

Erín Moure

**Sitting Shiva on
Minto Avenue,**

by Toots



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I'm not sure if the people, places, or events depicted in this memoir resemble anyone or anything living or dead. They are my memories, and memory is a work of the imagination.

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Whose lives are already considered not lives, or only partially living, or already dead and gone, prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment? Of course, this question becomes more acute for someone, anyone, who already understands him- or herself to be a dispensable sort of being, one who registers at an affective and corporeal level that his or her life is not worth safeguarding, protecting, and valuing. This is someone who understands that she or he will not be grieved if his or her life is lost, and so one for whom the conditional claim “I would not be grieved” is actively lived in the present moment. If it turns out that I have no certainty that I will have food or shelter, or that no social network or institution would catch me if I fall, then I come to belong to the ungrievable. This does not mean that there won’t be some who grieve me . . .

Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*

Il y a ici la conscience inavouée que l'élément authentiquement politique consiste précisément en cette clandestinité incommunicable, presque ridicule, de la vie privée. En effet, il est certain que la vie clandestine, notre *forme-de-vie*, est chose si intime et si proche que, si nous tentons de la saisir, elle ne nous laisse entre les mains que l'impénétrable, l'ennuyeuse quotidienneté.

Giorgio Agamben, *L'usage des corps*

There is here the unarticulated realization that what is truly political consists precisely in the incommunicable, almost ridiculous clandestinity of our private lives. In effect, it's certain that this clandestine life, our *forme-de-vie*, is something so intimate and so close to us that if we try to grasp it, all we hold in our hands is the impenetrable dreariness of everyday.

Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*

What I Knew About the Little Man

He was born in Québec in the Abitibi region on September 28, 1943. Or he was born in Montréal. I have a photo of him on a second-floor balcony with his mom when he was eight months old. In Montréal, in NDG. She has a beautiful dress in the photo and he is smiling.

His father and mother had been colonists in the Abitibi region under the *Plan de colonisation Vautrin*. The life was hard there under the iron hand of the Church and they returned to Montréal either before or after the little man was born. Paul Émile. Their eldest. Later they had two more, Hélène and Jean. Paul Émile, despite his own difficult life, outlived them all.

His father, Yvan or Yvon, had had a corner store in Montréal, or worked in one, before going north as a colonist. It was the Depression. The church was promoting the salvation of the French-Canadian people via a return to the land. The curés ruled all aspects of life there. The family, like others, returned to the city broke, everything lost to them, and his father

became a coach cleaner for the CPR. It was a dignified, union job. His mother was a housewife.

I wonder about the word “was,” the word “is.” To use either of them is like pushing a sewing needle through heavy material. Hide, or canvas. My thumbs hurt.

Either his mother or his father was half Indigenous, half Wendat, or *Huron*, as he called it. He had an old photo of his grandmother in traditional clothing that he was very proud of, from the early twentieth century, and said she was a princess. All his life, though raised Catholic according to the imperative of the time, he practised a more reverent spirituality: god, he said, was breath, was air. We took in god when we breathed in, and we breathed god out again. All breathing animals did this; plants did this.

Then he would purse his lips and breathe out a little breath of wind.

I have another photo of him given me by his Mom, of him at the age of six in a little woollen suit and tie and he looked the same age as he was when I knew him.

Only once, in Vancouver where we lived together, was he ever in an alcohol treatment program for First Nations and Métis (he was in others, and often; of all of them he hated Alcoholics Anonymous the most). This was in the early '80s, but after we'd parted ways. Maybe it was the first time such a program had existed. He accepted the spirituality of the

program but found it hard as the West Coast cultures were different, and he had been raised in white culture as a French-Canadian in Montréal.

He had a Grade 7 education, the highest level of public school education in French in his day. Yet he always read the newspaper and was cognizant of politics and sports, and liked to discuss them. He had had no chance for further education. The *collège classique* was not for those of his social class, unless a curé took them in hand. I was impressed by him as he was erudite, to me, and functionally literate, which was not always true for others in his class and position.

He never abided any prejudice. He defended both gay people (as he said, in the late '70s, in a just world it wouldn't make any difference if you were gay or straight) and First Nations people, and helped many old alcoholics living alone on skid row in the Downtown Eastside, visiting them, buying them groceries when he had a job. Like Postie, who lived in the skinny Hotel Empress, which had just a small neon sign, but its name painted huge on the west wall of the building. In those days, the '70s and early '80s, the Downtown Eastside was impoverished and was an area of prostitution, alcohol and drugs, but it was inhabited, lively. It wasn't the dead abandoned zone of later on.

We ate seafood at the Only.

Before I'd met him and before he'd had a steady job at CN as a waiter then steward, he'd had unemployed periods of bad

alcoholism, and he had stories of the prostitutes and police, and of police mistreatment of the poor and intoxicated. Of being in the drunk tank and the police hosing them down because one person was shouting, and the impossibility of fighting against the force of water, being pushed across the floor by it.

Then let out, later, into the icy cold, with wet clothes.

From that period, he retained a dislike of the Salvation Army; at their single men's hostel once they'd served him and others donated salmon, and he'd lifted his piece up with his fork and under it the plate teemed with maggots. He was insulted; he gave money away left and right but never gave any to the Salvation Army kettles at Christmas.

When I met him, he had a job and was respected, and he spoke English and French, and never swore, and would not countenance his compatriots speaking badly of women or of others. He said you had to speak up and put a stop to it. You couldn't just sit in silence. He taught me that. And he encouraged me to work hard to learn French in the French classes at CN, which on-train services employees with less seniority, such as myself, could take in the winter instead of being unemployed.

We ate lasagna in a long-gone restaurant on Main Street just north of the Hotel Ivanhoe. The little man would get drunk and flip coins with others, "his friends," for twenty-dollar bills. He bought lottery tickets too, alone and in pools run from under the counter at the Ivanhoe bar.

Sometimes his paycheque lasted one day.

There was only one time, back when the paycheques were issued at the crew office and I was on the road, that he somehow picked up my paycheque for me, and cashed it, and both my cheque and his were all gone when I came back the next day. I told the office never to give him my cheque again.

He gave me money from his next few cheques to pay me back. My paycheque had been invested in some kind of gambling scheme he never expected to lose.

He always had loans from Household Finance and other now vanished “finance companies” that charged usurious rates. I tried to talk him out of them, and into saving first then spending later.

He could be violent when drunk, and there were times when he frightened me and hurt me. Then he was apologetic and handsome again. I thought I could love him as I had loved my Dad who also had been of a temper (though not from drinking). I thought I could avoid the bad times and stay out of trouble.

The sun is rising on the snow as I write this: bright red, a line of light that outlines the stones of the church opposite in Montréal where I live.

The little man has been here in the past, to visit me.

Last night on December 27, 2015, my home phone rang, the

phone with the old number and no answering machine, and it was his cousin Betty from Vancouver calling as she had wanted to tell me he died on December 4, 2015 in St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver.

He was alone when he died.

They had admitted him earlier and diagnosed pneumonia after he had gone to emergency with difficulty breathing. A couple of hours later, they did a bed check and he was flat-lined. They started his heart again and put him on a respirator but he was brain dead.

In the next morning, they found his cousin who was his next of kin and she asked them to turn off the respirator. He had shown no brain activity; he was dead.

The little man was dead.

He was just seventy-two.

Did you know he had been using a walker the past couple of years, said Betty. No, I said. I knew he had trouble with his heart and was on medication. He died of a heart attack, she said. He had COPD for years too. Well, he smoked so heavily, I said.

Betty told me she knew she had to tell me.

She said she is just winding up the estate, and he'd had a RRIF