

Swiss Chalet and the Imperial Theatre

Amidst a very busy schedule of studio work and study at OCA, I was able to spend at least every other Saturday with Alice. Usually, she came to the city from Burlington, just west of Toronto. Our dates were wonderfully simple and romantically predictable. I lived just a few city blocks from a downtown Greyhound bus terminal at Dundas and Bay Street. By late afternoon Alice arrived and as we stood and embraced each other on the bus platform, it seemed like an episode from one of those hopelessly romantic, Hollywood, Harlequin Romance, black & white movies. Momentarily caught as if in the viewfinder of a motion-picture camera, we held each other. Around us the noise and clatter of buses, pedestrians, luggage carts, and PA systems, just didn't seem to matter. Puffs of steam and exhaust filled the air. Short of having a sunset to ride into, we held hands, walked close together, and headed towards Yonge Street. One large block over and about half a block up was the city's first and only Swiss Chalet Restaurant. Today the restaurant is a national chain bearing little resemblance to the actual Swiss Chalet on Yonge Street in 1965. Complete with decor and a staff dress code that somehow made you think of the Swiss Alps, the restaurant was our favourite spot "on the strip." It was huge. Tables and booths had plenty of room for my long legs, and the food was generous and delicious. How can I ever forget their chicken dinners, great fries, and "Swiss Chalet sauce" for dipping? Over thirty years later, Swiss Chalet opened in Nanaimo, British Columbia. I knew the manager Mark Timpson, because he had worked for me as *master chef* in charge of a luxurious buffet diningroom at the Chemainus Theatre in Chemainus, Vancouver Island, where I was the theatre's Executive Director. The day I told Mark my story of the first Swiss Chalet on Yonge Street also happened to be the day the manager from head office in Toronto was visiting Nanaimo. I got to tell him my story as well. He was overwhelmed; he told all the staff about our dates and offered my entire family dinner "on the house." The restaurant closed a few years later.

Yonge Street was a busy, charismatic, and vibrant place in the sixties. I could not take a single step without avoiding sixties rock music pouring from loudspeakers everywhere. Every other establishment, at least so it seemed, was a café or club. After dinner we walked hand in hand down Yonge Street towards the Imperial Theatre. The Imperial was a grand movie theatre in the style and tradition of theatres long ago. Years later the Imperial would capitulate to a number of multi-screen, shoebox enclosures, a far cry from the original Imperial. But in 1965, the Imperial was *imperial* indeed. After we walked a modest incline at the entrance of the theatre, we came upon a huge staircase that wound majestically up the side of a grand foyer to land on a spacious second floor. There we found our favourite spot hidden reasonably close to the back. Yes, I admit, in the darkness of that theatre we stole many a kiss. Being of Dutch, meaning frugal background, however, I also made sure I caught most of the movie. After all, I did pay for the feature. Needless to say, the experience was worth every dollar. I remember that the whole affair of dinner and a movie for two was just about ten dollars. After our movie we made our way to the nearest subway stop from where we rode north to the end of the line only to catch a bus to where Alice's brother John lived. Usually I dropped Alice off, hoping to see her again the following morning when I took her back to the bus station. Sometimes she stayed a bit longer and we went to church together. We had perfected the art of sitting upright in our pew, looking perfectly pious, yet able to hold hands without being detected by those "devil-behind-glass" elders. Occasionally, when a date got too late and busses were no longer running, or we just missed the last one, I stayed at John's place as well. There was always a decent couch to

sleep on. I remember feeling particularly daring knowing that Alice was sound asleep in the next room, with the door closed. Even though I often shared my joys of meeting Alice with my classmates, our relationship remained very private. After all, Alice still attended highschool in Hamilton, while I was a college student.

Those rare times when my friends at OCA got to meet Alice, were very special. It seemed as if the entire class had fallen in love with her. Perhaps it was the novelty that she was neither a fellow student nor an artist. No doubt it was her blond hair, her shy disposition among all these college students, and her youthful looks, that captured their hearts. She was only sixteen when I first met her. But, as an artist I was caught up in a student's world of artistic temperament, forever philosophizing about the world's woes and our creative solutions to solve every problem. They were heady years. But, Alice seemed untouched by our artistic rhetoric and therefore had a sense of innocence about her, which made her even more attractive. Our favourite *rendezvous* was the Royal Ontario Museum. On a couple of occasions, her highschool class made the trip from Hamilton to Toronto for a tour of the ROM. Both times fell on a Monday, precisely the day I had lectures at the museum as well as hours of drawing artifacts deep within the bowels of the museum's galleries. Lunch as usual, was in a crowded cafeteria-style room in the basement of the ROM. There our eyes would meet. Under the cautious and watchful glare of her teachers, Alice introduced me to her school friends and I introduced Alice to my college friends. For a brief moment cultures clashed as long-haired, hippy and "artsy" types, met clean-cut, well-groomed highschool types from the Hamilton District Christian Highschool. One can imagine the consternation the next day at school when Alice was asked to come to the principal's office.

"Who was that young man we saw you with at the ROM?" the inquisitors pried.

"Do you not know it is school policy that you cannot fraternize like that?"

"But he is my boyfriend," answered Alice.

Gasp-choke-catch-my-breath sounds emanated from the principal's throat.

He breathed heavily.

"He is your *boyfriend*?"

"Do your parents know? And who is this young man? He looks a lot older than you."

"Sure, my parents know him. They approve of our dating. He is Gerrit Verstraete and he is a confessed member of the First Christian Reformed Church of Taunton Road in Toronto, and a student at the Ontario College of Art."

A collective sigh heaved through the room. At least the principal was assured that despite this young man's "artsy" look and long hair, Gerrit Verstraete was one of the *chosen*, the *predestined* few. As an added bonus, the principal, and by noon no doubt the entire teaching staff, were comforted. Gerrit Verstraete was also Dutch.

Praise God he wasn't one of those "Canadians."

(I remembered my mother's letter)

In the weeks and months that followed, whenever I was caught daydreaming during studio sessions in college, or when I sat staring in the school's front hallway, pretending to read the Student Union newspaper, they knew I was probably somewhere with my thoughts in Burlington. They walked past me and smiled. It was so obvious I had fallen in love.

I have often thought about those days and wondered why in God's plan, life after college had to change and become complicated. College life was innocent and simple. Falling in love was like flying with the eagles far above "the maddening crowd." Even though there were some rough moments when funds ran out and my next bursary had not yet been approved, there always was Alice and my friends for comfort. I also did not relish the thought of leaving Alice at the

schoolyear's end to return to my summer job in Wallaceburg. Whether my school friends fought or got along, or when my best friend betrayed me and also stole my banjo, the OCA years were a bit of heaven on earth. Life was simple. Fellowship with friends and fellow students was warm and generous. The college was small enough that we all got a real sense of family. Most were in the same predicament with never enough time to finish projects, never enough sleep to keep up with weekends and parties, and never enough money. A few had rich parents. Their sons and daughters came to school in fancy cars and threw lavish parties. Most of us, however, were *artists* in every sense of the word: broke, in need of a decent home-cooked meal, and always looking for less expensive art supplies. Yet, they were good years.

As complicated as life became with children, mortgages, jobs, traumas and triumphs, the OCA years continue to stand as a very special "season" in my life. For four years I enjoyed my season of growing up as a young adult, free from the tethers of home and a Dutch immigrant church, and free to experience the pounding heartbeat of city life. My thoughts still wander to Yonge Street, Swiss Chalet, City Hall, and the infamous "Archer" sculpture by Henry Moore. I still remember downtown alleyways where I explored and sketched my way through "field research" classes, Chinatown, the Imperial Theatre, the Grange Park behind the college, endless hours at the Royal Ontario Museum, "Philosopher's Walk" at the University of Toronto, and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Fish and chips from any of the curbside vendors and rumbling rides on TTC's Red Rockets, I will never forget. I also thoroughly enjoyed a week each year at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. For one glorious week we were released from all studio classes to spend days sketching at the Winter Fair, held each fall on the grounds of the Canadian National Exhibition. Each day was special. Each day meant comradeship with fellow students as we traveled in groups. Each day we spread ourselves over the fair grounds to sketch and paint horses, cattle, wagons, vegetables, butter sculptures, old horse carriages, farm equipment, and crowds of willing people. OCA students were as much a feature attraction during that week as were all the blue-ribbon competitions. The following week, we all gathered our bundles of sketches and submitted them in bulky portfolios to be marked by a group of art instructors. Unless a student purposely chose to waste his or her time and take the week "off," it was virtually impossible to get a bad grade. Favourable grades were first of all determined by the degree of ambition and commitment we demonstrated in producing a week's volume of sketches. Quality of work, although important, was not nearly as important as quantity with a clear demonstration that we spent the week observing and learning. During the sixties the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair also featured many displays of *free and delicious* food as well as demonstrations by a variety of consumer product companies. I never packed a lunch because the fair's merchants offered plenty of free pizza slices, farmers' sausages, buttery deserts, and freshly-squeezed orange juice, from displays and an abundance of kitchen-gadget demonstrations.

Some students created virtual masterpieces by producing huge oils and watercolour paintings instead of a bundle of sketches. They too received good grades. But I was not as confident in my early years as a student artist. Without any family or church support for the arts, I was too preoccupied to think career and getting a decent and well-paying job than to concern myself with the true heart of an artist. That would have to wait another twenty-five years. Yet, I threw myself into the joys and challenges of the annual winter fair. Each year my portfolio of work earned a resounding A. Sadly most of those drawings were lost or destroyed.

On the first day of college in September, 1964, I attended a lecture at the Royal Ontario Museum. After the lecture we were instructed to go to the Oriental displays and find a place to squat on the floor. For the rest of that morning we had to sketch ancient Chinaware with the

intent of painting a finished "plate" at home and on our own time. I was petrified. My first art class in real time. What if all these students were really good and I had only imagined my artistic skills based on some highschool yearbook and some coloured chalk murals on the cafeteria blackboard? Would I be able to face the embarrassment when everyone of these student Michelangelo's, da Vinci's and Rembrandts, saw my first feeble attempt at art? I did not dare draw a single line on my paper. After an hour of fumbling with my art supplies, I got up enough courage to walk around and look at the work of the other students. I breathed a big sigh of relief when I saw the quality and skill of their work.

"I can do that!" I said to myself.

Confident I could match their abilities, I set out to sketch my plate. The next day I finished the drawing in shades of blue guache. Trembling I handed in my first assignment of my OCA adventure, and the first of hundreds of projects and assignments to follow during the next four years.

My China plate in blue received an A.

I breathed another sigh of relief.

Since graduation in 1968, I have often returned to my college home. Somehow I could never quite leave the place. Call me an old romantic, but for the first time in my life, during the four years I attended the Ontario College of Art, now the *Ontario College of Art & Design*, I tasted the joy of creating works of art with the pleasure of knowing I could make things beautiful. Whether I parked my car in front of the college or just around the corner at the University Settlement Building, where I used to swim and shower during my college years, it was as if I could walk back through time. I will always remember the swing of certain hallway doors and the look and feel of each floor as various departments took up residency there. The cafeteria has not changed much. Perhaps my foil and wax projectile is still stuck on its ceiling.

During the years when I owned an advertising agency I got to know David Owen Campbell, a special OCA instructor and Canadian drawing master. He was teaching evening life drawing classes and I needed a place to draw. We became friends and every Wednesday evening I joined his group to draw the human figure. He was then and remains to this day an excellent instructor. The opportunity to draw with David was a welcome relief from the hectic life of owning and running a business, a business that managed some twenty-six employees, with offices in Toronto and Ottawa, and a production schedule that made my infamous year as editor and designer of the college's yearbook look like child's-play. No sooner had five o'clock rolled around when I closed my office door. Within minutes I changed from suit, jacket and tie, into bluejeans and an old sweatshirt. Lacking a phone booth in which to change I nevertheless changed immediately from "adman" to "art-man." I was careful not to schedule heavy meetings for late Wednesday afternoons. Quick to jump in my sporty Chevy Camaro, I left the office parking lot and made it within five minutes to my favourite mom-and-pop fish & chip store. Shortly afterwards I raced downtown, with the aroma of fish and chips filling my car with great appetite. I had to get to the college no later than six o'clock sharp. The reason of course, was a practical one. After six, parking was not only plenty but free. However, if you came just five minutes too late there was not a parking spot to be found within blocks. Proximity to the Art Gallery of Ontario meant that on most nights Torontonians were cruising the streets looking for a spot to park in order to attend the latest exhibition of fine art at the AGO. Precisely at six I parked right in front of the college. That left a luxurious hour in which to savour my fish and chips and listen to the radio. *"The World at Six"* on CBC always had interesting stories. After all, next to home, my Camaro was a sanctuary where I spent many hours commuting back and forth

to my downtown office, as well as endless hours of driving to Ottawa, New York, Michigan, Buffalo, and throughout southern Ontario. Flying was simply not a preferred choice of travel, for reasons I will explain later in my "Mid-Seventies Crisis."

The evening session with David and his students started at seven o'clock. Three hours later I left the building satisfied I had spent three quality hours of exhaustive figure drawing. For those who think drawing the human figure is a vain pursuit of art and at best an opportune time to stare at naked bodies, their lack of understanding and appreciation of the rigours and disciplines required to draw the most complicated yet most rewarding of all subjects, namely the human form, is evidence of an uncultured mind. I was taught during my OCA years, that if I could master drawing the human form, I could draw anything. I have lived to draw the human figure professionally for over four-and-counting decades. My instructors were right. I can draw anything with or without models, from memory or from direct observation. Later, as I spent many years drawing countless hundreds if not thousands of colourful cartoons for audio-visual presentations to be used in our ad agency's well-known "business theatre" productions, I came to fully appreciate my hours of drawing on Wednesday evenings and the discipline of quality training at college.

I must close this lengthy chapter about the Ontario College of Art, for fear of slipping into some endless dream from which I choose not to awaken. Many stories and people remain locked in the files of my conscious and sub-conscious. Many I hope will continue to surface as a testimony to a time in my life that was worth every breath I gave it. Most assuredly, there were difficult times during those college years, but the years following OCA somehow managed to weed these times from memory, leaving only a bountiful harvest of good thoughts and memories to fill the picture albums of my student life. As I awake from my dreams, life continues to knock on my door. There is still much work to be done, masterpieces to create, spiritual truths discover and to teach, and disciples to counsel, as well as budding artists to encourage, a wife and family to love and cherish, friends to love all over again, and all good reasons to wake up from my nostalgic slumber. To sleep is a waste. I aim to live and love my daylight hours to the fullest of my ability and strength, God helping me.

What all this had to do with Swiss Chalet and the Imperial Theatre I still don't know, except that Alice has always been a great listener, and me, the proverbial chatterbox, never failed to find something to talk about.