

FIFTEEN THOUSAND PIECES

A Medical Examiner's Journey Through Disaster

MIROLAND IMPRINT 44



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

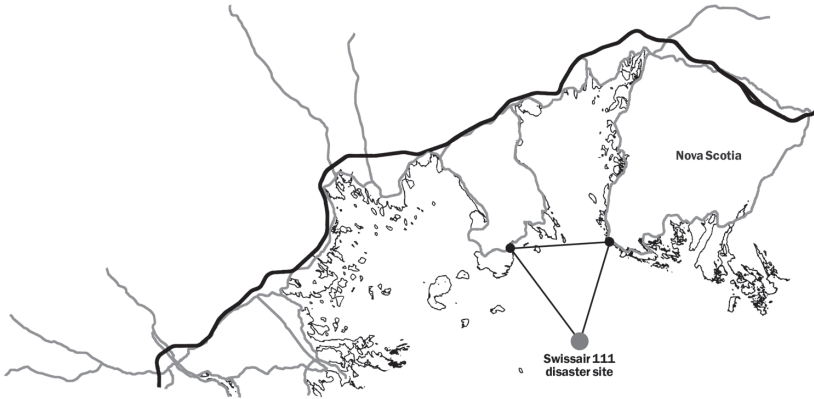
Canada

Guernica Editions Inc. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The Ontario Arts Council is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

FIFTEEN THOUSAND PIECES

A Medical Examiner's Journey Through Disaster



Gina Leola Woolsey



MiroLand
publishers

MIROLAND (GUERNICA)
TORONTO • CHICAGO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2023

Copyright © 2023, Gina Leola Woolsey and Guernica Editions Inc.
All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication,
reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording
or otherwise stored in a retrieval system, without the prior consent
of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Guernica Founder: Antonio D'Alfonso

Connie McParland, Michael Mirolla, series editors
Gary Clairman, editor
David Moratto, cover design and interior design

Guernica Editions Inc.
287 Templemead Drive, Hamilton, ON L8W 2W4
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.
www.guernicaeditions.com

Distributors:
Independent Publishers Group (IPG)
600 North Pulaski Road, Chicago IL 60624
University of Toronto Press Distribution (UTP)
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

First edition.
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2022951963
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Title: Fifteen thousand pieces : a medical examiner's journey through disaster /
Gina Leola Woolsey.

Names: Woolsey, Gina Leola, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230133150 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230133215 |
ISBN 9781771838115 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771838122 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Butt, John (John C.) | LCSH: Medical examiners (Law)—
Nova Scotia—Biography. | LCSH: Gay men—Nova Scotia—Biography. |
LCSH: Swissair Flight 111 Crash, 1998—Biography. | LCSH: Coming out
(Sexual orientation)—Nova Scotia. | LCGFT: Biographies.

Classification: LCC RA1025.B88 W66 2023 | DDC 614/.1092—dc23

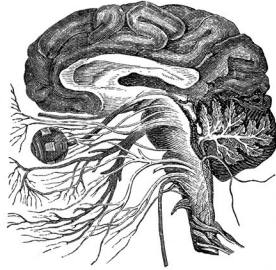
for Michael, my love
1966–2018

Contents

CHAPTER ONE: PLANE DOWN	1
CHAPTER TWO: MY MORBID CURIOSITY	8
CHAPTER THREE: A DEATH IN THE FAMILY	13
CHAPTER FOUR: SHEARWATER	23
CHAPTER FIVE: PATHOLOGY	32
CHAPTER SIX: PRESERVER	45
CHAPTER SEVEN: HEROES	56
CHAPTER EIGHT: HABEAS CORPUS	65
CHAPTER NINE: HOMECOMING	75
CHAPTER TEN: IDENTITY	86
CHAPTER ELEVEN: THINGS FALL APART	95
CHAPTER TWELVE: MEMORIAL	107
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DISASTER TRAINING	116
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MEMENTO MORI	127
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: BODY OF SECRETS	138
CHAPTER SIXTEEN: ACCOLADES & CONDEMNATIONS	148
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: DISCLOSURE	160
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: LOST & FOUND	169
CHAPTER NINETEEN: WRONGFUL DEATH	180
CHAPTER TWENTY: PATHFINDER FORUM	193
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: CLUB DEAD	206
Acknowledgements	223
About the Author	225

CHAPTER ONE

PLANE DOWN



September 2nd, 1998

THE PHONE ON the bedside table rings minutes before 11 p.m. on a rainy Wednesday night. It's a woman from his office.

"I've just had a call from the Halifax Rescue Coordination Centre. A plane's gone down somewhere off the Aspotogan Peninsula."

Dr. John Butt, Nova Scotia's Chief Medical Examiner (ME), and his two dogs are ready for bed. Deputy and Ben, golden retrievers, flank their master, ready for the night's watch.

"What is it?" He knows what she's going to say—a small craft, or a local carrier flight.

"It's an international flight. It's Swissair."

The information doesn't go straight to the action center in his brain. His plausibility muscle bats away the news so his mind has a minute to rev the mental engines.

"I think there's some room for double checking on this."

Dr. Butt, a forensic pathologist with over thirty years of experience, lives across the bay from the peninsula, about half an hour's drive from his office in Halifax where he leads the medically focused aspects of Nova Scotia's death investigations.

He'd only returned home a short time ago, after a long day in

court, two hours away in New Glasgow. His testimony had been postponed and the impatient doctor was forced to wait on the sidelines for his turn to give evidence of murder. The victim, a cab driver, had been strangled with a ligature placed from behind, and asphyxiated. It was an upsetting case; a deadly robbery that netted the two young assailants a handful of loose change. The Chief ME was determined to have his moment on the stand for the poor man, despite the waiting game.

As he drove home, a dark sky overtook the milky twilight. On grey fall days in Nova Scotia, the clouds crouch low over the rocky coastline, as if conspiring with the sea to swallow houses and towns. It's a different feeling than the expansive semi-circle sky of John's hometown in Alberta, where the air is dry and the land gently dips and rises toward the far-flung horizon. The people here, they're different too.

His office calls back. It's confirmed. A Swissair commercial plane has gone down off the Aspotogan Peninsula.

John's internal alarm sounds, igniting the flow of adrenaline through limbs and vital organs. The buzzing won't be far behind. At sixty-three, and after three decades of work in his field, John is no stranger to large-scale disasters. An international flight carrying possibly hundreds of people is proving difficult to imagine. *How? Where? Why?* The panic in his belly threatens, spreading its searing fingers, pushing blood from vital organs to the extremities, flushing his face and scattering his thoughts.

John drags a suitcase out of the walk-in closet and throws it open on the bed. He moves back and forth between his clothes and the bag, a repetitive motion to occupy the alarming thoughts while his brain works to find the logical next steps. *I should be back in a day or three*, he thinks, trying to compile a mental list of what one needs when heading off to deal with an international disaster.

Jan and Geoff, John's best friends in Nova Scotia, live across the road. In a few days, when John runs out of clean clothes, he'll ask Jan to bring him more. John, always dapper in his dress, gives her a list—the grey suit, the blue shirt with French cuffs, the soft yellow

tie. But Jan is colour blind and her choices are mismatched attempts to follow his instructions. In the years to come, they will laugh at her fumbles, laugh at how John struggled to put together a sombre but stylish outfit to address the families or the television cameras. The laughter will help them remember, and forget.

It takes him half an hour to gather his thoughts and finally zip the suitcase closed. By this time, the horrific news has travelled a circuitous route through his defence mechanisms and become true. He must keep his thoughts orderly and make the adrenaline work in his favour to stay ahead of the emotions. He never wants to hear that dreaded buzzing sound in his head again.

The dogs need minding. He calls his other neighbours, Frank and Shirley, a friendly couple just down the road. Shirley answers the phone, even though it's after 11 p.m. Of course they'll take the dogs, she tells him, don't worry about it one bit. She soothes his jagged nerves with her reassuring voice.

Shirley is an angel. This isn't the first time she's come to his aid. When he moved across the country, from Calgary to Halifax, Shirley greeted him with neighbourly warmth. In Alberta, it's customary to invite newcomers into your home for a meal or a cup of cheer. John finds the people on this coast friendly and earnest, but somehow not welcoming. He has trouble feeling connected to new people who don't extend dinner invitations or host parties. Shirley seemed different, and she invited him and his dogs into her life right away. It didn't take long for them to discover their shared friends. As it turns out, Shirley and her husband, Frank, lived in Alberta too, and they have common acquaintances back in Calgary.

With Jan and Geoff across the road, plus Frank and Shirley close by, John feels reasonably content in his seaside saltbox. Their three houses sit atop a small spit of land across the bay from the Aspotogan Peninsula. John's picture window overlooks St. Margaret's Bay and the arm of land that hugs the opposite shoreline. Had the neighbours been scrutinizing the dark sky that night in the minutes before impact, they might have seen the doomed aircraft on its final trajectory into the ocean.

After the call to Shirley, John checks the dogs off his mental list. Time to pass on the news. He needs to rally the troops and call the commander. His staff consists of one highly competent administrative assistant named Linda, two Nurse Investigators and one part-time file clerk. He starts with Linda.

* * *

A loud noise rips through the still air above the house. Trinkets and framed family photos shake on wooden shelves around the perimeter of the living room. Linda, a stout, working mom, and her giant-sized husband are spending a few minutes with the TV and their teenage daughter before heading up to bed.

“Oh my heavens! Do you hear that plane? Next they’ll be landing in our living room,” Linda says. She has to be up early the next morning to attend a workshop in Liverpool with her boss and several RCMP members. It’s her job to keep things going, to smooth out the rough edges of Dr. Butt’s communication style, and to keep him cooperating, especially when the RCMP are involved. She needs her rest.

The parents leave their daughter with the TV and head up to bed, both fast asleep within minutes, the sound of the too-close plane quickly forgotten. Sometime after 11 p.m., the ringing phone wakes her.

“There’s a plane down somewhere off the Aspotogan Peninsula,” Dr. Butt says.

“What do you mean? Like, in the water?” Linda is groggy.

“I don’t know exactly, but I believe so.”

“What kind of plane?” Linda enters her short period of denial. Surely, if it’s true, it must be a small plane. It must be a manageable tragedy. How can it be anything else?

“A big passenger plane. A Swissair plane.” John stabs at her disbelief.

“Oh my heavens!”

“You have to meet me at the office right away. You’ll have to get

up and come in right now. I need to call Emergency Measures. You'll need to call the RCMP and coordinate with them. We'll have to gather up—"

"Ok, listen," she says, interrupting his flurry of instructions. "I'm hanging up the phone and I'm coming to meet you at the office."

"Or, I should call the RCMP. You call Emergency Measures. We'll need to coordinate with everyone." John continues his rapid fire.

"Listen." She interrupts him again. "Now, listen. I'm going to hang up so I can get dressed and I'll be on my way."

Linda knows how to deal with her boss. She respects him for his intelligence and everything he's done to bring the Nova Scotia Medical Examiner's office to its current state of efficiency. Before Dr. Butt, there were so many problems. Now everything is done the same—all the investigations, all the paperwork, all the files throughout the province are part of one, unified system. The Medical Examiner relies on rural family doctors and hospital pathologists to visit distant crime scenes and do lab work. Before Dr. Butt, the ME office often waited over a year for pathology results. Government funding was minimal and Linda worked alone with the previous Chief ME. Dr. Butt changed all that.

Other aspects of her boss, in Linda's opinion, aren't as admirable. He's a micro manager who worries over everything. He needs to be in control and it causes a great deal of friction between the ME's Office and some of the RCMP. He's often fighting with one colleague or another, and Linda is called on to make things OK. The toughest test of her skill is about to start.

Linda's daughter bounds up the stairs to her parents' room. "Mom, mom! It's on TV. A passenger plane went down off Peggy's Cove!"

Within minutes, clear in her mission and direction, Linda is dressed and heading toward Halifax.

* * *

Robert Conrad wakes to the sound of the nightly news on his living room television. He must have fallen asleep. The regular broadcast

has been interrupted and a voice cuts through his semiconscious haze. A commercial airliner is down in the St. Margaret's Bay area, somewhere near his home.

Bob Conrad has raised his family on the tuna he's fished from the waters of St. Margaret's Bay. It is his extended yard, his home, and his workplace. The house that shelters him from the wild seasonal shifts of coastal atmosphere rests next to the shore of the bay. Waves lapping on the rocks can be heard from his kitchen table.

People must be out there right now, lost in the dark water, clinging to life. The need to find the crash site, to find survivors and pull them from the sea, takes Bob hostage. Within minutes, he is kneeling at the bedside, telling his wife that a plane has crashed into water nearby and he needs to take the boat out and help however possible.

"But, Bob, what about our rule?"

"No, no. It'll take you too long to be ready. I can't wait. Listen on the VHF and you'll know what's happening. You'll know I'm OK."

Bob rushes out the door and down the road to North West Cove, a thumbprint notch of shelter on the jagged edge of the peninsula where his boat is moored. At the dock, journalists hover, pecking at the other fishermen who've felt the same pull to help. The reporters with their camera crews want rides out to the crash site. Bob sets off without passengers, despite the rule he never go out by himself, and despite requests from the boat-less reporters on the dock. For some reason, he needs to do this alone.

* * *

David Wilkins, an ophthalmologist from California, and his wife fly from their home in Loma Linda to Seattle for a visit with friends. They've already said goodbye to their youngest child, nineteen-year-old Monte, at the airport when he left to attend university in France. He's flying to New York, then transferring to a flight bound for Geneva where he'll spend a little time on his way to school. It's bittersweet. The kids have all left the nest and the parents accept their new freedom with equal measures of nostalgic longing and

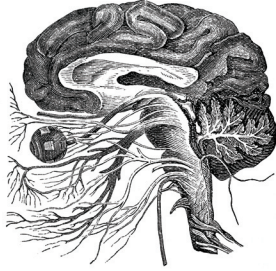
excitement. They're a happy and devout family ready for the next stage of independent togetherness.

* * *

John loads the car with his carefully packed bags. The sky is overcast and a thin rain blackens the pavement. The air smells of moldering leaves and wet stone. At the end of the driveway, he turns left onto Norvista Lane, away from his friends and beloved dogs. The drive to the main road leading to the city is hilly and narrow with twists and turns that trace the shape of the landscape. Scrubby underbrush and thin trees cling to the shoulders of the pavement. At the intersection of the coastal country road and the highway, he wonders which way to go. The instinct to head toward the crash site, where he imagines soon-to-be heroes are charging to the rescue, pulls at John. But what help could he give there? And where? *I don't even know where the bloody thing went down! Better to be sensible*, he decides, and turns the car toward town, his office, and the disaster manual he wrote years ago.

CHAPTER TWO

MY MORBID CURIOSITY



MATT WAS HIS best friend. He wasn't ready to say goodbye. "He's a wonderful, wonderful dog," John said at least once every time I'd visit. A gentle golden retriever, Matt had a habit of bringing his stuffed animal to the door to greet guests, head low, almost shy, tail wagging, like a child showing off a favourite toy. When he was especially pleased, he'd howl.

Matt had been diagnosed with cancer. Chemo had extended his life, but John was torn about the therapy. He was brought up on the prairies, where animals were rarely treated like humans. I called John after I saw the group text about Matt's demise. I was worried.

"I'm not morbid about it at all," he told me. "I'm okay."

"You've been preparing for this, I suppose." I was relieved. He sounded well.

"It's difficult in the evening. We always went to the park after supper and I'd chat with the other dog people. But I've kept myself busy." He went on to list a dizzying array of activity for a twenty-four-hour period.

How can a man of eighty-three have so much more energy than me? I wondered. In the five years we've been friends, he's travelled more, and had more adventures than I have managed to experience during

my forty-nine years. He certainly knows how to embrace living. Perhaps it comes from his intimacy with death.

I met John while attending my first *Quarterly Dinner Group*—a three-hour affair with cocktails, dinner, and an intellectual or political speaker during dessert—in the dining room of the Vancouver Lawn and Tennis Club, or Van Lawn as it's known to the locals. The venue is classic men's club: chic with plenty of wood and leather. I'm one of the few women in attendance. At each meeting, one by one, we stand to introduce ourselves and give updates on our professional lives, or any news we may wish to share. Many of these men have been attending for twenty years. Most of them shoot for laughs. John is no exception. At my first dinner, his opening sentence grabbed my attention.

"I'm Dr. John Butt, and you don't want to meet me professionally, because if you did, you'd be dead." He stood for a few beats, rocking gently back to front, heel to toes, waiting for the ripple of laughter to die down before he went on with his update. He reminded me of a sartorial Alfred Hitchcock.

I leaned over to my husband, Michael, and whispered, "I need to meet that guy."

I'm drawn to people who can handle death. Acceptance seems like some kind of enlightenment. Here was a man who'd spent his life with corpses and tragedy. More, he'd gone through med school, and then *chosen* to further educate himself with a specialization in forensic pathology, and a life working with death. I wanted to find out why. I was sure the answer was important.

During cocktail hour at a subsequent dinner group evening, I was formally introduced to the doctor by my accommodating better half. In our brief but dense conversation, John and I established that we are both Alberta-born, irreligious (this is important for two Albertans) food fanatics who enjoy wine, and have a healthy respect for nature. He made me laugh. His questions reminded me of our shared experience with prairie patriarchy.

Minutes into our meeting he asked, "What does your father do?"

After I'd given my family credentials, I asked my brave question. "I'm fascinated by your work, Dr. Butt. Would you consider being interviewed for a profile?"

I went to his office for our first one-on-one meeting a few weeks after that dinner. We sat in a glass-walled boardroom and I asked embarrassingly naïve questions.

"What made you want to become a forensic pathologist?"

I'd done some digging before our meeting. He'd essentially created the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for the Government of Alberta in the seventies. For seventeen years afterward, he was at the head of medical-legal jurisprudence in the province. After his tenure as the Chief ME in one of Canada's wealthiest provinces, John moved across the country to the Maritimes, where he served as Nova Scotia's Chief ME. Four years, and one life-altering catastrophe later, he moved to Vancouver and dedicated himself to his own consulting agency. Dr. Butt's experience with disasters piqued my morbid curiosity: two train wrecks, one in a busy London suburb, the other on a winding stretch of track in the Canadian wilderness; a deadly tornado that mowed a path through Alberta's northern capital; and a devastating plane crash in Nova Scotia that taught him, finally, what he was truly capable of giving.

I wanted my semi-obsession with death to lead me somewhere. I thought we'd talk about life in the presence of bloody organs stopped by some unknown cause, or of limbs severed from unknown owners, or stomach-churning putrefaction, and most of all, of great loss.

He swatted away the questions and even looked confused that I wanted to talk about death or anything philosophical. I felt silly. He was a scientist after all. I'd have to come at it from another direction.

"Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself?" I forged ahead. My notebook was open, pen poised, but no recorder. It was too soon.

"I'm just home from a terrible holiday trapped in a car with my cousin and his wife. He was very, very rude to her."

We chatted on about how the whole fiasco had left him so upset—he couldn't stop turning the thing over and over in his head.

The cousin-altercation led to further talk of his family; a difficult relationship with his mother, a yearning for more time with his father, and a lack of connection with his own children. He spoke candidly from the start. I had assumed I would be presenting my case to him, convincing him to share with me, but that wasn't so. He was ready to tell his story.

When I asked him why he wanted to expose himself to close scrutiny, he confessed to vengeful thoughts. Despite his apparent motivation to punish people for making his professional life difficult, his stories came around, again and again, to the impossibilities in his personal life. His complexity multiplied, as did my interest.

John told me he'd been approached to write his story in the past, after the Nova Scotia crash. No one had the right attitude. Maybe they reminded him too much of the press, greedy for gore. Was that what I wanted, too? I had to be clear with my intentions.

"Why me?" I asked him.

He seemed flummoxed by the question. "You're in the dinner group, and starting out with your writing career. I want to give you a leg up."

"Well, I appreciate that, but I can't promise anything." I was nervous. It was already clear from our conversation that he had a perfectionist streak, a controlling nature, and a giant but delicate heart. There was also this sensitive and caring side that came out in his expressions, inflections, and gestures. I didn't find out until much later that John had a penchant for nurturing careers in those he found worthy. It was obvious to me he carried a great wound, and I understood that. As a result, John was a walking, talking, emotional lightning rod, and I understood that, too.

Then he said the thing that grabbed me. "I can talk to you. I feel like I can tell you things."

By September, I was driving to John's house on Friday evenings. We sat for at least two hours at a time. I posed one question after another while the tape recorder's red light glowed between us. I watched his gestures and admired his manly hands, long and broad with straight phalanges and solid bundles of carpal bones. He wore

a gold signet ring on his left hand. I thought, *The things those hands have touched.*

We talked a great deal about the Swissair disaster in the early interviews. The flight from New York, bound for Geneva, spiralled into the ocean near Halifax, the capital city of Nova Scotia. Two hundred and twenty nine people were on that flight and not one survived. In the aftermath, a community of kind-hearted folks was thrown onto the world stage, and tormented by the immense tragedy for months, even years. Mourners who lost loved ones travelled from distant continents to witness the scene. As the Chief Medical Examiner, John inadvertently became the lodestone for the families' grief. It was a pivotal time in his life.

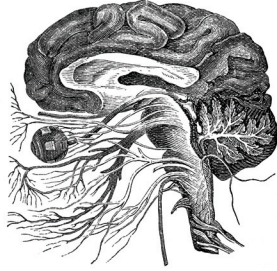
I kept questioning his career path. Why, and how, does someone become a forensic pathologist? I thought there would have been an epiphany moment, or a lifelong desire, but when is the plot of one's life so obvious? John held a secret at his centre.

In the handful of years since John and I met, I have travelled across the country interviewing his colleagues, friends, family, and foes, and gathered what feels like an endless pile of details: divorce proceedings, court transcripts, Black Friday, the Hinton rail disaster, Swissair, and more. My journey morphed from death investigation to something resembling an archeological dig. I was slowly exposing the bones of a public life lived in hiding. I've spoken personally to the people given a point of view in these pages. It became difficult to reconcile a single truth. But is there ever such a thing when it comes to a complicated human life? Their stories were all varying degrees of different. Some people refused to be interviewed but were impossible to leave out. Some names were changed, by request, for privacy.

This is John's story.

CHAPTER THREE

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY



June, 1958, International Waters, Pacific Ocean

HMCS ANTIGONISH HAD left Hilo Harbor, Hawaii a few hours prior to the call from the Naval Command Office in Esquimalt, British Columbia. By the time the Captain changed course, the closest port was Pearl Harbor. It had been seventeen years since Japanese torpedo and fighter planes landed a devastating attack on the naval station at Pearl Harbor and brought the US into the war; thirteen years since Enola Gay dropped Little Boy on Hiroshima, and Bockscar delivered Fat Man to Nagasaki. WWII had ended and the cold war gripped the psyche of a freshly post-nuclear world. Mike Wallace interviewed Aldous Huxley for rapt home viewers. TV cameras rolled as the serious men discussed Huxley's new collection of essays, *Enemies of Freedom*. Communism was the threat. Russia had the bomb. Men returned home from WWII and women were fighting to hold their places in the workforce. Feminism was on the lips of prepubescent girls soon to flaunt mini skirts and stage bra burnings. It was a brave new world.

Lieut. John Butt, a young man of twenty-three, stood at attention in his Captain's quarters where he'd been summoned for a private conversation. His slender build accentuated his height, and his

dark, closely shorn hair formed a widow's peak above his forehead, like his mother's. He looked quite a bit like her.

"Lieutenant, we're sending you home," the Captain told him.

John listened, but didn't respond or react. He stood silently, a cutting figure of manhood clothed to perfection in a custom uniform.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your mother is gravely ill, Lieutenant. I've ordered the ship to shore so you can disembark."

John was serving for the summer on *HMCS Antigonish*. In 1952, he'd been accepted to a prestigious University Naval Training Division straight out of high school. His buddy was doing it, and the perks were good. It meant that John could be away from home, and his mother, for most of the summer. It wasn't easy to get accepted, but he had the right pedigree and good grades. He did well in the program, and fit nicely into an officer's leadership role as a lieutenant.

John's father, Jack, had been a Navy man. Jack was born in 1899 to Lily and Percy Butt in London, England. Tragically, Percy had thrown himself in front of a subway train in London when Jack was a child. Lily and her children struggled to stay housed and fed after the suicide. In 1915, at sixteen years old, Jack enlisted in the Royal Navy. World War I was underway with Britain entering the fray in August of 1914. Leaving danger aside, Jack saw an opportunity to get away from home and the daily drudgery of poverty. Years later, his son followed suit and used the Navy to escape his own family dynamic.

At the age of seven, John had found his dad's wooden trunk of sea-time relics in the basement. There was a .22 calibre breach-loading pistol with bullets in the chamber, a fascinating toy for the young boy. He felt the danger associated with the weapon and knew he didn't want to get caught touching it, so he only handled it on rare occasions. The uniforms drew his attention most—white, single-breasted, stiff cotton jackets with tight, stand-up collars, and white cotton trousers. He loved to imagine himself in a crisp uniform and cap, travelling the world on a grand ship. Spending time with these artifacts from his father's past became a touchstone escape for young John. Joining the Navy on an officer's path was a dream come true.

Cadet John Butt was made Sub-lieutenant Butt in 1955. Young officer cadets in training became his charges. He was responsible for their paper work, their appearance, and their discipline. Along with the added responsibility, he felt a certain added status. All the smartest looking officers ordered uniforms custom made at Gieves, an expensive Bond Street tailor in England. John chose to do the same. His dark, double-breasted jacket and pants were the finest wool, and thick gold braid twice encircled the cuff of each sleeve. John was handsome in a boyish way. He had a round face that filled with childish mischief when he smiled under the black peak of his officer's cap. Being well turned out for a living suited him to a Bond Street T. He often thought of giving up medical school and having an officer's career in the Navy.

His mother, however, knew John's future. He was going to be a doctor. She had established this fact early on. Isobel Butt was serious about life. She was a no nonsense lady on a mission to educate. Born Isobel MacLean Lewis in 1905 to George and Margaret Lewis, John's mother was a proper English woman with a pragmatic approach to child rearing. Her father, George Lewis, was a devout High Anglican who worshipped daily at a church on Gore Street in Vancouver. He ran a strict home and spent his little free time reading or attending meetings of the Freemasons. Isobel's mother, Mrs. Margaret Lewis, was a Victorian-era lady who knew the rituals of a proper English tea, though she was born on a Canadian island in the Pacific Ocean. Mrs. Lewis also believed there was no place for emotional outbursts in a proper home. Life at the Lewis household was Dickensian. Adults went about with a stiff upper lip, and children were seen but not heard.

Isobel met Jack Butt in 1932 when she was a schoolteacher in Vancouver. Jack was working for the Marconi Company at that time. He had a post as the wireless radio operator aboard Canadian Pacific Steamships running tourist cruises up Vancouver Island to wild places on the northern tip where carved totems and centurion trees dominated the landscape. In the spring of 1933, Isobel and Jack were married in Vancouver. Victorian prudence hung about the

era like an old shawl. Personal independence movements struggled to shrug it off. Vancouver City Council had recently passed a bylaw allowing men to go topless on city beaches. The Great Depression was the real benchmark of the times. Two provinces over, Saskatchewan was a dustbowl, three years into a drought that punctuated the economic misery for many farmers. Family homesteads were abandoned because there was nothing left to eat, nothing left to do. The Temperance Movement had fallen and the United States finally ended prohibition, crippling the Canadian rum-running industry with the flourish of a pen. Across the Atlantic, Hitler had been named Chancellor of Germany.

Jack and Isobel started a family soon after marriage. John Clulow Butt was born on September 6, 1934 in Calgary, Alberta. Jack had left the life at sea and landed a job as a travelling salesman with Procter & Gamble in Alberta. His sales territory kept him away from the family during the week, or for weeks at a stretch, but he was a loving father to little John when he was home.

Like most little kids, John loved getting into bed with his parents in the morning for a snuggle or a game of pillow fort, which his dad played with great enthusiasm. But his mother didn't like any roughhousing or messing about, and she didn't make forts or play games. She said to John when he climbed on her, "Don't touch my breasts, I'll get cancer." He didn't really know what she meant at the time, but he knew it was bad.

It had been twenty years since her words made their first impression, but they were with him still. Despite his understanding of science, and three years of medical school, he couldn't shake her ominous premonition. Was he somehow responsible for his mother lying in a hospital bed dying of breast cancer?

When he was home from university for the Thanksgiving holiday, Isobel had told him in her matter-of-fact style that she'd had a mastectomy and the procedure had left her terribly disfigured. It was a great shock to John and he felt the need to do something helpful, so he spoke with the pathologist over slides of his mother's breast tissue. The biopsy specimens outlined disfigured lymph nodes and

a very bad prognosis. He knew then that she was terminal. Later, at the office with his mother's surgeon, John stepped into adulthood.

"Look, I'd like you to promise me something," John said to the surgeon. "Don't tell my father the prognosis."

"I don't think I can do that, John. Why don't you want me to tell him?"

"It's just . . . it's going to be so rapidly fatal anyway."

"I still don't think I can do that."

~ "He knows it's cancer, but in my opinion, he doesn't need to know this," John said, as definitively as possible, and left it at that. He assumed the surgeon would likely tell his father. He was wrong.

The last leg of John's journey from Hilo Harbour to Vancouver was spent on a bus. The trip was a long and slow. He had too much time to think. He worried over his little sister, wondering how she was coping with the impending loss of their mother.

Susan MacLean Butt was born in April of 1946 when John was eleven years old, but she didn't arrive at the Butt household until mid summer that year. Susan was adopted. John didn't know exactly why his parents chose to adopt a child. His mother was in her early forties, busy with her volunteer work and keeping up the home with an absent husband. John was quite jealous of any other children, as he felt that he never had enough of his dad's time for himself. Maybe if he had been more athletic, his dad would have shown him more attention. Maybe if he were smarter. Maybe if he had been a girl. It seemed to John that little girls had a way with his father that he just couldn't master. When he asked his mother why they were adopting a child, she quickly ended the conversation with a blow to his heart. "I can't have more kids because having you almost killed me."

Why couldn't he focus on the good times? John asked himself while the bus lumbered heavily toward his hometown. *Why did his mother torment him so?* And now that she was leaving him, he didn't want her to go. He didn't want his dad to be alone or his little sister, only twelve, to grow up without a mother. He was glad to live away from

Isobel, but he still wanted her there in her mother place, doing her mother things. Despite his efforts to resurrect happy memories, the painful old movies in his mind played on.

John thought back to when he was fourteen. It was 1948 and the rolling foothills of Alberta were showing their buried riches as the oil boom spread through the countryside. Calgary was flourishing. Industry leaders chose the city for their headquarters. Strong religious currents, a do-it-yourself attitude, and plenty of oil money, made Alberta into Canada's version of Texas. Men in cowboy hats with pressed shirts and fancy boots walked the city streets. They opened doors for ladies and used "Ma'am" liberally. The women dressed well, never leaving the house without hat and gloves. Downtown Calgary was the most cosmopolitan place in the province.

John had spent the morning babysitting a young girl who was staying with the family. His mother gave him bus money and told him to take the girl downtown and entertain her with some window-shopping. They went to the toy section at Eaton's department store. A ride-on train was setup on a track running around the aisles. Kids were lined up to ride for a few cents, so John used some change from the bus fare to pay for the girl. He'd have gone himself, but he was a teenager, too big for the fun at hand. John loved trains. He even dreamed of becoming a steam-locomotive engineer. Anything that travelled captured his attention. Ships and planes were favourites, too. Later that day, John had plans to meet his best friend, Alex, and ride out to the air station to look at planes. He was so looking forward to chumming around with his best pal.

"Where is my change?" his mother demanded after John and his charge returned home.

He lied. It felt like the only thing to do. Her tone was accusing, so he must have something to hide. "It must be in my jacket pocket. I'll have a look," he said, sliding from his chair at the table where they sat eating lunch. His mother followed him down the hall to the coat closet by the door. The rest of the family stayed seated, trying to ignore the growing tension.

John made a play of searching his pockets. "I must have lost it."

He tried to look innocent. He knew the lie wasn't going to hold. He saw it in her face.

"What do you mean you must have lost it?"

"I spent it on a train ride. She, she wanted to go for a ride, so I thought it would be OK."

Isobel slapped him across the face. "I'll teach you to lie to me! How dare you!"

He turned away, trying to fit between the coats in the closet and pad his head from her blows. He was almost man-sized. Isobel had to reach up to hit him on the head, her intended target. At the end of the beating, John was grounded and bawling uncontrollably. The worst part was missing his date with Alex. It was an extra embarrassment to explain over the phone and between sobs that he wasn't allowed out.

After the long bus ride, Lieut. Butt arrived home in Calgary for his final goodbye to the mother he never knew how to please. Mrs. Bulmer, Isobel's sister, and Mrs. Lewis, John's maternal grandmother, were waiting for him.

"Why is your father so shocked that your mother is dying? Surely the doctors knew she was terminal after her mastectomy? Look how quickly she's deteriorated!" Mrs. Bulmer's was fuming at her nephew.

"I told the doctor not to tell him," John admitted sheepishly.

"You did what? How could you do such a thing? It's not your place to make such decisions!" His aunt continued to berate him while his grandmother stood off to the side, nodding in agreement. They made him feel small, again, just as his mother had so many times before.

John escaped to Isobel's bedside as soon as he was able. When he arrived at her room in the Holy Cross Hospital, there were two giant bouquets; one bunch from the officers aboard *HMCS Antigonish*, the other from the crew. He was briefly overcome with emotion, but managed to control himself before anyone saw his facial contortions. Isobel herself might have cuffed him for being a sissy had she been privy to his suffocated fits of feeling. But she was in a coma. Her

skin had the telltale yellow tinge of jaundice from her body's vital organs' slowing momentum, headed toward stillness. He thought he wanted to tell her that he loved her. He was sure he would have. The late afternoon light faded, casting long shadows up the walls. Her death hovered close by and its looming presence frightened him.

When John returned home after the short vigil at the hospital, his aunt and grandmother were making demands. "Well. Where is Isobel's will? I think that is the best place to start," Mrs. Bulmer said.

"I don't believe Isobel has a will," John's father replied.

"That is simply not possible. Isobel was a responsible woman. It just is not possible that she does not have a will, is it mother?" Mrs. Bulmer looked at her mother, who bobbed her head dutifully.

The women took to pulling apart the closets, rooting through the storage boxes and demanding access to any other places, such as safe deposit boxes, where one might store a will. Jack insisted that Isobel had no will, but was helpless to stop the invasion of privacy. His wife was dying. John was furious at the intrusion. He wanted to protect his dad from this insulting process, but felt helpless.

The invasion ended when Mrs. Bulmer pulled a mink stole from its hiding spot where Isobel had packed it away for the summer.

"Look mother, it's the mink! I'm quite sure Isobel wants me to have this. I'm quite sure her will states it, wherever it is." With that, the search was over.

John thought of Susan. He thought of what she might have of her mother after. He thought of how little she knew. The last time Susan had seen their mother, Isobel had a suitcase in her hand. She had acted as if she were off to visit someone far away. No one told Susan what was happening. It wasn't considered proper. Little girls needn't know about death.

John felt the overwhelming emotions threatening to take hold again, to take him down. He needed to talk to someone with compassion. His family took pride in keeping everything clamped down tight, so he went to the doctor who lived across the back alley. The man was a family friend and had been their GP for years. When he got there, he broke down. He sobbed and stuttered his anguish

through the tears while the kindly doctor listened and consoled. It was an enormous relief, but it didn't last long. Mrs. Bulmer was waiting again for John with another scolding at the ready.

"Where have you been?"

John felt the familiar fear rise again from the pit of his stomach. "I was just having a visit with Doc across the way. I wasn't gone long."

"How can you be off worrying about yourself when you should be here with your father and your sister. Honestly, don't you know how to be a man?" Mrs. Bulmer always had the last, cutting word that put an end to discussion.

Isobel died two days after John returned home. He wasn't at her bedside when she passed. Families were meant to show their love in brief stints during visiting hours, and otherwise stay out of the way. After her death, John was tasked with collecting her things from the hospital. As he stepped through the doors of Saint Mary's, he heard the cries of a baby's birth and thought, *One life ends and another begins*, then imagined his mother's spirit flying into the baby's body. But he didn't believe in spirits, or heaven and hell. He didn't believe in anything like that. He was a scientist.

Two men in a Packard limousine arrived at the Butt house the next day. They wore outdated mourning attire and spoke in hushed voices with hands clasped at their hearts. They asked for things. Jack chose the blue brocade dress that sister Janet had given as a gift. He found a photo of his wife, vital and alive, to guide the undertaker's hand. Then the grieving husband and his son were escorted to a funeral home on 4th Street.

The Butt men stood in a room full of caskets while the funeral directors waited below stairs. A system for allowing the families privacy was in place. Each coffin bore a detachable sign. The mourners were to bring the sign associated with their choice downstairs whenever they were ready. No rush.

John handed the chosen sign to Mr. Holloway, the funeral director. "That's a very respectable decision," Holloway said in a solemn tone. The remark irked John. *What the hell does he mean by that?*

The family viewing before the funeral was held in a small chapel.

John didn't linger over his mother's body. She was fully made-up, with curled hair, lipstick, and a satin pillow under her head. It was creepy. At least Susan wasn't there to see what they'd done to her no-nonsense mother.

Once Isobel's remains were dispatched and the ceremonies over, Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Bulmer concluded Jack was not capable of raising Susan on his own, and Susan was soon sent to an all-girls boarding school in Vancouver. The family was blown apart. Isobel, however volatile, had been their nucleus. Without her strong force, they had no direction. Jack was bereft and alone, Susan sat crying in a dorm hundreds of miles from her family, and John lost his way. He was headed into fourth year medicine, about to realize his mother's dreams for him, but she was gone. Had he buried his medical ambition in that respectable coffin along with Isobel's painted corpse?

Acknowledgements

So many people have supported me on this first-book journey, but three men have been pillars in the process. First, my late husband Michael Izen, who often hung over my shoulder while I typed, and cheered at the unfolding action as if he were watching a sporting event. You are always with me, Michael. Next is Dr. John Butt himself. Thank you, John, for sharing your stories as candidly as you did. And a heartfelt thank you to Michael Mirolla at Guernica Editions. I'm forever grateful to you for believing in this story and its place in the Canadian literary landscape. Thanks also to Anna van Valkenburg and Nour Abi-Nakhoul for steering the publicity and teaching me how to be a useful participant in the process. A big thank you to my editor, Gary Clairman, and another to the book designer, David Moratto. Many thanks to all the people who shared their personal stories with me to make this work as round and honest as possible.

I had a solid crew of early readers, creative writers, and supportive friends who helped me immensely: Monica Ghosh, Adrick Brock, Portai Pascuzzo, Karen Garbert, Elizabeth & Chris Wootten, Susan Broatch, Melissa & ED Mortimer, Lindsay Wong, Moira Dann, Pauline Dakin, Cathy Chilco, Robyn Huth, Perry Goldsmith, Sasha Dryden, and Karri Green-Schuermans. Crafting this story was the

focus of my MFA program at the University of King's College in Halifax, and I can't thank the team of excellent mentors and leaders enough. Special thanks to Stephen Kimber and Don Sedgwick, along with my mentors, Lori A. May, David Hayes, and Lorri Neilsen Glenn. Thank you to the BC Arts Council for supporting my education goals.

Last, but always first, thank you to my daughter, Chloe, for keeping my feet on the ground, step by step.

About the Author

Gina Leola Woolsey's writing explores the highly evolved and the innately animalistic behaviours of humankind. Through story, she teases out the shared themes of our lives. Gina is an award-winning author who left her corporate job mid-life to pursue a creative career. She lives wherever the story takes her.