



Returning

by Catherine Y. Reininger

He had lived thirty-eight years without it but he found himself staring into the face of death who laughed at his unfinished dreams. He was reprieved and flung himself into achieving his goal with the enthusiasm of a child who plunges off the high diving board forgetting that he cannot swim. So it was that Calib returned to school. Before he faced death again he intended to graduate from university.

He had always hungered for knowledge, always on the periphery listening, he gleaned more from overheard conversations than most. He joined a host of clubs on everything from orienteering to rock hunting appearing to be fully engrossed in engine maintenance when in fact he was sucking up knowledge as if it were fuel. He had even wandered into crowded campus lecture halls and learned there too, but until the small tumor behind his left ear threatened him the idea of school had only stirred embers fraught with agonizing memories he wanted only to snuff out.

No one on the mountain road crews would believe Calib might ever return to school either. He was almost as famous for his hatred of paper work as he was for his ability to keep his D-6 Cat purring in the midst of a mud slide.

One spring when the rains had liquified the mountain mud and were dumping it by the ton on the Trans-Canada an officious payroll clerk had come shoshing through the mud waving a sheaf of papers for Calib to fill out if he ever expected to be paid. Calib stepped down from his vibrating machine and hoisted the squealing little man up on the Caterpillar track. "Here, you keep the mountain off the road while I read through this pile of crud," Calib spat. At that moment the whole mountain seemed to lurch as an outcrop broke free and slid toward the road. The clerk grabbed his papers and fled screaming followed by peels of laughter and no one ever knew it was Calib who was soaked in sweat.

From then on every rookie to the crew knew he was going to get stuck with Calib's paperwork.

"Here Boy, think you can handle this heavy bit of paper work?" Calib would invariably demand while the kid flushed and stammered under the crew's merciless eyes. But afterwards Calib would study the boy's work and announce, "I'm glad we hired this lad. He did a better job than F could ever do," and they'd all laugh, except Calib who knew that it was true.

Once Calib's mind was set he always carried through. Unkept promises even to himself nagged at him near dawn. Besides, ever increasing numbers of mature students with untraceable academic histories were

upgrading and retraining. Community Colleges offered a variety of desiccated and miniaturized courses toward a grade twelve equivalence and Calib plunged in. Math was not a problem. Frequently he got it right without really knowing the method his brain used to get there. He became a master at the brief response. Besides he was huge and soft spoken with the most disarming eyes that turned haughty and demanding registration clerks into gracious, enabling young ladies. And suddenly Calib found himself registered in first year Arts at the U. of A.

In the first months of classes Calib was intoxicated with the discovery of his capacity to learn. At night he lay awake sure he could actually feel brain circuits swell and become new thought pathways. In daylight he strained to comprehend the masses of information thrown at him, and sometimes he felt afraid. But he was determined so he arrived early and stayed late. He poured endlessly over every word in his first essay striving to capture on paper the way his professor talked. He looked up every single word he thought even might be wrong and handed in the paper with a mixture of terror and relief.

It came back as all school work all his life had come, FAILED . . . MINUS ONE "Is this some kind of joke?" screamed in red from the title page. The nightmare was alive again.

It brought back to the surface images that burned like bubbling tar, images of home. And his father angry and confused, accusing, "How can you embarrass us like this? The fact that you articulate so well and pick up things so quickly says you are a bright, capable boy and then you produce work like this."

"Retarded, you want people to think our son is retarded? Would that please you?" his mother would demand over and over. "It nearly killed me to have you, but after two girls it was worth it and all you do is fumble and flounder and chicken scratch like some cretin half-wit."

"I wish I'd never been born," he'd retaliate. And she'd stare at him and then turn away while his sisters giggled in the corner or called him 'retard, weirdo and dope.'

What no one understood was that Calib more than anything wanted to learn, needed to succeed and understood his inability less than anyone else. He knew he understood the work. He thought each time he copied that what he'd done was right but when he tried to read it the significance of the twisted lines and bumps was gone. He did learn though, he learned to deceive. So good was he at memorizing, at taking cues from pictures, at guessing what the uninspired writer might plot next that he was into grade seven before anyone realized he could not read.

"We have position in the community, we'll have to take him to a psychologist in the city and find out why he acts this way," he heard his mother say. And they did. The psychologist discerned nothing accurate from his assessment of Calib but added new and frightening words like 'childhood schizophrenic, emotionally disturbed, borderline autistic' to his mother's vocabulary.

Three weeks into grade nine Calib stopped trying. Enraged by his inability to get his hands to write the things he so clearly thought, filled with frustration and self hate he overturned every desk in the class and without ever going home walked to the highway out of town and hiked across four provinces in five days. He was fifteen the day he got his first job on a mountain slope outside of Golden clearing stubble off a future ski slope. The owner of the future gold mine left the serious, hard-working youth to watch over the frame of the ski lodge and the piles of lumber while he went to Florida for six weeks. For company Calib had a six-toed lynx and a shelf of books. When the resort owner returned, Calib could read. He also could take apart and put together every engine on the place. He knew because he had tried it and a love affair between a man and machines sprang up.

Calib could have stayed in the mountains. There was work there. No one ever thought he was stupid or dumb. No one would ever connect schizophrenic, disturbed or retarded with this capable man, yet his brush with death drove him away, pushed him back toward that vulnerable failed life he had once lived. Calib cursed his own need to persist at anything once begun and settled in to find the ways to get on with his degree. He failed numerous courses, teetered on the edge of expulsion all the time but he would not quit. And he learned. He took a lot of courses he didn't want but all exams were multiple choice, short answer or no exam. He paid out fortunes for cutie little girls to type his beautifully worded essays off the audio cassettes which revealed the true character of his creative mind.

"You're not wrong you know," said the blind woman who shuffled into his final class every Wednesday.

"What?" he demanded stupidly.

"You think the Professor is an idiot and you're not wrong," she repeated.

"How do you know?" he replied still confused.

"Because I am blind and not deaf is the answer to both," she replied. "That fool up at the front goes meandering all over God's creation in his lectures. He rarely makes a

point and when he does you get it every time. I can tell by the way you suck in your breath. I also know that when he doesn't make a point you often chastise yourself as if there was a point there and you missed it. You ought to be mad at the institution for allowing fools like that to fritter away your valuable time."

"Thanks," he said, "I think I needed that."

After that the blind woman never came to lectures but Calib always wished she had. She had opened his eyes and he began to see his education in a different light. He stumbled quite by accident in the final term of his final year upon a class that made all the misery worth while. One professor who brought to life not only impressionist art but the artists and the Empire and the way of life. For the first time Calib found himself looking at the bibliography lists. He became intimate with the journals of Van Gogh struck by the agonizing sensitivity of the artist and his art. Only Munch's *The Scream* impressed him more. In this one class listening was a joy, learning was a naturally flowing consequence.

Once, briefly Calib thought of confessing to this man that he was a secret idiot like Haubert but he did not. As the term drew to a close and the final exam grew imminent Calib grew more insecure. He began to think all pockets of laughter were directed at him. As if every person knew that he could not pass, would never graduate. His dreams were filled with the angry faces of his father and mother demanding to know why he shamed them once again. He had no contact with them since the day he walked away except now in his horrible dreams. They voiced for him his own self loathing, his monstrous flaw that crippled the capacity of his alert mind. In rage he pounded his right fist against a cement retaining wall and watched amazed as it ballooned in size and volume.

The plaster cast prevented him from writing the exam. Never in a human life had such agony brought such joy. The exam became an oral. He understood the shades of light and dark. He knew the mood of the brush strokes, the evolution of Impressionist art through each of its artists. He understood the body-wrenching labour emphasized by the rudeness in Millet's stroke. He knew all of Daumier's lithographs and their connection to the First Republic. Calib's verbal essays were music. He received the class's only nine, in this his own last year. Calib would not attend the convocation; he did not feel he'd earned it. He did not frame his diploma when he got it, he framed instead his library card because it was the most valuable piece of paper he had owned. He returned to the roads.