

A Charmed Life

I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT SOME PEOPLE HAVE all the luck. I know that I am not in that camp, but if you ask George Hunter, the Canadian photographer we profiled in this issue, he'll tell you he is one of the luckiest people you'll ever meet. First, however, he'll regale you with his harrowing stories of close calls with death and serious injury. Take the time in Pangnirtung when a mad sled dog rushed for his throat. Startled by girls' shouts, George jolted up and the dog's jaws clamped down on the flash of his camera instead.

Then, I considered how his story came to the *Review*. The idea originated from a conversation between two old friends. A former oil executive told an Imperial vice-president about a photographer, George Hunter, who has historic black-and-white photography of the Mackenzie River Valley dating back a half century. Wouldn't that make an interesting story? The idea eventually made its way to my desk. Intrigued, I asked myself, who is George Hunter? I looked up his work online and, impressed by what I saw, decided we should instead profile him and his life's work.

In our first telephone conversation, he told me the article might help him in his current pursuit. Today, George feels it's his obligation to make his photographs known to Canadians, both as a historical record of our country and as Canadian art. "Canadians don't appreciate photography as art. You rarely see it hung on walls and there are few collectors in Canada. And that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to elevate its stature in my own country."

In late September, I meet George in person. He stops by our offices in Calgary to say hello and to show me some photo possibilities for the issue. He just happens to be in town after working in Edmonton



for a national trucking company to shoot its 2008 calendar.

Colleagues who see him in my office marvel that he is 85 and still working hard. Who is he? they want to know. I catch the smiles on their faces as they peer around my office door. I learn quickly in our short time together that he has this effect on people.

It's a dreary, rainy morning when he visits. I take him out for coffee (he orders a sunny day refreshment – iced tea), and our conversation stretches from mid-morning through lunch. We spend a lot of time discussing perception and the impact of art. I learn that being a good photographer requires both skill and luck. George has made a career of being able to recognize the magic in everyday life and has also had the good fortune to be there at the precise moment to capture that magic on film.

From the photos he has brought to show me, I select the image for the front cover not only because it's a beautiful shot, but because I love the photo's story. It's a shot George took of teenagers in Quebec. They are tramping through knee-deep snow in a farmer's field, having just chopped down a tree for Christmas. When George was done taking their photograph, the farmer pulled up in his truck to shout at the kids to get off his land. George looks

at me and winks. "They were great kids. It's a good thing the farmer didn't figure out where they got the tree from." The photo later won second place in a Quebec photography contest, *Regards du Québec*, that received over 27,000 entries. George, of course, entered the contest on a lark.

The conversation turns to the artist behind the lens and his perception of the world he is photographing. George entertains me with his recollections and the conversation drifts back to his marvellous luck and how his enchanted life has been filled with the most wonderfully kind people.

George, I also discover, has a knack of befriending just about everyone he meets: he has broken bread with francophone families in Quebec (he speaks only a few words of French), miners have fought to carry his equipment, and flight crews have gone out of their way to help him gain passage to destinations around the world. George also has good friends everywhere that he can count on to locate new areas in their region for photographic subject matter. In a few days, he will be off to Revelstoke, B.C., to stay at a hotel he has been going to for 50 years. "I'm like family to them," he says.

I suppose George has had "all the luck." From humble Saskatchewan roots, he has gone on to experience the best our world has to offer: he has travelled the globe, met with royalty, and photographed hundreds of natural and historic sites, some that are now gone or destroyed. As I flip through his photographs, however, it becomes clear that the photos that hold the most meaning for him aren't the ones that reveal the world at its grandest but those that capture common people from the most modest of circumstances – the Inuit, miners, loggers and rural families.

As we part, he tells me that I've become his new Calgary friend, and in that moment I too feel as if I have all the best luck in the world. – *Catherine Teasdale*