

Introduction

When I first wrote a story for our school's review, *The Bohemian*, I had started it from a significant place of my youth, a spectacular site where I spent a few summers watching the ocean from the top of a cliff. When I explored it in my memory, the only person left there was an old parish priest attached to his church in more ways than one. I wrote a first story in which he wondered if he could get out and travel. There was a sequel in which he stayed a few days in the city of Montreal, surprised by the modernism and different lifestyles. In "A Leap of Faith" he travels to St. Boniface, Manitoba, reading *La Symphonie Pastorale* by André Gide, a gift from his nephew in Montreal. The book serves as a first agent of transformation for the old clergyman, who then discovers a welcoming place for him to stay instead of returning to his village.

In one version of "A Leap of Faith," a young student had appeared at the college where the priest's friend worked as a counselor. His story, I thought, could be interesting because it would look at the same world as the priest's from the point of view of a young man who could not quite fit its expectations. But "Heating Up the Fog" became a very difficult story to tell, as it revealed the disturbances of a young mind unable to cope with his feelings. I had been fascinated by stories like Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," and James Joyce's "Eveline." At the Library I found a book of testimonials by men who had been victims of early abuse, and how it had thrown them into the abyss of personality disorders. Every revision left me emotionally drained, and I decided to let "Heating Up the Fog" out in the name of those who could never meet someone like that counselor, someone who appears like a guardian angel at a crucial moment.

When one thinks of a bilingual city like Montreal, it is easy to imagine that all its citizens can use either language transparently. Not so: the Montreal I know has been divided by language, religion, ethnicity, and wealth for a long time. I wanted to write about someone who would look at it with a touch of irony, and I thought my Irish-Canadian grandfather could do that. I never knew him, but I knew he worked at the French-speaking daily *La Presse*. I was also interested in what the city looked like fifty years ago and apply to it the pressure to conform from in-laws, the clergy, censorship, ignorance, and social hierarchy. The narrator of “The Confirmed Bachelor” is gradually pulled into the story, away from his aloofness as if it were impossible to remain “outside of the box.”

Another bachelor appears in “Cherchez la Femme,” an almost unwilling tourist in Paris after his girlfriend has dumped him. Here I started the story from the display of Foucault’s Pendulum in the Pantheon because of its hypnotic quality. The pendulum sets a slow rhythm and steers the mind of the protagonist on different courses. He struggles with reminiscences of his girlfriend (what she said, or what she would have said) and his own lack of common sense and direction. In this story I could discover the pleasure of driving a character crazy with internal dialogue and external randomness – I was inspired by modern authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

Until I wrote “The Pleasure Party,” my characters had been predominantly masculine. After reading D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, I wondered how an author could successfully get in the head of characters of the opposite sex. In this story I applied the theme of someone who discovers that the world around her has changed. Given a chance, she can experiment, but who knows if it will take her to a new level of happiness?

Writing “Are We Dispersing” gave me great pleasure and excitement. Started after reading Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, from which came the original title phrase

("Dispersed Are We"), this story was written in fragments. I had interested myself in the way mirrors had been used in modern novels, giving characters an opportunity to see who they were. Twins came to mind as people who would have some identity issues (with themselves and others), and to make matters even more blurred I thought that they should be of different genders, and that their common thoughts would appear as dialogue. Then their parents entered, each with a separate identity yearning to come out, and seeing themselves through their gender-bending children. I initially wrote the dream sequence, in which the twins intervene in a scene of *Between the Acts*, as an exercise in surrealism: it was not at the beginning of the story, it was not a dream, and it did not have a comic end. I remembered seeing this kind of intervention in other works such as Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and being enchanted by the idea. As in *Between the Acts*, we have wars going on, but in our times they appear mostly edited on television. Heroes can be made up to influence our glorification of the act of war. Staging this story in London provided for the rich context of museums and street scenes. Perhaps Virginia Woolf's influence is visible in the way characters were developed, how they think, and how they have impossible dreams at times.

Each story in this collection takes the reader through a journey of one kind or another: it could be an actual trip in a foreign land where the sights stimulate the characters' response, digging into memories, or a journey into the depths of the protagonist's mind. Often at a juncture, these characters carry "baggage," the sum of their past experiences, causing them to be diffident. They may be wary of a changing world, but as they encounter new situations and people, they reveal more of themselves and their desire to move forward on a new path of discovery. They are alive; eventually the fog will dissipate and the journey ahead will become clearer.