Tony Fabijančić

Island Memories: Newfoundland, Maui

I went to Newfoundland for the first time because of a teaching contract. It was a few weeks after I defended my thesis when someone called from Corner Brook.

"Tony," a voice said on the end of the line. A deep voice, a little gruff.

"Yes," I answered.

"Randall Maggs. Sir Wilfred Something College."

"Hello," I said. I had no idea where this Sir Wilfred Something College was.

"... had a heart attack. Can you teach Canadian Lit.?"

I had never taught Canadian Lit, except for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.*

"Sure," I said, "no problem."

"OK," Randall Maggs answered, "classes start Wednesday."

Classes start Wednesday. It was Monday so the soonest I could leave would be Tuesday, tomorrow. I didn't think it would be a problem. I was enthused about my first contract, a contract so soon after defending my thesis! Things were working out. I would have some money. Now I could buy myself a tennis racquet!

The ferry on which I sailed from Sydney to Port aux Basques was the Caribou, a large ice-breaking vessel painted the white and aquamarine colours of Marine Atlantic, the company which owned it, decommissioned it later and eventually sold it to be scrapped in Alang, India. I drove up a steel plank into the dark belly of the ferry, and to the sounds of tractor trailers being chained down, I made my way to the main deck.

At first I stood outside, in a stiff breeze, and watched the land disappear behind us. Soon it became a dark blue sliver consubstantiated with the horizon. The wind was in my teeth, and it tore off the caps of the dark blue ocean. Not far from the ferry, maybe three hundred metres, some whales breached spectacularly.

Later, I went inside, where I took the fateful decision to have a beer in the bar, eat the salami sandwich I had made that morning, and read one of the stories I knew would be in the collection I was going to inherit. In the cozy half-light of the bar, among some beefy contented truckers, things

seemed alright at first. But about two hours into our crossing the rolling of the ship began to affect me. I started to feel queasy. I left the bar and sat on some stairs near the middle of the ferry, close to the men's washroom, and I tried to hold onto myself. Through one of the windows I could see some clouds beginning to approach. They were being pushed by the same wind which whistled inside the ferry. In alternating movements the wind whistled and then howled and then whistled again as it grew and slackened in intensity. The walls creaked and the floors shuddered from the waves slamming against the ferry's sides.

A worker saw me sitting on the stairs and asked how I was doing. I told her I wasn't doing very well.

"I know how you feel, m'luv," she said. "I was after trowin' up twice already. This is the worst crossin' I can remember in my fifteen years."

"How much longer?" I asked.

She looked at her watch. "Round five hours, dependin' on the winds."

Five more hours! I was sitting there on the stairs, beer and salami sandwich churning in my stomach, just hanging on. People passed by with normal expressions on their faces, seemingly unaffected by the rolling ship. These Newfies were tough. I was sure they had grown immune to sea sickness after generations of living on the island. Later when I looked back I knew I was wrong. Not all the passengers were Newfs, and those who were had been smart enough to take a Gravol when they heard the forecast. It was a good lesson. I was committed to the lesson. In the years afterwards I swallowed two Gravols religiously every time I sailed.

But on that first voyage I suffered. After another hour or so I staggered to the washroom and threw up. The door of the stall stayed open, I didn't have time to close it, and it swung back and forth, hitting the wall as the ship rolled. And then the ordeal was over. I felt better; the voice on intercom announced we would be docking in one hour, and soon we slid into Port aux Basques.

Morning dawned sunny and windless. Outside the window of the hotel where I'd spent the night were little aluminum-siding bungalows, perched among slopes of solid grey rock. There were few trees, mainly low tuckamore pine and patches of wild grass. From my mainlander's point of view, Port aux Basques looked desolate, the fragile houses clutching the stone as though they somehow knew the next storm could blow them into the sea, but the town looked pretty too, with the sun shining on the houses, winking off the windows.

Because the Caribou had taken so long to cross the Cabot Strait, almost eight hours, I had arrived in the dark, so this was my first sight of

Newfoundland, and it was a memorable one. The Trans-Canada, or TCH, as was painted in faded white on the blacktop, took me at first past the Long Range Mountains on the right. I say mountains, but they were mountains with their tops sheared off, or crushed into a flat surface like table tops. Stunted pines grow up their sides almost to the summit. The morning sun, which shone from behind them, left their western face in a dark blue shade. They looked vast and ominous, and the overriding feeling they gave me was of a huge implacable force brooding over the puny human life which scurried back and forth on the road nearby. The sight of those hills, the country unfolding over the next couple hundred kilometres, where the land opens up into big wide tundra-like spaces, boggy in the summer, open howling wastes in the winter, the anaemic pines leaning to one side from the prevailing wind, the fast-moving black-water rivers bursting out of black forest, more big hills near the road, all of it can be described as the sublime.

At the start of the 18th Century, Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* wrote that a feeling of fear and weakness filled the traveller before the power of a vast, potentially dangerous landscape. The sublime, he said, is often confused with the beautiful, but a beautiful landscape — pretty meadows, softly undulating hills, gentle valleys — seems safe and pliable to human will, whereas a sublime one does not. Nevertheless, despite our sense of weakness before the sublime, we search it out, even find pleasure in it, and consider it beautiful. It might be that the sublime landscape is awesome and worthy of respect, that because it is more powerful than we are, it is worth worshipping, is divine. So not knowing it, on my first trip I was viewing Newfoundland in these terms, imagining what it would be like to walk out there, without civilized comforts or safety. All my other hikes over the years — three-hour walks into the bush which led to places no one had been all winter, where I was the only traveller — all these walks were an extenuation of this moment.[1]

As I continued driving, I passed the exit for Stephenville, then a long narrow arm of water called, appropriately, Pinchgut Lake, and finally arrived at a promontory from which I could see the city of Corner Brook. In the folds of encircling hills, some of which far away would soon be sugar-coated by snow, is the Bay of Islands, and on the water, a pulp and paper mill which issued a steady funnel of smoke into the blue sky. It was almost noon, and because I had stayed overnight I had already missed that morning's classes.

I found Randy Maggs' office, which was open, and I stepped over the sleeping body of a husky and shook hands with a tallish man with big hands

and large eyes wearing a smoking jacket with patches on the elbows. Maggs led me a few office doors down, and introduced me to the occupant, a short, stooped guy with a white beard and thick glasses who was removing some items from his desk. This was the poet I was replacing for the year, and after I said hello he shunted aside my show of friendliness, waved his thin arm around the room, cigarette in hand, and said, "Don't get too used to this place. I'm coming back!"

***

In my first term I taught a kid from Pasadena, 25 kilometres east of Corner Brook. He was plump, had reddish-blond hair, cut in a bang, a round pleasant face and blue eyes. He sat in the front row, attended most of the classes, and often answered questions I put to the class. The sincerity of his attitude distinguished him from most of the other students.

He would come to my office for help with the course. A thoughtful, curious kid, his mind always seemed to go in new, different directions. Our sessions sometimes lasted an hour, but once I remember guiding our discussion away from the curriculum and to him instead. I asked what he liked to do outside of school.

"I like the outdoors," he said.

I suggested that maybe he was a Romantic.

"What's a Romantic?" he asked.

When I explained it to him, he asked whether I had been to Gros Morne.

"Not yet," I answered.

"Definitely you should go."

And go I did, to the mountain itself, which I climbed despite the snow-covered rocks, and to the Green Garden Trails near Trout River. The trail takes you across a section of the mustard-coloured Tablelands, an open area where the winds drive hard and probably without stop, then into the bush and down winding paths to the ocean. On high cliffs are meadows of cropped grass where sheep graze. They were brought on barges in the spring, left for the summer and then taken back in the fall (their location on the cliffs reminding me of Pieter Brueghel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*).

I went on other hikes, like the Blomidon trails on the road to Lark Harbour, where I climbed the mountain beside the falls and reached open country which stretches away on all sides, all of it the same, covered by evergreen Maquis, the sort of big space without prominent features to guide yourself. On a good day the sky is pale blue, the air rinsed clear and pure, and there is no wind. You can see the ocean far below, the muffin-shaped

Guernsey Island, and caribou wending through low stunts of tuckamore.

And so time went by. I had a final visit from my student in the spring. Looking back I realize that the signs were already there, but I wasn't able to piece them together, didn't know anything had to be pieced together. The college was deserted and he had driven in from Pasadena to talk grammar with me. I don't remember the details, but I remember his intensity, the serious attention he gave the most insignificant aspect of punctuation. He held the grammar book carefully in his hands, the pages in question marked off with yellow sticky notes, and his ruddy face looked at me with complete attention and without smiling.

And that was the last time I saw him. He continued to study at the College, and I still taught there, but he never stopped by again. I don't know if he ever finished his degree. Once, I heard about him from a colleague, who told me, in an off-hand way, after I had asked how he was doing, how annoying it was to have a student arrive unannounced at his door at eleven at night in some state of distress about something, the details of which he left to my imagination. What would have led him there (he was the student in question) I can't say, though his father later told me that the professor had had a negative influence on his son of extreme gravity.

I never learned what this meant. Years later I happened to open the web site of Corner Brook's newspaper *The Western Star* and saw my student's face looking back at me. The report stated that a search was underway for a missing man in Gros Morne National Park, that the police had issued urgent calls for the public's help. He was last seen in Corner Brook on Monday at 11 a.m. The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary referred to the case as a "disappearance," and issued two public alerts. The RNC said that his vehicle was found near James Callahan Trail Head in Gros Morne.

When I spoke to his father a few weeks later he mentioned that his son had suffered with a mental illness since he was 18, and that he had long resisted, or had often refused the medication intended to help him. And yet I thought that this decision of his to walk into the wild, for decision I decided it was, was made with some clear thought, some purposeful planning. He had gone to the College the morning of the day he disappeared and withdrawn from classes, to the surprise of the ladies in the office, said his goodbyes internally to himself and, Quentin Compson-like, walked around with the flatirons on his soul which no one could see. Then he headed to Gros Morne.

***

If Newfoundland is a sublime island, then Maui, which I'd visited a

few years earlier, is beautiful. When I first touched down in the Pacific, I was just sixteen, at that stage of my life when a curvy girl in an orange bikini caught my imagination and sent me off on fantastic daydreams, but when I still didn't have the guts to approach her, my father egging me on futilely, "You'll be sorry one day, sonny boy, just you wait." My young age embedded a certain stance or attitude in face of the world into my journeys to islands elsewhere in the world, most of which took place years later when I was older, much older, injecting all those later trips with the same joy of physical youth, the realistic (it seemed) impossibility of aging and death that I knew at some other level would come soon enough, too soon, too soon ...

At that time I was landlocked in a new sterile suburbia where the trees hadn't grown yet. Maui, by contrast, surrounded by the vast Pacific, with its great waves and beaches, was alive and warm and beautiful. It gave me a sense of new possibilities. Anyone who has travelled here from a Canadian city in winter understands what I mean so I say nothing new, but for me arriving at Kahului airport became a memorable travel moment.

There's the opposite scenario — a traveller who comes from a benign climate, steps into Canada's hostile wintry air and experiences a shock to the body. This is what happened to my father's Croatian friend, Tonček Juranko, who flew into Edmonton on a freezing night in November, 1970, still wearing the patent-leather shoes and sports jacket he'd become accustomed to in Rouen. My father had tempted him to western Canada with talk of steak two inches thick and plentiful jobs which paid well (three bucks an hour), but he knew he'd made a mistake the second he went outside. He said the icy air froze his throat and seized up his lungs and he couldn't breathe. He went right back to the ticket counter to ask about a return flight. Of course there was no return flight, not right away, so he was forced to stay a few days, arriving at the house owned by my grandmother, Oma, who pulled him out of the cold and the snow and drew a bath for him (it was super ironic, I suppose, hilarious even, that the very person who had convinced him to come to Edmonton, my father, was nowhere near the place, but on the French Riviera in Palavas-les-Flots, near Montpellier, where my mother was finishing her doctorate). Tonček's temporary visit led to a few self-imposed, depressed weeks, and then months. Then it stretched out impossibly to a few years. Of course, he's been in Edmonton ever since.

The island of Maui that I got to know never made me want to leave. Mornings back then, foot-high waves rolled with predictable regularity onto the beach and receded in broad foaming aprons. Local kids sprinted across the beach, threw their skim boards down and rode the inch-deep water until they shredded the face of an incoming wave and went airborne.

Early afternoons, the wind picked up, the beach emptied, and huge cumulus clouds gathered to the north-east. On those windy, choppy afternoons, I learned how to body surf, figuring out the patterns of the ocean and the right moment to throw my body into the momentum of each wave's final curling entropy.

During our stay a heavy storm blew through and high surf pounded the beach for days. Normally family-friendly Kamaole III was transformed by roaring monsters which gathered momentum and dark power far out, slowly building, growing, until they smashed the shore. I'm reminded of the wicked Adriatic Sea in winter when the north wind blows from the Dinaric mountains and howls to the coast and the waves get rough and dark and hammer the walls of the harbours. I know those waves on Maui were only six or seven feet-high but to me they were impressive, even frightening. Still, this was part of the thrill. But there were dicey moments too; I got hammered once by a big wave when I mistimed my ride and fell off the top and got plowed under. A dull white churning roar filled my head as I was hurled around viciously like a fallen skier at Kitzbühel. I held onto myself, held my breath, and waited out the wave, which was full of malice and tried to kill me. Finally it ran out of power and tossed me onto the beach where I sat down to get a hold of myself. From that moment on I had a new appreciation for the ocean, not an abstract understanding from books. It was serious. It could turn on you in a second. In that sense, Joseph Conrad is right when he says the sea is always the same.

While I spent my days on the beach, my grandmother, whom I called 'Oma,' sat on a picnic bench under the palm trees. Every now and again I would climb the slope to sit beside her or help her down to the water, if it was a calm day. She smiled at me when I came up, sweeping her arm over the scene around us, "Oh wie herrlich, Tony!" From where we sat we could see the northern side of the island and the sickle-shaped volcanic islet of Molokini, so the view was indeed 'glorious.' Oma thought that aside from her native Schleswig-Holstein, Maui was the most beautiful place in the world. Yet there was no doubt where her thoughts were. When we talked inevitably she returned to her home and to memories of her family. When she remarked how I enjoyed the water, she got to thinking about her older brother, Otto, who liked to swim too. Pictures of the thatched roofs of Großenbrode and the sand dunes of the cool Baltic coast swept over her and she was there, in 1912, with her brother. Otto had no fear of the water, swam in all conditions, even where he wasn't supposed to, like under the gate in the harbour and out to sea. The little girl watched him go, a pale phosphorescent flash in a bluegrey sea, watched him as he struck out with confident strokes. He was a real athlete, and a good boy, such a good boy,

Oma told me, with blond hair and blue eyes, a typical northern German.

I have a black and white photo of Otto in uniform wearing his sailor's cap, with the name of his division on the band. He was eighteen. Now when I look at him I don't see myself, but my son, who is just as blond as Otto, and could have been his younger brother. Like Otto, he too likes to take physical risks, and isn't afraid of the ocean. And when I see him dive off some rocks on a beach in Nova Scotia and descend to the bottom, then resurface brandishing a lobster, I think a bit of Otto must be inside of him.

Otto Bartschek, 1914

Of course, these thoughts could not have come to me as I sat with Oma on the bench above the beach under the palm trees. I just listened to her stories, bored, having heard many of them before, but loyal to them because I knew she was old and that her health wasn't good. She had suffered an aneurysm six months before and had nearly died. Even now her hair had not quite grown back fully where it had been shaved. And even though she always brought a book with her to the beach, *Buddenbrooks*, by Thomas Mann, she never managed to get beyond the first page. The past, though, always seemed to come back to her with ease and fluency.

As we sat on her bench, she told me the rest of Otto's story. An irony of his life was that the boy who could swim so well died at sea. During the Battle of Jutland, around three in the morning on June 1st, 1916, the SMS Pommern was torpedoed by the British destroyer Onslaught. The strike detonated one of the Pommern's ammunition magazines, which caused a number of enormous explosions, splitting the vessel in half. Otto and 838 other crewmen went down in the dark with the ship. The loss for Oma was still fresh, and it crossed the decades and arrived here, on a glorious day, as the blue waves rolled in and the sounds of children playing reached her on her bench.

"Ach, Tony, meine Mutter, meine arme Mutter sie wollte sterben." Her mother, she said, had wanted to die.

After telling me the story Oma was quiet for a while, then went back for lunch, and I took a last swim. With new and special vigour I threw myself against the waves and dove to the bottom where the sun on the corrugated surface cast flickering shadows and I rode one wave after another, arriving all the way to shore in the foam, and I imagined I swam under the gate and out to sea, like Otto, with confident strokes. In those moments the afternoon sun shone harder and with more heat than before, and the blue of Maalaea Bay was bluer than ever. Later, when I was tired, I sat on the bench above the beach and, in the place where Oma had been before, I took a last look around. I tried to memorize the scene, the blue sea, the clouds, remember all the little things[1], my habit leaving a place when I was leaving for good. I stayed for a while, then I picked up my towel and started back.

Notes

[1] Signs by the highway back in 1995 seemed to acknowledge what I was feeling. Half way to Corner Brook, where the campus was located, the first of many signs for Stephenville began to appear, telling me there were a hundred and something kilometres to the first exit, then a few kilometres later, another sign, then another, and then another, and so on. Twenty signs had been put there, alerting drivers about the ever-impending exit. You will soon be off the road, food and comforts are just around the corner, but be happy, this is God's country. I remembered the exact opposite scenario on a drive through the south of France towards the Spanish border where Biarritz was situated, on the Bay of Biscany. I had heard about Biarritz before, a seaside resort of 19th-century European royalty, and more recently a north Atlantic surfing resort, but when we drove through Bayonne on the road south, no signs for Biarritz appeared, not one I could see, and after a few kilometres I was sure we had missed the exit. I kept looking, but there was nothing. Maybe I'd fallen asleep. But then as quickly as the thought came, the city itself showed up, with its long beaches and big waves and pretty pastel buildings, none of which we got to explore because my father decided it was not worth stopping.