

ALDEN NOWLAN

The Wanton Troopers

With an afterword by David Adams Richards



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Goose Lane Editions
Suite 330, 500 Beaverbrook Court
Fredericton, New Brunswick
CANADA E3B 5X4
www.gooselane.com

Notes to the First Edition

Alden Nowlan wrote his first novel in 1960, when a Canada Council grant allowed him to take a leave of absence as a reporter for the *Hartland Observer*. A year later, he published *Under the Ice*, while two other collections of poetry, *The Rose and the Puritan* (1958) and *A Darkness in the Earth* (1959), had already appeared. So *The Wanton Troopers* came from an especially creative period which would extend to the poems of *Wind in a Rocky Country* (1960) and *The Things Which Are* (1962).

Nowlan hoped that a success with this novel would free him from the drudgery of work on a small-town newspaper. Yet it seems he submitted the manuscript to only a single publisher. His motives for holding back were not simple — for while he used elements of *The Wanton Troopers* in later prose writings and even the name of its hero for *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien* (1973), the novel is emphatically not a piece of juvenilia or the sort of failure writers prefer to forget.

D. Peter Thomas
Publisher, Goose Lane Editions
1988

Notes to the Second Edition

As Peter Thomas foresaw, *The Wanton Troopers* was well received, and its continuing popularity has made a new edition imperative. Various minor changes and one major change have been made to the text. A few small grammar and transcription errors have been corrected, and spelling and punctuation have been made as internally consistent as possible without intrusiveness. Dialect has remained as Nowlan imagined it, except that accepted spellings have been used when feasible (*wanna*, for instance), and elisions have been moved from verbs to auxiliaries (*could a-done* has become *coulda done*).

The one major change occurs at the end of the book. The copy text for this edition is the typed manuscript in the Alden Nowlan Papers at the University of Calgary Library; it is a carbon copy, corrected in pencil in Nowlan's hand. It is one page longer than the copy text used for the 1988 edition, which had lost its last page. The final words of the 1988 edition, "Please God," occur at the end of the last line at the bottom of the second-last page of the Calgary manuscript, and it is easy to see why no one perceived that a page was missing. However, as readers of this edition will see, there can be no mistake: at last *The Wanton Troopers* has its true ending.

Susanne Alexander
Publisher, Goose Lane Editions
2009

The wanton troopers, riding by,
Have shot my faun and it will die.
— Andrew Marvell

One

It was raining so hard that Kevin thought God must have torn a hole in the sky and let all of the rivers of heaven spill upon earth. The cold spring rain hit the roof with the force of gravel, rattled down the walls, and splashed black and silver against the tawny window panes. It felt good to be in the house, safe in the sleepy warmth and lamp-glow of the kitchen, breathing the soporific aromas of smouldering millwood and burning kerosene.

A clock ticked on the shelf above the pantry door, scarcely audible above the strident clatter of the storm. The kerosene lamps, one on the table by the window and the other on a shelf above the cot, threw out inverted cones of orange-yellow light that shimmered until they were dissolved by the shadows in the corners of the room. On the ceiling above each lamp, there whirled a golden halo.

His mother had set the wash tub in front of the stove. She took buckets of cold water from under the sink and emptied them into the tub, then added hot water from a pan boiling on the stove. Steam rose in sibilant clouds, glistening ghostly as it was absorbed by the dry air.

“Come, Scampi,” his mother said.

This was her private name for him. He stood on a towel while she undressed him. His body relaxed into will-lessness, went

limp as she removed the shirt his grandmother had made for him from bleached-out flour bags. He liked the way in which the room became a violent ferment of darkness and light while the shirt was being pulled over his eyes. And he liked her hands, their deft union of firmness and gentleness.

His father dozed on the cot. His grandmother had long since gone to bed. This was a private moment, shared only by him and his mother. He never loved her so much as when she bathed him and readied him for bed.

Outside, over the oozing, dun-coloured fields, down the overflowing creek, through the gurgling swamps, and across the cedared hills, the wind howled like a drowning beast. Inside, there was warmth and light and the music of his mother's hands on his body.

She undid buckles and buttons and let his denim shorts slide down his legs. From May to November, he never wore underwear. He stepped out of the ring of cloth around his ankles and into the tub, recoiling as the cold rim touched his back. He leaned forward, away from the ring of cold.

Now, there was the clean, acid smell of soap in his nostrils, the foam and film of soap in his hair and across his shoulders and down his back. He closed his eyes and sank into little-boy inertia, every muscle dormant, every cell in his brain passive and inert.

Around his thighs, hips, and belly, the water's warmth coaxed the energy out of his every pore. His knees and chest were prickled by the sharper heat of the stove, little slivers of heat shooting into his flesh.

She rubbed a washcloth over his face. He drew back a little as the soap bit his eyes and nostrils. She put her hand against the back of his head and made him keep still — and he liked the peremptoriness of her gestures. Like the stinging needles

from the stove, this mild discomfort accentuated their intimacy, made it more sweet.

He might have been a part of her body. She washed him as she washed her own hands. He was, all of him, hers: not the smallest part of him belonged any longer to himself. And in this surrender, there was a pervasive peace, an ecstasy of negation.

She kneaded suds into the soft fat of his belly, and he sank into the weightless dimension between wakefulness and sleep. When she made him stand up, it was as though he were coming awake.

Wind still pounded the house; rain was a rumbling landslide on the roof. With each gust, the lamp by the window flickered and the door shook on its rusty hinges. But he was only dimly aware of these things. She scrubbed his legs, rubbing his knees until they stung, the pressure of her hands softening as they ran up and down his thighs, tickling him so that he writhed and giggled. On the cot, his father — that man of ironwood and axe blades — continued to sleep. Upstairs, his grandmother was dreaming of crowns and trumpets and of the golden streets of Jerusalem. When his mother dried him with a towel made from a flour bag, she stroked him so briskly his body glowed as though it had become phosphorescent with sensuous fire.

Finishing, she draped the towel around his hips, like a loin cloth.

“Me Jane. You Tarzan,” she laughed.

Their communion of warmth had ended. Now, as he always did at such times, he felt a feverish desire for sound and action. He threw his arms around her and squeezed, exerting all his strength.

“Ohhhhh! You’re hurting me!” she cried in mock pain.

“I’m the king of the great bull apes!” he boasted. “You wanta hear me give the cry of the great bull apes, Mummy?”

The previous fall, they had gone to the motion picture house in Larchmont, and, ever since, Tarzan and Jane had been a game between them.

“Oh! You forgot! I’m not Mummy, I’m Jane!”

“Sure! You Jane! Me Tarzan!”

He threw back his head and howled until he was out of breath. She laughed again and slapped his posterior playfully.

His father snorted, shook himself, and sat up on the side of the cot. Rubbing his eyes, he glared at them angrily.

“For Chrissakes, Kevin, do yuh have tuh make so damn much noise!” he roared.

Kevin blushed and stared at the floor. Water that had dripped from his body as he stepped out of the tub lay in the little valleys in the warped linoleum.

“Yer gittin’ too big tuh act like a baby,” his father growled. He fumbled in the pockets of his jeans, found tobacco and papers, and began rolling a cigarette.

“Yessir,” Kevin mumbled.

Shrinking with shame and self-contempt, he thought of how pitiful was his own skinny, almost hairless body in comparison with that of his father. Judd O’Brien’s arms were bludgeons, and his horny, yellow fingernails reminded Kevin of hooves.

“Come to bed, Scampi,” his mother said.

She laid her hand on his shoulder. With a scowl of irritation, he drew away. He hated her when she caressed him before his father, for he knew that Judd despised all caresses as symptoms of weakness. Even now, so it seemed to Kevin, Judd eyed him with undisguised contempt.

She took his shoulder again. This time her fingers dug into his flesh. He knew that she had sensed the reason for his withdrawal and that she resented it.

“Come to bed, Scampi,” she commanded him.

She took the lamp from the shelf and, carrying it in front of her and above her head, led Kevin to his room at the other end of the house.

Setting the lamp on a chair by his bed, she helped him into the worn-out shirt of his father's that he wore as a nightdress. The air in this room smelled vaguely stale. It was strange how the odour of a room indicated the amount it was used. The air here contained just a hint of the staleness to be found in the unfurnished rooms upstairs.

He wiggled under the patchwork quilts, under the grey wool blankets that his uncle Kaye had stolen from the bunk house of the last saw mill in which he had worked. His mother put the lamp on the floor and sat in the chair by his pillow. At this end of the house, the storm was muted; water running from the eaves splashed almost gently against the window.

She leaned over him, and again he inhaled the aura of her presence: the scent of her perfume that always reminded him of wintergreen and lilacs; the pungent, comfortable odour of her body, the smell of grease and cooking oils and sweat.

"Do you love me, Mummy?"

This was the beginning of a nightly ritual.

"Yes, sweetheart, I love you."

"How much do you love me, Mummy?"

"Oh, I love you a thousand million bushels, sweetikins, a thousand million bushels."

"I love you too, Mummy."

The words, spoken in a drowsy monotone, were, in reality, not words at all, but sound-units in a charm. They were *abra-cadabra*, a charm against the dark powers of the night.

"Let's say our prayers now, Scampi."

"Yeah."

He chanted, running syllables together so that the prayer was broken, not by words, but by the rhythm of his breath.

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
God bless Mummy and Daddy,
and Uncle Kaye, and Grammie O'Brien,
and God bless everybody.*