ALEX PUGSLEY

DEATH BY DROWNING

Alex Pugsley (1963-) was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He studied at the University of Toronto and co-wrote the novel *Kay Darling* (1994) and the short films *Ghetto of Cool People* (1995) and *Fidelio* (1997). He also worked as a writer on such television series as *The Gavin Crawford Show* (2000-2003), *Life with Derek* (2005-2009), *G-Spot* (2005-2009), *Heartland* (2007-), *The Eleventh Hour* (2008-2009), and *Baxter* (2010-2011), and he wrote and directed the film *Dirty Singles* (2014), which was nominated for Best Canadian Feature at the Vancouver International Film Festival. The following story was published in the autumn 2015 issue and included in the novel *Aubrey McKee* (2020), which consists of a series of stories about the McKee and Mair families. The latter was a prominent family in the history of Halifax, as Pugsley explained: "The Maritime provinces of Canada are saturated generally with peculiars—drunks, pundits, misfits, masterminds—but the Mairs were the oddest on record, functioning in the years of my childhood on an almost mythopoeic level."

HOWLAND POOLE MAIR, LLB, KC, PC—fourteenth premier of Nova Scotia, husband to Vida (née Hendsbee), and childless when he lost the provincial election of 1953—returned to private practise in Halifax at the age of sixty-nine. There is a black-and-white publicity photograph taken on the morning he gave the address at the opening of the Nova Scotian legislature on February 19, 1952—the opening that year delayed because of the death of King George VI—that, for several reasons, has gone deep into my memory. Not only because in dirty snow he is pictured in top hat and boldfaced cashmere coat, a coat I would know in later years as navy blue, but because it is the only image I've seen when he is unaware his picture is being taken, and his hawkish face, turning with a smile towards the camera, shows a countenance uncontrived, his eyes in winter sun sparkly with an intelligence I

connect with all the menfolk in his family as well as the decrepit arrogance I would see firsthand near the end of his life. The coat was purchased on Saville Row, the suit, shirt, and tie on Jermyn Street, for he was a lifelong devotee of the patterns of the British Empire and old-school values of English perseverance, Christian industriousness, and private alcoholism would set his tone and standard. His life moved toward some sort of epic grandeur, yes, but the romance would falter, turning tragic, and tawdry in its tragedy. I suppose a historical figure is open to multiple interpretations because the details of his life—and sudden death—support any number of interpretations, but I feel there was magic in the man and even the weirdness of his rise and fall scatters some strange magic of its own. I don't know. The intricacies and contradictions of the Mair family have proliferated for me over the years, which might say more about my wish for the subject to remain provocative, I know, than it speaks to some the-past-is-a-foreign-country or the-truth-can-never-be-known hermeneutical uncertainty principle. But these events occurred in a flux before my own days began and many of the lives described herein only briefly and peripherally extended into the beginnings of my own, H. P. Mair and Madeleine Zwicker being two of many strange gods born before me.

He was, significantly, one of the few persons my father spoke about with considered respect. My father was a child during the Second World War and his experience of those years, and his understanding of the exigencies of those boys born ten years before, was something he never forget—our one family trip to Scotland notable for a three-day detour to Normandy to visit the Bény-sur-Mer Cemetery, where my father read in silent absorption the names of kids who graduated grade twelve when he'd graduated grade three—and he tended to treat with deferential regard anyone who had been in the service. Because Howland Mair served as a lieutenant with the Royal Canadian Navy, on a Flower-class corvette, guiding convoys back and forth across the Atlantic, and was in the sea at Utah Beach, he more than qualified. "What H. P. saw over there," said my mother. "I don't know. He lost a brother in the war. Merlin. Drowned. He never talked about it. None of them did, really. You sort of had to guess the implications. Coming home wasn't always a whole new lease on life, you might say that." Considering his naval and political achievements, as well as his family's social standing, Howland Mair would have been classed with an elite echelon of business folk in the province, white male grandees such as Robert Stanfield, Izaak Killam, Roy

Jodrey, and Cyrus Eaton, names superannuated now, but names in post-war Nova Scotia that would have compelled alert attention. “Remnants of the aristocracy,” said my mother. “Faded grandeur. Your father loves that Old Money bullshit. H. P. talks about heated towel racks at the Savoy or Trumper’s shaving cream and your father’s over the moon with that garbage. He thinks it’s all strawberries and champagne. The Mairs, good God, they’re all living in a dream world. And I don’t know if H. P. had that many clients after being away in politics so long. Ask your father. But I think he was pretty much dead in the water till these young guys came along.”

In the years during and following the Second World War, Halifax was hectic but grungy, a jumble of warehouses, clapboard homes, and grimy public buildings, its waterfronts haphazard with sea-craft—gun-metal ships tethered along the Bedford Basin and Northwest Arm. “It was a shabby little city, a city of somber wooden houses in dark greens and heavy reds, a city of rusting cranes, of splintered and water-lapped jetties, a city ragged and yet ponderous in outline, worn stale and flat in detail.” These lines are from the playwright Simon Gray, who is writing about the city he knew as an undergraduate at Dalhousie University in the 1950s. Such were the twin cities of Halifax-Dartmouth, and this was the municipality Howland Mair would have seen in 1953 as he sat in the law offices of Merton Mair McNab, gazing with fading eyes at the remains of the afternoon. He had been a two-term premier and his connections with the Liberal Party, especially at the national level—for he had worked on Louis St. Laurent’s successful re-election as Prime Minister—were not immaterial. And yet, though he was listed on the firm’s letterhead as Senior Counsel, his situation was trending towards the ceremonial and his remaining clients, like him, were advancing in years. Where once he consulted on deals between the Bridge Commission, Dominion Steel, and the Port Authority, he now took anxious, worried phone calls from the widows of late colleagues, the wills for whom he administered *pro bono publico*. But, very notably, the year H. P. Mair returned to private practise was also the year Gregor Burr graduated law school. Free of education at the age of 23, Gregor Burr started as an article clerk with Merton Mair McNab, where he presented very much as a Young Turk, impatient with the ways and means of the firm’s old boys, going so far in discovery as to suggest to a client an alternate plan of advocacy in front of the supervising lawyer. “It’s not the sort of behaviour typically associated with an articling

student," said my father later. "Certainly not in the presence of the client, no." My mother saw it differently. "Law firms back then, they were all stuck in a time warp. When your father and I were first married, I remember going out to buy a fedora. Men don't wear them now, but at the time they were all the rage. Well he looked terrible in all of them, and I had to ask why in the name of God were we buying this fucking hat when we barely had enough for cottage cheese? Your father was never one to stay on a budget. But back then you had to have a hat, because you had to tip it to the senior partners when they walked in the elevator. That's the kind of environment it was, and I don't blame Gregor for saying to hell with it."

Gregor Burr was transferred to the top floor, where, in a far corner, the Honourable H. P. Mair laboured in somewhat sinecured obscurity. At some point in the summer the two would have spoken, the young buck and the senior statesman, and my father recalls seeing them together at the Halifax Club—Friday afternoons there full of cribbage and rum-and-cokes—and indeed Howland would sponsor Gregor for membership at both the Halifax and Saraguay clubs, as well as the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron, from whose precincts he was an ex-commodore. It was at the Squadron where Gregor Burr was introduced to Ralph Fudge, a real estate developer, and here began a triumvirate partnership that would end in multiple allegations—the twisted legalities taking a number of lawyers a number of years to disentangle—but which, in the beginning, must have promised a glittering future. The nascent company was called Kingfisher Properties, and its first development was a low-rise apartment building in Cowie Hill, the loans for which were rumoured to have been secured through Gregor Burr's management of party funds from the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia—through H. P. Mair's connections he had become one of the youngest candidates in the province's history. The twenty-third general election in Nova Scotia was held in October 1956 and, although Robert Stanfield's Progressive Conservatives carried the day, Gregor Burr was elected to one of three downtown ridings for the Liberals; the victory party was thrown over three floors at the Lord Nelson Hotel.

For a brief period in high school, during my time as an indiscriminate teenage joiner, I participated in Model Parliament and was invited to the final night of an adult leadership convention, also held at the Lord Nelson, where I was astonished by the loose, rutted energy of the midnight celebrations—grown-ups blitzed out of their minds in the hallways, bathtubs full

of water and ice and floating cans of Ten Penny beer, Malcolm McCreery's father wandering the stairwells drunk in a kilt and bagpipes and later making out with a grade-eleven girl under the red glow of an exit lamp—and I doubt the versions of these scenes in previous years were much different. "Oh Jesus," said my mother. "Those political parties—I wouldn't let Stewart go to them—people carrying on till four in the morning, Gregor organizing all these girls to be there. What I heard was, Gregor hires these professional girls and brings them to the Lord Nelson, but doesn't tell the men anything. To the men, they're just women at the party, you know, secretaries and volunteers, so the men are thinking they're all doing so well with these girls, the girls giggling and smiling, eyes a little wider than normal. 'Aren't you interesting?' 'You're so smart!' What a crock. But that's how H. P. meets this young thing. Madeleine. She was one of Milly's girls."

To describe the famously private Milly Rees, to explain the open secret that was Mrs. Rees' profession, to suggest What Milly Knew and Whom Milly Knew, requires a digression that is pertinent not only to 1950s Halifax, but to the entire province in the second half of the twentieth century. Put plainly, Milly Rees was one of the most fascinating careers in Halifax—ever. She was an exacting, mindful businesswoman who owned and operated multiple brothels in the city, and allusions to her—in the hotel lobby, on the street corner, in the schoolyard—were pervasive. Milly Rees figures in Halifax's mythology much in the way Mayor Jimmy Walker does for New York or Mrs. O'Leary for Chicago or Rocket Richard for Montreal: singular personalities richly identified with a city's moral folklore. Much of what I know about Milly Rees I owe to an evening spent in the bottom of the Lord Nelson Hotel, in the now-vanished Lady's Beverage Room, in the company of a taxi driver named Murdoch Ryan.

A Note of Personal History: I was a crippled kid and spent my younger and more vulnerable years wheelchairing my way to school and back, unless the day was too icy or slushy or pouring rain, in which case I would call Regal Taxi. Given to my care was a voucher book of taxi chits, hundreds of which I would use during the years I wasn't able to walk. In this way I probably knew on a first-name basis more taxi drivers than any kid east of Montreal. Following my return to mobility, many of these drivers would remember loading me and my Petrie casts into their back seat and my wheelchair into the trunk, and so it was that in later years Murdoch Ryan would give me a

honk-and-smile whenever his Mercury Monarch passed me on the street. I would wave back, and in this way we preserved a familiarity that allowed for the prospect of taking him for drinks to ask about his motley career.

Murdoch Ryan was one of those men who look the same for decades, and all the details I remembered as a kid—black-framed glasses, grey cowlicks Brylcreemed and side-parted, a pack of Craven A Menthols in a left slicker pocket, the semi-compulsive jiggling of a single knee—these were all wonderfully intact the evening we met in the LBR. He was happy to talk, the interview filled three micro-cassettes, and though he winked and glanced at me from time to time, he seemed, after five Jack and Sevens, to be mostly playing to the audience that was my girlfriend Gail, who was just out of high school and freshly tanned from a summer working in the Naval Reserves.

"Who—Milly? Milly *Rees*? This is Milly Rees we're talking about now? Why Milly paid off the politicians, she paid off the police, my God, Milly would pay off the caterers at Camille's Fish and Chips if she thought it would do her any good. Smart lady. Hard-looking ticket, true, but fair. She had rules. She could be strict. But you always knew where you stood with Milly. Sixty years she ran that business. The place, the establishment she ran, this was the one behind Government House, Fifty-One Hollis, it had lines around the block during the war. 'I'm going to die at Fifty-One,' was what the sailors used to say, merchant marine and servicemen, before they went overseas. Some of those boys wouldn't come home, of course. But Milly, she was known all over. And in trouble with the law only once, if I remember right. In the last year of her life she got dinged for tax evasion. And how much money did she make that year? Three million dollars. In Halifax! All the money she made, Jesus. But she paid off those taxes. The mayor at the time, Porky MacPherson, he went to her funeral, God bless. Remember him? Oh, you do, do you, dear? But yes, I was one of Milly's drivers for years. Used to drive the girls around every week. Nice girls. Always dressed nice. Tipped pretty good. Some girls you'd see once or twice a week. Some you'd see once and never see again. But there was three I used to drive around pretty regular. Cee-Cee and Pearl and the one they called Maddy. Oh, I loved Maddy. A real sparkler. My God, they were living in an apartment on Jacob Street infested with three types of mice, mildew, you name it. Jacob Street's gone now, of course, torn down to make way for Scotia Square. But yes, usually you'd take the girls to whatever function it was, the event at the hotel or what-have-you—the Lord Nelson or the Sterling or one of the motels out

there on the Bedford Highway. Sometimes you went right to the fellow's house and, you know, you might have to wait for the magic to happen. We weren't supposed to know the names of the regulars. They had code names for all the regulars. One fellow they called Mister Quickly. Another was Doctor Shubenacadie. There was the Blond Bomber and Reverend Gravy Train. A fellow called Lard-Ass I never met. Nope. Never did meet Lard-Ass. Huey Boy and Black Angus. Boner Fitzgibbon was one they all liked. The fellow you were talking about? I think they called him His Honour because he'd been in the government. Older fellow. He was the one who went with Maddy? My favourite of Milly's girls. And Milly knew everyone in the city. Everyone worth knowing. Smart lady. So what's next, dear? Another round?"

Madeleine Zwicker was a slim young woman with a slash of strawberry blonde hair. There is only one photograph of Madeleine from her young adult years, but to see it once is to understand why she was one of the more dazzling women a city might cherish. As she floated through the marble halls of the Lord Nelson in October 1956, coming into full view of the Honourable H. P. Mair, I think his thoughts for the evening, for himself and for the future, were luminously readjusted. That Howland Mair might have met one of Milly's girls is not so remarkable—that he seemed to wish to marry her was another affair entirely. "When he returned to his practise," said my mother, "people said he wanted a divorce. But Vida wouldn't give him one. People didn't really get divorced back then. They just lived apart, you know. Oh she'd be seen with her husband sometimes. She sort of tolerated him, I suppose. But the truth was they led separate lives. She lived in the Hotel Nova Scotian the rest of her life. With a bottle of Beefeater gin. So there was no love in his life for oh, ten years or so. People do strange things when that happens. They look for love, they think they find it, they can convince themselves of anything. Yes, he thinks the light's gone out of his life forever and then he meets this girl from Ecum Secum. He was seventy-two at the time and she was twenty-nine. You do the math. They did the biology. Ha! It's funny now, but at the time the city was scandalized. I don't think Vida ever spoke to him again. And Madeleine, what happened to her, well, that was tragic. I don't know how many times she ended up in the hospital. And H. P. of course he didn't think anything was wrong with her!"

The ship they sailed in, the last from the Mair family shipyards, was a 24-foot ketch called Serendip. Toddling as a four-year-old in Point Pleasant

Park, I remember seeing her moored off the backyard dock of H. P. Mair's house on Chain Rock Drive—a sleek, wooden anomaly among all the fibreglass hulls bobbing at the other buoys. On the day H. P. Mair disappeared in August 1968, the ship was seen in full sail, downwind on a dead run that took her out past Herring Cove, Sambro Head, and beyond. A week or so later, a small two-master was seen off Cape Hatteras flying the blue ensign of the RNSYS, but without a soul onboard. Nova Scotia has more than its share of maritime mysteries and unsolved secrets—and Serendip would become another, sailing wide in vasty seas, without captain or crew, floating in and out of shipping lanes, drifting across the Atlantic, sightings made as far away as the Azores. She would become a lost ship, 17 weeks a derelict, weatherworn, sun-faded, finally found and steadied by the coast guard off the Canary Islands, 2000 nautical miles away. When she was towed into Halifax a few days after Christmas that year, there were some in the city who expected to find evidence of a bloody struggle or a steamer trunk of body parts. There were no such signs—the ship was bleak save for an ice bucket, a wicker picnic basket, and a woman's shoe wedged into the planking of the starboard gunwale.

A year after meeting H. P. Mair in the Lord Nelson Hotel, Madeleine Zwicker became pregnant, though it is unclear to whom she conveyed this intelligence, and it is possible, of course, that she did not know who the father was. For two centuries, unwanted newborns in Halifax had been abandoned by desperate mothers in stables, in cemeteries, in parks. At the end of the Second World War, ten years earlier, there had been a ghastly scandal at the Ideal Maternity Home, an unlicenced facility that sold infants—illegally—to families in New Jersey and New York. Babies who were unadoptable, *hundreds* of them, were starved to death and buried in wooden dairy boxes in a nearby field. Madame Milly Rees would have been alert to public sensitivities to such stories, which is why she ensured that Madeleine Zwicker received proper medical care, giving birth to a son in Delivery Room B of the Grace Maternity Hospital in November 1957. When no father was presented, and when Madeleine began to behave erratically in the weeks after her labour, Milly Rees installed the boy in her own house, giving him the surname of her then-boyfriend, a character named Dollar Bill Blomgren—a bootlegger about whom I've been able to discover very little—and so it was that little Vance Blomgren was raised and provided for by Milly Rees.

"That first child she has," said my mother, "well, it's not the type of story you want to get around. Certainly not in those days. So she disappears for a while. I'm not sure where she got to. But a few years later she shows up again. Well, my God, H. P. brings her to the Nova Scotia Bar Society! I'm sitting there with your father, this was down at the Digby Pines, and H. P. comes out with Madeleine on his arm. When you're at these dinners, you know, you're sitting there for some ungodly amount of time, outside in the cold, the wind coming off the Bay of Fundy, lobster bibs flapping, and everyone's waiting for some asshole to finish his speech, but your father won't leave because how would that look? So Maddy and I, we go off for a cigarette, everyone smoked in those days, and we're joined by Tiggy and you remember Mrs. Ogilvie? Well, I'm not sure if they know who this Maddy woman is. To them, she'd be some common prostitute. But here she is tearing strips off all assembled. It was hysterical. I mean, funny. Like manic funny. Well, manic-depressive. She'd be what's called bi-polar today. Oh, the man was fooling himself. Thinking everything's going to be all right. Carrying on as if nothing's wrong. Throwing his life away for a kink of a girl."

The next winter Madeleine Zwicker conceived a second child and that autumn delivered a son—my great friend Cyrus Mair. "With that second child, I thought maybe he would've sent her to Toronto and set her up there. That's what Frank Tobin did. He had a girlfriend in Bedford for years, the travel agent with the scoop-neck sweaters. When she got pregnant, she and the little girl moved to Toronto. But I suppose H. P. wanted them in town where he could see them. He must have really cared for her. I just don't think she was competent. And suffering from terrible postpartum. I had it with Katie. You feel overwhelmed. Terrible anxiety. Everything's hopeless. I don't know what kind of medication they had her on, but I remember seeing her on Spring Garden Road just out of it, pale as anything, not a thought in her head. Then she gets caught stealing those earrings from Mill's Brothers. Poor thing. What a sin. It was heartless how they treated her, the poor woman. That's who I feel sorry for in all this business. The men, they think only of themselves. That woman needed help—not to be jammed into some man's ideas for himself."

Not long after her arrest, Madeleine began the first in a series of stays at a sanatorium across the harbour. Founded as the Mount Hope Asylum for the Insane in 1858, it would become the province's largest mental health

facility. The Nova Scotia Hospital—or, as it was casually called in my childhood, the NS—was often used as a threatening reference, kids everywhere hearing variations on a line like, "You keep acting like that and you're going to end up in the frigging NS." The hospital is plainly visible from Halifax, a collection of red brick buildings on top of hill and heath overlooking Georges Island, and this was where Madeleine Zwicker was admitted for treatment in 1964. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, she was given a course of psychiatric drugs, experimental injections, and electroconvulsive therapy, but to very little outward improvement, and the birth of her second child—and Howland's death five years later—would result in a complete mental breakdown. The evening of the sailing accident, she was found collapsed on the Dartmouth side of the harbour, sodden, shivering, aphasic. Maddy Went Crazy—that's the Coles Notes to the story. She was deinstitutionalized and living in a group home on Vernon Street when first I saw her in the 1970s, by then one of the city's most recognizable street people, very much reduced in faculties, with a face lopsided, left eye droopy, one shoe tied to her foot with ribbon, the other in a ragged stocking.

My Sisters Talking: "I know who you mean—she was fricking psycho—she fought Dobermans"; "You used to see her on Summer Street when the Public Gardens opened in May. She'd be speaking in tongues, going from person to person, trying to sell her photographs"; "I gave Crazy Maddy two dollars once, and from then on it's like she's my best friend. When Jamie and I went to Thackeray's for my grad, she saw me through the window and barges right up to my table to ask for money. 'Make a deal with the lady?' She always used to say that. Remember?"

I do—and I remember her wandering skittish the streets of Halifax, whispering into her coat-sleeve, a plastic bag hanging from her coat's middle button—this bag a mix of breadcrumbs and crinkly old photographs. Her face, too, I remember: the sun-damaged wrinkles of her cheeks, the missing-pigment splotches on her nose and upper lip, all these specifics mystifying-terrifying to a child. But worse was the wince within her eyes that showed the pain of her own awareness and the distress such awareness brought her—as if in her mind she were participating in three different conversations, one happy, two sad, all painful. She would die a few years later, found inert on a ventilation grate on the south side of Scotia Square, in her coat pockets a litter of odd details—a cut glass door knob, a near-empty bag of Peek Freans, a sprouting tulip bulb.

A Note of Municipal History: early in the 1960s a bill was signed to expropriate and demolish 168 buildings and five city streets of old Halifax to make way for Scotia Square, at the time the largest commercial development in eastern Canada. Victorian Halifax was crumbling—Moir's Chocolate Factory, the South Street Poor House, the Halifax School for the Blind—all of these would be demolished before my childhood was done. Scotia Square marked the era of Halifax's great post-war expansion, and H. P. Mair and his partners at Kingfisher Properties were among those who would steer grimy, rusting Halifax toward six-lane expressways, cloverleaf interchanges, high-rises, shopping centres—though these plans for urban renewal, population displacement, and high-density land use were not supported in all quarters. Gail Benninger, fresh from reading Jane Jacobs, would describe the ideas of H. P. Mair as "WASP ascendancy bullshit," dismissing wholesale his rational planning as the prejudiced views "typical of that generation of white supremacist assholes." While I think H. P. Mair wished the city to be storied, to be splendid, to fulfill the promise he knew in his gilded childhood, he was forcing a vision of grandeur on a city that, except for the giddy expansions of its wartime years, had been in decline for almost a century. He reckoned on the city's growth and ascension, imagining an easy commerce of the old and new, but things are not always easy in Halifax, fewer are really new, and the city takes its time about its own evolution.

Still—as a response to Scotia Square, he pursued a final development called Empire Plaza. It was an elaborate scheme that sought to preserve six pre-confederation buildings around what would become the city's largest business tower, home to offices, storefront shops, and a new royal conservatory of music. For this venture, Kingfisher needed an anchor tenant and what better and steadier than the provincial government itself? Just the year before, Gregor Burr had crossed the floor of the Legislature to join the ruling Progressive Conservative party, and the prospective deal, based on early conversations, seemed a given. This was the plan and the exploit and in 1964, when it was drawn up, Empire Plaza must have seemed a fitting capstone to the monument of H. P. Mair's life and career. But the fate of Empire Plaza, like so many developments in Halifax, was blighted—devised and ground-broken in a time of optimism, stalled and unoccupied in an economic downturn, its Office Space banners blowing to tatters.

Kingfisher Properties would dissolve in a series of misunderstandings, accusations, and litigation. The suit, in the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia,

Trial Division, was between Howland Poole Mair, plaintiff, and Gregor Oswalt Burr, defendant, and heard at Halifax on May 29, 1968, the plaintiff contending the defendant in essence directed him to believe the provincial government would be leasing the first five floors of Empire Plaza. "I think it's probably reasonable to assume," said my father, remembering the case and speaking in the studied tone he reserved for subjects whose complexities were sometimes the focus of unstable speculation, "that the interests of the three partners had separated some time before." My father, who would represent Gregor Burr in a variety of lawsuits, both civil and criminal, was exceptionally circumspect whenever one of his clients was discussed. In fact, my father spoke so seldom to any of us about what he did when he wasn't in our house, that the few times he did speak about his cases—or anything at all that actually mattered to him—I tended to respond with full attention, though pretending, for reasons I'm not sure I understand, as if I were only half-listening.

"Very strange, Max," he said. "Whenever you set up a deal between partners, whatever their personal relationship, even if they're related by marriage, it's best to have a separate lawyer, preferably at a different firm, represent each party. To have one lawyer do the deal for all three partners at Kingfisher was very odd. That H. P. would have exposed himself to such a misconstruction was very out of character. He may have had other things on his mind at the time."

"You *think*?" said my mother.

"Well, my sense was that his own finances were in some disarray."

"In some disarray? Stewart. Get real. He had an office building he couldn't fill, a legal bill he couldn't pay, a wife and mistress he couldn't support, and a house up for sale—the man didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it through! She bailed him out. The sister did. Honest to God, the Mairs, that family, they're not made for the real world. H. P. wants a conservatory, he wants expressways, I don't know where in the name of God he thought he was living. Cole Porter's New York, maybe. Cole Porter's New Glasgow, more like it. I know that building was supposed to be his legacy, but by the time he died, the things he knew, the life he knew, it was all disappearing. He wanted things done his way, but that way was gone. Oh, he was lost at the end. It's a wonder he lasted as long as he did."

They were on an eastern tack, the wind from the northwest, the mainsail

fastened, the dazzle of an August afternoon. H. P. Mair was born at the end of the nineteenth century, and mostly I have imagined his life in sepia tones, sometimes grey-scaled and indistinct, like the blackening Ben-Day dots of a newspaper image, or dark-hued like a Steichen photograph, but, when picturing the events of his last day, I see the sequence in brash colours, like a film from the American New Wave. Colour 16mm shot on hundred-foot reels in a spring-wound Bolex, the image glinting with lens flares, a scene quickening as the motor sputters down, perforations of a reel-end flapping with random reds and yellows. The ocean is a saturated blue, the luffing sails burning white, and flashing into frame are further details—the scarlet of lipstick, a sun-freckled bald head, milky sunlight washing over the green bottle of champagne. A bottle of Mumms was purchased earlier that day at the Clyde Street liquor store, but it was not found onboard, so let us suppose that H. P. is at the helm, Madeline charged with evening drinks, fumbling with the bottle's foil wrapping. As a gust of wind fills the mainsail, she loses her balance, the bottle dropping and skidding along the deck, precarious on the leeward edge, Maddy sliding down to retrieve it—only to slip between boom and gunwale and vanish with the bottle into the sea, one shoe left behind, caught in the side planks. Howland points the boat into the wind—the mainsail for some moments loose and flappy—so to scan the surface of the water, calling her name, hearing nothing, then deciding to pursue her overboard as a second squall fills the sails, sending the ship towards the open ocean. The harbour is never really warm, not even in summer, and the cold shock of water to a somewhat desiccated man in his late eighties would be enough, it would do, the heart attack sudden, the drowning quick, dimming eyes staring into the sea's green darkness, plasma from his blood filling up his salt-watered lungs, his body softly following the sinking champagne bottle more than sixty feet to the sea floor below. For sixteen days, in fully five fathoms of water, H. P. Mair lay, his drenched remains settled into seaweed and mud, until the decaying contents of his stomach—the beef tenderloin in wild mushroom sauce, the duchess potatoes, the Johnnie Walker Blacks from the Halifax Club—would generate gas enough to float his body from the deeps to the surface, the bloating corpse breaking into daylight with the force of a popping cork. So long submerged, the Honourable Howland Poole Mair was almost unidentifiable, the skin of his hands wet-wrinkled, his face blistered black, his blue eyes lost to sea-bottom sculpin.