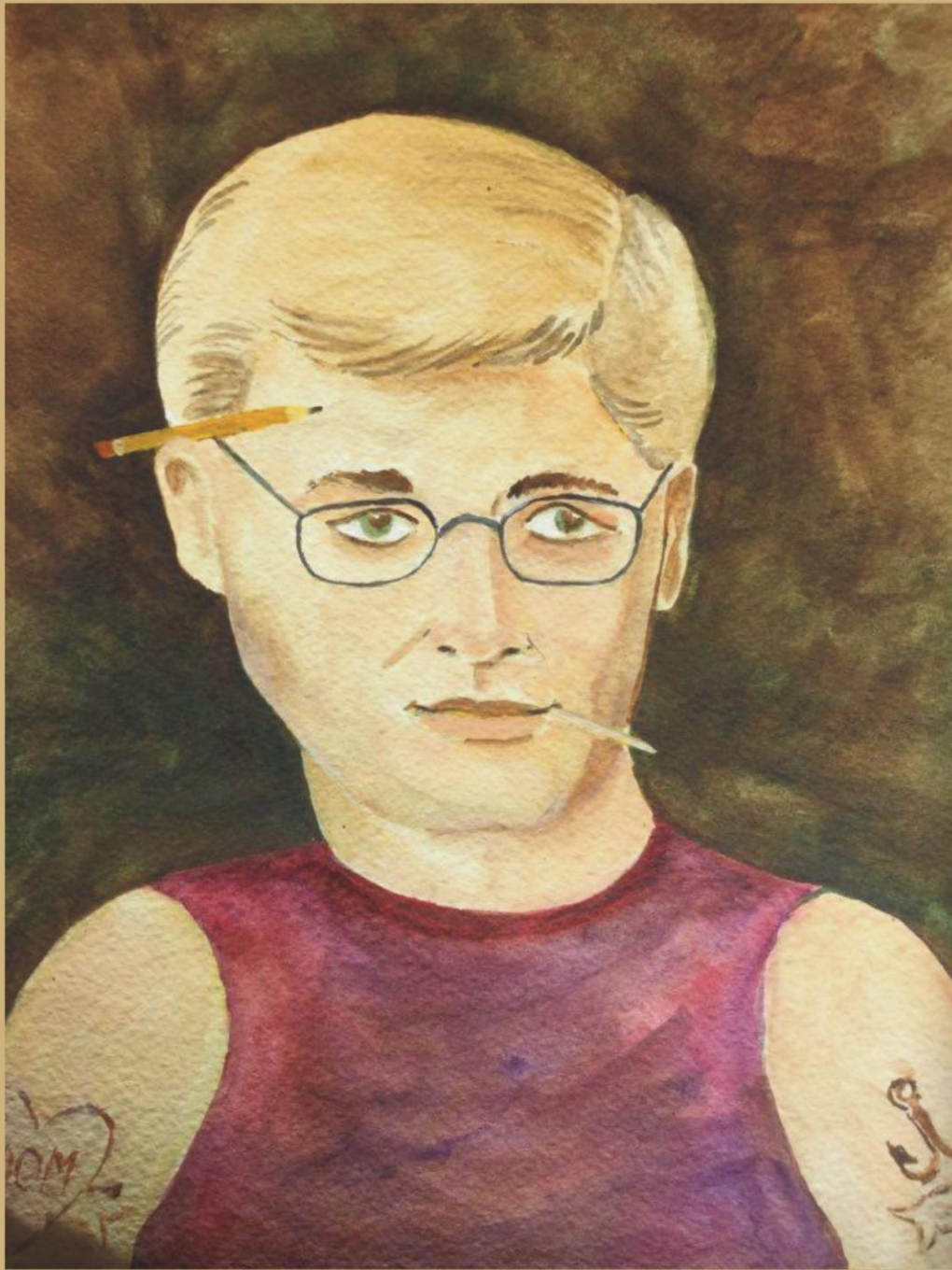


Whatever Happened To Harper?



a short story by **John Ginsburg**

Whatever Happened To Harper?

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Gil Bates Windows. Anyone that hears that name, who's not from here, always says the same thing: Bill Gates. Windows. Ha ha ha. I guess it does sound kind of funny if you're not from around here. Old Gil Bates is in his late eighties now, still kicking, still living on his property between Jubilee Park and Highway 13 in the middle of town. There's so many old vehicles lying around there, it looks like a used-car lot. Gil's been retired for years, but the business has stayed in the family; his son Morris runs the show now. If you ever mentioned Bill Gates to the old man, he'd always tell you the same thing: he had a window business years before anyone even heard of computers. And he was right. When I was a kid, in the sixties, my parents contracted Gil to replace all the windows on our old two-story house. No more storm windows to take off every spring. No more screens to patch and put up and take down. No more fighting with wooden frames that were stuck or painted in. Not any more. Gil was fixing us up with the very latest: aluminum windows. Sliders. We felt like we were pretty special for a while.

Anyway, like I said, Morris runs the business now. He kept the original name and he's done even better than his dad. He must have ten people on his payroll there. His daughter answers the phone and does the accounting. I always wondered about the other brother, Morris's brother Arnold. Morris was always the hard-working one. Never said much. Arnold was completely different. Loud and flashy. Always had good-looking girlfriends in high school. Crashed his old man's cars. He was never involved in the family business. He was always running for something or other; school trustee, councillor, mayor, MLA, MP. I don't think he ever won a single election. But he kept bouncing back up like a rubber doll with a lead weight at the bottom of it. Arnie's wife is a physiotherapist at the hospital. And her family's pretty well set too, so I guess Arnie's managed somehow. I always thought he should have gone into insurance or car sales or something. He was always pitching himself. Always trying to get you to do something or say something that you didn't really want to. If you ever saw him coming down the street or walking into a coffee shop, you were always hoping he wouldn't notice you and would keep on going. But I guess Arnie's entitled to breathe the same air as everyone else.

I didn't mean to run off at the mouth here like I had rabies or something. I've already made a fairly short story way too long. All I was trying to say was that's who I called up to replace our second- floor window: Gil Bates Windows. There was some water damage around the frame that was starting to look pretty ugly; probably water from the eavestrough had leaked in bit by bit over the years.

So I called up Morris, around the end of June, and we arranged a day for a guy to come out to take some measurements. That day turned out to be the twentieth of July. It was one of those killer hot days, so stifling it made you wonder why you looked forward to summer all year. My wife Susan was out shopping. She's an elementary school teacher. I've been retired for a few years so I had no trouble being around to meet the installer. When the doorbell rang, there were two men standing on the landing.

'Hello there' the first guy said, with an energetic and friendly tone. He looked to be in his early thirties and had a thick moustache. He was wearing a white t-shirt and had a baseball cap on backwards. 'I'm Mark. From Bates Windows.'

'Nice to meet you, Mark' I said. 'I'm Harry Maclean.'

'Harry' said Mark, shaking my hand. 'I've brought a new man with me, Harry. He's just starting out as an installer, so I'm kind of showing him the ropes.' Mark gestured toward the second man, to his right, who'd been standing there quietly, looking down at his shoes. 'This is Steve. Steve, this is Harry.'

At this introduction, the second man looked up and made eye contact with me. 'Hello' he said politely. He was obviously quite a bit older, mid to late fifties. Bareheaded with glasses, wearing a muscle shirt and jeans. Tattoos on his arms. At first glance, he appeared to be a bit uncomfortable, maybe awkward is a better word, and he looked away almost immediately. And then I did a double-take. I almost fell over! It was him! There he was, standing on my doorstep. Stephen Harper. Stephen friggin' Harper.

It really was him. No doubt about it. The wire-rimmed glasses, the grey hair, those cool pale blue eyes, the snout on him. I'd seen him so much in the media it was like I knew him personally. I didn't know what to say. I must have looked like a real idiot, just standing there staring at him.