

# The Woman & Her Prize

By Hilary R. Burke ©

[theatrethepeople@zoho.com](mailto:theatrethepeople@zoho.com)

## Prelude

"Many opportunities are available in Canada, and people are needed to meet the demand. Canada is an open and progressive society where newcomers are welcome to share in its prosperity."

Taken from <http://www.canada-law.com/> (Site accessed in 2015)

"If you are looking for a better quality of life, a better education for you and your family and a better work environment, all amidst beautiful scenery and peaceful surroundings, Canada is the best place to live in. ... Canada is a land of great opportunities for you and your family to start a new life."

Taken from <http://illuminatecanada.com/> (Site accessed in 2015).<sup>[1]</sup>

Pleon wanted to have the best & the brightest boys, but everywhere on the planet she was known for her cold temperament. Determined to get her boys, she touted her prize & promised to share it with those who came to her. Then she painted such a glowing picture of herself that everyone in love with it.

Soon countless boys from everywhere applied to be hers, & this pleased her immensely. She played hard to get by imposing tough conditions on her applicants & extracting hefty processing fees from them. She even made them do a language test to make sure that they had mastered many of the grammar points in her own language which she had never bothered to learn. As time went on, she played harder & harder to get; & the harder she played to get, the more boys wanted to be hers.

Her chosen boys, the best & the brightest, *la crème de la crème*, abandoned their mistresses & flew to her as fast as they could. As soon as they arrived, they jumped for joy & rushed to look at the woman in the picture. Most of them saw a woman with long silky hair that wound round her shoulders.

A few of them, however, scrutinized the picture at length & could see nothing in it. Some of those, if they had enough funds left after their costly flight, as fast as they had come to the country, flew right back to their former mistresses & never left them again.

Some of the others who saw nothing in the picture were glad to stay because they had escaped from insufferable women who had tormented them to no end. The bright & avid Semper, on the other hand, had not escaped from one of those women.<sup>[2]</sup>

He had been one of Arc's most privileged boys. Now as he stood to admire the woman he saw in the picture he, so steel-like sleek & finely clad, was, himself, a picture to behold.

The woman in the picture smiled & said, "You're very lucky to be with me. I'm an open & progressive woman who welcomes you to share my prize." She flicked her long hair, & rays of brilliant sunshine streamed through it.

Suddenly a weary-looking old man dressed in rags stepped into the picture, eyed Semper intently, & whispered, "Do you know where it is? The biggest one! But it may already be too late for you."

Semper was puzzled by this, but just for an instant; the woman's eyes took his like a magnet & drew them to her lips. All he could think of was reaching her prize & having a rollicking good time with it.

He took a step towards her, & she quickly put out a hand to stop him.

"Sorry," she drawled. "I'll give you a hand up & not a hand down.<sup>[3]</sup> I'm committed to helping you. I take your welfare very seriously. What's more, I'm polite & self-deprecating, not at all like that woman who lives next door, you know the one who goes around the place blowing her own horn."

"But how can I reach your prize?" He asked her.

You egg me on, then push me back. You come so near, then step away.  
You dash my hopes again, again. & now it seems, you've closed  
the doors.<sup>[4]</sup>

"Not to worry, Semper; you just need to have experience with me.<sup>[5]</sup> Then you will be forever mine, trust me."

Again she flicked her long hair. This time an icy wind swept through it, & he shivered. Then he heard someone whisper, "Take another path, Semper! It's already very late." The same old man flashed into view. "Why can't you see it? The pr -."

Without finishing his last word, the old man disappeared.

Again Semper was puzzled by this appearance, but not for long; Pleon's hair, now tossing & twirling in the wind, was brushing playfully against his face, & all he could think of was reaching her prize.

"Oh, the days when I was so innocent!" She thought to herself.

"Pleon," he called to her, "You told me that I needed to have experience with you before I could enjoy your prize. But how can I have experience with you when you always keep it so far out of my reach?"<sup>[5]</sup>

"You'll have to bring yourself up to my high standards, of course," she replied. "You'll need to get my credentials because the ones you brought from Arc, that old gal of yours, most certainly won't take you anywhere near my prize." Then she orchestrated a long song & dance about how high her standards were.

As so many others like him had done before, he took out a student loan, enrolled at one of her best institutions, & received her credentials, after which he wondered why she had orchestrated that long song & dance because the courses were 'a breeze', to use his words.

By this, she had applied so much gloss to her picture that he could see himself in it, & he smiled. But in a flash, the same old man now appeared beside him in the picture. Semper heard him say in an exasperated voice, "Open your eyes, Semper! Surely you must have seen it by now. The pr -."

If the old man did in fact complete the last word, Semper did not hear it. His attention was elsewhere. Pleon's body was undulating in a wild dance, & her long hair was swirling about her. With alacrity, he took a step towards her.

"Just hang on there, Semper. You still have to go through interviews," which he did. Sometimes he was short-listed to get ahead, & she would tell him, "I'll call you."

At first, he took her at her word; but in time, he realized that when she said, "I'll call you," it didn't mean that she would call him. What language did she speak? He wondered.

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One decade passed. Two decades passed. Almost three decades passed. In all this time, she had kept her prize tucked away & well hidden from his view. He thought more & more about his dear Arc, whom he'd abandoned so many years ago. He'd never had to break ice with her. He could always just delve straight in.

How he wished he could hear her melodious voice & feel her warmth against his skin again! Had he not left her, he thought remorsefully, he would now be in a very high & comfortable position with her. But how could he get back to her?

Pleon read his thoughts & responded in a razor-thin voice, "But you left her, & now you've painted a picture of her that she really & truly isn't."

"At least she allowed me to enjoy her prize," he returned. "& I have not even had a glimpse of that prize of yours, let alone enjoy it. I have credentials from two of your best institutions, in addition to the credentials I had when I came; & after three decades with you, I'm still struggling to make the most basic living. How can I ever save enough money to leave you on the low wages I earn from casual jobs?"<sup>[6]</sup>

She tossed her head sideways, & he felt her hair brush against his shoulders. Then in a high ear-piercing voice, she screeched, "My boy, it's a privilege, not a right, to be with me."<sup>[7]</sup>

"& for you," he returned, "it's a privilege to have me here, not a right."

He noticed that she was now playing nervously with her hair.

She gazed at him; she just couldn't understand his new attitude towards her. After all, she was one of the most, if not the most, sought-after woman on the planet, & a member of the Club of Elite Women. (A smallish group of interfering women who had often availed, & still availed, themselves of other women's jewels.)

"Without us here who would look after your elderly?" He asked her. "Who would keep your long-term care homes going? Who would take care of your young children? Who would guard your buildings? Who would clean them? Who would drive your taxis? Who would work in your call centres? Who would work in your indoor parking lots breathing in noxious fumes all day?"

"So whose fault is that if you can't get ahead?" She asked impatiently. "There are so many excellent opportunities here with me."

"& who would pick fruit," he continued, "so you can get it cheaply at the supermarket? It's high time you had a *boy* appreciation day."

She said in a flat voice, "You're lucky to be with me. Everywhere, everyone envies my lifestyle. Why do you think so many boys still want to come to me? Everywhere, everyone loves me."

He returned:

To lands beyond your canvas glows, such green, green grass they've  
never seen.  
Your coat of gloss a false veneer. I beg you please put down that brush.<sup>[4]</sup>

"Now listen here, I allowed you to come & live with me. I didn't have to,  
you know. & no one forced you to come here," she piped.

"It's guile," he said to her.

"Guile!?" she stuttered.

He then recited:

The morning sun intensified & cast her light spectacular.  
Beyond I saw a splendid sight, the glistening dew on petals bright.  
She tantalized, diffusing scent, & beckoned me to come to her.  
So there I flew & entered her. Her sticky juice then trapped me fast.<sup>[4]</sup>

This irked her. "So who writes such trash?" She asked in an ultra-high-pitched  
voice.

"Admit it, Pleon: You've planned it so that boys like me would have to do  
the jobs your homegrown boyfriends don't want to do. You have deliberately  
trapped us here on low wages. Admit it, we are your *buoys*, (b-u-o-y-s, pronounced  
as *buoy* in *buoyant*)."

"That's rude," she cried.

"Why else would you continue to lure other women's best & brightest boys  
to do the jobs that don't even require a high school diploma?"

He paused briefly before replying to his own question.

"Because you feel we adapt much more easily to new situations than the  
less-educated would, & we give you better quality children. Come now, Pleon,  
admit it."

"I give you many benefits," she said.

"Such as?" He enquired.

"Free health care just to name one. Does your old gal, Arc, give that?"

"Your health care is not free," he returned. "Everyone pays dearly for it."

"Not you," she shot back. "Your income is so low that you contribute nothing to it, yet you can use it any time you like. I ask you: is that a benefit, or is that not a benefit?"

"We've paid more than enough in kind," he countered. "We've serviced you in backbreaking positions for long hours & given you many children. Yes, Pleon, it is true that we use your health care system, & we use it a lot. Many of us are chronically depressed & super-stressed, & have associated illnesses because you've kept us in uncomfortably low positions to service you while you keep on making empty promises to help us enjoy your prize."

"You know I take your welfare very seriously. I am committed to helping you get ahead. I'm even going to set up an agency to evaluate the credentials of my newly-arrived boys so they can get to my prize quicker."<sup>[8]</sup>

"I have already told you, Pleon. I have a master's degree from Arc & an MBA from of one of your best universities, plus a diploma from one of your best colleges of arts & technology, which I obtained more than 20 years ago. In addition to that, I have excellent competency in both your official languages. Yet I'm still doing low-wage precarious jobs with no benefits. In fact, I am much worse off than before I got your credentials because I still have a student loan to pay off with interest. Your credentials have not helped me in any way. Only your banks & institutions have profited."

She looked at him for sometime, fingered her hair, then smiled, "I'm going to help boys like you upgrade your job skills to have the necessary credentials. Underemployment is one of the most perplexing problems facing boys like you, who are unable to find meaningful work. Face it because you don't have the right credentials, & as a result, can't raise the money to solve the problem."

He returned, "I & so many others like me had no trouble getting loans many years ago to obtain your credentials, & as I have just said, 'Where has that taken us?' I wish you'd stop selling empty dreams & destroying lives."

"This problem," she continued without having heard a word of what he had just said, "has led to doctors, scientists, & engineers working in menial jobs & unable to support their families. I'm going to spend \$6 million to help with tuition & training costs that are required to have foreign credentials recognized here. This small investment will strengthen the future of the economy."

"You've been talking about this credential issue since I first came to you more than three decades ago." He shot back. "That agency will just be another money-grab for you, & you know it. Anyway I'm already 64, & all of that is too late for me."

"On top of that," she emphasized, "Are you listening, Semper? On top of that," she repeated, "I'm going to spend nearly \$7 million to learn why boys like you with the right credentials have trouble finding the right jobs. The study will attempt to figure out strategies to overcome these problems."

"We don't need another study!" Semper replied. "You know, Pleon, there are many ways to destroy a boy, but your way, the legal way, to destroy him slowly is surely one of the worst. Take an honest look at yourself. You know, there's something profoundly wrong with those who negate the achievements of others so that they can feel better about themselves."

"You're bludgeoning me!" She cried. "I have tried so hard to help you. You're still lucky to be with me. I'm the best woman any boy can be with."

"It's not what people think about you & tell you straight to your face that you have to worry about, Pleon. It's what people think about you & say to others but never tell you," he returned.

She flicked a hand dismissively then threw her head from side to side. As she did so, many strands of her long silky hair wound round him.

"Well," she said in a huff, "I'm not stopping you from leaving, am I? The last time I heard all the airports were open."

"You lured me here," he said accusingly.

"So? You have a mind of your own, or don't you?" She asked him.

"I would never have come to you had I known what you really were like. Before I came, I'd only heard good things about you. I saw beautiful houses in your films. You didn't show your homeless boys. Just remember that there was no Internet then, not even the World Wide Web. Anyway, you never know what a woman is going to be like until you have lived with her for some time. & now that I seen what you are really like under your cover, if you were to dangle that prize of yours in front of me I wouldn't want it."

"Now that is really rude!" She exclaimed loudly.

He chanted:

How cleverly you spun your words to bring me here for dirty work.  
That was your plan, you devious one, to trap me here on wages low.  
You've made quite sure I cannot leave, & yet you taunt, 'Why don't you go?'<sup>[4]</sup>

"Ha!" She uttered.

"It's much less expensive for you to take other women's boys. You don't pay the many thousands of dollars for them to be born & educated as you do for your homegrown boys. You lure us here to increase your debt-bearing capacity; you sap us & reap the benefit. What's more we pay taxes to keep your economy going." He returned.

"Well, based on what you've told me, you haven't paid much of those." She said triumphantly.

She resolved that she would have to find a way to keep the boys busy. That way they would be too exhausted to bother her with complaints. "I must extol the virtues of hard work," she said to herself. "I must to use the word, *hardworking*, more when I address the boys. & it would be a good idea to have another flag-waving day to deflect attention."

She turned to him. "Many hardworking boys have been enjoying my prize & are happy with me. I ask you, is that true, or is that not true?"

"It's true that some of them are, I'll give you that. But you have ruined far too many lives," he replied.

"How you exaggerate!" She exclaimed.

He then chanted:

Pleon's a girl who uses boys. What kind of girl behaves like that?  
How did she get the house she has? How did she get so very rich?<sup>[4]</sup>

She found it hard to understand his attitude. "Take a look around me," she told him. "You see the zillions of boys from everywhere lining up for me. You know why?"

She paused for effect.

"You can't get any woman anywhere on this planet who's better than me, trust me. Everywhere I go, I wear my flag & everyone smiles & says to me, 'Oh so you're the woman in the picture.' Everywhere, everyone loves me." Then she patted herself on the back.

"You know, Pleon, I did not go to live with any of the other women in your Club because they did not offer to share their prizes with me. You have a history of making empty promises. By the way, did you watch the film *Martha of the North* by Marquise Lepage?"



She tossed her head sideways. More strands of her long hair wound round him, & he could feel them sticking to him.

Semper looked down at his disgracefully shabby clothes. How could he have come to this? He was one of the best & the brightest of all the boys! He had had everything going for him before he came to live with Pleon. His future looked bleak. Not even his pension would help him escape from her.

He would only get \$184 from her pension plan if he took it at 60 (*true in 2011*), & another pittance from her at 65 after so many years of hard labour servicing her. She also said she'd withhold at least 25% of what he received if he cut ties with her & took up residence again with Arc, whom he so wished to be with again.

He heard her say, "But I give the guaranteed income supplement. Does your old gal give her boys that?"

"What good will that be to me if I have to live with you to get it? You smile, ask me how I am, tell me to have a nice day, & pretend to care about me; & yet you continue to hurt me. You have only seen me as a commodity for your gain."

"But you still love me, don't you, Semper?"

He looked her in the eye & said nothing.

"Don't you remember how you ran to embrace me with open arms after you arrived? Don't you remember when you said your vows to me?"

"& don't you remember when you promised to share your prize with me? Instead you have only frustrated & humiliated me." He replied.

"Ok! Ok!" she said coldly. "So go back to your hell hole, & you'll learn. But I know you won't go back."

She tossed her head sideways. Now many more strands of her hair covered him, & he could feel the weight of them.

"Just in case," she thought to herself, "I'll have a special ceremony to let boys like him renew their vows to me, & I'll have it televised."<sup>[9]</sup>

He wondered why she wanted to keep him & others like him with her in their old age. He'd certainly use her health care system much more than he did now, & she'd subsidize his living expenses, & eventually long term care. Then there would be the guaranteed income supplement when he retained his residence with her. Now all of that that would cost her a pretty penny!

It now crossed her mind that he & other boys like him might be spreading unfavourable stories about her abroad,<sup>[10]</sup> so she announced that she would be setting up a matchmaking service on the internet for potential new boys to advertise their skills.<sup>[8]</sup> "They'll go into this pool, & then I'll be able to fish them out of that pool. It will be like a dating site."<sup>[11]</sup>

Semper turned away from her in disgust. As he did so, he saw a newly arrived boy rush in to take a close-up view of her picture. The boy, so sleek & finely clad, was, himself, a picture to behold. Semper tried to get the boy's attention & called out with all his might, but he was now so weary that his voice was feeble: "Take another path!" Semper urged him. "Why can't you see it? You're walking deeper into it. The pr -. The prison! The biggest one!"

It was to no avail. All that boy could think of was reaching her prize & having a rollicking good time with it.

Pleon's long silky hair was now winding fast round Semper. He struggled to extricate himself, but her hair pressed in on him then squeezed him harder & harder. He found it more & more difficult to breathe.

In a last desperate attempt, he cried out, "Get me out of here! Please! Anybody!"

Then he heard her say, "You know, I committed to helping you. I take the welfare of all my boys very seriously."

He looked at the picture for the last time.

Where is Pleon? Where has she gone? The picture there looks more like me.

She wanted seeds. She got my seeds. & now my fruit has covered her.

### Endnotes and References

1. Two extracts from a plethora of websites urging people to immigrate to Canada.
2. This narrative/play is loosely based on the author's docu-play "The Woman Who Touted Her Prize (& How she kept the boys)". The present work continues to be a tribute to the enduring spirit of optimism, which underlies the feelings of many immigrants mired in disillusionment or entrapment & others affected by them. A special thanks to Semper, pseudonym, for sharing his story, which sparked this narrative/play. I dedicate this work to him & many immigrants whose poignant stories I could not include in such a short piece. See Appendix, for a small sample of stories gleaned. Their stories have influenced the development of this work. I hope to produce this play for audiences, the gatekeepers and decision-makers whose actions, generally, have such negative impacts on the lives of so many immigrants.
3. "Give a hand-up — not a hand-down." (Well known statement of Mike Harris, former premier of Ontario's *Common Sense Revolution*).
4. Selected extracts of verse from, Hilary Burke's earlier work cited above, are interspersed at strategic stages as the plot develops.
5. How "Canadian experience required" may violate human rights. No job without experience, and no experience without a job. It's a vicious circle many people encounter at some time in their working life - but for new immigrants, it's an especially difficult circle to escape. That's because some employers don't just want experience. They want Canadian experience. Now, the Ontario Human Rights Commission is calling that requirement a violation of human rights.  
[http://www.cbc.ca/allinaday/#igImgId\\_82573](http://www.cbc.ca/allinaday/#igImgId_82573) (Retrieved, Monday October 28, 2013)

"Ontario attracts highly-skilled immigrants from all over the world," commented Hall, "but if they have to meet a requirement for Canadian experience, they are in a very difficult position – they can't get a job without Canadian experience and they can't get experience without a job. In most cases, that is discrimination under Ontario's Human Rights Code. ..."

The OHRC found that many newcomers turn to unpaid work such as volunteering, internships or low-skilled "survival jobs" to meet the requirement for Canadian experience.

They also face obstacles when trying to get professional accreditation since some regulatory bodies will not admit new members without prior work experience in Canada. As a result, they end up in jobs that do not correspond to their education, skills and experience. Ontario Human Rights Commission.

[http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news\\_centre/remove-%E2%80%9CCanadian-experience%E2%80%9Demployment-barrier-ohrc](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/remove-%E2%80%9CCanadian-experience%E2%80%9Demployment-barrier-ohrc) (July 15, 2013)

6. Canada has a shortage of skilled professionals, and yet thousands of internationally trained doctors, engineers, teachers and nurses are forced to deliver pizzas and drive taxis.  
Some immigrants believe that this is intentional, that Canada wants them only for their genetic potential. They may sweep floors and clean offices, but their offspring will be intelligent and creative. Why else would the government accept them & then make it so very difficult?  
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/we-are-capable-people/article1203983/?page=all> (October 25, 2003)
7. "It's a privilege, not a right to be with me." (Jean Charest, Former Premier Quebec)  
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2008/05/22/qc-accommodation.html> (May 22, 2008)
8. Before elections on May 2, 2011, the Conservatives made this promise to help underemployed immigrants. (The pre-election promise to help immigrants get loans so they can attend universities to obtain Canadian credentials. ...)  
<http://www.cicsimmigration.com/10000-immigrants-canadian-experience-class/>
9. What are immigrants supposed to think? By: Mia Rabson  
Six federal bureaucrats were drafted to pose as new Canadians for a citizenship reaffirmation ceremony, ... an event requested by Immigration Minister Jason Kenney's office. ...  
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/02/02/pol-cp-fake-newcanadiansbureaucrats.html>  
OTTAWA — When Citizenship and Immigration Canada couldn't pull together a citizenship ceremony for Sun TV last year, they opted to have bureaucrats pose as new Canadians instead.  
<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/What-are-immigrants-supposed-to-think-138773494.html>
10. Not Canada  
CTV <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5GuFcP010w> (Site accessed 2013)
11. Matchmaker Program  
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-to-play-matchmaker-forforeign-workers/article6840232/> (January 01 2013)

## Appendix

A great many immigrants who obtained loans & received Canadian credentials decades ago, continue to be severely underemployed. Indeed, for the most part, they were often worse off after, they obtained Canadian credentials. Many were stuck in the low education segment of the labour market. They returned to the same kinds of low-wage jobs which they had before they obtained credentials from postsecondary, Canadian educational institutions. They had incurred an additional burden, to repay sizeable student loans. Furthermore, many immigrants who obtained Canadian credentials decades ago, today, swell the ranks of very low-income pensioners.

Despite having credentials from some of the best institutions in Canada, many immigrants struggle to earn a living for the rest of their lives in Canada

Some of the people whom the author interviewed include:

C., a man from Kenya, completed a Master's degree in engineering more than 20 years ago at a Canadian university, as well as, a diploma in information technology at Algonquin College of Arts & Technology. He has always worked at precarious low-wage jobs.

F., a man from Rwanda, has a teaching diploma from the University of Ottawa, a diploma in information technology from Algonquin College of Arts & Technology, & an MBA from the University of Ottawa. In addition, he has excellent competency in French & English. Despite that, he has lived in penury since he arrived in Canada in the 1980s.

T., an accountant from Eritrea. She completed her accounting diploma at Algonquin College of Arts & Technology more than 20 years ago. According to the story she told me, she always topped her classes. However, for the on-site, workplace component of her program, she was the only student in her class who was not assigned to a job placement with a company. After she left the college, she returned to the very same kinds of jobs, she did before attending the Canadian college (specifically, as a part-time sales clerk & part-time caregiver for the elderly). She was still doing the same jobs in 2013.

R., a woman from Djibouti, who lived in several countries before coming to Canada, completed degrees in both France & Canada. In Canada, she completed a Master's degree at an English-speaking university almost 20 years ago. She has excellent competency in both official languages. She told me, "Never have I been so poor anywhere, as I have been in Canada."

A, a woman from a South American country remarked to me more than fifteen years ago, "Now I have two masters degrees: one from my country & one from here, & I'm still a cleaner." She was still a cleaner in 2013.

T., who has a master's degree from Oxford University, has lived in poverty since he came to Canada decades ago. He desperately wants to leave Canada, but does not have the money to do so.

M. worked as a physician in France before coming to Canada. He could not find a job in his field in Canada. Today he owns five clinics in the U.S.A. Had he stayed in Canada...

Z., who worked as an emergency room physician for 8 years in Paris, told me that the Quebec government had promotional material at medical conferences to encourage French-speaking European doctors (in the mid 2000s) to come to Quebec to practice. She left her job in France, only to find that it was virtually, impossible for her to work as a physician in Quebec. She said she had chosen Quebec because she spoke French and not very much English. When the author spoke to her, she felt that she had come to her ruin.

Interesting twists and turns of the tale: The author also knows several people with degrees from US universities who for decades never had problems applying for most jobs in Canada before an agency to assess foreign credentials was established. Now, they have to pay to have their US credentials assessed for many jobs. These individuals are now in their 60s.

A director of human resources in a large company in Quebec told me that every time he hired 'an immigrant' for a good job someone in the company would come to him & say, "Don't we have our own people?"

When the author first came to Canada, a man born in Mexico asked her, "What's the biggest prison?" She had no answer. He replied to his own question, "Canada." It took her sometime to understand what he meant.

For more notes: See the docu-play: *The Woman Who Touted her Prize (& How She kept The Boys)*.