

Part One

C H A P T E R O N E

After an impressive hang time, I plummeted back to the sidewalk, my fall broken by a fresh, putrid pile of excrement the size of a small ottoman. I quickly scanned the area for a hippo on the lam.

Before I quite literally found myself in deep shit, my day had actually been ripe with promise. I'm a big believer in signs. After six straight days of rain, I believed the sun burning a hole in the cloudless, cobalt sky was a sign – a good one. It somehow lightened the load I'd been lugging around in my mind for the previous six weeks. I lifted my face to the warmth and squinted as I walked along the edge of Riverfront Park. Even though it was a Monday morning, I hummed a happy little tune. Maybe, just maybe, things were looking up. Unfortunately, so was I.

My foot made a soft landing on the sidewalk and shot forward all on its own, leaving a brown, viscous streak in its wake. Congenitally clumsy, I was well into the splits before I managed to drag my trailing leg forward and slip the surly bonds of earth. Airborne, I surveyed the terrain below and, with all the athletic prowess of a quadriplegic walrus, returned safely to earth, touching down on the aforementioned crap cushion.

Just after I landed, I counted roughly twenty witnesses, who stared slack-jawed before many of them split their sides. Fortunately, only a handful of them had video cameras. I expect you can still find me on klutzklips.com. Everyone seemed quite amused by the prominent sign planted three feet to my left: KEEP CUMBERLAND

CLEAN. PLEASE STOOP AND SCOOP. The owners of whatever behemoth produced this Guinness-book offering would have needed a Hefty bag and a snow shovel.

And what an unholy aroma. I've always believed that English is better equipped than any other language to capture the richness and diversity of our daily lives. I promise you, the *Oxford Concise* does not yet have words to describe the stench that rose like a mushroom cloud from that colossal mound. Stepping in it was one thing; full immersion was quite another.

Bright sun in a clear blue sky – good sign. Russian split jump into a gigantic dog turd – not a good sign. Good form, good air, but not a good sign.

An hour and a shower later, I retraced my steps, eyes fixed on the pavement, ignoring the two township workers in hazmat suits at the scene of my fall. I quickened my pace, pumping myself up for the important encounter ahead. After nearly six weeks of intensive searching, I was down to my last seven days. I'd tried flattery, threats, cajolery, blackmail, and bribery, but had come up empty and bone-dry – nothing.

In the first two weeks after my arrival in Cumberland, I'd spoken to the mayor and every town councilor, including the lone Liberal, as well as the head of the chamber of commerce. No dice. In week three, I had pleaded with prominent business leaders, local doctors and lawyers, the head of the four-bus transit authority, and the high-school principal. They're all still laughing. In fact, one of them needed two sick days to rest a pulled stomach muscle. Last week, I had bought drinks for the local crossing guard, baked cookies for the chief instructor at the Prescott Driving School, and shared inane banter with the golf pro at the Cumberland Mini-Putt. No luck, although the crossing guard at least listened to half my spiel before holding up her STOP sign.

I like to think that one of my few strengths is a keen sense of when I'm doomed. None of this "the glass is half full" stuff for me. I know when I'm in deep. So I gave up and returned to the

no-hope option I'd rejected at the outset as cruel and unusual punishment. But what else could I do? I had splinters from scraping the bottom of the barrel.

The Riverfront Seniors' Residence loomed on my left just beyond the park. Built in 1952, it had that utterly forgettable but, I suppose, practical architecture of that era – early Canadian ugly. Two wings of rooms extended along the riverbank on either side of a central lobby. Everything looked painfully rectangular. The only architectural grace note, just adjacent to the dining room, was a curved wall of windows, overlooking the Ottawa River. For the residents, the panorama provided a welcome distraction from the steam-table cuisine.

The lounge next to the dining room was populated with 30-year-old couches and chairs, sporting strangely hued upholstery from the “shades of internal organs” collection, accessorized by protective plastic slip covers. I saw a couple of dozen or so residents camped out in the lounge. Some were reading. Others were locked in debate over what vegetables would accompany the pot roast that night. A few simply gazed at nothing at all with a forlorn and vacant look. The scent of air freshener hung heavy, only just subduing that other odor sadly common to many seniors' residences. I loitered in the lobby, surveying the scene and deciding on my approach. Evidently, I was too slow.

A grizzled, old man in a peach safari suit and a lavender, egg-encrusted tie looked me up and down a few times, wrestling with his memory. Finally, recognition dawned on his withered face. “Hey, it's the doggy doo-doo diving champ!” he shouted. I glanced at the aging alliteration aficionado before taking in the rest of the room. All eyes turned to me. I saw heads nodding and smiles breaking. A wheelchair-ridden centenarian gave me a thumbs-up. I heard a smattering of applause that slowly gathered strength and culminated some time later in an osteoporotic, stooping ovation. I felt compelled to take a bow. When the commotion abated, the guy in the peach safari suit approached.

"I gotta tell you that was some performance this morning. After that horse of a dog dropped his load in the middle of the sidewalk, we were all gathered by the window there, waiting for some poor sap to step in it. We even had a pool going."

"I'm certainly gratified that I could brighten your day," I answered with an inferior replica of a genuine smile.

"We had no idea someone would actually throw himself into it. What a showstopper! What chutzpah! We haven't had that much excitement around here since the great Arnie Shaw flatulence evacuation in '94."

"My pleasure," I said. "I'll work up a new routine for next week. Perhaps you can help me. I'm looking for Muriel Parkinson. Do you know where I can find her?"

He surveyed the room and pointed to the far corner. I followed his crooked finger to see an attractive and well-dressed woman, trying to conceal herself behind an anemic *benjamina ficus* that really wasn't up to the job.

"Thank you," I replied and started towards her.

From behind me, I heard, "No no, thank you. You made our month, young man."

I recognized Muriel Parkinson immediately. I'd met her four years earlier at a Liberal Campaign College prior to the last election. She had attended a workshop that I had led on election communications for campaign managers and candidates. We had eaten lunch together that day, and I had gotten to know one of the grand old dames of the Liberal Party. She'd been acclaimed as the Liberal candidate in Cumberland-Prescott for the previous five elections, never once gaining enough support to get back our deposit. Now, that redefines dedication.

During World War II, Muriel had actually worked as Mackenzie King's head secretary. Some historians believed she served as his sounding board and confidante when his dog, Pat, was unavailable. She was Liberal to the core. I clung to the fact that for five consecutive campaigns, with no hope of winning, she'd stood as

the lone Liberal in the safest Tory riding in the land. I harboured a faint hope that she might have a sixth left in her.

I was expecting at least to have the element of surprise. I didn't think my mission was well known beyond a small circle at national campaign headquarters back in Ottawa. But from her reaction, I had a faint inkling my cover was blown. She peeked through the sparse branches of the ficus and saw that I had a lock on her. Resigned, she sat back in her chair and waved her hands in front of her face in the universal gesture for "get the hell away from me."

"No no no no no!" she yelled. "Do not even think about it! Do not pass go! Do not collect two hundred dollars. Security! Security!" She yelled just loud enough to vibrate the picture window behind her. What a voice.

The room once again turned to me while I held my hands up in the universal gesture for "I'm harmless and just want to talk." Fortunately, the celebrity conferred by my morning acrobatics had not yet waned, and I was permitted to continue. I approached her as an asylum orderly might inch towards a violent patient.

"Hello, Muriel, I'm Daniel Addison. We had lunch together a few years back at the last candidates' school. How are you doing?"

"I know who you are, and I know why you're here," she said. "You really have your nerve. I told the Leader's office that under no circumstances would I stand again. I've done my part. Get somebody else to fall on their sword this time."

"Look, we really think Cameron's ripe for the picking this time around," I countered, wondering how plugged-in she still was to the local political scene.

"Look, college boy," Muriel said, "I'll lay it out for you. Eric Cameron is so high in the polls he starts each day with a nose-bleed. I've run against him in the last three elections and have never even come close to seeing his dust in the distance. He's smooth, courteous, educated, articulate, widowed, for mercy's sake, and so right wing that the middle of the road is in a different time zone!" Her tirade aroused the interest of everyone in the

room and several who weren't. "I'm eighty-one years old," she continued. "I've got the shakes, and I've been in the bathroom 13 times in the last three hours. I would not run again if the Leader promised to name me ambassador to Bermuda. And looking at the polls, he won't be able to offer me a House of Commons Visitor's Pass for much longer. I am not your candidate!" she harumphed with finality, crossing her arms.

I lowered my voice in a vain attempt to lower the temperature. "Is that why you think I'm here – to persuade you to run again?" I asked, giving her my best wounded look.

"Well, I don't think you're here to ask me on a date." I paused, unsure of how to play it out. Concern clouded her face. "Oh, please, tell me you're not here to ask me out," she blurted, mortified.

"I'm not here to ask you on a date," I conceded. "My two-year relationship with a philandering girlfriend just ended, and I plan to lay low for a while." I thought I'd open up a little and go for the sympathy vote.

"Then, I'm agog. You really are here to get me to run again, aren't you?" she pressed.

I really had no idea how to handle her, so I just rolled over. "Okay, okay, I thought I at least owed you the right of first refusal."

"Consider it exercised, Danny boy. I'm not your girl this time around. Am I coming in loud and clear, or should I speak slower?"

I crumpled into the chair beside her and buried my head in my hands. I toyed with the thought of convulsive blubbing, but she'd have been unmoved, and around the room, a dozen gnarled hands would've shot from sleeves, offering used tissues.

"What am I going to do?" I wheezed. "If I don't find a candidate to run against Cameron in four days, my solemn promise to the Leader will be broken."

"A broken promise in politics? Stop the presses!" she quipped. Now, she looked like she was officially enjoying herself.

"I just want to do the right thing and leave with a clear conscience," I stammered and fell silent.

I could feel her eyes on me, and when I looked up, they seemed to soften. I knew she'd never run. I think I knew that before I'd even arrived at Riverfront Seniors' Residence. But Muriel Parkinson was a loyal Liberal.

"Look, Daniel, I'll work on the campaign, but my name will not be on the ballot. Is that clear?" she asked gently.

I was very much in a "take what you can get" frame of mind. I was also filled with affection and gratitude, and I told her so. A topic change was in order before she reconsidered.

"How long have you lived here?"

"About two years," she replied. "Ever since God's sense of humour simply made living on my own too difficult for me and too onerous for my daughter." I was puzzled and must have looked it because she carried on. "It's my lot in life to suffer with a disease whose name I share. I was diagnosed with Parkinson's ten years ago and became debilitated to the point that getting around my house wasn't possible any more. I suppose I should be thankful I wasn't christened Muriel Melanoma. Anyway, after a fall, a broken hip, a stint in Cumberland Memorial, and much debate with my saint of a daughter, here I am." I nodded in sympathy and thought of my own name and how JFK had suffered with Addison's disease.

"My daughter and I nearly came to blows over my move here," Muriel continued. "She really wanted me to live with her and her daughter, Lindsay. I love them both, but they have their own lives." Her words faded.

"I'm sure their offer was genuine and well-meaning," I suggested.

"I'm sure it was, too. That's why I insisted on coming here."

For the first time, I noticed the book in her lap – *Home Economics and Free Labour*, Marin Lee's groundbreaking treatise on the unrecognized economic contribution of women working in the home. Lee's book was the first solid analysis of how society in general, and the economy in particular, benefited from the services typically pro-

vided by housewives day in and day out, ostensibly for no income. It was a classic in feminist theory that had first opened my eyes to women's equality issues during my involvement in student politics at university. In fact, I'd heard Marin Lee speak once at a Canadian Federation of Students conference at Carleton where she taught. She'd even signed my copy of her book after her talk.

I pointed to the book. "A little light reading?" Muriel's face brightened as she turned the book so I could see it and stroked the cover the way book lovers do.

"Light? No. Liberating? Yes. The way she writes, the way she puts her arguments, the positions she advances – it all makes so much sense to me. She actually uses humour to make her point even more profound; so many before her simply used anger and rage – not that they weren't justified, mind you. You should really read it." She was surprised and, I think, pleased when I told her I already had. Policy wonks read stuff like Marin Lee.

So this was Muriel. Eighty-one years old. She'd put her neck on the line in five consecutive elections. She was battling Parkinson's while fending off my entreaties to run yet again. Undiminished intellectually, she lived in a seniors' home where only a handful of her fellow residents could match her mental acuity. And she read Marin Lee instead of playing bingo. I liked this tough old warhorse.

I swept the room with my hand. "Have you made friends here?"

"I was born and raised in this town and only lived in Ottawa while working on Mr. King's staff," Muriel explained. "I returned here in 1950 after I refused to take minutes for one of his bizarre seances. Anyway, the point is, I knew everybody in this place long before I ever signed up to live here. See that guy over there in green-plaid shorts and the orange-striped shirt?" she asked. I looked over at a group of men playing cards, all of whom seemed to buy their clothes from the bargain table at the golf pro shop.

"Which one? Half of them are wearing plaid shorts."

"The one on the left, leering in my direction. When I was 18, I used to date him. He had the same avant-garde fashion taste back

then, too, not to mention a penchant for wandering hands, which he has yet to outgrow.”

“Would you like me to have a word with him about his manners? I’m not about to sit idly by as the honour of a former Liberal candidate is challenged by a dirty old . . . fashion train wreck.”

She laughed. “Thank you, but I fear he could take you,” she chuckled. She was probably right.

I was suddenly hit by the smell of lunch wafting in from the kitchen; I felt queasy. “How’s the food?” I inquired with my nose in full wrinkle.

“The view of the river is lovely,” she said, closing down that subject.

Muriel brought us back to politics and the millstone that still hung around my neck, feeling heavier with each passing day. As we reviewed my exhaustive four-week odyssey, she seemed impressed by my methodical search. I had left no stones unturned in Cumberland. Every person she rhymed off, I’d already crossed off or pissed off. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, the plastic slipcover protesting.

“You know, before Mr. King lost himself in the occult,” Muriel said, “he used to say ‘if you’ve really done absolutely everything you can and you still come up short, fate will smile on good people.’ He called it King’s axiom. That’s what accounted for his serenity in the face of such daunting challenges. Are you a good person, Mr. Addison?”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I just dialed up the wattage of my smile and nodded.

“I’ll tell you something else,” she went on. “There is more to Eric Cameron than the world sees. I can feel it. He’s been under my microscope for the last 15 years, and I’m certain something’s amiss. Ever since that harlot Petra Borschart took over his staff, I’ve been waiting for the wheels to fall off.”

I filed this insight away for further analysis. I’d met Petra a few times on the Hill, and she reminded me of a rattlesnake – scary,

slimy, aggressive, loud, and poisonous. That's where the similarities ended, because rattlesnakes were also ugly.

We talked a bit more about how the campaign might unfold and what role she might play, assuming I found a candidate. When we appeared to have run our conversational course, I rose. I squeezed her hand and told her how much I enjoyed renewing our acquaintance. She squeezed back and told me to call on her any time now that we'd resolved any confusion over her potential candidacy. I turned to go.

"Daniel, I'm sorry about your recent breakup. That's never pleasant. And I regret your search so far has been fruitless. But do not despair. It sounds to me like you've done everything humanly possible to draft a sacrificial Liberal lamb. Lord knows, Mr. King was wrong about many things, but he was not wrong about fate honouring good people just when they're dangling at the end of their rope."

I smiled – the genuine article this time – placed my hands in prayer, and looked heavenward. I waved good-bye to the others in the room and noted return waves from all but the two residents in wheelchairs jousting to be first into the dining room. I headed for the main door, just in time, as the lunch bell rang, unleashing the midday rush. Like a running back with a very bad offensive line, I dodged and deked the stampeding residents while holding my breath against the encroaching aroma.

With Muriel's parting comments still fresh in my mind, I walked over to the bank, eyeing passers-by and half-expecting one of them to walk right up and tell me it was my lucky day. None did – although in the preceding weeks, I'd struck up quite a friendly rapport with one of the bank tellers and wondered whether she might be interested in becoming this riding's Liberal. I needed to certify 12 postdated rent cheques to convince my new landlord that I was, indeed, solvent. Apparently, a tenure-track position at the same university that employed him wasn't adequate assurance. The friendly bank teller handed me the certified cheques

with nary a whisper of a latent interest in federal politics – so much for Mackenzie King’s axiom. I picked up my car in the public lot where I’d parked it earlier that morning, twice, and headed back to my still-new digs.

I’d really lucked out on the apartment front. I’d always wanted to live on the water, and through some shrewd maneuvering, laced with luck, I’d landed the upper floor of a boathouse built mere metres from the Ottawa River – hence, the term *boathouse*. My landlord’s workshop occupied the first floor, and I occupied the spacious, one-bedroom apartment on the second floor. The apartment was nice enough to call a suite, but saying “suite” and “boathouse” in the same sentence just didn’t ring true. My living room, with hardwood floors and a wall of built-in bookshelves, was much nicer than the downtown bachelor apartment I’d left back in Ottawa and only cost two-thirds the rent.

In my mind, nothing furnishes a room like books, and I had plenty. A raft of non-fiction – Canadian, American, and European politics and history – betrayed my ideological predisposition. An extensive collection of comedic novels – mostly Canadian, American, and British – rounded out my inventory. A chocolate brown leather couch and two matching armchairs guarded the perimeter of a small, family hand-me-down Persian rug. An old wooden desk bought at an Arnprior auction filled the far corner of the living room and supported a desk lamp, a green blotter, and my Fujitsu Lifebook laptop computer. A picture window offered an unobstructed northern view across the Ottawa River. Very soothing. The Parliament buildings were about an hour’s boat ride upstream – just far enough for me. Out of sight, out of mind.

The galley kitchen was large enough and well equipped to meet my modest needs. At this stage in my budding culinary career, I had mastered the kettle and was well on my way to conquering the toaster. For me, making dinner usually meant making a phone call. I could already make Kraft Dinner and spaghetti carbonara and was poised to add beef stroganoff to my burgeoning reper-

toire thanks to the August *Reader's Digest* I'd nicked from my dentist's office.

The refrigerator was one of those side-by-side units, which initially left me flummoxed. When you've spent the first 32 years of your life with the freezer on top and the fridge on the bottom, switching all of a sudden to the left/right configuration required some acclimation.

The bedroom was a good size with a view up the hill to my landlord's house. My queen-sized bed took up most of the space along with a bedside table, a small dresser, and a chair that held as much of my wardrobe as the closet in the corner. Finally, the bathroom had all the traditional apparatus save for a bathtub. I preferred to shower, anyway, so the glass-doored stall suited me just fine. My lonely toothbrush stood on the shelf over the sink. I'd retired the Rachel-toothbrush in several pieces before vacating Ottawa.

Two ceiling fans, one each in the living room and bedroom, kept the summer air circulating while the Ottawa River moderated the occasional heat wave. No need for air conditioning. When the temperature dipped, a small gas furnace stationed on the ground floor of the boathouse delivered warmed air to my apartment above via a generous network of ducts and vents.

I loved that apartment. Nothing before or since has lulled me to sleep like the tranquil rhythm of the flowing river an arm's length away. On the flip side, the lapping water completely bamboozled my bladder. The bathroom beckoned every two hours. Yep, I loved that apartment and was lucky to have landed it. I'd learned from an initial phone call to the off-campus-housing office that I had some competition, so I'd resorted to the kind of tactics that drove me from Parliament Hill just to ensure I'd be the chosen tenant. I wasn't proud of my subterfuge, but I really wanted that boathouse.

My first step was to Google my prospective landlord. In a matter of minutes, I had learned that Angus McLintock was a widowed, 60-year-old mechanical-engineering professor. He'd written esoteric papers on affordable third-world water-filtration

systems as well as a number of articles on innovative propulsion systems for small, recreational air-cushion vehicles, more commonly known as hovercraft. Interestingly, he had contributed a number of book reviews (mostly, on works of fiction) to the university newspaper and had even appeared once on a book panel on the local cable station. McLintock was no typical engineer. I also dug up a letter to the editor in the *Ottawa Citizen* wherein McLintock decried the decline of proper English usage in the newspaper and cited several recent heinous affronts to the language. Finally, on an obscure Ottawa-area chess-club Web site, I found a reference to his stellar play in an open tournament three years earlier. Beyond a passion for war on the battlefield of 64 squares, I could find nothing else about his personal life. He was an engineering, book-loving, chess-playing grammarian – a rare bird, indeed.

Twenty minutes later, I'd elevated my knowledge of hovercraft from nothing to next to nothing, which I hoped was enough. I needed no remedial grammar work as I, too, was, and remain, a stickler for proper usage, courtesy of my father. Some people contend that the English language is a living, breathing organism wherein the definitions of words and rules should change to reflect their mass misuse. I contend that English is already an extraordinarily difficult language to teach. Monkeying with English to legitimize common errors would not make the language easier to learn and love. English should not stoop to embrace the lowest common denominator. Rather, society should step up and grant the language the respect and reverence it deserves.

Finally, I played several games of chess online to reacquaint myself with the ancient board game. I'd played a lot of chess in my youth. In fact, I was quite obsessed for several years. Chess can do that to you. In any event, I discovered to my satisfaction that I could still play without embarrassing myself. I felt ready for my interview with Angus McLintock, landlord in waiting. I love Google.

I showed up in his office on campus with the most recent issue of *Chess Life* magazine rolled up in my back pocket, the title con-

veniently facing out for the world to see. As I had planned, he didn't notice it until I was leaving the interview, and by that time, I figured I had it in the bag anyway.

Angus McLintock looked like the quintessential engineering professor – an archetype. A Scottish émigré, he was of middling height but solid build. His longish, wavy, grey hair was not burdened with a part, a style, or even the slightest trace of organization. His hair looked as though he'd gone to the Ontario Science Centre, put his hand on the Van de Graaff generator's shiny silver ball, shaken his head, and accepted the result as permanent. In succinct terms, his hair looked Einsteinian. Combined with his unruly grey beard, McLintock looked like a stunt double for Grizzly Adams. Something about him, however – perhaps his clear, blue eyes – suggested deeper waters.

Angus McLintock was articulate, if a little gruff, and clearly took delight in the English language as his letter to the editor foreshadowed. Even though he'd been at U of O for the last 25 years, his Scottish brogue decisively won its daily battle with the dull, flat Canadian tongue.

In the interview, I talked about my faculty appointment in the English department. I mentioned that I was a nonsmoker and that I spent most evenings in the company of my beloved books. I noted, only in passing, that reading the newspaper daily had become a habit while on Parliament Hill though I lamented the sad decline in writing standards. With a deft push of his button, he was off. Fifteen minutes later, we were kindred spirits, united in the preservation of the English language. When he mentioned his interest in hovercraft and told me he was actually building one on the ground floor of the boathouse, I casually offered, "Ah, Christopher Cockerell's contribution to the world." Home run.

Professor McLintock called back that night to give me the good news and let slip that he'd cancelled two interviews scheduled for the next day. Grand slam. I moved out of the Cumberland Motor Inn the next day.

Upon arrival at the boathouse, I carefully placed my newly purchased, wooden chess set on the coffee table. Anyone who carries *Chess Life* magazine around in his back pocket must have a board set up and ready to go. The classic Staunton-style pieces stood ready to advance. The set brought a welcome, old-world charm to the room. I was careful to orient the board appropriately, with a white square in the bottom, right-hand corner. I'd seen too many movies, TV commercials, and magazine ads, featuring chess players deep in thought over boards set up incorrectly. Politics teaches you to sweat the small stuff.

I was still thinking about Muriel Parkinson. I looked forward to spending more time with her. She had seen it all during a period of unprecedented Liberal dominance and unparalleled change in Canada and the world. In the Liberal Party, and in society in general, we have a nasty tendency to cast older people aside and then to repeat their mistakes as if we're exploring uncharted waters. I made a pledge that night to plumb the depths of Muriel's knowledge as a way of inflicting historical perspective. While Parkinson's disease may have slowed her down physically, her intelligence, wit, and reasoning seemed undimmed. She also had a heart to balance her brain – my kind of Liberal. Unfortunately, she was not my candidate, but she was my kind of Liberal.

I put the twelve postdated rent cheques into an envelope and ambled up the slope to the McLintock house about 30 metres away. As I raised my hand to knock, I heard from behind the door a pseudohuman cry of anguish that seemed to cross an air-raid siren with a water buffalo in labour. My inner voice suggested a hasty retreat, but curiosity mugged my better judgment, and I rapped on the door. I heard Angus McLintock's footfalls charging from within, and far too soon for me, the door opened with considerable violence. Note to self: Next time, listen to inner voice, idiot.