

SLODETHLAND '66

Jean Marc Ah-Sen and André Babyn

ENFIELD
& WIZENTY

Copyright © 2026 André Babyn and Jean Marc Ah-Sen
Enfield & Wizenty (an imprint of Great Plains Publications)
320 Rosedale Ave
Winnipeg, MB R3L 1L8
www.greatplainspress.ca

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or in any means, or stored in a database and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of Great Plains Publications, or, in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a license from Access Copyright (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), 1 Yonge Street, Suite 1900, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5E 1E5.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790, Great Plains Publications expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Great Plains Publications gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided for its publishing program by the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund; the Canada Council for the Arts; the Province of Manitoba through the Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Book Publisher Marketing Assistance Program; and the Manitoba Arts Council.

Design & Typography by Beth Gillespie
Printed in Canada by Friesens

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Slodethland'66 / Jean Marc Ah-Sen and André Babyn.
Other titles: Slodethland sixty-six
Names: Ah-Sen, Jean Marc, 1987- author. | Babyn, André, 1986- author.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20260176958 | Canadiana (ebook) 20260176966 | ISBN 9781773371535 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773371542 (EPUB)
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PS8601.H2 S56 2026 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

**ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS STATEMENT**

Great Plains Press saved the following resources by printing the pages of this book on chlorine free paper made with 100% post-consumer waste.

TREES	WATER	ENERGY	SOLID WASTE	GREENHOUSE GASES
460	36800	193	1570	154000
FULLY GROWN	GALLONS	MILLION BTUs	POUNDS	POUNDS



Environmental impact estimates were made using the Environmental Paper Network Paper Calculator 4.0. For more information visit www.papercalculator.org

**CERTIFIED
CANADIAN
PUBLISHER**

**Canada**

**MIX**
Paper | Supporting
responsible forestry
FSC® C016245

For Sarah Burgoyne and Andrea Joyce

PART 1

“He has the same trouble of us bottom neurotics.”

- Montgomery Clift, describing a co-star on *The Hy Gardner Show*

I.

I knew it was John Slodeth shambling his way through the gates of the cemetery before I could even make out his face. It wasn't his gait or the shape of his body cut against the uneven slope of Calvary's acreage that gave him away; it was the completely defeated air that announced his presence, like he'd been brought low by every indignity imaginable. His hunched shoulders practically announced that my existence was about to pale in its contemptibility—that nothing could compare to the infelicity of Slodeth's misfortunes.

This kind of destitution was known to dig in around the eyes, and as I watched him lurch his way around inconveniently placed gravestones, I knew that some inner feeling of charity was beckoning me to run and to forget the past. Instead, I held my ground and kept my feet firmly planted where they stood. I didn't even think to hide. I put down my shovel, rested an arm against the horizontal handle lining up with my breastbone, and lit a cigarette. I accepted my fate and waited for him to be within earshot.

“What is it, John?”

"Thank goodness you can still recognize me. My eyes, Dani, they're failing me. I... I need your help."

"That's rich. We don't have two pennies to rub between us. That's how far wits get you."

He opened a panel from his sports jacket, revealing a dress shirt stained with what looked like blood. The diameter of the spatter pattern was about the size of a winter squash.

"Easy enough to come by," I said icily. I took a slow drag from my last Lucky Strike and kept my eyes aligned with his. "Yours?"

He collapsed at my feet by way of an answer.

"Slodeth, get up. It's too early in the morning for Grand Guignol." He made a souging sound from somewhere deep within his body. "I mean it."

I wedged the blunted, curling tip of my shovel into his shoulder blade with as much force needed to nick off moss from a corrupted slab of granite, a motion I had perfected into unconscious execution. When he failed to move, I flicked ash into his collar, which circled the nape of his neck. He brushed vaguely in the direction of the burning flesh. I hoisted him from his armpits and placed him against the base of a nearby tree trunk. I put the cigarette deep into his lips. A coughing fit finally did the trick. Roused back to our plane of reality, my last smoke went to waste.

"Who's after you now?" I asked.

"I need time. Time to think. Need to get away from here."

"You won't find any of those things at a marble orchard."

John started to remove his jacket. I thought perhaps he was overheating, but when he began to fully undress, I understood

his meaning more clearly.

“Find me some clothes. They know what I’m wearing. I can make this work with your help. Nobody cares what they’re buried with anyway. Life is for the living. Let’s be quick.”

“Hold your horses, you pix. I walked away from all this years ago. I don’t owe you anything.”

This was something I said to John when I became exasperated speaking with him. I had “won” countless confrontations this way. Many moons ago, my brothers had arranged for John and I to be married; they paid him two thousand dollars to accompany me to the City Clerk’s Office so that we could obtain a marriage license, allowing me to legally remain in the country. The National Origins Formula quota limits had been repealed the year before, and I was able to emigrate from Plovdiv once American policymakers decided saving face in the international community was more important than clenching their backsides. John and I lived this way—under cover of naked deception—for years in a two-bedroom high-rise on Houston Street. We had separate quarters and barely interacted at first. I did not spend much time there anyway—only to sleep, paint, or use the bath. Occasionally, I fried up a tin can of Bush’s Best when the fancy struck.

Whenever John’s entitlement brushed against me—when he asked me for a higher share of the equally divided rent or to steam press his clothes—I would pull out this phrase like a switchblade. I imagined it pointed in the direction of his in-nards, and now I saw it pressing up against the crusted blood that continued to seep through his shirt like a Gobolinks paper-board. Two thousand dollars wasn’t anything to sneeze at. He

had been paid his due and then some—my brothers sent him more than the amount agreed upon to facilitate discretion and secrecy. I don't remember any part of the agreement specifying we would be renegotiating terms every few years.

I had given him a kind of respectability on top of financial aid—a shield that gave other people the ability to look past Slodeth's inverted lifestyle so that they could only see a man struggling. I was owed something of immeasurable value, and being able to wield and weaponize my rejection of him reminded me of that fact.

A silence grew between us after my mantric recitation. Slodeth's haggard face clouded over with a feeling I couldn't identify. I took it to mean that he accepted the outcome I presented him. He let out a simpering moan, and as usual—watchwords notwithstanding—I capitulated to his rupturing need.

“Let's look at that gut buster,” I finally said.

I did not have much in the way of wound-dressing implements at my disposal, so I cleaned Slodeth's wound with ammonia, which we used as a homemade fertilizer. He made no protests until the liquid touched his body, at which point he began howling in agony. I had to press my hand against his mouth to keep him quiet; when I pulled my hand away, it was covered in drool and blood. Swayed by this bodily discharge, I gave him five dollars after wrapping his abdomen with garden netting mesh, feeling guilty about the pain I'd caused him.

“I feel like a deer that's been gralloched,” he griped. “Ugh, you didn't stint me, did you, Dani? How much is it?”

“It's less than I can afford,” I said bitterly. “Leave it at that.”

“I'm grateful. Don't mistake me for the grasping type. It's so

I know what I can get with it. My eyes aren't what they used to be. I can't promise I'll pay you back."

I thought to myself for a moment about what kind of impression I'd like to leave on John before making a reply. I considered my words carefully.

"Who said I'd ever see you again?"

John asked for one of the Dannimac coats that the groundskeepers were rigged with at Calvary. I told him that getting a replacement would come out of my pocket, so it was out of the question. Instead, I gave him a lavender wool sweater someone had abandoned in a supply shed near where we were standing. I didn't know who it belonged to and doubted that anyone would notice its disappearance. John fussed with his wound, his face becoming ashen whenever he applied too much pressure over it.

"Dani. I... I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"There'll be a time when you have use for it. The next time you have reason to curse my name, remember that I made amends."

I thought it was a queer thing for him to say. The words seemed ill-omened to me, even though I didn't have a superstitious bone in my body. He limped across the grounds clutching his stomach, exiting on the other side of the cemetery. No one else came through the grounds on my shift that was not legitimately there for the social utility offered by a boneyard. I thought it would be the last I'd see or hear from him.

I was wrong on that score of course, as I would later discover. Weeks later, I was trenching out yet another nondescript

grave for a poor soul. It took me about an hour when the ground wasn't frozen, but because it was the autumn, I was having to really put my back into the excavation due to the slipping temperatures. The shortest notice we'd ever get for a burial was about a day; this was one of those occasions. There was some hubbub around the inhumation that none of my colleagues wished to discuss with me. All I knew was that the gravestone was covered with a tarpaulin.

Once the grave was dug, I stationed myself a few yards away to see if I could recognize the mourners. I would always hold out hope for some local celebrity or reclusive movie starlet, even if I never went to the pictures; I didn't think it was beneath me to ask for an autograph because I reasoned that the bereaved would find solace in their kith being adored.

The burial did not rate much of a send off—there were maybe five people in attendance. I was a little disappointed that it wasn't going to be someone who rated more of a send off. There had been some talk that William O'Dwyer was to be buried in Calvary a few years ago, but the family ended up shipping the body to Virginia. I'd looked at Joe Masseria and Texas Guinan's plots a few times for inspiration—maybe some kind of moral instruction on how to lead a productive life would make itself known to me—but the stones could not live up to the grandeur of the lives they substituted. We were not afforded much in the way of time-eating.

I spent the rest of my afternoon weeding and rolling cigarettes, then returned to the gravesite at the designated time to put the dirt back in. Two of my workmates had just lowered the casket into the pit and stopped me as they passed me by;

they mentioned that the decedent had been spotted walking through Calvary not long ago when he was very much alive. As a general practice, we took photographs of the dead during the embalming process in case we ever had to identify a mix-up with bodies. One of the men must have matched the memorial programme or inventory photograph with what resided in their memory.

Dusk was approaching, and in my long, circuitous path to the mound of dirt, I noticed a lone woman lighting a candle at the gravestone. She placed it next to a single carnation resting against the slab of granite, whose tarpaulin was now removed. The woman had exquisite features, only partially dulled by the nuzzling of time. As I stepped closer, the stone tablet became legible. My Lucky Strike fell out of my mouth. There, carved with a jagged permanence, were the words "JOHN SLODETH – BELOVED. 1915-1966"

I walked towards the grave in a muddle, startling the woman. She looked only a few years older than me. She was familiar to me somehow, and then I thought I placed her. She must have been the woman in a photograph John kept face down in a kitchen drawer when we lived together. John had never married but he had been cohabiting with someone else before I entered the frame. I was surprised to have recollected it all these years later.

"Madam?"

"Who're you? You knew John?"

"I'm just here to put the dirt back in."

"Oh, of course. Don't let me stop you."

"Is everything alright?"

"It just beggars belief, his dying. Sure you've heard this a dozen times. I thought he would live on forever. He projected that impression onto people."

"Are you Evelina?" I couldn't help myself asking it and only realized my mistake afterward.

She eyed me scornfully and then adjusted her hat and veil.

"No, I am not. Thank God for that. Where did you learn that name?"

"Did they say... how he passed?" I tried to gracelessly change the subject.

"There are conflicting reports... I'm sorry, how did you say you knew John?"

"Evelina was the name given for our point of contact. The next of kin. It was the only name I was given."

"He bled to death," the woman said, appeased by my answer. "There was talk of him being poisoned. Chemical burns on his skin and inside his body. That's enough of an answer to satisfy the flatfoots. We're lucky to have that many answers, so they tell me."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"It won't bring him back, all this praying and botheration."

She waved me off and walked towards a black Imperial LeBaron idling nearby. There was some movement from the bushes behind the car, and at first I thought it was merely Marlon, one of the Calvary landscapers, trimming the hedge from the other side; two teenage heads popped out from behind the leafy shrubbery and then ducked away. They were evidently trying to ogle the sorrower's curvaceous body, adding to the mystery surrounding John's demise.

The driver of the LeBaron, a barrel-chested man in an off-the-peg, single-breasted suit, opened the door on the woman's behalf. She glided into the vehicle without turning back once. I tried to maintain a sense of composure as I filled in the plot, tempted as I was to open the casket to get a look inside—a part of me was in disbelief that fate had actually caught up with my feckless ex-husband, but deep down I knew this was the only way his story could have ended.

2.

I was art modelling at Cooper Union three times a week for fifty dollars a month. I filled out the remaining holes in my social calendar at Calvary. Together, I was able to eke out something approximating a life, living in New York's answer to a *chambre de bonne* with other models. Two of my classes were nude life drawing courses, and one was a painting course where I was encouraged to wear bright, vibrant clothing so that imaginations would have an easier time being "stimulated." In the nude drawing classes, I had only to sneeze to achieve this effect.

I myself occasionally sat in on advanced life drawing classes as a student because the instructor I posed for took a shine to me when I mentioned that I had wanted to be a painter all through my twenties and thirties. I'd since abandoned those life pursuits, but I'd be listlessly pacing the hallways otherwise, whiling away the time between sessions; advanced drawing didn't cost me anything—I was not asked to formally enroll—which made the decision not a decision at all.

It was while I was making a drawing of my fellow model and roommate Cynthia that the instructor, Madame Tuolora,

tapped my shoulder. I thought it would be in regard to how I was shading Cynthia's thighs, or to compliment the likeness of Cynthia's phlegmatic visage, but instead she let me know that I had a visitor waiting outside the door. Tuolora was insistent that I should in future make such arrangements after the class had finished.

"Are you sure they're here for me?" I asked. "I'm not expecting anyone."

"Go and see for yourself, my treasure."

I put my stick of charcoal down and stepped outside. Sitting on one of the benches was a youngish-looking man in a Tom Gilbey suit. He was stuffing a pipe, hunched over with his head almost below his knees. I could see the awkward curvature of his spine, which resembled a bass clef. There was no one else standing on the polished linoleum floor except for a woman plaiting her daughter's hair into a halo braid. When the man heard me close the open door behind me, his shoes squeaked dissonantly across the hall.

"Are you waiting on me?"

"Danica Klimmeck?"

"Who's asking?"

"Arnold Homeier. I believe you were acquainted with my father. John Slodeth."

"Not in the way that you might think."

"I know."

"Can it wait until I finish? My class is almost done. Twenty minutes."

"Of course. It's important, just so you know. It's about John's will. You're in it."

I couldn't focus on my drawing five minutes into resuming my studies and began to pack my things. Cynthia eyed me curiously. I mouthed the words "Wait for me" and then went to meet Arnold.

We left the building because I desired privacy. Each time Arnold tried to get started on a conversation on 3rd or on East 9th, I rebuffed him with one-word answers. I despised talking while on the move as I liked to give people my undivided attention—all the more so when concerning serious subjects.

We ended up on Lafayette Street sitting on a secluded park bench. Juncos were chirping in the distance, but a very large jackhammer was pounding away not far from where we were situated. The combination of the two sounds nettled the arrangement of my thoughts, and all the while Arnold pestered me about getting coffee. I abhorred entertaining pleasantries with strangers, and I could already tell that the situation called for diplomatic terseness.

"Homeier... You don't go by Slodeth?"

"My mother's maiden name. John never mentioned her?"

"Not directly. Mousy hair? A small thing?"

I did not want to name her and risk offending Homeier, as I had done with the woman at Calvary a few weeks ago.

"Evelina. That's her. You've met, then."

"No, but she used to call on occasion. I would have taken messages from her, certainly. I didn't realize John had a child."

"He needed convincing from time to time."

"What's this about a will? I mean this in the politest way possible, but I don't have time for a fool's errand."

"He left us something substantial."

“Us? Let me guess. You want all of it? Is that about the tune of it?”

“John owned a nightclub called the Aleph-Null. It’s in Two Bridges. Ramshackle little thing, couple rungs below ‘seedy.’ Not as bad as Dirty Dick’s. That’s how it’s usually described. I’d say it’s an accurate interpretation.”

“You want to buy me out?”

“Yes, but not in the way you might be imagining. It’s impossible to determine the Null’s true value. It’s crumbling to its foundation; the water lines need to be replaced. Don’t get me started on the Norway rats in the walls. What should be of interest to you though, is that I’m the beneficiary of John’s life insurance policy. My mother died many years ago now.”

“How sad. What’s the problem, then? Sounds to me like you’re being properly compensated. You got paid out and you want this Aleph-Null, too? The whole kit and caboodle, as they say?”

“I’ll give you the payout from the insurance policy. To top it off, I’ll buy your share out so we can dissolve the tenancy in common. It should have never gone to you as I understand it, but we can’t find your marriage annulment. The building was in John’s name and my name, you see. Your marriage *was* annulled, wasn’t it? We weren’t sure if the separation went through properly, and if the result would be that John’s shares transfer to you as his next of kin. It’s exclusive occupancy I’m after. I want... no, I *deserve* the Aleph-Null.”

“A couple rungs below ‘seedy.’ Isn’t that how you just put it? I think you’re not telling me everything.”

“Straightforward. I can get behind that. Let me ask you this.

Can you see yourself managing a nightclub? Do you know the first thing about the entertainment business? I don't want you or anyone else interfering with the plans I have for its revitalization. I want to turn the Null into a Zydeco club. Beyond that, I want it for sentimental reasons. I grew up there. I know all the patrons on a first-name basis, the city officials that haunt it, the ones that like braid cutting and the ones who are crurophiliacs. I'm ingratiated with the people working there. They all had a hand in raising me, practically. We have an understanding in all our dealings. I doubt they'd extend you the same courtesy. It would have to be earned."

"How much is the payout on the policy?"

"Because you're making so much now, showing your goods to half of New York? Believe me, it's enough, even with all of my father's debts."

"We're not horse-trading here. It's obvious you don't respect me, that you're not taking me seriously. I won't sign anything without hard figures."

"\$15,000. More than enough to get by on for years."

I got up to gather my things because I knew a raw deal when I heard it; frankly, I wanted to see how Arnold would react to a more bellicose approach to negotiation. He grabbed at my wrist, so I socked him across the arm with my handbag. It didn't have much inside that would have packed a punch and did little more than ruffle his perfectly pomaded hair.

"You'll be begging me for the money before long, you little hellcat. You take co-possession of the Null in a few weeks. You'd best be there every day. This is no bagatelle. Those girls are depending on you."

“Why aren’t you already managing this drinkery yourself?” I asked, sitting back down.

“I’m busy executing John’s last will and testament. The girls at the Null understand that I’ve got my hands full, but they know that it’s temporary. If I don’t make arrangements for someone to run the place, I’ll still be in their good graces. You, on the other hand... Last chance. A lawyer is going to come around sometime next week. You need to sign a quitclaim deed.”

“If it has to be so.”

“It’s no laughing matter. I’d really rather not have to sweat you out something fierce.”

“You know what this city can be like. I don’t need money. I need a *place to live*. I’m shackled up with two heifers from Sea Girt and Manasquan, people who shower once a month, who leave their used Baby Gays on the kitchen counter. That’s why this Null suits me just fine. Anything is better than the arrangement I have going on. We’ll just have to learn to play nicely together. You don’t seem too broken up about your dad dying, I don’t mind saying. It’s no wonder you’re in your current predicament.”

“We’re done here. You could have traded with me now, but it looks like I can buy it off you at half the cost when you’re desperate. The Null is a cesspool. No one will want it, even to tear it down.”

Arnold rose and hailed a cab without asking if I needed a lift somewhere. He left as easily as he entered my life—like a whiff of grapeshot.

I completely forgot about meeting up with Cynthia at Cooper Union. I apologized unprofusely at home, but when I re-

fused to answer her about where I went to and who with, she froze me out by holing up in her room. It was the final straw for her, who often mistook my diffidence for imperiousness. I began packing up my personal effects that night and waited out the rest of my sentence. Three weeks later, a few days before rent for the next month was due, I left without saying so much as a word. Cynthia avoided making eye contact with me when we saw each other in class, the friendship having run its course. It became unbearable, so I dropped out of Madame Tuolora's class.

Arnold left me to my thoughts of freedom. I left him to his thoughts of bastardly insignificance.

Acknowledgements

Brimstone-befouled fields of untilled gratitude exist for Iryn Tushabe, Jacob Wren, Zak Jones, Alex Pugsley, Keith Cadieux, Mel Marginet, Catharina de Bakker, Angeline Javier, Jaret Penner, Sophie McCreesh, Paul Pope, Teijun Bhak, the Goat-Slaying Flower Touts of Castlebar, Victoria Hetherington, Jowita Bydlowska, Paige Cooper, Jenn Woodall, Naben Ruthnum, the Ah-Sen and Lai families, Anna Wesolinska, Megan Hunter, Robert Lavoie, CAMH OSP program, Liz Harmer, Kevin Fong, Emily Anglin, Emily Johnson, Djordje Mantzios, Behzad Molavi, Cassidy McFadzean, Guillaume Morissette, Jonathan Tsao, Jason Foo, Cody Caetano, Brent Mendiola, Matt Lehner, Natasha Doyle-Merrick, Luc Mandl, Ratchit Chakerwarti, Andrés Salazar, Dakota McFadzean Mark Boucher, Georgia Toews, Miriam Toews, Loin-Sprout 1 and Loin-Sprout 2, and the The Writer's Trust of Canada Woodcock Fund Grant.

