

# Pushing string

16 Dec 13

The soon to be wet westerly wind scuffed the surface of the harbour as the ferry manoeuvred up to the landing. Chester dumped the last box of our catch in the truck while I closed up the boat. I kept one eye on the ferry for girls with backpacks. When everything was secure we went to watch the arrivals and departures.

"It'll be tears before bed time agin Chester"

"Ain't been a summer for rain like it Neon." He offered me a Marlboro. "You ain't been square all day. You alright?"

"Yeah. Should a told yer before 'spose. I think my wife's daughter is visitin'."

"Your ex-wife. And you said you ain't 'ad no children." The mooring ropes were tight and now the ramp began its moaning descent onto the concrete. Passengers waved, engines started.

"I'm guessing Chester. Pawina ain't a usual name. That 'ud be her grandma, my mother-in law."

"Why's she come Neon? Didn't she say?" The dozen foot passengers, all summer tourists by the look of it were being let off first.

"She said to interview me about my carvings. Sylv was blond. That must be her. Let's go." I approached the bunch of arrivals consulting their guides and maps no doubt wondering what hospitality awaited at this rotting edge of British Columbia. "Hi guys. Welcome to Lawson. I'm Neon the carver. If you need anything ask Chester. It's going to rain heavy before dark." There was no doubt about Pawina. She had her grandmother's squat build and thin eyes. I held my hand out to her then kissed her on the cheek with as much of a hug as I could manage while she was supporting her backpack. "Give it to me dear." She didn't understand.

"I'm pleased to meet you Mister Neon." and smiled. Already the tide of shuffling backpackers, motor-homes and big-rigs was leaving us an island. An island of emotion.

"Let me carry your pack to the truck..." She smiled. "My not-quite daughter." I nearly choked knowing the rocks to be exposed over the next couple of days till the ferry returned.

"I can make it that far." She smiled around at the world. The smile of youth. "Come on not-quite pop." She was like her mother: Alive and ready for anything.

As I drove the three quarters of a mile to my home along the back-track I pointed out the landmarks of decay. "The patched asphalt goes for ten miles up there round to Rooinooga Inlet where they used to mine gold and then every couple of decades another flourish of speculators arrive. This is the saw-mill." I pulled-up to emphasise my point.

"Where? There's just a lake."

"Closed in the sixties. I salvaged boards and cinder blocks from there to build my home. That clump of brush was the mill. You want to meet some of your family who worked there Paw?"

"Can I Neon? Mom was vague."

"Your mom was never vague with me Paw."

"Perhaps I mean I didn't grasp everything. It's not what I expected."

"What did you expect?" I offered her a cigarette, she declined. I opened the truck window as I knew women who weren't smokers liked a show of manners.

"I don't know. It's all so – basic. Houses so far apart. Utility poles just rough trees on the tilt. No lawns. Everything wherever. Not even a mall. Is there a school?"

I took a deep breath of calming smoke. "Yes Paw. Eighteen pupils. Do you want to be a teacher?"

"No. Perhaps a bit. I want to be an economist." I didn't know what an economist was except they came on the TV being knowledgeable.

"I haven't told anybody you're visiting Paw. Loads of folk would like to see you and ask you about your mom but for me when Sylv left I never wanted to be reminded of her again." I wrenched the key to start the engine and we hit the dirt round the back of the choked ponding lake, bumped over the old haul road then dipped into my yard without a breath being spoken.

I'd had three weeks to prepare for this visit. Two after the guess that it was Sylv's daughter. I wasted a day and a night wishing it was Sylv herself and another asking Greg at the Post-office if it was possible to trace a Pawina somebody living in Boston so I could call her back. He said to forget it and trust to providence. I'd mined into the spare room in bits and starts being stopped with memories. Eventually, after a bottle or two of Club Whisky, I'd made the room livable with a quilt borrowed from a neighbour full of curiosity.

"It ain't grand dear but I can have hot water ready in an hour if you want a shower."

For a moment she looked at me like a visitor to a museum looks at exhibits then turned away with a "Thank you not-pop. Give me a few minutes to freshen up then can we talk?"

"I got chores. Make yourself at home for an hour dear. There really are bears and wolves about." I hadn't got chores, that was the problem. I went across to Mack and Kim's and sat in their lovely main room with soft sofa and big TV while their two kids watched the Muppets as if they were sitting on springs. Kim understood. That's what neighbours are for. I was commanded to remain where I was as two more were programmed into her family and she went to fetch Paw. I was grateful. I could have managed but this was better.

Mack is a government surveyor who is often away in the summer. Kim was delighted to have Paw with her strange accent and me to kid's teatime and then supper. I knew Kim and Paw must have their shared secrets about me. I could accept that. The kids were at the stage where drawing could be stories. We'd done straight lines, curved our hands to shape faces and giggled over the shape, feel and general lunacy of ears. The evidence that I'd put ketchup on all our right ears and pressed them on paper was going brown and crinkly stuck to the fridge. I drew grandma Paw for the kids. I showed her as she'd once worked as a lumber-jill on the log-rafting during the war. Then a man in a tug skipper's jaunty hat. "This is David Robert Wellington Vicks" I repeated the 'David Robert Wellington Vicks' a number of times with a good rhythm and fingers counting out the parts. I sketched Pawina's grandfather with his pipe and mandolin. He was still alive in a home near Vancouver but wouldn't recognise anyone, let alone me or Pawina.

Kim was the best wife I never had. She asked Pawina all about Boston. She fed us on good salmon. She asked our guest about her future. She avoided the difficult issue. At one point Paw said "I've got a message from my mom."

Kim said "You're here for three more days 'till the next ferry so save it a while Pawina. Do you have any brothers or sisters..."

I wanted to take us home so Kim could do her chores and be alone. Kim defied me. Whatever I said she had an answer for. Washing-up? Use the machine. Tired? Of course not! It wasn't often there were new faces. I still nurtured a desire to go to a cold, dark, childless home even though it was semi-dark and raining big blobs outside. Just two minutes to get home, three if we walked. Bit by bit I understood they were clinging to moments of life to share in the warm

together. Something in me left when Sylv left. I'm not ashamed of Sylv leaving me for the South. Perhaps I'm ashamed of not following.

I'd brought-in two sorts of cereal for Pawina. She seemed content and smiled. I went outside into the damp, warm, true westerly that spoke of steadiness to have my first ciggy of the day. When she came to the door with cereal bowl in hand it reminded me of Sylv about to issue a command. So it came. "Not-pop, can we talk later if it's convenient?"

"Yes dear. Let me finish this and check the workshop then I'll be with you." That gave me a breather. As I stood in the chaos of half-completed carvings taking in my nicotine starter I wondered what good a breather was. I'd have to be honest with her.

We stood with mugs of instant looking out of the main room window at the clouds dropping their white tatters down the green forest slopes on the far side of the inlet. I'd tidied-up of course but my furniture was worn with working jeans and more suited to a being used to keep stacks of hunting magazines and ammunition than frosted cakes and sparkly ornaments. "My fisher-mate asked me why've you come. I said to ask me about my carvings. You're a lovely girl that reminds me of your mom and your grandma..." There were worms in the sand beneath my feet. A sea-eagle glided into view then dropped a hundred feet faster than a stone into the sea. After a few moments of splashing it fought to take off. Now we saw the size of the salmon trying to twist out of the eagle's talons. I'd fought desperate fish so I admired a bird with the determination to go for the big ones. I hoped it could keep its grip. With great slow wafts of its supple but strong wings it beat its way up into the forest with its silver prize. "Wow! I wish I'd got my camera." I was about to give a fatherly lecture on leaving the past to decay with dignity when the tide of time went out. "Are you alright not-pop?"

"I'm alright. Is alright what you mean? Is that what your mom wanted to know?" She held me like an aged relative. Aged! I wasn't aged! There was something about her confident optimism that made me change my mind. In that second I gave up. My future was past.

She went into the kitchen to make more coffee, looking at me as a faller eyes-up a tree. I had nothing to lose. "Do you want to know why your mother left me? If so I don't know. I hate her. I love you Paw. Would you rather know about me and Lawson now?" She took the bait. There was nowhere to go on the choppy

water today and nowhere to go on the land covered by low-cloud so I'd better start straight away. "What's your mom told me about me Paw?"

"She loved you Luke. She ran away from boredom. She regretted every minute after."

"No Paw. I said what's she told you about me? Her life is on another planet."

"You were an orphan, probably an illegitimate child shuffled away. Average until you joined the army then happy families until you were wounded."

"Rich Woznak dropped a two-fifty pound bomb on my foot. So they chucked me out as soon as I got out of hospital. Not a cent of pension! Thank you Uncle Sam!" I could see she was confused by my sarcasm. "I'm not a hero Paw. I escaped over the border."

It took her a while to catch up. I was patient. It was a long time ago for me too. I expect I couldn't recall half of it. "What brought you here?"

"Your mom. She was a nurse at the hospital and we fell in love. She sent me to convalesce with her parents here." I could see the 'why didn't you have children' question fighting against decency in her open face. "We couldn't have children Paw. For some reason. Perhaps it's me firin' blanks." I tried to raise my confident-personality I'd created after Sylv left.

"Sylv is alive Luke. She wants to come back."

"I'm a man not a library book! Tell her... ..Tell her I love her and hate her. Listen to my story and you decide. "

I reached for my prepared script knowing I would have to write another if Sylv returned. "You know I'm called Neon because of my wood carvings that look like neon signs. I made one then a few then got the colour magazines interested. Soon the name of Lawson was a tourist destination. I invented clever versions with fluorescent paint and a black-light across the street that made them light-up with garish colours. That's ultra-violet light which you can't see but they use in discos. I'd already carved the Welcome to Lawson sign on the highway to nowhere. Then I added separate signs with silly slogans. *Leave your anger at home. Home of underwater romance* – that a reference to the whales you often see in the inlets. *Twinned with evil* – That got me into trouble with the school teacher. I'd hopes of her once but she put religion before people. Probably the best one was a single flashing LED powered by a battery peeping through *The Las Vegas of British Columbia*. You see I turned an idiot's thought into a carving and then into magazine articles and then into tourists and then into money.

"That's what I call pushing string. That's what I do. That's why I'm famous. You see?"

"I half see pop. An experiment goes right?"

"An investment pays off and pays-off again. And again. I auction-off each year's slogan, only locals and relatives mind you, and the money goes to the community."

"That's very noble pop."

"But don't you see? That money allows me to put anything I like on the sign. It's win and win and win. That's what I call pushing string."

"But Luke? What does it achieve in the scheme of things?"

"It's not what you call the scheme of things that matters."

"Dad – I know you're not my real dad – Can Mom come back? She's had a horrible life."

"Come on let's go. I'll introduce you to your relatives not-quite daughter. Your mom made you just like your grandmother to me. You can't come back unless you can be half of what she was."

Then I was pulled by the string I'd always pushed. "I don't know where you belong Paw but Sylv belongs here with me."