

Avalon Road

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Ti-Paul knew this Avalon Road like the fingerprints of his long tapered fingers. His feet struck the gravelled surface and his grey eyes saw the under brush and long grass move with the scurrying of wilderness creatures. One of his habits was pitching small loose stones onto the river closets to the road. The river ran the whole length of the road, it was not quite wide enough for power-driven boats but it had deep holes where whirl pools existed. The water was coffee coloured but it did not smell so inviting. Perhaps it had something to do with red coloured buildings at the provincial agricultural university. He always felt uneasy as he stared at those out buildings and barns. There was something in the existence of the entire enterprise that seemed to underscore the inadequacy of his existence. He had no visible reason to think that way but the discomfort always ended up in the throat as if to throttle him. But—he always moved on.

Ti-Paul struggled to be more self aware whatever that meant. His parents neither neglected him nor nattered at him. He was seventeen-years-old and barely making it into his final year of high school. Here he was on Avalon Road, neither happy nor joy-filled about anything. Was he drifting into a Sad Sack, but why? He had stayed in school beyond fifteen when most of the students like him quit burdened by poverty and the family need for any kind of extra cash. He knew kids who kept all their belongings in a barrel. He owned three drawers in the hallway closet.

This particular fine morning he had followed the trail of Avalon Road past St. Mary's Road to those other imposing buildings of the provincial T.B. San. He applied for a kitchen job for the summer and he got it! He felt adventurous and damned lucky. The layout of the hospital was spacious and generous. The vegetable gardens were bursting with colour. The smell of sickness and chemicals did not hit you till you

reached the wards of the truly ill. He was not to ever work there. The commercial kitchens were huge and kept spotless. The nun supervisor sized Ti-Paul up and down, led him to a long counter and showed with a few deft moves how to slice, dice and keep his hands and counter clean. Then they brought in mountains of potatoes, greens, and stalks that had to be trimmed and onions had to be ready for the cooks who worked for a chef the size of a pirate ship. This chef would have sworn a lot at the line of cooks if the supervisor was out of ear shot. Fat chance! By the end of the first week, he had a handle on this job. His family members including himself had worked the market gardens for and wide so he could move as quickly as needed.

Then he discovered the perks of the job. Whatever the patients were served, for fifty cents, he could eat heartily the same healthy food.

He heard of the small cafeteria in the women's quarters where rural healthy girls and women boarded in spacious rooms. Men were welcome but they had to be invited to a large common room with a well used hi-fi unit. This is where dancing lessons were given with as many partners one could muster.

So he stayed for supper, summer daylight was on till 10:00 PM when the whole she-bang was shut down and the men were thrown out reluctantly. Now Ti-Paul had a gaggle of young girlfriends who giggled a lot. When anyone became too aggressive they ran into their private quarters behind two doors. If any male thought he could follow a voice that came from nowhere, the nun appeared and not a word had to be spoken. Within ten whole days, he found Lorraine, older, mature and very good looking. He was infatuated as any seventeen-year-old can become.

Lorraine worked somewhere in the bowels of the San with the sick and sometimes with the dying. It was heavy duty nursing. He never saw her except if he was working the vegetable counter dishing out peas, carrots, and spinach. Then she invited him inside the common room to spend time with her.

Her company made him feel, well, important. She had a knack of drawing out words from the most tongue-tied person. The younger girls stopped giggling around him. They even told Lorraine, Ti-Paul is in the coffee shop. The couple went for walks in the gardens, the summer weather cooperated.

Yet—there was that uneasiness—the creepy disease. He could not talk about this to anyone. In the introspective moments, he remembered being twelve-years-old. It was high noon and across the road wheat fields were green on the way to fruit filled seeds, the barley was bulging. When he reached his rustic home standing between the road and the river without enough land to plant a sizeable garden, he blurted out his one question: how come we have no land to farm? His grandfather, a kindly gentleman, said quietly, "we lost it during the Depression. Those used to be our fields." There was no rancour in his voice, just a trace of wistfulness seemed to be there. "Does this make us poor?" "Oh no, we can still work for cash in other people's fields." Ti-Paul ate his ample lunch. What he wanted to ask was how can you lose something when it is still there in front of you?

Sometime later, he started dreaming of buying land and a John Deere tractor. Where was he going to make a pile of money? When he finished grade ten he know he could hang in there for grade eleven. Grade twelve was possible at his local high school that was not quite rural and not really city either. His parents were always away working manual jobs bringing home every cent to keep themselves going during hard times. His struggle started in grade eleven, his English he found out was very poor. They spoke a patois of French and Cree at home, his grandparents called it a Creole language—Méchif. He knew it well but it did not exist in books and even French had to be taught after all the English lessons. Politics was avoided at all costs in his home. It was as if the affairs of the country had nothing to do with them since they received very little benefit from being Canadian. He wanted to discuss that, but questions only yielded more questions. Who pays for my schooling, he asked one day? We do, came the answer. Is it a lot of money? We pay no more than other people he was told. The silence that followed told him to stop probing.

During the few heady days of really hot summer, he saw the blonde female workers on their days off heading into the city. They went to Kresge's and Woolworth's for costume jewellery and a few clothes. Woolworth's had an affordable lunch counter. They came home broke but happy.

Ti-Paul did meet other workers, most were lifers settled into these jobs already knowing what they were going to make ten years from now. He met older women workers who sent all their meagre wages home. It was cash after all among people who could barter for anything, but cash was needed more and more. He had tried talking about a career with his fellow workers one told him to shut up and stop dreaming. He slowly realized that is how they survived the grind of the really awful jobs. It was in the talking he found out some of the rural girls were supporting siblings in school. Their turn would come when one of them made it. It took two years to save for one year of schooling but the wages went way up from then on. There were some really good hard working people among them.

On those same hot nights as he walked the length of Avalon Road, he could get the strongest whiff of the heavy odour pulsating from the mink farms. He had worked there one summer thinking it could not be that hard. All he had to do was feed, water the animals and clean their cages. Their fur was magnificent but they sure smelled bad. There was no getting used to it. He had to hang his work clothes away from the house. He smelled like hot mink. Well, the minks knew there were not skunks.

This summer was surely different away from the kitchen, the girls smelled pleasant. It was not pushing month end. His lot in life was enjoying a kind of break from his usual uneasiness. But on the last gasp from the full moon he had left a little too late past twilight. At that bend in the river closest to the cluster of red buildings, across the coffee coloured river the invisible barrier became visible to his mind. The barrier was the inadequacies of his life. It was as if he had in his possession the short end of no luck. This was foreboding. He hurried home.

Next day as he peeled the biggest pile of new potatoes, he decided to whistle while he worked. The chef kept one eye looking directly at him. How did he do that? Supper came and went, he sauntered over to the concession stand or doughnut and coffee counter. Lorraine came out after a while. According to one of the rules of the house everyone went to mass for 7:00 PM. Doors were locked and everyone attended except nightshift workers. This is when trouble ensued. Lorraine and Ti-Paul had been busy in one corner of the common room. At some point, Lorraine went to her room to fetch

something, Ti-Paul was reading a magazine; he never heard the click of the outer door being locked. It had no release bar like the inner door. Lorraine came through, everyone was gone; the door was definitely locked. She said we are in trouble. He did not know what to do or think. Can we jump through a window? Then what, they could not get back in? And they could break a limb or two from the height of the window to the ground. So they waited, they were now between two locked doors.

Mass would be over in half an hour. So in his Native system of values, he made no overt moves that could prove more embarrassing. Lorraine gave no hint of further distress. The first one at the door was the supervision nun. Ti-Paul was now really disturbed as she eyed him from head to toe. Lorraine kept still and quiet. He felt he should leave. It was a very quick exit and the long walk home was slow and pain-filled.

Next day, midmorning he got his walking papers. Fired with one whole month left before school, who gets fired mid-summer? He had some time to think on the walk back home. The episode last night, was it all that innocent? What part did he play, the buffoon, the clown, the stupid boy? By the time he reached that bend on that close river bed, he knew what he had to do. He had to get over this experience. His male ego had been flattened like a penny on the railway tracks. The mink farm might not smell so bad and the little critters were handsome.

As luck would have it for him, his Mother surprised him by not being there. This was a rare day off for her. Then his emotions ran him over. But what came out surprised even him. I want to go to school beyond high school. He did not realize he was crying and when he did, he did not know why he was slobbering. His mother, a wise woman let his moment run the clock. "If you want to do that son, we will help you," she said. Ti-Paul swallowed back tears and willed himself to believe her.

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