

A Moment of Perfidy

– a short story by George Pratt

What a pleasure to tune in to CBC Radio's North by Northwest on a recent morning to hear host Cheryl McKay in sparkling dialogue with Fran Jenkins, the fine British Columbia artist of stone-carving fame. Fran's was a voice I had heard but once, all too many years past. Listening to that animated interview carried me back to the Vancouver spring day Fran and I first met—and whence events overtook us that rendered the occasion a vignette truly etched in stone.

I must firstly mention that I, too, am a sculptor in stone. At the time of the incident, I think it was 1981, my studio was an open, stone-walled enclosure on the industrial edge of Vancouver's False Creek, now replaced by upscale condos. It was there I hammered out my particular brand of small animals and birds from marble and limestone.

In those days, I sold them through a powerhouse of a gallery up on Burrard Street (Images for a Canadian Heritage) and there first heard the appellation 'The Revelstoke Carvers' as they were commonly called, for they also sold their work through that gallery. Being artisans of the same gallery 'stable' we were thus exposed to each other's work. For a few years, we had regarded one another's creations with mutual, though vicarious admiration, for we never actually met during our respective visits to deliver work to the gallery. Over time, I perceived that the Revelstoke Carvers were three in number: Bill Cameron; Ruby, his wife, and their friend, Fran Jenkins. All were artisans of much merit and though I felt privileged that my work should be exhibited beside

theirs, I knew them only by the signatures on their sculptures.

Their curiosity, perhaps piqued by their reciprocal association with the faceless colleague with whom they vied for display space, caused the Revelstoke carvers to one day make a peregrination down to my studio to see what this George Pratt was all about. So it was that I looked up from my hammering one morning to perceive Bill Cameron, his stocky, muscular stature reflecting the massive grizzly bears he created; his wife Ruby, the embodiment of the gentle charm that were her soapstone geese; and Fran Jenkins, in graceful understatement like the excellence of artisanship of her sculptured cougars. Along with Fran's husband Tony, the quartette was studying me curiously through the open studio gate.

There is, I think, an occasion in everyone's life when a chance encounter results in an instant electric infatuation of stupefying intensity. Today, we call it a 'Moment'.

The Moment was Fran Jenkins. My, oh my, Fran Jenkins. Did ever such a handsome woman darken the door to my workyard. It was not a moment—it was a nanosecond; a blip in which her colleagues dissolved and left only Fran Jenkins. Poised and lithe like her cougars, her hair was just beginning to streak that elegant grey so sought after in the high-fashion magazines. It perfectly complimented the stunning grey-green suede pantsuit in which she was dressed. Her intoxicatingly scented presence was a stark contrast to the sweaty, dust-coated sculptor standing in the chips and detritus of a working studio—a man transfixed by the 'moment' with which he had become instantly beset. To this day, Fran Jenkins could not be aware of the

hormone-jangling effect her presence visited upon that poor artist (who, I hasten to point out, had, and still has, a thoroughly excellent wife who ably holds his attentions.) For a few heady moments though, flushing all over, my moment was garnished with perfidy as we cautiously introduced ourselves.

My open yard studio being hard beside the water, witness to our meeting was a ubiquitous squadron of seagulls that eternally wheeled and sideslipped and squawked overhead. At the very moment Fran graciously offered her hand in introduction, closing my throat and driving my pulse into somersaults, one of the more incontinent seagulls chose to drop his calling card from directly above us. The result was a revolting splash of digested fish that plummeted down, snarling in a tuft of Fran's fragrant hair as it continued in a white splurt down the left lapel of her jacket. The world stopped; none among us knew which way to look. Fran, her dignity never wavering, simply stiffened like the stones with which we were surrounded, as if waiting for the Great Hand to reach out of the sky to wipe away the evidence of this infamy. My mind whirled in williwaws trying to conjure up a solution to erase the trauma of it all. Inspired, I remembered the jackknife that I have carried in my pocket since I was a small boy. Of the many times it had 'come in handy' as my grandfather said it would the day he gave it to me, this was clearly a case for its handiest use ever. I whipped it out, opened the ever sharp big blade and readied to cut off the besmirched tuft of hair. If I was guilty of pause, it was influenced by the realization that to do so would mean I had to first grasp the tuft. By default, this would allow me the intoxication of personally touching the peerless Fran Jenkins—

but the price would be having to thus immerse my thumb and forefinger in the dollop of defiling ordure. But who cared, for this was Fran Jenkins, whose very presence could set the stoniest of men's hearts to going pit-a-pat and transform lowly artists like me to quavering jelly. Thus motivated, I grabbed the odious glob, excised it and flung it to the ground. Warming to the work, I then grasped the top of that chic suede lapel, scraped the remaining seagull cocktail away with one flourishing sweep, and whipped it off my knife blade to ooze into the pile of chips upon which we were standing.

'That seemed to be a good solution' I ventured. Fran relaxed visibly, exhaling the breath she had surely been holding all the while, and said quietly "Yes. I believe it was."

At the time of the broadcast interview, I had never seen Fran again in all the intervening years, although I had occasionally encountered her daughter, Cathryn, who grew to be another fine carver. By those fleeting encounters we exchanged greetings.

The ardor of The Moment now long cooled, I am inspired to look Fran up when she moves to Vancouver, as I am told she soon will. As colleague sculptors of long years, for we are now in our seventies, there is much we would have to talk about on the occasion of that reunion—but there can be no doubt about how the conversation would be opened.