

A Fondness for The Bay

BY ARITHA VAN HERK

Dena will never, in her uneventful life, ride the beautifully refurbished woodblock steps of Macy's escalator. Her vacations will never take her as far as New York. Nor will she ever face any kind of firearm, never have to coordinate an eloquent conversation with incipient death. The most money she will ever spend will be on a deep, luxurious couch, forest green, that she finds in The Bay's household furnishings department.

At home, the forks were stainless steel, their tines bitten and bent. Until 1967, when Dena's family made indoor plumbing their Centennial project, the toilet was an outdoor two-holer, and they took turns bathing in a dented tin tub on Saturday nights, littlest first, in the logic of smaller, less dirt, cleaner water, on up to larger, more dirt, last in line. During the week, they used a basin and ewer, a washcloth rubbed under their arms and around their necks to the backs of their ears. Until 1970, Dena slept with Janie in a bed creaky as the frame house that sailed the folds of Alberta parkland, sucking in draft between its cracks, shuddering at every gust. They made elaborate efforts to avoid touching one another.

— Stay on your own side. —

— Shove over. —

Her sister's index finger drew a heavy furrow down the field of blankets.

— This is the dividing line. One leg over and I'll —

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Janie never had to finish her threat. That invisible fence will stay with Dena forever, make her hesitate at the divisions of sidewalks, the mark on the floor that people standing in line for automatic tellers observe. Dena tries not to feel inadequate, but she can be frozen by details. Janie is the one who does the thinking, Janie the one who understands what work means and where it should get you.

Dena is the sensitive one, eager to absorb what her hands and feet make of meaning, the deflection of an arm or subtle arch of an eyebrow sometimes powerful enough to sink her to the ground, shuddering with sobs. Janie would never sit down and cry, and Dena dares to indulge in tears only on Edmonton afternoons when the sun is hopelessly bright and transparent, when the cold numbs her teeth, and when she can't remember who she is working for, herself or some future that will never arrive. In the 90s, everyone will question their employment, will change jobs without a second thought, but Dena does not know that yet. No one in 1970 knows that yet.

It isn't the work Dena minds. She's ignored and endured too many jobs to take details personally, to cringe at the rancid curl of smell from the armpit of her inherited uniform, the way moviegoers overlook the nibbled cuticles on her hand taking their cardboard ticket stubs, don't bother to

PARAMOUNT

KID
SUNDAY
THE
AND
CASSIDY
BUTCH



Hudson's Bay Company
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meet her eyes. Dena's working with a purpose, this extra job to save just enough for her extra desires, which flare like a match struck to a wick. She's sensible enough to know that she has to have patience, that it will take a while for her to accumulate what she needs, and then a while longer before she can apply that amount of money and experience to her unimaginable future.

Watching for the flare of fire in darkness rubbed by rows of heads, trying to catch the moment, twice a night and three times on Saturdays, when Paul Newman and Robert Redford scream as they jump from the cliff, is more diverting than typing letters for her belly-suited boss, Mr. L.M. Merriman, who employs her to cross her legs outside his door and call him sir, her days spent clacking meaningless reams of words through the keys of the IBM Selectric. He makes errors in subject/verb agreement, and when Dena, once, corrected him — just for appearance's sake, sir — he told her to put the sentence back the way it was, not her job to change his letters, and he/He/HE was the boss.

Dena replaced his mistake and tried not to cry. She wants to quit, but she knows she would only be changing offices, all typists' jobs more or less the same. What else is there to do but follow her fingers around the typewriter keys during the day, then work her way through *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the movie that she will see twice tonight, the first show at 7:10, the second at 9:20. She will tear tickets in half and sell licorice and shovel popcorn into cardboard cartons spotted with grease, all with one ear tuned to the film spooling itself past lines that she knows almost better than her own name.

She's done a lot worse work than she does here, carried

ten-gallon pails, hands clenched around metal handles until her forearms felt like they were pulling away from her elbows. She's driven a tractor and hayrake through a few lightning bolts, the Alberta kind, blue and forked and wicked, striking two places at once. She's picked stones from the summerfallow under a bleaching August sun. And she's peeled enough potatoes at harvest time to feed what seemed like famines, the vegetable scraper lodging a stitch in her right thumb that lasted two days.

And shovelling too, brutal work. Dena's shovelled snow and shit and chop, feed and barley and even sand, truckloads of shovelfuls while slow Alberta afternoons closed down around winter's flanks, when she felt only the grease of sweat and the elastic grind of muscles along her backbone. Although Dena's feet still ache, that kind of dog-tired bone-dense fatigue doesn't come from ushering at the Paramount, with the chest-high ledge at the back of the theatre where Dena rests her arms and watches the movie while she watches the audience watching the movie. She watches the young lovers who sit right at the back, below that ledge, their hands and mouths greedy for contact, crossing the dividing lines of clothing as much as they dare.

And she watches for the quick jump of matches held to cigarettes. She is supposed to pinpoint the offending smoker, steer the beam of her flashlight down the aisle, and politely but firmly inform the guilty patron that there is no smoking in the theatre.

She practices in front of her tinny bathroom mirror every afternoon before she goes to work.

— No smoking in the theatre, please. —

The please is supposed to come out like a statement instead of a plea.

— No smoking in the theatre. Please. —

— This will be your last warning. No Smoking In The Theatre. You'll be asked to leave. —

Smokers are allowed three warnings. The rule is that after three the manager is supposed to come and ask them to leave.



The manager does not emerge from his office in the basement of the Paramount, although he is presumably present every night. Dena has seen a broad-backed grey jacket and a version of bowler hat disappearing down the stairs. He keeps the office door locked and doesn't answer when they knock, even though the usherettes are careful to show their faces to the peephole. Telling people to stop smoking is beneath the dignity of Jason the floor manager, so in the end, it is always Hermann, the young doorman with the rakish gap between his front teeth, who has to go and threaten the smokers, pretend they will be forced to leave. Although everyone knows the routine. Put the cigarette out, wait exactly four minutes, light another, protecting the blossom of the match with your hand.

Dena looks forward to stepping beyond the heavy curtains separating the lobby from the auditorium. Those curtains are plush with dust but deep red, luxuriously thick. When Dena has finished cleaning up behind the candy counter, counting the waxed beverage cups and the popcorn tubs, taking the cash box to the floor manager, who in turn carries it downstairs to the manager, who presumably unlocks the door for money, she pushes through the velvet swag into the theatre's dark throat.

— What are you doin'? —

— Stealin' your woman. —

And Sundance, scratching himself through the casing of his underwear, turning away.

— Take her. Take her. —

So gentlemanly they are, courteous as only bandits in ironic movies can be, the dirt on their faces picturesque, their sweat wholesome, their motives theoretically pure.

Dena can't blame them for stealing. Although her upbringing prevents her from testing this hypothesis, she suspects stealing would be easier than the \$2.05 an hour that she collects (minus tax and CPP) for making popcorn and asking belligerent boys to stub out their cigarettes and watching couples, eyes fixed on the screen, grope the curve and cleave of thigh and breast. Dena's evening hours at the Paramount are from 6:30 to 11:30; she grosses \$10.25 a night. With her Saturday shift at the theatre, 1:30 to 11:30, an hour off for supper, Dena makes an extra \$59.45 a week. After deductions, it's closer to \$40.00, a punched cheque sourly handed to them on Friday nights by Jason, the truculent floor manager. That's so they can't actually cash it until Monday mornings, when the banks open. The

projectionist is paid on Wednesdays, collecting his envelope when he breezes through the door at 6:46, carrying the toolbox of his mysterious equipment and experience.

Dena is ready to quit, especially on Saturday nights when the usherettes are required to stay behind and vacuum the lobby, swab out the toilets. But she doesn't quit. She is saving for her wedding dress. She has already chosen it, only needs to try it on, a ritual that she has so far postponed, anticipating the moment as long as she can. She will



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stand in a musty fitting room to unbutton her blouse, wriggle out of her short-flared skirt, shivering as if she were being watched by Sundance over the hammer of his cocked gun.

The price tag on the dress is, impossibly, \$595. By the end of the summer, by the time the audiences for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* have dwindled to a dozen or so bored bodies, Dena will have saved enough. She does the math in her head and it comes out. But that doesn't stop her from wishing for a bandana to pull up over her nose, so she can wave her finger at the busdriver on the number 31 electric as it whines up 118th Street, and demand to be driven to the edge of the city, where she will cross a line that until now she has obeyed.

She imagines her future coloured with highway robbery, and then has to laugh because highways in Alberta imply Highway Two, the impossibly straight, broad road that sweeps between Edmonton and Calgary. What that highway needs, Janie says, is a train running between the

lanes. Janie can foresee a high-speed train linked with German-built glass and steel cars full of executives rocketed through the landscape tapping the keys of laptops and chattering into cell-bright telephones. Janie is on intimate terms with the future. She works toward becoming one of those executive women, polished, efficient, full of deadly alacrity. And although neither knows it yet, she will. Janie definitely will.

Dena will try other apprenticeships, first as a shoe store clerk, then a survey helper. Now she dreams of disappearing, like Etta Place, the schoolteacher in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, regretfully turning her horse toward a slow

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sunset, giving up the excitement of crime, the terrible choreography of theft and resistance, because she doesn't want to witness the lethal patter of shellfire at the inevitable deathscene. A schoolteacher can always find a job; teaching may be the bottom of the pit, but it is a reliable profession. Dena should upgrade and go to school. This is what Janie tells Dena, reminds her at least once a week when they split the grocery bill, when they huddle together counting out bus fare and lunch money and rent. The first thing they did when they moved to the city was go to Army and Navy and buy themselves each an army cot, so now the line is drawn on the floor of their shared bachelor apartment. But Janie's advice about becoming a schoolteacher is predictable. Janie does the thinking, while Dena dreams and coasts.

Dena does not yet know that her working life will swim in many directions, that the time for life-long occupation will pass. She does not know that she will spend next summer stumbling through dense bush north of Fort McMurray carrying her end of the measured chain. And when the captain yells out — chain — she will yell back at him an answering — chain — and while he marks the tree or stump he has stopped at

with a notch and a strip of flagging, she will open her book and stand in a cloud of mosquitoes, reading. In the future, when she thinks back, she won't remember which book she carried, just that it was thickly thumbed and that she actually read while she walked the chain through the deadfall, almost tripping in the undergrowth and the spoor of wilful black bears in northern Alberta.

But right now Dena usherettes — that's what Jason calls her, an usherette. Dena sells popcorn and syrupy cola, shines the spot of her flashlight down the aisle to empty seats, tells people to get their feet off the chairbacks in front of them and, of course, to stop smoking. Dena is free only on Sundays, her one night off, and no one asks for dates on Sundays, so she and Janie usually go bowling, or to the Rollerdrome. Dena knows that Janie would like to try dancing, but does not know how to initiate that activity. At home they weren't allowed to go to dances, dances were dangerous, people hot with music and liquor crossing the line of decency in the tall grass behind the community hall. The dance hall.

Dena says those words out loud sometimes, and feels her feet wanting to move to the swim of music.

The film spools over and over, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* in the summer of 1970, still playing after winning four Academy Awards for 1969 — Best Story and Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Song, Best Original Score — and Dena lusts after Sundance, waits for those few moments when he rolls up his sleeves, or unbuckles his gunbelt. To be honest, Dena wants to be Sundance, forget Etta with her soft face and cascade of hair, she wants to be Sundance leaping off the cliff, his faraway yell, his admission that he can't swim. He can't swim but he does and that's Dena, she stepped into a pothole in Buffalo Lake and drowned the summer that she turned thirteen and she's never gone swimming since, although she can imagine herself leaping with Sundance, her legs cycling air before she arrows the water. She has gathered all the external facts about the movie, how George Roy Hill thought of using Jack Lemmon or Steve McQueen



or Marlon Brando or Warren Beatty, how he cast Robert Redford as Butch and Paul Newman as Sundance, and then Redford suggested that they switch roles. Dena even knows Katherine Ross' measurements, how her dress size is the same as Dena's, who knows exactly, because she will soon be fitted for her wedding dress.

The number 31 bus stops in front of The Bay, and when Dena dismounts from its high step, she sees through the display window the drape of white sateen that flows down the mannequin's side, the cloth that will follow her own sturdy legs down the aisle. Dena has a fondness for The Bay, the cluttered store with its stone facade faded to a patrician grime, floor after floor reached by the exotic rotation of the escalators. Janie mocks her.

— What could you possibly buy there? — she asks.

Dena has not told Janie about the wedding dress. She wanders through the housewares section on her Saturday supper break between five and six, relieved and rested by the musty smell of green deurate, the hammered brass of the elevators, and the quiet hum of mouse-haired women shoppers in properly belted raincoats.

The Bay, she knows, is descended from the oldest merchandising company in the English-speaking world, and has a reputation for furs. But Dena is less interested in longevity than in the solid air of provisioning that the store exudes. This is where she will buy pillows and blankets, sheets and towels and electric kettles, all of the things that she needs but might not receive as wedding gifts. And where she will redeem the gift certificates that she is likely to get, their amounts glossy with nuptial virtue. This is where she will exercise her excitement at her new job. Dena does not know exactly what that job will entail, but she has an idea that once she has tried on the wedding dress, she can go straight. The work she assumes after that costuming will need all of her experience in applying what she has practiced in one place to

another, but will be cleaner, less desperate, quieter than the distant rumble that seems to accompany the movements of her hands and body now.

She watches Butch and Sundance, who dance with Etta Place, then dance more desperately with desperados and relentless lawmen, legs and arms windmilling flight. They have pitted themselves against the future. On principle they resist a future of wheels and trains and settlement, the ice-dance of day-to-day work. They prefer the click of a gunhammer, the clean thunder of bullets spitting chunks from the ground. They prefer alternative ways of financing their elegant apparel, their expensive vacations and their fancy women, rather than steady hour-by-hour labour.

Dena has no experience with vacations. When she was four the whole family drove through the mountains in the green and white Pontiac sedan, drove up and down the Okanagan Valley and Dena ate cherries until she threw up. She does not think of that trip as a vacation; but she remembers the sweet-sour taste of cherries and vomit, cherries and vomit, nothing else except the vague sway of the car, how she had to sit straddling the hump in the back seat, how she threw up into an ice-cream bucket.

Dena types letters all day, then works at the Paramount four nights a week and all day Saturday because in the window of The Bay, across the street from the Paramount, she has seen her wedding dress. It preens a *peau de soie* train, encouraging those who plan summer and fall weddings to think about The Bay's wedding department, which will in the future stagger to a close, after specialty shops corner the trade. But for now The Bay maintains a bridal boutique, with a dimly-dressed marcel-waved woman wielding a steam iron, ready to poke veils over customers' noses and to kneel



with the supplication of sateen pumps. And that particular dress gleaming in The Bay's display window promises Dena transformation, a change for the better.

She is behind the candy counter, making quick change and holding a beverage cup under the Orange Crush spigot when she hears an intake of breath like the flare of a match. She looks up into the eyes of Mr. L.M. Merriman, her real boss, the one she types letters and reports for, the one whose subject and verb do not agree.

"Dena," he says, with a smile that seems oddly lopsided. "What are you doing here?"

"Doing?" she asks stupidly, feeling sleepy, hypothemic, registering that behind him stands a woman who is probably his wife, and who is astonishingly good-looking. "I'm working."

"I was under the impression that you were in my employ."

"Oh, Mr. Merriman, I am. Of course."

"You are moonlighting, I take it."

"Moonlighting? Oh no, sir, well, just working to get some extra money."

"And what would a young lady like you need extra money for?"

Dena wipes her damp hands along the sides of her lumpy Fortrel uniform, its weave catching at the rough pads on her palms.

"Well?" asks Mr. L.M. Merriman.

"I —" Dena hesitates. She has told no one about the wedding dress, not Janie, not even herself. It is a vacation, shimmering blue with hope and the possibility of a new line of work, a new life.

"No wonder you are inattentive and sloppy. A girl can't work at two jobs."

Where am I? thinks Dena. I'm in Edmonton, Alberta, but I don't know where I am. Disconnect lines from the film are running through her head, as if here in the theatre she prompts the movie's dialogue, as if the sticky pop spilled on the floor is pulling her through an invisible barrier toward another time and place. She can think of no reply, has no choice but to blurt out her location. "Mr. Merriman, I'm saving up for my wedding dress."

"I was not aware," he says, raising both frothy eyebrows, "that you were about to get married."

"Oh, I'm not, I'm only —" Dena knows that she sounds hesitant, even stupid. From the theatre, she hears the contrary bargain between Butch and the gambler.

— Invite us to stay and then we'll go. —

What would Janie say? I have a right to work where I want. Lines from the movie. This will work. Make it work.

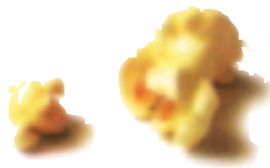
"I quit," says Dena cheerfully. "What will you have, Mr. Merriman? Popcorn? Coke? It's a fairly long movie."

He gazes at her, his wife behind him frowning as she looks back and forth between the two.

Dena can hear the faint rattle of the reels turning in the projector, can hear the shift and settle of the audience under Paul Newman's voice reasoning with Sundance, can smell the thick grease of coconut oil coating the popcorn. Her uniform is too tight, the cloth flattening her breasts. Her feet hurt. I'm don't want to hunt up another job, she thinks. First I need a vacation, then I'm going to Bolivia. I quit.

When she moves to Calgary, some ten years later, Dena will remember The Bay in Edmonton with nostalgia and regret, even though she will have learned that the law of retail is newness, and that emporiums, like racy women, lose their attraction with age. The Bay in Calgary is elegant rather than tawdry, with an almost European arcade. Its location echoes Edmonton's — it too rests on a corner block of the city's premier street — and across 8th Avenue the Palace Theatre slumps toward its own demise, the bulbs outlining the double-winged sign broken, the grand double doors boarded over. Eventually, Dena will confuse the two histories, will imagine that the Paramount Theatre in Edmonton, where she worked that summer of 1970, is closed, will imagine that The Bay in Edmonton is still open. The boarded-over Palace Theatre in Calgary will resist demolition or face-lift, will stagger under its shabby age until, after years of dusty neglect, a bright-eyed futurist marries its historical charm and re-invents it as a nightclub. The Paramount will stay a theatre, show James Bond and Quentin Tarantino movies. The Bay on Jasper Avenue will close, the respectable stone building converted into a television station for one of those upstart channels resisting broadcast history, but The Bay on 8th Avenue will thrive, will decorate its windows for Christmas with wonderful toys against rich red fabrics.

When she moves to Calgary, Dena will join that department store, clerking in the watch department, selling Timex and Swatch, measuring new straps, replacing batteries. She will enjoy working for The Bay, feel part of its extended family, its solid reputation, her initial fondness



expanding to an employee's proprietorship. Despite Janie's prodding, she will settle into service, never take a night course or return to a typewriter, the pound of the keys a distant undertone to her past.

But for now, Dena does not anticipate the way work and times will change. She is in the back of the Paramount, her uniform snug around her hips, short enough to show a good length of thigh, making Hermann's eyes follow whenever her back is turned. She is watching a couple sitting at the back, on the left side, making out. They are dressed, but with remarkable disregard the girl rides astride the boy's lap, neither watching the movie, where Butch and Sundance are now persuading Etta to go with them to Bolivia. Bolivia, thinks Dena. Why

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Bolivia? Why not Mexico, isn't it closer? They have to learn Spanish, figure out how to say "hands up" and "back against the wall," and "give me the money," Butch relying on a crib sheet, Sundance refusing to speak but understanding perfectly, so honed is his ability to read body language. Which is part of the movie's fun, that they have to break the law in a language they don't know and won't learn, like the future that they refuse to accommodate. Dena knows that before the movie ends, they will get a job and try to go straight. At exactly 10:53 p.m. in the late show, which is the one Dena gets to watch most of, they will finally fight on the side of law and order. Unable to avoid their own abilities, they will brutally kill other men in a shootout, an act which, despite their line of work and its specialized vocabulary, they have until then avoided.

Someone is snoring distractedly, the same scabby bottlepicker who spends every afternoon sleeping off his hangover in the second row from the back.

If he buys a ticket he can sit warm and dry through three showings, smelling of the slop-bucket back home, his pants soaked with piss. Except that

next week he won't shamble out when the credits roll at exactly eleven minutes after eleven, he'll stay huddled in his seat until Hermann is forced to walk along the flip-up seats and shake his arm limp as a sock, jumping back as if flicked by flame,

— Jesus —

and refusing to touch him again, will leave the nonchalant police to haul the body out from between the row of tight seats, collar and knees loose, dead all right, dying while Butch and Sundance shoot at stones and snakes and people and laugh and ride a bicycle and try go straight. A warm dark place to die, that won't be so bad.

Better than the basement below the theatre where Dena will have to make the popcorn, where mice run shivering along the walls and the manager lurks in his office answering only to a mickey of vodka, and the blackened popper hiss-spits oil over the grey-painted cement floor. That popper resembles the big grain chopper at home, and Dena has to use her body weight, needs real muscle, arm over shoulder, to flip the cast iron kettle at the precise moment so that it will not burn, emptying the fluffy river of popped corn. After an hour, she will lug the three garbage-sized plastic bags of popcorn up the stairs and behind the candy counter, where they will sit yellow and puffed, already stale, endless

as the one hundred and ninety-eight times that she will usherette through *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* for \$2.05 an hour (\$1.85 before her raise), and the uniform will need more washing than it ever gets, and Dena's shoes will suck stickiness from the floor, will smell of popcorn and oil and theatre dank. She will measure the float of thick yellow coconut oil into the pan, tip in the tin cup of popcorn kernels, the ladle of salt — extra salt makes them buy more pop — says Jason, and slamming the lid of the popper closed, Dena will sit down on the torn plastic seat of a displaced chrome kitchen chair to wait.

For a few moments then, Dena will anticipate her firing squad. She will close her eyes against the line between dark and daylight and wait to meet the rattle of gunfire, the explosion of popping corn. ✂

