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# The Final Years

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1950-1952

*Back to O'Brien Avenue*

*Near the end of 1949, we left the bungalow and all of its history and meaning for us and moved back to O'Brien Avenue, directly across from the first home we lived in at #7 O'Brien Avenue. Our mother told us this was Mrs. Hempill's house, our Sunday school teacher who somehow in the Deloro Town Hall on Sunday afternoons would put up with these kids and attempt to teach some Bible stories. I must admit there were moments when we weren't well-behaved. Of course, it always got back to Mother, and that was not good. There were always consequences.*

*Things and circumstances seemed to be changing at a very fast pace during this time. Leaving the bungalow was a question Dave and I had, only to hear later it had to be torn down due to contamination, arsenic, and much more. The bungalow was next to the Chemical Lab as well.*

*As I look back and reflect on all the times we not only walked through the old arsenic buildings, through the plant foundry, watched Harvey Koski in the foundry, grabbed some salt tablets on the way, and played with hockey sticks (butt ends), shoving them up and down in the red mud flats (processing waste from the plant manufacturing)—we wouldn't have known the health risk for us at that time. But the bungalow was gone, with just the frame of our sister Donna's old swing left on the property. It's still there today some sixty-seven years later.*

*One of the signs things were changing quickly was the more frequent trips of Father and Mother to Ottawa and the M.J. O'Brien Company. The other was the new general manager—Walsh was his name. Later we would find out that his role was to close the plant, and with that would come the loss of many jobs of those who had been a part of the DS&R for many years.*

*One day I observed this strange event in the middle of O'Brien Avenue with my father and Hector Boudreau.*

Hector and Nellie  
Boudreau

*I came to understand later that Hector Boudreau was a long time employee of DS&R. There in the middle of O'Brien Avenue, I saw Hector give my father a bottle of rye whiskey. Curious, I asked Mother what this was all about, only to find out that Father was able to get a small pension for Hector at a time when pensions were not readily part of many companies. That must have taken some doing in the 1950s business climate, considering as well that change that was happening all around.*

This event brought me into the very lives of Hector and Nellie as they began to build, on Highway 7 just west of the Deloro Road, a small house with a gas station and four or five little cabins for overnight stays for travellers. I found my many available days and hours helping Hector, doing whatever I could, and when the little gas station was up and running, I found myself serving gas, putting oil in cars, and with that very old cash register, ringing up the bill. Do you remember the old gas tanks, the big bottle of gas on top of a stand, graduated off in gallons? I had to look up and up, as I wasn't that tall yet, to make sure I was on the proper gallon mark. And the oil—well, not cans, but a bottle with this spout on the top.

There was a little candy and pop counter as well, and for many days and weekends, I was a part of their lives. I learned much from Hector and Nellie as we finished building the little

overnight cabins; no lighting or heating, but cozy. Hector eventually passed away and Nellie was alone, nursing her older son Billy, who was in major pain day and night. I'm sure it was at this point in my very young life that I found within myself feeling an overwhelming sense of compassion for Nellie, who tirelessly looked after her son and managed this little business as well. Dr. Hamilton Crawford and the new Dr. Parkins would stop in often, but to no avail. Billy was at times screaming. I think I grew up in so many ways overnight. I had feelings never before experienced, and my time with Hector and Nellie has a special place within my heart even to this day.

*"Compassion brings us to a stop, and for a moment we rise above ourselves."*—Mason Cooley

## The Beginning of the End

*One begins to know when things are not right. Things happen with those you love, or events happen that leave you puzzled and sometimes afraid. Why would my life be any different?*

Sunday mornings we would go the church at Saint Andrews United Church in Marmora. I, with my little brown suit and tie, would sit dutifully, if you will, through each service. Not sure what was going on at times—oh, let's be honest, hardly ever. As I hearken back to earlier ministers and events, I particularly remember Reverend Fletcher, kind of old, with glasses, gray hair, who baptized our sister Donna on an Easter Sunday. Well, what a show, for Reverend Fletcher kept saying with a loud voice hands in the air, "It will live again! It will live again!" over and over again. I remember almost laughing, but in the years to come, I would come to understand the Easter message and Reverend Fletcher's attempt to point it out.

Father would sing in the choir over the years, and this one particular Sunday, up Father got in the middle of the service in front of the whole congregation, and he left. What was wrong with Dad? We found Dad outside on the steps in tears after the service—oh my, what's going on? Mother and a few other men finally got Dad home, up to his room, with Dr. Hamilton Crawford not far behind. Funny how everything is to be hush, hush—and finally Mother explained that Dad has had a nervous

breakdown and we were to be very quiet always. It was at least two weeks before Dad was able to appear and return to work again, and he was different, quieter. As I look back on this time, I can imagine the pressure Dad must have been under—plant closing—what's going to happen to his family—what do we do now?—where do we go now?

*"The only thing that makes life possible is permanent intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next."*—Ursula K. LeGuin

We would go on with our daily lives, somehow changed and concerned as well.

## We're Heroes

*We Saved the Company Garages*

*Most weekends, we would take our bikes and just cruise around the village. Up the back road, behind the houses, to the dump and garden plots, then back to the town hall, through the school yard, and back to the Mr. Haike's General Store. Then down past Drew's house to Mrs. McInroe's boarding house. Opposite the boarding house were the company garages, in which all of the company cars for DS&R were kept. Mr. McInroe was the driver for the company executives as they would shuttle often back and forth to Ottawa.*

This particular Sunday, David and I approached the garages. What we saw was white and blue smoke coming out of the ceiling. In panic, we ran over to the boarding house, called Mr. McInroe, and out he came. He unlocked the doors to see a machine of some sort on fire and spreading. The fire didn't seem that large, and it was put out quickly. He thanked us, and we went home, thinking nothing more of it than that.

A week later, Father summoned both David and me to the company general office, and quickly herded us both into the office of the general manager, Mr. Walsh. In the office as well were two other senior managers, Mr. Buskard and Mr. Pacquette.

"Oh God, what did we do now?" as this seemed to be the only time we were called to account for some our actions. After a few deep breaths, we found that this meeting was a good thing

as the company wanted to thank us and reward us for alerting Mr. McInroe in saving the company garages and cars. Well, Mr. Walsh did thank us and handed a five-dollar bill to David and me as our beaming father—dare I say, for the first time a good event in his boys' lives—stood watching. Imagine that—we saved the company cars and received a reward. A good day.

*"You've come to celebrate the good days because there are brutal days that make the good ones sweet."*—Brian O'Driscoll

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### The Last Leaky Raft

*The Chemical Building (and a Brush with the Law)*

*Years and years later in Montreal, I attended a first-time writers' workshop and was asked to write and share a story that was important to me, spoke to me, and had, in other words, some kind of moral lesson. I chose this story I am about to share with you now—you already know the history, the background of David and I to this point, so you know the context.*

When I shared it with the writing class, it bombed, for the simple reason that they did not know the context of the story with all of its background to this point.

Well, I think you do know, and once again this story needs to be told.

We were fifteen or so. Testosterone-driven hormones all over the place, and into building a raft for the summer. Again, in the best place ever, above the falls and below the first eddy going north on the Moira River. As you proceed from the ball field through the forest, you would pass one of the old boarding houses for the many men who at one time were needed for the plant operations. Large numbers of men from many different countries would be housed here. The place now of course was deserted, but with the remnants of billiard tables and large kitchens. Moving on, we would pass the many empty and wide open buildings, housing anything from chemicals to who knows what from the plant. From

there it was a hop, skip, and a jump to the falls and our endeavours to build our raft again.

Once again, just to the left of the river overlooking the falls was another one of the old boarding houses, this one pretty well torn down, but not quite. This one must have been a beautiful place to be at one time, overlooking the falls, surrounded by rushing waters, with a beautiful vista to the high rocks and the green hue of summer. This building half standing was perfect for all the wood, wire, and any bindings we would need to build our raft. And this we did. We and all of our many friends were expert raft builders by this time, and we finished this perfect raft. We decided to come back the next day and share our rafting experience again together.

Well, we showed up the next day, ready to be there all day and enjoy the summer. Pause—pause again—where the h— is it? What happened to it? Where did it go?

Soon we found it in pieces all over the place, broken and torn apart. Who did this? Our voices rose—“They can’t do that to us”—“Must have been the company”—“They can’t do that to us” again. “We’ll show them.”

In retrospect, that was not a good statement, as the testosterone-driven hormones really kicked in here. There had to be at least eight or nine of us that day, and back we went up the road to the old chemical storage building that we passed on the way down, which was wide open, and we began to just pour chemicals from one bottle into another. Some of the bottles were cracked and large, and it didn’t take long to recognize something was happening. White smoke, bubbles, and breaking glass gave it away, and as we ran back toward the river, there was the sound of a great explosion and there was a huge hole in the building. We scattered fast, back home, thinking that would be it, recognizing how lucky we were not to have

been seriously hurt—other than a few remaining marks of acid burn on David's face after all these years.

Now, Mother and Father were away in Ottawa again, and just as well. Knowing Mother, she would have known we were into something that was not good. After a few days feeling comfortable that the incident would blow over, along came a loud knock on the front door of our house. David was upstairs, so I answered the door—and there standing at least seven feet tall, it seemed, was a real policeman towering over me as if I was a dwarf.

“Are you James Dalton?” in a voice that would shake one's being to its final resting place. “Yes” in a very weak, shy voice. “Do you know where Beaver Clemens is?” to which I could reply honestly, “No,” and I said, “Sir.” In the background upstairs there was a noise—David out the upstairs window onto the back porch roof, onto the ground, and gone—I wouldn't see Dave for two days—and Beaver—well, I had no idea where he was. My God, how would I explain David's absence if our parents came home early. I kind of knew where he was, again to the high rocks where David knew every nook and cranny.

That was the end of the conversation with this giant policeman (OPP), I assumed, his black car parked in front of Grant Airhart's house. *What on earth will happen to us now?* I thought. Would our parents hear of this? Of course they would, or the police would not have been here. They were there for a few more days, every day and then gone. Strangely enough, there was not a word from our parents, which certainly made me more uncomfortable, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But it didn't. Many years later, when we finally found a way to tell this story, both Mother and Father knew, along with the parents of the others who were with us that day. They didn't need to say anything to us that we hadn't already felt. Mother, some more years

after that, would candidly say after we told the story again each Thanksgiving or Christmas—"The damn company—the buildings should have been locked." However, there was really no excuse for that kind of—and let's call it what it was—vandalism. The moral of the story for me at least was and is today...

*"Emotions out of control are deadly."*

—That's my quote

I think this person says it much better:

*"He who controls others may be powerful, but he who has mastered himself is mightier still."*

—Lao Tzu

## Marmora

*After the last leaky raft was built and destroyed, I found myself more involved with the many happenings in Marmora and my friends there, at the age of fifteen, going on sixteen and in grade ten at Marmora High. I recall those moments and people there that had an impact on my life as well.*

Who can remember Charlie Crawford's (Beer) Bus? It really was a bus line from Marmora to Belleville, but on Saturdays, this changed a bit. Friday night, many of the folks in Deloro with cars would load up their cars with the empty beer bottles, and Saturday morning early, over to the bus line. Each and every week this happened till one day Madoc finally got a beer store. Charlie went to Belleville, unloaded the empties, filled his bus with the beer orders from the folks, and returned to Marmora. At 6:00, lining up for Charlie's bus full of beer, were car after car waiting for the beer. It seemed like such a ritual and almost comical.

There was Sanderson's Taxi, the only one in town, and Hannah's Dairy—I would travel with Frank around the lake delivering milk to the cottagers. Mr. Hannah Sr. showed me how to work the bottling machine. I remember how kind and generous they were with their time and instruction. Howard Sabine's dad ran the *Marmora Herald*, and for hours some times, I would watch Mr. Sabine load the printing presses, hands covered in ink, and then listen to the click and clack of the printing press. Then

there was Breen O'Connor's pool hall, where I would be a frequent customer, which as my father would tell me, "is the sure sign of a misspent youth."

Saturday night, it seemed everyone came to town, many to the local Royal Hotel. Almost every Saturday night there would be the usual folks having just one too many and out on the street they would come. Two brothers, it seemed, came out most Saturday nights, shouting and screaming their names and throwing quarters all over the sidewalk, which were scooped up by the kids. As I got older, I felt sadness in this ritual, not really knowing where this came from, but it was there.

The greatest memory I have was my short-lived career (two games, I think) as stick boy for the Marmora Millionaires, a senior hockey team that played local towns. Bill Regan, my father's friend, was the coach and took me along with him to several games. The person I remember the most was Gus Leonard, a defenceman, who would wind up behind his net, smooth as silk, come out from behind his net and set up so many plays. This has always stuck in my mind over the years as an example of sportsmanship and good play. In 2017, Gus was still alive and living in Peterborough.

Marmora will always hold such good memories for me.

## Postscript

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*In the summer of 1952, at the age of sixteen, myself and my brother David, now fifteen, left this little village of Deloro on the very same road that we arrived on in 1939. As well this time we had a sister, Donna, along. Father had recognized that the DS&R would finally close, and in 1961 it did. The whispering of environmental issues in the 1950s turned into a full environmental cleanup lasting more than thirty years.<sup>9</sup>*

After so many years of thinking about the “leaky raft,” so many wonderful, real and alive memories have surfaced again in the writing of this book. Each story is a thread weaving together the “raising of a child” by the people of love and hope in the villages of Deloro and Marmora, Ontario. I recognize how fortunate I have been to be part of their stories, a part of their lives as well.

The “leaky raft” is still alive and well, and it is my hope that even today in the year 2017, there are boys and girls again building a raft and floating it above the falls.

My leaky raft is still there, anchored to the shore, waiting for my return. And I will return, pick up the pole I shaped from an elm tree, slowly push off from shore, and continue my journey that was set for me so many years ago. And with great joy, I will be home.

Blessings,  
James

## Endnotes

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