

THE PUNCH Bill Boudreau

“Pop!” and Sam fell to the floor like a block of cement. It was a Friday night and the usual clique had clamored Joe’s Bar, a popular neighborhood hang-out. The group played pool, told jokes, competed at dart throwing, and drank. Sam, one of the regulars, sometimes consumed too much alcohol, became obnoxious and insulting. The gang knew Sam and ignored him when he reached that state. That night, a stranger sat alone at the bar, minding his own business. By ten o’clock, Sam felt smart-ass, sassy. He wasn’t getting the attention from his pals. So, he went to the bar and sat next to the stranger. “Hi, there, guy! What’s your name?” Sam said. The stranger didn’t say a word, kept staring at his drink. Sam pulled on the stranger’s arm. “Listen to me, I’m talking to you. Do you hear me?” “You better let go,” the stranger said. “What do you mean? ‘I better let go.’” Sam didn’t. “Wham!” When Sam came to, all his friends looked down at him. “What happened?” Sam said. “Where am I?” “You dumb ass,” Jim said. “D’you know who you pestered?” “Who?” “Rocky the Rock.” “The boxer?” “That’s right,” Jim said. They helped Sam get up.

108

THE CIGAR LESSON Bill Boudreau

Billy was eight years old. He had stolen a cigar from his grandpa and wanted to smoke it. He thought it would make him manly. Billy fetched his friend, Joey, of the same age. Together they went behind the barn. Billy lit the cigar, sucked the smoke in his cheeks and let it out quickly. He then gave the cigar to Joey. Joey puffed and said, “This is good.” He gave the cigar back to Billy who inhaled a deeper drag. Joey imitated Billy. After repeating the cycle several times, the cigar did not taste so good. “My belly hurts,” Joey said. Billy sucked in a long intake. He coughed and coughed. “I think I’m going...to... throw up. “Billy, your face is white,” Joey said. Both boys lay on the ground. Curled up, moaning, pale faced, and holding their bellies. “I feel sick, my head turns,” Joey said. “Me...too,” replied Billy. “Are we going to die?” All this time, around the corner, Billy’s grandpa had been peeking and chuckling. He approached the boys, looked down at them, and said, “Ahah! this is one lesson you’ve learned by doing.”

109

JOURNEY TO REDEMPTION Bill Boudreau

Decades ago, I mounted Lightning, the flame-colored stallion of life, and rode away from my birthplace. I’d never ridden before. Naïve and unaware of the perils of the world, I spurred Lightning at full canter in the direction of my youthful dream, a place I’d fantasized. I let Lightning gallop at will, free rein, toward that destination. Visions of a new world excited me, then. Images of glory prodded me like a sword at my back. A world of excess sizzled my aspiration. Unwittingly, I was vulnerable to the sweetness of the flesh. Primal voices beckoned me. An appetite for new knowledge stirred my intellect. Hunger to achieve taunted me. Sometimes in my sleep, I still hear a song my grandfather sang to me—If you only knew what’s in front of you, my Child, my Child /If I could only tell that all will be well, my Child, my Child... The trail had been long and winding. Looking back, I can see where we’d trotted, and a single road had faced me. We all have gauntlets to endure. For each one of us, it’s unique, and many times, of our own making. In earlier days, I didn’t know what was around the corner.

Perhaps, if I'd known, I wouldn't have gone forward—a blessing, a curse? Time went on. Lightning didn't want to gallop as often. Fire that had ignited my spirit years before, continued to burn, but at a diminished heat—a warm flame that didn't char the soul. Kept my essence vibrant. Arriving in front of a rocky cliff, more like a tower. I dismounted, looked up at the stone rise that reminded me of a temple, a shrine, or an altar. I couldn't determine whether man, nature, or some super being had built the twenty to thirty-foot structure that could have been a monument, marking a significant entity. I stared upward. A feeling of inferiority pressed on me, as if being judged. I pondered at an opening about fifteen feet up the wall of the precipice—an entrance, or just a hole in the rock? Away from the tower, a mile or so, there flowed a tranquil river, and on the far shore, lush vegetation flourished—trees, fertile slopes, and valleys. Mountains penetrated the clouds. Animals and birds frolicked at the water's edge. Nature's kaleidoscope. The wind blew aromatic scent from that distant bank. Then, the breeze changed direction, and on this side of the river, a frisky dust devil swirled sand in my face. The arid basin leading to the monolith, lay dry, red-dirt deprived of nutrients. Why? The earth was hard and cracked like a jigsaw puzzle. A band of horses appeared out of red bluffs' shadows. They stopped and stared at us. Lightning returned their gaze. Then he turned to me. I read his eyes. He wanted to join them, and sadness filled my heart. I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't own him. Before the dust settled, he became one of them, and together galloped along the river northward and up into a dark, almost black, cloud that began to move my way. The huge sky-body seemed angry. Flashes illuminated the dark mass like neon in a pitchblack night. Reverberating thunder shook my guts. I felt so alone, trapped in a terrible storm. The monster cloud had intelligence. It wanted to hurt me. Beyond the river, a clear sky met the horizon. But over me, rain began to fall hard. At the base of the rock-wall, I stooped under a stone awning, felt entombed. Thunderbolts rumbled, snapped, lightning zigzagged above the tower. It rained so hard that in a short time the water

110

rose around my feet. In a fetal position, I remained still for almost a half hour. The storm didn't let go, it spat hail. The wind rose, the pellets hurt me. How could I get away—cliff's opening above me? I must get to it, like a spider, crawl upward along the surface to that hole. Out of the crevice, I stood, hugged the cliff, grabbing stone niches. Drenched, the wind, rain, and hail hit my back with such force that I screamed. Sluggishly, I inched upward. My shirt ripped open. I scraped, bruised my skin. It seemed like an eternity. Finally, I reached the opening and climbed into a rocky lobby. Moments later, the storm cloud vanished. Scared, tired, wet, and chilled, I turned and peered into the cave. A throat? Uninvited images stormed my brain. Did the cave contain the corridors of my conscience? Did I dare explore its hallways and mazes? I turned and stuck my head outside. A lightning bolt struck the side of the entrance. I retreated and understood. I had no choice, the time had come. Inward, like evil eyes, two openings into caves. I stared. Where did they lead? Would they take me to the core my inner being, discover who I really am? Did I want to know? Deep in my psyche, there were faint, almost forgotten deeds I would've rather not revisit. Was that what I must go through before it's over? Doubts pervaded my thoughts. My moment of judgment? Who's to be my judge? Did the truth resided in those rocks? I feared to know. I stood still, pondering. Then, I stepped forward, closer to the entrances. I debated which to enter and could not help but believe that, inside, existed my true self. I shivered as I deliberated. What if I came face to face with my misdeeds—people I've cheated, lied to, harmed, and they know about it, and want an explanation, wanting to know why I did what I did? Was that my final confession, last confrontation with myself? Standing in front of the

right entrance, on uncertain legs, I forced a heavy foot inward. Consumed, somehow, I knew I was about to begin an extraordinary journey. About twenty feet into the cold, dark, corridor, I saw faint lights at perhaps twenty-five-foot intervals. In near darkness, balancing myself, I felt the pick's rugged marks on either side. In cautious steps, I moved ahead. The ceiling hung less than a foot above my head. An uncomfortable temperature shrouded my body. Deeper into the tunnel, a humid chill stuck to my skin. Feeling of helplessness came over me. A stench seeped up my nostrils, a scent I'd never sniffed before. Organic decay? In twilight, moisture glazed the passage. Other than drips, quietude engulfed me. An evil silence? I concluded that I'd no choice but to wander the catacombs of my soul.