just the second hole, and all of a sudden he said, "I'm feeling very, very sick." And he leaned right over onto his

partner there, leaned on him — and then he just went down. His heart stopped. Right there at the second hole.

And then there was the accident on Number Three Road, in 1984. A big one. Thirty-five vehicles. A fellow we knew and another man with him — Hedman, and a friend with him — they were on their way to Surrey to a hockey tournament. Five minutes. Five minutes after they left the house, that's all. They got crunched in that pileup and killed instantly, the both of them, killed right away. And Hedman left a wife and five kids behind him, all of them young ones. Five minutes out of his own driveway.

Now here's the thing I've come to, after all of it. The wagon that pulled me in, the plank that came down on my head in that basement, the truck that hit me on my birthday — and Blinkev going down at the second hole, and those men on Number Three Road five minutes from home. I've thought about it a long time. And I don't believe Blinkev died one minute too soon, or one minute too late. I believe everybody dies right on time. Right on time. Believe it or not — and a lot of people won't — but to my mind, that's how it is. You die right on time. Not a minute either way. That's what I hold to, and it's carried me through everything that's come, the three times the Good Lord sent my arm up or my sister down to the barn or that insurance to run out one day later. He didn't want me yet. And when he does, that'll be right on time too.

...

So I'm not afraid of the surgery. When the surgeon was telling me how it goes — they open the machine up to your blood, and

they've got to get right in there to the heart — he said, "We're going to have to cut your chest open."

And I said, "Well, should I bring my chainsaw?"

"I've got a chainsaw," he said. Then he laughed, and he said, "That might be a good idea."

"The rougher it is," I told him, "the better it'll heal. Matter of fact, maybe I ought to just cut it open myself before I come in, take the whole thing off, and save you the trouble." He got a good laugh out of that one. You've got to be able to laugh at it. You're here for a good time, not a long time.

I'm a framer. I've built houses my whole life, over two hundred houses, put up the walls and set the floors and finished the rooms. And I'll tell you how I picture the place I'm going. The room that I'm going to be in up there, it's going to be all granite. The whole thing, granite. And the floor is going to be gold. And the contractor who's doing the work on it — well, he's having a hard time getting the supply. He's behind. That's how I see it. The room's not quite finished yet, the granite and the gold, and the contractor's waiting on his materials, same as any job I ever ran.

I believe it's a done deal. I do. But if it isn't, it isn't. And either way, I'll still be happy, and I'll still be thankful.

CHAPTER XIII

REFLECTIONS

The book closes the way a long, good conversation closes — the talk loosening into whatever comes to mind. A fig tree in the yard whose old trunk died and which throws up green branches anyway. The aches of age. The world changed past all recognition in sixty years, and not, to John's mind, always for the better.

There is no tidy summing-up here, because he is not a summing-up kind of man. There is only what he keeps circling back to: a gratitude he says he never earned, a wife he credits with the whole of it, a faith he would hand to the children ahead of anything else, and the one line he has used his entire life for the entire thing. Here for a good time. He has had one, and he will tell you so himself.

...

There's a fig tree out in my yard, and that tree died. The old part of it, the main trunk, it died right out on me. But you know what it did. It just kept throwing up new branches off the

side of it, beautiful green branches, like nothing at all had happened. The old tree is still standing in there. You just can't see it anymore. It's hiding. I look at that tree some days and I think, well, there you are. That's about the size of it.

Because I'm in that zone now, and I'll say it plain. When you get to be my age it seems like every morning you wake up and everything hurts. That's the part that isn't much fun. Everything hurts when you get old, and there's no getting around it. That old bricklayer had it right, the way he told it — young you're all flexible except the one joint, old you're all stiff except the one. You're too young yet to know what that's all about.

And my memory, that's the other thing. I can tell you about something that happened sixty years ago like it was this morning — every detail of it, every name. But ask me what happened yesterday and I haven't got a clue. It's gone. That's frustrating, I'll tell you. What I figure I need is a new brain. A new computer up top, because this one's run its warranty out.

But I can still eat like a cow, I'll say that. I eat and eat and eat and look at me, thin as a rail, always have been. Plain food, mind you — porridge, a piece of toast, an egg, some potatoes. None of this popcorn and nacho business. You eat plain and you keep moving, that's the whole secret to it. Because here's the thing nobody wants to hear: you sit and do nothing, your body goes right down the drain. Just like that. I've watched it happen. A man retires and sits in his house and that's the end of him. Not me. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Nettie and I go to the gym in the morning. Then I come home and it's coffee time. And then, well, then it's nap time. In between I've always got the fence or some little thing, and I do it a section at a time, no hurry on it. Now that I'm retired, no employees, no jobs to chase down, my blood

pressure's come right down too. Hardly any stress at all anymore. I'm a happy man to have that whole business behind me.

Coffee with the old guys is worth something at my age — the BS and the laughs both. But after all these years here, most of my life now, I'll still catch myself feeling like a foreigner at that table. I can feel it. I do. A foreigner, right here.

This spring we drove out to Medicine Hat for the granddaughters' graduation, the twins. Two evenings of it. And I'll be honest with you — if it hadn't been for those girls I wouldn't have gone at all. You sit there, and you sit there, and the speakers get up one after another, and it's near enough the same speech every time. You listen to the same thing over and over. Four hundred of them graduating — four hundred — and that was just from the one school. Can you feature that? And our two, on account of the last name coming near the end of the alphabet, they were set way back in the second-to-last row. So you couldn't very well get up and slip out halfway, could you. You had to sit it right through to the end just to lay eyes on them.

And the second evening was worse yet. They come in and they all sit down, nice enough. Then all of a sudden they've got to get up and go behind a curtain — I don't know for the life of me why they've got to go behind a curtain — and then out they come again, one at a time, walking by real slow. *Marching*, they call it. That's the word for it. *Marching*. Showing off their clothes is nearer the truth of it, like a fashion show. Now if I lived out there I'd have had a thing or two to say about it. But there you are. We survived it. And I was glad to be there for the girls, I truly was.

Can you imagine how much has changed in sixty years? When I was a boy it was wagons and oxen, and one telephone line shared the whole length of the road. Now every soul is walking around with a phone in his pocket. The whole technology of it, in sixty years. And I'll be honest with you, I don't think it's getting better. I think it gets worse. Take the roads. In 1968, you drove into Vancouver of an evening, ten o'clock at night, you had the whole highway to yourself. Not another car. Now it can take you two hours to make a drive we used to do in fifty minutes. Two hours. Everybody in a hurry and nobody getting anywhere.

And if I went back to the place I grew up, that colony down in Paraguay, I wouldn't know where I was. It's all paved now, police and the whole works, like a city. You'd stand there and say, where the heck am I. I haven't got anybody down there anyhow. Nobody knows me and I don't know a soul. I had ninety cousins at one time — ninety — and thirty-some of them are already gone. They're putting on a big reunion down there, a hundred years since the Mennonites first came, and they asked would I go. No. I won't go. We're stubborn people, Mennonites. I call them stubborn Mennonites, and I'm one of them, so I'm allowed to say it. What's down there for me to go back to?

I'll tell you what I don't understand about the way things run now. The police. Nobody respects the police anymore. Everybody figures a policeman has got to be perfect, never put a foot wrong — well, that's not true, is it. They're only human. Same as you and me. No wonder they can't get a soul to take the job. And the driving. People speed like the devil, weaving in and out — you're going to kill somebody driving that way. You are. I saw enough down in Los Angeles that one time to be glad every day I came home to this. We've got it good up here and people don't know

what they've got. And yet they've made everything so safe over here you can't get a thing done. I couldn't be a framer today, not a chance. You can't so much as stand on a roof now without a harness and a rope tied onto you. The stupid laws they've got. I framed houses my whole life on my own two feet, the good Lord and I, and we managed just fine.

Now I had my fill of rules growing up. The church back there kept a holiday, three days of it, and if a man worked on the second or the third day, they told him he'd go to hell for it. To hell — for working. And you know what, that's not anywhere in the Bible. I looked. It isn't in there. People make up their rules and then they hang you with them. That's not the faith I hold to. The faith I hold to is simpler than all that, and it's bigger. There's still millions of people in this world who've never once heard about Jesus. Millions. That's the thing I think about. I had a native fellow ask me, down in Paraguay, why God didn't send the Mennonites sooner, because his own folks died never knowing a thing about it. I didn't have an answer for him right then. But when I sit and think on it — the hard road that brought us all down there, every bit of it — I figure there was a reason. There's always a reason, even when you can't see it for looking. So when the little ones come around, I tell them. My great-grandson Lincoln, he's all baseball, that boy, baseball morning to night. And I told him:

“Lincoln, you'd better get yourself ready and go preach the gospel. You go tell people about Jesus. That's more important. That's more important than baseball.”

And here's the whole truth of it. The Lord has blessed me left and right, more than I ever deserved, and I know it. I'm a thankful man. People look at what we've got and they think, oh,

John, isn't he a smart one. It's not just me. If it wasn't for Nettie we wouldn't be sitting in a house like this. You have to have a wife who's with you all the way — out in front of you, half the time, pulling. Whatever I built, I built it with her. I made my mistakes along the way, plenty of them. But that's how a man learns — you make the mistake and it teaches you, and it teaches you better yet if somebody's good enough to tell you about it. And you never, ever let on that you know everything. I never pretended I knew it all. That's exactly how I came to learn what I learned. If you want to get somewhere in this life there's no secret to it — you work hard. That's the whole of it. You have to work hard to get there.

As for the marriage — well. You only really find out who a person is once you've gone and married them. Things come up you never knew were there. Both ways, I'd expect. We were so young when we did it, so young and so green, we didn't have the first idea. But you grow up together, that's the thing. And a man can call himself the lord of his own house all he wants — that title doesn't come free with the wedding. You earn it. You earn the respect, day by day, or you don't have it at all.

People ask where we'll go from here, Nettie and me. This house was the right house once — a big family, always somebody in it, always something going on. That doesn't happen anymore, and those stairs get harder every day. So we'll downsize, we know that much. Nettie's started in about a townhouse. I don't want a townhouse. What I'd like is just a house, flat, no stairs to climb. I've built enough for one life. And the kids are after us to move out to Alberta, to be closer to them. There's family out that way that wants us near. It's a nice little town. Part of me would go. But it's a big move to make at our age, and you give up every friend

you've got, and a man doesn't get those back once he's old. So I told the family, "Let's deal with my surgery first. One thing at a time." Once we know where we stand, we'll make the decision, and not before. They even talked about all of us buying one big place together, with a separate unit in it just for Nettie and me, so they could look after us. That's no small thing to hear, that they want to take care of you — after a whole life of you taking care of them.

I could live in Mexico, you know. I've thought about it more than once. The heat of it, the people, the land — it all feels like Paraguay to me, I believe I'd feel at home inside a week. But that won't happen. I know it won't. I'll stay right here, where I am, till the day comes. And then it'll be whatever it's going to be.

People wonder how a man my age, with this thing ticking away in my chest, can be so easy about all of it. Well, I've got my theory about that granite room the Lord's building me up there, and His contractor being behind on the supply. The day that room's ready He'll come and take me, and not one minute before. So there's no use at all in worrying about it.

Here for a good time — that's always been my line for it. And I've had one. I've enjoyed my life, every bit of it, the aches and all. I surely have.

APPENDIX: THE WORLD BEHIND THE STORY

A Historical Companion to John Wall's Life

JOHN tells his life the way a man tells it from the inside — the heat of the Chaco, the mud of a December building site, the wait for a letter that would let him marry. He does not stop to explain why his Canadian family was born in Paraguay, or why a dirt road opening in 1961 changed everything, or what it meant that a jet could cross a hemisphere in a night. He lived those facts; he did not need to footnote them.

This companion is the footnote. It sets down the history that stands behind his stories — the migrations, the laws, the wars, the economies, the machines — so that a reader who did not live it can feel the ground he was standing on. Everything here was checked against the historical record. Where his memory and the record agree, that is said plainly. Where the record complicates his memory, or cannot confirm it, that is said too. The aim is not to correct him. It is to widen the frame around him, so that a single life comes into focus against the century it was lived in.

A word on what follows. It moves in the order his own story moves — from why the Mennonites were in Paraguay at all, through the colony of his boyhood, the long road north, the golden age of flight that carried him, the valley that received him, the woman he went back for, the trades and farms he worked, and the accidents he survived. Read it alongside his chapters, or on its own. Either way, it is offered in a different voice than his — the voice of the record, not the man.

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I. The Stubborn Mennonites: Why a Canadian Family Was Born in Paraguay

John calls his people “the stubborn Mennonites,” and the phrase is more precise than it sounds. It names a specific decision, made by specific families, for a specific reason — and that decision is the reason he was born in the Paraguayan Chaco in 1945 rather than on the Canadian prairie.

The Mennonites who came to Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the 1870s had been promised, in effect, that Canada would leave them alone: their own German-language religious schools, their own communities, exemption from military service. That promise held until the First World War, when a rising Canadian nationalism turned against anything that looked foreign and unassimilated. Manitoba passed a school law in 1916, Saskatchewan in 1917, that abolished private and parochial elementary schools, compelled instruction in English, and forbade religious teaching in the public schools. For most of the country this was ordinary

nation-building. For the most traditional Mennonites it was the breaking of a covenant — the deliberate dismantling of the German religious schooling that they understood to be the whole point of having come.

They resisted. They petitioned, they boycotted the public schools, and in return they drew heavy fines and the threat of having their property confiscated and their leaders jailed. Layered on top of the wartime resentment of a pacifist, German-speaking people, the pressure was enough to convince the hardest-line traditionalists — the Sommerfelder, the Chortitzer, some Bergthaler — that Canada was no longer a place they could keep their faith. In the 1920s roughly eight thousand Mennonites left Canada rather than send their children to English public schools. Most went to Mexico. About eighteen hundred chose Paraguay. John's grandparents were among the ones who went south; his parents made the journey as children. So when he says his people were stubborn over schools, he is describing, exactly, the wing of the community that would rather emigrate to a wilderness than give up teaching their own children in their own language and faith. It is not a colorful family phrase. It is the historical record in four words.

Paraguay was willing to have them, and it made that willingness law. On 26 July 1921, four years before the first settlers arrived, the Paraguayan congress passed Law No. 514 — remembered among Mennonites as *the Privilegium*, “the privilege.” It granted them full religious liberty; the right to affirm rather than swear oaths; exemption from compulsory military service in peace and in war; the right to run their own German-language schools; and internal self-government, with their own administration of their own affairs. It was the first law anywhere in Latin

America written to accommodate people who refused, on conscience, to bear arms. Everything the school laws had taken away in Canada, Law 514 gave back in Paraguay, and gave in writing.

Here the record gently corrects the family memory. John remembers the arrangement as free land, granted for fifty years. Neither half is quite right. The land was not free: a company called the *Corporación Paraguaya* bought Chaco land from the Carlos Casado enterprise — the first purchase was on the order of 138,000 acres, bought at about a dollar and a half an acre — and resold it to the Mennonites at five dollars an acre. The Mennonites owned their land outright, as a self-governing bloc, but they paid for it. And there was no fifty-year clause. The privileges of Law 514 read as permanent guarantees, not a half-century lease. The “fifty years” in his telling is most likely a memory of some remembered term — a tax holiday, a contract period — that has migrated over the decades into a rounder, larger shape. What matters, and what is true, is the core of it: no army, your own schools, self-rule. Those promises were real, they were in the law, and they held.

One detail in his account is beloved and cannot be confirmed. John remembers that the president of Paraguay learned German at night school in order to welcome his people in their own tongue. The welcome itself is solid history: the first Mennonite group was received in Asunción on 29 December 1926 by President Eligio Ayala, who had studied in Europe — at Heidelberg and Zürich — before his presidency, and who could plausibly have had some German. But every reliable source that records the welcome is silent on the language. The night-school detail traces only to low-quality sources and cannot be verified. There is a likely explanation for how it grew. The people who actually

did speak German and English with the Mennonites, in the years of negotiation before the settlement, were the land scout Fred Engen and the American banker Samuel McRoberts, who met Paraguay's president-elect and foreign minister and helped broker the whole arrangement. "They spoke our language" is a true and moving thing to remember about the men who made the colony possible — and over three generations that warmth may simply have climbed, in the retelling, from the negotiators onto the head of state. The kindness is real. The night school is folklore.

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II. The Green Hell: The Founding and Its Cost

The land the Mennonites had bought sat in the central Paraguayan Chaco, and the Chaco very nearly killed the colony in its first two years.

The story that reaches John as inherited family memory — settlers dropped onto scrubland with nothing, no water, no power, oxen and wagons — is the documented founding ordeal, and it was worse than the phrase suggests. The first group disembarked at Puerto Casado, on the Paraguay River, on the last day of 1926. From there the land they had bought lay inland, beyond the end of the railway, unsurveyed. They could not simply go to it. They were stranded at Puerto Casado for roughly sixteen months, waiting, while typhus, typhoid, and dysentery moved through the camps. One hundred and twenty-one settlers died during that wait, more in the interior afterward, and about sixty families gave

up and went back to Canada. Only in April 1928 did the survivors finally push inland — the last hundred kilometers by ox-drawn wagon — and found their first villages. Menno Colony, the first Mennonite colony in Paraguay and the one built by these Canadian emigrants, began as thirteen hundred people who had buried their dead and kept going.

They had barely established themselves when a war broke out on top of them. From 1932 to 1935, Paraguay and Bolivia fought the Chaco War over the Gran Chaco — both nations believed it held oil — in what became the deadliest South American conflict of the twentieth century, costing on the order of a hundred thousand lives. It is remembered as “the War of Thirst.” The young Mennonite colonies sat inside the contested zone, amid ground fighting and air attacks. This is the world John’s parents were children and teenagers in: a colony not five years old, in a land that had just cost a hundred and twenty of their own, now a battlefield between two armies fighting over water and rumored oil. His boyhood in the 1940s and ’50s was lived on ground that had been, within living memory, both a graveyard and a front line.

And the land itself asked for all of this and gave little back. The Gran Chaco has some of the highest temperatures on the continent — summer averages near thirty degrees Celsius, with absolute maximums that climb toward the high forties. It is dead flat, an almost imperceptible eastward tilt across hundreds of kilometers, covered in dense thorn forest and open woodland: *quebracho*, *palo santo*, cactus, thickets often described as impenetrable. It swings between a months-long dry season and violent rains that turn the only roads to axle-deep, tire-swallowing mud, where a few kilometers can take a day. Fresh groundwater is scarce; only about a third of the region has an adequate fresh supply, and

the shallow wells of the central Chaco are commonly saline. The colonies survived by catching rain — a modern survey found tens of thousands of catchment ponds across the Mennonite Chaco. Outsiders had a name for this country, and the arriving Mennonites adopted it for themselves: *el Infierno Verde*, the Green Hell. When John remembers a boyhood with no running water and no electricity, dependent on the sky, that is not hardship talking. That is a straightforward description of the central Chaco, where the salt in the ground and the rhythm of the rains left a household little other choice.

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III. A Map of Neighbors: Who Came From Where

One of the more striking things about John's memory is how accurately he holds the map of the colonies around him — a set of German-speaking settlements, each founded by a different wave of refugees, each with its own origin story. His pronunciations wander, but the history underneath them is sound, and in one case he remembers something so unusual that it is worth defending against anyone who would assume he had it wrong.

Menno Colony — his own — was the first, founded by the Canadian emigrants who arrived in 1926–27 and built their villages in 1928.

Fernheim, which he renders as “Fahrenheit” or “Farnham,” was the second, founded 1 July 1930 right beside Menno. Its settlers were a different people entirely: Mennonites fleeing Stalin's

Soviet Union, not Canada. And here is the detail that deserves protecting. John remembers that Fernheim's people came "by way of China." That sounds like a garble. It is not. Fernheim was settled by two streams of Soviet refugees, and the smaller, stranger one is exactly the one he remembers: a group that escaped east across Soviet Siberia rather than west, gathering in Harbin, in Manchuria — the so-called "Harbin Corner." The first Harbin transport, 373 people, crossed the frozen Amur River out of the Soviet Union and reached Fernheim on 12 May 1932. His "by way of China in the twenties and thirties" is historically correct. It should not be flagged, softened, or explained away. A man who never had more than a few years of schooling has held, for seventy years, an accurate memory of one of the most obscure escape routes in Mennonite history.

Neuland, which he calls "Colony Island" or "New Land" (the German *Neuland* means, precisely, "new land"), was founded in 1947, the youngest of the three central Chaco colonies, on land bought by the Mennonite Central Committee. Its settlers were post-war Soviet refugees from the wartime flight west, and it is remembered for a heartbreaking demographic fact: of its 641 original family units, 253 had no father. The men had been killed on the Russian front or sentenced to labor camps in Siberia. This is the colony that arrived without its men — which is exactly what John means when he says "the Bolsheviks took the men, and the families never saw them again." He is not being dramatic. He is describing Neuland.

Volendam (his "Follendam" — a *V* is pronounced as an *F* in his German) was founded the same year, 1947, in eastern Paraguay, from the same post-war Soviet-refugee wave, and named for the ship *Volendam* that had carried the refugees from

Germany. **Friesland**, founded in 1937 in eastern Paraguay, was started by about a third of Fernheim's people who left the Chaco — the same Soviet-refugee stock, one step removed. And in 1948 a group came directly out of Canada again: two sister colonies, Bergthal and Sommerfeld, founded by Manitoba Mennonites descended from the same 1870s migration, who sailed — as it happens — on that same ship *Volendam* from Quebec City in June 1948. That the *Volendam* appears twice, naming one colony and carrying the founders of another, is probably why the two 1948 arrivals blur together in memory.

John counts “six big German colonies.” A strict textbook count gives seven by 1948 — Menno, Fernheim, Friesland, Neuland, Volendam, Sommerfeld, and Bergthal. But his six is not an error. It lands exactly right if Sommerfeld and Bergthal, founded together off the same voyage, are counted as one Canadian settlement, which is a perfectly reasonable way for someone who lived nearby to have grouped them. He is not miscounting. He is grouping the way a neighbor would.

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IV. The World of His Boyhood: Menno Colony, 1945–1966

John was born into a Menno Colony that was, in the years he grew up in it, still living in its own pre-modern era — and he left it, in 1966, on the very cusp of the wave that would transform it. This timing is the key to almost everything he remembers about the

place, because the colony he describes is the one that existed just before modernization arrived.

The economy he was raised in ran through the Chortitzer cooperative — a collective structure that had begun informally in 1927, was organized as a committee in 1936, and was formally constituted as a cooperative in 1962. It ran nearly everything: credit, the stores, the buying and selling of animals, import and export, workshops, an electric plant, transport. Governance sat with a colony authority headed by an *Oberschulze*, overseeing land, taxes, schools, and hospitals; the villages elected their own administrators, and only landowners voted. Around sixty villages made up the colony by 1955, each of twenty to forty families, and Loma Plata — John’s “Lumar Plata,” the administrative center — had become the colony’s hub in 1937.

What they grew, in his years, was not yet what the colony would become famous for. Today Menno Colony is a dairy powerhouse, its Trébol brand eventually controlling something like seventy percent of Paraguay’s milk industry. But that transformation came later — the great dairy upswing was a phenomenon of the 1980s, well after he left. In his boyhood the cash crops were cotton above all, with peanuts and sorghum, alongside subsistence manioc, beans, sweet potatoes, and watermelon. Drought-resistant buffalo grass from North America had only been introduced in 1955, quietly laying the foundation for the cattle industry that would follow. So the colony John remembers — cotton and peanuts, oxen and wagons, no cattle empire yet — is precisely the colony of the years before the boom. He remembers it accurately because he remembers it as it was, not as it became.

The texture of daily life was German and isolated. The everyday, at-home language was *Plautdietsch* — Low German — which

is a spoken tongue, not a written one; the written and church-and-school language was High German. A boy in Menno Colony grew up speaking one German at the supper table and reading another in the schoolroom and the sermon. Healthcare was a single small hospital, built in Loma Plata in 1948 — a building perhaps seventeen by fifty feet, with a consultation room, a lab, a pharmacy, and three patient rooms — chronically short of doctors and hours away from most of the colony. John's memory of a scarcity of doctors, of physicians brought in from outside, fits the documented pattern exactly, even where the individual names he gives cannot be checked. And running through all of it was the isolation the Chaco imposed: no electricity, no running water, ox-and-wagon transport, and produce that was brutally hard to get to market.

Then came the road. The Trans-Chaco Highway — his “Tanchako” — is the single most important piece of infrastructure in his early life, and its dates explain why he remembers it as such a momentous thing. The Mennonites needed a way to move goods out of the central Chaco; the Mennonite Central Committee contracted for the build; construction began in 1956, and the road was inaugurated in 1961, with usability improving over the following years. It ran hundreds of kilometers, connecting Loma Plata and its sister colonies to Asunción. It was, for its whole early life, an unpaved dirt-and-gravel track, notorious for turning to an impassable quagmire in the rains — paving did not begin until the early 2000s. But even unpaved, it was the hinge on which the colony's world swung open: travel, trade, mechanization, and outside influence all followed it in. John was a teenager while it was being built. He left in 1966, five years after it opened, just as the modernization it enabled was beginning to crest. That is exactly why his “nobody had electricity or running water then, ev-

erybody does now” and his “Loma Plata was two hundred people, now it’s a town of thousands” ring so true. He is not exaggerating the change. He left at the precise moment the change began, and every visit since has shown him a colony transformed.

Two things belong in this frame that John’s own telling touches only lightly. The first is the Mennonites’ remarkable position in Paraguay: fewer than one percent of the country’s population, they came to produce something like six or seven percent of its GDP, with living standards far above their neighbors — a prosperity that has drawn real resentment from other Paraguayans over wealth and hiring. The second is harder, and it belongs in this companion precisely because it does not belong in his voice. John remembers the mission work with pride — “we brought the gospel, and now there are big native churches” — and that is true as far as it goes; large Indigenous churches did grow out of the Mennonite missions in the Chaco. But the fuller record is more troubled. The Paraguayan Chaco was home to some nine Indigenous peoples, and the arrival and expansion of the colonies is also documented as a story of Indigenous land loss — the Enxet especially — of labor arrangements that drew accusations of below-minimum wages and debt peonage, and, in more recent decades, of deforestation reaching into Indigenous and protected lands. Both things are true at once: a persecuted people found refuge and built something extraordinary, and that building had costs borne by peoples who were already there. His memory is his to keep. The record asks us to hold the rest of it honestly alongside.

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V. The Long Road North: Leaving the Chaco in 1966

John was not alone in leaving. Beginning in the 1950s there was a steady exodus back to Canada from the Chaco colonies, driven by hard living conditions and by the pull of Canadian economic opportunity — roughly eight hundred people went from Menno Colony to Canada in that wave, with even larger numbers leaving the Soviet-refugee colonies. His family's 1966 departure sits inside a real migratory current, not an isolated choice.

Getting out was itself a journey. Before the Trans-Chaco Highway, leaving the colony had meant days by ox wagon to the railhead, a day on the narrow-gauge Casado railway to Puerto Casado, and one to two days by riverboat down the Paraguay River to Asunción — a round trip of three weeks or more, longer in the rains. By 1966 the highway had shortened the overland leg, but it was still an unpaved, often-bogged road, and there was one hard bottleneck that John remembers vividly: the river. There was no bridge across the Paraguay River near Asunción until 1978. To reach the capital from the Chaco you had to cross by ferry, and John's memory of traveling overnight and then waiting until morning to cross "a big river, like the Fraser" is a precise fit for that ferry crossing before the bridge existed. The river was the wall between the wilderness and the city, and everyone leaving the Chaco had to wait at it.

The city on the other side was the only real city Paraguay had. Asunción held just under 290,000 people at the 1962 census, and it was the country's sole major urban center, its only river port, and its only international airport — which is why a family arranging passports and international travel had no choice but to

route through it and stay several days. It was also a city under a dictatorship: Alfredo Stroessner ruled Paraguay from 1954 to 1989, with a cultivated personality cult and a program of highway and bridge building that was, in fact, the very modernization drive the Trans-Chaco road belonged to. For a boy out of a Low-German-speaking colony with no electricity, arriving in a Spanish-speaking capital of nearly three hundred thousand — cars, paved central streets, a working port, electric light — the gap was not just geographic. It was a century.

The money for the journey came through an institution and a tradition worth understanding. John remembers that a friend arranged a loan through the Mennonite Central Committee, and that the rest was borrowed. Behind that is one of the most distinctive features of Mennonite immigration history: the *Reiseschuld*, the “travel debt.” In its classic 1920s form, the Canadian Pacific Railway had agreed to carry Mennonite immigrants to Canada on credit, eventually extending some two million dollars, recorded family by family in a ledger and repaid, on honor, over decades — a debt “often said with disdain by our elders,” and not fully liquidated until the mid-1940s. By John’s time the mechanism had changed. The body that had run the old system had folded, by December 1963, into MCC Canada, and the mid-century model relied more on relatives sponsoring newcomers and on direct loans than on a single mass railway credit. So a 1966 travel loan “through MCC” is exactly the right institution for the era — the direct descendant of the organization that had financed the *Reiseschuld* — even if the specific machinery was the later kind. What persisted, and what he carries, is the culture of it: an honor-bound travel debt, to be worked off. His memory of picking berries all summer to repay the loan lands squarely inside that tradition, and

inside the specific economy that awaited him, of which more below.

There is also the question of how a boy born in Paraguay was able to come to Canada as a Canadian at all. John's memory of the citizenship rules is correct in its shape, and the shape is this. The Canadian Citizenship Act came into force on 1 January 1947, creating "Canadian citizen" as a legal status for the first time. Under it, a child born abroad could acquire citizenship through a Canadian parent, by registration of the foreign birth. John (born 1945) and his sister (born 1946) were born abroad to a Canadian-born father, and it was registration of their births that made them Canadian — exactly the route he describes. Nettie, born in 1947, did not qualify by descent, and became Canadian instead by marrying him, which the 1947 Act (eased in 1950) allowed for the foreign wife of a Canadian man. He draws the line at "up to 1947," and here the record softens him gently: the real reason Nettie could not claim citizenship by descent was almost certainly something about her own parents' status or an unregistered birth, not the calendar year itself — the year is family shorthand. And there is a quiet piece of good fortune in the timing. Citizenship by descent in that era could be lost at age twenty-four unless the person had established Canadian domicile earlier. John moved to Canada in 1966, at about twenty-one — which very plausibly is what secured his status before the age-twenty-four trap could close on it. Many in similar situations, the so-called "Lost Canadians," were not so lucky.

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VI. The Golden Age of the Jet

John's fascination with airplanes runs through his whole life, and the history of flight in his era makes clear why the machines that carried him left such a mark. He came from a place where the airplane was not luxury but lifeline, and he traveled, as a young man, in what really was the golden age of passenger flight.

In the Chaco, the airplane was infrastructure. Paraguay's military ran a scheduled domestic air service — Transporte Aéreo Militar, formed in 1954 with a single DC-3 Dakota and later operating some thirty of them — carrying passengers, mail, and cargo throughout a country whose roads failed in the rains. The DC-3 he remembers is described exactly right in his telling: a roughly twenty-seat aircraft, a type used in the war, of which the post-war market was flooded with cheap ex-military examples. His account that colonists flew out on government DC-3s when the road washed out is entirely plausible and internally consistent — the military air network existed, the road genuinely stranded people, and the colonies were getting airstrips in his era (Fernheim's Filadelfia had a good strip with weekly service). The cause-and-effect is his testimony, but it sits on solid ground.

The trips that carried him between hemispheres — out in 1966, back for Nettie in 1968–69 — landed in the middle of the jet age's brief, glamorous prime. The Boeing 707 had inaugurated widespread commercial jet service in 1958; it and the DC-8 flew higher than the weather, pressurized, air-conditioned, and quiet in a way piston aircraft never were. A jet had cut the Rio de Janeiro–New York run from around twenty-five hours to roughly nine. And flying was still rare and expensive, an event for the well-off: passengers dressed in their Sunday best, the in-flight meal

was multi-course even in coach, there was full bar service and complimentary cigarettes, and the cabin was thick with smoke. His memory of a roughly ten-hour overnight leg from Rio to New York matches the era's nine-hour nonstop almost exactly. The carriers fit too: Asunción was served by Panagra, absorbed into Braniff in 1967, which routed South American traffic through Miami; New York's gateway was the airport renamed John F. Kennedy in late 1963, which older travelers still called Idlewild. And his offhand line that Pan Am "went bankrupt all the time" is folk-memory of that airline's long, public unraveling — years of financial crisis and asset sales — that ended in a single true bankruptcy in 1991.

There is one more thing the record wants to say about John and airplanes, and it is the tender part. He never flew a real aircraft; his cockpit was a flight simulator. And yet, when he explains how the machines work — auto-spoilers armed before landing that raise themselves on touchdown, autobrake set to a chosen deceleration, an approach speed of a hundred and thirty to a hundred and forty knots, a maximum bank around thirty degrees, tires too hot to touch and smoking an hour after landing, gear that can collapse from a landing that comes in too hard and too fast — he is right, again and again, at a level of detail that checks out against aviation sources. The small things he gets slightly off are genuinely small: the reverse thrust that a pilot pulls by hand rather than the spoilers that deploy on their own; the exact runway designations at Vancouver and Calgary; the fact that the automated system that doomed the two Boeing MAX jets he watched crash on YouTube was a stabilizer-trim system, not literally the autopilot. These are the errors of a man who learned an enormous amount and had no runway to test it on. The honest sum-

mary is the moving one: a boy from a colony with no electricity taught himself to fly, correctly, a machine he was never allowed to touch.

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VII. The Valley That Received Him

The Fraser Valley that John arrived in during December 1966 was not a random landing place. It was one of the densest Mennonite settlements in Canada, and the timing of his arrival was, in one respect, almost uncanny.

Some twelve thousand Mennonites had migrated from the Prairies to the Fraser Valley between 1928 and the mid-1950s — most of them descendants of the 1870s Russia-to-Canada migration, the same stock John came from, drawn west by fertile soil, mild climate, and community. By the mid-1950s the main centers, from east to west, were Chilliwack, Sardis-Greendale, Yarrow, Abbotsford-Clearbrook, and Greater Vancouver, threaded with a couple dozen churches and a cluster of Mennonite schools and Bible colleges. Clearbrook alone reached around four thousand people by 1967. A Low-German-speaking family stepping off the long road from Paraguay was not stepping into a strange country so much as into a distant room of its own house.

And then the timing. John's church was King Road Mennonite Brethren Church, and King Road was founded in September 1966 — the very year and season his family arrived — for a reason that could not have fit him more precisely. That autumn, a larger Abbotsford congregation had voted to end its German-language ser-

vices. Members who wanted to keep worshipping in German, and who saw an influx of newcomers from Paraguay, Germany, and the Soviet Union who needed exactly that, broke away to form a new German-language congregation. Around fifty-five members left; the first service drew seventy-three. So a family that spoke Low German at home and had just crossed a hemisphere walked, in 1966, straight into a brand-new church founded that very month to serve people exactly like them. His later memory that the church-standing letter for his marriage had to come from King Road, and that his social and financial world ran through German-speaking townsfolk, reflects how tightly woven that enclave still was.

The economy that received him is the one his loan repayment ran through. The Abbotsford area was the “Raspberry Capital of Canada,” built on a raspberry-and-strawberry industry that Mennonite families had cleared the land for since the 1930s. The Abbotsford Growers Co-operative, incorporated in 1948, had begun with about ninety members, “exclusively Mennonites,” and in its early decades the picking workforce was primarily Mennonite families. When John says he picked berries all summer to pay off the travel loan, he is describing the regional Mennonite immigrant economy doing precisely what it had done for a generation: absorbing new arrivals into the berry harvest. The money in that world moved through Mennonite institutions too — the Clearbrook credit union, of which more in the next section — and the whole apparatus of church, co-op, and credit union formed a self-contained community into which a penniless newcomer could be received, employed, and financed.

The work he took up outside the berry fields — construction — was also the right trade at the right moment. Vancouver was in

the middle of a 1960s housing boom, with British Columbia hitting record dwelling-unit starts in 1964, 1967, 1968, and 1969, and construction companies “popping up all over” to meet demand. This is the era that produced the cheap, boxy “Vancouver Special.” Crucially, the framing method of the day — platform framing, by then the universal standard — was learnable on the job, the kind of work “a carpenter with basic skills could do,” which is exactly how immigrant men with little English routinely entered the trade. The path John took, from laborer hauling sand into basements to framer to running his own crew, was a path the boom and the trade genuinely made possible. It was also, by modern standards, dangerous: 1960s British Columbia construction had little of today’s safety regime — no mandated hard hats, reforms still decades away — and his memory of standing in mud over his ankles, in half-snow, on an unprotected December site, is a fair picture of what those sites were.

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VIII. Going Back for Nettie

The 1968–69 return to Paraguay to marry Nettie and bring her to Canada is, in John’s telling, a story of love, paperwork, and a loan. The history underneath it shows how each piece worked — and reveals a resonance he may not have named.

The immigration part turned on a change in Canadian law that had happened just the year before he needed it. In August 1967, Canada adopted its first points system for immigration. It created three streams — independent applicants, who were points-

tested; nominated relatives, partly tested; and sponsored immediate family of citizens, who bypassed the points assessment entirely. A foreign spouse of a Canadian citizen fell into that last, sponsored stream, exempt from the points test. This is why the advice John received — that it would be far easier to marry Nettie in Paraguay and bring her back as his wife than to keep applying for her some other way — was not just folk wisdom but sound guidance under the brand-new rules. Marriage to a Canadian citizen made her a sponsorable immediate relative, and landing could be completed at the port of entry. His memory of three failed pre-applications, then an official steering him toward marriage, then the “free to go” moment at Toronto, maps cleanly onto how the system actually functioned in 1968–69.

The loan that financed the trip came from exactly the kind of institution that existed in Clearbrook then. The Clearbrook District Mennonite Savings Credit Union had been incorporated in 1958 specifically to serve the growing Mennonite population, and its membership bond was Mennonite-only until 1970. So in 1968 it was still a Mennonite institution, with Low-German-speaking officers, of the sort that would lend a young member the money for a trip on a co-signer’s word. His memory of borrowing there, backed by a friend, describes that institution precisely.

The delay that nearly broke his heart — the wait for the wedding — was not bureaucratic obstruction. It was theology. In traditional Mennonite practice, baptism is an adult act, and it is baptism, not birth or family, that makes a person a member of a particular congregation; and one marries as a member, within the church. A Paraguayan congregation asking for a written letter of good standing from John’s home church in Canada before it would marry him is entirely consistent with that ecclesiology —

inter-congregational transfer letters are a real practice. The wait, in other words, was the time it took for a letter to cross a hemisphere and come back. There is a cruelty in that which the record makes plain: the same slow mail that delayed the wedding was the same slow mail that had strained the courtship across continents in the first place.

Even the motorbike fits the moment. John remembers buying a motorcycle in Paraguay to court across the colony's distances, and selling it at a loss. Motorbikes are now ubiquitous in the Chaco — a major Paraguayan motorcycle distributor was founded by Chaco Mennonites — but in 1968 that was new. The Trans-Chaco Highway had opened the colonies to motorized transport only a few years before. A young man buying a bike to court in 1968 was riding, quite literally, on the leading edge of the colony's motorization.

And there is a deeper resonance, offered here as something to notice rather than assert. Menno Colony exists because Mennonites left Canada in 1926–27. If Nettie's family was of Menno-colony origin, then when John brought her north he was bringing back to Canada a descendant of the very families who had once fled it — closing, in a single marriage, a circle that had opened forty years before either of them was born.

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IX. Building a Life: The Trades, the Busts, and the Farm

The long middle of John's working life — framing, a backhoe business, dairy farming — was lived against a backdrop of boom-and-bust economic cycles and a transforming trade, and the big beats of his memory track the documented record closely.

His pride in the framing trade sits inside a real revolution in how houses were built. The single largest change across his decades was the shift from hand-laid rafters to prefabricated roof trusses — metal-plate trusses developed in the early 1960s that solved a skilled-carpenter shortage and are used by roughly three in four home builders today. A framer who worked from the 1960s into the 2000s watched the roof, the most skill-intensive part of the frame, change from something you cut and raised by hand to something you set. His field knowledge — a 4:12 minimum roof pitch for asphalt shingles is exactly right — reads like what it is: the accumulated rules of thumb of a working framer, mostly dead-on, occasionally a shop rule rather than the letter of the code.

The busts he framed through were real and severe. When he remembers the trade collapsing “at the end of summer 1974,” the record agrees: Canadian housing fell sharply that year, with new multi-family starts dropping about forty percent, inside a North America-wide recession driven by the 1973 oil crisis. This is the exact moment he had bought into a backhoe business — the summer of 1974 — which is why that venture went the way it did. He took on equipment debt of around twenty-seven thousand dollars (something like a hundred and seventy thousand in today's money, at a time when the prime rate ran near eleven percent)

right as British Columbia's record construction run broke; a subcontracting client going under that fall and the machine sitting idle through the winter is consistent timing to the month. His tax lesson from selling that business rests on a genuine Canadian distinction, too: capital gains tax was brand new, dating only to 1972, and the sale of a going concern with its goodwill was treated more favorably than selling a bare machine. The truly brutal British Columbia bust came later, in 1981–82, when the Bank of Canada rate hit twenty-one percent and average Vancouver house prices fell by roughly half — a downturn he would also have framed through.

His account of workplace safety maps onto a system that was genuinely being built up around him over his career. British Columbia's Workers' Compensation Board — renamed WorkSafeBC in 2005 — dated to 1917, but the modern safety regime, including serious fall protection, largely arrived after his early years; fundamental reforms followed disasters like the 1981 Bentall IV collapse that killed four carpenters. His memory of an "A rating" from the board is best understood as his own word for a clean record — the real mechanisms are experience-rating discounts and a certificate-of-recognition rebate for low-claim employers — but the pride is well-founded: the system does reward exactly the kind of safe, low-claim site he ran.

The dairy years, when he left construction in 1985 to run his widowed sister's family farm in Greendale, put him in the most concentrated dairy region in the province — flat, reclaimed Fraser Valley land that had carried dairy farms since the 1800s, in a Mennonite-rooted community. By then Canada's dairy supply-management system was well established, dating to 1971, which meant the farm could ship milk only because it held quota and a li-

cense from the British Columbia Milk Marketing Board. And the detail he remembers with such disgust — a man walking into the milk-tank room with manure on his boots — lands hard against real regulation. A bulk-tank milk grader inspected the milk before it left the farm and could reject an entire tank; provincial rules explicitly governed milkhous cleanliness and the exclusion of manure from the milking area. The relentlessness he describes is structural, not complaint: cows must be milked at least twice a day, every day of the year, which is exactly why several years on a small family dairy meant no real days off.

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X. The Good Lord Didn't Want Me Yet: The Accidents in Context

Three times, John's own account has the world set up to kill him, and three times he walked away. He reads these as providence. The record cannot speak to providence, but it can show that the danger and the rescue were both entirely real — that the margins were as thin as he remembers.

The first, the forage-wagon entanglement, was not a freak event. Self-unloading forage wagons combine moving aprons, rotating beaters, conveyors, augers, and chains, and entanglement in them is one of the best-documented ways farmers die. The related hazard — a power-take-off driveline turning at 540 rpm — can, in the literature's own words, “pull an arm, leg, foot or hair and wrap it around the shaft several times in less than one second.” Federal estimates run to dozens of such fatalities a year.

Clusters of men killed the same way are on record. And the safety trip bar John remembers is a real device, meant to halt the drive the instant it is contacted — a genuine last line of defense. His account that other men died the way he nearly did is unverifiable in its specifics, but the pattern he describes is exactly the pattern the safety literature exists to warn against.

The second, the 2006 fall — a plank to the head, a coma, an air ambulance, and a titanium plate — was survivable because of infrastructure that was real and in place. British Columbia had operated a public air ambulance since the 1970s, with fixed-wing and helicopter critical-care transport. Royal Columbian Hospital, in New Westminster on the Fraser River, was and is one of only two Level 1 adult trauma centers in the province, with neurosurgery on campus — the major trauma referral center for the whole Fraser Valley. And titanium plate-and-screw repair of skull and facial fractures was, by 2006, entirely routine — titanium had become the standard for craniofacial reconstruction. His layman's memory that "they lifted my whole face to put a plate in" is a plausible description of a craniofacial exposure. Everything that saved him — the helicopter, the trauma center, the titanium — genuinely existed and genuinely fit.

The third, the work-zone crash on his sixty-ninth birthday in 2014, sits squarely in the most common work-zone collision pattern there is: a vehicle stopped at a single-lane closure, rear-ended, and shoved into the car ahead. Rear-end crashes are the most frequent work-zone collision, exactly because traffic stops suddenly at a lane closure. Even the maddening detail — that his replacement-vehicle insurance was set to expire that very night — reflects a real product: British Columbia's public insurer does offer time-limited new-vehicle replacement coverage that a write-

off claimed before expiry can be settled against. The exact dates are his memory; the mechanism is real.

Three times the danger was real, and three times the rescue was real. The meaning John draws from that sequence is his to draw. This companion can only confirm that he is not exaggerating the odds he beat.

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A Note on Sources and Method

The history in this companion was assembled from published, checkable sources and set against John's own recollections. Where the two agreed, that agreement is noted. Where a memory could not be confirmed, or where the record complicated it, that too is stated rather than smoothed over. Nothing here was invented to make the story richer; the richness is what the record actually holds.

The principal sources, by subject:

- **The 1920s emigration and the school laws:** Pier 21, the Canadian Museum of Immigration ("Mennonites and Canadian Accommodation"); the Mennonite Heritage Village ("Parting Ways").
- **Law 514, the founding of Menno Colony, the neighboring colonies, and the Chaco War:** the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO) entries for Paraguay, Menno Colony, Fernheim, Neuland, Volendam, Friesland, Sommerfeld, and Bergthal; Encyclopedia.com, "Mennonites of Paraguay"; Wikipedia's Menno

Colony, Loma Plata, and Mennonites in Paraguay articles; Britannica on the Chaco War; and, for the Harbin Corner, GAMEO and mennonitegenealogy.com.

- **The Gran Chaco environment:** Britannica, “Gran Chaco”; and reporting on the “Green Hell.”
- **Colony daily life and the Trans-Chaco Highway:** the Cooperativa Chortitzer history; Encyclopedia.com; Wikipedia’s Menno Colony and Loma Plata; Britannica and Mennonite archives on the Trans-Chaco Highway.
- **The Indigenous history of the Chaco:** the Minority Rights Group, Cultural Survival, and Mongabay.
- **The route out, Asunción, and the Stroessner era:** the Plett Foundation’s “Casado Railway”; Wikipedia’s Asunción and Silvio Pettirossi Airport; Britannica on the Stroessner regime.
- **The travel-loan tradition and Canadian citizenship law:** GAMEO (“Debts”; “Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization”); the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta; and Wikipedia’s “History of Canadian nationality law” and the Canadian Encyclopedia’s “Lost Canadians.”
- **Air travel:** Wikipedia’s Boeing 707, Pan Am, Braniff, and JFK Airport entries; the Braniff International heritage site; and, for the Chaco DC-3 service, Aeroflight on Transporte Aéreo Militar.
- **The Fraser Valley Mennonite world:** On This Spot (“Mennonites of the Fraser Valley”; “Abbotsford Growers Co-op”); GAMEO’s King Road MB Church and Clearbrook Credit Union entries; Wikipedia’s Clearbrook article.
- **The 1967 points system and spousal immigration:** Pier 21 on Order-in-Council PC 1967-1616.

- **The construction trade, the busts, WorkSafeBC, and the truss revolution:** Statistics Canada on Canadian housing; the Bank of Canada's historical rate series; the BC Labour Heritage Centre; WorkSafeBC; and Fine Homebuilding on the history of framing.
- **The backhoe business and 1974 recession:** Statistics Canada and the Bank of Canada.
- **The dairy years:** GAMEO on Greendale; Dairy Farmers of Canada; the BC Milk Marketing Board; and BC's Milk Industry Standards Regulation.
- **The accidents:** the National Ag Safety Database and Penn State Extension on forage-wagon and PTO entanglement; Fraser Health and Wikipedia on Royal Columbian Hospital and the BC Ambulance Service; the Cleveland Clinic on craniofacial fixation; and the Federal Highway Administration on work-zone crashes.

The fuller citations, with the specific claims each supports, are held in the project's research notes.

