



The “Badlands”

BY DAVID KENDALL

Caledon's Badlands in September.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

Chapter of *Slag*

For winter reading, we present this excerpt of the novel Slag. It is chapter six, which is set in the Niagara Escarpment, and introduces a character who becomes crucial to the story.

Introduction to *Slag*:

Inama Meena is a *dalit*, an untouchable born to be spurned by the rest of Indian society, bound by a belief that he earned this life of lowly drudgery in a previous incarnation. He immigrates to Canada and works as a street cleaner. Can a person so warped of spirit resurrect himself in the “land of the free”? One day, in a Spadina Avenue gutter, his broom unearths a severed finger. It happens outside an up-market Chinese restaurant. So starts Inama’s incursion into the dark world of the illegal shark fin trade.

***Slag*, Chapter Six:**

He meets her on the Cheltenham Badlands, Elisa, just two days before he will meet the dismembered finger. He, Inama-cum-Michael Meena tagged Slag, aged twenty-four, and with lean arms that have never held a woman of sound mind.

He arrives there in his first car, steering with two hands and driving with fearful adherence to the rules of the road. It is a whitish Toyota Corolla, old enough to have wind-down windows, with 235,000 kilometres under its drive-belt and a body that looks like a tossed-away pork ‘n bean can after a year of rain and sleet. A workmate commuting from Brampton first urged him to visit the spot, specifying that a lot of ‘your people’ liked to go there.

Continued on page 41



PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

Today is his second time to the Badlands, a beveled expanse of red clay ridges and gullies an hour's drive northwest of Toronto that attracts scores of visitors on summer weekends. This time he has brought bags. The Toyota's trunk holds half a dozen jettisoned plastic bags, emptied of the gravel that a homeowner on a side street off Spadina Avenue used in repairing his concrete walkway.

He has brought the bags almost as an involuntary reflex: he was born to the impossible task of sweeping order into a cluttered world. Garbage galore speckles the Badlands and he will collect it.

Rich men are able to despoil with bulldozers and pollutants and boardroom decisions that blight great tracts of earth, air and water. But littering is a poor man's despoliation. It is environmental degradation minor—small in solitary, and deadly in a crowd—like pestilential germs. Everything we make becomes garbage. Everything. Even ourselves, reduced finally to strewn ashes rife with ingested chemicals.

He acknowledges these things, but such considerations bear limited relevance. Littering is the source of his income. His harvest. He is a living, breathing broom. True, he was born to it. But he honestly appreciates his role.

Were he in Singapore where nobody litters, he'd be out of work. How do you say 'kick my ass for two bucks' in Mandarin? Or Sanskrit? Fortunately, he has splashed down in Canada where it seems everyone litters.

It's like fishing where the fish are always biting. The Toronto gutters are unfailingly abundant. All that varies is the species of fish. Tim Hortons, McDonald's, Nestea, Canada Dry, Budweiser,

Crispy Crunch—all in a day's work. Kleenex tissue, Player's cigarettes, Spearmint gum wrappers.

He is, this early Saturday afternoon, carrying two of the bags from the Corolla trunk, one for unredeemable junk including the most repellant such as abandoned diapers and snotty tissues, one for recyclables—bottles and cans, paper and cardboard. Beer cans garner a nickel apiece and liquor bottles twenty-five cents. But he isn't in it for the paltry revenues. He's in it because he's Slag.

He is more than Nakusa, the scurrilous epithet often enough tossed at his mother. What he will pick up is *nakusa*—the unwanted. That he might pick up *someone* wanted never enters his head.

When he sees young people strolling Toronto streets, hand in hand, laughing, chattering, exchanging, he does not feel a lack in his own life. The notion that what they share might also be his does not scratch the veneer of his sense of function. Naturally, he must take a woman one day, to procreate. He knows, not without a slight tightening of the lips, that she won't be one of those leggy things his eyes covertly woo in the downtown streets. She'll be a *dalit* component of a negotiated package. The woman he dares dream of is one who will never drop a scrap of paper. His grandmother will find him one when the time comes, perhaps even that fat Daiko. But his current duties are his goals—to house and feed himself, to clean up the messes of others, to mail a modest monthly remittance to his mother and grandmother along with a brief letter in transliterated Hindi that the

shop-keeper at the end of the lane will read to them for a couple of rupees.

As a kid he used to fantasize about what evils he must have wrought in his previous life to merit re-birth as an outcaste. Now grown up and educated, he doesn't believe that stuff, even though he does, sort of, psychologically.

His intellectual repudiation of the very foundations of Hinduism he keeps private, perhaps because he views himself as secret sinner, or more likely because there is no one to tell. According to ancient Vedic hymnal texts, the first god Prajapati, Lord of Creatures, sacrificed himself to create the world. From the divine fragments of his immolated body

...his gaze
travels downhill,
traversing the
undulating
Queenston shale
of the Badlands
with its deep iron
oxide blush.

originated the caste system that so castigated his mother. Prajapati's mouth, according to the sacred doctrine, gave life to the priestly and ruling Brahmin caste; from his arms spilled the second tier Kshatria caste called the Warrior, while from the thighs poured the third-level merchants and landowners, known as the Vaishya. Then at the bottom, the Shudra, the vast servant and artisan class was spawned from Prajapati's feet. Beneath all of these, too foul even to claim a godly source, teem the unclean millions, the ones

who scour gutters and latrines, the ones whose very shadow contaminates the enlightened.

Such beliefs that served to define his lot in life, he denied and even learned to mock while at university—a postured rebuttal. But alone, clutching at right practice within an alien culture, the Slag who disclaimed religion is still imbued with Hindu custom. He is, as it were, a bright servant.

From the edge of Olde Baseline Road his gaze travels downhill, traversing the undulating Queenston shale of the Badlands with its deep iron oxide blush. His eyes flit over the enclosing scrub and thorn bush, across the Peel Plain and finally to the distant Toronto skyline some sixty kilometres southeast. It was farmland once, this present-day tourist site, ploughed by hard men from Scotland, grazed down by sheep and Hereford cows, eroded into a clay badland by a thousand hoofs joined with a hundred years of spring runoffs and the sudden torrential rains that pour over the Caledon hills. You'd have to fly to Utah or Alberta to see the like.

A chimney swift—rare in these parts, though he is oblivious to species beyond his own—harries a broad-winged hawk that lifts heavily from a deeply incised groove where rain has swept garbage against a low embankment of yellowed sedge. A photographer focuses behind a tripod, attracted by the irregular swirls of grey clay streaking the windswept red ribs. A notice, once hammered into the ground at the entry point, now knocked to the ground, reads: *'Take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but your thanks.'*

He lowers his gaze, bends barehanded to retrieve a blue cigarette carton with white lettering. At work he uses

government-issued gloves. He'd never before worn such contraptions, he who has disposed of other people's excretions much of his life. He slips the cigarette box into the refuse bag. A candy bar wrapper, four tissues, three plastic water bottles—one still half full, which he drains before stowing in the recyclables bag—an expired fireworks rocket, a Nestea can. How illogical it seems out here where nobody is assigned to clean up, this despoiling of a spot to which they travel specifically for its pristine beauty. People, who in all likelihood hold better positions than he. In India, at least, there was a careless reasoning that in tossing away, one was providing employment, even sustenance, for the low castes. And in Toronto, the litterers pay taxes for people such as he to clear the gutters.

"I know you want to forget about it. But it's the third time, and I just can't."

Slag looks up. They're getting out of a silver Acura that has pulled in beside his Toyota. She is all in black, a short, quilted jacket that fits over her svelte form as though it was vacuum packed. Long, slim jeans that end with running shoes that look like they get some use. A smooth, earnest face that retains its beauty even when enraged.

"Come on, Elisa. It won't happen again, I promise." He's tall, mid-thirties, a buzz-cut topping a face that's raw as though shaved with a blunt blade. In one gloved hand, a bag of take-out food. The other hand reaches for the woman, but she'll have none of it.

"Yes it will. You know it will; so don't compound your lack of consideration with false promises."

He mutters something out

of the corner of his mouth, as he passes Slag to begin the descent of the clay slope. She glances over. Standing, bags yet thin and curling about his legs, Slag feels the impact of her stare. She turns away.

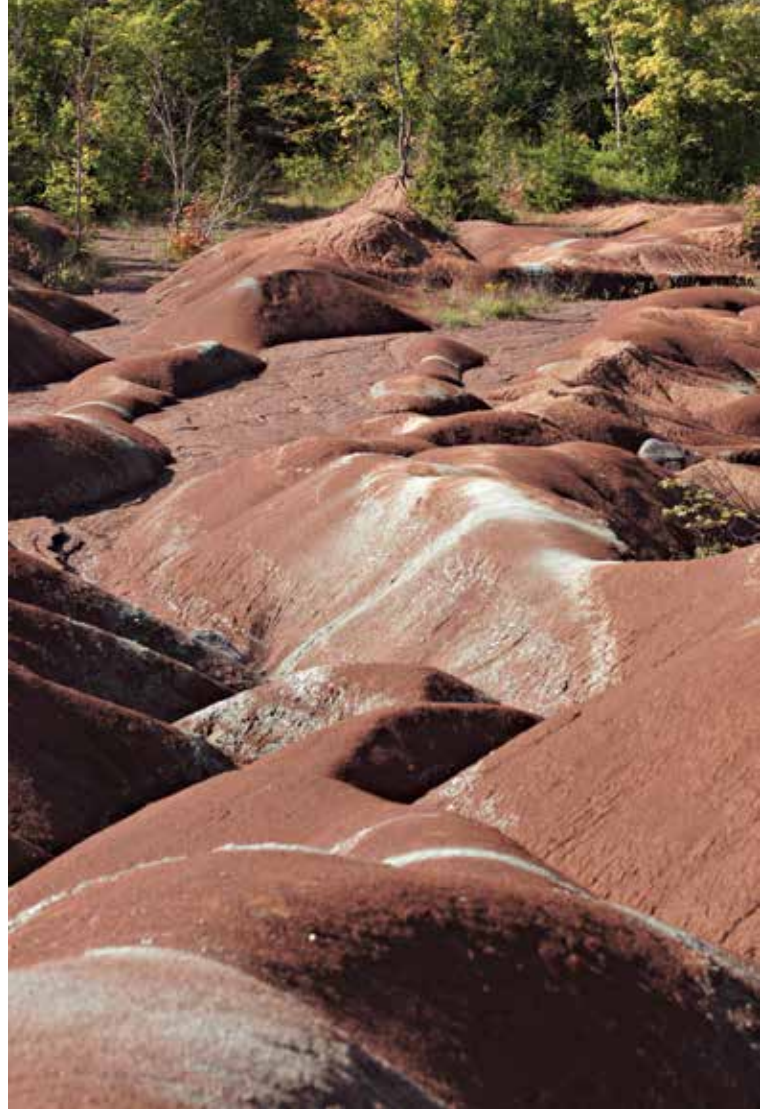
"No, I won't shut up. Don't you understand? When you make me stand on a corner dilly-dallying around for an hour, that's an hour of my life you've just thrown away. More than that, it's a declaration that for you there are greater priorities than me."

Their voices fade away. Not every young couple in this adopted land is hand in hand, laughing, chattering and exchanging.

He steps over some shards of glass embedded in the clay, reaches for a small black plastic bag, heavy with dense contents. Dog poop. Some dog-owner must have stooped, felt the heat of the waste through his plastic shrouded fingers, the steam in his nostrils, and knotted it all neatly inside the bag. Left exposed, the scat would have been compost in two months. The bag will last a hundred years.

He hates them, in a way, these people who mark their passing in plastic and glass. It's their blatant illogicality—to come to this beautiful rural spot and turn it into an urban dump.

By the time he nears the bottom, where the erosion narrows and tails off, he has returned to the car trunk for the third and fourth bags. Just as well he brought extra bags—these two will be full before he can complete the circuit up the other side and back to the road. The scrub bush forming a fringe around the red soils is fairly dense, multi-twigged, and regrettably thorny. The low branches catch at his cap as he ducks and slithers low through the shrubbery,



retrieving the detritus of this season and previous seasons.

Tourists—he sees them that way—glance his way obliquely, seemingly taking him for a hired Badlands worker. They munch their take-out lunches and swig their bottled drinks, but they don't cast away their droppings, at least not in his presence. Knowing that to pollute is a sin, they prefer to sin without witness.

A long thorn etches a horizontal carmine stripe just below his right temple, near the rim of the hat. He doesn't blame the thorn—it is the bush defending itself. He blames the tourists. A spurting anger, an anomaly triggered by sudden pain. If you must drop your shite, do it where a man can pick it up without having to squirm through the prickles like a snake. In fact, don't drop your shite when no one's looking, or toss it into the bush so no one can

see, or scrunch it up to make it look small—stand up for your rights. Be proud of who you are, you disgusting pigs.

It's only for a moment, his rage.

He can hear them once again, just over a rouged spine with a dorsal fin of fading goldenrod, the voices of the tardy man and the indignant woman. He can't quite make out their words, but then, he isn't spying, is he? Suddenly her voice breaks off. He thinks to detect the sound of a blow, an expulsion of breath. He rattles his bottle and tin bag loudly and mounts the ridge that separates him from the quarrelsome pair. The woman is on her back, sprawled, hands cradling her face, hair a black halo against the maroon clay. The man wheels toward Slag, his eyes small within a rubicund face, mouth wet. His cocked fist falls to his side.

"What you lookin' at,

junkman?" he says.

Slag's gaze drops. He stands mute.

"Put her in yer dirt bag with the rest of the shit. Yappin' bitch—she's all yours." And he's gone, a quick waft of perspiration as he passes and strides up the hill.

He hesitates to approach her. She isn't crying, not moaning, just an inert stretch of black cloth and two pale hands.

It's not his business. It's hardly the first time he has seen a man strike his woman. A man has an obligation to discipline a disrespectful wife. But this one has been called garbage, and his mother was called garbage and his is a lifelong commitment to picking up garbage.

She cringes as he steps near, jerks again when his bag of recyclables clatters to the ground. He crouches beside her, indecisive, he who has never touched a woman not of his family. Perhaps she smells him, a different scent from that of the other man, a different weight in the surrounding air. Her hands slide down her face and her dark, Eurasian eyes look into Slag's.

"Are you hurt?" he manages.

Stupid, redundant question. Her lower lip is split and dribbling blood.

"Is he gone?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Then I am well," and she attempts a smile, which quickly freezes as the stretched lip stings. She sits up. "Thank you for coming."

"It was..." he begins, and his eyes lower. "You're welcome."

She seems to sense something, flicks her head toward the trash bags. "Do you think I'll fit?"

For an instant he considers it seriously, clasping that lithe form, balancing her on his knee as one hand props open the lip of the bag while

the other slides this living litter into the plastic mouth. Then he laughs, just a little. It is the first spontaneous joke he has ever shared with one of the opposite sex.

She stands to her feet, slaps red dust from her jeans.

"Would you like some tea?" he asks. He pulls an old-fashioned thermos from a loop at his belt, then realizes he has no cup. He is accustomed to drinking from the metal cap that screws down over the cork.

"Please." She takes the thermos from his hand, tilts a steaming trickle into the cap, aims for the uninjured side of her mouth, places her lips where his have so often visited.

He watches, half repelled, half allured. That she would allow her mouth to go where the lips of an untouchable have touched.

Finished, she notices a brief smear of blood on the aluminum top and flushes momentarily. "I'm sorry," she murmurs, and wipes it against her jeans before handing it back.

He nods, still more unbalanced than she who is wounded.

"It's delicious tea," she says. "Indian *chai*, is it not?"

He smiles. "Yes." He tucks the flask back in his belt. "In my car I have food. *Samosas*. Do you eat such things?"

She glances around. "But there is still litter to pick up." She steps toward a dented Styrofoam cup, gathers it up along with a crumpled foil wrapping, then hesitates for an instant over the two bags before selecting the correct one.

Her nails, he notices, are flawless, a dark red that blends with her rich skin.

"Come on, I'll help you. Sing for my supper, as my aunt likes to say." She picks up the litterbag, moves over to a clump of grass nestling



Christmas
is
COMING

Subscribe To: **Niagara Escarpment VIEWS**

For Yourself or as a Gift!

Just \$22 each for one year, \$39.50 each for two years!

Canadian addresses only. Prices include HST. Contact us re foreign addresses.

1ST SUBSCRIPTION: ■ One Year \$22 ■ Two Years \$39.50

Name.....
Street Address.....
Town/City.....
Postal Code.....
Phone #.....
Email address

2ND SUBSCRIPTION: ■ One Year \$22 ■ Two Years \$39.50

Name.....
Street Address.....
Town/City.....
Postal Code.....
Phone #.....
Email address

WAYS TO PAY:

- 1. By credit card by phone, 905.866.7888.
- 2. For Interac, email ads@NEViews.ca.
- 3. Online with PayPal or credit card at <https://NEViews.ca/subscribe>.
- 4. Send a cheque payable to Niagara Escarpment Views, to: Niagara Escarpment Views 50 Ann St., Georgetown, ON L7G 2V2

a plastic water bottle. She holds it out, waiting for him to retrieve the recyclables bag. "I'm glad we don't allow handguns in Canada," she says. "I'd be up for murder. I just hate people who dump their crap."

"Thank you," he says, taking the bottle and unscrewing the blue top before he drops it into his sack. "I take off the cap. Otherwise the bottle won't compact properly."

"It's me who's doing the thanking," she says. "Thanks for saving me from that dork. And thanks for cleaning up after the rest of the world's dorks."

He has heard that about North American women—very firm in their convictions. He's not convinced this is a good thing. But he does hear in her words his own conviction.

She seems unashamed of such degrading work, plunging into the brambles after things that glint and flutter, emerging triumphant. At a certain point they converge, coming from opposite sides into a tiny glade where secretive picnickers have strewn their leavings. A scarlet condom droops from a nest of brown autumnal leaves, lewd and somehow menacing. He tries to position himself so she doesn't see it, but her eyes are quick.

"Nice," she says. "Communing with nature."

So she knows what it is.

In the city he would use his broom. Mad with embarrassment, he pinches the dangling rubber between two twigs and drops it in among the gathered trash. That she should see such a thing. He departs the cleansed glade without a word.

They work their way up the steepening Badlands border until they climb over a low roadside guardrail and lug

the bulging bags along the shoulder of the road toward his car. He pauses at the peak, looks back and inhales the view. There is reason he finds beauty in a cleaned ditch, a cleaned valley, a cleaned landscape. There was no litter before man. Everything issued clean from the Creator's hand.

The trunk is crammed with the first two bags, so he removes the tin of *samosas* and sets the third and fourth bags like two portly passengers on the back seat. He turns and she is looking back over the ribbed descent. "You know this is part of a UNESCO biosphere site," she murmurs, almost to herself. "I could write a piece about this. Beauty and the beasts."

He follows her stare, starts to circle the car to open the front passenger door. But she already has the door wide and her trim black jeans are settling onto the stained vinyl.

She writes stories, he thinks.

"I'm a reporter," she says, as though following his thoughts. "One of just two on a local weekly newspaper you've never heard of. We distribute through here and further north."

A reporter. He reads the Toronto newspapers—mainly secondhand after readers discard them—so he has noted the female bylines. But to see it in the flesh, to think that women do such work.

"Not much of a newspaper, truth to tell. A freebie, mostly ads," she adds. "But it's a start. Asshole who's run off with my purse is the ads manager."

The *samosas* are cold, of course, but freshly baked from Kensington Market earlier that day. Fortunately, he has a tube of hand cleanser in the glove compartment—an occupational practice he has acquired in Canada. Its antiseptic sharpness wars briefly with the emanations rising from the Indian pastries, until he ratchets down the side window and the medicinal fume drifts into the countryside.

"I can't eat your lunch," she says, her eyes belying her protest.

"Look—*eck, do, teen, char, panch*—five of them," he counts. "I can't eat them all."

He lets her pull one of the pastries from the tin.

"Yum," she says. A flake has roosted on her wound. White

on red, an edible poultice. "We brought boring old tuna sandwiches for lunch, and now that fool has driven off with them, not to mention my purse. But these are the best."

There are three left, a number that presents yet another dilemma. The first two of them, no problem. He'll happily give her the last one, but he already suspects she won't stand for that.

"No way," she says when he offers. "Thanks anyway. I'm guzzling your lunch as it is."

He rests the tin on his lap, the lone *samosa* poised for final delivery.

"Okay," she ends the standoff. "If you don't mind my fingers, I'm going to break it in half."

Apparently he doesn't mind those fingers one bit, because a second later he can feel them pressing against the bottom of the thin floor of the tin atop his groin, gripping the pastry and tearing. The dark red nails show pale scratches now, and at least one has sacrificed its perfect edge to the Badlands clay. The *samosa* doesn't split tidily, but tidy isn't on his mind at this tactile instant.

"I can't tell you how yummy

A note from the author, David Kendall:

I am a farm boy who became a professional writer. Sallied forth with an MA in Spanish literature only to find 21 years of joy as a staff reporter at the *Toronto Sun Newspaper*. Took an unpaid leave every five years to research and scribble in the Third World. Since retiring, I pen "ecological thrillers" such as *Slag*, with conservation officers instead of cops, trade in endangered species instead of drugs. I have visited every place I describe from the Amazon jungle to north of the Arctic Circle, from Cuzco to Nauru, from Halifax to Hong Kong, from the Niagara Escarpment to Rajasthan.

My first novel *Lazaro* co-won the Seal First Novel Award and was later released as an MGM feature motion picture titled *Where the River Runs Black*.

My ties to the Niagara Escarpment began in my youth. Our Hereford beef cattle farm near Inglewood stretched from the base of the Escarpment. In 1967 I helped cut the trail across our land for the newborn Bruce Trail. My father Douglas Kendall was a signatory to the letters patent forming the Bruce Trail. Since 1999 when I moved out of Toronto to Belfountain, in Caledon, I cleaned the litter from the Bruce Trail and the Badlands, until it was fenced off recently. Grecia and I live in a house 30 feet from the Escarpment's 80-ft vertical drop. Yes, vertical--the next house along the road the owner fell to his death over the cliff. We have placed a conservation easement on our seven acres of forest above the cliff, with the EBC as guarantor. The seven acres we owned below the cliff we donated to the Bruce Trail Conservancy, (BTC), a segment of the BTC's "ideal route."

these are. In our house we're so middle-of-the-road Canadian. A *samosa*. What's that? Like yikes! Lock the doors! My family thinks McDonald's is the height of gustatory excellence."

There's a McDonald's on Spadina where once a week he treats himself to lunch. He decides against mentioning it. Gustatory? Well, she is a writer. Maybe that's how writer-women talk.

After they munch down the last of the paltry lunch, he pours her another capful of *chai*. Again she protests, so in the name of fairness he tilts the thermos to his mouth to suck down the final drops.

"I have yet another kindness to beg of you," she says.

"A ride," he says, forthright beyond his ken. "I'll drive you home." **NEV**

The price of the book *Slag* is \$15.95. A portion of the proceeds from the sales of this book will be donated to the Bruce Trail Conservancy and Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy.

HOW TO ORDER:

To order online from the Bruce Trail Conservancy the address is www.bruce-trail.org and then click on "store". The book will be sent to you by Canada Post.

TO ORDER BY PHONE:

Call Bruce Trail Conservancy at 905.529.6821 or 800.665.4453. To order from Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy, call 888.815.9575

TO ORDER BY MAIL:

Send your order and cheque by mail to Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy, 503 Davenport Road, Toronto, M4V 1B8.

Name:

Address:

City: Prov: Postal:.....

Phone #: Email:.....

We got your attention.




Now let's get theirs.

ads@NEViews.ca
905.866.7888

For gifts that gladden ...

10,000
local, Ontario,
Canadian and
international
food items



FOODSTUFFS
Specialty • Bulk • Health

89 Main Street South
Downtown Georgetown
foodstuffs.ca • 905.877.6569

WISE CRACKS



Foundation Crack Specialists
Stop Leaks from the Inside!

Interior Drainage Without
Excavation

Window Wells, Covers and
Drain Systems

Supply/Install/Maintain
Sump Pump Systems

Ask about our Lifetime Warranty

We give a hoot!



1-855-947-2725
info@wisecrackscentral.com