

Vignette: 1988

*Scene 1: The Hall*

*I wanted to change the world: who at 17 doesn't? I had seen them, the Blue Berets, as they endeavoured to be a thin line between people who wanted to hurt, maim, and kill each other. In places like Cyprus and Beirut, Canadians asked their military to be peacekeepers. We seemed to be choosing, as a nation, not to make war, but to nurture and encourage civil discourse in the midst of conflict.*

*I admit I may have romanticised the national narrative of being a peacekeeping nation, which had been nurtured since the tenure of Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, who advocated that "[t]he best defence of peace is not power, but the removal of the causes of war, and international agreements which will put peace on a stronger foundation, than the terror of destruction" (Pearson).*

*Pearson's clarity of thought only emboldened my idealism that set me longing for truth-seeking and story-telling. At that point on life's journey, I imagined being a truth-bearer, a person who reported on the realities of war and highlighted and celebrated the choices of peacekeeping, as opposed to war-making.*

*I also realised that to do that both effectively and practically would require me to understand and appreciate the realities of a military life. To be a good reporter, I imagined, I had to be able to understand subject and context. Since I wanted to share the story of these peacekeepers, it seemed to follow, logically at the time, that I should enlist. So, at the age of 17, I joined the Canadian Armed Reserves, to take my first step towards my imagined career as a war correspondent.*

***A drill hall is a funny place:*** *Even in those silent moments, which are not many, you can hear the persistent echoes of those whom you have followed. The cadence of feet falling in unison, of a regimental sergeant major calling the platoon to halt, and then that sliding foot, one step, then a resounding stomp! In the finality of that unity, the lingering sound of the bagpipes keeps the silence at bay.*

***A drill hall is a funny place:*** *You can smell history blending with perspiration, jubilation, and fear. In this place, pride born in nationalism can be sensed. An idea that for Queen and country something noble persists within the walls, keeping at bay the horrors that have followed as feet have marched to war.*

***A drill hall is a funny place:*** *You can imagine echoes of marching, right-wheel turning men and women as they attempt to find their rhythm as a unit. In these*

moments, when the veil between now and then is briefly lifted, the ideal of a shared identity in arms is seductively invitational.

As one body, whether platoon or an entire regiment, arms and legs move in unison as every head turns on synchronised cue followed by a sharp salute to dignitaries and officers. In the Presentation of Colours, men and women, dressed in spat and tartan, bearing St. Andrew's emblems, reflect well-earned pride.

**A drill hall is a funny place:** During the beginning of a Flag Raising, as the thirty-eight Battalion Colours unfurl, one is touched by a connexion to a history marching back in time, a time before even the idea that would be the Canadian confederation was imagined and then formalized. In that marching formation, dressed in the green, blue, and black tartan accompanied by lighter lines of red and yellow, trepidation and pride parade every July 1<sup>st</sup> to Ottawa's Confederation Square.

**A drill hall is a funny place:** Tasting a wee dram, before the haggis is served, is an initiation and a milestone. It marks, in the cold January evening, a journey from child to adult, boy to man, girl to woman. As the haggis is piped, the address follows. On this night, which honours and celebrates the Bard of Ayrshire, flavours blend. Tastes and textures, which the uninitiated might never imagine should be paired, open a door to camaraderie well-earned and now festively embraced.

## *Scene 2: The Other Hall*

A drill hall is like the display windows of the stores that lined Rideau Street in the nation's capital of Ottawa. Windows are dressed up in a way to grab your attention, to entice you to walk in. All the baubles and "pretties," latest fashions and coolest gadgets, are presented in a way that intends to enamour. Whether the practiced march, attention to physical competition and training, or the art of arms, a drill hall puts on display the external, even romanticised, realities of a martial life.

Yet the drill hall never reflects that which lies just beneath: the assumptions and stereotypes that mould young men and women. Such moulding reinforces a shared purpose and identity. This moulding, some might call deconstruction and then reconstruction of self, is intended to prepare you for that future battlefield where your life will depend on those with whom you have practiced and trained. Assumptions form the binaries of what a good soldier looks like, and when you do not fit, the corrective is stark and eerily efficient.

*I have never liked locker rooms. Whether in high schools or public gyms, they have always seemed to be the places where secrets thrive and where the reality of paternalism and patriarchy is evident. On a base, in a nondescript Canadian town, one hallway leads into such a place. Cold concrete walls exude chlorine cleansings that do little to detract from the musk of the untold men who have entered the rooms where lockers, showers, and washroom stalls silently watch the mundane events and horrific acts, which often never get told, though some are never forgotten. I remember, in my imagining recollection, turning the corner to that artery that ends at double doors. Portals swing outward to reveal the places in which rest and respite ordinarily abide. Yet these gateways also lead into moments and times when violence – implicit or explicit – stalks. I heard their harsh, even excited, whispered voices, before I saw them. For some of them, their voices still broke as a reminder that not long ago some of those whispers might have been soprano and not yet tenor or bass.*

- *Before they saw me, I saw them as the outward turning doors closed behind them as they entered the hallway.*
- *Before they saw me, I noted their towels hanging like cudgels.*
- *Before they saw me, I knew that these weaponised linens, hastily rinsed and still blood tainted, spoke not to the ordinary on the other side of those doors.*
- *Before they saw me, before they hurriedly tried to shove their improvised weapons into just opened bags, which awaited their towelled cargo, I knew the idealism that had brought me to this place was about to be shattered.*

*There's a moment in the Canadian psyche of storied tales on long, winding trails, in which the hiker turns the corner only to be confronted by a bear. An animal, regardless whether black or brown, that hears you, smells you, knows you. In this collective tale, you hope it is not a mama bear with cubs too cute in pictures and significantly less so up close and personal, as the maternal instinct often makes this story even more frightening.*

*In the nature encounter, reconnects with a primordial self, long buried beneath consumerism and mechanisation, and the sacred act of prayer is invoked soundlessly.*

*Sometimes, the bear turns and walks away. Sometimes, you turn and run. Other times, you drop, play dead as you may or may not become a playmate or snack. Occasionally, pepper spray and an air horn prove to be wisely counselled companions. And, in other stories, it charges me with an intent to silence with violence implied . . .*

- *After they saw me, I found myself pinned to the wall as one cudgel soap-bearing towel became a teaching moment.*
- *After they saw me, as prey stank and predator perspired, forgetting was encouraged . . . demanded.*
- *After they saw me, the warning was issued. In its pronouncement, it is acknowledged in hallways that are never empty except in stories mythologised, I find myself alone. The bear had gone, my breathing was heavy, and I paused considering whether or not to go through doors, which beckoned like a loose tooth.*

### *Scene 3: The Soap Party's Finale*

*Let's imagine, for a moment, regardless of the degree to which truth is important when we share our own ongoing, mythologised stories, we are always the central protagonists and heroes. Let's imagine, in this unfolding mythology that I walk through those double doors, and as they swing shut, it seems like they slam resolutely as I stand in that locker room.*

*It's evening, yet without natural light, the fluorescent lighting flickers just enough to heighten the scene towards which I am walking. In the lit room, usually filled with jest and jeering, posturing and play, there is a stillness that reminds me of the ghosts we become. In that silence, there is no solace, only the inevitability of a story that will remain a constant teacher.*

*Lockers stand towering in multiple rows, and behind them, the restrooms and rise. I am willing myself not to hear that low, whimpering cry. I am hoping beyond hope that the adrenaline that is coursing through me, making everything sharper and causing the moment to slow, would hinder my desire to smell bloodied iron as it mingles with bleach and soap. I do not want to hear a shower running in the distance, knowing that the water is likely mixing with ochre flowing toward a drain that will never reveal what it devours.*

*The silent locker sentinels do not seem supportive or protective as I proceed upon this quest, imagined or not. Like the drain, they are mute about what they witness, what stories they see. While their slamming doors shout above the din when this room is occupied, now they are silent, even stoic, in their impassive grey mantle. Their mouths locked closed and yet you know that their interiors tell a different story. Pictures of loved ones, of families, friends, and lovers, their content tells the tale the current resident wants to see each time the mouth opens with a creaking metal greeting.*

*Standing on the threshold that changes from the forest of lockers to the stables of washrooms and further afield, the pasture of showers, I now hear that low, whimpering cry accompanied by moaning. The sound of running water continues unabated. I look back through the canopied path*

*from which I have come. I expect to see the doors flung wide and open. In that expectation, I would not be surprised to see the bear return . . . intent to deny any discovery of any fell deed perpetrated in the pasture beyond.*

*But nothing happens . . . time passes slowly, set aside for revelation . . . for witnessing. It's a moment of paradox, in which one is not wanting and wanting to dance, when fear and fortitude sway with one another, moving toward inevitability, when time returns in a sudden and dramatic moment that will never be remembered.*

*I walk through the stables, remembering the realities of embodied beings relieving themselves. The hard, cold floor is now perspiring. Though this vast and varied terrain of forest, stable, and pasture lies empty, it is clear that showers have long been running, and their humid presence is evident on walls and floors.*

*I finally leave the stables and now before me lies an open plain of showers, in which multiple heads are spewing a deluge of hot water. As the fluorescent lights previously flickered and augmented the atmosphere with clarity, in this space, the light seems focused; like a spotlight, it leads my eye to the centre of the plain, toward the drain. There I see a person, fetally bound, with knees tightly hugged, bare as a wee babe, and weakly whimpering as a result of the outcome of the soap party.*

*I fumble to offer some aid, a towel grabbed is presented: a kind of cowl to hide the rising welts though the broken teeth and battered nose will require much more care than I am able to offer. Touch is all I have. I have no words, no solutions, not even an understanding as to why this violent violation occurred. So, rocking this man is all I can do.*

*Eventually we stand, towel wrapped, preparing to return to barracks. No one, not the drain, gushing showers, stalwart lockers, or haunted stalls will tell this tale. In fact, we will never discuss this, after our procession out.*

*Secrets that normalise keep us bound to the stories we are told and the ones that have formed and fastened us. My companion will not remain for the rest of the training, and by the next season, we will both have left that Scottish military fraternity. Our paths would never again cross, except in my own evolving story, in which names are forgotten, details rewoven, and secrets named.*

*But before that moment faded, when the doors to the ordinary opened outward, leading us away from the trees, stable houses, and open plain, we exchanged what words defy. Regardless of truth, the soap party was held because someone, somewhere, some when had named him as gay. In that naming, labelling, the inevitable stereotypes limited, defined, and set in motion the body's response to that which is deemed aberrant and dangerous, infectious and alien.*

*I wish there was a resolution or epiphany, other than realising that idealism suffers greatly in the reality of violence that is symptomatic, regardless of the individual actors. I wish there was some*

*sort of awakening that happened, that maybe we hugged, maybe a long-term friendship was established, and something good came from that moment. Alas, we left that finale, as double doors definitively declared closure, broken . . .*

#### *Scene 4: Awakening*

*When our dreams are tarnished, harmed, or irreconcilably damaged, there is a sense of loss, of unmooring. That which was once familiar becomes distant, foreign, and alien. Where once certainty and confidence were touchstones, distrust and cynicism become new companions.*

*I still remember the powerful sense of longing for direction and clarity I felt after leaving the Armed Reserves. I am not sure I would have articulated it in this manner at that time, but I physically remember that nauseous sense of emptiness as each day unfolded. I was not yet at the point of pursuing my academic studies, and I began to seek solace in various expressions of faith. I experimented and explored. From the intimacy of the Wiccan coven, to the Buddhist temple, synagogue, and mosque, I attempted to answer questions, which I had not yet asked. In each of these sacred places, there were inklings of home, of arrival, yet they did not feel right. A word I might use now to express then what was simply a feeling might be appropriation: a sense of taking something that wasn't mine, but claiming it nonetheless.*

*I longed for something, yet I knew/know that to embrace any of these valuable expressions of Mystery was simply to perpetuate a cannibalising consumerism. It is easy to put something on that feeds and meets a certain hunger, if but momentarily, and to discard it when it no longer fits or perpetuates that which we want, as opposed to need.*

*In this time of wandering, though perhaps a better metaphor would be slumbering, I avoided the Christian tradition. I was, perhaps still am, reflective of a generation that perceives the Christian journey as firmly entrenched in institutional judgement and hypocrisy. A human institution that doesn't walk its talk. A collection of denominations and ecclesiastical organisations that perpetuate a form of oppression that does not liberate or bid people shine. And, perhaps obviously, as this imagined story spans a circle of seventeen years, my personal experience as a young boy only reinforced this sense of dis-ease.*

*As I have come to recognise, it seems to be the wont of the Universe that often that which we avoid with intention is the place to which we are ultimately called, where we end up finding that for which we have been seeking. This paradox, if you will, began to unfold in the summer of 1988. During my slumbering wandering, the headlines in Canada began to look a little something like this:*

*“United Church allows Gay Ministers”*

*“Canadians barely united on homosexual issue”*

*“Report Opens Doors to Gays”*

*“Homosexuals Could Win but Church Could Lose”*

*“Stand on Gays Will Destroy Church”  
“United Church Showdown Looms”*

*This was unexpectedly jarring for two reasons. First, and perhaps obviously, since my experience of the soap party and my wrestling as to whether the military was a place where my dreams could find nurture, I was only partially aware of the reality of homophobia. Though I admit I could not intellectually understand such discrimination, nor the subsequent violence that accompanies it, I remained aware that it was somehow wrong and connected to deeper eddies of injustice, which I suspected, but could not yet articulate.*

*The second is that I recall a sense of awakening. Perhaps, even more succinctly, a knitting together of parts of me that felt unbound, which had been previously torn asunder. A wrenching that I can now trace back to that day in which I stood before two Emissaries of the Christian tradition who passed judgement upon me as a young boy: “The bastard.” A mending that began to answer the quintessential question that animated me for decades and which now finds itself central to this undertaking about which I have been endeavouring:*

*Is love enough?*