

The Imaginary Girlfriends of Canada

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*Canada is the only country in the world that
knows how to live without an identity.*

—Marshall McLuhan

NONFICTION

Once, once you told me about your holiday in the North. You admitted the memory that the story was based on had already dwindled, that you weren't sure how exactly it happened anymore, how much of it actually happened, how much you were unwittingly making up. You admitted the story felt like a story, and not like something that actually occurred. Something that truly came to pass during the course of your life. In my mind I told you those stories that sound real are rarely real. In my mind I told you that real was often more fabricated than not-real. In my mind I saw the two of us walking on an open path frozen to the rest of the world. You admitted, as you spoke the words that brought the story into being, perhaps for the first time, that it felt like fiction, though it was not fiction. And as those deceitful, insidious words forged from your lips you felt yourself creating (not re-creating), you felt yourself fabricating a world that didn't exist, that never existed, that could never exist, though you were bringing it into existence, though those same deceptive words you used to elaborate the story which in your heart of hearts was untrue, those same words made your fictional story seem real, actually real, really real which was important to you because it was real, it was, yes, it really was. And so you related your memory to me. You told me what happened. You told me the truth, and all about it. You told me about your girlfriend in Canada.

MISSING FRAMES

You found her by a swimming pool in the palatial hotel lobby, the sun poking out from behind the only cloud in the sky, the square cooled by the titanic shadow from Mnemosyne's statue, the shadow almost touching your own, almost initiating you into ... as you stand between the two rivers, nothing for miles except the chlorinated splashing of children. Motionless, looking out, it was as if several frames were missing from the film. No one appeared to be moving, everything stagnant, the little kids' horseplay an echo from elsewhere. Without a blip, people were in one place, and then, as if teleported, another. The world was a collection of tableaux, still shots missing about half the twenty-four frames per second needed for the truth, here only half the truth, maybe a quarter, if that much. When movement returned, the two of you collided, you dropping your soda pop, your bag, your souvenir, she so full of apologies.

Girlfriend: This is my embarrassed and apologetic opening line. I am oh so sorry.

You: It's really okay.

Girlfriend: No, no, I am sorry. I wish I had something more memorable to say. I wish I had a line for you that would be remembered through

the ages, that would alleviate my guilt and would entertain you so that you wouldn't mind having dropped your . . . I really am sorry . . .

You: No, no. It was my fault.

Girlfriend: . . . I really have nothing to say.

NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO

The population of Niagara Falls, Ontario is just over 80,000. Yet, for the number of people who have claimed a girlfriend living there, the population would have to equal that of the entire world. Some point here to a paradox. Obviously you do not have a girlfriend in Niagara Falls. Obviously you are a liar. Maybe you haven't even been to Canada. But you needn't fear. We know you're telling the truth. And to explain, we shall use a parable. Above the entryway to Niels Bohr's country cottage was a horseshoe, reminiscent of the Horseshoe Falls in Ontario, and the Golden Horseshoe, that area of Canada where Niagara is located. Upon arriving at the noted physicist's retreat, a visitor asked how Bohr could possibly be so credulous. Niels Bohr, noted physicist, responded thusly: "No, I certainly do not believe in this superstition. But you know, they say it brings luck even if you don't believe in it." Having a girlfriend in the horseshoed land of Niagara Falls is like the good fortune from Bohr's talisman: she is there whether people believe your story or not. In this way, you will never be alone in Niagara Falls. In this way, we all have a girlfriend in Canada.

A STORY OF WHEN I WAS OLDER

You began the story you told me with many preambles, apologies, explanations. You started and stopped. You provided ample context. And then you contextualized the context. And then you contextualized that . . . before you began. This story takes place in the past, you said, when I was younger, much younger. I assume you wanted to assure me you weren't being prophetic. I assume you wanted to assure me you had no powers of precognition. I assume you wanted to assure me that in our realm of experience where the sun rises and sets repetitively during each twenty-four hour period, that future events, those events shrouded in the yet-to-come, are not banal for you, that they are just as mysterious as they are for everyone else. And so you told me the story took place in the past. As if it could take place at any other time. And so you told me the story took place when you were younger. Much younger. As if you could be any other age. You just wanted to make sure that I understood the obvious timeline. Though your introduction did nothing to stop me from wishing I could hear a story about you, about you or anyone else, when they were older. Much, much older.

THE LAND OF VACATION

But where were you when you met her? Walking through a city, buildings on top of buildings, legions of people pushing forward as if led at the front by a general, a field marshal who

would direct the masses toward—no. Exploring a resort, that manufactured rest zone of swimming pools, gaming centers, casinos you were too young to play at, palm trees to lie under daydreaming about—no. Shuffling along a boardwalk on the ocean, rides to be ridden, junk food to be purchased, side shows to be gawked at, beckoned away from the midway to see—no. A beach, a monument, a museum, mountains, canyons, deserts, were you lost in an estate—was there a folly? was there a ha-ha? Slowly, through the course of your story, though it never sounds like you know where you're going, as if you can't recognize the objects in the world you actually know all too well, those objects you can describe in great detail, when you're looking directly at them for some reason they're foreign to you, ask you about a boardwalk or the mountain trail and you can give every detail, but put you there and it's like you have no idea where you are, lost, all of these possible sites becoming one site, two-dimensional, obviously lost, but if you close your eyes you know it, with certainty you know, so exact in the lay of the land, the vacation land you describe becoming every vacation land combined, a place that could never exist, the place where you were lost so obviously impossible, unreal . . . impossible and unreal just like every other vacation land.

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

When the Girlfriends hear the joke, "Winnipeg, lose a peg," they smile. They enjoy the simple pun. They admire the zero-sum game created by the mild witticism. They understand the metaphysical notion that for each time we win one thing, we lose another; they understand that most of the world is designed as a zero-sum game, that most of the world is strictly competitive. But in Winnipeg, whose paronomasiac slogan should signal it as the epicenter of the zero-sum, the Girlfriends have decided to move in a different direction. And so they have built Brutus' Palace, the only non-zero-sum casino in the entire world. Here, unlike classic casinos, there are large windows looking out onto the vast Canadian Prairies, onto Lake Winnipeg along with its feeding rivers and pristine boreal forests; here, the players work together for a net gain; here, the house does not dominate. Everywhere else someone always loses, but in Winnipeg, you win.

SUPERPOSITION

I sat listening, never speaking. You said from the beginning it was obvious that the two of you would be spending this vacation together, that you'd only leave each other's side begrudgingly, when the parents demanded it. Yet now you remember spending all of your time with her, while simultaneously spending all of your time with your family. A synchronized memory of two impossible experiences that threatens to freeze both out. At the time the image was clear in your mind and in her mind. At the time the image was clear because neither of you had lived it yet, because neither of your memories had a chance to erode it away. You say, perhaps it would've been better if we'd left it alone, if we'd parted right there, if we'd spent the rest of the vacation with cotton candy, the boardwalk, sights, historical reenactments, rides. Or perhaps it would've

been better if you'd been alone, or with people you couldn't see so well in the future for then the film would've clicked on at twenty-four frames per second, they would've told you the truth the rest of your life, projecting a singular, clear picture, running smoothly in your minds forever. But you couldn't leave it alone, there in the flickering projection booth. You had to live it.

THE CONVERSATION

As the two of you sat gazing on the ocean, the waves crashing, the skyline surrounding you, the cool wind from the mountains, the lights from the amusement park dimming for the night, some still blinking, blinking, like the stars in the desert sky, the airboat bringing you in off the swamp, as you walked through the now quiet resort, maybe not so quiet, maybe a party in the distance, always in the distance, where could it be? you talked, saying:

Girlfriend: Later, you will not remember what I am saying.

You: What do you mean? I can't . . .

Girlfriend: My meaning is unimportant. I can say anything. Any words would be acceptable. You won't recall them anyhow. You can't understand. You will never understand.

You: But why can't I make out what you're . . . Why can't I understand?

Girlfriend: Whatever I say now will be taken away by the desert air, its intent lost, saturated by the humidity, its meaning plain to all but you. To you it will forever be a foreign language, a series of discordant sounds, a dissonance, a disharmony that you will remember as the only harmony, the perfect harmony.

You: Your voice is beautiful. I don't know what you're saying because I want to focus on each note. I wish I could . . .

Girlfriend: It doesn't matter. We shouldn't be so serious. It's time to laugh.

Together: [LAUGHING]

Girlfriend: You will remember laughing, you will remember happiness, but not why you were laughing, not why you were happy.

You: I'm sorry, what did you say?

OTTAWA, NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION

The Girlfriends, who have heard ceaselessly of their nonexistence, tell this tale:

One day Queen Victoria said, "Canada does not exist." This was a problem. It was very difficult to prove a negative existential, and the queen would have no paradoxes in her realm. But the fact of the matter was the country had no capital. Thus the queen's thinking: all existing countries have capitals. Canada does not have a capital. Therefore, Canada does not exist. It was with great

despair that the queen came to the following conclusions: 1) her subjects, claiming to have been to Canada, were treasonous, lying to the royal head of Great Britain, fabricating an entire nation; or 2) her subjects were delusional, thinking they had been somewhere that did not exist. She dismissed the first out of pride, and pondered the second. The queen, standing before an enormous, blank wall knew what to do.

“Ottawa is the capital of Canada,” said Queen Victoria to an advisor.

“Ottawa?” said the advisor. “Ottawa, whatever it may be, does not exist.”

And yet, to his own ears, the words rang false. He, himself, had been to Canada. Many emotions ran across the advisor’s face, and the images and memories that were immediately brought to mind were of a very personal nature, so we shan’t divulge them. We will, however, give you this piece of logic: he and the queen were talking about Canada. They were talking about nothing, if not Canada. But Canada could only exist if it had a capital, and the only city the advisor could think of as the capital of Canada was Ottawa.

The advisor and the queen stood in front of the enormous wall map. It was a map of the country that no longer gave Queen Victoria problems. And there, with a star next to it, was the oddly named city. “Ottawa is the capital of Canada,” the two said in unison, gazing at the map. Paradoxes did not exist in the queen’s realm.

FREE WILL

Perhaps you remember a vacation you took when you were younger . . . At points during your telling I found I couldn’t focus, I was confused, I was angry, I felt we shared no common language, hemmed in by plaque, lost in tangles, the paths into my mind frozen forever. The time was different than any other time in your life, and no matter how long it lasted it seemed like it was just a single night . . . But after your story was over, I retold it. The night was beautiful, one of those where the sky doesn’t look like a sky, but like outer space . . . If you could hear my reiterations of the story, maybe you’d think I was printing my own thoughts on you, that you wouldn’t talk this way, that you’d never act this way. Perhaps you walked through a city, along a boardwalk, on a beach, and you talked about things that you could never quite remember afterwards, that you could never quite remember ever again, as if you were speaking a different language in one of your own dreams . . . It could be that this isn’t the memory you would’ve chosen to be known for. And then later it all ended, the two of you promising to keep in touch, though as soon as the words were said you knew they weren’t true, and as soon as she was gone you could already feel the experience slipping into the realm of the fantastic . . . But it’s not my fault. There is no choice. Yes, perhaps all of this has happened to you . . . You do not get to choose. I do not get to choose. Perhaps you have been to Canada . . . The Girlfriends choose you.

THE MIND SCRAMBLER

The two of you rode The Mind Scrambler, an attraction which, in its herky jerky motion, makes it appear that you are about to smash into another part of the ride, only missing it by inches. The

twisting and turning worked like a clock that had smaller clocks on each one of the hands. Here, the two of you lost track of time.

You: I will never forget this.

Girlfriend: When did we meet?

You: I will always remember.

Girlfriend: How long have we been on this ride?

You: I hope they let us ride a little longer.

Girlfriend: Have we already kissed, or does that happen later? To me it seems like we have always been together, but then we might have met here, twisting and turning around.

BARKERVILLE, BRITISH COLUMBIA

The original Barkerville, center of the Cariboo Gold Rush of 1861, burned down in 1868. Later it was rebuilt, but when the mining industry crashed, Barkerville became a ghost town. The Canadian government, however, restored the ruin as Barkerville: A Gold Rush Theme Park. Unfortunately, the theme park burned down. There were problems from the beginning. Should we aim for accuracy (recreating the look and feel of the era), or should we aim to please the customers, feeding on the types and clichés they expect to find in a boom town? Now, left with a ghost town that was once a theme park that was formerly a boom town that itself became a ghost town, the Girlfriends stepped in, creating New Barkerville: A Virtual Theme Park. New Barkerville eliminates all of the problems with both amusement parks (lines, bad weather, illness, disappointment, etc.) and the problems with theme parks, and it's able to do these things because New Barkerville, being virtual, does not exist. The Girlfriends implant a tailored historical theme park experience, exactly the experience you were hoping for, into your mind. But that's not all. The genius of the Girlfriends' invention is that they don't merely give you the memories of a once lived trip to New Barkerville; instead the recollections you are given appear to come from a far distant past, an idyllic past, where you are young and the world appears alive with energy, so alive that you privately decide to return soon. And perhaps tomorrow you're going back to New Barkerville. Or perhaps you were just there last week.

VOLTA

You didn't know you were telling me this story. Or, I should say, when you tell this story, you won't know that you're telling it to me. In the future, as you reminisce, you'll think you're talking to yourself. Even when we're talking to others, we're primarily talking to ourselves, so you shouldn't be ashamed. But this time you won't know you have an outside auditor. You'll think you're the only audience for this memory, that you're all by yourself. But you won't be. I'll be there. And if now I can relate your story so well, it's because you haven't told it to me yet. You

see, for my part, this is a story of when I was older. Much older. When I'm older and listening to you tell a story of when you were younger. Much younger. The telling of this story has not yet come to pass. The events, having not yet transpired, are clear in my mind because my memory has had no chance to erode them away. Indeed, this story took place when I was older, much, much older, and only now, after all these years of it not yet happening, have I finally come to understand it.

THE JETTY

For a moment, you forgot who you were. You walked along a pier. You were no one. No one in particular. Another person wearing a tourist shirt. Sunglasses. A jacket. There was the smell of the ocean. But as the two of you walked along the wooden planks, it seemed like time was evaporating behind you. That if you would stop, that if you would turn around, there would be nothing, and soon that nothing would overtake you. In other words, you knew this was the end. Whereas you were in the moment the other moments you spent with her, this one was to be iconic. For you, anyway. The conclusion. On a pier. Your past wiped out. The way back frozen. You can't even remember the words you said. You only remember standing, blinded by all that light, even with your sunglasses on.

Girlfriend: [Bittersweet line that's extremely profound.]

You: [Bittersweet line that reiterates what was said previously, but expands upon it to make it even more profound.]

Girlfriend: [Finisher that encapsulates both statements but which can't be topped.]

You: [Repetition of same.]

FORGET, SASKATCHEWAN

If the Girlfriends exist, why is it that no one can find them? Anytime a credulous sap claims he has a girlfriend in Canada, immediately he's incapable of providing any evidence. Anytime an incredulous sap goes in search of these elusive girls, he fails to find them. It would appear that one of two propositions should then be true: 1) the Girlfriends do not exist, or 2) the Girlfriends do exist, but are impossible to find. What can be done?

The answer comes from the story of Admiral Korsakov. Korsakov, noted explorer of the country of Canada, is known to have loved most of the realm, except for Saskatchewan. No one is quite sure why he disliked Saskatchewan so much, but especially after visiting the village of Forget, he is known to have said, "I am certainly going to forget Saskatchewan." And yet, in the days after he left Forget, he could not get it out of his mind. He could not remember to forget. Each day the pain of Saskatchewan returned by reminding him that there is a village named "Forget," and each day Korsakov would say, "I am certainly going to forget Saskatchewan."

Months later, under the thrall of a melancholy that appeared omnipotent, the admiral made a decision and set out. Just before he left he was asked where he was going. "I am certainly going to Forget, Saskatchewan." Upon his return, Korsakov, in that tiny little village, sat on a stoop and was approached by one of the Girlfriends whom he could never remember to forget.

FICTION

Perhaps I am the only one, but I believed your story, though I hardly think this will soothe you. What I believe is unbelievable. I tend only to believe those things that seem least believable. And anytime I learn that I was right, that the unbelievable was true, I am disappointed. Fiction is stranger than truth, truth far more disappointing than fiction. I believe your story because I can't imagine that it happened; I can only imagine it happening . . .

And now, years later, after the only time with your paramour, your girlfriend whom you shared a fantasy world with, you wonder if you could recognize her if she were standing right in front of you; you wonder now if you'd even so much as remember where she's from. I am here to tell you: you wouldn't know her. She's from Canada.

THE PARTING

She was with you. You didn't know her before, and you never saw her again. And when you parted, you swore to keep in touch, though as soon as the words were said you knew they weren't true. You knew they weren't true, although you also knew they weren't lies. You would not keep in touch because that was impossible. The two of you only existed together at that one point, and would never exist together again. Perhaps as the two of you parted you realized the experience was already slipping into the realm of the fantastic. That even when you said goodbye, and began moving away from each other that your moving away was a movement toward reality, the real reality, and the reason it's so difficult for you to tell this story is because even when the two of you looked over your respective shoulders for that last gaze, that last gaze not at each other, but at the fantasy world you'd constructed and lived in briefly, you realized that soon there would only be reality, that this fantasy would slip away.

THE NORTH

The Girlfriends have moved to a village in the far north, so far north it may be in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, even Nunavut. For eight months of the year the village where they live is unreachable because of the ice and snow. There the Girlfriends reside in a log house kept warm by a fire. The house is decorated with maps of their country, though their country isn't quite like any the world knows. The Girlfriends, themselves expert cartographers, redraw these charts, composing entire atlases of private realms. One of them just might be Canada. Even though the village is unreachable eight months of the year, the Girlfriends have a special means of maintaining a secret path. The passageway can only be found by those who know where

it is, but aren't looking for it. For those in the know, the route is completely flat and smooth without impediment. For others, it is frozen solid, impassable. The path, being different for each, begins where it needs to begin, and ends at the log house. At the log house the Girlfriends keep working on their maps, they keep the way clear, they keep the fire burning. They wait for you.

Andrew Farkas