

Becker, the first time you see him, is at the mainland terminus waving your car down the ramp onto the government ferry and singing to your headlights and to the salt air and to the long line of traffic behind you that he'd rather be a sparrow than a snail. Yes he would if he could, he loudly sings, he surely would. In his orange life-jacket and fluorescent gloves, he waves his arms to direct traffic down that ramp the way someone else might conduct a great important orchestra — a round little man with a sloppy wool cap riding his head and a huge bushy beard hiding all of his face except the long turned-down weather-reddened nose. He'd rather be a forest, he sings, than a street.

Follow him home.

Ride the ferry with him on its two-hour trip across the Strait of Georgia, while the long backbone ridge of the island's mountains sharpens into blue and ragged shades of green, and the coastline shadows shape themselves into rocky cliffs and driftwood-cluttered bays; then follow him up the ramp, the end of his shift, as he sets out through the waiting lines of traffic and gusts of rushing passengers on foot. No longer the serenading conductor, he is a short stump of a man walking the full length of the waterfront parking lot and then up the long slow hill towards the town, his black overcoat hanging down past the top of his rubber boots suggesting the shape of a squat crockery jug. He stops to explore the rain water running through the limp grass in the ditch, and to talk for a while with someone leaning over a front-porch ledge, and to buy a pocketful of candy in a corner store. But eventually he gets into his old fenderless green Hillman

parked in one corner of the shopping-centre lot, and drives down the long slope to the beach again, and along past the bay, and north beyond town altogether on a road that twists around rock bluffs and dips through farm valleys and humps through second-growth timber until he turns off suddenly and rattles downhill on a gravel lane to his log cabin where it stands with others near the water's edge.

And now, Strabo Becker poised on his front step looks back down the strait where the ferry he has just left is nosing its way out again into the open water beyond stony islands and buoys and floating debris. Away, he sings, I'd rather sail a-wa-a-ay. His only song, it is half mumbled this time, or chewed; he's no golden-voiced crooner. He is only a man, he says, and that's more than enough for anyone to be.

And yet this man, this bushy raccoon of a man, with his long narrow red-rimmed eyes calmly filming the world, and his large bent-forward ears silently recording all that the world might say, this man has pretensions. He has chosen to nest on a certain piece of this world and to make a few years of its history his own. The debris of that history is around him and he will reel it all in, he will store it in his head, he will control it; there will be no need, eventually, for anything else to exist; all of it will be inside, all of it will belong only to him. Becker wants to be God.

Inside the moss-roofed cabin, amongst his god-hoardings, he is inclined to strut for you, to pull it all out where it can be touched, and seen. He hauls scrapbooks and shoeboxes of newspaper clippings and cardboard boxes of old photographs out from under the little cot and from behind the bedroom door and down from the dusty boards that lie across the ceiling beams. He pulls crates of cassette tapes out of the closet. He takes dozens of notebooks down from the shelf over the fireplace. He gathers all of it, collects it around him, he lays it out on the table, on the chairs, on the floor around his feet. Touching, brooding, gloating, he thinks that what he has here is at least the equal of all that exists outside his walls.

Sometimes this god-man almost believes that he owns this island, that he has perhaps invented it. He expects that he should be able to conjure it up for you out of the thick air above his kitchen table: twelve thousand square miles of rugged stone mountains and timber stands and logged-off slopes and deep green valleys, sprinkled with fishing villages around rot-

ting wharves, with logging camps of tarpaper huts on skids, with towns and resorts and hobby farms, with snag-spiked lakes and long crooked green rivers. In words, if you let him, he will decorate the tree-furry coastline with used-car lots, rotting hay barns, smoke-blooming pulp mills, weedy estuaries, log-booming grounds, and brand new subdivisions, with old beached freighters painted up for restaurants and rusted wartime destroyers sunk for breakwaters, with mountains of gleaming white shells growing right up out of bays and topped with tiny shacks selling oysters. He will even take the credit, now, for the single grey highway that stretches from the bottom tip two-thirds of the way up the eastern coast, and for leaving all the rest to be found by narrow snaking roads designed for logging trucks. And he will act as if he himself had set all this down in the ocean, amidst foamy rocks and other smaller islands where sea lions sunbathe and cormorants nest and stunted trees are bent horizontal from the steady force of the Pacific wind.

It is not necessary, of course, for him to invent the centre of his stage, which is all around outside the little cabin: a wide shaggy swell of land that thrusts out from the eastern shore and curves tightly south around a shallow bay, announced far up the slope at the open gate by a thick and handsome signboard painted green: *Revelations Trailer Park*. The long shiny trailers, which are owned by American tourists who spend their time out on the strait catching salmon to take home with them, are tucked away out of sight behind a strip of fir and hemlock and thick salal. Between him and the pale sea, directly across the little stone wellhead which is the exact centre of this circle of buildings, is the House of Revelations itself, that tall old brown house out on the promontory in a confusion of pink arbutus trees. Its high gables are as sharp and varied and apparently unplanned as the mainland mountains beyond: its verandahs sag under the weight of honeysuckle and morning glory which have over the years become intertwined and thick with possessiveness. A door opens, closes; a window shivers; a voice somewhere inside calls crookedly, a question.

But don't ask Becker to answer questions. He is a shy man, who knows only this much: that the tale which exists somewhere at the centre of his gathered hoard, in the confusion of tales and lies and protests and legends and exaggerations, has a certain agreed-upon beginning:

Donal Keneally's mother started it all, a hundred and fifteen years ago and thousands of miles away. When she was told in a dream that her child would be fathered by a black bull from the sky, she fell off the side of her bed in alarm and knocked all memory right out of her skull. Countrymen, frightened by the wild look in her eyes as she wandered from village to village, waved her on, kept her moving, and mumbled prayers to their Blessed Virgin until she was out of sight. "Bad luck to her so," they said, for all their piety, and spat on the ground. "Isn't it trouble enough we have in this world, without inviting tragedy in to sit at the fire?"

Indeed they were probably right, says Becker among his boxes and books, but consider the difference it would have made to us here if one of those Connemara farmers had taken her in.

Becker the caretaker-god sits deep into night, every night, in his nest of deliberate clutter. He touches, he listens, he reads, he worries. He will absorb all this chaos, he will confront it and absorb it, and eventually he will begin to tell, and by telling release it, make it finally his own. Becker, on this day that you've met him, is singing, though broodingly, that he'd rather be a sparrow than a snail.

Maggie

ONE

On the day of the Loggers' Sports, on that day in July, a mighty uproar broke out in the beer parlour of the Coal-Tyee Hotel, which is an old but respectable five-storey building directly above the harbour and only a block or two from the main shopping area of town. To the people out on the sidewalk, to Maggie Kyle stopping to mail a letter at the corner post office and to others coming out of the stone courthouse at the top of the grassy slope across the street, the fight seemed no different at first from what they might have overheard outside any one of the town's twenty-seven beer parlours on a Saturday morning like this, just the loud clash of voice attacking voice, bass and treble. But a fight is still a fight wherever it is found, and not to be lightly dismissed: like Maggie they all discovered reasons to hang around for a while, talking to strangers or reading a newspaper or watching pigeons, to see what would happen next.

What happened next was this: the door banged open and a woman black as a Zulu in a pair of lumpy jeans and a flowered blouse rushed out onto the sidewalk yowling insults over her shoulder. That son of a bitch behind her was worse than a savage animal, she said, and oh how she'd like to cut his throat. She stopped and swung a terrible scowl around at her startled audience and loudly offered to do the same for any one of them who got close enough to reach. They were all the same to her, she said, she was a stranger in this dump. Bronze hair fell for a moment across a furious

eye, then was flicked back by a ring-cluttered hand. This was no one Maggie Kyle had ever seen before.

Though the same could not be said of her friend, who stepped out of the hotel and ducked neatly to miss the beer glass the Zulu hurled. This was Danny Holland, down again from a bunkhouse camp deep in the north-island woods to take part in the annual Loggers' Sports: three times axe-throwing champion of the island, twice of the whole Pacific Coast. A celebrity. He was dressed for work or play, it made no difference: a pair of low-crotched blue jeans hacked off above his boots and held up by wide elastic braces, a white T-shirt stretched over his thickened middle, and a shiny new aluminum hat sitting level on his head catching sunlight like a warrior's shield. He roared, "Blast you woman for your donkey nature!" and whipped off the hat to scratch around in his hair.

Then, quickly, the Zulu was down inside the green sedan at the curb. "I love you, you stupid jerk," she threw at him, then drove off, snarling something inaudible at the street gawkers, and disappeared around the bend behind the town's one and only highrise apartment building. "Me too!" he shouted after her, and leaping into his pickup truck, made a tire-squealing U-turn and drove off down the slope in the opposite direction, past the post office and the customs house and the boat basin. The spectators breathed again, sighed; you could always count on a good show when the up-island people were in town. Straight out of the bush, they didn't know any better, half of them were crazy.

The safest thing perhaps, thought Maggie Kyle, was just to ignore them.

But ignoring them would not be possible for long. From around the curve beneath the highrise the Zulu's sedan soon reappeared. And from somewhere down beyond the customs house Danny Holland's pickup returned, roaring and bouncing up the slope. They rushed towards each other from either end of the street. In front of the coffee-shop windows of the Coal-Tyee Hotel their brakes squealed, both vehicles slid sideways and whipped back again; their noses met with a harsh grinding crash. Headlights shattered and fell in pieces to the pavement, grills collapsed, fenders folded back. In the terrible silence that followed, both drivers' heads were wooden-rigid; from behind the glass they glared at one another.

It was amazing, someone near Maggie said, what love could do.

Then both reversed and backed away from the scene of the crash in

opposite directions down the street. The woman's sedan dragged a squealing piece of its own bumper along the blacktop. Danny Holland's pickup sprinkled a trail of broken glass; the upright exhaust pipe behind his cab threw up clouds of smoke, plumes of challenge. They stopped, changed gears noisily, and roared ahead again. This time there were no brakes applied; they nearly missed, sideswiped each other, and bounced away. Doors sank in, windows clouded up and laced themselves like crazy cobwebs. Something dropped out of the bottom of the sedan and clattered across the pavement towards Maggie's feet.

They turned again and once more came at each other, cautiously, this time hitting directly nose to nose, barely hard enough to scratch. Engines stalled. Something heavy dropped from under the sedan and the back end settled like a tired bull. A moment before the quiet impact the woman's door had opened and she leapt free, rolled over twice towards the hotel, and righted herself in a sitting position against a light pole. She held an arm hugged close against her waist, nursing it, rocking. A small stream of blood glistened on her cheek.

Danny Holland, as Maggie Kyle and anyone else who knew him would expect, sat behind the wheel of his pickup and laughed. He spat snooze out the broken window onto the pavement and wiped an arm across his mouth. If the rather vigorous demonstration of his feelings had caused him any pain he wasn't about to show it here. He laughed again. When he opened his door it squealed and popped and sagged. Standing on his step, he hauled a red-and-white handkerchief out of the back pocket of his big loose jeans and blew his nose, as if he'd waited days for just this opportunity. Then, shoving the handkerchief back down inside the pocket, he looked at the long-legged black woman at the curb. "Well?" he said.

"You're still a jerk," she said, but with less conviction.

Before he could step down from the pickup to prove her right or wrong, the wail of a police siren came clearly on the air from somewhere deep in town. Danny Holland dropped back inside his truck, leaned into his starter button until his engine finally caught, backed off, and drove whining and sputtering away without so much as a see-you-hon to his woman. By the time the police arrived he was long gone and the woman was left to protest in a loud and insolent voice that it had only been a friendly fight and nobody's business but their own.

“He’s a son of a bitch all the same,” she told the RCMP officer who helped her to her feet. What she lacked in variety of language she made up for in sincerity of tone. “When I see him again I’ll cut his stinkin’ throat.”

“When you see him again,” the officer said, “you’ll both be talking to a judge.” He winked at someone on the curb, to show that he understood the craziness of bush people as well as anyone else.

“Don’t count on it,” she said, and put a hand over the bleeding side of her face. “There’s a long line of people want to get their hands on Danny Holland’s throat but none of them ever seem to manage it.”

And this is one of them here, said Maggie Kyle to herself. Let me at the man, I’ll rip out his gizzard and feed him to pigs.

A perfect sense of timing, she thought. He couldn’t have picked a worse day to arrive. If he had written her a note saying *Of all the days in the year, which one would it upset you the most for me to land in town?* she could not have thought of another day. This was it. This was the worst one. Of course she should have known, she should have thought about it, it only made sense. Danny Holland was made for spoiling things, you couldn’t expect him to turn down a chance like this.

So she could hardly hold back a good hoot at the sight of the Zulu being carted away in the purple police car. She’d been bush herself once, and hadn’t forgotten the shocks and humiliations that met you when you came out. She even waved at the silly woman, who could not have known who she was, or guessed all that they had in common.

She’d been bush herself once, and there were people who said Maggie Kyle had the smell of pitch and the mountains on her yet for all her moving down to civilization, to the coast; but others claimed it was because she hadn’t moved all the way in to town the way you’d expect a forest refugee to do, she’d settled into that sagging old house out north a ways, surrounded by second-growth fir. And a good thing, too, they said, until she learned to laugh like a lady instead of like a chokerman stomping on a snake.

But it only took a single glance to see how little she cared for anyone’s opinion. When a tow truck pulled up in front of the hotel to haul the