

# THE GIRL IN THE DRUG STORE

*Norman Levine*

I MUST HAVE BEEN about ten or eleven when my parents arranged for my sister and me to spend the summer holidays at Markovitch's farm on the outskirts of Ottawa. I was a city kid — but that summer I was taught how to pitch horseshoes, drink water out of a tin ladle, gather corn, ride a horse, throw a lasso, listen to cowboy songs on the wooden verandah from the gramophone inside. There were five other Ottawa kids on the farm for the summer. One of them was a girl called Mona. I liked her. And I decided to write a play for her. We put it on in one of the barns and charged the adults a button by way of admission.

Then later in High School (I went to the High School of Commerce) they had a magazine called *The Argosy*. It carried short stories. I wrote a short story for it, about a hangman who has to hang his own son. I called it "A piece of string." When I showed the story to Mr. Benoit, our English teacher who was also my basketball coach, he said:

"You can't use that title. Maupassant has a story called that."

I didn't know who Maupassant was. For we had no books in the house. My main home reading was the funnies. My uncle, who lived on the Driveway, used to get American newspapers and he would save me the funnies. Once, a second-hand book did get in the house. It was a novel. All about Vienna. I read the first chapter — about the hero wandering through the streets of Vienna with his coat-collar turned up. And that was enough to make me do imitation after imitation in exercise books.

As soon as I could leave High School legally I did and went to work for the government in the Department of National Defence. One of my jobs was to operate the duplicating machine, running off specifications. Some evenings I

would come back and do stencils of something I had written — short sketches, mostly descriptions — like going out fishing very early in the morning near Ottawa in a boat on a river with the mist close to the ground. I would then give these mimeographed pieces to my friends.

In 1942, when I was 18, I joined the air force and eventually ended up on Lancasters with 429 Squadron in Yorkshire. When the war in Europe was over, and while waiting to go back to Canada, I went to Trinity College, Cambridge on a special leave course. There a lecturer gave me a thin wartime production of Pound's *Selected Poems*. It was the first modern verse I had read.

Four months after returning to Canada I went to McGill. And it was at McGill that I started to catch up, and how, for my lack of good reading. Perhaps it was because I read too many classics too quickly. Or perhaps I read these books knowing I had to pass exams on them. Whatever the reason — I have only the haziest notion of those books today, unless I have re-read them since leaving McGill. The only book, from all the reading lists, that has left a definite memory is *The Sound and the Fury*. And the reason is not entirely because of the book.

I began to read it one evening in the basement room, on the corner of Guy and Sherbrooke, that I rented from the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral; he lived with his family above. I read it right through at one sitting. And when I finished it was early in the morning and I was far too excited to go to sleep. So I put on my black winter coat and went out. It was very cold. Hard-packed snow on the ground, icicles from the roofs. The only place open at this time was the drugstore on St. Catherine near Guy. I walked down the few blocks. And went in. The place was empty except for a woman sitting on a stool by the counter having a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. She was in her twenties. She had on a fur coat that was undone. She had her legs crossed. She wore galoshes. We both looked at each other. Then she crossed herself. I turned and walked out.

After twenty-two years *The Sound and the Fury* has become vague and hazy. But that girl in the drugstore crossing herself has remained vivid and there are times when she haunts me still. Later, I was to find out in writing that this is the way things emerge.

At McGill I had some flying war-poems, full of bad alliteration, published in the McGill Daily. And for a year I edited *Forge*, the university's literary magazine. I also took Professor Files' course in writing. This meant going to see Professor Files once a fortnight with something new I had written. In this way I started to write what I called a novel, which turned out to be *The Angled Road*. Every second Saturday morning I would go into his office and show him a chapter or

part of a chapter. Often I wrote it the night before. And he would go over it, sometimes correcting the grammar of a sentence. Sometimes suggesting parts to leave out.

I am unable to read *The Angled Road* today. But at that time Files' encouragement was vital. He helped to build up confidence on the shakiest of foundations.

My wartime stay in England was very unliterary. But when I returned in 1949 with the manuscript of *The Angled Road* in my Gladstone bag and a chapbook of juvenile poems that Ryerson had brought out, and a promise from McClelland to look after my books in Canada if I could get them published in England — I thought of myself as a writer and headed for literary London.

I had no letters of introduction nor did I know anyone. But it wasn't the kind of time when you needed these things. A lot of people had come to London from different parts of Britain and the Commonwealth. Writers and painters congregated in certain pubs. And there was still a hangover of the war in the loosened class barriers, the romanticism, the idealism. Wanting to be a painter or a writer was equated with wanting the good life. The rationing, the bomb-damage, the general seediness, also helped. And because of the wartime boom in reading it was still, comparatively speaking, easy to find a publisher for one's work. Literary standards were, on the whole, not high. What I didn't know, at the time, was that I had come in on the end of something that was in the process of breaking up.

I spent the summers down in Cornwall. And while St. Ives, then, was an outpost of what was going on in London, especially in the painting — the physical impact of Cornwall was another thing.

I had come straight from city life. And to be exposed, unexpectedly, to so much varied nature gave me an exhilarating sense of personal freedom. I spent most of the time outside just walking and looking. For much of what I was seeing I was totally ignorant. The names of the birds (apart from plain gull and sparrow) I didn't know. I didn't know the names of the flowers or what was gorse or bracken or heather or blackberries or these stunted English trees. The fish I saw up for auction every morning at the slipway with their fat human lips and small eyes were anonymous. A hard and new physical world seemed to have suddenly opened before me, and in such splendid colour. I'd get up before six in the morning and go out. And late at night I'd be sitting by the window, just so I wouldn't miss anything.

Then it was seeing the painters go among the beached boats with a sketch pad and do sketches that probably made me go out with a pencil and notebook and try to describe what I saw. I would spend a whole morning on a beach trying to

describe the way a wave broke, how the far-shore fields changed colour with the passing clouds. Then in the harbour: there were the boats, the gulls on the sand bar facing the wind, the sand eels swimming by the harbour wall, the way the sunlight fractured like fishing nets on the sandy bottom.

The physical presence of Cornwall and these exercises stopped me from writing the self-indulgent prose-poetry in the prose. And cut out all those inflated rhetorical bits in the verse. The writing became much more simple and direct.

But I still had to come to terms with something else.

At McGill I was running away from being a Jew. It sounds silly now. But at the time it was mixed up with coming from Murray Street, Ottawa, with the peddlers' horses and sleighs, and going around with boys and girls from rich parents. I made-up so many identities. It all depended on who I was with. This helped to give my life there a certain dangerous edge. But it was to prove near fatal to the writing. For at that time I was writing *The Angled Road*. And in it I cut out the fact that my characters were Jewish. And by doing this, a whole dimension is missing; I made them smaller than they should have been.

Then, when I came over to England I was running away from Canada. All my early stories, which were to do with Canadian life, I set in England. The result was the same sense of paleness and unreality. And I find that none of that early writing means anything now to me.

A couple more years had to go by before I was able to recognize my material and use it without trying to make it more acceptable. And the first book to come out after that was *Canada Made Me*. My writing begins with that book.

It seems a complicated and long way to have to go in order to come to terms with one's material. But then some people take longer than others to grow up. And perhaps it also took longer because I had to recognize that one of the conditions of my being a writer is of living in exile. I felt it in Canada, as the son of orthodox Jewish parents in Ottawa; then as the poor boy among the rich at McGill. And now I feel it as a Canadian living in England. It's not the way I would have planned it. And I still have fantasies of some day living in a community where I will take an active part in its everyday affairs.