

Excerpt from *Larry's Party*

Chapter One

Fifteen Minutes in the Life of Larry Weller

1977

By mistake Larry Weller took someone else's Harris tweed jacket instead of his own, and it wasn't until he jammed his hand in the pocket that he knew something was wrong.

His hand was traveling straight into a silky void. His five fingers pushed down, looking for the balled-up Kleenex from his own familiar worn-out pocket, the nickels and dimes, the ticket receipts from all the movies he and Dorrie had been seeing lately. Also those hard little bits of lint, like meteor grip, that never seem to lose themselves once they've worked into the seams.

This pocket – today's pocket -- was different. Clean, a slippery valley. The stitches he touched at the bottom weren't his stitches. His fingertips glided now on a sweet little sea of lining. He grabbed for the buttons. Leather, the real thing. And something else -- the sleeves were a good half inch longer than they should have been.

This jacket was twice the value of his own. The texture, the seams. You could see it got sent all the time to the cleaners. Another thing, you could tell by the way the shoulders sprang out that this jacket got parked on a thick wooden hanger at night. Above a row of polished shoes. Refilling its tweedy warp and woof with oxygenated air.

He should have run back to the coffee shop to see if his own jacket was still scrunched there on the back of his chair, but it was already quarter to six, and Dorrie was expecting him at six sharp, and it was rush hour and he wasn't anywhere near the bus stop.

And -- the thought came to him – what's the point? A jacket's a jacket. A person who patronized a place like Caf Capri is almost asking to get his jacket copped. This way all that's happened is a kind of exchange.

Forget the bus, he decided. He'd walk. He'd stroll. In his hot new Harris tweed apparel. He'd push his shoulders along, letting them roll loose in their sockets. Forward with the right shoulder, bam, then the left shoulder coming up from behind. He'd let his arms swing wide. Fan his fingers out. Here comes the Big Guy, watch out for the Big Guy.

The sleeves rubbed light across the back of his hands, scratchy but not too scratchy.

And then he saw that the cuff buttons were leather too, a smaller-size version of the main buttons, but the same design, a sort of cross-pattern like a pecan pit cut in quarters, only the slices overlapped this little bit. You could feel the raised design with you finger, the way the four quadrants of leather crossed over and over each other, their edges cut wavy on the inside margin. These waves intersected in the middle, dived down there in a dark center and disappeared. A black hole in the button universe. Zero.

Quadrant was a word Larry hadn't even thought of for about ten years, not since geometry class, grade eleven.

The color of the jacket was mixed shades of brown, a strong background of freckled tobacco tones with subtle orange flecks. Very subtle. No one would say: hey, here comes this person with orange flecks distributed across his jacket. You'd have to be an inch away before you took in those flecks.

Orange wasn't Larry's favorite color, at least not in the clothing line. He remembered he'd had orange swim trunks back in high school, MacDonald Secondary, probably about two sizes too big, since he was always worrying at that time in his life about his bulge showing, which was exactly the opposite of most guys, who made a big point of showing what they had. Modesty ran in his family, his mum, his dad, his sister, Midge, and once modesty gets into your veins you're stuck with it. Dorrie, on the other hand, doesn't even shut the bathroom door when she's in there, going. A different kind of family altogether.

He'd had orange socks once too, neon orange. That didn't last too long. Pretty soon he was back to white socks. Sports socks. You got a choice between a red stripe around the top, a blue stripe, or no stripe at all. Even geeks like Larry and his friend Bill Herschel, who didn't go in for sports, they still wore those thick cotton sports socks every single day. You bought them three in a pack and they lasted about a week before they fell into holes. You always thought, hey, what a bargain, three pairs of socks at this fantastic price!

White socks went on for a long time in Larry's life. A whole era.

Usually he didn't button a jacket, but it just came to him as he was walking along that he wanted to do up one of those leather buttons, the middle one. It felt good, not too tight over the gut. The guy must be about his own size, 40 medium, which is lucky for him. If, for example, he'd picked up Larry's old jacket, he could throw it in the garbage tomorrow, but at least he wasn't walking around Winnipeg with just his shirt on his back. The nights got cool this time of year. Rain was forecast too.

A lot of people don't know that Harris tweed is virtually waterproof. You'd think cloth this thick and woolly would soak up water like a sponge, but, in actual fact, rain slides right off the surface. This was explained to Larry by a knowledgeable old guy who worked in menswear at Hectors. That would be, what, nine, ten years ago, before Hectors went out of business. Larry could tell that this wasn't just a sales pitch. The guy -- he wore a lapel button that said Salesman of the Year -- talked about how the sheep they've got over there are covered with special long oily hair that repels water. This made sense to Larry, a sheep standing out in the rain day and night. That was his protection.

Dorrie kept wanting him to buy a khaki trenchcoat, but he doesn't need one, not with his Harris tweed. You don't want bulk when you're walking along. He walks a lot. It's when he does his thinking. He hums his thoughts out on the air like music; they've got a disco beat; My name is Larry Weller. I'm a floral designer, twenty-six years old, and I'm walking down Notre Dame Avenue, in the city of Winnipeg, in the country of Canada, in the month of April, in the year 1977, and I'm thinking hard. About being hungry, about being late, about having sex later on tonight. About how great I feel in this other guy's Harris tweed jacket.