

ONLY YOU DAD

CHAPTER TWO

Huntingdon & Powerscourt — The Years That Made Me, 1959–1969

To My Huntingdon Family

This chapter is dedicated to the friends who welcomed a young boy from Montreal into their lives.

You taught me about friendship, hard work, loyalty, first love, forgiveness, and second chances.

More than sixty years have passed, but those memories have never left me.

Thank you for helping shape the man I became.

— **Bobby Monette**

Finding a Place to Belong

When I was thirteen years old, my life began to change.

Every weekend I left the busy streets of Montreal and travelled toward Powerscourt, just outside Huntingdon, Quebec, where my Uncle Gordie lived near the covered bridge on the Châteauguay River. Back then, everyone called me Bobby.

I could read a little, but I could barely write. My schooling ended around Grade 5. Reading and writing never came easily to me.

Looking back, I do not blame the schools. My parents never sat down to read with me or help me with homework. Home was not a place of encouragement. It was a place where beatings were far more common than bedtime stories.

I never dreamed that one day I would write a book about my life.

Yet here I am, more than sixty years later, returning in my mind to those country roads, farms, dances, friendships, cars, girls and adventures that helped shape the person I became.

Those weekends became my escape.

They were among the happiest days of my teenage years.

Huntingdon and Powerscourt gave me something I had never truly known before: friends, acceptance, and a place where I felt I belonged.

Looking back now, I realize Huntingdon did not simply become part of my life.

It became the place where I grew up.

[Photograph: Huntingdon, Powerscourt and the covered bridge]

Mike — My Brother

Before much of the Huntingdon story unfolded, there was Mike.

Mike Jeanrie and I met in 1961 in Sainte-Eustache while riding our bicycles.

People sometimes ask whether Mike is my best friend.

My answer is no.

Mike is my brother.

We have stood beside each other through almost everything life has thrown at us. We grew up together, got into trouble together, learned difficult lessons together, and later became business partners.

When I began spending weekends in Huntingdon and Powerscourt, I brought Mike with me.

It did not take long before the area became his second home too.

It was there that he met Sharon.

They fell in love, married, and built a family together.

Sometimes I smile when I think about it. One friendship led to another, and none of us understood then that those weekends would affect the rest of our lives.

[Photograph: Bobby and Mike as young men]

Meeting Martha

I was about fifteen when I met Martha.

She lived with her family on a farm on First Concession, and her brother was Jon. Before long, the three of us became friends.

For a city boy from Montreal, that farm felt like another world.

There were horses, barns, open fields, fresh air, chores, and the honest tiredness that came after a day's work.

I loved every minute of it.

I often walked about a mile to the farm simply to spend time there. That walk never felt very long because I knew that at the end of it there would be people who were glad to see me.

Martha became my first girlfriend in Huntingdon.

We dated for only a few months, but our friendship lasted for more than sixty years.

That says more about the importance of those years than any teenage romance ever could.

Through Martha and Jon, I met Donna, Bill, Ian, Peggy and many of the other people who became my Huntingdon family.

Without Martha, there probably would have been no Huntingdon story.

[Photograph: Bobby and Martha dancing]

Friday Freedom

Every Friday afternoon, I could hardly wait to get out of Montreal.

The city was where I worked and slept.

Huntingdon was where I felt alive.

If Uncle Gordie was staying at his apartment in Montreal, he sometimes let me take his company car back to Powerscourt for the weekend.

He worked for Underwood Typewriters as a repairman, and the company supplied him with a Volkswagen Beetle.

To everybody else, it was a little company car.

To me, it was freedom on four wheels.

As soon as work ended, I pointed that Volkswagen toward Highway 4 and Huntingdon.

With every mile, the tension of Montreal seemed to fall away.

I knew what was waiting for me.

The farms.

The Châteauguay River.

The covered bridge.

My friends.

The Saturday-night dances.

And eventually, Donna.

My first stop was often Martha and Jon's farm on First Concession. Then we would make the rounds, picking up whoever was going out with us.

Mike and I would head toward Dundee to collect Ian, Sharon and the others.

By the time everybody squeezed into the Volkswagen, there might be six or seven of us inside.

Somebody was usually sitting on somebody else's lap.

There were no seat belts, and nobody thought very much about it.

We must have looked like a bunch of clowns climbing into a circus car.

But we were happy.

We crossed the border at Dundee and continued toward Malone, New York.

The American customs officers eventually came to recognize us.

They would look inside that overloaded Volkswagen, smile, shake their heads and wave us through.

Life was different in those days.

[Photograph: Uncle Gordie's Volkswagen Beetle]

Saturdays in the Country

Saturday mornings usually meant work.

Sometimes I helped at Martha's family farm.

I threw hay bales, worked around the barn, or did whatever needed doing.

For a city kid, it was hard work.

But it made me feel useful.

Nobody cared that I had little education or that I struggled to write.

If I worked hard and kept my word, I belonged.

By afternoon, we often made our way down near the covered bridge and the dam.

We swam in the Châteauguay River, splashed one another, laughed, and played around in the water.

There was nothing fancy about those afternoons.

Maybe that is why I remember them so clearly.

These were just ordinary young people enjoying an ordinary Saturday.

But to me, they were some of the best days of my life.

Saturday Night — The Skyliner

Then Saturday night arrived.

And Saturday night meant **the Skyliner**.

The Skyliner was outside Malone, New York.

To us, it felt like the centre of the world.

There was music.

Dancing.

Laughter.

Girls.

Cars.

And that electric feeling that came from being young and believing your whole life was still ahead of you.

We danced until late.

Afterward, we drove the girls home.

Then Mike and I often met Bill at Pivan's around one o'clock in the morning.

Bill could order five hot dogs and a big plate of fries like it was nothing.

Mike and I could never figure out where he put all that food.

But Bill was built like a farm boy and worked hard enough to burn it off.

Over hot dogs and Coke, we solved every problem in the world.

At least we thought we did.

Those late-night talks became part of the rhythm of our weekends.

[Photograph: The Skyliner]

[Photograph: Pivan's or an old Huntingdon street scene]

A Different Kind of Home

Sunday always came too quickly.

When I returned to Montreal at the end of the weekend, I could feel the happiness draining away.

Friday had been anticipation.

Saturday had been friendship, work, swimming, music and laughter.

Sunday meant knowing I had to leave.

I didn't have the words for it then.

I do now.

In Huntingdon and Powerscourt, I had discovered a different kind of home.

It was not a house.

It was not a farm.

It wasn't a piece of property.

It was the feeling that people wanted me around.

The people I met there didn't ask me to explain where I came from.

They didn't judge me because I had left school early or because my family life had been difficult.

They simply accepted **Bobby**.

For somebody who had spent much of childhood learning how to survive, being accepted felt almost unbelievable.

It changed me.

It taught me that family could also be created through friendship, loyalty, and the simple act of welcoming somebody into your life.

That feeling of belonging runs through everything that happened next.

The Arrest — 1964

In 1964, I was going to Huntingdon to take Martha to a prom.

John and I were in my car, heading south on Décarie toward Sherbrooke Street.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon and already getting dark.

My car had been giving me trouble with the generator and battery, and the headlights were becoming dimmer and dimmer.

As we approached Sherbrooke Street, I noticed a Montreal police officer looking at my car.

The light turned green.

I crossed Sherbrooke.

Sure enough, the police car pulled right in behind me.

Then the flashing lights came on.

I pulled over.

The officer walked up and asked me about my lights.

I explained that I was having trouble with the generator and battery and planned to stop at the next service station.

He asked for my driver's licence and started walking back toward the police car.

I looked at John.

"Let's hope he doesn't ask me to open the trunk."

We had a problem.

There were stolen car parts in the trunk.

The officer had also noticed all the tools lying in the back seat.

When he came back and asked me to open the trunk, John and I knew we were toast.

Once he saw what was inside, he placed both of us under arrest.

We were taken to **Montreal Police Station 15** for questioning.

They separated us and put us into different rooms.

Station 15 and Parthenais

The police officers at Station 15 were actually very nice to us, and I was nice to them.

They asked us about the stolen car parts, and we told them where we had gotten them.

John and I were charged with **18 counts of grand auto theft**.

I don't remember a lot about the questioning after that.

One thing I remember clearly is my father, Jack, and Uncle Gordie showing up with a carton of cigarettes.

From Station 15, we were transported to **Parthenais Detention Centre**, officially known as the Centre de prévention de Montréal.

We were held there waiting for a bail hearing.

The next day, we were brought before the court.

Bail was set at **\$10,000**.

That was an enormous amount of money in 1964.

There was no way we could make that kind of bail.

So back to Parthenais we went.

Parthenais had cellblocks with eight cells, and there were four men in a cell.

I was eighteen years old and suddenly living in a jail with men I didn't know.

At one point I got into a fight.

All those years of boxing and everything I had learned about taking care of myself at Weredale came back to me.

After that, nobody bothered me.

Two weeks passed before my next court appearance.

This time, my mother was there with her new husband, **Fred Riley**.

Mom and Fred were living in a house in St-Eustache.

My trial was going to be about four months later, so once again we asked the court for bail.

Fred Riley put their St-Eustache house up as security for me.

That was something I never forgot.

He was willing to put their home on the line to give me a chance to get out of Parthenais.

My bail was finally secured.

After two weeks in Parthenais, I walked out.

But the case wasn't over.

I still had to face the judge.

Waiting for Trial

While I was waiting for my trial, Martha dumped me.

That little event was going to change my life too.

Because after Martha came **Donna**.

But before that story really took over, I still had to get through court.

About four months passed.

Finally, the day of my trial arrived.

Before we went into the courtroom, my court-appointed lawyer had worked out a deal with the Crown.

As I understood it, I was going to receive **three years in jail**.

I walked into that courtroom believing I was about to lose three years of my life.

But that isn't what happened.

My Day in Court

The judge listened first to the Crown.

When the Crown finished, the judge turned to my lawyer and gave him an opportunity to speak.

My lawyer stood up and told him that sending me to jail for three years was the wrong thing to do.

This was my first offence.

He also had people who had come to court to speak for me.

The judge agreed to hear them.

Gilles Tessier

The first was my boss, **Gilles Tessier**, from Bechtel Corporation on Paré Street in Montreal.

Gilles was the manager of the printing department.

By then, I had been working at Bechtel for about three years and was responsible for running the printing equipment.

Gilles told the judge what kind of worker I was.

He explained that I sometimes worked as many as seventy hours a week.

There were times when I even slept at Bechtel because there was so much work that had to be finished.

But the work always got out.

Most importantly, Gilles told the judge that if I was allowed to remain free, **my job would still be waiting for me.**

My Uncle and the Police

Next, my uncle spoke.

He told the judge that if I was released, I had a place to live at his house.

Then something happened that I have never forgotten.

The police spoke.

They told the judge that John and I had cooperated with them from the beginning.

We had answered their questions.

We told them where the stolen property had come from.

Property had been recovered and returned.

Then the officer told the judge that putting me in jail might be the wrong thing to do.

Think about that.

The same police who arrested me were now standing in court telling the judge that maybe I deserved another chance.

One Chance

The judge listened to everything.

He listened to the Crown.

He listened to my lawyer.

He listened to Gilles.

He listened to my uncle.

He listened to the police.

Then he asked me to stand.

He went over what he had heard: the charges, the fact that this was my first offence, my job, my family, my cooperation with the police and the people who had come into that courtroom to stand behind me.

Then he gave his decision.

Three years — suspended.

I wasn't going to jail.

But the judge made something very clear.

This was my one chance.

He told me he never wanted to see me standing in his courtroom again.

He saw something in me and was giving me the opportunity to prove that his decision was the right one.

I walked out of that courtroom with my uncle.

That day could have sent my life in a completely different direction.

Instead, somebody gave me a second chance.

And whatever other mistakes I made in the years ahead, I kept one promise.

I never stood before a criminal court again.

The road ahead would take me back to Huntingdon and Powerscourt, to Donna, to fast cars, to Bechtel, Churchill Falls, Vancouver, Newfoundland and eventually to the woman who would become my wife.

But Huntingdon had already begun doing something important for me.

It had given me a place to belong.

And in 1964, the judge gave me something just as important.

A chance to become something more than the mistakes I had made.