

## Toronto bound

My mother gave me a special letter she had written just before I left for college. I was told not to read that letter until I was settled in Toronto and attending classes at the Ontario College of Art. On a sunny day in late August of 1964, I boarded the train for Toronto. The train had barely left the station in Chatham, Ontario, when I opened my mother's letter. Peter de Haan, a fellow first-year Art College student (and also from Wallaceburg) would be my roommate while attending college. Both of us were settled comfortably in the vinyl seats of our train. We watched the landscape outside our window pick up speed. Soon images of towns, farms, fields, and the noisy bells of railway crossings, flashed past us in quick succession.

I had no idea what my mother had written and I suspected no more than a mother's personal goodbye to a son who had left the family nest to join my older brother who had left home a year earlier to attend Western University. I carefully unfolded the single page that had been stuffed into a small envelope. But this was not some sentimental goodbye. In her letter she spoke of nothing else but a strong warning to watch out for the "wicked women" of the city. They were the women who would no doubt lure an innocent and unsuspecting young man like me into their *Jezebel* clutches. After all, it was my money those women were after, my mother wrote. Inwardly I laughed.

Even though she was serious, I could not help smiling at her needless concern. My treasure chest was a modest bank account in which I had deposited barely enough money for my first half-year stay in Toronto. I had already pre-paid my entire first-year's tuition thus leaving very little for the year's other expenses such as rent, art supplies, food, transportation, and clothing. My first order of business, once I arrived in Toronto, was to apply for a student loan to take care of the other half of the schoolyear. The "wicked women" of Toronto would find slim pickings in the pockets of this young man from Wallaceburg. Plus, I didn't even know what wicked women looked like. I had never seen a hooker before.

Peter and I arrived at Toronto's Union Station by mid-afternoon. I was glad he was with me as prospects of being in such a big city all alone were frightening. Regardless of what advice people offered two young men leaving for college, the culture shock of moving from a town of ten thousand to a metropolis of over a million was extreme. Any support along the way was welcome. Peter was a great support to me as I was to him during our first months in Toronto. We became good friends.

Peter had taken a sudden interest in the Ontario College of Art when he discovered I had already enrolled there. He had a passion for drawing anything and everything mechanical, especially cars. I knew Peter from the years we belonged to the same church youth group in Wallaceburg. When I discovered his awesome collection of *Meccano* sets, we soon became friends and spent many Sunday afternoons in his family garage building huge mechanical structures. His parents agreed that OCA would be Peter's post-secondary choice as well.

The September air in Toronto was thick with foreign experiences for the two students from Wallaceburg. I remember looking like a tourist as we strained our necks to stare up the sides of tall skyscrapers while we dodged thousands of cars that roared up and down University Avenue. The distance from our new home to the college was a short walk. On a previous occasion, intended as a fact-finding mission, Peter and I had hitchhiked the distance from Wallaceburg for a quick visit to Toronto. During our brief stay, we soon found an apartment, an *L-shaped Room* (like the old movie title) to be exact. Our room was so close to the college, we

could see the buildings from our window just half a block up the street. It was a prime location because it assured us we would not get lost in the big city. Carrying our suitcases, we left Union Station and walked up University Avenue to Queen Street. As we turned left it was only two very short blocks to McCaul Street, where stood the Ontario College of Art. Behind the college and sharing valuable space with the Art Gallery of Ontario, was The Grange, a park of beautiful old trees and wrought iron fences. John Street ran right into The Grange. On the third floor of an old, dirty-brick row-house, just steps from The Grange we found our L-shaped room, which was nothing more than a small dingy room with a double bed, a rickety old round table, four chairs, a dresser, and a table with a two-burner hotplate on it. The window ledge outside our only window served as a makeshift refrigerator. As long as cooler temperatures prevailed, we kept bottles of milk and cheap wine precariously perched on that ledge. Redemption came in the form of absolute security being able to see the college from our window. Across the street was a large building that housed the University Settlement Pool. It was our little miracle on John Street because our own bathroom facilities were horrible. Student admission price for the pool was just twenty-five cents including long hours of swimming and hot showers. Our first night in the L-shaped room turned out to be an unsettling experience. The air outside was warm and humid; the room was stuffy. We kept the window wide open and all through the night our room was filled with the noise of sirens, screeches, and squabbles up and down the street, yet this would be our home until the first summer break. We were living in the heart of the city, an area stretching east to west from Yonge Street to Spadina Avenue and south to north from King Street to Dundas Street.

To my surprise and despite all the noise, somehow I felt at home. It did not take me long to familiarize myself with the multicultural neighbourhood of family restaurants, antique shops, and tobacco stores, all huddled together in a mixture of residential and retail space. I will never forget those formative years at the Ontario College of Art. I never strayed far from living downtown, at least not until a year after I was married. I grew to love that core of cornices, porticos, verandas, brick buildings, awnings, and tiny little patches of green lawn strung like patchwork between structures of steel, concrete and glass. Toronto in 1964 was a special place to be. It was home. The city of Toronto was in transition from a sedate conservative city of bankers and blue-collar workers, to an international centre of arts and culture.

It was also a time of transition for Toronto's youth, as a relatively genteel *beatnik* crowd soon made way for the carnage of Britain's Carnaby Street, precipitated by the onslaught of the Beatles, those "Fab Four" of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, *and* the Rolling Stones. That same year the Americans elected L.B. Johnson as President. He was a big blustering Texan who soon ordered an escalation of conflict in Vietnam in a war that began ten years earlier in 1954, and a war that had grown into a no-win, politically expensive and humiliating defeat for the Americans.

Many Americans became *conscientious objectors-turned-draft-dodgers* who streamed north to Toronto. The air was thick with protests, hippies, and a kaleidoscope of colours. South of the border, racial tensions and burning ghettos threatened to tear the American fabric apart. The air became tainted with the acrid smells of marijuana. In the midst of all this change we stared out of our John Street window, just a young man and his friend from Wallaceburg, that small farm town in south western Ontario, where the only conflicts were an ongoing war between the Wallaceburg Red Devils and the Brantford Indians, as each team fought in often bloody combat for the coveted lacrosse trophy, as well as the struggle between *church and state*. Specifically, if I could dance with Janet, Cheryl, or Ginny, while at highschool.

From our window I could see and hear the sights and sounds of a changing city. Below gathered Toronto's newest citizens - the love-children of the sixties.

Four years of study at the Ontario College of Art immersed my body and soul in the culture of these love-children. In many ways I became one of them even though I had little time to participate in any of their activities. I was not a disillusioned student. I loved my studio and social time at Art College. I had a passion for artistic study with no ambition for politics or social change. They were good years. I came with only one agenda: to study art and graduate from Canada's prestigious OCA.

*"What the world needs now is love sweet love,"* wrote Burt Bacharach and Hal David in 1965. San Francisco had Haight-Ashbury where everyone shouted, *"Hey, dig all the beautiful freaks!"* Toronto had Yorkville where we shouted *"Hey, dig all the beautiful freaks!"* Yorkville was a string of coffeehouses, boutiques, galleries, and obscure eateries. Yorkville had become the centre of a Canadian universe where life was "where it's at!" It remained that way for at least seven years until my first venture into business with Joe Hatt-Cook. As owners of Folio Productions, later Folio Advertising Agency Ltd., our first office was located right on Yorkville Avenue. We had a *groovy* business address, the envy of many other creative shops. It was in our Yorkville office where I painted psychedelic designs on the bodies of dancers in the rock musical HAIR, a musical that had swept New York and now was about to leave its mark on Toronto. Our creative shop handled all the publicity and advertising for HAIR.

Yorkville was synonymous with shoulder-length hair, paisley shirts, colours of every rainbow, headbands, and body paint. The *trip* was simply, "wow man!" Love was in the air, at least the commercial kind whose word *love* translated into cash for a lot of hippie merchandise, both legal and illegal. In *Strawberry Fields* and *Yellow Submarines* we floated down Toronto's streets hoping the dream would never end. Even though I was caught up in the mainstream of social change in the sixties, I spent most of my time making every hour at the college count. OCA was home and I loved the atmosphere, the students, and the instructors, some of whom were genuine Canadian drawing masters, who I would encounter again much later in my life when I founded the Drawing Society of Canada. I graduated with honours from the Ontario College of Art in the spring of 1968, just a year before the infamous Woodstock gathering of 400,000 young people.

While the world around me revolved in a kaleidoscope of psychedelic colours, all-night dances at Club 888, endless journeys on Toronto's fabled public transit known as the "Red Rockets," those maroon electric trolleys that navigated the city through every warm spring and rustic fall, and the endless parade of hippies and *wannabees* on Yorkville, I spent full days in class and in the studio, leaving just enough time for a quick lunch and the trip home after school. Evenings were mostly occupied by finishing school projects. I was never much of a social creature other than among a select group of students who had become dear friends. Somehow I have managed to remember names like Dave Findlay, Marina Stoklasa, Rod, Johnny Alexander, Jan, and Katherine ("Kit") Harding, and of course Peter de Haan. College was serious business and I knew that one day I would need the AOCA diploma to enter the world of graphic art and fine art *and* get a job. No Beatles, no "joints," no protest marches, and no picket signs, were worth squandering years of hard work.

It was difficult to select highlights from those four years. They were all exciting and good years, some of the best of my life, despite a Toronto that was crumbling into the free-everything social-slush of modern and post-modern society. But who can forget names like the Beatles, the Stones, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Buffalo Springfield, Timothy Leary, and Cream, just to name

a few of my contemporaries, and my favourite Gordon Lightfoot. The sixties also turned Toronto's youth to drugs. My only encounter with drugs was one small puff of marijuana as it bubbled through wine in a water pipe. I didn't even bother to inhale the putrid smoke. *Much ado about nothing* I thought, as I returned to my usual, every-day, working-man's cigarette. Although I was acutely aware of the changing times and in some ways could not avoid its influence on my student life, I did not float along with the crowd in their mainstream of drugs, free love, and alcohol. Fine art studies at the college was not some laid-back, "hey man," affair. Creativity was then and still is hard work. I loved the discipline of hard work and the result was a thorough grounding in the traditions of art, both past and contemporary.

I met some incredible people along the way, despite regrets that my religious upbringing nearly crippled me as a social being. After all, better not get too close to those infamous "Canadians," I had been told when our family first arrived in Wallaceburg in 1958. Especially six years later when I left for Toronto, specifically to attend at an art college, no doubts a place synonymous with paganism and heathen culture, at least in the minds of so many religious people. God knew what I might pick up. Fearing for my eternal life while at Art College and the wrath of the elders, I stayed on the fringe of social contact, except for a few friends. As in highschool, I still didn't go to dances until Johnny Alexander, who was a first-year art college student from Jamaica, taught me how to dance. So, wherever you are, Johnny, Jan, Rod, Dave, Gail, Rick, Peter, Marina, Katherine "Kit," and all the others, God bless you. May we meet again one day and re-live our long nights in the student lounge, where we solved all the world's problems, as well as to remember the times we walked together downtown with a quick stop-over at the local corner bakery for a liverwurst-and-cheese on a kaiser bun. The quiet strolls down *philosophers' walk* at the University of Toronto somewhere between my college and the Royal Ontario Museum, where we attended art lectures. How can I forget late night travels on streetcars, the fabled Red Rockets, just to see a friend safely home, or to help a friend in need. One such friend was a classmate who needed encouragement in a desperate way. She wanted to commit suicide simply because she had allowed her work to become such an insurmountable backlog, she saw no way out. Failure would have been not only a personal disaster but a shameful return to family and friends in Winnipeg. I stayed with her all afternoon and night as we poured over endless projects with barely enough time for a bite to eat, yet enough time to catch up all her work. When morning came, somehow the sun seemed warmer as we took the subway to college. We were both very tired but I felt assured she had survived the ordeal. She passed the assignments and successfully completed her Foundation Year, only to quit college soon after and return to Winnipeg. Many more special memories remain locked away, not in secret, but in some form of a time warp that may someday permit me to share them with others.

Sometimes I wish I could turn the clock back and do Art College all over again.

If I may boast for a minute longer, I was a good and faithful student, well-liked by both student body and faculty. I made the best of my four years of study, earning me a number of scholarships, an honours graduation, and the coveted bronze OCA Medallion for Proficiency. When times permitted I have often returned to the streets and city blocks of downtown Toronto, a place filled with good memories. Whenever I return to my college roots and I walk the streets around the old buildings, memories of people and events flood back. I owe much to a great art instructor who taught me to observe life and with my observations discipline my mind to remember people, places, and events. It all began in a college studio class called "Field Research," taught by the renowned Canadian painter Carl Schaefer. "Field Research" was a fancy words for *the art of observation*. He taught me this art through endless drawings completed

*en plein air*, or on location on the streets in and around the college and downtown Toronto. Everywhere I looked I found objects to draw. I filled many sketchbooks with drawings of trees, old brick houses, and factory sites, close-ups of structural details, alleyways, garbage cans, and piles of boxes behind a store. I made drawings of pipes, ships in the harbour, construction sites, and heaps of stuff whose identities have escaped me, yet all found within blocks from the college. Again, and with great regret, none of these sketchbooks have survived, but the discipline of observation did survive. I tapped into those roots once more in the late nineties, when I began filling sketchbook after sketchbook with the people and faces of Nanaimo's coffeeshops. Twenty sketchbooks in all, now safely archived in the Thomas Fisher Library of Rare Books at the University of Toronto.

But no one could prepare or discipline me for what I saw one October evening.

The event took place while attending the Ontario College of Art, and stands out miles above all the other events of my college years. It happened on October 31, 1964.

The occasion was a Halloween party organized by two young men I had gotten to know at a church group in the "uptown" Eglinton and Yonge area of Toronto. Even though I considered church attendance was not a requirement of personal faith, but rather because I was expected to attend, my attendance nevertheless was sparse, yet not sparse enough to miss Tom and John. Tom Herman and John Koops were two young men with good careers and a penthouse-like suite in a large apartment building in "uptown" Toronto on Broadway Avenue. They loved to entertain. We got along very well from the day we first met. John was a fabulous cook. For a young and usually hungry college student with limited funds and a regular diet of canned goods, this friendship was an answer to prayer. John cooked up an extravaganza of sumptuous dishes. His generous and frequent offers to join them for dinner were too good to refuse. In exchange I gave them endless hours of attention as we talked the night away in pursuit of dreams, philosophy, and the usual male boasting of rich exploits and business ventures. We spent our time looking over the city from his high-above-the-masses balcony. When other young people joined us, we burned candles and sat on the floor among fishnets and other collectables. We gathered as young men and women of the sixties, to discuss life, politics, art, love (but with no bedroom shenanigans) and of course the church.

That October evening in 1964, was no exception, except we had a theme for the night. John and Tom had decided to throw a big Halloween bash, a costume party the likes of which would remain the "talk of the office" for weeks. Wherever it was the two worked, this was to be the party of parties, or at least so they thought.

Costume parties, however, were never high on the list of my priorities. I never did like getting dressed up. Perhaps it was because I spend some of my childhood years being "dressed-up" in my uncle's hand-me-downs.

"What shall I wear?" I remembered asking John.

"Just come as you are," John replied.

"Just as I am? But what about my costume?"

"Come dressed as an 'artist'. That will be your costume!" said John.

I had forgotten how much the "artist" had become a thing of stature and image in the Bohemian years of post-fifties Toronto. To have artists as friends was the "in-thing" to have. John and Tom and most of their friends were career people, office people to be exact, who were caught up in a world of material pursuits. I was the real thing, so they thought. I was an art student, so I attended their party dressed in my regular, daily college-wear, only to lead the

others to believe my corduroy pants, bright-coloured shirt, black Beatle-boots and sheepskin coats, were the "costumes" of a real-life artist. The party turned out to be a real success.

Sometime during the evening the apartment doorbell rang.

"You want to get the door, Gerrit?" shouted John from somewhere in the middle of a group of noisy party-goers.

"Sure thing, John."

I stood up, feeling somewhat light-headed because of a drink called *Black Russian*, but clear-headed and sober enough to open the door and stand face to face with my future.

My life would never be the same again.

There in front of me, framed by the open door, stood my future.

She was beautiful, blond, and with the most inviting smile I had ever experienced.

Something happened the moment I saw her.

It took but a microsecond for me to realize something had actually happened. I stood there staring, frozen in time and in love.

John came to the door and gave the young woman's date a welcome handshake, only to turn to her and embrace her with a big hug. He seemed awfully friendly with this young woman. What, competition already?

Then he turned to me and said, "Gerrit, I'd like you to meet my sister, Alice!"

Deep within the confines of my heart, amidst vain attempts at social contact, amidst the memories of fear of ever being liked by a girl, and amidst hopeful signs of social healing among college friends, I found the silent courage to believe she was the one. As if a sudden summer rainstorm had disappeared as quickly as it came, gone were nineteen years of inhibition and bashful shots at friendships with girls. I shook her hand and welcomed her to the party. I felt as if I was suspended in space. I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I was sober. Black Russians were not playing games with me. I saw no one but her. Everyone else at the party was swallowed up in the revelry. I wanted nothing more than to get to know this Alice.

She smiled back as she entered the apartment. Soon I found her talking with Peter, my roommate, as well as with other partygoers.

It turned out that her "date" was only a ride to the party.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

My mind began its love-truck calculations.

So far - no boyfriend. I would deal with Peter later. First things first. Alice and I got to know each other as best as we could that night. We talked and talked more than she. What else is new eh? But she enjoyed our conversation. I don't remember how soon after I said "hi" that evening just to get her attention, when I told her that I loved her. I do know it didn't take long to realize my love-struck condition. True love has a tendency of being right the first time. I had never had a girlfriend and no doubt I was a bit over-zealous that evening. In fact, I had no real idea who this Alice was. She had just broken up with a young man from Hamilton. She was hurt but free. Perhaps I was overzealous, perhaps I was just too love-struck to care, but in words I cannot even remember, I told her that night that I had fallen in love with her. The next morning, I shared the events of that evening with Peter, reminding him to back off any hopes he had for getting to know this Alice too. He must have known I was determined and serious, because he remained respectfully distant from that moment on. Yes, we remained good friends, but a classic "love triangle" never developed.

I was in love.

I knew it and I spared no time in telling anyone who would listen.

Within days everyone at OCA knew I was in love.

Alice was not as quick to reply. Even though her response was a genuine and warm "I like you very much," I would have to wait many months for the words I longed to hear.

About six months later, as Alice and I walked along Dundas Street in the early hours of an April evening, a late-winter dusting of snow began to drift gently into the soft light of streetlamps (I'm not exaggerating. It really happened that way; ask Alice). We walked hand in hand, intent on having dinner together and catching a movie at the Imperial Theatre. My thoughts drifted with the falling snow as time stood still. I was with Alice and nothing else mattered. It was also 1965, my twentieth birthday.

On the corner of Dundas Street and University Avenue, in the light of a tall overhead streetlamp, with gently drifting snow, and yes for all you romantic movie lovers, that's really what happened, she turned to me and said, "I love you Gerrit."

But, I must return to close the tale of my college years.