

NOVEL 1: SEA TO SKY  
CHAPTER FIVE - (TITLE TO COME)

Things went better than anticipated. Skiing under the influence proved more possible than Leo would have thought. Pleasurable even, after the first few anxious minutes -- and right up until the last, unfortunate moment.

Once he got the hang of it, there were moments when he managed to relax and get a rhythm going, exhilarating moments when he was a dancer on the hill, synched in and graceful (an objective onlooker might not have seen it quite that way) as he glided down the mountain with the breeze whipping his hair around and pushing tears out of the corners of his eyes.

He found himself subject though to a perception that the mountain was in motion, as well as himself; that he was riding a great white wave or bobbing in the swell of a heaving white sea.

At times it seemed he wasn't moving at all; he was anchored in a swift white river, still center of a world in motion as stunted high-alpine conifers flowed past, and other skiers and the occasional hallucination. At one point as he was taking a breather midway down the T-bar he could have sworn that the nation's prime minister -- Pierre Eliot Trudeau himself -- flashed past with a young woman in a fuchsia ski suit hard on his heels, and behind them, working hard to keep up, three big crew-cut guys on rentals.

It was a little worrisome, as was the mountain-in-motion sensation -- he kept having to fight down a panicky feeling that he was being swept along in an avalanche. He discovered though that he could control it, could banish the illusion by stopping frequently and breaking his run into segments. Which, after a near-thing with the cement-wrapped base of a recklessly wandering lift pylon, is what he elected to do.

This left the light as his chief distraction. The little lavender tablet had set his pupils to an f-stop more suited to a moonless night than a bright spring day and the glare was blinding, bouncing up off the snow, stabbing in past his Polaroids, filling his head with a painful migraine fluorescence.

Still, he managed to function. By seeking the shadows, by remaining vigilant and exercising caution, as was generally his wont (the little lavender tablet being a bit of an exception) he made it through the afternoon without mishap.

After a single run back down the mountain in his brother's company, with Russ chafing at the bit the whole time and bitching about how slow he was and what a chicken-shit and how pathetic his gerbil-sized *cojones* etc, Leo decided he would sooner take his chances solo than listen to any more. He therefore suggested in forceful terms that Russ could take off on his own anytime he felt like it ('take' wasn't the verb he used) and his brother did so forthwith, though not without stressing again the importance of their rendezvousing at 4:30, and threatening repercussions should this fail to come about, and also proposing half-heartedly that maybe they could meet for lunch at the new lodge up top, the Roundhouse. No definite time was established though, and once parted they didn't see each other again throughout the day.

Leo did though cross paths again with the girl from the gondola. It was early afternoon and he was standing in line once more for the Red Chair, feeling edgy in the crush of the crowd. As he squinted down at an undisturbed patch of snow to one side of the path -- it was dancing with sunlight and teeming with intricate little hieroglyphics and tiny faces that went out of focus when you looked at them straight on --- he was visited by a sudden sense of premonition. He looked up and around, his scalp tingling, then back down the line of sun-reddened, mostly young faces and there she was, thirty feet back, standing between two older women, smiling faintly, her head tipped to one side as she hooked a breeze-straggled strand of wheat-coloured hair behind her ear, caught in the conversational crossfire of her companions. Her over-age, under-height boyfriend, if that was the right word, was not in view.

Leo stared at her numbly, then took a closer look at the beaming, animated pair flanking her. The woman to her left was thirty or forty or so, tall and heavy with a jowly baby-face topped by a lot of stiff-looking copper hair upon which the breeze, though likewise stiff, was exercising little influence. Dressed to kill in black stretch pants and a fur-lined black jacket she was striking for someone so bulky and ancient. Little competition though for the woman to the girl's right, a glamorous ash blonde in a snug pink ski suit who, though younger and healthier looking, bore a startling resemblance to the woman last seen by the pool at the DiPuma place three summers ago.

In fact -- he blinked rapidly behind his glasses and his pulse raced -- it was her! Either that or a stunningly plausible hallucination. Remembering his Trudeau sighting, he gave this possibility some serious consideration, staring intently over his shoulder at her before rejecting it: Things had settled

down since morning and he was pretty sure the seeing-things stage was behind him, hieroglyphics and faces in the snow notwithstanding.

She looked to be in far better shape than the last time he saw her. Amazingly so: bright-eyed and smiling and seemingly years younger, her face thinner, not so puffy yet somehow less haggard as well; the picture of health, her skin glowing and deeply tanned.

The same deep, locally unavailable tan, it occurred to him, as that sported by the man on the gondola.

Who was surely Nick DiPuma and surely her husband.

Now she turned away abruptly from the redheaded woman – Leo sensed tension -- and looked up the line at him, meeting his masked gaze with a challenging look that narrowed to a glare as he continued to gape at her over his shoulder. He couldn't help himself, he was frozen in her high-beam.

For a moment he feared she had recognized him despite his incognito shades and was going to come after him, berate him before the multitude, assault him with a ski pole or something.

But no, she just made a face, then looked away and said something to the girl.

He sagged with relief and faced forward again, realizing now how unlikely it was that she would remember him nearly four years later. As his brother had pointed out at the time, her blood-alcohol levels that night rendered the chances of her recognizing them the next morning -- recognizing Leo, that is; Russ she never did get a look at -- about as good as those of their father recognizing a comic dimension to his mistaking a burning bed-dummy for his youngest son, or LBJ recognizing Ho Chi Minh as the legitimate president of a united Vietnam.

Besides, his own appearance had changed too since that unfortunate night at the pool. Radically and not necessarily for the better. In the interim he had undergone a sort of reverse metamorphosis, devolving from boyhood butterfly to teen caterpillar, as it were, as puberty and adolescence laid waste his complexion, stretched him six inches, and imparted a haunted look to his once-untroubled eye, leaving him virtually unrecognizable to anyone who hadn't seen him in a while.

And in fact just last month, having skipped dinner before his Thursday-night drawing class, he had stopped off at the Park Royal White Spot for a bite on the way home. When he looked up from the greasy, disarticulated remains of his second Chicken Pick'ns he was confronted with a sight at the green vinyl booth across the aisle that would have killed his appetite had he not already eaten: M. André

Rochefort, a.k.a. Roachfart. Russ's old nemesis and likewise his own ever since an unkind fate dealt him the fussy francophone for homeroom teacher three Septembers ago. Now, before he could take cover, Roachfart looked up from his purportedly Legendary hamburger (a bit furtively, Leo thought, burgers being a frequent classroom target of the teacher's epicurean disdain) and, back-handing Triple-O sauce from his meager moustache, stared Leo in the eye and failed to recognize him. Not the faintest flicker.

This being someone who had subjected him daily for nearly ten months -- the entire tenth grade -- to the closest possible scrutiny, assigning Leo the desk nearest his own on the first day of class and watching him relentlessly -- as closely and suspiciously in late June as he had in early September -- for the sociopathic tendencies he knew were bound to reveal themselves sooner or later in any brother -- full, half, adopted, or step - of Russell Lovett.

Not that his utter lack of faith precluded his nagging Leo the whole time for failing to achieve the marks in French that his brother had, Russ being simultaneously Roachfart's most unruly and most contemptuously accomplished student, a combination that had driven the teacher frequently to the brink of despair and on occasion over...

Leo looked back again at the women. The glamorous blonde one had slipped an arm round the girl's narrow waist and was smiling at her fondly. Posing thus, they put Leo in mind of one of those deceptive mother-daughter twosomes ('They pass for sisters!') in the rinse-grey-away ads. She looked as buoyant at the moment as she had miserable that unhappy night at poolside. The girl was subdued by comparison but infinitely more at ease than she had been that morning on the ride up.

Briefly he shifted his gaze to the big redhead -- she was standing a little apart from the other two now, looking sullen -- then, with an uneasy feeling that he was overlooking something, returned it to the blonde woman and the girl.

Mother-daughter twosomes.

His eyes widened and his pulse took off again as a new realization dawned like fifty kilotons over the Nevada desert: The woman was the girl's mother! The resemblance, now that he saw it, was so obvious he couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it right away. Probably because he wasn't exactly operating at peak mental efficiency at present, but maybe too because the likeness was only subtly physical. The

two were the same height -- both quite tall, five eight or nine -- but the older woman was tan and va-va-voom voluptuous, the younger pale and Twiggy-thin. They had in common the same high forehead and cheekbones and slightly *retroussé* nose but little else. Their eyes were as dissimilar as their colouring -- the girl's huge and dark and thickly lashed, her mother's jade-green and more deeply set -- and their resemblance became apparent only when underscored by their more striking similarities of gesture and facial expression, most of all their smiles, which, though dispensed more liberally by mother than daughter, were crookedly identical, somehow transforming each woman's face magically into a mirror of the other...

The skiers behind him had begun to clear their throats pointedly and to mutter. Facing round forward again, Leo saw that a gap had opened in the line between himself and the ruddy German-speaking (or was it Swedish?) family of four ahead of him. He lurched forward, struggling both to catch up and to come to terms with this latest revelation, to see the implications -- a task his brain was not really up to just now, unfortunately, tending less to rational analysis than to a dazed appreciation of the cosmo-synchronistic wonder of it all.

Even so several things were clear: The blonde woman behind him was the woman from the pool, wondrously resurrected; she and the pale girl were mother-daughter; the short silvery man was Nick DiPuma; and the pool woman his wife.

Less evident was DiPuma's relation to the girl. Cradle-snatching boyfriend, Leo had been convinced, but maybe not? Maybe, despite appearances and the complete lack of physical resemblance and the dirty-old-man vibes, he was her father?

A moment later he came to the head of the line and was confronted by the lift attendant. Who, having determined that he was alone, steered him to one side to wait for another single, the chairs being doubles and traffic heavy.

Such a person, though, was slow to appear. People seemed to be traveling in pairs and foursomes today, like the tennis and squash and bridge players many of them likely were. Couple after couple, they shuffled past toward the loading area, giving him an anxious, excluded feeling, like odd man out at the loading of the ark.

Another minute and the women had overtaken him. After a brief discussion the older two paired off, though the blonde woman seemed hesitant, glancing over several times at her daughter, but the redhead insisting. They moved by him in a haze of Chanel and Coppertone, the blonde woman passing within a few fragrant feet but paying him no mind, which suited Leo fine.

Now that she was closer it was apparent that she was quite a bit older than the girl; 'old enough to be her mother' in fact. Crow's-feet webbed the corners of her eyes, emphasized by her tan and smile. Still she was stunning; groin-stirringly alluring in a Kim Novak-past-thirty sort of way; fully credible as a former Girl of The West or Vegas Showgirl or Miss March '58 or whatever it was she was supposed to have been (Russ had given him several different versions); and nothing at all like Leo's conception of a mom.

She and the redhead seemed to be back on good terms, smiling at each other and chatting amiably again. Bits of their dialogue -- simultaneous monologues, actually -- tantalized his ear as they stood nearby waiting their turn; the blonde woman holding forth on a theme of real estate: "...six lots over by the lake for a song five years ago..."

The voice was shockingly familiar, though he had heard it just that once at the pool, and though it was much less harsh today than it had been that night, albeit low-pitched and slightly throaty, as befitted a Girl of the West.

Her companion's was louder and brassier, a smoked-out whiskey contralto; her theme was celebrity: "...back bowl with Val and all of a sudden he skis right up to them out of the blue..."

"...you would not believe the offer on the northeast one!"

"...makes eyes at her and asks what time it is..."

"...this darling little chalet..."

"...she realizes 'My god it's Trudeau!'"

"...twenty last month and they turned him down!"

Turning now to the redheaded woman and arching her eyebrows: "Pierre Trudeau?"

"Uh-huh. With one of those cute teenyboppers he goes for." The big woman tipped her frozen coiffure toward the girl, who was standing a bit to their rear now. "He likes them young, you know. Better keep you-know-who locked up or he'll be getting ideas." She twinkled mischievously. "Like you-know-who."

This latter in a stage whisper, but loud enough that the girl heard. She ducked her head and looked down at her shiny red Lady Harts.

It occurred to Leo now that maybe he really did see Trudeau go by, maybe he wasn't hallucinating after all. And come to think of it, hadn't he seen something on The News Hour last week about him being headed west on vacation over Easter?

The blonde woman gave the redhead an unappreciative, in fact furious look, then looked back at her daughter with troubled eyes and asked her something. When the girl shook her head no, the woman faced forward again and pushed ahead into the path of an outgoing chair as it doubled back round the bull-wheel and headed her way. Then turned and gestured at her lagging companion: "Anita! Move it!"

The big woman struggled forward, cutting it close, reaching the other's side at the last moment and only with the assistance of the attendant, who gripped her elbow and steadied her and caught the chair as it arrived and held it in place for an instant as the pair plumped down onto the glossy red slats. Then released it, the chair scooping them up, whisking them aloft.

Once launched, the blonde woman twisted round and waved back at her daughter, who had moved ahead a bit and was positioned to Leo's immediate left now, though she hadn't yet noticed him. She responded with a wistful smile and a little synecdochical waggle of her forefinger then looked away. Over towards Leo, as it happened, her eyes widening as she saw now who she was standing next to.

He managed a smile, somewhat twitchy, which she seemed to be getting ready to return when the attendant intervened.

"C'mon, hon, let's move it. Single?" His voice was loud and cheery and a bit impatient. A strapping, mountain-man type.

Leo started forward but then stopped. His prospective seat-mate looked confused. She stayed put, blocking the two skiers behind her as a chair glided past and headed riderless up the mountain.

The attendant grimaced and directed the pair to play through, then strode over, gesturing for her to move to the side. "Honey, are you a single or what? Don't get the wrong idea now" – big grin -- "I'm not gonna ask you out" – winking conspiratorially over at Leo -- "I'm just trying to as-cer-tain whether you need someone to ride up with. Okay?" Again, joky and ostensibly cheerful... but with a touch of exasperation. He flashed her another smile but then sobered immediately, his small blue eyes widening.

Leo looked at the girl and saw that her lip was trembling, her eyes bright and brimming again, as earlier when they arrived at top. She wasn't 'supposed to get upset', he remembered. Why not? Why exactly might that be 'bad for' her?

The attendant quickly adjusted his manner, murmuring an apology and asking again, this time in a respectful tone, one in fact worthy of an employee-of-the-month, would she be riding alone and, if so, did she mind sharing a chair with the gentleman to her right?

Smiling tightly without looking at him, she nodded first yes and then no, brushing a knuckle across the thick black lashes fringing her right eyelid as Leo looked around for a gentleman. The knuckle came away wet, the gentleman proved to be himself. The attendant turned to him, rolling and crossing his eyes as he beckoned him over from his siding, then guided them up to the white TIPS HERE line and oversaw their lift-off, with parting wishes both to 'Have a good one!' and to 'Go for it!'

Then they were swinging up into the bright sky, Leo finding himself for a second time of the day rising above snowy slopes in tense proximity to the fragile young woman on the red enameled bench beside him.

Again they rode in silence, she fidgeting with her hair at first then nibbling a nail; he speechless with *déjà vu* and intense, chemically-enhanced self consciousness. In the absence of conversation he initiated a sidelong, corner-of-the-eye surveillance, trying to determine his companion's emotional state (stabilized, it appeared) and, since the opportunity availed itself (she had unzipped her jacket), the topography of her chest region. Neither mountain nor molehill, it would seem. Neither soaring peaks nor prairie flats, but rather a happy mean. Gently rolling hills as pleasing to the senses and tempting of leisurely exploration as those of Berkeley in May, where in carefree days of yore he roamed and played among the canyons and eucalyptus trees till dark with his new big brother and their friends. Before the move north...

He was still pursuing this line of investigation when she glanced over his way. Without taking her finger from her mouth she gave him a wide-eyed, alarmed look then turned away again.

Flustered, Leo racked his brain for an observation of some sort with which to begin a conversation but none was forthcoming. None at least he deemed sufficiently witty and debonair. They had ascended past two more towers before he relaxed his standards and settled for 'That liftie was kind of a jerk', which

he was steeling himself casually to utter when she beat him to the punch. Withdrawing the finger from the corner of her mouth, she held it up before her and stared at it, then, without turning, said something in a low voice.

"What?" Was she talking to him or herself? Or to the finger?

"He's on TV tonight."

"Who is?"

"My father. His movie's on The Late Show."

"Uh what movie's that?" And what father? Did she mean DiPuma?

No reply. She was frowning at the glistening, nail-bitten digit as if it were itself to blame for the sorry state it was in. A dozen red scratches scored her forearm from just above the wrist halfway to the crook of her elbow, he noticed. Scars. He didn't like the look of them at all, and wondered what might have caused them. Wondered, that is, if the obvious explanation was the correct one.

Now she put the fingertip back in the corner of her mouth and started in on the nail once more. But took it back out after a moment and again muttered something without turning his way.

"Pardon?"

"...Hawaii."

"What? I can't hear you."

"We're going to Hawaii. In two weeks."

"You and your father?"

"No. He's dead. My mom and me. To Maui."

"Uh great... like I mean great about Maui. Wow. That'll be fun." So if her father was dead what was DiPuma to her? "Don't you have to go back to school though?"

"I don't go to school."

"No?"

She shook her head but didn't elaborate.

A long silence. Finally, just when he thought the conversation was over: "I'm supposed to take it real easy and rest, that's what Dr. Berland says."

Leo's gaze returned to her wrist and forearm as she again stared reproachfully at her finger. "Have you been sick?" he asked. Might this account for her thinness and pallor?

She didn't answer the question. Instead: "Sorry about this morning." She sighed. "Sometimes Nick gets so..."

*Nick.* As in Nick DiPuma. Confirmation.

"Like sometimes he can be such a..." She shrugged helplessly, her powers of description failing her, as earlier.

"Total jerk?" suggested Leo. "That's okay. So can my brother."

She nodded. "I figured you two were brothers, you really look like each other."

"Actually he's my stepbrother... but yeah, everyone says we look like real brothers... like twins practically. It's weird."

She blinked rapidly, then in a shaky near-whisper: "I had a brother... he was my twin... but he..."

Died. Leo only now realized it. Her mother's lost son being of course her brother. Jason. His head felt light, as if he were going to pass out.

She gave him an intense look, then continued in a barely audible voice: "Actually you kind of look like him... you look a lot like him. So does your brother. It's freaking me out."

Her voice broke, and she clapped a hand to her mouth and shut her eyes and turned away.

Leo stared at her trembling profile as she struggled with her emotions, understanding now why she had been so spooked on the gondola. After a long silence he attempted to move the conversation past this painful juncture but his change-the-subject choice was not well-considered: "So uh that guy with you this morning, he--"

"I don't want to talk about him!"

"I uh. Sorry."

"God! He's supposed to be some kind of father, like stepfather, but he acts like he's my boyfriend... he's always coming on to me and trying to touch me and stuff. I can't stand him!"

Leo looked at her, feeling increasingly uneasy and wondering again about the angry red scars ladderling the pale flesh of her forearm.

Wondering, too, what had become of DiPuma. Braked late at the edge of a cliff, he hoped. And in fact the one coming up now would do nicely: a sheer wall of glacier-polished granite rearing up dead ahead.

He raised his eyes and squinted up at the tiny Meccano-set pylon atop the ridge far above as their chair rattled through the wheels of the hold-down assembly on the crossarm of the tower at the base of the cliff, then jogged to a steeper angle and made like an elevator.

Fifty feet up he yawned and his ears popped and it was as if plugs had been removed. The volume came up and the movie he was in suddenly was dominated by its sound track: whoops of laughter from down-mountain; birdsong from invisible nests tucked among the crags and crevices of the cliff; the distant drone and stutter of a heli-ski chopper off to the east headed for the back-country powder.

After what seemed a very long while but probably wasn't they approached the top tower and bumped through another cluster of sheave wheels on the crossarm.

Just as they cleared the ridge and were about to move on to more relaxing terrain the lift engine cut out and the haul-rope froze and they stopped moving, silence falling like a foot of powder. For a moment their chair rocked back and forth in diminishing arcs, then it reversed direction, slipping back through the sheave train and out over the brink of the cliff again before coming once more to a stop.

Momentum swung them back and suddenly Leo found himself beholding between the V of his dangling skis a sight he had done his best to avoid during their ascent: a heart-seizing, Wile E. Coyote's-eye view straight down to the heap of talus at the base of the cliff a very long ways below.

This stall-and-slip-back business was not uncommon, was in fact something he had experienced without alarm on quite a few other occasions. The sudden yawning of the abyss though, coming as it did just when he thought they had passed beyond it, and working in concert with the various other stresses of the moment and of the day, was enough to overwhelm him both with vertigo and the conviction that the haul-rope had snapped and the moment of his death was at hand.

In a horrible clairvoyant flash he saw the bright red chairs plunging down the mountain, the occupants spilling off into shrieking freefall, bodies smacking into rock, bouncing down the escarpment as the severed cable whipped murderously through the bright air.

Some audible expression of his distress must have escaped him, together with a tiny particle of nasal matter which, launched by his gasping expiration, shot from his left nostril and, regrettably, landed on the sleeve of his companion's jacket.

She stared at it, aghast, then slapped it off and turned to him and asked if he was choking.

He shook his head and muttered an apology and turned away, mortified.

Now the auxiliary kicked in down below and their chair was drawn forward once more through the sheaves and past the tower. Leo stared dazedly into the eastern distance, shaken and deeply chagrined, his face nearly as red as his brother's boots, watching three tiny figures clad in primary colours etch powder-blue sine curves into the sun-spangled slopes of a distant peak.

He wished, fervently, he were one of them.

