

Check-Out Time at the Shallow Grave Motel

William Bankier

One of Canada's finest short story writers, has been nominated for all of North America's major crime writing prizes, including the Macavity, Edgar and Arthur Ellis awards. He is best-known for a loosely connected series of stories set in Baytown, based on his home town of Belleville, Ont. Baytown first appeared on the map of the crime world in 1965. Bankier now lives in Hollywood, Calif.



Art Harper returned to Baytown in the spring of the year when tedious winter had moved out and summer was at the front door. He came in response to a cry for help from his old friend, Luke Luftspring. They had been bellboys together at the Coronet Hotel. Harper, the kid who never missed a day of school and who did his homework before supper, was drawn to Luke's undisciplined spirit. He said things like, "I got the dropsy and heart trouble. I drops into a chair and I haven't the heart of get out of it."

After four years hustling baggage for quarters, Harper moved next door to the office of the Baytown Daily Banner. He was a go-fer until he was promoted to apprentice sports writer. Covering the local hockey and baseball teams and the occasional track meet was easy work and left him time to originate a column which met with the editor's approval. "Extra Innings" began running three days a week on Page 2 of the sports section.

Thus Art Harper became a celebrity in the eyes of Jenny Lennox, the youngest and most-blond waitress in the Coronet dining room. Jenny was a high school dropout who worked to help support her widowed mother. Mrs. Lennox pulled long shifts at the distillery in Corbyville. They lived in a cottage on South Front Street where the river meets the Bay and where a well-worn sofa became as familiar to Harper's lanky frame as his bed at home.

Luke's irreverence went a little too far where the Lennox girl was concerned. He said, "She only does it for her friends and she hasn't an enemy in the world." The absence of Harper's usual laugh told him not to make such a remark again.

But now, the Baytown high life had been left far behind and Harper was 32 years old and established in Montreal, where he was press agent for the Expos of the National Baseball League. The job had become fragile since the team was up for sale. Playing in a small television market, the Expos tried to survive on a lesser income than, say, the Mets in great big New York City. So they developed good players from their farm system and then sold them to more affluent teams. The Montreal fans, feeling betrayed, had begun staying away in droves.

Harper's concern for his future was set temporarily aside



Illustrations by Sherri Bassett/The Sudbury Star

flash of the former Luke lit up the haunted eyes. "Chuck comes by and does what's needed -- changes the beds, works a

the creaky bed to rest. The telephone rang. He picked it up and it was Jenny Lennox.

"Guess what, I told Mr. Danforth you're back in town. He'd like you to go in and see him."

"I was planning to touch base anyway."

"I think this is more than hello."

"I have to go across to the police station. See Chief Greb."

"The police know Luke. They pick him up from the beverage room when it closes and dry him out in a cell."

"He keeps getting those crazy notes in the mail."

"I could name a dozen people who qualify."

Mr. Danforth was relaxed in a swivel chair behind his desk in the back office, shiny boots propped up on the oak surface, cold cigar stump centred between his lips. "I always said you'd be back, Arthur. The Coronet exerts a great tidal pull."

"I came because Luke Luftspring wrote me."

"I know all about Luke. His condition is the Baytown flavour of the month."

"I'm going over to see the Chief."

"He'll pour you a glass of that awful peach brandy he makes. But he can't help our friend."

"I have to try."

"Come back here when you've seen him. I have a suggestion to put to you. An offer you can't refuse."

As he strolled across the market square, Harper knew Danforth was going to offer him a job. Funny thing was, with the benign weather, the dancing with Jenny and the gentle flow of air off the Bay, Harper was in a mood to say yes. Especially with the Expos planning to move the franchise to Topeka or some other forsaken place.

Chief Greg bent to the sliding door of his cherry wood credenza and fetched a quart bottle half full of an amber liquid. "The peaches were sweet this year," he said with a conspiratorial smile.

"Well hoo-ha," Harper said without enthusiasm.

The brandy could be swallowed if you held your breath during and after. "I know Luke gives you trouble. But I came down from Montreal to help him."

"Something must have happened out there last year. I don't know what it was, but Luke has not been the same."

"Is he drinking more?"

"And enjoying it less. He used to get loaded for fun. Arresting him was a ton of laughs. Now it's a one-man funeral. He's the mourner and he's the corpse."

The constable manning the front desk put his head inside