



SOME
GREAT
THING
LAWRENCE
HILL

A NOVEL

Author of the #1 Bestseller *The Book of Negroes*
Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

Some Great Thing

Lawrence Hill

 HarperCollins e-books

To my parents, Donna and Daniel Hill

“What! discouraged? Go do some great thing.”

Crawford Kilian
*Go Do Some Great Thing;
The Black Pioneers of British Columbia*

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PROLOGUE

His son was born in 1957 at the Misericordia Hospital in Winnipeg, before men had to start watching their wives give birth. Asked about it years later, Ben Grafton replied, “What’s a man to do in a place like that, except grow all bug-eyed and wobbly and make a shining fool of himself?”

On that windless January night, Ben Grafton didn’t enter the delivery room. He didn’t consider it. He waited until Louise was “finished,” poked his head in the door and shouted “atta way Lulu!” Wearing a blue woollen cap that stopped short of his huge brown ears, he followed two nurses who took the infant to the nursery. Ben Grafton was not invited. Nor was he self-conscious. He was a forty-three-year-old railroad porter who had coped with all sorts of nonsense in the past and had long stopped wondering what people thought of his being this or that. They turned to tell him he couldn’t stay in the nursery. He said he wanted to look at his little man.

“So cute, this little baby,” one nurse cooed, turning the brown face toward Ben.

Ben touched a tiny cheek. He didn’t understand all this hospital nonsense. Why couldn’t the nurses just leave the boy with his mother? Or with him? But he wasn’t going to raise a ruckus. He was going to take it calm and easy. But then something happened. The nurse crossed the baby. With her thumb. She actually touched his forehead and made a sign of the cross. Then she started mumbling a prayer. “Hey,” Ben said.

The nurse continued.

“No praying.” Gently, but firmly, Ben poked the woman in the ribs.

She turned on him, eyebrows raised. “Please,” she hissed.

“No praying,” Ben repeated.

The woman’s jaw dropped. The nurse beside her stared at Ben.

“That’s right,” Ben said, eyeballing both of them. “This little man is a Grafton. And Graftons don’t go in for devils and angels and heaven and hell. This little man will believe in humanity. Humanity and activism. You can leave him here till his mother wakes up but I don’t want any more of those rituals. Is that clear?”

The praying nurse nodded, the other one blinked. Neither spoke. They lay the baby in his bassinet. Ben backed out of the nursery but watched through the window. He stayed there for an hour or so. He had some thinking to do. Thinking about a name. A *good* one. This child was destined for great things. No ordinary name would do.

PART ONE

On his way to the men's room, which he considered a refuge, since in all his years at *The Herald* nobody had run in there to dispatch him to the scene of an accident, Chuck Maxwell spotted a memo from the managing editor. "*Mahatma?*" Chuck muttered. Staring at the message board, he read the news again: "I am pleased to announce that Mahatma Grafton of Toronto will join our reporting staff on July 11, 1983." Chuck let out the news with a shout. Colleagues surrounded him. They found the recruit's resumé appended to the memo. Mahatma Lennox Grafton. Age: twenty-five. Education: B.A. double honours, History and French, Université Laval. M.A. Economics, University of Toronto. Languages: English, French, Spanish. Marital status: single. Work experience: reporter for *The Varsity*, U. of T. Interests: literature, languages, squash.

"What kind of name is Mahatma?" Chuck asked.

"Indian," someone said. "East Indian."

"Maybe it's Spanish," Chuck said. "Hispanic or something."

Reporters argued about it all afternoon. One said he had heard the new reporter was a Pakistani, but Helen Savoie challenged him. "Who told you that?"

"Don Betts."

Helen snorted. Don Betts was the city editor. "What does he know?"

"Somebody might have told him," Chuck said. "Maybe the guy is a Pakistani. Maybe he's coming to live with his family here."

"Do you know how many Pakistanis there are in Manitoba?" Helen said. "Hardly any. But Betts is such a pea-brain, he'd call every East Indian a Pakistani."

"How can you say there's hardly any Pakistanis?" Chuck said. "There's tons of 'em."

"What do you mean, tons?"

"Thousands."

"Thousands in Manitoba?" she asked.

Chuck held Helen in high esteem. Sure, she was stagnating at *The Herald* just like him, never getting a decent assignment, but the woman knew more than anyone else on staff. Still, Chuck went after her on this one. "They're everywhere you look."

"Where, exactly, have you been looking?" Helen asked. "Do you see any on the police force? In politics? Delivering mail? You see three driving cabs and you say they're everywhere."

Chuck said, "I'll bet you twenty bucks the new guy is Pakistani."

"You're on."

A white bungalow. A closed-in porch with yellow trim, six steps off the ground. Tyndall stone exterior. A living-room window looking out on American elms on Lipton Street. His old bedroom window faced a garden plot, an alley, trash cans, electric wires and, further back, the rear ends of houses on the next street west. Mahatma Grafton took the stone path by the south end of the house. He set down his suitcases and dug in his pocket for a key that he hadn't used in six years. He wouldn't

stay long with the old man. A few weeks, maybe. Then he'd find an apartment. A cheap bachelor that he could abandon easily if the job didn't work out. The doorknob turned all by itself. The old man must have been watching from the window. He swung the door open, smiling. Wearing the same burgundy bathrobe, the same heel-beaten slippers. He was not a tall man. Five-seven, maybe. Mahatma was surprised. He had remembered his father as being taller.

"Welcome home, son."

"Thanks."

They shook hands. Mahatma gripped loose flesh around old bones. Dark grooves slanted down his father's cheeks, and others cut across his forehead. Mahatma glanced at his father's mahogany irises. Ben asked, "So you're going to work for *The Herald*?" Mahatma started to tell him about it, but Ben cut him off. "Let me take one of those bags. Is your old bedroom okay?"

Magazines and newspapers covered a chair in the living-room. A cherry desk, which Ben had bought at a garage sale fifty years ago, played host to scraps of paper—phone messages, memory prods, shopping lists. Mahatma tugged up the old blanket on the couch and saw boxes on the floor. The same old boxes stuffed with documents. Documents Ben collected. ("Did I ever show you this?" Ben had asked a thousand times. "What?" "This picture of your mother... This picture of your mother's mother... This picture of railway porters. These are history.") Mahatma wondered if the old man had touched the boxes in years. Did he still log details about the family, lecture about race consciousness and think Mahatma had forsaken his people? Ben asked, "You had lunch?"

"On the plane." Mahatma felt six years of silence rising between them. "But thanks, abuelo."

Ben smiled. Mahatma watched the dark lips lifting. He studied the ears: huge half-hearts running from eyes to jaw. The old man still liked to be called *abuelo*. It reminded him of union days; it reminded him of long-ago lessons from father to son: *hermano* means brother, *libertad* freedom, *papá* father, *abuelo* grandfather. *Uno dos tres cuatro cinco*: one two three four five. I'm your papa but you can call me *abuelo*. Our little secret. What'll you call me, Daddy? Mahatma. No, something else! *Gran alma*, then. What's that, Daddy? It means great soul, it means Mahatma. Ben said, "Glad to have you back, son."

"Glad to be back."

They didn't touch. Mahatma managed a smile. "I'm going to have a nap."

"Good idea." This surprised Mahatma, who had expected the old man to squawk, "Nap? I'm three times your age and I don't nap."

Mahatma closed the door. He sighed. Ben had dusted the window ledge, swept the floor, stuffed four boxes into the closet. Mahatma flipped one open and saw pages and cards and brochures and hand-kept journals. He dropped the box lid back in place. He lay back on his old bed. There was a desk in the room. A new desk and a lamp. Nice of the old man, that. Mahatma would have to keep in touch after renting an apartment. It had been understandable, not writing or calling from Toronto. His father hadn't written or called, either. But it would be wrong to return to Winnipeg and fall out of touch again. He wouldn't do that to his father. No matter what had come between them.

Mahatma chose to walk. He remembered the way. It was on the east side of Smith Street, just north of Graham Avenue.

Lyndon Van Wuyss, the managing editor, had confirmed it all three weeks ago by long distance. But Mahatma still found it hard to believe that he was going to work for *The Winnipeg Herald*. An establishment newspaper. He and his friends had poked fun at it when they were in high school. *The Winnipeg Hare-Brain*, they called it. Mahatma's father used to call the newspaper racist. By the time Mahatma was old enough to understand the word, he had stopped listening to his father. But he could still remember the old man's complaints: *The Herald* ignored the Indian community, except for its criminals; it ignored Martin Luther King, except for his death... Mahatma hadn't consulted his father about the job with *The Herald*. He merely sent a three-line letter, saying when he'd be arriving and why. 'Why' was a question Mahatma had asked himself a lot. The first thing in life was to be true to oneself. And there was no reason for Mahatma to be a journalist. He could think of a million places he would rather be than at a political convention, deafened by the dim-witted ranting of five thousand Young Conservatives. He felt no urge to report the bloody details of a court case, or to interview brokers about the stock market. And isn't that what reporters did?

Well, why not? The fact was, he had nothing better to do. Mahatma was an intellectual bum. No. He was worse than a bum. He was an M.A. graduate over his head in student loans. He had no particular job skills and no goals in life. What thinking citizen would place his life, or his liberty, or even his bank savings in the hands of an economics major? What Mahatma had discovered about journalism was this: it was the only pseudo-profession left in the world that still hired bums. Mahatma found it scandalous that one of Canada's biggest newspapers would hire a reporter—him!—on the basis of a ten-minute interview that focused neither on Manitoba's fiscal deficit nor on its tensions over French rights, but on the nocturnal carousing of one of Mahatma's professors, a friend of the managing editor. Sure, he was on a four-month probation. But Mahatma wasn't worried. He was putting them on probation too. Giving journalism a try.

Here goes freedom for twenty-five grand, Mahatma sighed, pushing through the revolving doors of *The Winnipeg Herald*. Three people were ahead of him. All of them walked by the security guard and waited for an elevator. Mahatma got stopped. "Sir," the guard said. Mahatma looked at him blankly. This sort of thing happened twenty times a year. Store detectives suspected him of shoplifting, border officials thought he was carrying contraband and security officers believed he came to foment trouble. The guard asked, "Where are you going, sir?" Mahatma detected a note of sarcasm in the word 'sir.'

"Fourth floor."

"For what purpose?"

"I work there."

"You work there. Funny. I've never seen you before."

"Funny. This is my first day."

"Name?"

"Mahatma Grafton."

“What?”

“Grafton,” he repeated. “Tell them it’s Mr. Grafton.”

The guard picked up a phone. He spoke, waited, listened. Then he hung up the phone. He didn’t apologize. He just said, “Fourth floor.”

“Is that a fact?” Mahatma rode the elevator alone. He rushed a pick through his curls, which held close to his angular head. He saw his own dark eyes in the mirror, gauged the shade of his copper-brown face, stood tall to straighten his tie and lingered on a depressing thought: he was going to have to read *The Herald*. Regularly.

When Mahatma entered the newsroom, he saw a rectangular work space with two long columns of eight desks each. He also saw twenty or so filthy orange and yellow computer terminals, Styrofoam cups smelling of cold coffee, garbage cans as big as oil barrels and blinds that barred all natural light. The blinds were caked in dust. They blocked the windows as if life outside were a military secret. It could have been 100 degrees outside, and not one reporter would have known. But the newsroom did have one good point. It seemed like an acceptable shelter in the event of nuclear attack. Mahatma saw phone books on the floor. Reports. Filing cabinet drawers yawned wide and leaked letters, envelopes and pencils. He didn’t see one clean desk. Nor did he see a receptionist. Nobody greeted him as he stood there. Nobody noticed him at all. Mahatma walked up an aisle, past a switchboard operator, and toward the biggest desk in the room. A police radio babbled but nobody listened. Messages had been jammed onto a spike anchored in a block of wood. A telephone rang. Nobody answered it. A man sat with his feet up, leaning back in a swivel chair, talking on another phone. He was forty or so. His sandy blond hair gave way to advancing columns of baldness. He had blue eyes and thin lips, and didn’t appear to be discussing newspaper business.

“I don’t care!” he shouted into the receiver. “You said those stocks would go up but they’ve gone down. I want you to sell ’em before they sink.” Slamming down the receiver, he leaned back a little further, eyed Mahatma and said, “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Don Betts.”

“You’ve got him.”

“I’m Mahatma Grafton.”

“Mahatma Grafton!” Betts swung his feet off the desk. “You’re fucking Mahatma Grafton?”

“You could put it that way,” Mahatma said with a grin.

“What happened to the Pakistani guy?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Snickering broke out among editors working around a long, horseshoe-shaped desk.

“Don’t mind those cowboys,” Betts said. “They thought...”

Again the men broke into laughter. So did Betts. When he calmed down, he shouted across the newsroom, “Hey, Chuck, you sharing that desk with anybody?”

A man in his mid-thirties shook his head in the negative, staring at Mahatma. He then yelled at a woman typing at a computer terminal, “Hey Helen! I owe you twenty!”

“Chuck,” Betts called out again, “could you show, uh, uh...,” he said, turning to Mahatma, “what should I call you, anyway?”

“Mahatma. Hat.”

“Good enough. Chuck, show Hat around, would you?”

“Sure.”

Chuck guided Mahatma by the elbow, as if they were old friends. “Welcome aboard.” Before Mahatma could answer he added, “Could you hang on a minute? I’ve got to finish something.” He began typing on a computer keyboard. “By the way, what’s ‘acronym’?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Acronym,” Chuck said. “What’s it mean?”

“It’s a set of letters that stands for the name of an organization, like NATO or FIRA.”

“Thanks.” Chuck typed a little more. “You must be a brain. Knowing a word like that, straight off—I admire that in a person. I always use the dictionary. Betts says I oughta use it more.” Chuck turned to face Mahatma. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Are you black?”

“It’s hard to say,” Mahatma said. “My heels are pink.”

“I mean, I know you’re black,” Chuck said, “but from where? You’re not from Pakistan?”

“Do I look like I’m from Pakistan?”

“Just checking,” Chuck said. “There was sort of a disagreement about all this yesterday. Anyway, lemme show you around.”

Chuck gave Mahatma a brief tour of the library. “I try to spend as little time in there as possible, but you’ll probably be different. You’re an intellectual.” They visited the cafeteria. It was as ugly as the newsroom: fluorescent lights; tables stained with coffee; armless, plastic chairs; steam tables and vending machines. They returned to the newsroom. “We’ve got forty reporters on staff,” Chuck said. “About half do city news. See that guy? That’s Norman Quentin Hailey. But we call him No Quotes. You see his copy, you’ll know why. B-O-R-ing! And watch out! He chews garlic. Calls it a natural antibiotic. Takes all kinds, eh? And that’s Helen Savoie. She’s French but she spells her first name the English way. You know, she dumped the accents and the extra ‘e.’ And her last name? You gotta pronounce it Savoy, okay? Very touchy!”

Don Betts approached them. “Hey, buddy, let’s have a chat,” he said to Mahatma. They entered the office of the managing editor, who was apparently out of town. “So,” Betts said, “where are you from, anyway?”

Mahatma tried not to stiffen. He kept his legs crossed, casually, at the ankles. “Winnipeg. The Wolseley area.”

Betts frowned. “Yes, but your nationality?”

“Canadian.”

“Yes, but you know. Where were you from? Before that?”

“Before that?” Mahatma fought back a lump of anger in his throat. He met Betts’ stare blankly.

“You know, your origins.”

“Origins,” Mahatma repeated, aware of the tension in his voice. “I originated in Winnipeg. Misericordia Hospital.” He said that a touch too smartly. His father had been much more skilful in dealing with fools. The old man knew how to play dumb.

Chuck Maxwell walked into the office. “Sorry, Don,” he said, “but there’s a

phone call for you. Say, you guys almost finished? There's some reporters who want to meet Mahatma."

It wasn't more than a twenty-minute walk to work. Mahatma crossed the Osborne Bridge and ducked behind the Manitoba Legislature, passing by American elms topping the banks of the Assiniboine River. It was a hot, sunny Tuesday morning, the start of his second day at *The Herald*. He passed between the green lawns of Government House. A statue of Louis Riel stood high in the park alongside the riverbank. Some people thought it was grotesque but he preferred the looming, naked man with an ugly head and bold genitals to airport music and corporate boardroom art.

Mahatma turned up Kennedy Street and right on Broadway, which was one of the most attractive streets in Winnipeg. It boasted the Manitoba Legislature and the Fort Garry Hotel, with rows of tall trees and a wide boulevard running between them. Just yesterday, Mahatma had seen hot dog vendors on Broadway. That would be something, being a hot dog vendor. Ever since he had read *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Mahatma had considered such vendors with a curious eye.

A curious eye. That was one thing he hadn't had too much of this morning, trying to force himself to read through *The Winnipeg Herald*. It had been tough. It had drained the taste right out of his coffee. There was a story about a group home—one of the tenants had pissed on a neighbour's lawn, provoking a neighbourhood clamour: move the home elsewhere, far from women and children. Women and children, Mahatma scoffed. They, presumably, were to be protected at all costs from retards and urine. That story had been written by Chuck Maxwell. Also on page three were two police briefs, one rape, one purse-snatching. Mahatma skipped over them. There was a story about pensions for City Hall councillors. It carried Norman Hailey's byline. It was deadly serious and devoid of quotes, except for one remark by an actuary. Who in his right mind would quote an actuary?

Mahatma turned up Smith Street, made a quick right and headed into *The Herald*. He saw Don Betts send Chuck Maxwell running into the library. Betts had another reporter trying to phone City Hall. Betts told Mahatma, "I've got one helluva story cooking and I don't have time to talk. Hang around and watch. I might need you." The phone rang. Betts hit a button. "City desk," he said, without having to pick up a receiver. A deep male voice came through a speaker in the telephone, asking if this was *The Winnipeg Herald*. "Yeah," Betts said. He whispered to Mahatma, "This guy's a complete dingo. I can tell 'em a mile off." The man asked if Christine Bennie worked there. "Yeah," Betts said, "but she's in Nicaragua."

"Nickar-what?"

"She's out of the country," Betts said. "Okay?"

"Wait! Wait!"

"What is it?" Betts said.

"I'm Jake Corbett."

"So?"

"She was gonna do a story on me. A whole big number. Page one!"

Betts shook his head and grinned. He ran a palm over his forehead. "She said that, did she? Well, I'll tell her you called."

"She said I had a good case. The welfare people are stomping on my rights and

she was gonna look into it.”

“Did you say you’re on welfare?” Betts said.

“Yes. And—”

“Then get a job.” Betts hung up. “I’ve gotta deadline in one hour,” he said while dialling long distance. Through the telephone speaker, Mahatma heard someone answer at the Hotel Managua.

Betts asked for Christine Bennie. The hotel receptionist didn’t speak English. Mahatma offered to help, since he spoke Spanish, but Betts declined. He raised his voice until someone else came to the phone. He said he was calling from a newspaper in Winnipeg, Canada, that it was a question of life or death, that he had to speak to Christine Bennie, and that if she wasn’t in her room could they please check the goddamn bar? As it turned out, Bennie was in her room. Sleeping.

“Sleeping? How come you’re not tailing our mayor? Why do you think we had you follow him all the way to Managua?”

Christine Bennie’s voice came through the speaker. “Piss off. I filed a feature three hours ago.”

“Yeah yeah,” Betts said, “we got it. Where’s the mayor?”

“At a reception,” she said.

“Hustle over there and tell him to call us.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Then ask him these questions and get right back to me. The mayor’s name is on a blacklist used by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. They use this list at the borders to keep out unwelcome visitors—commies, anarchists, you know. Ask him three questions. One: Does he know he’s on the list? Two: Does he think being a communist is preventing him from doing his job? Like, how is he gonna fight U.S. duties on our hog exports if he can’t even go down there? And three: Is he going to resign over the matter? Call me back pronto. Bye.”

Betts sent Mahatma to the library “See if Chuck has anything on the mayor. Tell him to move it.”

Mahatma found Chuck Maxwell thumbing through a wad of clippings without letting the newsprint touch his sleeves. He sat with perfect posture. Chuck shifted in his seat and turned his head to the side, glancing at a newspaper on his table. Mahatma walked up to him. Chuck didn’t hear. Mahatma, standing behind Chuck, looked at the paper. It was today’s *Herald*. July 12, 1983. Opened to the Lifestyles page. Chuck began underlining a horoscope entry:

If Today Is Your Birthday: You are a simple person with simple goals. You refuse to accept injustice, and that is your greatest strength. But you must hone your working skills to survive.

“Chuck?”

Chuck looked up as if he’d been caught reading dirty magazines. “Hey, man, don’t sneak up on me like that. My nerves are really shot.”

“Sorry,” Mahatma said. “Betts wants to know if you’re done.”

Chuck dried his forehead with an initialled handkerchief. He got up. He stood six feet tall, and had a good body. Slender. Athletic shoulders. A square, cleft chin. He

smoothed his jacket. “That man’s really on my case, you know that?”

“Giving you a hard time?”

“I only had like five minutes to go through three years of clippings!”

“What’s Betts want?” Mahatma asked.

“To know if the mayor’s ever been turned back at the U.S. border.”

“Has he?”

“S’far as I can see, no.”

Betts marched in. “Nothing?”

“Nope,” Chuck said.

“So when was he last in the States?”

Chuck said, “He went to Minneapolis in 1979.”

“Christ, Chuck, nothing more recent?”

“Gimme a break! It’s not my fault if we’ve got nothing on him.”

Betts glared at the reporter. “Thirty-five thousand dollars a year and you can’t get the mayor’s wife on the phone, you can’t find his assistant, and now you can’t dig through files. You know something, Chuck? You couldn’t handle a news story if it ran up and bit you!” Betts stormed out of the library.

“When he thinks he’s onto a big story, he writes it himself,” Chuck scoffed, “to see his byline all over page one. Don’t let him impress you. It’ll be a one-day wonder. Here today, forgotten tomorrow.”

Betts shouted at Mahatma, “Sit here at city desk and handle the phone! If Christine Bennie calls, I gotta talk to her.”

Mahatma nodded, glancing around the newsroom at the rows of computer terminals, the mounds of trash and note-pads and pens and government reports piled on desks. He noticed a cigarette butt floating in an old cup of coffee. He watched Betts bash out a sentence with the middle fingers of each hand. The editor glanced up to see how it looked on the computer screen, then bent down to pound out another sentence. His hands bounced high off the keys, nearly striking his face. Mahatma read the screen.

Winnipeg Mayor John Novak has been barred entry to the United States by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, *The Herald* has learned.

Documents obtained by *The Herald* show that Novak—the only communist mayor in North America—has been blacklisted because of political activities incompatible with American interests.

Border officials at airports, roads, train stations and ports have been equipped with a ‘lookout book’ containing names of unwanted foreigners.

Novak has been barred under Section 28 of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act, which aims to keep out communists.

The telephone rang. Mahatma said, “City desk.”

A voice jumped out of the speaker. “This is Jake Corbett. I want you to do a big story on the cruel and unusual punishment the welfare people are doing to me. Section 12 of the Charter says they’re supposed to be cutting that out. And—”

Mahatma took down a long message. But when the call ended, Betts crumpled the message and grinned. “Drop that dingo and take a look at this.” Mahatma read two

more paragraphs on the screen.

Informed yesterday by *The Herald* of the American move, three city councillors said they planned to call on the mayor to resign.

“Who’s going to defend our farming market south of the border if our own mayor can’t get down there and lobby for Manitoba hog farmers?” said Councillor Jim Read.

Christine Bennie called back. She told Betts the mayor denied being barred from the States. He had no intention of stepping down over a non-issue. “Get back to him,” Betts said. “Ask if he’s ever been barred entry.”

She told him to forget it.

“Why?”

“He’s gone off to meet villagers who’ve been brutalized by contras.”

“You are one useless tit, Bennie.”

“I love you too, Betts.”

“I’m gonna have you suspended for insubordination.”

She hung up on him.

Betts finished off his story:

Reached in Managua where he is to meet Marxist leader Daniel Ortega, Novak said there was “no substance” to the charge that he was a persona non grata in the United States. He refused to resign, claiming that the information obtained by *The Herald* was “a non-issue.”

Betts added a few more details. Then he sent the story through the computer system. He walked over to the slot man and said, “It’s all yours.”

The slot man spoke hesitantly. “You know, Christine Bennie has filed a good feature about contras mutilating villagers. It’s twenty-five inches long.”

“Hold Bennie’s feature! I’m talking spot news. You’d better use this before someone else gets it.”

“Let’s see it,” the slot man said. He hit some keys. He waited. Then he stared at the screen. “How’d you get this?”

Betts bellowed out in laughter. “None of your business who my sources are. Good, isn’t

it?” “I’ll see if we can cut Bennie’s feature.”

“Now we’re talking!” Betts said, slapping the slot man on the back. Then he shouted across the newsroom. “Hey, Chuck! C’mere.” Chuck wandered over, taking his time.

“No offence about what I said earlier, pal,” Betts said. “I got the story anyway. Wanna see it?”

Chuck looked at the screen. “Yeah, good, Don. Good work.”

“You feeling okay?”

“I’m all right.”

“Today’s your birthday, right? Why don’t you leave early?”

“All right.”

“No hard feelings?”

“Nope.” Chuck slung a leather jacket over his shoulder and walked toward the exit.

“See you, Chuck,” a copy editor called out.

“See you, Bill,” Chuck said.

“Happy birthday, Chuck,” another editor called out.

“Yeah, Chuck,” a third editor said, “happy birthday.”

“Thanks guys.” Chuck Maxwell waved and turned out of the newsroom.

“The man’s heading toward a breakdown,” Betts told Mahatma. “He’s lost his balls. Lemme tell you something. A reporter needs balls. No balls, no scoops.”

The story by Don Betts ran on Wednesday. The retraction ran on Thursday. Helen Savoie had worked for eight years at *The Winnipeg Herald*. She had never been promoted. Actually, for a brief period, they had given her the labour beat. But she angered her editors by refusing to cross picket lines and, in 1976, she joined a one-day national workers’ strike to protest against government controls on wage increases. She had tried to get Chuck Maxwell to join the protest. “You kidding?” he said. “They’ll can my ass.”

“You have to believe in something,” she told him.

“I do,” he said, “I believe in my pay cheque.”

They pulled Helen off the beat and put her back on general assignments. She asked for work as a copy editor. They turned her down. But after several years, they cut her reporting back to three days a week. The fourth and fifth days, they had her edit the Lifestyles page. It contained horoscopes and gossip columns.

Editors disliked Helen because she displayed no enthusiasm and minimized the importance of her assignments. However, she was the best-read reporter on staff, and could be counted on to put good questions to foreign dignitaries, business executives, famous writers and scientists who visited Winnipeg. Editors used her to cover complex stories but had little else to do with her. Reporters consulted her on points of fact, but, although desks were shared at *The Herald*, Helen Savoie ordinarily sat alone at the back of the newsroom.

Thursday the 14th of July, however, was no ordinary day. It was the day *The Herald* published its retraction of the Don Betts scoop. It was also the day that Christine Bennie resigned. Helen knew a fair bit about these things, and reporters, for once, had been approaching her all day. Late in the afternoon, Chuck Maxwell slipped into the seat next to hers. The setting sun had pierced a few cracks of the dust-covered window blinds. Dust particles floated in streams of light cutting across the newsroom. Chuck heard Helen relate how Christine Bennie had phoned from Managua to tell the assistant managing editor that she was quitting and not coming in to clean out her desk so why didn’t he just send her the last cheque in the mail? Helen asked Chuck if he wanted to know the kicker. Chuck nodded. The kicker, Helen said, was that Christine Bennie had just been hired by *The New York Times*. Chuck asked all about that. Then he asked what Helen thought about Betts’ so-called scoop. Helen uttered one or two expletives and offered to rewrite Betts’ lead, just to see how dull the truth looked. Chuck glanced at the computer screen as Helen typed.

Winnipeg Mayor John Novak visited the United States before his recent trip to Nicaragua despite claims that American immigration authorities had listed him as an unwelcome alien.

“Betts is pissed off at me for not telling him that the mayor had been in the States before going to Nicaragua,” Chuck said.

“You didn’t write the story,” Helen said. “He did. So it’s his problem.”

“Would you pull him out of a burning car?”

Helen said, “That’s a hypothetical question.”

“Would you or wouldn’t you?”

“It depends,” she said.

“The car is burning. You happen to come along. Yes or no?”

“He’s watching,” Helen said. “And he’s got ears like a hound dog.”

Chuck glanced over a column of desks and heads. He saw Don Betts at the front of the room. “Big deal. Just answer me.”

“Of course I’d pull him out. Wouldn’t you?”

“No way,” Chuck said. “I’d let him roast.”

“And his family?”

“Better off without him.”

Helen grinned. “His car’s on fire. He’s screaming. He has a fractured leg. And you won’t pull him out?”

“Not a chance,” Chuck said.

“But you oppose capital punishment.”

“We’re not talking punishment,” Chuck said. “We’re talking fate.”

“Say he’s bleeding to death,” Helen said, “but the car isn’t burning. Then would you help?”

At that moment, Mahatma Grafton passed by. He heard Chuck say no, EN-OH NO! “What’s going on?” Chuck explained. “If the car’s on fire, then I’m not going near it,” Mahatma said. “But if there’s no fire, I’d have to yank him out.”

They laughed together. Several heads turned.

Betts shouted, “Hey Chuck, I need you here!”

“He’s got it in for me,” Chuck said.

“Maybe he’s got a good story for you,” Helen said.

“Yeah, like rotten meat found in dog meat tins.”

“But with a new twist today,” Mahatma said. “Dog meat is tainted, but proves safer than canned tuna.”

Ten minutes later, Chuck returned to his desk. He ran a hand through his curled hair, which was brown but streaked with silver. He asked if Mahatma were good for a walk. They rode the elevator downstairs. Mahatma saw skin twitching under Chuck’s right eye. “I can’t handle it,” Chuck said. “I can’t take it any more.”

“Having a bad day?”

“You know how long I’ve been at *The Herald*?” Chuck said. Mahatma shrugged. “Twenty-one years. I dropped out of school to start as a copy boy.” They headed north on Smith Street. “I’m a man, aren’t I? An adult, right? I get up in the morning, wash my schlong, drive to work, pay my Visa, right? Then why this? Why this?” Chuck gave Mahatma a piece of paper. It was the size of a birthday card and entitled, in bold

typed letters, Performance Appraisal—Chuck Maxwell. The appraisal had five categories: Accuracy, Speed, Story Initiative, Enthusiasm, and Dress and Demeanour. Chuck got a B for Dress and Demeanour, and Ds for the rest.

“They’re trying to rattle you,” Mahatma said.

“They’ll suspend me if I screw up again. They blame me for Betts’ errors in that story on the mayor. They say the story never would have run if I had found some library clipping about the mayor stopping off in the States before he flew to Nicaragua. Okay, I missed it. I missed one clip. So what am I, an axe-murderer?”

“Don’t let it get to you,” Mahatma said.

They walked back to *The Herald*. Chuck blew his nose, threw his head back and took three deep breaths. “It’s okay. I’m all right now.”

His name was Hassane Moustafa Ali, but friends called him Yoyo. To sharpen his journalism skills, he was working temporarily for a French weekly in Winnipeg. All his life he had dreamt about travelling outside Cameroon. Recently, he had won a scholarship to work for ten months in Manitoba. Since his school days in Cameroon, he had known it to be the fourth most westerly province in a huge nation of ten million square kilometres. Yoyo had longed for years to visit North America. Now, after several days in Canada, he was already counting the months remaining before he could return to his people.

Of the many things that confused him about Canada, one was most irksome. It had to do with a massive tree on Provencher Boulevard in St. Boniface. A tree with white letters painted sloppily on its bark. Yoyo considered the lettering poorly done. Unaesthetic. Unprofessional. If *he* were to name a tree, he wouldn’t do so in such a slapdash manner. A great country like Canada and a great province like Manitoba could surely produce a sign on which the tree’s name in English, French and Latin could appear in neat letters, as one saw in the botanical gardens of Yaoundé, his home town.

Who had made the decision to identify the tree in such a fashion? In his first days, Yoyo paused to look at the tree as he travelled to and from work. He planned to contact civic authorities to suggest another naming procedure. The name itself, sprayed on the tree, also troubled him. Yoyo, who had read a book on Canadian nature before leaving Cameroon, was sure it was an elm. An American elm. He recognized the leaves: oval-shaped with serrated edges and bold parallel veination. But he had never heard of this tree name. *Clitoris*. He checked the letters carefully. Canadian handwriting differed from that of his countrymen, but Yoyo felt confident after several examinations: the name painted around the bark was *Clitoris*.

Yoyo noticed something else. Whenever he stopped to stare at the tree, people stopped to stare at him. The problem became dramatic on the third day, when he attempted to question a woman passing by on the far edge of the sidewalk. “Excuse me, Madame,” he said, pointing to the letters, “this is the name of the tree?” She coughed and began trotting down the sidewalk. Without even having the decency to reply. Yoyo was troubled by the manners of Canadians. Even if his French accent were strong, he saw no reason for the woman not to answer him. It was highly impolite. In his country, if a foreigner had stopped him to ask the name of the tree, Yoyo would have been honoured to provide the answer in English, French, Latin and in Bamileke, his maternal tongue. Then he would have befriended the foreigner and invited him to

dinner.

When he returned home, he would tell his family and friends that Manitoba was a great land. But he might have to concede that its inhabitants perplexed him.

Today, however, he planned to straighten out at least one difficulty. He would ask a friend at his newspaper about the name of that tree.

It wasn't a great story. It wasn't even a particularly good story. But it wasn't a total sleeper. So Edward Slade, crime reporter for *The Winnipeg Star*, went after it. As a matter of principle, Slade pursued all tips about cemeteries. Readers devoured anything to do with corpses. This one was about some kid who quit halfway through his first day as a backhoe operator at the St. Vital Cemetery. He quit because he dug up a bone. That's what he was telling Slade on the telephone.

"How do you know it wasn't a stick?"

"It was a leg bone! A big one! Here I am digging my third grave and I come up with a bone in the teeth of the backhoe. I freaked out, man!"

"Did you take the bone home?"

"No! It belongs to God!"

Slade wrote, "Boy says bone belongs to God."

"Where'd you put it?"

"I hid it in the cemetery."

"What's your name?"

"Denis Fortin."

The kid met Slade at the cemetery entrance, but he didn't want to go inside. "I don't work here any more. They might charge me with trespassing."

"Nobody's gonna charge you," Slade said. "You and I are just visiting. What good's a boneyard without visitors?" Slade led the kid toward fresh plots of earth. "Is that where you dug?"

"Yeah."

"It's filled up now."

"Like I said, they were burying someone there."

"So there's no bones left."

"I guess not," Fortin said, shivering. It was cool, for a July afternoon.

"Where'd you hide the bone?"

"By the fence over there."

"Go get it." Slade unslung his camera. When the kid didn't move, Slade growled that he had discussed this case with the police and he hadn't driven all the way out here to piss around.

Fortin trudged over to some shrubs. "It's here."

"Lift it!"

Using a paper bag stuck against the fence, the kid picked up the bone, careful to keep his fingers from touching it. It was about one and a half feet long, covered in slime. It looked like a human femur. It had a head like a tennis ball, and a socket—like the inside of a giant tooth—to fit a knee joint.

"Kneel by that gravestone," Slade ordered. "That's it. No, you're too close to the flowers. Get back. Hold up the bone. Look serious. Don't smile. Don't move." The kid still held the bone with the paper bag. Slade lowered his camera. "Get rid of the

paper.” Fortin grimaced. He let the paper drop. “Okay now, both hands on the bone!” The kid inhaled deeply. He held the mud-coated bone in his bare hands. The camera shutter clicked repeatedly for ten seconds. “Okay,” Slade said.

The kid ran back to the fence. He hid the bone again and wiped his hands on the grass. “Can we kinda get out of here?”

“Believe in ghosts?” Slade asked.

“Sorta.”

Slade’s story and photo ran the next day under the headline *Mystery Bone Spooks Gravedigger*.

Don Betts told Mahatma to match the story. Mahatma tried, but the cemetery manager claimed Fortin had dug up a stick. And Fortin wouldn’t cooperate. Edward Slade had warned him he could face a lawsuit if he spoke to *The Herald*. Maybe even a jail term. It was against the law to speak to two newspapers about the same story, Slade had said. It was breach of trust and fraud. Mahatma wrote a brief story and hoped it didn’t run. But it did run, on page three, and it carried his first byline. During his first week on the job, Mahatma felt guilty about not doing anything substantial. He killed time by reading the paper. The horoscopes amused him. After his cemetery story appeared, Mahatma checked Aquarius. It said:

When someone asks you to perform a foolish task, assume your responsibilities as a thinking adult. Refuse!

“Right,” Mahatma mumbled to himself. “Refuse, and I’m out of a job.”

Three times in as many days, Mahatma heard reporters arguing on the telephone, saying, “But the public has a right to know!” Once, Mahatma guessed that the information the reporter was demanding was somebody’s age. To Mahatma, the most striking thing about journalists was not what they did, but that they seemed to believe in it.

Jake Corbett didn’t like the letter from the welfare people.

“The Manitoba Social Assistance Allowance program has ruled against your request for an increase in benefits. Therefore, \$8.90 will continue to be deducted from your monthly cheque of \$178.10. The deductions will continue until they offset the \$602.38 overpayment you received in 1976 as a result of an administrative error...”

Jake threw the letter down. He sank onto his bed in his tiny room above Frank’s Accidental Dog and Grill. His leg ached. On \$169.20 a month, he wouldn’t even have enough to buy a new bath towel. His only towel was seven years old.

The words “Fort Garry Hotel,” his last place of employment, were barely visible on the cloth. Jake propped his leg on a pillow. At least he had a place to stay. Some people didn’t even have that. Jake had a feeling he would win this battle. He had no job, no family, no hobbies, no friends—and that made him lucky. He had nothing to do but fight the welfare people.

Jake wrote to his Member of Parliament. He complained about his overpayment deductions. He described his honourable discharge, For Reasons of Serious Bad Health, from his job as a doorman at the Fort Garry Hotel. Jake folded his letter into a stamped envelope. He even included his one-page Testament to the Good Character of Jake Corbett, which had been signed by the hotel manager. Jake hobbled downstairs,